

What Lutherans Think About the Bible

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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.



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