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# A Man of One Book: John Wesley's Theology of Scripture

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## Introduction

While there is much scholarly treatment of John Wesley's theology in general, little work exists specifically on his theology of Scripture. This may be due to the fact that its primacy is often assumed in his writings, but not directly stated. Or, as some scholars believe, this might be due to his either mixed or unstated beliefs on several characteristics of Scripture. By looking at Wesley's own life, his writings, teachings on the Bible, and the resulting theological constructs, one can begin to understand the way that this man valued Scripture and devoted his life to the teaching of the salvation it proclaims. John Wesley held a high view of Scripture in that he recognized its supreme authority and regarded it as the center of his preaching; however, scholarly debate surrounds his beliefs on certain biblical attributes, such as inerrancy.

### John Wesley's Life and Theology

#### Childhood and Background

John Wesley was born to a large Anglican family during the summer of 1703. His childhood was largely uneventful, except from the well-known "fire incident," in which the young boy was rescued from his burning childhood home.<sup>1</sup> It was at this time that his mother referred to him as a "brand plucked from the fire,"<sup>2</sup> perhaps indicating the great religious impact her son would someday have. As an interesting aside, this statement is itself taken from Scripture, in Zechariah 3:1-2. Even as a young boy, Wesley's life was described according to the book which would later become its compass.

As a young man, Wesley was educated at Lincoln College and became a teaching fellow at the school. After his first period of education at Oxford was complete, he sensed a call from God, and entered into the ministry as an Anglican priest. It would be nearly ten years, however, before the occurrence of what he considered to be his true conversion. During these ten years, he and his brother, Charles, formed the Holy Club, a small group devoted to the study of the Scriptures, communion, and good works. (The group would mockingly become known as "Methodists" due to their methodical practices of Bible study, etc.) The

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<sup>1</sup> John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), n.p., accessed July 20, 2019, Ministry Matters Online Reader.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

focus that Wesley put on study of the Word, even before his conversion experience, is a good indication of its primacy in his life.<sup>3</sup>

While on an evangelistic trip to the American colony of Georgia, Wesley was introduced to the Moravian community, a German Protestant sect that promoted justification on the scriptural basis of faith alone. This was a rather new concept for the Anglican minister, who was deeply ingrained in high-church practice. The Church of England in which he grew up did not place much focus on the daily application of biblical truths, so the Moravians' passion for Scripture was a new experience for Wesley. After witnessing the vibrant faith of his Moravian friends, Wesley began to desire a faith like theirs. His own journey of faith began not long after this time, when the Holy Spirit spoke to his heart through a religious meeting at Aldersgate.<sup>4</sup>

### Conversion and Theological Experience

John Wesley's Aldersgate experience, though brought about by the Holy Spirit, was largely influenced by Scripture. It was, after all, during a reading of Luther's commentary on the book of Romans that he felt his heart "strangely warmed." Thus, from the beginning, Wesley's religious experience had a foundation in the Bible. The centrality of Scripture to his conversion likely influenced his later faith and his reliance upon the Word throughout his life.

In years following Aldersgate, Wesley devoted himself to the preaching of salvation by faith, based upon Scripture. He did this apart from the Church of England, and according to the biblical principles found in the Word. He had used Scripture in his preaching before, to be sure, but it now had a new place in his life. It was rarely easy for this field preacher; he faced criticism from Anglican priests and layman alike. He persevered, however, calling his listeners to the Reformation doctrines of *sola Christus*, *sola fide*, and (especially crucial to this discussion), *sola Scriptura*.<sup>5</sup> These were the tenants of his faith throughout his ministry, until his death in March 1791.

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<sup>3</sup> R.G. Tuttle, "Wesley, John," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, edited by Walter Elwell, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Ada, MI: Baker Academic. 2009), accessed July 15, 2019, WORDsearch Reader.

<sup>4</sup> Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, n.p.

<sup>5</sup> Jason E. Purvis, "Great Awakening," in *Great Events in Religion: An Encyclopedia of Pivotal Events in Religious History* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO Publishing. 2016), 2.806, accessed July 2, 2019, ProQuest Ebook Central.

## Scripture in Wesley's Work and Influence

John Wesley consistently used Scripture in his preaching, writing, and other teaching. Even his letters are rich with biblical content that upholds the centrality of Scripture in his life. Salvation was the primary concern of Wesley's work, so he formed his theology of Scripture using this as his core doctrine. As such, most primary source material speaks to the use of the Word in Wesley's soteriology. Timothy Crutcher expresses it well: "[Wesley's] . . . orientation to Scripture flows from his commitment to follow God's way of salvation, and is never divorced from that."<sup>6</sup> While some scholars criticize Wesley for appearing to make salvation a priority over Scripture, others praise him for avoiding bibliolatry.<sup>7</sup> In general, his teaching shows a balanced approach that gives proper authority to Scripture while keeping soteriological issues at the forefront.

### Wesley's Use of Scripture

Wesley's sermons consistently demonstrate grounding in the Word. Each one focuses on a primary text, and works systematically through other salient verses. Some are organized topically, other historically, but each sermon has the Scripture at its core. There may be no better example of his Scripture-based preaching than his Sermon XLIII, "The Scripture Way of Salvation."<sup>8</sup> Using Ephesians 2:8 as his text, Wesley recorded a message that is rooted in Scripture, organized by logic, and argued with reason. Of salvation, he writes, "Yet how easy to be understood, how plain and simple, is the genuine religion of Jesus Christ, provided only that we take it in its native form just as it is described in the Word of God!"<sup>9</sup> There would be no sermon were it not for the constant use of Scripture throughout. In each point of his outline, Wesley backs up his claims with biblical references from both the Old and New Testaments. The constant use of Scripture in his preaching reveals much about his theology of Scripture.

A similar devotion to Scripture is found elsewhere in his writing. When writing a letter of rules to one of his societies, he directed his readers to ". . . read

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<sup>6</sup> Timothy J. Crutcher, *John Wesley: His Life and Thought*, (Kansas City, MO: The Foundry Publishing, 2015), 87, accessed July 20, 2019, ProQuest Ebook Central.

<sup>7</sup> Harold B. Kuhn, "Wesleyanism," in *Beacon Dictionary of Theology* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 1983), 546.

<sup>8</sup> John Wesley, *The Essential Works of John Wesley: Selected Books, Sermons and Other Writings* (Uhrichsville, Ohio: Barbour Publishing, Inc. 2011), 147-150.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

the Scriptures and meditate in them, at every vacant hour.”<sup>10</sup> The dedication of time and energy that Wesley gives to Scripture, even in his letters, is of prime importance in understanding his overarching theology of Scripture. Though Wesley made few statements that speak to Scripture’s priority as directly as the one above, the thrust of his writing is driven by a dedication to obeying Scripture and its truths.

#### Case Study: Wesley’s Use of Scripture in *Sermon LVII: On the Fall of Man*

One example of Wesley’s use of Scripture in his sermons can be found in one of his addresses on the need for salvation. Using Genesis 3:19 (“Dust you are, and to dust you shall return.”), Wesley traced the story of redemption and of the gospel message throughout Scripture, from Genesis to John.<sup>11</sup> Wesley began by asking the question of why suffering and pain occur in the world. From there, he derived a theological argument from Scripture that accounts for sin, suffering and even death, all because of the fall of man as recounted in Genesis.

Wesley first analyzed each phrase from Genesis 3:1-6, giving special attention to the words of God. One interesting statement claims that during the fall, Adam and Eve, “. . . gave more credit to the word of the devil than to the Word of God.”<sup>12</sup> Though not a reference to Scripture, per se, Wesley here clearly denotes the essential nature of the Word.

Continuing in his sermon, Wesley astutely pointed out the merciful nature of the fall dialogue, which, in the protoevangelium points to the ultimate Mercy to come. In this section of *Sermon LVII*, Wesley again addressed the scriptural text as literal, prophetic, and critical for salvation. In his “short review,” he argued that “an unprejudiced person might. . . infer [the story of the fall] to be the Word of God.”<sup>13</sup> He also stated that the Word is “. . . delivered with inimitable simplicity.”<sup>14</sup>

Finally, Wesley concluded his sermon with the gospel as recorded in John and Romans. As his sermon progresses, one can see the unity with which Wesley treated the biblical canon. As Wesley moved from the O.T. account to the N.T. gospel message, no disconnect in his perspective on the truth of the scriptural

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 864.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

record can be found. Instead, his concluding paragraph is a veritable treasure trove of texts on salvation all woven together.<sup>15</sup> Wesley even stopped including verse references at this point, most likely assuming that his readers would recognize this section of prose as stemming entirely from Scripture.

This sermon is a characteristic example of Wesley's writing on the Bible. While no external references exist in the sermon, it is not lacking in reason or logic. Indeed, its strength, foundation, and basis is the Word.

### Wesley's Followers and Scripture

John Wesley's early followers exhibited a similar attitude toward the Scriptures as did Wesley himself. They followed his directives to keep the Bible ever in their hearts and minds, adopting nearly identical theologies of Scripture to the one Wesley held. The "band societies" he formed, which were small accountability groups for believers, saw following Scripture as vital to all their meetings. They responded willingly to Scripture's command to ". . . confess your sins to each other . . ." (James 5:16) These meetings followed in the shadow of Wesley's teaching for many years, and some still exist in the present.

Methodist and Wesleyan thought today, however, often appears to deviate from Wesley's original opinions on Scripture. (Please note that for the remainder of this section, the terms *Methodist* and *Wesleyan* will be referring to the same thing: the beliefs resulting from Wesley's theology, not to the modern denominations. Great differences in practice and in principle do occur between the two denominations today). Much of what constitutes Methodist church practice in the twenty-first century would be unrecognizable to John Wesley. The topic of biblical exegesis and interpretation is at the heart of the divide between early Wesleyan beliefs and modern Methodism. Perhaps, as Steven Koskie argues, this is due to the lack of a definite Wesleyan hermeneutic of Scripture. Since Wesley's writings on the topic were largely occasional, Koskie asserts, there has been a noticeable lack of consensus surrounding the proper method of interpretation of biblical texts in the Wesleyan church today.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>16</sup> Steven J. Koskie, *Reading the Way to Heaven: A Wesleyan Theological Hermeneutic of Scripture* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014), 21, accessed July 5, 2019, ProQuest Ebook Central.

This dilemma has led to the introduction of some modern church doctrine that omits or contradicts the guidance Wesley gave to his churches. For example, some churches in the Wesleyan tradition today use Scripture infrequently during worship services. While Bible study was required for any meeting of believers in Wesley's circle, some fellowship today has suffered from theological decline. This may be due in part to a lack of study of Wesley's beliefs on the following biblical doctrines.

### **Analysis of Wesley's Views on Biblical Attributes**

Key to understanding Wesley's theology of Scripture is a discussion of his opinions on several biblical attributes generally recognized by the evangelical community. These include the following doctrines: the inspiration of Scripture, the infallibility (and inerrancy) of Scripture, the authority Scripture has, and the application of Scripture to daily life. While this list is not exhaustive, it addresses the most pressing issues of canonization and belief in Scripture. Although the topic of canonization is too lengthy for this discussion, suffice it to say that Wesley was referring to the orthodox Protestant canon when he referred to Scripture. As for translations, he utilized the Authorized Version most frequently, but not exclusively. He preferred to work from the Greek and Hebrew texts whenever possible.<sup>17</sup>

#### **Issues of the Writing of Scripture**

On the inspiration of Scripture, Wesley is unflinchingly clear. In a short writing entitled "A Demonstration of the Divine Inspiration of Scripture," he lists a four-step logical premise for the inspiration of the Bible by God. His arguments draw on the moral character of God and come to the penultimate conclusion that, "The Bible must be the invention either of good men or angels, bad men or devils, or of God."<sup>18</sup> Since the Bible teaches truth and uprightness of conduct, Wesley believed that it could not have been written by good beings who, not being God, would necessarily have lied throughout.<sup>19</sup> Also, Wesley posited that evil beings would not write a book that condemns their own behavior.<sup>20</sup> Wesley deduced the

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<sup>17</sup> Randy Maddox, "John Wesley – A Man of One Book," in *Wesley, Wesleyans, and Reading Bible as Scripture*, ed. Joel Green and David Watson (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2012), 5-8, accessed July 7, 2019, ProQuest Ebook Central.

<sup>18</sup> Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, n.p.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*



answer to this conclusion through this logical argument that excludes either bad or good non-divine beings from being the inspiratory factor behind the Bible.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, In Wesley's mind, this left the divine author – God – as one's only choice.<sup>22</sup>

Some debate exists regarding Wesley's views on infallibility and inerrancy. The limits of this paper will not allow for a comprehensive exploration of the topic, but beliefs from Wesley's supporters are nearly evenly split on the matter. Wesley makes few, if any, direct statements regarding inerrancy or infallibility. Inerrancy often appears to be assumed in his preaching, especially in view of his opinion on the authority of Scripture (discussed below). However, Scott Jones points out that Wesley, while breaking away from many aspects of the Church of England, retained Anglican belief in the Thirty-nine Articles. These, according to Jones, do not teach “. . . the inerrancy of Scripture, but its sufficiency for salvation.”<sup>23</sup> This again becomes an issue of the centrality of either Scripture or salvation in Wesley's life.

### Issues of the Rule of Scripture

John Wesley was a clear believer in the authority of Scripture. In the preface to his *Sermons*, he recorded the authority that Scripture should have, not only in his life, but in the life of every believer. He said, “I read his book; for this end, to find the way to heaven.”<sup>24</sup> He later observes, “God speaks not as man, but as God.”<sup>25</sup> Wesley did not regard any other book with such authority as he ascribed to the Bible, being the very words of God.

In regards to the application of Scripture, Wesley took a practical approach. As an evangelistic preacher and not exclusively an academic, he focused on those things in Scripture which are applicable to daily life. His sermons cover such essential topics as justification, holy living, the assurance of salvation, and good works in the lives of believers. He certainly did deal with the weightier topics of theology, such as election, predestination, and eschatology, but his main focus was on the ultimate salvation and sanctification of human souls.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Scott J. Jones, *John Wesley's Conception and Use of Scripture* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1995), 31, accessed July 26, 2019, ProQuest Ebook Central.

<sup>24</sup> Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, n.p.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

By leafing through a compilation of his work, one may see that Wesley was indeed a practical theologian rather than a systematician.

This focus made Wesley's application of Scripture unique from many other theologians. While Martin Luther may have written on Scripture from the perspective of a systematic theologian, Wesley wrote from the perspective of a soul-winner. Paul Chilcote observes that Wesley views Scripture as ". . . the language of simple, everyday life."<sup>26</sup> This may account for the lack of existing exegetical work by Wesley. While it seems clear that he did perform such work, his goal, like later field preachers, was to take what was theological and Scriptural and preach it in a way that could be easily understood. Wesley's writing on Scripture is not highly technical as some of the Reformers' work was, nor was it diluted to a compendium of emotional experience. Instead, he preached Scripture with the goal of salvation for all his hearers.

#### Case Study: *An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*

In one of the most practical of his sermons, Wesley chose to address the topic of the meaning of human life within the context of reason. While other theologians may have provided a philosophical diatribe on the purpose of human existence, Wesley founded his argument in the Bible, the book for the common man or woman who would be saved. His logic certainly did not suffer by this approach; indeed, it was only enhanced by his use of Scripture.

Through a series of thought-provoking questions, Wesley organized his call toward the repentance found in the Word. In this sermon, Wesley wrote, "Either cast off the Bible, or your sins."<sup>27</sup> There are no existential meanderings to be found; Wesley's purpose here was to preach salvation, and he utilized Scripture to accomplish this goal, citing verses from well over 10 N.T. books and several O.T. ones.<sup>28</sup>

In response to the question of the nature of humanity, Wesley regarded it as being sinful since the fall, but in pure in image. He recorded, "The Word of God bears witness in every page (and your own heart agrees to it) that you were made in the image of God . . ."<sup>29</sup> Again, Wesley's preaching values the Word and acknowledges its practicality for all who would believe on Christ.

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<sup>26</sup> Paul Wesley Chilcote, *Recapturing the Wesley's Vision: An Introduction to the Faith of John and Charles Wesley* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsityPress Academic, 2009), accessed July 4, 2019, ProQuest Ebook Central.

<sup>27</sup> Wesley, *The Essential Works*, 937.

<sup>28</sup> Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, n.p.

<sup>29</sup> Wesley, *The Essential Works*, 939.

### Wesley's Approach to Reading Scripture

Wesley approached Scripture in both a literal and contextual sense, according to his analogy of faith. To him, Scripture was to be read as it was written, without making unnecessary inferences. He allowed for a contextual reading when using Scripture to interpret other Scripture, but always strove to find the meaning of the original Biblical text. His method was to read the Bible alone, as inspired Scripture, "comparing spiritual things with spiritual."<sup>30</sup> Then, he would pray for the illumination of the Holy Spirit for understanding what he read. Only after these steps were completed would he consult other persons or books.<sup>31</sup>

Wesley firmly believed in communal reading of Scripture. Bible study, Wesley believed, should not only be done privately and with an introspective heart, but also in the community of believers. In the bands discussed earlier, Scripture reading was key, as was prayer based on the Biblical texts.<sup>32</sup> This indicates Wesley's recognition of the power of Scripture to interact with human hearts and minds through the illumination of the Holy Spirit.

### Views on Wesley's Theology of Scripture

When discussing the various views on Wesley's theology of Scripture, it is important to note that, other than the references provided above, markedly little salient primary source material exists. Unlike other revivalists and theologians, Wesley did not compose grand treatises on his beliefs, or write theological theses that address every key religious doctrine. Wesley was, at his core, an evangelist. To preach Christ was his aim, not to provide a comprehensive discussion of theology. In short, he was not a systematic theologian. This being said, there is much to be learned from examining the two prevalent views surrounding Wesley's thinking. These two beliefs can be defined according to the terms *compromised* and *consistent*. First, there is the opinion that, due to several of his written statements, Wesley compromised on his convictions regarding Scripture. Second, others hold that his teachings on Scripture are consistently in line with a biblical understanding of the Bible.

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<sup>30</sup> Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, n.p.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Jason E. Vickers, *Wesley, A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: T&T Clark International, 2009), 18, ProQuest Ebook Central.

### Compromised View

Some scholars, such as Donald Bullen, argue that while Wesley claimed to be a man *homo unius libri*, or “a man of one book,” he could not fully comprehend his own understanding of Scripture. As a result, Bullen states that, “. . . the Bible was more a mirror for his beliefs than the source of them.”<sup>33</sup> This view that Wesley’s teaching is based on eisegesis is understandable from a cursory reading of Wesley, as he had many religious preconceptions before his conversion. Also, he performs little exegesis in his work. However, one must keep in mind that the Wesley never claimed to be a theologian, but rather an evangelist.

Other scholars, such as Randy Mattox, question the validity of Wesley’s “man of one book” statement because of his library of more than a thousand other books, mostly on theological topics. While Mattox recognizes that Scripture was important in Wesley’s theology, he claims that this statement provides unnecessary confusion, implying that Wesley did not rely solely on Scripture.<sup>34</sup>

The issue here, then, becomes one of linguistics, not theology. It is true that Wesley does not *solely* rely on Scripture, in the sense that Wesley did not read and study strictly the Bible without ever consulting any other source, as some pietists claim to do. Nevertheless, Wesley does demonstrate a sole reliance on Scripture in that it was his ultimate measure of salvation, faith, sanctification, holiness, and every other Christian doctrine. He gives more weight to the opinion of Scripture than he would, say, to Plato, or Zwingli, or Calvin, or even his own writing. In this way, his theology does rely solely on Scripture.

In addition, evidence of the priority he gives to Scripture can be found in the format of his reasoning. In his recorded sermons, Wesley presented a text of Scripture and his main argument, but would make no supporting statements without a backing in the Bible. The Bible is the authority to which he compares any argument and is the sole source of his theological backing.

### Consistent View

Other scholars posit that what John Wesley taught and believed about Scripture is theologically and biblically correct. These scholars do not come from exclusively Wesleyan backgrounds, but instead hail from a variety of Protestant

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<sup>33</sup> Donald A Bullen, *A Man of One Book?: John Wesley’s Interpretation and Use of the Bible* (Milton Keynes, UK: PaterNoster Press, 2007), 28.

<sup>34</sup> Randy Mattox, “John Wesley – A Man of One Book,” in *Wesley, Wesleyans, and Reading Bible as Scripture*, ed. Joel Green and David Watson (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2012), accessed July 7, 2019, ProQuest Ebook Central.

theological positions. As the body of this paper has been in support of the consistent view, many of these scholars have already been cited and their beliefs described.

From a theological perspective, Wesley's views on Scripture align closely to those of the Protestant Reformers, Revivalists, and other theologians. Like Luther, he affirms the sole importance of other Scripture in determining theology, while allowing other books to be of lesser influence. Like Whitefield, he based the entirety of his post-conversion preaching upon the Word of God. Like Calvin, Arminius, and other systematic theologians, his doctrines were compared and contrasted with the entirety of the Scriptural text.

John Wesley's theology of Scripture is one that recognizes key biblical attributes and principles, such as the centrality of the Word of God in the life of the believer. His views on the Bible were primarily lived out in practice, rather than directly stated. It is only by reading his work and viewing his faith that one can fully comprehend his theology of Scripture. In one of his most profound statements regarding the Word, Wesley wrote, ". . . Scripture is the history of God."<sup>35</sup> By reading Wesley with an eye for his use of Scripture, one can witness this man's deep honor for and belief in the inspired, authoritative, and applicable Word of God.

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<sup>35</sup> Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, n.p.

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