

Bishop's Intended Presentation to 'A Way Forward' Participants:
A Lutheran Approach to the Task of Biblical Interpretation

Preamble

The purpose of this presentation needs to be clearly understood. I am speaking in general terms about the task of interpretation. It is not my intention to engage the discussion of whose interpretation of the Bible is right, or whose interpretation could be questioned. That takes us down a path that would not be helpful to us or to the Church, as we seek our way forward.

Instead I propose to paint with a few broad brushstrokes some of the principles Lutherans use when they approach the Bible, and I want to identify some boundaries or borders that we put around our work of interpretation.

It is important for our laity and rostered leaders to understand that we do not approach the task of interpretation in some willy-nilly, anything goes, fashion. We are deadly serious when we do this work and there is no frivolity involved. We do this work with reverence. We respect the Word.

Let us understand that – clergy or laity – we need to be in continuous interface with the Holy Scriptures. Let us remember that we are all interpreters of the Word. Luther translated the Bible into German (the vernacular of the people he served) precisely so that it would be accessible to every Christian. We believe, teach and confess that the Holy Spirit works through the Scriptures and speaks to us as we read, mark and learn them. Thus each of us, necessarily, is an interpreter.

To reiterate: I have no intention of telling you my method of interpretation and binding you (in some fashion, if that were even possible) to do interpretation my way. I am simply going to outline some principles and boundaries and invite you to do your interpreting of the Bible with reference to them. Nothing more is intended.

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The core doctrine of the Lutheran Confessions is justification by God's grace through faith. This is the lens we wear and through which we read, interpret and apply all of Scriptures. The case can successfully be made that Roman Catholics read through the lens of the love of God as central, and our Evangelical brothers and sisters read through the lens of the sovereignty of God. As Lutheran Christians, all of our interpretation of the Biblical material is mediated through the core doctrine of justification.

“Justification by grace through faith” is Confessional shorthand for radical (i.e. basic, root) Gospel. God, to whom humanity can find no way, has in Jesus Christ unilaterally and creatively made a way to reconcile with humanity. We stand foursquare on the theology of the Cross.

Luther taught us that the Bible is the cradle of Christ. The hidden centre of the Old Testament and the manifest centre of the New Testament is Jesus Christ. This means that the Bible's purpose is first and foremost to convey – not ideas, not principles, not commandments - but a person. As John the Evangelist says in the conclusion of his gospel... “these [things] are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name”. (John 20:31)

As soon as we use the word “gospel”, it is necessary to define what we mean. In the first place, “Gospel” means “Jesus Christ”. In the second place, “Gospel” means “the Jesus-story” which we find most succinctly in the first four books of the New Testament. In the third place, “Gospel” means the whole Scriptural testimony of *why* and *how* God reconciled the whole world to Godself. This was essentially Luther's understanding.

In preparing this presentation, I reviewed the Companion Volume to Luther's Works – the volume titled Luther the Expositor –and particularly chapter three “Luther and the Word of God”. There – just as I remembered – Jaroslav Pelikan (the pre-eminent Luther scholar of the 20th century) outlined Luther's three-fold understanding of the phrase “Word of God” – which, incidentally, he uses interchangeably with the word “Gospel”. For Luther, “Word of God” can mean Living Word, or Written Word, or Spoken / Proclaimed Word.

The Living Word is the Word of the prologue to John's gospel: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. And from his fullness have we all received grace multiplied by grace.” Clearly and irrefutably, the Living Word is Jesus Christ, the Son of God. And this Living Word is ultimately authoritative for us because he is incarnate God.

The written Word is the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. The written Word is authoritative for us because it conveys, and bears witness to, the Living Word.

The spoken or proclaimed Word is Christian preaching and teaching, witnessing and faith-sharing. And this spoken Word is authoritative for us whenever it conveys, and bears witness to, the written Word and the Living Word.

So we are bound to ask, whenever Luther speaks of Word of God, or whenever the Bible uses that phrase, which meaning is meant? And that's our task to figure out.

Edmund Schlink's insight is also helpful here as we deal with “Gospel” and “Word of God”. In his The Theology of the Lutheran Confessions Schlink wrote: “The Gospel is the norm in Scripture and Scripture is the norm for the sake of the Gospel... Without the knowledge of the Gospel the Bible remains unintelligible and useless. Only from the Gospel do all individual statements of Scripture receive their proper place and meaning.” (p. 6,7)

All evangelical Lutherans would agree that the Gospel is the theme that makes sense of the Scripture as a whole. The Gospel has been described as the hub of the wheel from which all the spokes radiate and to which they all lead. But the Gospel may not be set in opposition to the spokes, or the wheel will collapse. What does this mean? The Gospel may not be used as a critical authority which we set over against other parts of the Bible. We may not use a gospel focus to drain other parts of the Bible of their color until they no longer have any significance.

With those ideas as the preliminaries, I propose a checklist of classic Lutheran Bible interpretation principles.

1. Scripture interprets Scripture --- the movement is from the clear words of Scripture to the “not so clear” words of Scripture. Scripture interprets itself.
2. Lutheran Bible interpretation abides by the “simple, proper, and natural meaning of the words”. (Martin Chemnitz, *The Lord’s Supper*, 21)
3. A text taken out of context is a pretext. A semi-clever person can take a passage of Scripture out of context and make it seem to say anything a person wants it to say. The term for that is *eisogesis* - reading into the text. It’s an easy thing to do. And the history of the manuscripts shows how well-meaning transcribers of the Scriptures down through the ages glossed the text with their viewpoint to make the “real” message more accessible to the reader. A classic case in point is the ascetic gloss that has been given to the Peshitto Syriac New Testament.
4. The harder thing to do is *exegesis* - wrestling with a text in its immediate context and in the broader context of the whole of Scripture, a much more formidable task. To summarize, there’s a simple rule of thumb: A text can never mean what it *never meant* to its author and its initial readers.
5. There are at least four contexts for every Biblical text: the theological, the historical, the literary, and the cultural contexts, respectively. Examining a Scripture in each of these contexts gives rise to higher critical methods of interpretation, which are the tools we use to mine the text for its original meaning. And yet we put a hedge around our use of these tools. These tools are like any other tools. We can use tools to our benefit and we can also overuse them to our detriment. We do not use the higher critical tools to undermine faith - either ours, or the faith of our hearers. The tool is not in control unless the user is inept. The person using the tool needs to be in control of it. Finally, we hope and believe that in the interpretational task the Holy Spirit is ultimately in control, working in and through the Word and the interpreter.
6. The essence of the hermeneutical task, I suggest, can be summarized in these words from Paul to the Romans: “For in the Gospel a righteousness from God is being revealed, *through faith, for faith* (i.e. through means of faith, in order to produce faith) as the Scripture has it, the righteous shall live by faith.” (1:17)

The interpreting of Scripture is done for the primary purpose of preaching the Word in its truth and purity, and this is done in faith in order that the Holy Spirit, through the Word, will produce faith in the hearers.

7. Matthaeus Flacius, *Key to the Scriptures* (1567): “Every understanding and exposition of Scripture is to be in agreement with the faith. Such [agreement] is, so to speak, the norm or limit of a sound faith, that we may not be thrust over the fence into the abyss by anything, either by a storm from without or by an attack from within. For everything that is said concerning Scripture, or on the basis of Scripture, must be in agreement with all that the catechism declares or that is taught by the articles of faith.”

There is the biblical interpretation that happens in the academy and the seminary, and there is the biblical interpretation that happens in the parish and in the home. The interpretation that happens in the academy can be wild and wooly, because we want and we expect that the envelope needs to be pushed. Pastors will be challenged, so seminary students have to get used to it. The academy and the seminary have always been places where new interpretations and critical methods are presented. Those whose calling is to interpret the Scriptures always need to know what is happening in the world of Bible interpretation. That is a sign of simple professional competence, nothing more.

In my library is the Gospel of Mark, Red Letter Edition, produced by the Jesus Seminar. The Jesus Seminar is composed of Bible scholars from around the world who, on the basis of text and manuscript evidence, vote on which sayings of Jesus in the Gospels came from Jesus’ lips, and which sayings were put on Jesus’ lips by succeeding generations of Christendom. The fact that it is written in a book produced by the elite of the world’s Bible scholars still does not make it so. But I have to know about it, and come to terms with it.

In the parish and in the home, on the other hand, we must never lose sight of the “through faith / for faith” key, which is the task of every preacher as bible interpreter. Perhaps we could borrow a principle from the Hippocratic Oath – Do no harm.

Everyone whose privilege and burden it is to handle and interpret the Word of God for the people of God needs to do their weekly task with these principles of biblical interpretation in mind, as a reference point – and to that I respectfully call each of you.

+Ronald B. Mayan, Bishop
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