

In the beginning was the Word” (Jn 1:1): The Bible in the Life of the Lutheran Communion

A Study Document on Lutheran Hermeneutics

Executive Summary

- (1) The celebration of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in 2017 provides the opportunity to highlight the special significance of the Bible for the vitality of the Church and the life of every Christian. At the heart of the Reformation and the renewal of the Church were a new awareness of the Holy Scripture and the recently discovered dynamics of reading and understanding the Bible. Thus, the reformers emphasized the Bible as the only source of certainty and the primary authority over Church doctrine and practice. This focus on the Holy Scripture and its interpretation has become characteristic of Lutherans. Recent controversies within the Lutheran communion and the Christian community at large about biblical interpretation regarding different ethical issues therefore touch the very core of Lutheran identity.
- (2) The 500th anniversary of the Reformation is not only an occasion thankfully to remember the central role of the Bible in the life of Christians in general and the Lutheran churches in particular, but a commitment and challenge to continue using the Bible as the source of life and source and norm for all practices of the Lutheran churches. This implies that one of the major tasks for the Lutheran churches is, on the basis of joint readings and interpretations, to discern how the global Lutheran community understands what it reads in the Bible.
- (3) Given this difficult but essential task, the LWF initiated a study process on Lutheran hermeneutics within the global Lutheran communion. Using a new interdisciplinary methodological format, this truly global and intercultural study process brought together exegetes, historians of religion, Reformation experts and systematic theologians and united theologians from all LWF regions. Four conferences were held, each one of which focused on one biblical book in particular: Nairobi, Kenya (2011, John); Eisenach, Germany (2013, Psalms); Chicago, USA (2014, Matthew); Aarhus, Denmark (2015, Paul’s letters). The results of these conferences have been or will soon be published.
- (4) Today, Lutheran hermeneutics is confronted with hugely diverse cultural, political, economic and religious contexts in which Lutheran churches exist. How can Lutheran churches in such varied contexts reach a shared and mutual understanding regarding their reading and interpretation of biblical texts? Since this situation can give rise to new controversies within the Lutheran communion, as it has done in other churches, the LWF hermeneutics process has come up with some proposals of how the joint reading and interpretation of the Bible can constructively contribute to these discussions. The results of this process were shaped by (1) the core principles of Luther’s biblical hermeneutics; (2) highlighting the dynamic character of Bible reading with reference to Church traditions; and (3) drawing attention to the reformers’ emphasis on interpreting the Holy Scripture. This is done in deliberate engagement with contemporary challenges of reading and interpreting the Bible within the communion. Despite contextual diversity, such joint reading efforts provide many promising opportunities for deepening the global Lutheran communion as well the life of all Lutheran churches and Christians at large.
- (5) As we celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation we remember how the risen Christ “opened the Scriptures” and commissioned his followers to proclaim his message “to all

nations” (Lk 24:46–47). We are a global communion in which the Scriptures have a vital place. Therefore we,

- a. **Reaffirm the Lutheran emphasis that the heart of the Bible is its salvific message.** God’s Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the whole Church through the gospel, which the Bible proclaims. The gospel is “the power of God for salvation” (Rom 1:16). The whole Bible is to be interpreted in light of the message that brings life.
- b. **Commit ourselves to learning from one another globally about the ways in which the Bible can best be heard in our diverse contexts.** The books of the Bible were written at different times and in different places, and they offer a rich variety of perspectives. As the Bible is read in different contexts throughout the world, it engenders fresh perspectives. We benefit and are constructively challenged by hearing insights that emerge from contexts different from our own. We therefore commit ourselves to creating opportunities for people from our member churches to meet and study the Scriptures, and to share those insights with the wider communion.
- c. **Commit ourselves to ongoing dialogue about points of biblical interpretation on which members of the LWF disagree.** We recognize that interpretation is an ongoing process. The Church is a community in which different interpretations can be discussed, both locally and globally. We commit ourselves to continued dialogue about our understanding of Scripture within the context of Christian fellowship.
- d. **Commit ourselves to supporting theological education that prepares pastors, teachers and leaders effectively to interpret Scripture.** The Bible has a central place in the Church’s preaching and teaching. The Lutheran tradition values educating leaders who use their knowledge of biblical languages and are aware of the different forms of interpretation that build up the community of faith. We commit ourselves to creating educational opportunities that prepare leaders globally to engage those they serve in the study of Scripture.
- e. **Commit ourselves to encouraging the Church to recognize the Bible as a resource for social commitment.** We seek to ensure that our spiritual and academic engagement with the Bible also inspires the church’s social commitment towards “a just, peaceful and reconciled world” as stated in the LWF vision statement.

The task force

- (6) During its five year-cycle, the LWF hermeneutics process involved more than sixty Lutheran theologians from the seven regions of the LWF. A core group of participants accompanied the entire process, some of whom constituted the hermeneutics task force which prepared this statement.

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