

Four Approaches to Bible Study

Lutheran Theological Reading

Lutherans look for “five key principles” when studying the Bible.

1. **LAW AND GOSPEL** Law points to our sinfulness. Gospel is the Good News that God loves us. God proves his love for us in that “while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”⁴
2. **WHAT POINTS TO JESUS, THE CHRIST?** We read our Bibles to learn about him and things related to him.
3. **SCRIPTURE INTERPRETS SCRIPTURE.** That is, what does scripture teach as a whole?
 - a. **COMMANDMENTS** – Is this commandment for political, ethical or religious reasons?
 - b. **THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS** – That is, have the same mind as Jesus Christ who loved others unselfishly. Jesus suffered; prophets suffered; Christians also suffer.
 - c. **JUSTIFICATION BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH** – Our righteousness that places us in the covenant relationship with God cannot be earned by works. Jesus fulfills that requirement for us. Yet, we do good works because the Holy Spirit leads us to “Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children.”⁵
WE ARE AT THE SAME TIME BOTH SAINT AND SINNER.
4. **THE PLAIN MEANING OF THE TEXT** – How would the original listeners have interpreted the meaning? The Bible doesn’t have “secret” meanings. If it didn’t make good sense to the people of the time, would they have kept it and declared it to be important? Would it have been canonized? Not likely...
5. **PUBLIC INTERPRETATION** – The messages of the Bible are for everyone. Although you may dwell on one idea of a scripture passage at one time in your life and another aspect of it when your life’s circumstances change, realize that this is the beauty of the Holy Scriptures which were written ages ago and still speak to people today.

Holy Scripture does not, however, tell you anything specific to your personal circumstance such as where you should live, where and when you should invest your savings. The Bible is the Word of God.

Martin Luther translated the entire Bible into German. As he did so, he would have seen certain theological themes apparent throughout Scripture. Although we are not as totally immersed in scripture as he, we are invited to see, through his theology, the recurring themes of the Bible that gave him such joy, peace, and comfort.

Open the Bible. Join the conversation.

JP Meisenbach, May 2011

⁴ Romans 5:8

⁵ Ephesians 5:1

FOUR APPROACHES TO BIBLE STUDY

as presented in *Opening the Book of Faith* — Augsburg Fortress © 2008



First, select a Biblical text with a logical beginning and ending. Some Bibles have labeled sections that are useful for this selection.

An ancient Bible study method is *Lectio Divina* (dī·vēēn’ə). Its four steps are: ¹ Read or hear the text. ² Meditate on the text. ³ Respond with prayer. ⁴ Sit quietly to contemplate. These four approaches enhance understanding for the personal meditation.

The following are suggestions for meaningful questions that will lead to an understanding of the Biblical text. Discussion questions may be selected from any of the four approaches to Bible study.

Devotional Reading

This approach requires less research than the others. It is an opportunity for the individual to discover how the text becomes personal.

1. During quiet time a participant marks a few verses of the passage according to a scheme such as:
 - **Swedish Marking Method**
 - a verse that relates to personal experience
 - ? something that is not clear
 -  a new idea
 -  a verse to memorize
 - **T.R.I.P.** from Lutheran Outdoor Ministries
 - T = Thanks** Something in this verse makes me thankful.
 - R = Regret** Something in this verse causes me regret.
 - I = Intercession** What does this verse lead me to pray for?
 - P = Plan of Action** What action does the text encourage me to take today?
 - **S.P.E.C.K.** from David Mann
 - S = Sin** to confess
 - P = a Promise** to believe
 - E = an Example** to follow
 - C = a Command** to follow
 - K = Knowledge** to gain
2. Instead of the above marking methods, questions such as these from *Lutheran Study Bible* Augsburg Fortress © 2009 and *Opening the Book of Faith* Augsburg Fortress © 2008 can be used.
 - a. What in the passage scares, surprises, confuses, or challenges me?
 - b. What stories or memories does this text stir in me?
 - c. Who is speaking in this passage?

Four Approaches to Bible Study

- d. Who is being addressed in this passage? How am I like or different from that person or group?
- e. Why was this written or what situation is being addressed?
- f. What does this passage say to me, my church, my community, the nation, the world?
- g. If I took these words seriously, what person or situation would I see differently than I do now?
- h. What new possibility is God offering me? What is God encouraging me to do?
- i. What delights me in this text?
- j. What is God up to in this text?
- k. What images come to mind?
- l. What feelings surface from reading this text?

Another Devotional method of Bible study is Martin Luther's **Garland of Prayer**.

⁽¹⁾ Read or hear the text. ⁽²⁾ For what should I give thanks? ⁽³⁾ What does it cause me to regret in my daily life? ⁽⁴⁾ For what will I ask or petition?

Literary Reading

The Bible is a collection of writings. Using a literary method of Bible Study we can sometimes get a better understanding of how it was understood when it was written. These are examples of types of literature that are found in the Bible.

- The life of Jesus Christ and the beginnings of the Christian Church are in narrative story format. There are also many narratives in the Old Testament.
- Jesus introduced his disciples to the meaning of his parables in Mark 4: 1 – 20, The Sower and the Seed.
- The Psalms are poetry, the hymnbook of the Bible.
- The Old Testament is the history of God with his Chosen People.
- Eschatology is the study of the hereafter, life after death.
- There is apocalyptic literature which has particular characteristics including (1) unearthly creatures, (2) good vs. evil, (3) code names and numbers, (4) eschatology, (5) supernatural events, and (6) metaphors.
- There are metaphors, simile, and even an allegory which is in Galatians 4.
- The teachings of Jesus even included exaggeration (hyperbole) when it referred to a log in one's eye¹ or to cut off a hand that causes one to sin.²
- There are lists of data such as census and genealogies.
- Theology, letters, teachings, wise sayings, and even fables are in the Bible.
- There are prayers, Doxologies, Benedictions, hymns, creeds³ and even personal notes within the epistles.
- Prophecy and fulfillment of prophecy are certainly there.
- There are instructions, and scenes, and the teachings of Jesus.
- Battles, dreams, and tragedy and triumph are part of the Bible.

¹ Luke 6:42

² Matt. 5:30

³ 1 Cor. 15:3-4

Four Approaches to Bible Study

Perhaps you can name other types of literature in the Bible. Recognizing the literary context clarifies the meaning of the text we are reading.

What is the point of view of the book? Study Bibles give this information in the introduction to each of the 66 books of the Bible. For example, Matthew was written specifically to Jewish people to tell about Jesus' being the Messiah, the King of the Jews.

Look at the plot, the characters, the setting, the larger content, the theme of the passage.

- Ask **who, where, when, why, and how**.
- Discuss the characters' behaviors and how we can relate to them.
- Why is this text included in the Bible? **What is God telling us?**

Historical Reading

Like the literary method of Bible Study, the historical also requires some research. One may ask questions like:

- What do we know about the author?
- Where was the text written, and what do we know about that time and place?
- To whom and for whom was this written? What do we know about them?
- What situation is being addressed?
- Do social and political situations of the time shed light on this text?
- What do we know about the ancient world that may be helpful in understanding this text?

If these questions seem nearly impossible, some are! Find resources to learn all you can. Study Bibles have a wealth of information in their footnotes, background information at the beginning of each book, maps, charts, and cross-references. Find Bible Dictionaries, Commentaries, Bible atlases, and the lesson books from other Lutheran educational materials that may be current or in a storage room. Even the internet is helpful. Ask your pastor about reliable resources. Use several sources, for writers of commentaries and Sunday School materials occasionally disagree.

Answer the following questions.

- Who are the people listed in this passage?
- Where are these places on the map?
- What are the events to which the passage refers?
- What led up to this point?
- Why are the characters here?
- What did this mean then?
- What does it mean now?