

LESSON PLAN ON BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION – PART 1

Title: Biblical Interpretation – Part 1

Resources:

- Required: St. Francis Prayer, Unity Promise, Wesley's Homo Unius Libri Reading, Our Theological Guidelines, Whiteboard, Bibles
- Optional/Supplemental: Deeper Issues Trouble United Methodists

Outline:

- Open with welcome and introduce this session as the second in a series of constructive conversations designed to prepare our congregation for the denominational decision regarding any changes that may or may not take place at the February 2019 General Conference relative to human sexuality/homosexuality. Future sessions will deal with views of human sexuality and the plans being considered by our denomination to address the issue of homosexual inclusion in our church.
- Today's session focuses on the issue of biblical interpretation. Devoted Christians read the same bible and come to different conclusions on a whole host of matters. Why is this? Because they interpret the bible in different ways.
- But before we begin, let's start our session by praying the Saint Francis Prayer & reviewing the Unity Promise & Guidelines.
- The bible is foundational to our faith.
 - The bible was foundational to the theology of John Wesley our founder.
 - Distribute John Wesley – Homo Unius Libri reading.
 - John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, was quite possibly the best-read man of his day. He had a large library, wrote or edited many volumes, and sought to put good books into the hands of his lay preachers so they could be educated and edified. Nevertheless, in the preface to his book of sermons, he referred to himself as *homo unius libri* – a man of one book! The quote is worthy of our consideration: "Let me be *homo unius libri*. Here then I am, far from the busy ways of men. I sit down alone; only God is here. In His presence I open, I read His book...Is there a doubt concerning the meaning of what I read? Does anything appear dark or intricate? I lift up my heart to the Father of Lights:—'Lord, is it not Thy word, 'if any man lack wisdom, let him ask of God?' ... Thou hast said, 'if any be willing to do Thy will, he shall know.' I am willing to do, let me know Thy will.' I then search after and consider parallel passages of Scripture, 'comparing spiritual things with spiritual.' I meditate

LESSON PLAN ON BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION – PART 1

thereon with all the attention and earnestness of which my mind is capable. If any doubt still remains, I consult those who are experienced in the things of God: and then the writings whereby, being dead, they yet speak. And what I thus learn, that I teach.”ⁱ

- Clearly, the bible was a foundational document for Wesley in the formation of his thought and theology, though he drew on other sources to inform his understanding.
- The bible remains foundational in our current church context.
 - Article IV of our confession of faith says: “We believe the Holy Bible, Old and New Testaments, reveals the Word of God so far as it is necessary for our salvation.”
 - Clearly, this statement reminds us that the bible is foundational to our faith.
 - Notice that the bible “reveals” the Word of God, i.e. it reveals God’s message to us, especially as God speaks to us in Jesus Christ who is, according to John’s gospel, the Word made flesh. (Jn. 1:1ff)
 - Notice also that the bible’s focus is on salvation, i.e. how God is saving or restoring God’s creation. This means that it is a book about salvation, not science, sociology, chemistry, biology, geography, medicine, etc. We shouldn’t read it as though it were a manual on these other issues. For example, few of us would want to be treated for some disease using Isaiah’s prescription: “Bring a lump of figs. Let them take it and apply it to the boil, so that he may recover.” (2 Ki 20:7)
- Interpreting the bible is an essential task.
 - None of us simply reads the bible. Whether we realize it or not, each of us also interprets the bible. In other words, we try to discern what it meant to its first audience and what it means to us in our present context.
 - This is nothing new. According to the Wesley reading, how did Wesley interpret the bible? What other sources did he use to inform his theology and thought?
 - Wesley interpreted the bible and developed his theology by using what we sometimes call the Wesleyan Quadrilateral:
 - Scripture – Wesley “consider(ed) parallel passages of scripture.” In other words, he studied other bible passages dealing with the same issue to get an overall impression of the bible’s “macro” message on an issue instead of depending on a single “micro” verse as the basis of his views.
 - Tradition – Wesley “consult(ed) those experienced in the things of God and the writings whereby they (continued to) speak.” In other words, he consulted what the church taught in the past and how it

LESSON PLAN ON BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION – PART 1

- was interpreting the bible in light of present biblical scholarship to formulate his own opinions.
- Experience – Wesley prayed for guidance, committed himself to faithful obedience, and (though not mentioned here, but often in his Journal) he observed how God was working among his people. In other words, Wesley observed the present activity of the Spirit in the experience of the Church to see how God was acting in the context of his own time.
 - Reason – Finally, Wesley meditated “with all the attention and earnestness of which his mind was capable.” He studied logic and classics at Oxford. He used his Oxford training to think through and synthesize what he learned through a careful examination of scripture, tradition, and experience in order to arrive at a reasoned conclusion about the teachings of the bible.
 - You can read more about the Wesleyan Quadrilateral on your own in *Our Theological Guidelines as a supplemental reading on the Wesleyan Quadrilateral*. (Distribute this reading.)
- Although interpreting the bible is an essential task, it is not an easy task.
 - By now we should be able to see that the bible is foundational to our faith and interpreting the bible is an essential task. But this doesn’t mean that interpreting the bible is an easy task.
 - I think we can all admit that devout Christians read the bible and sometimes come to different conclusions about what it teaches. Can you give any examples?
 - Once saved, always saved! – or – No, you can fall from grace and be lost at last!
 - There are 7 sacraments! – or – No, there are only two!
 - Christ is really present in the eucharistic elements: the bread is his body; the cup is his blood. – or – No, Christ is present with his people as they commune but the elements only represent his body and his blood.
 - You have to be baptized by immersion as an adult upon your confession of faith! – or – No, you can be baptized as an infant or an adult, using any one of three modes – sprinkling, pouring, or immersion!
 - Baptism is a saving rite! – or – No, it’s merely a spiritual symbol!
 - Etc. Etc.
 - In addition to people arriving at different interpretations of the bible, throughout history, people have taught things from the bible that not all Christians believe today. Can you think of any examples?
 - For the first three hundred years of Christian history, the church was largely (though not exclusively) pacifist in its outlook. (Turn the other

LESSON PLAN ON BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION – PART 1

cheek, love your enemies, and do good to those who spitefully use you.) Over time, especially with the adoption of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman empire, and other developments in sacred and secular history, pacifism was largely abandoned and just war theory was adopted.

- For much of Christian history, based on biblical teaching and example, the church taught female subordination. Paul taught that women should wear veils in the church as a sign of their submission to God and to their husbands; he even used a natural law argument to substantiate that belief, i.e. he said nature itself teaches that this is the right and proper thing to do. (1 Cor. 11:2-16) Do we still believe this?
- In addition, Paul taught that wives should be subject to their husbands. (Ep. 5:22) Do we still believe wives should be subordinate to their husbands or do we believe more in an equality among the sexes and mutuality in marriage?
- Some Christian churches refuse to ordain female clergy. This seems to be the clearest teaching of Paul. See 1 Cor. 14:33-36 & 1 Tim. 2:11-12. But United Methodists ordain female clergy because we believe that there are no males or females in Christ, that all are one (equal) in Christ, and that God can call whomever God wills. Ga. 3:28. Which is right?
- Until as late as the 19th century, the bible was used to support slavery as a social institution. “Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything.” (Col. 3:22) This is not an isolated admonition and there’s little or nothing in the New Testament that would call directly for the abolition of slavery. Do we still believe slavery is a viable social institution?
- Throughout much of Christian history, divorce and remarriage were seen as grave sins. Jesus said, “...anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.” And Paul said, adulterers will not inherit the kingdom of God. (1 Cor. 6:9-10) Today we recognize that divorce may fall short of God’s perfect intent for marriage but we realize that in some instances, perhaps many instances, depending upon circumstances, divorce and/or remarriage may be positive for the parties involved. Furthermore, we don’t exclude divorced and remarried persons from the kingdom of God or full participation in the life and ministry of the church. Are we wrong in this?

- Summary and Closing

LESSON PLAN ON BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION – PART 1

- So far in this lesson on biblical interpretation we have seen that the bible is foundational to our faith and that interpreting the bible is an essential but not an easy. We don't simply read the bible; every age must interpret what it means. And in the process of interpretation, we sometimes come to conclusions that differ from those of other Christians or we may even come to different conclusions ourselves as we gain new knowledge or information over time. In next week's lesson we'll look more closely at why this is so.
- But now, let's close with a time for conversation.
 - What did you find most helpful in this lesson?
 - With what are you struggling?
 - How does this lesson impact the way your read the bible?
- Closes with prayer.

ⁱ <http://www.bartleby.com/209/750.html> accessed on January 21, 2016.