

HOW TO READ THE BIBLE AS A WESLEYAN

LEARNER OBJECTIVES

Your study of this chapter will help you to:

1. Define biblical interpretation
2. Identify Wesley's explicit methods of biblical exegesis
3. Describe the Wesleyan-Holiness theology of inspiration and understanding of biblical authority
4. Define the Wesleyan quadrilateral
5. Describe what is meant by the "wholeness of Scripture"
6. Identify the four elements of Wesley's "analogy of faith"

KEY WORDS

Biblical interpretation

Biblical criticism

Exegesis

Sola scriptura

Hermeneutics

Inductive (interpretation)

Soteriology

Wesleyan quadrilateral

Tradition

Reason

Experience

Double inspiration

Subjective interpretation

Analogy of faith

Midrash

Eisegesis

Dispensations

Original sin

Justification

New birth

Sanctification

Holiness is a thoroughly biblical concept, divinely revealed through the biblical writers and relevant for every new generation. Any adequate definition of holiness is based on God's holiness and on God's call that we be "perfect" (or, holy) "as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). We know the character of God only through God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ and through the Bible's witnesses to him. And we know the holy life to which we are called as Christians only because God has revealed it to us in the life of Christ and through the Scriptures.

These simple statements are foundational, but we cannot stay with them long. As the title of this chapter implies, multiple ways to read the Bible exist, and the Wesleyan way—which is the perspective from which this chapter is written—is one among many. We must first acknowledge that even seeing holiness as a central theme in the Bible is an *interpretative* move. We must concede that other theological traditions do not come to the same conclusions about holiness and its corollary, sanctification. Even the words themselves in the original languages must be translated, which implies interpretative decisions by the translators. From individual words to the major themes of the Bible, we interpret.

Biblical interpretation is a complex activity that "hides" just under the surface every time we try to understand any portion of Scripture, especially when we try to apply it to our lives today. Even those traditions that affirm "the plain meaning of Scripture" must recognize that every reader comes to the text with presuppositions—the learned and the naive alike. Claiming to be *just* a Bible Christian is simply impossible. All people and traditions have methods for making sense of the Bible and applying it to their lives. Finding an application to life is the purpose of biblical interpretation.

Many questions suggest themselves at this point. How did different ecclesiastical traditions come to their differing theological conclusions about what the Bible says? What do these traditions affirm about Scripture's place in the life of the church? What does each tradition believe about the Bible's authority over against other authorities? Do different traditions have different methods of interpretation? Is it a given that good interpretation seeks to be completely objective? What is the history of biblical interpretation? What methods of interpretation are used today? Do individual persons have the right to interpret as they see fit, or do they need to be faithful to their community's interpretation? What is the very purpose of the Bible?

All of these questions and more like them raise methodological issues. Although methodological inquiry might be thorny at times, we must attempt it, even at the outset of a book on holiness. We cannot just turn, however

tempting, to conclusions about what the Bible says about holiness without first being honest about how any conclusion is reached.

► METHODOLOGICAL QUESTIONS

As mentioned earlier, this chapter is written with the understanding that there is a Wesleyan way to read Scripture. For those of the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition, this approach to Scripture is foundational not only to a theology of Holiness but to a continuing self-identity as well. Confusion, tension, and conflict can arise when those in a community read and interpret scriptural texts in ways inconsistent with their tradition. Reading Scripture in accord with a community's tradition goes hand in hand with understanding that community's theology and history.

Before we go much further in our discussion of Wesleyan biblical interpretation, we must give attention to three clarifications.¹ First, reading the Bible as a Wesleyan does not imply that we read the Bible exactly as John Wesley did. Second, reading the Bible as a Wesleyan does imply certain understandings about biblical inspiration and the Bible's authority. And third, reading the Bible as a Wesleyan implies that the interpreter is spiritually (not just objectively) invested in the Bible and seeks to be submissive to its message. Framed as methodological questions, the importance of these three clarifications becomes increasingly evident as we examine them in greater detail.

1. To “read or not to read” like Wesley?

Generally speaking, John Wesley belonged to the “precritical” era of biblical interpretation. The “modern” period of higher and lower **biblical criticism** developed during the century Wesley lived. He was aware of some of the developments happening around him, and he even employed some aspects of modern **exegesis** in his work. But a more precise statement about Wesley would be that he belonged to the Reformation era of biblical interpretation. The key assertion for the Reformation was that of *sola scriptura* (“Scripture alone”), which countered the idea that church (Catholic) tradition was authoritatively on par with Scripture. Wesley modified *sola scriptura* as many of his Anglican contemporaries did. But the interpretative moves of Reformation **hermeneutics** significantly influenced Wesley's approach to the Bible.

Wesley did establish his own methods of exegesis. Scott Jones arranged these methods into seven different ideas:

1. Scriptural language should be used to explain or describe scriptural ideas; it should become dominant in our use of language.
2. The literal meaning of the text should be used first, unless it seems to contradict other texts or implies an absurdity. “In cases where two bibli-

cal texts appeared to contradict each other, [Wesley] stressed that the more obscure text should be understood in light of the clearer one.”²

3. A text should be interpreted in light of its context.
4. Scripture interprets itself, and each individual text should be interpreted in light of the whole.
5. Commandments should always be seen as covered promises. In other words, whatever we are commanded to do God will enable us to do through grace.
6. Biblical writers employ literary devices at times that need to be discerned if an appropriate meaning of the text is to be ascertained.
7. The earliest text available should be sought, as well as the best translation.³

Although these suggestions may remain beneficial for us today, the question still remains: Does reading the Bible as a Wesleyan imply that we use, and only use, Wesley’s methods and techniques? Most present-day Wesleyan biblical scholars say no. Advances in biblical exegesis and criticism need not be ignored. Joel Green is representative of this position. He states the following:

To read the Bible as Wesleyans is not to adopt a precritical stance with respect to the nature and interpretation of Scripture. . . . Those who lament Wesley’s precritical approach to Scripture, and who might imagine that recovering Wesley for Biblical Studies entails our embracing precritical assumptions and practices are mistaken.⁴

Green goes on to suggest that Wesley would have embraced many developments in biblical criticism and used them where appropriate.

So we should employ other methods besides Wesley’s. But along with this understanding we should still take Wesley’s guiding principles (as discussed below) very seriously.

2. *What does a Wesleyan paradigm assume about biblical inspiration and authority?*

The authority of the Bible was a given for John Wesley. Only further along in the Enlightenment era (18th century) did scholars question biblical authority and regard the Bible more as an object of investigation. For Wesley, the Bible was authoritative simply because it was inspired by God as a special revelation to humanity. Thus authority and inspiration are inseparably connected in his theology and his approach to biblical interpretation. “While recognizing that there are both divine and human elements in the process, he minimizes the human element and emphasizes the faithfulness with which the message is transcribed.”⁵

Clearly, asking Wesley to prove the Bible’s authority is somewhat anachronistic. The Bible is authoritative because it is true. The Bible is true because

it reveals the message that God inspired the writers to convey. The message of the Bible, then, being inspired by God to such a degree that God is its “author,” is fully reliable in its guidance regarding faith and practice.

The purpose of the Bible was also a given for Wesley. He followed the Anglican article of faith that affirms the sufficiency and reliability of the Bible in all things *pertaining to salvation*. Wesleyan-Holiness denominations also follow this position in their different articles of faith.

Like the question about proving biblical authority, asking whether Wesley was an inerrantist is also anachronistic. His position allowed him to be open to the developments in the areas of history and scientific discovery in his lifetime. He did not have to defend the truth of the Scriptures in areas they were never meant to address. The Anglican article on this point closely resembles the view of Scripture as set forth by the Protestant Reformation. Wesley, in accord with the early Reformers, would never have implied that the Bible is true in all forms of knowledge. It was Protestant scholasticism that shifted the focus of Scripture from revealing how to be in relationship with God to the belief that it reveals every doctrinal proposition in full.⁶ As Robert Wall asserts:

The Wesleyan tradition naturally inclines its biblical interpreters toward viewing their task as “open-ended and conversational.” Meanings made of Scripture are more fluid and contextual. . . . This is so because Arminius (whom Wesley follows at this point) understood Scripture’s authority in functional terms, whether to confirm the actual experience of conversion or to interpret the holiness of life for a particular setting. . . . Those of [later] Calvinist traditions, on the other hand, tend to press for a uniform interpretation of Scripture and its single meaning that justifies creedal and uniform “orthodoxy”—one book, one faith. Scripture’s authority is viewed in propositional terms.”⁷

Wesley’s approach is much more **inductive** in nature. While the Bible certainly reveals all that is needed to formulate doctrine and theology, the biblical interpreter must go to the text without preformed and highly structured doctrinal assertions. Wesley came to believe that the primary theology revealed in the Bible is **soteriology**. But he would resist the idea that he pre-determined Scripture’s meaning by taking creed or doctrine to the Bible with him. Likewise, we should not take Wesleyan theological conclusions to the Bible. Biblical hermeneutics and biblical theology should always remain prior to more systematic theological foundations. But Wesley did not go to the Bible alone. Wesley took with him the other three components of what is known as the **Wesleyan quadrilateral**.

While Wesley did affirm the Reformation idea of *sola scriptura* and placed the authority of Scripture above all else, he did not follow all the implications

of this doctrine without modification. When Wesley read “Scripture alone,” he believed that the Bible is the primary source of authority, not necessarily the only religious authority. As Donald Thorsen says on this point,

John Wesley’s most enduring contribution to theological method stems from his . . . [inclusion] of experience along with Scripture, tradition, and reason as genuine sources of religious authority. While maintaining the primacy of Scripture, Wesley functioned with a dynamic interplay of sources in interpreting, illuminating, enriching, and communicating biblical truths.⁸

This is not to imply that **tradition**, **reason**, or **experience** can stand alone as authorities. The Bible stands alone above these three handmaids. Tradition, particularly the patristic period and the Church of England for Wesley, should be given serious consideration. Knowing how the church has interpreted the Bible through the centuries and how it has expressed these interpretations in its liturgical life is important. This is especially so when examining the development of orthodox beliefs and creeds such as those about the Trinity and Jesus Christ. Also, only through the exercise of reason is the biblical message discerned, formulated, and communicated. However, Wesley did not suggest that we can reason our way to God.

Experience serves in confirming the truth of Scripture. If Christians are not experiencing the scriptural message, then they should question their interpretation of the message. Wesley is known to have reexamined and subsequently reinterpreted Scripture in light of some of the experiences of his Methodist people.⁹

An exhaustive study of the Wesleyan quadrilateral and its interplay is beyond our scope. For our purposes here we note that the quadrilateral is one way that Wesley remained humble before the Bible; this humility is an important part of a Wesleyan ethos. The quadrilateral serves as a check and balance for assessing the reliability of any interpretation of Scripture.

Finally, returning to the topic of biblical inspiration, we must mention that Wesley believed in what could be called **double inspiration**. Not only did the Holy Spirit inspire the original writers as they wrote particular books of the Bible, but the Holy Spirit also inspires us now to both hear and apply the biblical message to our own hearts and lives. As Wesley himself said, “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.”¹⁰

3. *What is subjective interpretation?*

Biblical interpretation coming out of the modern period might first appear to be noble. Biblical interpreters studied the Bible using many of the sci-

entific methods of the Enlightenment to reach a more objective understanding of its meaning. The Bible was examined as any literary text would be examined. This movement toward objective examination came to be called biblical criticism, which was subdivided into higher and lower criticism. Higher criticism asks questions about the authorship of each book, when it was written, how it fits into the canon, and so on. It seeks to give a historical context for each passage. Lower criticism (also known as textual criticism) examines all the intricacies of the texts themselves.

The development of biblical criticism since the Enlightenment shows a marked increase in biblical expertise. As mentioned earlier, Wesley himself would have made use of all the biblical resources that became available in the 19th and 20th centuries. Similarly today, Wesleyan biblical scholars should have a prominent voice in the sanctuary.¹¹

But some Wesleyan scholars also offer an appropriate word of caution. Joel Green and others fear that the biblical interpretation of the modern period, particularly in “the academy,” can lead to seeing the Bible too “objectively” and not as the Book of the Church.¹² This raises the question, Who can interpret the Bible best? Those outside the circle of Christian subjectivity? Or those inside the Christian circle? Asking this kind of question reveals a dichotomy that Wesley would never have anticipated.

Reading the Bible as a Wesleyan means that a person must acknowledge that he or she is always subjectively involved in the text he or she seeks to interpret. A person must have faith to affirm that God’s holy character and humanity’s appropriate response is fully revealed through Scripture. A person must have faith in the meaning and purpose of the Bible itself and enough faith to believe that what it shows is true. But faith is also needed to believe that the “goal of biblical interpretation” is “for the church [and is for] praxis.”¹³ Faith is needed to believe that any interpretation fails if it fails to ask the question, What are we to *do* in light of God’s revelation in this particular community?

Having this faith does not mean ignoring all the data and insight that biblical criticism offers. It does not mean a person can be a sloppy or “romantic” interpreter of Scripture, completely unconcerned about what a passage meant when it was written. But it does mean acknowledging that while a more objective knowledge of Scripture can (and should) aid in good interpretation, a good interpreter is always subjectively engaged with the text on behalf of the faith community. A Wesleyan believes that the best interpreter of Scripture, then, not only comes to the texts with biblical tools but also and always with a confessional trust in God and with faith that the Holy Spirit is intricately involved in the task of discerning the Bible’s life-giving meaning. Using the words of Charles Wesley, we could say that what John Wesley aimed for in

biblical study is what he aimed for more generally: to “unite the pair so long disjointed—knowledge and vital piety.”¹⁴

► GUIDING PRINCIPLES OF A WESLEYAN WAY TO READ SCRIPTURE

Biblical interpretation in the Wesleyan tradition is certainly interested in precise and thorough biblical exegesis. But such is not an end in itself. The following discussion explores interpretation as a means of grace, which is made more available when attention is given to the “whole tenor of Scripture” through the lens of what is called the analogy of faith.

1. *Biblical interpretation and the means of grace*¹⁵

Wesley believed that the Bible is the primary source for inducing theology and doctrine, but he stressed even more strongly the “devotional” purpose of the Bible. The Bible is one of the primary “means of grace” for Wesley. Its purpose is to reveal God’s grace to humanity. Robert Wall offers a helpful summary:

The revivalist ethos shaped by Wesley’s [evangelistic] ministry shifted emphasis from “the faith which is believed” to the faith which believes. . . . Wesley viewed Scripture as the privileged medium of God’s self-disclosure. The reading and hearing of the biblical word in evangelistic preaching and pastoral teaching create the context wherein the word of God is heard and understood as the instrument of prevenient grace, thereby restoring human freedom and enabling the Spirit to bring people freely to saving faith in and fervent love for God. This is the primary role that Scripture performs, then, and on this basis its authority depends. God “authors” Scripture not to warrant some grand system of theological ideas to guide people in orthodox confession, but rather to lead sinful people into thankful worship of a forgiving Lord.¹⁶

The Holy Spirit enlivens Scripture, often through preaching, to penetrate the hearts of people. It is a means through which God’s prevenient grace is active. Prevenient grace draws people to the points of awakening, conviction, repentance, and new birth. The focus for a Wesleyan is not that the Bible is right and true (although it is) but that the Bible is effective in changing people’s lives.

For the Christian, Scripture continues to be a crucial source of daily grace, resulting in an ever-increasing change often called growth in grace. Reading and searching the Scriptures then are the food of the Christian life that gives nourishment and energy in order for us to become all that God has created us to be. Put most simply, reading the Bible as a Wesleyan is always intended to aid in our progressive sanctification. Even the careful study of

Scripture in more technical hermeneutics has the potential to change the interpreter (if of course, the interpreter consents). Thus we return to the claim already made: The study of Scripture is most effective when we admit that we are subjectively engaged with it.

In this more devotional sense we can claim that the Bible is sacramental—that it is a medium of connecting us with God and a means of opening our hearts to participate in God’s gracious activity in our lives. “Since Scripture bears witness to a God who invites assent by loving concern and not by power plays, its [purpose] as a sacrament of divine revelation is understood finally in a profoundly relational way: Scripture discloses God by inviting faith in a God-for-us, who is then confirmed by our concrete experience of God’s grace.”¹⁷

Wesley advised his people to study and search the Scriptures in a devoted and meditative way. He believed that the Holy Spirit would inspire their hearts, provide nourishment, and be present in the very reading of the Bible so that they could receive whatever grace they needed. At the end of his preface to his *Notes upon the Old Testament* Wesley gives specific instructions for reading the Bible devotionally:

If you desire to read the Scriptures in such a manner as may most effectually answer this end (to understand the things of God), would it not be advisable 1. to set apart a little time, if you can, every morning and evening for this purpose? 2. At each time, if you have leisure, to read a chapter out of the Old, and one out of the New Testament; if you cannot do this, to take a single chapter, or a part of one? 3. to read this with a single eye to know the whole will of God, and a fixed resolution to do it? In order to know His will, you should 4. have a constant eye to the **analogy of faith** . . . 5. Serious and earnest prayer should be constantly used before we consult the oracles of God, seeing Scripture can only be understood through the same Spirit whereby it was given. 6. It might also be of use, if while we read we were frequently to pause and examine ourselves by what we read.¹⁸

Elsewhere, Wesley suggests the reader of Scripture pray a prayer taken from the *Book of Common Prayer* (1662 edition).

I advise every one, before he reads the Scripture, to use this or the like prayer: “Blessed Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning, grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of thy holy word, we may embrace, and ever hold fast, the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou has given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ.”¹⁹

Wesley’s deep conviction about the purpose of Scripture—namely, to reveal God’s character as love and God’s desire to save humanity—is “proven” when

real persons experience God in their lives. Scripture fulfills its purpose when God fulfills God's purpose in us.

Proclaiming that the Bible is a sacramental means of grace could imply a very private use of Scripture as it aids in the salvation and progressive sanctification of each individual. But Wesley would never approve any type of solitary or exclusive form of Christianity. While the Bible certainly aids us in our individual lives, it is a book addressed to the whole people of God. This led Wesley to stress the importance of preaching in the movement known as Methodism.

According to Rob Wall, one of the primary functions of Scripture is to inform the preacher, who then informs the people of its meaning. Wall argues that Wesley's "real (not rhetorical) conception of Scripture emerges [through] preaching."²⁰ Wall sees important parallels between the Jewish exegesis (called **midrash**) of the biblical writers and Wesleyan exegesis. "Homiletical midrash is a contemporizing hermeneutic, suitable for a sacramental view of Scripture, which supposes that interpreters mediate between God's Word and their own worlds. . . . The goal of biblical commentary is never simply to clarify the meaning of the biblical text per se, but rather to clarify how the text [de]ciphers the messiness of the readers' own context in order to liberate them from it."²¹ Thus along with reading and meditating on Scripture, preaching also becomes an incredibly important means of grace (although Wesley never specifically labels it as such). Wesley (the Protestant) would have seen preaching as a sacred act that complements the official sacraments. Preaching is certainly sacramental in a more general sense. The responsibility of the preacher cannot be underestimated.

Certainly then, the Bible was never meant to be interpreted apart from the community of faith.²² While Wesley obviously had a strong faith in the Holy Spirit to inspire and reveal, not only through the writers of Scripture but also through our reading of Scripture, we do not interpret in isolation. We are always accountable to the community of faith, especially as we interpret Scripture. Wesley explicitly denies that God would give only one person a new revelation about the Bible's meaning. Along with the quadrilateral, the Christian community acts as an appropriate check and balance of any one individual's interpretation of a text. The Christian community also extends across the centuries historically, and thus each community is also accountable to orthodox biblical interpretation that has come before it.

2. Biblical interpretation and the wholeness of Scripture²³

Just as no one individual can interpret the Bible in isolation from the whole community, no single verse, or even passage, is to be interpreted in isolation from the whole Bible. This is one of Wesley's most pronounced principles of biblical interpretation. When Wesley spoke of biblical authority, he meant

authority that is seen when the Bible is taken as a whole. He thus placed the Holy Spirit's inspiration not only with each biblical writer but also with those groups that determined the canon. "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."²⁴ He often spoke of "the general [or whole] tenor of Scripture" when considering its primary role in faith and practice. For him, every verse needs to be interpreted not only in light of its place in its passage and in its book but also in light of its place in the canon. In a sense every text is interdependent with all others.²⁵

Many biblical texts are intertexts, composed with other biblical texts in mind and heart, and still other texts, unknown or unintended by the author, that come to the interpreter's mind in canonical context. The talented interpreter listens for echoes of other biblical texts, however low their volume, and looks for allusions, however dim their reflection, that link biblical texts together, the one glossing and thickening the meaning of the other.²⁶

Wesley's approach to Scripture avoids the contemporary notion of proof-texting, or *eisegesis*. Picking various verses out of context to prove a presupposed point blatantly contradicts one of Wesley's most important interpretative principles, that of interpreting the parts in light of the whole.

The question can be rightly asked whether Wesley viewed every part of Scripture as equal in value. Or more specifically, what did Wesley believe about the relationship between the Old and New Testaments? According to Scott Jones, the answer to this question is multifaceted. In general,

Wesley's views on the relation of the Old Testament and the New Testament reflect a type of dispensational understanding that allows for both continuity and change in God's relationship with humankind. . . . On one hand, Wesley emphasizes that the Old Testament is sacred Scripture and therefore binding on all human beings. On the other hand, he emphasizes that there are aspects of the gospel available only in the New Testament which supersede portions of the Old.²⁷

Wesley severely cautioned those who would quickly skip over the Old Testament and neglect its principles. But several quotes are offered here to illustrate how Wesley also believed that the Old and New Testaments are different. He uses the idea of different biblical **dispensations**²⁸ (eras) to explain these differences.

The Jews and we are under different dispensations. The glory of the whole Mosaic dispensation was chiefly visible and external; whereas the glory of the Christian dispensation is of an invisible and spiritual nature.²⁹

[The New Testament] is a far more perfect dispensation than that which He delivered in Hebrew.³⁰

For there is no comparison between the state of the Old Testament believers, and that which ye now enjoy: the darkness of that dispensation is passed away; and Christ the true light now shineth in your hearts.³¹

Overall, Wesley believed the entire Bible should be seen as a whole, even though he viewed God's revelation as progressing from the Old Testament to the New. The Bible's continuity is maintained because Wesley affirmed its uniform theological message. But the question remains, what did Wesley believe about the meaning of the whole? This is where we very self-consciously and boldly move to proclaiming what Wesley called the "grand themes of Scripture." For Wesley, and for the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition, the Bible reveals the *salvation* that we find in the grace of God alone. So it is biblical theology that informs all systematic formulations. Biblical theology is soteriological.

3. *Biblical interpretation and the hermeneutic of love*³²

The whole purpose of Scripture is to reveal God as a God of love, who out of love saves the world. Wesley specifically names the message of the "whole tenor of Scripture" as the "analogy of faith." The meaning of the word "analogy" has shifted from its use in the 16th to 18th centuries, when it specifically referred to the great themes of Scripture. Although Wesley followed many of his predecessors and contemporaries in this usage, he differed in the *content* of the analogy of faith. Not all traditions would put soteriology as the primary purpose of Scripture.

To read the Bible as a Wesleyan necessarily means that we adopt this interpretative lens of soteriology. We may still read the Bible as a Wesleyan and not use Wesley's specific methods. We may even read the Bible as a Wesleyan and hold to other beliefs about the Bible's inspiration and authority. But we cannot read the Bible as a Wesleyan and ignore Wesley's view of the analogy of faith. That Wesley sees the very revelation of God as soteriological affects every other aspect of theology and of pastoral advice—indeed Wesley's whole "system." The content of the analogy of faith is that important.

Paradoxically, the analogy of faith is both Wesley's most powerful proclamation and his point of greatest weakness. This is because no objective proof exists to guarantee that Wesley is right in his assessment of the biblical message. Wesley's interpretation of Scripture as a whole stands alongside other options. For example, Wesley believed that God's primary characteristic, as revealed in Scripture, is love. But Calvin believed that God's primary characteristic, as revealed in Scripture, is God's sovereignty. Love will take Wesley to

a soteriology that affirms free grace and sanctification. Sovereignty will lead the Reformed tradition to emphasize God's control in the world and to the doctrines of irresistible grace and predestination. Other traditions will likewise place different Christian beliefs at the center of their hermeneutics and theological conclusions.

From his "hermeneutic of love" Wesley affirmed four related themes as central and necessary to understanding the Bible. They are original sin, justification by faith, new birth, and inward and outward holiness.³³ Our discussion of these four themes in what follows will also serve as a basic introduction to Wesley's theology. Each of these themes will be examined in greater detail in subsequent chapters.

► WESLEY'S ANALOGY OF FAITH

ORIGINAL SIN

Foundational to Wesley's focus on salvation is that humanity is in a broken condition from which it needs to be delivered. He sees this as a thoroughly biblical concept, spread throughout the Bible as a whole. This brokenness was not God's original design but came only after humanity "fell" through its first representatives, Adam and Eve. There was not much debate in the first centuries of Christianity about what this meant, or specifically about how our first parents' actions affected each of their descendants, including us. But in the late fourth century, the great theologian Augustine began to develop a theory about what became known as **original sin**. One of Augustine's opponents, Pelagius, believed that the primary effect of the Fall was that humanity become mortal. But Augustine believed more. He asserted that original sin is inherited and passed down to every human being. Though Wesley does not follow all of Augustine's theory, he does affirm that original sin affects all persons to their detriment.

Original sin influences our inclinations, and we end up committing actual personal sins. We are not guilty before God for original sin, but when original sin is actualized through our own choices, we are then guilty. These personal sins separate us from God. Foundational for Wesley is that we cannot bridge this separation on our own. We are helpless apart from God's grace and God's initiative toward us. Important for the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition is that original sin can be cleansed *in this life*; some other traditions believe that original sin can never be overcome until after we die.

Wesley believed, then, that one of the primary themes of Scripture, Old and New Testament alike, is that humanity is broken and sinful and helpless on its own. Many Old Testament stories and characters reveal this tendency

toward sin and failure. The Old Testament is radically honest about the proclivity of people to fall away from God's plan, even if God's plan is ultimately for their good. The New Testament further illuminates the sinful human condition throughout its contents—from Gospels to Epistles. As Paul states clearly, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). So following the analogy of faith, the question we should ask of each individual passage is how it might broaden our understanding of original sin.

JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH

Wesley came to understand this aspect of the analogy of faith after his biographically and theologically important encounters with a group of Moravians just before 1738. The Moravians were a group of Lutherans that helped Wesley understand experientially Martin Luther's famous declaration of *sola fide*: We are saved by grace alone through faith in Jesus Christ. Martin Luther, a Catholic biblical scholar, came to this conclusion when studying the book of Romans. His proclamation of this biblical theme helped initiate the Protestant Reformation.

Theologically, salvation by faith alone directly correlates with the doctrine of **justification**. This is also known sometimes as "forensic" salvation. In brief, we stand before God guilty for the sins we have committed. When we place our faith in Jesus Christ and his sacrifice on our behalf on the cross, our guilt is taken away. And so our "legal" status (using the forensic analogy) changes from guilty to not guilty. God forgives all our sins because, according to some interpretations, Jesus has taken our sin and our rightful punishment on himself.

In a sense, Wesley's personal experience allowed him to see Scripture in a new light. In 1738 he became *assured* of his salvation and understood for himself this verse: "The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.' The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children" (Rom. 8:15-16 TNIV). "From that time on, he insisted that faith alone was necessary for salvation."³⁴ If original sin is the condition that separates us from God, justification by faith alone is God's means for overcoming that estrangement. Wesley believed that Jesus Christ came to be the means of this justification.

Like Paul, Wesley believed that the Old Testament also depicts a God of mercy. God's covenant with Abraham was a covenant of faith. And as Paul explains in Galatians, faith was established even before the law. What the law does is show us as guilty before God in need of justification. Justification is by faith alone. This is foundational to the way all of Protestant theology interprets Scripture. God forgives sin, through faith, so that we can enter into a

relationship with God. Yet, while Wesley strongly affirms this biblical theology, he goes even further.

NEW BIRTH

There is a key difference between justification and **new birth** in Wesley's theology. Not only does God forgive us for past sins when we accept Jesus Christ as our Savior, but he also regenerates us and gives us a new life. "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ" (2 Cor. 5:17). By separating justification and regeneration, although they transpire simultaneously, Wesley began to separate himself from the Reformed tradition.

In Wesley's scheme, new birth is the beginning of the holy life, the beginning of sanctification. When Jesus told Nicodemus that he must be born again, he was also calling us to the hope of truly living a brand-new life. The call includes living this new life in a brand-new way. God not only forgives sin but also cleanses us from all unrighteousness, and (most important for Wesley) actually enables us to live a holy life. New birth relates to what we call imparted righteousness.

The Reformed tradition emphasizes what is known as imputed righteousness. In other words, Christ's own righteousness is imputed, or given to us. God then sees us as righteous because we are covered over by Christ's actual righteousness. In actuality, however, we are still sinful behind Christ's "screen." Imparted righteousness, however, means that God not only sees us as righteous because of Christ but actually makes us righteous. This begins at new birth. Therefore salvation is not just a legal action in which we are proclaimed not guilty by way of Christ's sacrifice. Salvation for Wesleyans includes God's cleansing work within our hearts. This cleansing work is closely related to our theology of Holiness and sanctification.

HOLINESS AND SANCTIFICATION

John Wesley believed that God had raised the Methodist people for the very purpose of proclaiming the message of holiness. He saw it as the most important theme in Scripture and thus as the most important theme in Christianity and in the Christian's life. Since this entire book is about holiness and **sanctification**, we offer only the briefest of descriptions here.

Sanctification begins at new birth and continues throughout our lifetime. We therefore speak of initial sanctification, progressive sanctification, and entire sanctification as important steps in a journey of holy living. Through God's sanctifying work in our hearts we experience a deep inner transformation, through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. This initiates the

progressive restoration of the image of God in us; this transformation frees us both from the guilt and power of sin and moves us into a growing, holy, loving relationship with God and others. We walk in love as Christ walked. Christ-like love is then the best definition of holiness.

Sanctification, more precisely, refers to the *how* of holiness. How are we made holy by God? The word “holiness” refers to the content of our life—the *what* of the holy life. What does it mean to be holy? We affirm that all holy acts come out of a holy heart and that God changes our desires and motivations from within when we fully devote ourselves to following Christ in faith and discipleship. We depend on God’s enabling grace every day in our Christian walk. Holiness means much more than sinlessness. To be holy, we must love. And love is never finished because there are always new opportunities to practice love for God and neighbor. This is the heart of the Wesleyan message.

SUMMARY STATEMENTS

1. A Wesleyan interpretation of Scripture makes use of the best exegetical tools available.
2. A Wesleyan interpretation of Scripture is focused on soteriology and follows the “analogy of faith.”
3. A Wesleyan interpretation of Scripture affirms the “whole tenor of Scripture” and that all texts are interdependent. Any one text is to be interpreted in light of the whole.
4. A Wesleyan interpretation of Scripture makes use of the Wesleyan quadrilateral.
5. A Wesleyan interpretation of Scripture confesses the subjectivity of faith and the need for community in properly interpreting Scripture.
6. Practical holiness is the ultimate goal of a Wesleyan interpretation of Scripture.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What is the purpose of biblical interpretation?
2. How might Wesleyan interpretation differ from other interpretative traditions?
3. Evaluate Wesley’s position on scriptural authority. Is it adequate?
4. How has the Bible helped you grow spiritually?

FURTHER READING

Callen, Barry L., and Richard P. Thompson. *Reading the Bible in Wesleyan Ways: Some Constructive Proposals*. Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2004.

Gunter, Stephen, et al. *Wesley and the Quadrilateral*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997.

Jones, Scott. *John Wesley's Conception and Use of Scripture*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995.