

Article IX: Holy Scriptures

Today, we come to look at the Article of Faith regarding Holy Scripture. Scripture has been important throughout human history, as it is the story which reveals God and His interactions with His creation.

Scripture tells us of God's Story, showing us His plan and His will. While it is not a history book, it shows us many historical events in which God interacted with humanity.

The Holy Bible was written over a fifteen-hundred year span, by forty different authors from every walk of life.

It was written by kings, servants, fishermen, poets, doctors, herdsman and even a tax collector.

It was written on three different continents, Europe, Asia and Africa, in sixteen different countries and in three different languages, Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek.

Throughout the books of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation we find unity in the message. Simply stated:

- God created the heavens and the earth and everything in it.
- God created man to have relationship with Him.
- Man broke his relationship with God through sin and God offers reconciliation to man through Jesus Christ.

How can we find a united theme in sixty-six books written over fifteen-hundred years, by forty diverse people? By understanding that the Bible is the inerrant, infallible Word of God who inspired each author to record what God wanted us to know through His Scriptures.

There can be no other explanation. Without inspiration from God, this would be an impossible accomplishment for man.

Within the Wesleyan tradition, we often speak of the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral” of... Scripture, Reason, Tradition, and Experience.

If you remember your geometry, you will know that a Quadrilateral is a four sided figure, but that all side of the quadrilateral are not necessarily equal, and the corners are not necessarily square.

In the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, we recognize that Scripture is always the foundational leg—the longest side, but that Reason, Tradition, and Experience all support God’s Word.

In other words, if all Truth is God’s Truth, then we know that God also reveals that truth to us through our gifts of reason, the teaching of the Church throughout the ages, and our own experience of how God has interacted with us.

Primary to that revelation of truth is the revelation of God’s Word—Holy Scripture.

I’d like to take a moment today and share with you a reading from a book by Dr. Rob Staples entitled Words of Faith.

Dr. Staples is a retired professor of theology at Nazarene Theological Seminary and Southern Nazarene University.

The chapters in Words of Faith first appeared in his monthly column in the Herald of Holiness (now Holiness Today). Each chapter is a brief summary of a theological word, defining it and helping us to understand its use within the Wesleyan Tradition.

This is what Dr. Staples writes on the topic of Scripture:

“ ‘The Bible is the manger in which Christ is laid.’ With that concise and graphic metaphor, Martin Luther explained his view of Scripture.

“The great Protestant reformer was utilizing Luke’s account of Jesus’ birth, in which shepherds found the Christ child lying in a manger.

The manger itself was not the shepherds’ ultimate goal. They were looking for the newborn babe, and the manger was simply the place where the angels told them to look.

“The point of Luther’s analogy is that Christ, who is the living Word, is found in the Bible, which is the written Word. But the latter is simply an instrument directing us to the former—and thus not an end in itself.

Dr. Staples goes on to say.. “Let me construct a story, playing off Luther’s metaphor. In my story are four shepherds.

After all, the Bible does not tell us how many of them came to the manger. I suppose we have three shepherds in the children’s Christmas pageants in order to balance the three wise men on the other side of the stage, also dressed up in their fathers’ bathrobes.

But the Bible is also silent on the number of wise men present. Christian art and legend have portrayed three wise men perhaps because there are three gifts—gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

“So my story has four shepherds—three representing various theological viewpoints that are widespread in today’s religious climate and one representing the Wesleyan viewpoint. One by one they come to the manger (remember that the ‘manger’ is the Bible), seeking the Christ.

“The first shepherd comes to the manger and says, ‘This is a weak manger; some of the boards have knotholes in them.’ So he tries to make it better by ripping out the ‘miracle’ boards—the ‘Virgin Birth’ and ‘Resurrection’ boards.

Pretty soon he has weakened the manger so much that Christ falls into the straw onto the stable floor!

“Then the second shepherd rushes up. ‘I’ll defend the manger,’ he says. ‘I’ll fight anyone who tinkers with it. Let no one lay a hand on it.’

He spends most of his energy defending the manger, and practically idolizing the boards (the written words), leaving little time to adore the Christ (the living Word) who lies in it.

“The third shepherd probably never even bothers to find the manger. He thinks the angel’s announcement of a newborn king is a nice story, but only one story among many.

It has meaning for some people. Other stories are meaningful to others, and who can say which story is most important?

We can each create our own stories, and one is as true as another.

“Now the Wesleyan shepherd differs from them all. Unlike the third shepherd, he knows he must go to the manger (the Bible) to learn about the Christ.

There are many mangers (books) in the world, but only this one has the words of eternal life.

But having come to the manger, he differs from the first shepherd, who wants to reconstruct it. The Wesleyan knows that this manger is truly unique.

Of all mangers (books) in the world, this is the most important. He respects it, loves it, and handles it with care.

But he does not worship it. Having come to the manger, he, unlike the second shepherd, does not tarry or loiter, avoiding adoring the manger itself.

He does not defend it, believing its truth is strong enough to defend itself. He quickly turns to worship and adore the Christ lying there, and then he goes and proclaims Him.

“Someone might say, ‘Wait a minute. Haven’t you slanted this story to make it come out the way you wanted?’

“I answer, ‘Of course, it’s my story. You may develop your own story and slant it as you wish.’ But this is my simple way of explaining the place the Bible has in Wesleyan theology.

“Luther was correct in calling the Bible the ‘manger’ in which Christ is laid. He also said, ‘Christ is Lord and King of Scripture.’

In these respects, Wesley was much like Luther. The center of the Bible is Jesus Christ. The written words are important. But they’re important for one main reason—they point us to the living Word, whom alone we worship and adore.”

Dr. Staples reminds us that when we look at the Bible, we must remember that its primary purpose is to reveal to us the person and work of Jesus the Christ.

The Bible is of great value to us, for in its pages we encounter the revelation of the Living God.

Scripture reveals to us the Triune God and His interaction with creation.

When formulating a doctrine about Scripture, it is important to look first at what Scripture says about itself.

It would be foolish to create a doctrine about scripture that doesn’t reflect the claims that Scripture makes about itself.

So, let’s take a moment and review some passages of scripture which help us to understand the nature of scripture.

In the Gospel according to Luke, chapter 24, Jesus appears to some disciples following the resurrection. They don't recognize him at first, thinking that they are seeing a ghost.

But Jesus speaks to them and opens the Scripture to them, in order that they might recognize Him. Hear these words from **Luke 24**, beginning in verse 36:

Luke 24:36

Jesus Appears to the Disciples

³⁶ While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you."

³⁷ They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. ³⁸ He said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? ³⁹ Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have."

⁴⁰ When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. ⁴¹ And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, "Do you have anything here to eat?" ⁴² They gave him a piece of broiled fish, ⁴³ and he took it and ate it in their presence.

⁴⁴ He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms."

⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. ⁴⁶ He told them, "This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹ I am going to send

you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

Jesus refers to the Hebrew Scriptures (what we call the Old Testament) when He says *“Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.”*

It has been said that all of the Old Testament is written to look forward to Jesus, and that all of the New Testament is written to explain Jesus.

In so doing, both portions of Scripture look to the central salvation event of Christ on the cross.

This passage in Luke also indicates that our *“eyes must be opened”* in order to fully understand Scripture.

We believe that not only was Scripture inspired in the writing, but that God has inspired the copying, translation, reading and interpreting of His Word, so that when *“our eyes are opened”* we can fully understand God’s will for us.

It is important when we come to scripture that we seek the Holy Spirit’s guidance and inspiration, that our eyes might also be opened.

Jesus summarizes the Gospel message in this passage as well, indicating the fundamental facts of the Good News, that *“The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.”*

Paul reiterates that Scripture reveals the fundamentals of the Gospel in First Corinthians 15, beginning in verse 1:

I Corinthians 15:1

“Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. ² By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.

³ For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures”

Paul seems to indicate as well that the primary purpose (of first importance) is the revelation of the Gospel message.

It is for these reasons that we say that Scripture *“inerrantly reveal[s] the will of God concerning us in all things necessary to our salvation.”*

Indeed, God’s Word does not return void but accomplishes the purposes that God has designed for it—to reveal to us:

1. the nature of God
2. the person and work of Jesus the Christ
3. and the path to salvation.

In this revelation, Scripture is inerrant and complete, accomplishing exactly what God intends it to accomplish.

We say that Scripture is inspired, but that word itself has many different uses. Paintings are inspired. Good works of literature are inspired. A performance of a piece of music can be inspired.

And yet, when we speak of Scripture as inspired, we mean so much more than artistic inspiration.

Indeed, Paul teaches Timothy that Scripture is God-breathed.

There is much debate over whether God inspired every single word of Scripture or inspired the thoughts of scripture.

In other words, did God take control of the pens of the authors, writing letter-for-letter, word-for-word (Diction Theory)?

Or, did He give them a general idea of what to write and they used their own language (Limited Inspiration Theory)?

Or, is there a middle ground that would be more accurate? For instance, did God give them the general ideas, and at times inspire specific words or phrases to be used in that flow of ideas?

One position on inspiration which I find to be meaningful is an “Incarnational Inspiration.”

In the same way that Jesus was fully Divine and fully human, this theory says that the Bible is fully God’s Word written with human words. This Theory is also often connected to Plenary Verbal Inspiration Theory.

The word plenary means "full" or "complete". Therefore, plenary verbal inspiration asserts that God inspired the complete texts of the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, and including both historical and doctrinal details.

The word verbal affirms the idea that inspiration extends to the very words the writers chose.

The Holy Spirit guided the writers along with allowing them the freedom of their own personalities to produce the Bible we have today.

This view recognizes both the human and divine element within Scripture.

It assures us that the Bible is trustworthy, therefore inerrant and infallible.

We can trust that all Scripture can provide insight into the history of God's people, God's plan for our lives and tells us how to become all God wants us to be.

Plenary verbal inspiration also assures us that the Bible is authoritative. Because it is God's Word, it speaks with God's authority. Amen!

When we see scripture as incarnational Plenary, we recognize that in the same way Jesus took on human limitations, God's Word has also taken on human limitations.

The Church of the Nazarene leaves room for many positions on inspiration, from a Verbal Inspiration to a more Dynamic Inspiration.

Our Article of Faith states that "We believe in the plenary inspiration of the Holy Scriptures." Plenary means "full." In other words, we believe that Scripture is fully inspired by God, able to accomplish exactly what He desires to do with it.

Beyond that, we make no dogmatic stance on how God chose to inspire the Bible, choosing instead to simply affirm that it is fully inspired.

Paul's teaching to Timothy helps us understand inspiration, and what the Bible is intended for. Hear these words from First Timothy, chapter 3, beginning in verse 14:

2 Timothy 3:14

"But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, ¹⁵ and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶ All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."

Paul teaches clearly what Scripture is for: *“making us wise for salvation through faith, teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness.”*

There is also a purpose and intent to the Scripture—that the *“Man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”*

We don’t read scripture for the purpose of education or entertainment, but so that we might encounter the Living God within its pages and be transformed into His Image.

By being transformed into His image, we are equipped for doing every good work.

Scripture reading is not solely for our edification, but for the edification of others.

Let us take a moment to summarize so far what we have learned about Holy Scripture.

- 1) It reveals to us the person and work of Jesus the Christ.
- 2) It teaches us the Gospel message, which is summarized most simply in that Christ died for our sins, was buried, and rose again on the third day.
- 3) Scripture is fully inspired by God, and is useful for teaching and instruction, so that we might be equipped for every good work.

As we turn our attention to the Fourth Article of Faith in the Church of the Nazarene, you will see these core beliefs about scripture represented within its words.

You can find this Article of Faith on the Screen, along with several more scriptures which help us understand God’s Word.

While we haven't had time to look at each one of those scripture passages, I hope you will make time this week to further explore our doctrine relating to Holy Scripture: the written Word of God which reveals the Living Word of God—Jesus.

“We believe in the plenary inspiration of the Holy Scriptures, by which we understand the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments, given by divine inspiration, inerrantly revealing the will of God concerning us in all things necessary to our salvation, so that whatever is not contained therein is not to be enjoined as an article of faith.”

An important point needs to be addressed. Since the Bible is truly inspired by God and His Scripture is trustworthy and authoritative, inerrant and infallible, why do we find errors today?

Inspiration and inerrancy applies to the original writings and not to the copies.

The originals were without error, and over time and translation, there have been copyist mistakes.

Therefore, when critics of the Bible point out contradictions, what they are doing is either failing to understand the context of the passages they are examining, or they have encountered a scribal copying error.

The fact is that there are indeed copyist errors in Biblical documents and they account for many alleged contradictions.

We must keep in mind that the original writings are inspired and inerrant, not the copies. The copies we have now are copies of inspired documents.

Lest we find this entire discussion to be purely academic, let us take a moment to explore the ways in which Holy Scripture make a difference in our lives.

As we think about Dr. Staples' comments that I quoted earlier, let me encourage you to come to the manger of God's Word, which reveals the Christ to you.

Do not fall into the error of the first shepherd, and attempt to deconstruct the manger or find fault in it.

It is God's Word, and should be handled with great respect.

On the other hand, do not fall into the error of the second shepherd who became so preoccupied with defending the manger that he forgot to worship the Christ child within the manger.

The Bible itself is not to be worshipped, only the Living God who you can encounter in its pages.

Neither should we succumb to the trap of pluralism which believes God's Word to merely be one story among many. Instead, recognize God's Word for what it claims to be: the inspired Word of God which reveals to us God's plan for salvation and for our lives.

When we read it, we recognize that it is God-breathed—or filled with His Spirit, and that we need the Spirit's inspiration to help us fully understand its message of truth.

I have found that the common thread that ties all of the books of the Bible together is God's inspiration alone. There can be no other explanation for such a united theme throughout.

The historical books are accurate, supported by scientific and archeological discovery, and the prophetic books are obviously inspired because of prophecies fulfilled. The apostles throughout the New Testament appealed to two areas of the life of Jesus to establish His Messiahship – the resurrection and fulfilled messianic prophecy.

Yes, the Bible, God's Word is inspired, infallible and inerrant. The Bible is truly our guide for daily living.

As we go forth this week, let us commit ourselves to being people shaped by the Image of God as revealed to us through Holy Scripture. As we are shaped by His image, we will be equipped for doing every good work, so that we may serve others and bless them.

Benediction: **Numbers 6**

24 " ' "The LORD bless you and keep you;

25 the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you;

26 the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace." ' "