

# Part two: The Bible

## (Chapter 2)

### Conjunctive theology

- Conjunctive theology: not an “either/or” but a “both/**and**” (conjunction) view of truth.
- Wesley was not simplistic in his understanding of the Bible. He was comfortable with the belief that the Bible needed interpretation. He is famous for his quadrilateral: Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience—all helpful in understanding scripture
- Conjunctive theology involved understanding and embracing opposites...and living with the tension this involved. It is a “wisdom” approach to the Bible, not a “rulebook” approach.
  - Proverbs 26:4-5
    - 4 Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you yourself will be just like him.
    - 5 Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes.
- For him the Christian life brought peace of mind and heart through faith in Christ...yet there exists the tension of working “out your own salvation with fear and trembling.”
  - Wesley was known for his emphasis on both salvation by faith and the need for good works to “prove” that faith.
- A. W. Tozer summarized it well: “Truth is like a bird. It cannot fly on one wing. Yet we are forever trying to take off with one wing flapping furiously and the other tucked neatly out of sight.”
- Charles Simeon, contemporary of Wesley, also said something similar: “Truth is not in the middle, and not in one extreme, but in both extremes.”
- Truth has also been called a two-sided coin, requiring wisdom to know which side applies in a situation. (Birds of a feather flock together, and opposites attract.)

### The primacy of scripture

From the Methodist statement of faith:

- “We believe the Holy Bible, Old and New Testaments, reveals the Word of God so far as it is necessary for our salvation. It is to be received through the Holy Spirit as the true rule and guide for faith and practice. Whatever is not revealed in or established by the Holy Scriptures is not to be made an article of faith nor is it to be taught as essential to salvation.”
- The Methodist Church has no statement about whether the Bible is inerrant

However...the Bible can be difficult to understand, even the words of Jesus.

- It can be confusing for a variety of reasons.
  - 1 Corinthians 13:12 NRSV For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.
  - Jesus' disciples didn't understand things he said, even when they heard them in person.
    - Mark 4:10-13 When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. He told them, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that,  
    'they may be ever seeing but never perceiving,  
    and ever hearing but never understanding;  
    otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!'"
- Then Jesus said to them, "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?"

## The quadrilateral

Wesley taught that the Bible, our primary source of spiritual teaching, is best understood in the context of additional insights offered by tradition, reason, and experience.

- Scripture—is our primary source of teaching. In addition, our understanding of it can be enlightened, but not replaced by the following:
- Tradition—Wesley felt that information from the early church can shed much light on the Bible and on healthy Christian practices in ones life.
- Reason—assisted by the Holy Spirit is important to discern the truths of scripture
- Experience—validates the truth of scripture in our lives, but does not supplant it. Example: changed feelings, thoughts, and behavior after becoming a Christian.
- Where to look for help
  - Beyond the Bible itself sources include: commentaries, books about biblical history, dictionaries, atlases, people you know (both Christian and secular) and other various resources of all sorts.

## A three-fold approach to scripture

- ☆ In your study of the Bible, search for **Wisdom**
- ☆ In your search for Wisdom, pay attention to **Context**
- ☆ In your study of Context, look for **Trajectory**

This requires perseverance, humility, and patience

# Wisdom

- Is the Bible a rule book or a pathway to wisdom—wisdom that we can learn to apply to our current lives in our day?
  - Rules are limited in their application. They may fit one context but not another. Wisdom can be applied anywhere.
- The primacy of wisdom in scripture

Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31 Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice? On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand; beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals she cries out: “To you, O people, I call, and my cry is to all that live.”

“The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth. When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no springs abounding with water. Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth—when he had not yet made earth and fields, or the world’s first bits of soil. When he established the heavens, I was there, when he drew a circle on the face of the deep, when he made firm the skies above, when he established the fountains of the deep, when he assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters might not transgress his command, when he marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him, like a master worker; and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race.”

Proverbs 3:19 By wisdom the LORD laid the earth's foundations, by understanding he set the heavens in place

I Corinthians 1:30 NRSV He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption...

Colossians 3:16 ESV Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

- The big picture—how do we find this wisdom? We start with the text itself. Think in terms of the quadrilateral mentioned above to help give you a breadth of study.
- Prayer can help in your understanding—it is not to be underestimated. Be still and listen to God for insights about a passage. D.L. Moody said, “The Christian on his knees sees more than the philosopher on tiptoe.”
- Of course, knowledge is important and is a part of our goal also, but it is easy to make that a substitute goal. **Wisdom involves action, knowledge doesn't.**

# Context

- Context is a broad topic and requires study
- “What would I understand from this passage if I were living in that time and it was directed at me?”
- Context requires wisdom to find more wisdom
  - Quote from Peter Enns (How the Bible Really Works): “...it has struck me over the years that some of the most important pieces of literature in the entire Bible are personal letters written two thousand years ago by people I’ve never met named Paul, Peter, James, John, and some others and intended for people I absolutely know nothing about in places I am not remotely familiar with in a culture I really cannot hope to grasp.”

“As one of my seminary professors said, ‘Reading the New Testament is like reading someone else’s mail.’ That might be the most valuable thing I ever learned in seminary. And now I pass it on to you, at a far lower cost. And yet, this is not mail we are supposed to stuff back in a mailbox. We are supposed to read these letters—and not only read them, but find some way to draw them into our own lives. Think about that for a minute. I think about it a lot. And it doesn’t really matter that we might think these letters are inspired by God. That still leaves the question of why God would decide to inspire context-dependent personal correspondence and expect us to “get it” two thousand years later in a very—I will say it again, very—different time and place. Doesn’t God realize that we don’t share the common understanding that, say, Paul shares with the people in Corinth or Thessalonica? Doesn’t God realize that making twenty-one of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament letters means that we will have to think—really think—about what these letters were meant to do and then be really thoughtful and intentional, maybe even humble, about how to engage them for ourselves? Doesn’t God know that we will have to exercise tremendous—what’s that word again? Oh, yes—wisdom in order to know how or even if these words will apply to others in their own context-dependent situations? Leaving the snark aside, I think that letters are the perfect format for a sacred book that is not intended as a helicopter-parenting manual, but as a source of wisdom. We can’t simply just drag these letters into our own life as is. We have to work at ***finding the connection between then and now.***”

- In other words, we have to understand the “then” to get to the “now”
- There are many different aspects to context
  - What are the surrounding biblical texts...what happened before and after the passage?
  - What is the context in the whole of the Bible and its timeline
  - The nature of the author’s life and experience
  - Knowledge about the people to whom it was written, the society, their current religious beliefs, and their language...which can be huge

- Again...what would I understand from this passage if I were living in that time and it was directed to me?
- Be willing to suspend understanding until you find an answer that satisfies both your mind and your heart/emotions...even if it takes months or sometimes years. Don't force an understanding. And don't expect to always be right. Understanding can take time...don't panic.
  - I once asked a pastor friend of mine what to do when I run across a passage while reading scripture that really bothers me and that I don't understand. His answer was, "Keep on reading. Perhaps you will understand at a later time." In other words, put in the back of my mind for another day, and continue to read what I do understand.
  - Example of Wesley and Whitfield: These two men had different understandings about free-will versus predestination that were never resolved. But they were both used mightily in the same Great Awakening. They did not need to have the same opinion as one another about this particular topic to be effective in their ministries. Someone naively asked Whitfield if he expected to see Wesley in heaven, since Wesley did not subscribe to Whitfield's beliefs about "predestination". Whitfield said no, he didn't expect to see Wesley in heaven. He went on to say that he expected Wesley to be so much closer to the Great Throne of God than himself that he would probably be out of sight. Nice.

## Trajectory

- Trajectory, as we are using it here, is a pattern of change that takes place over time that seems to have a particular direction. When we think of it relative to biblical interpretation it has to do with continuing a pattern of thought or action into the future from the original timeline. *For us we often think of it as bringing the message home to **our time** in order to understand how to live our lives.*
- Differing beliefs about trajectories are often points of controversy among Christians. Some people take more of a rule book approach and don't lean toward including a "trajectory way of thinking" as much as others. No one currently disagrees about slavery, while many do disagree about homosexuality, for example.
  - Interesting note: Our own Supreme Court faces the same issue with interpreting the Constitution. To some degree it is the job of the Supreme Court to interpret the Constitution in the same way that it is our job to interpret the Bible. Some justices hold to the "original meaning" view while others want to apply the original concerns of our founders "updated" to our current time and circumstances.

- Examples
  - Slavery—The Bible doesn't actually condemn slavery, and during the Civil War the Bible was used to support **both** sides of the slave argument.
    - In the Old Testament, as well as the New, slavery was an accepted practice
      - Exodus 21:20-21 (NIV) “Anyone who beats their male or female slave with a rod must be punished if the slave dies as a direct result, but they are not to be punished if the slave recovers after a day or two, since the slave is their property.”
    - In the New Testament
      - In terms of context, Roman slavery in New Testament times was very different than slavery as we think of it in the United States. It included all races, and many slaves held professional positions. It was not unusual for a slave to be able to purchase his or her freedom after a number of years and become Roman citizens with limited rights. Nevertheless it was wrong, of course.
      - Though the Bible did not record instances of Jesus or Christian writers as addressing slavery as a social practice to be condemned. Paul did push the social boundaries of his day when he claimed that slaves are equal to free persons in God's eyes. This emphasis was new.
 

Galatians 3:28 - “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”
      - Jesus said we are to love our neighbor as ourself. It's rather hard to say you're loving your neighbor if you own him and deprive him of freedom.
      - Thus Paul and Jesus planted the seeds for the downfall of slavery, and trajectory thinking was needed from Christians in the US to win the argument regarding slavery in the United States. “Original meaning” people wanted to keep slavery intact.
  - Role of women
    - In the Old Testament wives were considered to be property of their husbands, a view which to some degree at least, appears to have been carried over to the New Testament times. Women were not very active in public life, though there were exceptions.
    - However, Paul included women in his statement in Gal. 3:28 above, and in Romans 16:7 Paul praises a woman named Junia as a prominent apostle. Though elsewhere he talks about women remaining silent at church, he signals a change in the way women were perceived in biblical times, including their leadership in the church.
  - There are also trajectories in scripture that help us to understand the context of biblical history.
    - Example: The more war-like nature of God in the Old Testament versus the more gentle view of God in Jesus in the New. There are ways in which the

Hebrew understanding of God changed over time. This is a complex topic, but it is a significant trajectory with important implications

- Trajectory is a powerful, important, and sometimes controversial aspect of understanding and applying scripture. At times a trajectory can feel scary to consider because it requires significant interpretation on our part and is certainly open to error. However, the quadrilateral can help keep one grounded during that process. Trajectory is a rewarding and often necessary component of understanding how God would have us to live today.

## Homework

1. Read Chapter 3
2. Pray for our class daily, and that you will get from the class what you intended when signing up