

# Gospel Determinism Cases: Paul G. Bretscher

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## The Elements in Bretscher’s Thought

Rev. Paul G. Bretscher, Th.D. (1921-2016) is a significant and instructive case of gospel determinism.

Gospel determinism’s elements in Bretscher take two formulations. The first is a for-public-consumption Lutheran formulation. The second is a simultaneously harbored anti-creedal formulation that he disclosed later.

Among cases of gospel determinism, Bretcher’s is a good place to start. First, both of his formulations exemplify gospel determinism overtly. Because the formulations are explicit — even blatant — illustrating gospel determinism by them is easy. Second, with two substantially different formulations in one man, Bretscher represents two cases. The two cases in one man provide a handy way of showing how two apparently different theologies have the same structure and how structure is fatal in both cases.

Referred to as one of the “moderates” in the Law-Gospel debate and Seminex-related controversies, Bretscher ends at thoroughgoing heresy with expressed denial of “creedal Christianity.”

Recall from the preview of gospel determinism that:

Gospel determinism has two elements.

1. We know the Gospel.
2. Gospel determines everything.

The elements are simple. Together they are total. The Gospel rules all.

The elements spawn their implications in two rounds. The first round is their implications about Scripture. The second is their implications for a host of doctrines and practices.

Variants of gospel determinisms may be distinguished in two general ways:

In the first element, the source of our knowledge of the Gospel.

In the second element, the extent and thoroughness of carrying out the determinism.

In Bretscher's Lutheran formulation, we know the Gospel from Luther's Catechisms.

With this knowledge of the Gospel, we can determine issues of text criticism and which pieces of the resulting scriptures are the "Word of God." We can determine hermeneutics and exegetics. With the Gospel, the Word of God, and interpretation of Scripture in place, the Gospel determines everything else. It determines all doctrine and practice.

Because this formulation takes on coloring from Luther's Catechisms, the language of Lutheran theology, and the culture of the Lutheran church, it has a familiar and guard-lowering sound. But the authority of Scripture exists only insofar as it affirms the pre-known Gospel. All doctrines are determined not by Scripture alone but by what the pre-known Gospel allows to be the "Word of God" in Scripture.

In Bretscher's anti-creedal formulation, we hear the Gospel like Jesus heard it at his Baptism when God said, "You are my beloved Son." The title "Son" says nothing about deity. The divinity of Jesus is a later corruption. His hearing and our hearing of the Gospel of covenant-sonship are the same. The covenant-Gospel creates and delivers salvation existing in sonship before and without the work of Christ on the cross. Sonship, not blood atonement, is salvation.

With this knowledge of the Gospel, we can determine issues of text criticism and which pieces of the resulting scriptures are the "Word of God." We discern the metaphors in the memory-fragments from which the New Testament Gospels gradually were composed. The metaphorical meaning was lost early on and the Gospel of covenant-sonship has been unknown to the church for most of its history. Bretscher reconstructs the faith — an anti-creedal faith — by coherence to the covenant-sonship Gospel.

In both formulations, Scripture is not the Word of God because the Holy Spirit inspired the prophets and apostles. Instead, we can mine out of Scripture some ore of the Word of God. A pre-known Gospel determines which portions of text in Scripture are the Word of God and how those portions are to be understood. Scripture is not the Word of God in the Bible before it has an effect on a person who hears it in accord with the pre-known Gospel. Until Scripture performs in the believer, it is not the Word.

## Significance: Bretscher in the Action

In the 1960s and 1970s, Lutheran synods were embroiled in controversies about the Gospel and Scripture that would gain the names Valparaiso Theology, Seminex, the Law-Gospel Debate, and Gospel Reductionism (which is related to but different from gospel determinism). These episodes are part of the story of gospel determinism. Despite his name not being well known today, Bretscher was right in the action and was ranked as important by those engaged in the debate.

### Father and Elert

Bretscher was the son of Rev. Paul M. Bretscher (1893-1974). The elder Bretscher was among the American Lutheran theologians who attended the conferences in Bad Boll, Germany in the late 1940s.<sup>1</sup> He wrote the eulogy for the major Bad Ball theologian, Werner Elert (1885–1954).<sup>2</sup> As an illustration of his support of Elert's theology, Bretscher recommended to David P. Scaer that he study under Ernst Kinder (1921–2016), a protégé of Elert.

With Elert's death, Ernst Kinder, who had edited Elert's *Der Christliche Glaube*, was seen as carrying on this tradition, and for this reason Bretscher had recommended his name.<sup>3</sup>

The younger Bretscher and his siblings grew up on the campus of Concordia Teacher's College in River Forest, Illinois. He father taught there from 1924 to 1941.

Bretscher graduated from Concordia Seminary St. Louis in 1946. He served as pastor of Redeemer Lutheran Church in New Orleans, Louisiana from 1948 to 1958.

### Author

Bretscher authored numerous hymns and articles. He wrote nine books, as follows:

- The World Upside Down or Right Side Up? (6 eds. 1964 to 1985)
- The Holy Infection: The Mission of the Church in Parish and Community (2 eds. 1969)
- The Baptism of Jesus: Critically Considered (1973)
- After the Purifying (2 eds. 1975)
- Cain, Come Home! (3 eds. 1976)
- The Sword of the Spirit (1979)
- The Mystery of Oneness (1980)
- The Foolishness of God: A Course for Adults in Thirteen Lessons, Drawn from the Scriptures, and Structured According to Luther's Small Catechism for Enrichment

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick. E. Mayer, *The Story of Bad Boll: Building Theological Bridges* (St. Louis: Concordia Publish House, 1949).

<sup>2</sup> Paul M. Bretscher, "Professor D. Dr. Werner Elert, 1885-1954," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 26 (1955): 211-214.

<sup>3</sup> David P. Scaer, *Surviving the Storms: Memoirs of David P. Scaer* (Fort Wayne: IN: The Luther Academy, 2018) Kindle Edition. (Kindle Locations 1436-1439).

- and Confirmation in Christian Faith and Understanding (6 eds. 1983 to 2000)
- Christianity's Unknown Gospel (2001)

Sermons by Bretscher were sent to churches<sup>4</sup> and published in lectionary postils.<sup>5</sup>

### **Professor and Department Chair**

From 1958 to 1969 Bretscher was a professor of theology at Valparaiso University and became identified with Valparaiso Theology. While a professor there, he earned his doctorate from Concordia Seminary St. Louis in 1966. He served as Chairman of the Department of Theology at Valparaiso.<sup>6</sup> In 1968 he became pastor of Immanuel Lutheran Church in Valparaiso, where he served until retiring in 1992.

### **CTCR Member**

Bretscher was a member of the LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations from 1967 to 1975. The Law-Gospel Debate became serious business of the Commission and Bretscher played a serious role.

David P. Scaer described the Law-Gospel debate of 1971-1972 as a “controversy of considerable proportions” and identified Bretscher as one of three “original and major proponents” of the Valparaiso Theology side in the debate.<sup>7</sup> Bretscher wrote significant articles in the debate such as “The Log in Your Own Eye,”<sup>8</sup> a defense of the Seminex faculty position.<sup>9</sup>

John Montgomery had charged the Valparaiso theologians with Gospel reductionism in the 1960s. The CTCR dealt with this question in a 1972 report called “Gospel and Scripture: The Interrelationship of the Material and Formal Principles in Lutheran Theology.” The report explained that Gospel reductionism made the Gospel the norm for the Scriptures and set up the Gospel as a core from which all other teachings of the Bible are merely deduced. The Synod’s position was that the Scriptures are the norm for the Gospel. The Synod argued that the Gospel as a summary is inseparably united to its source, the Scriptures.<sup>10</sup>

Bretscher and two other members of the Commission voted against approving “Gospel and Scripture.”<sup>11</sup> The next year, the Commission issued “A Comparative Study of Varying

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<sup>4</sup> For example, his sermon for the Festival of the Reformation was mailed to St. Paul’s Lutheran Church of Brookfield, Illinois in 1972.

<sup>5</sup> For example, in *Augsburg Sermons: Gospels Series B: Sermons on Gospel Texts from the New Lectionary and Calendar* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1975).

<sup>6</sup> David P. Scaer, “The Law Gospel Debate in the Missouri Synod,” *The Springfielder* 36, no. 3 (December 1972): 158.

<sup>7</sup> Scaer, “Law Gospel Debate,” 157-158.

<sup>8</sup> Paul G. Bretscher, “The Log in Your Own Eye,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* XLIII, no. 10 (November 1972): 645-86.

<sup>9</sup> J. B. Madson, “Gospel Reductionism,” *The Lutheran Synod Quarterly* XIV, no. 3 (1974): 61.

<sup>10</sup> Donn Wilson, “The Word-of-God Conflict in the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod in the 20th Century” (2018). Master of Theology Theses, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, 106.

<sup>11</sup> Wilson, “The Word-of-God Conflict,” 106 n. 62.

Contemporary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation,”<sup>12</sup> Boehme says, “This report is all the more revealing when it is noted that a leading moderate spokesperson, Dr. Paul Bretscher, helped to write the moderate column of this document.”<sup>13</sup>

### 1973 LCMS Convention

At the 1973 New Orleans convention of the Missouri Synod, Bretscher was a nominee for the office of First Vice President.<sup>14</sup>

The report of the CTCR for that convention promoted one of Bretscher’s books.

“Studies in Biblical Interpretation”

In an effort to provide study materials for pastors concerning important features of contemporary Biblical interpretation, the commission requested certain scholars from within the Synod to produce exegetical studies of Biblical pericopes. Studies in this series do not necessarily represent the official position of the commission, but are rather provided in the interest of helping the church to study and understand important features of contemporary Biblical interpretation. To date, the following studies have been completed and authorized for distribution to the church: . . . “The Baptism of Jesus, Critically Considered,” Dr. Paul G. Bretscher<sup>15</sup>

At the same time, Bretscher’s theology was the subject of many negative overtures. Four such overtures expressly named him.<sup>16</sup> These came from California, Oregon, Ohio, and North Dakota. They called for a purge of everyone agreeing with him and for division of the physical property of the synod. The first recitals of Overtures 3-45A, “To Require Subscription to ‘A Statement’” and 4-12, “To Call for Realignment” were identical (except for citation style), as follows:

WHEREAS, There exists in Synod two incompatible theologies, as indicated by Dr. Preus’ Report on the investigation of the St. Louis seminary, by the faculty’s documents Faithful To Our Calling, Faithful To Our Lord, and as admitted by Dr. Paul Bretscher in his article “The Log in Your Own Eye” (*Concordia Theological Monthly*, Vol. XLIII, November 1972): “We have seen how our orthodox fathers were somehow derailed. Two possible authority principles carried through in the Lutheran Reformation. The one was . . . the authority of the Bible as the inspired and inerrant Word of God. The other was . . . the authority of the Gospel. The Reformation itself did not really sort out the new authority from the old. Somehow it was the old stream which in the end swept orthodoxy with it and supplies the foundation of its theological system.” Dr. Bretscher further admits that the historic position of our church “perverts Scripture and the Confessions, robs Christ of His honor, and seduces consciences with a false comfort” and that the basis of authority for his theology “is not the same authority

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<sup>12</sup> CTCR Document (n.p.: n.n., 1973).

<sup>13</sup> Armond J. Boehme, “The Smokescreen Vocabulary,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (April 1977): 36 n. 17.

<sup>14</sup> *Convention Workbook: Reports and Overtures*, 50th Regular Convention, The Lutheran Church -- Missouri Synod, New Orleans, Louisiana, July 6-13, 1973, 395.

<sup>15</sup> *Convention Workbook*, 1973, 30.

<sup>16</sup> 3-45A, 3-45B, 3-45C, and 4-12.

principle as the traditional one of the Bible's inspiration.<sup>17</sup>

The resolves also were nearly identical. They proposed what today would be called “The Nuclear Option.”

*Resolved*, That all leaders and teachers in the church, including all officers, members of boards, commissions and committees, pastors, c.r.m., missionaries, parochial school teachers, professors and instructors be required to publicly profess full and unequivocal agreement with the *Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles* and “Gospel and Scripture” within 6 months of this convention; and be it further

*Resolved*, That those who fail or decline to so subscribe to these documents be hereby requested in all honesty and equity to resign from their membership in The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod, and in the event of refusal to so resign, the presidium proceed with excommunication according to Matthew 18; and be it finally

*Resolved*, That the real property and tangible assets of the Synod and its Districts, and where necessary, of individual congregations, be equitably distributed on the basis of the communicant membership involved in such division, and this division to be effected by synodical and District boards of adjudication appointed by Synod's presidium to obviate all appeal to civil courts. All communicant members shall have one year from the time of this convention to file claims to their proportionate assets to be transferred to a Lutheran Synod of their choice.<sup>18</sup>

The convention adopted “A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles.”<sup>19</sup> It charged the Saint Louis seminary faculty majority with the error of abolishing the formal principle, *sola Scriptura* (i.e., that all doctrines are derived from Scripture and that Scripture is the sole norm of all doctrine).<sup>20</sup> It recorded charges of false doctrine and malfeasance against the president of that seminary.<sup>21</sup>

Bretscher played a significant role in the floor debate about seminary faculty resolution, number 3-09. Before Bretscher spoke, several had tried to stop, slow down, or change the resolution, but the convention moved steadily forward on it. Seminary president John H. Tietjen describes Bretscher's action this way.

Then Paul Bretscher, parish pastor from Valparaiso, Indiana, and son of a retired CS New Testament professor, made an impassioned plea that the faculty not be condemned without being heard. Bretscher pointed out that three representatives chosen by the faculty were among the convention's advisory delegates and that the convention had an obligation to listen to them at a time and in a setting that allowed for careful deliberation. With Bretscher making the motion, the convention agreed to suspend the standing rules to allow “not less than three hours” for discussion of Resolution 3-09 “at a more reasonable time,” giving the three faculty representatives an opportunity to speak, and granting me “speaking privileges equal to that of

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<sup>17</sup> *Convention Workbook*, 1973, 129 and 190, respectively.

<sup>18</sup> *Convention Workbook*, 1973, 129 and 190, respectively.

<sup>19</sup> *Proceedings of the Fiftieth Regular Convention of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod*, New Orleans, Louisiana, July 6-13, 1973, Resolution 3-01, 127-128.

<sup>20</sup> *Proceedings of the Convention*, 1973, Resolution 3-09, 133-139.

<sup>21</sup> *Proceedings of the Convention*, 1973, Resolutions 3-12 and 3-12A, 140-142.

the floor committee.” I was asked to meet with Bretscher and Niemoeller to work out the details. Perhaps it was still possible, I said to myself, to shut the buzz saw down.<sup>22</sup>

The convention responded favorably to Bretscher where it had not to others. The next day July 12, 1973, resolution 3-09 was the first order of business. Debate consumed the entire morning and continued after lunch. Eventually, it passed 574 to 451. Frederick W. Danker describes Bretcher’s further action as follows.

When the vote was finally taken on Resolution 3-09, it was clear that the Faculty’s representatives and Dr. Tietjen had not made a dent on anyone’s skull or heart. ...

In protest of the resolution, moderates encored a previous moment and moved forward to record their negative vote. While they were doing this, Dr. Paul Bretscher, pastor in Valparaiso, Indiana, read into the record a letter from his father, one of the most respected professors in the Synod’s history. To more fully appreciate this letter, it is necessary first to note that its writer, always soft spoken, had the reputation throughout his church of being non-judgmental and unacquainted with malice. These were his words according to *Forum*:

I am frightfully disturbed by the mad convention resolutions. If it wants to crush forever the one decisive living voice of Lutheranism (the St. Louis seminary), the convention is on the right track—the devil’s.<sup>23</sup>

## Response to Convention Actions

Bretscher responded to “A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles” in “A Statement and Confessional Lutheranism: The Doctrine of the Word of God,”<sup>24</sup> published in the monthly newsletter of the Lutheran Faculty Federation. Viewed as writing *per se*, Bretscher’s “A Statement” is excellent. It has all the traits of composition that we were taught in school. It is defined, well-ordered, clear, focused, concise, and coherent. Indeed, Scott R. Murray describes Bretscher as “a writer of extraordinary beauty.”<sup>25</sup>

The two positions were described in *Report of the Synodical President to the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod*. The *Report* defined the synodical position as follows:

The Scriptures are the only source and norm of doctrine in the church (formal principle), while the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the chief doctrine of the Bible and the heart of the Christian faith (material principle). The Gospel is a basic presupposition for the interpretation of Holy Scripture (that is, one approaches the Scriptures expecting to hear the Good News of Jesus Christ and to relate all that he reads there to Him), but it does not determine the meaning of the Biblical text. Whatever the text says is the meaning of the text and is to be accepted as such because it is the Word of God. The grammar, context, and literary form of a text determine if it

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<sup>22</sup> John H. Tietjen, *Memoirs in Exile: Confessional Hope and Institutional Conflict* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1990), 142.

<sup>23</sup> Frederick W. Danker, *No Room in the Brotherhood: The Preus-Otten Purge of Missouri* (St. Louis: Clayton Publishing House, Inc., 1977), 143.

<sup>24</sup> Paul G. Bretscher, “A Statement and confessional Lutheranism: the Doctrine of the Word of God,” *In Touch*, Lutheran Faculty Federation, 1974.

<sup>25</sup> Scott R. Murray, “Law and Gospel and the Doctrine of God: Missouri in the 1960s and 1970s,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 65, no. 2 (2001): 144 n. 67.

is to be understood literally or otherwise.<sup>26</sup>

The *Report* defined the “Other Position” as follows:

The Gospel is not only the center of the Christian faith but the criterion of acceptable Biblical interpretation. Thus no interpretation of a Biblical text need be rejected unless it harms the Gospel. Considerable latitude needs to be given in the interpretation of the Bible in a non-literal, non-historical way, so long as this does not affect the Gospel. For example, the fall of Adam and Eve or the world flood need not be accepted as factual so long as the doctrinal lesson of sin and grace is preserved in the interpretation.<sup>27</sup>

As we will see later, Bretscher’s 1975 book, *After the Purifying*, “is not just another event in the history of publishing.”<sup>28</sup> Its purpose as a refutation of major synodical resolutions arising from Seminec, its content, its form as the 32nd yearbook of the Lutheran Education Association, and its being sent to 8,000 educators in parochial schools in just its first printing indicate its significance. David P. Scaer sees it as a book-length sequel to “The Log in Your Own Eye.”<sup>29</sup>

Raymond Surburg wrote an article reviewing *After the Purifying*, setting out some of its errors.<sup>30</sup> Previously David P. Scaer had written an article titled “The Law Gospel Debate in the Missouri Synod.” The publication of *After the Purifying* prompted him to write a continuation, titled “The Law Gospel Debate in the Missouri Synod Continued.” He explained that it was necessary for him to write a refutation of *After the Purifying* even though Surburg already had done so.

In a previous issue of *The Springfielder*, my colleague Dr. Raymond Surburg prepared a review article on Paul Bretscher’s *After the Purifying*. It is not the custom of our journal to review books twice unless there is some special reason to do so. I believe that such a reason exists.<sup>31</sup>

## Suspension from Roster

Bretscher’s 1979 book, *The Sword of the Spirit*, prompted an opinion about its errors by the Department of Systematic Theology of Concordia Theological Seminary Fort Wayne, authored by Kurt Marquart.<sup>32</sup>

By publication of his 2001 book, *Christianity’s Unknown Gospel*, Bretscher finally revealed

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<sup>26</sup> Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod., and Jacob A. O. Preus. Report of the Synodical President to the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod: In Compliance with Resolution 2-28 of the 49th Regular Convention of the Synod, Held at Milwaukee, Wisconsin, July 9-16, 1971. St. Louis, MO: Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1972, 28.

<sup>27</sup> Jacob A. O. Preus. Report of Synodical, 28.

<sup>28</sup> David P. Scaer, “The Law Gospel Debate in the Missouri Synod Continued,” *The Springfielder* 40, no. 2 (April 1976): 107.

<sup>29</sup> Scaer, “Law Gospel Debate Continued,” 107.

<sup>30</sup> Raymond F. Surburg, “Paul Bretscher’s ‘After the Purifying:’ A Review Article,” *The Springfielder* 39, no. 4, (October 1975): 212-215.

<sup>31</sup> Scaer, “Law Gospel Debate Continued,” 107.

<sup>32</sup> Kurt Marquart, “Opinion of the Department of Systematic Theology, ‘Dr. Paul G. Bretscher’s “The Sword of the Spirit:”’ An Evaluation by the Department of Systematic Theology of Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana— June 1979),” *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, 43, no. 4 (1979): 327-337.



openly his second, anti-creedal formulation of gospel determinism. On its publication, his district president announced his suspension from the synodical roster of ordained clergy. By this action, the synod finally recognized what a church secretary had seen nearly 30 years earlier.<sup>33</sup>

For a person whose name is unknown even among LCMS pastors, Bretscher is significant. Bretscher is right in the action of the Law-Gospel debate, Seminex, and Gospel reductionism.

## **Lutheran Formulation**

### **Introduction**

In Bretscher's Lutheran formulation, we see a variant of gospel determinism that uses Luther's Catechisms as the source of our knowledge of the Gospel. Once we know the Gospel from the Catechisms, we can approach Scripture and all other matters of doctrine and practice. What we see in Scripture and what we adopt in practice will be determined ahead of time by the Gospel from the Catechisms.

### **Defending the Seminex Faculty**

When the 1973 synodical convention formally acted on the Seminex case, Bretscher responded with "The Log in Your Own Eye," "A Statement and Confessional Lutheranism: The Doctrine of the Word of God," and other writings. By 1975, he published a book length sequel to "The Log in Your Own Eye" in two editions of *After the Purifying*.

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<sup>33</sup> Bretscher's sermon for the Festival of the Reformation was mailed to St. Paul's Lutheran Church of Brookfield, Illinois in 1972. The secretary of St. Paul's, Mrs. R. Overholt (Audrey), responded to that sermon by letter to Bretscher dated September 21, 1972. Mrs. Overhold is direct and blunt.

Why can't you be man enough to really bring out the contemporary crisis to which you refer constantly – and name names – rather than the side references to:

- the "debilitating forces among us"
- "honored traditional interpretation" of the Bible
- don't "try to please God by being loyal to tradition and close ears to fresh words out of those same Scriptures"
- nice words about history – how they are a "distraction from and substitute for the very word of our living Lord"

I am amazed to read a sermon for the Festival of the Reformation to be given (hopefully not in many) Lutheran Churches and not read one word about SOLA SCRIPTURA.

If you wish to push the thought that today's traditionalists are Pharisees, why didn't you say so – also saying that you are against the historical, traditional, and formulated DOCTRINE of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. It is dishonest to build an army of straw-men in order to equate the TRUTH OF DOCTRINAL RESOLUTIONS with Pharisaical unawareness; and then to put FREEDOM FROM ANY LAWS AND CHRISTIANITY together.

Note the date, 1972, while Bretscher was a member of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations, before Seminex, and almost 30 years before Bretscher would be suspended for heresy effective December 15, 2001.

In “The Log in Your Own Eye,” Bretscher asked, “Are the Holy Scriptures our ‘only rule and norm’ according to the *formal* principle or according to the *material*? That is the critical question.”<sup>34</sup> He rated the errors of Liberalism as specks. He rated the errors of those who make Scripture authoritative on the formal or inspiration principle as “the log in your own eye.”

Bretscher believed the action of the synodical convention was an attempt to purify dross from the synod.<sup>35</sup> He believed that dross indeed would be removed. The synod indeed would be purified. But the dross, instead of being the error of Seminec, was the error of the official and traditional position of the synod.

To propagate his idea, Bretscher wrote the trim volume of 108 pages. This book was published in the form of the 32nd yearbook of the Lutheran Education Association. Its point of view is: what does Lutheran education need to be; how can Lutheran education be part of the refining fire to purify the dross from the synod. “Imagine the day when the fire ceases, the cleansing is finished, and all is at peace. What will Christian education be like then?”<sup>36</sup>

The publication of Bretscher’s new book is not just another event in the history of publishing. It is being provided to most parochial school teachers of the Missouri Synod through the Lutheran Education Association. A letter from Donald Kell, the association’s president, states that eight thousand copies have already been sold. A second printing might be necessary. Special rates are making the widest distribution possible.<sup>37</sup>

What is the dross, according to Bretscher? What is the Holy Spirit’s refining fire removing from the synod? The dross is about the Word of God. What is the Word? How is the Word interpreted?

Lutheran education must make it crystal clear what it means by the “Word of God.” The answer to that question is the burden of this book.<sup>38</sup>

## **Catechisms as Source of Knowledge**

Remember from the “Preview” the question:

The throbbing question gospel determinism raises is: **How do we know the Gospel?**

Bretscher answers this with the following proposition: We know the Gospel from Luther’s Catechisms. Once we know the Gospel from the Catechisms, then the Gospel determines everything else.

In other words, the Catechism rather than the Bible is the formal principle of Lutheran theology. Further, the Gospel as obtained from the Catechisms is the material principle. Knowing this before we even approach Scripture, we know already what Scripture must say. Whatever we encounter in Scripture that does not accord with what the Gospel determines

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<sup>34</sup> Bretscher, “Log in Your Own Eye,” 666.

<sup>35</sup> Paul G. Bretscher, *After the Purifying* (River Forest, IL: Lutheran Education Association, 1975), 7.

<sup>36</sup> Bretscher, *After the Purifying*, p. 9.

<sup>37</sup> Scaer, “Law Gospel Debate Continued,” 107.

<sup>38</sup> Paul W. Lange, Chairman of the L.E.A. Editorial Committee in the “Preface” to *After the Purifying*, v.

either is not the Word of God, though in Scripture, or is being misinterpreted.

Bretscher continually asserts that his position is based on and upholds the “Word of God,” but he emptied that phrase like a water glass when it is poured out and then filled the glass with “the Word” as revealed in the Catechism. He expositis by a chain of quotations from the Small and Large Catechisms how Luther identifies the “Word of God” with “the Gospel.”<sup>39</sup> The terms “Gospel” and “Word of God” are interchangeable.

It is clear from the Catechisms that in Luther’s mind “the Word of God” is not simply equivalent to the Bible. It stands rather for specific things that God is saying, which He expects us to believe in our hearts, concerning our relationship to him. . . . The Word of God proclaims grace and forgiveness in Christ to the Sinner. . . . This concept of “the Word of God” belongs to what the Confessions and Lutheran theology know as “the means of grace.”<sup>40</sup>

Notice too that for Bretscher, the class “Means of Grace” exists first, and then “Word of God” exists as an instance of that class. Anything that is not a Means of Grace is not allowed to be the Word of God. This implements the Barthian address to man, the encounter between the “Word of God” and man. Until the Scripture *does* something in man, it is not the Word of God.

Based on “the Word” redefined as something we know before we even come to Scripture, Scripture has authority not because the Holy Spirit inspired it, but only insofar as Scripture accords with “the Word” as identified from outside the Bible. This “Word” is the “Gospel” revealed in the Catechism, and thus the Gospel determines everything.

## Identifying the Dross

What is the dross that Bretscher sees being refined out of the synod?

According to this “Missouri” meaning, the Word of God is simply equated with the Holy Scriptures. Scripture is understood to be the Word of God, not by and for the sake of the Gospel, but in its formal totality as a Book. Indeed, when some brethren insist that Scripture is the Word of God according to the “means of grace” (Gospel) understanding of that term, without implying the totality of the Bible as a Book, they are charged with “Gospel Reductionism.” In the Synod’s tradition and piety, Scripture is the Word of God according to the meaning derived from the doctrine of inspiration and certified by Missouri’s understand of the sentence fragment, “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God” (2 Tim. 3:16).<sup>41</sup>

Bretscher says the synod’s official and traditional position is dross because,

In that case we have in mind the Bible, with God as the true Author of every word. Our concept of plenary divine authorship immediately reduces the Gospel to only a “part” of the Bible. The Bible now is *larger* than the Gospel. The Word of God is not only the Gospel and its articles, but also the rest of the Bible.<sup>42</sup>

And again,

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<sup>39</sup> Bretscher, *After the Purifying*, 13-14.

<sup>40</sup> Bretscher, *After the Purifying*, 14.

<sup>41</sup> Bretscher, *After the Purifying*, 14-15.

<sup>42</sup> Bretscher, *After the Purifying*, 17. (emphasis in original)

The dross, as we have suggested, is rooted in a confusion regarding the term “the Word of God.” In Biblical usage and in Luther’s Small Catechism, God’s Word means essentially the Gospel, conveyed to us in the form of words, by which the Holy Spirit draws us to the Father through Christ and makes us His own. In the prevailing theology of our Synod, however, the Word of God is taken to mean the Holy Scriptures. And Scripture is the Word of God, not because its Gospel is the Word of God, but because God is the true author of every word of the Bible. Anything less is rejected as “Gospel reductionism.” Indeed, if the entire Holy Scripture is not pure and inerrant gold by virtue of its inspired authorship, then even its Gospel ceases to be gold.

This is the rationale of the dross. It follows that critical study of the Bible is the great enemy. People who use or condone the historical-critical method do not respect the essential goldness of the Scriptures, namely, their plenary inspiration, inerrancy, and authority as God’s divinely authored Word. The issue in Synod’s controversy, the dross insists, is not the Gospel. It is rather the goldness of the inspired Bible.

To the dross the Scriptures are gold in their own right, quite apart from the gold of their Gospel. Inevitably, then, the Scriptures are regarded as broader than the Gospel. Beyond their content of Law and Gospel there remains “the rest of Scripture.” The Scriptures contain also “information about other matters.” Christians must also “accept matters taught in the Scriptures which are not a part of the Gospel.” Thus, in the mind of the dross, the message which Christians must accept to be true Christians, is *more* than Christ alone! It is more than “the Gospel of the gracious justification of the sinner through faith in Jesus Christ.” “Anything and everything that the Scriptures teach” now belongs to our Synod’s faith and confession.<sup>43</sup>

### **Schizophrenia about “the Word”**

So there are two significantly different meanings of the term “Word of God,” Bretscher says, and when members of synod affirm the authority of the Word of God, there are two different groups of members who both believe they affirm the Word, but what they are affirming really is two different things.<sup>44</sup>

We used the term “the Word of God” to mean the Gospel, but also to mean the inspired Scriptures. In our theology we designated the Gospel as the “material principle” and the Scriptures as the “formal principle,” and thought that these terms defined and assured the integrality of the two. An uneasy tension persisted, however, and was never really resolved.<sup>45</sup>

At a practical level, besides there being two pastorates, there are two congregations in many congregations. When a congregation sings hymns such as, “God’s Word is our great heritage,” one congregation is singing about one sense of the “Word of God” and another congregation in the same pews is singing about another sense of it. There is less synod — walking together — among pastors and parishioners than we commonly suppose.

In *The Sword of the Spirit*, Bretscher expressed the split in stark terms:

We in the Missouri Synod have been trying to carry two incompatible “theologies” at the same time. Our behaviour, in consequence, has been what psychologists would call schizophrenic,

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<sup>43</sup> Bretscher, *After the Purifying*, 62-63.

<sup>44</sup> Bretscher, *After the Purifying*, 15-16.

<sup>45</sup> Bretscher, *After the Purifying*, 98.

and self-destructive.<sup>46</sup>

As David P. Scaer says:

Perhaps Lutheran Orthodoxy has unwittingly prepared the way for Lutheran Barthianism. Both types of theology put the stress on the “Word.” With what seemed to be the same flag for the two opposing sides, no wonder the soldiers became confused.<sup>47</sup>

Applied to Lutheran education, Bretscher says the two different ideas of “Word of God” meant that there could be no unified approach. He cites a decade-long effort of the Board of Parish Education to formulate a clear and unified philosophy. Acknowledging that those who worked on it were many, able, and dedicated, he says the effort was doomed to inevitable futility.

In the mind of Synod the authority of Scripture was a function not of the Gospel, but of its verbal and plenary inspiration. Thus the dross . . . was unwittingly mixed and equated with the gold of the Gospel. Its effect was to set Lutheran education on two foundations, each leading to its own set of consequences. There was no way a single and coherent “philosophy” could do equal justice to both.<sup>48</sup>

If all this was too technical for many, though they were educators, *After the Purifying* was accompanied by a study guide.

Several cartoons in the guide show the difference between conservative and moderate positions in the Missouri Synod. One cartoon character says, “Because I believe the Bible is inspired, I Believe the Gospel.” The other says in return, “Because I believe the Gospel, I believe the Bible is inspired.”<sup>49</sup>

### **Scripture as Stumbling Block**

Bretscher develops a severe critique against stumbling blocks to faith. Two stumbling blocks are tradition and institutional authority. As bad as those are, Bretscher identifies an even worse third stumbling block: Scripture. “But the dross is still not satisfied. It adds still another stumbling block, *the Scriptures!*”<sup>50</sup> He recalls the misuse of Moses by the Pharisees and likens the synod’s doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture to the pharisaical error. “The parallel to our own situation seems painfully close.”<sup>51</sup> Finally, as stumbling blocks go, the synod adds a fourth, repression. As an example of repression, he cites doctrinal review, putting that phrase in scare quotation marks.<sup>52</sup> Doctrinal review is cast as pharisaical repression that causes the people to stumble.

But take heart, for Bretscher says, “It is different now. The day of reckoning has come. The

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<sup>46</sup> Paul G. Bretscher, *The Sword of the Spirit* (St. Louis: Evangelicals in Mission, 1979), 9.

<sup>47</sup> Scaer, “Law Gospel Debate,” 164.

<sup>48</sup> Bretscher, *After the Purifying*, 97.

<sup>49</sup> Scaer, “Law Gospel Debate Continued,” 116-117 n. 6a.

<sup>50</sup> Bretscher, *After the Purifying*, 66. (emphasis in original)

<sup>51</sup> Bretscher, *After the Purifying*, 67.

<sup>52</sup> Bretscher, *After the Purifying*, 67.

Lord's fire is upon us."<sup>53</sup> "After the purifying 'the Word of God' will have one meaning for us, and not two."<sup>54</sup> "When the dross has been left behind, Lutheran education will hold to 'the Word of God' in a single meaning of that phrase."<sup>55</sup>

We shall unfold the thesis that the authentic meaning of the phrase "the Word of God" is that found in Luther's Catechisms. The Spirit speaks the Word of God's grace to our hearts out of the cross of Christ. By means of that Word He works the miracle of faith. The closest synonym for "the Word of God" is "the Gospel" in all its senses, including also the antithetical "Law." We shall unfold its content extensively in the next chapter.

Wherever Scripture itself uses the term "the Word of God" or parallel expressions, the content of His Word is consistently God's communication of Law or Grace to the hearts of men. We honor Scripture as our "only rule and norm" when we take the trouble to examine its texts in order to see what the Scriptures themselves have in mind when they speak of "the Word." We honor the Confessions when we capture and make use of their insight that the Gospel of justification by faith alone is the key which opens to us the entire Holy Scriptures.

The Word of God, meaning Christ and the Gospel which proclaims Him, is the true glory and authority of the Bible. For the sake of that message it is proper to call the Holy Scriptures "the Word of God." Biblical texts ascribe to this Law-Gospel "Word of God" many precious qualities. They declare that God speaks the truth and does not lie, that His Word is clear, a light to our path, that His Word is powerful, unique, abiding, alive and spirited.

But if these qualities are ascribed to the Scriptures simply as inspired Book, divinely authored, apart from and larger than the Word of God as Gospel, then they are misapplied. . . .<sup>56</sup>

What is the result of all this for Lutheran education?

The authority of Scripture consists in nothing else than the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ inherent in the golden Gospel which proclaims Him to our hearts. Once the dross is left behind, that authority will be Lutheran education's single presupposition for the study of the Bible.<sup>57</sup>

With that single, deterministic presupposition, there can be no such thing as doctrinal discipline. "Bretscher argued that the gospel should keep Christian teachers from undergoing doctrinal discipline. Such discipline smacked of rationalism and unfaith."<sup>58</sup>

As a momentary digression, Bretscher made a similar argument about congregations.

Paul Bretscher argued that the gospel itself was the norm for faith and practice and that law had no place here norming the practice of a gospel-centered church. He complained of the abuse of the synod's constitution, which enjoined unity in faith and practice in Article II.<sup>59</sup>

Remember from the preview of gospel determinism that it has two elements.

1. We know the Gospel.

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<sup>53</sup> Bretscher, *After the Purifying*, 69.

<sup>54</sup> Bretscher, *After the Purifying*, 18.

<sup>55</sup> Bretscher, *After the Purifying*, 77.

<sup>56</sup> Bretscher, *After the Purifying*, 18-19.

<sup>57</sup> Bretscher, *After the Purifying*, 73.

<sup>58</sup> Murray, "Law and Gospel," 142.

<sup>59</sup> Murray, "Law and Gospel," 143.

## 2. Gospel determines everything.

The elements are simple. Together they are total. The Gospel rules all.

We see in Bretscher's knowledge of the Gospel from the Catechism, and this knowledge being the single presupposition for the study of the Bible a case of gospel determinism. The structure of gospel determinism is there. In the first element, he fills the structure with knowledge of the Gospel from the Catechism. In the second element, this pre-knowledge foreordains what we will let our study of Scripture discover in God's Word.

### **Barthiansim**

In the Preview of gospel determinism we saw, "gospel determinism is like a second story, an upper floor of a house with no ground floor. Our knowledge of the Gospel just floats in the air without Scripture as its ground." Bretscher recounts this view being present expressly in his time. He says those who identified the "Word of God" as the Gospel,

were learning what it means to stand on the Word of divine promise in *the Gospel* as the one, sure, and unshakeable foundation even of the Bible! Yet in the eyes of brothers who regarded *the inspired Bible* as the foundation of all faith and theology, this "Gospel" without the undergirding of the Bible would seem to be pure human speculation, detached from history, drawn out of "thin air," and *no foundation at all!*<sup>60</sup>

Bretscher sets Christ as the Word and Scripture as the Word against each other. He sets the Gospel as the Word and Scripture as the Word against each other. Kurt Marquart summarized these false antitheses on behalf of the Department of Systematic Theology of Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, as follows:

Dr. Bretscher's essay abounds in false antitheses. Complementary aspects of the truth are set in opposition to each other, with disastrous consequences. . . . This mischievous tearing asunder of what God has joined together appears to be inspired by a tendency to denigrate concrete outward particulars in favor of undefined and undefinable Spirit-absolutes. This spiritualizing tendency – most clearly evident in the fateful cleavage between historical fact and theological faith (*After the Purifying*, pp. 86-87) – runs directly counter to the central biblical reality of the Incarnation itself. It reveals a mode of thought which is typical not of Lutheran realism, but of Docetism, Nestorianism, Calvinism (*finitum non capax infiniti*), and Barthianism. It is a species of enthusiasm.<sup>61</sup>

David P. Scaer shares the evaluation that Bretscher has adopted and adapted Barthianism. He says,

Essential to the theology of the very influential Swiss theologian Karl Barth was a peculiar understanding of a concept called "the Word of God," which was defined as God's address to men. Barth's concept of "the Word of God" involved a vertical invasion of God into our world. The Bible was not equated with "the Word of God" but could provide a place where the "the Word of God" could become active, under the right circumstances, in the lives of men. It is hard

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<sup>60</sup> Bretscher, *After the Purifying*, 102. (emphasis in original)

<sup>61</sup> Marquart, "Opinion of the Department," 334. In accord, "The offer of a choice between Christ and the bible is not only misleading--it is downright deceptive. It is certainly not suggested by the Scriptures themselves. . . . No real choice can ever be made between Christ and the Bible, simply because the Bible centers in Christ and he submits himself totally to it." Scaer, "Law Gospel Debate," 160.

not to conclude that Bretscher has adopted this totally false and erroneous Barthian view of “the Word of God” and dressed it up in traditional Lutheran terminology to make it digestible for Missourian palates. Bretscher’s case rests on his definition of “the Word of God”; the most common synonym is “Gospel.”<sup>62</sup>

Bretscher’s books *After the Purifying* and *Christianity’s Unknown Gospel* both describe and promote the Barthian vertical invasion of the horizontal by the “Word of God” and illustrate it with accompanying graphical images.

“Barth cast a long shadow in the Missouri Synod during the 1960s and 1970s.”<sup>63</sup>

## **Anti-Creedal Formulation**

### **Introduction**

In Bretscher’s anti-creedal formulation, we see a variant of gospel determinism that uses the words “You are my Son” as the source of our knowledge of the Gospel. These words are covenantal and they confer sonship on Jesus and on us. Once we know the Gospel as covenant-sonship, we can approach Scripture and all other matters of doctrine and practice. What we see in Scripture and what we adopt in practice will be determined ahead of time by the Gospel of the covenant-word.

### **Bretcher’s Barthian Experience**

In *Christianity’s Unknown Gospel*,<sup>64</sup> Bretscher describes his own Barthian experience. This experience germinated his gospel determinism. It — his experience — provided him knowledge of the Gospel. Once he had this knowledge, the Gospel determined everything.

This Gospel had been lost not long after the death of the apostles. Consequently, the Gospel had been unknown for most of Christian history. Creedal Christianity had usurped the true Gospel’s place. Through his Barthian experience, Bretscher recovered the unknown Gospel. This Gospel rejects creedal Christianity thoroughly.

The experience happened in 1957. Bretscher was in his ninth year of pastoral ministry. Epiphany fell on a Sunday. He preached on the Gospel text in Matthew about the Baptism of Jesus. He was struggling with the text. During preparation, suddenly the words, “You are my beloved Son,” sounded as if from heaven directly and personally to him.<sup>65</sup> He believed he experienced the same thing Jesus did when Jesus heard those words. In Barthian mode, Bretscher experienced those words as an address to Paul Bretscher and hence as the “Word of God.”

Bretscher heard a Gospel of covenant-sonship. The Gospel is the Word of God that confers sonship. Sonship itself entails every blessing. With every blessing, the Gospel-word of

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<sup>62</sup> Scaer., “Law Gospel Debate Continued,” 108.

<sup>63</sup> Murray, “Law and Gospel,” 140.

<sup>64</sup> Paul G. Bretscher, *Christianity’s Unknown Gospel* (Valparaiso, IN: Dove Group, Inc. 2001).

<sup>65</sup> Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 10.



covenant-sonship accomplishes salvation before and without the cross of Christ. In this Gospel, no sacrifice for sin is needed. Salvation is bloodless.

Jesus was not unique. He was an instance of the case of all Christians. He was only a man. This is good news because we, as only men, can experience the same thing Jesus did. The covenant sonship given in those words grants salvation apart from any incarnation of deity in the flesh, apart from any atoning sacrifice on the cross, and apart from any justification that credits the righteousness of Christ to us. “That *revealed-gospel* is the founding principle of this book. All else flows from it.”<sup>66</sup>

Once Bretscher had this covenant-sonship principle of the Gospel, then the word Gospel means covenant-sonship wherever we see it in Scripture. Commencing on the first page of the first chapter, Bretscher quotes Jesus as he opens his public preaching following the imprisonment of John, “Repent and believe the gospel.” “What gospel?” Bretscher asks. “It had to be of a *sonship*, intended by God for all his people.”<sup>67</sup>

No matter where we go in Scripture or the Confessions, this square peg of “sonship-gospel” will be sledge-hammered into all the round holes. Bretscher took being called God’s beloved son “with whom I am well pleased” as the grant of salvation directly at the point of the Word addressing him and having the effect of faith. One with whom God is pleased must be justified. Rather than seeing Christ as the one who has righteousness that his Father could declare and that He could bestow on us, he sees righteousness being granted to Christ by covenant at his Baptism.

## **Publication and Suspension**

The date of the Barthian experience was 1957. That was long before the disclosure of it by the publication of *Christianity’s Unknown Gospel* in 2001. The experience happened just before Bretscher became a professor at Valparaiso and 10 years before he became a member of the LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations.

The dust jacket explains how the book was published.

Realizing that no church or scholarly house can publish a work so out of step with orthodox doctrine, and yet of faith, a number of people who have known and trusted Pastor Bretscher’s ministry through the years took on the mission of preserving and making known “Christianity’s unknown gospel.” In 2000 they organized the Dove Group, Inc., registered in the State of Indiana as a non-profit corporation, to publish and disseminate this book.

In the foreword, Theodore N. Strelow says, “If the original gospel had prevailed unobscured, Christianity would not have separated from Judaism or from Mohammed.”<sup>68</sup> Strelow says, “Our heavenly Father is merciful and forgiving by self-definition, [so] that he does not need or require an atoning sacrifice to appease his wrath.”<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 10. (emphasis in original)

<sup>67</sup> Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 13.

<sup>68</sup> Theodore N. Strelow, Foreword in Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 1.

<sup>69</sup> Strelow in Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 3.

In the Prologue, Bretscher abolishes the Gospel, saying:

Christianity fell victim very early to another weed. Scholars of Greek culture, not knowing covenant-sonship, took “son of God” for Jesus in their sacred documents to mean incarnate-deity. Miracle stories seemed to confirm it. From this they crafted a theologic *about* Jesus. He was God-incarnate, second person of a Trinity, his death God’s atoning sacrifice for the sin of the world, his resurrection the bodily proof of it all.<sup>70</sup>

The book resulted in Bretscher being suspended from the roster of the Missouri Synod. On January 8, 2002, Rev. Timothy Sims, District President of the Indiana District was reported as saying Bretscher’s doctrines varied from the synod on:<sup>71</sup>

- The inspiration and authority of Scripture
- The divinity of Christ
- The bodily resurrection of Christ
- The Trinity

Bretscher denied the incarnation of God in Christ, the bodily resurrection of Christ, and the Trinity while claiming to believe the Gospel. He denied these doctrines because the Gospel does not need them and, on the contrary, the Gospel determines that they are wrong. Besides the heresies mentioned by Sims, one’s own reading of the book encounters a complete denial of creedal Christianity. Carried out, this is what gospel determinism does. Give Bretscher credit for facing the implications of his premises.

Gospel determinism is able to set us free from the slavery of “Creedal Christianity” where the creeds “harness majority power once again to enforce the falsity and keep God’s people enslaved” as Pharaoh had enslaved the Hebrews.<sup>72</sup>

### **Principle of Coherence, Text Criticism, and Hermeneutics**

How does Bretscher get from the Barthian experience and the Gospel of covenant-sonship to a thorough rejection of creedal Christianity? What are the steps or the nuts and bolts of how this happens?

In overview, Bretscher’s process is:

- Establish how the Gospels were formed.
- Apply principle of coherence.
  - Text criticism of Scripture.
  - Metaphorical hermeneutic.

To trace the process, first we will look at Bretscher’s explanation of how the Gospels of the New Testament were formed.

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<sup>70</sup> Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 6. (emphasis in original)

<sup>71</sup> Brian Williams, “Church suspends pastor over book: Retired Immanuel Lutheran pastor to appeal decision by Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod leaders,” *The Northwest Indiana Times*, January 8, 2002.

<sup>72</sup> Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 21.

Once that is established, Bretscher applies a principle of coherence, meaning, coherence to the Gospel of covenant-sonship. This principle governs text criticism of Scripture. It sifts authentic and corrupt text. This sifting deals with source fragments, compilers of source fragments, compiler injections, and copyist interpolations.

After text criticism removes corruptions, the principle of coherence governs the interpretation of the remaining text. A metaphorical hermeneutic repeatedly enforces the discovery of the pre-known Gospel everywhere in Scripture. Scripture has authority because the pre-known Gospel is found in it.

“The Gospels were formed from fragment-libraries of random Jesus-memory.”<sup>73</sup> Various witnesses wrote down fragments. Collections of fragments grew. People organized the fragments into a somewhat smooth but still jumpy order.<sup>74</sup> Once these assemblages were more or less complete, then the era of copying began. The principle of Deuteronomy 4:2, 12:32, “You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it,” was not followed:

That principle failed as the Gospels were produced. Compilers, who arranged the fragment-memories into a progressive story on a scroll, supplied transitions in some cases. It failed also when copies were made. Interpolations at this level may be casual, but can also be substantive.<sup>75</sup>

The covenant-sonship Gospel survived while the apostles were alive and the original fragment-libraries from which the New Testament was being formed still existed. When the apostles died and the original fragment-libraries were destroyed, copyists gained control. They corrupted the text to falsify a doctrine of Christ’s deity. The church fell from the covenant-word to the documentary-word.<sup>76</sup>

The sonship-gospel determines the true text of the New Testament. Interpolations “are detectable by the principle of coherence (Jesus’ own sonship-gospel).”<sup>77</sup> The process involves firstly understanding the meaning of the Gospel and the meaning of the corruptions of the copyists. By those meanings, the text can be critiqued. The critique sifts the text into the authentic Word of God and the corrupted interpolations of copyists.

As a quick illustration, see how Bretscher denies the deity of Christ based on covenant-sonship. Bretscher examines usage of the phrase “my son” in the Old Testament. “This was covenant-language! Jesus must have heard it so! In that case, it cannot have meant ‘deity’!”<sup>78</sup>

What of testimonies concerning Jesus’ “mighty works” or “signs and wonders” then? Creedal Christianity accounts for these by assuming that the name “my beloved son” or “son of God” for Jesus means deity, and that the power to do “miracles” is evidence of his deity. My principle of coherence does not allow this explanation, however. The name “son of God” for Jesus is a language of covenant, not of deity. The gospel Jesus preached and lived is the LORD’S covenant-

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<sup>73</sup> Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 284.

<sup>74</sup> Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 65-76.

<sup>75</sup> Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 78.

<sup>76</sup> Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 82-83.

<sup>77</sup> Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 78.

<sup>78</sup> Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 17.

word to his people. Any works of power told in the preserved memory must have been of his gospel, not of his omnipotent deity, because there was no such thing. This is my premise, my principle of coherence.<sup>79</sup>

Notice the overt — blatant — gospel determinism. “My principle of coherence does not allow this explanation.” The Gospel does not allow the deity of Christ or any scriptural evidence of it such as miracles, signs, or wonders.

Notice also what this does to Christ. Jesus did not do miracles. The Gospel did.

Based on this principle of pre-determining what God is allowed to say in Scripture, Bretscher delineates various modes of interpolation and identifies many errors in the Gospel texts.<sup>80</sup> For example, one section captioned “Deity Inferences” exposes many interpolations falsely added by copyists to support the deity of Christ.<sup>81</sup> “Jesus exhibits his glory as the son of God by knowing everything in advance and by his almighty power.”<sup>82</sup> In another extended example about the raising of Lazarus from the dead, Bretscher exposes no less than 21 fraudulent copyist interpolations that he says they made to forge a false doctrine of the deity of Christ.<sup>83</sup> He exposes no less than 12 “corruptions in the extant text of John 6 [that] need to be detected and set aside,”<sup>84</sup> because they show a false deity of Christ contrary to the covenant-sonship Gospel.

Apparently, Bretscher does not recognize<sup>85</sup> the circularity of his theory. He begins with the words of the Father to Jesus in his Baptism. From those words he generates his covenant-sonship Gospel. Then he uses that Gospel to edit the text and determine which words are authentic. For example, he can weed out some of Jesus’ words on the cross. He never seems to recognize the issue: if you can weed out some of the words, then how do you know that the words on which you base it all, the words of the Father at Jesus’s Baptism, are not among those that need to be weeded out?

## Prologue of John

The prologue of John’s Gospel (1:1-18) is an important text revealing the incarnation of the Second Person of the Trinity in Jesus. Therefore it receives repeated critique in Bretscher’s gospel determinism. Take three examples.

The compiler who translated each item into Greek chose this one to begin his scroll. “In the beginning was the word,” it said. Copyists, not knowing “the word” in its covenant sense, took it to mean the pre-incarnate deity of Jesus. They interpolated clarifications then which supported their misconception. ... Pronominal references should say “it,” not “him.” Jesus as “the word made body” does not enter John’s text until verse 14. Any shift from it to him prior to this must

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<sup>79</sup> Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 128-129.

<sup>80</sup> Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 78-82.

<sup>81</sup> Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 80-82.

<sup>82</sup> Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 138.

<sup>83</sup> Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 138-139.

<sup>84</sup> Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 187.

<sup>85</sup> Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 87-89.

have been from copyists. ... The issue is God's word and the God who speaks it. From the very beginning God by his word created everything that exists. By his word he created John, and Jesus, and the apostles, and the young church.<sup>86</sup>

Again,

Copyists corrupted John's prologue very early. Not knowing "the word" as God's covenant-revelation to Israel, driven also by the assumption that "son of God" for Jesus meant deity-incarnate, they mysticized "the word" into a pre-existent deity. Thus a copyist felt it necessary to explain, "and God was the word; he was in the beginning with God." "Light" and "life" were not of the covenant-word but of the mysticized pre-existent Jesus. That made a reminder of John's inferiority necessary; "He was not the light, but came to bear witness to the light." Since "word" and "light" were synonymous with Jesus' pre-existent deity, another reminder was in order: "and the world was made through him." Ignorance and unbelief were perceived as directed not to "the word," but to Jesus. "The world knew *him* not." "His own people received *him* not." "As many as received *him*."

This misunderstanding detached "the word made body" from "the glory of grace and truth" in Jesus' serving to death, then attached it instead to the glory of his deity-incarnate as told in the birth narratives. On that assumption a copyist, intent again on rankings, paraphrased a later testimony of John, "He must increase but I must decrease," into "John bore witness to him and cried out, saying, 'This was he of whom I said, the one coming after me ranks before me, for he was before me.'" Jesus came *after* John in time but was *before* him as "deity." Jn 3:30;1:15 Another copyist entered this "of whom I said" saying into John's actual preaching. Jn 1:30

Again,

It could hardly have happened otherwise, for Greek scholarship had no way of knowing covenant-meanings. Yet the loss was grievous. John's memoir contrasted the fullness of "the word made body" with the *emptiness* of temple tradition and law. Christianity, not knowing the fullness either, suffered a deprivation and emptiness no less grievous.<sup>87</sup>

## Virgin Birth

As with the prologue of John, the principle of coherence by which the Gospel determines what God is allowed to say in Scripture must sift all texts that reveal the virgin birth of Jesus.

The Gospel of covenant-sonship determines that Jesus need not and must not be born of a virgin. Instead, virgin just means starting over with Mary, cut off from what went before. She is virgin only in that sense. Ahaz and Israel had considered themselves Immanuel, God with Us, but righteousness was not coming through them because they rejected the covenant-sonship Word of God. So the Lord would cut off Israel and start over afresh through a second woman, Mary. Starting afresh with her is the virginity of what the Lord is doing in the birth of Jesus.

To make this work, the covenant-sonship Gospel demands that a great mass of material in the Gospel accounts be reworked. Bretscher deems dozens of features in the story of Jesus to be copyist interpolations and metaphors. He does this with the annunciation, betrothal of Mary to Joseph, Zachariah and Elizabeth, Mary and Elizabeth, the star, Bethlehem, Rachel

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<sup>86</sup> Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 292-293.

<sup>87</sup> Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 296.

weeping, Egypt, Nazareth, Simeon, Anna, and Jesus in the temple.<sup>88</sup>

Bretscher's reworking of the story consumes many pages. Take a couple examples. First, an example about the decree of Caesar Augustus.

Luke's need for "an orderly account" posed a problem, however. He had written that Mary and Joseph were of Nazareth in Galilee. How could Jesus have been born in Bethlehem, then? They must have journeyed there. But why? To keep his narrative flowing, Luke invoked a census-edict of Caesar Augustus in the era of Quirinius, governor of Syria. "Everyone to his own city," as he told it, required Joseph, descended from David, to go to Bethlehem and Mary with him—she only "betrothed" to him. Everywhere else in the Bible "the city of David" is Jerusalem, but for Luke it is Bethlehem. Thus his patched account—no room, manger, angels, shepherds—obscures all sense of metaphor. A Greek copyist wondered who might have remembered and reported all this. Borrowing from the incident of Jesus as a twelve-year-old, he attributed it to Mary's memory. "But Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart." Lk 2:19, 51<sup>89</sup>

He would cut the "house of David" off and start over with a woman, as in the garden of old. Gen 3:15 By a virgin and a son she bore, he would revive his people's "enmity" against their real enemy, the lying snake. "Therefore the LORD himself will give you a sign. Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel." Is 7:14; Mt 1:23<sup>90</sup>

Second, an example about Simeon. "Simon understood the 'virgin' prophesy from Isaiah as a metaphor of 'cutting off and starting over.'"<sup>91</sup>

In transcribing this, Luke understood Simeon to have taken up in his arms the literal baby, however. In that case, his parents must have brought him to the temple. To keep his "orderly account" flowing, Luke told of Jesus' circumcision and naming on the eighth day (parallel to what had been written of John), then had his parents observe the law of purification in the temple thirty-three days later. Lev 12:2-4 His memory-fragment on the long-widowed Anna could follow. The young church in Judea cherished her as an enthusiastic "prophetess" for Jesus within the temple.

Having completed this group of entries in a sequence that seemed reasonable, Luke had the holy family return home to Nazareth.

Copyist Interpolations. A copyist misread Simeon's song, "Lord, now let your servant depart in peace according to your word." Not knowing "the covenant-word" and its recovery, he supplied what God had said to the aging Simeon: "It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he should not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ." To get Jesus' parents back into the scene, he divided the song and interpolated, "And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him; and Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, 'and a sword will pierce your own soul also.'" This "piercing" predicted her grief at the cross. Jn 19:37; Zech 12:10<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 301-314.

<sup>89</sup> Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 311-312.

<sup>90</sup> Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 302.

<sup>91</sup> Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 302.

<sup>92</sup> Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 312-313.

## Jesus and John the Baptist

One of the consequences of Jesus lacking deity is that Jesus supposedly needed to and did ask questions of John.<sup>93</sup> Another is that Jesus needed to be baptized by John. For Bretscher, John's words, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me" are a false copyist's interpolation.<sup>94</sup> "Similar concern to rank Jesus above the Baptist corrupts the prologue of John's Gospel."<sup>95</sup>

## Transfiguration and Other Mountain Stories

For Bretscher, the transfiguration of Jesus on a mountain and his conversation with Moses and Christ did not happen as the Gospels relate. It is a post-resurrection event. The collators of the story fragments got this fragment into a wrong sequence when copying from the fragment to a scroll. Misplacing it as a pre-crucifixion event<sup>96</sup> created problems and copyists tried to fix them.

But more importantly, the false Gospel of Christ's deity forced many forgeries in the text. "Christianity's early and controlling assumption that 'son of God' for Jesus means deity was tragic. It took Jesus' own gospel out of circulation and substituted a counterfeit."<sup>97</sup> The effect of this on the transfiguration is that "Its pristine form is preserved in 2 Peter, not the Gospels."<sup>98</sup> In the original, there is no appearance of Moses and Elijah. "Moses and Elijah are meaningful additions to the original."<sup>99</sup> Problems thus produced by the resulting mangled text confused copyists.

Copyists, not grasping what Peter meant, attribute their ignorance to him. Thus, Luke has the entry "not knowing what he said," and Mark "he did not know what to say." That Moses and Elijah talked with Jesus about his coming death is likewise a copyist's speculation.<sup>100</sup>

But it is not the church that forced counterfeit proof of deity into the text. It is Bretscher's gospel determinism that is slicing up the text like coleslaw to force his sonship-gospel onto Scripture. The sonship-gospel determines that the event should end with the declaration from heaven of Jesus' sonship, so it truncates everything after that and excises anything before that which no longer fits.

Peter's original witness ended appropriately with the declaration from heaven. The additions in Matthew of the disciples' falling on their faces in fear and "Jesus' bidding them rise," is a copyist's enhancement. Coming down from the mountain is a transition entered by compilers who, not recognizing the metaphor, took the mountain as literal geography.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 104-105.

<sup>94</sup> Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 105.

<sup>95</sup> Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 105.

<sup>96</sup> Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 213.

<sup>97</sup> Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 212.

<sup>98</sup> Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 212.

<sup>99</sup> Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 213.

<sup>100</sup> Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 214.

<sup>101</sup> Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 214.

The determinism of the sonship-gospel drives not only text criticism that brands much of the text as counterfeit, but it foists onto the remaining text a metaphorical hermeneutic. None of this really happened. It is all just among many instances of “mountain-metaphor.”<sup>102</sup> Gospel determinism decides in advance what could be true, punches holes in the wall by text criticism to force that truth, and then putties in the holes with a hermeneutic of metaphor.

### **Storm Stories, Healing Stories, Etc.**

Bretscher repeats that demolition-and-patch-up procedure — demotion by gospel-determined text criticism and patch-up by gospel-determined metaphorical hermeneutic — not only on a number of other “mountain-metaphors,” but also on “storm stories,” “lake stories,” “fishing stories,” “healing stories,” and “mission stories.”<sup>103</sup> The procedure is necessary to make Scripture witness to the pre-known covenant-sonship Gospel. The Gospel determines in advance that Scripture must witness to this. Nothing that is not Gospel can be the “Word of God” even if it is in the written Word. Covenant-sonship rules out the deity of Christ. All the evidences of deity in the Gospel text must be branded as inauthentic by text criticism. The holes left by that demolition patched by metaphor.

In Bretscher’s view, Jesus did not direct a great catch of fish. He did not walk on the sea. He did not calm a storm at sea. He did not heal a paralytic. He did not heal at the pool of Bethesda. He did not raise from the dead the young man at Nain. He did not raise the daughter of Jairus. On the way to raise Jairus’ daughter, He did not heal the hemorrhage of the woman who touched the hem of his garment. He did not deliver the Canaanite daughter from demon possession. He did not cleanse the Samaritan leper. He did not possess knowledge of the life of the woman at the well in Samaria. He did not give sight to a blind man. He did not see Nathanael under the fig tree.<sup>104</sup> And so on, and so on, and so on.<sup>105</sup>

The later church erroneously,

took metaphor to be literal-visible reality. How could Jesus do such wonders? He was God! Why did he do them? To demonstrate himself so. When Jesus’ covenant-sonship became unknown, his covenant-gospel was lost with it.<sup>106</sup>

### **Parables**

The parables of Jesus also receive a new interpretation. Take, for example, the parable of the mustard seed. “His covenant-name, ‘my beloved son,’ has grown like a mustard-seed into the full tree.”<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 212.

<sup>103</sup> Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 211-230.

<sup>104</sup> Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 331.

<sup>105</sup> Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 211-230, 236.

<sup>106</sup> Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 214.

<sup>107</sup> Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 233.



## Sacrifice and Atonement

Because gospel determinism denies the sacrifice of Christ as our atonement, it must do something with the Levitical sacrifices. Otherwise, how can it explain that God required the Hebrews to observe the sacrifices for hundreds of years only to finally say, “Never mind. Sacrifice really has nothing to do with salvation.”

Gospel determinism deals with that history by simply erasing it, saying the priestly scribes forged it in Moses’ hand. “Priestly scribes, descendants of Aaron, wrote detailed laws of sacrifice, as from the Lord, into documents they attributed to Moses.”<sup>108</sup>

## Sacrament of the Altar

Bretscher says the accounts of Jesus’ institution of the Sacrament of the Altar in the upper room are loaded with inauthentic later additions. “Implications perceived later were retrojected into the memory of the meal itself.”<sup>109</sup>

Then there is “the blood.” Preserved manuscripts of Luke suggest that this was not in the original event, but only the bread, of which Jesus said, “This is my body.” Lk 22:19a “Given for you, ... in remembrance of me, ... the new covenant in my blood” — all this was written into Luke’s text later.<sup>110</sup>

When:

- A. We know the Gospel, and the covenant-gospel locates the gospel in the covenant-sonship and the covenant-name, and
- B. The Gospel determines everything else,

Then:

- C. Luke’s account locating the covenant in the blood of Christ is inadmissible.

Though contained in Scripture, the Gospel determines that it just can’t be God’s Word. The words, “Likewise He also took the cup after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you,’” must have been injected later.

While claiming to be a moderate form of historical-criticism of the text, this is not moderate and does not criticize the text on the basis of history. It criticizes history first, on the basis of a presupposition about what the Gospel is allowed to be, changes the history of the upper room, and then pretends to critique Scripture, Christ, the atonement, and the Sacrament on the basis of a “history” that is merely so-called. Bretscher has made himself an author of history and scripture.

## Words on the Cross

Gospel determinism does not need history. It does not need the biography of Jesus. It can put our own words into Jesus’ mouth so long as the words we invent convey the Gospel we

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<sup>108</sup> Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 43.

<sup>109</sup> Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 245.

<sup>110</sup> Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 245.

know already before we hear Jesus' own words.

For example, the words of Jesus on the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do," need not be words that Jesus actually said. We can add them into the text of Luke because they are Gospel.

Did Jesus actually utter this [**"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."**] aloud on the cross, so that a witness heard and reported it? Or might some witness, in his own telling of the passion history, have had reason to put this saying into his mouth? Assuming the latter, a subsequent level of the history needs to be imagined. Why might someone, in telling Jesus' passion, have wanted to report Jesus as saying this? Perhaps a shamed disciple perceived himself among those who did "not know what they were doing," yet came to know how Jesus loved and forgave him in the dark hour of his dying. How could he testify to this briefly and yet unmistakably, so that others who "did not know what they were doing" might hear Jesus' love and forgiveness for their comfort, too? He did so by putting into Jesus' mouth words which reflected his heart.<sup>111</sup>

By this approach, the assurance of forgiveness of sins rests not on the fact that Jesus said words of forgiveness. It rests on us wanting those words and putting them into his mouth. We are making it up ourselves — all of it, history, biography, text, and doctrine. Our assurance is sheer self-assurance.

## **Burial and Resurrection**

In an elaborate explanation spanning three and three-quarters pages,<sup>112</sup> Bretscher makes hash out of the burial and resurrection.

Traditional interpretation views the guards as reporting Jesus' resurrection the next morning and being bribed to conceal it. In its original untampered unity, however, the fragment tells something very different.<sup>113</sup>

According to Bretscher, because Jesus was convicted of blasphemy and insurrection, He ought to have been buried in an unmarked pit in the valley of Hinnom along with other cursed people. He ought not to have been buried in a holy grave that the council had approved for Joseph of Arimathea and his family. "His illicit burial in a holy tomb was reversed that sabbath night by guards instructed to rebury him in the cursed valley of Hinnom (his descent into hell)."<sup>114</sup>

To accomplish this, Bretscher invents a fictitious member of the council and gives him the hypothetical name "Perez." When this fictitious Perez learned that Pilate had granted the body of Jesus to Joseph, Perez ordered a squad of temple police to remove the body from Joseph's tomb and rebury it in Hinnom.<sup>115</sup> Thus, according to Bretscher, the empty tomb is no evidence of bodily resurrection. It is only evidence that Perez put things right as he saw right.

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<sup>111</sup> Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 61-62.

<sup>112</sup> Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 270-74.

<sup>113</sup> Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 271.

<sup>114</sup> Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 6.

<sup>115</sup> Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 272.

The squad Perez sent to remove Jesus from Joseph's tomb goofed, however, by leaving the tomb open. Perez had to concoct the story about the disciples. He had to bribe the guards to say they fell asleep. He told that story to Pilate and to the council. The council went along with the story. "That is how the lie about the empty tomb came about. . . . The young church knew about Jesus' reburial in Hinnom all along."<sup>116</sup>

St. Paul knew this, too. He paraphrased "Hinnom" for Gentile readers as Jesus "descended into the lower parts of the earth," as low as anyone can get, lower even than crucifixion and death and burial in Joseph's tomb. Eph 4:9

Ironically, by reburying Jesus, the council itself created the shocking first sign of his resurrection, the open and empty tomb, timed even for the literal "third day."<sup>117</sup>

Lutherans teach that the descent into hell was a stage in Christ's state of exaltation, not a stage in his state of humiliation. His actions there are in triumph over sin, death, hell, and the devil. But according to Bretscher's Perez story, the creed is not talking about Jesus descending into hell as part of his triumph over it. It is talking about the reburial of Jesus from Joseph's tomb to the smoldering pit in Hinnom.<sup>118</sup> Thus he denies Christ his triumph.

For Bretscher, there is no bodily resurrection of Jesus. Yet there is a resurrection. What resurrection? Remember the two elements of gospel determinism. First, we know the Gospel, in this case, the covenant-sonship that Jesus received at his Baptism and that God gives directly also to you. Second, the Gospel determines everything else. So, Bretscher expounds the Gospel-determined resurrection thusly:

The miracle of Jesus' resurrection was not a resuscitated corpse. The faith and witness of the young church did not proceed from the "eyes-opened" logic of a barren "Wow!" The miracle was that the sonship-gospel Jesus embodied, which the council tried to kill by killing him, did not stay dead! It arose in the women as by the voice of angels, and in the disciples by their witness. The Jesus who appeared to them was embodied in that gospel. They saw him by that gospel! . . . Copyists, however, could conceive of his "resurrection" only as the resuscitation of his corpse. . . . Hence, they interpolated bodily "proofs" of Jesus' resurrection into copies they were making. Then, to explain why he was no longer being seen in his resurrected body on earth, they invented a visible bodily departure. The disciples saw him "carried up into heaven."<sup>119</sup>

In other words, in gospel determinism, the Gospel literally replaces Jesus! Jesus did not bodily rise on the third day. The covenant-sonship Gospel rose on the third day.

What of the witnesses to the bodily resurrection? To save Bretscher's Gospel of covenant-sonship, a handy metaphorical hermeneutic comes to the rescue.

"I have seen the Lord," Mary said, as she told them what Jesus had told her. . . . Such sight and hearing is not physiological, no more than Mary's seeing and hearing the two angels was physiological. It took the language of metaphor to express to others how the revelation broke

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<sup>116</sup> Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 273.

<sup>117</sup> Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 274-274.

<sup>118</sup> Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 273.

<sup>119</sup> Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 277-278.

through to her own heart.<sup>120</sup>

The resurrection is the resurrection of the covenant-sonship Gospel which Mary expresses in the metaphor of seeing, hearing, and bodily resurrection. The existence of two different ideas of resurrection explains the reaction of the disciples to the women's testimony in Luke 24.

The dawning broke upon the women by the word of God. They returned from the tomb and told it to the disciples. The men, however, seeing and thinking with natural eyes only, dismissed their witness as an idle tale.<sup>121</sup>

Bretscher predicts that we will be like the disciples. Notice "Christianity" in quotations marks as Bretscher says,

For "Christianity" to accept that Jesus' resurrection and appearances are not physiological but of the gospel he embodied, will be as difficult a "repentance" as it was for the authority and piety of synagogue and temple in that day to accept the resurrection-gospel of the young church.<sup>122</sup>

Just as the Gospel-determined metaphorical hermeneutic salvages Bretscher's denial of bodily resurrection of Jesus, text criticism does also. "A copyist of Matthew interpolated a bodily appearance of Jesus to the women as they were running from the tomb."<sup>123</sup> "The doors being shut, where the disciples were, for fear of the Judeans' is a copyist's enhancement, designed to accent the miracle of his bodily appearing."<sup>124</sup>

A copyist, however, fashioned an elaborate interpolation to show that the resurrection of Jesus was of *body*. Lk 24:37-43 "They were startled and frightened, and supposed that they saw a spirit," it began. "Why are you troubled and why do questionings arise in your hearts?" Jesus asks. To the copyist "in your hearts" meant "in your minds." "Believing" meant being intellectually convinced by the miraculous. Jesus overcame their disbelief and questionings by offering visible proofs. "See my hands and my feet," the copyist has him say, hands out of sleeves and feet beneath his robe. "Handle me and see" is a next level of proof, "for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see me have." The ultimate proof is eating. "While they still disbelieved for joy and wondered, he said to them, 'Have you anything here to eat?' They gave him a piece of boiled fish, and he took it and ate before them."<sup>125</sup>

For the same reason, gospel determinism demands that the story of Thomas be loaded with copyist corruptions,<sup>126</sup> because the covenant-sonship Gospel determines in advance that Jesus was not "raised for our justification" (Romans 4:25), we don't need a bodily resurrection for our justification. We just need to hear and believe the Gospel of covenant-sonship like Bretscher heard it from the text of Jesus' Baptism.

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<sup>120</sup> Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 280-281.

<sup>121</sup> Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 281.

<sup>122</sup> Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 283.

<sup>123</sup> Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 284.

<sup>124</sup> Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 286.

<sup>125</sup> Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 287.

<sup>126</sup> Bretscher, *Unknown Gospel*, 287-289.

## Samaritan Descent

One of the ironies of Bretscher's historical-critical method is how incompetently it handles history. For example, Bretscher says Jesus "was himself of Samaritan descent. Jn 8:48." The verse upon which he bases that historical and biographical claim is: "The Jews answered him, 'Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?'" If their witness is alone sufficient to prove one half of their accusation, then why not the other half, that Jesus had a demon? Why is this charge sufficient as proof that Jesus was of Samaritan descent?

## Bretscher's Glossary

An extremely handy and useful feature of Christianity's Unknown Gospel is its glossary. More books ought to have such glossaries. Here are some of the core entries.

**Atonement.** Priestly corruption, written into scrolls ascribed to Moses—that Johwah does not forgive sins simply out of his own name and character, but must be appeased by blood sacrifices administered by priests. Basis for Christianity's doctrine.

**Baptism.** The crossing of a boundary from an old life to a new. In Moses, through the sea. In John, through the Jordan. In Jesus, through death into resurrection and life with him. In Judean law, however, a name for various washings, with which these crossings came to be equated.

**Biblical authority.** In Christianity, the Bible as the source and secure authority of all doctrine. True biblical authority rests in the covenant-gospel, however, which God spoke and his people believed long before stories and testimonies to it were written down and so preserved. This gospel, when simply heard, breaks through to hearts as revelation still—no other authority needed.

**Christianity.** The religion inferred from the study of Greek documents about Jesus (the Gospels and others), by scholars (theologians) who could read and write, taught to folk who could not.

**Compiler.** Scholar sent to find and access a library of written memories of Jesus in a Judean or Galilean church, translate each item accurately from Aramaic into Greek, arrange his findings in sequence, copy them on a scroll, then bring this treasure back to the church which had commissioned him.

**Covenant-gospel.** The revelatory covenant Jesus himself heard from heaven, believed, taught, and lived by. The young church titled this the "glad news" (from Isaiah); in old English, the gospel. See Gospel.

**Covenant-sonship.** Rooted in Moses and the exodus history, the noble name "son of God" is epitomized in Johwah's word by Moses to Pharaoh, "Israel is my first-born son," and in the voice-from-heaven word to Jesus at his baptism, "my beloved son." Incompatible with Christianity's illusion that "son of God" for Jesus means deity.

**Covenant-word.** "The word of God" (or of the Lord) is his covenant-word, not the Bible as book. Believing the Bible is incompatible with believing the covenant-word of God, just as believing the Gospels is incompatible with believing the gospel.

**Deity-believing.** In Christianity, the object of believing is Jesus' presumed deity and the doctrine which theologians have inferred from it—not the covenant-gospel Jesus believed and taught, spoken by God to Israel first, but intended from the beginning for all nations, all peoples.

**Deity-enhancement.** Copyists assumed that Jesus, as the deity-incarnate son of God, had divine

knowledge and power. They dictated signals of this into the copies their scribes were preparing, so that readers might see it in action, and so believe in him.

**Deity-incarnate.** A familiar notion in Greek, Roman, and Near-Eastern cultures. Scholars in the Greek world, reading the Gospels and Paul with no awareness of Israel's covenant-sonship, assumed that the name "my beloved son" or "son of God" for Jesus meant incarnate-deity, and that to believe in Jesus was to believe this of him. The birth narratives, and the testimony to Jesus in John's prologue as "the word made flesh," were misread in that light.

**Fragments.** "Gather up the fragments left over, that nothing may be lost," Jesus said—not crumbs of bread, but sayings of his once memorized, also testimonies of his disciples afterwards. People of the young church, raised by his resurrection, began to recite these from memory—then write them down, so that none would be lost.

**Fragment-libraries.** Independent sources of all four Gospels. "Twelve baskets" of fragments refer to random memories of Jesus, written down, gathered and treasured in towns of Judea and Galilee, then to some extent copied and exchanged.

**Gospels.** Visible scrolls, assembled very early from fragments of Jesus-memory. Cherished in the Greek world, and studied by scholars, they were titled Gospels when the invisible gospel, God's covenant-word to hearts, had become unknown.

**Salvation.** To be delivered by God from sin and death here and now, thus restored to the way of Johwah in the kingdom-now. Not a futurist kingdom or escape from evil, like dying and going to a supposedly better world or life in heaven.

**Son of God.** Covenant meaning: God's people (gender-inclusive) deriving from him as Father, dependent on him, belonging to him and he to them, formed in his image and character, serving him in their bodies on earth. Jesus heard this name of himself at his baptism and lived it even to death. Greek, Roman and Near Eastern minds missed this, however. By their own culture, they took "son of God," in documents of Christianity, to herald Jesus as deity-incarnate.

**Word of God, or Word of Johwah.** Revelation from God, its substance the covenant-gospel, or voice-from-heaven, making known to human hearts what a corrupted psyche cannot imagine. Framed in words by prophets and communicated by disciples to the people. Christianity fell into the snare of naming its visible documents "the word of God," however. From this initial fallacy, it deduced logically the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible. "The Holy Spirit cannot deceive," it was said, and "The word of God cannot err." Such authority made the Bible itself an object of believing—thus rendering the authority and believing of Jesus' own gospel unknown. See Covenant.

**Word made flesh.** Summary testimony of John's Prologue concerning Jesus—that he not only heard, believed and taught Israel's ancient covenant-word, but filled full the work of servant to which it called him in his body, even to death. Thus he was the only son of the Father, full of grace and truth, now returned to the bosom of the Father who sent him. To see and believe Jesus is to know and believe the word God spoke from the beginning, by which he created heaven and earth, and gave light to the world. To reject or deny him is to reject and deny the very covenant-word that made Israel God's people in the first place.

## **Bultmann: Methods and Trajectory**

Bretscher wrote a set of "Propositions on Scripture" dated October 29, 1959. The ninth and final proposition was from his father, Professor Paul M. Bretscher.

As a final point, may I acknowledge my indebtedness to my father by quoting from a recent letter:

9. "It is not easy to take Scripture for what it says of itself. There are, as Cullmann points out, many 'skandals' connected with interpreting Scripture. Here are some: the text itself, the canon, the cruxes of exegesis, interpretation itself, translations, the differing accounts of witnesses in the NT. Every interpreter is aware of these 'skandals' and would like to remove them in some fashion, whether by allegory, or by assuming interpolations (Bultmann), or by existential interpretations. In short, every interpreter would so much like to fashion Scripture according to his own mental image."<sup>127</sup>

Bretscher's father recognized the temptation to Rudolph Bultmann's existentialism, form criticism, and demythologization. How did the senior Bretscher, at least as of 1959, stand regarding the temptation? He continues:

"The Christian interpreter suffers under these 'skandals' more so than the non-Christian interpreter. But he lets them stand. He realizes that Scripture as we have it is nevertheless the Word of God. He is intent to glorify God for the fact that in spite of the 'skandals' God still speaks to His children in all the words of Scripture. Therefore he keeps on reading and meditating on the Word of Scripture. and feeds the hungry flock on that Word. For only that Word is able to cast down the proud and haughty but also to raise up the truly repentant to the glories of heaven."<sup>128</sup>

Marquart in "Opinion of the Faculty" commends the senior Bretscher's teaching and pleads with the junior Bretscher to return to the teaching of his father. Sadly, as we have seen already, that was not to happen.

Bretscher's *Christianity's Unknown Gospel* is Bultmannian. It teaches Bultmann's view of the Word which is not the Word until it has existential effect in man. It presents a laborious Bultmannian form criticism, particularly in the New Testament. It thoroughly demythologizes both testaments. It assumes, *a la* Bultmann as his father said, hundreds of interpolations. After punching holes in the text by removing those interpolations, it relies again and again on metaphorical-existential interpretations to putty in the holes that form criticism punched.

In *Anatomy of an Explosion*, Marquart (crediting W. Kuenneth) says the spirit of historical criticism (of which form criticism is a type) "has reached 'completion (*Zuendefuehrung*) and perfection' in Bultmann."<sup>129</sup> Having said this, Marquart proceeds immediately to say:

Yet Missouri's "moderate" party did not hesitate to follow historical criticism even into this deeply anti-incarnational tearing asunder of what God has joined together. Consider Dr. Paul G. Bretscher's forthright pronouncement: [extended quotation of Bretscher omitted]<sup>130</sup>

In another place, Marquart says:

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<sup>127</sup> As quoted in Marquart, "Opinion," 336-337.

<sup>128</sup> As quoted in Marquart, "Opinion," 337.

<sup>129</sup> Kurt E. Marquart, *Anatomy of an Explosion: Missouri in Lutheran Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), 119.

<sup>130</sup> Marquart, *Anatomy*, 119.

According to Missouri “moderate” Paul G. Bretscher even Bultmann, who rejected the whole Christian faith, was one of “us Lutherans” and submitted “altogether to the authority of the Holy Scriptures as the Word of God.”<sup>131</sup>

Marquart there cites Bretscher’s *The Baptism of Jesus Critically Considered*. It is significant that Bretscher brings Bultmann to bear upon the Baptism of Jesus. Recall that Bretscher’s Barthian experience happened as he struggled with the text for Epiphany in 1957, which was the Baptism of Jesus. Suddenly the words, “This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased” were addressed existentially to Bretscher. The methods of Bultmann — form criticism and demythologization — run rampant and yield Bretcher’s *Christianity’s Unknown Gospel*. The result is a thoroughly anti-creedal gospel of covenant-sonship and this-worldly salvation. Theologians can distinguish this from theological Liberalism, but for the layman, it might as well be Liberalism’s fatherhood of God, brotherhood of man, and social gospel. How will you hyper-nuancing theologians ever write a catechism for 12 year olds using Barth, Bultmann, and Bretscher that does not land the children squarely in faithless Liberalism?

In *Baptism of Jesus*,

“Moderate” spokesman Paul Bretscher illustrated historical criticism by interpreting the dove and the opened heavens at our Lord’s Baptism simply as “a graphic literary imagery.” In the same essay Bretscher said of Bultmann, who rejected all Christian dogma as so much myth and legend, including the Trinity, the Incarnation, Atonement, Resurrection, and Ascension: “. . . as a Lutheran preacher Bultmann submits altogether to the authority of the Holy Scriptures as the Word of God. . . . It is not Bultman’s intention to detach the Gospel from the history of Jesus.”<sup>132</sup>

That type of double-speak is what you would have to do in your catechism. First, detach the Gospel from the history of Jesus, and second, claim you are not detaching it. If you are honest in making these claims, this is evidence that your theology is so advanced that you have out-nuanced reality.

Bultmann — and Bretcher, along with other Lutheran “moderates” — hold that John “while making use of the tradition created the figure of Jesus entirely from faith.”<sup>133</sup> In existentialism, the Word does not create faith. Faith creates the Word. Faith creates Jesus. We are the creators.

The “moderates” rob ordinary Christians of the *extra nos* assurance Baptism delivers by making Baptism into *intra nos* existentialism both for Jesus and for us. They call this Lutheran!

The methods of Bultmann yield in Bretscher the trajectory of Bultmann ending in immanent Liberalism.

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<sup>131</sup> Marquart, *Anatomy*, 112-113, n. 367, citing Paul G. Bretscher, *The Baptism of Jesus, Critically Considered*, CTCR Biblical Studies Series, no. 5, May 1973, p. 5.

<sup>132</sup> Marquart, *Anatomy*, 122-123, citing Bretscher, *The Baptism of Jesus*, 8 and 5.

<sup>133</sup> Marquart, *Anatomy*, 123, citing Sten H. Stenson, *Sense and Nonsense in Religion* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1969), 153.



## Reflections

### A Tragic End

To read from Bretscher's body of work is to meet a man of good will. His tone always is kindly. He deals with the material and the topic without veering toward *ad hominem* or the ascription of motives in his opponents.

Bretscher's industry is a marvel. He has an immense capacity for drilling down into nearly any aspect of his topics. At times one wonders if he has all 66 books of the Bible in memory. He identifies and uses texts from widely different portions of Scripture that connect to each other and his points. He can sustain extended examinations, comparisons, and exegesis of passages in the original languages. His writings are models of focus and sequencing. Writers who read Bretscher will sense that his works must have been re-edited multiple times before they were published, or else he had a special brilliant gift for design.

Bretscher's industry is especially evident in *Christianity's Unknown Gospel*. He applies his doctrine thoroughly in three dimensions: across every book of the Bible; across every *loci* and dogma of Christianity; and drilling down into texts and text criticism. I hardly could help but visualize him slaving away at his desk to produce the opus, to re-edit it, and iron out its wrinkles.

While imagining that scene, by the time I reached the end of the book, it looked like Father McKenzie in "Eleanor Rigby." As portrayed earlier, from the 1960s to about 1980, Bretscher was in the action. He was producing. People were reading him. He was bearing an influence. Somewhere between then and 2001 when he published *Christianity's Unknown Gospel*, his gospel determinism ran away with him, he shed the Lutheran formulation, and he lost his audience. He seems to have become like Father McKenzie, "Writing the words of a sermon that no one will hear."

Bretscher is a once-great theologian, significant in his time, in the center of momentous action, whose significance now is mostly to show a stark example of where gospel determinism ends.

### Harboring Heresies

From 1957 to 2001, Bretscher published his for-public-consumption Lutheran formulation of gospel determinism. He published it in articles, sermons, books, and papers of the LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations. He maintained a façade of basing the knowledge of the Gospel on Luther's Catechisms.

Given that his anti-creedal formulation sprang from the words, "You are my son" at the Baptism of Jesus in 1957, one might have thought something of this would appear in his 1968 article "Exodus 4:22-23 and the Voice from Heaven." But it did not. There were plenty of places where one could be forgiven for expecting to see it. But it is nowhere to be seen until 2001.

The publication of *Christianity's Unknown Gospel* in 2001 revealed that all along Bretscher was developing and harboring his anti-creedal formulation. His bloodless, cross-less,

Incarnation-less, and Trinity-less theory was hidden. He harbored his true belief that the words “You are my beloved Son” were spoken from heaven directly to him. In those 8,000 copies of the first printing of *After the Purifying*, he hid what he later revealed in *Christianity’s Unknown Gospel*. It was not so much Christianity’s unknown Gospel as Paul G. Bretscher’s unknown hidden Gospel.

## Conclusion

In both formulations of gospel determinism, Bretscher critiques and rejects the view that Scripture has authority because the Holy Spirit inspired the prophets and apostles. He gives the inspiration principle critical names. He calls it dross. Sometimes he calls people who believe it dross. He likens it to Pharisaism. He likens people who believe it to Pharisees. He posits a dichotomy between the Gospel-Word and the document-word of a sheer Book.

To be blunt, he accuses centuries of Christendom of bibliolatry – an idolatry of Scripture. He claims his opponents have robbed Christ of his glory by giving it instead to the Bible.

But note the irony. In Bretscher’s Gospel, who is virgin-born? Not Jesus. The covenant-gospel is. What is divine? Not Jesus. The Gospel is. Who does miracles? Not Jesus. The Gospel does. Where is the Sacrament of the Altar? Not in the blood of Jesus. The covenant-sonship Gospel saves without sacrifice or blood. What is the resurrection? Not the resurrection of the body of Jesus. It is the resurrection of the Gospel. What saves us from sin? Not the blood of Jesus. The Gospel as an immediate, enthusiastic, Barthian address to, action upon, or effect in man that saves by conferring sonship and with sonship every blessing, with no need for sacrifice or atonement.

If the structure of the inspiration principle warrants it being called bibliolatry, then the structure of Bretscher’s gospel determinism warrants it being called gospelolatry. If the inspiration principle displaces Christ – which I deny, but if, for the sake of argument, it does – it does that incidentally since, in confessional Lutheran theology, it still affirms Trinity, Incarnation, sacrifice, atonement, resurrection, a triumphant descent into hell, ascension, and session at the right hand of God. Bretscher’s Gospel denies Christ all of that. It denies the entire Second Article of the Creed. It expressly rejects “creedal Christianity.” The whole creed is replaced by another Gospel that makes Jesus just one of us. Jesus *is* one of us, but He is not *only* one of us. He is the mediator between God and man, “Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:12).

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