

The Authority of Scripture

The Bible was written over a period of 1,600 years by 40 authors in three languages, Hebrew and Aramaic for the Old Testament and Greek for the New. Despite that length of time and diversity of authors and languages it displays a unity of purpose and harmony. The Bible has always been considered the Word of God in the Judeo-Christian community. As Paul states in 2 Timothy 3: 16 “All Scripture is breathed out by God profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.”

Paragraph 104 of the Articles of Religion in the Book of Discipline (BOD) states that, “United Methodists share with other Christians the conviction that Scripture is the primary source and criterion for Christian doctrine.” John Wesley stated that “In all cases, the Church is to be judged by the Scripture, not the Scripture by the Church.”¹

The primary purpose for studying Scripture is to discern the will of God so we can apply it to our lives and to help us grow in the faith. Anyone who studies Scripture knows that interpreting Scripture can be difficult. As noted above it was written by people who lived in different times with unique social, religious and economic conditions and contexts. To interpret Scripture, we should try to understand the conditions under which the authors lived and wrote. We also use Christian tradition, our reason and experience when trying to understand Scripture, but Scripture itself supersedes all, as found in paragraph 105 of the BOD.²

Every passage of Scripture has been studied and commented on numerous times over the past 1,500 years. There is a rich treasure of knowledge that has been passed down to us through history by the saints that came before us that can help us interpret Scriptures. When we try to reinterpret Scripture in light of current social conditions, we are in danger of misinterpreting Scripture. As has been said, “if I have an original thought about any passage of Scripture it is almost certainly wrong.”

One of the issues facing the UMC today is how do we interpret Scripture as it relates to homosexuality. Both the Old and New Testament seem fairly clear that the practice of homosexuality is a sin. The Apostle Paul in Romans 1: 22-29³ and 1 Corinthians 6: 9-11, 15-20⁴ is very clear on homosexual behavior being one of the many sins confronting the early church. Some recent theologians believe that Paul was addressing ritual prostitution and therefore sex between two consenting adult males is not necessarily a sin. That has not been the historical interpretation and Dr. Efirid, a noted Bible scholar who taught at Duke Seminary and Wesley Memorial for many years, has said that Paul uses the Greek word for relations between two consenting adult males which is different from the word for relations with a male prostitute.

In conclusion to quote Rev. Chris Ritter: “The Bible is the church's book. These are the texts we read, love, study, proclaim, wrestle with, and seek to order our lives around. They tell a sweeping epic of salvation that includes us in the story. We use many books, but the Bible is our canon, our measuring stick for truth. It tells us where we come from, why we are here, how we should live, and where we are headed. And the canon is closed; we do not add to or take away. Yard sticks are never made of elastic.”⁵

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References:

- 1) John Wesley (1831) “The Works of the Reverend Wesley A.M.” p.805
- 2) The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2016, paragraph 105 “Our Theological Task” page 82 – 89
- 3) Romans 1: 22-29 ESV “Claiming to be wise they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. Therefore, God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever, Amen. For this reason, God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those contrary to nature, and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.”
- 4) 1 Corinthians 6: 9-11, 15-20 ESV “Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.....Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So, glorify God in your body.”
- 5) A Firm Foundation, Seedbed Publishing, 2017 Chapter 3 p. 35-36