

Discovering the Bible Anew as a Treasure

The United Methodist Church

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- 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*, Vo. 8, London 1831, 299.

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.