

Randy L. Maddox. "How John Wesley Read the Bible." *Catalyst* 38.1 (November 2011), 1–3.
<http://www.catalystresources.org/how-john-wesley-read-the-bible/>

How did John Wesley read the Bible? The best known passage where he answers this question is in the preface (§5) to the first volume of his *Sermons*, which begins:

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! ... Let me be *homo unius libri* [a man of one book]. 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.

“A Man of One Book” comparatively!

Read in isolation, this passage could suggest that Wesley was a *biblicist*, relying solely on the Bible for all matters. But Wesley elsewhere responded to the claim, “I read only the Bible,” with strong words: “This is rank enthusiasm. If you need no book but the Bible, you are got above St. Paul” (1766 *Minutes*, Q. 30). As he explained more carefully in *Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (§10), to be *homo unius libri* is to regard no book *comparatively* but the Bible.

While Wesley was stressing the preeminence of the Bible over other books, one might catch hints here that he read the one Book itself *comparatively*. Wesley did not limit himself to the translation currently standard in the Church of England (KJV). He conferred with other English translations, as well as versions in French and German. And he valued over all of these the Bible in its original languages of Hebrew and Greek.

Going a step further, Wesley owned at least four versions of the Greek New Testament, because he knew that there was no pristine copy handed down from the earliest church. Among the versions he owned was John Mill’s two-volume set, which gathered in footnotes the most complete list at the time of variant readings in various manuscripts. The English translation that Wesley provided for *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* often corrects that in the KJV, by conferring with these variant readings and with the arguments about which might be most reliable.

Finally, Wesley conferred as needed with scholarly tools like lexicons, concordances, and commentaries in reading the Bible. Perhaps most surprising is his use of historical critical resources that began to surface in the later seventeenth century. While he was uncomfortable with the reductive intent of some scholars who highlighted historical and literary parallels between the Bible and surrounding cultures, Wesley found that studies of the customs of the ancient Israelites and the early Christians enriched his reading of the Bible—so much so that he published an abridgment of one (by Claude Fleury) for his lay preachers.

Read comparatively the Many Books in the One Book

Another characteristic often attributed to biblicism is the assumption that Scripture is always clear (perspicuous) to the ordinary reader and uniform in its teachings throughout. Striking a different tone, Wesley’s preface to *Sermons* continues:

Is there a doubt concerning the meaning of what I read? Does anything appear dark or intricate? ... 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.

Wesley recognized that readers often labor to understand particular scriptures, and that a central resource is consulting other parts (or books) of the one Book. He encouraged his followers to read a portion of *both* testaments each morning and evening, rather than confining themselves to favored portions of Scripture. He also modeled conferring with the whole Bible. We have records of him preaching on texts from every book in the Protestant canon except Esther, Song of Songs, Obadiah, Nahum, Zephaniah, Philemon, and 3 John.

Read relying on the Inspiration of the Spirit

Before exploring more of Wesley’s recommendations for our human role in reading Scripture, we need to return to the ellision (...) in my second extract from his preface, because it contains one of Wesley’s deepest convictions about Christian life in general and study of Scripture in particular. Here is the missing material:

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 has said, ‘If any be willing to do thy will, he shall know.’ I am willing to do, let me know, thy will.”

Wesley’s emphasis on the “inspiration of the Spirit” in Christian life is reflected here. His typical use of this phrase is broader than considerations of the production of the Bible. In the *Complete English Dictionary* (1753), he defined “inspiration” as the influence of the Holy Spirit that enables persons to love and serve God. This broad use of the word trades on the meaning of the Latin, *inspirare*: to breathe into, animate, excite, or inflame. The broader understanding is evident even when Wesley uses “inspiration” in relation to the Bible, as in his comments in *Explanatory Notes* on 2 Timothy 3:16. He affirms God’s guidance of the original authors, but his focal emphasis is encouraging current readers to seek the Spirit’s inspiring assistance in reading and appropriating the truths of Scripture!

Read in Conference with Other Readers

Bearing in mind this dependence upon the Spirit’s empowering and guiding presence, let us push on in Wesley’s preface. After encouraging his readers to pray for help and stressing the need to compare scripture with scripture, Wesley continues, “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.” The crucial thing to note in this concluding line is not just that an individual might turn to other books to help understand the one Book, but that we as individuals need to read the Bible in conference with other readers!

Note that Wesley identifies consulting particularly those “more experienced in the things of God.” His focal concern is not scholarly expertise (though he is not dismissing this), but the contribution of mature Christian character and discernment to interpreting the Bible. Where does one find such folk whose lives and understanding are less distorted by sin? One of Wesley’s most central convictions was that Christian character and discernment are the fruit of the Spirit,

nurtured within the witness, worship, support, and accountability of Christian community. While the class and band meetings that he designed to embody this principle were not devoted primarily to bible study, they helped form persons who were more inclined to read Scripture, and to read it in keeping with its central purposes.

But Wesley's emphasis on reading the Bible with others was grounded in his recognition of the limits of *all* human understanding, even that of spiritually mature persons. He stressed that, as finite creatures, our human understandings of our experience, of earlier Christian precedent, and of Scripture itself are "opinions" or interpretations of their subject matter. God may know these things with absolute clarity; we see them "through a glass darkly." Thus, in his sermon on a "Catholic Spirit" Wesley commended a spirit of openness in conferring with others, where we are clear in our commitment to the main branches of Christian doctrine, while always ready to hear and weigh whatever can be offered against our current understanding of matters of belief or practice—seeking together *more adequate* understandings of the topic being considered.

Moreover, it is vital that we do not limit our conferring to those who are most like us, or those with whom we already agree. We should remain open to, and at times seek out, those who hold differing understandings. Otherwise, we are not likely to identify where our understanding of something in Scripture (usually shared with those closest to us) might be wrong!

Read in Conference with Christian "Tradition"

Among those outside of his circle of associates whom Wesley sought to include in conference were Christians of earlier generations. He particularly valued the writings of the first three centuries of the church, in both its Eastern (Greek) and Western (Latin) settings. In a published letter to Conyers Middleton, he insisted that consultation with these writings had helped many readers avoid dangerous errors in their interpretation of Scripture, while neglect of these writings could leave one captive to misunderstandings currently reigning.

Wesley tended to jump from the early church to seventeenth-century Anglican standards (which he viewed as closely reflecting the early church) in his consideration of Christian precedent. We would do well to extend his precedent by engaging in a critical appropriation of the *breadth* of Christian history.

Read the One Book in Conference with the "Rule of Faith"

Wesley's strongest interest in the ancient church was their model of Christian practice. But he also valued early precedent in doctrine. One deserves special attention. An emphasis emerged early in the church on reading unclear or ambiguous passages in the Bible in light of the "rule of faith" (*regula fidei*—a Latin translation of Paul's advice in Romans 12:6 for exercising the gift of prophecy according to the "analogy of faith"). This was a summary of God's saving work revealed in Scripture, with particular attention to the implicit trinitarian form of this work (the Apostles' Creed is a key example).

The term "rule of faith" became a battle ground during the Reformation. Some teachings and practices had been advanced through the medieval period that Reformers judged contrary to biblical teaching. In response they championed "Scripture alone" as the rule of faith. But for most Protestants this did not mean rejecting the value of some communally-shared sense of the central and unifying themes in Scripture when trying to interpret particular passages. They changed the name for this shared sense to the "analogy of faith" (reflecting Paul's Greek text) as one expression of their concern to stick close to Scripture. But they typically defended under this label consulting at least the Apostles' Creed when interpreting Scripture.

Wesley's commitment to reading the Bible in light of the trinitarian (and other) themes affirmed in the Apostles' Creed is embodied in his advice: "In order to be well acquainted with the doctrines of Christianity you need but one book besides the New Testament — Bishop [John] Pearson *On the Creed*" (Telford, *Letters*, 4:243). Thus, Wesley's self-description as a "man of one Book" should not mislead us from recognizing that he read that Book in conference with the broadly shared Christian "rule of faith" and his specific Anglican commitments.

Read the "Book of Scripture" in Conference with the "Book of Nature"

One commitment that Wesley's Anglican upbringing nurtured was a higher emphasis than in some other Protestant circles for studying God's revelation in the natural world (the "book of nature") alongside of studying Scripture. Wesley's central interest in studying the natural world was to strengthen the faith awakened by Scripture and deepen our appreciation of God's power, wisdom, and goodness. But his reading of current studies of the natural world also helped him test and reshape inherited interpretations of Scripture.

For an example, return to the preface of *Sermons* and note Wesley's line: "I want to know one thing, the way to heaven." Wesley is reflecting here a long development in Christian history. Although Scripture speaks of God's ultimate goal in salvation as the "new heavens and earth," a variety of influences led Christians to assume increasingly that our final state is "heaven above." The latter was seen as a realm where human spirits, dwelling in ethereal bodies, join eternally with all other spiritual beings (a category that did not include animals) in continuous worship of God. By contrast, they assumed that the physical universe, which we abandon at death, would be annihilated. Wesley was raised with this understanding, and through much of his ministry it was presented as obvious and unproblematic. But in the last decade of his life he began to reclaim boldly the biblical imagery of God's renewal of the whole universe, specifically championing the notion that animals participate in final salvation. What led to this change? A major factor was his study of some current works in natural philosophy (the closest term for "science" at the time) that utilized the model of the "chain of beings." Central to this model is the assumption that the loss of any type of "being" in creation would call into question the perfection of the Creator. Prodded by this, Wesley began to take more seriously the biblical insistence that God desires to redeem the whole creation.

Here we can sense the dynamic of "honoring conference" that characterized Wesley's theological reflection at its best. Confronted by an apparent conflict between current human accounts of the natural world and his current (human) understanding of Scripture, Wesley did not simply debate which was more authoritative. He reconsidered his interpretations of *each*, seeking an understanding that *honored both*. In this way he upheld the authority of Scripture, while embracing the contribution of broad conferencing to understanding Scripture.

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