

Queen of the Church, Servant of Christ

A Lutheran Understanding of the
Authority of Scripture

By Ritva H. Williams
based on her book

The Bible's Importance for the Church Today
(Augsburg Fortress, 2009)

The Bible is...

	Literal Word of God	Word of God, not literal
White Evangelicals	62%	35%
Black Protestants	64%	27%
White Mainline	17%	59%
White, Non-Hispanic Catholics	18%	64%
ELCA *	24%	69%

*US Congregational Life Survey 2001; the rest of the data is from the Pew Research Center's August 24, 2006 report "Many Americans Uneasy with Mix of Religion and Politics"

Hebrew Canon

- Torah (Law) completed during Babylonian Exile, brought by Ezra to Judea in 444 BCE
- Nevi'im (Prophets) finalized in the Persian era, by 323 BCE
- Kethuvim (Writings) concluded 90 CE or later
- Septuagint (LXX) a Greek translation of Judean sacred texts compiled in the 3rd-2nd centuries BCE includes "writings" that were later excluded from the Hebrew Canon adopted at Jamnia in 90 CE or later

Early Jewish Assumptions

- biblical texts are **cryptic**, i.e. their meaning is not self-evident
- biblical texts are **eternally relevant** instruction about how to live in right relations with God and the world
- biblical texts are **wholly significant**, i.e. they contain nothing unintended, accidental, or superfluous (even the discrepancies & errors are significant)
- biblical texts are **divinely given**, i.e. God speaks through these texts either **directly** (Torah) or **indirectly** (Prophets & Writings)
- Result: an interpretative method called **Midrash** that seeks deeper meanings in the texts through imaginative alternative readings, metaphors, allegories, and so forth.

New Testament Canon

- Justin Martyr (~150 CE) mentions “memoirs of the apostles” that are read in the Christian assembly
- Irenaeus (~180 CE) refers to the *tetramorph* - a defined set of four gospels
- Muratorian Fragment (~200 CE) lists the 4 gospels, Acts, 13 letters of Paul (but not Hebrews), 2 letters by John, Jude, Revelation, the Apocalypse of Peter, and Book of Wisdom
- New Testament canon as we know it is described in Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria’s Festal Letter of 367 CE.
- Athanasius’ canon accepted by Councils of Rome (382 CE), Hippo Regis (393 CE), Carthage (397 & 419 CE)

The Early Church

- The writers of the New/2nd Testament all quoted, and interpreted the Septuagint using two primary approaches:
 - (1) expectation-fulfillment (typological) readings in which ancient persons & events function as “types” — models or patterns for persons and events in the interpreter’s present, e.g. Matthew 4:12-17
 - (2) allegorical interpretation in which concrete details in the text — people, places, events — are explained as representing abstract entities, ideas, virtues, vices or theological doctrines, e.g. Galatians 4:21-5:1
- hermeneutical problem: can typological/allegorical readings overturn the literal/plain meaning of the text and still be valid/true?

Irenaeus and the Rule of Faith

200 CE

- since Christ is “the treasure hidden in the Scriptures (i.e. Septuagint) revealed by means of types and parables,” readers need to know what to look for:
- God the Father, uncreated, invisible, maker of all
- Word/Son of God, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom were made all things, shown forth by the prophets, became human to abolish death and bring about communion of God and humans
- Holy Spirit through whom prophets prophesied & patriarchs taught about God, poured forth upon humanity renewing humans to God
- any biblical interpretation that contradicts this rule of faith cannot be authentically apostolic

Augustine

(354-430 CE)

- “I would not have believed the gospel if the authority of the church had not moved me.”
- The Church and its Scriptures exist in a symbiotic relationship. Both came into being through the work of the Holy Spirit. The Scriptures that shaped, were produced in, and accepted by the early church were divinely inspired expressions of the church’s divinely inspired faith.
- So if it seems to you that you have understood the divine scriptures, or any part of them, in such a way that by this understanding you do not build up the twin love of God and neighbor, then you have not yet understood them.

Jerome

AD 340-420

- produced the Latin “Versio Vulgata” or commonly used translation of the Christian Scriptures between 382-405 CE, using Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek texts. It included all the texts of the Septuagint and the New/2nd Testament.
- God conveyed the message of salvation to the prophets and apostles who proclaimed it publicly. Their proclamation was written down much later. Hence, the written text contains discrepancies in language, history, and other details. The central core of God’s message of salvation has been transmitted intact. It is that core content which is divinely inspired.

Gregory the Great (540-604 CE)

some biblical passages cannot be “expounded literally because when they are taken in that superficial way they offer no instruction to the reader but only generate error.”

Medieval exegetes saw the Bible as a tool for teaching Christian beliefs and morals, especially answering the questions:

- what must we believe?
- what must we do?
- what must we hope for?

Peshat

- Rise of Islam & the Crusades introduced Europe to Arabic linguistics, grammar, and rhetoric which were easily applied to Hebrew.
- *Peshat*: discerning the author's intended meaning in context from linguistic and rhetorical clues in the text itself. Promised to yield one single contextual meaning. Results: Scripture was no longer cryptic; challenged the eternal relevance of Scripture by pointing out that some passages were only of historical interest, others were simply rhetorical devices. (e.g. Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki 1040-1105)
- Nicholas of Lyra (1270-1349) brought this focus to Christian scripture, augmenting the new "literal" reading with a mystical/spiritual interpretation, specifically a "typological" reading that remains true to literal sense of the text

Martin Luther (1483-1546)

- The relative importance of reformation slogans in Luther's writings (*Reading the Bible with Luther* by Timothy Wengert, 2013):
 - Sola Scriptura*: 20 times
 - Sola Gratia*: 200 times
 - Sola Fide*: 1200 times
- God communicates with humanity through 3 interrelated media each called the Word of God: (1) The Word made flesh = Jesus Christ; (2) the spoken Word/oral proclamation of the gospel; (3) the written Word/Scripture.
- The Scriptures are **the queen of the church to whom all are subject and whom all ought to obey AND the servant of its Lord and King — Jesus Christ** (Commentary on Galatians).

The Bible as **queen of the church, servant of Christ**

- *Doctrina Divinitus Inspirata*: the content/teaching/doctrine contained in the biblical texts is inspired, specifically “*was Christum treibet*” whatever emphasizes, drives or pushes Christ:

“This is the proper touchstone by which to measure all books, when a person observes whether or not they emphasize Christ ... whatever does not teach Christ is not apostolic, even if Peter or Paul taught it. Or again, what preaches Christ is apostolic, even if Judas, Annas, Pilate, and Herod did it.”

- Christ really speaks in and through Scripture, therefore Scripture is a means of grace.
- Scripture is self-authenticating, i.e. scriptural authority is a result of faith. The Bible is God’s Word because it “does God” to me. It makes believers in Christ out of us (law & gospel).

Council of Trent (1545-1563)

- defined the Jerome's *Versio Vulgata* as the official text for public preaching and teaching in the Roman Catholic Church.
- declared the apocryphal/deuterocanonical books of Tobit, Judith, Greek Esther, Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach, Baruch, Letter of Jeremiah, Additions to Daniel, 1 & 2 Maccabees to have the same status as the Old and New Testaments.
- These Scriptures, together with ancient Christian tradition, define faith and practice, with final authority to interpret them resting with the church through its pope and councils.

Johannes Andreas Quenstedt

(1617-1688)

The canonical Holy Scriptures in the original text are the infallible truth and free from every error, or in other words, in the canonical Holy Scriptures there is found no lie, no falsity, no error whether in the things or the words; but all things, and each single one, that are handed down in them are the most true, whether they pertain to doctrine or morals or history, chronology, topography, or nomenclature; no ignorance, no thoughtlessness or forgetfulness, no lapse of memory, can or dare be ascribed to the amanuenses of the Holy Ghost in their penning of the sacred writing.

(Plenary Verbal Inspiration)

Formula Consensus Helvetica (1675)

Swiss Reformed Church document declaring that not only the words but even the consonants and vowel points of the Hebrew text of the Old Testament were dictated by God.

- Plenary verbal inspiration was used in 17th century Europe to defend the concept of *Sola Scriptura* in the face of Catholic insistence on the equal status of Scripture & tradition; and to silence the discussion of the consequences of historical discoveries about the Bible.

America

- Plenary verbal inspiration was the belief held by Lutherans and other Protestants who settled in America in the 1600-1700's.
- 1893, Charles A. Briggs, professor of Hebrew Bible at Union Theological Seminary was removed from the ministry of the Presbyterian Church for teaching that there were errors in the original manuscripts of the Bible.
- *The Fundamentals*, a collection of essays published between 1910-1915, to affirm conservative Protestant (Reform) traditions against "higher criticism," liberal theology, Catholicism, socialism, modernism, atheism, evolutionism, and more.

Lutherans in America

Intersynodical (Chicago) Theses of 1928

“We pledge adherence to the Holy Scriptures as the only source and norm of doctrine and faith ... We believe and confess that Scripture not only contains God’s Word, but *is* God’s Word, and hence no errors or contradictions of any sort are found therein.”

Missouri Synod rejected the entire document as inadequate.

Iowa Synod was uncomfortable with its claim to unqualified biblical inerrancy.

Lutherans in America

Iowa Synod's (1928) clarification on what it meant by affirming "the old Lutheran doctrine" concerning the inspiration of the contents and form of the Scriptures and their consequent inerrancy, quotes the teaching of Dr. Sigmund Fritschl:

"When we confess the inerrancy of the Bible, as we now have it, we do not maintain that there are no inaccuracies of transcription, different readings, omissions or minor additions to the original text, or that there are not passages which to us seem to be contradictions or discrepancies, which however do not affect the interests of salvation and faith."

Lutherans in America

Missouri Synod (1932) *Brief Statement*

“We teach that the Holy Scriptures differ from all other books in the world in that they are the Word of God” ...
We teach also that the verbal inspiration of the Scriptures is not a so-called ‘theological deduction’ ...
Since the Holy Scriptures are the Word of God, it goes without saying that they contain no errors or contradictions, but that they are in all their parts and words the infallible truth, also in those parts which treat of historical, geographical and other secular matters.

Lutherans in America

Sandusky Declaration - ALC (1938)

“The Bible consists of a number of separate books, written at various times, on various occasions, and for various purposes. Their authors were living, thinking personalities, each endowed by the Creator with an individuality of his own, and each having his peculiar style, his own manner of presentation, using at times even various sources at hand ... by the virtue of inspiration, i.e. that unique operation of the Holy Spirit by which He supplied to the holy writers contents and fitting word ... the separate books of the Bible constitute an organic whole without contradiction and error.

Lutherans in America

The Baltimore Declaration - ULCA (1938)

- Word of God refers to
 - (1) the gospel message concerning Jesus Christ,
 - (2) the historical revelation of God in the life and work of Christ,
 - (3) the record of God's revelation in Scripture
- Scriptures are God's Word and the infallible truth in all matters pertaining to God's revelation & our salvation
- Some parts of the Bible are more important than other parts, e.g. those that emphasize Christ and his gospel
- Prefer "doctrinal" inspiration rather than verbal inspiration and inerrancy.

Excursus

Dei Verbum (Vatican II, 1965):

- Scripture is a particularly clear source of revelation, but not the only source; revelation is also found in creation, history, humanity, society, tradition, and reason.
- Divine inspiration is located in the community life of ancient Israel and the early church, not so much in the minds of individual authors.
- Inerrancy means that the Bible is a trustworthy guide to salvation.

Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy

(1978)

- Scripture is wholly and verbally God-given, without error or fault in all its teaching ... including history, science, biblical origins
- authority of the Church (its creeds, councils & declarations) is subordinate to Scripture
- God's revelation in Holy Scripture is progressive, *but no normative revelation has been given since the completion of the New Testament*
- inerrancy/infallibility of Scripture is NOT a doctrine invented by Scholastic Protestantism NOR a reaction to "higher criticism" (i.e. academic biblical scholarship)

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

(1988)

- confesses Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and the Gospel as the power of God for the salvation of all who believe.
- Jesus Christ is the Word of God incarnate...
- The proclamation of God's message to us as both Law and Gospel is the Word of God...
- The canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the written Word of God. Inspired by God's Spirit speaking through their authors, they record and announce God's revelation ... Through them God's Spirit speaks to us to create and sustain Christian faith and fellowship for service in the world.

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (1988)

- accepts the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired Word of God and the authoritative source and norm of its proclamation, faith and life.
- accepts Apostles', Nicene and Athanasian Creeds as true declarations of faith
- accepts Unaltered Augsburg Confession as a true witness to the Gospel
- accepts the confessional writings in the Book of Concord as valid interpretations of the faith

ELCA hierarchy of authority: Christ (lord), Scripture (queen/servant), Tradition (human witness/interpretation)

The Use of the Means of Grace

(ELCA, 1997)

- affirms the threefold understanding of God's Word as Jesus Christ, the proclamation of God's message, and the Scriptures, stating: "Through this Word in these forms, **as through the sacraments**, God gives faith, forgiveness of sins, and new life."

Scriptures are like the sacraments consisting of an earthly element — texts produced by people of faith for people of faith — united with the Word of God (Christ). God/Christ/Holy Spirit speaks to us through the human words of the Scriptures, just as Christ is truly present in, with, under & through the water, wine & bread.

If Scripture is the **queen of the church and servant of Christ** that functions like the sacraments, then

- we do not believe in the Bible, but rather in the living and abiding Word — Jesus Christ — for whom Scripture is a medium of revelation & communion.
- we can affirm the human origins of the biblical narratives b/c human origin does not diminish Scripture's potential to serve as a vehicle for Christ's presence. The incarnation of the divine Word in the babe of Bethlehem shows us that God comes to us in human, earthly forms with all their vulnerability and messiness.

David Brandos, *The Letter and the Spirit: Discerning God's Will in a Complex World* (2005)

- We cannot simply apply commandments and precepts from Scripture to present-day contexts; must be interpreted.
- We interpret Scripture through the perspective of Christ, i.e. spirit over letter of the law.
- God's revelation in Christ is not finished, so Scripture is a beginning point, it guides but does not bind.
- Jesus gave his disciples the authority to bind and loose, empowering the church to discern what is faithful in the particular time and place in which it is called to serve.

Williams (2009)

The Bible's primary importance for the church today is forming, informing, transforming, and reforming the faith of individuals and communities.

Bible does this when we approach it as **queen of the church, servant of Christ**, as a means of grace, that touches not just our hearts, but makes us think, engages us in intellectual struggle, and nurtures our spirits.

Now what?