

A LUTHERAN APPROACH TO INTERPRETING SCRIPTURE

Lutherans believe the Bible is the Word of God. We believe that God continues to speak to the community of faithful believers through scripture and that what the Bible reveals about God's will is authoritative for our lives. To fulfill this role, the Bible must be interpreted from a humble perspective that allows scripture to inform and transform the reader's own viewpoint.

Lutherans generally hold to some commonly accepted principles for interpretation of scripture:

- Lutherans interpret scripture *contextually*. We ask about the literary context of the book in which individual passages are found and about the historical context of the situation they were intended to address.
- Lutherans seek to apply scriptural teaching to the present through a principle of *analogy*, asking whether situations in the modern world are comparable to those in the biblical world even if they are not exactly the same.
- Lutherans interpret "scripture in light of scripture." This means that we try to reconcile what is said in one part of scripture with what is said in other parts of scripture, sometimes recognizing tensions between texts that seem to say different things. We try to be faithful to the entire Bible rather than just picking some parts and leaving others alone.
- Lutherans recognize that some things in scripture are more important than others. All of scripture is the Word of God but what the Bible says about loving one's neighbor is more important than what it says about picking grain on the Sabbath, and what it says about justification by faith in Christ is more important than what it says about speaking in tongues or eating food offered to idols. Jesus gives us principles for determining which matters are most important (e.g., Matt. 7:12; 22:37-40; 23:23) as do Paul (1 Cor. 15:3-4) and other biblical writers (Mic. 6:8; Heb. 6:1-2). The Lutheran Confessions urge interpretation of all scripture in light of "the message of law and gospel" and in light of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ as the Word made flesh.

Lutherans believe that the Church has the responsibility to determine the extent to which biblical teaching applies to the present day. Sometimes, the Church has extended basic biblical teaching to prohibit things that are not actually forbidden in scripture (e.g., modern Christians condemn slavery, which was permitted in biblical times). At other times, the Church has recognized exceptions to biblical teaching, specifying instances where what was prohibited in scripture is now allowed (e.g., modern Christians save money for retirement in spite of Matthew 6:19-21, and women pray in church without head-coverings in spite of 1 Corinthians 11:2-16). In such cases, the Church bases its decisions on discernment of the will of God as revealed in scripture as a whole.