

A PATH INTO THE BIBLE, OUR *BOOK OF FAITH*

for congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

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Why We Read the Bible

The biblical literature is the most influential collection of documents ever assembled. Although the various writings were first composed to meet some rather specific issues in the ancestral history of the Jewish people and in the life of the early Christian community, they have since been canonized and enshrined as the world's most widely read religious authority.

As such they have been valued as the Sacred Scriptures of Europe; their values have been embedded in the traditions of Western civilization; and they have thereby impacted the history of the entire world.

For nearly 2000 years the Bible has been used, and in some cases abused, to justify various personal, social and political agendas. Its impact is beyond calculation. No well-educated person in the 21st century can afford not to be familiar with the Bible's teachings.

But the honest truth is that today fewer and fewer people, even within the fellowship of the church, actually do read the Scriptures. Our new *Book of Faith* initiative begun within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America intends to change that.

We propose to undertake a fascinating journey into the Bible, and we hope to do more than merely fill a gap in our educational backgrounds. We intend not just to learn *about* the Bible, but more importantly to learn *from* the Bible. We wish to become "more fluent in the first language of our faith," as some have put it. In fact, the vision statement for the *Book of Faith* initiative states the goal clearly:

*That the whole church become more fluent
in the first language of faith,
the language of Scripture,
in order that we might live into our calling
as a people renewed, enlivened, empowered,
and sent by the Word.*

Consequently our efforts will need to be flexible and "user friendly" in order to appeal to many age levels. This cannot afford to be another "canned" course or "stand alone" curriculum; instead, it should obviously be embedded within a larger picture.

Our best approach will be to use the *Book of Faith* initiative as a practical way of starting to live out our calling as disciples of Christ Jesus. When we were baptized, we were brought into the family of God's people. We therefore became brothers and sisters of Jesus, and now we live our lives as part of his ongoing narrative. In short, he has called us to follow him as his disciples. So now, when

**"The Word of God"
refers to...**

- **Jesus Christ,**
- **the Gospel, and**
- **the Bible**

...in that order!

We can read the Bible from four perspectives...

- literary,
 - historical,
 - theological, &
 - devotional
- ...take your pick!**

we want to be intentional about our discipleship, the first thing we can do is get into Jesus' story by reading the biblical witness.

In other words, we cannot help but be enamored by his *story*, which is why we read the gospels and the other documents of the early Christian community in the New Testament. The biblical account of our origins includes not only the evangelists' narratives of Jesus and his earliest followers, but also the apostles' letters which shaped those earliest churches.

Also, because we will want to know *his* story, we will find ourselves reading the Jewish scriptures contained in the Old Testament. Jesus' own ministry was shaped by the values and world-view of his ancestors, the people of Israel. Consequently, we too must engage the law and the prophets and the other Hebrew writings which are now our common heritage.

In this way we value the Scriptures as the "written Word of God," because they are the basis for our "proclaimed Word of God," which bears witness to the "incarnate Word of God," who is Jesus Christ himself.ⁱ

How We Read the Bible as Literature

The *Book of Faith* initiative is based in part on the idea that we can read the Scriptures from at least four perspectives, which are called "devotional," "historical," literary," and "theological."ⁱⁱ Some may infer that the four should be done in that order. And for many of us our uncritical personal use of the Bible is our chief entrée into the Scriptures. Better to read it devotionally than not at all!

However, these four approaches may be used in any order one chooses. An alternative proposal is to go in this order: literary, historical, theological, devotional. Here's why: Many people don't read the Bible because they do not see its relevance. Those who do read it, especially in our wider culture, often treat it as a reference book, a place to find answers for their problems. They tend to read it literally as they search for "proof texts" to direct them to solutions for whatever issues they are wrestling with.

As satisfying as this may be in the short term, this is a long way from the sense that the Bible is the means by which we are drawn into a relationship with the living God. Perhaps the best way to recapture that understanding is by emphasizing the stories which shape our lives and give them meaning.ⁱⁱⁱ

Which means that our best entry point into the Scriptures will be through its overarching narrative, as well as through its individual stories. And the best way to do that is by paying attention to its literary qualities.

So let's start with a literary approach. Here is a helpful definition:

Contemporary *literary analysis* examines a text against the literary context it makes for itself, paying special attention to its inherent rhetorical, poetical, structural, and symbolic devices, in order to understand how the text continues to function and affect modern readers

Literary studies, of course, can be quite complex. But the basic questions can

The biblical narrative is basic...

**because it's
Jesus' story,**

**and therefore
God's story,**

**so now it's our
story, too**

**...the story of our
lives!**

be learned and applied by novice study leaders. It helps to realize that the Bible contains three basic kinds of material: narrative, discursive, and poetic.

Much of the material is *narrative*; it tells the overall story of how God deals with people. The story unwinds in the Old Testament books from Genesis through Kings, for example, plus Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah. The short stories of Ruth, Esther and Jonah are also obviously narratives. In the New Testament, the gospels and the book of Acts contain the story of Jesus and his followers.

Other materials are *discursive*; they present a message, argue a case, establish ethical standards, and the like. The Old Testament legal codes and prophetic oracles are discursive in this sense, as are the New Testament epistles.

The book of Psalms is obviously composed of *poetic* material, as are shorter passages in other books in both the Old and New Testaments. Also, much of the wisdom materials as well as prophetic oracles are phrased in poetic lines.

One could argue that narratives are more fundamental than logic or poetry. Social psychologists tell us that the feature which distinguishes humans from the other animals is our ability to anticipate the future and to reflect on the past.

In other words, we are able to use language to tell our stories. Story telling is thus more basic to our human experience than the other two. Discursive language requires us to use abstract thought and logical reasoning, and poetry often employs sophisticated figures of speech and metaphorical language. But narrated accounts are largely straightforward descriptions which recount actions and dialogue.

Furthermore, as heirs of the Reformation, we Lutherans have much invested in getting the theological content right. We have depended largely on the discursive elements—especially the epistles of St. Paul—and have tended to use the stories as anecdotes to illustrate theological “truths.” Nevertheless, the chief organizing principle in the biblical witness itself is its narrative, the story of God’s dealings with people, and we need to focus on the story above all else.

Now in the case of *narrative materials* like the gospels, popular studies show that character, plot and setting are the three essential ingredients in any story. “Someone...has to do something...somewhere.”^{iv} So questions like these will be helpful when reading stories:

- Who are the main characters in this story?
- Who are the protagonists, the heroes?
- Who are the opponents or villains?
- With which character would you identify?
- What is the plot of this narrative?
- Is this a story of conflict, or journey, or psychological growth?
- How does the setting affect the emotional tone of the story?

In the case of *discursive materials* like the epistles, these sorts of questions will help us understand the content of the message:

- How can we outline the author’s argument?
- What supporting evidence is used?
- Does the author appeal to personal experiences?

- Are quotations from the Old Testament brought into play?
- Can we detect any Greco-Roman or Jewish rhetorical devices?

In the case of *poetic material* like the psalms and the canticles, questions like these will be helpful:

- What images does the poet use here?
- Do the lines balance each other? If so, in what ways?
- How do any metaphors or comparisons picture God and creation and our situation?

Literary analysis enables us to get *into* the biblical texts without presuming that we have extensive prior knowledge *about* the text. A helpful way to start looking at the literary dimensions of any biblical passage is to ask:

- What sort of writing is this? Its genre? How is it structured or outlined?

How We Read the Bible as History

Since the time of the Enlightenment, from the 1700s through the 1900s, historical methods have been the chief tools which Bible scholars have used to interpret the Scriptures. Here is a good working definition:

Traditional *historical analysis* examines a text against the historical context in which it originated, paying special attention to its author, recipients, occasion and purpose, in order to understand how the text was understood by its original recipients.

Historical studies *do* assume a significant amount of “outside” information. This is where Bible dictionaries, commentaries, atlases, word books, exegetical notes, and the like have their place.

Not only do these resources help us understand more precisely what the biblical texts are saying, but just as importantly they give clarity about what the texts are *not* saying. This can help keep us from treating the Bible like a “waxen nose” which we can bend and shape to say whatever we want it to say.

Seminary-trained leaders will be familiar with the standard exegetical approaches used by biblical scholars today—textual criticism, source criticism, form-criticism, redaction-criticism, composition-criticism, canonical-criticism, sociological-criticism, structural-criticism, de-construction-criticism, and the like. The options can seem bewildering even for the experts, and we may be tempted simply to ignore them.

What we need to remember is that historical analysis is not just about critiquing the biblical text; more importantly historical studies are necessary for us to critique *our own understanding* of the biblical text.

This is what keeps us from imposing our 21st century values and perspectives on ancient documents which are some 2000 to 3000 years old and which are so culturally removed from us that we can scarcely imagine ourselves back in their world. Questions such as these will be helpful for assessing the historical dimensions of biblical texts:

- Do we know who wrote this document? When? Where? Why? To whom?

Historical readings keep us honest...

...we are not so much critiquing the text as much as we are critiquing ourselves.

- Are there any important discrepancies in the text, or alternate translations?
- Did the author make use of other sources or materials?
- What social values or cultural traditions lie behind this text?
- Does it agree with, or contradict, secular writings from the same time and place?
- How would this writing have been used in the ancient Jewish or early Christian communities?

To start looking at a text historically, try asking:

- Which people, places, events or customs need to be explained?

How We Read the Bible Theologically

What has kept the Bible relevant for many generations is the fact that it has a message. It speaks to us today. For us Lutherans the content of that message has been a key emphasis.

In their historical context in England, for example, Episcopalians needed to focused on *correct worship*. Which is why Thomas Cramer was so insistent on maintaining the historic episcopate. Two hundred years later the Methodists felt called to emphasize *correct practice*. Which is why they were named after John Wesley’s “method” for living a more sanctified life.

Our historical context in Germany and Scandinavia required us to articulate *correct doctrine*. Which is why Martin Luther’s summary of the Gospel message as “justification by grace, for Christ’s sake, through faith” is at the center of our theology. Consequently we read the Bible through doctrinal lenses, as this definition suggests:

Confessional *theological analysis* explores the content of a text against a Lutheran understanding of its message, paying special attention to how it functions as Law and Gospel within the community, in order to articulate the church’s doctrine and ethics in the contemporary world.

Systematic or constructive theology has always been central to the way we Lutherans approach scriptural studies. But the Bible determines our dogma, not *vice versa*, which is why theological reflection properly comes after literary and historical engagement with the text itself.

Furthermore, we need to focus not only on doctrinal truths, but also on ethical practices, for the Bible is to inform both our faith and our life.

Also, we Lutherans have always been good at applying the Scriptures to our personal and family situations; now we also need to expand our horizons to see how they apply to our larger social and political contexts.

So questions like these will help us get at the Lutheran theological understanding of biblical texts:

- Do we hear this passage as Law? Is it a word of command or judgment?
Does it critique, embarrass or condemn us? Is it thumbs down?
- Or do we hear it as Gospel? Is it a word of promise and hope?

The biblical word impacts us two ways...

- **either as Law, which always accuses and condemns us,**
- **or as Gospel, which inevitably encourages and uplifts us.**

...so listen very carefully!

- Does it encourage, uplift or forgive us? Is it thumbs up?
- Is the teaching in this passage expressed clearly and obviously?
- Or must we infer or deduce the doctrine from what we read?
- If the content is ethical instruction, is it culturally conditioned and therefore open to revision in new contexts?
- Or is it eternally valid just as it stands?
- How does this apply to our personal, family and churchly lives?
- How does this apply to our community and social and political lives?

Religious and ethical issues are often at the center of our disagreements, and they challenge the way the Bible has authority in our lives and in our churches. So it is helpful, *first*, if we can find ways to read the Bible together in small groups. The Scriptures were originally addressed to communities, and they still resonate best and achieve maximum effect when we study them in the company of other people who share a commitment to explore their insights together.^v

Then, *second*, we need to focus on the ways in which the biblical writings intersect our modern lives and impact us both positively and negatively. Both polarities need to be heard: Law and Gospel, accusation and forgiveness, judgment and grace. The Bible's functional effect, whether critiquing or affirming us, accounts for its continuing authority today.

As a result, *third*, when we read the texts sympathetically and with open minds, we allow the biblical texts to address our own lives, and then we will experience a rewarding convergence:

The story of how God deals with us both in judgment and grace will have a "lawing" and "gospeling" effect in our lives today, and we will come to experience the presence of the God who acts in history. And as a result we will learn to value these ancient biblical documents as the inspired, and inspiring, Word of the living God.

- So to begin examining the theological message of a biblical text, try asking:
- Does this sound like Law, or Gospel? Does it criticize, or encourage us?

How We Read the Bible Devotionally

For many Christians, our most frequent encounter with the Scriptures occurs when we are praying or reading inspirational materials. This is a personal experience, whether we are reading individually, as a family or in a small group, as this definition suggests:

Personal *devotional analysis* meditates on a text within the context of one's prayer life, paying special attention to its inspiring, nurturing and challenging properties, in order to comfort and strengthen Christians in their journey through life toward eternity.

Popular devotional resources such as *The Word in Season* and *Christ in Our Home* are familiar to our people. Meditative practices such as the *Lectio Divina* method popularized by the Benedictines (*lectio, meditatio, oratio, contemplatio*)

**You can read the Bible without praying about it...
...but who would want to do that?**

Here are four kinds of spiritualities...

- **mystics,**
- **martyrs,**
- **scholars, and**
- **saints**

...which kind are you?

and the T.R.I.P. method inspired by the Moravians and promoted by Mount Carmel Ministries (thanksgiving, regret, intercession, plan of action) are becoming more widely known.

A common element in all devotional approaches is the fact that they link Bible reading with prayer.

The danger is that they can become merely personal, to the extent that reading the Scriptures devotionally may lead us to disengage from the larger worshiping community. Also, devotional approaches can lead to an overly emotional or sentimental response to the Word and our hope for heaven, and this can then enable us to ignore the larger realities of life.

Our devotional use of the Scriptures comes closest to what people often have in mind when they talk about their spirituality. The difficulty is that we do not have a tight and precise definition of spirituality. To say that it is the way the Holy Spirit works in us doesn't give us much to go on. Even non-religious people talk about their "spirituality" and how their "spiritual needs" are being met by the so-called "new age" religious quest.

For our purposes, this practical description may be helpful: *In our context as Christian people, whatever it is about our faith that touches our lives both mentally and emotionally and therefore affects our way of viewing the world and living out our lives, that is how God's Spirit is leading us. That is the measure of our spirituality.*

On that basis, there may be different kinds of spirituality, just as there are different kinds of people. Here are four possibilities. Perhaps we can identify with one or the other.

- The *mystics* are those who are striving for inner peace. Their contemplation focuses on the hidden mystery of God, and their prayer life leads to a sense of mystical union with God. Picture them *kneeling* in meditation after reading John's gospel.
- The *martyrs* are those who are striving for justice and peace in the world. Their actions in society may lead to struggle and persecution, and their prayer life leads them to witness in the world. Picture them *striding* for a cause, motivated by reading Luke's gospel.
- The *scholars* are those who are striving for a right understanding of God's ways. Their study and thinking focus on the reasons for why we believe what we believe, and their prayer life leads them into deeper insight. Picture them *sitting* in their study as they read Mark's gospel.
- The *saints* are those who are striving for personal holiness of life. Their feelings may bring them to a "born again" experience, and their prayer life leads to a greater sense of God's presence in their everyday living. Picture them *standing* upright as they follow Matthew's gospel.^{vi}

The style of our devotional use of the Bible, therefore, may be quite different from one person to another. Thus the questions we ask must be open-ended and allow for various correct responses. Try some of these:

- What words or images in this passage strike your imagination?
- Does this passage help you feel closer to God?

- Does passage call you to repentance, or to give up some harmful practice?
- Does it summon you to action on behalf of your neighbor?
On behalf of society?
- Does it lift your spirits? Does it offer comfort and encouragement?
- Think about how this passage makes you feel. Can you describe that emotion?
- Can you rephrase the words of this text to turn it into a prayer?

In sum, placing devotional reading last can help assure that our reading of the Scriptures will not be overly influenced by our personal prejudices and our faith struggles. Then we can also be more intentional about linking our devo-tions with the church’s liturgical life and the prayers of the whole people of God.

In addition, we can learn to grow our prayerful meditation into meaningful life applications for ourselves personally, for our neighbors, and for our wider social communities. We can start simply by asking:

- What is God placing upon our hearts here? And how can we pray about this?

How We can Participate in Bible Study

In the past, popular curricula such as the *Bethel Bible Series*, *Crossways*, *Search, Word and Witness*, and the like included extensive written materials which were to be read in conjunction with each lesson.

Within the *Book of Faith* experience, however, we may prefer to minimize the required readings in order to allow ourselves to spend the majority of our time actually reading the Scriptures.

The resources being prepared for this venture will allow us to read the Bible as individuals, of course. But we imagine that we will do better if we are able to study the Scriptures in small groups of up to a dozen or so people.

One helpful approach is known as the *Mutual Invitation Process*, which encourages all in the group to share their insights. It helps avoid the problem where one or two people monopolize the conversation while others remain largely silent.^{vii}

Although the leader may bring literary, historical and contextual information to help the group understand the text better, this is not a class. The leader is chiefly a facilitator, not an instructor. Because we gather to share our insights, it is essential that everyone join in the discussion. A typical session goes like this:

- The leader welcomes all participants and introduces the Bible selection to be considered.
- The leader invites all to follow the text as one person is asked to read it out loud.
- The leader then invites another person to share a response or insight.
- That person then invites the next person to share, preferable not one’s spouse or the person sitting in the next chair.
- If someone prefers not to speak, they may simply say “Pass” or “Pass

The Bible works best when we share it together in a small group....

...and when all in the group respect each other.

Push a pencil, and you'll get more out of your reading and reflecting.

for now” and then designate the next person to share.

- This continues until all in the circle have had a chance to speak.
- If anyone has said “Pass for now,” the leader again invites them to share.
- After everyone has had an opportunity to share, then the leader may ask questions or ask for clarification.

The Mutual Invitation Process encourages these respectful guidelines for communication:

R – Take **responsibility** for what you say and feel, without blaming others.

E – Use **empathetic** listening skills to discern both the content and feeling of what others say.

S – Be **sensitive** to differences in communication styles.

P – Take time to **ponder** what you hear and feel before you speak.

E – Honestly **examine** your own assumptions and perceptions.

C – Keep **confidentiality** when others share sensitive personal information.

T – And **trust** ambiguity; we are not here to debate who is right or wrong.

This process works best when we are considering shorter passages of Scripture, and it does not require advance reading or preparation.

Other groups will want to study larger selections, several chapters or an entire book perhaps. In this case, we will likely need to read the assigned portion in advance, and we may want to write out some responses on a reflection sheet.

The simple truth is that sometimes people learn and retain more when they are pushing a pencil!

Several models of such sheets are appended to this document:

- *Four Ways to Look* is for recording first impressions using the four *Book of Faith* categories—literary, historical, theological, devotional
- *Three Grids* is especially useful for a group engaged in writing or planning a sermon to examine all sides of a text.
- *Stories on the Journey* is intended for studying narrative passages.
- *The Four Questions* is especially suited for studying the content of discursive passages.
- *Big Picture, Little Picture* is helpful when longer narrative or discursive sections are considered.
- *Summarize the Impact* can be used to identify gospel (+), law (O), instructional (!) and problem (?) passages and to distinguish between personal and communal applications.

Where We Can Find Resources

A number of easily accessible resources for the *Book of Faith* initiative are being prepared by Augsburg Fortress and others. Here are a few:

WWW.BOOKOFFAITH.ORG – This is the official web site and the place to sign up as a *Book of Faith* congregation. It has chat rooms, webinars, Ning groups, and the like.

**Bookmark these
two web sites and
add them to your
list of favorites...**

· bookoffaith.org

· enterthebible.org

**...and check them
out frequently.**

Opening the Book of Faith: Lutheran Insights for Bible Study, by D. Jacobson, M. A. Powell & S. N. Olson (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2008) – Three essays tell how to read the Scriptures from the four perspectives. The book also includes four practice studies and two helpful assessment tools.

Rediscovering the Book of Faith – This three-session course introduces newcomers to the Bible and explains how we got it, where it comes from, what's in it, etc. It also includes a leader's guide, participant's book, and a DVD at an easy level of difficulty.

Opening the Book of Faith Course – This is a seven-session introductory course to get people into the *Book of Faith* initiative. It includes a leader's guide and a DVD, at a medium level of difficulty.

Lutheran Study Bible – The text of the NRSV is supplemented with notes and articles by over sixty Lutheran pastors and professors. It includes the usual historical- and literary-critical information, *plus* specifically Lutheran insights for faith reflection. Yet it is devoid of technical theological jargon. Its lively format is reader-friendly and targeted at a junior-high reading level.

Book of Faith Field Guide to the Bible – This accessible, colorfully illustrated reference tool is still in the planning stage. When it becomes available, it should be an excellent accompaniment for any Scripture study.

Book of Faith Bible Studies – These studies offer both book-based and theme-based courses. Each includes DVD components, leader helps, etc.

Select Multimedia Resources: Lutheran Voices for Leadership Formation – These clergy-oriented continuing education resources are located at Trinity Seminary in Columbus, Ohio, and are available from www.selectlearning.org. Courses aimed for *Book of Faith* use include: "Introduction to the Old Testament," "Introduction to the New Testament," "How Lutherans Interpret the Bible," and "Pedagogy: How to Teach the Bible."

Enter the Bible – This easy-to-access **free** website prepared by professors at Luther Seminary in St. Paul contains insights into all the biblical books, and is available at www.enterthebible.org.

How We Can Get Started

Because *Book of Faith* is a grass-roots initiative, not a program or course, every congregation will need to find its own approach. A typical path into the process could include these steps:

- (1) Log onto the *Book of Faith* web page and become thoroughly acquainted with all the resources available there; join the Ning group.
- (2) Join the *Book of Faith* initiative at some level, whether by resolution of your church council or annual meeting, or at the request of some study group, or even as your own personal decision.
- (3) Use the assessment tools in the back of *Opening the Book of Faith* (also available online) as widely as possible within your congregation.
- (4) Enlist one or more groups to work through the ten sessions in the *Rediscovering the Book of Faith* and the *Opening the Book of Faith Course* resources.

**Get Ready...
...Get Set...
...Go!**

- (5) Send potential lay study leaders to the teacher-training workshops which will be hosted within your synod during the coming year.
- (6) Encourage as many people as possible to purchase the *Lutheran Study Bible*, and use its notes and questions to shape your group discussions.
- (7) Determine locally which Bible studies your congregation will include under the *Book of Faith* banner.
- (8) Continually publicize the results. E.g. How many are enrolled in which studies? How many studies, have been completed? More importantly, do people feel that their lives have been changed?
- (9) Check in with your synod's *Book of Faith* task force from time to time to report on how you are doing, and tell them how they can help your ministry.

page 11

i. As outlined in the ELCA Constitution, ch. 2, "Confession of Faith" (2.02.).

ii. As proposed by Diane Jacobson's essay "How Can the Bible Be Studied?" in *Opening the Book of Faith: Lutheran Insights for Bible Study* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008; pp. 46-64).

iii. Thanks to David Lose for this analysis, which is a foundational insight in his *Making Sense of Scripture: Big Questions About the Book of Faith* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009; esp. pp. 11-30).

iv. A helpful introduction is Mark Allan Powell's *What Is Narrative Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).

v. "The Bible's authority is honored most not when lofty claims are made in its behalf but when it is used in the community of faith and embodied in the daily lives of the community's members," concludes Darrell Jadock in *The Church's Bible: Its Contemporary Authority* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989; p. 145).

vi. Based on Allan H. Sager's *Gospel-Centered Spirituality: An Introduction to Our Spiritual Journey* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1990; pp. 30-56).

vii. Thanks to Diane Shallue, based on Eric H. F. Law's *The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb: A Spirituality for Leadership in a Multicultural Community* (St. Louis: Chalice, 1993).