

We Believe: Foundations of the Christian Faith

Session 5: The Authority of Scripture

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The Articles of Religion

Article V: Of the Sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures for Salvation

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. In the name of the Holy Scripture we do understand those canonical books of the Old and New Testament of whose authority was never any doubt in the church.

The Articles of Religion

Article VI: Of the Old Testament

The Old Testament is not contrary to the New; for both in the Old and New Testament everlasting life is offered to mankind by Christ, who is the only Mediator between God and man, being both God and Man. Wherefore they are not to be heard who feign that the old fathers did look only for transitory promises. Although the law given from God by Moses as touching ceremonies and rites doth not bind Christians, nor ought the civil precepts thereof of necessity be received in any commonwealth; yet notwithstanding, no Christian whatsoever is free from the obedience of the commandments which are called moral.

The Confession of Faith

Article IV: The Holy Bible

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.

I want to know one thing, - the way to heaven; how to land safe on that happy shore. God himself has condescended to teach the way: For this very end 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 (" a man of one book").

John Wesley, "Preface" to the *Standard Sermons*

The Scripture therefore of the Old and New Testament, is a most solid and precious system of Divine truth. Every part thereof is worthy of God; and all together are one entire body, wherein is no defect, no excess. It is the fountain of heavenly wisdom, which they who are able to taste, prefer to all writings of men, however wise, or learned, or holy.

John Wesley, "Preface" to *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*

“My ground is the Bible. Yea, I am a Bible-bigot. I follow it in all things, both great and small.”

John Wesley, *Journal*, June 5, 1766

The Bible and the Word of God

Revealing the Authority of Scripture

- The central revelation of the Christian faith is the incarnate Word of God, Jesus Christ (John 1:1)
- That central revelation is disclosed to us through the Bible
- “Apart from Scripture, we cannot know who Jesus is. We cannot comprehend how we should properly relate to God, including how we should live, and the kinds of behaviors that separate us from God. We cannot understand what salvation is, nor can we respond to God in gratitude for our Lord’s boundless grace...We cannot appreciate that we are, in fact, saved people, nor can we understand the imperative to offer salvation to other people.” - David Watson

A Wesleyan Doctrine of Scripture and Tradition

Prima Scriptura

- Anglicanism - Scripture is primary, but we also come to know God through the teachings of the church, particularly the decisions of the first five centuries (Creeds and Councils)
- Wesley emphasized both the primacy of Scripture and the illuminating power of tradition
- We measure against what God has said in the past and spoken through an authoritative revelation

A Word on the “Quadrilateral”

Albert Outler’s Great Misunderstanding

- Popularized the idea that Wesley believed that Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience were all equally valid interpreters of Christian life
- Wesley believed Scripture was primary, interpreted within the tradition with the aid of reason and experience
- In some parts of the Church, “experience” has become the primary guide and Scripture is useful insofar as it affirms that experience - to be put into a “bucket” if it does not.

“Canon” - A Measuring Rod

The standard for the Church

- The biblical canon emerged early in the life of the Church
- Biblical books accepted and used by the community (Jewish and Christian)
- Scripture, interpreted in the community of the Church, is thus authoritative
- We may read the Bible individually and interpret it, but our interpretation is not canon for the whole Church and must be evaluated in light of that canon
- “What e’re the Spirit speaks in me must with the written word agree. If not, I cast it all aside as Satan’s voice or nature’s pride.” - Charles Wesley

Defining the Authority of Scripture

Two meanings

- Authority as decision-making power and responsibility (“To have authority over someone.”)
- Authority as knowledge and competence (“Speaking with authority.”)
- By speaking of the “authority of Scripture,” we are referring to the extent to which Scripture makes binding claims over our lives.
- Scripture can make those binding claims because of the power and authority that stands behind it—the power of God
- The Scriptures also speak with authority in teaching about God, human beings, the way of salvation, and the world

A “God-breathed” Authority

2 Timothy 3:16

- “All Scripture is *theopneustos* (God-breathed) and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.”
- Scripture is thus an incarnation itself - the Word of God “breathed” into human authors
- “It can teach us about God because it is from God. It can teach us about life because it is from the source of life. It can teach us about human relationships because it is from the one who lives eternally in a relationship of perfect love, the Holy Trinity. Scripture is binding upon our lives and it can speak powerfully into the circumstances of our lives.” - David Watson

A Word on “Inerrancy”

Plenary Verbal Inspiration

- Usually means that the Bible is “inerrant in its original autographs” (none of which we have today)
- Plenary verbal inspiration: A view that the very words of the Bible, in every sentence, are determined by God, as if God transposed every page.
- Neither of these are claims that the Bible makes about itself
- All Scripture is true in the sense that it discloses to us the grand narrative of salvation. Inerrancy tends to miss the forest while focusing on the trees.
- God is inerrant, and it is the overall and consistent witness of his Word that is authoritative for Methodists. It is a reliable guide for faith and practice.

Scripture as *The Story*

The Bible as Metanarrative for Human Life with God

- Scripture is authoritative because it is the story of salvation
- Scripture is given to the Church as an authoritative guide to inviting and incorporating people into God's story
- It is the story that provides both order and instruction for human life in light of God's creating, redeeming, and glorifying work.
- The story of the Bible tells us who God is and who we are.

The Story of God, The Story of Us

The Grand Narrative of the Bible

- Creation
- Fall
- Israel
- Jesus
- Church
- New Creation

Reading Scripture

John Wesley's Way

- Read the text (“I read His book”_
- Pray (“I lift up my heart to the Father of Lights”)
- Compare (Context - Scripture as its own interpreter)
- Meditate (What is God saying? What am I going to do about it?)
- Consult (read and interpret in dialogue with the Church)
- Teach (share it with others)

Questions?