

The Word, flesh and text?

Let's pick up Luther's lenses to see the difference



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Martin Luther stands out in the history of Christianity as a remarkably bold and free interpreter of Scripture. Lutherans, thus, stand theologically in a mediating position between overly literal and overly casual readings of the Bible—sometimes a fine line to walk.

Now the ELCA Book of Faith initiative helps us recapture distinctive Lutheran interpretive principles, and the public debate on human sexuality lets us see the usefulness of interpretive methods that neither imprison us in the culture of an ancient past nor leave us adrift in a rapidly changing world.

As we have often heard, Luther saw the whole of Scripture through two interpretive lenses: first, the idea of the Word of God as Jesus—the Word made flesh—as distinct from the words of the biblical text. Then, second, in the special relationship between “law” and “gospel” as paired ways of communicating the divine message of grace.

The first leads Lutherans to distinguish sharply between the content of the message and the medium in which it comes to us. For Luther the text of Scripture isn't holy because of its divine origin but because of the message of divine favor it contains. Even the ancient claim of the Hebrew Bible to speak to us of God would, he believed, not make it valid for Christians if it didn't also witness to Christ. Luther makes this clear again and again.

In fact, Luther sets the whole understanding of God's revelation to God's people first in a person and only secondarily in a text. Jesus is God for us. The Bible, in turn, is a story of the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and a proclamation of salvation offered freely to humans redeemed by grace.

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This leads Luther to his second distinctive principle: what shows us Jesus in the Scriptures communicates God's favor; what does not, shows us only human weakness and limitation and judgment. The former (wherever we find it) is gospel; the latter is law.

Suddenly, for Luther, law and gospel appear—simultaneously or parallel—everywhere in Scripture, both in the writings of the ancient law and in Jesus' teaching of mercy and peace. The old laws of the people of Israel become gospel as much as they were obviously law: law in that they demonstrate to an erring humankind the impossibility of achieving even the most basic of God's commands; gospel in that they show God's enduring love for humankind, a love that sees human achievement not in terms of maintaining purity or earning salvation but in humility and service to neighbor.

This law-and-gospel simultaneity of judgment and redemption was for Luther the second basic way the Bible communicates God's Word. And this insight makes it possible for him to read the writings of ancient Judaism according to his first principle: that the Hebrew Scriptures contain the same gospel message that was made flesh in Jesus Christ.

Luther applied his insights with astounding boldness. With two basic principles, he elevated some parts of the Bible to great importance—while relegating others to relative insignificance—with what for us may seem like breathtaking assurance. This seems harder for us today, and our inclination is to cling to the sure and ancient. But Luther challenges us to believe more firmly and read more deeply—and not be afraid to search for the Word within the text! □

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