



LUTHERAN STUDY BIBLE

SAMPLER

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LUTHERAN STUDY BIBLE

An Introduction

Lutherans share with other Christians this foundational understanding: The Bible is the Word of God, and through it God's Spirit speaks to us to create and sustain Christian faith and fellowship for service in the world. The Bible shapes our lives individually and together as the church of Christ. The "Confession of Faith" in The Constitution of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America states:

This church accepts the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired Word of God and the authoritative source and norm of its proclamation, faith, and life. (2.03)

With this clear view of the Scriptures comes the impetus to develop a new study Bible for use in the church. We are a gifted church with many talented and influential teaching theologians. This study Bible provides a means to display these gifts and insights for the sake of all who seek to study, read, and reflect on God's Word. Like other study Bibles, the notes utilize the best of modern biblical scholarship. To this are added Lutheran perspectives and articles that make Lutheran Study Bible truly unique. Drawing on the rich catechetical traditions of Martin Luther, this study Bible brings together Bible insights with theological reflection on foundational teachings important to Lutherans and relevant for all.

Book of Faith Connections

Development of this Bible was well underway when the ELCA decided to support a new initiative called Book of Faith in 2007. The emergence of this initiative lent further support to the need for this new study Bible. In fact, the guiding principles of the initiative have helped shape the ongoing development, design, and content of Lutheran Study Bible. The release of Lutheran Study Bible to coincide with the Book of Faith initiative is truly an opportune moment for the church. The initiative's vision is "that the whole church becomes more fluent in the first language of faith, the language of Scripture . . ." What better way to support this vision than by reading and studying Scripture together under the guidance of some of our very best Bible teachers.

The Book of Faith initiative invites all to "Open Scripture. Join the Conversation." In the spirit of this invitation, Lutheran Study Bible also includes questions for individual reflection and group conversation. The Bible comes alive and God's Word does its work of renewing and changing lives, especially when we talk about it and share it with one another. In this way Lutheran Study Bible is also a study guide.

What to Look For

Lutheran Study Bible has several unique features that can be used to support individual study and reflection as well as group study ranging from confirmation to various adult learning settings. You will note the following features:

Introductions

Each major section and each book of the Bible will begin with a summary introduction. Here you will discover historical and contextual background, as well as insights into the key themes and messages. Use these introductions as helpful guides to approaching the sections or books of the Bible.

Study Notes

Each book of the Bible is accompanied by three types of study notes and by faith-reflection questions. These study notes and questions are designated by the following icons and provided in the margin near the corresponding Bible text.



World of the Bible notes explore people, places, events, and artifacts that are mentioned in the Bible. These may also describe how a particular book may have been written and what literary form it takes.



Bible Concepts notes focus on ideas and theological insights. Here you will find connections between how such concepts are expressed in different books and how Old Testament themes influence the New Testament.



Lutheran Perspectives notes are introduced by a key question that connects a Bible verse or passage with Lutheran theological perspectives, teachings, or practices.



Faith Reflection questions encourage individuals and groups to think about and discuss the meaning of some Bible texts or study notes.

Charts, Illustrations, Diagrams, and Maps

Found throughout the study Bible, these resources will provide helpful summaries and views to help you picture what is introduced in the Bible text.

A set of four-color maps and occasional spot maps are provided to help you follow the action.

Bible Reading Plan and Subject Guide

For those who wish to engage in a daily Bible reading plan, a detailed plan is provided for three different levels (see pp. 2081-2093).

The Subject Guide (pp. 2055-2078) provides a concordance-like listing of key Bible terms and cross-references.

Articles

Many helpful articles can be found in the first and second four-color sections of the Bible (pp. 15-32 and 1537-1568). The first section includes a detailed Introduction to the Bible, a chart describing the various canons of the Hebrew Scripture (Old Testament), and a helpful three-page Bible History Timeline. The second section highlights Martin Luther and the Bible, provides a helpful view of Luther's Small Catechism and the Bible, and offers several short articles that focus on how Lutherans and others may read, interpret, and study the Bible. Helpful hints for personal Bible reading and study can be found here as well. Be sure to spend some time reviewing this rich collection of articles and resources.

A Word about Dates

In Lutheran Study Bible, dates are designated by the initials B.C.E. (Before the Common Era) and C.E. (Common Era). These correspond to the traditional dating convention of B.C. and A.D. The abbreviation B.C. stands for “before Christ,” while A.D. stands for the Latin phrase *anno domine* (“in the year of our Lord”). A monk named Dionysius Exiguus invented this dating system in Rome in 525, based on his work on calculating the date of Easter. While the system attempted to mark Jesus’ birth as the transition point in history, it was later discovered that the calculation of Jesus’ birth year was incorrect. It is now believed that Jesus was more likely born in about 4 B.C. (B.C.E.).

We recognize that some readers may prefer the traditional dating abbreviations, which call attention to the importance of Christ’s incarnation and center human history around that event. We also recognize that we share history with people of many faiths, including Jewish brothers and sisters with whom we share sacred Scripture. Therefore, we have chosen to follow the lead of several other study Bibles and scholars today and use the B.C.E. and C.E. dating abbreviations.

A Word about the Translation

The New Revised Standard Version translation of the Bible (NRSV) was chosen because of its continued wide use in the church. Research revealed a strong preference for the use of this translation in a new Lutheran Study Bible. The NRSV is acclaimed for its accuracy, clarity, and inclusivity. It continues to be an important translation for use in various teaching settings.

Using this Bible

Lutheran Study Bible has been designed to support confirmation study and various adult learning settings. Here are some additional ways to use the resources:

- Consider using various articles as the basis for teaching activities.
- Make use of the helpful hints for individual study.
- Discuss the Faith Reflection questions with others.

- Adopt a personal reading plan. Use the study notes for guidance as you read. Consider writing your reflections and your questions in a journal.
- Read and think about the many Lutheran Perspectives notes. Use them to learn or review important Lutheran teachings and practices. Those who are new to the Lutheran faith may find these perspectives to be particularly helpful.

The Bible is an exciting but challenging book. It can be difficult to understand. We hope Lutheran Study Bible will be a valuable guide and companion to your reading and study of the Bible. We hope it does indeed help you become more fluent in Scripture, the first language of faith. As we become more fluent in God's life-giving, renewing Word, we are better equipped to live out our Christian faith for the sake of the world.

Acknowledgments

You will see the large number of contributors on pp. 10-11. We thank them for their work and for their willingness to participate in this major undertaking. We also thank the board of consultants for helping shape the design of the project and for reviewing selected material. Their insights and ongoing counsel were invaluable.



John 20:30-31

JOHN

Background File

It is clear from the beginning of the Gospel of John that it has a different feel than the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. While the first three Gospels have a lot of the same stories and events in Jesus' life, John's Gospel gives us an altogether different Jesus. John's Gospel begins with a hymn of praise for the Word of God made flesh (1:1-18). It includes events in Jesus' ministry, but the order is not like that of the other Gospels, and much new material focuses on who Jesus is, including the way he describes himself in "I am" statements. Like the other Gospels, the authorship of John's Gospel is unknown. Early traditions credit John the son of Zebedee as its author. The "beloved disciple" mentioned in the book (19:26; 21:20-24) has been identified with John. There are clues in the Gospel that lead scholars to believe that it was written for Jewish Christians who, because they were followers of Jesus, experienced hostility within their Jewish communities.

What's the Story?

This gospel includes two larger sections after the prologue (1:1-18). Frequently called the Book of Signs, the first of the larger sections (1:19-12:50) tells of Jesus' public ministry. He is described as performing seven miracles, or signs, as they are called in this gospel. The second section (chapters 13-21) describes the events of Jesus' last meal with his disciples and his crucifixion, resurrection, and post-resurrection appearances. This last half of story is sometimes referred to as the "Book of Glory."

An early-church father, Clement of Alexandria, described the Gospel of John as a "spiritual account" of Jesus' life and teaching. Often considered more theological than historical, the portrait of Jesus in the Gospel of John is very different from the other Gospels. John includes stories about Jesus that do not appear in Matthew, Mark, or Luke, among them his first sign at the wedding in Cana (2:1-11); his encounters with Nicodemus (3:1-21); the Samaritan woman (4:1-41); the woman caught in adultery (7:53-8:11); his raising of Lazarus (11:17-44); and his post-resurrection appearances to Thomas (20:24-29) and Mary Magdalene (20:11-18). Also unique to John's Gospel are the various "I am" images of Jesus (see the chart *The "I AM" Sayings of Jesus in John's Gospel*, p. 1773). On the other hand, John's gospel does not include some familiar events in the story of Jesus. There are no parables, Sermon on the Mount, institution of the Lord's Supper, or nativity story.

What's the Message?

The first words of the Gospel, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God,” make it clear that the Gospel is not concerned with Jesus’ family tree but with his true identity as the Word of God made flesh. Jesus is portrayed as being one with the Father, and he is in absolute control of and aware of his purpose. The central claim of this Gospel is that, in Jesus, the Word that in the beginning was with God, and was God, became human. This claim is firmly established in the prologue (1:1-18), and we can use this lens to read the whole gospel. The prologue introduces the Gospel’s main themes: light and darkness, belief, truth, witness, and the identity of Jesus. Jesus is the one who makes God known (1:18). In Jesus’ words and actions, God is revealed to us. For the Gospel of John, Jesus is not the suffering Messiah but the very presence of the divine “I AM” (see Exod 3:14 and NRSV footnote *a*) who has chosen to come into the world.

The writer also makes it clear that the Gospel was written for a very specific purpose: “Now Jesus did many other signs. . . . But these 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” (20:30-31). The reader is invited into this story to have an encounter with Jesus and to abide in the Word (8:31-32). We receive the same promises as Jesus’ first disciples: abundant life and unity with Jesus and God the Father. The Gospel continues to call Jesus’ followers to witness to the presence of the Word in the world even after Jesus has returned to the Father.

The Word Became Flesh

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, ^a and the life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. ^b

¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹He came to what was his own, ^c and his own people did not accept him. ¹²But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have



1:1 the Word: The Greek term for “word” is *logos* (LOW-gohs), which has roots in Greek thought as the ordering plan of the universe and in Judaism as divine Wisdom.



1:1 In the beginning: The first words of John’s Gospel recall the first words of Genesis (Gen 1:1). In contrast to the stories of Jesus’ birth in Matthew and Luke, here Jesus’ origin is outside of time, space, and history.



1:7 so that all might believe: This is the first occurrence of the verb “to believe.” Belief is always active in John’s Gospel—it is something one does, not what one has.



1:14 the Word became flesh and lived among us: That God chose to take on human form is the central claim of this Gospel. The word *lived* can also be translated as “tabernacled” or “dwelt.”

^a Or ^athrough him. And without him not one thing came into being that has come into being. ^aIn him was life

^b Or He was the true light that enlightens everyone coming into the world ^c Or to his own home

 What difference does it make to your faith that God chose to become human?

 **How do Lutherans understand God's grace?** That we are saved by grace through no effort of our own is central to Lutheran theology. John tells us that we receive "grace upon grace" because of Jesus. The word *grace* never again appears in the Gospel of John, but the whole of the Gospel shows what grace upon grace looks like because of God's presence in Jesus. *John 1:16*

 **What does it mean to confess that Jesus Christ is truly God?** John 1:18 provides biblical support for claiming that Jesus is true God. The second part of the Nicene Creed reflects this confession of the church, "We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father; through him all things were made." (See also the Lutheran Perspectives note on Prov 8:22-24.) *John 1:18*

 **1:29 Lamb of God:** This title for Jesus, one of many in John's Gospel, links Jesus' crucifixion with the slaughter of lambs in preparation for the Israelites' celebration of the festival of Passover (Exod 12:21-27). Although the lamb was not a sacrifice for sin in Jewish celebrations of Passover, Jesus' death is linked to this belief in the early church.

 Note that Jesus takes away the sin (singular) of the world, not plural, "sins." What is the difference? How do you define sin?

 **1:35-51 What are you looking for?** Jesus' first words to his disciples are critical for this Gospel (see 18:4; 20:15). When the disciples ask, "where are you staying?" the verb is "remain" or "abide." The Gospel of John uses this term more than any other writer in the New Testament. By remaining or abiding with Jesus one comes to believe in Jesus and is given life by being in his presence. It denotes the intimate relationship that Jesus has with his "own."

seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son,^a full of grace and truth.¹⁵ (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'")¹⁶ From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.¹⁷ The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.¹⁸ No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son,^b who is close to the Father's heart,^c who has made him known.

The Testimony of John the Baptist

19 This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?"²⁰ He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah."^d ²¹And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No."²² Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"²³ He said,

"I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,'"
as the prophet Isaiah said.

24 Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.²⁵ They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah,^d nor Elijah, nor the prophet?"²⁶ John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know,²⁷ the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal."²⁸ This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

The Lamb of God

29 The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"³⁰ This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'³¹ I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel."³² And John testified, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him."³³ I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.'³⁴ And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God."^e

The First Disciples of Jesus

35 The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples,³⁶ and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, "Look, here is the

^a Or *the Father's only Son* ^b Other ancient authorities read *It is an only Son, God, or It is the only Son*

^c *Gk bosom* ^d *Or the Christ* ^e Other ancient authorities read *is God's chosen one*

Lamb of God!”³⁷ The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus.³⁸ When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, “What are you looking for?” They said to him, “Rabbi” (which translated means Teacher), “where are you staying?”³⁹ He said to them, “Come and see.” They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o’clock in the afternoon.⁴⁰ One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother.⁴¹ He first found his brother Simon and said to him, “We have found the Messiah” (which is translated Anointed^a).⁴² He brought Simon^b to Jesus, who looked at him and said, “You are Simon of John. You are to be called Cephas” (which is translated Peter^c).

Jesus Calls Philip and Nathanael

43 The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, “Follow me.”⁴⁴ Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter.⁴⁵ Philip found Nathanael and said to him, “We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.”⁴⁶ Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.”⁴⁷ When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!”⁴⁸ Nathanael asked him, “Where did you get to know me?” Jesus answered, “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.”⁴⁹ Nathanael replied, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!”⁵⁰ Jesus answered, “Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.”⁵¹ And he said to him, “Very truly, I tell you,^d you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”

The Wedding at Cana

2 On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there.² Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding.³ When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, “They have no wine.”⁴ And Jesus said to her, “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.”⁵ His mother said to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.”⁶ Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons.⁷ Jesus said to them, “Fill the jars with water.” And they filled them up to the brim.⁸ He said to them, “Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.” So they



1:39 Come and see: Jesus invites his first disciples to know him through “abiding” with him and witnessing for themselves his active presence in the world. See also 4:29, where the Samaritan woman at the well invites the people in her city to “Come and see.” As a result, they also “abide” with Jesus (4:40) and believe in him.



Jesus’ words to his disciples to “come and see” suggest that one way to witness to your faith is by invitation to experience Jesus for oneself. When you think of sharing your faith, what comes to mind? Why would you encourage someone to come and see Jesus?



2:1-11 the first of his signs: Changing water into wine is the first of seven “signs” that Jesus performs in John’s Gospel, and only John includes this event. The author of the Gospel does not use the term “miracle” but “sign,” because they *point* to some truth about Jesus beyond the event itself.



2:3 the mother of Jesus: Jesus’ mother, Mary, is mentioned only twice in this Gospel: here and at Jesus’ crucifixion (19:25-27). While never named, her presence in John’s Gospel frames Jesus’ ministry.

^a Or Christ ^b Gk him ^c From the word for rock in Aramaic (*kepha*) and Greek (*petra*), respectively
^d Both instances of the Greek word for you in this verse are plural



2:13 Passover of the Jews: John records that Jesus made three annual pilgrimages to Jerusalem for the Passover festival (2:13; 6:4; 11:55). In the other Gospels the adult Jesus travels to Jerusalem only once for Passover, in the last week of his life, after his ministry in Galilee is done. In John, Jesus goes back and forth between Galilee and Jerusalem. The three-year ministry of Jesus is based on the number of times Jesus attended Passover according to John's Gospel.



2:13-22 In the temple... Stop making my Father's house a marketplace! This event, described as Jesus' cleansing of the temple, is included in all four Gospels. In John, it takes place at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, it happens just before he is crucified.



2:19-21 Destroy this temple: This temple is the second temple. The first was destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 B.C.E. The second temple, constructed after the Jews returned to their land from exile in Babylonia in 539 B.C.E., was leveled by the Romans in 70 C.E. and never again rebuilt.



What do you think Jesus means by connecting the temple to his body?



2:23 Passover festival: Jewish festivals have a central role in this Gospel. Passover, an eight-day festival in the months of March–April, commemorates Israel's escape from slavery in Egypt (see Exod 12). The Festival of Booths (John 7:1–8:59), at first a harvest festival held in September–October, commemorates God's care for Israel in the wilderness following the escape from Egypt. The Festival of Dedication (John 10:22–42) observed the rededication of the temple in 165–164 B.C.E., after its desecration by the Seleucid king, Antiochus Epiphanes (see 1 Macc 4:36–61). Celebrated in November–December, it is known today as Hanukkah.



3:1 Nicodemus: Nicodemus isn't mentioned in the other Gospels, but he appears here and two other times in John's Gospel (see 7:50–52; 19:38–42).



3:2 by night: That this encounter takes place "by night" is significant, because in this Gospel night/darkness symbolize unbelief and day/light symbolize belief. Nicodemus's last words to Jesus, "How can these things be?" suggest that he does not yet believe who Jesus is or understand what Jesus is able to offer him.

took it.⁹ When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom¹⁰ and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now."¹¹ Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

12 After this he went down to Capernaum with his mother, his brothers, and his disciples; and they remained there a few days.

Jesus Cleanses the Temple

13 The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.¹⁴ In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables.¹⁵ Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables.¹⁶ He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!"¹⁷ His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me."¹⁸ The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?"¹⁹ Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."²⁰ The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?"²¹ But he was speaking of the temple of his body.²² After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

23 When he was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing.²⁴ But Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people²⁵ and needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone.

Nicodemus Visits Jesus

3 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews.² He came to Jesus^a by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God."³ Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."^b ⁴Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" ⁵Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without

^a Gk *him* ^b Or *born anew*

MARTIN LUTHER

on the Bible



Portrait of Martin Luther by Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472-1553). 1529.

Martin Luther's deep engagement with Scripture caused the Lutheran Reformation. Writing in 1545, a year before his death, Luther recalled how his meditation on Romans 1:17 had affected him. The words of the apostle Paul, "He who through faith is righteous shall live," led Luther to a new understanding of the righteousness or justice of God. Luther remembered that "a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me." He no longer saw God's righteousness as the righteousness by which God judges us but rather as the way God justifies us, that is, puts us in right relationship with God.

Luther then "ran through the Scripture from memory," he later said, and found similar passages about "the work of God, that is, what God does in us, the power of God, with which he makes us strong, the wisdom of God, with which he makes us wise . . ." In his "Reformation breakthrough" he came to recognize that God acted in the gospel to give away his righteousness. That was profoundly different from God acting in the law to demand righteousness from

us. Luther's insight had tremendous implications for how we read the Bible, how we engage with the Bible's message, and how we live as Christians in the world.

☀ How Luther Read the Bible

For Luther, God's two ways of dealing with humans—law and gospel—gave both content and shape to the biblical message and provided the proper lens for reading the Bible. He recognized that truly understanding the biblical text always rested on fundamental principles of Christian teaching or doctrine. But he also understood these principles to arise from the Bible itself rather than from the mind of the reader. Today we may struggle with the idea that certain core Christian beliefs shape the way we read the biblical text. But Luther and other theologians through the centuries recognized that this is true. Luther always tried to make his presuppositions clear, to show his readers that they

originated in the Bible itself, and to show that they truly helped the hearer and reader to understand the biblical message.

☀ Law and Gospel in the Bible

Luther recognized both law and gospel as God's good ways of working in the lives of humans. Sometimes he equated the Old Testament with law and the New Testament with gospel, but more often he recognized that law and gospel were found in both parts of the Bible. God gives us the law to teach us to fear, love, and trust in God above all. The law also helps us to order society, to curb evil, and

to provide a standard of righteousness that guides human life. God gives the law so that we may know what good works please God. Luther recognized that some laws in the Bible were outdated or did not apply in his time and place. But he never dismissed biblical laws lightly and never merely because they were inconvenient or difficult. He taught that the biblical laws were one valid expression of the natural law governing humanity, law that could vary according to time and place. Most importantly for Luther, our failure to live up to God's law also reveals our sin and puts to shame all our assumptions about our own human ability! This function (or "use") of the law drove humans to the promise of the gospel.

The gospel is the gracious promise of God in Christ. It grants forgiveness of sin, life, and salvation to the fallen and unworthy sinner. To read the Bible with the gospel as its heart is to "urge Christ" in each biblical text. "The Scriptures," Luther stated, "must be understood in favor of Christ, not against him. For that reason they must either refer to him or must not be held to be true Scriptures." And again: "If one of them had to be parted with, Christ or the law, the law



Facsimile of a page of the New Testament printed in 1523.

would have to be let go, not Christ." Like Christian interpreters since the earliest era of the church, Luther understood Jesus Christ to be the center of Scripture. Christ was found throughout Scripture, not just in the New Testament. For many prior interpreters Christ was primarily an example to be imitated. But Luther saw Christ first and foremost as gift (gospel) and only secondarily as example (law). For him, this carried very personal implications:

The chief article and foundation of the gospel is that before you take Christ as an example, you . . . recognize him as a gift, as a present that God has given you and that is your own. This means that when you see or hear of Christ doing or suffering something, you do not doubt that Christ himself, with his deeds and suffering, belongs to you . . . This is the great fire of the love of God for us, whereby the heart and conscience become happy, secure, and content . . . Now when you

have Christ as the foundation and chief blessing of your salvation, then the other part follows: that you take him as your example, giving yourself in service to your neighbor just as you see that Christ has given himself for you . . . Therefore make note of this, that Christ as a gift nourishes your faith and makes you a Christian. But Christ as an example exercises your works. These do not make you a Christian. Actually they come forth from you because you have already been made a Christian.³

☀ Is the Bible the Word of God?

Repeatedly, Luther warned against confusing law and gospel, demand and promise, example and gift, when interpreting Scripture: “It is not yet knowledge of the gospel when you know these doctrines and commandments, but only when the voice comes that says, ‘Christ is your own, with his life, teaching, works, death, resurrection, and all that he is, has, does, and can do.’”⁴

So Luther never simply equated the Word of God (both law and gospel) with the written Scriptures. On the contrary, he taught that the word of God is essentially oral in character; it is a “living voice.” In a famous passage from the *Church Postil* of 1522, Luther contrasts Moses as a writer of “doctrine” with Christ, who commanded that his teaching “should be orally continued giving no command that it should be written.” That the New Testament finally took written form is, for Luther, evidence of “a serious decline and a lack of the Spirit which necessity forced upon us....”⁵

Where is the Word then? Luther believed that all humanity, all institutions, including the church, are affected by the hurly-burly of events and infected with sin. God’s Word is mingled with and hidden under the forces that oppress the church at all times and places. God’s Word is realized in the community of faith only because the Word itself acts in us. It forms in us confession of faith, a loving response to divine grace. Although that has been true from Adam to the present day, knowledge and proper understanding of God’s Word are not a continuous, unbroken achievement of the church. Rather, our knowledge of God is best understood as God’s gift, which draws the spontaneous response of the Christian community to the gospel. It is a response created within the hearts of believers by the Holy Spirit’s work in the Word. God, not doctrinal propositions, a pope, or a succession of bishops, provides faithfulness in the church. Therefore, under the guidance of the Spirit, responsible faith requires critical discernment of the text of Scripture, not just listening to the traditions of the church.⁶



Genesis. Fontispiece Depicting the Creation,
From the Luther Bible, 1st edition, 1534.

Lutheran Study Bible

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