

READING SCRIPTURE AS METHODISTS

Methodists have a four-part tool for interpreting scripture based on John Wesley's methods. Our *Book of Discipline* says, "Wesley believed that the living core of the Christian faith was revealed in **Scripture**, illumined by **tradition**, vivified in personal **experience**, and confirmed by **reason**" (par. 105).

- **Scripture** is our primary source for understanding God. We should read difficult passages in light of other passages, and especially the teaching and life of Jesus, the living Word. We can also call upon...
- **Tradition** is the collected wisdom of the Church over the years in interpreting scripture.
- **Experience** of the Holy Spirit bearing fruit in daily life also informs our understanding of scripture.
- **Reason** is the expectation that we think critically about our understanding and practice of scripture.

For example: Wesley shared the common 1700s attitude that women should not preach. Two verses of **scripture** seemed to prohibit it (1 Cor 14:34; 1 Tim 2:12), and church **tradition** for hundreds of years had banned women from being pastors or priests. However, Wesley was presented with the **experience** of two Methodist women lay speakers who felt a strong call to preach, and whose ministry bore fruit in new Christians experiencing an awakening of the Holy Spirit. His **reason** compelled him to reconsider what he took for granted, and he realized that other **scriptures** provide evidence of female preachers and leaders (Miriam the prophetess, Deborah the judge, Mary Magdalene's proclamation of the risen Christ).

Of course, today we gladly accept the gifts of women in ministry! Over the centuries, the Church has similarly come to new understanding on circumcision, food purity, married clergy, slavery, and divorce.

John Wesley did not insist on 100% agreement on details of doctrine and interpretation. He said, "Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt, we may. Herein all the children of God may unite, notwithstanding these smaller differences. These remaining as they are, they may forward one another in love and in good works."

TAKING SCRIPTURE SERIOUSLY

"All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness," writes the Apostle Paul in 2 Timothy 3:16. While Paul was talking about what we know as the Old Testament, Christians take all scriptures, Old and New Testament, seriously.

However, taking scripture seriously is not the same thing as taking it literally word-for-word. For instance, what parent would execute a rebellious teenager (Deuteronomy 21:18-20)? Or who has gouged out their eye after looking lustfully at another person, as Jesus suggests (Matthew 5:27-29)?

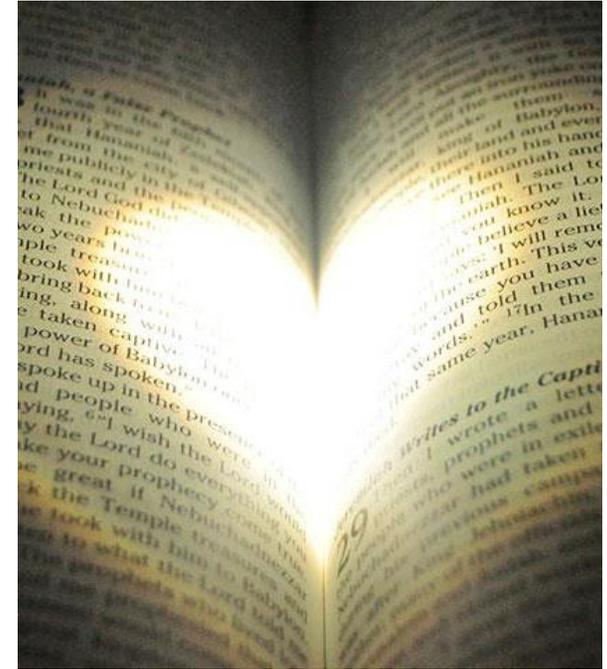
Jesus also says, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). Jesus uses humor and exaggeration to make important points. We obviously can't be perfect like God, but we're supposed to try, just like we are supposed to resist lust but not physically wound ourselves.

Taking scripture seriously means considering:

1. **What type of literature is this?** The Bible contains many types of texts which should be read differently – history, poetry, prophecy, private letters, law and etiquette codes for particular societies, and parables (fictional stories meant to convey important truths).
2. **How has translation affected what I am reading?** The Bible was originally written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. Different English translations bring subtle nuances to the text reflecting the translators' choices and understanding.
3. **What was the original context?** Who was this written for originally, what was their culture, what problems were they having, and what did they need to hear?
4. **What is my context?** What is my culture, what problems am I having, and what do I need to hear?
5. **How is God at work?** Do we see the Holy Spirit moving in new ways in the world? Are we open to the Holy Spirit helping us to hear God say a new thing in an old scripture?

All scripture quotes are from the *New Revised Standard Version* of the Bible, unless noted.

What Does the Bible Say About LGBTQ People?



Reading God's Word with an affirming Spirit.

"Every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or another – showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God's way. Through the Word we are put together and shaped up for the tasks God has for us."

2 Timothy 3:16-17, The Message

NEGATIVE VERSES

Genesis 19, the men of Sodom want to attack and rape angelic visitors. God destroys Sodom by fire and brimstone.

Although the name of Sodom has become a word for homosexual activity, the real sin of the town was violence and a lack of hospitality, including gang rape. Ezekiel 16:49-50 assumes this interpretation.

Leviticus 18:22, "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination."

Leviticus 20:13, "If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death..."

The Old Testament holiness codes contain some material no longer relevant or binding for Christians, such as circumcision, bans on eating pork and wearing mixed-fiber clothing, and requirements for men to impregnate their brother's widow. See Acts 10&15 under **Interpretation and Change**.

Romans 1:26-27, "For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another..."

Part of a long diatribe against idolatry. In this case, Paul may have been talking about temple prostitution. Paul turns this into a "gotcha" on the reader, *Romans 2:1, "Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things."*

1 Corinthians 6:9-10, "Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers – none of these will inherit the kingdom..."

1 Timothy 1:8-10, "...the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God."

"Sodomites" is an approximation for Paul's Greek word, ἀρσενικοίτης, which is found nowhere else in ancient literature and thus is difficult to translate. All the other sins in these lists cause harm to others. Paul likely refers to men raping boys or prostitution, not loving, monogamous same-sex marriage.

INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE AND CHANGE

Matthew 22:35-40, "[Jesus] said to him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.'"

Jesus says that the Great Commandment to love is the tool we should use to interpret other scripture.

Matthew 5:21ff, 27ff, 31ff, 33ff, 38ff, 43ff, "You have heard it said... But I say to you..."

In the Sermon on Mount, Jesus repeatedly reinterprets Old Testament scriptures, challenging a literal reading with a call to righteousness and love.

Acts 5:34-39, "Keep away from these men and let them alone; because if this plan... is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them – in that case you may even be found fighting against God!"

The respected Pharisee Gamaliel warns the Jewish council not to harass the Christian apostles, in case their new teaching is actually from God.

Acts 10, Jesus sends Peter to a non-Jewish centurion to share the Good News. Cornelius's family converts to Christianity and shows evidence of the Holy Spirit.

Acts 15, the Jerusalem Council hears Peter and Paul's testimony about Gentile converts to Christianity receiving the Holy Spirit, and decides to relax the Old Testament holiness codes about circumcision and diet.

Outsiders who don't follow scriptural laws and customs are welcomed into the church upon evidence of heartfelt faith and the Holy Spirit. The church reinterprets or suspends some scriptures.

John 14:26, [Jesus says,] "The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you."

Jesus' teachings are not just words fixed on a page, but our ongoing interpretation and understanding of them through the Holy Spirit.

1 John 4:1, "Test the spirits to see if they are from God..."

The Apostle John puts forth two spiritual tests for interpretation: faith in Christ as God's son (4:2), and loving God and one another (4:7). John concludes, *1 John 4:20-21, "Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars... The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also."*

POSITIVE VERSES

Genesis 1:26-27, God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness... So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them."

God is multi-gendered, with male and female traits.

1 Samuel 18:1, "the soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David; Jonathan loved him as his own soul."

2 Samuel 1:26, "I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; greatly beloved were you to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women."

These verses may be a positive example of same-sex love by King David, a hero of the Old Testament.

Luke 7:1-10, the centurion sent word to Jesus, "Only speak the word, and let my servant be healed."

The word παῖς, translated "servant," was sometimes used of a male sexual companion. Jesus does not condemn the relationship but commends the non-Jewish centurion's faith and heals the servant (7:9).

Acts 8:26-40, Philip encounters an Ethiopian eunuch and tells him about Jesus. The eunuch responds, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?"

Eunuchs, men who had been castrated for high government service, were seen as sexually "other" by Jews. Yet Philip gladly baptizes this social outcast.

MARRIAGE

Genesis 1:28, "Be fruitful and multiply..."

Genesis 2:18, "It is not good that the man should be alone."

1:28 is sometimes used to suggest that procreation is the purpose of marriage. But 2:18 suggests that marriage is also about companionship. For example, we don't deny marriage to infertile couples.

Mark 10:2-11, Pharisees ask Jesus if divorce is legal. He responds, "From the beginning of creation, God made them male and female... Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate... Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her..."

Often cited as Jesus defining marriage as one-man-one-woman, this passage is really about divorce.

SUMMARY

The six negative scriptures deal with abuse, rape, and promiscuity, sinful for hetero- and homosexuals. They do not address loving same-sex marriages. Other verses offer positive examples of alternate sexualities and give guidelines for reinterpretation of Scripture.