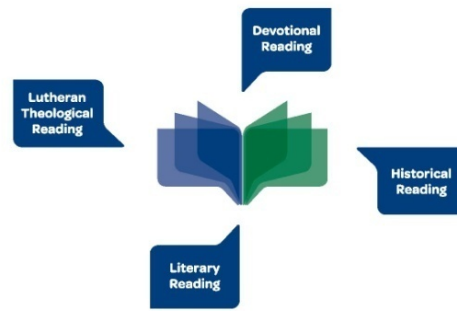


## ***Some Helpful Ways to Read the Bible***

***Diane Jacobson***

Knowing how to begin with Bible Study or how to have good conversations gathered around the Bible is often the biggest challenge we face. What kind of questions might we ask that will help open up the passage? How can we generate excitement and learning and have fun as well? How can we be challenged and comforted by God and hear both God's demands and promises through our engagement with the passage and with one another?

Folks engaged in the Book of Faith Initiative of the ELCA have been talking about four different ways of reading the Bible, four ways of asking questions. These four ways, as shown in the following illustration, are devotional reading, historical reading, literary reading, and Lutheran theological reading.



Note: Even though we talk about four different ways of reading, the four tend to overlap and get messy. That is just fine. Messy is often good. Still it helps to begin by learning how to differentiate between the four types of reading or questions.



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## ***Devotional Reading***

**Devotional reading** invites all of us to set aside our lack of knowledge or our expertise and let the passage from the Bible seep into our hearts, minds, and souls both individually and in community.

Devotional reading has a long history in the church, going back to *Lectio Divina*, a latin phrase meaning “divine reading.” This method of reading was first practiced by the Benedictine order of the Roman Catholic Church. While it was used for individual meditation, it has now been adapted for groups. You can read some basic information from the Benedictines on *Lectio Divina* at <http://www.osb.org/lectio/index.html>

There are many other helpful devotional methods one can practice. Here are four other methods:

1. The Moravians, using their daily texts, practice the T.R.I.P. method, asking what am I **T**hankful for, what do I **R**egret, for what do I **I**ntercede, and what is my **P**lan of Action.  
See <http://www.dailytext.com/dailytexts/TRIP.php>
2. The Swedish Marking Method invites a person to use a system of candles and arrows and question marks in the margins of their Bibles:
  - One candle means: This is new for me -- a new understanding or insight
  - Two candles means: I want to remember or memorize this verse or idea.
  - An arrow means: This strikes me as being especially important.
  - A question mark means: This is not clear. I need to explore further.See <http://www.matthiasmedia.com.au/briefing/library/5445/>
3. One can find a variety of devotional Bible Study Methods for the Catechumenate at [www.sclutheran.org/Committees/Bible%20Study%20Methods.doc](http://www.sclutheran.org/Committees/Bible%20Study%20Methods.doc)
4. Eric Law of the *Kaleidoscope Institute for Competent Leadership in a Diverse, Changing World* has developed a way of reading designed to build inclusive community around Holy Scriptures by mutual invitation at [http://216.104.171.229/ki/bible\\_study.html](http://216.104.171.229/ki/bible_study.html)

### **Here are four helpful principles with devotional reading:**

1. Listen slowly and carefully. Listen both to the biblical passage and to each other.
2. Find a method of devotional reading or a set of questions that your group can become familiar and comfortable with and use these questions regularly.
3. For devotional reading, you don't need an expert in the room. Sometimes experts get in the way because...
4. With devotional reading, there are no right answers.

Remember, the idea is to let the Bible seep into our hearts, minds, and souls, both personally and in community.

### **Some Examples of Helpful Devotional Questions:**

- **What word or phrase strikes me, and where does it take me?**
- **What stories or memories does this passage stir in me?**
- **What scares, confuses, or challenges me in this passage?**
- **What delights me in this passage or fills me with hope?**
- **What is God up to in this passage?**

## ***Historical Reading (Who, When, Where, Why, What?)***

**Historical reading** grows out of the understanding that our Bible is, among many other things, an ancient text, written in a different time and place by and for folks with sensibilities and experiences quite different from our own. We can gain insights for our present context through better understanding the ancient context.

It is not always easy to understand what a good historical question is. Often we think the basic historical questions is this: “What really happened on that day?” We want to know what Jesus really said or where Noah’s ark really landed or questions like that. But mostly we cannot answer questions like these. Instead the basic historical question is this:

“What insights from history would be helpful to know in order to hear, read, study, or understand this passage more accurately?”

Historical questions help us to understand what stands behind a text. So when we are reading the Book of Ruth, we might want to know something about Moab (Ruth was from there and Naomi’s family immigrates there) or what the life of widows was like in ancient Bethlehem (both Ruth and her mother-in-law, Naomi, were widows).

There are many ways history can be helpful, but it doesn’t always solve stuff. Sometimes insight from history gives you really good options, so that you might imagine different possibilities. For example, if we imagine Mark is writing to a Jewish community, they might hear his Gospel one way. If he were writing to a Gentile audience, they might hear it this other way. Both are possible.

Often when we ask read historically, we get to meaning through analogies with our own life circumstances. For example, we learn that prophet Amos was a working class shepherd from the southern kingdom of Judah called to deliver a message to the leaders of the northern Kingdom of Israel warning them about God’s judgment if they don’t take care of the poor in their midst. So we might think what would it be like if an immigrant farm worker from Mexico started delivering prophecies about taking care of the poor to the leaders of the United States?

Historical readings do need an expert. Sometimes the expert is in the room. Sometimes you learn good places to go to look stuff up like in the church library or in a good Study Bible. Sometimes you learn some good websites to visit. Here are three good websites. (There are many more, but there are also websites that are not so good!)

<http://www.enterthebible.org> <http://www.textweek.com> <http://www.workingpreacher.org>

### **Some Examples of Helpful Historical Questions:**

- **What insights from history would be helpful to know in order to hear, read, study, or understand this passage more accurately?**
- **Do we know anything about who wrote the passage or to whom it is written?**
- **Do we know when this passage was written?**
- **Do we know where this passage was written or takes place and anything about that ancient part of the world?**

### **Two Examples of a helpful Historical Exercise:**

1. **Look at your passage. Pretend you are an editor for a soon-to-be-published Study Bible. Your job to tell the scholar writing the notes for this book of the Bible where he or she should put a note. Put an asterisk (\*) wherever you would want that person to put a note.**
2. **Pretend you are looking at your text on a computer screen. Where would you want a hyperlink that would give you more information?**

## ***Literary Reading (How do we find meaning in the details of this passage?)***

A **literary reading** is one in which we look at a passage as a written text and we attend to the details and nuances of the text, believing that meaning can be found deeply within the text.

To read the Bible with literary questions in mind, you don't have to be a biblical scholar, but it does help to be a really good reader, maybe an English teacher. Think book club.

### **Some Examples of Helpful Literary Questions (with comments):**

- **What type of literature is this passage?**  
It helps to know what kind of literature you are looking at. We read a story (narrative) differently from a psalm or a prophetic pronouncement or a proverb or a letter. So you would ask different literary questions. Many of the questions below have narrative in mind.
- **What is the literary context of this passage? What comes before or after it? What is the larger biblical context?**
- **What is the setting of this passage?**  
Does the passage mention a particular time (midnight, noon, Sabbath, Passover)?  
Does the passage mention a particular place (a river, a well, a mountain, a banquet)?
- **Who are the important characters in this story?**  
What do we know about them? What might they be thinking of feeling?  
How do you know from the text and what comes from your experience?  
Pay close attention to description, action, and dialogue.
- **What are the important themes in this passage**  
Across the different types of biblical literature, you can often discover what themes are important by noting repetitions or word plays or other literary moves. Often verbs provide the clue to what is important.

### **Some Examples of Helpful Literary Exercises:**

1. ***Setting Exercise:*** Circle/Note any places, times, or settings. Talk about these places in your own life. What do they evoke personally? Where are these places found elsewhere in the Bible, and why are they important? What is their symbolic value?
2. ***Character Exercise:*** Divide up the group and invite them to act out the story for one another.
3. ***Thematic Exercise:*** Underline the verbs and/or repetitions. Share what you discover about what is important.
4. ***Thematic Exercise:*** Imagine that you were a court reporter for the Judah or Galilean or Roman Post at the judicial proceedings at one of the places in your passage. What would your headline be?
5. ***General Literary Exercise:*** Imagine you are making a movie of this passage? What are the settings? What are the plot and the major themes? Who might you cast in the major roles and why? What stage directions would you give them to show their feelings and character development?

## ***Lutheran Theological Reading***

A **Lutheran theological reading** brings questions to the passage rising out of particular insights from our Lutheran heritage that can help us engage the Bible anew in each time and place.

The truth is Lutherans come to Scripture not so very differently than others. But certain convictions across the years have shaped our reading, studying, hearing, encountering and being encountered by the Bible. We have particular insights from our Lutheran heritage that can help us engage the Bible in our time and place. We should always be aware as we go through these that though we identify these ideas as Lutheran, they are not exclusively so.

## **Some Important Lutheran Convictions about Biblical Engagement**

### **Law and gospel**

One of the principle Lutheran convictions is that the Word, in all its manifestations, works on us as law and as gospel. In the theological phrase “law and gospel” both terms are used rather differently than they are in everyday language. The phrase can be a kind of code language for us so what we mean by law and gospel is often very confusing. Here is a simplified version:

What we mean by speaking of law and gospel is that as we engage and are engaged by God through the Bible, we experience the demands (law) and promises (gospel) of God. Law and Gospel are about what Bible does to us when we read it. Law and Gospel are about the effects of being encountered by the written and spoken and incarnate Word.

Law and Gospel is often better expressed by verbs rather than nouns:

So we read a passage (or our neighbor does), and we are convicted. We may even despair. We are struck by the needs of our neighbor. We hear who we are – sinners in need of forgiveness, lost souls in need of being found, lonely creatures in need of love. We hear God’s word as law. The passage “laws” us.

Or we read this same passage or another and we know the reality of God’s promise to us, to the world. We experience God’s forgiveness and grace. Christ is for us. We are surrounded by steadfast and committed love. We hear who God is. We hear God’s word as gospel. The passage “gospels” us.

When we hear the Bible as law and gospel, the effective meaning of the Bible is not found in the passage or behind the passage. The meaning of Scripture is found in the encounter with the Word. We are not used to asking such questions but they are at the heart of how we think of the Bible as the Word of God.

### **What Shows Forth Christ**

A second central Lutheran insight is that as we read and study and hear the Bible, what shows forth Christ (brings Christ to us and us to Christ) is central.

For Luther, the true meaning of the Bible, the core of biblical truth, is the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

This insight brings us to a favorite of Luther’s images of Scripture:

*Here you will find the swaddling clothes and the manger in which Christ lies.*

-- Luther, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 35: *Prefaces to the Old Testament*, 236.

Through this image of Scripture as the manger of Christ, Luther shows us how the Bible both **is** the Word of God and **contains** the Word of God, cradles it if you will. It is also not so much that the passage talks about and teaches us about Jesus Christ (though it certainly does that) but that rather that the passage points us, drives us, leads us to Jesus Christ. What is important and true about the Bible is what births Christ in us.

## **Scripture interprets Scripture**

Another Lutheran insight to highlight is the notion that Scripture interprets Scripture. As Lutherans, we do not read biblical passages in isolation from each other. The whole of Scripture helps us to understand the particular. So, Scripture interprets Scripture means that difficult parts of the Bible should be read in the light of clearer or more central passages. This means that the better we know the Bible, the better able we are to find both depth and clarity of meaning. It also means that while we let each passage speak in its own voice, we judge the edges by the center. Not all passages of the Bible are equally important. Lutherans come to all Scripture with certain biblical ideas having pride of place. One example: We Lutherans believe that the Bible teaches a theology of the cross. So, Scripture interprets Scripture means that we cannot get to God by bypassing the pain and suffering and messiness of life. God comes to us from within the suffering and through it, giving us a very different understanding and experience of divine power. If you want to talk about Jesus and his resurrection, you also have to talk about bearing his cross.

## **The Plain Meaning of the Text**

Lutherans begin their exploration of the Bible seeking for the plain meaning of the text (rather than the allegorical). Luther said “The Christian reader should make it his first task to seek out the literal sense, as they call it. For it alone holds its ground in trouble and trial.”( Luther’s Works, vol.9, 24) This quotation is confusing in our contemporary setting because we hear the word “literal” quite differently from the way Luther meant it. He did not mean as that every word of the Bible was literally true. Rather, by literal sense, Luther meant the plain meaning of the text. Luther was concerned that we not read the text using fanciful allegory, as medieval interpreters did, completely disconnected from what the text actually says. As modern readers of the Bible, we try our best to get to the plain meaning of the text through asking the historical literary questions and by reading with great care. So this reformation principle often leads us to commend modern methods of interpretation.

## **Public Interpretation**

Finally we come to the study of Scripture publically, as a wide and inclusive community. Underlying this principle are two issues. One issue is that if our interpretation is public then the passage is not just a private word between one individual and God. The Bible is not filled with secret messages. The second issue points to our preference for communal interpretation and hearing of the Bible. Though private study of the Biblical text is certainly not to be discouraged, our Lutheran view of both God and church commends a more public reading. Hence the tag line for the Book of Faith initiative is: Open Scripture. Join the Conversation.

We come to the study of Scriptures as community with the conviction that we learn the most in conversation with the other. Moreover our community is never complete if we exclude the interpretation of the other, especially those most different from ourselves. We often learn most from folks from cultures, generations, genders, and experiences different from our own who hear God speaking literally a different language. The broader the community, the fuller the meaning.

## **Some Examples of Helpful Lutheran Theological Questions:**

- **In what ways do we hear this passage as law?**
- **In what ways do we hear this passage as Gospel?**
- **How does this passage show forth Christ?**
- **What other passages from the Bible help us to understand this passage?**
- **How do others hear this passage, especially folks from cultures different from my own?**