



About the Initiative (An Address by Dr. Diane Jacobson, Director of BFI)

I. What Lutherans Think About the Bible

Here We Stand -- Between Fundamentalism and Secularism: One of the great gifts of the Lutheran heritage is that we tend to take the middle road and stand there proudly.

We believe the Bible is the written word of God in so far as it speaks to us words of command and promise from God and births Christ in us.

There are two ditches in today's world around Bible. One is fundamentalism. **The logic goes something like this:** The Bible is true. The only way something is true is if it literally, factually true. No contradictions. No mistakes. The Bible says it. We believe it. End of argument.

The other ditch is secularism. **The logic goes something like this:** The only way the Bible can be true is if literally true, scientifically verifiable. Because the Bible is not consistently literally true, it is not true at all and hence not the Word of God. The Bible is a human book, old and irrelevant. So let's all be spiritual but not religious and forget about the Bible.

So what's a Lutheran to do? *We take the middle road.* We claim that Bible is the Word of God, but not in the way fundamentalism would have us understand this. We begin by affirming that God's Word is threefold.

Lutherans Read the Bible in the context of a threefold understanding of Word

Interestingly enough a good place to begin can be our **ELCA Constitution** in which we find the following:

2.02. This church confesses Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and the Gospel as the power of God for the salvation of all who believe.

- a. Jesus Christ is the Word of God incarnate, through whom everything was made and through whose life, death, and resurrection God fashions a new creation.
- b. 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.
- c. The canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the written Word of God. Inspired by God's Spirit speaking through their authors, they record and announce God's revelation centering in Jesus Christ. Through them God's Spirit speaks to us to create and sustain Christian faith and fellowship for service in the world.

So, let's look at these three manifestations of the Word of God in a bit of detail. The first insight from our Lutheran heritage is this:

a. Jesus Christ is the Word of God incarnate

When God speaks, the Word God speaks is Jesus (See John 1:1-14). That is, this Word is not just information about God. The Word is first and foremost human rather than written. We are related to God's word as we are related to another person more than as we are related to words on a page. This Word is an invitation from God to have a relationship with Jesus as the source of life and new creation.

b. The proclamation of God's message to us as both Law and Gospel is the Word of God

If the Word of God is really to be brought home to us, we must always speak to our own situation. Luther emphasized that Christ did not command the apostles to write, but only to preach, and he regarded the church itself "not as a pen house, but a mouth-house." (Sermon on Matt. 21:1-9)

Now often we tend to think proclamation is synonymous with preaching. Certainly preaching is part of the picture, but preaching is only one means of proclamation. Proclamation is part of the calling of every Christian. We proclaim the Good News to others whenever we enable the other to hear the good news not a record of something that happened back then, but as a present, living message from the present, living God. We proclaim the Good News when the Word is alive, personal, and effective. When you sit on the other side of the kitchen table and remind someone of God's mercy, that is the Word of God. When you reassure a person in the hospital of God's presence, that is the Word of God. When you embody the mercy or justice of God in your actions, that is the Word of God. As we hear in Romans 10:17, "So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the Word of Christ."

c. The canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the written Word of God

The Bible is God's Word in the context of God's Word also being the enfleshed Word and the proclaimed Word. For Scripture to be truly Word, it must always involve a communications event. Jesus, after he has read from the scroll of Isaiah in Luke 4 says "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." Not in Jesus' speaking, but only in so far as it is actually heard. Therefore it makes no sense to talk about the Bible as Word when it sits on the shelf some place. As someone once said, "a Bible in the hand is worth two on the shelf!" Word to be Word must involve a communications event.

When you look back at the constitution you also notice how and where the Spirit is at work. God's Spirit was certainly there with those who wrote the Bible, speaking through the authors. But the Spirit's work did not end at the beginning, with the writing. The Spirit is also alive today as we read and study and hear and are engaged by the Bible. This is one of our firmest convictions.

- Through the Bible, God speaks to us. God speaks to us for a purpose. When we read this Bible something happens to us. Primarily what happens is that God works faith in us.
- Through the Bible, the Spirit creates and sustains us together in fellowship, in community, as church.
- Through the fellowship that is created in our gathering around the Word, the Spirit works through us, for the world.

This Bible business, this faith stuff, is not finally cerebral, about ideas and getting our theology straight. Our notion of Word is dynamic and living.

II. Some Helpful Ways to Read the Bible

Knowing how to begin with Bible Study or how to have good conversations gathered around the Bible is often the biggest challenge we face. What kind of questions might we ask that will help open up the text? How can we generate excitement and learning and have fun as well? How can we be challenged and comforted by God and hear both God's demands and promises through our engagement with the text and with one another?

Folks engaged in the Book of Faith Initiative of the ELCA have been talking about **four different ways of reading the Bible, four ways of asking questions**. These four ways, as shown in the following illustration, are devotional reading, historical reading, literary reading, and Lutheran theological reading.



Note: Even though we talk about four different ways of reading, the four tend to overlap and get messy. That is just fine. Messy is often good. Still it helps to begin by learning how to differentiate between the four types of reading or questions.

Method #1: Devotional reading invites all of us to set aside our lack of knowledge or our expertise and let the passage from the Bible seep into our hearts, minds, and souls both individually and in community.

Devotional reading has a long history in the church, going back to *Lectio Divina*, a latin phrase meaning “divine reading.” This method of reading was first practiced by the Benedictine order of the Roman Catholic Church. While it was used for individual meditation, it has now been adapted for groups. You can read some basic information from the Benedictines on *Lectio Divina* at <http://www.osb.org/lectio/index.html>

There are many other helpful devotional methods one can practice. Here are four other methods:

1. The Moravians, using their daily texts, practice the T.R.I.P. method, asking what am I **T**hankful for, what do I **R**egret, for what do I **I**ntercede, and what is my **P**lan of Action. See <http://www.dailytext.com/dailytexts/TRIP.php>
2. The Swedish Marking Method invites a person to use a system of candles and arrows and question marks in the margins of their Bibles:



One candle means: This is new for me -- a new understanding, a new insight, a new appreciation.



Two candles means: I want to remember or memorize this verse or idea.



An arrow means: This strikes me as being especially important.



A question mark means: This is not clear. I need help in understanding what it says.

See <http://www.matthiasmedia.com.au/briefing/library/5445/>

3. One can find a variety of devotional Bible Study Methods for the Catechumenate at www.sclutheran.org/Committees/Bible%20Study%20Methods.doc
4. Eric Law of the *Kaleidoscope Institute for Competent Leadership in a Diverse, Changing World* has developed a way of reading designed to build inclusive community around Holy Scriptures by mutual invitation at http://216.104.171.229/ki/bible_study.html

Here are four helpful principles with devotional reading:

- Listen slowly and carefully. Listen both to the biblical text and to each other.
- Find a method of devotional reading or a set of questions that your group can become familiar and comfortable with and use these questions regularly.
- For devotional reading, you don't need an expert in the room. Sometimes experts get in the way because...
- With devotional reading, there are no right answers.

Remember, the idea is to let the Bible seep into our hearts, minds, and souls, both personally and in community.

Some Examples of Helpful Devotional Questions:

- What word or phrase strikes me, and where does it take me?
- What stories or memories does this text stir in me?
- What scares, confuses, or challenges me in this text?
- What delights me in this text or fills me with hope?
- What is God up to in this text?

Method #2: Historical reading grows out of the understanding that our Bible is, among many other things, an ancient text, written in a different time and place by and for folks with sensibilities and experiences quite different from our own. We can gain insights for our present context through better understanding the ancient context.

It is not always easy to understand what a good historical question is. Often we think the basic historical question is this: “What really happened on that day?” We want to know what Jesus really said or where Noah’s ark really landed or questions like that. But mostly we cannot answer questions like these.

Instead, the basic historical question is this:

“What insights from history would be helpful to know in order to hear, read, study, or understand this passage more accurately?”

Historical questions help us to understand what stands behind a text.

So when we are reading the Book of Ruth, we might want to know something about Moab (Ruth was from there and Naomi’s family immigrates there) or what the life of widows was like in ancient Bethlehem (both Ruth and her mother-in-law, Naomi, were widows). Or if we are reading a letter from Paul to the Corinthians, we might want to know something about the city of Corinth in Paul’s day so that we can better understand the original context of the letter.

There are many ways history can be helpful, but it doesn’t always solve stuff. Sometimes insight from history gives you really good options, so you might imagine different possibilities. For example, if we imagine Mark is writing to a Jewish community, they might hear his Gospel one way. If he were writing to a Gentile audience, they might hear it this other way. Both are possible.

Often when we ask read historically, we get to meaning through analogies with our own life circumstances. For example, we learn that prophet Amos was a working class shepherd from the southern kingdom of Judah called to deliver a message to the leaders of the northern Kingdom of Israel warning them about God’s judgment if they don’t take care of the poor in their midst. So we might think what would it be like if an immigrant farm worker from Mexico started delivering prophecies about taking care of the poor to the leaders of the United States?

Historical readings do need an expert more than the other methods may. Sometimes the expert is in the room. Sometimes you learn good places to go to look stuff up like in the church library or in a good Study Bible. Sometimes you learn some good websites to visit.

Here are three good websites. (There are more, but also ones that are not so good!)

<http://www.enterthebible.org>

<http://www.textweek.com>

<http://www.workingpreacher.org>

Some Examples of Helpful Historical Questions:

- What insights from history would be helpful to know in order to hear, read, study, or understand this passage more accurately?
- Do we know anything about who wrote the passage or to whom it is written?
- Do we know when this passage was written?
- Do we know where this passage was written or takes place and anything about that ancient part of the world?

Two Examples of a helpful Historical Exercise:

1. Look at your passage. Pretend you are an editor for a soon-to-be-published Study Bible. Your job is to tell the scholar writing the notes for this book of the Bible where he or she should put a note. Put an asterisk (*) wherever you would want that person to put a note. When everyone in your group has finished marking their places, compare notes and figure out places where you might find out what you want to know.
2. Pretend you are looking at your text on a computer screen. Where would you want a hyperlink that would give you more information?

Method #3: A literary reading is one in which we look at a text as a written text and we attend to the details and nuances of the text, believing that **meaning can be found deeply within the text.**

To read the Bible with literary questions in mind, you do not or this you don't have to be a biblical scholar, but it does help to be a really good reader, or maybe an English teacher.

Think book club.

So what are our literary questions:

- What type of literature is this passage?
It helps to know what kind of literature you are looking at. We read a story (narrative) differently from a psalm or a prophetic pronouncement or a proverb or a letter. So you would ask different literary questions. Many of the questions below have narrative in mind.
- What is the literary context of this passage. What comes before or after it? What is the larger biblical context?
- What is the setting of this passage?
Does the passage mention a particular time (midnight, noon, Sabbath, Passover)?
- Does the passage mention a particular place (a river, a well, a mountain, a banquet)?
- Who are the important characters in this story?
What do we know about them? What might they be thinking of feeling? How do you know from the text? Pay close attention to description, action, and dialogue.
- What are the important themes in this passage

Across the different types of biblical literature, you can often discover what themes are important by noting repetitions or word plays or other literary moves. Often verbs provide the clue to what is important.

Some Examples of Helpful Literary Exercises:

1. **Setting Exercise:** Circle/Note any places, times, or settings. Talk about these places in your own life. What do they evoke personally? Where are these places found elsewhere in the Bible, and why are they important? What is their symbolic value?
2. **Character Exercise:** Divide up the group and invite them to act out the story for one another.
3. **Thematic Exercise:** Underline the verbs and/or repetitions. Share what you discover about what is important.
4. **Thematic Exercise:** Imagine that you were a court reporter for the Judah Post at the judicial proceedings at the Bethlehem gate. What would your headline be?
5. **General Literary Exercise:** Imagine you are making a movie of this passage? What are the settings? What are the plot and the major themes? Who might you cast in the major roles? What stage directions would you give them to show their feelings and character development?

Method #4: A Lutheran theological reading brings questions to the text rising out of particular insights from our Lutheran heritage that can help us engage the Bible anew in each time and place.

The truth is Lutherans come to Scripture not so very differently than others. But certain convictions across the years have shaped our reading, studying, hearing, encountering and being encountered by the Bible. We have particular insights from our Lutheran heritage that can help us engage the Bible in our time and place. We should always be aware as we go through these that though we identify these ideas as Lutheran, they are not exclusively so.

Some Important Lutheran Convictions about Biblical Engagement

Law and gospel

One of the principle Lutheran convictions is that the Word, in all its manifestations, works on us as law and as gospel. We see and experience this time and again. Speaking about law and gospel can be a kind of code language for us and, therefore, what we mean by law and gospel is often very confusing. Here is a simplified version. (Please note that, in the theological phrase "law and gospel," both terms are used rather differently than they are in everyday language.)

In one sentence, what we mean by speaking of law and gospel when we talk about Scripture is that, as we engage and are engaged by God through the Bible, we experience the demands (law) and promises (gospel) of God. Law and Gospel are about what Bible does to us when we read it. Law and Gospel are about the effects of being encountered by the text, by God through the text. Law and Gospel are better verbs than nouns:

So we read a passage (or our neighbor does) and we are convicted. We may even despair. We are struck by the needs of our neighbor. We hear who we are – sinners in need of forgiveness, lost souls in need of being found, lonely creatures in need of love. We hear God’s word as law. The text laws us. Or we read this same passage or another and we know the reality of God’s promise to us, to the world. We experience God’s forgiveness and grace. Christ is for us. We are surrounded by steadfast and committed love. We hear who God is. We hear God’s word as gospel. The text gospels us. When we hear the bible as law and gospel, the effective meaning of the Bible is not found in the text or behind the text. The meaning of Scripture is found in the encounter with the Word. We are not used to asking such questions but they are at the heart of how we think of the Bible as the Word of God.

What Shows Forth Christ

A second central Lutheran insight is that as we read and study and hear the Bible, what shows forth Christ (brings Christ to us and us to Christ) is central. As Mark Allen Powell says in *Opening the Book of Faith*, “we Lutherans are Jesus people.”¹

For Luther, the true meaning of the Bible, the core of biblical truth, is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This insight brings us to a favorite of Luther’s images of Scripture:

Here you will find the swaddling clothes and the manger in which Christ lies.

-- Luther, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 35: *Prefaces to the Old Testament*, 236.

Through this image of Scripture as the manger of Christ, Luther shows us how the Bible both **is** the Word of God and **contains** the Word of God, cradles it if you will. It is also not so much that the text talks about and teaches us about Jesus Christ (though it certainly does that) but that rather that the text points us, drives us, leads us to Jesus Christ. What is important and true about the Bible is what births Christ in us.

Scripture interprets Scripture

Another Lutheran insight to highlight is the notion that 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. So, Scripture interprets Scripture means that difficult parts of the Bible should be read in the light of clearer or more central passages. 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. Not all passages of the Bible are equally important.

Lutherans come to all Scripture with certain biblical ideas having pride of place. Two examples: We Lutherans believe that the Bible teaches a theology of the cross. So, Scripture interprets Scripture means that we cannot get to God by bypassing the pain and suffering and messiness of life. God comes to us from within the suffering and through it, giving us a very different understanding and experience of divine power. If you want to talk about Jesus and his resurrection, you also have to talk about bearing his cross.

Or a second... We Lutherans believe that the Bible teaches us that we are justified by faith through grace. Now clearly not all passages in the Bible say this. When we read or hear passages that say something else, we study those passages and listen and dig and ponder. But finally, we might say, “No! I just don’t buy it! What is central is more important.

The Plain Meaning of the Text

Lutherans begin their exploration of the Bible seeking for the plain meaning of the text (rather than the allegorical). 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.”²

¹ For this quotation and more depth on this list of Lutheran insights see Mark Allan Powell’s chapter in Jacobson, Diane L., Olson, Stanley Norris, and Powell, Mark Allan. *Opening the Book of Faith: Lutheran Insights for Bible Study*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008.

² Luther’s Works, vol.9, 24

This quotation from Luther is confusing in our contemporary setting because we hear the word “literal” quite differently from the way Luther meant it. He did not mean as that every word of the Bible was literally true. Rather, by literal sense, Luther meant the plain meaning of the text. Luther was concerned that we not read the text using fanciful allegory, as medieval interpreters did, completely disconnected from what the text actually says.

As modern readers of the Bible, we try our best to get to the plain meaning of the text through asking the historical critical questions and by reading with great care, using many of the literary and rhetorical questions we have been exploring in the last decades. So this reformation principle often leads us to commend modern methods of interpretation.

Public Interpretation

Finally we come to the study of Scripture publically, as a wide and inclusive community. Underlying this principle are two issues. One issue is that if our interpretation is public then the text is not just a private word between one individual and God. The Bible is not filled with secret messages.

The second issue points to our preference for communal interpretation and hearing of the Bible. Though private study of the Biblical text is certainly not to be discouraged, our Lutheran view of both God and church commends a more public reading. Hence the tag line for the Book of Faith initiative is: Open Scripture. Join the Conversation.

We come to the study of Scriptures as community, in community, with the conviction that we learn the most in conversation with the other. Moreover our community is never complete if we exclude the interpretation of the other, especially those most different from ourselves. We often learn most from folks from cultures, generations, genders, and experiences different from our own who hear God speaking literally a different language. Often the broader the community, the fuller the meaning.

Some Examples of Helpful Lutheran Theological Questions:

- In what ways do we hear this passage as law?
- In what ways do we hear this passage as Gospel?
- How does this passage show forth Christ?
- What other passages from the Bible help us to understand this passage?
- How do others hear this text, especially folks from cultures different from my own?

III. Some Fun Quotations about the Bible from Martin Luther

These are the Scriptures which make fools of all the wise and understanding, and are open only to the small and simple, as Christ says in Matthew 11:25. Therefore dismiss your own opinions and feelings, and think of the scriptures as the loftiest and noblest of holy things, as the richest of mines which can never be sufficiently explored, in order that you may find divine wisdom which God here lays before you in such simple guise as to quench all pride. Here you will find the swaddling clothes and the manger in which Christ lies. --Luther's Works (LW), vol. 35: Prefaces to the Old Testament, 236.

It is for Christ's sake that we believe in the Scriptures, but it is not for the Scriptures' sake that we believe in Christ.

The church is not a pen-house but a mouth-house. --LW, Companion Volume, p. 63.

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. --LW, vol.9, 24

The Bible is alive, it speaks to me; it has feet, it runs after me; it has hands, it lays hold of me... A simple layman armed with Scripture is to be believed above a pope or a cardinal without it. --Quoted in "Luther--The Early Years," Christian History, no. 34.

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.' --LW, vol.54, 379; Table Talk, 5017

V. Final Words

We as a church are committed to opening Scripture together and joining the conversation.

As we do this we are invited to come to this encounter with a certain attitude.

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

May we be deeply enriched by our conversations as we engage and are engaged by the Bible again and again. And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with us all as we walk together with the Spirit on the journey to which God is calling us.