

UNDERSTANDING SCRIPTURE



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NELCSA**

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ABBREVIATIONS:

BCE: Before Christian era

CE: Christian era

cf.: confer = compare

f. / ff.: following (verses)

NT: New Testament

OT: Old Testament

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PSALM 119:105: “YOUR WORD IS A LAMP TO MY FEET AND A LIGHT TO MY PATH.”¹

THE CHALLENGE:

0.1 Our times are changing and very challenging. We are living in a world where truths, values, and convictions of long standing are questioned. Diversity can be enriching, but also confusing. On the one hand this is very exciting and opens up numerous possibilities; on the other hand, it causes insecurity and anxiety.

0.2 In the church, too, we experience a great diversity and insecurity, which becomes evident when we try to come to terms with issues like ‘faith and science’ or ethical questions relating to homosexuality, abortion, genetics, etc. The same plurality, which we experience around us, even touches the very core issues of our own church, e.g., understanding of baptism and interpretation of Scripture.

0.3 Diversity can also be painful: We experience that when Christians fail to reach consensus in crucial matters and questions, although they love their Bible and wish to live by it. Another possible reaction to diversity can be a judgemental attitude which inadvertently excludes fellow-Christians by questioning the validity of their faith and/or credentials.

0.4 In this context we Christians seek answers and guidance from Scripture and the church. In our congregations we observe a wide spectrum of biblical usage among clergy and lay-members alike:

- from the assumption that the Bible is in every regard infallible, inerrant, and verbally inspired (“fundamentalism”) to the assumption that one subjective interpretation of the Bible is as valid as any other one (“relativism”)
- from a simple, childlike interpretation of the Bible in Sunday-school, confirmation-classes and religious instruction to sophisticated and critical ways of interpretation and exegesis in sermons or theological studies
- from a rich treasure of biblical verses and texts, which have been learned by heart, to a more discerning way of reading the Bible, driven by the quest to understand the biblical texts in their context
- Other symptoms we experience are a near biblical illiteracy on the one hand and an indiscriminate consumption of a huge diversity of so-called ‘spiritual’ literature with its sometimes-wayward use of the Bible, on the other hand. That seems to reflect a growing insecurity in regard to reading, interpreting and understanding the Scripture

0.5 In this situation we sometimes seem to have lost the joy of reading the Bible, which for generations has been, and still is, an inspiring fountain of truth, life and blessing and the foundation for the Church and for Christian life.

0.6 With this document we therefore aim:

- to develop and clarify the framework for a relevant Lutheran position
- to encourage Bible-reading and Bible-study in our congregations and beyond
- to equip members with appropriate tools for sound Bible-interpretation
- to empower our members to witness and confidently engage in biblical discussions
- to offer some guidance in the field of Christian literature / literature for Bible-study
- and, through all that, to foster a greater confidence and joy in reading the Scripture

0.7 We hope and pray that our congregations and pastors will use this document for in-depth discussions, sermon-series, cell-group studies and other means to discover and take ownership of its message.

¹All quotes from the Bible in this paper are taken from the *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV), 1989

- THESES -

I. THE BIBLE – WHAT ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?

1. When this paper uses the term “Bible”, it refers to the physical book, whereas the traditional expression “Scripture/s” places the emphasis on the communicative experience, as Jesus himself did.²

2. The Bible developed gradually, first in oral then in written form. The 39 books which today comprise the Old Testament, originally written in Hebrew (a few in Aramaic), developed over a period of a thousand years and were accepted around 100 CE (by the so-called Jewish Council of Jamnia).

3. Although Jesus most probably spoke Aramaic, the 27 books of New Testament were written in Greek within a period of some seventy-five years. The Greek language promoted the rapid spread of the gospel throughout the Roman Empire. Most of the books and letters of the NT writings were already mentioned in the middle of the second century (actually by a church heretic, Marcion, in about 150), however, the first full compilation of what today is the New Testament (the biblical “*canon*”) was established by bishop Athanasius in 367 CE.

4. The original scrolls and parchments of the biblical books were rewritten and copied by scribes and, later, monks and, when compared, show a number of differences. Biblical researchers have investigated and are continuing to discover and research the earliest manuscripts to verify the exact words and their original meanings.

5. The Christian Church has never (contrary to, for example, Islam) held the notion that there is something like a ‘Holy language’, in which the original divine message has been written. The Bible has repeatedly been translated and is being read today, at least in part, in over 2400 languages.

The *Septuagint*, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible (our OT), was completed by 198 BCE and was regarded as Holy Scripture by most of the early Christians. Many of the citations in the NT do not use the Hebrew, but instead the Greek wording of the OT. Early in the second century Bible translations emerged in Coptic in Egypt and Syriac in Syria. The *Vulgate*, the Latin translation by Jerome (404 CE), became the official Bible of the Western church, and was required to be used in the Roman Catholic Church until 1943.

The Reformation brought a surge of Bible translations, e.g., in English (1526), in Dutch and in French (1535). Martin Luther’s German translation of the NT was edited in September 1522 and the complete Bible in 1534. During his life time he is said to have edited the OT some four and the NT some ten times. During the mission enterprise of the Western churches of the Reformation during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Bible was translated into many languages throughout the whole world.

II. REALITY, GOD AND GOD’S WORD

6. Let us start with the ambiguity of our everyday-experiences: The reality we encounter can be comforting, uplifting or assuring, but also unclear and confusing, even frightening or devastating. Where does God fit into these experiences?

7. When we confess that God created and sustains heaven and earth, we try to express that God is not part of creation but the ultimate source, power and destiny of all reality. Without God, nothing happens, and nothing happens to us – good or bad.

² Cf. Luke 4:21: (After reading from the prophet Isaiah,) “Jesus began to say to them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’”; John 5:39: (Jesus said:) “You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf.”; and Luke 24:27: “Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets Jesus interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.”

8. To express this ambiguous experience of 'God behind our reality', Luther coined the term "the absolute God" (*Deus absolutus*), or "the hidden God" (*Deus absconditus*; in the sense that God's intentions are hidden to us). To guide us through this ambiguity, God has made himself identifiable and recognizable. As 'God for us' God becomes the "revealed God" (Luther: *Deus revelatus*).

9. As human beings we are only capable of communicating with God through human means, and since language is the ultimate human form of communication, we call God's revelation God's word. In other terms: **God's intention is revealed through God's word.**

10. God's word addresses us in two different ways:

- a) Insofar as it reveals our sinful nature, our severed relationship with God and others, and our brokenness, God's word confronts us with our need for redemption and calls us back into relationship with God and others. This is what Luther understood as "**Law**".
- b) Insofar as it reveals to us God's unconditional gift of grace, love and redemption, God's word is proclaimed and experienced as "**Gospel**" (literally: "good news"). It grants us forgiveness of sin, grace, redemption and a new life, and proclaims us to be children of God, sons and daughters, who no longer try to earn God's love through our own efforts, but accept God's unconditional love as being true and sufficient for us.

11. Since God's grace, love and redemption is granted through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, we can call Christ 'God's Word' in the deepest and most meaningful sense.

12. We can only receive God's grace in faith through the work of the Holy Spirit, whenever God's word is proclaimed to us (cf. *Theses 15 and 18*).

From there, we can justly distinguish between three expressions of God's word: God's incarnate, written and proclaimed word.

III. GOD'S WORD AND THE BIBLE

13. **God's incarnate word is Jesus Christ**, through whom God gifts the world grace, love and redemption (cf. John 1:14; Hebrews 1:1f.).³

14. **God's written word are the Scriptures**, which are witness to our need of redemption and to God's gift of salvation in Christ (cf. John 5:39).⁴

15. **God's proclaimed word** is wherever God's Law and Gospel are communicated to the individual **through word (sermon) and sacrament (Baptism and Holy Communion)** (cf. Rom 10:17).⁵

16. Whenever God's word is *proclaimed* through word and sacrament, it has to be based on the witness of the *written word*, which ultimately leads to Christ as God's *incarnate word*.

17. Wherever God's word is encountered in this way, we realise that it has the power to interact with and change our lives; the word itself is encountered as a vital agent of the living Christ (Luther: "the living voice of the Gospel"; *viva vox evangelii*).

³ John 1:14: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." - Hebrews 1:1f.: "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by the Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds."

⁴ (Jesus said:) "You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf."

⁵ "So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ."

18. It is equally important that we cannot find or speak God's word from within us, lest we should confuse it with our own wishes, desires and presumptions. It always addresses, challenges and comforts us from the outside through the spoken word (Luther: "the external word"; *verbum externum*).

This becomes especially evident in the context of counselling, when people in crises are no longer able to find the helpful word or advice by themselves. Therefore, we must not limit the notion of God's proclaimed word to the typical sermon in a Sunday morning service. It can also take place wherever Christians find mutual consolation under the promise of Matthew 18:20 (Jesus: "*For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.*")

19. Consequently, we state:

- a) **If proclamation is based on God's written word and leads to Christ as God's incarnate word, it becomes God's word for us.**
- b) **The same is true for the Scriptures: If our reading and interpreting the Bible reveals our need for redemption (Law) and grants us God's redemptive answer in Christ (Gospel), then it becomes God's word for us.**

20. On this theological basis, Luther stated: God's word *for us* is whatever promotes Christ ("was Christum treibet").

"All the genuine sacred books agree in this, that all of them preach and promote Christ. And that is the true test by which to judge all books, when we see whether or not they promote Christ. For all the Scriptures show us Christ, Romans 3[:21]; and St. Paul will know nothing but Christ, I Corinthians 2[:2]. Whatever does not teach Christ is not apostolic, even though St. Peter or St. Paul does the teaching. Again, whatever preaches Christ would be apostolic, even if Judas, Annas, Pilate, and Herod were doing it." (Luther's works, vol. 35: Word and Sacrament I, Fortress Press: Philadelphia)

"All churches appeal to Holy Scriptures as their foundation. The decisive fact is, how the Bible is understood. We do not understand the Bible statutory as a book of many separate laws and regulations, but rather from its centre which is the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ. He is the living Word of God." (Guidelines for Church-Life, Credo 2005: 50)

21. Therefore, it would not be advisable to use the term "God's word" indiscriminately for the whole Bible or any single verse or quotation, if the reference to Christ as God's incarnate word is obscure or unclear.

We could then be led to some strange consequences: Is the Bible also God's word when it is just a book on the shelf (as was discussed in the age of Lutheran Orthodoxy [18th century])? Or even when I use it to smash a fly or to stabilize my dinner-table? These questions only arise when we neglect to differentiate between God's word in a specific situation and God's word for me / us today.

22. Rather we should ask, what is God's word *for us* in a specific situation, under specific circumstances and with regard to the different ways through which God communicates with God's people. It does not necessarily speak to every person in the same way.

As Luther vividly pointed out: "*God has spoken many things to David, and has charged him to do this and that. But it does not concern me and was not spoken to me [...] You have to see the Word which concerns you, which has been spoken to you and not which has been addressed to the other. There are two kinds of messages in Scripture, the one does not address or concern me. The other word addresses and concerns me, and with this word I may courageously venture ahead and depend on it as a strong and solid rock.*" (Luther's works, vol. 35: Word and Sacrament I, Fortress Press: Philadelphia)

23. For the same reason, we can no longer subscribe to the concept that the Bible is *verbally* inspired (in the sense that every single letter and even the punctuation has been dictated to the biblical authors by the Holy Spirit).

The concept of verbal inspiration, too, was developed in Lutheran Orthodoxy to counter the Roman-Catholic notion that papal authority stands over the Scriptures. As such it was an understandable, but misguided attempt to find for each and every dogmatic statement an immediate justification in single quotations from the Bible, often taken completely out of context.

The same applies to the often-cited passage from 2Timothy 3:16, which states: “*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.*” This verse does not refer to the verbal inspiration of every single word, sentence or biblical book as a whole (our biblical canon had not even been established by that time!), but to the insight that God’s Spirit breathes in and through the Scriptures and so enables the written words of humans to confront us with the living God. It seems to be just another expression for Paul’s experience that the letter (the written word) only becomes alive through God’s Spirit (2Corinthians 3:6).⁶

24. Thus, we state clearly: **Our faith is not founded on verses and letters but on the redemptive work of Christ. We believe in the Triune God, who is revealed in the Christ-event as testified to in the Bible.**

The Bible was not dictated to people without history and context, but written by people in their situation, with their particular understanding, who were overwhelmed by what God had done in their lives. All scripture and every interpretation receive its authority from the principal revelation in Christ and all single verses need to be interpreted from this centre. The Bible witnesses to this event and this faith, but is not itself an article of faith. It is not coincidental that all Creeds of the Early Church confess faith in the Triune God and do not include the Bible as an article of faith.

25. God’s Word is revealed to us through ordinary human words, yet these human words are fundamental and indispensable, as they lead us to Christ, God’s Word. This applies to the New Testament, but equally so to the Old Testament.

Again Martin Luther: “*Here [sc. in the Old Testament] you will find the swaddling cloths and the manger in which Christ lies, and to which the angel points the shepherds [Luke 2:12]. Simple and lowly are these swaddling cloths, but dear is the treasure, Christ, who lies in them.*” (Luther’s works, vol. 35: Word and Sacrament I, Fortress Press: Philadelphia)

26. The *Guidelines for Church Life of the NELCSA* name the gladdening message of the Gospel as the church’s foundation, Christ as the centre of Holy Scripture, the differentiation of Law and Gospel, and a specific understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit as outstanding characteristics of the Lutheran Church.

God grants the Holy Spirit through the means of Word and Sacrament and creates faith in those who hear the Gospel in different ways where and when God wills (Guidelines NELCSA 12.5).

NELCSA Church Council, in its brochure ‘Why are we Lutherans?’, formulated: “*Just as we understand God through Jesus Christ, we read and understand the Bible through Jesus Christ. The gospel message of salvation by grace alone is the lens through which we view the entire body of Scripture. This means that Bible passages are interpreted in terms of whether and how they promote the good news of Christ’s love. Dealing with the Bible responsibly means that we ensure that our interpretation promotes the cause of Christ.*”

Creeds and the catechisms are a summary of the core-message of the Bible. In the Constitution, Congregational Code and Pastors’ Law of the Northeastern Evangelical Lutheran Church in South Africa, as well as in the vow at the ordination and induction of pastors, the inductions of church workers and members of synod, all are called to *subscribe to the Gospel of Jesus Christ as revealed in Holy Scripture as the only norm and guide for faith, doctrine and human existence.*

27. A final theological notion: As witness to Christ, God’s incarnate word, the Scriptures have to endure the same ambiguous reactions that Christ experienced. Not every sermon converts all listeners, not every biblical word convinces each and every reader. Even Christ himself encountered resistance and rejection – ultimately the cross. In being related expressions of God’s word, the written word (Scripture) and the proclaimed word (sermon) are never free of this ambiguous reception. They, too, can be ‘crucified’, namely be interpreted conversely, misunderstood, jeopardized, misused, and rejected.

In taking this position we consciously place ourselves in line with the Lutheran tradition, which understands Jesus as centre of and hermeneutical key to the Scriptures – acknowledging that there are also other dogmatic and hermeneutic approaches to Scripture.

⁶ “Our competence is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter, but of Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.”

IV. THE BIBLE: RICH DIVERSITY AND CRITICAL APPROACH

28. As we have established that we do not understand the Bible only in a literal sense, we are set free to approach it 'critically'.

'Critical' comes from the Greek word *krinein*, meaning 'to discern / to differentiate'. It has nothing to do with a negative or destructive attitude. Instead, it means that we become aware of the historical, social and other dimensions of the biblical texts and to interpret them accordingly.

29. 'Critical' (in the sense of 'discerning') interpretation of the Bible is then

- a) not only inevitable if we use our reason and human experience in reading the Bible and wish to communicate our interpretation reasonably;
- b) but also, a safeguard against interpretations that arise only from our own presumptions and suppositions: We *need* a critical approach if we do not just want to reiterate all the thoughts, ideas and convictions we already have before we read the Bible.

That, again, stresses the fact that we cannot have the word of salvation from ourselves. Critical interpretation of the Bible helps us to acknowledge the external character of God's word, guarding it from being mingled and confused with our own ideas and presumptions (the '*verbum externum*'; cf. Thesis 18).

30. This Christ-centred and critical approach liberates us to discover what the Bible is *also*: "A variety of writings such as poetry, prose, biography, law, letters, family trees, official records, songs and prayers." (Credo 2005: 52; cf. Annex A).

31. Different authors with different historical and social backgrounds, different literary genres which address different situations and ways of life all show us a richness of testimonies and vivid accounts of God's history with God's people.

To name but two examples: The belief that God is the origin of all life is expressed quite differently not only in the two creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2, but also in psalms (Psalm 8; 19) and other poetic accounts (Job 38-41) that praise *God as Creator* and source of life.

The *Exodus* – Israel's experience of slavery, oppression and then liberation through God's intervention – is expressed differently in the later song of Moses (Exodus 15:1-18) and the song of Miriam (Exodus 15:21) and in the prose narrative (Exodus 2-14) and yet again differently in the so-called 'liturgical confession' in Deuteronomy 26:5-9.

32. Such an approach, which recognizes differences and discrepancies, even contradictions, in the Bible, takes nothing away from the fact that God uses the biblical writings to speak to us through human words.

33. Rather, we encounter a vibrant process of mutual interpretation, full of life and full of God's footprints throughout history (cf. in more detail **Annexes B and C**).

34. The beauty of psalms, hymns and prayers, the profound theological reasoning, the deep insights into human nature, the moving testimonies of trust (and, sometimes, of despair), the interpretation of history through the eyes of faith, the countless expressions of hope and belief – all these can comfort us and strengthen our faith. In all their variety, they help us to find words in our own various and different situations, they open up new horizons and give meaning to our lives and to our world.

35. If we read biblical texts only as a means to prove certain viewpoints to be either true or false (e.g., historical accounts or scientific statements), then we disregard their vitality and miss the life-giving force of God's Spirit, who speaks through them in many different ways.

36. Therefore, we would like to encourage everyone to discover the Scriptures anew as a vital source. It not only confronts us with our need of redemption and invites us to join in God's process of reconciliation, but also shapes our faith, fosters our understanding, shows us the manifold ways of God's interaction with God's people and teaches us the language of faith and trust.

V. SOME CONSEQUENCES FOR OUR READING OF THE BIBLE

37. When we read the Bible, God can touch us in a special way, lead us to conversion, and guide us through our whole lives and uplift us even further in our times of joy. In trials, tribulations and temptations, the Word of God can be “*comfort to the afflicted, remedy for the sick, life for the dying, food for the hungry and a rich treasure for all the needy and poor.*” (Luther [on Holy Communion], cf. Credo, 23).

38. There is a specific gain in reading and sharing biblical texts with one another (in families, cell-groups, Bible-study groups, ecumenical settings, etc.). We would like to encourage congregations and pastors, Bible-study groups and individuals, families and youth groups to discuss and discover biblical insights and guidelines in their relevance especially in the important spheres of life: Personal and individual life, marriage and family, congregation and church, and the social, public and political sphere.

39. Pastors and pastors’ conventions, congregational study groups and those responsible for book sales should exchange with each other good and suitable Christian literature. This includes visual material and recommendable internet sites, so that congregation members may be informed of different opinions and develop a balanced view and opinion. Bible reading-plans, Study Bibles and sermon series on biblical books can be fruitful tools for our understanding of the Bible. (cf. **Annex D**: “*Guidelines and helpful hints*”).

40. Yet, when reading the Bible, we will also come across passages that are difficult to understand or even completely strange to us and seem to contradict God’s love. These ‘dark’ passages of Scripture should be interpreted by those that clearly express God’s love and redemptive intention (Luther: *scriptura sacra sui ipsius interpres* – “The Bible is its own interpreter”).

In this regard, we may learn from the Jewish tradition, which continues to search for deeper meaning and a better understanding of the text and God’s will, even if that means a continuous struggle with the diversity of texts. A beautiful example can also be taken from the healing of the blind man which occurs in stages (Mark 8): He regains his sight only partially at first and needs to return to Jesus to be fully healed. Likewise, we may need to be patient and remain persistent not only in praying, but also when dealing with biblical texts.

41. All this becomes especially relevant, when dealing with ethical issues. As Christians, we do not regard the Bible a statutory book of laws and regulations. We are free and responsible children of God (Galatians 5:1)⁷, sons and daughters, who aim to live their life in everything they do according to God’s love and grace in Christ.

42. We have to admit that in our church the Bible was used to support and lay down rules and regulations that were derived more from tradition and the ‘Zeitgeist’ rather than from the liberating message of the gospel. This led to a judgemental and condemning attitude that caused much suffering, wounds and exclusion among our members.

We think of examples, such as the exclusion of women from leadership and ordination⁸; strict church-discipline, excluding ‘fallen’ members from Holy Communion⁹, and other painful experiences.

We sincerely wish to re-discover, proclaim and live this liberating message anew. However, we have to realise that future generations might similarly be as critical of our decisions today. This leads us to contemplate decisions on church-life in humility and in a spirit of constant critical self-reflection.

43. It is no coincidence that the New Testament stresses that the sole foundation for every Christian praxis is love: The Great Commandment of Jesus (Matthew 22:37-40)¹⁰ as well as Paul¹¹ (Gala-

⁷ “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”

⁸ With reference to verses as 1Corinthians 14:34; 1Timothy 2:8-15.

⁹ With reference to 1Corinthians 11:27.

tians 5:14 and 6:2; Romans 13:8) and John (1John 4:11-21)¹² make it abundantly clear that “*love is the fulfilment of the law*” (Galatians 5:14) and that a Christian life consists of nothing else than of “*faith expressing itself through love*” (Galatians 5:6).

In line with this, St. Augustine and Martin Luther could formulate: “Love – and then do what you will!”.

44. That does *not* mean that biblical values, precepts and rules are useless or no longer relevant for Christians. In the Bible, we find lots of helpful rules and words of advice for protecting our relationship to God, the other, ourselves and the world – *but* all those rules and laws have to be measured against the core principle of love and grace.

45. This means that **a biblical word that is in conflict with God’s love and grace in Christ cannot be God’s word for us today**. Instead, we have to search for answers that are valid and helpful consequences of the ultimate principle of “*faith expressing itself through love*”.

“All [...] laws must and ought to be measured by faith and love. That is to say, the other laws are to be kept where their observance does not conflict with faith and love; but where they conflict with faith and love, they should be done away entirely.” (Luther’s works, vol. 35: Word and Sacrament I, Fortress Press: Philadelphia)

46. With these guidelines we do not intend to answer all possible questions and objections. Furthermore, we have to endure different opinions and sometimes tensions in interpreting the Bible.

47. For the same reason we do not have to abstain fearfully from critical questions when they occur – fear is always a bad counsellor, and should not prejudice our reading of the Bible.

48. Finally: The mutual struggle for the interpretation of Scripture and its correct understanding is at the same time strain and gain for the Lutheran Church and theology. As such it not only remains our characteristic, but also our challenge and source of happiness.

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¹⁰ Matthew 22:37-40: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

¹¹ Galatians 5:14: “For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” - Galatians 6:2: “Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” - Romans 13:8: “Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.”

¹² 1John 4:21: “The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.”

ANNEX A: "WHAT IS THE BIBLE?" (from *Credo 2005: 52-54*)

"Although the Bible contains sixty-six individual books, within each of these there is often a variety of writing such as poetry, prose, biography, law, letters, family trees, official records, songs and prayers.

POETRY: Several of the Old Testament books are written completely in poetry: Psalms, the Song of Songs, Lamentations and most of the book of Job. Other poems are found in prose passages, for example, Exodus 15; Judges 5 and 1 Samuel 2 and most of the prophetic books are written in poetic form. In the New Testament there is some poetry, for example, Mary's Song (Luke 1:46-55), Zechariah's Song (Luke 1:68-79) and Philippians 2:6-11.

LAW: Israel's laws are found in the books of Exodus through to Deuteronomy. These formed the foundation of the life of the nation and of its relationship with God. Thus the law is regarded as an expression of God's character and will; the law shows how God wants his people to behave, to worship, and to live in society.

The best-known list of laws is the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20). Three groups of laws have been drawn out: Covenant Law or the Book of the Covenant (Exodus 21-23); the Holiness Code (Leviticus 17-26) which is named from the frequent statements, '*I the LORD am holy*' and sets out rules for worship; and the Deuteronomic Code (Deuteronomy 12-25), which is set out like a sermon and includes warnings about the consequences of breaking the laws.

There are no new lists of commandments in the New Testament, though some regard the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) as the "new law". The law of the Old Testament is summarized in Jesus' commandment to love God above everything and one's neighbour as oneself.

A SPECIAL KIND OF HISTORY: The historical books in the Hebrew Bible (Joshua through to 2 Kings including some duplications in 1 and 2 Chronicles) are called 'The Former Prophets'. Some historical passages are found in Isaiah and Jeremiah, parts of Genesis, Exodus and Numbers and in the New Testament in the Gospels and Acts. Biblical history is not history told for its own sake, but describing those events which show how God is at work in his world, developing his plan in the Jewish nation and later in the church.

PROPHECY: The prophetic books in the Old Testament are grouped together from Isaiah through to Malachi. The prophets announced God's message not only about the future, but very often about the present. Frequently they began with the words, 'This is what the Lord says'. They spoke God's word condemning social injustice and sham worship. They exposed mistaken, cosy ideas about God and his laws and warned the people that God would punish them if they did not mend their ways.

The New Testament writers show how many of the Old Testament promises were finally fulfilled in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

CONFESSION: Many parts of the Bible can be understood as confessions to God the creator, the God who led his people from the land of bondage. An old confession is to be found in Deuteronomy 26:5-9: "*My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great nation, powerful and numerous. But the Egyptians mistreated us and made us suffer, putting us to hard labour. Then we cried out to the LORD, the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice and saw our misery, toil and oppression. So, the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with miraculous signs and wonders. He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.*"

In the New Testament we find confessions of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord (1 Cor.12:3; Phil. 2:10- 11 etc.), and the beginnings of triune formulations (Matth.28:19; John 3:5,15; Rom 11:36; 2 Cor 13:14; etc.).

APOCALYPTIC: This is a particular type of prophetic literature found notably in Daniel (chapters 6-12) and Revelation, but also in Isaiah 24-27, Ezekiel 38-39, Zechariah and Mark 13, which is known as 'the little Apocalypse'. The Greek word means 'unveiling' or 'revealing'.

WISDOM: Job, Ecclesiastes and Proverbs are the main biblical Wisdom books, but many of the Psalms belong to this type of writing (for example, 1, 34, 37, 73 etc). Wisdom writing was interested in the problems of existence: why are we here? why are things the way they are? why do people suffer?

GOSPEL: Although there are four Gospels the word actually applies to what they contain, namely the 'good news'. The Gospels are a new and particular kind of biblical literature. Each Gospel presents the story of Jesus from a particular viewpoint, and each has a distinctive way of telling the story. Matthew has grouped Jesus' teaching together; Mark is vivid in telling of Jesus' suffering; Luke sketches many of the people around Jesus and emphasizes his love for them; John is deeply religious, and emphasizes Jesus' glory.

LETTERS: The writers of the New Testament letters follow the 'rules' for letter writing of the first century CE: opening with the names of the writer and the recipient, a general greeting and, after the main section of the letter, concluding with a personal greeting. Paul's letters are usually characterised by a main section which deals first with teaching and then with the way Christians should put into practice what they have learned.

There are also some interesting letters in the Old Testament: e.g., Jeremiah 29; 1 Kings 21; 2 Chronicles 30; Ezra 4-5 and Nehemiah 6.”

ANNEX B: THE BIBLE INTERPRETS ITSELF

The Christian Bible has a singular and unique place in the world of religions: Its first part, the Christian 'Old Testament', is at the same time regarded as Holy Scripture to another, namely the Jewish religion. This fact alone shows how Christianity was shaped through constant reflection on the sacred texts of its 'mother-religion'. By incorporating the Jewish Torah into the Christian Bible (a decision that was taken after many arguments and much deliberation) the early church made an important decision and hence the statement: The sacred texts and scriptures of Israel did not become invalid or outdated after Christ, but remain valid expressions and contain central elements of the Christian faith.

Only in modern times we have come to learn that the same texts are being read with equal right by the Jewish community as their Holy Scripture. For centuries, the Church proclaimed that Judaism had forfeited their right to use the Old Testament as their own Bible, as punishment and consequence of their rejecting Christ. The brutal and terrifying consequences of that position cannot be pursued here, but must not be forgotten.

The Scriptures of Israel were Holy Scriptures to Jesus, his disciples and all of the New Testament writers. But now they were read under a completely new perspective: God's revelation in Christ became the hermeneutical key for the 'Old Testament'; Christ himself became the central focus and guide for the appropriate understanding of the Scriptures. The Church has upheld this general notion throughout the centuries, although with different implications and variable consequences over the times.

However, we must not forget that the early church was not the first to start this process of interpretation and actualization. The Old Testament itself already presents a fascinating process of interpretation and re-reading. Again and again, we can observe how – throughout the whole Old Testament – older statements and proclamations are revised and repeated, underlined, emphasized or corrected, and thus, in general, re-interpreted. The Old Testament in itself is indeed a book in constant, lively dialogue with itself.

This is partly due to its historical growth (cf. Theses 2 and 3, and Annex A): The writers of the latter parts of the OT already had some of the earlier traditions and writings in front of them and were able to use these texts and comment on them. Their comments and interpretations were then added to the Scriptures and incorporated into them.

To name just two significant examples: The book of **Isaiah** consist of three parts (ch. 1-39; ch. 40-55; ch. 56-66) , which, according to general opinion, have been written in three different times: The message of the prophet Isaiah before the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians (at the end of the 8th century BCE); the comforting message of the "second Isaiah" (Deuteroisaiiah) to the exiled Jews in Babylon (6th century BCE), and, finally, the proclamation of the "third Isaiah" (Tritoisaiiah) to those in Jerusalem, who had already been released from exile and started a new life, albeit in their now destroyed and far from glorious capital (towards the end of the 6th century BCE). Whereas the first part of the book announces primarily the coming disaster as punishment for Israel's disobedience, the second part starts with the announcement of a God's new beginning with God's people:

"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. 2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins." (40:1-2) The punishment, proclaimed in the opening chapters of the book, is fulfilled, the former – fully justified! – message of doom is now turned into one of hope and comfort. This new interpretation in continuity with the older words of Isaiah might well have been the reason for the inclusion of the "second Isaiah" into the book of the older prophet: God's history with God's people carries on and has not come to an end.

The same can be said for the way, in which the „third Isaiah“ deals with the proclamation of the „second Isaiah“. The promise from Isaiah 52:12 (*"The Lord will go before you, the God of Israel will be your rearguard"*) was originally aimed at the party that had embarked on the exodus from Babylon and the long journey back to Jerusalem. To preach these very words now to those already back in Jerusalem, gives them a completely new meaning (ch. 58:8): *Only if you do away with unrighteousness and wrong behavior, shall "your righteousness go before you and the glory of the LORD will be your rearguard!"* The writ-

ten words of the earlier proclamation become vivid and fluid, they are recaptured and updated in the light of the latest experiences.

Another intriguing example can be observed in the book of **Chronicles**. They belong to the youngest portions of the Old Testament and present the history of Israel from Adam, the first human, until the Babylonian exile (587 BCE), obviously relying on older sources and texts (Genesis to Deuteronomy, the books of Samuel and Kings). But they do so under a very distinct perspective: The whole history of Israel is measured according to the basic principle how the people and the rulers of Israel dealt with the one and only legitimate place for worship. Since, after the exile, only Jerusalem was considered to be the appropriate place of worship, the whole history of the northern kingdom is omitted more or less completely. Furthermore, every king and ruler of the southern kingdom (Juda) is judged against the mentioned core-principle; their lives are presented in a rather crude black-and-white profile, and their fate is directly linked to their piety.

That – of all the godless kings – the wicked Manasse (cf. 2Kings 21) was ‘blessed’ with a long life, is explained through the notice that – while already in exile – he changed his mind, repented and returned to true piety (2Chronicles 33) – a notion that cannot be found in any of the sources of Chronicles, but fits well into their concept that only a pious life means a long life and vice versa.

Even more interesting is the small detail from 1Chronicles 21:1.7f. compared to the notice in 2Samuel 24:1.10: That David’s idea to conduct a census was sinful in God’s eyes is mentioned in both accounts. But whereas in 2Samuel 24:1 it is explained that “*the anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, Go and take a census of Israel and Judah*”, the authors of Chronicles probably found it too harsh to credit God with such a temptation. In 1Chronicles 21:1, it is therefore explained that “*Satan rose up against Israel and incited David to take a census of Israel.*”

Already from these few examples, we can see how even within the Old Testament a lively dialogue takes place – inside the very texts that, later, became, Holy Scripture, the ‘Bible’ – for Jews as well as for Christians. That is even more true for the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, the so-called “**Septuagint**”. During the 3rd century BCE, it became *the* Holy Scripture for all the Jews living in the Hellenist and Roman empires, who long since had become much more acquainted with the Greek language than with the traditional Hebrew. Not only did this translation become widely accepted and used (instead of insisting on Hebrew as the only legitimate language for the sacred texts!); it also absorbed many philosophical ideas and notions from the Greek and Hellenistic tradition, so that the whole character of central passages of the Old Testament changed.¹³ But this shift, not only in language, but also in interpretation, was one of the driving forces that lead to the acceptance of Judaism in the Greek-speaking world, and, ultimately, to the spread of (Greek-speaking) Christianity throughout the Mediterranean and into the world.

Perhaps little known, but very important is the fact that many of the quotations in the **New Testament** are directly taken from the Septuagint and have thus found their way also into the later Bible translations. Only in a few instances, we can observe that quotations in the NT have been taken directly from the Hebrew Bible, and in some instances, we can even observe some “mixed” quotations, which have no exact equivalent either in the Hebrew or in the Greek Bible.

That is mainly due to the fact that all of the New Testament writings have been handed down exclusively in Greek. There may have been older Aramaic writings (some scholars assume this for the oldest form of the Gospel of Matthew) –even in Jesus’ time, Hebrew was used only for liturgical purposes – but all existing manuscripts of the New Testament writings have been preserved solely in Greek and have most probably been written in Greek from the beginning.

That means that we already have to be aware of a distinct gap between Jesus’ original sayings (he certainly spoke Aramaic, spoke and understood maybe some Greek and most probably knew the He-

¹³To quote just one example: The name, with which God presents Himself to Moses from within the burning bush, can be roughly translated from the Hebrew as „I am who I am“, or: „I am what I am“ (Ex 3:14) The Septuagint translates this somewhat mysterious introduction as: “I am the (eternal) being:” – a throughout metaphysical expression, close to Greek philosophy, but distinctly apart from Hebrew thought and its dynamic worldview.

brew of the Scriptures) and their recording in the New Testament. But there is no doubt that **Jesus**, again and again, referred to the Old Testament and used it to shed light on his own words and deeds.

At the beginning of his public ministry, Luke shows us Jesus in the Synagogue of Nazareth (Luke 4:16-21): Jesus is asked to read from the Scriptures (Isaiah 61:1-2), which was the prerogative of every grown Jewish male, and, as such, nothing peculiar. But then, Jesus adds in his own words: “*Today this word is fulfilled in your hearing!*”, proclaiming that God’s promised time of grace has begun.

Here, for the first time, we can observe one of the most important patterns in the New Testament, the sequence of **promise and fulfillment**. In Jesus’ life, his words and deeds, but even more through his death and resurrection is fulfilled what the Scriptures already have announced and promised; he, in person, is the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies.

„*Are you the expected Christ, the son of the living God?*“, the High Priest of Israel asks Jesus during his trial. And Jesus answers: “*I am!*” (Mark 14:61f.). That means: He is the one on which all promises and prophecies of the Old Testament are focused; in him they are fulfilled.

However, that does not mean that at Jesus’ time there already existed a compilation or fixed collection of prophecies, which Jesus only had to fulfill, piece after piece. Even if some passages in the New Testament seem to give that impression,¹⁴ we can rather imagine that this process took some more time. Slowly but surely, Jesus’ followers and disciples *discovered* through their encounter with Christ how many of the well-known Old Testament passages found a new and deeper meaning, and, thus, were ‘fulfilled’ through him.

The words of Psalm 22 have always been read and understood as the mournful prayer of an innocent victim, without implying a specific, historic situation. When Jesus prayed the same words on the cross – like many other pious Jews before and after him – the disciples suddenly became aware that he was the just, innocent sufferer par excellence. Or could it be that he always had been the hidden speaker of this Psalm? To put it another way: Psalm 22 does not prefigure Jesus’ passion in detail, but through Jesus’ passion, the venerable Psalm receives a new dimension and a deeper meaning through Jesus’ suffering and death and, thus, is ‘fulfilled’.

Especially the so-called “Servant Songs” (Isaiah 52 and 53) have fostered the imagination of the early Christians. It did not take them long to realize that they had seen Jesus himself as “*despised and rejected*” before their very eyes, and, therefore, were able to confess that “*by his wounds we are healed*” (Isaiah 53:5).

Apart from these few examples, we find many other accounts the Gospels, in which Jesus refers more or less directly to the Scriptures and interprets them in the light of the present situation. This can happen in support of a specific action of his (or his disciples, as in Mark 2:23-28, where he excuses them for plucking ears of grain on a Sabbath). It can also be observed in a very fundamental way (and not without a certain polemic undertone), when he sharpens some of the Old Testament laws in a radical way through his “*But I tell you*” (in Matthew 5:17-48).

In these and many other examples, Jesus’ disciples experienced him in a constant lively and fruitful ‘discussion’ with the Scriptures and thus discovered himself as the hidden focus, in which all the Scriptures converge. Through this experience, they finally understood his whole life, his suffering, death and resurrection as fulfillment of ‘the Scriptures’; from there, more and more of the well-known Old Testament passages became transparent for Christ and were interpreted accordingly. One might even say that only at the moment of their fulfillment, the promises were recognized as such.

If we look at the moving story of the two disciples on their way to the little hamlet of Emmaus (Luke 24), we can observe this focal hermeneutical discovery in detail. We can assume that they knew the Scriptures well, but their grief keeps them from understanding their deeper meaning. When Jesus approaches them and starts to “*explain to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself*” (24:27), their hearts begin to burn. But only when Jesus “*took bread, gave thanks and began to give it to them*” (24:30), they finally recognize him: Their mysterious travel companion reveals himself to them in

¹⁴ “*Later, knowing that all was now completed, and so that the Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, ,I am thirsty.’*” (John 19:28). I prefer to think that Jesus uttered these words because he really *was* thirsty.

the act of communion, and it is only through this most personal encounter that they really understand him and – through him – the ultimate meaning of “all the Scriptures”.

The same can be said for Paul: For him, death and resurrection of Christ, as foretold in the Scriptures, are the ultimate expression of God’s grace and salvation: “*For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.*” (1Corinthians 15:2-3). The rest of the New Testament follows this general line of thought with slightly different nuances (which cannot be traced here). They all confess that the Christian faith is, right from its start, a faith that is based in the Scriptures of Israel, which show Christ as their centre and ultimate goal.

Once this general principle is understood, it need not be a matter of grave concern that, in some details, the New Testament authors can show a significant amount of liberty when referring to the Scriptures: When, in Matthew 2:5, the well-known prophecy regarding the little town of Bethlehem (Micah 5:1) is quoted, we can detect a charming little alteration: Matthew introduces into the famous line the words “*by no means*”, so that Bethlehem is no longer regarded as “*least among the clans / rulers of Judah*”, but becomes quite prominent as the birth place of the Savior.

The abbreviated version of the Ten commandments in Mk 10:19 (“*Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honour your father and mother.*”) resembles most closely the version in Sirach 4:1 – a book which was considered non-canonical by many authorities and has not been included in Martin Luther’s translation of the Bible. What do we make out of the fact that Jesus obviously quotes from a non-canonical book? Should we include Sirach into the Old Testament canon, because Jesus used it? Or should we rather acknowledge the fact that the margins of the Scriptures have not always been fixed and rigid, but were variable and flexible and take this flexibility into account?

In Paul, we find some even more puzzling examples: in 1Corinthians 2:9 he uses the traditional formula “*it is written*” to introduce the quote “*No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him*”. These words are faintly reminiscent of Isaiah 64:3, but the exact wording we find only in the so-called Apocalypsis of Elijah, which was never part of the biblical canon. And in 1Corinthians 9:10 he even refers (again with the traditional formula of citation) to a ‘verse’ (“*when the ploughman ploughs and the thresher threshes, they ought to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest.*”) that could not be verified in any biblical manuscript or edition.¹⁵

These examples have to suffice. Old *and* New Testament show us an amazing loyalty when dealing with the traditions that later became Holy Scripture or the written word. This loyalty is an expression of their loyalty and faithfulness to the speaker and author of this word, God Himself. The Old Testament is based on the strong conviction that God’s history with God’s people has not yet come to an end, so that even the already manifest words, texts and books can become ‘alive’ again and have to be heard and understood ever anew. The New Testament keeps its sole focus on Christ and, in consequence, finds ever again new and creative means of interpreting the Scriptures, so that God’s interaction with humankind becomes a living encounter, a liveliness, which also includes the Scriptures as witness for God’s redeeming action towards us.

However, as long as this central focus on Christ is maintained, we find an amazing creativity and liberty in detail when dealing with the Scriptures; a flexibility that reminds us of the fact that every encounter with the Scriptures is a living process and live-giving experience.

Volker Lubinetzki

¹⁵The NIV obscures this detail by linking the verse in question to the earlier quotation in v. 9, although in the Greek original it is quite clear that Paul actually uses the formula to introduce the *following* verse (v. 10).

ANNEX C: TRAJECTORIES (“ENTWICKLUNGSLINIEN”) IN THE BIBLE

The dynamic nature of the Word of God

God’s Word is God’s creative and redemptive response to human needs. Therefore, God’s Word enters human reality to change it from within. God picks up humans where they are – in their specific situations, their limited insight, their provisional worldviews and their problematic motivations – and leads them a few steps in the direction of where he wants them to be.

According to the Bible, God has a vision of comprehensive well-being for us and our world. It is called shalom (= comprehensive well-being) in the Old Testament and the Kingdom of God in the New Testament. This process of transformation and renewal can be observed by looking at the changes that biblical traditions underwent in biblical history. Let us look at three examples.

The king as God’s representative on earth

According to Psalm 2 the Israelite king is adopted by God as his son and representative on earth. Through him God maintains the cosmic order and channels his blessings. He is entitled to subdue all nations with an iron fist. Rebellion against the king is rebellion against God. Research has shown that this model originated in ancient Egypt. It was taken over by the Davidic kings to legitimate their rule.

But Israel did not have very happy experiences with its corrupt and dictatorial kings. Samuel had already warned against the institution (1 Sam 8; 27). In the North the Jotham fable in Judges 9:7ff says that the king is the most useless member of society. In the South the notion of a *genuine* representative of God emerged. His rule would be based on justice and peace, not on violence and war (Ps 72; Is 2:1-5; Is 9:1-7; 11:1-16). That was the root of messianism in biblical times.

The Assyrians and Babylonians put an end to the nation states of Northern Israel (721 BC) and Juda (586 BC). For about 500 years the kingship played no role in Judaism. After the exile, priests formed a religious mini-state in Jerusalem within the Persian and Macedonian Empires. When the Macedonian Empire weakened the Jewish priestly dynasty changed into royalty and tried to restore the Davidic kingdom. Herod the Great was the most important ruler of the time. But his rule was a far cry from what was expected by the prophets.

During Roman times messianic expectations flared up again among the Jews. Various revolutionary leaders with messianic pretensions came to grief. Jesus too was believed by his followers in Galilee to be the long expected messianic king. He seemed to be the Prince of Peace promised in Is 9 and 11. Alas, his triumphant entry into Jerusalem ended with his execution on the cross. His followers were devastated and fled.

According to the apostolic witness, God raised Jesus from the dead and affirmed his status as God’s universal representative, thus the legitimate ruler over the world. That is why all the Jewish royal titles were applied to Jesus: Son of God, Son of David, Son of Man, Shepherd and Messiah (Hebrew = the Anointed, translated as Christos in Greek).

By this time, however, the model of Psalm 2 had turned on its head. In Mark 10:35-45 Jesus calls this model ‘pagan’. Those who would be leaders in his new dispensation would not be oppressors, but servants of their subordinates. We find the same message in John 13. It was the most remarkable change of leadership principles found in biblical times, if not in human history.

Christian bishops and rulers soon reverted back to the model of Psalm 2. Bloody wars were fought between emperors and popes. Both claimed the status of divinely appointed rulers over the universe. Both the state and the church became authoritarian regimes.

The Reformation questioned the legitimacy of the Pope, but not the feudal state. When the feudal system began to crumble, the state changed into princely absolutism. It is humiliating to see that it

was the Enlightenment and secular humanism that picked up the principle of a servant leadership, which the church had abandoned. In fact, Christian churches often opposed these trends, believing them to be a rebellion against the divinely appointed order.

Revolutions – some sudden and violent, some gradual and peaceful – turned authoritarian states into functioning democracies based on human rights and binding constitutions. In Europe this process only came to a conclusion during the 20th century. In the rest of the world, it is far from over.

Moreover, the principle that all people must be accorded equal dignity and opportunity and that leaders are the servants of their subordinates is still struggling to penetrate the family, the economy, the civil administration and the international order. Christians should realise that this is their very own heritage and one of the most powerful contributions they can make to a peaceful society and the world community.

Priesthood and sacrifice

In ancient Phoenicia, families sacrificed their first-born sons, being their most precious possessions, to the Deity in recognition of their dependence and obligation. The practice made sense to the early Israelites. The claim of Yahweh to the first-born was firmly entrenched even in post-exilic legal texts such as Ex 22:29f.

However, by that time child sacrifice had become unacceptable under the impact of the prophetic critique (Jer 19:5; Ez 20:25). In consequence the law now required that the firstborn be 'redeemed' by payments (Nu 18:15f). The sacrifice of Isaac was the model. Animals took the place of humans. Later the blood of the animals substituted for the animals, so that priests could utilise their meat.

That is the origin of the blood symbolism in Judaism and Christianity. However, the prophets had attacked the very idea of sacrifices. God required righteousness and could not be bought off with rituals (Is 1:10ff; Am 5:21ff; Hos 6:6; Mi 6:6ff; Is 58). However, the priestly tradition was institutionally entrenched and proved to be stronger. The temple in Jerusalem became the site of an enormous commercialised turnover of sacrificial animals.

This is the background of the 'cleansing of the temple' by Jesus and his followers. It was one of the reasons for his execution. However, enlightened by Is 53:4ff, the early church saw a link between the Jewish sacrificial tradition and the death of Jesus. Jesus was not guilty – he had died for our sins.

The Letter to the Hebrews argues that Christ was the true high priest who sacrificed himself to God on our behalf. With that he wants to say that all sacrifices had become redundant forever. Looking at other texts, however, we realise that the sacrificial model was turned on its head: Not humans sacrifice their firstborn to God, but God sacrificed his only-born to humanity (Rom 3:25; Rom 4:25; John 3:16; 1 John 4:10).

The New Testament makes it clear that those who are in fellowship with God will be involved in the sacrifice of Christ on behalf of others. They do not give sacrifices to God but take part in God's sacrifice for humanity. They carry the cross. They die to themselves and live for Christ and his redeeming love (Rom 6; Rom 12:1; 2 Cor 5:14ff).

Modern science and the ecological crisis led us to deeper insights still. We realise that what happened in Christ was only the culmination of a much more comprehensive divine sacrifice to humanity. God is the Creator and Owner of reality as a whole. Our present life and prosperity were made possible by the struggles, the labours, the suffering and the deaths of countless generations before us. All that was part of God's sacrifice for us.

Our prosperity still depends on immense burdens carried by other members of the global society. It operates at the expense of the natural environment. Just imagine how many creatures have had to die so that you could eat and live! We cannot continue to treat nature as a quarry to be mined to sat-

isfy our short-lived whims and desires. Sharing God's sacrifice for humanity means that we too become willing to sacrifice so that other creatures and our own progeny can live and prosper.

Creation and new creation

The Bible is a collection of texts that witness to the creative power and the redeeming love of God in the world. The texts have been written over a period of roughly a thousand years. They all want to highlight the way God tackles the difference between what is and what ought to be. But what they believe ought to be changes in the course of time. The imagery they use also differs substantially.

In Gen 2:4ff God first creates the man, then the garden to feed him, then the animals. Then, almost as an afterthought, he creates the woman. Meant to be his helper, she actually leads him into temptation and disaster. It is clear that this narrative presupposes a patriarchal system where women are supposed to be incompetent, unreliable and subordinate. It also presupposes an agricultural context. The sea does not figure.

In spite of Paul's assertion that in Christ there is no Jew or Greek, no slave or free and no male or female (Gal 3:28), patriarchal assumptions remained firmly entrenched and found perhaps their most radical expression in 1 Tim 2:8-15. But in Gen 1 (which is a much later text than Gen 2) the picture changed completely. Here God first creates the preconditions of life: light against darkness, a stable structure against a chaos (depicted as a primordial sea surrounding the cosmos), then land and sea. Then he creates the plants, the heavenly bodies, the animals and – last of all – humans.

Created in the "image of God" humans are the most important creatures, but they are part of the animal world. And – very significantly – there is no difference in status between man and woman. The development of insight concerning God's creative activity did not stop there. Texts such as Is 40-55, Ps 104, Job 38ff, Sirach 1 and Wisdom of Solomon 7 (both apocryphical books), Col 1 and John 1 show how ever new attempts were made to describe the creative and redemptive activity of God under changed circumstances.

Now we come to the "new creation". God wants to change what is into what ought to be. But what ought to be? Beginning with the fulfilment of inner-worldly needs such as land, progeny, freedom, land, rain, fertility, economic sufficiency, military victory and political stability, expectations slowly changed into hope for a complete reconstruction of reality – the human heart, the human body, the community, the political system, nature, even cosmic phenomena such as the sun. We call the expectation of a totally new world "apocalyptic". It matured under the impact of the constantly worsening fate of the Jewish nation, which was oppressed and persecuted by one great pagan empire after the other.

These attempts to fathom God's creative activity were formulated between 3000 and 2000 years ago. In the mean time we have learnt a few things about how God's creation evolved and how it operates. In the Bible God is depicted as creating with his hands (Gen 2), then through an imperial decree (Gen 1), through a violent conflict (Is 40-55), through divine wisdom (see above), through the divine logos (Jn 1), even through death and resurrection (2 Cor 5).

As believers we must do for our times what the biblical authors did for theirs: We must witness to the creative and redemptive power of God in terms of contemporary insights. We are not bound to the worldview of two or three thousand years ago. We can also not prescribe how God must have created the universe to satisfy our preconceptions. We must look at what actually happened. If we do not do that, we lose our integrity and our message loses its credibility.

Conclusion

What do these examples teach us? The Word of God enters human history and picks up people where they are. As needs change, God's redemptive response changes accordingly. The authors always address the needs of their contemporaries in terms of their current worldviews. Either the interpretation of the tradition is adapted, or the tradition itself is altered. This is done quite freely be-

cause the main thing is the message of God's creative power and redemptive love, not the tradition as such.

In time insight into God's redemptive intentions moves closer to God's vision of comprehensive well-being. It becomes more focused, more profound and more comprehensive in scope. Assumptions of an earlier time are superseded by insights of a later time. If that were not the case, we would still labour under the faith assumptions of ancient Israel or later Judaism.

The dynamic versatility of the Word of God is the strength, not the weakness of the biblical faith. That means that each insight found in the Bible is provisional. We must always ask: what was said before this text and what was said after this text on the topic. The process reached its culmination in the Christ-event and is heading towards God's eschatological future.

If we want to be true to what happened in biblical times, we too must be involved in the historical dynamics of God's Word. We always have to take present needs and present insights into account. We have to ask ourselves: what God's creative and redeeming love wants to say to us, our congregations and our social contexts now and here under present circumstances.

Prof. Dr. Klaus Nürnberger

ANNEX D: GUIDELINES AND HELPFUL HINTS FOR BIBLE-STUDY

We differentiate: who is involved and when and where is Bible study done? Working with Bible texts will differ whether we do it alone, as family devotion, as Bible study group in the congregation, as preparation for a Sermon or as a working document of the church on a specific theme. The theses in the main document are applicable for each of these situations, but these guidelines and hints are applicable mainly for doing Bible study alone, as family or as Bible study group for different groups in the congregation.

1. Choosing the text:

1.1. Although some people have tried it, it is not advisable reading the Bible as a novel from cover to cover. The 66 books of the Bible are of such different nature that one cannot just read them indiscriminately one after the other, chapter by chapter.

1.2. Reading plans are a help which are given for each year in the ELCSA Almanac, devotional and Bible reading books for English readers, such as “Faith for daily Living”, “Daily Bread” and “Portals of Prayer”. For German readers “Losungen” with the accompanying devotional books such as “Ein feste Burg”, “Neukirchner Kalender”, “Licht und Kraft”. A useful Bible-reading plan in German for the whole year can also be obtained from the following website: www.oeab.de/bibelleseplan/aktuell.

1.3. It is recommended that the texts (prescribed verses) should be read within their immediate and broader context (surrounding passages).

1.4. Or one could use Bible studies as a continuous reading of consecutive texts in one book of the Bible.

1.5. Alternatively, to follow the church’s Sunday service readings which are arranged according to the church year with a cycle of six readings and a psalm for every Sunday. These can be used for Bible studies during the week as preparation for the following Church Service, e.g., taking one reading per day or per week.

(The list of these readings is printed in the “Evangelisches Gesangbuch” Nos 954.1-954.74 with I Gospel, II Epistle, III often Old Testament texts, and IV-VI with Old Testament, Epistle and Gospel texts, while Psalms are separately listed).

1.6. Another option is to make use of topical Bible studies, taking into account certain relevant issues within the group.

2. Choosing a time and place for Bible Study:

A fixed time and quiet place are recommended, where no telephone or other electronic devices can distract us. A prayer at the beginning and end is advisable, also to collect our thoughts and feelings. A suitable hymn or song may accompany the meeting. Depending on the group dynamics, the group decides whether to meet in a private home or church venue.

3. Meditation:

It is recommended to read through the text, reflect on it and write down in an exercise book what we see, hear, smell, taste and touch in the text. Besides using our five senses, we may ask ourselves, what do we feel, what brings hope and joy or what disturbs, annoys or angers us in the text. We try to formulate with which character in the text we can identify and try to slip into the shoes of those with whom it is difficult to identify.

4. Bible Study Tools (included in many Bible editions):

Many Bibles provide one or the other of these tools:

- 4.1. Index with Bible books and their abbreviations.
- 4.2. Headings for each section within the text (these, as chapters and verses, are not in the original manuscripts - in Luther's time texts were not printed with verse numbers).
- 4.3. Introduction to each book, giving an overview with summarized contents, author and date of writing, which should be used critically.
- 4.4. Cross-references to other texts or sentences with the same word or thought.
- 4.5. Overview of the main stories in the Bible from Creation to Revelation.
- 4.6. Overview of topics, e.g., parables of Jesus, relevant texts for specific life situations.
- 4.7. Concordance, where all main words are listed according to usage in the Bible, e.g., the word "Reconciliation".
- 4.8. A dictionary of important words and their meaning.
- 4.9. Maps and charts of Biblical times and places.
- 4.10. Charts of the History as time-line, e.g., from Pre-history, through Abraham to Jesus, ending with the Fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE and the consecutive writing of New Testament books and letters.

5. Special Bible Editions: (out of a multitude, only a few are mentioned)

- 5.1. There are some 43 different English translations, some are very close to the original languages (e.g., English Standard Version). Others are more a transliteration giving the general content in modern thoughts and contemporary English (e.g., The Message).
- 5.2. The Comparative Study Bible places four different English text translations next to each other for comparison.
- 5.3. The Serendipity Bible for Bible Study Groups is arranged with: Open, Dig and Reflect. Open: this starts with sharing one's own story with some general questions. Dig is to figure out the main idea, plot, argument, principles in the text. Reflect is to apply the story to one's own life.
- 5.4. The Application Study Bible which interprets and applies texts to the present situation.
- 5.5. Special editions for men, women, youth and children.
- 5.6. Special art editions with paintings of certain painters, e.g., Rembrandt van Rijn, Rudolf Schäfer, Sieger Köder.
- 5.7. Some study Bible editions include short commentaries to each section for each text (pericope).

6. Special Bible Tools:

- 6.1. Synopsis of the Gospels: where the same story is set side by side as written in Mark, Matthew, Luke (the so-called synoptic Gospels) and John. It becomes evident that each Gospel writer has arranged and emphasised the material differently for different readers, e.g., Mark is the shortest written for gentile readers with an emphasis on the suffering of Jesus. Matthew writes for Jewish Christians and has collected the Jesus sayings in five great blocks, relating to the "five books of Moses", thereby emphasizing the teaching of Jesus. Luke writes for gentile Christians and emphasizes the

love and acceptance of God even of the sinner. And John writes sermon-like interpretations of Jesus' miracles or signs, includes Jesus's description of himself in seven "I am" words, thereby emphasizing Jesus' glory.

6.2. Different Bible Commentaries from easy editions to sophisticated specialised ones are available, some in individual volumes, others as one-volume commentary.

6.3. Tools such as Dictionaries, Concordances, interlinear Bible editions are available in different languages, from OT Hebrew, NT Greek to the modern languages of English, German etc.

6.4. Internet, films, DVDs, Videos and Bible games can enhance Bible studies but should be researched carefully.

6.5. Many Christian books take up themes which can be used in Bible studies, which should be used critically.

7. Individual and Group Bible Study:

7.1 In Bible study we as individuals try to understand what God intends us to do with our life. We are searching for guidance, for support, encouragement, clarification and necessary self-discipline. The goal is to experience Bible study as communication starting with God and our responding to it.

7.2. Group Bible study is listening to a Bible text, sharing experiences with others on the text and thereby giving guidance to our life and that of the congregation. The result is to lead us as congregation on a way of contemplation and action.

7.3. Many courses have been introduced in our church to renew and further Bible studies and give new insights, e.g., "Auszug aus dem Schneckenhaus", Alpha Course, Kingfisher Project, Willow Creek.

8. Consequences for Sermon and Teaching

8.1. All Bible Study is to be bound into the common service and spiritual development of the local congregation and church as a whole. Questions, discrepancies and opposing theological standpoints in Bible texts can be researched, discussed, explained and accepted. It is essential that thoughts, ideas and new insights from Bible Studies flow into our sermons, teaching, pastoral care and actions of the congregation as a whole.

8.2. Sharing insights in Bible studies and participating with others in the congregation, may lead us to contextualisation of texts into our situation and by influencing and rediscovering our missionary, evangelistic, educational and diaconic commission.

8.3. In personal Bible study it would be important to take home at least one simple thought, sentiment or message for the day or week. We might discover, learn and continually convert to new insights in our relationship with God in the suffering and risen Lord, with our fellow human beings and with ourselves and thereby influence our surroundings in a broader context.

8.4. We pray that the Holy Spirit will enlighten us with God's Word to find comfort in affliction, hope in despair, patience in waiting, laughter in sadness, enthusiasm in boredom, faith in persecution and love in enmity.

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ANNEX E: GLOSSARY OF TECHNICAL TERMS

Apostolic: Belonging or pertaining to an Apostle, the Apostles, their times or their teachings.

Canon / canonical: From the Greek for “rod” or “rule”; is used to denote the list of books of Scripture accepted as authentic and authoritative.

Creed: A confession of faith (from the Latin “credo” = “I believe”) accepted by the Church, e.g., the Apostolic and Nicene Creeds.

Dogma / dogmatic: An official statement of ecclesiastical belief that is regarded as authoritative / pertaining to such (a) statement(s).

Exegesis / exegetical: The (scholarly) exposition of Biblical texts.

Fundamentalism / fundamentalist: In theology, a profoundly conservative approach to the Bible, holding that its text is to be understood literally and holding also that, being divinely inspired, its text is infallible in every respect and that therefore its pronouncements are authoritative, whether religious, moral, historical, or even within the domain of natural science.

Heretic: A person who advocates a doctrinal view that is at variance with the recognized, established and official doctrine for the church.

Hermeneutics / hermeneutical: The theory and practice of interpreting biblical and other texts with special attention to language, literary and historical criticism.

(Verbal) Inspiration: The idea that God inspired the biblical authors to write what they wrote. In its strongest form, the concept of verbal inspiration proclaims that God through the Holy Spirit has inspired every single letter, word, and sentence without the influence of the human writers.

Liturgy / liturgical: (from the Greek “leiturgia” = office / service). Used in the early church for the office of conducting the church service. From there the understanding “order of church service” developed, specifically the traditional Lutheran worship.

Relativism / relativist: The notion that there is no universal, absolute truth, not even when dealing with the Bible. Every interpretation is as valid as any other.

Sacrament: (from the Latin “sacred or religious mystery”) – In the Protestant church the two rituals which Jesus instituted, namely baptism and Holy Communion. In the sacrament, Christ’s word of institution (e.g., 1Corinthians 11:23-25; Matthew 28:19f.) combines itself with the visible sign of water and bread and wine, respectively. In the sacrament, the believer receives the same as through the proclaimed word, only in a physical and thus more personal and intensive way.

Septuagint: (Latin: “The Seventy”) The best-known Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), which was used by Greek-speaking Jews throughout the Roman Empire and also by the early church. It is said to have been produced by 72 translators in 72 days in about 270 BCE in Egypt.

Vulgate: The Latin version of the Bible in the “vulga” (Latin: “public or common tongue”). It was the work of Jerome, translating from Hebrew and Greek, finishing the whole Bible in 404 CE. The Vulgate became the official Bible version of the western church, and until 1943, all Roman Catholic translations were required to use it.