

LIVING IN A CHANGING RELATIONSHIP WITH THE ELCA

Introduction:

The Bible tells the story of God's relationship with His creation. From the Old and New Testaments of Holy Scripture we learn that God saves His people from their sin, bestowing upon all who believe in Jesus Christ, the free gift of eternal life. One of the most well known verses lies at the heart of Bible. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." John 3:16-17. Verse 17 is a key verse in that it clearly expresses God's desire to save all people.

The Bible includes many voices that God uses to tell this amazing story, among them are: patriarchs, matriarchs, prophets, disciples, men and women. The Bible encompasses a collection of various types of literature. Poetry, songs, creeds, parables, historic accounts, genealogies, metaphors, visions, dreams, sermons, prayers, are but a few examples of how God's story is told in Scripture.

One of the most frequent questions I am asked is why there are so many different Christian denominations. The theological differences that exist stem at the root of how Christians read Scripture.

There are Lutherans who teach that the Scripture is the inerrant and infallible Word of God. To say the Bible is inerrant is to say that the Bible is free from all errors in word and in content dictated word by word from God to human authors, down to the last punctuation mark. To say the Bible is infallible is to say that it is historically accurate and without error. Among Lutherans who hold this view of Scripture are Missouri Synod Lutherans. The foundation of our belief is in Christ who reveals God to us in Holy Scripture. The ELCA view is that the Bible is inspired by God and the authoritative source and norm of the church's faith. Second Timothy 3:16 serves as a basis for this viewpoint. "All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness."

This is a distinction that is not limited solely to Lutherans. There are denominations that hold to Biblical inerrancy and infallibility such as the Baptist and most non-denominational congregations, while others like Episcopalians, Methodist, and United Church of Christ and the developing North American Lutheran Church denominations hold that Scripture is the inspired word of God.

An important distinction is needed here between the Bible and Word of God. They are not synonymous. When speaking of the Bible we are speaking to the written Word of God which is much larger.

Twentieth Century Lutheran theologian Paul Tillich stresses six meanings for the phrase "Word of God".

1. refers to the second person of the Trinity, who was coeternal with the Father.
2. was the active agent and medium of the creation of the world.
3. was preached by the prophets of the Old Testament
4. became flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth
5. was proclaimed by the apostles of Jesus Christ in creating the church
6. is the living voice of the gospel in every generation of Christians to follow.

All the meanings of the Word of God have one center and norm: the appearance of Jesus Christ in History.

There is much more that can be said of course. However, we now turn our attention to specific ways in which we as Lutherans view Scripture. Such a basis is important for us to have as we eventually look at specific Biblical texts and the overall view of the Bible in the current context of the ELCA.

Lutheran view of Scripture:

There are five ways in which Lutherans view Scripture. These are important for us to realize as we eventually turn to look at specific Scripture passages. So, I ask you to bear with me as I highlight briefly these five viewpoints.

A. Law and Gospel:

For Lutherans the Word of God comes to us as Law and Gospel. Inasmuch as the Bible is the Word of God it cannot be simplified to argue that the Old Testament is law and the New Testament is gospel. Both testaments contain both law and gospel.

Lutherans agree on two uses of the law. The first is that through the law external discipline may be maintained against the unruly and the disobedient. In other words, this purpose serves to maintain good order. The second purpose of the law is that people may be led through it to recognition of their sins. In other words, the law reveals I am guilty of sin and only in Christ may I be set free.

In the Formula of Concord, (one of the Lutheran Churches confessional documents written to bring Lutherans together following disagreements that emerged following Luther's death) which contains the Epitome and the Solid Declaration, we hear in Article five of the Epitome, "We believe, teach and confess that the law is, strictly speaking, a divine teaching which gives instruction regarding what is right and God-pleasing and condemns everything that is sin and contrary to God's will." BC 500:3.

Some Lutherans argue that there is a third use of the law. This third use applies to all the baptized in which the law serves as a moral guide for conducting their life. Other Lutherans argue that this use of the law is properly understood in the first use.

Because of our sin, we hear God's word as a word of law. God's law puts to death our sinful selves. The law exposes our efforts to save ourselves.

The Word of God comes to us as gospel. Through Christ we have redemption and life. Where the law kills, the gospel sets us free; our freedom in the gospel is accomplished in the work of Christ who makes us alive. Again from Article five of the Epitome, "...the gospel is, strictly speaking, the kind of teaching that reveals what the human being, who has not kept the law and has been condemned by it, should believe; that Christ has atoned and paid for all sins and apart from any human merit has obtained and won for people the forgiveness of sins, 'the righteousness which avails before God, (Romans 1:17 according to the Luther Bible) and eternal life.'" BC 500:5.

When it is heard correctly, the Word of God kills and makes alive. The Law exposed our efforts to save ourselves as sinful and hopeless; this is the terror of the law, in that we don't have a prayer. The Gospel delivers us into the kingdom of God by the work of Christ; this is the joy of the Gospel because we are not on our own, "God is with us."

B. What Shows forth Christ

Among one of Luther's most famous statements is that the Bible is the manger that holds Christ. We do not worship the Bible. We worship God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Bible is God's revelation to the world centering in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Carl Braaten, one of the leading theologians of our church and retired professor of Systematic Theology from the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago in volume one of Christian Dogmatics, "The foundational event of the church is Jesus Christ himself according to the original apostolic witness of faith." Further on he writes, "Because this event is the source off the church's faith, it is the norm of the church's doctrine. (CD Vol. 1:62).

Thus Christ is what gives the Bible its authority. Now the question that follows is how do we know Christ? The reformation answers this question with the principle of Scripture alone. Again, from the Epitome of the Formula of Concord, "We believe, teach, and confess that the only rule and guiding principle according to which all teachings and teachers are to be evaluated and judges are the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments alone...Other writings of ancient or contemporary teachers, whatever their names may be, shall not be regarded as equal to Holy Scripture, but all of them together shall be subjected to it, and not be accepted in any other way, or with any further authority, than as witnesses of how and where the teaching of the prophets and apostles was preserved after the time of the apostles." BC,486:1-2.

Luther also held that not all Scripture was equal in its witness to Christ. Books like James and Revelation offered little understanding for Luther as it relates to the heart of the Gospel. Books of the Bible such as the Gospel of John and Romans had more weight in Luther's theology. This understanding is what is referred to in the canon within the canon. A canon in the instance refers to the collection of books that make up the Bible.

C. Scripture interprets Scripture

The key point of this view of Scripture is to see the Bible as a whole. It has happened throughout many points in history where people take one verse out of context and lift it up with the phrase “Well the Bible says...”. For example, in the church’s history Colossians 3:22-24 has been used to justify the institution of slavery. It was a reality in the world of the both Old and New Testaments. However, this goes against the larger element of scripture where God liberates people from slavery such as He did for the Israelites while they were in Egypt. For New Testament examples, see passages such as John 8:31-32 and Gal. 3:28.

Theology of the Cross and Justification by grace through faith are further examples by which Lutherans understand Scripture. Let me offer a word about the Theology of the Cross. At the center of the Bible is the cross on who suffered and died the Savior of the world. For us what is central is God’s action through Christ as revealed in places such as Philippians 2:5-11. This overriding theme stands in contrast to the singular passages of Scripture that promise specific rewards in heaven. God’s story of salvation is not about our individual personal gain.

Justification by grace through faith again points us to God’s action. Through the fall of Adam and Eve all humanity is plunged into sin and death and cannot free ourselves. While there are scriptures that bid us to do good works, these works have no saving power. Only by the mercy of God through Christ do we have the hope of eternal life.

Key to our understanding is the work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit revealed to Luther what was truly God’s Word in the midst of the false teachings of his day. Thus, “Luther’s position was that, to be sure, the Spirit of God enables the right interpretation of Scripture. The Spirit, however, does not operate apart from the scriptural word, but is mediated through it.” CD Vol. 1:70. This quote from Dr. Braaten is important for understanding what is happening today. There are some that will say the Spirit is doing a new thing. Yet in Luther’s view, the Spirit would not lead to beliefs that went against the larger witness of Scripture.

D. Plain Meaning of the Text

When talking about the Bible we often ask what the Bible has to say in relation to the events of our day. For example, many have used the book of Revelation to make attempts at predicting such things as the return of Christ, the beginning of the 1,000 years of strife and the rapture. What tends to get lost is that Revelation, like every other book of the Bible was written in a specific time and context. So yes, the Bible may and does have things to say about the future, most importantly our salvation through Christ, but it also had things to say to the original hearers of these writings.

What the Biblical passages meant in their original context is what we are talking about when speaking of the plain meaning of the text. This acknowledges what we have said earlier about Scripture, that the Bible is written with different types of literary devices. It also acknowledges that the Bible was written in a different social, economic,

political and world view from that of our own today. This is not something for which we apologize for, but it is important that we keep it in mind as we approach the reading of Scripture.

E. Public Interpretation

Bible reading is strongly encouraged. We encourage people to read the Bible on their own. We read Scripture in worship. Sunday school classes and Bible studies offer us an opportunity to seek the collective wisdom of those reading the Bible with us.

While we do acknowledge that the Bible does speak to us we don't go to Scripture looking for private messages to us and no one else. There is the famous joke of a man who picked up the Bible looking for a personal message and turned to the passage and read "Judas went out and hanged himself." Discouraged by this verse he then closes his Bible and opens it again to be confronted with the verse, "Go and do likewise." The point is that as Lutherans we don't look to the Bible for personal messages in the same way that others might use horoscopes.

Public interpretation helps us in our own study to remain faithful to what God is teaching us. In such circumstances we stand with the witness of God's saints throughout the long history of the "one holy catholic and apostolic church" (Nicene Creed). The wise pastors and teachers of the church will avail themselves of the writings and wisdom of the whole church through Bible commentaries, scholarly articles, etc.