

# The Bible, the Word of God, and the Augustana Church

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## *Summary*

The Christian Church has always understood its mission to be to preach and teach the Word of God in truth and purity. But it has often disagreed as to whether and to what degree the Bible, especially the Old Testament, is the Word of God. The Augustana Church, following its Lutheran heritage, was selective in its use of Biblical materials. Like Luther, the Church believed that what preaches Christ is the Word of God. Theologically, the criterion was “salvation by grace, through faith.” So the church viewed the Bible functionally, i.e., for the creation and nurturing of faith, not primarily dogmatically and thus resisted both Fundamentalist and Modernist pressures.

As far as I am aware, every church that considers itself a Christian church, claims to preach and teach the Word of God which it finds in the Bible. Yet, as we all know, there is a wide variety in what each church teaches, and the words by which each church responds to the events of our personal and corporate lives also vary widely.

This is not a particularly modern problem. From the first days of the church there were disagreements about what was “the authentic Word of God for us today.” There was as yet no official canon of the Jewish Scriptures, and of course, there was no New Testament. There was the Torah, the Prophets, the Writings, and we now know there were many other religious writings like the Dead Sea Scrolls as well. Among the Christians there were reminiscences of Jesus, his teaching, his ministry, and especially his death and resurrection, as well as varied interpretations. Most, if not all, of this was passed on orally in the preaching of the apostles and other missionaries.

No one knows when Christians began to write things down, but likely it began very early, at least when the first generation who had been contemporaries with Jesus began to die. There seems to have been many written materials, some of which have been incorporated in our present gospels, some of which are known outside of the canon, and some which have totally disappeared.

A major problem for the pre-New Testament church was the question of the authority of the Torah for Christians, especially Gentile Christians. The mother church in Jerusalem and Peter, until the event at Joppa, maintained that all Christians were subject to the Torah, that is, they had to be circumcised and that Christians had to maintain the Jewish separation from Gentiles, observe the dietary laws, etc.

On the other hand, the apostle Paul, whose Jewish credentials were impeccable, maintained that the authority of Christ and the new Word of God which was in Jesus, superseded the old regulations of the Torah. Although he was an expert in the Torah, and it had shaped his life, he was determined, he said, “to know nothing but Christ and him crucified.”

A story which surfaced post-resurrection may be instructive, it seems to me. It is the familiar story of the Transfiguration. Peter, James, and John—the inner circle of Jesus’ disciples—were on the mountain top along with Moses, Elijah, and the transfigured Jesus. Moses was the father of the Jewish faith and nation, the one who had talked with God face to face, the author of the Torah, the foundation of Jewish life. Elijah was the great historic hero of contemporary Judaism, the great defender of the nation, zealous in defense of God’s honor and mighty in defense of the nation and the faith. And there was Jesus. But it was Jesus, not Moses or Elijah, that God told the disciples to listen to. The Law and the Prophets, as it were, were honored, they were not denied or rejected, but the final ultimate authority belonged to the word and ministry, the death and resurrection of Jesus.

This story may well have emerged (with the imprimatur of Jesus’ inner circle) to answer the burning question of the relative authority of Jesus and the authority of Judaism.

The church dealt with the problem of authority in its own materials by specifying which writings were considered worthy of being used by the churches. They were not all of equal authority or value. Some were considered to be edifying but not equal to the others in authority, and some were rejected outright. At about the same time, the Rabbis were establishing their own canon for what the Christians call the Old Testament. And so the Christian Bible comprising the New Testament and the Old Testament came into being.

This did not settle the problem of what is the authentic Word of God, as we all know. Along came Marcion, not a bishop, but a perceptive theologian who said that there were major discrepancies between the stories that the Old Testament told about God and the God that Jesus prayed to and called Father. He suggested that the God of the Old Testament was actually evil and that most of the Old Testament ought to be dispensed with, along with chunks from the New Testament as well. Naturally Marcion was declared a heretic and his editorial emendations were rejected.

If Marcion represented the left wing, on the right wing were Christians who maintained all of the Torah requirements just like pious Jews. They faded away over time and were never a significant part of the church.

The far more typical response to the question of the relative authority of the Old Testament and the New Testament was the concept of fulfillment. The disciples and the earliest Jewish Christians were all familiar with the Old Testament, and naturally it furnished templates or paradigms by which to understand who Jesus was and the meaning of the events of his life and certainly of his death and resurrection. But no Greek, Roman, or modern person who had ever heard of the Passover in Egypt would ever call Jesus “The Lamb of God.” Certainly, Jesus never called himself the Lamb of God, though John the Baptist, essentially an Old Testament character, seems to have done so.

One of the reasons for the differences in the accounts in the gospels of Jesus’ life and career rises from the use of different Old Testament materials that were thought to apply to Jesus. Often this usage can be recognized by the phrase, “This took place to fulfill....”

A modern version of the fulfillment approach to the Old Testament is the familiar jingle, “The New is in the Old contained, the old is in the New explained.” Sometimes this is used to mean that we learn about God from the Old Testament, and then we learn a little more from Jesus, the frosting on the cake, as it were. The priority in time of the Old Testament is often understood to mean that it is the basic source for our knowledge of God, rather than Jesus, however. But in John 14, Jesus seems to assert that there is no other God, no Old Testament God different in character from Jesus, and that the wholeness of God is seen in Jesus. Thus Jesus is the final and ultimate revelation of the being and character of God. The Old Testament must be understood in the light of the Christ.

The early Christian fulfillment approach to the Old Testament is made possible, certainly, because the Old Testament is so full of hope and expectation. But the Jewish church had in many cases a different expectation about these hopes. It had a different interpretation of the Servant Songs in Isaiah, for instance, and did not accept the Christian fulfillment interpretations.

Another recent type of fulfillment interpretation, which I was surprised to find still alive and well, was Scofield Dispensationalism, which sees the Bible as a succession of stages, each one an advance over the previous. This was quite popular in the early twentieth century.

In the history of Christian thought, theologians, teachers, and church rulers have made use of whatever Biblical materials suited their purposes without much regard for the context or the original meaning. And, of course, they developed methods to legitimate what they wanted the texts to say. One such method was the so-called four-fold meaning of Scripture. Every text from the Bible was thought to have a moral, a spiritual, an analogical, and last and not least importantly, a literal meaning.

Luther repudiated the four-fold meaning method of deriving meaning from the Bible and insisted on the priority of the literal meaning of the text. But Luther’s greatest contribution to the interpretation of the Bible, perhaps, was his insistence that the Word of God was not a book but a person, Jesus the Christ. Whatever bears witness to Christ is the Word of God. The

Word of God is present in the Bible like the infant Jesus in the manger, along with the straw. His characterization of the Epistle of James as a “strawy” epistle is well known. The theological expression of Luther’s insight is that the Word of God is the Gospel, the message of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

Luther found Christ all through the Bible. Wherever it spoke of “chesed,” God’s steadfast love, as it often did in the Old Testament, there is Christ, he said. The object of our faith, for Luther, was the gospel, the God and Father of Jesus Christ, not a book. No truly Lutheran church could call itself a “Bible Believing Church” as some Fundamentalist churches do. For unlike Luther, Fundamentalism, with its doctrine of verbal inspiration, asserts that each word has equal value, for each has been dictated by God. Yet, it is the Bible, for all its “straw” which is the witness to the act of God in Christ. And in so far as it bears that witness, it is normative.

However, the Protestant churches were born in controversy and polemic. Some opposed an essentially infallible church with an infallible book. The church, especially the German church, built a fortress of dogmatic propositions supported by an array of proof texts. Some of the churches have made similar fundamentalist responses to the modern age, especially against geology, biology, psychology, genetics, literary criticism and the like.

These issues did not affect the Swedish Church quite as directly as they did some others, but the Augustana Church did not exist in a vacuum, nor was it insulated from events in the American churches. There were those who tried to move the church in a fundamentalist direction, but they did not dominate the church, nor did they succeed in capturing control of the seminary as the Fundamentalists had in some other denominations.

In some seminaries the central courses were the courses in dogmatic theology. The Bible had a secondary role as support for these courses. In Augustana Seminary, the dominant courses were the courses in Bible. They were powerful and creative for many of us. I had never before thought to compare gospel accounts to see how the differences and similarities might illumine the text.

I had never heard of JEDP, the different strands of tradition in the Torah, and their varied perspectives.

The study of the Hebrew language itself was a major revelation to me. I found it to be the language of poetry, allusive, a shorthand of a language. It is the opposite of the directness, the precision of Greek. I saw right away that to take the Hebrew text as the language of a law book or of a scientific treatise was to badly misunderstand it. Because the Hebrew is so indirect and allusive, it is often susceptible of a variety of meanings. That is why the Torah, for Jewish scholars, requires the Mishnah, a compilation of wide-ranging commentary and interpretation; that is why my Bible so often says at the bottom of the page in the Psalms, “one possible meaning of the difficult Hebrew text.”

The seminarians came from a variety of congregations, of course, some of which had pastors with fundamentalistic leanings. Some of them were severely challenged by what they heard in the seminary, but more were liberated and even exhilarated by a new understanding of the Word of God. By and large, the seminary and the church followed Luther, declaring that Christ is the living Word and whatever bears witness to Christ is the Word of God. Christ is the salvation of God, the grace of God, the undeserved mercy of God, received by faith.

As a result, preaching generally was Bible centered and expository, usually an explication of salvation by grace through faith. Like good Lutherans, most pastors were sensitive to the division between law and gospel. They were not divorced; first came law and then came gospel. We often started out with “the wages of sin is death,” but we wound up with “but the free gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord.” The quip that the usual Protestant sermon consisted of eighteen minutes of law and two minutes of grace was not fair, nor was it typical of the usual sermon in my experience.

The Augustana Church had only two lessons for each Sunday in the lectionary, a Gospel and an Epistle text in a three year cycle. The Gospels focused of the life and career of Jesus leading up to Easter, and the latter half of the year focused on the teachings of Jesus and the

Christian life. The Epistles were usually from the New Testament epistles, often Paul, but a number of them were from the Psalms and a few were from the Prophets, especially Isaiah.

To be sure, we learned stories from the Old Testament in Sunday School, but these seemed more like ancient history that we might learn in regular school, not like anything we heard in church. In confirmation instruction there was a strong emphasis on Bible reading as well as on learning specific Bible verses. Bible camps, as the name indicates, were fine experiences for the youth of the church, for a variety of reasons, but especially for their emphasis on Bible study in a more intensive way. Often various themes were pursued or larger units were taught. It was also possible for a teacher to ride a hobby, if he wished.

The average person in the pew was not a Bible scholar, nor did he or she spend much time reading the Bible. Though he honored and respected the Bible, and though regular Bible reading was encouraged, basically, what he knew of the Bible was what he heard each Sunday in the assigned pericope and in the sermon. The function of that selection of Bible materials was to create, inform, and nurture faith and trust in Jesus Christ and to encourage the hearers to live out that faith in their daily lives. Scripture was viewed functionally, not dogmatically, though of course, there were exceptions.

Back when I was an Augustana pastor typically we had a series of instructional meetings for prospective new members. One prospective member was a woman who told me that she had never been in church in her life. She had married a Canadian professional hockey player who came from a Lutheran background and had joined the Boston Bruins. She was curious about religion and Christianity but somewhat apprehensive too because her experiences with religious people had not been very happy. She asked me at the very beginning what religion was all about. So I read to her John 3:16-17, Matthew 5:43ff, and some words from First John about the love and grace of God. I told her that religion is our response of faith and thanksgiving to the love of God in Jesus Christ. She burst out crying, and said, "Why didn't anyone ever tell me this before?" I thought to myself, probably because lots of religious people didn't know

that themselves.

But I think that the Augustana Church, as I knew it at least, viewed the gospel as a love letter from God, calling us to repentance, obedience, and faith in Jesus Christ our Lord. I believe that the Augustana Church used the Bible with the same purpose that John had in writing his gospel: “These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and believing you may have life in his name.” Certainly, there were differences of interpretation and of emphasis, but it was this gospel that was the Word of God for the Augustana Church.