

Lutherans and the Bible

This is the second week of our looking at how Lutherans interpret the Bible. The information that will be shared will come from a variety of resources including The Book of Faith and a video series entitled How Lutherans Interpret the Bible by the Reverend Doctor Mark Allan Powell. The topics to be covered include:

1. Word of God
2. What Lutherans Say About the Bible
3. Where the Bible Comes From
4. Interpreting the Bible in Context
5. Determining Right From Wrong
6. The Many Meanings of the Bible

Last week we focused on the Bible as being the Word of God. More specifically it is the written Word of God and it tells us what God wants to say to us. This week we focus on what Lutherans say about the Bible. We understand that Christ is the ultimate word of God and the Bible draws us to Jesus - to peace, love and hope. There are four things that Lutherans say about the Bible:

1. Law and Gospel: The Word of God speaks both Law and Gospel. In a very basic sense we understand that the Law accuses and judges and the Gospel comforts and saves us. The Bible speaks God's Word which is a word of both judgment and salvation. God's Word condemns and redeems us. We are human sinners so God's Word always condemns us, but we have a God of love and mercy, so God's Word always saves us (redeems us) - forgives and heals our brokenness. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament contain Law and Gospel.

While the Gospel is more pleasant to hear, both are important and we need to hear the word of the law that brings us to despair so we can appreciate the gospel. So each time we read Scripture we need to ask the question - what does this text say that brings God's Word of judgment and what does it say that brings God's Word of salvation.

2. Sola Scriptura: This is latin for "Scripture Only". That is we say that Scripture is the only rule and norm according to which doctrines are to be established and evaluated. The Bible has unique authority in that it is the only record of revealed truth. For philosophers, truth is determined based on reason and experience. Christian philosophers however say that truth is determined based on reason, experience and Divine Revelation (3 legs - and as such a 3 legged stool can stand). Scripture is that Divine Revelation that Christian philosophers use to determine truth and so Scripture has the authority of Divine Revelation. And so we know certain things to be true because God has revealed them to us (Divine Revelation). As Lutherans we see reason and experience as avenues that God has given us for knowing the truth. Scripture reveals Divine Revelation, conveying truth that cannot be known through reason and experience. What happens when sound reason and human experience do not agree with Scripture? Dr. Powell tells us that we must have missed something in God's written Word because God doesn't expect us to turn off our brains and believe things that don't make sense or that don't pan out in reality.

3. Plain Sense of Scripture: Scripture is to be interpreted in its plain sense as it would have been understood by its original readers. We would ask the question - what would have been seen as obvious to the original audience? To understand if the passage is to be understood as literal or figurative we would need to know how the original audience interpreted it - literally or

figuratively? God is a rock would be understood as a metaphor (figurative) by the original audience and that is how we understand it today. Jesus stilling the storm at sea is understood by the original audience as Jesus actually stopping the storm (literally) and that is how we understand it today. It is important to interpret Scripture in this way otherwise we can make Scripture mean whatever we want it to mean today.

The Book of Revelation is used in this way. Many see the writings in Revelation as containing secret codes or may use creative ways of interpreting Revelation to speak of what is known as Rapture Theology. Rapture Theology is doctrine that lays out what will happen at the end times. As Lutherans, we focus on the Book of Revelation as it would have been understood by its original audience. It was written for Christians who suffered terrible persecutions. It helped to explain why they suffered and provided help and comfort to them at that time. When we read the Book of Revelation we focus on how the hope of Christ's coming strengthens us and allows us to persevere and remain faithful to him in troubled world. We don't focus on the how or when Jesus will come again.

4. Public Interpretation: Interpretation of Scripture is a public act and not a private one. God speaks to Israel and God speaks to the church. God doesn't speak in a magical way. And we don't just randomly open the Bible read a passage and think that God is telling us specifically what we are to do with our lives. Dr. Powell give the example of a young adult who opened Scripture and read the passage "You shall go out with Joy". This young adult believed this was a private message from God that he was to date a girl named Joy.

We don't use the Bible like a Ouija board or tarot cards. We first seek the general meaning by asking the question - "what would this mean to everyone?". Then we seek the personal meaning - "now that I know the general meaning, what does this mean to me?". Public interpretation and private application is how we read Scripture.

Blessings and prayers as you engage the written Word of God this week!