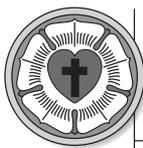




**THE BIBLE AS THE WORD OF GOD
STATEMENT & STUDY GUIDE**
NALC COMMISSION ON THEOLOGY & DOCTRINE



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NALC

North American Lutheran Church

The Bible as the Word of God: Statement & Study Guide

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THE BIBLE AS THE WORD OF GOD STATEMENT

WHERE DOES THE BIBLE COME FROM?

The Bible is a gift to the Church from the Triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The “good pleasure” (cf. Ephesians 1:9-10 NIV) of the Triune God is to free His fallen human creatures from the wrong and corruption of sin, the tyranny of the devil and the threat of death, draw them into communion with Himself and, in the end, fill the created universe with His glory. Coming from God, the Bible not only makes known this holy, loving purpose, it is also a means by which God achieves His purpose.

1. The Bible comes to the Church from Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen Son of God, by way of His apostles.

Risen from the dead, Christ appeared to the witnesses whom He had chosen, taught them the Gospel and sent them as His ambassadors to announce His victory to all nations.

These messengers or “apostles” have a unique role in God’s saving work. They were not just one group of teachers or preachers among others. Christ spoke in them (cf. 2 Corinthians 13:3). They were eyewitnesses of the Lord (1 Corinthians 2). The message they proclaimed was not a human message but the Word of God (1 Thessalonians 2:13).

Jesus opened the minds of the apostles to understand Israel’s Scriptures as witness to Himself (Luke 24:44-48). The apostles delivered those Scriptures to the Church, bound up with the proclamation of Jesus crucified and risen. “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve” (1 Corinthians 15:3-5 ESV). For the apostles, the “Scriptures” were the Scriptures of Israel, to which they turned to explain and expound God’s saving action in Jesus Christ.

The Scriptures of Israel received the name “Old Testament” when they were delivered to the Church by the apostles, joined with the proclamation of Christ. “Old” in this case does

not mean outmoded or obsolete, but oriented to something that came afterwards, the new thing God did in Christ.

The New Testament is a collection of writings which document and expound the apostolic proclamation of Christ. These writings were in most cases composed with a view to the worshiping assembly of the Church in which they were read along with the Old Testament. In time, they were recognized as a second body of “Holy Scriptures,” given to the Church not only to resist distortion or forgetfulness of the apostolic message, but also to bless us with a rich, many-sided exposition of the mystery of Christ.

The New Testament does not replace the Old Testament. As Luther says, the New Testament writings point us back to the Old Testament to understand Christ. “They themselves want to be our guides, to direct us to the writings of the prophets and Moses so that we might read and see for ourselves how Christ is wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in the manger, that is, how Christ is comprehended in the writings of the prophets” (“A Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels,” *Luther’s Works* 35, 112).

Jesus Christ Himself is therefore the focal point and target of both the Old and the New Testaments. Each of them makes Him known in its own irreplaceable way.

2. The Bible comes to us from the Holy Spirit, poured out by the risen Christ from the Father.

The saving mission of the Holy Spirit is to bear witness to the crucified and risen Christ, gathering and sanctifying the Church through Word and Sacrament. The Spirit was promised and poured out on the apostles, intertwining His mission with their mission and with the mission of the Church which receives and hands on the apostolic gospel.

According to St. Paul, the Gospel of Christ is a “secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory ‘what no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined’” (1 Corinthians 2:7, 9 *ESV*). The apostles, however, were given God’s own Spirit, so “that we might understand the things freely given us by God” (2:12). It is the Spirit who taught the apostles how to speak of Christ in fitting language: “we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit” (2:13).

Even before Christ came in the flesh, the Spirit was at work in Israel to prepare the way for Him. “For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:21 *ESV*). The apostles did not have to rely on human reason and speculation to interpret and proclaim Christ and His work of salvation. The Holy Spirit had already prepared a body of sacred writings which testify to Christ in many ways.

It is because of the gift of “words taught by the Spirit” that St. Paul is certain that the word which the apostles preached is not the word of human beings, but the Word of God, living and active (1 Thessalonians 2:13 *ESV*).

This is also why there is such concern, as the apostles were coming to the end of their lives, that the Church should remember and follow “the pattern of the sound words” (2 Timothy 1:13 *ESV*) which it had heard from the apostles.

The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the Spirit’s provision of a “pattern of sound words” to guide and instruct the Church as it continues the apostolic mission “to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20 *ESV*). The Scriptures are the bond between our witness and the witness of the Spirit. Insofar as our words and our minds are formed by the Spirit-taught words of Scripture, we too may speak the Word of God and share in “the mind of Christ” (1 Corinthians 2:16 *ESV*).

Because Scripture is “inspired” or “breathed out by God,” it is not only a normative “pattern” but also the lively instrument of the Spirit’s work of justifying and sanctifying the Church and its members. Scripture is thus “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16 *ESV*).

3. The Bible is the Word of God the Father which comes to us inseparably from His gift of His Son, Jesus Christ.

From all eternity, the Word was with God and the Word was God (John 1:1), one in Being with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Our Lord Jesus Christ is God’s eternal Word, His only Son, who “became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14 *ESV*) for our salvation. The Word made flesh is the great gift of the Father to His lost human creatures: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him

should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16 ESV).

The Father does not send His Son and Word anonymously; we are meant to behold His glory (John 1:14). Therefore, the Word made flesh comes from the Father announced and accompanied by words, witness and testimony. Christ the Word and the words which make Him known are inseparable from one another. They come together from God the Father in the power of the Spirit for our salvation.

The Bible is therefore the Word of God written. The Bible makes known the gift of the Word of God incarnate, so that the world may believe in Him and have eternal life. The Bible does this by forming and empowering the Word of God proclaimed in preaching and sacrament, and in the witness, thanksgiving and praise of all believers. The Word of God thus comes to us in the unity of the Word incarnate, the Word written and the Word proclaimed.

When we confess that the Bible is the Word of God, we do not isolate it from the eternal Word incarnate, to whom it testifies, or from the Word of God proclaimed, which it generates and governs as the instrument of the Spirit. Rather, we confess that, in providing the Church with the Bible, God has truly drawn near to us and given His Word an enduring presence in our midst.

The Bible is thus the Word of the Father in heaven to His children. We have a book of Holy Scriptures because the Father loves us and wants the great gift of His Son to be preached, heard and known for our salvation. In the Bible we hear the voice of our Father in heaven, inviting, teaching, comforting, correcting and encouraging, all to bring us to eternal life by faith in His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. When we read or hear Scripture, or preaching and teaching in accord with Scripture, the mercy and love of God the Father are reaching out to us.

4. The Bible comes to us from a human history governed and directed towards Christ by the providence of God.

The Bible as the Word of God written is also a human, historical book, its texts composed at various times and places in several different human languages, by human writers with their own gifts and limitations who were addressing a variety of particular situations.

To say that the Bible comes to us from history is not to say that it comes from a “secular” realm which must be explained without reference to God. All human history is embraced by God’s “plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him” (Ephesians 1:10 *ESV*).

Throughout the long history of the Bible’s origination, God had Christ in view and His Spirit worked with human authors to produce texts which not only spoke to their own times but looked in different ways towards Jesus Christ and the “fullness of time.”

The Holy Spirit worked with the human authors of Scripture, weaving their purposes into His own, so that their human words bear witness to Christ in ways that reveal not only their own minds but the mind of God who was intent on Christ from the beginning.

God rules over His creatures without suppressing or cancelling the powers He has given them. In the same way, nothing human or historical is suppressed or overridden in the Spirit’s preparation of the texts of Scripture. On the contrary, the Spirit has incorporated into His own testimony the characteristics of the biblical languages, the outlook and style of the human authors and a wide range of literary genres and techniques.

In all their diversity, the various biblical writings were intended all along by the Spirit to come together in a complex unity which speaks of Christ. The significance a biblical writing had in its context of origin is only part of its meaning; its full significance only comes to light when it is united with the other scriptural texts to make Christ known. This is not an artificial unity imposed by interpreters, but a unity for which the texts were designed by the Spirit, which faithful interpretation seeks hopefully to discover.

For several centuries, the Church has wrestled with the so-called “historical-critical method,” the study of the Bible with the tools of modern historical research. Historical-critical interpretation has challenged traditional assumptions about the Bible, and thus provoked opposition and conflict.

Sometimes this has happened because traditional Christians have become defensive too quickly. At other times, however, it has been claimed that *only* historical research yields valid

understanding of the Scriptures, disqualifying the biblical interpretation of the church fathers and the Reformers, who formulated the central doctrines of the Church.

The Church should have no hesitation about rejecting the claim that *only* historical study gives us access to Scripture's "real meaning." The Church has its own way of reading the Bible, with its own rationale and integrity, as the gift and instrument of the Triune God.

This does not prevent us from acknowledging the human, historical character of the biblical writings. Historical study of the Bible can often help us understand the biblical writings more clearly and concretely, but we receive and evaluate the findings of historical research from the perspective of the apostolic faith.

WHAT KIND OF BOOK IS THE BIBLE?

1. The Bible is a book of *Holy Scriptures*.

In its original meaning, "holy" means "set apart for God and His service." The biblical writings have been brought together and "set apart" by the Spirit from all other human words in order to play a singular role in God's work of salvation.

The Bible is holy because it sets forth Christ, the Word of the Father, in the power of the Spirit, not as one voice among many, but as the definitive, constant and lifegiving witness to the ways and work of God through every generation. Scripture is holy because it has been fashioned for and continually plays this role in the power of the Spirit.

As a written text, as Holy Scripture, the Bible is a stable, constant presence, which accompanies the Church on its pilgrimage, just as the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire accompanied Israel through the wilderness.

At the same time, as Holy Scripture, the Bible is never simply the "property" of the Church, a resource to be used for human purposes. The Bible is a holy presence in the Church through which God is continually speaking in our midst.

Neither the whole Church nor any believer ever gets beyond the need "for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training" by the Holy Spirit through the written Word of God (2 Timothy 3:16 *ESV*).

2. The Bible is both clear and deep, straightforward and complex, because it presents us with Jesus Christ “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Colossians 2:3 *ESV*).

If the Bible is read as it came to the Church from Christ’s apostles, as testimony to Christ, then it is clear and straightforward, even if there are themes and passages we do not understand.

- The Bible points steadily to Jesus Christ, Son of God and Son of Mary, crucified, risen and exalted, as the only Redeemer and Deliverer in whom we may put our trust.
- The Bible plainly identifies the God who sent Jesus as the God of Israel, the Creator of heaven and earth.
- The Bible teaches us God’s commandments and shows us that we are sinners.
- The Bible attests the outpouring of the Spirit of God and the gathering of the Church as the rescued people who have forgiveness and life in Christ.
- The Bible announces that by sending His Son and pouring out His Spirit, God has had mercy on sinners, so that we may trust in His grace alone for salvation.
- The Bible presents us with Christ’s institution of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper and the promises which He attached to them.
- The Bible calls us to hope for Christ’s coming in power and glory to do away with evil, raise the dead and grant eternal life to those who put their trust in Him.

Scripture is deep and complex for the same reason that it is clear and straightforward: because it testifies to Jesus Christ, the image of the invisible God, in whom “all the fullness of God” is pleased to dwell (Colossians 1:15, 19 *ESV*). Christ is the center and goal of all the ways of God, the one in whom the whole creation finds its meaning. Because the Scriptures present us with Christ clearly and truthfully, they present Him as *inexhaustible*, richer in significance than we can ever fully grasp.

We should not therefore be embarrassed or impatient with the complexity and diversity of the Scriptures, which are essential to its witness to the inexhaustible Christ. As

Martin Luther wrote, Scripture is “an infinite wisdom, which could not be exhausted were we to spend our whole lives in learning the Scriptures” (“Lectures on the Psalms of Degrees,” *Weimarer Ausgabe* 40/III, 11).

To recognize that Scripture is complex and diverse does not imply that it has no unity, or that it dissolves into chaos when we read it. It only implies that the one Christ is greater than any single strand of testimony can capture.

3. The Bible is the powerful Word of God which both kills and makes alive, ruthlessly exposing our sin and at the same time proclaiming Christ as our Savior.

In its clarity and complexity, Scripture speaks in two very different ways about the will of God. It presents us with God’s *commandments*, which declare how He wants us to be and act, but also with God’s *promise*, the promise He has made in Jesus Christ.

Because we are sinners, the Word which tells us God’s will does not lead to the accomplishment of God’s will. The Law of God disciplines and restrains sin, but it cannot overcome sin. When the Law is truly heard, it exposes the corruption of our hearts, our inability to fear and love God (*Augsburg Confession*, Article II), but offers no way forward. Life and hope come only through another Word, the Gospel which announces that in Jesus Christ, God has overcome sin and death for us and reconciled the world to Himself.

Law and Gospel, commandment and promise, interact with one another throughout Scripture in many and various ways. The Old Testament presents us with God’s Law and His judgment, but it also promises salvation in Christ. The New Testament proclaims Christ as the only Savior, but Christ Himself upholds and teaches God’s commandments.

The commandments teach us the *good will* of the Creator for His creatures. Even as they expose our sinfulness, they show us what a good human life would be. The Gospel tells us how God has *accomplished* His good will for us in Christ despite and against our sin. By richly setting forth God’s will and promising reconciliation and new life in Christ, calling sinners to faith and repentance on the way of discipleship

in the fellowship of the Church, the Bible is a lamp for our feet and a light on our path (cf. Psalm 119:105). Though God's Law is not unknown to any human being, the Church relies on Scripture to form the character and conscience of believers and to guide moral decision-making.

Christ is made known in Scripture by both the Law and the Gospel in their interaction with one another.

The Law discloses the situation into which Christ has come bringing salvation. The Gospel discloses how Christ has fulfilled the Law and borne its condemnation for us.

When the Law is separated from the Gospel, the will of God remains unfulfilled and sinful human beings are left without hope. When the Gospel is separated from the Law, it will not be clear that Christ is the Savior who has come to fulfill the Law and rescue *lost* human creatures from destruction.

4. In its holiness, in its clarity and complexity, as Law and Gospel, the Bible baffles human wisdom and challenges our habits of understanding.

According to St. Paul, because human beings did not honor God or give thanks to Him, "they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools" (Romans 1:21-22 *ESV*). Since the Fall, "human wisdom," habitual human ways of making sense of the world and finding our way through life, are typically out of joint with reality and not to be trusted. No matter how many "facts" and "explanations" we pile up, the "foolish heart" interprets them according to its own skewed vision.

When God acts to save human creatures from sin, He necessarily contradicts and offends this world's wisdom. God promised, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise" (1 Corinthians 1:18-20 *ESV*; cf. Isaiah 29:14), and He has fulfilled His promise in Christ:

For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and

Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:21-24 ESV).

Because the Bible is the Word of this saving God, because it is ordered from beginning to end towards God's "foolishness" in Christ, the Bible is at odds with human wisdom.

The Reformers, especially Martin Luther, warned continually against imposing on the Bible some framework or principle which we bring with us to Scripture, whether from deep human reflection or even from what we take to be "common sense." When Scripture is thus subjected to human wisdom, it will always seem to be saying unreasonable things which make no sense and to need adjustment to fit with our assumptions about reality.

Through the hearing, reading and interpreting of Scripture, God overcomes our futile wisdom for our salvation. It is we who must be "adjusted" to Scripture rather than the other way around. As Scripture is read in faith as the Word of God written, the Holy Spirit continually disturbs our "conformity to this world" so that we may be "transformed by the renewal of our mind" (cf. Romans 12:2 ESV).

5. The Bible is a transforming book through which God calls us to follow Christ and guides us on the way of discipleship.

By presenting Christ to us, the Word of God equips us to be His disciples. After the resurrection, disciples are those who are united with Christ in His body the Church through Baptism (Matthew 28:19-20), abide in Him, draw life from Him through Word and Sacrament, trust Him, learn from Him, and bear good fruit which glorifies His Father (cf. John 15:1-8).

Discipleship at its heart is not preoccupation with good works and activities, but preoccupation with Jesus Christ, as Mary of Bethany "sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching" (Luke 10:39 ESV). The inexhaustibly rich testimony to Christ in Holy Scripture feeds and sustains such preoccupation.

As Martin Luther saw, Christ is first of all a "gift and present" from God, the one who saves us ("Brief Instruction," *Luther's Works* 35, 119). But those who receive Him as gift may and must also go on to learn from His teaching and example. We are not commanded to imitate the outward circumstances of Christ's life, but we are invited to share His "mind" (1 Corinthians 2:16;

Philippians 2:5ff.). This “mind” or outlook of Christ is made known not only in the four Gospels but by the whole scriptural witness. By way of the Bible, we may amidst all the chances and changes of life “[look] to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith” (Hebrews 12:2 *ESV*).

6. The Bible is a truthful, reliable book that will not lead us into error and falsehood, nor does it contain error or falsehood.

Scripture’s truthfulness is primarily a truthfulness about God and His Christ. In the Bible, we are presented with “the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom [he has] sent” (John 17:3 *NIV*).

In speaking about God and Christ, the Bible also speaks of God’s plan as it has been carried out in history. Here too, the Bible speaks truly and reliably.

However, there is more than one way in which language can communicate truth. We should not approach the Bible with our own preconceived ideas of what it must be like if it is truthful. We must take our lead from the texts themselves and respect their actual character.

Much harm has been done in recent centuries by the imposition on the Bible of standards of truth derived from modern science and modern historical research. Whether done by “conservatives” or “liberals,” this is simply another way of subjecting Scripture to human reason.

The Holy Spirit has incorporated a wide range of literary forms into the written Word of God. Different kinds of writing communicate truth in different ways. A psalm or a prophecy of Christ is true in a different way from the Gospel accounts of His crucifixion.

Furthermore, in order to speak understandably, the Holy Spirit permitted the writers of the biblical text to write in ways familiar to them, so long as this did not defeat His purpose. For example, the Bible does not recount historical events in the manner of modern historians, but in ways typical of the ancient world.

Faith in the reliability of Scripture rests on faith in the Triune God, not on apologetic arguments of human reason. Because God has acted to save us, and because He wants His salvation to be preached, believed and celebrated, we are confident that

the Holy Spirit has provided us with trustworthy testimony to His purpose and His saving deeds.

HOW MAY WE UNDERSTAND THE BIBLE?

1. Approach the Bible with Hopeful Prayer

God gave us the Bible because He intends for His Word to be heard and believed. We may therefore approach the Bible hopefully, confident that God wants us to understand so that we may know Christ and find eternal life. At the same time, we cannot expect to understand Scripture if we approach it casually or carelessly. If the Bible is the written Word of God, then it is no light thing to engage with it.

Our greatest difficulty in understanding the Bible is our own “wisdom.” Even when we know better, we want Scripture to make sense on our terms and support us in our own plans and projects. Acknowledging Scripture as the Word of God written, however, allows us to read in the hope that, by the Spirit’s power, it will break through such obstacles and transform us by the renewing of our minds (Romans 12:2).

We must therefore, first of all, come to Holy Scripture with prayer. Martin Luther wrote:

[In the first place] you should know that the Holy Scriptures constitute a book which turns the wisdom of all other books into foolishness, because not one teaches about eternal life except this one alone. Therefore you should straightway despair of your reason and understanding... But kneel down in your little room and pray to God with real humility and earnestness, that he through his dear Son may give you his Holy Spirit, who will enlighten you, lead you, and give you understanding (“Preface to the Wittenberg Edition of Luther’s German Writings,” *Luther’s Works* 34, 283-284).

2. Be Guided By the “Rule of Faith” in Creed and Catechism

What the early Church called the “rule of faith” was the memory of the Gospel delivered by the apostles, the message of Christ which was to be interpreted in accordance with the Old Testament Scriptures.

By the end of the second century, the rule was known in a three-part form that corresponds to our creeds. The summary of the Gospel (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:1ff) was woven together with the baptismal confession of “the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19 ESV). Eventually the rule of faith was practically identified with the Baptismal Creed.

The rule is not an addition to the Bible, or a “Church tradition” that stands alongside or over the Bible. It is a reminder that Scripture comes to the Church for the sake of the apostolic mission to proclaim Christ crucified and risen and make disciples through Baptism into the Triune Name.

In this way, the rule orients our reading of the Old and the New Testaments. It tells us what this whole complex body of words is all about in the purpose of God. We read Scripture to learn about the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit and their works, centered in the incarnation, death, resurrection and ascension of the Son of God.

In the Lutheran church, the two Catechisms have served as an expanded rule of faith. The Catechisms were not intended to stand alone, but to provide Christians with a common starting point and framework for a lifelong exploration of Scripture.

It is not uncommon today for people who sincerely honor the Bible to be confused about its point and purpose. People then look in Scripture for answers and advice about all sorts of secular matters. The rule of faith in creed and catechism aligns our reading with God’s purpose in giving us His Word in written form, as the Word of the Father which bears witness in the power of the Spirit to His eternal Word made flesh for the salvation of the world.

3. Read Scripture in the Fellowship of the Church

The Reformers rightly insisted that the Bible is a gift to every Christian. However, a Christian is not an isolated individual but a member of the Body of Christ, brought into the communion of the Church by the very Baptism which bestows salvation in Christ.

Reading Scripture in the fellowship of the Church means reading as a member of a worshiping assembly in which the Bible is publicly and regularly expounded through preaching,

in “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” (Colossians 3:16 *ESV*) and in public prayer which responds to Scripture. Unfortunately, not everything we hear in the Church is of equal value, but we read Scripture best when we constantly listen to, learn from and interact with the public exposition of Scripture in the worship of the Church.

The Church is also a communion of diverse spiritual gifts in which the Spirit blesses us through one another. True understanding of the Scriptures comes as Christian people listen to Scripture together, “teaching and admonishing one another” (Colossians 3:16 *ESV*), each giving and receiving insight as the Spirit provides.

The fellowship of the Church extends beyond any one location in space or time. To be a member of the Church is to be united in “one body and one Spirit” with all those of every time and place who have been “called to one hope” by the one Gospel (Ephesians 4:4 *ESV*). We best understand the Bible as we listen, insofar as we are able, to fellow Christians who are very different from us, who speak to us from places, circumstances, or ages other than our own.

In the NALC, the Lutheran Confessions represent the corporate judgment of our Church about the right interpretation of Scripture. These documents do not add to Scripture or replace it. They are the fruit of the Church’s struggle to grasp the sense and coherence of Scripture amidst the controversies of the ancient Church and the Reformation. The confessions are thus guidance into the Bible received from those who have explored and mapped its territory before us. Our Church expects its pastors and teachers to know and follow the confessions precisely so that their preaching and teaching may be in tune with Scripture.

4. Interpret Scripture by Scripture

By the Spirit’s design, the Bible is a complex interrelated whole, which bears witness to Christ as a whole. Each part has a role to play, but no part is independent of the others. To understand Scripture, it is necessary to pay close attention to each part, but also to situate each in relation to other parts, especially those which bear on the same subjects.

Interpreting Scripture by Scripture helps to prevent us from imposing our own preconceptions on the Bible. Instead of

absorbing a passage of Scripture into the framework of our ideas or our needs, we seek to discover the design of the Spirit by tracing connections across the breadth of the Scriptures. Instead of sitting in judgment on strange or unpleasant texts, we seek to discern their function within the totality of Scripture.

It is especially important in this regard to interpret the New Testament in terms of the Old Testament. As Martin Luther wrote, “there is not one word of the New Testament which does not look back to the Old” (“Sermon on John 1:1-14,” *Church Postil*).

Within the complex whole of Scripture, there are passages which declare the central things especially plainly. Such especially clear and direct passages should guide our interpretation of more difficult passages.

To interpret Scripture by Scripture, it is necessary to have a broad familiarity with the whole of Scripture. There is no way to acquire this except by persistent hearing and reading across the length and breadth of the Bible.

5. Pay Attention to the Words

God has mercifully chosen to give us His Word in written form. “Writings” are made up of words, artfully arranged in units of various length and type to communicate meaning. Furthermore, words always come in various languages, each of which works somewhat differently than any other.

The Bible was written in Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic words. These words are employed in a wide variety of literary forms, written in various styles, drawing on most of the diverse resources of human language. If we believe that the words of Scripture are “taught by the Spirit” (1 Corinthians 2:13 *ESV*), then we have reason to attend closely to those words in their concreteness and particularity.

Paying attention to the words involves:

- Giving preference to translations which attempt to stay close to the words of the original text, even though they may be somewhat harder to read;
- Learning what we can about the biblical languages and their distinctive characteristics;

- Reading texts with reference to their literary contexts;
- Bringing to bear in our reading everything we can learn about language and literature; and
- Accustoming ourselves to reading slowly, closely and observantly.

This is not to say that it is useless to read the Bible without specialized expertise. Anyone who (1) reads with a view to Christ, guided by the rule of faith, (2) gets to know the whole Bible well, and (3) reads thoughtfully and attentively, will be formed, fed and instructed by the reading of Holy Scripture.

WHAT IS THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE IN THE CHURCH?

According to the Formula of Concord, Scripture is the “pure, clear fountain of Israel, which is the only true guiding principle by which all teachers and teachings are to be judged and evaluated” (*Book of Concord*, Kolb-Wengert translation, 527). Two distinct but interrelated roles are assigned to Scripture by this confessional statement.

1. Scripture is the “pure, clear fountain of Israel.”

As the Word of God written, which accompanies the Church through the ages, Scripture is the “fountain” from which the Church continually draws the Water of Life. Water both nourishes and cleanses. It quenches thirst and washes away grime. It is from the Scriptures that we learn the Gospel, the life-giving message of Christ, and it is by engaging Scripture that the mind of the Church is cleansed of illusions and falsehoods.

There is no other way of “acknowledging” a fountain besides drawing water from it. We only acknowledge Scripture as the “fountain of Israel” by continually hearing, reading, preaching, teaching, meditating and pondering it. The primary claim of Scripture on the Church is its claim on our constant attention.

If our churches are to be governed by the Word of God, they must be communities in which the Bible is known and loved, read and taught, studied and prayed. Only a people formed by Scripture can be ruled and ordered by Scripture.

2. The Bible is the “only true guiding principle by which all teachers and teachings are to be judged.”

This description addresses the Bible’s role when choices must be made or when controversy breaks out in the Church. In such circumstances, the Church turns with prayer to Scripture to seek guidance and resolution.

To respect this form of the Bible’s authority, the Church must engage in a particular dialogue and argument. We deliberately present our views by expounding the Scriptures. We turn our debates into discussions of Scripture. We make the case for our position by attempting to show how it fits with Scripture.

This does not mean that the confessions, church doctrine and great teachers like Luther and the church fathers have no role in controversy. But confession and doctrine themselves have the function of bringing out the sense of Scripture. Likewise, we revere great teachers because they have proven to be faithful and insightful guides to Scripture.

A church fellowship which takes Scripture seriously as “the only true guiding principle” must provide occasions and spaces in its life for extended scriptural engagement. Seeking the guidance and judgment of the Scriptures together takes time and patience. Perceptions and outlooks are often only slowly conformed to the Scriptures through extended study, conversation and reflection.

Only a Church which has drunk deeply of Scripture as the “pure, clear fountain of Israel” will be ready to receive the guidance and judgment of Scripture in times of conflict and confusion. If Scripture has not already permeated and ordered the mind of the fellowship, people will seek a “guiding principle” elsewhere, in emotion and opinion, driven by the social forces which mold emotion and opinion.

Conducting contentions and controversies in this fashion, seeking the guidance and judgment of Scripture, the Church entrusts its life to the Spirit of God. We cannot resolve serious disagreements or find our way amidst confusion at will, by decree. But we trust that through patient, persistent engagement of Scripture, the Spirit will lead us into the truth (cf. John 16:13-15).

3. Only Scripture (*sola Scriptura*) can play these roles of “fountain” and “guiding principle” in the Church.

The Reformation slogan *sola Scriptura* (“Scripture alone”) does not mean that we should interpret Scripture in isolation from the apostolic mission, the rule of faith and the fellowship of the Church, or that creeds, confessions, doctrines, liturgies, traditions and faithful teachers have no value in guiding our reading of Scripture. *Sola Scriptura* does not call for a “solitary” Scripture, artificially separated from its natural habitat.

Sola Scriptura does mean that only Scripture is the source from which the Church draws the Living Water of the Gospel which enlivens the Church’s teaching and worship.

Only Scripture therefore gives the Church the authority to call its preaching and teaching “the Word of God.” Only from Scripture does the Church know and announce the will of God for the salvation of the world. Only from Scripture does the Church know and proclaim Jesus Christ as the only Savior.

The Church therefore may not regard historical developments, cultural forces, or claims to wisdom and enlightenment as authorities with the right to shape its message along with Scripture. The Church makes sense of all such things and evaluates them on the basis of Scripture. *Only Scripture* at once constrains and empowers the witness and worship and teaching of the Church.

It is not wrong to want to reduce unnecessary dissonance between our interpretation of Scripture and what seem to be legitimate discoveries and conclusions of human reason and conscience (which are damaged but not obliterated in fallen humankind). But this cannot be done either by subordinating Scripture to another authority or by suppressing or distorting the clear testimony of Scripture.

Only on the basis of Scripture, moreover, can the Church bind or loose the conscience of believers. The Church and its teachers may not say that God requires what Scripture does not require, nor may they encourage or approve what is not in harmony with Scripture. Likewise, only based on Scripture may the Church promise reconciliation with God and eternal life. As Martin Luther wrote,

The Church also has no power to establish new divine promises of grace, as some prate, who hold that whatever is decreed by the church is of no less authority than what is decreed by God, since the church is under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. For the church was born by the word of promise through faith... That is to say, it is the promises of God that make the church, not the church that makes the promises of God. For the Word of God is incomparably superior to the church, and in this Word the church, being a creature, has nothing to decree, ordain, or make, but [is] only to be decreed, ordained and made (“The Babylonian Captivity of the Church,” *Luther’s Works* 36, 107).

Therefore, rules, customs and practices of the Church which are neither contrary to Scripture nor imposed by Scripture may have a claim on our respect as we “make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3 NIV). But, they may not be presented as though they were commanded by God.

Likewise, good works may be the will of God, and various practices of devotion and service may be worthwhile spiritual disciplines or appropriate expressions of faith. But the Church has no authority to promise that such works and practices will make people acceptable to God or enable them to gain eternal life. According to Scripture, reconciliation and eternal life are promised only to faith in Jesus Christ as He is proclaimed in the Gospel.

CONCLUSION

The Church of God in this present age is not exempt from conflict, confusion and temptation. The way of discipleship is a narrow way, and from the time of the apostles it has been known that we must enter the kingdom of God “through many tribulations” (Acts 14:22 ESV). Amidst these trials and troubles, however, the promise endures: “The word of our God will stand forever” (Isaiah 40:8 ESV).

This utterly reliable and unshakeable Word of God is not hidden from us. By God’s merciful gift, by the work of His Spirit, the Word of God abides in our midst in stable, written form. God’s powerful and life-giving Word accompanies us on our pilgrimage, and through it His Holy Spirit continually stirs up faithful witness and faithful worship. Making Christ known, the Bible makes known God’s commandments and His promises, His judgments and His

THE BIBLE AS THE WORD OF GOD – STATEMENT

mercies. Instructed by Scripture, we are equipped to be Christ's witnesses in the world. From the Bible, we begin to appreciate the glory and goodness of the Lord, so that we may worship Him. In this way, through the Scriptures, the Holy Spirit fulfills the promise of Christ: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12 ESV).

Thanks be to God!

THE BIBLE AS THE WORD OF GOD STUDY GUIDE

INTRODUCTION

This study guide has been written in great admiration for the teaching statement now before you, “The Bible as the Word of God.” That statement was prepared by the Commission on Theology and Doctrine of the North American Lutheran Church (NALC). It is a strong blessing for the NALC that it should have such a substantial, traditional and glorious doctrine of the Bible. We can hope and pray that other parts of the Lutheran church and the ecumenical Church around the world will use and profit from this teaching statement.

The study guide proceeds, section by section, by way of an introductory comment and then some possible discussion questions.

Even the title of this teaching statement is worthy of admiration and comment, and so we begin there.

TITLE: “THE BIBLE AS THE WORD OF GOD”

This title invites us to think nothing small-minded when it comes to the Bible. The Bible can be considered in many ways: as a source for historical and archaeological information, as collections of beautiful poetry and stories, as the writings of fallible people limited by their historical circumstances, and so on. So the Bible can be conceived in these ways, and there is no way for the Church to stop such conceptions, but this statement begins with a defiant and weighty title: “The Bible as the *Word of God*.” Ponder that! Our Maker is not silent to us. He gives us the inspired words of the Bible. This title is in harmony with one of the great and traditional prayers concerning the Bible:

Blessed Lord, who caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and

the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen. (Book of Common Prayer)

FOR DISCUSSION

Does this title sound traditional to you from a Lutheran point of view? Is this how the Lutheran Confessions and Lutherans through the ages have thought of the Bible?

The official teaching of the Lutheran Confessions on the Bible can be found in the *Formula of Concord*, in the opening sections of both the “Epitome” and the “Solid Declaration.” Here is the teaching of the Epitome. It refers to the Bible as the Word of God (“Your word is a lamp to my feet”):

We believe, teach, and confess that the only rule and guiding principle according to which all teachings and teachers are to be evaluated and judged are the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments alone, as it is written, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Ps. 119[:105]), and Saint Paul: “If...an angel from heaven should proclaim to you something contrary...let that one be accursed!” (Gal. 1[:8]). (*Formula of Concord*, Epitome, opening section, Kolb-Wengert)

The title of our statement also fits with the language of the NALC Model Constitution for Congregations:

Chapter 2. CONFESSION OF FAITH

This congregation incorporates Article 2 of the constitution of the North American Lutheran Church (the “NALC”), confessing:

2.03. 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, “according to which all doctrines should and must be judged.” (Emphasis added, *Formula of Concord*, Epitome, Part I)

—◆—

Have you encountered people who think of the Bible otherwise—who simply do not believe that it is the Word of God?

If so, we need not think them unfaithful people, but rather as people who are waiting to learn a more wonderful and traditional doctrine of the Bible.

SECTION 1: WHERE DOES THE BIBLE COME FROM?

According to an old rule of dogmatic theology, “The works of God *ad extra* are the joint work of the three divine persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” This means that works of God *outside Himself* are the joint work of the three divine persons. Creation, for example, is the joint work of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit—each with a distinctive role to play in creation, and each in harmony with the others. Likewise with salvation and sanctification. None of these good things would be possible for us without the joint work of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

This statement on “The Bible as the Word of God,” begins in this majestic way: It conceives the Bible as the joint work of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The statement places the Bible in a Triune setting. Skeptics might think that the Bible comes from human beings. This statement contends that, behind the human writers, the Bible comes from the Triune God. The Triune God uses and inspires human writers, but the glorious answer to the question, “Where does the Bible come from?” is “from God, the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.”

Let us not, then, underestimate the Bible. The Bible might sit and gather dust on too many bookshelves, but the Bible is a great gift of the Triune God to humanity. The Bible permits us to hear the very voice of God.

FOR DISCUSSION

Does it seem right to you that the Bible is often called the “Holy Bible”? Why?

Our statement’s claim that the Bible comes from the Triune God is awesome! It is no wonder that the Bible is called “Holy Bible.” To have good words from our Maker meant for each of us is a wonderful and mysterious thing, not to be taken lightly.

1. The Bible comes to the Church from Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen Son of God, by way of His apostles.

Two important themes emerge in this section: (1) Jesus as the “focal point and target” of both the Old Testament and the New Testament, and (2) the apostles as a unique generation and the authorized interpreters of the Old Testament as pointing to Jesus.

Jesus opened the minds of the apostles to understand Israel’s Scriptures as witness to himself (Luke 24:44-48).

Israel herself does not interpret her Scriptures that way, but Jesus taught the apostles to understand the Old Testament that way, and, glad to say, the apostles did not keep that understanding to themselves, but proclaimed it to the ends of the earth.

FOR DISCUSSION

Do you think that preachers should preach on the Old Testament? Why or why not? Do we lose anything if we do not preach on the Old Testament?

If a crowded liturgy must be shortened, let us not shorten it by way of omitting the Old Testament or the Psalm. The apostles proclaimed Jesus Christ by preaching on the Old Testament (a paradigm of this is Stephen’s preaching to the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8). If preaching on the Old Testament was good enough for the apostles, it is probably good enough for us too.

Martin Luther encouraged Christians to study the Old Testament:

But what a fine lot of tender and pious children we are! In order that we might not have to study in the Scriptures and learn Christ there, we simply regard the entire Old Testament as of no account, as done for and no longer valid. Yet it alone bears the name of Holy Scripture. (“A Brief Instruction on What To Look for and Expect in the Gospels” (1521), *Luther’s Works* 35, 123).

What do we mean when we say the Church is “apostolic”?

When we say that the Church is “apostolic,” we mean that our Church, in our modern times, is somehow the *same* Church as that of the apostles. We are in continuity with them. Each generation faces its own technologies, temptations and moral quandaries, but the claim that the Church is “apostolic” means that we address these modern questions in such a way that the apostles, there in the communion of saints, can somehow agree with what we are preaching. We want our current preaching to not betray the preaching of the apostles. The chief instrument given to the Church by God that our current preaching might be apostolic is the Bible. The Bible is God’s gift to the Church that we might maintain apostolic faithfulness.

2. The Bible comes to us from the Holy Spirit, poured out by the risen Christ from the Father.

Our statement says, “The saving mission of the Holy Spirit is to bear witness to the crucified and risen Christ, gathering and sanctifying the Church through Word and Sacrament.” For the sake of this mission, the Holy Spirit inspired people in both the Old Testament and the New Testament to write in fitting words about Jesus Christ. Jesus Himself taught the apostles how to understand the Old Testament as witness to Himself, as we saw above. This understanding and preaching of the apostles needed to be documented so that ongoing generations of the Church could be faithful to the apostolic preaching. The Holy Spirit presided over the production of our Bible and uses it still to create faith on earth.

FOR DISCUSSION

How do you think of the Holy Spirit? Do you connect the Holy Spirit with the Bible?

Martin Luther had a quaint but powerful image for his theological opponents in controversies about the Sacraments. He called them “enthusiasts” and claimed about them that they had “swallowed the Holy Spirit feathers and all.” In a sense, modern controversies about sexual ethics and other matters can be thought of as modern-day cases of

“enthusiasm”—that is, whenever someone claims to know the will of the Holy Spirit *apart* from the Bible, that person is tempted by enthusiasm. The Holy Spirit both inspired the writers of the Bible and uses the Bible to this very day to keep the Church apostolic and to comfort us as our God would comfort us.

Our statement says that a mission of the Holy Spirit is to “sanctify” the Church. That means to make it holy, as in “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.” What would you say is the meaning of “holy?”

The Holy Spirit desires that the Church should be holy (1 Cor. 6:11, 2 Thess. 2:13). What does “holy” mean? It seems to have two dimensions—one in relationship to God and one to humanity. In relation to God, “holy” means “set apart for his purposes.” In relation to humanity, “holy” seems to mean that the Church should have a kind of goodness that can only be explained by the assumption that this business about Jesus is true.

Consider John 13, for example, which we read each Maundy Thursday. Jesus teaches us that the world will notice the Church if the Church loves after the manner of Jesus:

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. (John 13:34-35 NRSV)

It was the extraordinary compassion of the early Christians that helped the Church to grow. Theologian Robert Wilken argues that it was the Church that invented many of this world’s institutions of mercy, like orphanages and hospitals (*The First Thousand Years*).

3. The Bible is the Word of God the Father which comes to us inseparably from His gift of His Son, Jesus Christ.

Our statement says, “The Word made flesh is the great gift of the Father to His lost human creatures: ‘For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him

should not perish but have eternal life' (John 3:16 *ESV*)." It is humanity's greatest blessing that the Father did not withhold His Son from us. Then, when the Father did give His Son, He did so in a unity of three forms: the Word incarnate, the Word written, and the Word proclaimed.

FOR DISCUSSION

Our statement speaks of "the Word incarnate, the word written, and the word proclaimed." Can we have any one form of the Word apart from the others?

We should resist the temptation to think that we can love and follow Jesus, but neglect the Bible or neglect the Church. Likewise, it is a mistake to love coming to church, but not care much about Jesus or the Bible. And it is not enough to sit alone in our closet and read the Bible. We need to interpret the Bible as pointing to Jesus and we need fellowship with Jesus in the Church with its proclamation and Sacraments.

4. The Bible comes to us from a human history governed and directed towards Christ by the providence of God.

Our statement says that "The Holy Spirit worked with the human authors of Scripture, weaving their purposes into His own, so that their human words bear witness to Christ in ways that reveal not only their own minds but the mind of God who was intent on Christ from the beginning." Imagine the complexity of this! Take that shepherd Amos, for example. In the providence of God, He created Amos, because He wanted Amos to speak of Christ. So Amos leaves his sheep in Tekoa, goes up to the Northern Kingdom, and preaches like a lion. He preaches in ways that are natural for him. He has his own personal strengths and weaknesses, his own language and images, and he speaks his own human words. But in speaking those words, he is pointing ahead to Jesus of Nazareth. He is inspired by the Holy Spirit to preach in ways that are apt to his particular world, but also in ways that reveal the mind of God about Christ. What he said is truer than he knew!

FOR DISCUSSION

How can we help people who dismiss the Bible as a human book? What if even the *New York Times* should claim that the Bible is a human book?

In the chaos and conflicts that many pastors and congregations knew in moving to the NALC, the claim that frustrated normal churchly deliberations was the notion that “The Bible is just a human book. It is limited by its historical circumstances and by the limitations of its authors.” It is hard to carry on debate in the Church if people discount the Bible. But this statement helps us to answer modern dismissal of the Bible. Yes, we can say, the Bible is a human book, and its writers had the limitations natural to all people. And yet, the Bible is not just a human book. It is also a book whose writers and editors were created by God in such a way that their conscientious work actually reveals the mind of God about Jesus Christ.

What about the historical-critical Bible scholars? Must we always yield to their scholarly insights?

We live in a good generation—a generation of “theological commentaries” on the Bible. That is, we live in a generation when Bible scholars are often learned in the results of historical-critical scholarship, but use those results, not to destroy the faith of the Church, but to illumine the actual Bible text lying before us. Writers of theological commentaries, then, tend to be mindful of and to honor the Church’s traditional interpretation of the Bible. And to the degree that they read even the Old Testament as bearing witness to Christ, they take their place with the great patristic commentators.

Examples of modern “theological commentaries” are the *Brazos* commentaries; *T&T Clark International Theological Commentary*; *Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*; and *The Two Horizons New Testament Commentary*. Also, many preachers value the three-volume *The Lectionary Commentary*.

SECTION 2: WHAT KIND OF BOOK IS THE BIBLE?

Some of us come from homes where we did not lay other books on top of the Bible. It is not that we had a superstitious fear that harm would come to us if we did that. Rather, it was simply that we wanted to show respect for the Bible as a special book in this world. How is the Bible special? What kind of a book is the Bible?

1. The Bible is a book of *Holy Scriptures*.

We take two important words here: “holy” and “Scripture.” The Bible is “holy” because it sets forth Christ and is used by the Holy Spirit for human salvation. The Bible is holy “Scripture,” which means that it is a text in this world—a text that is a fixed order of words, not subject to human whims, but standing outside us and the Church, and capable of guiding us and the Church into faith.

FOR DISCUSSION

Earlier in our statement, we read this note about God drawing near to us in the Bible: “Rather, we confess that, in providing the Church with the Bible, God has truly drawn near to us and given His Word an enduring presence in our midst.” This is part of the “holiness” of the Bible: that God draws near to us through it. How, then, do we best use the Bible? What should we do with this holy book?

The best use of the Bible is to read it. Let us not turn our back on the Lord. It is nice to give the Bible a prominent place on our bookshelf. It is nice to have it leather-bound with gold edges. But the best way to use this holy book is to read it, so that God can draw near to us. Read the Bible, seeking to learn of Jesus Christ in the Bible from beginning to end. Read the Bible, not searching for strange or idiosyncratic interpretations, but rather read it as trying to plunge deeper into Christian faith by reading the Bible.

What about Bible reading guides, guiding and pacing our reading through the Bible?

Bible reading guides can be helpful, but the best such guide would read through the whole Bible, and not just selections.

2. **The Bible is both clear and deep, straightforward and complex, because it presents us with Jesus Christ “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Colossians 2:3 ESV).**

The Bible witnesses to Jesus Christ, who is a complex subject. Jesus is “the image of the invisible God, in whom ‘all the fullness of God’ is pleased to dwell (Colossians 1:15, 19 ESV.)” If all the fullness of God dwells in Jesus, then we should not be surprised that it takes a BIG book to tell us about him. A great theme of this statement is that the Old Testament also teaches us about Jesus Christ. We do not understand the Ten Commandments, for example, unless we understand that they come from the hand of the Second Person of the Trinity, who in the fullness of time was born as Jesus of Nazareth. But neither do we understand Jesus unless we understand that he is the author and giver of the Ten Commandments.

FOR DISCUSSION

Why do you suppose there are four Gospels rather than one?

One is not sufficient to bear witness to the richness of Christ. We cherish each of the four Gospels, but where would we be, for example, if we did not have the Fourth Gospel, John? John is the Gospel that especially calls the believer to a close personal relationship with Jesus. “Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me” (John 15:4 RSV). And John is the one who most clearly teaches the pre-existence of God the Son before creation. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1 RSV). We tend to intermingle Gospel pictures of Jesus, but the truth is, we would have a poorer picture of Jesus if we lacked any of the Gospels.

This section of the statement offers seven central themes of the Bible, beginning with its steady pointing to Jesus Christ and ending with the Bible’s call to hope for Christ’s coming again in glory. Do you think this is a good list? Should it be expanded? Can we make do with the list and

set the Bible aside?

Setting the Bible aside in favor of a list of themes is a temptation of fundamentalism. No matter how complex or fine a list of themes, it is no substitute for actually reading the Bible. On the other hand, keeping in mind a list of central themes can help us notice things in the Bible we might have missed and to interpret the Bible in traditional ways.

3. The Bible is the powerful Word of God which both kills and makes alive, ruthlessly exposing our sin and at the same time proclaiming Christ as our Savior.

This section speaks of the famous Lutheran distinction of “Law” and “Gospel.” The *Gospel* tells us the good news of what our God has done for us, to give us a chance for a new life in Jesus Christ. The *Law* tells us how we should walk in life that we might live a life pleasing to our Maker, as Martin Luther says in the *Large Catechism*:

Here, then, we have the Ten Commandments, a summary of divine teaching on what we are to do to make our whole life pleasing to God. (“Conclusion of the Ten Commandments,” *Large Catechism*, Kolb-Wengert translation, 428)

The Law “kills” because we fall short of it, as our statement says: “Because we are sinners, the Word which tells us God’s will does not lead to the accomplishment of God’s will.” And so God’s Law accuses us of sin. Still, the fact that God’s Law *always* accuses, does not mean that it *only* accuses. God’s Law is to be cherished by Christians as a guide to life in Christ. And so our statement says, “...the Church relies on Scripture to form the character and conscience of believers and to guide moral decision-making.”

FOR DISCUSSION

For the believer, does God’s Law do anything more than ruthlessly expose our sin?

Judging by the Psalms and the Beatitudes, God’s Law also describes a blessed life:

Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the

seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night (Psalm 1:1-2 RSV).

The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the LORD is clean, enduring for ever; the ordinances of the LORD are true, and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb. (Psalm 19:7-10 RSV)

Blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the LORD! Blessed are those who keep his testimonies, who seek him with their whole heart, who also do no wrong, but walk in his ways! (Psalm 119:1-3 RSV, The Whole Grand Psalm)

Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God. (Matthew 5:8 RSV, The Sermon on the Mount)

Are good works *necessary* for Christians?

The Lutheran Confessions answer, yes, a renewed life is necessary for believers:

It is also taught that such faith should yield good fruit and good works and that a person must do such good works as God has commanded for God's sake but not place trust in them as if thereby to earn grace before God. ("The New Obedience," *Augsburg Confession*, Article II, Kolb-Wengert translation, 40)

Since this faith is a new life, it necessarily produces new impulses and new works. Accordingly, James rightly denies that we are justified by a faith that is without works. ("Justification," *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, Article IV, Kolb-Wengert translation, 159)

And Luther wrote in the 1535 *Commentary on Galatians* that a "faith" which does not issue in a transformed life is a counterfeit faith:

A counterfeit faith is one that hears about God, Christ, and all the mysteries of the incarnation and redemption, one that also grasps what it hears and can speak beautifully about it; and yet only a mere opinion and a vain hearing remain, which leave nothing in the heart but a hollow sound about the Gospel, concerning which there is a great deal of chatter. In fact, this is no faith at all; for it neither renews nor changes the heart. It does not produce a new man, but it leaves him in his former opinion and way of life. This is a very pernicious faith, and it would be better not to have it. (“Lectures on Galatians,” *Luther’s Works* 26, 269)

The Gospel has an encouraging negative point: We are not justified by good works. This is good because our good works are never enough to justify us before our holy God. Does the Gospel also have a *positive* meaning?

If the Gospel is conceived only in negative terms, we are tempted toward antinomianism and we miss out on the joy of the Gospel. The heart of the Gospel is positive: that Christ is willing to live in us and asks us to live in Him:

I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Galatians 2:20 RSV)

How about being true to oneself? Does living in Christ and Him in us mean the annihilation of oneself? Is this an authentic way to live?

Life in Christ does not destroy life but leads to its discovery. Life in Christ does not annihilate self, but fulfills it. To have Christ “in us” asks us to let Him lead us into new conduct, thoughts, and new values, but these new things do not betray us, but perfect us. When Jesus said to Nicodemus, “You must be born again or anew,” He did not mean that the man should live an inauthentic life, but at last turn to his real life.

How about the traditional spiritual disciplines mentioned on Ash Wednesday: repentance, fasting, prayer and works of love? Are they relevant to life in Christ and therefore relevant to the Gospel?

In his book *The Theory and Practice of Virtue* (1984), Gilbert Meilaender quotes from a letter by C. S. Lewis about the relationship between practice and character:

And the distinction between pretending you are better than you are and beginning to be better in reality is finer than moral sleuths conceive (15).

Practicing the traditional spiritual disciplines of Lent is, of course, subject to the temptation of works righteousness. But such disciplines might also open us to Christ and create more space within us for Him to manifest Himself in us.

- 4. In its holiness, in its clarity and complexity, as Law and Gospel, the Bible baffles human wisdom and challenges our habits of understanding.**

Our statement includes this good passage on the need to trust the Bible:

The Reformers, especially Martin Luther, warned continually against imposing on the Bible some framework or principle which we bring with us to Scripture, whether from deep human reflection or even from what we take to be “common sense.” When Scripture is thus subjected to human wisdom, it will always seem to be saying unreasonable things which make no sense and to need adjustment to fit with our assumptions about reality.

FOR DISCUSSION

But does not the Church need to be “relevant” to the modern world?

We are dealing with some heartrending matters here. Many people feel that our land is becoming more secular. If so, then the faith of the Bible will feel evermore strange to many people. The faith of the Bible might not match up well with what our children are learning in their public schools or even in many church-related colleges, and do

we want our children to feel odd? The commonsense of our city newspapers often overruns and dismisses the faith of the Bible. Popular movies, music and television are out of sync with the Bible. And many good church people are left wondering whether we should adjust our notions and values to fit the modern world, so that we will be “relevant” to the modern world.

But the truth goes the other way round: The only way for the Church to be relevant to the modern world is to be “irrelevant” as the world judges things. For if we are not irrelevant, then we have no alternative vision of the good, the true, and the lovely to share with the world.

Our statement speaks of reading the Bible “in faith”: “As Scripture is read *in faith* as the Word of God written, the Holy Spirit continually disturbs our ‘conformity to this world’ so that we may be ‘transformed by the renewal of our mind’ (cf. Romans 12:2 *ESV*)” (emphasis added). What do you suppose that means? How concretely do we read the Bible “in faith?”

Reading the Bible “in faith” means reading with the discipline urged by St. Paul: “let God be true, but every man a liar” (Romans 3:4 *KJV*). A practical suggestion: Let us read the Bible knowing that sooner or later—in this life and in eternity—we will meet its Author, and that Author is going to be important for our destiny. Let us read it eagerly, as if searching for clues to our existence and eternity.

5. The Bible is a transforming book through which God calls us to follow Christ and guides us on the way of discipleship.

Two of the lovely lines in this section go this way:

Discipleship at its heart is not preoccupation with good works and activities, but preoccupation with Jesus Christ, as Mary of Bethany “sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to his teaching” (Luke 10:39 *ESV*).

We are not commanded to imitate the outward circumstances of Christ’s life, but we are invited to share His “mind” (1 Corinthians 2:16; Philipians 2:5ff.).

The combination of these two lines could lead us to this thought: The Bible should *transform* us, indeed, transform us in a particular direction, toward Jesus. The Bible leads us onwards, not toward a multiplicity of options in life, but toward the particular mind of Christ. When we read the Bible, we should be open to an adventure: that our reading will make us more like the One we desire: Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. We will hold our ideas, then, “captive to Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5), so that we learn the content of even so basic a word as “love” from the story of Jesus as we learn of Him through the whole Bible.

FOR DISCUSSION

Some books teach us things, increasing our knowledge, but not much changing of our hearts. Is the Bible such a book?

One way of describing the controversies between traditional churches and progressive churches is that they are disputes about visions of the Gospel. Is the Gospel about “affirmation of us as we are” or about “transformation of us toward Jesus?” Our statement here on the Bible sides with the Gospel transforming us in the direction of Jesus.

6. The Bible is a truthful, reliable book that will not lead us into error and falsehood, nor does it contain error or falsehood.

This section can be of immense help in getting past controversies about the six days of creation, for example, and whether the Bible is reliable for information about archeology and such. A key idea is this:

We should not approach the Bible with our own preconceived ideas of what it must be like if it is truthful. We must take our lead from the texts themselves and respect their actual character.

When reading a passage of the Bible, we should ask the question, “Is this the kind of literature that should be taken as a *factual* account?” Not every *true* account of an encounter is a *factual* account. Let us take a famous example. The parable of the Good Samaritan starts off this way:

A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, which stripped him of his raiment, and

wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead. (Luke 10:30 KJV)

This verse is true, and is reliable in teaching us about God and Jesus Christ, *whether or not* there really was a man who went down from Jerusalem to Jericho. And so it is that “We should not approach the Bible with our own preconceived ideas of what it must be like if it is truthful.” We must not permit the standard of truth used by a modern historian to deprive us of the Gospel truth of this passage.

Another key idea of this section concerns the individual gifts and limitations of the writers of the Bible:

Furthermore, in order to speak understandably, the Holy Spirit permitted the writers of the biblical text to write in ways familiar to them, so long as this did not defeat His purpose.

This goes back to our statement’s wonderful line in Section 4 of “Where Does the Bible Come From?”:

The Holy Spirit worked with the human authors of Scripture, weaving their purposes into His own, so that their human words bear witness to Christ in ways that reveal not only their own minds but the mind of God who was intent on Christ from the beginning.

Again, we can admire the sublime complexity of this. Our God intended that the Bible should be a true and reliable book about God, Christ, the Church, salvation, and life in Christ. To accomplish this, the Holy Spirit permitted the writers of the Bible “to write in ways familiar to them, so long as this did not defeat His purpose.”

FOR DISCUSSION

If there are inconsistencies, say, in the way the four evangelists describe the length and sequence of our Lord’s public ministry, does this mean that at least one of them must be false?

No, none of the evangelists is wrong. Each Gospel should be read as a true and reliable account of Jesus. In Him, there is no confusion. A modern historian might say that at least one of the Gospels must be wrong, but that is because the modern historian is using a standard of truth appropriate to

his or her discipline, but that standard of truth is different from the standard of truth of the Bible. The Bible's standard of truth concerns true witness to Jesus. This is not to say that the Bible's standard of truth is inferior to that of the modern historian, but rather to say that it is different. It is a different category from that of the historian or the archaeologist. The Bible is true because it reliably teaches us about God.

But does not this notion of the Bible having its own “standard of truth” leave the Bible subject to liberal interpretation? Cannot one say, for example, “The Bible is about love. None of its historical or scientific claims matter. It is simply about love?”

Two answers seem important here: (1) For Christians, the notion of “love” receives its content from the Bible, and therefore we cannot set aside the Bible in favor of our antecedent notions of “love.” We learn about love by watching God at work in the Bible. What we learn about love from the Bible is different from what we might learn about love from popular culture. So, to say that the Bible has its own “standard of truth” does not mean that the Bible can be summarized (and then dismissed) by some notion of love. The Bible's standard of truth is the literal meaning of the long text, from Genesis to Revelation, understood as revelation of Jesus Christ. And (2) “liberal interpretations” of the Bible are bound to tend wrong precisely because a “liberal interpretation” does not consider itself constrained by the literal text and by the Church's traditional interpretation of that text. But our teaching statement does not do that. Our statement is devoted to the literal text of the Bible and to the Church's traditional interpretation of that text.

SECTION 3: HOW MAY WE UNDERSTAND THE BIBLE?

1. Approach the Bible with Hopeful Prayer

There are two important ideas here: (1) We can approach the Bible with “hope.” We need not fear that we are not smart enough or learned enough or that the Bible is best left to the

scholars. Rather, we can believe that our Maker desires to talk with us and makes this possible for each of us through the Bible. (2) But we should approach the Bible with “prayer.” To say that it is within our reach to profit from the Bible does not mean that it is easy or should be done in a casual way.

FOR DISCUSSION

Does the Lutheran tradition help us with a prayerful approach to reading the Bible?

Indeed it does! This is a chance to lift up a spiritual masterpiece of Martin Luther: his little treatise “A Simple Way to Pray” (*Luther’s Works* 43). Luther, they say, prayed a lot, maybe three hours a day. In his treatise, we learn his method. It can be called “a prayerful reading of Scripture.” There we find that for Luther, meditation is not upon himself, but upon sacred text.

2. Be Guided By the “Rule of Faith” in Creed and Catechism

The “rule of faith” is a set of convictions orienting us as we read the Bible. To use our statement’s lovely phrase from a bit later in this statement, the rule of faith is “guidance into the Bible received from those who have explored and mapped its territory before us.” The Bible is big and can be bewildering. The rule of faith points us in the right direction, teaching us what to look for in the Bible. “We read Scripture to learn about the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit and their works, centered in the incarnation, death, resurrection and ascension of the Son of God.” We seek to learn these things for the sake our own faith and for the Church’s mission to proclaim Christ to the world, make disciples and teach them the faith of the Church. We *could* approach the Bible looking for historical, archaeological, sociological, architectural, all kinds of information. The rule of faith teaches us to approach the Bible seeking God. For us, the rule of faith can be found in the ecumenical creeds and the Lutheran Confessions. They are not replacements for the Bible, but guides into reading the Bible.

FOR DISCUSSION

What about Abraham Lincoln reading the Bible as a boy or the Christian going into his quiet study and reading the Bible alone? Does Lincoln or the plain Christian need a rule of faith?

Many of us approach the Bible via a rule of faith, whether we know it or not. We inherit the rule from our parents or pastor or other people important for us. If Martians came to earth and found the Bible, who knows what would interest them or excite them about the Bible? But for us, it is good to be guided by the creeds and confessions as we approach the Bible.

3. Read Scripture in the Fellowship of the Church

Do not be eager for idiosyncratic interpretations of the Bible. Go to Church, try to learn how the Bible is traditionally understood in the church, and share your insights to the Bible with your fellow Christians—both for their good and for the chance that their comments will help get you back on track if you are straying. And this too is important: our brothers and sisters in the Church include those who have come before us. We should try to learn and to value the convictions of Christians through the ages who have read the Bible with great devotion.

FOR DISCUSSION

How can we have access to the interpretations of Christians in the past?

Again, we live in a good age when it comes to study of the Bible. In particular, this is a good chance to lift up the commentaries and homilies of the church fathers. They are available online and can be read with profit and joy by many people: ccel.org/fathers.html

4. Interpret Scripture by Scripture

There is no way around our statement's appeal to some hard, but good work:

To interpret Scripture by Scripture, it is necessary to have a broad familiarity with the whole of Scripture. There is no way to acquire this except by persistent hearing and reading across the length and breadth of the Bible.

Broad familiarity with the whole of Scripture is important so that we do not arrive at odd interpretations of individual passages, out of sync with the whole flow of the Bible as a witness to Jesus Christ.

FOR DISCUSSION

This is a daunting task, to acquire “broad familiarity with the whole of Scripture.” Can we get some encouragement for this task?

Coming to church helps a lot. The three-year Sunday lectionary used by many Lutheran churches takes us through a broad overview of the Bible. Also, the two-year daily lectionary found on pages 179-192 of the *Lutheran Book of Worship* provides a comprehensive guide to important passages of Scripture. Bible study classes at the church help too. But there is little substitute for us, one by one, reading the Bible in a steady way. Approach the Bible by way of the rule of faith in the creeds and catechisms, to help orient us toward the Bible’s meaning as we believe God wants us to understand that meaning. It is not unheard of for Christians to read through the Bible each year, perhaps using a different translation from time to time. Or we can read at a slower pace. Perhaps we remember mother or father drinking coffee at the breakfast table and reading the Bible when we would get up from bed in the morning. We can do that too.

5. Pay Attention to the Words

There is much encouragement for us in this section. The words of the Bible are worthy of respect, and so let us choose a translation that is close to the original, like the *Revised Standard Version* or the *English Standard Version*. Remember too Luther’s little treatise “A Simple Way to Pray” (*Luther’s Works* 43). As the title suggests, it is a treatise on prayer. But also it is a treatise on a prayerful reading of the Bible. We do not need to be geniuses or poets to profit from the Bible. We can accustom

“ourselves to reading slowly, closely, and observantly.” We can read prayerfully. This is within our power if we take the time.

FOR DISCUSSION

Are there models for us in how to read the Bible slowly, closely and observantly?

Yes, indeed! One of the privileges of being a Lutheran is that we have Martin Luther as a teacher. His commentaries on the Old Testament and the New Testament teach us how to linger with the Bible. He makes people and ideas in the Bible come alive. Our age is a good one in that Luther’s commentaries and homilies are available in respected English translations. Again, commentaries and homilies of the early church fathers are available for free online: ccl.org/fathers.html. Both clergy and lay can find themselves inspired by these patristic writings.

SECTION 4: WHAT IS THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE IN THE CHURCH?

The Lutheran Confessions speak of the Bible in two ways: (1) as the fountain of Israel, and (2) as the guiding principle to judge teaching in the Church.

1. Scripture is the “pure, clear fountain of Israel.”

The Bible has the power to form us—to change our thoughts, convictions and conduct in the divine direction. This should be prior to our attempts to use the Bible as a standard of truth:

If our churches are to be governed by the Word of God, they must be communities in which the Bible is known and loved, read and taught, studied and prayed. Only a people formed by Scripture can be ruled and ordered by Scripture.

FOR DISCUSSION

Do you think this is possible? Do you think a people can be “formed by Scripture?”

It does seem to be the case that our Maker has so created us

that we can be formed by the things we read. Newspapers across the land and blogs on the internet know that. The real question probably is not whether we can be formed by what we read, but what is it that is busy at work forming us? Our statement would urge us to be formed by the Bible. Let us, then, know and love the Bible.

2. The Bible is the “only true guiding principle by which all teachers and teachings are to be judged.”

Failure to respect this principle is what left so many of us bewildered in face of church controversies. We hardly knew how to proceed if the controversies could not be carried on by reference to the Bible. And so our statement’s stance is of great importance:

To respect this form of the Bible’s authority, the Church must engage in a particular dialogue and argument. We deliberately present our views by expounding the Scriptures. We turn our debates into discussions of Scripture. We make the case for our position by attempting to show how it fits with Scripture.

FOR DISCUSSION

For Lutherans, can controversies about the Gospel be settled simply by reference to the Lutheran Confessions without regard to the Bible?

This is incoherent. The Bible cannot be set aside in favor of the Lutheran Confessions because the Lutheran Confessions have no higher claim for themselves than that they are true and faithful expositions of Holy Scripture. In synodical deliberations, for example, clergy and lay representatives could well approach the microphone with the Bible in one hand and the *Book of Concord* in the other, but the Bible always trumps the *Book of Concord*.

What about ecumenical relations? Need they be ruled by the Bible too?

Yes, indeed! Ecumenical dialogues and agreements should hold themselves accountable to the Bible. Struggle for the

unity of the Church is not struggle for just any kind of unity, but rather for unity in the truth of faith. Such truth requires harmony with the Bible.

3. Only Scripture (*sola Scriptura*) can play these roles of “fountain” and “guiding principle” in the Church.

This section helps save us from violating the Second Commandment. The name of God should be treated with such reverence that it should never be used to bolster false teaching:

See, all of this is an attempt to deck yourself out with God’s name or to put up a good front and justify yourself with his name, whether in ordinary worldly affairs or in sophisticated and difficult matters of faith and doctrine. (“The Second Commandment,” *Large Catechism*, Kolb-Wengert translation, 393)

The only faithful way to say, “Thus saith the Lord,” is to ground the proclamation on the Bible. *Only Scripture* can serve as the fountain and guiding principle in the Church. This does not mean that the Bible can be read in isolation from its natural home in the Church, but it does mean that it is the foundational means for preserving the apostolic faithfulness of the Church.

FOR DISCUSSION

But suppose a *bishop* proclaims something inconsistent with the Bible? After all, bishops are supposed to be guardians of the apostolic faithfulness of the Church.

All Christians have the right to use the Bible to maintain apostolic faithfulness. While bishops have the laying on of hands and the prayers of the Church for the special ministry of apostolic faithfulness across the land and back in time through the centuries to the apostles, even they must ground their ministry in the Bible and be subject to critique from others based on the Bible. Neither a bishop nor an angel has the right to proclaim something inconsistent with the Bible.

CONCLUSION

Our statement's conclusion returns to a sense of amazement and gratitude that God should share His Word with us through the Bible. We poor human beings are capable of working a lifetime or traveling many miles to find lesser treasures than the Word of God. Our statement reorients us to value the Bible. In a confusing world, it is an inestimable blessing that we can seek the Word of God in the Bible.

FOR DISCUSSION

What could we do at the level of the local congregation and individual piety to uplift the Bible among us?

Until God's kingdom comes, this should be the continual question for us. This should set the program for us as individual Christians and as congregations: How can we honor the Bible even more than we have before?

The following letter on Holy Scripture prepared by the NALC Commission on Theology and Doctrine, as well as a study guide for congregational use, affirms the strong commitment of the North American Lutheran Church to the Bible as God's gift to the Church. It also affirms that "the Bible not only makes known this holy, loving purpose... to free His fallen human creatures from the wrong and corruption of sin, the tyranny of the devil and the threat of death, draw them into communion with Himself," the Bible is also "a means by which God achieves His purpose."



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