

✠ *In the Name of Jesus* ✠

“What does this mean?” Anyone who had the privilege of attending one of our Lutheran Elementary Schools or attending youth catechism classes in a confessional Lutheran church, probably had to memorize the Ten Commandments and Luther’s explanations of them. In his Small Catechism Luther first states what God says in the Bible, for example, “You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God.” And then Luther immediately asks, “What does this mean?” He follows the same pattern in the three articles of the Apostles’ Creed. “I believe in God the Father almighty, Maker of heaven and earth. What does this mean?” What an important question! It’s like saying, “Help me understand the words so I know what God is teaching, and then help me understand how this applies to my life and my faith. I want it all to be clear.”

The major problem with our wanting everything clear is that Satan wants everything about God to be murky. That way people can feel like they understand God and what he wants, even if they don’t. Whenever things about God are unclear in the minds of people, they become vulnerable to the persuasion of those who would teach something different from what God reveals in the Bible. And if that weren’t bad enough, our own sinful flesh, lurking in our hearts, is happy to go along with ideas

that aren’t quite right in God’s sight.

It’s not a new problem. The apostle Peter was dealing with this same issue just a few decades after Jesus rose from the dead and ascended to heaven. Apparently there were opponents of Christ coming around to the scattered congregations and saying that the apostles made up certain parts of the Jesus-story, that the Apostles were passing off fiction as fact: “Don’t believe Peter and John when they tell you that Jesus took them up a high mountain and was transfigured before them, or when they tell you that Jesus let his divine glory shine out. That’s just a cleverly invented story to make your Jesus look more important, as if he is the Son of God or something. Yeah, right!”

How would you respond to such an attack on your faith? Peter simply asserts that he and John were eye-witnesses of Jesus’ glory. They did not make any of it up. So who are you going to believe?

That’s where our text picks up. Peter says, *20Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation.* “No prophecy.” A ‘prophecy’ is a message that God wants spoken forth. “No prophecy of Scripture.” “Scripture” is another word for “the writings.” Peter is talking about holy writings. The holy writings did not come about by the prophet’s

own interpretation. By this time the evangelists and the apostles had written down some of the books that would be collected into the New Testament within the next several decades. So it's possible Peter is talking about these New Testament books. But the Old Testament books (scrolls) were already considered sacred. Whether Peter is talking about the Old Testament or the New, it doesn't matter. His point is that, if a message came from God, it is reliable. It's not JUST A MATTER OF INTERPRETATION. The sacred Scriptures did not come *by the prophet's own interpretation*. How could a message come from the prophet if it came from God? *21For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.*

I love that phrase "carried along." It makes me think of you standing on the bank of a river. You pick up a stick and you throw it into the river. Since it's wood, it floats. But the stick doesn't just stay where you threw it. The current of the river carries it along downstream.

What a great picture of how we got God's messages. The true prophets didn't need to come up with their own material. They didn't need to see which way the tea leaves fall, or to scatter bones and see how they lie on the ground, or to shuffle cards and see

which one comes up, or to cut open an animal and examine its liver. False prophets consider some sort of omen, and then they decide what the omen means. They must make up a message by their own interpretation.

The true prophets didn't need to come up with their own material. The Holy Spirit carried them along like a stick in the river current. The Holy Spirit supplied the content. He even chose the words, which is really amazing when you consider that the Holy Spirit used the prophets' own personalities, their life situations, their writing styles, their vocabularies to get his message across accurately so people could understand what God intended to be understood. It's not JUST A MATTER OF INTERPRETATION. We have God's message. We can trust it fully.

As if getting attacked from outside of the church isn't bad enough, Jesus (see today's Gospel lesson, Matthew 7:15-29) and Peter both want us to watch out for false prophets on the inside of the church. Peter says it this way: *2:1There were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. We are not immune. But if we heed the warning, and if we faithfully read our Bible at home, we can spot the false teachers. They share certain characteristics. They mix in their own ideas as if they were speaking only God's Word. Often they*

aren't interested in submitting themselves to the authority of others. No, they want to be in charge. They love to talk about freedom—freedom is a good thing. But if their freedom involves going against any of God's commands, their followers will end up enslaved to sinful ideas or sinful behaviors. We need to pay attention so we don't lose the freedoms God actually gave us. | False teachers share certain characteristics. They are often able to behave quite well when the spotlight is on them. No one, of course, can achieve a sinless life, but a spiritual leader's life ought to be free from egregious sins. So if it comes out that a spiritual leader has a corrupt personal life, perhaps greed or materialism, perhaps substance abuse, perhaps abuse of someone close to them, perhaps something of a sexual nature, that leader must step down from office.

Unfortunately the unfitness of spiritual leaders often becomes known after the spiritual damage has been done to a congregation through the false teachings. Peter goes on to say, *They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them—bringing swift destruction on themselves.* How sad! Jesus didn't exclude anyone when he paid the penalty for all sins on the cross. But when false teachers stray from God's teachings by relying on their own interpretation, they often stray away

from Christ. They have a Savior, and they throw him away in exchange for their own wisdom.

*2Many will follow their shameful ways and will bring the way of truth into disrepute.* Many believers will follow their shameful ways. Do you know anyone who used to be a follower of Jesus, and now isn't? They decided to listen to someone who told them about the ways of the world. It doesn't really matter which particular 'way of the world' it was. "Come, on. It's just hooking up." Or "You gotta keep drinking till you get a buzz." Or "What does the church know about right and wrong anyway. The people there are just as sinful. So they shouldn't be allowed to tell us what not to do." Or "Who cares if it's bad for you. It's delicious." Or "I don't have time to do this work the right way. I have to get it done fast. I'm cutting corners. It'll look good at least long enough to make the sale." Or "Cheat on your homework so we can go have some fun." Whenever former believers walk in shameful ways, when they turn away from the ways of the Lord, they bring the way of truth into disrepute: "See, I told you those Christians weren't any better than we are. What do we need their Jesus for. We're just fine without him." How ashamed I would feel if anyone said these things on account of my behaviors or life choices! I hope you have the same concern.

Don't go along with false teachers. *In their greed these teachers will exploit you with stories they have made up.* In today's Old Testament lesson (1 Kings 22:10-28) you heard how King Ahab had surrounded himself with false prophets who would tell him what he wanted to hear: "Go ahead and attack your enemy, O King. The Lord will give them into your hands." Only one lone voice told the truth. Micaiah. "If you go into battle today, you will die today." Ahab died that day.

"So why does the Lord let the false prophets get away with their false ways? Why doesn't he stop them?" Are they really getting away with it? Peter says, *Their condemnation has long been hanging over them, and their destruction has not been sleeping.* When the time is right, they will be exposed and they will get what's coming to them.

In the meantime, let's make sure we stick with God's clear message. If we understand what he means in the Bible, then it's not JUST A MATTER OF INTERPRETATION. But even if people want to claim that it is, we know how to resolve the matter in our minds. We keep listening to what the Bible says. We are children of God. God adopted us into his family through faith in Jesus. We're on the way to heaven. We are so happy to belong to God that

we are willing to chuck any of our viewpoints that happen to conflict with God's. If it's a matter of interpretation, we accept God's. What he revealed in the Bible is sufficiently clear. If we are hearing and reading his Word frequently, we can sense when an explanation of God's will is spot on and when it's not quite right. If the messenger is humble, the messenger will welcome honest challenges: "Can you show me where it says that in the Bible?" Any teaching that God wants us to cling to as his truth will be set forth as true in the Bible in at least three places. And then you can see for yourself, it's not JUST A MATTER OF INTERPRETATION.

I'm not asserting that God tells us everything we want to know or that he answers all our questions definitively. There are quite a few matters that he leaves up to our choice. But when he repeatedly sets forth what his choice is, it's no longer JUST A MATTER OF INTERPRETATION. Let's keep working to get our teachings right in God's sight. Let's keep working to line our lives up right in God's sight. Let's keep working to lay God's truths on the hearts of others so they can be right in God's sight. That's what true teachers of God's Word do. You be God's true teachers.