

LUTHERANS AND THE BIBLE:  
Some Starting Points

1. Lutherans are more interested in *understanding* the Bible than they are in *defending* it.

We don't want to argue about whether the Bible is "literally true" or whether it contains contradictions or errors and so forth. We just say that the Bible is the Word of God and that it tells us what God wants to say to us—and then we try to understand what it is saying.

2. Lutherans are Jesus people and they view the Bible as "a Jesus book."

The Bible reveals Christ to us. We do not expect it to teach us about science or any number of other things. And we do not worship the Bible—we regard it as a means to an end. The Bible helps us to have a relationship with Jesus Christ who is risen from the dead. The most important thing about the Bible is that it helps us to know Jesus and to be known by Him, to love Jesus and to be loved by Him.

3. Lutherans do not treat the Bible as a magic book, but as the Word of God.

The Bible conveys the Word of God to us when it is believed and received. But to do this, the Bible must be read and properly interpreted. God does not speak to people automatically through the Bible in magical ways that would apply only to them. The Bible is God's Word to the whole church and it can be misunderstood. We study the Bible and work hard at understanding it, often in dialogue with others.

What the ELCA Constitution says about the Bible:

**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.**

**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.**

## A LUTHERAN APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING SCRIPTURE

Lutherans believe the Bible is the Word of God. We believe that God continues to speak to the community of faithful believers through scripture and that what the Bible reveals about God's will is authoritative for our lives. To fulfill this role, the Bible must be interpreted from a humble perspective that allows scripture to inform and transform the reader's own viewpoint.

Lutherans generally hold to some commonly accepted principles for interpretation of scripture:

- Lutherans interpret scripture *contextually*. We ask about the literary context of the book in which individual passages are found and about the historical context of the situation they were intended to address.
- Lutherans seek to apply scriptural teaching to the present through a principle of *analogy*, asking whether situations in the modern world are comparable to those in the biblical world even if they are not exactly the same.
- Lutherans interpret "scripture in light of scripture." This means that we try to reconcile what is said in one part of scripture with what is said in other parts of scripture, sometimes recognizing tensions 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.
- Lutherans recognize that some things in scripture are more important than others. All of scripture is the Word of God but what the Bible says about loving one's neighbor is more important than what it says about picking grain on the Sabbath, and what it says about justification by faith in Christ is more important than what it says about speaking in tongues or eating food offered to idols. Jesus gives us principles for determining which matters are most important (e.g., Matt. 7:12; 22:37-40; 23:23) as do Paul (1 Cor. 15:3-4) and other biblical writers (Mic. 6:8; Heb. 6:1-2). The Lutheran Confessions urge interpretation of all scripture in light of "the gospel," the revelation of God in Jesus Christ that gives scripture its true authority.
- Lutherans believe that the Church has the responsibility to determine the extent to which biblical teaching applies to the present day. Sometimes, the Church has extended basic biblical teaching to cover matters not explicitly addressed in scripture (e.g., modern Christians condemn slavery, which was permitted in biblical times). At other times, the Church has recognized exceptions to biblical teaching, specifying instances where scriptural mandates no longer seem to apply (e.g., modern Christians save money for retirement in spite of Matthew 6:19-21, and women pray in church without head-coverings in spite of 1 Corinthians 11:2-16). In such cases, the Church bases its decisions on discernment of the will of God as revealed in scripture as a whole.