

## John Wesley's Scriptural Christianity

There can be little doubt to the ultimate importance of Scripture in John Wesley's understanding of the Christian faith. From Wesley's view, the only Christianity to follow was that which was based upon the message and morality revealed in the Bible. One cannot help noticing in Wesley sermons the multitude of Scriptural references and allusions utilized in their design. Wesley indicated in his volume entitled *Notes on the Old Testament*, that "I design only, like the hand of a dial, to point every man to This: not to take up his mind with something else, how excellent soever: but to keep his eye fixt upon the naked Bible, that he may read and hear it with understanding. I say again, (and desire it may be well observed, that none may expect what they will not find) It is not my design to write a book, which a man may read separate from the Bible: but barely to assist those who fear God, in hearing and reading the bible itself, by shewing the natural sense of every part, in as few and plain words as I can."<sup>1</sup> Such was Wesley's encouragement to both men *and women* (allowing for the communication style of the 18th century), who desire to know and follow Christ to engage the plain meaning of the Bible and to allow the Scripture itself to guide and impact each person's life. And those who seek to follow Christ in the Wesleyan tradition in our day are likewise urged to engage the Scriptures for both understanding and life direction.

Wesley further elaborates on the importance of Scripture in his sermon entitled *The Means of Grace*, where he notes that "... all who desire the grace of God are to wait for it in searching the Scriptures. Our Lords direction, with regard to the use of this means, is likewise plain and clear. "Search the Scriptures," saith he to the unbelieving Jews, "for they testify of me," John v, 39. And for this very and did he direct them to search the Scriptures, that they might believe in him.

The objection, "that this is not a command, but only an assertion, that they did search the Scriptures," is shamelessly false. I desire those who urge it, to let us know how a command can be more clearly expressed, then in the terms, ἐπαινεῖτε τὰς γραφάς (cf. Acts 17:11 from the Greek text)? It is as preemptory as so many words can make it.

And what a blessing from God attends the use of this means, appears from what is recorded concerning the Bereans; who, after hearing St. Paul, "search the Scriptures daily, whether those things are so? Therefore, many of them believed;" - found the grace of God, in the way which he had ordained, Acts xvii, 11, 12.

It is probable, indeed, that in some of those who had "received the word with all readiness of mind," "faith came" (as the same apostle speaks) "by hearing," and was only confirmed by reading the Scriptures: but it was observed above, that under the

general term of searching the Scriptures, both hearing, reading, and meditating, are contained.

And that this is a means whereby God not only gives, but also confirms and increases, true wisdom, we learn from the words of St. Paul to Timothy: "from a child thou hast known the holy Scriptures which are able to make the wise unto salvation, through faith which is in Christ Jesus," 2 Timothy iii, 15. The same truth (namely, that this is the great means God has ordained for conveying his manifold grace to man) is delivered, in the fullest manner that can be conceived, in the words which immediately follow: "all Scripture is given by inspiration of God;" consequently, all Scripture is infallibly true; "and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness;" to the end "that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good deeds," ver. 16, 17.

It should be observed, that this is spoken primarily and directly of the Scriptures which Timothy had known from a child: which must have been those of the Old Testament, for the New was not then wrote. How far then was St. Paul (though he was "not a whit behind the very chief of the apostles," nor, therefore, I presume, behind any man now upon earth) from making light of the Old Testament! Behold this, lest you one day "wonder and parish," he who make so small account of one half of the oracles of God! Yay, and that half of which the holy ghost expressly declares, that it is "profitable," as a means ordained by God, for this very thing, "for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness;" to the end, "that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works."

Nor is it profitable only for the man of God, for those who walk already in the light of his countenance; but also for those who are yet in darkness, seeking him whom they know not. Thus St. Peter, "we have also a more sure word of prophecy;" literally, "and we have the prophetic word more sure;" καὶ ἔχομεν βεβαιότερον τὸν προφητικὸν λόγον (cf. 2 Peter 1:19 from the Greek text); confirmed by our being "eyewitnesses of his Majesty," and "hearing the voice which came from the excellent glory;" unto which (prophetic word; so he styles the holy Scriptures) "ye do well that you take heed, as to a light that shines in the dark place, until the day dawned, and the day star arise in your hearts," 2 Peter i, 19. Let all, therefore, who desire that day to dawn upon their hearts, wait for it in searching the Scriptures."<sup>2</sup>

Since every believer stands in need of the grace which only God can provide in Christ, the child of God is urged to engage the Scriptures for the purpose of actually experiencing profoundly the goodness of God found in the testimony of the prophets and apostles to Christ our Savior. However the simple knowledge about Christ from Scripture, even gained from direct personal experience, was only half of the goal of faith in Christ. According to Wesley, not only is the one who is seeking the grace of God to

engage the Word of God for understanding, but to imitate the righteousness of Jesus Christ our Lord and one's day to day lifestyle. Changed thought and behavior was the proof of truly encountering the grace of Jesus Christ. In his sermon *The Lord our Righteousness*, Wesley states:

"What is the righteousness of Christ? It is twofold, either his divine or his human righteousness.

1. His divine righteousness belongs to his divine nature, as he is  $\Theta\ \omega\gamma$  (cf. Septuagint Exodus 3:14 "I AM"), He that existeth ; "over all, God blessed for ever; "the Supreme; the Eternal; "equal with the Father, as touching is Godhead, though inferior to the Father as touching his manhood. "Now this is his eternal, essential, immutable holiness; his infinite justice, mercy, and truth; in all which, He and the Father are One. But I do not apprehend that the divine righteousness of Christ is immediately concerned in the present question. I believe few, if any, do now contend for the imputation of this righteousness to us. Whoever believes the doctrine of imputation, understands it chiefly, if not solely, of his human righteousness.

2. The human righteousness of Christ belongs to him in his human nature; as he is the "Mediator between God and man, the Man Christ Jesus." This is either internal or external. His internal righteousness is the image of God, stamped on every power and faculty of his soul. It is a copy of his divine righteousness, so far as it can be imparted to a human spirit. It is a transcript of the divine purity, the divine justice, mercy, and truth. It includes love, reverence, resignation to his Father; humility, meekness, gentleness; love to lost mankind, and every other holy and heavenly temper; and all these in the highest degree, without any defect, or mixture of unholiness, THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS.

3. It was the least part of his external righteousness, that he did nothing amiss; that he knew no outward sin of any kind, neither was " guile found in his mouth; " that he never spoke one improper word, nor did one improper action. Thus far it is only a negative righteousness, though such a one as never did, nor ever can, belong to any one that is born of a woman, save himself alone. But even his outward righteousness was positive too: He did all things well: In every word of his tongue, in every work of his hands, he did precisely the "will of Him that sent him." In the whole course of his life, he did the will of God on earth, as the angels do it in heaven. All he acted and spoke was exactly right in every circumstance. The whole and every part of his obedience was complete. "He fulfilled all righteousness.""<sup>3</sup>

For Wesley, the goal of searching Scripture and Jesus Christ, the Holy One of God, was to gain the righteousness of Christ in the follower's day-to-day living. Scripture informs our understanding of what type of behavior and what mode of thought

is actually pleasing to God. For directly connecting acceptance of the message of the Bible with the acquisition by faith in Christ of personal holiness is what drew the ire and hostility of many in his day. Yet multitudes came to accept Wesley's understanding of Scripture and Christian lifestyle.

The following passage taken from Wesley's *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*, in his preface Wesley elaborates on his confidence regarding the Bible as the perfect guide for Christian life. In this passage, I have taken the liberty of preserving the writing style of the 1757 edition of his work, simply because of the unique way in which emphasis was added by Wesley and the publisher to gain the attention of the reader to his message. In some respects, it is regrettable that in current English style of writing, many points of emphasis may be lost. But this publication style has a way of causing the reader to pause and reflect on the written message.

“Concerning the Scriptures in general, it may be observed, the Word of the Living GOD, which directed the first Patriarchs also, was in the time of *Moses*, committed to Writing To this were added, in several succeeding Generations, the inspired Writings of the other Prophets. Afterward, what the Son of GOD preached, and the HOLY GHOST spake by the Apostles, the Apostles and Evangelists wrote. This is what we now style the *Holy Scripture*: This is that *Word of our GOD which remaineth for ever*: of which, tho’ *Heaven and Earth pass away, one Jot or Tittle shall not pass away*. The Scripture therefore of the *Old and New Testament*, is a most solid and most 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.”

An exact Knowledge of the Truth was accompanied in the inspired Writers with an exactly regular system of Arguments, a precise Expression of their Meaning, and a genuine Vigor of suitable Affections. The Chain of Argument in which each Book is briefly exhibited in the Table prefixt to what, which contains also the Sum thereof, and may be of more Use, then prefixing the Argument to each Chapter; the Division of the *New Testament* into Chapters, having been made in the dark ages, and very incorrectly; often separating Things that are closely joined, and joining those that are entirely distinct from each other.

In the Language of the Sacred Writings, we may observe the most Depth, together with the utmost Ease. All the Elegancies of human Composures sink into nothing before it: GOD speaks not as Man, but as GOD. His Thoughts are very deep; and whence his Words are of inexhaustible Virtue. And the Language of his Messengers also is exact in the highest Degree: for the Words which were given them, accurately answered the Impression made upon their Minds: and hence *Luther* says,

"Divinity is "nothing but a Grammar of the Language of the Holy Ghost." To understand this thoroughly, we should observe the *Emphasis* which lies on every Word; the holy *Affections* expressed thereby, and the *Tempers* shewn by every Writer. But how little are these, the latter especially, regarded? Tho' they are wonderfully diffused thro' the whole *New Testament*, and are in Truth a continued Commendation of Him, who acts, or speaks, or writes.

The *New Testament* is, all those Sacred Writings in which the *New Testament* or Covenant is described. The former Part of this contains the Writings of the Evangelists and Apostles: the latter, the Revelation of JESUS CHRIST. In the former is, first, the History of JESUS CHRIST, from his Coming in the Flesh, to his Ascension into Heaven; then, the Institution and History of the Christian Church, from the Time of his Ascension. The Revelation delivers what is to be, with regard to CHRIST, the Church, and the Universe, 'till the Consummation of all Things."<sup>3</sup>

What an amazing declaration of confidence in the Scriptures Wesley makes in this passage. Wesley made it his goal to attempt to plumb the depths of the Scriptures in order to gain the wisdom and guidance of God for his own life and for the lives of those people who identified with the Methodist movement. And such wisdom as Wesley gained, he then committed into writing, not for the purpose of impressing people with his writing style, but to communicate in a way which could be understood and easily applied by the people who heard him preach and teach.

And so Wesley's model was gaining a practical truth for practical people, for growing in the grace and knowledge of our Savior Jesus Christ and for living out the Christian life in ways that are pleasing to our Lord. The next excerpt comes from the introduction to Wesley's *Explanatory Notes on the Old Testament*. The practicality of Wesley in urging his followers to search the Scriptures is easily perceived:

"15. Every thinking man will now easily discern my design in the following sheets. It is not, to write sermons, essays or set discourses, upon any part of Scripture. It is not to draw inferences from the text, or to shew what doctrines may be proved thereby. It is this: To give the direct, literal meaning, of every verse, of every sentence, and as far as I am able, of every word in the oracles of God. I design only, like the hand of a dial, to point every man to This: not to take up his mind with something else, how excellent soever: but to keep his eye fixt upon the naked Bible, that he may read and hear it with understanding. I say again, (and desire it may be well observed, that none may expect what they will not find) It is not my design to write a book, which a man may read separate from the Bible: but barely to assist those who fear God, in hearing and reading the bible itself, by shewing the natural sense of every part, in as few and plain words as I can.

16. And I am not without hopes, that the following notes may in some measure answer this end, not barely to unlettered and ignorant men, but also to men of education and, learning: (although' it is true, neither these nor the Notes on the New Testament were principally designed for Them.) Sure I am, that tracts wrote in the most plain and simple manner, are of infinitely more service to me, than those which are elaborated with the utmost skill, and set off with the greatest pomp of erudition.

17. But it is no part of my design, to save either learned or unlearned men from the trouble of thinking. If so, I might perhaps write Folios too, which usually overlay, rather than help the thought. On the contrary, my intention is, to make them think, and assist them in thinking. This is the way to understand the things of God; Meditate thereon day and night; So shall you attain the best knowledge; even to know the only true God and Jesus Christ whom He hath sent. And this knowledge will lead you, to love Him, because he hath first loved us: yea, to love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. Will there not then be all that mind in you, which was also in Christ Jesus? And in consequence of this, while you joyfully experience all the holy tempers described in this book, you will likewise be outwardly holy as He that hath called you is holy, in all manner of conversation.

18. If you desire to read the scripture in such a manner as may most effectually answer this end, would it not be advisable,

1. To set apart a little time, if you can, every morning and evening for that purpose?
2. At each time if you have leisure, to read a chapter out of the Old, and one out of the New Testament: is 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; the connection and harmony there is between those grand, fundamental doctrines, Original Sin, Justification by Faith, the New Birth, Inward and Outward Holiness.
5. Serious and earnest prayer should be constantly used, before we consult the oracles of God, seeing "scripture can only be understood thro' the same Spirit whereby "it was given." Our reading should likewise be closed with prayer, that what we read may be written on our hearts.

6. It might also be of use, if while we read, we were frequently to pause, and examine ourselves by what we read, both with regard to our hearts, and lives. This would furnish us with matter of praise, where we found God had enabled us to conform to his blessed will, and matter of humiliation and prayer, where we were conscious of having fallen short. And whatever light you then receive, should be used to the uttermost, and that immediately. Let there be no delay. Whatever you resolve, begin to execute the first moment you can. So shall you find this word to be indeed the power of God unto present and eternal salvation.”<sup>4</sup>

The final excerpt is worth reviewing once more, as it contains a portion of Wesley's preface to his standard sermons printed by Zondervan in 1872. Here we will discover Wesley's abiding passion for the Bible, especially expressed in section 5. It is a fitting conclusion to this article on Wesley's understanding of Scriptural Christianity, providing food for thought for all who identify the Methodist movement in our own day.

“3. I design plain truth for plain people: therefore, of set purpose, I abstain from all nice and philosophical speculations; from all perplexed and intricate reasonings; and, as far as possible, from even the show of learning, unless in sometimes citing the original Scripture. I labour to avoid all words which are not easy to be understood, all which are not used in common life; and, in particular, those kinds of technical terms that so frequently occur in Bodies of Divinity; those modes of speaking which men of reading are intimately acquainted with, but which to common people are an unknown tongue. Yet, I am not assured, that I do not sometimes slide into them unawares; it is so extremely natural to imagine that a word which is familiar to ourselves is so to all the world.

4. Nay, my design is, in some sense, to forget all that ever I have read in my life. I mean to speak, in the general, as if I had never read one author, ancient or modern (always excepting the inspired). I am persuaded, that, on the one hand, this may be a means of enabling me more clearly to express the sentiments of my heart, while I simply follow the chain of my own thoughts, without entangling myself with those of other men; and that, on the other, I shall come with fewer weights upon my mind, with less of prejudice and pre-possession, either to search for myself, or to deliver to others, the naked truths of the gospel.

5. To candid, reasonable men, I am not afraid to lay open what have been the inmost thoughts of my heart. I have thought, I am a creature of a day, passing through life as an arrow through the air. I am a spirit come from God, and returning to God, just hovering over the great gulf; till few moments hence, I am no more seen! I drop into an unchangeable eternity! 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 a 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*. Here then I am, far from the busy ways of men. I sit down alone: only God is here. In His presence I open, I read His book; for this end, to find the way to heaven. Is there a doubt concerning the meaning of what I read? Does anything appear dark or intricate? I lift up my heart to the Father of Lights: Lord, is it not Thy word "If any man lack wisdom, let him ask of God"? Thou "givest liberally, and upbraidest not." Thou hast said, "If any be willing to do, Thy will, he shall know." I am willing to do; let me know. Thy will I then search after and consider parallel passages of Scripture, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. I meditate thereon with all the attention and earnestness of which my mind is capable. If any doubt still remains, I consult those who are experienced in the things of God; and then the writings whereby, being dead, they yet speak. And what I thus learn, that I teach.

6. I have accordingly set down in the following sermons what I find in the Bible concerning the way to heaven; with a view to distinguish this way of God from all those which are the inventions of men. I have endeavoured to describe the true, the scriptural, experimental religion, so as to omit nothing which is a real part thereof, and to add nothing thereto which is not. And herein it is more especially my desire, first, to guard those who are just setting their faces toward heaven (and who, having little acquaintance with the things of God, are the more liable to be turned out of the way), from formality, from mere outside religion, which has almost driven heart-religion out of the world; and, secondly, to warn those who know the religion of the heart, the faith which worketh by love, lest at any time they make void the law through faith, and so fall back into the snare of the devil."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Wesley' Notes on the Bible*, John Wesley, Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, p.591

<sup>2</sup>*Sermons on Several Occasions*, John Wesley. 1745, New York, Volume 1, Sermon 16 "The Means of Grace" pp. 140-142

<sup>3</sup>*The Lord our Righteousness*. Sermons on Several Occasions by the Reverend John Wesley, Volume 1, 1845, New York, pp 170-171

<sup>4</sup>*Explanatory Notes on the New Testament, 2nd Edition*, John Wesley, London, 1757, pp. v-vi

<sup>5</sup> *The Works of John Wesley*. Volume 5, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1872, pp. 2-4.