

## Unit 1 Introduction

# Engaging Hard Texts

For Christians the Bible is the source of much joy, comfort, and hope. It is a gift of God that has been cared for and passed down in the church through the centuries. It is sacred-holy, set apart not for careless consumption, but faithful listening, seeking to encounter God for continual transformation into the image of Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. While it is clear the Bible is not God, by the Spirit, it does provide us with encounters with the Word of God that seeks to heal and transform us to more faithfully be the church.

As we approach Scripture, we must discipline ourselves to listen well and resist imposing our will upon the text, forcing it to say or be something for our own pleasure or purposes. We also must reject any use of Scripture that inflicts personal harm and injury upon others with an arrogant or malicious spirit. Pretending the text says what we want it to say to us or to our enemies is called “eisegesis.” However, a proper reading seeks to listen and hear from the Spirit with devotional intensity. The gift of a careful reading celebrates the process of “exegesis.” One of the great ways to listen well, refusing to impose our will, includes reading within the community of the church, both present and past. Some people want to claim, “Well I just read the Bible and get the one, simple meaning. I don’t need to interpret the text.” While the desire to engage in a pure or unbiased manner is admirable, it is impossible. All people approach the text with a certain lens that shapes how they interpret Scripture. That is not bad, but if we just read by ourselves, we are prone to being stuck in our own bias that we are often unable to appreciate. Recognizing that we read with our own unique lens/bias/understanding does not make someone’s reading bad, but the meaning and interpretation is only partial and would be helped by sharing and listening with other believers who also have encountered God in the text.

Yet, with the best of intention, there are still texts that are difficult and perplexing. One of the great gifts of Scripture is that there are many types or genres of literature. There is history, poetry, wisdom, songs, apocalyptic, prophetic proclamation, and so much more. We celebrate hearing the stories of God’s people from Adam and Eve all the way into the birth of the early church. Certainly, the proclamation of Jesus Christ’s birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension is the lens by which all of Scripture is to be read.

The texts to be considered in this unit are challenging texts to be sure. Some of their challenges are not that they are confusing, but that the message is demanding. These texts are profound and life-giving, but they are a “hard word.” Jesus’ invitation to the rich young ruler in the Gospels to sell all he had and follow Jesus was not a command that was hard for this young man to understand, but the

life-giving call demanded all that he had. The text invites us into the great cost of discipleship.

Some of these hard texts people simply may not agree with. I recently heard a story of a pastor who was preaching Jesus’ teaching from the “Sermon on the Mount.” After the service, a member of the congregation came to the pastor and said, “I don’t like this kind of Christianity.” This pastor full of love, grace, and wisdom, responded by saying that this is simply the gospel of Jesus Christ and central to all Christianity. The pastor noted that this member walked away not sure this person wanted to follow Jesus’ version of Christianity. May the Spirit grant us the courage to encounter these hard, life-giving texts with grace and humility to allow God to better mold and shape us to be God’s church in the world!

Yet, some texts are challenging because the meaning is more veiled and complicated. With earnest desire to listen, learn, and be transformed, some texts may require us to take extra steps—going deeper—in order to have a proper listening and divine encounter.

John Wesley and the Wesleyan tradition offer some suggestions for all texts—especially those that are challenging when trying to listen and learn. First, the church should keep using scriptural language and grammar. While all translations of Scripture have a unique focus, using scriptural terms that are sometimes foreign to contemporary syntax is important. Words like righteousness, kingdom, holiness, and other terms are often not used in contemporary syntax. Yet, these unique words have a robust history and depth of meaning that is important for Christians to attend to.

Second, John Wesley encouraged his people when reading Scripture to follow the plain or literal meaning of the text. When Jesus said to love our enemies (Matthew 5:44), that probably means we are not invited to kill them. Some texts are written with a simplicity that we should not overread but sit in the literal meaning. Yet, with all the genres of Scripture, including the multiple teaching methods of Jesus, some texts are not meant to be read and lived out literally. While Jesus wants to remove any roots of sin that linger in our lives, he did not desire we cut off our hand or gouge out our eye when we engage in sin (Matthew 18:9).

A third step for Wesleyan interpretation of Scripture is to recognize the literary context of a passage. Is this passage retelling history, is it a poem, is it a parable, is it apocalyptic, is it straight teaching? It is very important to look very carefully about the genre in which this verse lives. We must interpret literary devices carefully. Just as the proverbs time and again say practice “X” is good in the first part of the verse and then in the second refrain practice “X” is bad, we must recognize the genre and literary device being employed. Sometimes

verses are in parables, that are not historical, but still proclaiming a truth. Sometimes, hyperbole is used to make a point. Moreover, we must pay attention not only to the genre of the paragraph, but the themes of the chapter, the main theme of the biblical book and of course the larger context of all of Scripture.

This leads directly into the fourth step for Scriptural interpretation—allowing Scripture to interpret other Scripture. One of our passages in this unit offers a verse where Jesus tells His disciples to “hate his mother and father” (Luke 14:26). Yet, Jesus also says, in following the Ten Commandments, to “honor your father and mother” (Exodus 20:12) and “Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death” (Exodus 21:17; Matthew 15:4). So, are we to love or hate our parents? We will let that tension be solved in that session, but the whole of Scripture makes the answer clear, which also means we need to really be paying attention to what is happening in Luke 14:26. It was noted above the danger of eisegesis, which is simply using the Bible to say whatever we want. One of the dangerous practices of eisegesis is that of “proof-texting.” This is the practice of simply looking at one verse or even a phrase of a verse and then calling that one phrase’s potential meaning (out of context) “biblical.” This is dangerous and must be avoided. Scripture interprets other Scripture.

Fifth, as noted above, some texts are hard and seem impossible. Matthew 5:48 is often translated “Be holy/perfect as your heavenly Father is holy/perfect.” While the idea of holiness is intimidating, the notion of being perfect as understood in our present context is impossible. To make matters worse, the verbs in that verse are commands, not suggestions. So, would God command us to do something we could not do? Wesleyans would say a hard, NO! God’s commands are things we can’t do on our own strength; yet, all of God’s commands are covered promises. That is, God will never command and ask something of us that God has not done and will only command things that God will promise to help us live into (John 14:23; Ephesians 3:16).

Finally, John Wesley did celebrate the gift of the original languages of Greek and Hebrew, and the use of translations that provide a faithful appreciation of the original languages. It is recognized that most Christians have not been afforded the opportunity to study and

learn the original languages of Scripture. This is why having people with skill in this area is beneficial for the church. In addition, there are some specific commentaries that can assist people into the gift of the original languages. When I first started studying these languages in college and seminary, I was under the illusion that I would finally get the one true meaning of each verse and thus all of Scripture. However, my naivete was quickly disrupted. Sometimes there are multiple words that can be chosen in the translation. At other times, when translating, there appears no good word that connects to the word from the original language. Yet, the gift of these languages is the depth and breadth of scriptural meaning that is not contradictory, but provides a much deeper encounter with Scripture.

Some may be aware of what is called the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral” comprised of Scripture (God’s Word), tradition (what the church has affirmed the Bible to say), reason (my rational understanding of the text), and experience (how my life story helps me understand a text) that guides interpretation. While using this model is helpful, and our goal might be to just read the Bible and get the one simple meaning, we must always recognize that we all bring our own lens and layers of bias and history to the text.

My encouragement with all of Scripture, including texts that may be challenging for a variety of reasons, is not to attempt to conquer or crack some hidden Bible code. The goal in our reading personally and communally is that we may encounter the transforming grace of God to heal and further transform into the image of Jesus. Wesleyans affirm that God inspired (breathed into) the authors of these texts and the church to gather and collect these texts for the world’s edification. Yet, Wesleyans also believe that God’s inspiration did not stop in the writing or gathering into one book, but that the Spirit still inspires and breathes on and into us in our present reading. The Spirit keeps inviting us into the good, but sometimes hard good news, of Jesus Christ, who is the Lord of all creation. So, as we engage these texts may we ask the Spirit to teach and transform us all for God’s glory!

**BRENT PETERSON** is Dean of the College of Theology and Christian Ministries at NNU and Pastor of Spiritual and Liturgical Formation at College Church in Nampa. He is married to Anne with three great kids Noah, Lexi, and Sydney.