

Lutherans and Scripture

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As Lutherans read the Bible, we read with some important basic convictions:

- We are convinced that Scripture is God's living, active Word.
- We are convinced that Jesus is the center of God's living, active Word.
- We are convinced that the Holy Spirit is at work, both in inspiring the Word in the first place, and in helping us to hear and interpret it in ways appropriate to our lives today.
- We are convinced that God was involved in Israel's story and the church's story, and continues to be involved in our story today.

Here are some aspects of how Lutherans read the Bible, based on those convictions:¹

Divine and Human: God seems to love to use earthly vehicles for carrying and conveying God's own power and grace: Jesus himself is fully human and fully God. The sacraments use ordinary water, bread, and wine as vehicles of grace. The Bible is like that, too – fully human and fully God's word. As a collection of human writings, it bears the marks of time, place, and personality, and can be studied with the aid of any tools appropriate for literature. As God's own word, it is faithful, reliable, and trustworthy, and calls for our reverence, our commitment, and our obedience.

The Right Word for the Right Time: God's word is contextual. While God's purposes and plans are eternal, God also knows which message to speak for each season. This is because God is in real relationship with us, and knows what word we need at any given time. For example, the book of Amos is almost all judgment, because that's the message Israel needed to hear in his day. Later, however, when God's people were captive in exile, judgment was not what they need to hear; instead, God's word for them was "Comfort, comfort my people" (Isa 40).

Historical Reading: Because God is involved with real people in real historical moments, and always knows the right message to speak for each season, we care about history as we read. Place and time make a difference in the Bible.

Change and Movement in Scripture: Again, God's purposes for us are eternal. But because God is working with flesh-and-blood people in our concrete settings, God knows how to lead us at each moment in history. For example, when God commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac (Gen 22), the command may have felt horrible, but child sacrifice was not unusual in Abraham and Sarah's culture. Later on, God makes it clear that human sacrifice is abhorrent, and God forbids it.

Change in God's Law: By the same token, we can observe changes in God's law as time goes on. Some examples: In Exod 21, male and female slaves are to be treated differently, but later Deut 15 insists that they be treated alike. In Deut 23.1 castrated men are banned from the worshipping assembly, but God reverses this in Isa 56.3-5. In Mark 7.18-20, Jesus cancels the food laws of Lev 11. Why are these changes important? They once again signal that God is in relationship with us, knows what his people are facing, and responds accordingly. That's good news.

¹ Much of what follows is based on Mark Allan Powell's and Diane Jacobson's chapters in Jacobson, Powell, and Olson, Opening the Book of Faith: Lutheran Insights for Bible Study (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008). Other paragraphs are my own formulations.

Jesus the Center: All scripture is inspired by God, and profitable for God's purposes (2 Tim 3.16). At the same time, Lutherans believe that Scripture has a center: Jesus Christ. What Christ has done changes where we stand with God. For example, while Paul insists that the law is holy and good (Rom 7.12), he also announces that in Christ we are no longer under the law (Gal 3.23 – 4.7, 5.16-26).

Christ-Centered Reading: "What Shows Forth Christ": In the Bible, all roads lead finally to Jesus. Because Lutherans see Christ as the center of Scripture, as we read any portion of the Bible we are listening for whatever reveals Christ, leads us to Christ, puts us in mind of Christ, or shows us our need of Christ.

Law and Gospel: Lutherans hear God's voice in two modes throughout Scripture. Both modes are important. "Law" is God's voice which accuses us, judges us, calls us to account, and makes us realize that we need a savior. "Gospel" is God's voice that saves us, comforts us, forgives us, and declares steadfast love to us. We listen always for both voices as we read the Bible.

Devotional Reading: There are many different devotional approaches to Bible reading. What they have in common is the expectation that the Bible is God's living, active word, and that the Holy Spirit encounters us in the text of Scripture as we approach in faith and trust. We read the Bible – both individually and together – expecting to hear the voices of law and gospel, and expecting to meet Jesus Christ.

The Plain Meaning of the Text: After centuries of elaborate and often fanciful interpretation of the Bible, Martin Luther came to insist that the basis for our interpretation is always "the plain meaning of the text." Passages are to be understood in the sense that would have seemed obvious to their original readers (p. 37). The plain meaning will usually depend on what kind of literature a given passage is: The "plain meaning" of biblical *poetry* will be different from the "plain meaning" of biblical *history*, and the "plain meaning" of a *parable* will be something different yet.

Literary Reading: Because the "plain meaning" of the text depends on what sort of literature each passage is, we learn about different kinds of literature in the Bible, and pay attention to the type of literature as we read and study.

A Community of Readers: Public Interpretation: Scripture does speak to us individually as we read and study it. The Holy Spirit uses the text of Scripture to address our individual lives. One problem, however, is that we are fallible people, and what we think we're hearing in the Bible can easily be skewed. We need each other. We need the Holy Spirit operating in the whole Body of Christ to be sure that we are hearing God's Word accurately. The personal, individual messages we find in the Bible ought finally to be in harmony with what the whole community of faith is hearing.

Scripture Interprets Scripture: We've seen throughout history how people can make the Bible say whatever they want: Just pick the right verses in isolation, and you can support just about any position. But Scripture is contextual, and one of its most important contexts is itself. That means that as we read Scripture we seek to read each verse in its own context, and in context of the flow of all of Scripture. In this way the crystal-clear passages of Scripture will help us with the verses that are more difficult to understand, and we will come to understand each part of the Bible in the flow of God's overall purposes.