

# Reclaiming the Church for the Bible

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Many of us here think the ELCA has a problem with the Bible. Many of us also agree with the obverse: the Bible has a problem with the ELCA. "With them," said our Lord, "indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says: 'You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never perceive. For this people's heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; so that they might not look with their eyes and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn – and I would heal them.'" (Matthew 13:14-15)

How have we grown so hard of hearing? The parable of the Sower and the Seed is the occasion of our Lord's recollection of Isaiah. It warns of three causes for the failure of the Word of Kingdom to grow among us: the devil, shallow roots, and worldly desires. The next parable, the Weeds among the Wheat, warns of a fourth cause: bad seed – words that appear to be wheat, but are actually weeds.

The ELCA has a problem with the Bible, and the Bible has a problem with the ELCA. What is the solution? Being wary of the evil one, growing deep roots in the Word, and not being fooled by the needs of this life. What is the solution? Good seed. Exposure to plenty of good seed. To reclaim the church for the Bible we need to...read the Bible.

Why aren't Lutherans more interested in reading the Bible? Because, like the church in Luther's day, we've developed habits that make it unnecessary. In Luther's day, on the one hand, the Pope and certain experts were the official interpreters of Scripture. In our day, Chicago and certain experts are the official interpreters of Scripture. In Luther's day, the "heavenly prophets" claimed to know the meaning of Scripture on the basis of their individual experience. In our day, everybody can claim to know the meaning of Scripture on the basis of their individual experience.

It had become unnecessary to read the Bible in Luther's day, and you see the same forces at work today, for example, in our Christian education materials that typically combine isolated bits of Scripture, explanations from experts, and the predictable question, "What does it mean to you?" At best, you might end up learning **about** the Bible. In any case, you don't actually have to read the Bible, because an expert will tell you what it meant and you decide what it means.

Luther objected to experts and individualists for the same reason: both are substitutes for Scripture – both assault Scripture’s ability to speak the Word of God clearly and publicly. What we need said Luther, are pastors who will proclaim the Word clearly and publicly, and congregations that will regard it as holy and gladly hear and learn it.

Luther’s alternative to learning **about** the Bible is learning **from** the Bible. First and last, this means simply knowing the words – taking in the words, chewing on them, developing a taste for them. “How sweet are your words to my taste; sweeter than honey to my mouth” (Psalm 119:103). Familiarity with the words is the fundamental form of Scripture’s inspiration, and the fundamental form of Scripture’s authority is allowing the words to say whatever they have to say. “Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, ‘Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us, and not to the world.’ Jesus answered him, ‘Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me” (John 14:22-24).

For that reason, the text of my confirmation classes is the Bible. What we do in class is read the Bible. When reading the Bible, we will go to the catechism, too, and we will go to the liturgy, too, and we will go to any question they want to ask, too, and we will read summaries I have prepared, too. But it is in learning from our Bibles that we will go to these other places. Reading the Bible together is what we do in confirmation class. Knowing the words is our goal.

There’s more I’d like to say on the subject, especially in regard to the sexuality study, but for the moment it is enough to know that to reclaim the church for the Bible we need to...read the Bible.

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