

The Bible

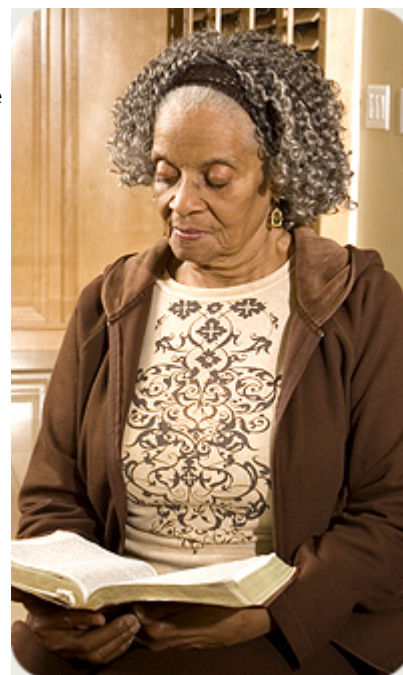
The Bible as encounter with the living Word

Lutherans believe that the Bible is the most important of all the ways God's person and presence are revealed to humanity. That is because it is in reading the biblical books that we most reliably hear and encounter the living Word of God, who is the risen Jesus.

The Bible's very name begins to tell us what we have between its covers. In Greek "the Bible" literally means "the books." The Bible that Lutherans use is a collection of 66 books produced over a period of as much as 1,000 years. Each of these books had a life and use of its own prior to its incorporation into what we know as the "sacred canon."

The Bible contains the story of God's interaction with humankind, first through the understanding of the Jewish people (Old Testament, 39 books), and subsequently to all people through God's self revelation in Jesus (New Testament, 27 books).

Lutherans believe that people meet God in Scripture, where God's heart, mind, relationship to - and intention for - humankind are revealed. Through an ongoing dialogue with the God revealed in the Bible, people in every age are called to a living faith.



The Bible's authority rests in God

ELCA Lutherans confidently proclaim with all Christians that the authority of the Bible rests in God. We believe that God inspired the Bible's many writers, editors and compilers. As they heard God speaking and discerned God's activity in events around them in their own times and places, the Bible's content took shape. Among other things, the literature they produced includes history, legal code, parables, letters of instruction, persuasion and encouragement, tales of heroism, love poetry and hymns of praise. The varying types and styles of literature found here all testify to faith in a God who acts by personally engaging men and women in human history.

At the same time, we also find in the Bible human emotion, testimony, opinion, cultural limitation and bias. ELCA Lutherans recognize that human testimony and writing are related to and often limited by culture, customs and world view. Today we know that the earth is not flat and that rabbits do not chew their cud (Leviticus 11:6). These are examples of time-bound cultural understandings or practices. Christians do not follow biblically prescribed dietary laws such as eliminating pork from one's diet (Leviticus 11:7) because the new covenant we have with God has replaced the Old Testament covenant God had with his people. Because Biblical writers, editors and compilers were limited by their times and world views, even as we are, the Bible contains material wedded to those times and places. It also means that writers sometimes provide differing and even contradictory views of God's word, ways and will.

Listening to the living Jesus in the context of the church, we therefore have the task of deciding among these. Having done this listening, we sometimes conclude either that the writer's culture or personal experience (e.g., subordination of women or keeping of slaves) seems to have prompted his missing what God was saying or doing, or that God now is saying or doing something new.

The Bible's authority is interpreted through Jesus

By no means does that human presence in sacred Scripture detract from the Bible's testimony to God. Rather, this human testimony provides layers of faith and insight by those who contributed to the canon. The Bible's reliability lies not in reading it as science or proscription, but as humankind's chief witness to God, reflecting on faith as it is to be lived. Again, ELCA Lutherans judge all Scripture through the window of God's chief act — that of entering human flesh in Jesus of Nazareth — and they interpret Scripture by listening to the living Jesus in the context of the Church. Because Jesus' person, life and witness become the lens through which we read and interpret all Scripture, we can judge slavery as "not of Jesus," yet understand the customs of the time and read Paul's inspiring letter to Philemon, master of the slave Onesimus, as testimony to faith.

On several occasions, Martin Luther suggested that not all books of the Bible have the same value for faith formation. Similarly, as in all of life, ELCA Lutherans ask, "Is what we find here consistent with God's revelation in Jesus?" This is a central question/prescription that provides guidance for acting

as moral beings and for calling humankind to justice; it also becomes the authority for our reading Scripture, for it is the Jesus of Scripture, the living Word, who reveals God and judges Scripture, just as he is the judge for all else in life. Therefore, it is a question that ELCA Lutherans find best answered within the life of the Church in community, for this risen Jesus is Lord of the Church.

Biblical interpretation as scholarly endeavor

ELCA Lutherans understand that the Bible contains various kinds of testimony to God's purpose for humanity. Included in its literary forms are history, story, parable, legal codes, hymns, inspirational and instructive letters, and personal faith testimony.

Some ancient Biblical content precedes the written word and was passed orally from generation to generation. Thereafter, early manuscripts were written fully or in part in a number of languages, principally Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. In order to duplicate and disseminate these manuscripts before the invention of the printing press texts were hand copied. While they are remarkable in their agreement and accuracy, sometimes - though mostly in minor matters — because of a copyist's writing, mistakes or incorporation of margin notes, these texts do not agree among themselves.

Manuscript variances raise questions among scholars concerning the original text's intent or meaning. For instance, did God use ravens or Arabs to feed Elijah in the wilderness (1 Kings 17:6)? The two words share the same Hebrew characters, and since the passage predates the use of vowels in the Hebrew language, manuscript translations vary according to which vowels were assigned later by the scribe-copyists.

It may be helpful here to distinguish studying Biblical texts from mining the Bible for devotional material. ELCA Lutherans honor and employ both approaches in faith formation. The distinctions are not clear cut, for elements of each are found in both approaches. Yet some Biblical material particularly lends itself to meditation or reflection on the will of God for faithful living (e.g. Hebrews 11 on examples of faith).

There is also the kind of textual study that dissects a passage for deeper meaning or insight. In so doing, one discovers clarification, or understanding that informs and shapes doctrine (e.g. Romans 5 on grace and justification).

ELCA Lutherans understand that the Bible can be read and understood by an individual. We also recommend its being read and interpreted in Christian community, using helps provided by scholarly work for this getting to the heart and meaning of Biblical texts.

Biblical "criticism"

To come to the best understanding of a text's meaning, ELCA Lutherans, together with Roman Catholics and most other churches, respect the light shone on Biblical passages by a number of scholarly methods of scriptural study. These are called "criticisms" in that a critical eye uses one of several methods to analyze texts in an attempt to discover their meaning. The term criticism is not to be understood as being critical of the text. In the example of God providing Elijah food, a highly specialized area of research called "textual criticism" would compare the diverse manuscript copies known to exist, as well as other similar ancient translations of the words in question, to determine the more likely meaning.

Other such helpful "criticisms" used to understand author intent are, to name just a few:

- Historical (applying knowledge of ancient languages, grammar, idioms, customs, etc.)
- Form (comparing literary forms used by the author with similar Biblical and non-Biblical literature found in legends, stories, narratives, etc.)
- Redaction (understanding how writers creatively shaped material they inherit and how, perhaps, they brought nuances from their own context and culture)

ELCA Lutherans and ELCA teaching scholars do not rely on a single critical approach to a text, but find a variety of approaches helpful for understanding the meaning of various passages. These scholarly tools help to inform and strengthen our knowledge, faith and understanding of God's marvelous acts, and point us to God's ongoing action in the world in every age.