

Opening the Book of Faith
ELCA Bible Study Initiative – Session #1
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Book of Faith Initiative – Background. (p. vii – Opening the Book of Faith)

In 2007 the ELCA churchwide assembly voted to embrace an Initiative called Book of Faith. The bold vision for this five-year initiative is *That the whole church become more fluent in the first language of Scripture in order that we might live into our calling as a people renewed, enlivened, empowered, and sent by the Word.*

The Book of Faith initiative calls for a conversation that is deep and broad, including folks of all ages and across all the many cultures that inform who we are as a people of God. The Book of Faith initiative envisions a church renewed and empowered for faithful service. This renewal can be fueled by groups coming together and exploring the Bible in depth. As we open Scripture and faithfully join in conversation, the Bible will come alive for us anew.

With God’s help we will discover new ways to hear and share God’s living Word. God’s Spirit will help us express more fluently the biblical message and the unique Lutheran insights that define who we are as God’s people. God will open us – individually and as communities of faith – to the gospel, which the Apostle Paul declares, “Is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith.” **(Romans 1:16-17; Ephesians 2:8; 2 Corinthians 2:15; Romans 13:11; see also THE MESSAGE; Life Application Study Bible and the New King James Version Study Bible)**

The Book of Faith initiative invites us to “become more fluent in the first language of faith, the language of Scripture, in order that we might live into our calling as a people renewed, enlivened, and empowered by the Word.

Why does the Bible have Authority? (pg. 1-3)

- We worship a living, active, relevant God who continues in relationship with creation, with humanity, with the church, with each of us. Through the Bible, God speaks to each of us with challenge and with promise. **That’s the Bible’s authority.**
- The Bible is authoritative because it communicates the grace of God in Jesus Christ.
- The Bible is authoritative for us because it allows us to encounter the gracious God who was self-revealed in Jesus of Nazareth.
- We encounter God through the Bible because it effectively conveys Jesus Christ to us.

- The Word of God has a center, Christ Himself. God in Jesus Christ engages people through the Bible.
- **Lutherans** do not attempt to prove that the Bible is inspired by God or authoritative. Rather, we testify to what we and other believers have experienced: The Bible is powerful because God addresses us there with demand and promise. It is authoritative for us. It changes lives.

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- The authority of the Bible comes from God.
- To be engaged By God is to be made a person of faith, trusting God who is revealed in Jesus Christ.
- The Bible is a book of faith because we are invited to come to it in faith – faith in God who saves us through Christ and faith that God will engage us and all people through these texts.
- The Bible is called “holy” because it is set apart by God for humanity in order to convey Christ and nurture faith.
- **Lutherans** are showing confidence in a God who is not absent, distant, or uninvolved. God is present in the speaking of God’s Word.
- The Bible assumes that God addresses people.

Lutherans are: (pg. 6-7)

- Lutherans are convinced that Jesus Christ is the definitive Word of God and that the Bible’s primary function is to convey Christ.
- Lutherans believe that the Word of God through the Bible is for each person in his or her own life, but our confidence for individuals is inseparable from the conviction that the Bible is an inherited and shared gift.
- Lutherans will put their best thinking and hard work into the study of the Bible, but they always intend to acknowledge God’s voice through their insights and methods.
- Lutherans aim to be attentive listeners, hearing God’s living word for this church, our lives, these days.

Lutherans believe: (pg. 7-8)

- Lutherans believe God’s Word speaks to us in three ways: God speaks through Jesus Christ. God speaks through believers telling the story of God’s love in Jesus Christ. God speaks through the Bible.
- Lutherans need to recognize and challenge unhelpful approaches to reading and interpreting the Bible.
- **Bible Fluency** comes from knowing the Bible well, but begins simply with hearing Christian Proclamation, and grows by grace. God allows us to take God-bearing words on our lips. Pastors and other public ministers of the Word speak these words on behalf of us all.

- **As Luther said, we are Christ to one another.**
- Lutherans are confident that God speaks through people, today as always, but the Bible is the source and norm that allows us to speak to and hear one another with confidence.

Bible-Shaped People – what does that mean? (pg. 8-11)

- The Bible shapes our lives, our individual behavior, and it shapes the ELCA's institutional life. It determines our commitment to evangelizing, to gathering for worship, to teaching the faith. The Bible calls this church to have structures and policies that leave God free to speak,
- The social statements of the ELCA will reflect careful study of the whole witness of Scripture.
- Being shaped by the Bible is part of our identity as a Lutheran church and, individually, as Lutheran Christians.
- The Bible shapes this church and our individual lives, but we remain dependent upon listening to the Word of God.
- In speaking, in formulating doctrine, and in guiding lives, Lutherans act with confidence because we are convinced God does engage and guide us in all these arenas.
- Lutherans have always understood that church traditional and beliefs, including the creeds, the Augsburg Confession, the Small Catechism, and other Lutheran confessional documents, are only normative because and to the extent that they rightly convey the Word of God found in the Bible.
- **The Lutheran test is: are these words heard as God's law and gospel?**
- *The Word of God is not something that we possess. It always belongs to God. Naming the authority of Scripture is a declaration about the Bible and about God. Language of biblical authority is pointedly not about our self-confidence to speak for God. Our confidence is humble and it is expectant.*
- We are shaped by the certainty that God speaks through the Bible. That leads us to expectant stewardship of the Bible and humility about our claims and conclusions.

(1 John 4:1-6; see also THE MESSAGE; The Life Application Study Bible and the New King James Version Study Bible) (Isaiah 55:1-11; THE MESSAGE; The Life Application Study Bible; and the New King James Version Study Bible)

Proclamation of the Word: (pg. 6, 13-14)

- The proclamation of God's message to us as both Law and Gospel is the Word of God, revealing judgment and mercy through word and deed, beginning with the Word in creation, continuing in the history of Israel, and centering in all its fullness in the person and work of Jesus Christ.
- Proclamation of the Word includes the public reading of Scripture, preaching, teaching, the celebration of the Sacraments, confession and absolution, music, arts, prayers, Christian witness and service. The congregation's entire educational ministry participates in the proclamation of the Word.

- The language of Lutheran worship itself is intentionally and richly drawn from the Bible. Within all this breath, Lutherans have historically given prominence to the sermon in worship and to the study of the Bible by the people of the church.
- The commitment to hearing the Word shapes both communal and individual Christian practices. Daily Bible reading is encouraged so that God's Word can shape our lives and guide our decisions. For Lutherans, individual use of daily lectionaries, devotional guides, and disciplines such as *lectio divina* and meditation are always understood as taking place within the context of the whole community of faith. This context reflects our conviction that God's Word is for all and is never a private possession.
- Lutheran convictions lead to use of the Bible for proclamation, worship, study, and discernment so that the Word of God may speak to others and to us.

Lutherans need to recognize and challenge unhelpful approaches to reading and interpreting the Bible: (pg. 14-19)

- Biblical reading without expectancy or limited expectancy may be the most dangerous misreading of all. – Lutherans know that God speaks to all of life – to each of us in all the callings of our daily lives. Yet we often fail to expect the full breadth and power of God's Word.
- Reading the Bible without community can be problematic.
- Reading the Bible without its contexts must be rejected – Ripping words from their God-chosen environment risks mishearing the voice of God. The words of the Bible do not stand on their own without the God who inhabits them. Particular sentences are not disconnected from the rest of the Bible or from the God who inspires them. The life and teachings of the church can be grounded in nothing but the grace of God.
- Biblical reading without care and attention to the nature of the Bible can limit the Bible's effective authority for us – The Bible is fundamentally clear. It speaks in its plain sense, and we are wise to read it together. Because we understand that the Bible is given to the whole church, we open ourselves to the wisdom of others. Collaboration is a vital aspect of allowing God to engage us through the Scriptures.
- Diverse and conflicting interpretations often obscure the authoritative function of the Bible – Our anchor in facing the challenges of conflicting interpretation is the same foundational belief: God in Jesus Christ speaks through the Bible. The Spirit of God guides us in our hearing. Thus we return to the texts. **The Bible is the fixed point given to us. It is the norm. Our commitment to this authority leads us to treat any Christian disagreement as a conversation that remains open. We take the stance, remembering the fundamental Lutheran assumption that the Bible speaks clearly.** Until we hear clearly, we seek to be patient. God does speak. The Word interprets us, so we stand before it in hope, with our varied understandings.

Lutherans take initiative for the hearing of the Bible – for ourselves and for others. We intend to be a church of the Bible, to make the Scriptures available and accessible to our own members of all ages and to share the Word as a missional church with a public voice. (pg. 19)

Opening the Book of Faith is offered as an invitation to experience the Bible as a book of faith. God invites us, individually and together, to listen expectantly to the words of the Bible, listening in the company of others who help us hear. By the Spirit's power, we will hear the Word of God. (pg. 19)

Romans 1:16-17:

New King James Version Study Bible – notes for this passage:

- **In the past the Believer has been saved from the penalty of Sin (Eph 2:8)**
- **In the present the Believer is being saved from the power of Sin (2 Cor 2:15)**
- **In the future the Believer will be saved from the very presence of Sin (Romans 13:11)**

- **The New Testament speaks of salvation in the Past Tense (Eph 2:8), The Present Tense (2 Cor 2:15), and the Future Tense (Romans 13:11).**

- **In Romans 13:11 – Salvation speaks of the imminent return of Christ.**

Romans 1:17:

New King James Version Study Bible – note for this passage:

From faith to faith means faith is at the beginning of the salvation process, and it is the goal as well. When a person first exercises faith in Christ, that person is saved from the penalty of Sin and declared righteous. As the believer lives by faith, God continues to save Him or Her from the power of Sin to live righteously.