

## WESLEY'S GUIDELINES FOR READING SCRIPTURE

**A**s we now begin to look at specific, practical, methodological aspects of the role of scripture in spiritual formation, let us once again open ourselves and give God permission to use this time we have together:

*Our gracious and loving God, we thank you that you have been touching our lives: illuminating us; opening us at deep levels of our being; stretching us at points of our narrowness; confronting us where we are distorted; challenging us to become the word you speak us forth to be; but in every way working in it all for your good purposes in our lives. As we begin to consider ways of coming to scripture that will enable it to become your living Word in our lives, help us, God, to remain open to the guidance of your Holy Spirit. Amen.*

John Wesley's guidelines for reading scripture provide an excellent description of the posture necessary for our reading to become an encounter with the living, penetrating Word of God. They move us from the informational to the formational level of reading, from the functional to the relational aspect of response to what we read, and from the "doing" to the "being" mode of implementation of what we read. In introducing his guidelines Wesley suggests:

This is the way to understand [informational] 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" [formational/relational].

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” [relational/being] . . . And in consequence of this, while you joyfully experience all the holy tempers described in this book [being] , you will likewise be outwardly “holy as He that hath called you is holy, in all manner of conversation” [doing that flows from being].<sup>28</sup>

Wesley is here speaking of a process of approaching scripture that opens us to the living Word. This approach leads us into spiritual disciplines through which God can break the crust of self that holds us in bondage and which results in the nurture of the Word that enables us to be the word God speaks us forth to be in the world.

#### T I M E

If we desire to read scripture in such a way that we become, through the shaping of the Word, the word God speaks us forth to be, the first thing Wesley tells us to do is, “to set apart a little time, if you can, every morning and evening for that purpose.” I hear Wesley saying two things in this first guideline, which I would commend to you for your own use of scripture in your spiritual formation.

First, our use of scripture in spiritual formation must be a regular, consistent, daily feeding upon the Word; it must be a spiritual discipline as defined in chapter 10. We are to undertake reading scripture as a regular, consistent discipline, an action, a “function,” something we “do,” but we offer it up to God as a means of grace so our reading can become formational, relational. This offering is the heart, the core, the inner dynamic of spiritual discipline. But there is also the regularity of the discipline, the persistent, daily sticking with it.

Second, in the words “set apart,” I hear Wesley saying there needs to be not only a disciplined, daily time of reading the scripture but an unhindered time. The idea of unhindered time has two implications.

One, the time needs to be *outwardly* unhindered. You need, if at all possible, to have a time when you will not have interruptions or disruptions of your reading, to have a time when there will not be outside intrusions into your opening of yourself to the Word. For some this may be impossible, especially at certain stages of life. But uninterrupted time should be the goal toward which we move in establishing our set apart time.

Two, the set apart time needs to be *inwardly* unhindered. It needs to be a time when you can let go of the pressures, the problems, the burdens of your daily life for that period of time. It should be a time when you can center down or be still and open to God alone, a time when you can be in the presence of God's Word. There needs to be an inner as well as an outer solitude, inner as well as outer silence. This inward centering may also be impossible for some, but it should be the ideal we seek in setting apart a time for the scripture.

One additional aspect of this set apart time is to give God your best possible time. Often we give God the "leftover" time, the time when all the other responsibilities of our lives have been met. We come to God with our energies depleted, our emotions at low ebb, our minds dulled by the duties of the day, our spirits sluggish. Is it any wonder that we so infrequently encounter the living Word in our reading of scripture? or that our discipline of scripture reading becomes irregular and haphazard? We need to give God our best time, the time when we are alert, sensitive, fully alive, responsive. For many this time is at the beginning of the day; for others it is at some point during the day or in the evening. Whatever that best point is for you, that is when you should set apart time for reading the scripture. You should give God that part of your day when your attention and alertness are at their peak, the time when you can be "fully there." Here too, of course, it will not always be possible to offer God our best time at all stages of our life, but we should seek to give God the best possible time.

## BALANCE

Wesley's second guideline is, "At each time, if you have leisure, read a chapter out of the Old and one out of the New Testament; if you cannot do this, take a single chapter, or a part of one." There are at least three things implied in what Wesley gives us.

First, he is talking about an ordered discipline, an orderly working through the whole of scripture. As Christians, we have a strong tendency to focus our reading on the New Testament. We often tend to think of the Old Testament as "second class" scripture. I hope that this is not true for you; but if it is, then Wesley is reminding you that there needs to be a balance in your reading of scripture. We need to allow God to meet us in both the Old and the New Testaments.

Second, in our use of scripture in spiritual formation we tend to return to those passages that have nurtured us in the past. We all cherish certain passages that have deeply enriched us, passages in which we have been addressed by God, passages where we have been shaped by the Word. We tend to gravitate to these passages with a much higher frequency than we move to new areas of the scripture. As in our physical nature, if we eat only one kind of food persistently and do not have a balanced diet, we begin to experience physical deterioration. The same deterioration is true in an unbalanced spiritual diet. Part of the structure of a holistic spiritual discipline of scripture reading is to have some means by which we work through the whole of scripture. One way to balance our reading is to use a lectionary.<sup>29</sup> A lectionary usually gives you an Old Testament reading, an Epistle reading, and a Gospel reading. Over a period of two, three, or more years, a lectionary will move you through most of the Bible.

Third, Wesley seems to indicate that we should work with fairly small units of scripture. We are reading for formation, not information. Here is where the lectionary is also beneficial. It preselects the amounts for you, usually a rather brief portion. Often I find that I want to move beyond what the lectionary "allows." I become inter-

ested in the "story" and want to cover it all as quickly as possible—the informational dynamics tend to take over. However, if I am faithful to the discipline of the lectionary, I am forced to stop and move more deeply into the passage at hand; I am required to still myself before the text and seek to allow the Word to address me out of the portion before me. The fact that Wesley is perfectly comfortable with reading only a portion of a chapter seems to indicate that he is thinking in terms of formational reading rather than informational.

#### FOCAL INTENTION

Once you have developed a means of working through scripture in a balanced and formational way, Wesley indicates in his third guideline that you should approach each passage "with a single eye, to know the whole will of God, and a fixed resolution to do it." This focal intention is the heart of the approach to scripture in spiritual formation.

First, Wesley affirms that the intention of our reading should be to know the whole will of God. We come to the scripture with the focal purpose of encountering the will of God for our life. We come in openness to what God wants for us at every level of our being, in every facet of our relationships, in all of our activities and involvements. To read the scripture in this focused way is to bring the whole of our life before God and to seek expectantly and receptively God's will for everything in our living. We come to the reading of scripture with our habits, attitudes, and perspectives; we come with our dynamics of personal and corporate relationships; we come with our patterns of reaction and response to the world around us; and we seek for God to speak the Word into our lives in any or all of these areas. We come with our "crust of self;" we come with our garbled "word"; we come with our false self; and we seek to be addressed by the living Word, which can make us whole.

Second, Wesley asserts we should seek the whole will of God

with a *fixed resolution to do it!* This resolve is the key to our approach to scripture. Often students come to me wrestling with something in their lives. They are working through a series of complex responsibilities, options, and desires, trying to discern God's will for their lives in the midst of their situation. The question I always ask them, in one form or other, is, "Are you ready to *do* God's will in this situation, *no matter what God's will may be?*" They usually say yes. Then I begin to probe them at this point, because I have discovered that my tendency is to say to God, "What is your will?" Then I can set God's will up against all the rest of my options and pick what I think is best. I have also discovered that when this is the mode in which I seek God's will, it is amazing how closed the heavens are.

Exodus 19:3-8 illustrates well the fixed intent to do God's will. Moses goes up on Mount Sinai, and God addresses him,

Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples...you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation (NRSV).

Moses goes down the mountain, calls the elders together, and tells them all that God has said. Between verses 7 and 8, we must presume the elders go and tell the people and receive their response; for in 19:8, the people respond, "Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do" (NRSV). But what has God spoken? Nothing, not one single command, not one single statute, not one single ordinance; all God has said is if they will obey, God will be their God and they will be God's people. This is a calling for their unconditional obedience to God's will, a "fixed resolution to do it" *when* it is revealed *before* it is revealed. This is what Wesley is talking about in the third step: to read the scripture, to open your life to that living Word of God, to

know God's Word spoken to your life *in order to do it*. This is one of the crucial dynamics for moving from informational to formational reading: an inner decision, down in the center of your being, that whatever God speaks into your life you are going to do.

#### HOLISTIC REALITY

In his fourth guideline, Wesley continues, "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." We must realize that in the scripture we are not dealing with isolated pieces that are somehow hermetically sealed from one another. We are dealing with a great, holistic unity. We are dealing with the living reality of God's purpose, power, and presence in our lives and in our world. To put this concept into terms we have developed, Wesley implies that everything that addresses us out of the scripture relates in some way to kairotic existence, to God's new order of being in Christ. It may be a Word of God that reveals some brokenness or disobedience in our lives, some dynamic of sin. It may be a word that offers us God's grace, love, and forgiveness for that brokenness and disobedience. It may be a Word that awakens us to the possibility of a new life at that point. It may be a Word that calls us, at that point in our lives, to a total consecration to God (inner holiness) and to a new life of consistent obedience in the world (outer holiness). These are the focal areas of our lives that the living Word addresses and penetrates.

This holistic approach to scripture is part of what Paul expressed when he wrote, "Fully appropriate for yourselves the *kairos*" (Eph. 5:16). We must be careful not to fall into the trap of "cubbyholing" the Word of God into nice, neat, objective, systematic categories. Such activity represents the informational/functional dynamic. We must realize that in reading the scripture we are engaged with a living and holistic Reality, who seeks to form our lives into wholeness of being and doing.

## PRAYERFUL READING

Wesley's fifth guideline urges that when we approach the scripture, "serious and earnest prayer should be consistently used before we consult the oracles of God, since 'Scripture can only be understood through 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." Wesley emphasizes the relational rather than the functional dynamic. We enter into scripture in the relational mode; we open ourselves to God in prayer at the deeper levels of our being. This prayer opens us to the Spirit who brought that scripture into being in the first place, the same Spirit who is now at work in our reading to make that scripture the living Word of God that addresses us.

In this prayerful reading of scripture we encounter the "dynamic of inspiration" involved in the scripture. The inspiration of the scripture involves you and me as much as the original writer, together with the whole process in the church, under the guidance of the Spirit, which brought the scripture writings into an authoritative collection—the canon. In prayerful, relational/formational reading of the scripture, we become participants in the process of inspiration. Prayerful reading of scripture is the opening of ourselves to that order of being, that kairotic existence out of which scripture speaks to us and forms our life in Christ.

## ADDRESS AND RESPONSE

Finally Wesley indicates, "It might also be of use [he is a master of understatement!] if, while we read, we were frequently to pause and examine ourselves by what we read, both with regard to our heart and lives." This self-examination is the conscious, disciplined opening of ourselves to be addressed by the Word. It is, on the one hand, the examination of the outer actions of our lives. What is going on in our personal and corporate relationships? What is taking place in our patterns of reaction and response? What is happening at

work, at home, in the church, in our social activities? What is occurring in all the outer situations of our life? It is, on the other hand, the examination of the inner dynamics of our being. What is going on in our attitudes, our habits, our feelings, our emotions? What is taking place in our perceptions, our motives? In all these things, inner (heart) and outer (lives), we open ourselves to God; we bring them before the Word and let them sink down before the Word and be addressed by God.

Wesley suggests we pause "frequently" for this examination of our inner being and outer doing, a primary aspect of formational reading. Rather than trying to cover a certain amount of scripture, we seek to allow the text to draw us into its depths. Instead of informing the text with our own agenda, we present the inner and outer dynamics of our life to be formed by the text. Instead of trying to bring the text under our control, we allow the text to take control of our being and doing. This is the discipline of allowing a portion of the text to become iconographic, of stilling ourselves before the kairoic dimensions of the text and allowing the Word to probe and penetrate both our being and our doing.

Then Wesley adds, "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." Here we come to the point of immediate obedience to the Word that has addressed us. This is where the spiritual discipline of reading scripture leads us into the spiritual discipline of offering to God our loving obedience to God's Word at particular points of our lives. At one or more of those points, the Word speaks to our flawed "word." As we steadily offer to God the spiritual discipline of obedience *at those very points*, God graciously works through that discipline to transform our very being into the word God speaks us forth to be in the world.

In stressing the "uttermost," the "immediate," the "undelayed" obedience to the Word that has illumined us, Wesley implies the

fulfillment of his third guideline—the *fixed intent* to do God's will. If we find ourselves equivocating, rationalizing, justifying our lack of obedience, then we need to back up to step three and examine our hearts before God at that point. How sincere am I here? Am I seeking the *whole* will of God for my life? Do I want the living Word to probe and penetrate *any* and *all* areas of my being and doing? Do I really have a *fixed intent* to obey?

Now there will be those times when, at step three, you truly have no doubts about your sincerity. You truly want to be addressed by the Word. You honestly want to hear what God has to say to you. But then what you hear goes so much deeper into your life than you had expected! Up to a certain level you were, with absolute integrity, willing to obey. But now you find the Word pushes you beyond the limits of your willingness. You may have been willing to do the will of God, but on your own terms, in your own way, at your own convenience. Now the Word calls you to will your heart completely, and you can't do it. Frequently you may find the spiritual discipline of reading scripture will keep moving you from step six to step three until your "fixed intent" is at the level of total consecration to the will of God, *whatever it may be*.

Wesley's guidelines for reading scripture, as amplified here, provide for us an approach to scripture in spiritual formation. If consistently practiced, these guidelines will enable us to read scripture formationally and relationally. The dynamics of these guidelines will allow the scripture to become iconographic. Using these guidelines will draw us into those dimensions of kairotic existence through which God can transform our distorted word into the word God speaks us forth to be in the world. By this process, the scripture becomes the means of grace by which God shapes our lives.