

7-24-2022 “How Do United Methodists Interpret Scripture?”

The very first Bible I remember in my home when I was a child was a very old, large, leather-bound, family Bible that, among other things, started my original exploration into my family’s genealogy.

Like many old Bibles of this nature, it included a family tree section in the center in which someone had taken the time to inscribe some family history going back into the early 19th century.

The first Bible I was **given** was this one that I received in church on September 8, 1968 when I was 8 years old.

St. John’s UCC didn’t give children’s Bibles or story Bibles - you got the “real thing,” as it were.

You might note, the spine is barely cracked on this one. It was just too much for my 8 year old brain to contain.

This is the Bible I had when I was in youth group as a teenager.

As can be seen, it got a lot more use and shows the wear and tear of a young person eagerly exploring their faith and looking for answers.

As I went through life other Bibles were added to my collection at various times, such as a study bible when I did 3 years of Disciple Bible Study, life-application bibles, chronological bibles, and other variously themed bibles.

This is the Bible that was used in Lynn's and my wedding ceremony 18 years ago.

In seminary you work with many different translations so if you didn't happen to have one that was required for this course or that professor, you bought it.

When I went through Local Pastor's Licensing School - which Lucy just recently completed - they insisted on a particular

translation and version of the Bible that, alas, I did not own, so I bought that one as well.

Oftentimes, older ministry peers and mentors, especially when they retire, will pass along to newer or younger clergy colleagues parts of their personal libraries, which can be very helpful.

And those libraries inevitably include Bibles, sometimes multi-volume study Bibles like this twelve volume New Interpreters Study Bible that was passed on to me by a retired clergy friend.

And finally, at the very end of the entire ministry candidacy and ordination process, when you are ordained and the Bishop lays hands on your head in blessing for set-apart ministry and speaks the words, "Take Thou Authority," when you rise, they present you with a Bible.

So over time you can accumulate a lot of Bibles.

And that is all well and good, except that most pastors I know now use electronic Bible applications on their computers and smart phones more than print versions because they are more portable, quicker to access, and because you can quickly switch between

hundreds of translations in the palm of your hand so much quicker and easier than juggling all of these books.

And then there's the question, what do I do with an old Bible that I don't use anymore, or that is falling apart, or that the dog got hold of?

You can't throw it away, can you? Heavens, no!

That would be a sacrilege - a sin! Wouldn't it?

Hmm. I don't think it's a sin - what it actually is, is idolatry.

Making an idol out of something, worshiping something, holding something as being on par with God that is not God. And we do that don't we?

We take a book, a collection of paper and ink, and because of how we view what that paper and ink say, we make an idol out of it.

We call it the Word of God, sometimes forgetting that within the covers of this very book, it tells us that it is Jesus who is the Word of God, not a collection of writings.

So we're going to begin our series on the Bible, Sexuality, and the United Methodist Church by talking about how we view the Bible - how we understand the nature of the Bible, how we read it, how we interpret it, and what our doctrine as United Methodists says about the Bible.

Then, as we move through this series we'll explore specific passages that address human sexuality in both the Old and New Testaments, we'll consider what it means to consider scripture through the lens of Jesus as the ultimate Word of God, and finally we'll look at how our differing understandings of the biblical texts have led us to where we are as a denomination, and what might be next for the United Methodist Church.

But first, this explainer.

This is a five-week sermon series.

In this series Lucy and I will be using various sources, one of which is the resource we're using for the accompanying six-week video study that begins tomorrow night.

In that study that I will facilitate we will have time for discussion around some of these issues that a sermon in a worship setting simply doesn't allow for.

I encourage you to participate in both.

At the same time, Pastor Lucy is also offering again her study on "Making Sense of the Bible," which, if you have not yet participated in it, is a **wonderful** resource from Adam Hamilton that deals more deeply with many of the issues about how we approach scripture that we can only touch on today.

Add to that, the four-week after-church study that Rev. Jim Wagner is providing each Sunday in August about prayer and healing generally as a ministry of the church and I think we have a very broad, wholistic and prayerful opportunity to engage the questions of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ, to love God and love our neighbor, and to approach the scriptures that deal with issues of sexuality in a meaningful and serious manner without it having to a crisis of faith or cause separation in the church.

So before we go any further, I invite you to pray with me:

Lord, we begin recognizing that we are your children and you love us equally the same.

We are people who need guidance and direction.

As best we can, we begin this experience open to new learning.

Even if we believe our minds are fully made up, send your Holy

Spirit to convict us, convert us, and conform us, until we are

wholly yours. In Christ's name, Amen.

Let's begin by considering United Methodist doctrine as it pertains to the Bible.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, recognized early on that people would look at scripture differently, and would interpret and understand various passages in different and sometimes conflicting ways.

And addressing that very issue, Wesley wrote,

“Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt, we may. Herein all the children of God may unite, notwithstanding these small differences.”¹

As United Methodists our doctrine of the Bible comes out of the Articles of Religion of the Church of England, which was the denomination in which John Wesley was a priest, and from which Methodism was birthed.

And this doctrine, which can be found in our United Methodist Book of Disciplines, states simply about the Bible:

- 1) All things necessary for salvation are contained in the Bible.
- 2) Nothing beyond Scripture as it pertains to salvation is required of any person.
- 3) We recognize the 66 books of the Bible.

¹ Wesley, John, as quoted in “Faithful and Inclusive: The Bible, Sexuality, and The United Methodist Church,” six-part video study, part one.

There is nothing in our doctrine as United Methodists that says we are to read the Bible literally or, as some say, as the “inerrant” word of God.

In fact, a literal reading of the stories of the Bible did not even become common until the mid to late 19th century as a response in some corners of the church to the Enlightenment and Enlightenment era thinking that sought to rationalize and explain more and more of the workings of the universe in more scientific ways.

For the first 1800 years of Christianity biblical literalism as it has come to be called, was not even a thing.

That said, John Wesley believed Scripture was above **all** in importance in our faith, but in what would be termed by a later Wesleyan scholar as the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral,” Wesley believed that our interpretation and understanding of scripture must be influenced by Tradition, by Reason, and finally by our personal Experience.

These things, he said, should be the lenses through which we read scripture and that should influence our understanding of Scripture in our contexts.

Many Christians, though, struggle in this area.

They want to be open and accepting of others, but at the same time they want to be faithful Christians.

The struggle, in part, lies in the fact that many people view the Bible as harsh, judgmental, and condemning when it comes to some expressions of human sexuality. This, I would offer to you though, is a false dichotomy. While some folks like to lead with the idea that “the Bible is clear” when it comes to these issues, it really is not clear at all.

Our interpretation and understanding is certainly not clear.

As Rev. Rob Fuquay, the Senior Pastor at St. Luke’s UMC in Indianapolis, IN and the host of our accompanying video study points out, people tend to look at the Bible in one of three ways:

First, that the Bible should be taken as both *literal and authoritative*. This belief holds that God dictated the words of the Bible to the authors, and so, as the bumper sticker phrases it, “The Bible says it, I believe it, that settles it.”

The second way he suggests that people approach the Bible is *seriously and with authority*.

That is, the Bible is God-inspired and authoritative, that God inspired the human authors who wrote it, but that the Bible is not the dictated words of God.

This is the United Methodist understanding of Scripture as described in our Doctrinal Standards in the Book of Discipline.²

The third way some people approach the Bible is as non-authoritative, viewing the Bible as nothing more or less than a collection of writings akin to a book of literature or history, but not authoritative in any way.

² United Methodist Book of Discipline 2012, “Doctrinal Standards and Our Theological Task,” par. 105, pg 81.

Now one of the ways that these approaches play out for Christians in our interpretation of scripture is whether we see a certain passage as *prescriptive*, meaning it is God's will for all people for all time, or *descriptive*, describing something within the context of the time period in which it was written and being understood as applicable to that time only.

So here are a couple of examples:

Leviticus 19:18 (NRSV) reads, "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord."

So what do you think?

Is that passage *prescriptive*, describing God's will for all people for all time, or *descriptive*, describing a specific context in time but having no universal authority?

Here's another from the New Testament letter 1 Corinthians (1 Cor. 14:34, NRSV): "Women should be silent in the churches. For

they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says.”

Is that passage *prescriptive*, describing God’s will for all people for all time, or *descriptive*, describing a specific context in time but having no universal authority?

I’d be very careful here, men.

There are no right or wrong answers here, Christians across the centuries and across the theological spectrum fall into all of these categories as it pertains to both the level and kind of authority we give to the Bible and to whether we view various passages as being more prescriptive or descriptive.

What’s important is to understand where **you** fall and why.

What is it, thinking in terms of the Quadrilateral, within your particular faith traditions and experiences - and some of us have had more than one - within your sense of reason, and in your own lived experience that guides you to view the Bible and to interpret scripture in the way that you do?

As United Methodists, as the Wesley quote I read earlier suggested, we commit foremost to humility and unity in our approach to scripture.

In the passage we read earlier from 2 Timothy, which is ascribed to the Apostle Paul, the writer says

“All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for showing mistakes, for correcting, and for training character,” (2 Tim. 3:16).

Assuming that Paul was the author, which is not certain, “all scripture” in that time would have included only a small amount of what we call scripture today. It would have included the Pentateuch, which is the collective name given to the first five books of the Bible, it included some but not all of the history, and it included some, but again not all, of the Prophetic writings, along with the book of Psalms.

Scripture then did **not** include most of what we now call the Old Testament and it included zero of what we call the New Testament because none of that had been written - the letters of

Paul are the earliest writings in the New Testament, written anywhere from two to four decades before the gospels.

And Paul would have had no idea that these letters he was exchanging with various faith communities around the Middle East and Asia to address very specific issues they were dealing with would someday be considered scripture. So Paul's understanding of or meaning of the term "all scripture" was very different than what we have today - the canon of scripture was still forming in the first several centuries after Christ.

As for the idea of scripture as "inspired," inspired means "God breathed," and this is the only place in the Bible where these words are used.

Some, as I alluded to earlier, interpret this to mean God dictated scripture to authors who merely acted as scribes, but the word *breathed* brings to mind God breathing life into Adam in the Creation stories, or perhaps God breathing life into both people and scripture, as

authors and as interpreters throughout time as we seek to understand God's desire within our own context.

This idea is what is called Progressive revelation.

Progressive revelation assumes that God is not finished communicating with us, or as one denomination puts it, "God is Still Speaking."³

Progressive revelation means God's will may be eternal and permanent, but **understanding** God's will may live beyond the **specific** standards of the cultures when the Bible was written and read.

It comes nicely alongside Wesley's admonition that we best approach scripture when we humbly bring the lenses of tradition, reason, and experience to bear as well.

And so in the coming weeks we will utilize Wesley's interpretive lenses along with other scholarly work as we address the six verses, six verses out of a total of over 31,000 in all of scripture,

³ The United Church of Christ.

purporting to address homosexuality that have become known as the “Clobber Verses.”

They are called this because they have been used to “clobber” LGBTQ children of God, to deny them a seat at the table, access to marriage equality, or recognition of a call to ordained or set-apart ministry within the church, as well as in other ways in other aspects of life.

And I say “purporting” to address homosexuality because, while Scripture has been with us for thousands of years, the word “homosexual” only first appeared in Scripture in 1946, yes, 1946 - during many of your lifetimes.

Before then different words with different meanings were used in these passages.

And further, the concept of heterosexuality and homosexuality as orientations is a fairly recent concept that was totally unknown and inconceivable during biblical times. But I’ll let Pastor Lucy tell you more about that...next week. Amen.