

# THE BIBLE

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*I. If you don't understand something in the Bible, where do you look for guidance? Do you think a Bible passage can mean different things to different people or at different times? How do you know what the right meaning is?*

Fortunately, no one is saved by the correct interpretation of Scripture, or none of us would be saved. We are saved by Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, we need to discern who it is we believe in. How can we discern? What is the final authority? The Bible is the final authority, of course. The problem is that the Bible must be interpreted, for it must speak to all time as well as to its time. Who can authoritatively interpret the Bible? Is it satisfactory to say that the Bible is simply to be taken as it is because it is inerrant? But those who do this disagree widely among themselves. Is it satisfactory to say that the Church is to interpret the Bible? But there is no "church" to which all churches grant such authority. Nor can the matter be left to individuals, for they go their own ways.

Lutherans propose a theological answer. Basic to Lutheran understanding is that the word of God is to be understood in three senses, in descending order of importance. First of all, the Word of God is Jesus Christ. Second, the word of God is the preached word, the living voice of the gospel. Third, the word of God is the written word, the text of Scripture.

*II. What do you think about the order of importance found here? Do you think the preached Word is more authoritative than the written Word of the Bible? What are the implications of that?*

Lutherans have five basic principles for interpreting Scripture.

1. **The New Testament interprets the Old.**  
In other words, the two testaments are not

equal. Not only is the New Testament that which came later and therefore interprets the Old, but also the New Testament brings something new, Jesus Christ.

2. **The clear interprets the unclear.** The converse is not true; the unclear does not interpret the clear. The interpreter must begin with clear passages describing the human predicament and how God has acted. But another step is involved beyond historical and intellectual clarity, for in the second place, clarity is that which points to Christ and whatever does not point to Christ is unclear; final authority is the clarity found in Christ.
3. **Scripture interprets itself.** But does this not mean that one is arguing in a circle? Does this mean that one cannot use other material to help understand Scripture? To the contrary! Every possible tool needs to be used in order to understand what Scripture has to say. Nor is Scripture understood therefore to be a perfect system, containing all knowledge and truth. What is meant is that Scripture is the final authority and cannot be subsumed under or judged by any other authority. Yet such finality is not finality in a wooden sense. Scripture is the final authority because it points to Christ, and nothing can be allowed to be higher in authority. Christ is the one who gives Scripture whatever authority it has.
4. **"Was Christum treibet."** No satisfactory translation into English exists. Literally the words mean: "What drives Christ." What is meant is what "promotes" Christ is the truth. This may seem to be simply another slogan, like "Christ alone," yet it expresses in a profound sense the heart of the Lutheran approach to Scripture.
5. **Interpreting Scripture can only be done within the Church.** This may sound intolerant. And it does not solve the question where "the" Church is. Again, what is

## The Five Solas

- Christ alone
- Grace alone
- Faith alone
- Cross alone
- Scripture alone

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meant is that Christ is found in and through his Church and that it is in his Church that his Spirit is working. A person might speculate about whether Christ and his Spirit are present outside of the Church, and if so, the definition of the Church would need to be broadened or what it means for Christ and his Spirit to be present might need to be redefined. All such speculation remains pure speculation. What the Christian knows for sure is that Christ and his Spirit are present within his Church and that those who are outside of Christ are, because they lack his Spirit, unable to interpret Christ correctly and therefore unable to interpret Scripture correctly.

It is obvious that all five Lutheran principles really state the same thing, that where one finds Christ, there one finds the truth and that this is how Scripture is to be interpreted. Finally this is a theological judgment. As a consequence, Lutherans not only have no problem with the historical-critical method but use it gladly when it helps point to Christ and question the method and its results when it does not point to Christ.

*III. Some people reject the historical-critical method because they claim to believe the literal, or plain sense of the Bible. Do you think it is possible to interpret the Bible literally? How might the historical-critical method be helpful in interpreting Scripture? How might it be harmful?*

### The Five Solas

When Lutherans spell out their approach to Scripture, they normally use five slogans. Each of these slogans is like a miniature creedal statement.

1. **Christ alone.** Christ is the sole foundation, "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). Thus "the truth" is a historical person of a particular time and place, who did certain things and said certain things. Yet he is "the truth" who determines what all other truth is.
2. **Grace alone.** No one denies that salvation is by "grace alone." But what does this mean? Is grace truly "alone" or does it include works? What about the law? Because of these difficulties, Lutherans make use of the Pauline phrase "justification of the ungodly" (Rom. 4:5) so that grace truly remains grace and sin truly remains sin.
3. **Faith alone.** All may agree on "grace alone," but few agree on "faith alone." Is there nothing else except "faith alone"? Do no works apply? The Christian has no guarantees as the world reckons guarantees, for all experience, including the experience of faith itself, is ambiguous. Faith is based upon God's faithfulness to his promise in Jesus Christ, not on any security a person might find in the experience of faith or any other experience. Since through the promise a person is free from all demands of the law, a new world begins, a joyful life freely doing what others need.
4. **Cross alone.** Lutheran theology is cross-centered. The

cross, the symbol of torture and defeat, is the power of God for salvation (cf. 1 Cor. 1:22-24). The cross without the resurrection is simply a tragedy. Conversely, the resurrection without the cross is simply a fantasy. Both cross and resurrection must be held as a unity. Yet as long as Christians continue in this world, their lives continue to be lived under the cross, broken by sin, sickness, weakness, and death.

5. **Scripture alone.** Would this be the place where Lutherans finally establish the "what" in some other way than by means of "theology"? Not at all. "Scripture alone" does not mean that Scripture in all its parts is equally valid. Precisely because Lutherans take Scripture seriously and in its literal sense, they take the difficulties in Scripture seriously, whether brought to their attention by the historical-critical method or by any other means. But Christ is the truth, not the difficulties.

*IV. What is the difference between 'faith alone' and 'grace alone'? Can you think of other ways grace might be delivered rather than by faith alone? What are some ways we try to have the cross without the resurrection, or the resurrection without the cross?*

Why should these five Lutheran slogans, all stating "Christ is the truth," be thought of as authoritative for the Christian faith? Could not other slogans such as "the church alone" or "inerrancy alone" be used just as well? And have not Lutherans with these five slogans tied themselves to the 'what' instead of 'how' after all?

*V. What would it mean to say "the church alone?" How does that differ from saying, "interpreting Scripture can only be done within the church?"*

When Lutherans spell out their stance, on the interpretation of Scripture they take one final step. Final authority lies in the proclamation of the promise. To put it another way, when Lutherans are asked about the "what," their proper answer is to proclaim the promise that for Christ's sake all your sins are forgiven. The reason for doing this is that the question of authority is but the symptom of a deeper question, sin, and the answer is to proclaim the promise to you. And if you ask why this promise, the Lutheran will proclaim the promise to you once again. It is in the proper use of the promise that final authority lies; this is the "how." Finally, whatever points to Christ is the truth, and what is needed is that the promise of salvation in Jesus Christ be proclaimed.