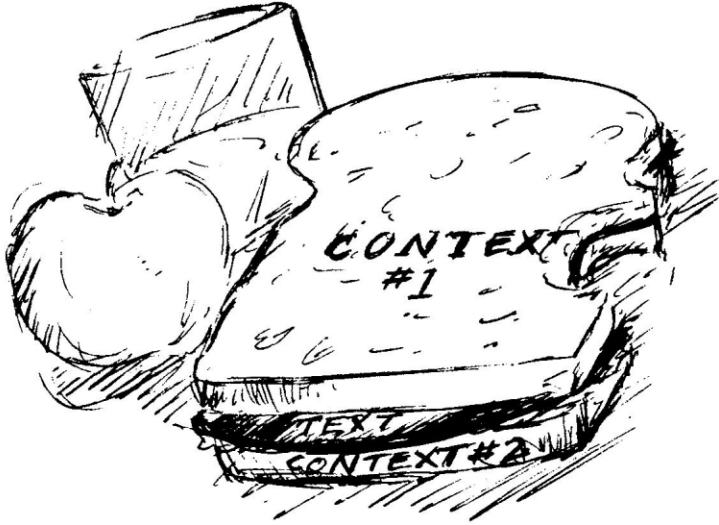


# Texts and Contexts

## The Use of the Bible in Campus Ministry A Lutheran Perspective

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The title of this essay suggests that the various contexts out of which and in which scripture addresses us are important for a Lutheran understanding of the use of the bible in ministry, be it on the campus or in the parish. These contexts, it seems to me, fall into two categories: (1) my context — that is, my confessional identity as a Lutheran as well as the particulars of my ministry — and (2) the canonical, literary and historical contexts out of which the bible comes. In what follows, then, I want to comment on these in that order.

### 1. My Context

Lutheran use of the bible is premised on its normative value for the church. The communion of which I am a member — the Lutheran Church in America — declares in its confession of faith that “this church acknowledges the Holy Scripture as the norm for the faith and life of the Church.”<sup>1</sup> And the

constitution of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America — to which the LCA, ALC and AELC will belong come January 1, 1988 — affirms that

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 centering in Jesus Christ. Through them God's Spirit speaks to us to create and sustain Christian faith and fellowship for service in the world.<sup>2</sup>

These two statements witness to what has been a mark of Lutheranism since the sixteenth century: namely — as in the words of the 1580 Formula of Concord — that

we believe, teach and confess that the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments are the only rule and norm according to which all doctrines and teachers must be appraised and judged, . . .<sup>3</sup>

And as ministers within this tradition, Lutheran pastors are bound by ordination vow to "preach and teach in accordance with the Holy Scriptures and these creeds and confessions."<sup>4</sup> For Lutherans, then, the bible is at the heart of the church's life, ministry and witness.

It is in my preaching and teaching that the centrality of scripture manifests itself in my calling as a campus pastor. Week in and week out I and my colleagues preach on one of the appointed texts — Old Testament or New — from the lectionary. The custom is followed whether we are preaching a brief homily in a midweek eucharist or a sermon in a local parish on Sunday. In the course of a school year, then, the students with whom we work will have heard the Gospel proclaimed by us on the basis of a variety of biblical pericopes.

The teaching of scripture in my ministry takes place in bible studies in our campus center, in the Sunday morning class I do for students in a nearby congregation, and in the university classroom as an adjunct instructor in the Religious Studies Department. In the latter instance, since I am teaching in a public institution, my approach to scripture has to be by necessity as objective and non-sectarian as possible. Thus historical-critical methodology is employed. But my use of these tools is not restricted to the neutral context of the university classroom. Rather modern approaches to the study of

scripture are equally at home for Lutherans in our student centers and campus parishes. If we are utilizing critical methods for the study of scripture *in the contexts of pulpit and parish hall*, and not just in the university classroom, then it seems to me that it is the further responsibility of campus ministry to make students aware of *the contexts out of which the bible comes*. Such consideration raises, I suggest, three issues: the authority of texts, the integrity of texts, and the historical nature of texts.

## 2. The Authority of Texts

The students with whom I work generally arrive at the university with a straightforward understanding of biblical authority. It is the Word of God. Yet rare is the student who has taken the time to reflect on what that statement means. Does it signify some mechanical view of inspiration? Does it equate inspiration with canonicity? Or vice versa? Does it require a view of the bible that it is without error in all of its parts?

One way through which I try to get students to think about what scripture *is* and *how it is authoritative* is to raise for them the question of the Old Testament Apocrypha. Historically Lutherans have been in the position of recognizing apocryphal materials such as Sirach, Baruch, the Wisdom of Solomon, I-II Maccabees, etc. as quasi-canonical. And they may well have been canonical for Lutherans if it had not been for Luther's debate with John Eck in Leipzig in July of 1519. At issue was the efficacy of prayers offered for the dead. To Luther's criticism of the practice Eck countered by quoting II Maccabees 12:45, where Judas the Maccabee "made atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin." If Luther claims that dogma must have scriptural warrant, here is a biblical text that supports a doctrine which Luther opposes. In Eck's mind Luther was being inconsistent in his appeals to scripture. Now this incident, when coupled with the distinction of which Luther was already aware between the Jewish canon and the larger collection of books in the Vulgate and Septuagint (a distinction made by Athanasius as well as Jerome),<sup>5</sup> led him in his German Bible of 1534 to collect the books of the Old Testament Apocrypha into a separate section and to preface them with the note "These books are not held equal to the

Scriptures, but are useful and good to read.”

This bit of Lutheran history, and subsequent Lutheran liturgical use of apocryphal texts,<sup>6</sup> comes as a surprise to most students. If such materials are “useful and good to read,” and if they can be employed in Lutheran worship, what does that say about questions of canon and authority? Moreover, if one is tempted to equate authority with inspiration, and inspiration with canonicity, there are surprises. Albert Sundberg has pointed out that in the early church the idea of inspired books was far broader than any sense of canon. Inspired books included both those that were canonical as well as those that were not. Inspiration, then, was never used as a means of dividing between included and excluded books.<sup>7</sup>

When students become aware of the difference between canon and inspiration, and of Luther’s appreciation for some apocryphal texts, yet his disdain for some canonical — e.g., James (“An Epistle of Straw”) and Esther (“A Jewish book”) — it raises for them some basic questions about the authority of the bible. At this point, then, I’ve found that students are ready to begin to work with the Lutheran notion of “a canon within the canon,” viz. that it is the message of judgment and promise, Law and Gospel that gives scripture its authority. For Luther the issue is not inspiration or canonicity, but the question, “does the Scripture drive us to Christ?” Does what we meet in the bible speak to us of the graciousness of God over against the vanity of human effort to effect salvation? If so, then and only then, does the text have authority for the faith and life of the Christian.

### **3. The Integrity of Texts**

One consequence of the use of the lectionary in Lutheran worship is that scripture is often heard only in isolated pericopes. When this is taken in conjunction with the Sunday School experience of most students — where the bible seems to be an anthology of stories about personalities (Abraham, Moses, Joseph, etc.) — scripture for most students becomes a random collection of pieces of narrative without any real focus or intent. Thus a concern in my use of the bible in campus ministry is to enable students to see that texts have integrity: viz., that biblical books were composed with an intentional

outline in mind, that they have a particular purpose and development. I want students to see biblical writers as artists and theologians, not as journalists. Of assistance in this enterprise are the contributions of modern literary or rhetorical criticism to the study of the bible,<sup>8</sup> as well as the perspectives offered by comparative literature from the ancient world.<sup>9</sup>

Now to get students to change their approach to bible study is not easy. They've been accustomed to working with discrete pericopes and proof-texts, each of which is thought to have instant application or relevance. It takes time, then, to get them to read the whole of a biblical book and to have them think in terms of overall thematic and rhetorical features. Yet it can be done and it has its rewards.

One example of such an approach to the integrity of the text is a Sunday morning bible study I recently concluded in a local parish. Entitled "Sacred Mountain and Sacred Text," it was a study of Matthew 5-7, the Sermon on the Mount. But rather than starting off with Matt. 5:1 and doing a verse by verse examination of the three chapters, we spent the first several sessions focusing on Matthew as a whole and the nature of the community for whom the Gospel was written. We looked at the structure of the Gospel, we marked off the five sections in which Matthew arranges the teaching material (cf. Matt. 7:28, 11:1, 13:53, 19:1, 26:1), and then we moved on to discuss the significance of mountains in both the Old Testament (Sinai, Zion, Gerizim, etc.), in primal traditions, and in Matthew itself (4:8-10, 5:1, 15:29-31, 17:1-9, 21:1, 24:3, 28:16-20).<sup>10</sup> Thus students were able to gain an understanding of what Matthew was about when he chose to organize these sayings of Jesus into a sermon preached from a mountain. For Matthew Jesus' word about a higher righteousness is none other than the *Torah* that was to go out from Mt. Zion to all nations in the last days (cf. Isa. 2:3, Micah 4:2). As Jesus witnessed to that *Torah* of the last days in his life, death and resurrection, now Matthew's community — the church — is called to proclaim it to all nations (Matt. 28:16-20 — n.b., on a "mountain"). Doing bible study in this way, then, can give students a feel for the overarching themes, patterns and intentions with which biblical writers work. With such a broader, or more wholistic, grasp of the text the student is better prepared to ask the question as to what the text means for today. For

only when he or she has a sense of what the text meant back then, can the student begin to let that text address us today as a living word of God.

#### **4. The Historical Nature of Texts**

Along with viewing the bible as an anthology of stories about personalities, I have found students to have little, if any, awareness of the ancient world — be it in terms of history, culture or geography. To ask the dates of the Davidic-Solomonic empire or to inquire if they know the location of ancient Assyria draws most often blank stares. And although they — as do most people — find archaeology fascinating, it tends to be regarded as “treasure hunting” (a la “Raiders of the Lost Ark”), or as something that can “prove the bible.”

I’ve found it important, therefore, to spend some time with students on the history, culture and geography of the biblical world. But to do this could be deadly, resembling the kind of academic activity known to them from their History of Western Civilization course. Hence I choose to take advantage of the library of colored slides I’ve assembled from my travels and archaeological work in the Middle East. Through slide presentations I take students to “Bronze Age Syria” and to the initial season of excavation at Tell Qarqur on the Orontes River. And a little humor makes it all the more interesting. The title “Secrets of a Sultry Summer in Sodom” makes the group all the more attentive to a program on the 1981 excavation at Bab edh-Dhra along the S.E. shore of the Dead Sea, while the juxtaposition of a slide of a mason’s trowel and that of a bulldozer provides an occasion to talk about tools and methods — about what archaeology can do and cannot do. Colored slides, first person anecdotes about life in contemporary semitic cultures, and passing around the room some broken pottery fragments have gone a long way, I’ve found, in awakening student interest in the context out of which the text of scripture comes. As they feel the texture of an Early Bronze Age potsherd, they’re reminded that the texts of scripture are rooted in time and in space.

#### **5. The Context of Students’ Lives**

But does it work? Does the attempt to deal with the author-

ity, integrity and historical particularity of the text — using the tools of modern biblical criticism — make it possible for students to grow in their appreciation of scripture as the norm for their faith and life? In answer, I can only point to the comments offered by students with whom I have worked. One young man, when asked what he gained from the kind of bible study we've done together, remarked that for the first time he realized that the biblical authors were real people writing to real communities which were troubled by questions of destiny and purpose, despair and suffering. Having come out of a background where the worlds of the bible and today were seen in simple, black and white terms, it was an eye-opener for him to know that the world of Jeremiah, Job and Jesus was as complex and as nuanced as ours is. And if the bible witnesses to a conviction that God was at work in times such as those, he felt himself free to believe that this same God is also at work amidst the competing ideologies, vocational uncertainties and moral ambiguities with which he and other students live. Seeing the *text in context* enabled the Word therein to come alive for him — becoming “sharper than any two-edged sword . . . discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb. 4:12), and bearing to us the saving grace of God.

1. 1962 LCA Constitution, Art. II, Sec. 3.
2. 1986 ELCA Constitution, 2.02.
3. Formula of Concord, Epitome, Rule and Norm 1. In Theodore G. Tappert, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), p. 464.
4. *Occasional Services* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1982), p. 194.
5. Athanasius was the first to use the term “apocrypha” to designate those books of the Septuagint which did not appear in the Jewish canon. He continued, however, to cite books of the apocrypha with the same formula he employed for canonical material, *sicut scriptum est*.
6. A summary of the Lutheran liturgical use of apocryphal materials during the Reformation and Post-Reformation periods is in correspondence from A. C. Piepkorn in the “Theological Observer” section of *Concordia Theological Monthly* 43 (1972) 449-53. In *The Lutheran Book of Worship* readings from the apocrypha are employed in the Daily Lectionary, the propers for the Commemoration of a Theologian, and in the Service of Readings at the Easter Vigil.
7. Albert C. Sundberg, “The Bible Canon and the Christian Doctrine of Inspiration,” *Interpretation* 29 (1975) 352-71.

10 *Association of Southern Baptist Campus Ministers*

8. For example cf. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981).

9. For example cf. John Dominic Crossan, *Sayings Parallel: A Workbook for the Jesus Tradition* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986).

10. Terence L. Donaldson, *Jesus on the Mountain: A Study in Matthean Theology* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985).