



THE BIBLE AS THE WORD OF GOD

NALC COMMISSION ON THEOLOGY AND DOCTRINE

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,” WA 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,” 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 worshipping 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 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!