

Legacy: Remember Your Bible!

Psalm 119:105
2 Timothy 3:14-17

*Everything we do should be
grounded in Scripture.*

A sermon preached by
Rev. Dr. William O. (Bud) Reeves
First United Methodist Church
Fort Smith, Arkansas
May 26, 2024

As rock and roll bands age, they often go on farewell tours. As long as they can still play, and gray-haired Baby Boomers will still pay, they will go at it one more time, remembering their days of glory. Some of the current rock stars doing farewell tours include Billy Joel. He is doing a monthly residency at Madison Square Garden through July, when he will play his 150th show there. Aerosmith is currently doing their Peace Out Farewell Tour, which will end sometime later this year. Foreigner's farewell tour is called Feels Like The Last Time. If you're a fan, you get the pun. Their last show will be on November 9.¹

I always wanted to be a rock star; I never quite made it. But I do want to do a farewell tour of sermons over the next four weeks. After preaching for 44 years, one final sermon was not going to cut it. I want to reflect on a lifetime of ministry and talk with you one last time about four areas that I think are crucial to your spiritual life and the health of this church. This is not new material; very little preaching contains ideas you have never heard before. It's like a band on their final tour; these are the old hits. I'm going to tell you some things I have told you before, but things I want you to remember, because I think they're important.

I'm calling it the Legacy series, and today we're going to talk about the Bible. Next week, we'll look at what's so special about being Methodist. The third week is focused on the path of discipleship. And the last week is on the vision and mission of the church. You have free tickets to all four shows!

I grew up active in church. My parents were faithful church members, and they made sure my brother and I were grounded in the faith. But I didn't really take the Bible seriously until high school, when our youth group was led by some adults who took the Bible seriously and led us in that direction. In addition to church and youth group on Sunday and choir practice on Wednesday, we also had small group Bible study at our youth leaders' home on Thursday.

Still, my hometown acquaintance with Scripture was somewhat narrow, and I had questions about some of the things we were studying, like the so-called end time prophecies. I went to

Hendrix College—not to study religion—and in my sophomore year I took a course from Dr. Francis Christie called “Biblical Literature and Thought,” or BLT for short. It was a year-long course in the Bible, and it changed my life. It opened up my understanding of the Bible from a literary and historical perspective. It transformed my Scriptural paradigm.

Then I was called to ministry, and I went to seminary, where I studied Scripture in even more depth. The more I understood about the Bible, the more inspiring it became, precisely because of the questions it raised. After seminary, I began a 40-year journey of weekly Bible study. I read the Bible for prayer time; I studied the Scripture for sermons; and I prepared Bible lessons for classes. There is hardly a day in the last 40 years that I have not opened up my Bible.

In the late 1980’s, I was part of the first group of teachers to be trained in Disciple Bible Study, authored with many Biblical experts and our bishop at the time, Richard Wilke. I taught Disciple Bible Study for over ten years and trained a group of teachers. There has been nothing in my ministry that has changed as many lives as the in-depth Bible study of Disciple.

Simply put, I love the Holy Scripture, and I hold every part of my faith up to the light of Scripture to see if it is consistent with the teaching of that wonderful book. Why is that? Primarily, it is because the Bible is the inspired Word of God. Paul writes to Timothy that “*All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that the person of God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.*”² “All scripture” for Paul meant the Old Testament. Timothy had been immersed in these holy writings from childhood, and Paul wanted him to remember and apply them. Scripture for us includes the Gospels, Paul’s letters, and the other writings of the New Testament.

These are holy words, and they carry the weight of centuries of authority. Yet at the same time, they are very human documents, written from a particular time and place by people with distinctive personalities. We see a progression of understanding across the ten centuries of writing of the Bible, and part of the joy and the

challenge is to understand the historical context, the audience, and the issues being addressed in a particular passage.

As Methodists and heirs of John Wesley, the Bible is our primary source of authority. He called Scripture “the sufficient rule of faith and practice.”³ Yet because Scripture was written by inspired human beings between 2,000 and 3,000 years ago in languages other than English, there is room for interpretation. Wesley also had two words about that. He said, “As to all opinions which do not strike at the root of Christianity, we think and let think.”⁴ And “In essentials, unity, in non-essentials, liberty, in all things, charity.”⁵ Not everybody is going to read the Word the same way.

The Christian faith is a religion of the Word. The words of Scripture contain the Word of God, but they are not the Word of God. The Word of God is Jesus Christ, the Son of God incarnate. The Gospel of John begins, “*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. ...And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.*”⁶ Scripture is valuable, authoritative, inspiring and useful only as it points us to Jesus Christ.

William Barclay, in his book *Introducing the Bible*, concludes with these words:

- The Bible is the word of God, because it is the place where the broken relationship between man and God is repaired.
- The Bible is the word of God, because it was written by men who knew God, because they loved and obeyed him.
- The Bible is the word of God, because it tells of the self-revealing, saving acts of God, culminating in the event of Jesus Christ.
- The Bible is the word of God, because in it and in it alone we are confronted with the life and teaching of Jesus Christ.⁷

Everything we do as Christians should be grounded in Scripture and consistent with what we understand to be its

teachings. Because our understanding of Scripture grows and changes, so does our understanding of the Christian life. The biggest paradigm shift in my ministry came about because of Bible study. I recently found and re-read my papers for ordination that I wrote 40 years ago. I was amazed how consistent my doctrine has remained over the years. But the one area where I really experienced a shift in perspective has been my attitude toward homosexuality.

I have struggled with understanding homosexuality since I was a teenager. I was reminded recently that I gave a report to the youth leaders of the annual conference in 1974 about the new language that had just been put into the Book of Discipline that homosexuality was “incompatible with Christian teaching.” As attitudes about homosexuality began to change, and as I made friends who were gay, I struggled to understand what was going on. My understanding of Scripture was that homosexuality is a sin, and that pretty much settled it. For thirty years, I taught and wrote that opinion in public. The best we could do was to be gracious to homosexuals without accepting their sinful behavior, since we’re all sinners, right?

For 50 years, homosexuality was the elephant in the room at every United Methodist Church gathering, and I began to feel a growing unease with the view I had always held. But I couldn’t change, because I couldn’t go against what I thought the Bible was teaching. I longed for an opportunity to study more deeply and come to a better understanding.

I finally got my chance in 2012, as I was appointed by the bishop to lead a task force to develop a curriculum to discuss homosexuality in the churches. For two years, a very diverse group of brothers and sisters in Christ read books and wrote papers and had discussions, and I discovered that there was a different way to understand Scripture.

There are basically six Scripture passages that relate to same-sex behavior in the Bible. I can give you a list or have a detailed discussion with you if you would like. What I discovered was that reputable, orthodox, Wesleyan Bible scholars were saying that what the Bible addresses is not what we think about as

homosexuality or same-sex relationships. The Old Testament passages had to do with the abuse of foreigners and cultic prostitution in the Canaanite fertility religions. The New Testament passages have to do with sexual rituals in Greek religions, the abuse of children and slaves, and what today we would call sexual addiction. At the same time, I learned that marriage, though it took a lot of different forms in the Bible, was most perfectly expressed as a covenant. It’s not about gender so much as it is about faith and trust. Covenants of marriage are sacred, faithful, permanent, and monogamous.

Over the course of two years of serious study, I came to realize that I could be perfectly consistent with Scripture, because I agree that all those abusive and addictive behaviors are wrong. I am against every form of same-sex practice that the Bible is against. Heterosexuality is still normative (Over 90% of American adults are straight.⁸), but it is not definitive. There are some people who are just wired differently, and they are children of God, too, and they can live in a covenant relationship with someone of the same gender. Many, many LGBTQ people are Christians, and the church ought to welcome, accept, and affirm everyone who wants to follow Jesus.

Let me say quickly, that is a matter of Scriptural interpretation on my part. You may not agree, and that is fine. We are a “big tent” church. We have lots of different opinions on lots of issues. The only things we absolutely have to agree on are “love God,” “love your neighbor,” and “Jesus is Lord.” On everything else, we can, in Wesley’s words, “agree to disagree.”⁹ I could be wrong on this, but I could be right. And if there is a possibility that we should pay attention to a better historical understanding of Scripture, shouldn’t we err on the side of grace? I don’t recall Jesus ever getting mad at anybody for being too gracious and inclusive, but he did have words for those who were narrow and judgmental.

The point of this extended illustration is that the biggest change in my career in ministry came through my understanding of Scripture. No other argument could be persuasive until I was confident that I was consistent with the teaching of the Bible. Everything we do should be grounded in the Holy Scriptures.

So I want to leave you with an action plan today. Scripture is fundamental to faith. We cannot be Christians without it. Here's how you make the Bible the foundation of your spiritual life:

1. Read the Bible or listen to it read every day. Even if it's just for a minute or two. Get a Bible app that will give you a Scripture for every day. Read a devotional with Scripture, like the *Upper Room*.¹⁰ Download a plan to read the Bible in a year. Somehow touch the word of God every day with your eyes and your heart.

2. Study the Bible in a small group. This is why Sunday School classes and Bible studies are so important. You will do better if you have other people to have conversations with, and you will be more disciplined if you are accountable to a group. You are more likely to do the reading if someone is going to ask you about it next time you meet.

3. Study for depth and understanding. The Bible is so rich. There is so much historical and literary background to every single passage. If you want to ground your life in the Bible, you have to dig some deep foundations. That takes time, and that takes energy, but there is nothing in the world that you will ever do that will have more significant rewards.

I love the Bible. John Wesley loved the Bible. He was a scholar and read many books, but there was one book that he treasured above all. In his preface to his first book of sermons, Wesley wrote, "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! At any price, give me the book of God! I have it: here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be *homo unius libri*."¹¹ (a man of one book)

Remember this after I am gone: Everything we do should be grounded in Holy Scripture.

Bibliography

Barclay, William. *Introducing the Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1997.

Hamilton, Adam. *Making Sense of the Bible: Rediscovering the Power of Scripture Today*. Nashville: Abingdon, 2014.

Harper, Steve. *Holy Love: A Biblical Theology For Human Sexuality*. Nashville: Abingdon, 2019.

Wink, Walter, Ed. *Homosexuality and the Christian Faith*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999.

¹ <https://www.aarp.org/entertainment/music/info-2024/final-live-band-tours.html>.

² 2 Timothy 3:17.

³ John Wesley, “The Character of a Methodist,” 1742.

<https://foundationforevangelism.org/2022/09/19/wesleys-orthodoxy/>.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ More of a “Wesleyan” statement than an actual quote, this phrase has been attributed to Wesley, St. Augustine, and several other theologians.

⁶ John 1:1-2, 14.

⁷ William Barclay, *Introducing the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 164.

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LGBT_demographics_of_the_United_States.

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agree_to_disagree.

¹⁰ <https://www.upperroom.org/devotionals>.

¹¹ John Wesley, “Preface to the First Series of Sermons,” 1747, in *The Works of John Wesley, Third Edition*, Volume 5 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 3.