

A LUTHERAN APPROACH TO THE BIBLE

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A). From the **Constitution of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada** (Article II: Confession of Faith):

--Section 1: This church confesses the Triune God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – as the one true God. It proclaims the Father as Creator and Preserver; His son, Jesus Christ, as Redeemer and Lord; and the Holy Spirit as Regenerator and Sanctifier.

--Section 2: This church confesses that the Gospel is the revelation of God's saving will and grace in Jesus Christ, which He imparts through Word and Sacrament. Through these means of grace, the Holy Spirit creates believers and unites them with their Lord and with one another in the fellowship of the Holy Christian Church.

--Section 3: This church confesses the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired Word of God, through which God still speaks, and as the only source of the Church's doctrine and the authoritative standard for the faith and life of the Church.

B). Towards a Lutheran approach to the Bible:

a) We believe that the Word of God is living, active, powerful, and life changing (Genesis 1; John 1:1-14; 2 Corinthians 3:6; Hebrews 4:12). At its heart, the Word of God refers to the Gospel, the “Good News” of Jesus Christ. Luther put it this way:

What then is the Word of God? ... The Word is the gospel of God concerning his Son, who was made flesh, suffered, rose from the dead, and was glorified through the Spirit who sanctifies. To preach Christ means to feed the soul, make it righteous, set it free and save it, provided it believes the preaching. Faith alone is the saving and efficacious use of the Word of God.¹

This is why Lutherans place such emphasis on preaching. Luther said that “Christ did not

¹ Martin Luther, “The Freedom of a Christian,” *Luther's Works*, v.31, p.346.

command the apostles to write, but only to preach” and that the church is a Mundhaus ("mouth house"), not a Schrifthaus ("writing house").² In other words, we come to church not just to read words on a page but to hear God's living Word speaking to us personally. According to Luther, this Word of God -- preached, believed and professed – is what makes Christians distinctive and recognizable:

But we are speaking of the external Word, preached orally by [people] like you and me, for this is what Christ left behind as an external sign by which his church, or his Christian people in the world, should be recognized. We also speak of this external Word as it is sincerely believed and openly professed before the world.³

b) Because the Bible contains the Gospel, we believe it is the Word of God in written form. We read the Bible always focussing first and foremost on the Gospel. Whenever we look at a passage of the Bible, we ask: Where is the Good News of God's love in Christ in this text? In this way, the Bible is the living, active, powerful and life changing “inspired Word of God, through which God still speaks.”

c) We try to relate the Gospel message found in the Bible to the real life situations of people today. This is a matter of deeds (living according to the Gospel day by day) as well as words.

d) We try to understand the Bible within the historical context in which it was written. Lutherans have been in the forefront of scholarly historical study of the Bible.

e) We try to read the Bible in keeping with Christian tradition and with the wider consensus of the church. We do not claim to have discovered a "new" teaching/message in the Bible.

f) It is more important to take the Bible **seriously** than to take it "literally". Indeed, sometimes people who claim to take the Bible "literally" end up trivializing its message. (For example, the point of the book of Jonah is not whether or not a human being can possibly be swallowed by a big fish: rather, it is to love and forgive our enemies the way that God does.)

C). The Bible is a huge collection of books: it contains history, poetry, legends, mythology, laws, hymns, wisdom sayings, sermons, parables, exhortation, symbolic writings, etc. Are all parts of the Bible to be equally emphasized? No matter what people say about the Bible, the fact is no one treats every part of it equally: we all emphasize some passages more than others. Here are some passages from the Bible that Lutherans in fact no longer follow.

² Jaroslav Pelikan, Luther the Expositor (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1959), quoting Luther's Church Postil.

³ Martin Luther, “On the Councils and the Church,” Luther's Works, v.41, p.149.

- Leviticus 19:9-10, Deuteronomy 24:19-22: When harvesting crops, enough should be left behind in the field for the poor to gather.
- Leviticus 19:19, Deuteronomy 22:9-11: One should not sow two kinds of crops in the same field, one should not plow with an ox and a donkey yoked together, and one should not wear clothes made of two different materials (e.g. wool and linen).
- Leviticus 19:27: No tattoos.
- Leviticus 25:1-12: No crops to be planted every seventh (sabbatical) year and every fiftieth (jubilee) year.
- Deuteronomy 21:18-25: Parents are to request the execution of a rebellious son.
- Exodus 22:25: No charging interest on loans.
- Exodus 20:8-11, 31:12-17: Worship and rest are to take place on the Sabbath day (i.e. Saturday).
- Leviticus 11:2-47: Certain "unclean" animals cannot be eaten (e.g. the pig, hare, lobster, various birds and insects, etc.)
- Leviticus 15:2-32: Purification rituals required for women having their period and for men who've had a discharge of semen.
- Matthew 19:9, Mark 10:11-12, Luke 16:18: No divorce (except in cases of adultery).
- 1 Corinthians 11:1-16: Women to cover their heads in church.
- 1 Timothy 2:9-10, 1 Peter 3:2-3: Women not to wear make-up.
- 1 Corinthians 14:34-36, 1 Timothy 2:11-15: Women are to keep silent in church; if they want to know anything, let them ask their husbands at home.
- Ephesians 5:22ff., 1 Peter 3:1-2, 5-6: Wives are to submit to their husbands.
- Ephesians 6:5-9, 1 Peter 2:18: Slavery is unquestioned, slaves are to submit to their masters.