

# Lutheran Theology: How Lutheran's Read the Bible

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## INTRODUCTION

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### **Leader Introduction**

*(The Leader should say this.)* Today you will be introduced to the way we, as Lutherans, tend to read and interpret the Bible. But before we get started it is important to offer a brief definition of what the Bible is.

- The Bible is not **a** book, but it is **many** books.
- It is best to think of the Bible as a library.
- It contains legal codes, narratives, poems, songs, letters, etc. It was written over hundreds of years by many different authors with many different intents for many different audiences.
- The Bible is the documentation of how the ancient Jewish and Christian communities interpreted their very real experiences of God's presence and activity in their lives.

Today's session will consist of a series of video clips each followed by an opportunity for personal reflection and/or discussion.

So lets get started with our first discussion question. *(Ask the participants to find a partner to discuss this question.)*

### **Intro Discussion: How did you grow up reading the Bible?**

1. What comes to mind when you think about the Bible or Bible study?
2. How did you grow up reading the Bible? Did you study it? Memorize it? etc.

*(Process as a large group after they've had time to share with their partners.)*

## SEGMENT #1: THE BIBLE'S AUTHORITY

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### **Introduce Segment**

*(The Leader should say this.)* Now that we've discussed what the Bible is and how we've grown up reading the Bible, let's dive into the question of the Bible's authority.

### **Video Segment #1: The Authority of the Bible?**

*(Text for video)* I grew up in the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. When I joined the ELCA as a college student, all my LCMS friends started calling me to tell me that the ELCA doesn't *believe* in the Bible. They were concerned for me. And I was concerned as well – at first. Nobody at my ELCA congregation had told me that they didn't believe in the Bible! But quickly I began to realize the truth of the matter. It isn't that we don't *believe* in the Bible, it's just that we don't think of Biblical authority in the same way.

Marcus Borg, a Biblical scholar, gives us some helpful language here. He talks about a monarchical understanding of the Bible versus a dialogical understanding of the Bible. Some view the Bible monarchically, as a king ruling over us. (Video Note: Add a graphic with a Bible wearing a crown.) It has all the answers for us and commands and directs our lives. Others view the Bible dialogically, as a conversation partner. (Video Note: Add a graphic of the Bible "in conversation" with a person.) It does not "rule" over us like a king but it is something the Christian community has been, and should remain, in conversation with throughout time. This dialogical approach is how we read the Bible as ELCA Lutherans.

Many biblical scholars now argue that the authors most likely never intended for the Bible to be read monarchically, but rather dialogically. We can see this in the fact that the Bible starts off with two different versions of the Creation story. We also see it in the fact that Jesus is presented to us in The Gospel of Mark quite differently than the way he is presented in The Gospel of John.

Diane Jacobson, professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN, addresses this issue when she says, "I take joy when scripture contradicts itself, because this indicates that God's truth is far more complicated than my truth. If we use it to make life easy, we betray how scripture makes truth work." Scripture does not offer us easy answers, but instead requires us to take part in the hard work of interpreting God's word for today's concerns.

We often approach the Bible with inappropriate expectations. We expect scientific and historical facts or answers or proofs when those were never what the authors intended to provide. It is important to be honest about the expectations, prejudices and baggage we bring with us to the text.

*(Stop video here and have the participant discuss, write or reflect on these questions.)*

### **Discussion #1: What do we expect of the Bible?**

1. Share your experiences with both the monarchical and dialogical ways of reading and interpreting the Bible.
2. Discuss what you see as being problematic (or potentially problematic) with both of these approaches.
3. What are the expectations you usually bring to your reading of the Bible? Historical fact? Scientific fact? Answers? Inspiration? Proof? Etc.
4. How do these help and or hinder your engagement with the Bible?

## SEGMENT #2: BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

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### **Introduce Segment**

*(The Leader should say this.)* So, there are different ways of thinking about the type of authority the Bible can have in our lives. There are also different ways in which Christians interpret the Bible. Now we will look at a few of them.

### **Video Segment #2: Forms of Biblical Interpretation**

*(The following image will appear on the screen and each cell will be filled in as it is discussed. The category "Conservative" will be relabeled "Fundamentalist".)*

## **The Issue of Inspiration**

	<b>Conservative</b>	<b>Word of God</b>	<b>Secular</b>
<b>Authorship</b>	God/ Spirit-guided (inerrant)	Inspired by God but interpreted through human culture	Human product only
<b>Subject Matter</b>	Historical and scientific facts	Theological Truths	Myths and legends
<b>Interpretation</b>	Literal	Historical- metaphorical	Symbolically at best

*(Text for Video)* Biblical interpretation can be understood on a spectrum between Fundamentalist and Secularist. I want to present you with three spots on this spectrum. These three ways of interpreting scripture can be called Fundamentalist, Secularist, and – in the middle – the Word of God. The best way to understand the differences between these three is to look at how they think about the Bible’s authorship, the Bible’s content and the basic way to interpret the text.

First we will deal with authorship. The Fundamentalist position would say that the Bible is written by God or is Spirit-guided. It is therefore inerrant or without error. According to this position, what we read in the Bible is exactly what God put in the Bible. Every word in scripture was intended to be there and there are no errors or inconsistencies in the text. The Secularist position would say that the Bible was written by humans without any divine inspiration and therefore contains errors, biases and inconsistencies. The middle way, or the Word of God position, would claim that the Bible is inspired by God but still written by humans. It is God’s revealed truth filtered through the limitations of a particular culture and context. This way honors God’s involvement in the creation of the text as inspiration, but also is honest about the limitations that are evident as well.

Next, let’s look at the subject matter. The Fundamentalist position will claim that, since it is written perfectly and accurately, the Bible contains historical and scientific fact. You can look to the Bible to find accurate and factual information on how history has unfolded and how the world came into existence. On the other end of the spectrum, the Secularist position would claim that the Bible only contains myths and legends because humans with no divine inspiration have written it. In the middle, the Word of God position would claim that the Bible contains theological truths. Its content might not be factual

(historically or scientifically) but it does contain underlying truths about God and our relationship with God.

Lastly, the Fundamentalist position would urge us to interpret the Bible literally. It says what it means and we should take its meaning at face value. The Secularist position would be strongly opposed to any literal interpretation and would, instead, caution us to interpret the Bible symbolically at best – if at all. The Word of God position, again, wants to find a middle way. This position would encourage something called the historical-metaphorical approach to interpreting the Bible. This approach requires the reader to try and clarify the author’s intent given the author’s actual context. This, then, allows for us to ask the next question, What might this text mean for us today?

An example . . . In Luke’s gospel, the shepherds are the first to hear about Jesus’ birth. We don’t think much of this if we don’t understand the author’s context. Shepherds were considered unclean and, therefore, unworthy of worship in the temple. This little bit of historical knowledge enhances our understanding of the author’s intent. Why would Luke claim that Jesus’ birth is announced first to the shepherds? Maybe this was the author’s attempt to claim that God has now, once and for all, come to us – even to those who have been deemed too unclean to come to God. Now we are able to ask ourselves, “What might this mean for us today?” A literal interpretation of this text does little to enhance the depth of its meaning. All it does is leave us with 5th grade boys wearing bathrobes at the Christmas pageant.

*(Stop video here and have the participant discuss, write or reflect on these questions.)*

**Discussion #2: How have you/ do you interpret scripture?**

1. Which ones are you familiar with or have experienced?
2. Which one feel most natural for you? Why?
3. What are the pros and cons of each of these forms of interpretation?

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## **SEGMENT #3: A LUTHERAN FRAMEWORK FOR INTERPRETING SCRIPTURE**

**Introduce Segment**

*(The Leader should say this.)* Now that we’ve laid out the spectrum of biblical interpretation, lets look at the traditional way in which ELCA Lutherans interpret scripture.

**Video Segment #3: A Framework for Interpretation**

*(Text for Video)* In, *Opening the Book of Faith* (show how people can order this book on the screen), Mark Allan Powell shares with us five key principles Lutherans tend to follow when interpreting the Bible. These include (list these on the screen):

- Law and Gospel
- What shows forth Christ?
- Scripture interprets scripture
- The plain meaning of a text
- Public interpretation

All of these principles should find their way into our reading and interpreting of the Bible for our times. Let me show you how they work.

### *Law and Gospel*

You might remember our discussion of law and gospel from our session on Lutheran theology and how God works in the world, but here is a quick review. God's law shows us what we should do and it shows us when we do not do it. God's gospel frees us and saves us in spite of our failures. We do not only find the law in the Old Testament and gospel in the New Testament. Instead, we believe the entire Bible reveals God's law and God's gospel to us. Mark Allan Powell expresses it clearly when he says that God's word always reveals our brokenness (the law) AND also heals our brokenness (gospel). And this is a good thing! God's law and God's gospel are both good because they work together to set us free. So, one question to keep in mind when reading the Bible is this, *"How does this verse reveal my brokenness and how does it offer me healing and hope?"*

### *What shows forth Christ?*

Martin Luther referred to the Bible as the manger that held the Christ child. The Bible shows us Jesus Christ but we don't worship the Bible, we worship Jesus Christ who is revealed to us through scripture. The Bible helps us to know Jesus and to have a relationship with Jesus. A second question to keep in mind when reading the Bible is this, *"How do I see Christ in this verse?"*

### *Scripture interprets scripture*

Some parts of the Bible are fairly easy to understand while other parts are extremely complicated. We can use the parts that are easier to understand to help us make sense of the more difficult parts. In fact, we should always be thinking about the relationship between the specific text we might be reading and the overall story of the Bible. This means we need to have a good understanding of the Bible as a whole. I'll give you three quick suggestions on how you might gain this understanding if you don't already have it.

- *Manna and Mercy* by Daniel Erlander is less than 100 pages long and is a great overview of the entire biblical story. It is available at [danielearlander.com](http://danielearlander.com).
- The *Jesus Storybook Bible* by Sally Lloyd-Jones is not just a children's Bible. It is meaningful for all ages. It doesn't just tell the stories; it also keeps the individual stories connected to the overall story of God redeeming God's people. It is available at [jesusstorybookbible.com](http://jesusstorybookbible.com).
- For those who want to go really in depth, I'd recommend you explore *Crossways International* at [crossways.org](http://crossways.org). They produce solid bible study materials at varying levels of depth and length.

A third question to keep in mind when reading the Bible is this, *"How does this verse connect to the overall biblical story?"*

### *The plain meaning of the text*

Another thing to keep in mind when interpreting the text is simply what it means at face value. In an age of conspiracy theories, we are often tempted to assume that there is always something more meaningful hidden behind the text. We should not become distracted by these wild goose chases. Instead we should try to understand what the author meant to say to the original audience. So, a fourth question to ask yourself when reading the Bible is this, *"How were people expected to understand this verse in the first place?"*

### *Public interpretation*

Lastly, we are to interpret the Bible in community. Yes, we should read our Bibles on our own but the message is not for me alone and this requires me to interpret scripture with others in mind. In fact, I would even argue that we should find ways to read and interpret together with those who are quite different than ourselves. This pushes us to realize just how big God's word is and it prevents us from narrow, one-sided interpretations that might be meaningless to most people. So, the final question to keep in mind is this, *"How might someone in a completely different life-situation interpret this verse?"* And it would even be best for you to actually ask that person this question.

*(Stop video here and have the participant discuss, write or reflect on these questions.)*

### **Final Exercise: Reading and Interpreting the Text**

(The Leader should say this.) Now it is our turn to practice interpreting scripture in this way. The theme verses for the 2012 ELCA Youth Gathering are Ephesians 2:14-20.

<sup>14</sup>For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. <sup>15</sup>He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, <sup>16</sup>and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. <sup>17</sup>So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; <sup>18</sup>for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. <sup>19</sup>So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, <sup>20</sup>built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.

Let's work through these 5 questions we've been introduced to and practice using them on these verses.

1. How do these verses reveal my brokenness and how do they offer me healing and hope?
2. How do I see Christ in these verses?
3. How do these verses connect to the overall biblical story?
4. How were people expected to understand these verses in the first place?
5. How might someone in a completely different life-situation interpret these verses?

(After guiding them through a discussion on the text using these five questions, give them time to process – What did they learn? What did they enjoy? What was difficulty? Etc. – and then close your time together.)

*\*This curriculum was developed for the Practice Discipleship Project, an initiative of the 2012 ELCA Youth Gathering ([www.elca.org/gathering](http://www.elca.org/gathering)) in partnership with the ELCA Youth Ministry Network ([www.elcaymnet.org](http://www.elcaymnet.org)). While primary authorship belongs to the author noted above, this is a collective work of the Practice Discipleship writing team: Dr. Terri Elton (Luther Seminary: [www.luthersem.edu](http://www.luthersem.edu)), Dennis "Tiger" McLuen (Youth Leadership: [www.youthleadership.org](http://www.youthleadership.org)), and Dr. Jeremy Myers (Augsburg College: [www.augsburg.edu](http://www.augsburg.edu)). Permission is given to use these resources in your local context, so long as no organization or individual profits from the use of these materials.*

