
Module 7 Workshop Guide

How do we challenge the misuse of Scripture against women and girls?

Pages 99-111 in Faith, Sexism, Justice: Conversations Toward a Social Statement

<http://www.elca.org/womenandjustice>

Note to Workshop Leader: This module is important and complex! There is more than can be easily covered in one session. Our Lutheran heritage is covered in important ways, too.

Opening Prayer .

Let us pray, watchful and caring God, you have created each of us with wonderful gifts and talents. We are constantly uncovering our passion for new things. You have provided us with Holy Scriptures to guide us. Help us to understand what scripture means to us and how to interpret it for us today. At times women and girls feel devalued when reading the Bible when they know that you love us so much that you sent your Son to earth who died for us. This act shines great value upon women and girls. Help us to live into your light. AMEN (Pastor Connie Winter-Eulberg, 2017)

Conversation covenant *See Pages 13-14 for more information and to copy the Covenant*

"I would like to remind you all that this is a safe place to talk and that whatever is said here does not leave this room. Our conversation covenant states that we are to be respectful of all people in the room and speak with "I" statements. Thank you."

Scripture reading

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The Word was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through the Word, and without

him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in the Word was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. ... And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth."s(John 1.1-5, 14)

Moment of silent reflection I.

What's the Problem? (5 MINUTES)

Invite participants to think of a time when a scriptural passage was used to limit or harm someone they know. Invite them to turn to a partner and share the passage and how they felt. After a minute of sharing have everyone return their attention to the full group.)

In our time together we will:

1. discuss the problem that the Bible has been misinterpreted to devalue and harm women.
2. distinguish between what a text says and what it means for us today.
3. explore how the gospel of Jesus Christ functions for Lutherans as the central way to interpret the Scriptures.
4. practice how to listen well for what the Word of God means for us today.

Read the Following paragraph aloud or have as a handout for all participants.

HANDOUT

Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church.

The Bible has been interpreted in many ways, by different people, in different contexts. Unfortunately, the Bible has often been misinterpreted in ways that are limiting and even

destructive for women and girls.

Christians treasure the Scriptures because from these writings we hear the message of God's wondrous, saving acts – especially the liberation of God's people from slavery in Egypt and the life, death and resurrection of Jesus — and God's promise of a new creation in Christ. So, it is troubling for many Christians when the Scriptures are used in other ways that devalue and harm women and girls, compromising the promise of a new creation in Christ.

For example: (Have someone read these)

- Even though all the Gospels identify women as the first witnesses of Jesus' resurrection, some people use other scriptural passages to silence the voices and witness of women and girls in the church.*
- Even though the Old Testament tells us that both women and men are created good and in God's image and even though the New Testament repeatedly affirms that God's mercy in Christ opens a place for all regardless of social identity or location, including race and gender, some people use other scriptural passages to devalue women and girls and to deny them equal standing in the church and society.*
- Even though the entire Scriptures uphold the two-fold commandment to love God and to love one's neighbor as oneself and direct all Christians to live respectfully with others, some people use other scriptural passages to excuse and legitimize violence against women and girls. Faithful Christians are right to be concerned and seek a remedy to these misuses of the Scriptures.*
- II. WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY, AND WHAT DOES IT MEAN? (10 MINUTES)** **(All of the following passages are from ancient religious texts. As each is read each out loud, invite participants to mark a Y or N next to the ones they think are from the Bible. Y*

(Yes: in the Bible) or N (No: not in the Bible).) **HANDOUT**

- If a woman will not veil herself, then she should cut off her hair; but if it is disgraceful for a woman to be shorn or shaven, let her wear a veil.
- Women should keep silence in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.
- If a man seduces a virgin who is not betrothed, and lies with her, he shall give the marriage present for her, and make her his wife.
- It is well for a man not to touch a woman. But because of the temptation to immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. If brothers dwell together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the dead shall not be married outside the family to a stranger; her husband's brother shall go in to her, and take her as his wife, and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her.
- Woman will be saved through bearing children, if she continues in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.

**(Note to leaders: Ask participants to share brief responses to this exercise. Then lead a discussion of the following questions.)*

QUESTIONS

How did these passages make you feel?

What helped you determine if each passage was in the Bible or not?

As a matter of fact, all of these statements are found in the Bible.¹ Does that surprise you? Why or why not?

READ:

Many biblical texts, as well as texts from other ancient religious writings, originated in patriarchal cultures. These texts often say things about women and girls that we find problematic today. It is important to recognize that the Bible also says other things that many Christians today do not consider relevant for us anymore, such as prohibitions about eating pork² and shellfish³ or cross-breeding cattle or crops.⁴

It's clear what the Bible says. It's less clear what these passages mean for us today. Such texts are especially challenging to us because the Bible is regarded as the Word of God and thus holds a place of authority among Christians. How do we decide when, whether and how specific scriptural passages are still relevant for us today?

III. WHAT IS THE “WORD OF GOD,” AND HOW DO LUTHERANS INTERPRET SCRIPTURE? (10 MINUTES)

How do Lutherans understand the “Word of God”? The “Confession of Faith” in the constitution of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America identifies three complementary understandings of the Word of God. We confess:

- “Jesus Christ is the *Word of God in bodily form*, through whom everything was made and through whose life, death, and resurrection God fashions a new creation.

- “The proclamation of God’s message to us as both Law and Gospel is the Word of God, revealing judgment and mercy through word and deed, beginning with the Word in creation, continuing in the history of Israel, and centering in all its fullness in the person and work of Jesus Christ.
- “The canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the written Word of God. **Inspired by God’s Spirit speaking through their authors**, they record and announce God’s revelation centering in Jesus Christ. Through them God’s Spirit speaks to us to create and sustain Christian faith and fellowship for service in the world.”⁵

For Lutherans, the Word of God is much more than words printed on a page. The Word of God is living and active. When proclaimed, the Word both reveals to us our brokenness and offers us God’s love and grace. When we speak about the Scriptures as inspired by God, this refers not only to the activity of the Holy Spirit when the Scriptures were first written but also to the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit through the Scriptures in the life of the church. We trust that God is still speaking to us through the Scriptures!

Because the Word of God is first and foremost Jesus Christ himself, Lutherans practice a Christ-centered method of interpretation.

As Martin Luther wrote, “The gospel itself is our guide and instructor in the Scriptures.”⁶ We should read the Scriptures, Luther said, expecting that in them we will encounter the good news of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, as a gift for us. When we read the written Word, we do so with our attention focused on Christ the living Word, and we do so for the sake of speaking and hearing the

Word today – a Word for all people regardless of gender, ethnicity or social and economic class.

New Testament scholar Diane Jacobson explains that at the core of this Lutheran understanding is an emphasis on what it **does**.⁷ This means that God works actively through the Word (and the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion) for our benefit.

**(Note to leaders: Direct participants to circle the words that catch their attention as these paragraphs are read or summarized aloud.)*

What does this mean in practice? Here are three ways of describing a Lutheran, Christ-centered hermeneutic. These are “lenses” we can look through to focus our attention on the central, saving message of the Scriptures.

Distinguishing between law and gospel is a Lutheran practice that keeps the gospel promise of God's mercy in Christ from being confused with the demands of God's law. It seeks to preserve Christ as the embodiment and enactment of God's mercy and to prevent Christ from being turned into a lawgiver and judge.

Distinguishing between law and gospel is not only a way of understanding what a specific scriptural passage says objectively; it is also a way of discerning how that passage is heard, either as good news or as bad news. To give an example, the statement “God loves you” is objectively gospel, or good news. However, to someone who feels guilty or unworthy, the statement “God loves you” can actually reinforce feelings that one is not worthy of God's love.

“What proclaims Christ” expresses a Lutheran commitment to use the Scriptures in a way that conveys their life-giving

authority today. Left to our own devices, humans tend to read the Bible through legalistic lenses, as a rule-book for how to live a God-pleasing life. Luther described the problem with this approach to the Scriptures by saying that it turns Christ into a newer and better Moses. Instead, we should interpret the Scriptures in a way that bears witness to the promise of new life in Christ. The fifth article of the Augsburg Confession (one of the Lutheran Confessions) says that when the gospel is preached as the promise of good news in Christ, the Holy Spirit works faith in those who hear it.

LEADER: PLEASE READ THE BOLD AND UNDERLINED SECTIONS!

“Scripture interprets Scripture” is the Lutheran principle that this gospel promise – what preaches Christ – is the key to interpreting all of Scripture. When scriptural passages are unclear, or when they seem to contradict each other, they should be interpreted in light of the central message of God’s mercy in Christ. Even when a text itself is primarily an expression of God’s law, the Lutheran way to preach on the text and apply it to daily life is within the context of the good news of Jesus Christ who has fulfilled God’s law for us. When we let Scripture interpret Scripture, the law is never the last word!

To give an example, this principle helps explain why the ELCA and many other Lutheran churches have chosen to ordain women as pastors. Scriptural passages like 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 – “Women should keep silence in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.” – are interpreted in light of the Christ-centered perspective expressed in Galatians 3:27-28

– “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

Optional activity: Using Lutheran principles of interpretation

**(Note to leaders: If you have time, use this exercise using Lutheran principles of interpretation. Invite participants to form groups of two or three. Have someone in the group identify one of the texts or situations they had in mind earlier where we identified how someone was limited or harmed by the misuse of Scripture. Have members use the following questions to talk about the meaning of the passage together.)*

- Was the passage in question used as law or gospel?
- How was (or wasn't) the promise of Christ conveyed in this situation?

Wives, in the same way, accept the authority of your husbands, so that, even if some of them do not obey the word, they may be won over without a word by their wives' conduct,² when they see the purity and reverence of your lives.³ Do not adorn yourselves outwardly by braiding your hair, and by wearing gold ornaments or fine clothing;⁴ rather, let your adornment be the inner self with the lasting beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in God's sight.⁵ It was in this way long ago that the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves by accepting the authority of their husbands.⁶ Thus Sarah obeyed Abraham and called him lord. You have become her daughters as long as you do what is good and never let fears alarm you.⁷ Husbands, in the same way, show consideration for your wives in your life together, paying honor to the woman as the weaker sex, since they too are also heirs of the gracious gift of life—so that nothing may hinder your prayers.

(1 Peter 3:1-7)

- Use “Scripture interprets Scripture” to identify one or more Scripture passages that bring the message of God's new creation in Christ to reinterpret the passage that was used to harm. How does this interpretation bring a healing, liberating or reconciling word or message for women and

girls in the situation that you had identified earlier?

**(Note to leaders, if you have time, gather the group and ask a few participants to share examples from their small-group discussion. Together, brainstorm a list of some empowering biblical texts that show forth Christ and preach the gospel against sexism, abuse and discrimination.⁸)*

IV. HOW DO WE LISTEN FAITHFULLY? (20 MINUTES) Listening to varied perspectives

1 Peter 3:1-7 is one example of the **household codes** found in the New Testament. Other examples are found in Colossians 3:18-4:1; Ephesians 5:22-6:9; and Titus 2:2-10. Codes like these were common in the ancient world as advice about proper behavior for the members of a household in that society: husbands and wives, parents and children, and masters and slaves.

**(Note to leaders: Divide participants into small groups of three to four people. Direct them to close their eyes and listen while someone reads 1 Peter 3:1-7 out loud. Then direct each group to use the following questions, as you keep track of time.)*

Discuss initial reactions to this text. How did the text make you feel? How does this text illustrate some of the gender roles and assumptions that we have discussed in earlier sessions? Did this text function as law or gospel for you as you heard it read? (3-5 minutes)

Now think about the text from different perspectives. As you listen to the text from 1 Peter being read aloud a second time, try to listen with the ears of your neighbors:

- How do you think you would hear this text if you were single?

- If you were in a same-sex relationship?
- * If you were in a heterosexual relationship?
- If you were divorced?
- If you were a teenager?
- If you were in an abusive relationship?
- If you were married to someone who is not Christian?
- How do you think you would hear it if you were from an ethnic community other than your own? (African Descent, American Indian or Native Alaskan, Asian, Middle Eastern, European Descent, etc.)

Share some of your thoughts with other members of your small group. Then talk about what you learned from trying to listen to the Scriptures with the ears of your neighbor (5-7 minutes). (For more on women in Scripture and reading Scripture together, see *Going Deeper*.)

Considering historical context

**(Note to leaders: Gather the group and read or summarize together the paragraphs below. Conclude with open sharing about the “aha” question found at the end.)*

We often talk about the Christian community as “the communion of saints” (Apostles Creed) or “a cloud of witnesses” (Hebrews 12:1). The Christian community exists across time as well as space. We are part of the same body of Christ as our Christian sisters and brothers who lived hundreds or even thousands of years ago.

If we want to listen to the Scriptures with the ears of our neighbors from earlier time periods, it is important to know about the historical contexts in which they lived, as well as the historical contexts in which the Scriptures were written. How

would the people to whom 1 Peter was addressed have heard and understood this passage?

This exercise in hearing the Scriptures with the ears of our neighbors helps us recognize that the Bible does not speak to everyone in the same way. This is true not only with respect to our individual circumstances but also with respect to the time and place in which we live.

Biblical scholars believe that 1 Peter was written by Silvanus (also known as Silas) to a church of Jewish Christians in Asia Minor (present day Turkey) around 80-90 AD.⁹ Christianity was a minority religion in that area and was viewed with suspicion by the wider society. It was seen as foreign, with strange religious practices that differed from the norms of the Roman Empire. In the past, other foreign religions had come to the area and caused problems. For example, the cult of the Egyptian goddess Isis upset the established social order because it empowered women and slaves who, according to the cultural norms of the time, should have remained submissive. The cult of Dionysus or Bacchus – the god of wine and fertility – was also seen as leading good Roman women astray.

In this cultural context, it was feared that the Christian belief in equality after baptism (Galatians 3:28) would cause similar social unrest if Christian wives and slaves refused to worship the Roman gods of their husbands and masters and desired emancipation. Scholars believe that these Christians were facing social discrimination, including harassment, arrest, imprisonment and even death.

1 Peter was written not only to encourage these Christians in their trials and sufferings but also to provide them with practical advice for easing their relationships with civil authorities and within society. Understood in this way, the household codes were a life-giving help to a persecuted Christian community.

Understanding the historical context of this letter helps us to

recognize that the household codes were written as specific advice to specific Christian communities at specific times and places. They were not intended to establish a timeless, universal set of gender roles and norms, any more than God's instructions to Noah about the precise measurements for the ark were intended as a timeless, universal ship-building blueprint.

Martin Luther captures the critical importance of interpretation that is faithful in this way:

“From the very beginning the word has come to us in various ways. It is not enough simply to look and see whether this is God's word, whether God has said it; rather we must look and see to whom it has been spoken, whether it fits us. That makes all the difference between night and day. ... You must keep your eye on the word that applies to you, that is spoken to you.

“The word in Scripture is of two kinds: the first does not pertain or apply to me, the other kind does. And upon that word which does pertain to me I can boldly trust and rely, as upon a strong rock. But if it does not pertain to me, then I should stand still. The false prophets pitch in and say, ‘Dear people, this is the word of God.’ That is true; we cannot deny it. But we are not the people. God has not given us the directive.”¹⁰

Conversation questions:

What was the greatest (most significant) “aha” for you listening to Scripture's historical context? Name one way that your realization affects the meaning of Scripture for women and girls. (Or: Name one way your realization positively affects women's and girls' lives.)

If you want to know more about the problem of women's voices in the Scriptures: The Bible was written long ago in a **patriarchal** context that valued men more than women. One effect of this is that there is far more male representation than female representation in the Bible. Lindsay Hardin Freeman

reports in her book, “Bible Women: All Their Words and Why They Matter” that:

- Although there are many named men in the Bible, we are only told the names of 49 women.
- There are only 93 women who are allowed to speak in the Scriptures.
- Of the 93 women given voice, they speak collectively 14,056 words (which is roughly only 1.1 percent of the total words in the Bible).¹⁴

Question for reflection: Are these statistics surprising to you? How does this make you feel? What message does this give to young girls and boys today? What can we do about this?

Ending Prayer:

Let us pray, Guardian of our lives, we are filled with gratitude for the people gathered here who listen, share, and teach us. This conversation has brought up so many of our emotions. We know that you are by our sides to comfort and guide us. Help us to reach out and get help and support when we need it and help us to listen and lift up others who are affected by sexism and injustice. Thank you God for blessing our time together. AMEN (Connie Winter-Eulberg, 2017)

GOING DEEPER FOR MODULE 7

If you want to know more about Jesus’ beliefs about women and his view of households, consider these examples:

*Mary and Martha in Luke 10:38-42*¹¹ (Invite a participant to read): Jesus and his disciples were visiting the household of Martha. Martha was working in the kitchen and serving her guests, consistent with women’s role. Her sister was breaking the

gender norms; she was out with the men, sitting near Jesus, listening as he taught. In the end, Jesus not only welcomed Mary's presence with the men, but also actively supported her decision to break with the social rules and not spend the visit serving. Later Jesus took on the role of a female servant and washed the feet of his disciples.

*Jesus's own traveling household in Luke 8:1-3*¹² (Invite a participant to read): Whereas social norms prohibited women from traveling away from their homes and male protectors, Jesus traveled not only with 12 male disciples but also with a group of women patrons who provided for them out of their own means, including Johanna, wife of Chuza, an influential courtier – who far from submitting to her husband, had left their household to travel around the countryside with Jesus and a band of men. How does 1 Peter 3:1-7 connect with texts of Jesus' interactions with women and practices regarding households and with the over- all biblical story?