

Five principles Lutherans tend to follow when reading and interpreting the Bible

1. Law and Gospel
2. What shows forth Christ?
3. Scripture interprets scripture
4. The plain meaning of a text
5. Public interpretation

1. Law and Gospel

God's law shows us what we should do and shows us when we do not do it. The gospel shows us what God does for us and how God frees us and saves us in spite of our failures. We do not only find the law in the Old Testament and gospel in the New Testament. Instead, we believe the entire Bible reveals God's law and God's gospel to us. God's word always reveals our sin and brokenness and also heals our sin and brokenness. That is Good News! God's law and God's gospel are both good because they work together to set us free. A question to keep in mind when reading the Bible is, "How does this verse reveal my/our sin & brokenness (law) and how does it offer me/us healing and hope (gospel)?"

2. What shows forth Christ?

Martin Luther referred to the Bible as the manger that held the Christ child. We worship Jesus Christ who is revealed to us through scripture. The Bible helps us to know Jesus and to have a relationship with Jesus. A second question to keep in mind when reading the Bible (both Old and New Testaments) is this, "How do I see Christ revealed in this verse?"

3. Scripture interprets scripture

Some parts of the Bible are fairly easy to understand while other parts are very difficult and complicated. We can use the parts that are clearer to understand to help us make sense of the more difficult parts. In fact, we should always be thinking about the relationship between the specific text we might be reading and the overall story of the Bible (The Good News). This means we need to have a good understanding of the Bible as a whole. A question to keep in mind when reading the Bible is this, "How does this verse connect to the overall biblical story and how do other stories agree, counter or balance things out?" For example how does Jesus' teaching on forgiveness and reconciliation shape our reading of stories of violence and warfare in some parts of the Bible?

4. The plain (ordinary) meaning of the text

Another thing to keep in mind when interpreting the text is simply what it means at face value. In an age of fearful conspiracy theories, we are often tempted to assume that there is

always something more meaningful or sinister hidden behind the text. We should not become distracted by these theories. Instead we should try to understand what the author meant to say to the original audience at that time. So, a fourth question to ask when reading the Bible is this, “How were people expected to understand this verse in their context and their time in history which is both similar and different from ours?”

5. Public (Communal) interpretation

We are to interpret the Bible in community. We should read the Bible on our own but the message is not for me alone and this requires me to interpret scripture with others in mind. Therefore we should find ways to read and interpret Scripture together with people who are quite different than ourselves. This helps us to realize just how broad and deep God’s word is and it prevents us from narrow, one-sided interpretations. A key question to keep in mind is, “How might someone in a completely different life-situation or another part of the world interpret this verse or story in the Bible?”

All of these principles should find their way into our reading and interpreting of the Bible for our times.