

### **The Bible tells me so. Ken Todd**

“My conscience is captive to the Word of God.” These words of Martin Luther are being quoted in this 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary year of his public challenges which sparked the Protestant Reformation. His rediscovery of the primary authority of the Bible and his use of the phrase “Scripture alone” (*sola scriptura*) challenge us about the centrality of scripture in the life of the Church. Debates about abortion, sexuality, marriage or mission, usually boil down to our understanding of the authority of Scripture. This is what makes it such a vital issue for us today when many long-held convictions are being questioned.

Methodists believe that Scripture is our “supreme rule of faith and practice.” This means that the Bible reveals the ways and the nature of God and is our ethical guide. We would not know God without his self-revelation. “God is Light” and it is the nature of light to shine out. It is the nature of God to make himself known. “Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light for my path” (Psalm 119v105). Generally, God reveals himself in creation and conscience and history but supremely God reveals himself in Christ and in the Scriptures. Methodists are largely influenced by Wesley’s high view of scripture. We also are guided by what is called the “Methodist Quadrilateral.” I wish to comment on both.

### **Wesley’s Approach to Scripture**

Mr Wesley famously described himself as “a man of one Book” and further provided a guide for interpreting Scripture that we should not depart from the “plain sense” of the Bible. It is a helpful steer as we study God’s word. We handle Scripture, respectfully, coherently and consistently, aided by sound scholarship. We view the world through the lens of Scripture. We “let Scripture interpret Scripture,” believing that the various books of the Bible make up God’s unified self-revelation.

### **The Methodist Quadrilateral**

Another guide for the interpretation of Scripture was suggested by Methodist scholar Albert Outler in 1964 when he outlined a fourfold approach to understanding the Christian faith. Outler pictured four components or sides of a quadrilateral which were: (1) Scripture, (2) tradition, (3) reason, and (4) experience. Methodists believe that Scripture is the primary source while the other three are to be considered in its light. This “quadrilateral” however has taken a life of its own and some have “misconstrued” it to mean that tradition, reason and experience, are equal to Scripture. Outler himself wrote: “The term ‘quadrilateral’ does not occur in the Wesley corpus - and more than once I have regretted having coined it for contemporary use since it has been so widely misconstrued.” Professor Billy Abraham has similar regrets: “While the stated goal of the Quadrilateral may have been to stress the interdependence of Scripture, tradition, reason and experience in theological reflection, the inevitable result of such language in the modern arena has been that reason and experience win out over Scripture and tradition.”

### **Interpreting Scripture Today**

There are two significant challenges relating to the primacy of Scripture today. On the one hand there is the tendency to “revisionism” which claims that the authority of the Bible lies in how we read it rather than in what it says. The danger here is that we can water down or skate around that which either makes us uncomfortable or appears to go against modern popular culture. Hitler in 1941 published a Bible in the city of Weimar which attempted to remove all Jewish words. A single copy of it was discovered recently. A humanist Bible has been produced with advice about how to live the good life without reference to God.

. On the other hand there is the danger of simplistic literalism which ignores the context within the 66 books of the Bible using isolated “proof” texts. The danger with any Biblical minimalism is that it ends up using Scripture to promote our own dearly held ideas.

### **What Methodists Believe about Scripture**

So why do we believe in the Bible? There are many reasons. The first is that Jesus believed it. We have a Christ-centred approach to Scripture. The Lord Jesus Christ put his stamp of approval upon the Old Testament and predicted the writing of the New Testament (John 16v12,13). Of the Old Testament Jesus said: “The Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10v35) and he quoted from its most difficult parts including Jonah and Daniel. He saw the major points of his life foretold in the Scriptures. In the Bible a portrait of the Lord Jesus Christ is presented, without which we would not know him.

The Bible’s own self-testimony is that it is the “God-breathed” word of God (2 Timothy 3v15-17). External evidence for the authority of the Bible is increasingly seen in archaeological discoveries and in the social and moral impact of its teachings. Not least, there is the testimony of Christians whose lives have been transformed by its gospel message. The personal testimony of believers is that our Christian life progresses or backslides according to our daily obedience to Scripture. When we approach Scripture prayerfully and humbly we find that the Bible reads us as we read the Bible.

We meet instances of murkiness and mystery, especially in the Old Testament which cannot be dealt with here. There are some short-term localised food laws and dress codes which need to be distinguished from moral values which are constant. When, on a few occasions, isolated acts of violence are claimed in God’s Name it is an acknowledgement that nothing happens to us outside the scope of God’s sovereign power and will. I commend Paul Copan’s book “Making Sense of The Old Testament God” and N.T. Wright’s book “Scripture and The Authority of God – how to read the Bible Today.” Above all, the Scriptures point to our Lord Jesus Christ. Martin Luther described the Old Testament as ‘the cradle of Christ’. A.W. Tozer said: “We read the written word to encounter Jesus, the living Word.” So we can sing: “Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so!”

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