

A Survey of Lutheran Hermeneutics

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Scripture Alone!

"Scripture Alone!" is the key foundational premise of the Reformation, as our Lutheran forefathers confessed:

- "First, then, we receive and embrace with our whole heart the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as... the only true standard by which all teachers and doctrines are to be judged."¹
- "The Word of God alone should be and remain the only standard and rule of doctrine, to which the writings of no man should be regarded as equal, but to which everything should be subjected."²

All teaching is to be tested against what the Bible says. We are so committed to this principle that the authority of Scripture reigns over these quotes from the Formula of Concord too. The teaching of all men, even of our confessions, is normed by the one source that holds all other teaching accountable, the inerrant Scriptures.

The Lutheran church is not alone in her desire to teach what the Bible says. Most Protestant, Reformed, and non-denominational churches also boldly confess the phrase "Scripture Alone!" They do so with such zeal that their confessions have words very similar, if not identical, to those from the Formula of Concord above. But despite the similar words, these heterodox fellowships have different doctrine. How can this be? How can we all say "Scripture Alone" but teach different things from the one, same Bible?

This is the study of hermeneutics, the theory and methodology of interpretation. Different churches have different approaches to the Bible. If they differ in how the Bible is to be interpreted, it should be no surprise they come to different conclusions.

"Scripture Alone" might be the same words that come across the lips, but those words mean different things to different churches in how they interpret the Bible. This paper reviews how Lutherans put "Scripture Alone" into practice. You will see that the other groups say "Scripture Alone" but also use human reason to contradict what Scripture plainly says. We want not just to say "Scripture Alone" but truly let Scripture speak for itself in all matters: "My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth" (I John 3:18).

The foundation of our study will be Paul's advice to a young Pastor Timothy: "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness" (II Tim. 3:16).

¹ FC SD, Rule and Norm, 3

² FC SD, Rule and Norm, 9

If the Holy Scriptures are profitable and sufficient for all doctrine, that must include our teaching on how the Bible is to be interpreted. To the Lutheran church, the slogan "Scripture Alone" is not a mere phrase uttered across our lips. It is our commitment always to submit to what the Bible says about itself.

Verbal Inspiration

God gave the prophets and apostles the very words and thoughts to teach and write.

The purpose of all Scripture is to make man "wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus" (II Tim. 3:15). All doctrine is intended to preserve the believer in the saving faith. Scripture has a life-giving nature, and to this end, God inspired the authors of the Old and New Testaments with His divine breath such that "holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit" (II Pet. 1:21).

We believe that every word of the Bible is specifically inspired. How could the God who expresses His care for you by saying that "the very hairs of your head are all numbered" (Luke 12:7) not have the same and more care for the words of Holy Scripture. Each has been carefully chosen out of His divine love for you. For this reason, both the first and last inspired authors of the Bible warn against changing any word:

- "You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it." Deut. 4:2
- "If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life." Rev. 22:19-20

No part of the Bible is any less God's Word than another. The words "all," "add," and "take away" are all-inclusive. The Lord Jesus taught the same: "One jot or one tittle will by no means pass" (Matt. 5:18).

Take careful note that the Bible consistently pairs the individually written words with their meaning:

- "The words of the prophecy of this book." Rev. 22:18
- "The words that I speak to you are spirit." John 6:63
- "For I will give you a mouth and wisdom." Luke 21:15

Verbal inspiration may be summarized in three points:

1. God gave the prophets and the apostles both the words and thoughts (meaning) to write and teach.
2. God has inspired both the words and the meaning of the Bible together in one divine breath.
3. The words and their meaning are inextricably intertwined. They cannot be understood apart from each other.

Some churches teach that the words should not be changed but that the meaning does not necessarily come from the words. The Roman Catholic church certainly confesses this, that Scripture cannot be understood apart from papal authority and tradition. This idea can also be found in certain circles of the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod (LCMS) and International Lutheran Council (ILC) fellowship, that the Scriptures can only be properly understood in the context and lens of their confessions. The Reformed churches teach that the meaning of the words of the Bible can be changed when the plain reading does not make

sense to human reason. In each case, they teach that the words are inspired but not necessarily the thoughts expressed by those words alone.

The liberal churches today, like the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) fellowship, take a different path to dismantle words and meaning. They teach that God gave the authors of the Bible "holy thoughts," but by the time those divine inklings made it to ink and paper, incorrect words could have been penned by men. Thus, they confess that the Bible "contains" the Word of God somewhere behind imperfect words. This allows cultural changes in morals and opinions of God to be read into and behind the words of the Bible.

It is important, then, that we maintain that God gave the prophets and apostles the very words and thoughts to teach and write.

The Clarity of Scripture

We believe in the perspicuity of Holy Scripture, that God's Word is objectively clear and that God's desire is to make His Word clear to you.

God teaches that the Bible is clear: "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Ps. 119:105). God defines what is "good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom. 12:2), and His Word draws the lines, revealing what He defines: "For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow" (Heb. 4:12). There is no doubt that when God speaks, the matter is clear.

But one might object, and many do, if the Bible is so clear, why does confusion abound as to what it says? The promises of God are certain and true. He cannot be to blame for this problem: "God is not the author of confusion but of peace" (I Cor. 14:33). When Scripture is unclear to the individual, that does not change what God says about His Word. The Bible is always objectively clear.

The fault, then, when one does not understand a word, a verse, or a doctrine of Scripture, is man's. The confusion comes from our sin and weakness. Our lack of clarity concerning God's clear Word can fall into one of two categories:

1. The Lord Jesus warns against unbelief or unwillingness to learn. If you come to His Word looking for a preconceived notion, you will not hear what He is teaching. You will only hear what you want:
 - As the Lord Jesus told the Jews, "You search the Scriptures... but you are not willing." John 5:39-40
 - As He told the Sadducees, "You are mistaken, not knowing the Scriptures." Matt. 22:29
2. God shows that we do not carefully pay attention to the language He uses. Man's confusion often comes from a quick glance at words out of context or from a lack of understanding of how language works:
 - "Jesus spoke of his death, but they thought that He was speaking about taking rest in sleep." John 11:13
 - "But He was speaking of the temple of His body." John 2:21

If misunderstanding comes from our sin and weakness, then proper understanding must be His work of grace. The Holy Spirit works this grace in the heart of the believer where and when He wishes: "The breath of the Almighty gives him understanding" (Job 32:8). And God sends His Spirit of enlightenment by means of His Word: "The entrance of Your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple" (Ps. 119:130).

And on two counts, (1) since His Word is the means of grace meant to make men wise unto salvation and (2) since He desires all men to be saved, it follows that His constant, active desire is to make His Word clear to you, despite our shortcomings.

The perspicuity of Scripture may be summarized in three points:

1. The Bible is objectively clear.
2. If a part of the Bible is unclear, it is due to our sin and weakness.
3. God's desire is to make His Word clear to you.

It should be no surprise that the churches which break apart the words of the Bible from their meaning also claim that the Bible itself, to some degree, is unclear. They say human reason or tradition must fill in the gaps and make it clear to you.

Thus, another key distinction is that we maintain the clarity of Scripture.

The Historical-Grammatical Method

We adhere to the linguistic usage of the Bible, in our interpretation of words and sentences.

God created man with a language faculty, the ability to speak. Adam spoke to God on the first day he existed. Language, both words and grammar, were part of man's creation. Before the destruction of the tower of Babel all men had the same language. After Babel, the power of the Word of God diversified man's speech into a variety of languages: all different but all still intelligible and with intricate grammar. Thus, the diversity of grammars throughout the world are governed by the God who makes and preserves all things. Grammar, the order of language, is a creation of the God of order.

We discussed earlier that each word of the Bible was individually chosen by God. He has also knit them together into a grammar by the same inspiration: "These things we also speak, not in words which man's wisdom teaches but [words] which the Holy Spirit teaches" (I Cor. 2:13). To study how language operates is to behold a masterpiece and wonder of God: "The works of the Lord are great, studied by all who have pleasure in them" (Ps. 111:2). This study of language is a crucial component for the study of Scripture, because God has chosen to put language to use. He created language, and He uses it to convey His eternal truth to man: "The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life" (John 6:63).

Throughout the Scriptures, God refers man back to His own use of grammar and language, as His means of self-revelation:

- "Has not the Lord God of Israel commanded...?" Judges 4:6
- "Did I not say to you...?" John 11:40

As part of the clarity of His Word, God purposefully chose to use the familiar language of the people to whom He spoke: "But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may do it" (Deut. 30:14). God spoke in words and patterns that were immediately

comprehended by the original audience: "For we are not writing any other things to you than what you read or understand" (II Cor. 1:13).

The comprehension of language is part of the human reason with which God has endowed man. He has given us human reason and the ability to understand language for a purpose. And God puts such human reason to use as His servant when He speaks His Word to us: "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God" (Rom. 10:17).

Thus, Lutherans have always said it is important to study the original languages of the Bible (Greek and Hebrew) as well as the culture and historical circumstances of the original audiences: "Who among us has ever denied the proper use of reason in theology? Do we not use reason as often as we give attention to the peculiarity of the language or the structure of the context?"³

To apply this linguistic knowledge to the Bible is a ministerial use of reason (where human reason serves as servant to God's Word), because in such study we rid ourselves of our preconceived notions and assumptions in order to humble ourselves into the place of the original audience.

This historical grammatical method has always been employed by the orthodox Lutheran church: "We must everywhere adhere to the simple, plain words of Scripture and its peculiar style and meaning, which the letter or the grammar and the natural way of speaking convey, as God has created language among men."⁴

This ministerial use of reason is a spiritual gift from God. On Pentecost, God gave the apostles an amazing display of such linguistic gifts all at once, in an instant. Today, the Lutheran theologian needs to spend much time in the Word and learning to receive gifts and abilities in language, but the miracle of Pentecost proves that such study is God's means by which He bestows understanding and wisdom to you today.

Many false churches today depart from the grammar of the Bible, claiming it alone cannot be trusted. The LWF fellowship widely accepts and promotes the higher critical method of Scriptural interpretation. This worldly approach to Scripture dismantles the text, claiming the books of the Bible we have today were not written by the authors indicated but that they were pieced together over time from various earlier accounts. They seek to investigate the motives and personal opinions of each man who supposedly had their hand in what we have today.

Further, they claim many passages had one meaning or understanding of the text for the original audience and then another separate meaning applied at a later time or by us. Take, for example, "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son." Higher criticism says that to the Jewish people who first read Isaiah, "virgin" meant a young woman who would give birth to a child after she got married. They claim Matthew then applied this passage to Jesus with a different meaning, claiming to show Jesus was born of a virgin.

The churches of the Missouri Synod/International Lutheran Council fellowship tend to reject such gross distortions of God's Word and doubt of God's miraculous ways, but several of their seminaries, as in the LCMS and SELK, have begun to accept higher critical

³ Balthasar Meisner *Disputio de Calvinismo fugiendo Thesis 83* – Pieper Vol. I p. 198

⁴ Reply to Erasmus' Tract *On the Freedom of the Will* (1525) XVIII, 2271 f.; SL XVIII, 1820

methodologies and conclusions. They claim that the old historical grammatical method is too rigid and does not allow one to sufficiently explore the "human aspects" of Biblical authorship.

The danger of these methods is making human reason master over Scripture (magisterial use of reason). Once man departs from the grammar of the text as the way God conveys His meaning, man exalts himself over God and claims to know better than how God has chosen to reveal Himself.

Sadly, a great variety of errors in interpretation across Christendom are due to a departure from the grammar and plain reading of the text. They read into the words what they want to find in the words.⁵ In these fellowships, there may be no study of the original languages or of how language works at all. And if there is, the grammar and plain reading are not upheld as the sure meaning.

It is an important distinction, then, for us to maintain the historical grammatical method.

Single Intended Sense

We maintain that each passage of Scripture has but one intended sense.

When you use God's gifts of language and grammar to unlock the plain reading of a passage from Scripture, you may rest assured that you have found the meaning. There are no hidden meanings apart from the grammar. That would be God speaking apart from what God has said. This concept, that God's meaning is so tightly connected to the grammar and language of the text, can be difficult for many to believe.

Many look for double or multiple meanings, because we sinners do not always talk with one another in just one sense. We are accustomed to so many double meanings and misunderstandings in our daily conversations that it is easy to think God speaks this way too. These layers of meanings range from the seemingly innocent (like casual humor and bad puns) to the purposefully evil (like misleading statements and lies).

The Apostle Paul was accused of meaning something other than the words he spoke as an attack on his proclamation of Christ crucified as your eternal life. When the Apostle intended to visit Corinth on his way to Macedonia and back (but couldn't) his enemies claimed nothing he said could be trusted. This was no mere attack on his personal integrity; it was an attack on the Gospel!

The Apostle proceeded to defend God's inerrant Word. Although in the matter of the visit, God's will turned out to be different than his, it changed not one word of Paul's sincere intention. He urged the Corinthians not to doubt the plain reading of his words: "When I was planning this, did I do it lightly?" (II Cor. 1:17a).

He defended the integrity of the entire apostolic witness: "Or the things I plan, do I plan according to the flesh, that with me there should be 'Yes, Yes,' and 'No, No?' But as God is faithful, our word to you was not 'Yes' and 'No'" (II Cor. 1:17b-18).

⁵ The Lutheran church intent in Biblical interpretation is exegesis (allowing the grammar and plain reading to reveal what God says). Other churches turn to eisegesis (reading into the words what they want to find there).

Here, the Apostle says he does not talk in hidden or double meanings, as we of the flesh are accustomed to. For example, you might ask your wife, "What do you want for your birthday?" She answers, "Not a thing!" But what she really means is something entirely different – "You better get me something!" – saying "Yes" and "No" in the same breath.

Thanks be to God that He speaks nothing like we do:

- For our boasting is this: the testimony of our conscience that we conducted ourselves in the world in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom but by the grace of God, and more abundantly toward you. For we are not writing any other things to you than what you read or understand. (II Cor. 1:12-13)

This is our proof passage for the single intended sense of Scripture. God's Word is simple, clear, and direct. Through the verbal inspiration of the prophets and apostles, God says what He means and means what He says.

But how are you supposed to know what God means? By the plain reading of His words:

- "But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may do it." (Deut. 30:14)
- "For we are not writing any other things to you than what you read or understand." (II Cor. 1:13)

Before the Reformation, the Roman church taught that Scripture could have not just double meaning but up to a fourfold meaning:

1. Literal sense - what the words themselves seem to teach
2. Allegorical sense - what is symbolically taught beneath the words
3. Tropological sense - what moral lesson the passage can be applied to
4. Anagogic sense - what the passage taught about the end days or end times

Who made these categories? What confidence could you have as to what God really wanted you to know? Why would the God of love talk to us in such a roundabout or hidden way?

Luther saw that this approach only caused doubt: "By doing this they brought it about that they indeed retained the words of Scripture, but so divided and torn that they left us absolutely fixed sense by which we might clothe the souls."⁶ When Luther returned to the Scriptures in the Reformation, he also returned to the single intended sense of Scripture: "To interpret Scripture in more than one way and in more than one sense I regard not only as dangerous and unfit for teaching, but also as lessening and weakening the name and reputation of Scripture, which must forever be taken in one certain meaning and sense."⁷

In so doing, the Lutheran Reformation, by God's grace, followed the pattern of every Reformation God has worked by the power of His Word. When the Jews returned to Jerusalem after the Babylonian Exile, God restored public worship there, the preaching and teaching of His Word. In this Old Testament Reformation too, there was a clear commitment to the single intended sense of Scripture. Ezra and the other public ministers took great care when it came to interpreting God's Word to the people: "So they read distinctly from the

⁶ *Exposition of the First Twenty-two Psalms*, 1758; SL IV, 1303

⁷ *Large Exposition of Genesis*, chap. 15, v. 7, I, 1434; SL I, 950

book, in the Law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped them to understand the reading" (Nehemiah 8:8).

The Bible is very specific that they gave *the* meaning. Not what it "could" mean. Not various meanings. The one sense, the one reading.

The liberal churches today (like the ELCA and LWF) deny the truth of an objective meaning, teaching that the only important meaning is the meaning to you. They claim the original author had flawed opinions, and what you get out of it is divine speaking to you.

Other more conservative fellowships (LCMS and SELK) claim that the single intended sense is too rigid and limits all God wants to tell you. Their seminaries teach that Scripture can have double meanings or "complex meanings." It is taught that one can find hidden references to the Lord's Supper and allegorical references throughout the Bible. They blur the lines between the plain reading of the text and what else it "could" be saying.

It is sadly rare to find a church that holds to the single intended sense of Scripture. There are many doctrinal differences within most fellowships. If Scripture can have multiple meanings, how could there be doctrinal unity? Thus, in the vast majority of churches, false teaching is allowed to have equal standing alongside true teaching for a given passage of the Bible.

It is important, then, that we maintain the single intended sense of Scripture.

Scripture Interprets Scripture

We let the Scriptures interpret themselves.

The single intended sense of Scripture gives great confidence that the one and only meaning of a passage is found in the grammar and plain reading. But what if the Christian studies the grammar closely and still feels lacking? You might have consulted dictionaries and lexicons but the meaning still seems unclear. You may very well face one of these scenarios, and you most likely have:

- The poetry of the passage leaves you wondering what God is saying.
- Unknown information leaves you wondering why what God said what He did.
- You may have multiple options before you and are unable to decide which is correct.
- You think you know what it says, but it seems to contradict another portion of Scripture.

What do you do?

We saw earlier that God's Word is always objectively clear. If the verse in question is unclear, it only account of your own sin and weakness.

Thus, you have two options.

The first option is to deny your weakness and forge on ahead regardless with a personal opinion. In other words, you could make something up. A great number of sloppy interpreters do just this, reading into unclear passages of Scripture all sorts of man-made doctrines: post- and premillennialism, the rapture, and a whole host of end-times conspiracy theories. Other false teachers take a seemingly contradictory statement in Scripture and try to

redefine the rest of Biblical doctrine, as the Roman Catholic church does with James' statement that "faith without works is dead."

Such contortions of God's Word come from a denial that the passage in question is unclear. The root error, then, is an unwillingness to humble oneself and admit that he is weak.

So, the Lutheran interpreter, by God's grace, follows the second option, to honestly admit to God the self-obvious: "This is unclear to me!" No better advice can be given than to "lean not on your own understanding" (Prov. 3:5), but rather to seek the Spirit, who "helps in our weaknesses" (Rom. 8:26). Humble yourself and ask God to show you the meaning: "Teach me, O Lord, the way of Your statutes" (Ps. 119:33). But prepared for where you will find His answer... in another part of the Bible: "Give me understanding according to Your Word" (Ps. 119:169).

The Apostle Paul clarifies that the key to understanding one verse of Scripture is found somewhere else in Scripture, when He says: "For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God" (I Cor. 2:11).

How do you know what I am thinking? You only know if I tell you. When I speak to you, I reveal my hidden thoughts, which you could never know without my words. So too, God. You only know what He thinks when He discloses the meaning to you through His words.

God gives you all-sufficient access to His inner thoughts by His Spirit in the Word, namely the teaching of the prophets and the apostles: "My Spirit who is upon you, and My words which I have put in your mouth" (Is. 59:21). If you have a question about one part of Scripture, it is only clarified by other parts of Scripture.

Thus, the Lutheran church desires to allow God to speak for Himself by the principle that Scripture is its own best interpreter:

- Hence Scripture is for itself its own light; and it is indeed excellent when Scripture interprets itself.⁸
- It is above and before all the surest way to discover the meaning of Scripture that you seek to understand it by comparing and studying the various passages.⁹

When you use Scripture to interpret Scripture, a guiding rule is to allow the clear passages to shed light on the unclear. One must beware not to use an unclear passage to change the meaning of a clear one: "Can the blind lead the blind? Will they not both fall into the ditch?" (Luke 6:39). Some examples of the unclear used to distort the clear teaching of other Scripture:

- The Jehovah Witnesses use the number 144,000 of Rev. 7:4 to contradict "a great multitude which no one could number" of Rev. 7:9 and elsewhere.
- The Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and various Reformed groups use Jesus' commendation of good works on judgment day in the parable of the sheep and the goats (Matt. 25:31-46) to contradict justification by faith alone.

⁸ *Church Postil*, Gospel for St. James' Day, SL XI, 3108

⁹ *Exposition of Deuteronomy*, Chap. 1, v. 19-26, SL XI 2335

Such an approach reads an assumption into an unclear passage and then superimposes that false idea upon the rest of the Bible. This allows human reason to reign as master over Scripture.

The Lutheran interpreter confesses his weakness to God and admits the passage appears unclear. By grace, he turns back to God, looking for the answer somewhere else in His Word. In this way, human reason sits before Scripture as its humble servant.

Scripture interprets Scripture can take a variety of forms, but each of them allows the Bible to speak for itself. Some examples:

1. Search the immediate context:
 - a) Proponents of the rapture read their false teaching into: "Then two men will be in the field: one will be taken and the other left" (Matt. 24:40). They claim that "true believers" will be taken into heaven before a great worldwide tribulation, leaving unbelievers behind to suffer.
 - b) But Jesus' context clarifies this passage: "For as in the days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and did not know until the flood came and took them all away, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be" (Matt. 24:39). Those "taken" are the unbelievers taken away by the Flood into hell. Those left behind are the believers, preserved by God in the ark. On the last day, you will remain standing in a new creation for eternity, while all unbelievers, sin, and evil will be taken away into hell.
2. Use a clear parallel passage to clarify the unclear:
 - a) Some passages of Revelation and other places may appear to depict the Last Day as a long, drawn-out process.
 - b) But Jesus' clearest teachings show that Judgment Day will come in an instant: "For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be" (Matt. 24: 27). In light of this passage, the other passages are strong imagery of the power and victory that will be accomplished in that instant.
3. The whole of Scripture, the standard of the faith, clarifies the unclear. No passage can contradict the doctrine of the Bible as a whole: "The Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35). The unclear must be interpreted and understood "in proportion to our faith" (Rom. 12:6) and not in opposition to it.
 - a) The Pope and others claim that "faith without works is dead" (James 2:20) shows the necessity of good works to earn heaven.
 - b) But in light of the overall teaching of Scripture that "man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law" (Rom. 3:28) and that "it is God who works in you both to will and to do" (Phil. 2:13), "faith without works is dead" is understood as a description of what naturally flows from the saving faith.

We maintain that Scripture is its own best interpreter. This principle, Scripture interprets Scripture, can be summarized in three points:

1. If a passage is unclear to you, admit it is the case.
2. Turn back to Scripture for the answer.
3. We let the clear interpret the unclear. The unclear does not change the clear.

Literal vs. Figurative

When you investigate a passage of Scripture in terms of the grammar and common usage, a constant question is before you: Is this word literal or figurative? Is it the sense of the letters or poetry? This question has been a common source of confusion between God and man.

Scripture shows several cases where God used poetry, but man assumed He spoke literally:

- Nicodemus thought "born again" meant he had to come out of his mother's womb a second time, but Jesus meant spiritual life by faith in Him. (John 3)
- The Jews thought they were "children of Abraham" by genealogical lines, but God makes you an inheritor of Abraham's promises by believing in the same Savior he did. (Matt. 3)

There are also times when God spoke literally, but man assumed He used poetry:

- Jesus often spoke of His bodily resurrection from the dead, but the disciples questioned "what the rising from the dead meant" (Mark 10:10).
- God prophesied the destruction of Jerusalem and the Babylonian exile, but the false prophets twisted the words into a figurative meaning. (Jeremiah and Isaiah)

We covered above how such unclarity is our fault. Therefore, you should make the decision between the literal and figurative with great seriousness: "He who has My word, let him speak My word faithfully" (Jer. 23:28).

The literal reading of a word is its plainest definition. It is the sense of the letters, what the word immediately brings to mind in its common usage. We tend to consider literal language among the clear passages of Scripture, because it matches the dictionary definition.

On the other hand, poetry can often become the victim of our subjectivity. Man faces the temptation to read into figurative language what he wants. More searching of Scripture is involved in order to understand God's true meaning in these cases. Thus, we tend to consider poetry among the unclear passages of Scripture

God warns us against taking literal words as poetry, describing it as "stealing" the meaning away from His word: "Behold, I am against the prophets," says the Lord, "who steal My words every one from his neighbor... and cause My people to err by their lies and by their recklessness" (Jer. 23:30-32).

In order to remain faithful to "nothing other than you read and understand," the Lutheran interpreter takes God literally by default. We begin with the assumption that what He speaks is the sense of the letters, and we interpret His words as poetry only when we are forced to do so.

God most certainly uses poetry; He created it! But if you are going to claim that a word of Scripture is not the plainest, literal reading, but rather a figurative device (poetry), do not take this path lightly. You want to have God on your side, such that "it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you" (Matt 10:20).

Thus, in order to let Scripture speak for itself, we hold to the following principle:

1. Every word of the Bible is to be interpreted literally
2. Unless *Scripture* forces us to interpret it figuratively.

Examples of this principle in practice:

- The Lord Jesus says "This is My body." Nothing in Scripture contradicts the plainest of readings, the real presence in the Sacrament. In fact, other passages like "Let there be light" show God has the authority to mean what He says.
- On the other hand, when the Lord Jesus says, "I am the Good Shepherd," Scripture forces us to interpret it figuratively. A literal reading of "Good Shepherd" would mean Jesus spent most of his days feeding and caring for a flock of bleating sheep covered in wool. The four gospels show us that this was not Jesus' daily occupation. He was followed by disciples He taught God's Word, wandering not from pasture to pasture but from town to town. Jesus' work was to be our Savior, not a literal "shepherd." Thus, "Good Shepherd" must be poetry for what Scripture reveals He did come to do, save us by His blood and merit and care for us through His Word.

It must be noted that the poetry of the Bible has real meaning. If we say that "Good Shepherd" is poetry, some might object, "But He really *is* my Good Shepherd!" We agree that the phrase has real substance and meaning, but it is poetry. He really and truly saves and cares for you. But that real meaning lies beneath imagery of a man caring for sheep in a field.

The Lutheran church is unique in her approach to the literal vs. the figurative. Most other churches, most notably the Reformed churches, generally hold to the following principle:

1. Every word of the Bible is to be taken literally
2. Unless Scripture, sound reason, or good morals force us to take a figurative reading.

Notice the addition of "sound reason" and "good morals." This allows them to interpret additional statements of the Bible as poetry when the literal reading does not "make sense" to them. This is how they can read "This is My body" as poetry. Since to them it does not "make sense" that Jesus' body is in the bread, they claim it is not! They change Jesus' literal words into poetry based on reason alone.

To repeat, because it is so important, when it comes to distinguishing between the literal and figurative in Scripture, we maintain that:

1. Every word of the Bible is to be interpreted literally
2. Unless ***Scripture*** forces us to interpret it figuratively.

Some thoughts on interpreting poetry in the Bible:

1. A General Principle: Remember it is tempting to read into figurative language what you want or more than what God intends. Be ready and willing to admit to God that His poetry is unclear to you. Use literal passages of the Bible, clear doctrine, to interpret the figurative language.
2. Jesus' Parables: Jesus expressed His singular purpose in everything He said and did with the words: "I have come that they may have life" (John 10:10). Thus, the central theme of His parables is always the forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and salvation by faith in Him. Since this is what He promises to be talking about, look for that in His parables. In each, He uses a point of distinction in poetic form in order to clarify the importance of His death and resurrection.
3. Revelation and Other Apocalyptic Literature (Zechariah, Ezekiel, etc.): My son calls Revelation "extreme poetry," and I agree. When reading portions of Scripture that are highly figurative, accept that you will not understand every poetic detail. It is tempting to read too much into them and define descriptive adjectives that God does

not. Remember, "the Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35) and all prophecy is to be understood "in proportion to our faith" (Rom. 12:6). There is no new doctrine in Revelation. The apocalyptic literature only teaches what is clearly taught everywhere else. Look for God's clear promises in Revelation, and the book will be greatly demystified.

4. **Synonymous Terminology:** The Bible often uses different imagery or "picture words" for the same doctrine. God uses them as teaching tools for you to better understand the basic doctrine He wants you to know. Missionary Evensen did a wonderful job presenting this pattern of Scripture in his 2016 JAPC paper, *Pictures of the Christ's Work*.
 - "Forgiveness," "redemption," "adoption," "reconciliation," etc. are not distinct and separate doctrines, as if they are steps to salvation, but a variety of images God uses to teach us about the one work of the God who saves, different pictures of the Christ's work.
 - So too, "sin," "transgression," "iniquity," etc. are not different doctrines or levels of sin but a variety of images God uses to teach us about the depth of our spiritual problem.
 - Similarly, "deacon," "overseer," "elder," "pastor," "teacher," etc. are not separate categories or levels of ministry but different expressions and forms of the one ministry God has established.
 - Remember, God uses a variety of imagery out of His desire to teach you. Interpret it in light of His clear doctrine and beware of making false dichotomies or separate categories where God does not.
5. **Learn the Literary Devices:** Familiarize yourself with the variety of figurative language and poetry the Bible uses. By studying poetry, you can better identify points of distinction and what God intends to convey. A limited list of examples:
 - Metaphor - A comparison showing a similarity between two different things
 - "The Lord is my shepherd." (Ps. 23:1)
 - Simile - A resemblance between two things using "like" or "as"
 - "He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water." (Ps. 1:3)
 - Metonymy - A replacement of a word with another word closely related to it
 - "For the Holy Spirit was not yet given." (John 7:39)
 - Synecdoche - A part represents the whole or the whole represents a part
 - "I will not trust in my bow." (Ps. 44:6)
 - Understatement - An intentional minimization for the sake of emphasis
 - "For You have made Him a little lower than the angels." (Ps. 8:5)
 - Hyperbole - An exaggeration for the sake of emphasis
 - "The king made silver and gold as common... as stones." (II Cor. 1:15)

Descriptive vs. Prescriptive

The prescriptive passages of Scripture explain and clarify the descriptive passages.

Perhaps, you have told your child: "Do as I say, not as I do." A parent must give clear directions, because children have the habit of interpreting whatever they want to do as right. A child might often be on the lookout for a parent's actions which seem to contradict what they have been told. Children like to interpret a parent's actions in a way that allows them to do what they like.

The child of God must watch out for this temptation when it comes to His Word. Many try to interpret stories of the Bible ("as I do") in a way that contradicts what God directly teaches in the Bible ("as I say").

Thus, Lutheran hermeneutics makes a distinction between prescriptive and descriptive passages.

Prescriptive passages are like a prescription from a doctor, specific instructions. They are the "as I say" of the parenting analogy. Prescriptive passages are the clear statutes of God's Word spoken for man to obey. They may be either Law or Gospel. Some examples of prescriptive passages:

- "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." (John 3:16)
- "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength." (Deut. 6:5)
- "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you." (Matt. 28:19-20)
- "Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them." (Rom. 16:17)

Descriptive passages are stories and details of events recorded in the Bible. They are the "as I do" of the parenting analogy. The details are true, because it is God's Word all the same, but they are not necessarily binding for all people. Descriptive passages are what happened at a particular place and time. Some examples of descriptive passages:

- The baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8)
- Jesus overturns the tables in the temple (Matt. 21)
- The miracle of Pentecost (Acts 2)
- Paul preaches at the Areopagus in Athens (Acts 17)

There is much to be learned from every passage of the Bible, but one must beware that man faces the temptation to read new doctrine into descriptive passages or interpret descriptive passages as a way to contradict prescriptive passages.

This confusion between the prescriptive and descriptive was the root of Job's difficulty with God. Job knew what God clearly revealed in His Word (prescriptive) but his observations of how God acted toward him (descriptive) led him to contradict the clear. God's rebuked such misinterpretation: "Would you indeed annul My judgment?" (Job 40:8). Observation (the descriptive) cannot contradict what God explicitly reveals (the prescriptive): "For we walk by faith, not by sight" (II Cor. 5:7).

Much error in Christianity comes from this confusion. Many false teachers use an impression or a passing detail in a story as a way to contradict what God clearly teaches. Some examples:

- The Anabaptists, Baptists, etc. use the story of the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch to reject infant baptism. They point out details like the fact that he is an adult and instructed before baptism in order to make these requirements of others. Some groups use details like "down into" and "up out of" the water to demand full immersion for a valid baptism.

- But where do the details stop applying? He is also a man. Must you be a man to be baptized? He is an Ethiopian. Must you become an Ethiopian before baptism? He is also a eunuch, castrated. This detail they do not enforce. Here you can see the inherent subjectivity of making the descriptive into the prescriptive.
- The baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch is one example of baptism among a great variety of details one can find in baptism: man or woman, infant or adult, instruction before or after. Rely on the prescriptive passages to put the descriptive into context:
 - "For the promise is to you and your children..." (Acts 2:39)
 - "Teach all nations, baptizing them..." (Matt. 20:19)
 - "He who believes and is baptized will be saved." (Mark 16:16)
- Many churches use the story of Pentecost and Biblical miracles in general to claim that such signs still happen by command today. They teach people to pray hard enough and they will see miracles like in the Bible. They put Christians in doubt of their faith if they do not receive or perform such signs as tongues and healings.
 - But these miracles were the signs of a prophetic office with direct inspiration. Where are their books of Scripture? (Of course, some are so bold as to claim they have written some, but not most.) There are no stories after the resurrection of failed miracles. How do they account for their failed attempts at miracles and signs?
 - The miracles of the Bible did indeed occur, but they are not promised for today. Rely on the prescriptive passages to put the descriptive into context:
 - "They went out and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them and confirming the word through the accompanying signs." (Mark 16:20)
 - "Simon saw that through the laying on of the apostles' hands the Holy Spirit was given." (Acts 8:18)
 - "To seal up vision and prophecy." (Dan. 9:24)
- Lutheran churches which have abandoned the doctrine of fellowship use the story of Paul preaching in the Areopagus amid a variety of gods to justify their joint worship and joint prayer in a mixed confession.
 - Paul did preach in another religious context, but do you have the discernment of the directly inspired apostles? The story is also lacking in every detail of the context that day. It is a brazen assumption that Paul encountered what you want to do.
 - This is a classic case of "Do what I say, not as I do!"
 - "Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them." (Rom. 16:17)

The Centrality of Justification

Justification by faith through grace is the central message of Holy Scripture, the doctrine by which the church stands and falls.

The Apostle Paul proves justification to be the pinnacle of all teaching when he said he both declared "the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27) but at the same time "determined not to know anything... except Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (I Cor. 2:2). This apparent

contradiction can only be resolved by the confession of justification as the most important matter the Scriptures have to disclose.

By virtue of verbal inspiration, all doctrine is equally the Word of God, but by God's own testament of His desire for the salvation of man, all other doctrine is servant to the chief doctrine of justification:

1. The Law is given in service to the Gospel.
2. The attributes of Christ served to accomplish your justification.
3. The church is the congregation of the justified, etc.

All of God's Word finds significance in justification and vice versa, because the Scriptures "are able to make you wise for salvation through faith" (II Tim. 3:15).

There is no greater shining light to the believer than the doctrine of justification: "For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, 'The just shall live by faith'" (Rom. 1:17). It is interesting to note the example of how true doctrine was restored in the Lutheran Reformation, as the Holy Spirit revealed pure doctrine to Luther through this verse first and then from there through the entirety of Scripture.

Luther rightly confessed justification as the central doctrine of Holy Scripture based on God's own self-revelation: "The proper subject of theology is man guilty of sin and condemned and God the Justifier and Savior of man and sinner. Whatever is asked or discussed in theology outside the subject is error and poison."¹⁰

Since the Bible declares itself to be "a lamp" to the "feet" and "a light" to the "path" (Ps. 119:105), the clarity of Scripture begs us to use the centrality of justification as a hermeneutical principle. Thus, justification as the chief doctrine stands as a lighthouse to shed insight on everything else found in the Bible.

In this regard, one must be on guard against "gospel reductionism." Gospel reductionism is the false idea in the ELCA and LCMS that the Scriptures can be "reduced" to the Gospel. They claim that the Gospel is so important that it can reinterpret, change, or negate other clear statements of the Bible. Such false teachers use the centrality of justification as a distraction technique to invent their own doctrines and claim certain parts of the Bible are not as important or can be disregarded. We reject the idea that the Gospel is so important that other parts of the Bible do not matter.

Instead, justification is a hermeneutical principle as a litmus test. If your interpretation of a passage contradicts the doctrine of justification, you should reassess whether your interpretation is the actual intended sense of the passage in question. And if it is, and it appears to be in conflict, the theologian "must compare apparently contradictory passages and, like the two cherubim facing each other from opposite sides, must find the agreement of the difference in the middle of the mercy seat."¹¹

The proper distinction between Law and Gospel is good example of such conflict resolution. The two doctrines may appear to contradict each other, but they do not at all. Rather, they

¹⁰ Martin Luther, "Psalm 51," in *Luther's Works*, vol. 12, *Selected Psalms I*, ed. Pelikan, Oswald, and Lehmann (St. Louis, MO: CPH, 1955), 311.

¹¹ Plass, *What Luther Says*, p. 1335

serve two very different purposes: "the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (II Cor. 3:6). For instance, a correct understanding of Law and Gospel shows passages that may appear to teach works-righteousness - like "Go and do likewise" (Luke 10:37) - are actually the Law spoken with the intent to bring about repentance.

The doctrine of justification also unlocks the Old Testament and shows dispensationalism to be a lie. Dispensationalism says that man was saved by works before Jesus' birth and by faith after Jesus. Justification by faith alone has been God's plan from eternity, for Adam and Eve up until the Final Day: "Abraham believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness." (Gen. 15:6).

Before Luther understood justification by faith, he thought the Old Testament was filled with moral stories and that the characters of the Old Testament were shadows and mysteries. But once he understood the doctrine of justification, he found the Old Testament "exceedingly evangelical," because it "is made up almost entirely of illustrations of faith and unbelief, and of the fruits that faith and unbelief bear."¹²

Conclusion

More could certainly be discussed in terms of Lutheran hermeneutics, but the topics explored in this paper are the fundamental guiding principles. I believe you will notice you have already been applying them, perhaps without being aware you are. This shows the Spirit's work in you and that from your faith naturally flows an obedience and submission to God's Word.

Understanding these principles does not make interpretative questions among us disappear. No, questions on non-doctrinal matters, how best to interpret a word, what "extreme poetry" is meant to convey, these will always be discussions even in a true fellowship.

But we do agree that the Bible is the sole source and norm of doctrine. And when we agree on what the Bible says about how it is to be interpreted, these Lutheran hermeneutical principles, we now have the framework with which we can discuss differences of opinion in a God-pleasing manner.

This is a great reason to have pastoral conferences and fruitful conversations among the brethren. Together, we submit to God's Word to reveal all matters to us: "Be assured that no one will make a doctor of the Holy Scripture save the Holy Ghost from heaven."¹³ For if we are unified on the ground rules above, these conversations can only be a blessing where His truth comes to the fore: "Behold, how good and pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity" (Ps. 133:1).

A trusty weapon is Thy Word,
Thy Church's buckler, shield and sword.
Oh, let us in its power confide
That we may seek no other guide! TLH 292:8

¹² Luther's Works, vol. 35, Preface to the Old Testament, p. 237

¹³ Plass, *What Luther Says*, p. 1334-1335