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Christlicher Kirchen
in Deutschland

Discover Anew the Bible's Treasures



Contents

Preface	3 – 4
Part I – The Bible in the life of the churches	5
Reading the Bible in the Anglican Tradition	6–11
<i>Charlotte Methuen</i>	
Common discipleship as a hermeneutical approach to Scripture	12–17
Giving scope for diversity in fellowship when interpreting Scripture	
<i>Jürg Bräker / Joel Driedger</i>	
Bible reading in the Armenian Apostolic Church	18–23
<i>Diradur Sardaryan / Serovpe Isakhanyan</i>	
Prayer and the Bible in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church	24–26
<i>Merawi Tebege</i>	
The Bible as a Guide in all of Life's Questions	27–32
A contribution from the Union of Evangelical Free Churches in Germany (BEFG) on the handling of Holy Scripture	
<i>Friedrich Schneider</i>	
The Bible in The Salvation Army – Divine rule of Christian faith and practice	33–37
<i>Frank Honsberg</i>	
Discovering the Bible's Treasures.....	38–43
The use of the Bible in the congregations of the Evangelical Old-Reformed Church in Lower Saxony	
<i>Heinrich Lüchtenborg</i>	
"Discover Anew the Bible's Treasures"	44– 49
Experiences from the Moravian Church	
<i>Erdmann Becker</i>	
"Discover Anew the Bible's Treasures"	50–53
The significance of the Bible in the member churches of the Evangelical Church in Germany	
<i>Johannes Friedrich</i>	
Discovering the Bible Anew as a Treasure – The United Methodist Church	54–59
<i>Ulrike Schuler/Holger Eschmann</i>	
"Discover Anew the Bible's Treasures"	60–63
A contribution from the Old Catholic Church	
<i>Joachim Pfützner</i>	
The Bible in the Orthodox Church	64– 68
<i>Konstantin Nikolakopoulos</i>	
The Bible in the Coptic Orthodox Church	69– 70
<i>Anba Damian</i>	

The Bible as the Basis for Faith, Doctrine and Life	71–73
The way the Bible is understood by the Mulheim Association of Free Churches and Evangelical Communities	
<i>Markus Liebelt</i>	
The Bible as Sacred Scripture in the Catholic Church	74–79
<i>Franz Josef Backhaus</i>	
The Bible is a hidden treasure. An invitation to unearth it!	80–85
<i>Andreas Volkmar</i>	
The Bible in the Syriac Orthodox Church over the centuries	86–89
Historical and current overview	
<i>Aram Bar Schabo</i>	
“Discover Anew the Bible’s Treasures” – Apostle Ministry of Jesus Christ	90–96
<i>Michael Schulz</i>	
Untying knots. The Bible in the Apostolic Community	97–100
<i>Matthias Knauth</i>	
“The Bible is the indispensable foundation for faith, teaching and life.”	101–105
Aspects of how the Bible is used in German Free Evangelical Churches	
<i>Michael Schröder</i>	
Discovering the Bible Anew as a Treasure – Developments within	106–109
the German Evangelical Assembly of the Church of God (FBGG)	
<i>Rainer Klinner / Marc Pietrzik</i>	
The Understanding of Scripture and Use of the Bible	110–113
in the Federation of Pentecostal Churches (BFP)	
<i>Bernhard Olpen</i>	
“Were Thy truth no more to guide us, How our faith would go astray!”	114–120
The Bible in Faith and Practice in the Seventh-day Adventist Church	
<i>Rolf J. Pöhler</i>	

Part II – The Bible from the women’s point of view **121**

No longer male and female – really?	122–127
Women’s perspectives on the Bible	
<i>Claudia Janssen</i>	

Part III – The Bible in ecumenism **128**

Reaping the Bible ecumenically	129–133
Ecumenical Association for Bible reading	
<i>Wolfgang Baur</i>	
On the Road Together – learning different approaches to the Bible	134–138
<i>Jürgen Dittrich</i>	
Discover Anew the Bible’s Treasures	139–141
Practical advice for joint Bible study	
Authors	142–143

Preface

The year 2017 marks the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, an event whose origins, course and effects are the subject of scientific research and debate. There is no question that it caused lasting changes to the world and the Church. However, the appropriate form of commemoration has been a matter of controversy in the churches. Should the Reformation be celebrated as “the birth of the Protestant Church”, should it be mourned as the cause of division in the Western Church and subsequent, often bloody conflicts? Is it appropriate to discuss the Reformation only with regard to the relationship between the German Protestant churches and the Roman Catholic Church, or should the Free Churches not also be taken into account, which also see themselves as heirs of the Reformation? Are the Eastern Churches (Orthodox and Orthodox Oriental churches) affected by the Reformation, and if so, in what way?

The delegates of the churches in the Council of Christian Churches in Germany (ACK) have considered these issues jointly. The principal insight which caught their attention was that the fundamental concerns expressed by the Reformation (summarized, for example, in the fourfold “solus”) were based on intensive study of Holy Scripture. This is the basic document of the Christian faith for all churches and orientation for the doctrine and life of the Church. The Bible was central to the work of the reformers, and it is also the common foundation on which all the churches are based. The churches also have the common task of passing on the message of Holy Scripture, the Gospel, to their contemporaries, and they all share the experience that this is no easy task in our secular and pluralistic society.

Thus the idea emerged that something which ought to be taken for granted – the biblical basis of the churches – could for once be made the explicit topic. The member churches of the ACK were asked to explain how they read and understand the Bible, to describe its significance for their worship, for congregational life and personal piety, and to show how this finds particular expression in their denomination.

This booklet contains the responses of the churches. They show how important the Bible is for all churches and explain the great variety of ways in which this is expressed. The ecumenical dialogue on the Bible opens up the opportunity to learn from each other and to gain mutually from the wealth of traditions which have developed in the churches. One of the articles in this booklet is devoted to the women's perspective. It shows that women from many churches are putting the same questions to the Bible and looking for the answers together. The third section draws attention to ecumenical practice: it presents the work of the Ecumenical Association for Bible reading and a model for ecumenical pilgrimage with the Bible as well as practical proposals for reading Scripture together and learning about different forms of approach to it.

The overall purpose is summed up in the title of this booklet: "Discover Anew the Bible's Treasures". The Bible links the churches. In it we meet Jesus Christ, in whom God himself has come close to us humans. He is the true "treasure" that is meant. Turning to the Scriptures means

turning to him. It is a fundamental ecumenical experience that churches come closer to each other when they turn to Christ together. If the 500th anniversary of the Reformation is an opportunity to walk together on the way to the centre of our faith – the scriptural witness to Christ – then it will be possible to celebrate this day ecumenically as a fellowship of churches.

Sincere thanks are due to the authors who contributed to this publication and to the team that developed the idea: Jürgen Dittrich (ACK Saxony-Anhalt), Hans-Joachim Ditz (Council of Churches in Berlin-Brandenburg), Dr. Albrecht Haizmann (ACK Baden-Wuerttemberg), Lothar Peitz (ACK Hesse/Rhine-Hesse) and Dr. Maria Stettner (ACK Bavaria).

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Dr. Elisabeth Dieckmann
General Secretary of the Council
of Christian Churches in Germany

Part I

Your word is a lamp
to my feet and a light
to my path (Ps 119:105).

The Bible in the life of the churches



Reading the Bible in the Anglican Tradition

Charlotte Methuen

*Almighty God,
we thank you for the gift of your Holy Word.
May it be a lantern to our feet,
a light to our paths,
and a strength to our lives.
Take us and use us to love
and serve all persons
in the power of the Holy Spirit
and in the Name of your Son
Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Prayer of Dedication, *The Book of Common Prayer of the Church in the Province of the West Indies*, Kingston Jamaica 1995, p. 47.

In many ways, the *Dedication Prayer* of the Church of the Province of the West Indies summarises Anglican approaches to the Bible. The sixth article of the thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England (agreed in 1572) affirms:

- *Of the Sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures for Salvation.*

Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation.¹

Scripture is definitive for the faith of the Anglican churches. Anglican churches are currently considering the Anglican Communion Covenant, in which each church affirms:

- the catholic and apostolic faith uniquely revealed in the Holy Scriptures and set forth in the catholic creeds, which faith the Church is called upon to proclaim afresh in each generation
- the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as containing all things necessary for salvation and as being the rule and ultimate standard of faith.²

Similarly, the central role of the Bible in defining Christian life and faith is confirmed in every ecumenical agreement into which Anglicans have entered.

1 http://anglicansonline.org/basics/thirty-nine_articles.html.

2 Anglican Communion Covenant 1.1.2-3, www.anglicancommunion.org/commission/covenant/final/text.cfm.

The English Reformers wanted to ensure that the Bible was read. The first official English translation of the Bible was printed in 1539. Every congregation was instructed to acquire a copy and place it in the parish church so that people could read it there. In successive Books of Common Prayer, printed in 1549, 1552 and 1559, the lectionary for the new services of Morning and Evening Prayer was designed to require the clergy and allow the people to read through the whole Bible: the New Testament three times (later twice) each year, the Old Testament once, and the Psalms every month. In this way, it was intended that clergy should become familiar with the whole Bible and competent to preach on it.

However, Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury from 1534 until 1554 under Henry VIII, Edward VI, and (until his arrest) Mary I, wanted people not only to read the Bible but to turn to it in prayer. The Reformation liturgies which were designed for the Church of England were deeply rooted in Scripture. Traditional passages which had been used in the medieval monastic offices and the Liturgy of the Hours were retained: the *Benedictus* (Luke 1:68–79), *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46–55) and *Nunc Dimittis* (Luke 2:29–32), the Psalms, and other song-like passages of scripture, known as *canticles*, remained (and remain) fundamental to morning and evening prayer. Many of the prayers elsewhere in the liturgy were based on biblical passages. A consciously biblical liturgy was, and remains, characteristic of the Anglican tradition. The liturgy is one way in which Anglicans become ever more familiar with Scripture, but it also mediates Anglican doctrine. The principle *lex orandi, lex credendi* – the rule of prayer is the rule of faith – has been very important for the Anglican tradition. And for Anglicans, the rule of prayer must be biblically based.

In his first Homily, “A Fruitful exhortation to the reading of holy Scripture,”³ Thomas Cranmer encouraged the people of England to read the Bible “faithfully and diligently,” with “humble and lowly hearts”. The meaning of Scripture is not always clear on first reading: “If we read once, twice, or thrice, and understand not, let us not cease, but still continue reading, praying, asking of other, and so by still knocking (at the last) the door shall be opened (as Saint Augustine says.)” Cranmer knew that a true reading of Scripture required prayer and insight.

Today, Anglicans still say, “We are a people who live, learn, and pray by and with the Scriptures as God’s Word.” (*Anglican Communion Covenant*, Introduction, § 6). In the draft *Anglican Communion Covenant*, Anglican churches commit themselves “to hear, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest the Scriptures in our different contexts.” This reading of Scripture should be “informed by the attentive and communal reading of – and costly witness to – the Scriptures by all the faithful, by the teaching of bishops and synods, and by the results of rigorous study by lay and

ordained scholars.” (*Anglican Communion Covenant*, 1.2.4) And Anglicans believe – and expect – “that Scripture continues to illuminate and transform the Church and its members, and through them, individuals, cultures and societies.” (*Anglican Communion Covenant*, 1.2.5) The Bible permeates the life of the Church; through it the Church is called to participate in God’s mission to the world, and strengthened to that mission. In this way, God’s Word is carried into God’s world.

In 2012, the Anglican Communion published *Deep Engagement, Fresh Discovery*, the report of the “Bible in the life of the Church” project, a wide-ranging exploration of how Anglicans use the Scripture. In his foreword, Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury from 2002 until 2012, wrote: “Anglicans have consistently given Scripture the supreme role of deciding the limits of what can and must be believed; and they have tried to listen to Scripture in the expectation of being converted and transformed by the Spirit whose action underlies the words on the page.”⁴ The “Bible in the life of the Church” project used regional groups to explore the way in which the Bible was read across the Anglican Communion. It showed that it is not possible to speak of “a single Anglican view of Scripture” or “a single Anglican theological perspective”, confirming the findings of earlier investigations. All Anglicans read the Bible, but they read it in different ways.⁵ For that reason it is important to Anglicans that the Bible is not read only by individuals, but in Bible study groups – including ecumenical groups. In Britain and Ireland, for instance, ecumenical Bible study has become a central feature of how Lent is kept. Groups find that through shared reading of Scripture, ecumenical relationships can be deepened and can bear new fruit.

In the context of the “Bible in the life of the Church” project, it was repeatedly emphasised that the Bible needs to be read communally, with a conscious awareness of the context, and with an awareness of Scripture’s transformative power. The South African group saw the Bible as “A Foundation for Community Transformation.” Members of the North American group felt that they had been “Transformed by the Bible – but by many routes”. The Australian group found that the Bible is being read “in a Changing Society”; the East African group that it must be read “in Community and in Context.” The Cuban group found that the Bible is “Alive in Context and History.” The British group emphasised “Gathering together to read the Bible matters!” Groups in Hong Kong and in the Philippines valued the fact that reading of Scripture means “Learning from Beyond Ourselves.” A group in South-Sudan who worked with a European consultant reflected on “Moving towards a genuinely intercontinental mode of reading Scripture.”⁶

4 *Deep Engagement, Fresh Discovery*, London 2012, 1, www.anglicancommunion.org/ministry/theological/bible/docs/pdf/Final%20Report%20for%20the%20web.pdf.

5 Vgl. Rowan A. Greer, *Anglican Approaches to Scripture: From the Reformation to the present*, New York 2006, 161f.

6 *Deep Engagement, Fresh Discovery*, 14.

This last question – of a genuinely intercontinental mode of reading Scripture – is crucial for the Anglican Communion. It has focussed on questions of sexuality. Is it legitimate, particularly, but not only, in ethical questions, to recognise the validity of varying, or even contradictory, readings of Scripture? Can the Gospel – the good news – look different to a person in Nigeria and a person in the USA? These on-going questions are rooted in our hermeneutics, and they highlight the question of whether, and if so how, in our increasingly global and interconnected world, different interpretations of Scripture can be lived out alongside each other. The speed of communication means that decisions based on an interpretation of Scripture which speaks the Gospel into one context quickly become known in other contexts in which this interpretation is seen at best as misguided, and at worst as profoundly wrong. In order to deepen mutual understanding across the Anglican Communion, real attempts are being made to support networks and partnerships which span different contexts. Shared reading of Scripture is a very important aspect of this work.

For most Anglicans, the ordered reading of scripture – usually based on a lectionary – is a normal part of their worship. At morning and evening prayer, readings may be drawn from either the Old Testament (including for some but not all the Apocrypha), or the New Testament or both. At the Eucharist, a passage from one of the Gospels is required, together with up to three further readings (Old Testament, New Testament, Psalm). A sermon is a normal and expected part of a main Sunday service. Other services may not have a sermon, and the response to the reading of the Word might take another form such as silent meditation, discussion, music, or drama. Many Anglican provinces now base their Sunday lectionary on the three-year cycle of the *Revised Common Lectionary* (RCL), putting them in line with other denominations including Roman Catholics, Old Catholics and Lutherans. However, self-defined reading schemes – preaching through a specific book of the Bible on successive Sundays, or thematic sermon series – are not unusual. Cranmer based his Sunday lectionary on the medieval pattern, which set a gospel and an epistle for each Sunday. One of the benefits of many twentieth century Anglican lectionaries has been the rediscovery of the Old Testament in the Sunday readings, although many preachers still choose to focus on the Gospel.

It is characteristic of the Anglican tradition that the liturgy is steeped in Scripture. Indeed, Paula Gooder and Michael Perham have observed that in the Church of England's Eucharistic liturgy "there is scarcely a sentence that is not based on Scripture,"⁷ and this is equally true of the liturgies of other Anglican provinces.

7 Paula Gooder & Michael Perham, *Echoing the Word: the Bible in the Eucharist*, London 2013, ix.

In some parts of the Anglican Communion – New Zealand is a good example – modern liturgies bring together biblical texts and imagery with the local cultural inheritance, often resulting in fresh insights into biblical texts.

As Rowan Williams observes: the Bible “is a book read in public, read in worship; a book whose words worshippers make their own in prayer, private and public; a book whose purpose is to show what a human life looks like when it is lived in loving intimacy with and obedience to the living God, whose eternal Word became flesh to reconcile us to the Father and transform us by his Spirit.”⁸ The central importance of Scripture in the life, the liturgy and the learning of the Church is emphasised in a well-known collect:

*Blessed Lord,
 who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning:
 help us so to hear them,
 to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them
 that, through patience, and the comfort of your holy word,
 we may embrace and for ever hold fast
 the hope of everlasting life,
 which you have given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ.*

The Bible is to be read; it is to be prayed about, reflected on, lived out. We are called to make the Bible our book and ourselves people of that Book. And if we do that, the Bible will strengthen and comfort us, will offer us again and again the hope of everlasting life.

⁸ *Deep Engagement, Fresh Discovery*, 1.



"The Great Bible" (1539):

www.shafe.co.uk/crystal/images/lshafe/Anon_Great_Bible_1539.jpg

Common discipleship as a hermeneutical approach to Scripture

Giving scope for diversity in fellowship
when interpreting Scripture

Jürg Bräker / Joel Driedger

Anabaptist understanding of Scripture

The Mennonite understanding of Scripture is closely associated with Mennonite understanding of congregational life. The local churches are autonomous in their teaching and continuously seeking both for the self-understanding of the churches as well as the significance of the Bible for faith and life, whereby tradition, interpretation of the Bible, social relationships and personal experiences are brought into relation to each other by means of a collaborative process. This takes place in different ways in the various local groups and churches, but the common basis of such processes may certainly be found in the special emphasis on the four Reformation “Solas”: sola scriptura, solus Christus, sola gratia, sola fide.

Solus Christus and sola fide were understood by the Anabaptists of the 16th century¹ to mean that faith is fulfilled by following Christ. Faith takes shape in the following of Christ. The Anabaptist Hans Denck expressed the connection: “The medium [the mediator of salvation] is however Christ, whom no one may verily recognize, unless he lives as a follower of Him.”² Discipleship is indispensable for the recognition of Christ. In this way, ethics gains a hermeneutical function: only those who emulate Christ in word and deed can begin to understand the Word of God, which in turn shapes the thoughts and actions of believers. But that does not cancel the sola gratia: both the desire to follow as well as its success and the growth of the knowledge of Christ are a gift of God. Starting point is God’s free commitment in Christ for the salvation of mankind; and this free commitment continues wherever Christ takes shape in his church through the power of his Spirit. In discipleship Christ is recognized and believed as the one through whom God offers his salvation freely to mankind and lets it take shape among them.

1 The Anabaptists did not make explicit reference to the four “solas” in their theology, but with the help of these terms it is possible to show how Anabaptist theology set its own accents within the Reformation.

2 Hans Denck, *Was geredt sei, daß die Schrift sagt* (1526), in *Hans Denck, Schriften*, 2. Teil, Walter Feldmann (ed.), Bertelsmann, Gütersloh 1956, 27–47, 45.

The life of Jesus in the centre

Although nowadays only a few Mennonites would see the acquisition of salvation, their discipleship and the knowledge of Christ in such radically close connection as Denck did, nonetheless the relationship between faith and discipleship is regarded as inextricable. The question of right action guides Mennonite text interpretation, but it is inseparably linked to the question of true knowledge of Christ. Texts such as the Beatitudes and the call to love one's enemies in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5), the Magnificat (Lk 1:46–56) and the Nazareth Manifesto (Lk 4:14–22), the exemplary foot-washing (Jn 13:1–17) and the books of the Prophets with their social criticism are often read as key texts for the interpretation of Jesus' life. To be sure, parables, stories of healing and promises of salvation from the Pauline writings are also interpreted in the sense of individual, inward-mental healing, but at the same time the significance of Jesus' words and symbolic actions with regard to political, economic and social issues is to be sought. God's salvation and the coming of his kingdom always take place within these structures. Thus, Peace Church theology recognizes the principle of non-violence and the resulting commitment to peace as founded in the entire life of Jesus, in his death and resurrection. Accordingly, the positioning of these texts in their political and social context lends them a strong hermeneutical weight. Regarded in a historical context, this interpretation of the Christ-event also sheds light on God's saving activity for and through Israel. In the historical narrative, those elements are emphasised which show God to be the guardian of the rights of the weak, the protector of the oppressed and of vulnerable minorities, as the one who stands up against all who rely on military force and power politics.

Hermeneutical fellowship

The emphasis on the socio-political dimension of the Gospel is also reflected in the understanding of local churches. In practice, the body of Christ should take shape in the renewal of relationships and in the way people treat one another. For the understanding of Scripture and its interpretation, this means that the hermeneutical community gains a high priority. It arises where a local group of people comes together who profess Jesus Christ and see themselves as part of the worldwide Church of Jesus Christ. Through their shared commitment to Christ, they differ from other faith communities and find their place in the current of Christian tradition. Wherever such a group is located, it belongs to a specific social context. This social placement always has a different individual accent, just as every member brings a different educational background into the congregation. Moreover, the Pauline doctrine of charisma (e.g. 1 Cor 12) means that the gifts of the Spirit are shared among the whole congregation, and it is therefore essential that every voice is respected, heard and tested. Scientific knowledge has here as much place as the personal life situation or regional interests.

Only in the course of the process will it become clear, which voice is weightier. The office to which a person was elected, their theological knowledge, depth of experience and generally recognized particular charismatic talent – all of these aspects may be taken into account in the hermeneutical process. It is crucial that the process of recognition remains open, and that decisions taken in the past are frequently re-examined. There is trust in the power of the Holy Spirit to create in each situation the necessary understanding by the dialogue of persons and the related fields of reference.³ The awareness process in the hermeneutical community is founded in *sola gratia*.

Scripture in practice

How is this understanding of Scripture put into practice in the life of Mennonite churches and in their use of Scripture?⁴ The congregations in Germany, which are organised in the Association of Mennonite congregations (AMG), come from various historical backgrounds and have gone through different regional processes. The Anabaptist movement was polygenic, not only in its origins⁵, but also in the way present-day congregations define their identity differently in relationship to these origins. But the hermeneutical community demonstrates its significance in dealing with this fascinating diversity. Every year Theological Study Days are held, in which people with very different theological education and various leadership responsibilities work together. The focus lies on the theological study of biblical texts, tapping on the very diverse skills available. These discussion groups in changing constellations are introduced by lectures from experts. The forum does not aim to formulate joint resolutions or binding statements; the theological work itself is of prime importance, allowing the different backgrounds and preconceptions to be presented and brought into dialogue with one another.

In compliance with the autonomy of the local churches, there is no mandatory liturgy or lectionary for the worship services. The central element is usually a sermon on a biblical text. Occasionally there may be a sermon on a particular topic, illustrated by texts from various parts of the Bible. This shows that narration and the relation between the texts and their context have top priority in the interpretation. Of course, references to other Bible passages which are found in the texts themselves are also taken up in the interpretation; but the texts are chosen according to a topic – for example “What does the Bible say about the use of money?” – and then text collages are sometimes compiled. Some churches arrange a sermon series

3 Cf. John H. Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community before the Watching World*, Herald Press, 1992, 61 – 70.

4 The information on practice is based on a survey conducted in June 2013 among the congregations of the Association of Mennonite Congregations in Germany.

5 Cf. Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *Die Täufer*, in: *Das schwierige Erbe der Mennoniten*, Evangelische Verlagsanstalt Leipzig 2002, 19 – 25.

on one topic every year. Here texts are chosen that are thematically related. Each sermon focusses on only one text, so that the diversity of the scriptural canon can be voiced before looking for possible agreement on a unanimous biblical position.

Such thematic sermon series remain the exception, as also are series covering an epistle, a lengthy portion of the Gospels or another book in the Bible consecutively. One explanation may be that in most churches there are a number of people who share the preaching. The pastors are expected to have completed theological studies at a university or another centre of theological training, but in most cases other church members also preach, so that they are jointly responsible for the doctrine. For their sermons, they can choose the text freely, and the preachers do this individually, each in their own way.

Choosing texts for the sermon

If the understanding of Scripture is such that its meaning is also affected by the context in which it is spoken, then it is to be expected that political and social topicality will be taken into account in the choice of texts. For example, the congregation in Hamburg holds the “Mennoforum” in collaboration with the University, where they identify current challenges to society and discuss them from the perspective of politics and peace theology. The topics of these forums are also taken up in local church services. Other congregations also report that many of the preachers select their texts on the basis of topical social issues. Just as frequently, the text selection is determined by topics which interest the preacher personally. Those who have not been trained in theology often speak on a text with which they have been occupied for a considerable time. Full-time pastors say more often that they are guided by the needs of the congregation. But in both groups there are also preachers who say that they tend to choose the texts suggested by the lectionary of the Protestant Church in Germany. For some of them, the lectionary relieves them from the responsibility of finding a text which is appropriate for all the worshippers. Others find it helpful in order to avoid being guided simply by personal preference and to ensure that lesser-known texts are taken.

Apart from the lectionary, it is also the church year which determines the choice of texts, most clearly in the rhythm of the Christmas and Easter cycle, but not so markedly in the period between Trinity and the last Sunday before Advent. Also, other parts of the Sunday liturgy relate to the church year by their reading of Bible texts: many congregations use readings from both Testaments, recite the Psalms as prayers, or take a Bible verse as a leitmotif for the whole service. For this purpose, the Watchwords of the Moravian Church are often used, but in this case, too, each congregation is free to choose, and often the person leading the service decides the service order and the texts.

Worship and dialogue

The significance of hermeneutical community is shown by the fact that several members of the congregation take turns preaching, so that different perspectives can be brought up in the services. The significance with regard to the forms of worship is not so obvious. Many churches offer a way to discuss the sermon after the service. Some of them hold a discussion group at regular intervals after the service, but consciously separated from the worship itself. Where several sermons deal with a single issue, the topic will be dealt with in the weekday church groups and Bible studies. Other congregations observe a period of silence after the sermon, allowing time to contemplate what has been heard; after that, worshippers can formulate free prayers as a response to the message of the sermon. In many places, there are opportunities for personal contact after the service, whether it is a coffee time or occasionally even a midday meal. Here the conversation often revolves around the content of the sermon, which can be deepened, extended or contradicted. Some churches pass around printed forms in order to obtain targeted feedback on the sermons.

But there are also ways in which the congregation is invited to take part in text interpretation even during worship. Sometimes they are given the opportunity to respond to open questions posed by the preacher and to express their own opinions. Some churches use the technique of “Bibliologue”. The leader of the service reads a Bible story aloud, stops from time to time and asks the hearers to play the role of one of the characters in the story, expressing their thoughts and feelings in the first person. The leader goes and stands next to any person who takes part in this way, repeating in his own words the ideas put forward. In this way the real world and the world of the biblical narrative connect in a way that can open up new perspectives on both levels.

An even more open form is that of dialogue services, such as some churches offer on a regular basis. One form is loosely modelled on the method of Bible sharing: after an introduction, a text is read in two different translations. Then, in a first round, the participants say what particularly struck them, repeating passages or thoughts which stuck in their minds. These remarks are not commented on. The text is read out again, and there follows a second round of talks, in which questions are asked and reference is made to the previous statements. Other churches prefer more open forms: a minister gives a short introduction to the text as a basis for more intensive discussion. The minister may possibly make suggestions for the further course of the conversation. After this, there is an open discussion, possibly in groups, depending on the size of the gathering.

Apart from dialogue-oriented forms, there are also other ways to approach the text jointly, for example in yearly Children's Bible Weeks, sometimes in ecumenical collaboration with other churches, ending with a stage production in which children and adults present a story from the Bible. In many places, texts are acted out as little plays during the Sunday service.



Participation belongs to scriptural understanding

Such participatory forms highlight certain aspects of the understanding of Scripture. Every member of the church is credited with a high degree of competence, which is increased by active engagement with the texts of the Bible. How the texts translate into practical discipleship is a question which is not only decided in individual responsibility in face of the text, but also explored in joint deliberations. Associative approaches such as Bibliologue show that ethical considerations are connected with inner conviction and a personal experience of salvation.

Bible reading in the Armenian Apostolic Church

Diradur Sardaryan / Serovpe Isakhanyan

In Armenian the Bible is called *Astvacašunč'* (Arm. God's breath). It is the Book of Books, the written revelation of God to mankind. It is the source of all confession, theology, church service (in the full sense of the word) and the entire life of the Church. The Armenians stand in awe of the *Astvacašunč'* for the reason that it is inspired by God himself. It is precisely this divine inspiration which makes it unique and endues it with irrefutable authority. For the Armenians, the Bible is indeed the breath of God, which spreads out as a spiritual and intellectual power and grants grace and wisdom beyond the literal meaning of the words of the text.

Bible reading is understood in the Armenian Church as an inseparable part of the community life of the church (worship services, catechumenical instruction, theology, etc.) and of the personal life of the individual believer (personal prayer, spiritual life, etc.). The necessity of regular Bible reading is justified by recourse to Scripture itself (cf. for example Deut 6:6–9; Deut 11:18–21; Num 15:39–40; Ps 1:2; Jn 5:39; 1 Tim 4:13–16, and others). The Fathers point out that Bible reading cannot be compared with the reading of other books, because it is more than just receiving information, it is a conversation, a dialogue with the Creator himself. The Word of God which is revealed in *Astvacašunč'* has the power to comfort, heal and renew the souls of men: "Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Mt 4:4) and "It is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith" (Rom 1:16). It is "the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit" (Eph 6:17). It is "like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces" (Jer 23:29) and a "fire" that burns the impurity of souls. It is "a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises" in the hearts of believers (2 Pet 1:19). And ultimately it is the "Word of God" which shows us the way to eternal life (Phil 2:16).

The liturgical books of the Armenian Church such as *Kanonagirk'* (canon law), *Maštoc'* (mysteries, rites, ceremonies, etc.), *Žamagirk'* (breviary), *Vark' srboc'* (lives of the saints) and others, as well as the literature of the Fathers and Doctors of the Church, bear witness to the special role of Bible reading in the Armenian Church. It is noticeable that since its inception the Armenian Church has placed particular emphasis on hearing, reading, examining and preaching Scripture, and it promotes Bible reading not only for a certain select category of people, but for all sections of the population.

The first authentic written evidence of Bible reading practice in the Armenian Church dates back to the 5th century. It was Agatangelos, the author of the Life of Saint Gregory the Illuminator, who reported that Gregory, together with his followers and the king, studied the Bible “day and night”, thus serving as an example for the whole population¹. The great saint advises the king to found Bible schools, so that children and young people from all parts of the country may come together and be taught the Scriptures. In almost every province evening Bible classes started. Children and youngsters studied the Word of God in order to abandon their former idolatrous beliefs.²

This tradition of Bible schools was continued. St. Nerses changed the evening classes into day schools. But Scripture was taught in the Assyrian and Greek languages. And thus it was complained that “the monks showered the population with Christian doctrine day and night, like a torrential rain pouring out of the clouds, but none of them, not a single one, could understand a word.”³ Until the beginning of the 5th century, the texts were generally passed on to the people orally. But this did not achieve the desired effect, namely full integration into Christianity on the one hand and the preservation of national identity on the other. That meant that in the Armenian Church the question of scriptural understanding, and therefore Bible translation, became increasingly urgent. In the course of several thousand years the Armenians had already recorded their language in six different alphabets adapted from other languages, so that in the first centuries of the Christian era there was no suitable script available.⁴ It was thus necessary to invent an Armenian alphabet. The King and the Catholicos entrusted this task to the scholar Mesrop Mashtots, who managed to complete it in the year 406.

The first text which Mesrop translated with his students was Proverbs. The first Armenian sentence to be written and read in the Armenian language was: “To learn about wisdom and instruction, to understand words of insight” (Prov 1:2). The first part of the complete translation of the Bible was produced in the years 407–412, the second followed after the Ecumenical Council of Ephesus in 431. At that time the Old Testament was revised on the basis of the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Old Testament. But manuscript tradition also indicates that some books were translated from Syriac. During the 430s this text of the Armenian Bible was finalised and has been known since then as the “Sahak-Mesrop translation”. Down to the present day it has served as the canonical and binding text of the Armenian Apostolic Church.

1 Agatangelos, *The History of Armenia (Arm.)*, Eriwan, 1983, 889–891.

2 *ibid.*, 839.

3 Phaustos Bysand, *The History of Armenia (Arm.)*, Eriwan, 1968, 91.

4 Margret Egenstein-Harutunian, *Einführung in die armenische Schrift*, Buske, Hamburg, 2012.

In the centuries that followed before the appearance of the first printed edition, thousands of manuscripts were produced and richly illustrated by scribes and illuminators. The first Armenian Bible was printed in 1666 in Amsterdam. With the help of wealthy Armenian patrons an Armenian publishing house was founded in the Dutch city.

In the mid-19th century colloquial variants replaced the classical Armenian. Two written forms emerged: Eastern Armenian and Western Armenian. The Western Armenian variation was the language spoken by Armenians in the area which now belongs to Turkey. The Western Armenian translation of the Bible was printed in 1853. In 1843 the New Testament was published in Eastern Armenian. The complete Bible in Eastern Armenian, translated from the Hebrew and Greek text, appeared in print in 1883. In the meantime a number of other translations have been published.

In 1994, on the initiative of the Catholicos of All Armenians in Etchmiadzin, the head of the Armenian Apostolic Church, a revision of an Eastern Armenian Bible translation by Arsen Bagratuni dating back to 1860 was published in cooperation with the Bible Society. This edition of the Bible was reprinted several times between 1999 and 2013. It is the official Bible edition of the Armenian Church.

Holy Scripture was finally complete when the canon was defined. This canon is in its turn the precondition for all exegetical and dogmatic theology. In the formation of the canon the Armenian Church adhered to the Jewish and thus the more restricted canon in the selection of Old Testament books. Thus the canon consists of the 39 (22) Books of the Old Testament. The canon of the New Testament comprises 27 books: the four Gospels, Acts, fourteen Pauline letters, seven so-called Catholic letters and the Revelation of St. John.⁵

Some translations (also the latest official translation) include the deuterocanonical books of the Old Testament alongside the 39 canonical books: Ezra, Judith, Tobit, the three Books of Maccabees, the Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus (Sirach), Baruch, portions of Esther and Daniel.

However, during church services only the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments (excluding the Book of Revelation) are read. But Bible reading has its place not only in the Liturgy of the Hours (regular daily devotions) and the Surb Patarag (Sacred Liturgy), but also in all Xorhurds (sacraments, mysteries) and all rites. According to the Armenian Church Fathers, nothing in the church may take place without Scripture.

5 The canon was confirmed at the National-Ecclesiastical Council in Partav, in 768, under the chairmanship of Catholicos Sion I of Bavon.

In the Armenian Church the apostolic tradition of reading has been kept alive down to the present day.⁶ Thus the first reading is taken from the Old Testament, the divine providence of the plan of salvation by the Redeemer. Then there are readings from New Testament scriptures (Acts, Epistles) as testimony, and finally a reading from the Gospels as the fulfilment of the plan of salvation. In this way the believer is enabled to comprehend the Old and New Testaments in their unity and to reflect on the Word of God. The readings are chosen to correspond to the feast day or other special event (such as baptism, marriage, burial).



Medieval Armenian Bible manuscript with an illustration of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem (Mk 11:1-11)

The liturgy contains the entire New Testament, while the Gospels are read more than once during the year. During Holy Week and in the fifty days after Easter, there are more scripture readings than at all other times of the liturgical year.

Originally the liturgical texts of the Armenian Church, as in many other Eastern Churches, were restricted to the biblical vocabulary. Worship was such a sacred act that words of purely human origin were not considered appropriate. Early liturgical prayers consisted of the Lord's Prayer, the Psalms and passages from the Bible. As time went by, these continued to form the basic structural elements of the Armenian liturgy. The liturgy of the Armenian Church, in the basic form which it took on in the fifth century, preserved this tradition; and even in its present full form there are considerable portions taken directly from Holy Scripture. Every Sunday, readings from the Old Testament precede those from the New Testament. These readings are taken from almost all the Old Testament

Since the readings in the Armenian Church took place especially around mealtimes, the book listing the liturgical readings for the year is called Čaşoc' girk' (mealtime book). The readings here begin with the Paschal readings and include all New Testament books (except the Revelation of St. John) and some Old Testament books. For liturgical use there are collections of readings such as Čaşoc' girk' (which contains the complete liturgical readings), Ateni Avetaran (readings used in the daily

⁶ For more information, see: Christian Armenia (Arm.), Encyclopedia, St. Etchmiadzin, 2002, 114.

Liturgy of the Hours), Čašu Avetaran (readings used during the Sacred Liturgy), Yulaberic' Avetaran (the so-called "Gospels of the women bringing oil", "Temple Gospels" and "Healing Gospels", that are only read on Sundays before the liturgy).

It should be noted that for liturgical use the Gospels are read in daily chant modes. (The tonal system of Armenian churches is not based on the major-minor system, but on the eight modal scales of Októechos, four authentic and four plagal [derived] and two Legetos. At the same time the Armenian system differs very strongly from the Byzantine one, so that comparison is impossible.) Thus the Gospels are distributed in this way:

Matthew is read in daily mode 4 and 8.

Mark is read in daily mode 3 and 7.

Luke is read in daily mode 2 and 6.

John is read in daily mode 1 and 5.

In addition to these readings, the church recommends for every day of the year certain readings from the Bible for private study. These recommendations are found in the so-called Book of "Feasts, Fasts and Readings of the Armenian Holy Church". Here the calendar begins with the Feast of Easter. The readings here are chosen to cover the entire Bible (only the canonical books) in the course of one year.

Some liturgical practices emphasise reverence for the Word of God. At certain points during the Eucharistic liturgy and other services, the sacred Gospel Book, which is always held in a clean embroidered cloth, is elevated as a sign of praise and worship. Whenever a priest, a deacon or a member of the choir steps on to the ambon, he kisses the Gospel, which is always on the bema of the altar. The Gospel always lies on the altar table. At the end of a service, before the congregation leaves the church, they approach the priest, who holds up the Gospel to bless them. Occasionally the priest will give the benediction with the Holy Gospel.

To sum up, it must be said that most Armenian literature, and even Armenian culture, is deeply influenced by Astvacašunč', not only from the linguistic and literary point of view, but also psychologically and spiritually.

The influence of the Bible is evident in the whole of classical Armenian literature. It not only heralded the dawn of Armenian literature as such, but also remained the inspiration for the entire development of that literature for many centuries afterwards.

Unfortunately, during most of the 20th century the historical influence of the Bible on the life of the Armenian people was dampened. This was largely due to the unspeakable persecutions and vicissitudes to which the Armenian people were subjected in recent history. However, in the latest generation there are positive signs of a real awareness of the need to restore the historic position of the Bible in the Armenian Church and to rediscover and revive the spiritual riches of the Bible in the life of the Armenian people. The younger generation of clerics – who are trained in the seminaries, where biblical studies are given more and more attention – will hopefully be the main tool for the renewal of the biblical tradition in the Armenian Church in the new century. The same is true for the Sunday schools, where the Bible is read and studied regularly.

The Bible and the Church cannot be separated. And they never were separated. Even today the Bible must be understood and lived as part of the entire life of the Church, namely in the interrelated areas of Christian thought and witness: theology, spirituality, liturgy, mission, and ministry.

Prayer and the Bible in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church

Merawi Tebege

Since the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is one of the few churches with a really long, unbroken tradition as national church, the present-day use of the Bible and personal prayer can only be described against the background of the historical development.

Apart from the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch which is related in the book of Acts, it may probably be assumed that the Christianization of Ethiopia did not take place through the conversion of individuals, but rather as a sovereign act of the Emperor. So it is not particularly surprising to hear that a deepening of faith in Ethiopia took place several centuries later as a result of the mission of Syrian monks.

Outside the narrow Roman and Greek cultural circles, it was assumed that the people could not read or write. Only the priests and some court officials had reading and writing skills, as was also the case in Western Europe at the time of Charlemagne.

This meant that the Christianization of the Ethiopians could on no account be accomplished with personal Bible reading; the believers could only become familiar with the Bible through the readings given by the priest, an astounding memory performance. From time immemorial, pictures were used to explain the events of the Bible, whereby the Ethiopian church developed its own particular style. The attachment of the believers to the New and Old Testaments was deepened in the 12th and 13th centuries when the Emperors emphasised their biblical ancestry.

More or less in contrast to all other churches, right down to the 20th century the Ethiopian Church had not built up its own hierarchy. There was the Patriarch, and otherwise all the priests were equal. Since the Patriarch, an Egyptian, was not resident in the country and therefore always remained a stranger and a foreigner, it is not surprising that the faith and spirituality of the Church was not expressed in organizational structure and large churches, but in the spiritual life of families and devotions in the monasteries. The basis of piety within the Ethiopian Church lay for centuries in the family tradition of transmitting the faith from mother to children. Here it was not a matter of scientific theology, but rather the handing down of well-known rules of faith and devout proverbs. It was a good thing if the mother's explanations were not all too far removed from what the priest said in his sermon.

As an Orthodox church, the Ethiopian Church had no problems with preaching in the vernacular, so the Amharic language replaced the ancient language Geez. As an Orthodox Church, the Church wants to change as little as possible, so Geez, which none of the people understand any more, remains the language of worship; the traditional readings are held in Geez, which only the really well-educated priests can understand to some extent. But it has become customary to read these texts twice, once in Geez and once in Amharic. All the traditional prayers are spoken both in Geez and in Amharic. So the Bible is read during church services in a generally understandable form. Everywhere in Ethiopia there were and are schools where young people are taught to read and write, although the interpretation of the Bible is essentially passed on orally. Young men who want to be priests are obliged to study the Bible. After ordination, priests have a clear commitment to expound to believers the faith of their fathers, and therefore the Bible.

This strong popular religiosity has basically been preserved until today, and had remained unchanged until the 20th century. As a result of the spread of literacy in the 20th century, the relationship to the Bible has changed. Protestant missionaries have greatly helped the Ethiopian Orthodox Church to integrate Bible reading into popular devotion. The national religious tradition also includes the many legends of the saints, which are still read and retold alongside the Bible stories. Many of the pictures in Ethiopian Churches can only be understood with knowledge of the lives of saints, which characterize living faith.

Modern day religious practice within the Ethiopian Church is strongly rooted in the Lord's Prayer from the Bible, many prayers to the Virgin Mary, many prayers to the saints, as well as the recitation of psalms and proverbs from the Books of Wisdom. For example, prayers from the Bible can be spoken in Geez during solemn Mass, otherwise in Amharic or another native language. Ethiopia is a multi-ethnic state with a corresponding number of languages. In this article, Amharic has been singled out as a typical medium of prayer for the Ethiopian Orthodox Church; Protestant missionary churches have seen it as their specific duty to translate the Bible into the languages of minority groups.

It is important for popular religion and for the practice of prayer that for Ethiopian Orthodox Christians the church is a sacred place, which may naturally not be entered with shoes, and everybody obeys this custom. It is presumably an essential feature of the Orthodox churches that they practice the holy mystery of encountering God. Thus the simple grace spoken before meals is recognizably a sacred act.

There is no dress code for lay people in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church; on Sundays most believers go to church in their “Sunday best”, thus expressing their solidarity and respect.



The Ethiopian Orthodox Church has developed its own church music. In particular, the popular prayers are sung with great enthusiasm. Even after the end of a church service, it may well happen that the churchgoers simply continue to sing hymns. Many people know the songs and prayers by heart, whilst one or more drums beat time.

The Bible is the foundation of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, but in practice the local congregations use the lives of saints, religious images and church music alongside the Bible in order to express their religious feelings. These ingredients are vital to their patiently practised Christianity.

The Bible as a Guide in all of Life's Questions

A contribution from the Union of Evangelical Free Churches in Germany (BEFG) on the handling of Holy Scripture

Friedrich Schneider

"It's the Bible's fault." This was the short reply that Johann Gerhard Oncken supposedly gave when he was asked to give a reason for the formation of a new group of baptism-minded Christians in Hamburg. Indeed, shared Bible study was fundamental for the beginnings of the Baptist movement.

Over 175 years ago, there were circles of laypeople reading the Bible together in many places. There were probably various reasons for the formation of these conventicles. One objective condition was that Bibles became affordable and accessible for everyone, a development made possible through industrial book printing. Although Bibles were not to be found "just around the corner" in every bookshop, anybody who wanted to have a copy could purchase one.

The developing modern times and accompanying optimistic mood also led to a general curiosity and a desire to "get to the bottom of things". Those who were interested in Bible study were brought together by a thirst for knowledge about the way faith and church were originally intended. Just as in the educated bourgeoisie groups often gathered for an evening of philosophical discussion – sometimes "garnished" with a bit of domestic music – some groups came together in their living rooms to "get to the bottom of things" about God. Certainly the proclamation in the established churches, which was often perceived as boring and liberal, motivated some people, here and there, to figure out for themselves what the core of faith was. The search for an individual concept of life and faith without the paternalism of the state and the state-churches is sure to have played a role as well.

And lastly, the development of small groups reading the Bible together was probably also motivated by the search for an "everyday democracy," which, after the failed revolution of 1848–49, created a climate that contributed to the formation of many clubs and societies in which personal interests came to fruition. These were led not by governmental agencies but rather by chairpersons who were elected democratically. There were sports clubs and music societies – and also Christian associations, structured like a club with the aim of shared Bible study.

The character of their Bible reading was less that of scientifically-distanced research; rather, it was done with an attitude of being personally affected by the Bible and with the attempt to derive a practical design for one's own life out of biblical contents. The attitude of personal Christian living with its emphasis on personal "holiness," which was also made prevalent through international revivalist movements, was nourished by the shared Bible study.

From the very beginning of this movement, it was important that the Bible be read and interpreted in community. A consensus could emerge from group discussion, which would be further developed into concrete rules for life. The direct application of biblical passages led to ethical rigour. Fornication and debauchery of all kinds were forbidden – not just from the perspective of the bourgeois, but also because the Bible's absolute authority evidently demanded it. Thus, for example, that "the woman remain silent in the assembly" was just as much a consensus as the prohibition of work on Sunday.

The general knowledge of the Bible was high, the (felt) competence in interpreting the Bible widespread. Based on this self-perception, the Baptist congregations were able to do without theologians in their founding years. In the so-called "Brethren movement," which joined with the Baptists to form the Union of Evangelical Free Churches in Germany (BEFG) during World War II, it is still the rule that laypeople "interpret the Scriptures," and they can do so without an ordained pastor. – However, the number of ordained ministers in Brethren congregations is growing, and in Baptist congregations "preachers", who in the beginning only completed a short course of Bible training, began to be hired shortly after the founding period.

The biblical concept of the "priesthood of all believers" was not only understood as the individual's immediate access to the salvation of God. The priesthood of all believers is, even today in Baptist churches, the expression of the basic structure of the congregation: each individual has received the Holy Spirit. There are certainly different spiritual gifts; nevertheless, all are equal in their immediacy to God and therefore equal in the congregation. Thereby the rejection of a hierarchy of offices, an idea connected to the democratic leadership structure, was declared to be a basic biblical principle. In such questions – and in many others – the Bible was the binding guide: if something could be justified biblically, then it was acceptable. And if not, then an argument was deemed less persuasive.

This direct style of reading the Bible characterizes, above all, the founding times of Baptist congregations in our country, which lies over a hundred years in the past. But even though life circumstances and, in accordance, the relationship to the Bible have changed since then, it should be noted that this direct orientation to the Holy Scriptures is still formational and continues to shape the identity of the Baptists.

The opinion was already growing over 100 years ago that the direct interpretation of Scripture by laypersons was reaching its limits and that a thorough education for professional ministers could therefore be helpful. What had begun as a kind of basic Bible training developed quickly to become a “preacher’s seminary,” first with a four-year and then a five-year course of studies. Today the Baptist theological educational institution is a state-recognized university with a prestigious academic standard. Women have also been welcome there as students since the early 1970s, and later as pastors as well.

Although the interest in academic theology is strong, that has not diminished the understanding of the Holy Scriptures as a guide for what it means to be a Christian on a personal level and for the church community. Ethical questions like the position on homosexuality, for example, are always debated in reference to individual scriptural passages and their interpretations. In the context of such a concrete ethical question, the current broad spectrum of understandings of the Bible become apparent. These various understandings share a common reverence for God’s revelation in God’s word, but recognize various methods for determining the meaning of those words. To what extent should the original historical context of the books of the Bible be taken into account? What role should the texts’ historical tradition play? Through which lens do we read particular passages today? Questions like these are answered differently; as a result, the Bible is not only a connecting foundation, but also a trigger for dispute and division.

Traditionally, there are two main events that take place in a Baptist congregation: alongside Sunday worship, the mid-week Bible study is an important place of meeting for the congregation. Up until the 1980s, the Bible study – sometimes more in the form of a lecture, other times more of a discussion – was, next to worship, the core activity in the life of the church. Several years earlier, though, a new model was imported from the United States: the Church Bible School, patterned after the Sunday Schools of Baptist churches in America. The Sunday School in the USA was not, as one might guess, only offered for children and youth; rather, it was to a large extent also for adults. With the help of pedagogically sound lesson plans combined with explanatory background information, small groups were able to work through Bible passages in detail.

Some congregations offered this concept, as in the American example, on Sunday mornings before worship, others as a replacement for the usual mid-week Bible study. The “Church Bible School” was widespread in its heyday in the 1980s and 90s, and it created a unifying element for Baptist churches, that was almost reminiscent of a class at an adult education centre. Understanding biblical contents and contexts and the knowledge of various interpretational possibilities – as well as the lesson design – appealed primarily to the intellect.

The discussion groups' focus on learning increasingly came to be dominated by the participants' need to talk about their daily lives, to discuss and take part in one another's cares, concerns, joys and faith. The small so-called "home groups" came into being, which still maintained a focus on reading the Bible together, but to an equal extent also made sharing in daily life together possible. As a result of these changing needs, the materials for the small groups also changed.

In the meantime, the small home groups have become a fixed component of the programme in many Baptist congregations. As a rule: the larger the congregation, the greater the need for many small groups and home groups that make the community aspect of Christian life tangible.

Reading the Bible together is still a widespread practice – usually done by reading straight through one book of the Bible or following a biblical topic through multiple books. However, books by Christian authors or other materials are also used as the basis for conversation.



Bible study in small groups – in the past and in the present – has been referred to frequently up to this point. In addition, the personal "quiet time" must be mentioned. The quiet time is an essential practice of faith for many Baptists. This spiritual practice was initiated and propagated by pietistic-revivalist circles. For many Baptists a quiet time is a matter of course, a practice that belongs to their daily routine.

They sit down in the morning or evening for fifteen or thirty minutes and occupy themselves with a Bible passage – for example, by reading through the Bible consecutively using the Moravian Daily Watchwords (Herrnhuter Losungen). Some people use devotional books by various authors or a calendar published by the Union of Evangelical Free Churches in Germany (BEFG). However, a daily quiet time can no longer be taken for granted as it would have been 20 or 30 years ago.

The use of the Bible in Baptist worship varies – given the greatly varying forms of worship. Whilst there was still a kind of unwritten liturgy 20–30 years ago that made the order of worship in all Baptist churches comparable, then today the picture is much more diverse.

In traditional worship services, a Scripture reading belongs in the first part of the service, and the reading of the sermon text at the beginning of the sermon. The sermon is to be, above all else, an interpretation of the text – garnished somewhat with concrete suggestions about how the central ideas of the text can be lived out in everyday life.

This “normal” form of a traditional worship service, which is quite similar to a Lutheran liturgy, although without pre-formulated liturgical elements, has yielded to a more “modern” form in many congregations: worship services are moderated by a worship leader. They are planned around a central theme. The congregational music is more similar to modern hits or pop songs and often comes from the USA, Canada, or Australia – mostly translated into German, but also increasingly sung in the original English. The songs are accompanied by a band; the organ is more seldom. It is also typical for this form of worship that the sermon is not an interpretation of one text, strictly speaking; instead, multiple thematic texts are quoted, and the sermon is not only oriented on the Bible, but also on the congregants’ current everyday reality.

The sermon attempts to impart advice for living – and to a lesser degree understanding of a (possibly complicated) biblical text. In this style of preaching, though, biblical messages are quoted in order to aid and guide in coping with everyday life.

However, an additional Scripture reading (in the traditional sense) alongside the Scripture passages quoted in the sermon is often missing. More often, Bible passages – primarily Psalms – are integrated in the first part of the worship service, which is designed as a “praise and worship” segment: in an inner attitude of worship, 3–4 songs are sung and accompanied by spoken prayers or short Bible texts. Thus the Bible texts directly affect the congregation with a consoling, encouraging, trust-generating effect.

Many Baptist theologians lament – rightfully so – that the Bible is used more directly as a kind of “collection of sayings” or personal “book of edification,” and that the knowledge of biblical content and its theological background is decreasing. But at the same time, the effect of the Bible in this form is also still very present.

In viewing the history and the present situation of Baptist congregations, it becomes evident that the Bible was and is always a determining factor in local church ministry. The ways of working with the Holy Scriptures vary; the interpretations of the text within Baptist congregations are diverse; the extent to which individuals feel they are personally accountable to the Bible differs; nevertheless, there is intensive and lively engagement with the Bible at all times and in all places in Baptist life.

There is no one translation of the Bible that is used significantly more than others. Alongside the traditional Luther translation, the “Good News”, “Elberfelder” and “Einheit” translations are widely used.

If the passages from the book of Acts and the Epistles were especially significant in the early years because of their depiction of a “model” for the early church, then the broader context of the two main parts of Scripture became more important in the course of history. However, the particular focus lies on poetic and directly applicable portions of the “First Testament”, like the Psalms. But also the wonderful narratives of the patriarchs in Genesis, the great Exodus, and the stories of King David are exciting and interesting, not just for children’s church and teaching in schools.

Prophetic texts like Amos and Isaiah have repeatedly encouraged people to make concrete efforts for justice and peace. Though when it comes to the image of God, the Gospels and the role model they describe in the person of Jesus Christ have been especially formative – as is presumably the case in all Christian churches. And as in other churches, the “message of the cross” in the Gospels is a central focus of the Christian faith.

The Bible in The Salvation Army – Divine rule of Christian faith and practice

Frank Honsberg

“We believe that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments were given by inspiration of God, and that they only constitute the Divine rule of Christian faith and practice.”

This is the first of the 11 Doctrines of The Salvation Army, in accordance with the Foundation Charter of 1878. The same declaration is still valid today and unites worldwide the more than 1.5 million members (Salvationists) of this evangelical free church in more than 125 countries. The theological roots of The Salvation Army are to be found in the Methodist doctrine and tradition of John Wesley. It received its cultural formation first of all through the British Empire of the late 19th century. Due to the rapid expansion of the work to other continents, there was and is to this day an intensive worldwide network of people of all cultures. At various international meetings, different approaches to the Bible and the many ways of dealing with it were evident and enriched the whole of The Salvation Army.

The Salvation Army recognises that God has many means of communicating his will, but it looks on the Bible as the primary source of Christian revelation (Salvation Army Founder William Booth: “God can speak without the Bible but never against it”). In the *Handbook of Doctrine*¹ it states about the Bible: “Its unique authority reveals the thoughts and actions of God. The authority of the Bible tests all other authorities. It is therefore described as a ‘sufficient authority’. Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria (c296–c373 AD) wrote that ‘the sacred and inspired Scriptures are sufficient to declare the truth’. Similarly, Augustine of Hippo (354–430 AD) stated ‘in those things which are plainly laid down in Scripture, all things are found that concern faith and the manner of life’.”

On the Nature of the Bible

The Salvation Army stresses that the Bible is absolutely trustworthy and reliable in all matters of Christian faith and life. Everything that is necessary for the knowledge of the saving truth, we find in the pages of the Bible. The above-mentioned Handbook goes on to say that all who hear the good news of Jesus Christ will have hope for the future. The Bible is to be considered as “the living word of God”, which to this day inspires the thoughts of men and women. Even today “God’s living word speaks to us with authority and power”. Without equating it with Christ himself,

¹ The Salvation Army *Handbook of Doctrine* 2010.

one can speak about “two natures” in reference to the Bible. It is human, because the earthly authors have written about what they heard from God and about their meetings with him in *their* words and *their* writing style. It is divine, because God reveals himself and talks through it in a unique way. So on the one hand it has many writers and on the other hand only one: God.

The Bible books, songs and letters, which can be clearly distinguished from one another by their literary form and cultural background, can be read as an individual expression of historical cultures. However, for Salvationists, these writings together form *one* book. The Old and New Testaments form a whole and are understood as *one* revelation.

However, this revelation requires the careful interpretation of its readers. Each portion must be viewed in its context, whilst also taking into account the entire biblical truth. Salvationists are therefore encouraged and taught to read their Bibles daily, with open hearts and clear minds. In the pages of the Bible we meet the living, triune God of history and from its teachings we learn to live in relationship with him.

The Bible in the Life of Salvationists

Children from the age of seven have the possibility of a binding commitment in The Salvation Army. In a covenant, which is written in language suitable for children, they declare their intention, among other things, to pray, read their Bible and help others. In this way, the children are encouraged to connect the Bible with their everyday lives. The stress on helpfulness at this point shows an emphasis which is characteristic for the understanding of the biblical message: that God pays special attention to the poor and disadvantaged and that our deeds of faith must follow on from this.

With religious maturity, which occurs at 14 years old, the young people or other interested parties have the possibility to become a Salvation Army soldier (Salvationist). In a covenant, the Salvationist declares his/her wish to lead a holy life and states, among other things: “I believe in the truths of the word of God, as expressed by The Salvation Army in its 11 Articles of Faith and will live my life accordingly. I will be open to the work of the Holy Spirit in my life, I will obey his leading and grow in grace through fellowship with believers, prayer, the reading of the Bible and service.”

The *officers* are ordained ministers of The Salvation Army; but primarily they too are Salvationists. During their training they receive, among other things, a thorough knowledge of the Bible. Mostly, they do not do classical theological studies.

Throughout its history, The Salvation Army has probably had fewer theological debates than other churches. This has to do with its strong focus on the salvation of the lost. Of course, The Salvation Army has been repeatedly concerned with theological issues, for example it is very strongly concerned with the doctrine of holiness. However, among the majority of officers the powerful proclamation of the word of God – in word and deed – is more important than theological discourse. To proclaim the word of God in plain and comprehensible language and to lead a life of complete love to God and people is here the highest ideal.

The Salvation Army has a number of “Orders and Regulations” which are there to support the Salvationists’ life of faith and service. Certain hierarchical structures also pertain to their work and appearance. However, the highest priority is given to the word of God and its study. Thus the “Spiritual Life Commission” reminded the worldwide Salvation Army most recently in 2008 that preaching and teaching the word of God must remain a priority in all that is done. This is significant for a worldwide movement which is often “only” perceived as a charitable organisation. Here are some quotes from the Commission’s report, which show the importance of the Bible. The first “call” concerns the word of God:

- “We call Salvationists worldwide to a renewed and relevant proclamation of and close attention to the word of God, and to a quick and steady obedience to the radical demands of the word upon Salvationists personally, and upon our Movement corporately. To respond in obedient faith results in a decisive encounter with God. We affirm that God speaks profound truth in simple words, common language and powerful images.”
- “Scripture is God’s truth for his world. Its words bring life.”
- “Its pages confirm the possibility of forgiveness, salvation, renewal and empowering for living as God intends his people to live. Its messages are never exhausted. There is always more to find, more to take in, more to live by. To explore Scripture is to embark on an adventure that goes on and on, challenging both mind and heart, and promising God’s presence throughout the journey.”
- “As we study the Bible we train our minds towards Christlikeness, allowing the word of God to shape our thinking.”
- Bible study is considered to be an important spiritual exercise. “Quiet times, study of the word of God, consistent openness to learning more about our great God and his ways, are essential to spiritual development.”
- “Our Bible study can help ensure that our prayers are rooted in God’s values and not our own.”

2 All quotes from “Called to be God’s People”, *The International Spiritual Life Commission, its report, implications and challenges*, by Robert Street. London 2008 / Salvation Army Publisher Cologne, 2013.

The Bible in the Fellowship

Bible readings and interpretations are a central component of the worship service, which is called a “meeting” in The Salvation Army. Other elements of these non-liturgical gatherings are prayer, praise, songs and testimonies.

In Salvation Army halls, one often finds the open Bible at the front near the mercy seat. This simple wooden bench (mercy seat, throne of grace) has an important significance in connection with the proclamation of the word of God, the Bible message. Usually, the proclamation of the word ends with an invitation to respond to what has been heard. The word of God challenges us. This takes place first of all, of course, in the hearts of the listeners. However, it is a help to give their thoughts a visible expression and “to move” forward to this special place of prayer. People praying here find support through shared prayer or intercession.

In some places it is traditional to stand up “before the word of God” when it is read. An invitation to do this is not mandatory. Overall, Salvation Army meetings are marked by great freedom. This also relates to how the Bible is handled.

The reading of Scripture does not follow a predetermined order. The leader of the meeting chooses this prayerfully during his/her preparations. The same applies for the sermon text, which can be interpreted by a man or a woman.

The reading and interpretation of the Bible is not reserved for certain (official) persons. In a “Priesthood of all Believers” God will enable whomever he wants to interpret his word in the correct way. Scripture reading is undertaken in all places by different people, even non-members. This illustrates the fact that God’s word was given to all of us equally.

The work of The Salvation Army is primarily aimed at unchurched people. Thus, the interpretation of biblical texts is of particular importance. Everyone should be able to understand the message of the Bible, even if they have no experience of Christian socialisation. The Salvation Army is committed to a clear and simple language. It is part of the self-conception of The Salvation Army that the word of God has its place in meetings, devotional times and Bible studies and also in social institutions offering help to the homeless and in institutions for people in need of care and for children.

Taking the Bible out into the World

In addition to Sunday meetings and Bible studies, shared Bible reading in homes or in public places also plays an important role. “House groups” offer a safe environment to exchange questions and insights and to seek God together, and some Bible activities are intentionally directed to the public. Bible discussions in cafés or parks show that there are still people who can be inspired by the Bible and at the same time often have a lot of fun.

During street missions, open-air meetings and also at sporting events, again and again it is a matter of bringing Bibles and the biblical message to “the man or the woman in the street”. It happens in the knowledge that the word of God can realise its full potential when a person opens up towards it.

The Bible also plays a central role in the charitable activities and institutions. On the one hand, it is an example for the helpers and inspires them to unconditional and sacrificial love. On the other hand, it is help which goes far beyond food, clothing or shelter. Again and again, needy people experience a fundamental change in their lives through reading and studying the Bible (alone or in a group).

Because the power of the word and its luminosity already begin with the Bible text itself, the chosen Bible translation orientates itself to the target group which should be reached. Therefore, there is no stipulation about which translation is to be used. The Salvation Army is open to contemporary interpretations, which allow even experienced Christians to hear old texts in a new way. More important than the semantics of the printed text is the “readability” of the biblical message in the lives of its preachers. When the Revised Edition of the King James Bible was introduced in 1881, there was a lively discussion about it. In this context, William Booth formulated his greatest wish thus: “I want to see a new translation of the Bible into the hearts and conduct of living men and women. I want an improved translation – or transference it might be called – of the commandments and promises and teaching and influence of this Book to the minds and feelings and words and activities of the men and women who hold it to be an inspired book and the only authorised rule of life.”

Discovering the Bible's Treasures

The use of the Bible in the congregations of the Evangelical Old-Reformed Church in Lower Saxony

Heinrich Luchtenborg

The Evangelical Old-Reformed Church

The congregations of the Evangelical Old-Reformed Church in Lower Saxony are to be found in western Lower Saxony, in East Frisia (Bunde, Campen-Emden, Ihrhove) and in the County of Bentheim (Bad Bentheim, Emlichheim, Hoogstede, Laar, Veldhausen, Nordhorn, Uelsen, Wilsun). Almost all these churches were founded in the mid-19th century as a result of separation from the Reformed Church. In 2002 the Dutch Reformed congregation in Wuppertal joined the (synodical) Church Association of the Evangelical Old-Reformed Church.

The “Groningen school” and its influence on the foundation of the Evangelical Old-Reformed congregations

At the time when the Old-Reformed congregations came into being in the 19th century, the theologians and pastors of the Reformed churches were mostly influenced by liberalism and rationalism. In those days the Reformed pastors mostly did their studies at the theological faculty of the University of Groningen, whose prevailing theological orientation was known as the “Groningen School”. This represented a departure from the traditional doctrine of Calvin (1509-1546). The sin of mankind was misunderstood as moral deficiency. Christological statements of the Old Church were pushed into the background. New catechisms were introduced into church life, replacing the Heidelberg Catechism.

The principle of humanity took the place of Scriptural principles. Ordinary parishioners resisted this development. They met on weekdays and Sundays for “catechisations” (called in Dutch “oefeningen”). In these “trainings”, led by “oefenaren” (lay preachers), it was mainly the Heidelberg Catechism which was expounded and discussed. When these “oefeningen” were forbidden and leading figures from this protest movement against the then prevailing theology arrested, the rift between the parties deepened increasingly. In the meantime this division has been overcome and given way to fruitful cooperation between the Evangelical Reformed (Protestant regional) Church and the Evangelical Old-Reformed Church.

Given this historical background for the emergence of Evangelical Old-Reformed congregations in the 19th century, it may be easily understood that there were not only considerable reservations towards historical-critical biblical scholarship, which may even be associated with radical biblical criticism such as that of H.S. Reimarus (1694–1768), but even harsh rejection. This did not change until the second half of the last century, when (moderate) historical-critical research was increasingly recognized and taught in the training of Evangelical Old-Reformed pastors at the Theological University in Kampen (NL) and the Free University in Amsterdam. The belief in God's liberating activity in the history of Israel and the life of Jesus Christ, to which the Spirit bears witness in the Bible, does not justify a rejection of historical biblical research. Indeed, belief in God's action within human history gives us the freedom to examine the traces of his actions in biblical scholarship.

The use of the Bible in worship services

In most Evangelical Old-Reformed churches two services are held on Sundays, one in the morning and one in the afternoon or evening. During the afternoon or evening services, a portion of the Heidelberg Catechism is frequently interpreted in connection with a Bible text. A sermon on a passage from the Bible is usually preached in the middle of the morning worship service. In choosing the text for his sermon, the pastor is not obliged to comply with the liturgical calendar. A popular method is to preach a series of sermons covering a certain book of the Bible (consecutive interpretations in the sense of *lectio continua*). Following Reformed tradition, Old Testament texts are given greater attention than in the standard Protestant lectionary. Nonetheless, the sermon texts used correspond mostly to those found in the lectionary, even if they are not necessarily taken on the particular dates suggested there. Apart from the sermon text, there are two further readings during morning service: one for instruction (the Decalogue or another biblical text such as Mt 22:37–40) and a text to throw light on the sermon text (scripture reading).

The order of worship for the morning service

Musical prelude

Greeting

Silent prayer

Introductory word: Our help is in the name of the Lord

Doxology: Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit ...

Liturgical greeting: Grace be to you ...

Congregational singing: Psalm or hymn (EG = German Protestant hymnal with all the Psalms)

Confession of sin (open repentance)

Assurance of forgiveness

Instruction (Decalogue or other biblical text)*(or in the Dutch Reformed Church: Narration of God's Word)*

Congregational singing: Psalm or hymn

(Baptism)

Prayer for Scripture reading and sermon (prayer for the Holy Spirit)

Reading of a biblical text

Congregational singing: Psalm or hymn

Sermon on a biblical text

Creed

(if the Creed is not spoken during the afternoon service)

Congregational singing: Psalm or hymn

(Communion, once a month or once a quarter)

Notices

Prayers of thanksgiving and intercession

Offertory for diaconal tasks

Congregational singing: Psalm or hymn

Blessing

Final music

Collection at the door

In the Dutch Reformed church in Wuppertal, the idea of re-telling a biblical text (Narration of God's word) according to the EKD order of service for children's worship was very well received by the older worshippers as well, and may serve as an inspiration to combine the children's service with the first part of the service for adults.

The afternoon service (Catechism service) is structurally only slightly different to the morning service. Here there is no reading of instruction, and in the final part the Creed is usually spoken, mostly the Apostles' Creed.

The influence of the Heidelberg Catechism

The consecutive interpretation of the Heidelberg Catechism in connection with a Bible text in the afternoon services has influenced generations of Old-Reformed Christians. The Heidelberg Catechism of 1563 with its three parts (Misery of Man – Deliverance of Man – Gratitude to God) has served and continues to serve many church members as a kind of coordinate system for their faith and life. The Catechism is divided into 52 Sundays with 129 questions and answers altogether. Each section has references to Bible texts. This may be exemplified by the first series of questions and answers in the Heidelberg Catechism:

Q. *What is your only comfort in life and in death?*

A. *That I am not my own,
but belong – body and soul, in life and in death –
to my faithful Saviour, Jesus Christ.*

*He has fully paid for all my sins
with his precious blood,
and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil.*

*He also watches over me in such a way
that not a hair can fall from my head
without the will of my Father in heaven;
in fact, all things must work together*

for my salvation.

*Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit,
assures me of eternal life
and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready
from now on to live for him.*

1 Cor 6:19

Rom 14:8

1 Cor 3:23

1 Pet 1:18

1 Jn 1:7; 2:2

1 Jn 3:8

Lk 20:18

Jn 6:39

Lk 21:18, Rom 8:28

2 Cor 1:21ff.

Eph 1:13ff.

Rom 8:14

Rom 8:15ff.

The biblical “reference texts” do not always underline the key statements of the Heidelberg Catechism appropriately, but nonetheless the biblical substantiation of the Catechism statements is of utmost importance to many church members. In the Reformed tradition they are convinced that the Catechism statements are valid as long as (and not because) they are in accordance with Scripture.

Catechism classes

Catechism classes normally last eight (winter half) years and lead to a public profession of faith. There is no fixed curriculum, but biblical texts are very frequently introduced into classes in the Old-Reformed churches and then applied to the problems and experiences of young people. A (non-compulsory) schedule of topics which was offered to the churches by a Synod Committee lists a selection of biblical texts about people. For example, the topics in the first year of teaching cover Noah (rainbow, creation), Samson (power and strength, failure and a second chance), David (friendship), Jesus (Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, Last Supper), Adam and Eve (Paradise Lost), Cain and Abel (envy and hatred), Moses and the Golden Calf (ban on images).

In the final, eighth year of instruction, this schedule suggests, for example, David (adultery and its consequences, guilt and forgiveness), Elijah (human weakness of a man commissioned by God), Paul (mission, inculturation), Thomas (“I have my doubts”), Mary and Martha (what takes priority?), Judas (why?), the centurion of Capernaum (faith helps). The teaching at Catechism classes intends to help young people to find a living faith and to participate positively in their congregation and in society.

Church groups and house fellowships

The Bible is firmly anchored in church groups and house fellowships, whether in the form of a devotion with a hymn, prayer and Bible reading (with or without commentary) at the beginning of a meeting, or in the form of a thorough Bible study. There are no particular “old-reformed” types or methods of Bible study. In some cases one may simply go through the text verse-by-verse, at other times a biblical devotion may be read out in order to introduce the discussion. Bible studies often utilise well-known methods such as Bible sharing, Bibliodrama, Bibliologue, and so on.

Ecumenical Bible Week

Several Evangelical Old-Reformed churches take part in the Ecumenical Bible Week together with other churches in the neighbourhood. Here people experience the Bible as a book that they share and which crosses boundaries which may otherwise exist.

The Bible in the families

Many Evangelical Old-Reformed believers traditionally held family prayers, mostly at meal times. In my parents' house, for example, a prayer was usually spoken before and after each of the three daily meals. After breakfast a biblical devotion was read aloud, mostly from the Neukirchen calendar. After supper the “biblical manna” was taken from another calendar, often in Dutch. After the midday meal, the Bible was brought to the table, and one chapter was read out every day consecutively (*lectio continua*), irrespective of the subject matter or length. In this way we managed to read the whole Bible, all 1,189 chapters, in the course of about four years, starting at Genesis and reading through to Revelation. Then we started again at the “beginning”, with Genesis chapter 1: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth ...” In this way or similarly, the families laid a solid foundation of biblical knowledge for the children and adolescents.

However, this tradition of domestic Bible study is on the decline, and now it is practically only done by older members of the congregation. In many cases, Bible texts are never read at home, or at most the Moravian Daily Watchwords. Many people have very little contact to the main source of their faith. For them, the Bible has disappeared from their personal, family and church life.

Sometimes this happens very abruptly, sometimes gradually. But the Bible is the indispensable source of the belief and life of a Christian. It is the Bible which brings people into contact with God as a living reality. If one complains about the lack of faith experience, then a most significant reason is surely to be found in people's estrangement from the source of living water: Jesus Christ, who wants to encounter us in the Word and the Sacrament.



A Bible in German and Hebrew

translated from Dutch, was very popular in many Evangelical Old-Reformed families, but is now hardly to be found. And that is a good thing, for this Children's Bible conveyed a very problematic image of God.

Nowadays, people like to use the Children's Bibles by Irmgard Weth. They are not only convincing in their language and their closeness to the original texts, but the lively illustrations by Kees de Kort make them attractive both for young and old. The Children's Bibles by Dietrich Steinwede and Regine Schindler are also to be recommended.

The Church is a community which draws its life from God and His Word. A church which is essentially a missionary church continually faces the major challenge of re-discovering the treasures in God's Word.

The innovative revival of home Bible study remains a challenge for pastoral care and congregational work. Church retreats offer a favourable opportunity for trying out methods of Bible reading which are appropriate for the different age groups.

A new approach to Bible texts can sometimes (or even often?) be experienced in young families when they use children's Bibles. Years ago, the strongly psychologizing Children's Bible by Anne de Vries,

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“Discover Anew the Bible’s Treasures”

Experiences from the Moravian Church

Erdmann Becker

Holy Scripture is for the Moravian Church, as in other churches, the only valid yardstick of doctrine and faith. Nevertheless, the Moravians do not commit themselves to a special doctrinal system, because they cannot recognize one in the Bible. Instead, they seek right doctrine and ask the Lord of the Church to grant a deeper understanding and a clearer proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. (“The Ground of the Unity” 1957/1995)

The Moravian Church, founded in Bohemia in 1457, adopted decisive ideas from the reformer Jan Hus, who in his turn had been influenced by John Wycliffe. Not least among his demands was that sermons be preached in the language spoken by the people, which naturally entailed a vernacular and reliable translation of the Bible. Thus, in the second half of the 16th century, the “Bohemian Brethren”, largely spurred on by Jan Blahoslav, presented the “Kralice Bible”, a complete translation of the Bible into Czech. This was achieved in times of great tribulation and recurring persecutions.

Singing was for the old Moravian Church (Bohemian Brethren) an essential and vibrant way of getting to know the saving truths of the Bible, and that remains true today for the renewed Moravians (Unity of Brethren). Nicolaus Zinzendorf understood the hymnal to be the response, the echo, and the continuation of the Bible.

Here a very special and original approach to the Bible is described in detail, the so-called “Daily Watchwords” or “Daily Texts”.

The beginnings of the Watchword tradition may be found at the outset of the Moravian Church. It is reported that at the end of a meeting of the community on the evening before May 3, 1728, Count Zinzendorf gave the residents of Herrnhut a short, easily memorable line from a hymn to take home with them as “a watchword for the following day”. Since the community met together every day, it was not difficult to repeat this procedure in the same way. Thus the Daily Watchwords of the Unity of Brethren came into existence.

This title quickly became popular, too. It was based on the “watchwords” issued in the army. From the outset, the watchwords were a personal message for the day, whilst at the same time uniting the sisters and brothers under one shared text.

In the first few years, the watchword might be either a Bible text or a verse from a hymn, sometimes both. Until his death in 1760, Zinzendorf usually chose the texts personally and compiled the manuscripts for the following year.

Soon after founding their settlement, the Moravians set out to spread the gospel, first of all in the vicinity, Upper Lusatia, but later on in various European countries and overseas. In order to enable the brothers and sisters scattered all over the world to share in the common promise for the day, the first book of Watchwords for a whole year was printed in 1731.

Over the years the Watchwords took on various forms before assuming their present form. At the beginning of the 19th century it was decided that the daily watchword should be taken from the Old Testament. The Moravians continued to uphold this high regard for the Old Testament, even when church and society often treated it disparagingly in the 19th and 20th centuries. The watchwords were then supplemented by “doctrinal texts” selected for each day from the New Testament. This also goes back to Zinzendorf’s initiative. The doctrinal texts were intended to help the members of the community improve their knowledge of the New Testament. This somewhat misleading expression has been preserved down to the present day.

Originally the doctrinal texts had no thematic relation to the watchwords. The Old and New Testament texts have only gradually become an entity. Since 1970 the Daily Watchwords in the German language consist of three texts: the Old Testament verse watchword drawn by lot, a New Testament text which is selected to correspond with it, and a third text leading the reader to prayer. The watchwords are drawn by chance every year in late April or early May, thus recalling the origins on 3 May. More than two and a half years in advance, the watchwords are drawn in the Vogtshof in Herrnhut, one of three administrative offices of the church leadership of the Moravian Church. At present the pool of watchwords consists of 1,824 Old Testament verses, each of which has a particular number. A bowl is filled with cards, each of which bears one of these numbers. The draw takes half a day and is a solemn act. It begins with a time of prayer for God’s blessing. Four people are involved in the draw. One picks a card at random, and a second reads out the corresponding text. The two others each take notes of the procedure, in order to make sure that no mistakes are made. The numbers drawn are removed from the pool for the next two years, since the texts should not be repeated too often in order to give expression to the fullness of Scripture.

The leaders of the Moravian Church always appoint a pastor for several years who is responsible for working on the Bible texts drawn. He or she is then responsible for selecting a doctrinal text and the third, supplementary text for each watchword



Bishop Friedrich Weber, Chairman of the ACK from 2007 to 2013, drawing the Daily Watchwords of the Moravian Brethren for 2015

and compiles the entire manuscript for the year. All these proposals are checked by an editorial team made up of theologians and lay people. This board is entitled to make amendments and suggestions for improvement, whereby the rule applies that none of the watchwords drawn for the day may be changed. The church leadership then bears the responsibility for the final text.

The original collection of watchwords dating back to Zinzendorf has in the meantime repeatedly been revised and altered. This is done nowadays roughly every ten years by a committee set up by the Moravian Church leadership. Every revision means that some of the verses are removed from the pool and new ones added. On the one hand, changes in the understanding of language are taken into account. Recent theological insights also play a role in this process. Care is taken that the selected verses or verse parts do not take on a different meaning outside the biblical context. Old Testament books which were long considered to be of little use now enjoy higher esteem. Changes also take place regarding the themes that are important to Christians. As topical examples one could mention the relations between Jews and Christians and the issues of justice, peace and integrity of creation.

Removing a biblical verse from its original context is, in the best sense of the word, a “questionable” act, but not a new one. It is known that the Desert Fathers in the Early Church used to give people single sayings from the Bible to accompany them

on their way. Even in the New Testament congregations, single sayings of Jesus played an important role. The short, easily memorable texts of the Watchwords make them helpful and popular in everyday use down to the present day. At the same time, they form an invitation to look up the original context.

The “doctrinal text,” a Bible passage from the New Testament, takes up the thoughts underlying the watchword, elaborates them or interprets them in the light of Christ and the experience of the New Testament Church. With these texts it is also possible to place accents in accordance with the church year. In order to reveal the diversity of biblical treasures, the doctrinal texts are mainly selected from those books recommended by the ecumenical plan for consecutive Bible reading. In addition, each New Testament text may only appear once during the year.

The third texts are predominantly hymn verses, principally taken from the German Protestant hymn book and its regional supplements or from the Moravian Church hymnal. Alternatively, there are also prayers or short meditations intended to encourage a personal response of faith to the Bible texts. The choice of these texts tries to take into account the fact that the readers come from all age groups and represent a wide range of styles of piety. The variety of spiritual experiences is expressed in these third texts even more strongly than in the juxtaposition of the two biblical texts. This means that these texts are open to criticism. They are not generally accepted statements. It is therefore no surprise that the majority of critical reactions from readers refer to these texts. For several years now, a special edition of “Daily Watchwords for the Youth” has been published, in which the texts are often quoted in a different translation from the revised Luther Bible commonly taken for the traditional watchwords. In addition, this version for young people comes with a different graphic design and often contains some additional texts as well as illustrations.

The Watchwords are firmly rooted in the life of the Moravian Church and its members. In addition to personal reading at the beginning or end of the day, they play an important role in devotions on a birthday. Brothers and sisters of Surinamese origin in the Netherlands place great importance on this tradition; they are united with the congregations in Germany in one church. On festive occasions in the local churches, the watchword for the day can often form the basis for the sermon, not to forget its role in congregational prayer meetings and study groups, in schools and retirement homes of the Moravian Church.

Beginning and end of the lengthy title of the very first book of Daily Watchwords provide the programmatic words: “Be of good courage ... anew every morning”. As a devotional handbook, the Watchwords express the conviction that God speaks to

us every day afresh through the words of Scripture, not so much in the form of a general revelation of eternal truths, but rather as a direct personal demand and promise, a special message to me in my specific everyday situation. The great treasure of the Bible is paid out in small change. The watchwords are drawn a long time in advance, so that it is obvious that God's Word is not our own choice, springing from our present interests and mood. On many occasions it is "dealt out" to us by God so unexpectedly and unerringly that we could never have found this word for ourselves. Of course, it may happen that the daily texts mean nothing to some people, while others find that they are just what they needed. It is good practice not to treat the watchwords with exaggerated expectations, they are not an oracle. Whatever the circumstances may be – whether the word fills us with joy, gives us encouragement or remains indigestible as a stone – we are always challenged by the Word of God.

Only a few years after the Watchwords were first published as a book in 1731, the idea of spreading the texts in other languages was born. Although originally intended for the congregations and mission fields of the Moravian Church, the Watchwords have long since become an ecumenical book, connecting sisters and brothers of various denominations and 50 native languages in almost as many countries all over the world. About 1.8 million copies of the Daily Watchwords are printed every year, about 800,000 of them in German. Even though the books have different titles in different languages, nonetheless the Bible texts are the same in all of them. Only the hymn texts, prayers or other texts differ in the regional editions. In this way the individual readers of the Watchwords form part of a worldwide community covering the planet.

The invitation to discover anew the Bible's treasures is also expressed by the fact that for every weekday two Bible references are printed under the daily texts. The first passage named relates to the theme of the foregoing Sunday in the liturgical year, while the second one is taken from the consecutive Bible reading compiled by the German language "Ecumenical Association for Bible reading" (ÖAB), of which the Moravian Church is a member. Whoever faithfully follows this latter recommendation will read the entire New Testament in the course of four years, and most sections of the Old Testament in eight. The aforementioned ÖAB also chooses the motto verses for each month and the Watchword for the Year, which has borne this title since the 1930's, following the Moravian example. The Daily Watchwords are also an ecclesial book and may be compared to a lectionary. The most important Sunday texts, such as the Bible references for sermons and readings, are printed here together with the Protestant Church's motto verse and hymn for the week.

“Discover Anew the Bible’s Treasures”

The significance of the Bible in the member churches of the Evangelical Church in Germany

Johannes Friedrich

I. The Bible as the legacy of the Reformation



The Bible was a central issue for Martin Luther and the other reformers, in whose theological tradition the regional churches of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) stand. Together with Martin Luther, the Reformation movement interpreted the Bible from its “focal point”, its central message, which Luther had seen in the Gospel of Jesus Christ and hence in the justification of sinful man by grace alone through faith. Wherever scripture ran contrary to this focus, it did not possess authority as the Word of God.

Therefore, the 16th century confessions are not to be understood as equivalent to Scripture, but as the evolvement of faith from the scriptural centre, relating to indisputable and disputable issues raised in the theological and ecclesiastical discourse of that time. For this reason, there is no room for a doctrinal authority in questions of biblical interpretation which is binding for the whole Church.

This makes it obvious why Bible study was from the very outset a highly respected and fundamental element of theology and piety in the German Protestant churches. Until today, Protestant theologians must learn Greek and Hebrew, so that they can read the Bible in its original languages. But it is also clear that down through the centuries Bible reading by theological lay people has also been expected and encouraged. For Martin Luther and Philipp Melanchthon it was important that people learned to read, in particular in order to be able to read the Bible themselves and not depend solely on the interpretation by clerics. All the efforts of the Reformation towards the education of the masses were rooted in the idea that it is necessary for a Christian to gain knowledge of the Bible independently. With the help of Luther’s Bible translation, the Reformation ensured that the Bible was widely distributed and studied and understood in the local congregations. Believers were not supposed to be dependent on the Church’s interpretation.

Against this historical background, it is easily understandable that there is nowadays an immense diversity of contents and forms of Bible reception in the Protestant churches in Germany, both in quantity as well as in quality. It is quite impossible to depict and name this diversity in every detail. Moreover, the use of the Bible in the member churches of the EKD was and is so varied because these churches belong to different traditions. Lutheran, Reformed or United denominations have led to different ways of dealing with the Bible in these churches. In addition, member churches of the same denomination have different devotional traditions with regard to the Bible. For example, since the 18th century Pietism with its biblical orientation has influenced the various regional churches to a greater or lesser degree.

The regional Protestant churches that emerged in the Reformation and are now member churches of the EKD continue to feel themselves committed to this heritage in their use of the Bible. This also means that in these churches there is not, and cannot be, any stipulation for the way the Bible is received by the parishes or their believers. There is a basic right of responsible handling of Holy Scripture.

However, the Protestant churches insist that authoritative assertions about God and his saving action, which is the foundation of Christian faith, speech and action, are only acceptable if covered by reference to the focal point of Scripture.

Despite this fundamental appreciation of the Bible, the Lutheran Reformation does not recognize biblical fundamentalism. Just because something is in the Bible, it is not automatically the Word of God. The Bible derives its authority from the specific application of its interpretation in the service of humanity, by creating or strengthening faith in the listeners, by awakening hope and sowing love in their hearts. Luther and the reformers were interested in biblical hermeneutics. The Bible is not a reference work for scientific, historical, moral, or political insights. It is a testimony of faith, inviting the listener to witness to the faith.

II. The Bible in worship services

Martin Luther valued the oral preaching of the Gospel higher than the reading of the written word. He believed that it was not in Bible study that one encountered the Gospel as a living word of God to man (“viva vox evangelii”), but rather in the direct address by the spoken sermon. Correspondingly, preaching was held in high regard in the Protestant churches then, and it still is. Down to the 20th century there were major differences between the Protestant churches regarding the biblical texts used in worship. Since 1978, the order of readings and sermon texts (pericopes) is identical in all the regional churches and characterizes the life of the congregations. These guidelines are mandatory in some of these churches, while in others they are only recommended. The lectionary comprises six series for six church

years, with a biblical text for every Sunday and church holiday. Series I consists exclusively of Gospel texts, which also serve as the key texts for each Sunday and feast day. The sermon texts for all Sundays and holidays in Series II come from the Epistles. All the other text series have been chosen in such a way that the subjects relate to the texts of Series I and II. Series II, with texts from New Testament epistles, Acts or Revelation, together with the texts of Series I, preserves the reading tradition of the Western Churches that even goes back to the early Middle Ages. By contrast, the Series III to VI have been composed anew and contain either pericopes from the Gospels and the Old Testament (Series III and V) or from the Epistles and the Old Testament (Series IV and VI). This means that the preachers are now enabled – with more or less obligation according to the different churches – to follow a particular sequence of texts for an entire liturgical year, so sermon texts are not repeated for six years. As I write, in the current church year 2013/14, Series VI is being used. In most church services, another Scripture text is read out apart from the sermon pericope, usually the Gospel text of the relevant Sunday; the Lutheran liturgy also includes the Epistle text for this Sunday. If one of these two texts is also recommended for the sermon text, then it will often be replaced in the liturgy by an Old Testament text for that day. Thus, in most cases, a text from the Epistles or the Old Testament text will be read out in church as well as the Gospel, and frequently there is even a third Scripture reading. None of the Old Testament texts recommended in the lectionary come from the Apocrypha or the deuterocanonical writings, as they are called in the Catholic tradition. At present the lectionary is being revised, so that the total number of Old Testament texts will increase significantly in the future.

For all liturgical readings the member churches of the EKD recommend the translation of the Bible according to Martin Luther. In many cases, the altar Bible is used for Scripture reading in Protestant churches, or else a lectionary which contains the texts from all the series in the chronological order of the liturgical year. An integral part of most Protestant worship is also a psalm spoken as a prayer, generally in alternate verses by clergy and congregation, or else sung as an introit.

III. Forms of Bible use

The following specific forms of Bible use are widely practised in the Protestant churches, but are nonetheless not typical for every congregation. As in the past, a considerable number of Bible study and discussion groups, Bible courses or similar meetings are offered. Here Bible texts are discussed that have either been specially chosen or taken sequentially according to a plan; otherwise, Bible texts may be the basis of a lecture or a lecture series. In this connection the Ecumenical Bible Week should not be forgotten. Moreover, in some congregations interactive role play is used to get to grips with Bible texts, helping the participants to find new existential and personal meaning. Examples of such methods are Bibliodrama or the simpler

version “Bibliologue”. Many groups on a parish level start their meetings or working sessions with a devotion, which may sometimes take the form of a detailed text commentary, or sometimes a short interpretation of the Moravian Daily Watchword. These so-called “watchwords”, which started in the pietistic Herrnhut community in Saxony, have been drawn by lot for each day of the year since 1731. Nowadays, the watchwords for a complete calendar year are published in a little booklet which contains not only the daily Old Testament text drawn at random, but also a New Testament verse on the same theme and a hymn verse or a prayer. The Watchwords, like other devotional calendars, have a long tradition of use in the personal devotions of many Protestant Christians. At this point we should also mention the Bible Reading Plan of the Ecumenical Association for Bible reading. The selection of a Bible verse to accompany someone in their future life also plays a major role in services connected with important occasions in personal life. Thus a child will be given a baptismal verse, adolescents a confirmation text, and the wedding couple a biblical quotation for their marriage. One of these Bible texts often serves finally as a basis for the sermon at their funeral.

In many cases, a Bible will be given as a present to confirmation candidates or to bridal couples. In most parishes the “Children’s Church” on Sunday is a regular appointment for the youngsters, where Bible stories are the most important element. Some congregations regularly (often annually) organize Children’s Bible Days or even a Bible Week. Finally, in Protestant kindergartens the children get to know biblical texts, just like the children who are given religious instruction in their school by the clergy, or those preparing for confirmation.

Discovering the Bible Anew as a Treasure

The United Methodist Church

Ulrike Schuler/Holger Eschmann

- The United Methodist Church (Evangelisch-methodistische Kirche) maintains that the Bible is “the only and sufficient rule both for Christian faith and practice.”¹ John Wesley, one of the founders of the 18th century Methodist Revival in England, used this language from the Anglican *Articles of Religion* to succinctly characterize the preeminent position of the Word of God in the Christian tradition.
- Article V of the *Methodist Articles of Religion* states that “the Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation; so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man that it should be believed as an article of faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation.”² This statement, likewise, reflects the United Methodist affirmation of the reformed heritage embedded in the theological documents of the Church of England from which this article was originally drawn.
- Another basic document of The United Methodist Church says: “We believe the Holy Bible, Old and New Testaments, reveals the Word of God so far as it is necessary for our salvation. It is to be received through the Holy Spirit as the true rule and guide for faith and practice. Whatever is not revealed in or established by the Holy Scriptures is not to be made an article of faith nor is it to be taught as essential to salvation.”³
- Accordingly, in the book *Living Grace: An Outline of United Methodist Theology*, the authors declare that “... the Bible serves both as a source of our faith and as the basic criterion by which the truth and the fidelity of any interpretation of faith is measured.”⁴ This means that the teaching and proclamation of the church must always be examined and measured in relation to scripture.

These few quotations express the basic understanding of the Bible in the Methodist perspective. What follows further explains Methodist teaching and practice related to engagement with the Bible, illustrating the importance of context through practical, historical, and contemporary examples.

1 John Wesley: *The Character of a Methodist*, in: WJW, Vo. 9, ed. by Rupert E. Davis, Nashville/TN 1989, 34.

2 Article V – Of the Sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures for Salvation, in: *the Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* 2012, Nashville 2012, 64.

3 The Confession of Faith of The Evangelical United Brethren Church, Article IV - The Holy Bible, in: *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* 2012, Nashville 2012, 71.

4 Klaiber, Walter/Marquardt, Manfred: *Living Grace: An Outline of United Methodist Theology*, translated and adapted by J. Steven O'Malley and Ulrike R.M. Guthrie. Nashville/TN 2002, 438.

Teaching

Since the Bible functions as the primary source and measuring tool for faith, those who act upon and teach the Word of God understand the Bible to be “Holy Scripture.” God makes himself known through the scriptures. He reveals himself through the witnesses of human beings who have found their true identity in Jesus Christ.⁵ The biblical witnesses lived and spoke centuries ago in contexts very different from those of today. But their message continues to be rediscovered anew in all times and is understood by means of proper exegesis in communities that then seek to live the Word in actual life situations.

We use the term “Holy Scripture,” then, in two ways. We call scripture holy because it stands for the faith witness of the “self-revelation” of God that comes to us in the written form of the Bible. Secondly, it is holy because of the “effect” it has on the readers and listeners, who become engaged in a dynamic way in the reality of God through this engagement. Hence, Methodists describe Bible reading as a “means of grace,” a place in which God conveys prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace. The study of scripture functions like a “channel” through which God’s unbounded love flows into those who listen to, read, reflect upon, and interpret the Word.⁶

According to the Methodist understanding, theology can be defined as those teachings about God and his acts in the world that develop out of the life of the church of Jesus Christ. The United Methodist Church understands itself to be a visible part of this larger community of faith. Exegetical procedure – the process of interpreting the biblical text – entails the dynamic interaction of the church’s tradition(s), the multitude of Christian experiences, and reason as an instrument for understanding. These sources as the constitutive elements for the exegesis of the Bible and the teaching of the church must be evaluated constantly by the universal evidence of truth according to the scriptures. John Wesley understood church tradition, especially the writings of the Pre-Nicene church fathers, to be authentic interpretations of the Holy Scripture. But today, in addition to these historical commitments, biblical exegetes recognize with appreciation the many different denominational perspectives and confessions and are sensitive to the ecumenical mandate to try and understand scripture together.

When Wesley affirmed the value of “experience,” he meant religious experience – the presence of God in the daily events of life. Methodists expect that a growing and deepening relationship with God will activate the spiritual senses and enlarge one’s capacity to recognize God’s presence, so that God’s presence and will become

5 S. Gebauer, Roland: *Die Autorität der Heiligen Schrift allein. Das methodistische Schriftverständnis*, in: Walter Klaiber/Wolfgang Thönissen (ed.), *Die Bibel im Leben der Kirche*, Göttingen/Paderborn 2007, 85–104.

6 S. Wesley, John: Sermon 16 The Means of Grace, in: *WJW*, Vo. 1, Sermons I, ed. by Albert C. Outler, Nashville/TN 1984, 376–397.

more fully visible. Without attending to this ongoing dialogue of scripture with tradition, reason, and experience (commonly referred to in Methodism as the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral”), the church’s understanding of scripture, on all its various levels, is impossible.⁷

Life

Reading, listening to, meditating upon, and seeking to interpret Holy Scripture – either alone or in community – awakens, deepens, and strengthens faith. From a Methodist perspective, therefore, daily Bible reading belongs to daily life. In Germany the reading of the Moravian Daily Watchwords – including an additional doctrinal text and a prayer or verse of a hymn – is a general, daily practice among many Methodists. In international Methodism other traditions of daily Bible reading, such as the “Upper Room,” are common. This daily devotion book is written from and for the people of the Methodist churches all through the world, translated into many languages, and often reflected on together among families. There are also guides for biblical meditation such as Bible commentaries, illustrated daily readings, tear-off calendars, and meditation books for various age groups in use. Many ecumenical publications are supported by and include contributors from The United Methodist Church.

Daily devotional readings from these resources can also inspire reflection at the beginning of meetings, such as at church committees or in the social-diaconal institutions of The United Methodist Church. Bible reading in fellowship happens regularly at various weekly activities in the congregation, such as at the beginning of choir practice, in various age-group meetings (teenage/youth, men’s, women’s, and senior fellowship groups), as well as at the specific Bible studies in the weekly “Bible hour,” when the minister of the congregation provides leadership for biblical exegesis. In ecumenical Bible weeks this exchange also happens with believers from other churches.

Whereas in the past the whole congregation would gather in Methodist “classes” of about twelve people in regional weekly meetings for Bible study, today one commonly finds house groups which meet at regular intervals. Participants of the house groups are Christians of various ages who seek God. They meet for common prayer and reflection on biblical texts or topics in order to find answers to questions in life, to exchange various understandings about Christian responsibility, and to encourage each other in relevant action. Sometimes literature published by the “Medienwerk” (the publishing committee of The United Methodist Church in Germany) is used,

7 Cf. Schuler, Ulrike: *Die Autorität der Heiligen Schrift allein. Die Notwendigkeit der hermeneutischen Reflexion – das „Wesleyanische Quadrilateral“*, in: Walter Klaiber/Wolfgang Thönissen (ed.), *Die Bibel im Leben der Kirche*, Göttingen/Paderborn 2007, 105 – 126.

along with other sources, all of which help to stimulate intentional engagement. Normally, the leaders of the house groups are not the theologically educated but rather lay people. The conviction that the Holy Spirit not only inspired the authors of the Bible, but continues to inspire the readers and listeners of the Bible, reveals the Methodist view that the interpretation of the Bible is not fixed for all time; rather, the Bible speaks anew and again to the fellowship of the faithful.

Many documents on specific biblical topics, sermons, essays, creeds, and even songs have influenced the life and thinking of the church or stimulate it anew. These examples of the “tradition” are taken into account for the advice they offer, are reflected upon in relation to the life experience of the Christians (“experience” and “reason”) and then, again, are measured and evaluated by the message of Holy Scripture.

Liturgical readings from the Old and New Testament have a fixed place in Sunday worship. The “new” hymnal for the German-speaking areas, issued eleven years ago, has included significantly more Psalms than former editions. These are normally read responsively with the congregation. While the means of selecting a biblical text for the sermon is not mandated, many pastors often follow the lectionary of the Protestant regional churches (Evangelische Landeskirchen). The United Methodist Church in the USA, the British Methodists (The Methodist Church in Great Britain), and many other English-speaking churches utilize the Revised Common Lectionary. Besides ordained pastors, lay people also take on the task of preaching (often with a strong emphasis on practical life experience), receive training through lay preaching classes, and are authorized by the congregational leadership. In “Sunday Schools” children learn about the biblical stories from a young age. In Anglo-American contexts, Sunday Schools are much closer to the original Methodist model, offered after worship as catechetical instruction for people of different ages and with various topics.

Methodists have always saved a special place for the proclamation of the Word through spiritual hymns. They conceive church hymns as “sung theology.” The hymnal of The United Methodist Church has a theological structure, therefore, and for the most part follows the Apostles’ Creed. Charles Wesley, co-founder of the Methodist movement, expressed both scripturally-based theology and religious experience poetically. Because of this, some have described him as a “lyrical theologian.” Many of his songs are translated into German. They express (especially in the original versions) the everyday experience of a Christian. Some move forward along the road with God; others wrestle with questions and come to dynamic faith.

Some of Charles Wesley's hymns remind singers of God's promises and help enable them to claim them as their own. Charles Wesley put together a collection of hymns and sacred poems on biblical topics, the following serving as an example of his theology:

*All thy word without addition
Renders us for glory meet,
Fits us for the blissful vision,
Makes the man of God complete.*⁸

Methodist hymnals also draw from Christian song collections all around the world and thereby enhance the ecumenical connection and promote the unity of the church.

History/stories

John Wesley described himself as a “man of one book” (*homo unius libri*). The way in which the Bible shaped his life is confirmed through many publications (teaching sermons, diaries, commentaries of the Old and New Testament, tracts, and articles), all filled with innumerable biblical quotations and references to Scripture. The mission of the Methodist revival movement was, according to him, “to spread scriptural holiness throughout the land.”⁹ The organizational structure of the Methodist Societies (and later the church), moreover, emphasized the important role of the Bible in the daily growth of the believer.

This was and can still be done today

- through opportunities to participate in small group Bible studies (actually used initially and on the mission field to help people learn how to read and write as well as to know God),
- through publication – Bible translations in the context of missions (for example in Bulgaria) and the distribution of religious literature,
- through education – through theological seminaries for preachers, but mainly in the 19th century through literacy programmes and the establishing of schools, including those for girls (for example in Asia, but also in Italy, Macedonia, Bulgaria, Poland).

Especially impressive in this connection is the education and employment of the “Bible Women” through Methodist Women’s Missionary Societies in the Anglo-American and German language contexts at the end of the 19th century.

⁸ Hymn 278, *Short Hymns on Select Passages of the Holy Scripture* (1762).

⁹ Wesley, John: *Minutes of Several Conversations*, in: Thomas Jackson (ed.), *WJW*, Vol. 8, London 1831, 299.



Bible study

In a majority of the cases, the local women in the Orthodox and Roman-Catholic contexts learned to read with the help of the Bible and spread this practice to other women and families. The first documentary evidence of this work “from women to women” exists from Bulgaria, Italy and the former Yugoslavia. Bible Women worked like the deaconess order of the Old Church, by taking on more and more social-diaconal tasks. Their main task, however, was simply to read the Bible out

loud in the native language in all times and circumstances where there were no Bibles in the households or where it was not permitted to read the Bible without the mediation of the church. In this way, the Word of God was made known publicly, with the expectation that those who were thereby liberated to a new life in relationship to God and others would become increasingly sensitive to God’s Word and grow in grace.



Bible woman in Macedonia

“Discover Anew the Bible’s Treasures”

A contribution from the Old Catholic Church

Joachim Pfützner

“He kisses the Bible”, a woman exclaimed recently, referring to the priest of a church she had visited. With her Protestant background, she lacked any understanding for such behaviour. To be sure, the book he had kissed could only have been a part of the Bible, namely the Evangelary. That is what the book used in worship services is called, which only contains the Gospels that are read out on Sundays and church feast days in the course of three years.¹ Usually this book has a richly decorated cover and is carried into the church during the entrance procession. Before the deacon or deaconess reads the Gospel, he or she can incense the book. And at the close of the reading, according to the Old Catholic Eucharist liturgy,² he or she can kiss the Gospel Book.³ This is not compulsory, but is allowed. This does not mean that the book is venerated, but rather Christ Himself, whose voice is heard in the Gospel. However this is handled in the Old Catholic congregations – for the Old Catholics the Bible has become precious ever since they were explicitly recommended to read it in their mother tongue, something which had previously been forbidden.⁴ This is officially reflected in a thesis from the Reunion Conference of 1874 in Bonn, a symposium convened at Bonn University by the Munich church historian Ignaz von Döllinger⁵ for Old Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, and Anglican theologians. It says: “We agree that the reading of H[oly] Scripture in the vernacular cannot be prohibited in a legitimate manner.”⁶ In the wake of the introduction of the German language for the Eucharistic celebration, which proved to be difficult, the first Old Catholic bishop, Joseph Hubert Reinkens⁷, pointed out in 1876 “that there

1 To be precise, in the case described it was an Evangelistary, i.e. a collection of selected texts from the Gospels, whereas the Evangelary contains the full texts of the four Gospels. However, the designation “Evangelary” for a collection of selected Gospel texts for liturgical use is commonly used nowadays.

2 *Die Feier der Eucharistie im Katholischen Bistum der Alt-Katholiken in Deutschland.*

Drawn up by the Liturgical Commission for use in church services and published by the Bishop and Synod Board, Bonn 2006.

3 *Ibid.*, 188.

4 *Kirche für Christen heute.* Information about the Old Catholic Church. Published by the working group for public relations in the Catholic Diocese of Old Catholics in Germany, Berlin 1994, 73: “Before the final break with Rome, the Church of Utrecht was accused (!) by the Pope in 1713, among other things, of wanting to open the Bible for all and to make it available to all people in the proclamation.”

5 * 1799 in Bamberg, + 1890 in Munich, from 1827 professor at the University of Munich. Döllinger is considered to be one of the spiritual fathers of Old Catholicism.

6 Heinrich Reusch (ed.), Report on the Reunion Conferences held in Bonn in 1874 and 1875 Unions, reprint of the two volume edition of 1874 and 1875 with an introduction by Günter Esser, Bonn 2002, 16.

7 * 1821 in Burscheid near Aachen, + 1896 in Bonn, 1857 professor of church history in Breslau, 1873 election and consecration as first Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Old Catholics in Germany.

is no hindrance to reading the Epistle and the Gospel in German ..."⁸ In addition, the priests were encouraged to preach during the Eucharist with reference to the biblical texts.⁹ In 1877 the Diocesan Synod decided upon "a series of Sunday worship readings changing every two years".¹⁰ Thus an important signal for the importance of the Bible was set in the early years of the German Old Catholic Church. For in this way the church service became the most significant place for the dissemination of biblical texts, much more so than had previously been the case. However, it must be noted that even before establishment of the German diocese, there had been a strong interest in the Bible in reformist Catholic circles, even if this had not become widely known.¹¹

It is also revealing to see what else was agreed upon at the Reunion Conference in Bonn regarding the Bible: "We agree that the apocryphal or deuterocanonical books of the Old Testament do not have the same canonicity as the books contained in the Hebrew canon"¹² and: "We agree that no translation of H[oly] Scripture can claim a higher authority than the original text."¹³ Even before the conference was convened, Holy Scripture had been acknowledged as the highest norm and the historical-critical method had been recognized.¹⁴

When the second Altar Book for the celebration of the Eucharist appeared in 1959¹⁵, the lectionary that had previously covered a period of two years was extended to a four-year cycle of readings. For the first time, Old Testament texts were also included, even though the New Testament still predominated. That did not change until, in the 1970s, the Liturgy of the Word during the Eucharist was expanded to three readings, the first of which was usually an Old Testament text, whilst the

8 Quotation from Johann Friedrich von Schulte, *Der Altkatholizismus, Geschichte seiner Entwicklung, inneren Gestaltung und rechtlichen Stellung in Deutschland*. Reprint of the edition Giessen, 1887 Aalen 1965, 608. For the celebration of the sacraments and other religious acts, the first Diocesan Synod had already approved the use of the German language in principle in 1874. Despite the continuous and increasingly pressing demand for the introduction of German in the Eucharist as well, this was officially only implemented in 1885 with the publication of the Liturgical Prayer Book along with a song book as appendix, Mannheim 1885.

9 *Kirche für Christen heute*, loc. cit. (see note 4), 73. Until then it had been the practice in Catholic services to hold the sermon outside and before the sacramental celebration. This "custom" is explained by the fact that the biblical texts could only be read by the celebrating priest and only in Latin. Thus the reference to the biblical texts was also lost.

10 Ibid. cf. also the Liturgical Prayer Book, loc. cit. (see note 8).

11 Ibid. cf. also Angela Berlis, *Frauen im Prozess der Kirchwerdung. Eine historisch-theologische Studie zur Anfangsphase des deutschen Altkatholizismus (1850–1890)*, Frankfurt am Main 1998, 384–398.

12 Reusch, report (see note 6.), 15.

13 Ibid.

14 Urs Kury, *Die Altkatholische Kirche. Ihre Geschichte, ihre Lehre, ihr Anliegen*, Frankfurt am Main 1982, 103.

15 *Altarbuch für die Feier der heiligen Eucharistie im Katholischen Bistum der Alt-Katholiken in Deutschland*, issued on behalf of the Bishop by the Liturgical Commission, Bonn 1959. The first Altar Book was published in 1888 with the title "Das heilige Amt auf die Feste und Zeiten des Jahres". It was put together on the basis of the Liturgical Prayer Book, the principal author was Adolf Thürlings (see below, note 17).



An angel brings the Gospel to St. Matthew;
Fulda Evangeliary from the 9th century

second was taken from the New Testament epistles and the third from the Gospels.¹⁶

The liturgical reform of the German Old Catholics also included from the outset the reintroduction of a Liturgy of the Hours with the congregation, which proved difficult in practice, however.¹⁷ Nevertheless: the Liturgical Prayer Book, which was principally the work of the expert on liturgy and music, Adolf Thürling¹⁸, comprises sung morning and evening prayers with three or four psalms for every stage of the liturgical year. For the Scripture readings at these services reference is made to an early church lectionary. For the Advent season, for example, we find: "Early Church lectionary for Advent: The Prophet Isaiah."¹⁹ And at Christmas it says: "Early Church lectionary for Christmas: Isaiah 9:1–6; 40:1–8; 52:1–6; for

Saint Stephen's Day: Acts 6; for the period from the Sunday after Christmas until Saturday before Septuagesima: The Epistles of Paul the Apostle".²⁰ So it was at least intended to reveal the treasure of biblical texts on a broad basis by means of worship services. And this is the idea until today.

16 This lectionary corresponds on most Sundays and feast days to that of the Roman Catholic Church.

Exceptions are detailed in a lectionary of distinct texts published in Bonn, 2013. The lectionary of the Church of England also follows the rules of the Roman Catholic church mode, whereby the pericopes are in that case reproduced unabridged, especially in the readings, so that the choice of verses often differs.

17 Sigisbert Kraft, *Adolf Thürlings – ein Wegbereiter der Liturgiewissenschaft und der Erneuerung des Gemeindegottesdienstes*, in: IKZ 75 (1985).

18 * 1844 in Kaldenkirchen near Cologne, + 1915 in Bern, joined the Old Catholic movement in 1871 with his theological teachers in Bonn, 1872 priest in Kempten, promotion in Munich as Dr. phil. in Musicology, 1887 Professor of Systematic Theology in Bern, lectures in liturgical studies.

19 Liturgical Prayer Book, loc. cit. 4.

20 Ibid. 18ff.

However, this intention is not limited to the services alone. Bible seminars and Bible study groups are standard practice in nearly every congregation. The method of Bible Sharing is also widespread. Many parishes take part in the annual Ecumenical Bible Week. Many a church member reads the Bible daily, following one of the common Bible reading plans, preferably an ecumenical one. Or they let the Word of God accompany them through the day, as proposed for example in “Te Deum”.²¹ The singing of psalms has also become a matter of course. In the 1980s, it was generally preferred to sing a hymn after the Old Testament reading, rather than the responsorial psalm, but nowadays this psalm will often be intoned by a cantor, while the congregation sings a fitting refrain, or else the cantor and the congregation sing the verses alternately.

It is more unusual for the sermon to be based not on the Gospel, but rather on one of the two readings, even the one from the Old Testament. The preacher is basically free to choose any one of the three texts in the service, for there is no fixed sermon text, and it is a clear principle that the congregation should listen attentively to all the texts, including those from the Old Testament or the New Testament epistles, which are sometimes difficult to understand.²²

²¹ *Te Deum. Das Stundengebet im Alltag*. Published by the Benedictine Abbey Maria Laach and the Catholic Biblical Society. Appears monthly since 2004 on subscription.

²² *Die Feier der Eucharistie*, loc. cit. (see note 2), Introduction XVI.

The Bible in the Orthodox Church

Konstantin Nikolakopoulos

1. Introduction

In all Christian churches, Holy Scripture, in which the revealed truths of the Triune God are laid down in words, presumably has a more or less important place and plays an indispensable role. However, in Christendom as a whole there is no uniform way of interpreting or dealing with the Bible. Therefore, in the interests of promoting ecumenical rapprochement of the Christian world, mutual understanding is required from all sides and has become more necessary than ever today. The following explanations on the way in which the Orthodox Church deals with the Bible are intended to help in this process and pave the way for the churches to learn from each other in good faith.

The Bible has a tremendous importance for all Orthodox believers, not least because it did not come into existence independently, but within and in vital contact with the life and tradition of the Church. Through the Church Fathers in particular, we can trace the path of continuous Orthodox tradition regarding the significance,



value and interpretation of Scripture. These living witnesses of the apostolic tradition point to the unique educational function of Scripture in their theological, homiletic and exegetical works.

In order to gain a better understanding of the present value and the permanent position of Holy Scripture in the Orthodox Church and its theology, I favour the following meaningful picture: on the altar of every Orthodox church you will find the heart of the New Testament and its most important part, namely the Gospels. The celebrating priest lifts up this text, which is known in liturgical use as an entire book as the "Holy Gospel", in order to read from

Jesus Christ, the "giver of life", holding the open Bible with the logion from Joh 11:25f.:
"I am the resurrection and the life ..."

it at the liturgical gathering of the faithful, and then he lays the Evangeliary down on the altar again at the end of the reading. This illustrates the special position of the Word of God in the Orthodox Church, as well as the close relationship between the Scriptures and the Church. The Church not only preserves the Scriptures and reads them to the believers, but also interprets them responsibly over the centuries.

2. How the Bible is used in the Orthodox Church

This is an expression of a first fundamental statement about the Orthodox understanding of the Bible and its interpretation. In other words, one of the main principles and essential requirements of Orthodox hermeneutics is its **ecclesial context**. Interpretation, the attempt to penetrate deeply into the meaning of the text and to grasp it completely, is a function, a service and a gift in the church. The Church represents the spiritual womb from which all Christian life emerged and unfolded, including the Bible. The Bible finds its proper place within the Church, for the Christian community was already in existence long before Scripture had found its form. The Bible traces its origin back to the Church and may be seen to belong to the strong current of so-called tradition of early Christian life.

Scripture and tradition are not, according to Orthodox understanding, independent sources of faith, but two manifestations of the life of the Church. There is namely only one source of our faith: the life of the Church, going back to the true God and true Man, Jesus Christ. The unity which exists between Scripture and tradition can thus only be felt and experienced within the life of the Church. When speaking of the Bible within Orthodoxy, it is always regarded as an integral part of tradition. On the other hand, the term "Bible" presupposes the unity of Scripture in the duality of its two main parts. There is no doubt in Orthodoxy that the Old Testament be interpreted in the light of the New (*interpretatio christiana*). This question is actually answered by the New Testament itself and its attitude to the Old Testament, thus by the appropriate "promise-fulfilment" model of Christian exegesis. The attitude of the Church Father John Chrysostom († 407) on the relationship between the two Testaments proves very clear on this point: "The Old Testament preceded the New, and the New Testament interpreted the Old. I have said several times that both Testaments represent two daughters and two sisters serving one master. The Lord is announced by the Prophets; Christ is preached in the New (Testament). The New is no longer new, for it was preceded by the Old. The Old has not lost its worth, but it has been interpreted in the New (Testament)" (*Patrologia Graeca* 50:796).

The **pneumatic singularity** of Scripture, expressing the mysterious wisdom of God, leaves no room for a subjective and merely speculative, theoretical interpretation. In Orthodox understanding, the inspiration of Scripture by the Spirit emphasizes its divine-human character, for inspiration can only be understood in the field of con-

ceptual content, not in the precise wording and linguistic structure of the text. A dry, philological intellectual method of interpretation cannot lead to a proper explanation of Scripture, as Paul makes clear in 1 Cor 2:7. He states that the message of Holy Scripture is "God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory".

Besides the ecclesial and pneumatic character of the exegetical approach to the Bible, Orthodox hermeneutics emphasize further fundamental principles for its authentic and genuine usage, such as: **the personal attitude of the exegete** and the **liturgical dimension of exegesis**. The famous Alexandrian theologian and bishop, Athanasius the Great († 373), describes the essential attitude of the commentator towards what is sacred: "But for the study and true understanding of the Scriptures, it is necessary to lead a good life, to have a pure heart and virtue in Christ, so that in this way the mind can achieve and capture what it aspires to, as far as human nature is capable of reaching knowledge of God, the logos, at all. Without purity and the imitation of the lives of the saints, nobody can understand the language of the saints."

The tradition that has been handed down to us by the Fathers without interruption likewise provides a very important principle and the "key" to Orthodox hermeneutics altogether. The **Church Fathers as exegetes** of Scripture continually had the furtherance of the true and unadulterated faith of the Church in mind when dealing with the sacred texts. They always strove to protect the faith passed down from earliest times from every form of heresy, and this remains their legacy to Orthodox exegesis down to the present. Neither the Church Fathers, nor the general Orthodox interpretation of Scripture have ever doubted the value of scientific and critical inquiry into Holy Scripture. The hermeneutic tradition, developed with ecclesial reference in the so-called "liturgical interpretation", in no way precludes scientific research, but rather presupposes it. This is typically testified by John Chrysostom, when he refers to a biblical text and states: "One must investigate who the author is, when and about what he has written, and for what reason the reading (of any given biblical text) was determined for this feast day." (Patrologia Graeca 51:71).

The reception of the Fathers, who are regarded as living witnesses of the apostolic tradition, is still regarded with the greatest respect by Orthodox hermeneutics. This is not to be confused with the pure copying or dry, imitative repetition of the texts of the Church Fathers. Modern theologians do not necessarily have to agree with the opinion of a Church Father when analysing the grammar or the history of a Bible text. Agreement is rather to be sought in the way faith is handed down in patristic texts.

The celebration of the diverse and numerous services is the strongest expression of the essence of Orthodox faith. These services, which are directly derived from the authentic heritage of Early Christian and Patristic times, represent the theological and theoretical, but also the practical core of Orthodox **liturgical life**. As the various liturgical forms originated and developed in the Ancient Church, the factor “Bible” played such an important role that the Orthodox Church is often called a biblical church.

The oldest liturgical texts undoubtedly go back to the apostolic age and have an indisputably biblical background. Even though many other factors may have exerted influence on the development of Christian worship, the Bible, both Old and New Testament, has certainly shaped the rituals and imbued them with content and language. The outward form of the Orthodox church services is most interesting, which includes readings and recitations, songs and sermons. In all of these types of worship, the biblical text plays a fundamental role. The designated readings for each liturgical day, as well as the prayers and hymns, are often biblical passages, or otherwise directly influenced or indirectly inspired by Scripture. Thus biblical theology is most strongly expressed within the liturgical life of the Orthodox Church.

According to Orthodox understanding, the Bible in its dual identity (Old and New Testament), constitutes the divinely revealed Word of God which, in the context of the Church’s tradition, serves as an infallible guideline for the **ethical conduct** of every person. For this reason, the study of Holy Scripture is of the greatest importance for believers. The principal aim of studying and correctly understanding God’s Word is spiritual edification of the faithful for the salvation of the human soul, and, over and above that, the glorification of God. It is therefore necessary for the practice of the Christian life to be based on the testimony of Scripture. Only intensive study and a deep examination of the spiritual and patristic understanding of the Gospel can contribute to a human ethos that corresponds to Orthodox spirituality. Such ethos is inextricably connected with biblical truths, exhortations and admonitions. In this important context, I would like to invoke a striking example from an Orthodox point of view: the aforementioned, great Antiochian theologian and exegete and Patriarch of Constantinople, John Chrysostom († 407), known as “the golden mouth” of the Eastern Church.

As a tireless shepherd with a gigantic body of writing, Chrysostom underlines extremely clearly to his followers the mental and spiritual benefits of personal study of the Scriptures. The Church Father stresses the letter of the Bible by emphasising the historical dimension and meaning of the texts. He strives for a linguistic and philological approach to the Bible. He tries to explain the events described against their historical background. He is determined to bring the hidden meaning of poetic

metaphors to the surface. Chrysostom pays such close attention to the letter of the Bible because he firmly believes in the inspiration of all Holy Scripture. On numerous occasions he stresses the sanctity of the “written word”, and accordingly demands from readers and interpreters respect for every word and syllable. Very often and in many ways, he encourages believers to study the Scriptures privately, emphasizing the spiritual and ethical benefits to be gained by it. Altogether, Chrysostom is convinced that Scripture reading is nourishment for the soul, just as food is necessary to maintain bodily strength. It is spiritual food and strengthens the mind. It makes the soul stronger and more steadfast, filling it more and more with philosophical wisdom.

3. Closing remarks

If one studies the thousand pages of exegetical Patristic texts carefully, one can recognize that these personalities of the Early Church were both traditional and also “modern”. They managed to successfully combine the “analytical” method of modern science with the traditional “synthetic” method. They did not overlook analytical biblical criticism, but they sought the meaning of scriptural texts in their exegesis; that is to say, they took the theological dimensions of the actual biblical text into consideration. This contribution of the Fathers to theology and exegesis is the unwavering foundation of the Orthodox understanding of Scripture.

The Bible in the Coptic Orthodox Church

Anba Damian

Our Coptic Orthodox Church places great emphasis on memorizing and storing the words of the Old and the New Testament. This takes place in the Sunday School for children and adolescents, in separate Bible classes for adults, in the training of Sunday school teachers, in sermons and in the theological faculties. Particular emphasis is placed on the Psalms. The Psalms are an important part of our Liturgy of the Hours and our hymn singing. We are convinced that the Word of God gives us protection, spiritual growth and blessing.

At every Incense Prayer in preparation of the service, both on the previous evening (evening incense prayer) and immediately before the service (morning incense prayer), sections from the Psalms and a portion of the New Testament are read. The theme is the same as the liturgical readings at the service.

Every church service includes readings from the Epistles of our teacher Paul, from the Catholic Epistles, from the Acts, the Psalms and the Gospels. After Sunday services there is usually an interpretation of the Bible, a meditation or a sermon. On church holidays the reading is done in Arabic (in Egypt), in German (in Germany) and in the Coptic language.

The readings are announced by the deacon, who asks the congregation to stand up in reverence for the reading of the Gospel. The senior celebrant proclaims the text in the Coptic language with a particular melody. A prayer is spoken before the Gospel reading and incense is offered. The senior celebrant reads the Gospel barefoot, accompanied by two deacons carrying the candles. At the end of the reading, the reader kisses the Holy Scripture and blesses the congregation with it.

On feast days, the Bible is always read in the Coptic language. If worshippers of other denominations are present, we read a passage of Scripture in their language, for example in the Syrian or Ethiopian language.

Pastoral visits to believers' homes begin with a scripture reading and its interpretation, so that the Word of God is proclaimed before we start to talk. With the help of plays, quizzes and songs, children are taught to learn simple verses from the Bible by heart.

In all the seven sacraments practised in the Coptic Orthodox Church, portions of the Old and New Testament are considered to be important elements of the administration and completion of the sacraments.

On the banks of the Nile, near the Church of the Virgin Mary in Maadi, and thus in a district of Cairo, a very large copy of the Scriptures was found floating on the surface of the river, opened at the nineteenth chapter of Isaiah, in which we read (19:19): "On that day there will be an altar to the Lord in the centre of Egypt." This prophecy was literally fulfilled, because exactly at the geographic midpoint of Egypt near Assiut there are not only an altar and a church, but a whole monastery, known as the Monastery of the Virgin Mary or "Deer El-Moharrak." In the same chapter 19, in verse 25, we read: "Blessed be Egypt my people."

As Copts, that means Egyptians, we are proud that the word "Egypt" is very often found in both the Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament we read the word Egypt four hundred and eighty times. We turn to Jesus Christ, praying that he may give us protection, peace and security in our homeland Egypt, just as that country received him as a small child with the Holy Family for three and a half years and granted protection against the murderous plans of King Herod. We trust in his love, his promise and his divine power.



Papyrus 52, a fragment of the Gospel of John (18:31-33) from the 2nd century A.D., discovered in Egypt

The Bible as the Basis for Faith, Doctrine and Life

The way the Bible is understood by the Mulheim Association of Free Churches and Evangelical Communities

Markus Liebelt

It is an especially difficult challenge to accurately document the way a church, one of the Protestant Free Churches, understands Holy Scripture as a whole, just from the point of view of one of its members. This is because the Mulheim Association (MA), in keeping with the Protestant church tradition, does not have a doctrinal authority, nor does it have binding teachings or dogmas. In the light of this, the acceptance of the Bible's authority as Holy Scripture and its importance as the basis for faith, doctrine and life, must always also be seen as a personal acceptance of the Scriptures and a substantial part of personal faith. The jointly formulated dogmatic foundation of scriptural teaching can be found in the booklet "The Self-understanding of the Mulheim Association of Free Church Congregations." One chapter – "The Bible, as the Word of God, is the binding element for faith, doctrine and life"¹ – describes in brief the way scripture is understood.

The concrete everyday practice within MA congregations, in terms of their interpretation of scripture as well as in other areas of doctrine, can still differ from the homogeneous presentation found in the "Self-understanding." In spite of the cooperatively formulated and approved "centre," there are differing scriptural approaches and ways of interpretation. This has less to do with the acceptance of scripture as the Word of God per se. Rather it has to do with the focus on how scripture can be interpreted for our time and what that means for our everyday lives. Additionally, the ecumenical perspective is also taken into account. "We are committed to theological debate with Christians of other denominations because we see our own thinking as being fragmented."²

The approach to Scripture as delineated in the "Self-understanding" has its roots in the "Lausanne Covenant." "Together with those who signed the Lausanne Covenant 'We affirm the divine inspiration, truthfulness and authority of both Old and New Testament Scriptures in their entirety as the only written word of God, without error in all that it affirms, and the only infallible rule of faith and practice. We also

1 www.muelheimer-verband.de/mv-selbstverstaendnis-ua/statische-inhalte/mv-ordnungen/mv-selbstverstaendnis/werte-und-ziele

2 Ibid.

affirm the power of God's word to accomplish his purpose of salvation. The message of the Bible is addressed to all men and women. For God's revelation in Christ and in Scripture is unchangeable. Through it the Holy Spirit still speaks today. He illumines the minds of God's people in every culture to perceive its truth freshly through their own eyes and thus discloses to the whole Church ever more of the many-colored wisdom of God."³ Thus the MA understanding of interpretation of scripture is on the one hand intentionally placed within the so called "Evangelical movement." At the same time it is (and sees itself) as decidedly belonging to a tradition of ecumenical openness. One point of departure for ecumenical dialogue could be a reference to the Roman Catholic catechism: "Since therefore all that the inspired authors or sacred writers affirm should be regarded as affirmed by the Holy Spirit, we must acknowledge that the books of Scripture firmly, faithfully, and without error teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the Sacred Scriptures."⁴ These statements can be found in the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation "Dei Verbum" from the Second Vatican Council.⁵

With an intentional reference to the Reformation, the Self-understanding stresses the Bible as the decisive premise from which theological work can arise (*sola scriptura*): "Our own theological work arises from the joy found in this revealed Word of God and strives to reflect our responsibility for the congregation and society. We therefore attempt to lay out the entire content of Holy Scripture when we interpret and proclaim the Word of God."⁶

According to the MA's Self-understanding, social responsibility can be derived from biblical theology. This ideal can be seen in concrete form in the manifold social service agencies and commitments found within the association. Whether in developing different relief strategies for the poor, organizing help for displaced people, the homeless or neglected children and adolescents, sending assistance to Eastern Europe etc., or even running a nursing home for the elderly, the MA congregations make an effort to live a life of charity spelled out in the Word of God within their specific abilities.

Every year, two conferences devoted to addressing current topics and problems follow the central idea that, through theological discourse, the Scripture's message can be understood in the present and made useful in practice. These forums can be understood as the Mulheim Association's "synods." The agreements and understandings made here are seen as authoritative in the sense of their being guidelines

3 Ibid. Cf. www.lausanne.org/content/covenant/lausanne-covenant.

4 www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p1s1c2a3.htm.

5 www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html.

6 *Selbstverständnis* (see Footnote 1).

and offering orientation. They are not viewed as dogmatic and ethical constitutions. This circumstance is seen as being both an expression of Evangelical freedom as well as a problem. It is seen as a freedom since every insight, according to Evangelical thought, should always be regarded as conditional. However, it is seen as a problem since the joint theological path always seems to be subject to the real danger of subjectivism. The MA is very much aware of the inescapable tension resulting from taking a path that straddles the need to commit and have orientation, and to accept conditionality.



Typical rituals dealing with the Bible within the MA cannot be adequately verified. In many parts, daily reading of the Scriptures is desired of every member of the congregation as a spiritual exercise. There is a table (altar) with candles, (a cross) and an open Bible at the front of the room in most of the MA's houses of prayer. However, this type of worship-service symbolism is not mandatory for individual congregations. An integral part of worship in the MA's congregations is the reading of Biblical texts, as well as the sermon which is seen as a proclamation of the Word presented in the texts. The texts can be chosen freely; there is no binding reading order. Some congregations follow the reading order of the Evangelical-Lutheran church.

The Bible as Sacred Scripture in the Catholic Church

Franz Josef Backhaus

The following article briefly outlines Catholic hermeneutics of the Bible. This is followed by considerations on interpretation as well as on the liturgical and pastoral use of the Bible in the Catholic Church.

How does the Catholic Church understand the Bible?

The basis of the understanding of the Bible as Sacred Scripture in the Catholic Church is the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation “*Dei verbum*” (abbr. DV) of the Second Vatican Council. It was approved by Pope Paul VI on 18 November 1965 and then promulgated.

At the very start of the text, in DV 2, it is clearly shown that divine revelation does not mean the transmission of supernatural truths of faith in the sense of an instruction, but first and foremost God’s *personal self-revelation* in dialogue with chosen people or a chosen nation. The opening words of the document in Latin have been deliberately written in upper case letters – “DEI VERBUM” (Word of God) –, for it is about Jesus Christ as the incarnate Word of God. The aim of the revelation, which reaches its zenith in Jesus Christ, is fellowship of believers with the Triune God for the salvation of mankind.

God’s revelation as his self-manifestation takes place within human history. In faith, which with the assistance of the Holy Spirit is a gift of God, the *revelation of God* is accepted in Jesus Christ and passed on (DV 5). By the working of the Holy Spirit and the resulting development of a fellowship of believers, the process of handing down the tradition of revelation is started. For this process of tradition *two forms of mediation* have emerged in the course of church history: the Sacred Scriptures and the sacred tradition of the Catholic Church.¹ Thus neither of these is a source of revelation, but they both convey the one revelation in Jesus Christ.

Even though Sacred Scripture as the witness to revelation contains all knowledge of revelation, so that sacred tradition does not provide any additional content ex-

1 In the Latin text of DV 7 the phrase “sacred tradition” (*Sacra Traditio*) appears alongside “the Sacred Scriptures of both Testaments” (*Sacra Scriptura utriusque Testamenti*). In contrast to the ecclesiastical traditions in the plural (*traditiones*) concerning church rites, customs and habits, “sacred tradition” in the singular means a process which is initiated and supported by the Holy Spirit for the renewed appropriation and the deeper understanding of the revelation event testified in Sacred Scripture in the fellowship of believers.

tending beyond Sacred Scripture, nonetheless Sacred Scripture is not sufficient unto itself, according to DV 9, but needs the Church as a community of faith with its sacred tradition for canonical definition and interpretation. Only in this way can it be said with “certainty” to be the living Word of God.² In reflecting and meditating upon Scripture, tradition takes on an interpretative character. Accordingly, DV 21 states that all the preaching of the Church has to be guided by the Sacred Scriptures. On the other hand, DV 21 also says that Sacred Scripture together with sacred tradition is the “supreme rule” of the Church’s faith. That is to say, even though Sacred Scripture bears witness completely to all revelation and therefore forms the content and foundation of our Catholic faith, nonetheless faith takes place within the Church, and with it the acceptance and handing down of the one revelation in the communication of Sacred Scripture and sacred tradition, sustained by the Holy Spirit.

A progressive understanding of tradition is derived from the interpretative nature of sacred tradition, as stated in DV 8: “This tradition which comes from the Apostles develops in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit. For there is a growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down. This happens through the contemplation and study made by believers, who treasure these things in their hearts (see Luke, 2:19, 51), through a penetrating understanding of the spiritual realities which they experience, and through the preaching of those who have received through Episcopal succession the sure gift of truth. For as the centuries succeed one another, the Church constantly moves forward toward the fullness of divine truth until the words of God reach their complete fulfilment in her.” It is interesting that the believers’ study of Sacred Scripture and their spiritual access to it precedes any preaching by ministers of the Church.

The *third criteriological witness* to revelation alongside Sacred Scripture and sacred tradition is, according to DV 10, the living teaching office of the Church, which has the task of “authentically interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed on.” So it is not above the one revelation, the one Word of God, but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on in Sacred Scripture and sacred tradition. Specifically, this means that the teaching office listens devoutly to the one revelation, the one Word of God, in awe with the help of the Holy Spirit, guards it in the two revelation witnesses of Sacred Scripture and sacred tradition, and explains the former with faithful regard to the latter.

2 “Hence there exists a close connection and communication between sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture.

For both of them, flowing from the same divine wellspring, in a certain way merge into a unity and tend toward the same end. ... Consequently it is not from Sacred Scripture alone that the Church draws her certainty about everything which has been revealed. Therefore both sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture are to be accepted and venerated with the same sense of loyalty and reverence.” (DV 9).

DV 10 closes with the words: “It is clear, therefore, that sacred tradition, Sacred Scripture and the teaching authority of the Church, in accord with God’s most wise design, are so linked and joined together that one cannot stand without the others, and that all together and each in its own way under the action of the one Holy Spirit contribute effectively to the salvation of souls.”

How does the Catholic Church interpret the Bible?

This understanding has implications for the interpretation of Scripture in the Catholic Church:

- Since Sacred Scripture as a witness to revelation contains the *Word of God in human words* (cf. DV 12,13), interpretation must take place using a method that does justice to the historical dimension of Sacred Scripture. Thus, the historical-critical method represents “the indispensable method for the scientific study of the meaning of ancient texts.”³ With regard to methodology, therefore, Catholic exegesis does not differ from Protestant exegesis.
- Since Sacred Scripture was committed to writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, as is stated in DV 11, God is regarded as the originator of Sacred Scripture, which does not rule out the real authorship of humans. Sacred Scripture which is thus inspired is not inerrant, but it is true, for God wanted to record truths in it *for the sake of our salvation*.
- Since the inspiration does not only apply to the writing of the biblical texts, but also to the texts themselves, which are *spirit-filled*, and even *spirit-activating* for the reader, one may speak of a “relecture” (re-reading) of the texts. Thus, a biblical text does not only possess a *literal sense*, but as part of a canon comprising not only the Old, but also the New Testament, and therefore the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ and his resurrection, it also has a *spiritual sense*.⁴ But in order to avoid arbitrary interpretation, the spiritual meaning of a text is always subject to its literal sense. In addition, one must observe the criteria that the spiritual sense of a biblical text has to refer to the Easter event, and that the current situation of the readers is seen to be interwoven with the Spirit of God. In this respect, clear limits are set for the spiritual sense. It affects mainly Old Testament texts which, beside their literal sense, allow a Christological interpretation with hindsight after Jesus Christ.
- Since Sacred Scripture and sacred tradition as witnesses to revelation both emerged from the process of tradition within the faith community of the Church, their *authentic interpretation* only takes place in accordance with the faith of the

3 Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, April 23, 1993.

It should be noted that the historical-critical method is open and can therefore be broadened by newer methods and approaches.

4 *Ibid.*, II B 2.

Church: “The believer always reads and interprets Scripture within the faith of the church and then brings back to the community the fruit of that reading for the enrichment of the common faith.”⁵ The interpretations of biblical scholars (exegetes) also have to be based on the faith of the Church. The Church’s teaching office, which has to guarantee the appropriateness of exegetical interpretations in the light of the Church’s faith, consults the biblical scholars for this purpose, in order to achieve the common goal of “preserving the people of God in the truth which sets them free”.⁶

How is the Bible used liturgically in the Catholic Church?

In the second part of his post-synodal Exhortation “*Verbum Domini*” Pope Benedict XVI dealt in detail with the importance of Sacred Scripture in the liturgy.⁷ He states that “every liturgical action is by its very nature steeped in sacred Scripture.”⁸ Therefore, the Pope calls not only for an increase of the ecumenical services of the Word, but also emphasizes the close connection between Sacred Scripture and sacramental action, for example in Confession or the Anointing of the Sick.⁹

Since Jesus Christ is present in the words of Sacred Scripture, Benedict also speaks of the *sacramentality of the word*: “The sacramentality of the word can thus be understood by analogy with the real presence of Christ under the appearances of the consecrated bread and wine. By approaching the altar and partaking in the Eucharistic banquet we truly share in the body and blood of Christ. The proclamation of God’s word at the celebration entails an acknowledgment that Christ himself is present, that he speaks to us, and that he wishes to be heard.”¹⁰ The presence of Jesus Christ is recognizable in the liturgy, for example in the Gospel procession at the beginning of a service or a Eucharistic celebration. The veneration of the Gospel or the Lectionary with incense expresses the presence of Jesus Christ in the word. The close connection between Sacred Scripture and sacramental action is also made clear in the Eucharist, when after the proclamation of the Gospel the Evangeliary or the Lectionary is opened and placed on the altar facing the congregation. Thus the celebrating congregation lives not only from the consecrated gifts of bread and wine, but equally from the Word of God in Sacred Scripture. This is also shown outside liturgical celebrations, when the Lectionary lies on the ambo, open to the congregation.

5 Ibid., III B 3.

6 Ibid., III B 3.

7 See Benedict XVI, Apostolic Exhortation “*Verbum Domini*”, 30 September 2010.

8 Ibid., [52].

9 Ibid., [61].

10 Ibid., [56].

Although the revelation of God was fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the Old Testament retains its own inherent value as revelation, “as our Lord himself reaffirmed.”¹¹ In this respect, “*Verbum Domini*” understands the New Testament as the best commentary on the Old Testament. Should difficulties arise in understanding the connection between the Old Testament and the New Testament reading when using the valid lectionary, then a *canonical interpretation* can be helpful, which sees the two testaments in the light of Jesus Christ as a unity of Sacred Scripture.

In his exhortation, the Pope demands emphatically that only biblical texts should be used in the liturgy. *Elements of silence* can prevent excessive “wordiness” in church services, but should not have the function of pauses.

The Pope attaches great importance to *Christ-centredness* of every sermon (homily). Abstract ideas and digressions should be avoided. The “dark” passages of the Bible (e.g. those containing violence) are to be explained to the believers in the sermon. It would be a mistake to neglect those passages. In *liturgical chant* all those songs are to be preferred which are biblically inspired. An example here is the responsorial chanting of the Psalms.



The presence of Jesus Christ is reflected liturgically in the ceremonial presentation of the Gospels.

11 Ibid., [41].

Finally, it should be noted that the Sacred Scriptures are used in the Catholic Church not only in various devotions such as the Stations of the Cross, Marian and Rosary devotions, but also in Blessing services (cf. Book of Blessings) and especially the Liturgy of the Hours of clergy and congregations.

Letting the Bible inspire pastoral activity

This headline formulates a central idea of “*Verbum Domini*”: biblical pastoral activity must not take place in addition to or alongside other types of pastoral work, but must form the basis for the manifold pastoral ministry. This *biblical foundation* of all pastoral work can be manifested, for example, in the biblical dimension of catechesis or in a lively biblical apostolate. Biblically oriented pastoral activity can also favour the growth of so-called “small communities”, that gather around the Word of God as spiritual communities or family circles. In this connection, recalling the relationship between the literal and spiritual sense of Sacred Scripture, one should also mention the *lectio divina*, meaning a “divine reading” of Sacred Scripture in the sense of approaching and understanding it with the help of the Spirit of God and thus enriching one’s own prayer life.¹²

¹² In this connection one should mention the Lectio Divina project “*Dem Wort auf der Spur*” (In pursuit of the Word), which the Catholic Bible Society in Germany (Stuttgart) has been running successfully for several years.

The Bible is a hidden treasure

An invitation to unearth it!

Andreas Volkmar

Discovering the Bible as a treasure! How can that happen? I would like to lead you, dear reader, through a dialogue of questions and answers. Taking this path is not a coincidence. It is a form of dialogue that Luther already used in his Small Catechism, so that important contents of the Bible are understandable. Even today, questions such as “What does this mean?”, “Where is this written?” lead church members to learn about the importance of the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, Holy Baptism, Holy Communion and Confession. Maybe this dialogue form can help you to understand how the Independent Evangelical-Lutheran Church (SELK) unearths the treasures of Scripture.

1. The unity of the Old and New Testaments in Holy Scripture and their witness to Christ

Question: *The Bible should be revealed as a treasure to Christians of different backgrounds in our country, and perhaps to other people as well. How can the SELK contribute to that?*

Answer: I invite you to visit the SELK Holy Trinity Church in Bielefeld. Maybe this little church can help you to unearth the Bible as a precious treasure. From the outside, there is nothing impressive about this church, but you can discover hidden treasures inside.



Trinity mosaic in the entrance portal

Question: *Yes, the church is unimpressive. It has neither a tower nor bells. Only a mosaic with the symbols of the Trinity, a hand, a lamb and a dove, indicate that this could be a place of worship. Is that already one of the treasures?*

Answer: Yes, the mosaic is one of them. But we want to focus on a selection of the stained glass windows inside. We will select the group of three named “The Praise of God.” This church built in the early 1950s was originally very simply furnished. In the course of time, it became increasingly embellished. Thus, in the early 1980s, 18 glass windows with biblical motifs were added. Those glass windows are a part of the hidden treasures of this church. In a similar way, we often discover the treasure of the biblical message, which did not suddenly fall from Heaven, in an outwardly unassuming form. Just as we have to enter a church, so we must also enter into the Bible and listen to, read or sing what it contains. In this way we can discover its riches.



Church interior

Question: *Who designed these glass windows, and who is responsible for their motifs? What do they basically show?*

Answer: These 18 windows were designed by Renate Strasser (1924–2012), an artist from Bielefeld. The idea for the subject matter came from the former pastor, Christoph Horwitz (*1933), who served this church from 1971 to 1983. He grew up in the family of a pastor with Jewish roots. His intention was to emphasize the unity of the Old and New Testaments, and the windows do indeed successfully show the connection of the two Testaments in central issues of faith. The liberation from Egypt, the acceptance of the Moabite Ruth into the covenant people of Israel, and the salvation of the city of Nineveh by Jonah's preaching, all point to God's saving action in Jesus Christ, which is now experienced in baptism and communion, preaching and confession.

Question: *You mention in particular the group of windows entitled "The Praise of God". What can these pictures tell us about your understanding of Scripture?*

Answer: The window in the centre of this group shows Jesus Christ riding into Jerusalem on a donkey on Palm Sunday (Mt 21:1–10), when the people acclaimed him and called to him for help, crying Hosanna ("Save us!"). Christ is wearing a red robe as a sign that he gave up his life on the cross. Christ is robed in red in all the pictures in this church. And the people or angels from the Old Testament, who point to Christ, are also dressed in red. The left-hand picture shows Moses' sister Miriam, singing a song of thanksgiving (Ex 15:20) after God has saved the people of Israel from its enemies. It is one of the oldest songs of the Bible. Just as God saved Israel from destruction in the Old Covenant, he now wants to redeem all mankind through Jesus Christ. Unlike other women from the Bible such as Ruth, Miriam is not wearing red, but her skin is coloured light pink. Instead, there is a hand stretched out of a red circle, referring to 1 Cor 10:1–4, which implies that the pre-existent Christ intervened in Israel's exodus more directly than otherwise

in the Old Testament. The window on the right shows David, one of the ancestors of Jesus (Mt 1:6). With his music he comforts the troubled King Saul (1 Sam 16:14–22). As long as he plays the lyre, the power of the evil spirit can no longer torment Saul. The Spirit of God can prevail. David is the prototype for Jesus Christ, whose ministry prepared the coming of the Comforter, the Holy Spirit, for all mankind. Many psalms are attributed to David. They also proved to be a source of comfort over the ages. This triptych shows that the Old and New Testaments are inseparable. Jesus Christ fulfilled the prophecies and yearnings of the Old Covenant. Nevertheless, the Church is aware that the origin of Scripture is rooted in the history of Israel, and Christian singing, prayer and praise is derived from the Psalms of Israel.



Window Group: The praise of God

Question: *Is this emphasising of the mutual relationship of the two Testaments, and that the Scriptures bear witness to Christ, a fundamental concern of the SELK?*

Answer: Yes, in Article 1 of its constitution the SELK states: “[The church] is bound to the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament as the infallible Word of God, in the light of which all doctrines and teachers of the Church are to be judged ... It testifies to Jesus Christ as the one Lord of the Church and proclaims him as Saviour of the world.”¹

Question: *Does this understanding of Scripture represent a special position of the SELK? Does the church take notice of and reflect upon ideas from Christian ecumenism?*

Answer: The principles of “sola scriptura” (Scripture as decisive doctrinal basis!) and “solus christus” (Christ as the only mediator of salvation!) are a fundamental concern of all churches that are committed to the Reformation. In recent years the SELK reacted positively regarding the issue of a “canonical approach” to the Bible, which also attracted attention in the worldwide ecumenical community. Clergy and

1 Basic Order of the SELK (as amended on 16.06.2007), 100.1, EL 17.

the Church Synod of SELK affirmed a “Biblical Hermeneutics” which recognizes this approach: “The Lutheran hermeneutics presented here takes the canonical approach to exegesis as a counter-measure to the disintegration of biblical statements in different theologies; it understands Christ as the centre of Scripture.”² “Therefore, irrespective of the controversial assessment of canonical ‘fringes’, the Church of the Lutheran Reformation shares with the catholic Christianity of all time the universally acknowledged canon of the Old and New Testaments.”³

Question: *Can you say in a few words how the SELK thinks that the Bible came into being?*

Answer: Like Holy Trinity Church itself, the Bible came into existence as a process. It did not come down from Heaven as a single work. Through the Holy Spirit, God took people into his service and did not hesitate to combine his word with human words. In, with and by this process the Bible evolved and proves itself to be the true Word of God that speaks to us infallibly in matters of eternal salvation and the conduct of our lives.

2. A key to the understanding of Scripture

Question: *You believe the Bible to be God's Word and the testimony to Jesus Christ. How does this view affect the life of the church and the believers? Is there a key that unlocks the door to a right understanding?*

Answer: We recall that in the Church singing, prayer and praise are all derived from the Psalms of Israel. In contrast to the others, the first two psalms do not have a title naming the author. Psalm 1 celebrates the greatness of the laws of God and the delight of following his commandments. Psalm 2 praises the work of God, which reaches its goal through his Anointed and his son. According to canonical exegesis this combination did not arise by chance, but is a key to understanding the Psalms. The Psalms can only be properly understood from the perspective of the law of God and his Anointed (Christ). Thus Erich Zenger maintains: “New Testament Christology is to a large extent Psalm Christology. Just over a third of all quotations from the First Testament in the NT come from the Psalter.”⁴ In Heb 1:5–13 alone, there are no less than six quotations from the Psalms (2:7; 97:7; 104:4; 45:7ff.; 102:26–28; 110:1) testifying to the divinity of Christ. Even in the combination of the first two psalms, the basis is laid for the Lutheran distinction between Law and Gospel in God's Word. This distinction is a fundamental concern of the Lutheran Reformation. In the law, God reveals his demands towards mankind. A threefold use of the law is recognizable. It acts as a “bar” to ensure law and order in human affairs and as a “mirror” leading to the knowledge of one's sinfulness. In his inter-

2 SELK (ed.), *Lutherische Orientierung 10* (2012). *Biblische Hermeneutik*, 7.

3 *Hermeneutik*, 6ff.

4 E. Zenger et al (Ed.), *Einleitung in das Alte Testament*, Stuttgart 1995, 7th. ed. 2008, 369.

pretation of the ban on murder and adultery (Mt 5:21–31), Jesus masterfully shows how the law acts as a mirror. Finally, the law serves as a “rule” in order to know and to live by God’s will. Ultimately, the law is intended to lead to the realization that no one can stand before the presence of God in their own strength. In this way, the Gospel may be willingly accepted as the Word of God. One learns that God accepts us unreservedly for Christ’s sake, if we trust in God’s offer of grace.

Question: *You referred several times to the fact that the SELK sees Scripture as “infallible”. What does that mean?*

Answer: “Infallible” does not mean that the Bible is an absolutely dependable recipe book for all life issues and areas of knowledge. We would be missing the point entirely, if we wanted to find out from the Bible whether rabbits are ruminants, or how old the universe is supposed to be. The question is rather how we gain eternal salvation and how we can live our lives responsibly before God. This is where we find infallible answers in the Scriptures!

Question: *Could you clarify that statement with examples?*

Answer: Let me try to do so with two examples. 1. Firstly, the message of “justification of sinners by grace alone” is not just Pauline or even Lutheran theology, but is evidenced all through the Bible. Psalm 32 states, for example, that the sinner is forgiven because of a simple confession. In his prayer, Daniel (9:18) puts his trust not in his own righteousness, but in God’s great mercies. In the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican, Jesus teaches (Lk 18:9–14), that a man is justified solely on the basis of his repentance and confession of sin. Finally, Paul (Rom 4:1–3) explains the “hope of justification by faith” with recourse to the Torah, which testifies: “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness” (Gen 15:6). 2. Secondly, marriage is not just any possible form of coexistence, but a divine institution. Thus there is mention “of its consummation (e.g. Prov 5:18ff.), legitimisation (e.g. Judg 14, Jn 2:1–12) and endangerment (e.g. Ex 20:14; 2 Sam 11; Mt 19:1–12; 1 Cor 7) both in the historical books, the Old Testament laws and wisdom literature as well as in the New Testament epistles.”⁵ Jesus states clearly and unequivocally that this God-given institution (Mt 19:6) cannot be separated by humans.

3. How the church and its members live with the Scriptures

Question: *So how do your church and its members live with the Scriptures now?*

Answer: I have already referred to the Small Catechism as an aid to understanding biblical themes. Otherwise, all approaches to the Scriptures are practised which are common in Protestant churches. So there are the classic Bible study or home Bible study groups, where pastors and church members exchange opinions concerning biblical texts. A lot of church members read the Bible daily, many of them with the help of the “Feste Burg” (Mighty Fortress) devotional calendar, published by the Freimund-Verlag in Neuendettelsau, with contributions from 200 pastors in the SELK and other Lutheran churches. The texts follow the lectionary for the church year issued by the Protestant St. Michael’s Brotherhood. The theme of the preceding Sunday is taken up and commented on with passages from a cross-section of various biblical books. This description of personal Bible reading already indicates how closely the Bible and the Sunday services in the SELK are related to one another. At the beginning of the church services, psalms are normally sung antiphonally. The psalm singing ends with the Gloria Patri, the praise of the triune God. As with the selection of Scripture readings, the patristic tradition is followed here. Mostly there is a reading from the Epistles (reading the New Testament letters) and the Gospel. The epistle may be replaced or augmented by verses from the Old Testament. The Sanctus, the threefold “Holy” of the Seraphim (Isaiah 6:3), and the Nunc Dimittis, the Canticle of Simeon (Lk 2:29–32), are additional biblical chants which are elements of the worship services.

The Bible in the Syriac Orthodox Church over the centuries

Historical and current overview

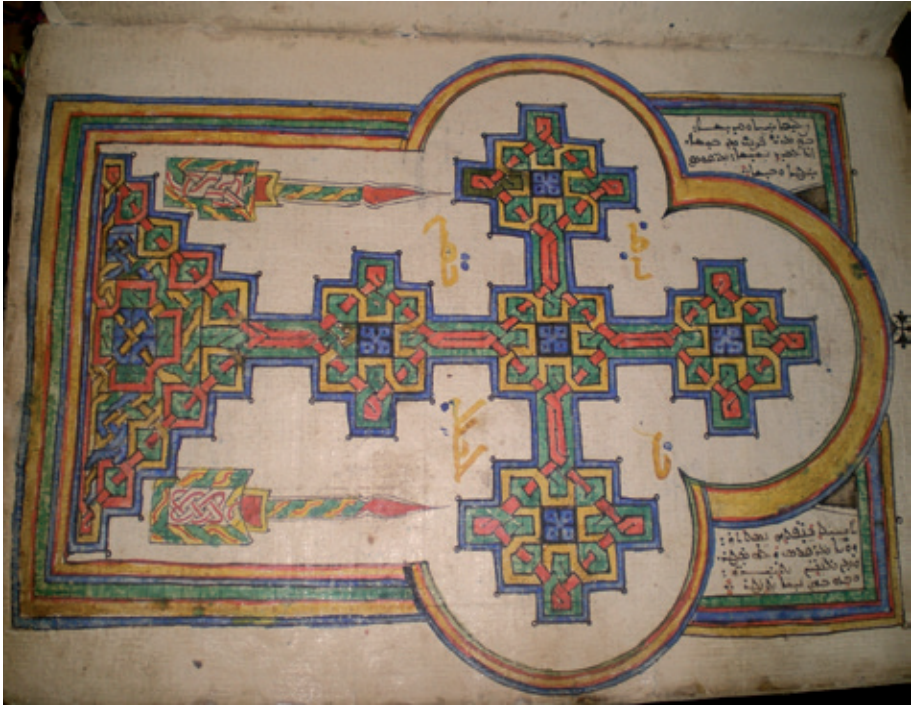
Aram Bar Schabo

Before printed Syrian Bibles became available, Syriac Orthodox Christians usually came into contact with the Scriptures by way of hearing rather than by reading. The various liturgical services, which were richly filled with readings and lessons from the Scriptures, served this purpose. The choice of readings differed greatly from place to place. For example, there was a difference between the readings in monasteries and outside. Lectionary texts were not standardised until the printed texts came up in modern times. Although the readings differed in the early Middle Ages, there was a common core, in particular those biblical texts that were read at certain church festivals.

The most common version of the Old Testament in the Syriac churches was always the oldest translation, namely the Peshitta. This was translated directly from the original Hebrew and most probably originated in the 2nd century A.D. The Peshitta is still the most important of all Syriac Aramaic versions. Three further translations developed later, based on the Greek text, the Septuagint, one of them by Philoxenos, Bishop of Mabbug († 523).

The earliest translation of the New Testament into Syriac seems to have been the version known as the Diatessaron, which was practically a harmony of the four Gospels. Ephrem the Syrian later wrote a commentary on this version, which had been produced by Tatian shortly after the middle of the 2nd century. But it was not used very frequently, and disappeared in the course of time. The earliest surviving Syriac text of the Gospel, known as the Old Syriac, was possibly translated at the beginning of the 3rd century and declared to be the official Peshitta translation, since this version was widely used and distributed.

Just as many generations of German writers have grown up with the language of Martin Luther's Bible translation, so have Syrian writers of all eras, as well as their readers, grown up with the Peshitta Bible and been permanently influenced by its language and style. In particular, Syriac poetry is often thoroughly steeped in references to the Syriac Bible, and this does not only apply to liturgical poetry. Whoever wishes to savour completely the work of a famous poet such as Ephrem the Syrian must be as familiar with the Syriac Bible as Ephrem assumed his readers and lis-



Syriac Orthodox Evangelary

teners would be. The Syriac Bible plays a fundamental role in the development of the language and terminology of liturgical texts and monastic writings. Quite a few turns of phrase which are in general use originate in the Syriac Bible. For example, it is only there that one can find expressions such as: "New world, new age" (Mt 19:28) or "New Life" (Rom 6:4; for the Greek "newness of life").

The Syriac translations are of particular interest for Bible study for three reasons. First, Syriac Aramaic is the only Semitic language in which an early translation of the Gospels exists. All the Gospels were indeed originally written in Greek, but they contain material that must first of all have been circulated orally in Palestinian-Aramaic. The process of translation of the Greek Gospels into Syriac – that is to say, into an Aramaic dialect – can sometimes make it apparent which Aramaic term was originally used. Although the Syriac Gospels have all been translated exclusively from Greek, by chance they may well restore a play on words which was most probably present in the underlying Palestinian-Aramaic saying.

The sentence “The hairs of your head are all counted” (Mt 10:30) does not have any particular effect in Greek, but in the Syriac translation an alliteration comes to light – mene (“hair”) corresponds to manyon (“are counted”).

Secondly, an exceptionally large number of earlier, well-preserved manuscripts have survived, containing different parts of the Syriac Bible. Syriac has the honour of possessing the oldest dated Bible manuscript in any language, written in the year 459/460 A.D.

Thirdly, the various Syriac translations are often of interest with respect to the early history of the biblical text. Concerning the Old Testament, the Syriac translation is one of the earliest witnesses to the standardised Hebrew text. There are even peculiarities in the Syriac Old Testament which reveal knowledge of Jewish exegetical traditions. A striking example concerns the traditional location of the mountain on which Noah’s Ark was stranded at the end of the Flood (Gen 8:4). In the Hebrew and Greek texts, this is said to be Ararat (in eastern Turkey), whereas the Peshitta and the Judeo-Aramaic translations (Targumim) both place this event in Qardu, further south in north-western Iraq.

In recent years, and especially in the Diaspora, the readings from the Old Testament are increasingly being dropped in the Syriac Orthodox liturgy. With the exception of the Psalms, which have always been an integral part of all liturgical services, there are now hardly any readings from the Old Testament books of the prophets or from wisdom literature. An exception is the funeral liturgy, in which there is still a reading from the book of Genesis. The reasons for this should be examined more closely. But one reason could be that in the course of time the liturgy has come to include more and more hymns, and these already reflect Old Testament contents.

For Syriac Orthodox believers the liturgical books provide excellent access to the Bible: these include for example the Book of Hours for the weekdays (šḥimo), the Lectionary (liturgical readings of Holy Scripture), Anaphora (the Divine Liturgy), Fanqitho (Book of Hours for the Sundays and holidays of the liturgical year, the 40-day Fast, and Holy Week), Beth Gazo (treasury of melodies), book of Qinotho (church hymns for Sundays and holidays) and several other books. The theological texts and hymns, especially those of the šḥimo, are simply written, but composed with unusually spiritual melodies.

The beauty of the liturgical poetry, which goes back to the earliest Christian centuries, presents a repertoire of tunes. Here one must once again emphasise that all the texts of these books are strongly permeated with biblical content and encourage intensive study of the Bible.

Another doorway to the Bible is the sermon. It should be mentioned that in the Syriac Orthodox Church the sermon has always been a central element in the liturgy. The sermon takes the believers on a journey through the Bible and gives them new impulses for their Christian life, so that it gains more and more importance in the modern world. Further, preaching opens up the Gospel to the future, revealing new perspectives to comfort people in today's world.

“Discover Anew the Bible’s Treasures”

Apostle Ministry of Jesus Christ

Michael Schulz

The following text is intended to show how our religious community, the Apostelamt Jesu Christi (Apostle Ministry of Jesus Christ – AJC), reads and understands the Bible. There is certainly a great deal of similarity to other member churches of the ACK, but maybe there are still some new inspiring thoughts that may help the reader to rediscover the Bible as a treasure.

The Bible, the Book of Books, or simply one book among many?

First of all, it is important to know what one sees in the Bible. For us, the Bible contains God’s word to us humans. Therefore we name it the Holy Bible or book of books. The Bible is unreservedly the basis of our faith; the proclamation of its message plays a prominent role every Sunday in the church services, and all members are encouraged to read the Bible. We would like to preserve the Bible as a treasure for ourselves and all mankind. Therefore, it is for us a cause for concern to see the many attempts to devalue the Bible, to throw doubt on its authenticity, to water down or falsify its message, to qualify its significance and finally to present it as one book among many others.

How do we grasp the meaning of the Bible? In our understanding, the text of the Bible was written by humans filled with the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God. As a consequence, the reader can only understand the full statement of the texts and the deep meaning of its words if he or she is filled with the same spirit as the writer. For us, the key to a proper comprehension of the Bible is the Holy Spirit, as Paul states concisely in his letter to the Corinthians: “For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.” (2 Cor 3:6).

Does that make Bible reading useless for people who know little or nothing about the Christian faith? That is by no means the case, for scriptural understanding grows step by step. The right intention is decisive, namely the good will without which comprehension is impossible. In our understanding, the good intention to understand the Bible will be blessed by God, for he “desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim 2:4). How is this will of God revealed? Mostly by people, in our opinion. A key scene from the Bible is the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch, to be found in the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 8. Philip asked the eunuch, “Do you understand what you are reading?” He replied, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” Philip first explained the gospel and then baptized him.

Can the Bible give advice to people today?

For us, it seems to be an important duty for all Christians to make the word of the Bible comprehensible and relevant for interested people in this present age, too. It is a question of arousing people's curiosity for a message that not only changed the course of history, but also provides answers to the important questions in their life, including the awareness that the Bible is not a book filled with pious fairy tales. It is possible to rediscover your own life in it. It would be desirable to enthuse many of our contemporaries in this way, so that they discover the Bible anew as their own treasure. In the AJC, it is mainly the Sunday services which serve this purpose, in which the preaching has the highest priority. The sermon should not be a more or less successful lecture about a certain passage in the Bible, but should rather make the Word of God come to life here and now. We are confident that such a sermon is able to inspire faith and to impart hope and joy.

So, who can proclaim the gospel of God in this way? According to our understanding, it is not necessary to have studied theology in order to be a preacher. We trust that the Holy Spirit can accomplish in us something of which we would not have been capable in our own power. That does not mean that the preachers should neglect their regular Bible reading. They are additionally provided with short written preaching aids, which are prepared afresh for each Sunday by an Apostle for the whole of our fellowship. Jesus himself often referred to his word as the "bread of life", and that is why we simply call these short preaching aids "Bread notes". More important still is the so-called "Breaking of bread", during which an oral explanation of the sermon texts is given by the Apostle responsible. In this case, the listeners have the opportunity to ask questions and also to share their own thoughts and experiences in the faith. The sermon itself is then held in each local congregation as a speech without notes, inspired by the Holy Spirit.

The texts for the sermons originate from all parts of the Bible, both Old and New Testament, and occasionally from the Apocrypha. However, the emphasis is on the New Testament. The selection of the texts is based on the pericopes, but may also diverge from the liturgical year if the need is felt as a reaction to the current situation. Therefore, the conference of the Apostles, an assembly of all active Apostles, prepares a new sermon text plan each year.

Does the Bible really need to be modernized?

From time to time, people ask whether the Bible still fits into the modern age, because its language is old-fashioned and difficult to understand. Needless to say, a linguistic adjustment is important in order to keep texts understandable over a long period of time. But we believe that great care is necessary, and that one must beware of going with the zeitgeist and changing not only the language, but also the message. In our community, we use the Luther Bible of 1912 in our church services. Of course, its language sometimes seems to be quite incomprehensible to the younger church members at first. That is no wonder, given that terms such as humility, grace, blessing, gentleness, kindness, patience, obedience or even awe, chastity, and meekness are rarely used nowadays, or possibly have a different meaning, mostly with a negative connotation. But it is not harmless to reformulate biblical texts radically, so that they are more easily understood in modern linguistic terms. The original message can suffer, be shortened, impoverished, or at worst distorted. We think it is better to tackle such barely comprehensible passages in the sermon or in conversations. In that way, the Bible can be kept as a treasure and still discovered anew over and over again.

Parishioners and ministers do indeed use various other Bible versions besides the Luther Bible, including PC-based Bibles and secondary literature. The Good News Bible is particularly popular, and also the New Testament and the Psalms of the "Albrecht Bible" translation, which is very true to the original texts and includes profound comments. The author Ludwig Albrecht was a minister of the Catholic Apostolic Church, which is very close to us as a "spiritual forefather." Bible study groups, such as are to be found in other churches, are quite rare in our congregations, nonetheless one may say that many people there work intensively with the Bible. Apart from the ministers who prepare their sermons each week, it is mostly the choirmasters who look into the Bible texts for the coming Sunday, in order to choose hymns that best suit the sermon. On Mondays, the ministers and officials of the congregations usually meet to arrange the activities for the week and to talk about their faith experiences. In these cases, the Bible text of the previous Sunday sermon often plays a central role. Finally, the Bible text of the sermon can also be passed on during the week in pastoral visits, choir practices, and congregational gatherings or at birthday celebrations.

Miracles in the Bible – timidly denied or childishly believed?

When people read in the Bible, they automatically come across stories of incomprehensible occurrences which contradict everyday experience. Consequently, such occurrences are referred to as miracles. The best known examples are Christ's virgin birth, his resurrection and ascension, but we also read of his walking on water, the feeding of the five thousand, as well as the healing of sick people and even the raising of Lazarus from the dead. What is our attitude to all that? Are these miracles impossible, because they defy the laws of physics, or do these passages simply speak of a reality that goes beyond everything science can prove? Here too, the key to understanding the Bible is to be found in the "Holy Spirit," expressed in a strong belief in the truth of the Bible's testimony and naturally appearing ridiculous and childish to many of our contemporaries. There are indeed many good causes and reasonable arguments for this belief, which at the same time involves taking a risk; everyone has to decide for himself what he is prepared to believe and to rely upon. The early Christians, and among them the Apostles, had this faith. For us, this is an inducement to believe in the same way.

The AJC has reservations towards historical-critical Bible exegesis. Of course, it is important to study the Bible accurately and critically, respecting historical aspects. In our opinion however, this ought to happen from a viewpoint of faith and with Christian confidence. We are convinced that the Bible itself is a reliable source. It is naturally possible to have doubts about what is in the Bible, but these are not absolutely necessary, even from the scientific point of view. For example, the idea that only those things exist which are physically demonstrable and conform to the principles of analogy and causality belongs to a conception of the world which is now outdated. At the latest since the emergence of quantum physics at the beginning of the last century, it is well known that analogy and causality alone cannot explain the whole reality of physical natural phenomena. Physicists had to broaden their horizons of understanding. Why should we not broaden the horizon of our religious understanding to include a reality evinced by the Bible and which goes beyond the scope of science? Why should we not accept what the Bible offers, trusting that God has revealed himself to the whole world in Jesus Christ? It should be a collective Christian concern to encourage our fellow human beings to embark on the venture of faith and to rediscover the Bible as a treasure.

Does there have to be a conflict between science and faith?

The biblical story of creation is often used to construct a conflict that according to our understanding does not even exist. In the Bible, God reveals himself to mankind as the almighty creator of heaven and earth. The creation story is not supposed and does not claim to be a book on physics or biology, but describes God's omnipotence and power of creation, who has made and sustains all things, both natural and spiritual. This includes not only those things that we as humans can see and understand, but also things that are today still hidden from us or may well remain hidden forever during our life on earth. Furthermore we believe, as the Bible testifies, that God created mankind in his own image and therefore assigned him a special position in his creation. This also includes the fact that God equipped humans with particular cognitive capabilities, giving them the task of themselves being creative to a limited extent. We therefore do not see a contradiction between faith in God as a creator and the findings of modern sciences. These sciences can at best shed some light on the order underlying his creation.



Allegory of piety,
Hofgarten in Düsseldorf

It is therefore foolish to play off faith and reason against one another, because both are God's sacred gifts to mankind. With the help of reason, we can at least bring a little bit of light into the previous obscurity of nature, even if a new insight often raises more new questions than answers. At least our knowledge helps us to exploit nature to our own advantage. But that is not always a blessing for mankind, as has been clearly demonstrated in the first environmental catastrophes. Many key issues, such as the origin of all beings and the goal of human life, cannot be satisfactorily answered by reason alone, which leaves us standing in the dark without hope. In this case, faith can shed a far greater light, illuminating a person's entire life as well as the future of all mankind. It can be exciting to find

those riches which science has brought us, but in our opinion it is much more exciting to rediscover the Bible as a treasure again and again.

Should we follow modern trends, or trust in the timeless values of the Bible?

Apart from the purely linguistic problems connected with understanding the Bible, there are occasionally problems with the values it wishes to impart to us. There are values such as the respect for the integrity of creation, which corresponds to the highly topical theme of environmental awareness and protection. On the other hand, there are statements in the Bible which run contrary to popular trends and majority opinion. One example is the marriage between man and woman with love and responsibility for their common children and lifelong faithfulness, which the Bible teaches as the ideal of human coexistence that is to be strived for.

Can this image of marriage and family still be a role model these days? In a world of singles, single parents, patchwork families and same-sex partnerships, a world, in which marriage sometimes appears to be an obsolescent ideal? According to our understanding, it is right to rely on the timeless values of the Bible, regardless of whether we are applauded by the majority, lie outside current trends or are even exposed to ridicule or hostility. Even if we adhere to such an ideal in the case of the family, it does not mean that we fail to encounter other forms of social coexistence with dignity and respect. One further value which the Bible teaches is to accept the imperfect and to offer help wherever possible.

Especially in an age in which everything is subordinated to the fulfilment of the individual's own ego, we should uphold such values as fidelity, honesty, responsibility, justice, compassion, Christian charity, the willingness to forgive and the willingness to serve. The Bible contains the true treasures to be newly discovered.

The Bible as the basis of society?

A good Christian is also a good citizen. However, if the government opposes the order desired by God, we need to obey God rather than men. These simple statements based on the Bible have carried the AJC through more than 100 years of its history as a church. Even during the difficult years of the Nazi dictatorship, in which the church was forbidden, and 40 years of socialism, which imposed many restrictions and discrimination on the members. This has taught us that you sometimes have to fight for your faith. Today we are delighted, that we can live in a country where all citizens are given equal rights and freedoms, including the freedom of religion, on the basis of the UN Declaration of Human Rights. All citizens, whether Christians, Jews, Muslims, people of other confessions or even atheists and agnostics, can live together equally and peacefully on that basis.

At the same time, it is often overlooked that the UN Declaration of Human Rights and the German Basic Law were founded on the Jewish-Christian tradition and based on biblical anthropology. According to this conception, God endowed man with an inviolable dignity. The rights and freedom to which all mankind is entitled are based on this dignity. They must not be acquired on the grounds of a particular confession, and nothing and no one can take them away. This conception is not unchallenged, and it is not always shared in the same way by other cultures and religions. Advocating the Bible and Christianity also means advocating the foundations of freedom and human rights. For this reason, we observe with concern attempts to relativize the significance of the Bible. We should respect other religions and their scriptures, but at the same time we are obliged to defend the Bible against assaults and attempts at disparagement.

Especially in times of radical change, such as we are now experiencing with globalization and the inherent multicultural and multi-religious structures within society, orientation is urgently required. Here, the Bible can definitely help us with its timeless values. It is a great treasure, we just need to rediscover it.

Untying knots

The Bible in the Apostolic Community

Matthias Knauth

It is a great joy for me to write about discovering the Bible as a treasure. It gives me the opportunity to come up as a discoverer. Discovery means finding something that was lost or unknown and now amazes us. I am always intrigued to find out what is to be learned from God's Word.

Let me start with two personal memories.

When the German translation of the "Good News Bible" was in preparation, parts of the text were published by the Protestant Bible Society of Berlin and Altenburg with the title "I discover the Bible." In the foreword of this edition it said in one passage: "The Bible is worth being explored." We have found this to be true over and over again, and for decades we have been on a journey of discovery through the Bible. In all this time, we have always been able to discover something new.

A second memory also takes me back many years to the time when our children were in elementary school. In our church we held a children's day on the theme "The Bible and you." Taking up an idea from a story, we brought along a heavy old Bible, tied up with thick knotted cords. We had given names to each of the knots (for example, "No time", "No interest", "Much too old"), and then we began to untie one knot after the other and to think what the unravelled knots might mean to us all. Metaphorically speaking, we in the Apostolic Community are still in the process of untying the knots one by one. So it remains exciting.

Time is one of those knots. How much time do we take to study the Bible? Apart from the answers of individual believers, there remains the question of how intensively the Bible is used in the church. During our present process of reformation we have done research in Scripture, leading us to an ecumenical reorientation.

The central focus of worship services in the Apostolic Community is on preaching. In the present form, the sermon is the most important element in the service. The preachers can make use of sermon aids, which are worked out for every Sunday. The Scripture passage underlying the sermon is read out, and in some congregations it is usual to hear readings from the Psalms.

A few decades ago, it was mainly church leaders (apostles, bishops, elders of the community) who wrote these sermon aids and decided on the Bible text for the sermon, and the preachers were strictly bound to these instructions. In the mean-

time, this practice has changed somewhat. The sermon aids are worked out by many church workers who regularly serve as preachers. The sermon texts follow the order of the liturgical calendar of the Evangelical Church in Germany. On special occasions, the local congregations are also allowed to make exceptions, of course. We have been using this liturgical calendar since the Church Year 2006/2007 and find it greatly enriching. Although we have always been familiar with texts from the Old and New Testaments, the liturgical calendar helps us to deal with passages which a preacher would probably prefer not to choose. In this way we learn more about the complexity of the biblical message. In preparing the sermon, each preacher is obliged to consult other biblical literature and not just the aids from our church. Since there is a huge range of Bible commentaries, we concentrate on literature which strengthens trust in God's Word, e.g. the Wuppertal Study Bible or Edition C.

One great challenge, for example, was a preaching aid on Job 14:1–6. Here Job speaks in his despair. For the first time in my life, I read the book of Job right through, from beginning to end. That made a number of things clear, among others this:

"The story of Job shows us that even the greatest godliness can be shaken. Someone undergoing great suffering can be plunged into the deepest doubt. Since every suffering is absolutely unique, there are no prescriptions or ready-made plans for dealing with it. Real help comes from companions who help to bear the suffering without knowing the answers, and from those who, by their presence, alleviate the solitude of the sufferer. We cannot explain the inexplicable. But we can strengthen one another in the faith in our Lord. It is he who does the decisive thing. He overturned Job's fate. He also intervenes in our lives. The purpose of a church is not to offer pleasant hours of fellowship, but first and foremost mutual encouragement in the faith. God turns our need into salvation through Jesus Christ. – Hallelujah!"

When it comes to the use of the Bible, daily readings are a constant factor. Even if they are not practised by all church members, they are becoming increasingly common. In the meantime, for example, the Moravian "Watchwords" are widespread in the congregations. One more "knot" is the difficulty of understanding the Bible. We are truly grateful to notice how this "knot" is being untied by a large number of translations and expert commentaries. For teaching, pastoral care, mission, as well as for the many facets of church life, we simply do need help. In this way, we are learning more and more to appreciate the inspiration Christians can give each other by sharing their manifold gifts.

It was a very great step to overcome the rejection of biblical research which often existed in the Apostolic movement until the middle of the 20th century. An even greater challenge was the reorientation. We want to be guided by the Holy Spirit, who leads us into all truth. But now, expressly in the history of our own church, we have at times experienced that revelations were proclaimed which did not come to pass. Therefore, the yardstick of proof should be the Bible alone, the Holy Scripture, entirely in accordance with the Reformation principle. But in order to use this yardstick we need better and growing understanding. We remain learners. We want to leave untouched whatever we cannot understand, and not to cast doubt upon it.

In our small book "Sacraments in the Apostolic Community", issued in 2005, we have formulated one of the principles for our doctrine of faith as follows: "The foundation of all Christian doctrine is the Bible. We profess the Bible as the Word of God. Everything that is taught and lived in Christian communities must be measured by the overall testimony of the Bible. Even if we are conscious of our human limitations, it is our goal to re-examine our doctrine of faith constantly, so that it is in harmony with the overall testimony of the Bible and does not contradict this testimony. We are not allowed to add anything to this testimony. All revelations, all prophecy, all knowledge must be measured by the testimony of Holy Scripture, and bound to its statements in their totality."

Yet another of the many "knots" is trust. Do we trust the word of the Bible, or do we doubt it? This is the most challenging of the "knots". We are clearly committed to trusting the word of the Bible. We want to face up to all attacks on the trustworthiness of the Bible and become involved with the Bible's message. We do this as a sign of loyalty to our Lord Jesus Christ.

For example, we are pleased with the movement "Zeit zum Aufstehen" (Time to Stand up)¹, because it serves to strengthen trust in the Bible as God's Word. We have ourselves experienced how confidence in the Bible can be shaken through human error, and thus we have once again stressed the authority of the Bible as the basis of all doctrine in the context of the study of apostolic history. For example, in a declaration dated February 1, 2008, we stated among other things:

"We are certain that revelations made by the Lord come from his Holy Spirit, who has been the permanent companion of the Church of Christ on Earth since Pentecost. Those who receive such revelations are in all cases obliged to examine them in the light of the entire witness of Holy Scripture, in order to be certain that they are truly divine revelations. Should they be divine revelations, they will always be in

1 www.zeit-zum-aufstehen.de

agreement with the overall testimony of Holy Scripture and cannot contradict this testimony. We are certain that God is bound to his Word for all eternity. His word is reliable and true. Wherever he calls people into his service, he binds himself to them as long as they remain in his word. Should they abandon his word, he is not bound to the words of his disciples. He does not bind himself to their errors and heresies."

We look forward to discovering new things in the Bible over and over again. This journey of discovery succeeds mainly because we have the opportunity to profit from the fullness of the work of faithful disciples of Jesus. Their gifts, their research, their professional knowledge, their loyalty are a great blessing to us. "And what you have heard from me through many witnesses entrust to faithful people who will be able to teach others as well." (2 Timothy 2:2). We can only be deeply grateful to all the many "Timothys."

“The Bible is the indispensable foundation for faith, teaching and life.”

Aspects of how the Bible is used in German Free Evangelical Churches

Michael Schröder

The first Free Evangelical Church (Freie evangelische Gemeinde, FeG) in Germany was founded in the year 1854. At that time, the work of Hermann Heinrich Grafe (1818–1869) and particularly Heinrich Neviandt (1827–1901) was very influential. After his theological studies, Neviandt worked as a reformed assistant preacher, after which he was appointed as preacher and teacher at the church in Elberfeld-Barmen in 1855. Later, he was elected as the president of the German Federation of Free Evangelical Churches, and so he was involved in all important decisions in the early stages of the FeG Federation.

As a prefix to the constitution of the church in Elberfeld-Barmen there is a creed which, in its wording and purpose, is modelled on other reformed creeds. In the first paragraph it states that “the entire Holy Scripture, in all its parts, is inspired by God and is the only infallible guide for faith and life.” Thus it was emphasised that Scripture was to be the only decisive benchmark on which the church and its individual members should orientate their faith and life. When in 1874 over 20 churches (some of which were very small or simply groups of Christians) came together to establish the Federation of Free Evangelical Churches, the leaders laid down that the Bible was to be the only standard and guide.

If one examines the past constitutions of the Federation, one will often come across this statement or find it in a similar wording. The Bible is to be “the guide” or “the foundation.” It is meant to stress that Scripture is the authoritative point of reference for the faith and life of the church and its individuals. The allusion of the statement to the Reformation tradition is intended: Apart from “solus Christus” (Christ alone), “sola gratia” (only by grace), and “sola fide” (only through faith), which were also intentionally incorporated by the free evangelical churches, the “sola scriptura” (Scripture alone) is meant to emphasise that only Scripture infallibly testifies to God, who reveals himself through Christ, and is thus of utmost importance for the Christian faith. All important decisions, whether in the faith and life of the church or of the individual, should be examined in regard to the question: What does Scripture say? Since its establishment, the Federation recommends all joining or newly established churches to orientate the wording of their constitutions to the model constitution

for single churches. In 2011, for example, it was formulated as follows: "The Bible, the revealed Word of God, is the indispensable foundation for faith, teaching and life. The church uses the descriptions of the churches in the New Testament as models for its structure and organization."

Despite the clear and direct focus on Scripture as the only authoritative benchmark, it is noticeable that there is no elaboration as to what this precept entails. Terms like "Holy Scripture", "Bible" or "God's Word" are simply used interchangeably without making any distinction. The Biblical canon is referred to without giving any definition or stating its boundaries. Most of the time, it is simply assumed that the 39 books of the Old Testament and 27 books in the New Testament are meant. The Apocrypha are rarely taken into account in Free Evangelical Churches. In order to conform with other reformed creeds, it is often written that the Word of God is inspired. 2 Timothy 3:16 is cited to affirm that Scripture is "God-breathed", i. e., inspired. However, it is not further elaborated as to how this inspiration is to be understood – for example whether it was a verbal or personal inspiration. There are some who prefer to keep this issue unresolved, in order to bear the tension of the question as to what extent Scripture was inspired by God.

In the 1970s, during which a process of clarification of theological issues regarding the interpretation of Scripture was pursued, a phrasing emerged which is widely used within the Federation of Free Evangelical Churches. Scripture is entirely the Word of God and at the same time "word of man", in short: it is the Word of God in the form of man's language. Thus it is also expressed that the Bible has a completely human aspect to it. Time and again, God has spoken to and through individuals who received and recorded his Word according to the means available to them and their circumstances. Hence, the texts of Scripture of the Old and New Testament were formed and passed on over a time span of many centuries. This historical aspect of God's Word entails the need of methodical steps as tools for working with and studying Biblical texts. In many churches it is consensus to use the historical-critical method. On the other hand, over a long period of time, there have been considerable misgivings in FeG churches regarding this method. Many have denied its right as an adequate exegesis method. The notion is that those who work with these methods directly dismiss God's revelation and concrete intervention throughout history. The opinion of some exegetes that Jesus did not actually perform miracles and the disciples had only interpreted his resurrection, was ascribed to the historical critical method. Only in the past years has it become clear that every methodical work has to give an account for its own premisses. Recent publications, for example by Benedict XVI or the Protestant theologian Ulrich Wilkens, have demonstrated that the interpretation of Scripture with the premise that God does not exist, does not do justice to the Bible's own claims. The historical-critical method

does not eliminate God's intervention per se. This method with its individual work steps is at the same time a good and important tool for doing justice to the texts themselves and preventing them from being interpreted in the wrong way. Used correctly, it can help work out what Scripture intends to convey. This differentiated approach has helped to overcome prejudices and has opened perspectives for adopting further impulses, for example from literature.

With this high regard for the Bible, it is not surprising that the Bible plays a special and central role for the church and the individuals' personal lives. For many members of Evangelical Free Churches, it is the custom and practice to read the Daily Watchwords and doctrinal texts of the Moravian Church and to thus begin the day with God's Word. The relation to the Bible is characterized by a close proximity. It is assumed that God or God's Spirit speaks directly to the listeners through the Bible verses and gives encouragement for one's faith, as well as guidance in each individual's life situation. The Bible-centricity strengthens one's personal piety and spirituality. Other aspects such as the reading of edifying literature or discovering the prayer treasure of spiritual authorities of other denominations take a back seat to the Bible itself.

The Bible is highly cherished during the church service and especially in the sermon. This is why, for many decades now, a lot of value has been placed on the study of the Greek and Hebrew languages during the training of pastors in the Federation's own theological college. The students are expected to be knowledgeable in these subjects. In their preparation for the exegesis, they should be able to translate the original text and develop a feeling for the subtleties of the languages.

The proclamation of God's Word has a central place in the service of a Free Evangelical Church. Often the sermons are 30 minutes long, thus recalling an old, reformed tradition. We know the first preacher, Heinrich Neviandt, usually preached three quarters of an hour. He concentrated on the New Testament in the choice of his sermon texts, and there he especially appreciated the epistles. Single books were preached progressively. In many cases only two or three verses were the basis for the sermon. According to a survey done at the end of the 1990s, most pastors felt free to choose their own text for their sermon, only a few oriented themselves to the order of pericopes of the Evangelical Church of Germany (EKD). This is used more in the traditional churches in the big cities than in newly founded churches. Also the official, traditional church year, aside from Christmas and Easter, has hardly any relevance for Free Evangelical Churches. Beside the classical exegesis preaching, there is a tendency for more and more preaching of themes, with topics often orientated to the church's own needs.

In early years, Luther's translation of the Bible (or in some churches the Elberfelder, a very literal translation) was almost universally used in services, but today there is a confusing diversity. Often different translations are used for the reading of a text and for the sermon itself, above all newer communicative translations. The Bible translation is normally chosen by the service leader or by the person who preaches.

Parallel to the service in most FeG churches, is a special service for children, for which members or friends of the churches are responsible. While in some churches the children's service follow the plan of the EKD, other churches focus on themes. In recent years, more and more impulses are coming from America, especially from the Willow Creek church with its "Promiseland" conception.

Beside the Sunday services, there are many activities during the week to which church members and friends are invited. Apart from activities for special age groups (teens, youth or seniors) and those which are important for the conducting of the worship services (for example choir), the "Bible hour" needs to be mentioned. In the 1980s nearly all churches had such a programme. After a short introduction and a few songs, there was usually a long Bible study, normally led by the pastor of the church.

During a long process in the Federation of Free Evangelical Churches, a "Church Bible Hour" (Gemeindebibelschule), a kind of "Sunday School for adults", was introduced. The long lecture was replaced with a short introduction, which was then followed by a group discussion. The group tried to discover together what the Bible was saying and to think about how to apply the Bible's text to daily life. The Federation of Free Evangelical Churches developed and published a lot of material as a help for the preparation and implementation for the group discussions. This was published quarterly and covered a larger section of the Bible. These groups have evolved to Home Bible studies in the past few years. The private atmosphere encourages the desire to read Biblical texts together and to exchange views on the personal relevancy of these texts for daily life. The leadership of these evenings is mostly in the hands of the participants themselves with a revolving leadership of the individual evenings.

In the last few years, the Federation has especially supported initiatives that aim to focus on the Bible more and to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ. For example the "Year of the Bible" had a big echo in the Free Evangelical Churches, and the Federation had the slogan "New start with the Bible" in the year 2011. There was not only the clear missionary focus, to talk with people about the Bible; one important consideration was the significant decrease in knowledge of the Bible in the churches in the last years. The reasons for this change have not been clearly identified so far.



The Federation of Free Evangelical Churches, which has so clearly had the principle of Scripture in its centre, needs to confront this problem, so that the preamble to the constitution continues to be true: "The indispensable foundation for faith, teaching and life in church and federation is the Bible as God's Word."

Discovering the Bible Anew as a Treasure

Developments within the German Evangelical Assembly of the Church of God (FBGG)

Rainer Klinner and Marc Pietrzik

Truth in the heart

The inward attitude to reading the Bible has been shaped by the history of the origins of the FBGG (= Freikirchlicher Bund der Gemeinde Gottes/Free Evangelical Assembly of the Church of God). When the first “US-pioneers” of the “Church of God Reformation Movement” (FBGG’s initial name) disembarked in Hamburg towards the end of the 19th century, they first contacted Christians who had subscribed to the German version of the American “Gospel Trumpet” (“Evangeliumspossaune”), sent from the USA. This monthly magazine was read here and there in the western part of Germany, but much more in parts of East Prussia and in some eastern countries where Germans had settled, such as Poland, the Ukraine and others. Small house churches grew up. They were supported by “travelling preachers”, visiting cities and even remote villages by train and horse-drawn carriage. In between visits, these believers read the Bible on their own and celebrated church



Two Bible school students

services in houses and barns. “Universal priesthood” was the basis of their action. Their keen awareness of the necessity for guidance in exegesis brought them to their knees in prayer. Whether in daily family devotions, weekly Bible study groups or Sunday church services, their central plea was “O Lord, help us to understand your word. Send us your Holy Spirit to lead us in all wisdom.

“Many hymns were written during this period, expressing joy at reading the Bible and the expectation of a sermon giving strength and orientation. They also expressed trust in insights given and generated by the Bible and obedience to them. Some titles were: “Oh, I Love the Holy Bible”, “Oh, How I Love to Hear You, Wonderful Word of Life”, “O Bible Esteemed, Burning Word from Above”, “Through Following Your Word Our Love, O Lord, We Show.”

It goes without saying that – right from the beginning – you would find Bibles on living room tables, and their worn appearance was proof of daily use by their owners. Texts were underlined, notes written in the margins, and dates for special encounters with God were noted. Some people jotted down on the last page the dates when they had once again read the Bible right through. Thus I can read in my father’s Bible, for example: “Read through for the 30th time on Aug 20, 07.”

Truth in life

From the historical perspective, the FBGG originated in the Holiness Movement. In those days, rigid orthodoxy with little inclination for real, living Christianity was widespread, and this observation led to the aim of bringing new life into the act of following Jesus. This obviously had consequences with regard to biblical interpretation and practical use of the Bible in the FBGG. The focus of interest was not so much on emphasising single doctrinal truths to be found in the Bible, but rather on their application in daily life. Often, James 1:22 was quoted: “Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers” The FBGG did not distinguish itself with a pronounced exegetical, hermeneutical, or even apologetic approach to the Bible. The emphasis was rather on the relation between the Bible and daily life.

Even though the FBGG has changed fundamentally in certain practical and theological issues during the last decades, these historical experiences dating back to its early stages have influenced its use of the Bible until today. Certainly, theological subjects and debates are reflected today. Nonetheless, it does not take long before someone asks about the practical use of the Bible with the remark: “What now?” This reveals that the desire for relevance in the conduct of life is in the foreground, much more than profound professional or even academic quality of a discussion. This overall approach is more functional and sometimes almost pragmatic. The emphasis is on practical implementation of religious truths in daily life. Likewise,

sermons during services generally focus less on explication of theological correlations, but rather on their illustration and application. This is, however, often not a conscious decision, but rather intuition that has been handed down, and not explicit tradition. The danger in this is to equate one's own intuition with the biblical message, calling for self-critical reflection.

Let us take the example of 2 Timothy 3:16ff. for a better understanding of this: one could approach this text via the filters of prolegomena (authorship, date of composition, etc.) or fundamental theology (authority, theopneustos). In the FBGG, the discussion of this text would presumably stress v. 17, which presents consequences for Christian behaviour.

Truth in breadth

Another aspect which has historical origins and still holds today is the wariness in determining and preserving doctrine as written confessions of faith. Although these have been recognized in the meantime, they remain a marginal phenomenon. For example, the Apostles' Creed is indeed considered helpful, but at the same time reservations remain, since it reflects only a very restricted section of Christian dogmatics. For instance, it has been pointed out very consciously that the central question is missing: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Luke 10:25). One needs to keep the background of such reservations in the right perspective. The point is not that these creeds originated in another denomination – "not in our own backyard", so to speak, – but rather that we show great respect for the abundance of biblical messages. The perception is that the confessions formulated by churches have more shortcomings than usefulness, and that they are in danger of subjectively selecting the biblical message; here preference is given to pragmatic, hands-on interpretation, even at the risk of going too far in the opposite direction.

An obvious disadvantage of this dissociation from creeds comes into view when trying to grasp the beliefs of the FBGG theologically. In the practical life of congregations, you will get various answers to the question "What do you believe?" There will be general lists of statements of faith (for example, "We believe in God, who became visible in Jesus" or "We believe in the message of the cross") or even reference to those of other denominations. Nevertheless, one may also detect advantages: since there is no one written confession, the FBGG can cover a vast range of Christian beliefs and thus reflect the unity of the Church of Jesus. In relation to its relatively modest size, it covers a broad spectrum of Christian beliefs. Consequently, the template of one creed will not be forced upon the subject to be discussed; instead, one will try to enter into dialogue with those concerned according to the attitude: "I do not understand you. Please explain your point of view to me." The people know each other well.

Truth in interpretation

This basic attitude is closely related to the opportunity to perceive the Bible as an object of interpretation. Our interpretation can hastily be seen as equivalent to the biblical message itself. But to err is human. Within the FBGG, the open, brotherly discussion about biblical contents is encouraged in an open and constructive atmosphere. One can stick one's neck out quite a long way without being afraid of violating a certain set framework. As an example, in the last few years the topic "What is the kingdom of God?" was discussed frequently, at times even controversially. Yet these discussions did not destroy our fellowship, firstly because we know each other and understand each other's motivation, and secondly because we are obliged and committed to the biblical message, rather than to our personal interpretation with all its weaknesses.

Truth in the church

Notwithstanding this, the Bible is decisive for the life of the churches in the FBGG. It is formative for the church services through scripture readings and as the basis of the sermon. Scripture readings are often done by church members, thus involving a personal touch. The Luther Bible translation was standard in Sunday services for decades – both in the readings and for the sermon. This was helpful for memorization. The central role of the sermon was also apparent in the wording of the service order – this included the *pre-programme* and the *sermon*. Even though hymns of praise and times of prayer were not questioned as substantial elements of the service, they were not specifically mentioned by name until much later.

The local church chooses its own focus of proclamation and teaching independently, thus is not tied to a strict and set agenda. Contents of Bible studies, house groups or workshops are based on biblical topics. Leaders are consciously given the freedom to interpret scripture in a binding way. Even "business meetings" involving local church leaders and lay church workers always begin with a biblical input, in order to create awareness for the importance of the Gospel of the kingdom of God in advance of all planning.

The Understanding of Scripture and Use of the Bible in the Federation of Pentecostal Churches (BFP)

Bernhard Olpen

As a free evangelical denomination on the one hand, which, like Luther and the reformers, sees its one source of faith as lying in Holy Scripture, and on the other hand as a movement with its historical roots in Pietism and the revival movement, the Federation of Pentecostal Churches (BFP) affords the Bible a central role in the life of our churches. We treat it as the “single authority and guide in all questions of faith and teaching, but also of ministry and personal activity. For us, it is the revelation of God’s own will.”¹ Whilst we know all about the cultural and era-specific “wrapping” of the Holy Scripture and are familiar with the various literary genres represented, we follow Paul’s statement in 2 Timothy 3:16² and are certain that God speaks to us through each part of Scripture, and wants and is able to bring about real, long-term change in our lives by doing so. In our view, therefore, the Bible is “the Holy Scripture of the Old and New Testaments, inspired by God’s spirit”, and also the “infallible guiding principle of our lives, thinking and behaviour.”³ This confession shows the strong practical significance of Scripture, and its relevance to everyday life, which is, without doubt, of paramount importance in our churches. Its revelatory character and inspirational storyline, which will always, to a certain extent, remain a mystery, make it necessary to pursue a historical, grammatical, semantic and cultural investigation of the text, but do not necessitate a historical-critical approach. Based on our conviction that when we deal with Scripture, we are dealing with “God’s Word in people’s words”, we base our approach on the supernatural school and its revelation-focused understanding of the Bible, which is ultimately founded on the infallibility of the original copies of the Scripture, which no longer exist.⁴

1 www.bfp.de/pages/wir-ueber-uns/lehre.php (accessed on 15.7.2013)

2 All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (NIV).

3 www.bfp.de/pages/wir-ueber-uns/lehre/glaubensbekenntnis.php (accessed on 15.7.2013).

This section is taken from the BFP Guidelines in the edition published in 2003. In the edition from May 2002, the guidelines contained the title “What we believe and teach”, followed by a short paragraph on the Bible with the statement: “We believe that the Bible is the Word of God, inspired by God and infallible in all respects.”

In the current BFP Constitution from 5.5.1982, we confess in the preamble: the triune God reveals himself “through the inspired word of Holy Scripture.”

4 In this context, Matthias C. Wolff, BFP Pastor of the Elim Church in Hamburg and lecturer on hermeneutics at the Theological Seminary of the BFP, Beröa, states incisively that the Bible “(should) not be picked apart in the court of human reason, even though human reason can, of course, be employed to its fullest capacity in service of achieving better understanding of Scripture” (“The Understanding of Scripture in the Pentecostal Movement”, manuscript of a talk given at the ACK Study Session on 4.9.2007 in Kloster Nütschau).

We read and understand the Bible christocentrically, thus recognizing that the individual elements of the Scriptures have different weightings, in the light of Jesus Christ's act of salvation. In this, we follow Luther's "touchstone" and key to Scripture, and ask to what extent individual passages of Scripture "promote Christ or not"⁵. We see Christ at the centre of Scripture, and want him to remain there. He is the culmination of the momentum of revelation revealed in the Bible, and Scripture is therefore to be interpreted by Scripture, through Christ and in his light.

As well as the christocentric principle of Bible reading, we also emphasise the "pneumatic" principle. Jesus promised that his Spirit would remind us of all of his words and lead us in all truth.⁶ This goes beyond Bible study that takes place initially on a purely cognitive level. We are reminded of Jesus' words firstly by the written word, but Jesus does not want to stop there. Only once the illuminating influence of the Holy Spirit ignites, renews and gives existential understanding of the word that has been read can it release its life-changing power into people's inner lives. When Paul says that the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life,⁷ he hints at this thought. We therefore encourage people to read Scripture under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Based on this "pneumatic" principle, as we understand it, we regularly experience testimonies in our church services and gatherings. In such testimonies, the person in question reads a passage of Scripture and explains how God has "spoken" through this passage to him or her.

In line with the tradition of the Herrnhut Watchwords, we believe that God will speak to us on a daily basis through his word. This practice is not always conducted according to exegetically perfect methods, however. Where the original meaning of the text has clearly been taken out of context, we refer to the apostolic rules.⁸ We do, however, continue to hold on to the promises of Scripture, and expect even today to experience God's amazing providence and leadership, just as can be seen powerfully and repeatedly in the Psalms and the Gospels. Since God's wonders and miracles as described here happen in our personal and church lives (and not only in Pentecostal churches), the literal meaning of the relevant passages is unquestionable for us. We do not, however, take this to mean that all biblical passages (e.g. the eschatological pictures in Revelation or the description in the Creation story, which aims to illustrate God's intentions) are to be taken literally. We believe that the Bible bears witness to God's actions and God as author of all things, but is not a scientific

5 WA.DB 7, 385, 26. We do not go as far as Luther, however, who questions the apostolicity of the book of James in this context, because it sets a counterpoint to Paul. On the contrary, we see clearly here the holistic nature of Scripture and its dialectic unity.

6 John 16:13

7 2 Corinthians 3:6

8 Cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:21

document, claiming to give an exact description of chemical or physical processes. We therefore do not take everything literally, but do take everything seriously.⁹



The President of the Federation of Pentecostal Churches, Johannes Justus, reading the Bible.

Our use of Scripture in church services is not governed by the use of a pericope or by a church calendar. There are, therefore, considerable differences between churches, depending on the specific gifting and calling of the pastors and elders in those churches. Whilst some churches have a more evangelistic focus, and choose appropriate biblical passages to suit this focus, other churches give more weight to topics such as worship, missions, discipleship or social relationships. In all cases, there is a strong focus on interpreting the Bible in such a way that it can be put into practice in daily life. Strictly theological explanations are an exception, as are links to current affairs or politics. The eternal message of Jesus Christ, God's principles and guidelines for living, and God's comfort for those who are mourning, suffering or discouraged dominate and dictate our approach to preaching Scripture. The sermon, which is aimed predominantly at daily

life, is illustrated mainly with practical examples, which underline the truth and relevance of the Bible text on which the message is based. We can therefore consider the sermon to be an encouraging, faith-building, witness-led speech. The use of Old Testament and New Testament texts varies in frequency from church to church. In German churches, the New Testament features more heavily, given that the allegorical interpretation of Old Testament texts, which could also be encountered frequently in Pietist churches in the past, has gone somewhat out of fashion in recent times. For our international churches, especially those with an African background, the trend above only applies to a certain extent. In these churches, Old Testament texts are used more often and interpreted descriptively. There is also a more challenging style of sermon, focusing on sanctification and discipline in daily life, as was also common in German churches in the past. On the whole, the expository approach to preaching has given way somewhat to a more topic-oriented approach.

9 Matthias C. Wolff: "The Understanding of Scripture in the Pentecostal Movement" (see note 4)

Liturgical use of the Bible occurs rarely and selectively. It is typical to present the bride and groom with a Bible at their wedding, as a symbol that their marriage should be based on God's Word. It is also common to give teenagers a Bible at their dedication service following their participation in Bible teaching, our equivalent of confirmation classes. Some BFP churches with an African background observe the practice of laying a Bible on someone's head or symbolically "beating" them with it as part of prayers or blessing for that person. This expresses the prayer that the person's thinking should be filled with God's Word and promises, and not by their own thoughts or fears.

In contrast to its reputation, the Pentecostal movement is clearly a Biblical movement. Scripture not only plays a central role in the church services, but also in all the other aspects of church life, be that children's church, Scout groups, youth work or the many house groups that take place. Many churches make use of Bible reading plans to motivate church members in their own personal study of Scripture. We can observe that regular personal Bible reading is closely connected to growing joy in faith. We encourage the use of different Bible translations, not only those which are easy to read and understand, but also those which are closer to the original text, such as the Elberfelder Bible, which continues to be used widely in our churches.

The Bible is a treasure for us, which we hold in high regard, and which must be rediscovered time after time.

“Were Thy truth no more to guide us, How our faith would go astray!”

The Bible in Faith and Practice
in the Seventh-day Adventist Church

Rolf J. Pöhler

I well remember hearing a poem that my father, who was also a Seventh-day Adventist pastor, often quoted in his sermons and at other occasions:

*Lord, Thy Word, that sacred treasure, Let me evermore retain;
Naught on earth can give the pleasure That I from its wealth may gain.
Were Thy truth no more to guide us, How our faith would go astray!
Lord, whatever may betide us, Let this light illumine our way.*¹

These words, written by Nikolaus Ludwig Count Zinzendorf in 1725, somehow stuck in my memory, and as time passes, they keep coming to mind more often. Sometimes I also quote the poem myself while lecturing to my students. The deep appreciation that the founder of the Moravian Church expressed for the Holy Scriptures has also always been – and continues to be – a characteristic of Adventist Christians.

There are four areas in which the position that Seventh-day Adventists take concerning the Bible becomes particularly clear: (1) in personal life, (2) in common worship, (3) in scholarly research, and (4) in the Adventist Fundamental Beliefs. Taken together, these form an overall picture of how the “treasury” of the Bible is dealt with in the Adventist Church. The spectrum ranges from individual believers to the local and worldwide church and from scholarly writings to official statements of belief. The following tendency can be observed: the more sophisticated and official the approach when dealing with the Bible, the lesser the impact on individual believers. Conversely, the more practical the perspective, the deeper and more lasting is the influence that reading the Bible has.²

1 Count Zinzendorf, 1725, transl. H. Brueckner, 1925, in: American Lutheran Hymnal (Columbus, OH: Lutheran Book Concern, [1930]), No. 28.

2 Ellen G. White wrote: “The Bible was given for practical purposes” (Selected Messages from the Writings of Ellen G. White, Book One [Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association], 20).

The Bible in Personal Life

According to the findings of a worldwide survey conducted in 2013, one third of all Adventist families hold daily family devotions. This may include prayer, singing, and/or a short Bible reading from a devotional book or the Bible itself. The number of Adventists who read in the Bible once a week or once a day corresponds to 90 % and 40 %, respectively. The Bible apparently plays a significant role in the daily lives of Adventist Christians.³

In order to encourage Bible reading and help foster a better understanding of what is read, the Adventist Church publishes a quarterly Bible study guide on a certain topic⁴ that is issued worldwide. It is structured in weekly study units on a subtopic, and these in turn have daily sections based on one or more Bible texts to be read. It includes questions and explanations as well as space to note down personal thoughts. According to a survey conducted in the German-speaking countries in 2012, a quarter of all church members use this study guide for personal devotions and three-quarters use it to prepare for the Bible discussion group held in each church service.⁵

Besides personal devotions, Bible readings are also a traditional part of home Bible study groups. In these groups, biblical answers are sought for current issues concerning faith and life, or biblical books are read through and studied. Various Bible translations, dictionaries, concordances and commentaries are consulted to contribute to a better understanding. The discussion is sometimes led by a pastor, but usually by one of the group members. Besides church members, participants may also include friends and guests.

Reading the Bible is of fundamental importance in religious instruction. Aside from the two to three years of religious instruction for youth carried out by the local pastor or qualified church members,⁶ people who would like to join the Seventh-day Adventist church are prepared in baptismal classes, often over a period of several months.⁷ In this instruction (called *Bibelstunde* in German), the biblical basis for Adventist beliefs is examined. This is one of the traditional responsibilities of Adventist pastors, where they pass on their biblical and theological knowledge in an understandable and practical way.

3 My father, for example, made it his habit to read in the Bible for half an hour or longer every day, and in this way read it completely through within one year. He could quote many Bible verses from memory.

4 The quarterly focus alternates between a biblical book and a biblical topic.

5 More details are found in the following section.

6 In Germany and Switzerland, the Adventist Church maintains an institute for religious education (*Religionspädagogisches Institut*, or RPI) that offers a training programme for volunteers who coordinate children's ministries. The training takes place over the course of several years, and develops resources and material for the children's and teens' Sabbath School classes, as well as for helping get youth involved with the Bible (*echtzeit* study guides). See www.sta-rpi.net.

7 Seventh-day Adventists practise believer's baptism, which requires candidates to first receive thorough instruction in the faith as well as the personal desire to be baptized. The age of baptism for youth in Germany lies at about 14 and upwards, while internationally it even lies at about 10 to 12 years of age.

Personal devotional time, regular personal Bible study, home Bible study groups, and Bible study lessons (*Bibelstunden*) are common contexts where the Bible is read, with which most Adventists are familiar and through which they deepen their biblical understanding and faith. This is more than just an old tradition. The deeper motivation for this lies in the belief that as followers of Jesus Christ we are called to develop a personal life of faith that is based on the Word of God, and that we should “always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have” (1 Peter 3:15, NIV). Ellen G. White, the prophetic voice of the Adventist Church, described this conviction as follows:

“It is the first and highest duty of every rational being to learn from the Scriptures what is truth, and then to walk in the light and encourage others to follow his example. We should day by day study the Bible diligently, weighing every thought and comparing scripture with scripture. With divine help we are to form our opinions for ourselves as we are to answer for ourselves before God.”⁸

The Bible in Common Worship

Personal time spent contemplating the Bible and the questions and issues concerning faith and life finds its logical continuation and collective expression in the weekly worship services of a local Adventist church. Besides the special day on which Adventist worship services are held – the Sabbath⁹ –, the church service is above all characterized by a communicative institution, the so-called “Sabbath School.” That is the designation for a Bible study in which the topics and Bible texts dealt with in the “Sabbath School Bible Study Guide” are discussed together, usually in small groups.¹⁰ This exchange of ideas and experiences lasts approximately 30–40 minutes; the discussion groups are moderated by lay members of the church, for whom corresponding training is offered.¹¹ The objective of this dialogic form in the church service is to establish a connection between the Holy Scriptures and their message on the one hand and the faith and life of the individual and of the congregation on the other. For many, the Sabbath School discussion is the most important part of the worship service, ranking before the sermon in significance.¹² This way of

8 Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1888/1950), 598. The quote is reminiscent of the famous words that the Pietist theologian Johann Albrecht Bengel once wrote about the Bible: “It is a letter, commissioned by God and written for me, the rule by which I am to lead my life, and the rule by which God will judge my life.”

9 Seventh-day Adventists celebrate Saturday as day of rest in keeping with the divine example in the creation week (Gen 1–2), the biblical commandment (in the Decalogue), and the practice of Jesus and the first Christians as described in the New Testament.

10 The Sabbath School as an institution is older than the Adventist Church itself, which was organized in 1863. Modeled after the common “Sunday School” concept, it was initiated by James White in 1852/1853, at first for children, but soon also adopted for adults.

11 Participating in the “Bible School” also promotes language and leadership skills. For those without higher education, this helps improve their personal (and professional) competencies.

12 In the worldwide survey mentioned above, more than 50 % of those surveyed reported that the “Sabbath School” had a greater influence in their spiritual lives than sermons, family devotions or private Bible reading.

approaching the Bible also promotes personal exploration of biblical passages and teachings. Guests are welcome to participate and can thus discover what the Bible has to offer for their own lives.

The sermon – the entire Adventist worship service usually lasts about two hours – is another context where Bible texts are read and interpreted. The Old and New Testament are represented rather equally. It is customary for the audience to follow along in their own Bibles as texts are read during the sermon. Some sermons are similar to a Bible study and can last up to an hour, although they are usually not longer than about 30–40 minutes. The Seventh-day Adventist Church does not have or follow a lectionary. Preachers are therefore free in their choice of texts and topics, and can build on the observations and insights gleaned in their own personal Bible readings.

As with the discussion moderation in the Sabbath School section of the worship services, the preaching is also largely done by lay members. Seminars for lay preachers provide the necessary tools so that the local congregations receive healthy nourishment and are built up spiritually. It is one of the important tasks of an Adventist pastor to promote and develop this volunteer ministry.

The Bible in Scholarly Research

The Bible has its primary *Sitz im Leben* in the daily lives of Adventist Christians and in the weekly worship services of Adventist churches. In these areas, all members are needed and involved; all members carry their share of responsibility and make their own unique contribution towards demonstrating in practice how relevant the Bible is for everyday life. Beyond that, however, there is also a kind of innate desire sparked by the Christian faith that strives to ever better understand what is believed and experienced, to delve deeper into it intellectually, and to describe and communicate it more methodically and compellingly. That is why the Adventist church maintains theological seminaries and universities where pastors, biblical scholars and professors are educated or teach and do research. In the early days of the Adventist Church, the preachers were all self-taught lay members. But since the middle of the twentieth century, the role of the preacher developed into a profession for academically educated pastors and theologians who strive to interpret the Bible on the basis of sound hermeneutics.¹³

How then does this affect how Seventh-day Adventists approach and deal with the Bible? As developments in the history of theology have shown, the academic study of the Bible has contributed in no small measure to the erosion of the Christian

¹³ It is also worth mentioning that the Seventh-day Adventist Church is a member in numerous Bible Societies and is involved in producing translations of the Bible.

faith. Adventists also experience the tension between faith and reason, confession and science, certainty and doubt. The factor that protects them against sacrificing biblical beliefs on the altar of rationalist presuppositions is the unequivocal commitment to the formal principle of the Reformation: the *sola scriptura* principle. For Adventists, that means that the Bible has the last word in questions concerning Christian faith and life. The church, including all its tradition(s), must be subordinate to it, just as readers today must be, with their ways of thinking that are conditioned by the times and culture.

In order to understand the Bible, one must carefully consider the context of the text. Adventist interpreters understand the context to be the Holy Scriptures in their entirety (*tota scriptura*). The rule that the immediate literary and historical context has priority over similar texts within the biblical canon can sometimes be lost sight of when focusing on the search for the overall message of the Scriptures. In their effort to do justice to the Bible as the written Word of God, Adventist interpreters feel a close connection with the reformer Martin Luther.¹⁴

In order for the Bible to speak for itself and thus be its own interpreter (*sancta scriptura sui ipsius interpres*), it is also necessary to be open to hear its message and approach it as unbiasedly and unprejudicedly as possible. Ellen White challenged Bible readers to do this:

“In your study of the word, lay at the door of investigation your preconceived opinions and your hereditary and cultivated ideas. You will never reach the truth if you study the Scriptures to vindicate your own ideas. Leave these at the door, and with a contrite heart go in to hear what the Lord has to say to you.”¹⁵

Adventists are well aware that that is easier said than done, especially because the comprehensive writings of one of its founding pioneers, Ellen G. White, represent a treasure trove of spiritual guidance that can tempt one to consult her words instead of engaging in a time-consuming and open-ended study of the Scriptures. She herself, however, always pointed to the Bible as the ultimate standard and authority (*prima scriptura*). To what extent have Seventh-day Adventists been successful in upholding the normative authority of the Holy Scriptures, compared with other, subordinate authorities – including their own tradition of interpretation? Adventist creedal statements certainly leave no doubt regarding the official position of the church.

14 “Such is the way of the whole of Scripture: it wants to be interpreted by a comparison of passages from everywhere, and understood under its own direction. The safest of all methods for discerning the meaning of Scripture is to work for it by drawing together and scrutinizing passages” (Martin Luther, *Lectures on Deuteronomy*, trans. Richard R. Caemmerer, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 9 [Concordia Publishing House, 1960], 9, 21).

15 *The Youth’s Instructor*, July 24, 1902.



Paul with the Sword of the Spirit,
which is the Word of God (Eph 6:17)

The Bible in the Fundamental Beliefs

All unofficial and official Adventist creedal statements¹⁶ from the early days of the denomination to the present agree on this point: the Bible is granted unquestioned priority in questions of faith. In the latest version of the Adventist Statement of Fundamental Beliefs (2015), the following can be found: “Seventh-day Adventists accept the Bible as their only creed. ... The Holy Scriptures, Old and New Testaments, are the written Word of God, given by divine inspiration. The inspired authors spoke

and wrote as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. In this Word, God has committed to humanity the knowledge necessary for salvation. The Holy Scriptures are the supreme, authoritative, and the infallible revelation of His will. They are the standard of character, the test of experience, the definitive revealer of doctrines, and the trustworthy record of God’s acts in history.” (From the preamble and art. 1)¹⁷

The writings of Ellen G. White are considered to “speak with prophetic authority and provide comfort, guidance, instruction, and correction to the church” (art. 18). However, “they also make clear that the Bible is the standard by which all teaching and experience must be tested” (ibid.). Paradoxically, it is the most influential personality among Adventists who has untiringly and unequivocally emphasised the unique authority and unequalled significance of the Bible for the life of the church. Filling this fundamental Protestant commitment to the Bible with life remains a permanent challenge for all Christian churches that endeavor to uphold the primacy of the Holy Scriptures in ecclesiastical teachings and church practice, without discounting the significance of the men and women who have had a decisive influence on the life and thinking in their churches.

Summary and Conclusion

The worldwide Seventh-day Adventist Church likes to speak of itself as “a people of the book.” It considers the Bible to be the written Word of God and the source of divine revelation. Its 66 books were not written to serve as objects of scrutiny to

¹⁶ Seventh-day Adventists have no creed in the sense of a fixed confessional statement. They hold certain “fundamental beliefs,” which may be revised “when the church is led by the Holy Spirit to a fuller understanding of Bible truth or finds better language in which to express the teachings of God’s Holy Word” (taken from the preamble of the Adventist Fundamental Beliefs).

¹⁷ For each of the 28 Fundamental Beliefs, numerous supporting biblical references are cited. A detailed explanation of the Adventist Fundamental Beliefs is provided in: *Seventh-day Adventists Believe ...: A Biblical Exposition of Fundamental Doctrines*, 2nd ed. (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Ministerial Association, 2005).

be dissected by theologians and scholars, but in order to help real people live a truly fulfilled life and bring them into connection with God. For this reason, Adventists strive to make the Bible accessible to everyone, and invite all people to read it, and to discover and accept the truth hidden, or much rather revealed in it.

This implies that the Bible can sufficiently be understood by ordinary people. As heirs of the Reformation, Adventists seek to put the biblical and Protestant teaching of the “priesthood of believers” into practice and fill it with life, also with respect to dealing with the Holy Scriptures. Regular personal devotional time, private Bible study, home Bible study groups, the Bible discussion groups in church services, thorough instruction in faith and beliefs, as well as preaching grounded in the Bible – all provide opportunities for developing a sound and vital personal faith that is built on one’s own convictions and not on the submissive adherence to prescribed church doctrines and traditions.

Beyond that, the Adventist Church maintains theological seminaries and universities that provide opportunities for gaining a qualified education and engaging in scholarly research. They promote thorough theological reflection and inquire as to the relevance of the Bible for life in the world and societies of today. In their studies, Adventist theologians are driven by the conviction that the Holy Scriptures should have the last and authoritative word in all important questions of Christian teaching and living.

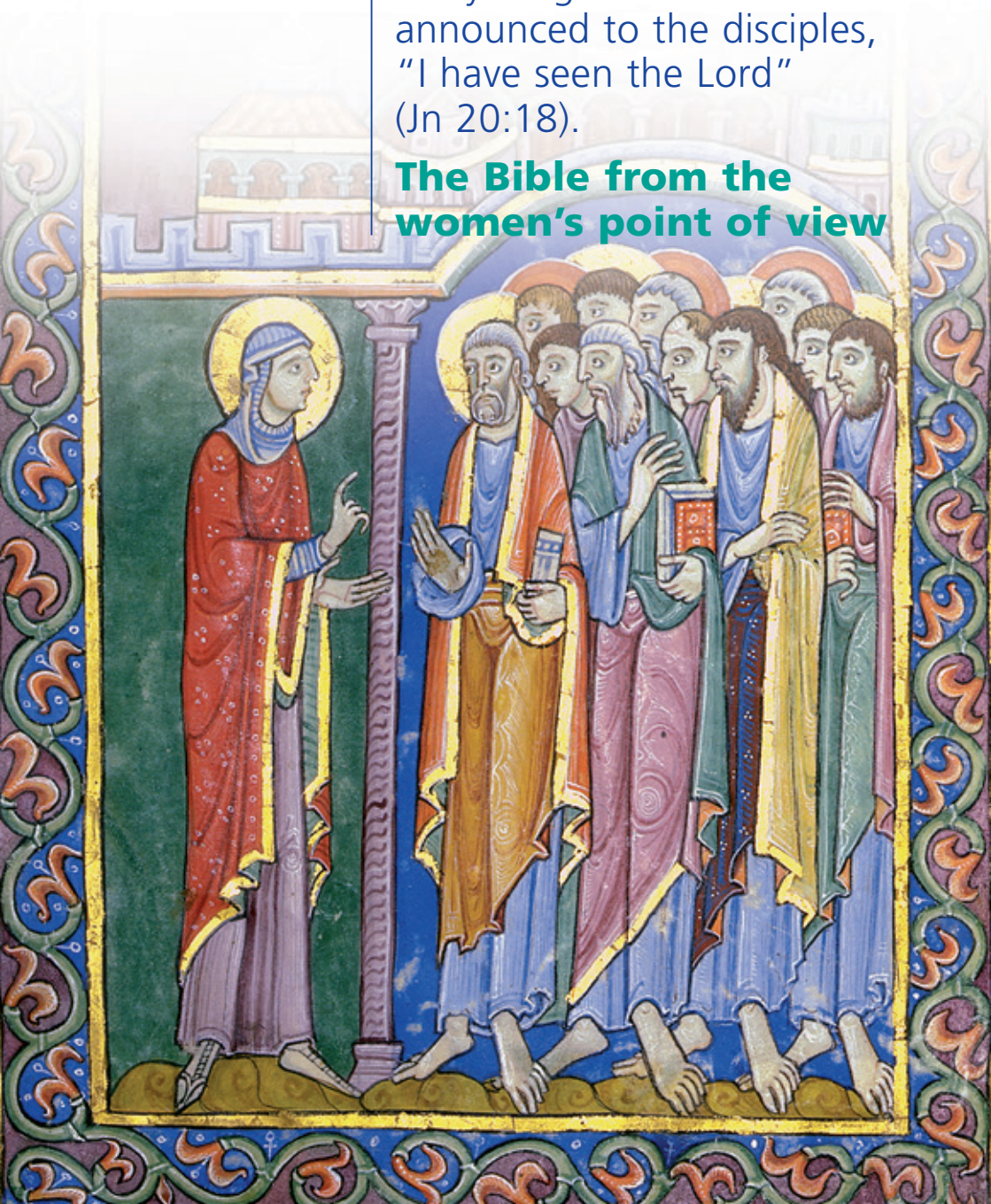
Interpreting the Bible appropriately according to context and content, without distorting it due to doctrinal or cultural bias, is a constant challenge. As the foundation of the Adventist Christian faith, the Scriptures should be allowed to speak for themselves and freely express their unfiltered message. Again, in the words of Zinzendorf: “Lord, Thy Word, that sacred treasure, Let me evermore retain; Naught on earth can give the pleasure That I from its wealth may gain. Were Thy truth no more to guide us, How our faith would go astray! Lord, whatever may betide us, Let this light illumine our way.”

One of the most important tasks for pastors and theologians consists in helping the so-called “lay people” (the Greek word *laos* means “people”) to read the Bible for themselves or together with other Christians in a careful, hermeneutically reflected way, and to apply its message practically in their own lives. God wants Christians to grow to maturity; a faith anchored in the Bible brings forth mature and discerning believers. The German author Manfred Hausmann has put this insight in a nutshell: “With the Bible in his hand the Christian is mature. Otherwise he’s not.”

Part II

Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord" (Jn 20:18).

The Bible from the women's point of view



No longer male and female – really?

Women's perspectives on the Bible

Claudia Janssen

Discovering the Bible anew as their own treasure – that is a project on which women from all denominations and many different countries in the world are working. Their discoveries are primarily based on the fact that they take a new look at biblical tradition in the light of their own experiences, thus reaching changed insights. “New” is naturally a relative term, because biblical female research, feminist exegesis and theological gender studies have been going on for more than 40 years now, and the results have been published in the relevant standard works such as the compendium “Feminist Biblical Interpretation” (1998, English version 2012).¹

However, the research on women in biblical texts started much earlier. In 1895 the American civil rights activist Elizabeth Cady-Stanton published “The Woman’s Bible”, a commentary on the Bible in which she listed and commented on important passages for the women’s movement.² Her focus was on gender equality: where is it stressed, where do women assume leadership roles, where do they prove to be educated and act as teachers? As from the 1970s, these beginnings of feminist Bible reading were taken up again and developed further.³ Here again, it was the women’s movement in politics and churches which acted as a motor for the development of feminist-theological Bible interpretation.

The great women of the Bible

Feminist-theological Bible interpretation started with the discovery of the great women of the Bible: Miriam, striking the tambourine and leading the Israelites through the Red Sea, Sarah, whose laughter gave her son Isaac his name, Deborah the judge, Huldah the wise prophetess... . Women who read the Bible together discover more and more of their foremothers in faith as models for their own lives. The importance of women in the Jesus movement is being re-assessed. They were the ones who were courageous enough to accompany Jesus at the crucifixion and at the tomb, and they were also the first witnesses to the resurrection. The New

1 Luise Schottroff / Marie-Theres Wacker (Ed.), *Feminist Biblical Interpretation: A Compendium*, Eerdmans 2012.

2 More info: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Woman%27s_Bible.

3 Cf. Marie-Theres Wacker, *Geschichtliche, hermeneutische und methodologische Grundlagen*, in: Luise Schottroff / Silvia Schroer / Marie-Theres Wacker, *Feministische Exegese. Forschungserträge zur Bibel aus der Perspektive von Frauen*, Darmstadt 1995, 3–79.

Testament texts show that in the early communities they had the same functions as the men. There is the old prophetess Anna (Lk 2:36–38), the disciple Tabitha (Acts 9:36), the deaconess Phoebe (Rom 16:1–2) and the apostle Junia (Rom 16:7), who in some German Bible translations is still called Junias (male).⁴ The strong women of the Bible also strengthen women in their present-day involvement in the church.

After this initial phase of discovery, further research developed. There was a differentiated rethinking of the partially anti-Jewish presuppositions which the first drafts had in common with traditional theology. For example, there is criticism of the way in which Jesus was presented as the one who liberated women from a rigid patriarchal Judaism.

The prophetess Mary

In the New Testament, it is particularly Mary who has come to be seen in a new light. Many church traditions and Bible translations depict her as a “lowly maiden”, a role model for devoted female service, who is then exalted as a “pure virgin”, beyond the reach of all other women. Feminist interpretations look closely at the Bible text, where they find completely different signs. Here Mary is seen in the tradition of Old Testament prophetesses such as Hannah and Miriam, singing her song of liberation together with Elizabeth: “My life magnifies the Eternal, and my vitality rejoices in God my deliverer, because he sees the humiliation of his slave. See, from now on all generations will call me happy, because the divine power does great things for me, and her name is holy” (Lk 1:46–49).

This prayer woman has experienced God's saving action, which takes notice of her and sees her humiliation (Lk 1:48). The Greek word *tapeinosis* is traditionally translated with “lowliness” towards God. However, in the context of biblical language it seldom expresses an interior attitude, but rather speaks of the social experience of humiliation: by political leaders (as in Lk 1:52), due to childlessness (1 Sam 1:11) and (sexual) violence (Gen 34:2; 2 Sam 13:12; Lam 5:11).⁵ It is impossible to ascertain whether the historical Mary suffered physical violence or was subjected to accusations on account of her pregnancy. Lk 1 does not elaborate on Mary's humiliation. However, hunger, poverty and political powerlessness were part of everyday life for those suffering under Roman occupation and economic exploitation by a small elite of their own people. Elizabeth and Mary shared these experiences with many other Jewish women and men who yearned for liberation (cf. Lk 2:38, 24:21).

4 Cf. Bernadette Brooten, “Junia ... *hervorragend unter den Aposteln*” (Rom 16:7), in: *Frauenbefreiung. Biblische und theologische Argumente*, Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel (ed.), 2nd. revised ed. Munich / Mainz 1978, 148–151. The revised versions of the Luther and “Einheit” translations now use the name Junia.

5 Cf. Jane Schaberg, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus. A Feminist Theological Interpretation of the Infancy Narratives*, San Francisco 2nd edition 1990, 97.

“Behold, I am a slave of God” (Lk 1:38), declared Mary after the Annunciation. The Greek word *doule* is almost always translated as “servant” or “maid”, emphasising her obedience and her humble and passive subordination to God’s will. But Mary calls herself a “slave”. This expression implies more than just a gentle, humble attitude of faith. Slaves were on the very lowest level of society; they had neither rights nor protection, they were the property of their masters or mistresses and subject to their economic and sexual exploitation. When Mary calls herself a slave, she shows that she is aware of the consequences of obedience, and that she is taking a conscious and active decision. She behaves as a self-conscious woman. By calling God her “Kyrios – Lord”, she denies those who see themselves as masters of the world the right to have power over her in future. Thus she takes her place in a long tradition of men and women in Israel’s history, such as Moses, Joshua, David and Abraham or the prophetess Hannah (1 Sam 1:11). “Servant/maid of God” or in other words “slave of God” describes her special relationship with God, out of which her power of resistance grows. The power of her “Kyrios” is different from that of those who determine her everyday life. God’s presence is for her the source of strength she needs to rise up from humiliation.

The Gospel of Luke begins with Mary’s prayer, who praises God’s action in song together with Elizabeth and many others who are also hoping for the liberation of God’s people. They proclaim the radical change in the existing social, political and economic conditions: “God casts the mighty from their thrones and raises the humiliated. She fills the hungry with good things and sends those who live in abundance empty away” (Lk 1:52–53). The Kingdom of God’s justice is dawning.

Paul and women

For some years now, attention has been turning increasingly towards Paul’s letters and his person. Opinions differ at this point. For example, according to the German Protestant Professor for New Testament, Luise Schottroff, the letters of Paul belong, just like the Gospel texts, to the treasures of early Christian tradition, possessing great liberating potential as the “songbook of the poor”.⁶ Elsa Tamez, a Methodist teacher on the New Testament living in Costa Rica, also understands Paul to be an “author in the plural,” expressing the everyday experiences of many women and men.⁷ She sees Paul as part of a network within a community that changed reality by promoting new and healing forms of coexistence. However, the German

6 Cf. Luise Schottroff, *Auf dem Weg zu einer feministischen Rekonstruktion der Geschichte des frühen Christentums*, in: Luise Schottroff / Silvia Schroer / Marie-Theres Wacker, *Feministische Exegese. Forschungserträge zur Bibel aus der Perspektive von Frauen*, Darmstadt 1995, 175–248.

7 Elsa Tamez, *Gegen die Verurteilung zum Tod. Paulus oder die Rechtfertigung durch den Glauben aus der Perspektive der Unterdrückten und Ausgeschlossenen*, Lucerne 1998.

Roman-Catholic theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, who teaches in the USA, considers the letters of Paul to be authoritarian texts, intended to establish dogmatically a particular interpretation of Jesus' message, which was originally liberating, thus using Christological arguments to legitimize a misogynist Church hierarchy. She describes all efforts to find liberating content in these texts, as "rescue attempts for irredeemably oppressive texts."⁸

At the moment, it is no longer the great female figures or their relationship to Jesus or Paul who occupy the centre of attention in the scientific feminist or gender-conscious Bible interpretation. These topics are being replaced by comprehensive questions on gender relations or on individual aspects such as constructions of masculinity in the texts or issues of the body and corporeality, of sexuality and violence. Above all, basic theological questions of sin, resurrection⁹ and socio-historical and political aspects of the Scriptures are being examined.

Overall, one may observe an asynchronicity: while scientists are developing an increasingly differentiated picture of biblical reality, traditional stereotypes continue stubbornly to exist on the other side: "Women should be silent in the churches..." (1 Cor 14:34–35). This sentence, which does not come from Paul himself, but was subsequently inserted into his letter to the Corinthian church, is deeply rooted in collective consciousness. The controversy about the "*Bibel in gerechter Sprache*" (Bible in Inclusive Language), which for socio-historical reasons also speaks of prophetesses, shepherdesses as well as female disciples, apostles or Pharisees, shows that the results of feminist biblical exegesis have not yet become entrenched in general knowledge.¹⁰

Gender and Power

The asynchronicity also exists on another level: while in the current discussion in the social sciences the gender question has led to a dissipation of firm ideas of masculinity and femininity, many women in the churches still find it important to discover "the great women of the Bible" as role models for themselves. Recently, the church men's work has also started to look more closely into the theology of men and masculinity in the Bible.¹¹ Both trends are important and should not be played off against each other. In particular, the great biblical treasures can be unearthed together, by people of different generations, backgrounds and sexes. Reading and interpreting the Bible is particularly fruitful in a community that tries

8 Cf. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Gleichheit und Differenz. Gal 3,28 im Brennpunkt feministischer Hermeneutik*, in: Berliner Theologische Zeitschrift 16 (1999), 212–231.

9 Cf. Claudia Janssen, *Endlich lebendig. Die Kraft der Auferstehung erfahren*, Freiburg 2013.

10 Cf. contributions to the web site: www.bibel-in-gerechter-sprache.de.

11 Cf. Reiner Knieling / Andreas Ruffing (Ed.), *Männerspezifische Bibelauslegung. Impulse für die Praxis*, Göttingen 2012.

to live jointly what they find in the texts. This is a major insight gained from Bible reading by women, which is practised with great success every year in the ecumenical World Day of Prayer movement.¹²

What has accompanied the discussion of gender issues in the Bible and church tradition from the outset was the strength of emotion on both sides. While women presented their findings with great vigour and enthusiasm, often in a militant tone (as was generally usual in the 1970s and 1980s), they were decried by other parties – church leaders and university professors – as “neo-pagan” or “unscientific.” In retrospect, it is clear that it was not just about factual content or even scientific debate, but also about power: the power of teaching authority, and the practical exercise of power between the sexes at universities and in the churches. In the meantime, the results of feminist theologies have become a normal part of general theological opinion, training and congregational practice in many churches (but often without mentioning where they come from). But in spite of all that, gender competence still does not count as a central qualification in German theology.

One important result of modern biblical research is the recognition that it is not a new phenomenon when one poses gender questions with regard to texts which would not have been problematical two thousand years ago. Questions of relations between the sexes, questions of masculinity and femininity, and notions of power and dominance in that connection were already controversial in biblical times; among other issues, they played a significant role in the question of church leadership. Gal 3:28 can be seen here programmatically: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” The dimensions addressed here – origin (Jewish, and people from other nations), social status (enslaved or free) and gender – are closely interwoven with one another. In recent years, a new terminology has been developed to describe this interaction, the concept of “intersectionality”, from the English word for a road crossing. This indicates that race, colour, sex, age, sexual orientation, economic situation and other factors do not simply exist alongside each other, but intensify each other mutually. Therefore, none of these aspects can be considered in isolation, but always in conjunction with the others. To understand what that means specifically for the interpretation of the Bible, women’s associations and unions see it as their task to open up spaces in which previously inadmissible questions can be asked. Using methods such as Bibliodrama, Bibliologue and other creative forms of Bible study, they try to promote the democratization of knowledge, whilst at the same time dealing carefully

12 Cf. www.weltgebetstag.de

with anxieties and uncertainties that may arise in the process. For in addition to the challenge involved in approaching the complexity of the texts, there is yet another problem, often more deep-seated, namely becoming aware of their own profoundly ingrained gender images. If these are not understood as biologically determined and thus unalterable and “natural”, but principally defined by social factors, many new questions and challenges emerge. Here our work has only just started, both scientifically and in church practice.

Part III

Let the word
of Christ dwell
in you richly
(Col 3:16).

The Bible in ecumenism



Reaping the Bible ecumenically

Ecumenical Association for Bible reading

Wolfgang Baur

Gregory the Great once said of the Bible, it was like a river, shallow enough for a lamb to go wading, but deep enough for an elephant to swim. His comment shows that when dealing with the Bible there are both opportunities and problems. Its richness can offer people enough thoughts and ideas for action to last a lifetime, but they need access or a guide to find their way through the maze of texts. This is precisely the concern of the Ecumenical Bible reading plans. They extend an invitation to read the Bible regularly, without overwhelming the readers, but rather guiding them through the variety of the books of Holy Scripture.

A daily “Bible portion” – the roots

The idea of Bible reading plans originated among Protestant Christians. It conforms to the tradition of the Early Church, which urged believers to get to know the Scriptures in order to become mature as Christians (John Chrysostom). The Reformers, in particular Martin Luther, seized upon this recommendation: “When you lie down to sleep at night, take something from the Scriptures to bed with you, so as to ruminate upon it there in your heart – like an animal – and thus gently fall asleep. However, it should not be much, rather very little, but well thought through and understood. And when you arise in the morning, you shall find it to be the harvest of the previous day.” That is just the point: one “portion” of the Bible every day as spiritual nourishment. Such “portions” are what the Ecumenical Bible reading plans serve up. The daily amount of text can be read in five minutes, so that there is still time to think about it. Of course, there are other Bible reading plans that take you through the entire Bible in one year, for example. But such a plan requires at least 20 minutes of reading time each day, which is probably too ambitious for most readers.

Plans for young people

The first group targeted for Bible reading plans were young people. A young man training for the ministry (Franz von Roques) founded a youth association in 1850 in Treysa (now in the Evangelical Church of Kurhessen-Waldeck) with 13 young men who were about 18 years old. He wanted to encourage these young men to read the Bible daily. For this purpose he divided the Bible into short sections, one for each day of the year. When the calendar for the first year was complete, he still had passages of the Bible left over. So he added more calendars filled with short Bible portions. Those were the very first Bible reading plans. After the First World War

the German “Protestant Young Men’s Associations” (forerunner of the YMCA in Germany today) issued Bible reading plans for the young generation. Pastor Wilhelm Thiele, predecessor of Otto Riethmüller as Chairman of the Burckhardthaus, took the initiative and proposed a Bible reading plan lasting four years, based on the four Gospels. During this time, Bible study meetings became more and more central in the youth work.

This development was carried forward by Otto Riethmüller when he succeeded Wilhelm Thiele. His particular contribution to Bible study and Bible reading plans can be summarized in three points:

1. He consciously made Bible reading according to a specific plan the focal point of church youth work. Reading the Bible, and the rules which followed from it, formed the essential basis for all other activities.
2. Otto Riethmüller built up the youth work entirely on the foundation of daily Bible reading. The texts were not just to be read in the course of a personal “quiet time”, but the individual daily Bible reading was consciously and consistently bound up with the meetings and devotions in the church youth group. Riethmüller said: “We repeatedly impress this sentence upon our youngsters: ‘The Bible should become my home.’ That does not take place overnight, that is the work of a lifetime. ”
3. But in order that Scripture reading could really form the basis of youth work, not just on paper or in the minds of the leadership, it had to be shaped according to specific and attractive rules. Even before he had adopted Bible reading as the essential working basis, Otto Riethmüller had emphatically demanded that church youth work be planned. Such systematic work began with the biblical motto for the year, which at first was chosen independently of the reading plan. These mottos were not just valid for the work of the Burckhardthaus, but also for the Young Men’s Associations. In 1925 the Association of Protestant Young Women (Burckhardthaus), the deaconesses’ houses and the Women’s Relief Organisation in Germany were also affiliated.

Orientation and resistance

The Youth Associations were interested in making every effort to encourage daily Bible reading. At that time Otto Riethmüller complemented the Bible reading plans with the motto for the year, the theme of the month and a hymn of the month. The first Watchword for the Year appeared in 1930: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ” (Rom 1:16). In 1935 the Men’s Work of the Confessing Church also joined the Bible reading plan, which had in the meantime been standardised, as did the German Methodist and Baptist churches in 1938. The working fellowship which had thus been formed was called the Text Planning Committee. In the aftermath of the political upheaval of 1933, missionary activities emerged

from working with the Bible reading plan. All the periodicals published by the organisations associated with the text plan published the Watchword for the Year as well as the motto verses for the month. It was Oskar Schnetter, youth director of the YMCA in Kassel, who had the idea of printing and distributing the monthly motto verses as a poster. This so-called “Yellow verse” soon reached a circulation of 500,000 during the church struggle in the Third Reich and caused a considerable stir in public. The government of the Reich invoked the “Law against Treacherous Attacks on the State and Party” and prohibited the distribution of the posters.

A global success story

After the Second World War, the Text Planning Committee was constituted anew. The departments for home mission and pastoral ministry in the Protestant churches took up membership, and delegates were also sent by the Union of Evangelical Free Churches, the German CE Union (Christian Endeavor) and the Association of Protestant Bible Societies. The Bible reading plan also attracted attention outside Germany and the German-speaking countries. Through the World Federation of the YMCA, with its headquarters in Geneva, it spread into almost one hundred countries around the world.

Catholics on board

In connection with the biblical and liturgical renewal movement in the Catholic Church, daily Scripture reading and the use of Catholic Bible reading plans had been recommended since the beginning of the 20th century and practised widely alongside the daily Liturgy of the Hours. The founding of the Catholic Bible Movement in 1933 meant that these initiatives were brought together and strengthened. The “Katholisches Bibelwerk” (Catholic Biblical Association) in Stuttgart as well as the Biblical Pastoral Ministry of the East German Bishops’ Conference in East Berlin joined the Text Planning Committee in 1969. Since 1970 this committee is called the **Ecumenical Association for Bible reading (ÖAB)**.

Critical potential in GDR times

During the period of German division, the ÖAB worked in two regions. Nonetheless, the decisions on reading plans and motto verses for the months and years were always taken jointly, namely at the Annual General Meeting in East Berlin. These three-day meetings had a very special atmosphere: every morning the delegates from the West passed the border-crossing Friedrichstrasse in East Berlin. They brought citrus fruits and coffee with them. The hospitality of the sisters and brothers from the East was always impressive, despite the fact that the premises of the YMCA were still heavily damaged from the war. The potential of the Bible for criticism and resistance was always felt to be extremely encouraging in the atheistic surroundings of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Due to the state controls

and the difficulties in obtaining paper for printing plans and posters, the texts to be read always had to be selected three years in advance. Since 1990, it has become possible to do the work again in concert in every sense. The leadership of the Association, which had been separate until then, was reunited.

Spoilt for choice – what does the Bible reading plan contain?

The plans intend to help people

- to read the Bible daily in manageable sections
- to perceive the wider context of the sections
- to recognize the variety of biblical tradition, expressed by the alternation of narrative, didactic and poetic texts
- to gain an overview of the whole Bible, i.e. Old and New Testaments including the deuterocanonical (apocryphal) texts
- to discover the relationships between Bible passages from the Old and New Testaments
- to get into conversation with others on the text that one has read together.

Since the passages for daily reading may not be too long, while at the same time all the books of the Bible are to be read within a reasonable period of time, compromises were necessary. That means that some Old Testament texts are left out (for example, those that are identical in the historical books Kings and Chronicles), so that in a period of eight years about three quarters of the Old Testament texts are read, including passages from every book. The complete New Testament is read within four years.

Texts from the Apocrypha with alternative readings

Regularly, about every two or three years, sections of the so-called Apocrypha (late writings of the Old Testament) are also found in the reading plan of the ÖAB. The reasons for this are obvious: First of all, according to Catholic tradition, these books are an integral part of the Christian Bible – which an ecumenical association cannot ignore – whilst secondly, according to Protestant understanding, they are indeed “useful and good to read” as Martin Luther stated explicitly in the title of the Apocrypha in his Bible.

To be sure, the members of the ÖAB are aware that for Protestant Bible readers the Apocrypha are not as weighty as the other biblical books. Therefore, the reading plan of the ÖAB always offers a parallel series of readings from a non-apocryphal book as an alternative to the apocryphal texts. The individual publishing houses which have the Bible reading plans, calendars and Watchword booklets in their programme, have the option of choosing how to deal with this parallel reading proposal: Some of them only print the series of readings from the Apocrypha, others only the alternative series, whilst others publish both series as parallel selections.

Sunday is Psalm Day

On Sundays and Church feast days, the ÖAB Plan offers a series of Psalms which takes the readers through all the Psalms in four years. In this way it follows a tradition which runs through the whole history of the Christian church. The Psalms contain prayers for so many human experiences and situations that they really embody “a life of prayer.” It is appropriate to take Sunday as “Psalm Day” for a number of reasons. Firstly, in this way the Bible reading plan highlights the character of Sunday as an interruption of everyday life. Secondly, it allows the whole Book of Psalms to be read without causing a potentially tedious sequence of psalms in the reading plan, whilst ensuring that they are represented regularly throughout the year. Finally, the Sunday Psalm reading also corresponds to the practice of weekly Psalms in church services. However, this series only comprises certain selected psalms, whilst in the ÖAB Plan all the psalms are included. Therefore, the Sunday Psalm reading only coincides occasionally with the Psalm of the week in the liturgy; but the ÖAB makes sure that all the Psalms of the week which figure in the Bible reading plan for the year are placed on the Sunday concerned.

Reading Plan “light”

Although the “full-size” Bible reading plan already offers easily digested text rations, youth workers expressed the desire to make another plan available for beginners and less experienced Bible readers. This contains a smaller selection of important texts from the Old Testament.

Distribution

At present there are 19 organisations and unions which belong to the Association and they have various different ways of making the reading plans, Watchwords for the Year and motto verses for the month available to their members. In addition, there are now over a hundred publishers and institutions that reproduce and comment upon the Bible reading plans of the Ecumenical Association in calendars and magazines as well as in specially produced books. The Sunday newspapers of many regional churches and dioceses publish the appropriate section of the ÖAB-lectionary every week. The annual Watchword is published on front pages, greeting cards, calendars, Watchword books and decorative posters. The total circulation is about seven million. Several million copies of the reading plan with the monthly motto verses are printed each year in addition.

All the Bible reading plans, Watchwords of the Year and monthly motto verses are available in German on the website www.oeab.de

On the Road Together – learning different approaches to the Bible

Jürgen Dittrich

The following suggestion for a pilgrimage combines the rediscovery of the Bible with a multilateral, ecumenical approach to the commemoration of the Reformation, particularly envisaged for the year 2017.

Martin Luther, who described himself as a “sworn doctor of Holy Scripture”, emphasised his obligation to the interpretation of the Bible and the necessity of founding all theological argument on the Bible. In this sense, all Christian churches should seek their common ground in the Bible as they move towards the anniversary of the Reformation, for that is the central foundation of their faith. When representatives of different churches and denominations make a short pilgrimage together on a local level, then it is a visible sign that they should look at Scripture and the Reformation spiritually, at best in ecumenical diversity.

Pilgrims

Pilgrimage is one of the oldest forms of mobility, whereby the reasons for going on a pilgrimage have changed over the years. In the Middle Ages it was an act of penitence, and the central idea was the salvation of the pilgrim’s soul on reaching the shrine of a saint. Nowadays, the motivation is different.

Nevertheless, a deliberate decision has to be taken before choosing to leave the place of work and daily routine for a certain time. Someone who is prepared to go without telephone, emails, friends, family and colleagues for the duration of a pilgrimage may well find that the unaccustomed slowness provides a spiritual experience and leads to a restructuring of life. When passing through many places as a guest, and then continuing the journey, one can understand what is meant by Hebrews 13:14: “Here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.”

Pilgrimage can be described by the three actions “setting out, being on the way, and arriving”. This is a reminder of the life of Jesus, who set out after his baptism, left his inconspicuous life at home, made his way through the desert, towns and villages, before arriving at his Father’s house on the cross.

Although pilgrims will not find fulfilment of all their hopes and wishes, and are often tempted to give up during a longer pilgrimage with all its external and internal difficulties, nonetheless they are close to nature and prepared to listen to God's Word, so that they are deeply healed and stimulated in body and soul.

Many pilgrimage routes – such as the Camino de Santiago, the Via Regia, the route of St. Boniface, the St. Elisabeth Way or the Luther Trail – offer an opportunity to take the first step out of everyday life. Pilgrimage routes within one town or a small region help people to find a path that they can manage.



Pilgrims in Wittenberg on their way across the marketplace amid the normal bustle of the market at lunchtime on a Friday

Practical suggestions

Depending on the length and duration of the pilgrimage and the size of the town or area, it is advisable to interrupt the route by holding short services in three to six churches. At each stop, the denominations can present different approaches to the Bible, so that at the end of the pilgrimage those taking part will have been given examples of the rich biblical experience in the various churches. The liturgical form of the prayers can be the same at each station, lasting about 20 minutes, leaving 10 minutes for the differing approaches to the Bible texts. It is especially interesting if the denominations do not use their own church for the biblical presentation, but

rather do it as guests in another church. In this way, ecumenical hospitality takes shape; in Wittenberg, for example, there was a high degree of symbolism when representatives of the Armenian Church demonstrated their use of the Bible in the Castle Church, a place of great significance for all Protestants, since it was there that Martin Luther proclaimed his 95 Theses.

The Council of Christian Churches in Saxony-Anhalt observed a two-hour pilgrimage in Wittenberg around midday on Friday, 16th August 2013, which was attended by numerous senior clergy from seven different churches in the ecumenical movement and about 200 church members. The date was chosen to commemorate the beginning of Luther's lectures on the Psalms on 16th August 1513, and to emphasise the special importance of the town where the Reformation began. The pilgrimage made stops for devotional prayers and biblical approaches at four different churches: Hope Church (Baptist), St. Mary's (Roman Catholic), the City Church and the Castle Church (both Protestant).

Devotional Prayers

In Wittenberg the following liturgy, which was developed in order to give a uniform structure to the times of prayer, has proved its worth. The order contains recurring elements that underline the unity of the pilgrimage, and special sections which change at each station.

At the entrance to each church

1. God has led me in sacred ways, ways inward and ways outward. We need ways of sanctity, so that we may be transformed into committed and faithful human beings. A sign of the cross on our way can show us afresh the proper way within ourselves.¹
2. Song: Lord Jesus Christ, your light shines within us (Colours of Grace² No. 62)

In the church

The leader and the pilgrims gather in the sanctuary.

1. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
2. Amen.
3. Our help is in the name of the Lord,
4. who made heaven and earth.
5. **Station 1 (Hope Church):** Broad ways I have passed through, so as to discover the world, to get to know the unknown. On every highway of life, I met people. Their thoughts came upon me. Sometimes I passed them by. Sometimes I took delight to linger on.

1 Sinfonia Oecumenica / Worship with the churches in the world, ed. Fritz Baltruweit and others, Gütersloh / Basel 32004, 360.

2 Colours of Grace. The Songbook of the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe, Strube Verlag (www.strube.de).

Station 2 (*St. Mary's*): There are narrow paths in life. Only when I turn forward, am I able to follow them with certainty. On the right there is an abyss, on the left there is a danger. Minutes and hours became longer and frightening, too. A single journey through the narrow paths makes me sure, confident and determined. There is only one step towards the goal, a step inspired by a hope that even in the midst of dangers there is still a chance for things to turn out for the better.

Station 3 (*Town Church*): I have passed through difficult ways in life, when heavy burdens were lying upon my shoulders. The turmoil of war obstructed the way. I was surrounded by grief and mourning. Bondage restricted and oppressed me. Bearing the burden, enduring the pain, persevering under difficult circumstances and still moving ahead. Such is life in difficult ways.

Station 4 (*Castle Church*): I have gone through dark ways, without a beam of light, gloomy, without direction and goal. My thoughts were confused, my heart embarrassed, and my eyes tempted to stray. Unreliable and scaring ways, remorseful ways that reduced my innermost to bitter tears. Ways from which I had to turn back through self-realization, through a fresh beginning, and through reconciliation. Ways on which I have failed, and on which I was at my wit's end.³

6. The goal of the outer pilgrimage is the Church or the Sanctuary. The destination of the inner pilgrimage is the Lord of the Church. And the Church has been raised to keep us steadfast to this aim and to lead us all the way to Him.⁴
7. Reading: Ps 84:2ff.
8. Prayer
Lord Jesus Christ, no separation comes from you. In you there is no hate, because you are love. But we are torn by sin. Make us whole, help us to repent and let us forgive one another, as you forgive us. Give us grace that we may take to heart the great danger of our discord. Take away all hatred and all prejudices and whatever else hinders our true unity. Amen.⁵
9. Song: Ubi caritas (Colours of Grace No. 61). [3x]
10. Introduction to the following approach to the Bible (2 – 3 sentences)
11. Biblical approach with a specific text
12. Song: In the Lord I'll be ever thankful [3x] (Taizé Community)
13. For the ways of life which I have passed through I am thankful. For the ways that lie ahead of me, and are yet to be trodden, I wait in peace, because all my past travel experiences have equipped me.⁶
14. Blessing
15. Departure

³ Texts: Sinfonia Oecumenica, 356–358.

⁴ Sinfonia Oecumenica, 350.

⁵ *Umkehr ökumenisch feiern. Theologische Grundlagen und Praxismodelle*, Frankfurt am Main/Paderborn 2011, 157.

⁶ Sinfonia Oecumenica, 362.

At the last station the following prayer was inserted after No. 13:

Leader: Your word, Lord, is a lamp unto our feet and a light unto the path of our pilgrimage.

All: Into your word will I flee when fear darkens my eyes; in your Word will I hide when my trust has broken.

L: Have mercy on the divided body of the Church; bring together what has been separated, to your glory and the salvation of mankind.

A: Let me by baptism be a living member of your body, grant me protection and security in the one, holy Church.

L: Let us not be ashamed to call you by name, take away our fear of the crowd's mockery.

A: You are my shepherd, I shall not want, in joy and in sorrow you are by my side.

L: Your word, Lord, is a lamp unto our feet and a light unto the path of our pilgrimage.

A: Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and shall be forever. Amen.⁷

All pilgrims should be given a compact song sheet they can take with them to all the stations. The church bells should be rung about three to five minutes before their arrival to welcome the pilgrims.

Approach to the Bible

There are a number of various possibilities for this part of the pilgrimage, which demonstrate for each denomination particular aspects of piety, liturgical approaches to the Bible, or specifically local points of view. Thus, in the case of Lutherstadt ("Luther town") Wittenberg, the Baptist congregation approached the Bible by worship and adoration; the Roman Catholic Church focused on children, who showed an approach that was appropriate to their age in the context of catechesis; in the Protestant City Church they presented the expectations of tourists in the church where Martin Luther preached and compared them with his understanding of Scripture. In the Castle Church, which the pilgrims entered through the "Theses Doors", the Armenian Church celebrated a short part of their liturgy, the "Little Procession", thus illustrating the way they encounter the Gospel, namely by prayer and traditional rites.

Discover Anew the Bible's Treasures

Practical advice for joint Bible study

Finding unity by spiritual reading of Scripture (lectio divina)*

For centuries, spiritual Scripture reading (lectio divina) has been part of the traditional treasure of the churches. As early as the Middle Ages, Bible reading with prayer and meditation developed into an integral part of spiritual life. In recent times this form has been rediscovered, for example in a book of Bible readings for Advent which is regularly published by the Catholic Biblical Association in Germany.¹ By the spiritual reading of Scripture, Christians can gain a deeper familiarity with the sacred texts. Supreme purpose of this form is "to welcome the loving presence and voice of God, to find food for the soul, to learn to distinguish the will of God and to grow in obedience to him."² The spiritual reading of Scripture is a form in which Christians can discover the treasures of the Bible together and benefit from their respective traditions. For example, certain books of the Bible can be read and considered in small groups, or churches can offer a Bible course jointly with others in the neighbourhood, either studying books of the Bible or discussing scriptural topics. It is essential that the participants pray together and study the texts with care and contemplation.

Caring for unity with the Bible Week and Bible Sunday

In many congregations all over the world, it is long-standing practice to cooperate in projects related to the Bible. The respective materials are freely available and are valued by many churches.³ Learning and living with Scripture together is experienced, for example, during the Ecumenical Bible Week or on Bible Sunday, which is celebrated in many local churches of different denominations on the last Sunday in January. Such days offer an ideal opportunity to celebrate ecumenical services, focusing on the topics proposed for that year in the light of the different churches taking part. It is helpful to use the same readings in the services of the various churches.

Practising unity by a common understanding of Scripture

In accordance with their respective doctrinal traditions, the churches have developed different ways of understanding and using Sacred Scripture. This is reflected in the articles in this book. By reading Scripture together, it is easier to learn how

* These remarks are based on proposals by Cardinal Walter Kasper in *Wegweiser Ökumene und Spiritualität*, Freiburg 2007, 19–27. 1 Cf.

1 www.bibelwerk.de/lectio+divina.89122.html.

2 Cardinal Walter Kasper, *ibid.*, 21.

3 The materials for the Bible Week and Bible Sunday can be found, for example, at www.biblesunday.org.

the denominations approach the Bible in different ways. Joint Bible study offers Christians the opportunity to come to a better understanding of the interpretation of the Word of God. For joint Bible studies, it is useful to choose particularly those texts of Scripture that have given rise to controversy and disagreement, above all the passages that have gained special significance for a particular tradition. While Christians remain loyal to the teachings of their own faith community, they can still develop a growing appreciation of the ways in which others have approached the Word of God. This is also a good way to obtain new insights into the different ways of reading biblical texts. These cover not only the mainly literal meaning, but also the symbolic, scientific-theological and mystical interpretation of Scripture. Cooperation in this field offers Christians the opportunity to appreciate the relative merits of these approaches and the possibilities for potential complementarity. The questions and issues arising in modern society can be of particular interest in this process. It can be especially fruitful to consider ethical issues in the light of the Word of God and the different approaches to it, for example in the following areas: human rights, the beginning and end of human life, human sexuality and the understanding of marriage and family, war and peace, terrorism and public security, poverty and justice.

Discovering unity in biblical texts

In Scripture the theme of “Unity and Division” plays a role in many texts. Many texts on this topic, in a variety of literary genres (historical texts, psalms and prayers, sayings of the prophets, sermons and parables), are suitable to be read and discussed jointly. Here is a selection of possible themes to be taken into account⁴:

- the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and their divine work of reconciliation, as expressed at the origins of the Church and in its continuing life;⁵
- the painful reality of division: its origin in human weakness and sinfulness, its profound and lasting consequences, the appeal to God and the search for words in prayer, the need for forgiveness and reconciliation;⁶
- Jesus’ teaching on the Kingdom of God, which he has revealed, which has begun its course with his words and deeds, which the Church has been called to proclaim among all nations after his death and resurrection;⁷
- Jesus’ explicit prayer for the unity of his disciples, the ensuing teaching of the apostles and their constant efforts to safeguard the unity of the Church when it was threatened by internal or external forces of discord and division;⁸

4 Cf. Cardinal Walter Kasper, *ibid.* 26ff.

5 Cf. Jn 16:4–15; Eph 4:1–16.

6 Cf. Gen 4:1–16 (Cain and Abel); Gen 37–50 (the story of Joseph); Isaiah 42–53 (the suffering servant); Ps 44 (lamentation and prayer for help); Mk 9:33–40 (who is the greatest?); Lk 12:51–53 (Jesus as a cause of division); Lk 15 (the parable stories of the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, and the Prodigal Son and the Merciful Father).

7 Cf. Mk 4:26–34; Rom 14:17–21.

8 Cf. 1 Cor 1:10–17; 3:3–39; 12:4–27; Eph 4:1–16; Col 3:12–17.

- pictures and symbols used in the Bible to describe the nature or the mystery of the Church:
 - the images of the Old Testament referring to the “people of God” (Ex 19:5ff.; Deut 7:6; Mic 4:1–4);
 - the images of the New Testament proclaiming Christ as the head of the Church, which is his body (Rom 12:3–21; 1 Cor 12:12–31);
 - comparisons taken from everyday life, such as the example of the shepherd and his flock (Jn 10:1–16; Ezek 34:11–31), tilling the ground (e. g. the parable of the vineyard and its owner, Mt 21:33–43; Jn 15:1–11), architecture (e. g. a building or temple and the living stones, 1 Cor 3:5–23; Eph 2:19–22; 1 Pet 2:1–9), the vision of Jerusalem descending from heaven (Rev 21:1–27) and images taken from marriage and family life, such as the image of the Church as the bride of Christ (Mt 22:1–14; 2 Cor 11:2) and as the family of God (Mt 12:46–50; Eph 2:19).

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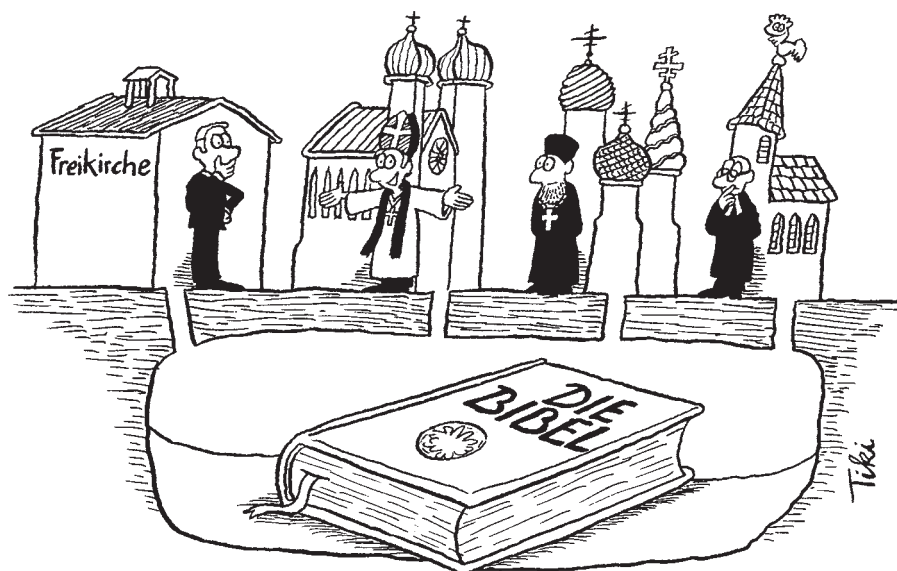
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"And I'd like to bet that there is something we all have in Common."

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P. 78: Jesuit Church, Innsbruck

P. 80, 81 und 82: Independent Evangelical-Lutheran Church

P. 87: Aram Bar Schabo

P. 94: I. Rasche, pixelio.de

P. 106: Samuel Klusz

P. 112: Federation of Pentecostal Churches

P. 119: Dieter Schütz, pixelio.de

P. 121: St. Albans Psalter, Library of the Cathedral in Hildesheim.

P. 128: Panthermedia

P. 135: ACK Sachsen-Anhalt

P. 144: Thanks to Werner Tiki Küstenmacher, who drew this cartoon especially for this book

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Ecumenical discussion of the Bible gives Christians the opportunity to learn from one another and to draw mutually on the riches of the traditions which have accumulated within the churches. The members of the Council of Christian Churches in Germany were asked how they read and understand the Bible, to describe its significance for their worship, for congregational life and personal piety, and to show how this finds particular expression in their denomination. This booklet contains the answers given. One article is dedicated to the women's perspective and shows that women in many different churches pose the same questions relating to the Bible and are seeking answers together. The third section of the booklet focusses on ecumenical practice. It describes the work of the Ecumenical Association for Bible reading, an exemplary ecumenical pilgrimage, as well as practical suggestions for joint study of Holy Scripture and an introduction to the various approaches to the text. The overall purpose is summed up in the title: "Discover Anew the Bible's Treasures".