

# Basic Faith

## Christian Theology for Everyone

### **Session 2: The Bible and How Not to Misread It**

#### **The Bible - What It Is**

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**Lots of writers, lots of voices, one God's inspiration.**

Many "books", often originating within oral tradition, written by a variety of writers (some known, others not known) across about 1,000 years.

By doctrinal definition, all biblical material in the authorized canon (i.e. the Bible we have today) is inspired by God through the Holy Spirit, but not dictated to be written verbatim.

#### **Revelation (even before Revelation) & Narrative**

The Bible is God's story. It is God's revealing of God's-self to us, thus it is the best and primary source for knowing God, God's saving purpose, and how God is fulfilling that purpose.

#### **A Smorgasbord of Genres**

- Narratives – stories. EG. history books (Joshua through Ezra-Nehemiah)
- Prophetic Writing – oracles, messages, visions of the prophets. EG. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Ezekiel, the Minor Prophets

- Poetry – EG. Psalms
- Gospels – stories of Jesus Christ. They are NOT biographies in the modern sense but carefully organized and edited writings that convey particular aspects of the significance of Jesus.
- Epistles/Letters – direct communications with specific churches (EG. Paul’s letters) and unaddressed letters to be shared with any or all churches known by the writer (EG. Hebrews)
- Apocalyptic – revealing of God’s future, which, paradoxically is already taking place (EG. Daniel, Revelation)

## Languages

- Hebrew – Massoretic text
- Koine Greek – Septuigent & New Testament

## **Biblical Truth, Inerrancy, and Authority**

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### Truth

The Bible contains the truths upon which we base our beliefs. Truth may be based upon fact, but is not dependent on it in the modern sense that one needs empirical, repeatable test results. For example, we take it as truth that God created the universe even though we cannot establish this as fact.

### Inerrancy (No Mistakes . . . really?!?)

Really . . . a tenet of faith is that the Bible is not in error in its messaging to us. Biblical inerrancy is, unfortunately, too large and nuanced a topic to dive into here.

### Authority – for All Christians

Yes. It just is. When Jesus says that the most important thing for each person to do is to love God and love each other, that’s what we are to do.

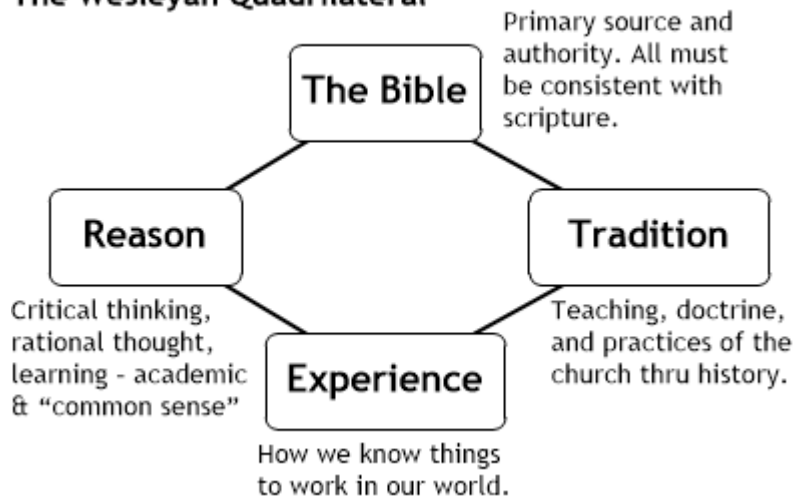
Exactly how each part of the Bible is authoritative is a bit complicated. For example, as Christians we no longer observe the dietary laws contained within the first five books of the Bible (Torah), yet we consider

the concepts contained therein of our relationship with God to be instructive.

How the Bible's authority applies case-by-case is informed by context (see below).

## Authority – the Keystone to the Wesleyan Quadrilateral

### The Wesleyan Quadrilateral



Wesleyan/Methodist theological reflection recognizes that we do not slavishly adhere to either the simple reading of the Bible or the teaching of the church. Even so, when we develop an understanding of something, it must be consistent with the Bible or it is not Christian.

## Reading the Bible - A Verse at a Time

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### Exercise in interpretation: John 11:35

Forgetting the story around the following verse, interpret

“Jesus wept”

The primary interpretive question is, Why did Jesus weep?

## Reading the Bible - The Secret Sauce

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“Jesus wept” is easily interpreted once one knows the **context** in which the verse is found (it is Jesus’ reaction to the death of Lazarus).

**Context** is necessary for making a useful interpretation.

Some types of context are:

- Textual – the verses and passages around the material being interpreted
- Linguistic – the language, usage, and idioms
- Historical-Cultural – the world of the Bible, which is very different than our own

## Reading the Bible - The Two Most Frequent & Harmful Mistakes

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**#1 Cherry-picking** – lifting a verse from the Bible and out of its context. The exercise above using “Jesus wept”, taken without mention of Lazarus’ death, is a cherry-pick. Cherry-picking is a lazy, and often error-prone, way to use the Bible.

**#2 Eisegesis** – this 50-cent word means to read a Bible passage and claim what it means without having done the work to interpret it. Typically this is done when we want a passage to mean something that it may or may not actually mean. The opposite is **exegesis**, which describes the process of letting the Bible tell the interpreter what it means.

## Reading the Bible - Entering God’s Story

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The best way to read the Bible is to become invested in it by entering God’s story therein. Remember, as Christians we are active participants in God’s saving work in the world.