Hi,

Today’s updates:

* My noon Tuesday class on Genesis will meet today on [my Facebook ministry page](https://www.facebook.com/Scott-Engle-St-Andrew-UMC-110365790736617/?modal=admin_todo_tour).
* The links to my on-line classes, the video recordings of the classes, the class audio podcasts, and the archive of these daily emails can all be found at [www.scottengle.org](http://scottengle.org/scotts-weekly-classes/). All the postings are up-to-date.

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

**When the seventh month came—the people of Israel being settled in their towns—all 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. Accordingly, 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. He 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. The 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. And 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. Then Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, “Amen, Amen,” lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground. Also 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. So 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)***

**Now you have observed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my 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. Indeed, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. But wicked people and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving others and being deceived. But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God [*Greek*: *God-breathed*] and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.**

Regrettably, 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 50 years, I can attest that the Bible was little read and less studied in many churches. Indeed, the UMC General Conference (our “legislature”) 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.”

The UMC quickly moved to develop new Bible study programs, such as the *Disciple* series. Here at St. Andrew, we developed the Bible Academy nearly twenty years ago. We also began the creation of these Weekly Bible 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. Today’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 was an act of celebratory worship for all the people gathered.

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.

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.

‘til tomorrow, grace and peace,

Scott