



“The bible is the cradle wherein Christ is laid.” – Martin Luther

Martin Luther, and other reformers of his day, argued that scripture should be the primary tool for guiding the church. He did not agree with the Vatican that tradition (or dogma) was equal in importance with the bible. Luther held up the church’s dogma and compared it to the bible. Anywhere that he saw a discrepancy, he gave greater authority to the bible and argued against the tradition. He didn’t want to throw out all the traditions – only those that he saw as explicitly contrary to scripture.

The challenge, however, in honoring the authority of the bible, is that some pretty bad things have been motivated by bible verses (slavery, racism, crusades, the inquisition, etc.). In recent years, I’ve seen mugs and magnets that read, “I can do all things through a verse taken out of context.” It’s a play on Philippians 4:13, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” - a verse that is regularly and egregiously quoted out of context. The use of bible verses to argue our own point of view can be dangerous when our own point of view is sinful.

So, how is a lay person to know what the bible really says? And how can someone know, if the interpretation of a verse or passage is helpful or harmful? Martin Luther said to look for the *canon within the canon* – THE GOSPEL. We are to use the Word to interpret the word. We ground ourselves in Christ first. Martin Luther explained the gospel as Jesus clothing us in righteousness and putting on our sin. We use that as a filter to understand everything else we read.

I take it a step further, because, in truth, some dedicated Lutherans have used Lutheran theology to interpret the bible and still come up with some pretty poor interpretations. So, what I do, is consider the two greatest commandments as Jesus said, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind” and “*the second is just like it*, you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Matthew 22)

Each time I sit down to read scripture, I do so with these two twin viewpoints:

1. God loves all of humanity enough to be crucified with us and by us.
2. We are instructed to love God and all of humanity.

There are some passages and stories that easily back up these viewpoints. Others require a lot of prayer. I call this leaning on the Holy Spirit. When I come across a passage that is violent or disturbing, I ask the Holy Spirit to help me see God's love at work. So far, I have always found it.

I have heard from a number of you that reading the bible is intimidating or boring. There are places that are hard to understand. Other places can get a bit bogged down in details. So, I want to give you some suggestions of places to start: The *Letters*¹ of John (1, 2, and 3) are short and very sweet. It is in 1 John 4: 19 that we have the beautiful words: "we love because he first loved us." All three books are encouraging and empowering.

The Letter of James, the biological brother of Jesus and head of the church in Jerusalem. This book is heavy on guidance – how to follow Christ in the world. Martin Luther wasn't a big fan, but I am.

Paul's letter to the Romans is his masterpiece. In this letter he is especially clear on justification by the work of Jesus Christ. Take this one slow. Some might find it boring, but it is well worth a try. It is here that we find these words:

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Romans 8: 35, 37-39

You don't have to read the bible like other books. The bible is best taken in small bites instead of big chunks. Just read a few verses at a time. If you have any questions about what you are reading, come find me and ask. We can look for answers together. If you want more suggestions than those provided above, come ask me. These are just starting points.

In order to further encourage you to do this, every single person that comes to tell me they have read the bible (outside of church) will get a prize (rules and exclusions may apply²). Talk to you soon!

¹ Not to be confused with the one Gospel according to John – entirely different and written by a different person.

² Just kidding. There are no exclusions – that's the gospel.