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Interpreting Scripture A Lutheran View of the Bible



Lutherans believe that the Bible is the inspired, authoritative Word of God. But what exactly does this mean, and how does that affect Lutheran Biblical interpretation?

Most Christians, regardless of their denomination, will state that they believe the Bible to convey the Word of God. However, what this means exactly may be different from one person or denomination to another. For Lutherans, the Bible is seen as conveying what God wants to say to humanity, and is thus inspired as well as authoritative. However, each of these terms must be explored further in order to understand how Lutherans interpret scripture.

The Word of God

What is meant by "Word of God" is paramount to understanding how Lutherans interpret scripture. Lutherans view the "Word of God" in three ways: First, the Incarnate Word (John 1:1,14); second, the proclaimed Word in the form of "law and gospel" (Acts 13:5; 18:11); and third, the written word (Mark 7:13).[1] This third functions as the Word of God in that it delivers the first two.

The "Inspired" Word of God

Lutherans, as well as many other Christians, will state they believe the Bible to be "inspired." This means that they do not believe God came down out of heaven and handed humanity the Bible, nor do they believe that the Bible was simply "dictated" by God to human scribes. Rather, the "inspired" Word of God means people's experiences of God have been recorded through a variety of people in different forms and literary methods. Thus, the Bible is both a divine Word as well as a human word. It relates the human experience of the divine through poetry, narratives, prophecies, insights, discussions, and even letters.

The Authority of Scripture

Lutheran professor Stan Olson states that a written text is authoritative in several different ways: 1) It is authoritative because it is the best available account one has of an event, life, etc., and 2) it is authoritative because the concepts are generally accepted, like a rule book for a sporting activity. While the Bible is authoritative in both these ways, for the Lutheran, it is primarily authoritative because of what it does: it communicates the grace of God through Jesus Christ.[2] Rather than trying to prove its origin, Lutherans simply testify to their experience of what the bible does: it changes lives.

The Living Word of God

Additionally, the Word of God, while contained in the Bible, does not remain relegated to the pages of the Bible. The power is not in the pages, but is in the impact the Word has on the hearer in the here and now. God's Word is thus "active" and "living" in the sense that it is actively doing something to people (and its power, since it's God's power, is not dependent upon the hearer!).

The "Literal" Word of God?

Many Christians will state that they believe the entire Bible to be the "literal word of God." Given the Bible is comprised of many different forms of literature (as mentioned above), Lutherans would probably say that they believe the literal parts literally, the metaphorical parts metaphorically, etc. When questions arise over how certain parts of the Bible should be read, Lutherans tend to turn to how it would have been heard/understood by its original audience. For example, how would first century Christians have understood apocalyptic literature? Symbolically or literally?

Thus, when Lutherans interpret books like Revelation, they usually will focus on the hope of Christ and the call for faithful perseverance in troubled times rather than trying to match up its imagery with modern world events. They would not out and out say this latter method is "wrong," but one would be hard-pressed to find a Lutheran pastor who would preach on Revelation in a way that did not highlight hope and perseverance, as these are the more "plainly understood" messages inherent in the text.

The "Inerrant" Word of God

This particular element of scripture is one that most Lutherans would probably find a bit more difficult to answer. Lutherans recognize that there are, technically, "errors" in the bible. There are grammatical errors (such as mixed metaphors), there are scientific errors (Jesus claims the mustard seed is the smallest of all seeds, but this is untrue--the orchid seed is smaller), there are places where scripture seems to contradict itself, etc. Does that mean the bible is "wrong" or "erroneous"? No. It means that the language and examples used fit the time and place of their authorship and serve a particular function. Certain words, parables, references, etc., were spoken into certain situations so that they could both be readily understood by the original hearers, as well as address a particular situation/issue that may or may not be relevant in today's context.

Scripture Interprets Scripture

Lutherans acknowledge that not only can scripture be misunderstood, but that it in fact has been misunderstood (yes, even by Lutherans!). However, the Lutheran process for interpreting difficult passages lies in the practice of reading the more difficult parts of scripture in light of those that are more readily understood, concentrating on the central themes and motifs that run throughout the entire Bible (such as faith, mercy and justice - Matt. 23:23). This process of "reading the Bible as a whole" thus resists "proof-texting," or using a single line of scripture to justify a stance that would not hold against the rest of scripture.

The Expectation of Scripture

Lutherans approach the Bible with a certain expectation: they expect that when they encounter scripture, they will also encounter God. They expect to be engaged by demands that judge them as well as promises of forgiveness that set them free to love and serve others. Lutherans are confident that just as God has addressed humanity in the past, God will continue to address them in their contemporary lives through the Biblical texts. This is a powerful expectation - but also a transformative one.

[1] [*Constitutions, Bylaws and Continuing Resolutions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*](#), 19

[2] Diane Jacobson, Mark Allan Powell, Stanley N. Olson, *Opening the Book of Faith: Lutheran Insights for Bible Study*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008) 2