

man] hang all the law and the prophets." (Matt. 22:40) "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets." (Matt. 7:12) (See also Matt. 5:17-18, as above.)

The United Methodist Church holds a high view of the authority and inspiration of Scripture. It calls the faithful to read these Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, to meditate on them, to learn of and worship Christ our Savior whom they reveal, and to follow and obey Him.

"There are abundant references throughout the Discipline to 'our standards of doctrine'---along with prohibitions against contrary teaching and provisions for disciplinary action against deviant public teaching for the determination of otherwise irreconcilable doctrinal disputes." Although Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason are norms for theological formulations, the Discipline makes clear that "There is a primacy that goes with Scripture, as the constitutive witness to the biblical well-springs of our faith."

This, in summary, is what United Methodists believe about Scripture. Articles 5 and 6 on biblical authority can be found in the United Methodist Discipline under "Our Doctrinal Standards." They have not changed since Wesley's time, and cannot be amended by the General Conference. The bishops are commissioned to guard this teaching of Jesus Christ, and ordained ministers are pledged solemnly to

affirm it, and to proclaim this teaching to all who will hear. If you think your minister might have taught about Scripture contrary to our doctrinal standards, have a friendly talk with him or her about the Articles of Religion, Articles 5 and 6. Ask about their understanding of their promise when they were ordained to uphold and preach Christ according to the Articles of Religion. If your minister thoughtfully teaches this doctrine, express your gratitude.

*For further explanation, see the biblical notes on the articles by Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury, which may be found in T. Oden, *Doctrinal Standards in the Wesleyan Tradition*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988).*



OUR DOCTRINAL STANDARDS ON SCRIPTURE

 **THE
CONFESSING
MOVEMENT**
Confessing Son, Savior and Lord

OUR DOCTRINAL STANDARDS ON SCRIPTURE

Thomas C. Oden

Drew University, Theological School

Every pastor admitted in full connection is asked by the bishop: "Have you studied the doctrines of the United Methodist Church?" And: "Will you preach and maintain them?" (The Book of Discipline, para. 424). The Doctrinal Standards of the United Methodist Church are clearly set forth in the Discipline. They include the Twenty-five Articles of Religion. Two of these articles deal with the authority of Scripture as the norm of Christian teaching, the sufficient rule of faith for salvation. Since 1792 these articles have remained in the front of the Discipline as doctrinal standards.

The General Conference is restricted from changing these articles, as it is restricted from changing the Confession of Faith, Article Four of which reads: "We believe the Holy Bible, Old and New Testaments, reveals the Word of God so far as it is necessary for our salvation. It is to be received through the Holy Spirit as the true rule and guide for faith and practice." These teachings unite us with the historic faith of Christianity. What follows is a summary of this official United Methodist teaching on Scripture.

The United Methodist Church acknowledges Holy Scripture as our authoritative and completely sufficient guide to life and salvation in Christ. With Paul, we affirm that, "All scripture is inspired by God, 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." (2 Tim. 3:16-17, NRSV) Similarly, "No prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God." (2 Pet 1:20b-21) Scripture contains all the testimony necessary for our salvation. All true articles of faith, including Wesley's 25 Articles, derive from, and receive their authority from, Scripture; if not contained in Scripture, no article holds authority nor may be required. The canon of Scripture grew out of long-term, church-wide (i.e., "ecumenical"), Spirit-led agreement. Early church councils (and following them, Wesley, in his 25 Articles) list the books of the Christian canon: the Hebrew Scriptures, or our Old Testament, and what we now call our New Testament. The word "canonical" itself indicates whatever reflects, or is confirmed by, the guidelines of the church, especially these earliest councils in the first centuries of Christendom.

Five categories comprise the Old Testament Scriptures: the Pentateuch (the five books of Law/Torah), the Historical books, the books of Wisdom (including Psalms and Proverbs), the Major Prophets, and the Minor Prophets. Like-

wise, the New Testament includes the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) and Acts, John's writings, Paul's epistles, the general epistles, and the book of Hebrews. The Old and New Testaments complement one another; rather than contradicting each other, they mutually edify the faithful. Both Testaments reveal God's will as well as God's character. The Old Testament promises the Anointed One, Christ, the God-man proclaimed in the New Testament. Job exclaims, "I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God" (Job 19:25-26). The gospel writers affirm this: "Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, He [Christ] interpreted to them the things about Himself in all the scriptures [of the Old Testament, which alone existed at that time]." (Luke 24:27) "You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on My behalf." (John 5:39) The promised Christ fulfills, rather than abolishing, the law and the prophets. (Matt. 5:17-18) God's covenant promises to endure across time and across cultures.

We believe that God gave the Mosaic law for various times and purposes. The Jewish ceremonial law (i.e., the Levitical sacrificial rites, and the civil precepts) does not command Christian obedience. However, Jesus made clear that the essence of the moral law (the Ten Commandments and "the law and prophets") does bind us as Christians: "On these two commandments [the love of God, and the love of