

## **Lutherans Approach the Bible**

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*This church accepts the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired Word of God and the authoritative source and norm of its proclamation, faith, and life.*

Constitution of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, C2.03.

The following is intended for the general reader and is to be understood as a brief description of how Lutherans have and should approach the Bible. A Lutheran approach to Scripture has certain necessary components. They are: the priority of Scripture, Christ the center of Scripture, law and gospel, the plain sense of Scripture, the power of Scripture and the inspiration of Scripture.

### ***Sola Scriptura (Scripture alone)***

Lutherans approach the Scriptures as divine revelation. The first point in a Lutheran approach to Scripture is to acknowledge the primacy of the Scriptures in matters of Christian faith and life over all other voices. When the Reformation began, there were countless voices vying for the attention of the Church. Some came from within the church herself, others came from outside. Numerous Church traditions and practices had developed during the Middle Ages because of people's listening to these various messages. By Martin Luther's day many of these traditions had become more important than plain Christian faith. In an effort to reclaim an emphasis on that faith Martin Luther and the reformers insisted on the primacy of the Scriptures as a way to refocus Christian devotion on the essential core of Christianity: Christ.

The reformers assumed that since the Scriptures were the founding documents of the Church, having been handed down by the apostles and their disciples (thus in a sense creating the Church), that the Bible was the best source of information about Christ and his proclamation, not later traditions and teachings. When they approached Scripture they recognized that it had authority over all pronouncements of the church, including priests, bishops and the pope. The reformers writings themselves are

subordinate to Scripture. Therefore, when Lutherans approach Scripture they do so with a certain reverence that is withheld from other books, teachings and messages. This is not to say that Lutherans refuse to acknowledge the positive contributions of science and archaeology or allow any contradictions and inconsistencies in Scripture. However, when Lutherans read the Bible they acknowledge that it is only in the words of Scripture that the pure message of Christ is to be found and nowhere else.

The Lutheran reformers wrote, "We believe, teach, and confess that the only rule and guiding principle according to which all teachings and teachers are to be evaluated and judged are the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments alone, ... Holy Scripture alone remains the only judge, rule, and guiding principle, according to which, as the only touchstone, all teachings should and must be recognized and judged, whether they are good or evil, correct or incorrect," as found in the Formula of Concord Epitome in "The Book of Concord," edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert.

And again Philip Melancthon wrote, "We concede to neither the pope nor the church the power to issue decrees against this consensus of the prophets," in the "Apology of the Augsburg Confession," Article XII, para. 66.

For these reasons Lutherans look upon Scripture as the norm or standard by which all other teachings and teachers are judged. Other messages, writings, philosophies, thoughts, or experiences are not to be placed on an equal basis with Scripture, or the Word of God. Scripture retains its primacy even before the church and her creeds and teachings. The Word of Scripture is considered the authoritative voice in the church, not someone's notion of the Gospel or God, for such opinions are necessarily derivative of Scripture.

### **Christ the center**

Lutherans approach the Scriptures as faithful witnesses to Christ. The primacy of Scripture and its authority are dependent upon Jesus Christ, to whom the Scriptures testify. For Christians, including Lutheran Christians, Christ is the center of Scripture. "Take Christ from the Scriptures - and what more will you find in them?" as Luther asked in "The Bondage of the Will," translated by J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston. Therefore, any teaching that claims Scripture as its source must focus on the person of Jesus Christ and not (for example) on a vague notion of love.

## **Law and gospel**

The Scriptures portray Christ through the messages of law and gospel. Melancthon wrote in the "Apology," Article IV, para. 5, "All Scripture should be divided into these two main topics: the law and the promises. In some places it communicates the law. In other places it communicates the promise concerning Christ." The law (divine demands that convict human beings) says, "You need Christ." The gospel (divine forgiveness that redeems human beings) says, "Here Christ is." Depending upon the listener's situation, various passages may function as either law or gospel. These two messages are always to be distinguished but never separated. The gospel is incomprehensible without the law, just as forgiveness is meaningless to those unaware of their sins.

Therefore, Lutherans do not shrink back from the law as negative and embrace only the gospel as positive, but rather they recognize the value of the law in its service to the gospel of Christ. When the law is separated from the gospel, the good news of Christ is cheapened and robbed of its significance. Some may wish to eliminate or marginalize scriptural messages that cause discomfort. Because Lutherans embrace Scripture as both law and gospel they should not seek to marginalize either law or gospel but retain both as divine functions of Scripture. In this way Lutherans honor Scripture as that force of God that both kills and makes alive.

## **The plain sense**

Lutherans approach the Scriptures primarily as clear words, not as hidden symbols. Though certain passages remain obscure, the content and meaning of Scripture is open to all. Lutherans recognize that it is in the text of Scripture that God's voice is heard, not something behind or under the text. An emphasis upon the plain sense of Scripture guards against the common error of subjectivism, peculiar readings and ideological interpretation.

For this reason, the literal sense of Scripture is to be preferred over figurative readings except where such readings are necessary in order to make sense of the words. In the Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article VII, para. 45, the Lutheran reformers wrote: "Because of all these things, we are bound to interpret and construe these words of the eternal, reliable, and almighty Son of God, our Lord, creator, and redeemer Jesus Christ, not as embellished, figurative, exotic, expressions, as would appear in line with our reason. Instead, we should accept the words as they stand, in their proper, clear sense, with simple faith and appropriate obedience and

not permit ourselves to be drawn away from this position by any objection or human counterargument spun out of human reason, no matter how attractive it may appear to our reason." And in the Formula of Concord, The Solid Declaration, Rule and Guiding Principle 1, the reformers stated, "First, we confess our adherence to the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments, as to the pure, clear fountain of Israel, which alone is the one true guiding principle, according to which all teachers and teaching are to be judged and evaluated." (Kolb and Wengert, p. 527) For instance, when Scripture reports Christ's words, "Love your neighbor as yourself," they should be read literally, not figuratively. On the other hand, when Scripture portrays Christ as a slaughtered lamb (Rev. 5:6) it should be read figuratively not literally.

In many cases, Scripture can be used to interpret itself. If one passage seems obscure it is often enlightened by another. This does not mean that Scripture is monolithic, but rather that the immediate, general and canonical context of the whole of Scripture must be taken into account and used to understand the meaning of a single passage.

### **The power of the Word**

Lutherans approach the Scriptures as power. Since Christ is the center of Scripture, the Word has power to transform lives, grant the gift of faith and effect salvation through that gift. Luther said, "And note that the strength of Scripture is this, that it is not changed into him who studies it, but that it transforms its lover into itself and its strengths," in his First Lectures on the Psalms, Luther's Works volume 10. This is what gives Scripture its authority. Scripture's authority is not dependent upon external human pronouncements concerning its historical conditioning or infallible character. (The use of various methods such as the historical critical method and the insistence of the inerrancy/infallibility of scripture came after the Protestant Reformation.) Rather, its ability to change lives constitutes its very power and authority, regardless of what one may say about it.

For this reason human beings should not consider themselves as judges over Scripture but rather as persons who are judged and recreated by Scripture. Scripture is the Word of God that exists over against the individual who reads it. Moreover, as the transforming, and therefore authoritative Word of God, Scripture necessarily has a claim over the Christian as a means of God's grace for the Christian. The Christian, therefore, should never consider herself the master of Scripture and its meaning, but rather Scripture's pupil and servant. Scripture remains, but the hearer is changed.

## **Inspiration**

Lutherans approach the Scriptures as inspired. The reformers never developed a doctrine of scriptural inspiration. They assumed it. God is the assumed author of Scripture as attested by many statements in the reformers' writings. For example Luther wrote, "Neither councils, fathers, nor we, in spite of the greatest and best success possible, will do as well as the Holy Scriptures, that is, as well as God himself has done," from Luther's Works Vol. 34, para. 284. Scripture is therefore understood as a divine Word that transcends humankind. Though it is also considered of human origin, Scripture's message and content are divine. Martin Luther therefore maintained that the Holy Spirit is necessary for the proper understanding of Scripture. He wrote in "The Bondage of the Will," "The truth is that nobody who has not the Spirit of God sees a jot of what is in the Scriptures." And from the same source, "The Spirit is needed for the understanding of all Scripture and every part of Scripture." Though Scripture can certainly be read and appreciated by non-believers, it is only when one has the gift of faith by the Spirit that one is truly opened to the power and impact of Scripture and able to understand the true character and nature of the Word.

## **Conclusion**

Lutheran Christians are not the only ones who approach the Scriptures with reverence and faith. However, whether we use various methods to enhance the reading of Scripture, a "Lutheran" approach is guided by the concepts mentioned above. Any reading of Scripture may be said to be Lutheran that incorporates the following approaches: a reverence for Scripture as God's Word; as law and gospel; as Christo-centric; as open and plain; as powerfully transformative and authoritative.

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