

WHY METHODIST – WHY SERVANT ?!

¶ 102. SECTION 1—OUR DOCTRINAL HERITAGE

United Methodists profess the historic Christian faith in God, incarnate in Jesus Christ for our salvation and ever at work in human history in the Holy Spirit. Living in a covenant of grace under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, we participate in the first fruits of God’s coming reign and pray in hope for its full realization on earth as in heaven.

We hold in common with all Christians a faith in the mystery of salvation in and through Jesus Christ. . . . We share the Christian belief that God’s redemptive love is realized in human life by the activity of the Holy Spirit, both in personal experience and in the community of believers. . . . We understand ourselves to be part of Christ’s universal church when by adoration, proclamation, and service we become conformed to Christ. (p. 49) We share with many Christian communions a recognition of the authority of Scripture in matters of faith, the confession that our justification as sinners is by grace through faith, and the sober realization that the church is in need of continual reformation and renewal. (p. 50)

Theological Guidelines: Sources and Criteria

As United Methodists, we have an obligation to bear a faithful Christian witness to Jesus Christ, the living reality at the center of the Church’s life and witness. To fulfill this obligation, we reflect critically on our biblical and theological inheritance, striving to express faithfully the witness we make in our own time.

Two considerations are central to this endeavor: the sources from which we derive our theological affirmations and the criteria by which we assess the adequacy of our understanding and witness.

Wesley believed that the living core of the Christian faith was revealed in Scripture, illumined by tradition, vivified in personal experience, and confirmed by reason. Scripture is primary, revealing the Word of God “so far as it is necessary for our salvation.” Therefore, our theological task, in both its critical and constructive aspects, focuses on disciplined study of the Bible. (p. 82.)

¶ 104. SECTION 3—OUR DOCTRINAL STANDARDS

Article I—Of Faith in the Holy Trinity

There is but one living and true God, everlasting, without body or parts, of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness; the maker and preserver of all things, both visible and invisible. And in unity of this Godhead there are three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.

Article II—Of [faith in] the Word, or Son of God

Who Was Made Very Man The Son, who is the Word of the Father, the very and eternal God, of one substance with the Father, took man’s nature in the womb of the blessed Virgin; so that two whole and perfect natures, that is to say, the Godhead and Manhood, were joined together in one person, never to be divided; whereof is one Christ, very God and very Man, who truly suffered, was crucified, dead, and buried, to reconcile his Father to us, and to be a sacrifice, not only for original guilt, but also for actual sins of men.

Article III—Of [faith in] the Resurrection of Christ

Christ did truly rise again from the dead, and took again his body, with all things appertaining to the perfection of man’s nature, wherewith he ascended into heaven, and there remains until he returns to judge all [humanity] at the last day.

Article IV—Of [faith in] the Holy Ghost

The Holy Ghost, proceeding from the Father and the Son, is of one substance, majesty, and glory with the Father and the Son, very and eternal God.

Article V—Of [faith in] the Sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures for Salvation

The Holy Scripture contains all things necessary to salvation; so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any [person] that it should be believed as an article of faith, or, be thought requisite or necessary to salvation.

For the better part of thirty years, I have been saying to local church audiences, as well as to students at the undergraduate and graduate as well as post-graduate level these words: “You cannot, with logical and theological consistency, be both a Wesleyan and a Fundamentalist.” There are several reasons why this is the case, but the primary reason I have found it necessary to say this so often is with regard to the way the Bible is understood and interpreted by Wesleyan Christians who seem not to understand that their assumptions and interpretive practices are foreign to the Wesleyan tradition. Let’s look at how this came to be. In the late 19th and early 20th century, the influence of the scientific inductive method from the natural sciences were pushing hard against the there-to-fore largely dominant domain of unquestioned theological truths.

This is especially the case in the post-modern, and as some would have it, our emerging Post-Christian era. Simply put, the status of truth has devolved rapidly in the last hundred years – as truth has become a cipher for one’s preferred, culturally conditioned, socially constructed version of reality. This social construction requires the deconstruction of truth as having little more than personal meaning – my truth, your truth, his truth, her truth, their truth, our truth. This has become the case not only for public words and concepts, but also for texts – the Bible included. Since all truth is now construed to be local, constructed according to culture and context, not even to the Biblical text might one have the audacity to ascribe broad authoritative status. Accompanying the loss of textual authority is also the loss of any status for moral authority – actually any ‘authority’ at all beyond personal preference.

Modern Definitions of Truth

It seems that words like truth ought to be rather straightforward, something like the question every parent asks a child, “Are you telling me the truth?” In other words, do your words reflect an accurate representation of what happened? Seems straightforward enough; but what if my words are not an answer to a direct question as to what happened? What if my words are a narrative, or even a poetic account through which I am trying to convey the significance and meaning that I understand to be part of a larger story? You see immediately where this is going. If you parse the literal meaning of my words, they may be adequate to the events at one level but not at another. They might also be true at both levels: an account of what happened as well as conveying the meaning attached to them; and the meaning attached to the accounts, as in Scripture, was part of a shared community of meaning that was understood by the first hearers. For almost eighteen hundred years the Christian Church understood Scripture in this way, or at least something similar to this way of understanding “literal.”

It is well known that the Reformers, especially Luther and Calvin, **as well as John Wesley**, adhered to a ‘literal’ reading of the text when they affirmed **sola scriptura**; and this is certainly the case when he affirmed

Luther's teaching of **claritas scripturae**. But for the modern reader, schooled by the assumptions of socially constructed truth, our difficulty is actually the **lack of clarity** with regard to the supposed self-evident transparency of Scripture's literal truth and meaning. "The literal sense of a text was its face value to a reader or hearer who was formed by the Christian experience and the Christian story by the church's liturgy, its creeds, its catechism, its hymns, its ethos. It was the plain meaning, it was the literal meaning that was the **insider's** meaning, but for the insider it seemed to reside in the text itself."

To the insider, the meaning was transparent because there was a shared field of meaning and reference between the text and the community. This can be illustrated in the contemporary setting with typical ecclesial shorthand references that do not need to be explained to insiders. In the Roman Catholic church, "Rome has spoken." In the Church of the Nazarene, one might say, "Kansas City has spoken." In the United Methodist Church, the shorthand reference is to Nashville. For an Anglican, the reference would likely be Canterbury. And all the outsiders, say, "Huh?!" The meaning inherent in the words is an unconscious transaction, and the meaning transcends the literal dictionary definitions of the words.

By the early eighteenth century, the field of transactional meaning which defined what literal meant for the Reformers and their successors began to change very rapidly. This change has significant implications for us in our new century, for the changes in ground level assumptions are still with us in the twenty-first century. With regard to my present concern, let me zero in on what I believe to be at the heart of our Bible Wars in North America. The set of issues surrounding Biblical authority I find to be among the single most disruptive factors when I teach at the congregational level as well as among theology students. There is no common frame of reference in which the Bible is read and interpreted; and where there is a degree of commonality, it is almost always foreign to the Holiness and Wesleyan tradition. And it is basically the thoroughly Enlightenment-based understanding of the 'authority of Scripture.'

In the next few paragraphs, we set out how Fundamentalism was formulated and took hold in American Christianity. In nineteenth-century Princeton, B. B. Warfield, followed by Charles Hodge, laid the groundwork for supposedly all 'conservative evangelical theology' by insisting on the importance of propositional truth. The Bible is seen as the repository of revealed truth, and theology is the 'science' of describing the truth of that repository. To the extent that these Princeton theologians understood theology as a science, they based their theory on an understanding of the inductive method that dominated the natural sciences of that era. The Bible contains revealed data, not only soteric/salvific insight, but scientific, historical, and geographic data as well. This is the case, they said, because these are God's words, but it is also true because God's words are inextricably intertwined with real events in the world. They assumed the connection between these two to be uncomplicated and transparent – hence the "clarity of Scripture" is preserved as a rather straight forward exercise of common sense logic.

Within this so-called ‘biblical hermeneutic’ the science of theology is being done correctly when the theologian is interpreting the Bible accurately through a process of empirical observation and/or logical deduction. In Hodge’s own words: “The Bible is to the theologian what nature is to the man of science. It is his storehouse of facts.” Carl Henry’s (former editor of *Christianity Today* magazine) magisterial defense of propositional revelation in the second half of the twentieth century follows the same basic trajectory. He defines a proposition as “a verbal statement that is either true or false.” The Scriptures, says Henry, contain a divinely given body of information, actually expressed or capable of being expressed in propositions. Those parts of the Bible that are not already in the form of statements may be paraphrased in propositional form. Even such speech acts as promising and commanding can be “translated into propositions.”

These narrow rationalistically defined “truth as fact assertions” are necessary for Henry because “the primary concern of revelation is the communication of truth”, and truth for Henry, like Hodge and Warfield before him, is a category inclusive of all categories – soteriological/salvific and scientific. This is the foundational essence for Fundamentalist assertions about the Truth of Scripture. This theology tends to see Scripture in terms of revelation, revelation in terms of conveying information, and theology in terms of divine information-processing.”

Methodist Articles of Faith and Holiness Tradition Churches

With regard to the issue of fundamentalism, let me say unequivocally that I do not believe that it is possible for one to be with theological consistency a Fundamentalist and a Wesleyan at the same time.

In order to see why this is so, why one cannot consistently be a Wesleyan and a Fundamentalist at the same time, it may be helpful for us to return to Wesley’s famous dictum: **homo unius libri**. Fundamentalism has also historically and theologically been concerned with “The Book,” but their preoccupation has been of a different nature than ours. Aware or blissfully unaware of the historical and hermeneutical assumptions at play, Fundamentalists return continually to the Bible as a source of factual certainty and rational authority. While the heirs of Wesley are not disinterested in either of these, **our primary concerns lie elsewhere**. Wesley’s own use of the expression, “a person of one book,” is instructive for us. In 1765 Wesley wrote, “In June 1730, I began to be **homo unius libri**, to study (comparatively) no book but the Bible.” It is important to note that the purpose of this letter to John Newton was a description of Wesley’s own **via salutis** (“Way of Salvation), as is confirmed in his *Plain Account of Christian Perfection*: “That this is the very point [Christian perfection] at which I aimed all along from the year 1725 [the year of his ‘first conversion’ and his beginning to keep a *Diary* (April 5)]; and more determinably from the year 1730, when I began to be **homo unius libri**, ‘a man of one book,’ regarding none, comparatively, but the Bible.” Wesley’s consistent authoritative center is, “God himself has condescended to teach the way: for this very purpose he came from heaven. He hath written it down in a book.

O give me that book! At any price give me the book of God! I have it. Here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be **homo unius libri**.” This use of the Bible as the source book for understanding the way to heaven and the life of holiness is different than the fundamentalist use of Scripture to verify factuality of rational propositions. And this should have important implications for what we, the spiritual heirs of Wesley, believe and teach with regard to the Bible and its authority.

In order to see how this soteriological frame of reference worked itself out in formulating the faith of American Methodists and the Christian Holiness Association Churches, we go back to the Christmas Conference of 1784 and the condensation of the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England that Wesley prepared for the American Methodists. We all know that the early American Methodists were not thrilled about the authority of the “old man from England” on very many points, but when it came to the Articles of Faith, they were willing to listen.

In the early Latin versions of the Anglican Thirty-Nine Articles, it is crucial to note that the original wording of Article One was “Of Faith in the Holy Trinity” [underline mine], not simply “On the Holy Trinity.” The Anglican divines chose to privilege faith in the Triune God as the first affirmation of faith. The theological logic has implication for all the articles, namely, that which is affirmed as an article of belief comes within the circumscription of active faith. So, article two, “De Verbi Dei...,” [‘On/Concerning the Word of God’], should be construed as **Of faith in** the Word of God. Every article of faith is affirmed within this theological affirmation of belief. Unlike most other Protestant Creeds (especially the Westminster Confession in the English context, which places Book One with its ten affirmations on the Bible **first**), the Anglican Articles affirm first the **faith in** the Trinity. After this comes affirmation of the nature of Christ, Christ’s resurrection, and the Holy Spirit, all prior to the first mention of the Bible. And when we do get to the article on Scripture, it is not about rational authority per se, for it reads, “On the Sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures for Salvation.” Indeed, the implication of this doctrinal article in its total grammatical context is “Of faith in the sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures for Salvation.” The word sufficiency rather than the word authority is used, and that sufficiency is *for salvation* rather than to certify the rational certainty of facts or data.

This is a different emphasis and nuance than can be found in nearly any confession or creed of early Protestantism, especially those of the Reformed tradition that are foundational for Fundamentalism, especially as they have been interpreted by many Neo-Reformed Evangelicals for the last hundred years. As Nazarene Theological Seminary Professor, Paul Bassett has rightly pointed out, “By contrast, in most of the continental confessions, especially those of the Reformed tradition, the article on Scripture stands first, or, even prior to that, a preamble asserts the priority of the authority of the Bible.”

There is not a hint of this kind of Fundamentalist propositionalism (“truth as fact” assertions) in the Methodist Articles: Rather what we find is a different controlling concern: “All truth necessary to faith and

Christian living.” And this is of great importance for Wesleyan Christians in the twenty first century. Wesley understood well the faith-centered and salvific intent of the Articles of Religion, and this understanding informs the manner in which he “condensed” them. For example, among others, he omits the article that does not deem soteriologically [i.e., for our salvation] significant, *the descent into hell*, and when he comes to the article on Scripture, he does not follow the Puritan emphasis that had come to insist in the eighteenth century on rational authority on all matters. Wesley retains the original wording of the Anglican Article V, “Of the Sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures for Salvation.” For Anglicans and Wesleyans who do not fear the word “evangelical,” the authority of Scripture has a soteric/salvific rather than a rationally defined epistemic [i.e., defining all truth] center. On this point, we Wesleyans are more Anglo-Catholic (and early church and Eastern and Orthodox) than we are Puritan-Reformed!

We can, however, be evangelicals! I would, in fact, argue that it is those of us who appreciate fully Wesley’s appropriation of the Anglican soteriological use of Scripture who are most free to be evangel-centered. For it is in the context of faith in God, that is the body of Christ in personal and public worship, that religious experience takes on its distinctive character. For it is here that faith in God comes alive through the testimonium Spiritus sancti internum, the internal witness of the Holy Spirit. Without the Spirit of God bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, without the Living Word testifying to the saving sufficiency of the spoken and written Word, even the written Word may be little more than the dead letter of the law. It is in this way that Experience became the fourth leg of the Anglican tripod of Scripture, Tradition and Reason for Wesleyans. While methodologically we affirm sola scriptura, theologically it is in the ecclesial context of Trinitarian affirmations, and evangelically it is **always** this Trinitarian God graciously initiating a saving relationship through Christ, witnessed to by the Holy Spirit, that must remain central in a fully formed Wesleyan “evangelical” theology.

It is soteriological [salvific] sufficiency and not factual inerrancy that lies at the heart of Scripture’s authority for Wesleyans. One can be an Evangelical and affirm the absolute soteriological sufficiency of Scripture for our salvation; however, one cannot consistently be a Wesleyan and hold on to the epistemic-centered emphasis on factual accuracy for all things recorded in Scripture. Inerrancy is not the issue for Wesleyans, and the sooner we can teach our students and pastors that this is the case, the sooner we will leave behind the fractious Bible Wars that disrupt our evangelical churches.