



How to read and study the Bible

Preamble

The 22nd European Lutheran Conference met 31 May – 2 June 2012 in Mulhouse, France, under the theme 'How to read and study the Bible'. We were encouraged and stimulated by the presentations and discussions, relearning truths about God's Word and discovering new opportunities for reading and studying the Bible.

We share our conference input and reflections with our churches with the hope that congregations read this material and see themselves in the reflection, be encouraged in what they are doing about reading and studying the Bible, and also be encouraged to try additional activities that promote one of the Reformation themes: 'Word alone'.

Our conference considered four topics summarised as: 1. The Bible: God Speaks; 2. The Bible: Our Ears; 3. The Bible: In Public; and 4. The Bible: In Private.

1. The Bible: God Speaks

Does God speak? It is not obvious that God speaks! Both the world's experience and the experience of many Christians is that God is mute; that Jesus doesn't answer prayer; and that we are left alone with divine silence and a myriad of human words. This experience should not be discounted or ignored. However silence is never God's final answer in this world.

We affirm that God is speaking. God speaks through the Bible. In a world of many opinions there is only one Word of God. This Word of God is revelation – an uncovering and exposing of truth by the power of the Holy Spirit – whereby we see ourselves as the sinners we are by nature and we see Jesus crucified on the cross as the central and clearest revealing of God's grace and mercy towards humanity.

We noted and agreed that the Bible's message from Genesis to Revelation is heard by us as Law and Gospel. The Law reveals our sin and God's will and expectations, while the Gospel reveals God's mercy in Jesus Christ, forgiveness of sins, and life with God through his Word – whether visual, audible, or dressed in water or bread and wine. The purpose of the Bible is our salvation; faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God whom we confess as 'Lord and God'. The Bible is the inspired Word of God and cannot err (2 Tim 3:16) and God uses this written word to speak to us – a living, dynamic, powerful word that is shaper than any two edged sword which kills and is sweeter than honey which makes alive and comforts.

There is no single language in which God speaks but God sanctifies all languages as they are able to convey Christ. God is speaking. God is speaking through the Bible.

2. The Bible: Our Ears

We are capable of hearing. However people often hear what they want to hear. Perhaps this is even more so when God speaks! Our attitude and perspective towards God's Word affects how we hear it.

While we think we are in charge and in control of what we read or hear, the truth is that it is the Holy Spirit who is in charge and control and we are the object of his work as he reveals God's Word – God *speaking* – to us in our daily situations. Consequently we recognised the following attitudes we should bring to our reading, studying, and hearing of the Bible:

- (a) that we regard the Bible as the Word of God and our Confessions as a compass for our understanding;
- (b) that the Bible conveys Christ – and we search the Scriptures until we 'find' him;
- (c) that we read from the stand point of faith in Jesus and consequently if our interpretation or understanding of the Bible leads us away from the cross and the teaching of justification that we keep reading!
- (d) that Scripture interprets Scripture and passages that are unclear must give way to passages that are clear;
- (e) that the New Testament reveals the fulfilment of the Old Testament;
- (f) that we recognise the different authors, contexts, and literary genres in the Bible and seek to understand the author's intention;
- (g) that we read 'literally' not 'literalistically';
- (h) that understanding the two natures of Jesus is helpful in understanding the divine and human nature of the Bible.

3. The Bible: In Public

We were encouraged by the similarities among our churches in our use of the Bible in public. Each church was also pleased to hear new ideas regarding the use of the Bible in public.

The Bible is central in worship as it is read and proclaimed and in the liturgy (which quotes Scripture). Without God's Word our worship is idolatry. We support and encourage anything that helps people encounter God's Word: faithful preaching and teaching; lectors who prepare their readings and read with dignity. Our congregations were encouraged to discover what people have actually heard in worship. Bringing one's Bible to church is worth considering!

The Bible is central in our care for children. All churches have a variety of programmes that link the Bible and children especially since children no longer usually encounter the Bible in their schools and biblical illiteracy is ever increasing. Our churches support families in their home devotions, operate Sunday Schools, Bible camps, Bible activities during the week, and have special moments in worship for them such as participating in dramatic readings, drama, and the regular and festival life of the church. Foundational in all these interactions with the Bible is joy for God loves his people and he wants them to know that.

We encourage our congregations to use all the senses as they bring children into an encounter with the Bible – pictures, movement, sound, candles, and more. Please do not underestimate children's capacity to learn and understand the Bible – Jesus picks them up and blesses them! – and so learning is very much a matter of belonging in the family of God and learning what this means through repetition, action, games (eg. wrap 66 cereal boxes in paper and label each as a book of the Bible and see what fun you can have!), and memorisation. As the Bible is presented to children in warm and inviting ways, so these encounters with the Bible shape attitudes to God and the Church as well as being opportunities to invite others to 'come and meet Jesus'.

The Bible is central in Bible Studies. All churches have a wide variety of settings for Bible Studies, similar reasons for them, and often similar challenges. Bible Studies are a standard part of Lutheran Church life. They provide a social atmosphere for dialogue that is good for nurture and for mission where people can explore what the Bible is saying and what the Bible is saying 'to me today'. One innovative Bible Study approach (from South Africa) was for people to study the sermon text after having heard the sermon and, when in receipt of further stimulus questions or summary statements, to meet during the week and then discuss how we can live what we have heard in the Bible and the sermon.

We recognise that there are increasing pressures regarding travel and time and encourage our congregations to facilitate local gatherings where possible and perhaps increase the activities on Sundays (Bible Study before or after worship). Congregations are reminded that illiteracy is a hidden issue and through no-pressure-to-read environments and use of visual aids that everyone can be encouraged to attend. Often Bible Study leaders are in short supply and so congregations are encouraged to increase the training and participation of lay leaders while also balancing the pastor's responsibility for oversight (too much emphasis in either direction leads to limited Bible Study opportunities).

4. The Bible: In Private

We noted in this area of faith and life, that identifying, monitoring, and encouraging what exactly is happening in relation to our private use of the Bible is more difficult whether we are talking about individuals, couples, or families. All our churches strongly affirm the need to read the Bible daily beginning from as young as possible. It is the formation that occurs from one's early years that best helps people later in life. ('I never read the Bible without having a benefit.') Our private use of the Bible can be enhanced with devotional books and Bible tools (dictionaries, concordances, 'Study Bibles', internet). Where people have impairments or life issues that make sitting down and reading the Bible difficult, our congregations are encouraged to use other formats of the Bible (audio, pictures). Churches are encouraged to be creative in supporting private use of the Bible (eg. reading the Bible before physical exercise when one can then meditate or setting a goal to memorise chapters and even books of the Bible).

Conclusion

If we may be succinct ... 1. Read the Bible! 2. Go to church!

To God be the glory!

Adopted in Mulhouse, June 2, 2012

The Delegates of the Member Churches:

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| Belgium | ELKB | Mr Johannes REITZE-LANDAU, Pres. Gijsbertus VAN HATTEM |
| Denmark | ELFKiDk | Pres. Leif G. JENSEN |
| France | EEL-SF | Mrs Carine BOOS, Mrs Angela FLAUSS, Rev. Jean Thiébaut HAESSIG (ELC Pres), Rev. Jean-Louis SCHAEFFER |
| Germany | SELK | Mrs Dorothea FORCHHEIM, Rev. Markus NIETZKE (ELC Vice Pres), Rev. Klaus PAHLEN, Mrs Stefanie ROTH, Bish. Hans-Jörg VOIGT |
| Portugal | IELP | Rev. Genivaldo AGNER, Pres. Adalberto HILLER |
| United Kingdom | ELCE | Chairman Jon EHLERS, Mrs Rosana KRIGER, Rev. George SAMIEC (ELC Sec) |

The Delegates of the Guest Churches:

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| Kyrgyz Republic | LCK | Bish. Kenjebek BOTOBAEV, Mrs Larissa KURMANBAKEEV, Rev. Mansur KURMANBAKEEV |
| USA | LCMS | Rev. Brent SMITH |