

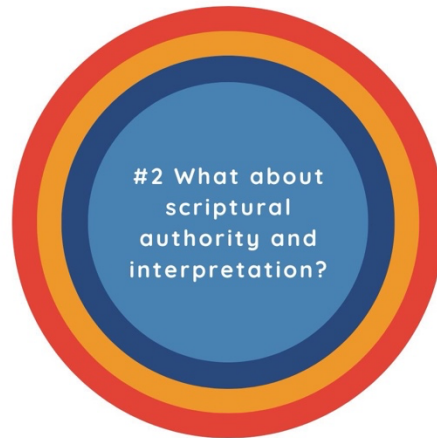
Human Sexuality and Our Future in the UMC

Circle #2

“What about scriptural authority and interpretation?”

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Fig. 2.1



Some argue that the issue dividing the UMC is not human sexuality but the authority of Scripture. The assumption is that those who believe homosexuality is wrong are the ones who uphold the authority of Scripture. In contrast, those who believe homosexuality is not inherently sinful must necessarily deny Scriptural authority. Those who argue this distinction say that the biblical passages prohibiting same-sex relations are unambiguous. *“Scripture says it, and that settles it”* for them.

This assumption about who most faithfully holds to Scriptural authority may also have roots in the view of some who believe that the Bible is inerrant and infallible. For those who hold this view, the Scriptures must be read literally, without considering that the words in English are not the words the original writers used or that the cultural context of the Scriptures is different from ours. In some ways, this view of Scripture robs it of its richness and vitality because the Bible becomes a static and one-dimensional book that we can read only one way.

Dr. David Lose, former professor of Biblical Preaching at Luther Seminary, argues that most Christians throughout the centuries have not considered the Bible to be inerrant and infallible, nor have they read the Bible literally. Before the 17th and 18th centuries and as far back as the first few centuries of the early church, most Christians believed that something could be *“true”* even if not *“factually accurate.”* Dr. Lose says that Ambrose, the bishop of Milan (c. 339-397 AD), taught the allegorical interpretation of Scripture to the pagan scholar Augustine (354-430 AD), leading to his conversion to

Christianity. Only the writings of the apostle Paul have influenced early Christian thought more than Augustine's.

Ambrose argued that some biblical stories seemingly presented as historical facts are metaphors that point to spiritual realities. Openness to interpreting Scripture remained unopposed until the late 19th century when some fundamentalist preachers and teachers began emphasizing a belief in the inerrancy and infallibility of Scripture. This concept was a reaction to the Enlightenment's focus on reason and rationalism over religious revelation. Some Christians, perceiving the worldview of the Enlightenment as a threat to their faith, began trying to "*prove*" everything the Bible taught as factually correct. In essence, the church began to emphasize "*facts*" over "*faith*," evident today in Young Earth Creationism, which holds that Genesis is an actual historical account of Creation and that the consensus scientific view of Creation is in error. This view ignores the fact the author of Genesis wrote a beautiful and sometimes poetic narrative about God's relationship with humans and never intended to write a scientific explanation for Creation.

Those who hold to a literalist view of reading Scripture reject the more orthodox belief that while God inspired those who wrote the Bible, their words are not without error nor meant to be taken literally in every respect. In an upcoming article on Wesleyan/ Arminian theology, I address the nature of free will and how we can exercise freedom in our response to God. The authors of the Scriptures bore this burden of free choice as much as we do. We can and do resist God, and I'm sure they did, too.

Literalism requires that the words of Moses in the Torah are equal to the words of Jesus in the Gospels, which is not an accurate assertion. Jesus is "*The Word of God*," as described in John 1, the very essence of the Father, unequaled by any person (*or object, including the Bible*), and the perfect representation of the Father. Therefore, the Scriptures are rightly subject to interpretation as we discern the degree to which the biblical text reflects God's Spirit, character, and integrity, revealed in Jesus Christ. This standard of authenticity to God's nature explains why Jesus often clarified any misconceptions about God found in the Old Testament to his followers.

For example, when we compare Deuteronomy 21:18-21 with Luke 15:11-32, we see that Jesus ignores the Deuteronomic commandment to stone a wayward and disobedient son in his telling of the parable of the prodigal son. He depicts God the Father as more loving and merciful than the Old Testament Deuteronomic Law implies, even going as far as the Father humiliating himself by lifting his tunic to run to his wayward son to save him from the stoning ceremony prescribed in Deuteronomy. I love this picture of God! Since Jesus is the most accurate depiction of God the Father; therefore, we must carefully examine any Scripture that fails to reflect God as presented by and represented in the person of Jesus Christ.

The analytical interpretation of Scripture does not mean we question the authority of Scripture; instead, it means we take the authority of Scripture more seriously as we discern what it teaches us about God and our relationship with him. John Wesley critically analyzed the Scriptures, yet for him, the Bible was authoritative and contained *"everything necessary for salvation."* Wesley used the Quadrilateral (*not Wesley's term but one applied to his method of interpretation by scholars after his death*), which combines looking at Scripture through the additional perspectives of tradition, reason, and experience. The Wesleyan Quadrilateral would have us ask three questions about the biblical texts:

1. *How has the Christian church traditionally interpreted this passage?*
2. *What does human reasoning add to our understanding of this passage?*
3. *What resonates in this passage with our experience, and what conflicts with it?*

In Wesley's perspective, Scripture is always the starting point and stands as the primary source for our understanding; however, tradition, reason, and experience are also trustworthy and inspired (*literally "in-Spirited"*) tools for discerning God's truth in Scripture. Some may challenge this interpretive approach, quoting 2 Timothy 3:16-17, which says,

"All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that the person of God may be proficient, equipped for every good work." (2 Timothy 3:16-17, NRSVue)

In Wesley's own words, from his Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament, commenting on 2 Timothy 3:16, we read,

"All Scripture is inspired of God -The Spirit of God not only once inspired those who wrote it but continually inspires, supernaturally assists, those that read it with earnest prayer."

-from John Wesley's Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament, specific commentary on 2 Timothy 3:16.

Wesley believed that God's inspiration not only guided those who wrote Scripture, but the Spirit of God continues to *"supernaturally assist"* those who study it, inspiring and empowering us as we interact with Scripture. The inspiration of the Holy Spirit ensures the Scriptures remain the *"living word"* from generation to generation.

To sharpen the point concerning Scriptural interpretation, especially in cases of inconsistencies in Scripture, Dr. Lose says some of these differences, like some of those found in the Gospel accounts, reveal the personal faith, experience, and perspective of the author:

"In the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus drives the moneychangers out of the Jerusalem Temple in the days immediately preceding his crucifixion. In the Gospel of John, he does this near the beginning of his ministry, two years before his death. Similarly, in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the day Jesus is crucified is identified as the Passover, while in John, it is the Day of Preparation, the day before Passover. Inconsistencies like this are part of what undermines claims of the inerrancy of not just the Gospels but also many other books in the Bible.

"But if the primary intention of the biblical authors was not to [accurately] record history – in the post-Enlightenment sense we take for granted today – but instead to confess [a particular emphasis of their] faith, then these differences are not troubling inconsistencies to be reconciled but rather helpful clues to understanding [the faith and experience of] the author. So rather than ask who got it right, we might instead wonder why John describes these events differently than the other Evangelists. As it turns out, both examples [in John's Gospel] stem from [his] theological claim that Jesus is the new Passover lamb. For this reason, once [Jesus] begins his ministry, there is no need for Temple sacrifice, and he is crucified on the same day – indeed, at the exact hour – at which the Passover lambs were sacrificed on the Day of Preparation."

–from "Four Good Reasons Not to Read the Bible Literally" by David Lose

We can hold a high view of scriptural authority while also using the tools of interpretation to understand biblical texts better. Critical reflection on the biblical text honors the sacredness and integrity of the Scriptures as the Holy Spirit informs our inquiry.

We must never worship the Bible, attempting to make it the *"Fourth Person of the Trinity."* Scripture points us *"to God,"* but *"Scripture is NOT God."* Jesus himself said as much when he said,

"You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life, and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life." (John 5: 39-40, NRSVue)

Jesus makes it clear that we can know the Bible and still not know him. We should NEVER worship the Bible, for God in Jesus Christ alone is worthy of our worship. Worshiping the Bible is a form of idolatry known as *"bibliolatry,"* literally *"worshiping a book."*

Bishop Scott Jones, a Traditionalist United Methodist bishop and former faculty at Perkins School of Theology at SMU, in his academic treatise on Wesley and his use of Scripture, argues that,

"A genuinely Wesleyan understanding of Scripture would meet at least five criteria.

- *First, it would uphold a high view of the authority and inspiration of Scripture, taking the position that in the Bible, God has chosen to reveal himself to humankind in a way that is dependable and certain.*
- *Second, it would provide proper places for other authorities and constantly see a unified view of truth, constantly seeking the correlation of Scripture with all other approaches to knowledge.*
- *Third, it would seek the whole message of the Bible, listening carefully to its individual parts but also seeking to understand the entire book concerning the saving activity of God, reconciling humanity to himself, and restoring them to the image in which they were created.*
- *Fourth, it would utilize the best critical tools available, using any means possible to elucidate the message of the Bible.*
- *Fifth, and most important, a Wesleyan understanding of Scripture would not be narrowly Wesleyan, but rather a genuine attempt to articulate the best understanding of the whole Christian church."*

--Scott Jones, John Wesley's Conception and Use of Scripture, Kingswood Books, 1995, pp. 222-223, formatting mine)

According to Jones, in Wesley's theological conception of Scripture and his practical use for teaching and preaching, he frequently interpreted the text in a non-literal way, utilizing the testimony and message of the whole of Scripture to analyze its parts (*see p. 215*). In other words, if he found any Scripture contrary to what the larger message of the Bible taught, he dismissed it in favor of the Bible's wholistic revelation. No one would accuse Wesley of denying the authority of Scripture!

Therefore, the issue dividing the church is not the authority of Scripture, as some assert. This issue is the degree to which we are willing to analyze Scripture, looking for Jesus, the perfect revelation of God in every text, and allowing that picture to guide our understanding of human sexuality and a host of other culturally challenging dilemmas. The Bible is not a container in which we keep God; the Bible is the little "w" word of God that points us to the One, True, big "W" Word of God — Jesus Christ, the Son of God, living in us through his Holy Spirit.

I will address how we can faithfully interpret the specific scriptures related to homosexuality in two upcoming articles on Circle #4. Before we get to those, next week's email (#3) covers Wesleyan/ Arminian theology.