

The following information is taken from the Lutheran Study Bible which is the Bible used at seminary and which was assigned for teaching confirmation.

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## **Introduction to the Bible**

### **The New Testament**

“In the early centuries of the church, the lists of New Testament books were divided into books that were accepted, books that were disputed, and books that were rejected. Disputed books that came to be included in the New Testament were Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and Revelation... Still other writings were rejected ... these included gospels such as the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of the Egyptians.” (27)

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### **Criteria for “accepted” books**

“Early in the fourth century C.E., Eusebius, considered the “father” of church history..., identified criteria for deciding which books were to be regarded as Christian Scripture. He identified three primary criteria by asking three questions. First, was a particular book used as Scripture by all the churches? Second, did a book accurately communicate the gospel of Jesus Christ? Third, did the book have a clear connection back to early apostles of Jesus? Writing style and consistency of key themes and message were also considered important.” (27)

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## **Martin Luther’s View of the Bible**

### **Is the Bible the Word of God?**

“... under the guidance of the Spirit, responsible faith requires critical discernment [judgment, discrimination, sensitivity] of the text of Scripture, not just listening to the traditions of the church.” (1523)

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### **Discerning the Scriptures**

[On not having to have the Bible be harmonious]

“Luther sought to discern or understand the meaning of biblical texts within his overall theological framework. At the same time he paid close attention to a number of factors, including historical context and literary style.” (1524)

“[Luther] used and encouraged others to use the latest and best critical tools for understanding Scripture and making it available to everyone... But while emphasizing the literal meaning, Luther was open to understanding texts in other ways when necessary, and he was willing to admit that he did not fully understand some biblical texts.” (1524)

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### **Scripture Interprets Itself**

“Luther heard biblical texts as speaking both to the time in which they were written and to his own time.”

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## Scripture for the People

“Luther wanted all Christians to hear, read, learn, and understand the Bible.” (1526)

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## Lutheran Insights that Open the Bible

“Lutherans are not peculiar in how they understand the Bible. Most of what we do is pretty similar to what other Christians do, but we sometimes do put a little different spin on things. We have our priorities and our preferences, and these sometimes lead us to understand Scripture differently.” (1538)

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## The Word of God

“... Lutherans believe the Bible is the Word of God.” (1538)

“... Lutherans are more interested in understanding the Bible than they are in defending it” (1538)

[So, what is meant by the “Word of God?”]

- “... Jesus Christ is the Word of God’ (1538) [In other words, we learn the word through Jesus’ life. Teaching by example].
- “The message of law and gospel may also be identified as the Word of God.”(1539)
- “The writings of Scripture may be identified as the Word of God” (1539)

“Lutherans do not view the Bible as the only source for knowing what is true in this world, but they do claim that the Bible is the only authoritative source for knowing divine truth that God reveals to us.” (1539)

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## Understanding the Bible

[Note that Lutherans have 2 simple and 1 complicated response to the question “where the Bible came from”.]

1. “... The Bible did not just fall out of heaven, all bound in leather with the words of Jesus printed in red. ... [Nonetheless], Lutherans have no trouble saying, “This book comes from God.” (1539)
  2. “...The Bible comes from the church.” The church (meaning the historical Christian church) put the Bible together, preserved it, translated it,” (1539)
  3. “... The individual books of the Bible were written by human beings. In order to understand any particular book of the Bible, we need to know something about the circumstances in which it was written. This is important for Lutherans, because we believe the Bible must be studied and interpreted if we are going to understand it and receive God’s truth.” (1539)
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## Five Key Lutheran Principles

1. **Law and Gospel.** “... The Word of God speaks both law and gospel...” The same text may function as both law and gospel: which function it has in any given situation may depend upon who is reading it and on what they need to hear.” (1540)
2. **What Shows Forth Christ?** “... We do not worship the Bible. We worship the Christ who is found in the Bible.” (1540)

3. **Scripture Interprets Scripture.** "... All of scripture is to be interpreted in light of the Bible's central themes and motifs. ... We try to be faithful to the entire Bible rather than just picking some parts and leaving others alone." (1541)
4. **The Plain Meaning of the Text.** "Lutherans say that Scripture is to be interpreted in line with its "plain sense." This means that passages are to be understood in the sense that would have seemed obvious to their original readers. They are not to be taken out of context or twisted to be read in a sense that never would have occurred to their original readers. This comes straight from the teaching of Martin Luther and, when he talked about this, he had something specific in mind. It was popular in his day for interpreters to come up with creative ways of understanding the Bible that never would have been intended by the author. This was done by finding "secret meaning" in the Bible that no one had ever noticed before<sup>1</sup>. The more creative the better! ... Luther would claim, if you allow this sort of thing to go on, people will find that they can make the Bible say anything they want it to say." (1542)
 

**Example of the Book of Revelations** – Lutherans do not take it literally, it is an interpretive, symbolic work that must be understood in relation to the time it was written and the conditions in which the writers found themselves. "... What is typical and traditional for Lutherans – is to focus on how the book would have been understood by its original reader. This book was written for Christians who had suffered terrible persecution..." (1542)
5. **Public Interpretation.** "What we recommend is that individuals first seek the general meaning – what the text would mean to all people – and then ask about personal application to their own particular circumstance. What the Bible means for you should be consistent or compatible with what it means for everyone." (1543)

### Some Final Words

"... many Lutherans do not approach the Bible nearly enough. This is very un-Lutheran... We should read the Bible, we should study the Bible, we should believe the Bible, we should treasure the Bible ..." (1543)

## What Should We Expect When we Read the Bible?

1. "The Lutheran understanding of Scripture is that we need to find ways for it to break through our expectations and to challenge us. Martin Luther opposed those who let their view of what was in the Bible keep it from speaking anew to them." (1544)
2. "We should expect a language rich in metaphor. In the Bible we find many metaphors, such as the "lamb of God," the "rock of our salvation," the "bread of life," and the "way." We should not expect to read the Bible simply as a textbook. The bible uses language and stories rich in metaphors that point to God. That lively language enlivens our sense of ourselves in relation to our neighbours and the world." (1544)
3. "We should expect to be challenged. ... We need to let the challenge confront us." (1544)

<sup>1</sup> This is why Gnosticism was rejected, because it's followers believed that discovering the hidden messages of the Bible – which only some people could do, was of most importance, rather than aligning oneself with the suffering Jesus on the cross.

4. “We should expect to find meaningful answers for life, but we should not expect to find in the Bible an answer for every ethical decision we face. ... We don’t expect to read the Bible to find a detailed list of do’s and don’ts. Luther did not read the Bible that way. Just as Jesus had done and the apostle Paul had done. ... So, on the one hand, we need to take what we find in the Bible seriously enough to let it challenge us. But, on the other hand, we also have been freed by the gospel .... We are not to be enslaved by the instructions found in the bible but rather to use our God-given wisdom to serve our neighbour.” (1545)
5. “We should also not expect to have every question about God answered.” (1545)
6. “We should expect to find out about God’s here-and-now relationship with us. The Bible does talk about life after death. ... [But] it is not the core of what is believed or of what the Bible is about. Luther almost never talked about hell and seldom talked about heaven. He rejected the idea he had been taught – that salvation was the end goal of life. He thought instead that being saved was the same thing as being in right relationship with God here and now. Whatever one says about life after death, one thing is for sure. For Luther it is not a reward. It is an extra gift from a gift-giving God.” (1545)
7. “We should expect to be left with tensions. God is described in many ways in the Bible .... God is both this and that. ... The Christian life is both this and that. The Bible does not resolve all these tensions. It reveals life’s beauty and life’s messiness....There is more to God than any single portrait can convey.” (1545)
8. “We should expect that each book of the Bible was written for a particular purpose and has a particular message.” (1545)

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## The Bible and God’s Mission

“God’s Word in the Bible has come to us shaped by and bearing marks of a diversity of cultures, competing religious worldviews, and tribal and ethnic distinctiveness and intermixing. Much in Scripture presents the reader with the reality that God has spoken and speaks through such distinctive human marks. Both the content of Scripture and the way the Scriptures have been passed on call for us to use special lenses in reading and interpreting Scripture. These lenses take into account both cultural and religious differences. When we read and interpret the Bible with this in mind, we pay attention to, highlight, and value diversity in listening to God’s Word speak to the individual reader and the community.” (1547)

\*\*\*\*\*“Every reader comes with a framework of interpretation, a tendency to see and understand the Bible in certain ways. So, it is important that we keep in mind that the biography of the reader- interpreter plays a critical role, sometimes the decisive role, in the interpretation of scripture. Of course, if all we see in the biblical text or story is what we bring with us to the text, then our personal biography can get in the way of hearing what Scripture may be saying. We may read the Bible as if it were written only for a person, or people, like me. We may miss that God’s Word is normative, meaning it is a standard for all who encounter it.” (1547)

“God speaks to us in the diversity of languages, peoples, cultures, and even religious expressions. This means that we should be sensitive to these dimensions in Scripture, in history, and in ourselves. For example, it is helpful to bear in mind the many ways that Jesus of Nazareth .... is depicted in art.” (1548)

“Not only should Scripture be read in light of those who are at the center of the story, but it should be read from the standpoint of those on the margins. In the Bible, God is the decisive maker of history, and one important way God acts in history is by showing surprising generosity, grace, and mercy to those on the margins.” (1548)