

8 Bible



43. What is the Bible's authority?

The Bible's authority comes from God. United Methodists (along with almost all Christian communions) believe that God chose to reveal God's very self by inspiring writers to record accounts of God's movement in, through, and in spite of God's people. The church in prayerful reflection identified those written sources which were consistent with the apostolic faith. For United Methodists, the canon (literally, measuring stick, but here meaning the authorized Scriptures) consists of thirty-nine books of the Old Testament and twenty-seven books of the New Testament. For Christians, Jesus Christ—the Word become flesh (John 1:14)—is the lens through which to look at the Bible.

Although he read voraciously, John Wesley claimed to be “a man of one Book.” That view established firm roots for the centrality of Scripture in Methodist life and thought. The Evangelical United Brethren cousins have been no less clear about the Bible: “the true rule and guide for faith and practice” (Confession of Faith, article IV). (See 2 Tim. 3:16.)

The most important thing about the Bible is that it contains all we need to know in order to be saved (article V, Articles of Religion; article IV, Confession of Faith). In effect, the principle is “If it ain't in the Book, don't worry about it, leastways in terms of salvation.”

United Methodists do not agree on how to study the Bible (see question 46). Persons might read the same passage and come to diametrically opposed views. Does this mean that one is right and the other wrong? Perhaps, sometimes, it does, but more often it means

that God has more to reveal to us than any one of us can grasp (2 Tim. 2:14). In order to hear God, we need each other! Surely the God who inspired poetry (The Psalms), law (Leviticus), history (Exodus), story (Ruth), letters (Romans), Gospels (Matthew), legend (Genesis), admonition (Obadiah), and imagery (Revelation) has recognized that the One Story, One Truth, One Love, One Grace, One Word has many shapes. And all of this just so we can be saved through Jesus Christ!

Come, Holy Ghost (for moved by thee the prophets wrote and spoke), unlock the truth, thyself the key, unseal the sacred book.

Another question: What is the salvation story revealed in the Bible?



44. Why do we call the Bible “God's Word”?

The Bible is God's Word because it contains what God wants to say, what God wants to express, what God seeks to reveal. That Word became flesh and lived among us (John 1:14). An interesting thing about the phrase “lived among us” is that the literal translation of the Greek is “tented among us.” With that literal rendition, we get a sense of a tent, a temporary housing that is moved from location to location as needed. God has moved in many ways in many places to speak what needs to be spoken. The Bible, as God's Word, God's speech, is filled with accounts from all kinds of places! God has indeed tented among us, and the Bible is evidence of that (John 21:24–25)!

Distinction should be made between the Bible as “God's Word” and the Bible as “God's words.” God's Word is what God has to say to us, but most United Methodists would not assume that the biblical text was dictated word by word for a human writing machine to record. (In fact, this is how Muslims understand God to have revealed the Qur'an [Koran] to the prophet Muhammad; in the Islamic faith, only the Arabic original is the sacred language; the prophet was a passive recipient of the word-for-word text.) John Wesley, who had the highest possible regard for the Scripture, acknowledged that the writings were filtered through human historical context and that the organization of the material—such as

chapter divisions—was often done incorrectly (“often separating things that are closely joined, and joining those that are entirely distinct from each other” [preface to *Explanatory Notes*]).

Further, the Articles of Religion aver that Old Testament ceremonies and rites and civil precepts of another time are not binding for the Christian (article VI). (What is binding is obedience to moral teaching.)

No wonder that United Methodists believe that in order to take the Bible seriously, we must study the words in order to hear the Word of God.

Open mine eyes to see thy face, open my heart thyself to know.
And then I through thy Word obtain sure present, and eternal gain.

Another question: What is the essential truth in the Bible?



45. Is the Bible infallible?

Would you like a nice phrase to use when you need to impress your friends? Try “The Bible is soteriologically inerrant.” Not only is the sentence impressive, it is also true! “Soteriology”—based on the Greek word *soteria*—is the branch of theology dealing with salvation (see chapter 5). “Inerrant” means “without error.” Your new sentence is a way of saying, “The Bible is not mistaken in telling us all we need to know in order to be saved.” (See question 43.)

But what about other kinds of errors? This is an important question for United Methodists, and for all Christians who take biblical interpretation as a serious matter. Jesus himself did not have a literal view of Scripture. He interpreted Scripture as having meaning beyond the dictionary meanings of words: “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times. . . . But I say to you . . .” (Matt. 5:21–22, for example, which moved beyond the literal meaning of Exod. 20:13). Jesus told stories (not literally true) to make a point (the parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15:11–32 and the parable of the Rich Fool in Luke 12:16–21, for examples). Jesus quoted Scripture knowing full well that the text was not literally true, but was an image or a metaphor for a truth (“they have shut their eyes,” a quotation of Isa. 6:10 in Matt. 13:15, for example).

Does God hear a prayer only if the door is closed (Matt. 6:6)? Does God really shoot people with a bow and arrow (Ps. 64:7)? Is Psalm 25:15 about soccer or about hockey? The Bible is filled with figures of speech that we understand not to be literally true. The Bible is true, but not literally true.

Is the Bible inerrant—without error in terms of science or geography or history? There are United Methodists who believe this to be the case. The Confession of Faith gives a more nuanced understanding of Scripture: “true for faith and practice.” This view allows for mistakes in matters other than those related to faith and practice. So, if 2 Samuel 24:9 and 1 Chronicles 21:5 disagree on the number of soldiers in the armies of Israel and Judah, it is of no consequence for faith and practice. So, if 2 Kings 8:26 and 2 Chronicles 22:2 disagree on how old Ahaziah was when he became king, it is of no consequence for faith and practice. (See question 46 on helps for reading the Bible.)

Other United Methodists see the Bible as an infallible book (no human filters) in its original manuscripts. This perspective recognizes the probability of human error in copying, transmitting, and translating the texts given by God. The questions remain: Was God’s intent to reveal a book of science or to invite persons to faith? Was God’s intent to teach mathematics or to tell how we might be saved? Was God’s intent to share geographic facts or to teach us how to live? Faith, salvation, and holy living do not depend on the infallibility of the Bible, only on the truth telling of God, revealed in a number of ways and seen in Jesus Christ.

Whether the Word be preached or read, no saving benefit I gain
from empty sounds or letters dead; unprofitable all and vain,
unless by faith thy word I hear and see its heavenly character.

Another question: In what sense is the Bible true?



46. How do I read the Bible?

John Wesley believed the Bible was twice inspired: once when written and again when read. The same Holy Spirit who brought the Scriptures into being (2 Tim. 3:16) inspires the reader to hear the

Word of God (2 Tim. 3:17). Wesley referred to the Bible as “plain truth for plain people.” Its usual meaning is its obvious meaning. We are not to pick and choose among the texts until we find one to our liking! In the preface to his *Explanatory Notes*, Wesley penned, “Every part thereof is worthy of God; and all together are one entire body, wherein is no defect, no excess.”

When the Bible is taken as a whole (“one entire body,” to use Wesley’s term), there is neither too much nor too little. The Bible is a self-balancing act. When texts are pulled out of context or when reading is with a microscope rather than a “macroscope,” the biblical witness can be distorted. It is all of a piece.

In an introduction to the 1746 edition of *Standard Sermons*, Wesley outlined his own practice for finding the plain truth of the Bible when there seemed to be conflict or uncertainty. (This is my summary—not Wesley’s words.) (1) Find a time and place where interruptions are not likely. (2) Accept the promised presence of the Holy Spirit. (3) Have openness to new places God might lead. (4) Pursue difficult passages by praying, by comparing other biblical texts, by conferring with others in the community of faith, and by drawing on the understandings of the ancient tradition. In this way, Wesley called Methodists to be “worker[s] who [had] no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15).

The appropriate clarification of difficult Scripture is other Scripture that is clear. United Methodists are in a tradition that takes the whole Bible seriously (see question 48), so it is valuable, even essential, that any given passage be seen in light of the full revelation of the Bible (Ps. 119:105).

Come, divine Interpreter, bring me eyes thy book to read,
ears the mystic words to hear, words which did from thee proceed,
words that endless bliss impart, kept in an obedient heart.

Another question: What, for you, is the most difficult aspect of reading the Bible?



47. Why do Christians disagree on what the Bible means?

If the Bible is, as Wesley said, “plain truth for plain people,” why don’t all Christians find the exact same meaning in the biblical text? (I’ll let you in on a secret: all United Methodists do not agree on what the Bible means!) Philip William Otterbein writes of “the eternal witness in the Bible.” If it is eternal, you’d think we would have figured it all out by now!

But it does not take a very clever observer to recognize the ways that Christians disagree on what the Bible says. Denominations form, dissolve, and form again because we do not agree. (Each of the constituent bodies now in United Methodism has experienced such splintering, some still in place.) Call the roll of issues on which faithful, authentic Christians have disagreed over the centuries: slavery, abortion, homosexuality, role of women, racial segregation, war, labor organization, global warming, economics, and the proper color to use for the Advent paraments!

Three factors drive most of this division: (1) sin, (2) approach to biblical interpretation, and (3) variety of life experience.

1. Paul challenged the church in Corinth to quit squabbling (1 Cor. 1:10). He chalked up divisiveness to persons having worldly wisdom that was foolishness to God (1 Cor. 3:18–19). Human beings ought to know about God because God has shown it to them (Rom. 1:19). God’s intent is for all to be saved (Rom. 10:13), but the way we judge one another is a sin, which makes God judge us (Rom. 14:10). Thinking too highly of ourselves is a sin (Rom. 12:3). That sin will sometimes not let us have our minds transformed (Rom. 12:2).

2. United Methodists vary in their approach to biblical interpretation (see questions 3 and 4). If I think God closed down the revelation when the Bible was inspired (not one jot or tittle to be changed—Matt. 5:18–19), then I approach the Bible in one way. If I think God has not finished revealing the meaning of the Scripture (it is a living word—Heb. 4:12), then I approach the Bible in another way.

3. A friend of mine moved to North Carolina from Montana. When he first got here, he said he felt claustrophobic, as if all the

roadside trees and forests of green were closing in on him. In Montana, he had known “big sky” and open land. I, on the other hand, felt right at home with woods and tall pines and roads among towering oaks. These two different ways of “experiencing trees” are simply functions of our life journeys; the places where we stand to do our looking are different from each other. We see the exact same woodland differently. Readers of the Bible bring differing backgrounds, experiences, expectations, hungers, filters, sins, and learning for looking at exactly the same text. God invites us to get past those differences (Gal. 3:28), but until we do, the view is going to be different from person to person.

On what can we agree? Jesus Christ is Lord. Now, let’s talk about what that means.

Join us, in one spirit join, let us still receive of thine;
still for more on thee we call, thou who fillest all in all.

Another question: What gives you confidence in a biblical interpretation?



48. Why follow the lectionary?

The lectionary is a collection of biblical texts assigned to be read on certain Sundays of the church year or holy days. Many—but by no means all—United Methodist congregations follow this cycle of readings, usually a lesson from the Old Testament, a lesson from an epistle, and a lesson from one of the Gospels. Frequently, they include a selection from the Psalms. The practice of having a portion of the Bible appointed to be read each Sunday goes back at least to the fourth century, if indeed not in previous Jewish custom. The lectionary used by United Methodists was revised in 1992 and follows common readings (on most Sundays) with Roman Catholics, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Lutherans, and others who value the three-year cycle of readings. (See *BOW*, pp. 227–37.)

Why do this? Following the lectionary leads the preacher away from the temptation of choosing only personal favorite biblical passages. In the course of the three years (cleverly called Year A, Year B, and Year C!), a congregation using the lectionary will hear all the

major biblical themes and will explore some texts that otherwise might be hidden. There is a power in the awareness that the congregation where I worship is engaging the same Scriptures as friends in England or Africa or Porthdinllaen, Gwynedd, North Wales. Use of the full lectionary readings will expose a congregation to three or four lessons a Sunday—not bad for a people who hold the Scripture to be foundational!

The use of both Old Testament and New Testament readings helps the church avoid the heresy (false teaching) of Marcion. In the second century, he argued that the Old Testament was no longer valid now that the New Testament was revealed. The Articles of Religion (article VI) speak directly to this issue and declare, “The Old Testament is not contrary to the New.”

Some United Methodists feel that following the lectionary binds the Holy Spirit. These persons allow the Spirit to guide the choice of Scripture for preaching. In this freedom, they sense a greater likelihood that the text will be the appropriate word for a given occasion.

Most United Methodist congregations follow the Christian year, giving the thematic and biblical emphases for Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost. Often, additional days are observed: All Saints, Christ the King, Ash Wednesday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Transfiguration, Baptism of the Lord, and so forth. Tradition offers colors to be used to reinforce the meaning of the seasons: white, purple, blue, gold, green, black, and red. Clergy vestments vary according to local convention, pastoral preference, and liturgical teaching.

When he first the work begun, small and feeble was his day;
now the Word doth swiftly run, now it wins its widening way;
more and more it spreads and grows, ever mighty to prevail;
sin’s strongholds it now o’erthrows, shakes the trembling gates of hell.

Another question: How can the use of the lectionary help or hurt how you hear the gospel?