

Nehemiah 7:73b-8:8 (NRSV)

When the seventh month came—the people of Israel being settled in their towns—¹all the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had given to Israel.

²Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month.

³He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. ⁴The scribe Ezra stood on a wooden platform that had been made for the purpose; and beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right hand; and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hash-baddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand. ⁵And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. ⁶Then Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, “Amen, Amen,” lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshipped the LORD with their faces to the ground. ⁷Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the law, while the people remained in their places. ⁸So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

2 Timothy 3:10-17 (NRSV)

¹⁰Now you have observed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, ¹¹my persecutions, and my suffering the things that happened to me in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra. What persecutions I endured! Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. ¹²Indeed, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. ¹³But wicked people and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving others and being deceived. ¹⁴But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, ¹⁵and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶All scripture is inspired by God [*Greek: God-breathed*] and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

With other Christians, we United Methodists receive Scripture through the Holy Spirit and embrace it as the rule of faith and practice for our lives.

Many Christians in our part of the country would be skeptical of the title for today's study. Over much of the 60's, 70's, and 80's Methodists came to be seen by many as a denomination that no longer subscribed to the primacy of Scripture in establishing what we believe and how we are to live. Having been a part of the UMC in Louisiana, Ohio, Massachusetts, and Texas at various times over the last 40 years, I can attest that the Bible was little read and less studied in many churches. Indeed, the UMC General Conference (see last week's study) found itself at a crossroads in the late 80's – would the denomination drift further still from the authority of Scripture?

The answer was no. Led by groups of younger bishops and scholars, the UMC embraced its Wesleyan heritage with a renewed vigor. General Conference affirmed that the Bible is the “primary source and criterion for Christian doctrine . . . [and] bears authentic testimony to God's self-disclosure in the life, death, and resurrection of

Jesus Christ, as well as in God's work of creation, in the pilgrimage of Israel, and in the Holy Spirit's ongoing activity in human history."¹

The United Methodist Church

Methodism began as a movement within the Church of England led by John Wesley and his brother, Charles. After the American Revolution, American Methodists formally separated themselves from the Church of England and established the Methodist Episcopal Church. Like so much of America, the Methodist Episcopal Church was torn apart over slavery and it was not until 1939 that several large "wings" of Methodism came back together as The Methodist Church. In 1968, The Methodist Church united with some of its "Wesleyan cousins," the United Evangelical Brethren, to create the United Methodist Church.

Today, the UMC has about 8 million members in the U.S. and another 3.5 million in Europe, Africa, and the Philippines. In the U.S., the UMC is divided into five "jurisdictions" which are further divided into conferences and districts. St. Andrew is part of the Dallas-Northeast District, which is part of the North Texas Conference, which is part of the South Central Jurisdiction. We Methodists are an organized (methodical?) lot!

Of all the congregations, organizations, and leaders that make up the UMC, *only* the UMC's General Conference can speak on behalf of the UMC. No Bishop nor any other group speaks for the UMC. The General Conference is a legislative assembly made up of 50% clergy and 50% laity that meets every four years. The most recent General Conference met in Ft. Worth in April 2008.

The UMC quickly moved to develop new Bible study programs, such as the *Disciple* series. Here at St. Andrew, we developed the Bible Academy more than eight years ago. We also began the creation of these Background Studies, and generally sought to not only become better readers of Scripture, but to incorporate the Bible fully into our lives as disciples of Jesus Christ.

I'm quite sure that all this would make John Wesley smile. He'd surely wonder how the Methodists allowed themselves to drift away from God's Word, falling into an all-too-common biblical illiteracy. John Wesley was Oxford-educated and yet called himself a "man of one book," the Bible. Quotations from and allusions to Scripture were woven throughout his sermons.

We United Methodists, John Wesley, and all God's people stretching back through the centuries celebrate and cherish God's gift of Scripture.

Celebrating God's Gift of Scripture

The book of Nehemiah focuses on the rebuilding of Jerusalem's city walls after the Jews began to return to Israel following the Babylonian exile.²

This week's passage from Nehemiah recounts the great celebration after the walls are completed. The celebration of this reconstructed community lasted several weeks, the longest such celebration in the Bible. And it began with the reading of Scripture.

Everyone gathered at one of the city gates, the Water Gate, and Ezra rose in the early morning to read the book of the Law of Moses (i.e., the Torah). He read until mid-day and all the ears of the people were "attentive" as they stood to hear the Word read. (I can't help but wonder how we'd do with this.) The reading of Scripture is an act of celebratory worship for all the people gathered.

¹From the UMC *Book of Discipline*, the "book of law of the UMC . . . the product of over 200 years of the General Conferences of the denominations which now form the UMC."

²The Persians supplanted the Babylonians and, in 445BC, King Artaxerxes allowed Nehemiah to return to oversee the rebuilding of Jerusalem. The priest Ezra had returned earlier to lead the rebuilding of the temple, for the great temple built by Solomon had been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar.

Notice all the names we are given. These are real people with real names; there is no abstraction or vague remembering. Notice also that these named teachers helped the people to understand what they were hearing read. The teachers read from the book “with interpretation,” giving “the sense so that the people understood the reading” (v. 8). Then, as now, there is better and poorer interpretation of Scripture.

Which translation should I read?

There are many excellent English translations of the Bible. We at St. Andrew most often use the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). The translation team sought to be as close to the ancient Hebrew and Greek as reasonably possible. In their own words, the translators sought to be “as literal as possible, as free as necessary.” Consequently, the NRSV can be a little difficult to understand in spots.

Thus, I usually recommend using the NRSV primarily, but also using an easier-to-read translation in places. The NLT (New Living Translation) is a good choice. Our youth department uses it a lot. You might also enjoy reading from Eugene Peterson’s biblical paraphrase, *The Message*. I find that *The Message* sometimes has an immediacy and emotional effect that I don’t get from the NRSV or even the NLT.

Bear in mind, however, that to get an “easier” translation, the translators have to get further and further from the original Hebrew and Greek. Eugene Peterson is a knowledgeable scholar, but paraphrasing ancient languages into English presents big challenges.

So, I’d go with the NRSV and supplement your reading elsewhere. If you read the daily Bible passages in these studies, you might take my advice and read the passage twice each day. Once using the NRSV and once using *The Message*. You can pick up inexpensive paperback copies of these translations at many bookstores.

Finally (reading on past verse 8), the reading and interpreting of Scripture had a powerful effect on the people, moving many to weep, as they were either overwhelmed by the moment or reminded how far some had wandered from God and God’s ways. Scripture, when thoughtfully read within the believing community, will always affect the reader. Too often, we give the Bible only a small portion of ourselves and then are surprised when it seems so benign. Better that we emulate the people gathered at the Water Gate in Jerusalem many centuries ago.

The Sacred Writings

Zooming ahead about five centuries from that morning at the Water Gate, we find the Apostle Paul reminding his young associate, Timothy, to cling to what he has learned, remember from whom he learned it, and hold to the “sacred writings,” by which Paul means the Hebrew Scripture, as there is not yet a New Testament.

Paul tells Timothy that “all scripture” is “God-breathed” (*theopneustos* in the Greek, often translated “inspired”) and useful for (1) teaching us, (2) showing us when we’ve gone wrong, (3) helping us to get back on track, and (4) training us to stay there.

Like the passage from Nehemiah, Paul’s letter illustrates the commitment of God’s people to God’s written word. We, as United Methodists, affirm the unique origin and role of the Bible in revealing to

us the story of God’s love and in helping us to learn what it really means to love God and pursue God’s ways and purposes in this world.

So . . . do United Methodists believe in the Bible? The answer is an unequivocal “yes.” Do we believe in the authority of the Bible? Again, yes. Is it the primary place we turn to understand who God is, who we are, and so on? Yet again, yes. And in all this, we affirm the importance of sound interpretation that is guided by the Holy Spirit and informed by scholarly inquiry. We’ll ask any question, but we won’t give any answer.



The UMC, the Bible, and Our Own Rose Window

The depiction of the Holy Bible in St. Andrew's Rose Window incorporates the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. These letters signify that God's Word is complete and whole, it is a unity. Nothing need be added. Nothing can be taken away. As we United Methodist Christians proclaim in our Articles of Religion, the Bible "containeth all things necessary to salvation."

The symbol also points us to Jesus Christ, who is the "Word" (John 1:1), the "Alpha and Omega, the first and last, the beginning and the end" (Revelation 22:13; also Rev 1:8). "He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word" (Hebrews 1:3).

Despite the scriptural roots of the Methodist church, in the closing decades of the twentieth century the UMC undervalued the Bible, failing in many congregations to teach even the basics. But this has begun to change in the last twenty years or so. The General Conference, the governing body of the UMC, has reaffirmed the place of Scripture in Methodism. We at St. Andrew created the Bible Academy eight years ago so that we might improve the biblical literacy of our church and enable us all to read and embrace Scripture as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.

In the United Methodist Church, we affirm that the Bible is the "primary source and criterion for Christian doctrine. . . The Bible bears authentic testimony to God's self-disclosure in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, as well as in God's work of creation, in the pilgrimage of Israel, and in the Holy Spirit's ongoing activity in human history."

Further, the UMC affirms that the sixty-six books of the Bible are "to be received through the Holy Spirit as the true rule and guide for faith and practice. . . We properly read Scripture within the believing community, informed by the tradition of that community. We interpret individual texts in light of their place in the Bible as a whole. We are aided by scholarly inquiry and personal insight, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit."

from the UMC *Book of Discipline*

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Try to put yourself at the Water Gate on that morning. Can you really imagine standing there in rapt attention for six or more hours. Were they really that much different from us? What's changed? How can we do more to elevate Scripture as God's Word without falling into the worship of the Bible?

What if there were no Bibles? How would Christianity change? Would the body of Christ survive? Could there be a church without the Bible? Bishop Willimon calls United Methodists a people of the book? What do you think he means? Do you agree with him? Do you think we look that way to other Christians?

How central a place does the Bible really hold in the church? in the UMC? in St. Andrew? Are we a scripturally-formed congregation? How would such a congregation differ from one that is not scripturally-formed?

Do you think that we tend to read or talk about the Bible more than we actually read it? If so, why do you think we don't spend more time reading the Bible? Why do we find it so easy to neglect the Bible? What barriers are there to our becoming better readers of the Bible? How can we overcome these barriers? How can we help our children to be people of the book?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Psalm 119:73-80 We love God's instruction because it comes from he who made us</p>	<p>Tuesday, Psalm 119:105-112 We never stand beyond the need for help; trust and complaint!</p>
<p>Wednesday, 1 Timothy 1 Timothy's mission in Ephesus; contrasting portraits of faith and faithlessness</p>	<p>Thursday, 2 Timothy 1 & 2 Timothy' suffering for the gospel and his combat with false teachers</p>
<p>Friday, 2 Timothy 3 & 4 Life in the last days; Paul's reflections on his own impending death</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

