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# The Bible as the Word of God

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## What is the Bible?

The term Bible comes from the plural Greek noun, *biblia*, “books.” The Bible is thus a collection of books. Concerning this collection, we affirm that “[t]his 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” (ELCA Constitution, “Confession of Faith” 2/03).

## What is the Word of God?

Early Judaism and Christianity were insistent that the Word of God is the kerygma (proclamation). The Word of God is active, dynamic, and alive, as 2 Peter 1:21 attests: “people moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.” Human beings received the Word of God, sometimes retold it for generations, and then eventually they wrote it down. However, the Word of God cannot be simply equated with the words of the Bible. For at least 2,000 years, there was no Bible, but the Word of God nonetheless was active among God’s people. Because of a series of unique events in the first century of the Common Era, the community of faith gathered their sacred records of God’s activity among them, and began to define their Bible. Yet there was and still remains disagreement as to which books make up the Bible. Therefore, it is very important to remember that the Word of God is alive, kerygmatic (i.e., it is at its heart the proclaiming of God’s good news), and dynamic. It can never be limited to words on a page.

For Christianity, this living, kerygmatic, and dynamic Word of God is preeminently Jesus Christ. John I defines the Word of God in terms of the origins of the universe: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his [the Word’s] glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father . . . For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known.” The Word is nothing less than the presence of God in the world. That Word has come throughout the

Hebrew ages through human beings, and it was made preeminently manifest in the man, Jesus of Nazareth, Grace and Truth Incarnate. Thus, the ELCA constitution’s “Confession of Faith” says “**Jesus Christ is the Word of God incarnate, through whom everything was made and through whose life, death, and resurrection God fashions a new creation**” (2.02.a). First and foremost, the Word of God is Jesus Christ.

We have to ask ourselves how we know about this dynamic Word of God manifest through the ages. Chances are that someone in the Church has told the good news to us. It is through this living, dynamic telling that faith is born and nurtured. As St. Paul says in Romans 10, “How are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?...So, faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ.” Just as the Word of God has been active among God’s people through the centuries, that Word continues to come to us in the proclamation of what God has done, is doing, and will do through Jesus for the salvation of the world. This proclamation is the continuing activity of God’s Spirit among us, and it too is rightly called the Word of God. “**The proclamation of God’s message to us as both Law and Gospel is the Word of God, revealing judgment and mercy through word and deed, beginning with the Word in creation, continuing in the history of Israel, and centering in all its fullness in the person and work of Jesus Christ**” (ELCA constitution, “Confession of Faith” 2.02.b)

## What, then is the Bible in relation to the Word of God?

The people of God need some way to learn about the Word of God through the ages, lest they think the Word of God is limited to their own generation. The people of God also need to have some way to measure or test the Word of God which comes to them in their generation’s teaching and preaching, lest they blindly succumb to the temptation to make the Word of God match the values of the culture around them. Thus, through the ages, the human experience

of the Word of God was written down. In the fullness of time, the people of God, the community of faith, gathered the written records of the experience of the dynamic Word of God, to remind them of the Word's past activity, and to measure and test its future activity.

This collection of the written records of the human experience of the Word of God, the church calls the Canon. "Canon" means "measuring stick." Thus the Canon is that collection of sacred literature by which the community of God measures its proclamation, faith, and life as we receive and experience ever anew the activity of the Word of God among us. Therefore the first paragraph of the Formula of Concord is entitled, "Of the summary, content, rule, and standard" and reads, "We believe, teach, and confess that the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments are the only rule and norm according to which all doctrines and teachers alike must be appraised and judged . . . Other writings of ancient and modern teachers, whatever their names, should not be put on a par with Holy Scripture. Every single one of them should be subordinated to the Scriptures and should be received in no other way and no further than as witnesses to the fashion in which the doctrine of the prophets and apostles was preserved in post-apostolic times." Thus also the ELCA constitution's confession of faith states

*[t]he canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the written Word of God. Inspired by God's Spirit speaking through their authors, they record and announce God's revelation centering in Jesus Christ. Through them God's Spirit speaks to us to create and sustain Christian Faith and fellowship for service in the world (2.02.c).*

Twentieth-century theologian Karl Barth provides a helpful summary. He talks about the three-fold Word of God: Jesus Christ (the preeminent Word), the Bible (the account of this Word), and Preaching (the proclamation of this Word). Luther's description may be more familiar to you: the Bible is the manger in which the Christ is found. Without the manger, you will not find the Christ. But you dare not confuse the Christ with the manger! Likewise, the Christ does you no good unless you pick him up out of the manger. And once you have found the Christ in the manger, how can you not tell others about him?

So the Word of God is preeminently the living Christ. But this Word can only be known through the Canon of Scripture. Once the Word, mediated by Scripture, is experienced by human beings, they become vessels of the Word and mediate it to others.

## The Authority of Scripture

The third defining motto of the Lutheran Reformation, alongside *sola gratia* and *sola fide*, was *sola Scriptura*, i.e., Scripture alone is the norm and rule for the Church's proclamation, faith, and life. This was in contrast to the Roman Catholic tradition of Scripture plus the Tradition of the Church. The Calvinist and other Reformed movements placed more emphasis on the literal, written Word, and every major Reformed confession, e.g., the Second Helvetic Confession and the Westminster Confession, begin with a list of canonical books. The recent doctrine of inerrancy grows out of this Reformed emphasis and became one of the five pillars of Fundamentalism. As Roman Catholicism developed the doctrine of an infallible Pope, Fundamentalism countered with its doctrine of an inerrant Bible.

Lutherans largely avoided this latter controversy by their focus on the living, dynamic Word which is Christ. For Luther, as for Paul, Christ is virtually a synonym for the Gospel. Therefore, in contrast to the Reformed traditions, no Lutheran Confession anywhere defines the canonical books. In fact, since the Word is preeminently Christ or the Gospel, the Lutheran Confessions do not even contain an article on the Bible. This frees Lutherans from biblicism, but leaves somewhat open the question of Canon. Lutherans have followed Luther's lead (and that of Jerome before him) of studying and valuing the Apocrypha (i.e. those Jewish writings that are not a part of the Hebrew canon but have been accepted as scripture by a large part of the church, books such as Judith and Sirach) for what it may teach us and for its record of the Word's activity among God's people in the intertestamental period, but ascribing it less authority than the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament.

## Hermeneutics (Interpretation)

The Reformation spawned a renaissance of historical and linguistic studies. It was no longer possible to read the Bible as if it had been written in medieval Europe; people began asking about the original, historical context for these writings. It was no longer possible to be content with reading Latin summaries of the Bible dispensed from Rome. Under the Reformation cry of "*sola Scriptura*," people wanted to study the texts of the Bible in the original Hebrew and Greek. Only in this way could they be sure they were reading Scripture and not ecclesiastical dogma. Encouraged by the Lutheran principle of the priesthood of all believers, people wanted to encounter and interpret Scripture firsthand.

But the concept of *sola Scriptura* raises a hermeneutical problem. The problem is that because the Word of God

is always an incarnate word, which works in and through the human realities of life, throughout the centuries the biblical writings had addressed many different questions in many different contexts and in many different ways. Thus we are sometimes faced with a troubling diversity within the canon of the Bible, especially if we are looking for quick and simple answers. The Bible does not give us simple answers or abstract teachings, but instead gives us the witness of a multitude of God's people, expressing how God has worked in many particular times, places, and settings. How shall such a collection of witnesses speak with authority for us today?

Luther solved the problem by making the Gospel paramount. Whatever was inconsistent with the Gospel, the good news of God present throughout the Hebrew Bible but revealed most clearly in Jesus Christ, was of secondary importance. This led Luther to distinguish critically among the books of the Bible. For example, he was not particularly fond of Esther in the Hebrew Bible, and he relegated Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation to the end of the New Testament, because, as he said, in those books he "did not find Christ," by which he meant the Gospel.

A word of caution is appropriate here. The Lutheran position is not that the Bible "contains the Word of God," as is sometimes assumed. The Bible, Old and New Testaments, is the written expression of the Word of God. The Bible is the Word of God. This Word of God comprises both Law and Gospel. The Lutheran Confessions argue that every sentence of Scripture is either Law, a word of demand or judgement, or Gospel, a word of freedom or forgiveness. Both are the Word of God. Both are to be read, studied, preached, and taken seriously. Both are found in the Hebrew Bible and in the New Testament. But the Christ event proves that God's ultimate word is Gospel. For example, in Exodus 20:13 we read the Law, "Thou shalt not kill." But it is preceded and given its proper context by the Gospel in Exodus 20:2, "I am the Lord your God who has delivered you from your bondage." In Luke, Jesus counsels with the Law, "Sell all you have, and give it to the poor." At which point the disciples object, "Lord, then who can be saved?" To which Jesus replies with the Gospel, "What is humanly impossible is possible with God." Examples could be enumerated *ad infinitum*. All Scripture is either Law or Gospel. The Gospel is the final word, but it is not the only word.

Yet the Gospel always has the last word and must even criticize, or we might say complete, some Law portions of Scripture. Take the example of slavery. The Hebrew Bible allows it as a worldly institution, though tempering it with

certain restrictions and granting copious rights to slaves — a radical concept in the ancient world. Jesus emphasizes the equality of all people, which implicitly condemns the enslaving of any person. Though Paul would send the slave Onesimus back to his owner Philemon, Paul does so in a way that makes clear Philemon cannot treat Onesimus simply as a returned slave; Onesimus must be received as a beloved brother (vs. 16), and Paul expects Philemon to do even more than what Paul has explicitly instructed (vs. 21). Eventually, the Gospel Word of God would lead the Church to condemn slavery as sinful and attempt to erase it from the world. One could repeat this example with respect to the role of women; despite some instructions for women to be silent in church in *1 Timothy 2*, our church has heard a more powerful Word of Gospel in Galatians 3, which says that because of our baptism into Christ there is no more "male and female."

It is to hear this Word — Law and Gospel, but especially the Gospel — that the church gathers around Scripture to read and to study and to listen again to the Word of God. Because the Word of God is living and active, this listening activity of the church will never be finished. We are called back again and again to an encounter with the written Word of God, bringing our ever-changing struggles and joys, challenges and questions into conversation with that foundational witness. We train our people, and especially our pastors and teachers, to bring to this task the best tools and methods available for understanding the texts. We attempt to hear the texts first of all within their own historical setting by exploring aspects of ancient culture and politics and religion, as well as the historical development of these books. We do this historical work, however, in order that we might hear these texts speak the Word of God more clearly for us today; and we work always under the hope and conviction that in this serious and joyful work of biblical interpretation, God continues to speak God's Word to the world.