

An updated “Statement on the Authority and Interpretation of Scripture in the Church-Aug. 2021.”

As Lutheran Christians we are deeply concerned about the role and interpretation of the Bible in the Church. We offer the following statement.

1. The canonical books of the Old and New Testaments are the written Word of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who has revealed himself most fully and completely in Jesus Christ. The Bible bears witness to and receives its ultimate authority from the Triune God--Father, Son, and Holy Spirit--as definitively revealed in, by, and through Jesus the Messiah, the incarnate Word of God, from and through whom the written Word came to be.
2. God gives his written Word to the church--the community of believers across time and space who confess and worship Jesus as Lord and Messiah and God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The church is only able to recognize the authority of Scripture as the Word of God by the power of the Holy Spirit given to the community of Jesus Christ. Further, the church is only able to submit to and obey Scripture by this same Spirit. The misuse of the written Word by the church or individuals does not divest Scripture of its authority but rather reveals sinful disobedience and rebellion on the part of human beings.
3. It is not primarily we who interpret Scripture but Scripture which interprets us—providing us with identity and coherence, giving voice to our sorrows and joys, and grounding us in and directing us towards the purposes of God in the world. In addition to serving as the source of doctrine the Scripture also shapes us into being a people of faith.
4. The proper relationship of the church to the Bible then is that of appointed steward responsible for its correct care and use. Therefore the interpretation of Scripture is the prerogative and responsibility of the church; the church cannot and must not surrender its stewardship of Scripture to either the secular academy or others who would usurp the Scriptures for contemporary ideological agendas. At the same time, neither the church nor the individual believer is judge or master over the written Word. The church's interpretation of Scripture is bound by Scripture's own witness. This witness includes the biblical diagnosis of sin as the catastrophic infection affecting every human being. All human beings are sinners, turned inward upon themselves, under the judgment of God. This condition is so pervasive and dire that it can be overcome by nothing less than the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ in whom the Old Testament's history of Israel is fulfilled and consummated. The Scripture's own distinction between law and Gospel informs and guides the church in faithful proclamation; the spoken Word is used by the Holy Spirit so that sinners are convicted of the truth that they are indeed dead in their sins, and redeemed and forgiven for the sake of Christ Jesus who transforms them for lives of new and fruitful obedience.
5. For the Lutheran community, the Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church provide a faithful and sufficient summary and witness to the content and boundaries of Biblical proclamation, faith, and life. A Lutheran understanding of the Bible is readily available to us in our Confessions and through our heritage within the church catholic. Major themes for a Lutheran understanding of Scripture should include, among others: the centrality of Christ in Scripture, the plain sense of Scripture, the distinction between law and Gospel, the relationship between Scripture and church and between Scripture and Confession, the unity of the Bible as the inspired and written Word of God, Scripture as its own interpreter, and the authority of the Bible as *sola Scriptura*.
6. Any correction of the church's interpretation and application of the written Word can only be legitimately undertaken on the basis of Scripture itself. Those who advocate for changes in the

traditional Lutheran interpretation and application of Scripture are called to demonstrate how such changes are congruent with the comprehensive witness of the Scriptures and the confessions of the church: "Holy Scripture remains the only judge, rule, and norm according to which all doctrines should and must be understood and judged" (Formula of Concord, Epitome I, 3).

7. The present generation has no new authority or special revelation to authorize new or additional meanings that contradict or undermine the plain sense reading of the Bible. However, the lack of a Biblical and confessional basis has not prevented the rise of numerous revisionist readings of Scripture which share a common approach to Scriptural interpretation: an appeal to contemporary context and relevance at the expense of Scripture's intrinsic meaning and authority. Human reason, personal experience, and contemporary culture are regarded as final arbiters of the Bible. Two millennia of the church's reading and interpretation of Scripture are blithely dismissed as "culturally conditioned," undermining and denying the church's confession of the Bible as God's written Word.
8. When the primacy and immediacy of the interpreter's experience and contemporary context predominate over the written Word, interpretation becomes a means of importing contemporary social political agendas into Scripture. These contemporary agendas increasingly control the church's interpretation of Scripture and threaten to displace the Bible's message of redemption and transformation. Antinomian ideologies of inclusivity and acceptance become determinative for the church's proclamation. The result is a sweeping revision of Christian faith and life, contradictory to and discontinuous with that of classical, orthodox Christianity.
9. Advocates for such changes often begin with the claim for some sort of equivalency between their approach to the authority and interpretation of Scripture and that of the traditional Lutheran approach. They argue that somehow despite the irreconcilable differences in the presuppositions and the resulting interpretations both approaches can exist side by side in the church, that both approaches reflect a legitimate diversity in Biblical interpretation. Not only is this a logical absurdity but it is disingenuous as well. The two approaches begin and end with radically opposed understandings of the church and the Christian faith. More to the point are the words of Jesus: "A house divided against itself cannot stand" (Mark 3:25) and "No one can serve two masters" (Matthew 6:24).
10. Increasingly the "traditional" approach to Biblical interpretation is dismissed as a Lutheran version of fundamentalism. In contrast to fundamentalism, the "traditional" approach to the Bible is neither literalism nor bibliolatry. The "traditional" approach recognizes the divine and human character of the Bible, gives priority to the living Word, Jesus, from whom the Scripture receives its authority, and makes use of responsible scholarship. One of the distinctive marks of such scholarship is concern for continuity with the church before us, and care to build upon the foundation of faith bequeathed to us. The revisionist approach, on the other hand, so emphasizes the human nature of Scripture as to virtually exclude divine revelation from the Biblical message and endangers the authority of the Bible within the church.
11. We therefore encourage and call Lutheran pastors, laity, and congregations to a reading, interpretation, and application of the Scriptures that, in continuity with the Church for two thousand years, recognizes and bears witness to the authority of the Scriptures as the written Word of God. We similarly encourage reliance upon the Lutheran Confessions as a trustworthy exposition of the Scriptures and a guide to our understanding of the heart of the Scriptures, namely, salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.