

# LUTHERAN INSIGHTS

## that Open the Bible\*

Lutherans are not *peculiar* in how they understand the Bible. Most of what we do is pretty similar to what other Christians do, but we sometimes do put a little different spin on things. We have our priorities and our preferences, and these sometimes lead us to understand Scripture differently.

### The Word of God

Perhaps the first and last thing we should say about Lutherans and the Bible is this: *Lutherans believe the Bible is the Word of God.* Of course, 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 the Bible is the Word of God? Simply put, we Lutherans believe that the Bible tells us what God wants to say to us.

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?" When we read the Bible, it tells us what God wants to say to us.

Lutherans have more to say about the Word of God. 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). It isn't just Lutherans who speak of "the Word of God" this way. The Bible itself does so.

First, the Bible speaks of *Jesus Christ* as the Word of God. In John's Gospel, we read, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God (John 1:1). And, then, a little bit later, John's Gospel says, "The Word became flesh and lived among us" (John 1:14). Obviously, the Bible did not become flesh and live among us. Jesus Christ did. So Jesus Christ is the Word of God.

Second, the Bible speaks of *preaching* as the word of God. In the book of Acts, we often hear about Peter or Paul or some other missionary preaching "the word of God" (see, for example, Acts 13:5; 18:11). What did they do? They didn't just read the Bible to people: they proclaimed a message that convicted people of their sin and offered them hope of salvation. Lutherans call this "the message of law

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and gospel,” and we will say more about it later. The message of law and gospel may also be identified as “the word of God.”

And, third, the Bible identifies the Scriptures as the Word of God. For example, when Jesus believes that some people are failing to abide by one of the Ten Commandments, he tells them that they are “making void the word of God” (Mark 7:13). Jesus did not just regard Scripture as ancient testimony, as a collection of old traditions that ought to be valued for their historical significance. He believed that the writings of Scripture continued to express what God had to say to people centuries after they were written. The writings of Scripture may be identified as the Word of God.

Another phrase important to Lutherans is the Latin expression *sola scriptura* (“*scripture alone*”). So, what do Lutherans mean by *sola scriptura*? They mean that “scripture alone” has authority to serve as a source of divine revelation. Not councils. Not popes. Not churchwide assemblies. Not bishops or seminary professors. Only the Bible has the authority of divine revelation. 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

We are going to look at some principles that Lutherans have come up with to guide them in understanding the Bible. But, first, let’s consider a basic question: “Where did we get the Bible?” Where does the Bible come from? We can answer the question, “Where does the Bible come from?” in three ways: two simple answers and one complicated answer.

The first simple answer is “The Bible comes from God.” Of course, the Bible did not just fall out of heaven, all bound in leather with the words of Jesus printed in red. But it *is* the Word of God, and it does convey what God wants to say to us in a way that no other book or collection of books ever could. Lutherans have no trouble saying, “This book comes from God.”

And the second simple answer is, “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.

And, finally, a third, more complicated answer is that the individual books of the Bible were written by human beings. In order to understand any particular book of the Bible, we need to know something about the circumstances in which it was written. This is important for Lutherans, because we believe the Bible must be studied and interpreted if we are going to understand it and receive God’s truth. There is a famous bumper sticker that reads, “God said it, I believe it, and that settles it.” Lutherans would want it to be a little bit longer: we would want to say something about *understanding* what God has said. It doesn’t do any good to believe what you think the Bible teaches if you have misunderstood what the Bible teaches. What would we want the bumper sticker to say? “God speaks to us through the Bible, we interpret the Bible to understand what God wants to say, and then we believe it—and *that* settles it.” But, of course, that is much too long. Lutherans have never been very good at bumper stickers.

## Five Key Lutheran Principles

Here are five key principles that Lutherans follow when they study or interpret the Bible. The principles are easier to describe than they are to practice, but we have discovered over the years that when we do manage to follow these principles, we usually get things right.

### 1. Law and Gospel

Lutherans say that the Word of God speaks both law and gospel and that both must be held together for God's Word to be fulfilled. One way to describe these important terms is:

- the *law* is that which accuses us and judges us;
- the *gospel* is that which comforts us and saves us.

This message of law and gospel is at the heart of Scripture. One common misunderstanding sometimes equates “the law” with the Old Testament and “the gospel” with the New Testament. This is not right. There is a lot of material in the New Testament that accuses and judges people (law), and there is a lot of material in the *Old* Testament that comforts, saves, and heals (gospel). The whole Bible is both law and gospel.

A similar misunderstanding often tries to categorize Bible passages as *either* law or gospel. Some people develop lists: law texts and gospel texts. The law is usually associated with commandments and the gospel with promises. But this is not always right. The *same* text may function as *both* law and gospel: which *function* it has in any given situation may depend upon who is reading it and on what they need to hear.

Lutherans look for both messages in the Bible: law *and* gospel. This is part of what makes us love the Bible. We don't just believe the Bible; we treasure it—promises and commandments alike.

### 2. What Shows Forth Christ

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.

The Jesus we know and love is the Messiah of Israel, so the Scriptures of Israel—the Old Testament—also reveal him to us. Sometimes, I admit, this happens in a kind of a roundabout fashion. But, eventually, everything in the Bible brings us to Jesus Christ. Everything in the Bible points us toward Christ and helps us to know Christ and to love Christ and to have a relationship with Christ, who is risen from the dead.

Martin Luther used to say the Bible is like the manger that held the Christ child. In many Christmas scenes, we see people kneeling before the manger to worship, but they are not worshipping the manger. They are worshipping the Christ child who is in the manger. So, also, we do not worship the Bible. We worship the Christ who is found in the Bible.

I like to put it this way: *Lutherans are Jesus people, and they understand the Bible to be a Jesus book.* This is my own language—a contemporary way of expressing what I think is typical and traditional for Lutheranism.

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### 3. Scripture Interprets Scripture

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 often try to reconcile what is said in one part of Scripture with what is said in other parts of Scripture, sometimes recognizing that there is tension between texts that seem to say different things. We try to be faithful to the entire Bible rather than just picking some parts and leaving others alone.

In practice, interpreting Scripture in light of Scripture means that Lutherans must do some initial work at defining the teaching of "Scripture as a whole" so that they will be able to interpret individual passages in light of the broader themes and overall message. When we do this, people who are not Lutheran often think that we are interpreting the Bible in light of our own theology. We understand why they think that, but we think that we are interpreting Scripture (individual passages) in light of Scripture (the Bible as a whole).

Let's look at a few examples:

**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 us to deny ourselves, take up *our* crosses, and follow him (Mark 8:34). The Apostle Paul calls us to have the same mind as Jesus Christ, who "humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross" (Phil 2:5, 8). Lutherans try to read all of Scripture in this light. We believe we are called to love others with unselfish devotion and to do what we can to make the world a better place—loftier goals than simply expanding our own borders (see 1 Chr 4:10) or feathering our own nest. In the same vein, a theology of the cross (taught in Scripture as a whole) tells us that God has special concern for the most vulnerable people of the earth (Isa 61:1; Luke 6:20; Jas 2:5) and that pure religion must be fundamentally oriented toward them (Jas 1:27).

**Justification by Grace through Faith.** Lutherans believe that the Bible as a whole presents God as gracious and merciful and "abounding in steadfast love" (Exod 34:6; Ps 103:8; Joel 2:13). 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). Since Scripture as a whole teaches this, we know better than to think that our own efforts or merit will improve our status with God or increase God's love for us. There are many passages of Scripture that encourage us to do good works, and we take those seriously, but we do not think that those works will enable us to earn favor with God. Interpreting Scripture in light of Scripture leads us to view the call to good works as an invitation for people redeemed by God's grace to act as the transformed, spirit-filled "new creations" that God has made them to be (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 5:22-23).

### 4. The Plain Meaning of the Text

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. They are not to be taken out of context or twisted to be read in a sense that never would have occurred to their original readers.

This comes straight from the teaching of Martin Luther and, when he talked about this, he had something specific in mind. It was popular in his day for interpreters to come up with creative ways of understanding the Bible that never would have been intended by the author. This was done by finding "secret meaning" in the Bible that no one had ever noticed before. The more creative the better!

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Luther hated this way of interpreting the Bible. Luther would claim, if you allow this sort of thing to go on, people will find that they can make the Bible say anything they want it to say. We should stick to the plain sense of Scripture—the meaning it had for its original readers.

What about today? Do people still read the Bible in ways that ignore its “plain sense”? One example in our modern world might be the way that the book of Revelation gets treated at a certain popular level. Some books that are written about Revelation claim that modern authors are able to understand the book in a way that it never would have been understood in the first century. They do this by developing a creative system of codes and dispensations—some of them based on things they find in other books of the Bible and some based on current events or things that have happened in church history. Then, when these are applied to the book of Revelation, we get a picture of what is going to happen at the end of time.

If you have grown up Lutheran, you may not have heard much about this—or, you may have only heard about it as something that people in *other* churches believe. Why? Do we think it's *wrong*? Do we think there *won't* be a rapture, or a tribulation, or an Antichrist?

No. That would be going too far. Lutherans have no doctrine on this—though of course, we have *opinions*, and the opinions of individual Lutherans on such matters will vary. Basically, we recognize that the book of Revelation is a difficult book to understand, and we know that intelligent, responsible people understand it in different ways. But our tendency—what is typical and traditional for Lutherans—is to focus on how the book would have been understood by its original readers. This book was written for Christians who had suffered terrible persecution. Why had they suffered persecution? And how would this book have comforted them and helped them in their trials? Those are the questions we want to ask.

If you spend time in Lutheran circles, when you hear a sermon or Bible study on the book of Revelation, you will probably not hear about how certain things in that book match up with things that are happening in the world today, nor will you hear about what things are going to happen next, or *when* those things will happen. More likely, you will hear about how the hope of Christ's coming strengthens us and allows to persevere and to remain faithful to God in a troubled world. The reason is that this is what we get out of the book when we pay attention to its *plain sense*—what it would have meant to its original readers.

## 5. Public Interpretation

Lutherans say that the interpretation of Scripture is a public act rather than a private one. Through the Bible, God speaks to Israel and to the church. God does not speak directly or privately to individuals. What God says to Israel and to the church may have specific application for individual lives, but the meaning of Scripture for individuals is to be in harmony with its universal meaning for the community of faith.

This principle is difficult for some people to grasp. We *do* encourage personal and private Bible reading, and we do believe that the Bible speaks to people as a living Word with relevance to their individual lives. But Lutherans do not believe that this just happens automatically in a magical sort of way. People do not just open their Bibles to find private messages from God, words that would apply to them in a way that they would probably never apply to anyone else.

There is an old preacher joke about a man who opened the Bible every morning to let God speak to him, and one day it said, “Judas went out and hanged himself.” Hmm, he thought. I don't know what God is saying to me. So he closed the Bible and opened it again. This time it said, “Go thou and do likewise.”

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I actually know someone—this is *not* a joke—who was a college student and read Isaiah 55:12 for his morning devotions. It says, “You shall go out with joy.” So he decided to ask a girl named Joy for a date. He was serious. He thought God had given him a private message through the Bible.

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. But this does *not* mean that we think the Bible has no personal application to individual lives. Of course it does. 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.

## Some Final Words

Since we are talking about a Lutheran approach to the Bible, we should perhaps conclude by noting that many Lutherans do not approach the Bible nearly enough. This is very un-Lutheran. Martin Luther translated the entire Bible, Old and New Testaments, into the language of the common people so that every family in Germany would be able to read the Scriptures in their homes. He was one of the first people to do this. It was a lot of work, and he did it because *he wanted Lutherans to read their Bibles in their homes*.

We should read the Bible, we should study the Bible, we should believe the Bible, we should treasure the Bible . . . and, I think, we should even memorize Bible passages, chapter and verse. Why? Because the Bible is the Word of God. The Bible tells us what God wants to say to us.

More than that, the Bible *does* things to us. In Scripture itself, we often hear about the Word of God as an active, dynamic force: the Word of God cleanses; it heals; it creates; it judges; it saves. One thing it does *not* do is sit unopened on bed stands or coffee tables. Rather, the Word of God is a force that never returns void but accomplishes what God intends (Isa 55:11).

So, the Bible is actually *more* than a book that says what God wants to say; it is also a book that *does* what God wants to do: a book that affects us, that transforms us.

Best of all, the Bible reveals Christ to us. It draws us into a living relationship with Jesus Christ, who is risen from the dead. Through the Bible, we come to know Jesus and love Jesus and to experience his love for us.

The Bible opens the very heart of God to us. It shows us what God has done for us—what God still does for us—what God always will do for us.

That’s the first and the last thing we Lutherans want to say about the Bible: the Bible is the Word of God.