

**Opening the Book of Faith**  
**ELCA Bible Study Initiative – Session #3**  
**John Thebus – St. Luke Lutheran Church in Devon, PA**  
**May 30, 2009**

Lutherans come to our encounter with the Bible with certain convictions and expectations. We come not only to hear about God but also to experience God directly. We come not only to learn about Jesus but to meet Jesus.

We come convinced, convicted if you will, that this encounter will bear fruit in our lives for the sake of God's world.

Matthew 13:1-9 - Parable of the Sower - Matthew 14:24-31 - Luke 8:22-25

We come trusting that immersion in the Bible, becoming more fluent in the language of the Bible, will help us live more deeply into our calling as a people renewed, enlivened and empowered by the Word.

**The Bible speaks to us as both law and gospel. The Bible points us to Christ as the incarnate, crucified and risen Lord.**

**And our interpretations are public rather than private, able to be heard and interpreted and lived out in open conversation with the whole Church.**

**FOUR WAYS TO APPROACH THE BIBLE:**

- The first three approaches are methods of reading and studying the Bible that Lutherans share with other people of faith.
- We share with others the conviction and hope that these ways of reading and studying can help us to hear what God is saying to us.
- The fourth approach gathers up the particular Lutheran insights about how the Bible works and articulates these insights as questions we might bring to our biblical study.
- While we share these questions about the Bible and its message with other Christians, we Lutherans have a particular stake in ensuring that such questions stand at the heart of our biblical study

**The four methods we will explore are:**

- **Devotional Reading**
- **Historical Reading**
- **Literary Reading**
- **Lutheran Theological Reading**

### **Devotional Reading: *Lectio Divina***

The practice of devotional or meditative reading has a long history in the church and has taken many forms.

Perhaps the oldest of these approaches is the *Lectio Divina* (Latin for “sacred reading”), a very ancient method, nurtured by the Benedictines, which can be traced back to the patristic period (ce 100-450).

This approach was intended for individual devotions, but has also been expanded for use with groups.

*Lectio Divina* traditionally has four steps that can be used and adapted for many sorts of devotional reading:

- Step 1 *Lectio* (reading or listening to the text)
- Step 2 *Meditatio* (meditating, reflecting, and ruminating on the text)
- Step 3 *Oratio* (responding with prayer)
- Step 4 *Contemplatio* (contemplating and sitting quietly in the presence of God)

*Lectio Divina* is certainly not the only possible meditative or devotional approach to Bible study, but it provides a model of structured devotions.

Interestingly, Luther commends **just such an approach as a spiritual practice for the formation of young theologians**. Luther bases his approach on Psalm 119, reduces the number of steps to three, and sets them in his own theological context that warns us against making too much of our own thinking.

Luther urges us to begin with *oratio* (prayer), that the Holy Spirit will enlighten us, lead us, and give us understanding

For Luther, *meditatio* includes study, so this “devotional” approach is not separated from sound reason.

Thirdly, for Luther, there is *tentatio*, in German, *Anfechtung*. *Tentatio* is connected to Luther’s Theology of the Cross. Luther here encourages us to understand that through internal and external trials we are driven to the Bible and the comfort it alone can give. He says “This is the touchstone which teaches you not only to know and understand, but also to experience how right, how true, how sweet, how lovely, how mighty, how comforting God’s Word is, wisdom beyond all wisdom.

The approach is rooted in prayer and coming to the study with a proper attitude of openness and humility. The strength of the approach is found in the capacity of everyone to open the Scripture together and join the conversation

*The next two methods are both concerned with content and can be tied to the Lutheran interpretative principle of beginning with the plain meaning of the text. Both methods invite us to move from how the text worked through and on its original audience to how it works through and on us.*

### **Historical Reading:**

The historical approach begins with the recognition that the Bible is an ancient text written by people who lived in times and places different from our own. The basic assumption of this method is that we cannot understand the plain meaning of the text without understanding something about those people, places, and time.

A historical approach to biblical study invites us to concentrate on who, what, why and where questions. The underlying question would always be this: What insights from history would be helpful to know in order to hear, read, study, or understand the plain meaning of this passage more accurately?

The reality is that most people don't study the Bible with a room filled with experts or with even one expert in the room. So how can the ordinary community studying the Bible find help with this method?

Here are some suggestions:

- Be very clear about what questions you have, and then recognize that not all of these questions have answers.
- Know that folks with training (pastors, teachers, professors, and other trained leaders) can often be helpful.
- Find and use good resources. You might begin with a good study Bible.
- Keep digging. Exploring historical questions can be fun, educational, engaging, and more often than not they lead us to a deeper and richer reading of the biblical text.

### **Literary Reading:**

The central aim of the Literary approach is to hear or to read a biblical text with particular attention to how the text is written, how the text conveys meaning, and how the text was and is heard.

Luther and other reformers were deeply immersed in understanding the biblical text in this way, caring about the original Hebrew and Greek and reading the text with great care, attending to both the details and the logic of the argument.

Primarily, this method calls on all of us to learn some helpful literary questions to put to a text and then to become careful and attentive readers who believe the details of the text matter.

- **Step 1. Choose a text itself with some care.**
- **Step 2. Identify what type of literature the chosen text is.**
- **Step 3. Read different versions of the biblical text to help discover the importance of the choices that translators make.**
- **Know the general themes and purpose of the book in which your passage is found**

*At the heart of the Lutheran notion of reading the text as law and gospel is how the Bible addresses us directly as we read the text today.*

### **Lutheran Theological Reading:**

As has been said earlier in this session, the three methods that we have thus far considered are those which we Lutherans share with other Christians.

As Lutherans we also come to our study with certain convictions, insights, and expectations that rise particularly from our Lutheran heritage.

As we encounter and are encountered by the Bible, we expect not only to learn about who God is and who Christ is, we expect to hear God and Christ speak to us directly.

### **LAW AND GOSPEL**

Specifically, we claim that when we read the Bible, it will speak to us both as law and as gospel. Asking law/gospel questions is asking about the effect of the texts on us rather than specifically about the content.

We are confronted by God's law, that is, by God's demands on us, God's expectations of us, or God's judgments on us. And because we can never live up to these right and good expectations, we are driven to look to God to speak to our inadequacies, our sin, and our despair. It is then that we can be opened to hear God's gospel, God's good news of forgiveness, of grace, and of promise,

So when we read any Biblical text we should ask:

- In what ways do we hear this text as law? Or how does this text speak the law to us when we hear or read or study it?
- And then, in what ways do we hear this text as gospel?
- How does this text proclaim the gospel to us when we hear or read or study it?
- How do we hear God's good news of forgiveness of our sin, of grace towards us, of promise to be with us, of the gift of Christ Jesus given for us?

### **WHAT SHOWS FORTH CHRIST?**

And in the midst of hearing the text as law and gospel, the text points us, drives us, leads us to Christ. Kathryn Kleinhans notes, quoting Luther, that we should expect when we read Scripture "to receive Jesus Christ 'as a gift, as a present that God has given you and

that is your own'; for reading or hearing the Scriptures rightly is nothing else than Christ coming to us, or we being brought to him."

***Luther's metaphor – the Bible, "is the swaddling cloths and the manger to which Christ lies."***

Understanding the gospel of Christ as the core of God's truth gives us a principle on which we can rightly take our stand, so long as we understand the cradle of Christ to contain all sorts of straw. That is, both Old and New Testament are able to show forth Christ. Demands for Justice and condemnation of sin can and do show forth Christ.

### **SCRIPTURE INTERPRETS SCRIPTURE:**

As Lutherans, we do not read biblical passages in isolation from each other. The whole of Scripture helps us to understand the particular and keeps passages in proper perspective. This means, of course, that the more we hear and study and know the Bible, the better able we are to find both depth and clarity of meaning.

It also means that while we let each passage speak in its own voice, we judge the edges by the center; we also believe that not all passages are of equal importance.

Lutherans come to all Scripture with certain biblical ideas having pride of place, including justification by faith through grace and a Theology of the Cross.

So we come to each passage with important questions that reflect these convictions:

- Can other passages in the Bible help us to understand or interpret this passage?
- Are there important ideas we find to be at the center of the Bible that help us put this passage in the perspective of the whole?
- Might we see this passage as more or less important because of our convictions about what God has done in the life, death and resurrection of Christ?

### **THE PLAIN MEANING OF THE TEXT:**

Luther said "the Christian reader should make it his first task to seek out the literal sense, as they call it. For it alone...holds its ground in trouble and trial." By *literal sense* Luther meant the plain meaning of the text.

Mark Powell has suggested that this means, first and foremost, what the text would have meant to the original audience. As modern readers of the Bible, we get at the plain meaning of the text through asking the questions discussed in the Historical and Literary Readings.

In truth, modern biblical interpretation was in some ways given birth by Luther when he put the Bible into the hands of all and encouraged educated study.

What is the plain meaning of this text? Are we giving Scripture, in whatever ways we are able, its own integrity.

### **PUBLIC INTERPRETATION:**

Finally for Lutherans, the interpretation of Scripture is a public act rather than a private one. The meaning of Scripture for individuals is to be found by seeking application of its universal message to personal situations.

We do not believe that God speaks private messages to us through the Bible. So we might ask:

- Is the interpretation we are commending accessible to everyone? Are we gleaning lessons from the text that others might also hear that we can explain?
- Are there interpretations from the past that help broaden and lend depth to our reading? Are there interpretations from cultures other than our own that might broaden or lend depth to our reading?

Each aspect of this Lutheran approach to studying the Bible is designed to make room for God's voice speaking to us through the Bible, beckoning us to lead lives worthy of our calling, laying out our sins, offering us God's grace, and delivering to us the promise that is ours in Christ.

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The crucial test is whether the tools are used to further truthful and honest reading that frees the text to deepen faith and understanding, to spark faithful questions, to inspire works of justice and mercy, to speak law and gospel, and to drive us toward Christ. **We are justified by faith, not by method.**

Luther said "The Holy scriptures require a humble reader who shows reverence and fear toward the Word of God, and constantly says, "Teach me, teach me, teach me!" The Spirit resists the proud.

- We come to the Bible humbly, asking for the gift of faith and ever mindful of our own capacity for sin and self-deceit.
- We come mindfully, bringing to our study the gifts of reason, the tools of scholarship, and the insights of others.
- We come attentively, reading Scripture carefully and closely.
- We come in the context of a faithful community, letting our stories interact with the stories of the Bible.
- We come prayerfully, asking that the Holy Spirit might guide our study and that Christ might be among us.
- And we come expectantly, listening for the voice of God working through the text and in the mutual study to inspire, shape, and enliven us individually and as a community of faith

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Closing Prayer – John 8:31-32, 36

Resource: Opening the Book of Faith