

Opening the Book of Faith
ELCA Bible Study Initiative – Session #2
John Thebus – St. Luke Lutheran Church in Devon, PA
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Typical and Traditional Lutheran Approach to the Bible:

- Lutherans believe that the Bible is the Word of God - but, almost all Christians would say this – and they might mean all sorts of different things by it.
- So we have to ask: What does it mean to say that the Bible is the Word of God?
- Simply put, it means that the Bible tell us what God wants to say.
- **We Lutherans believe that the Bible tells us what God wants to say to us.**
- The ELCA constitution says that we accept the Bible as “the inspired Word of God; we believe it is the authoritative Word of God.
- **We Lutherans do not mean, the Bible is a book that contains no errors or contradictions.**
- **We Lutherans do mean to say that, “the Bible is the book that tells us what God wants to say to us.” That puts a different spin on things.**
- For the most part, **Lutherans are more interested in understanding the Bible than they are in defending it.**
- We don’t think that we have to prove the Bible is the word of God – we just believe that it is the Word of God, and then we focus on asking, “What does God have to say to us?”

Lutherans typically speak of “**the Word of God**” in a three-fold sense. The Word of God is, first, Jesus Christ (the Incarnate Word); second, the message of law and gospel (the proclaimed Word); and, third, the Bible (the written Word). This, again, is in the ELCA constitution.

When we open Scripture, we have an opportunity to be transformed by God’s Word. God spoke to the Israelites through Moses. Today one way God speaks to us is through the Bible [Deuteronomy 6:4-9] (Phylacteries)

Other Bible Passages for consideration:[Luke 6:20-26; 2 Cor 5:17; Matt 7:15-16; Gal 5:22-23; Mark 8:34]

The Bible also speaks of “the Word of God”:

- The Bible speaks of Jesus Christ as the Word of God.
- Second, the Bible speaks of *preaching* as the word of God.
- And, third, the Bible identifies the Scriptures as the word of God.

Sola Scriptura:

- Lutherans say that Scripture is the “only rule and norm” according to which doctrines are to be established and evaluated. This does not mean that Lutherans do not respect the validity of sound reason or the legitimacy of human experience.
- Rather, Scripture has unique authority as the only record of *revealed* truth, and it therefore provides a perspective from which human reason and experience are best understood.
- The phrase *sola scriptura* became something of a rallying cry for Lutherans in the sixteenth century.
- It literally means “scripture only” or “scripture alone.”
- **Analogy of a three-legged stool:** If you take everything that is possible to know through reason and experience, you still do not have a sturdy or reliable grasp of the truth. There is a third leg: *divine revelation*. We know certain things to be true because God has revealed them to us.
- Okay, so what do Lutherans mean by *sola scriptura*? They mean that scripture alone has authority to constitute that third leg, to serve as a source of divine revelation.
- But Lutherans are not fundamentalists – at least not typically or traditionally. We do not reject experience or reason, but view them as appropriate God-given avenues for knowing the truth. Still, some truth can only be known by revelation, and the Bible is the only source for that truth,
- So, Lutherans do not view the Bible as the only source for knowing what is true in this world, but they do claim that the Bible is the only authoritative source for knowing divine truth that God reveals to us.

Understanding the Bible:

- Lutherans read the Bible...they believe the Bible...they love the Bible. But they also try to understand the Bible. **Lutherans have earned a reputation for being Christians who emphasize understanding.**
- Lutherans have no trouble saying, “This book (the Bible) comes from God.”
- The Bible comes from the church. The church (meaning the historic Christian church) put the Bible together, preserved it, translated it, and made sure that people like you and I could have copies of the Bible today. The Bible is the church’s gift to us and to the world.
- The Bible comes to us from God, through the church.
- **Lutherans believe that the Bible must be studied and interpreted if we are going to understand it and receive God’s truth.**
- Lutherans believe that the Bible can be misunderstood. We believe that it has been. (see page 28)
- Anytime that you are absolutely certain that God is on your side, it may be good to get a second opinion.
- If we think that the Bible means something, and there are other people – Christian people who love and worship Jesus – who think that the Bible means something else, maybe we should talk to each other.”

- Lutherans are really big on “listening” and on “talking to each other.” We call it “dialog” and it is one of our favorite words.
- If you want to make fun of Lutherans, that’s probably where to go. We’re always having dialogues. And drinking coffee.

Five Key Principles that Lutherans use to Study and Interpret the Bible:

- **Law and Gospel:** (pgs 29-31)
- **The Law is that which accuses us and judges us...The Gospel is that which comforts us and saves us.**
- The message of law and gospel is at the heart of Scripture: faithful interpretation discerns this message; faithful proclamation declares this message.
- All Lutherans can experience God’s Word more profoundly if they listen carefully for how the Word speaks to them through the double truth of law and gospel.

- **What Shows Forth Christ:** (pgs 31-33)
- When we Lutherans say the Bible is the Word of God we mean, above all, that the Bible is the book that reveals Jesus Christ to us. And by that we mean the whole Bible – not just the Gospels or the New Testament.
- Eventually everything in the Bible brings us to Jesus Christ.
- Lutherans are Jesus people, and they understand the Bible to be a Jesus book.
- Being a Christian means being in a relationship with Jesus Christ, who is risen from the dead.
- Our theology, our doctrines, our sacraments, our liturgy – all of those things are important because they help us to have a relationship with Jesus Christ.
- **Lutherans read the Bible to learn about Jesus Christ – and about things that are related to him.**
- The Bible is a Jesus book, not a science book.
- **We value the Bible precisely because it brings us to Christ and keeps us grounded in Christ.**

- **Scripture Interprets Scripture:** (pgs 33-36)
- Lutherans believe that difficult passages of Scripture are to be interpreted in light of those passages that are more readily understandable, and that all of Scripture is to be interpreted in light of the Bible’s central themes and motifs.
- We try to be faithful to the entire Bible rather than just picking some parts and leaving others alone.
- The goal is to find the heart of Scripture so that we don’t end up majoring in minors.
- **How the Commandments Work:** Lutherans often say that the commandments of God work or function in three ways: *the political function* of maintaining order in society, the *religious* function of showing us our need for the gospel, and the *ethical* function of teaching us right from wrong.
- **Theology of the Cross:** Lutherans believe that the death of Jesus Christ on the cross is an ultimate focal point of Scripture that reveals something profound about

God's love for us and also about God's expectation for how we are to love and treat others. **Jesus calls upon us to deny ourselves, take up our crosses and follow him. [Mark 8:34]**

- **Justification by Grace through Faith:** Lutherans believe that the Bible as a whole presents God as gracious and merciful and “abounding in steadfast love.” We are unworthy sinners, but we have been reconciled with God through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God sent Jesus to die for our sins, and we can be put right with God by trusting in God's grace. [Rom 5:1-11; Eph 2:8]
- **The Plain Meaning of the Text:** (pgs 37-41)
- **Lutherans say that Scripture is to be interpreted in line with its “plain sense.”** This means that passages are to be understood in the sense that would have seemed obvious to their original readers.
- The traditional Lutheran approach to interpretations like this would be to ask, “how were the original readers expected to understand these stories.” [Matt 8:23-27]
- For Lutherans, the traditional question would be, how were people expected to understand this story in the first place?
- **Public Interpretation:** (pgs 41-43)
- Lutherans say that the interpretation of Scripture is a public act rather than a private one.
- The point, I think, is that Lutherans do not treat the Bible like some kind of magic book. We don't use the Bible the way that some people use Ouija boards or horoscopes or Tarot cards.
- What we recommend is that individuals first seek the general meaning – what the text would mean to all people – and then ask about personal application to their own particular circumstances. What the Bible means for you should be consistent or compatible with what it means for everyone.

Closing Prayer: Read Ephesians 4:1-6 – After each verse is read, the participants respond with the refrain: Open our hearts to your Word O God.

Resource: Opening the Book of Faith