

John Wesley on 'Searching the Scriptures': Reading, Meditating, Hearing, Doing
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Introduction

Over the years, several have written about Wesley on the Scriptures. For example, there is Bishop Scott Jones' work, *John Wesley's Conception and Use of Scripture*,¹ even Thorvald Källstad's, psychological analysis, *John Wesley and the Bible*.² They are commendable works, but they do not give any suggestions regarding how Wesley wanted Methodists to read Scripture. The only work that approaches that is Catherine González, et al. in *How United Methodists Study Scripture*.³ But still, there is no word there regarding how Wesley wanted Methodists to read Scripture. When one looks carefully at the method he suggested for "searching the Scriptures" there is a way of addressing some cultural distortions created by Western society's emphasis on technology and individualism. These values influence regarding how Scripture is used in Bible study and the way it is appropriated in theological method.

In his sermon, "The Means of Grace," as well as several other places, Wesley repeatedly told Methodists that "searching the Scriptures" was a means whereby God might convey to persons preventing, justifying, and sanctifying

¹ Scott Jones, *John Wesley's Conception and Use of Scripture* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995).

² Thorvald Källstad, *John Wesley and the Bible: A Psychological Study*. (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 1974).

³ Catherine González, Ben Witherington, et. al. *How United Methodists Study Scripture* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999).

grace. Anyone who took love of God and love of neighbor seriously could not afford to ignore it. Searching the Scripture was seen as a work of piety, consisting of reading, meditating, hearing, and practicing. We have the makings of a syllogism and if it functions properly, if searching the scriptures is a means of grace, and reading, meditating, hearing, practicing are all a part of searching the scripture, ergo: reading is a means of grace; meditating is a means of grace; hearing is a means of grace; and, practicing is a means of grace. This is what Wesley meant by “searching the Scripture” and it is embedded not in “Our Theological Task” but in the “The Nature, Design, and General Rules of Our United Societies” which is included in the United Methodist *Discipline*. There is a methodology and dynamic here that is worthy of exploration, and because it is from Wesley it makes it all the more intriguing.

Reading

First there is “reading.” There is a lot to unpack from just the one directive: reading the Scripture. From the start there is the whole notion of what constitutes Scripture and the nature of Canon. Wesley aspired to be a “man of one book.” But the truth is the One Book is made up of many books and not all of Christianity has always agreed on what those books should be. Being the good Anglican that he was, Wesley easily subscribed to Article 6 in the “Articles of Religion” regarding the Canonical Books.

Then there is the theological issue of inspiration. Wesley held to a view of double inspiration of Scripture. Much could and should be said of this and more

of will be said later. However, there is a more subtle and implicit implication to this that needs to be explored right now.

Wesley is making the reading of Scripture a means of grace. The devotional reading of Scripture is so taken for granted now we forget it needs to be recognized that not all Christians everywhere and in all ages have had, A.) a Biblical text to read; or, B.) the ability to read it if they were given one. For the first 1400 years texts were kept and maintained in the monasteries in manuscript form. Access to them was given by a privileged few and copies beyond the confines of ecclesiastical structures were rare, making Scripture reading itself something of an act of elitism. Because of the cost and rarity of texts of any kind, illiteracy was exceedingly high. Not many could read the Scriptures if they were given them.

It would not be until Guttenberg invented the movable type press 1450 that the first Bible would be published. Furthermore, if it had not been for the Arab development of a cheap way to manufacture paper, printing would have been significantly more impracticable. Even so, in 1539 a copy of the Coverdale Bible was printed for around 12 shillings bound, which is about \$500 in today's currency. A copy of the Geneva Bible in 1576 sold for 5 pounds, or about \$1400. It was not until 1611 that Bibles were being printed small enough (7"x9") to be owned by the individuals who could afford them. Even then, in 1652, the London Polyglott Bible sold for 10 pounds each which translates into around \$1400 in

today's currency.⁴ The price had to be lowered before Scripture reading could be incorporated into common piety.

For that to happen technology and market forces had to come into play. By the beginning of the 18th century technology had increased and governmental interference had decreased enough so that printing costs could come down. Bibles had started to be printed in Germany by the Canstein Bible Institute in 1710 for around \$6. It was only in the beginning of the 18th century that a printed copy of the Bible was affordable for most people. Wesley certainly made good use of the affordability of the printing press in his day, which was of course the cutting edge technology. According to Frank Baker, the Wesleys churned out some 3 million pieces of literature during their lifetimes. The reading of scripture could now be democratized and become a common part of Protestant piety. This is reflected in Wesley's mandate to Methodists, "Read the Scripture." Now that anyone *could* own a Bible everyone *should* read the Bible as a means of grace.

The immediate issue raised by this is, has a means of grace that has not been an experience of all Christians, in all times, in all places been invented? Is "Scripture reading" the invention of Protestant piety when Luther's slogan of "Sola Scriptura" met Guttenberg's printing press? Or, let's press the matter a bit further. Can technology create a new means of grace? In the elements we have creations of "nature" in water, wine, and bread. In the printed Scripture we have the result of a relationship between technology and spirituality, or a merging of science and the doctrine of inspiration in the very least.

⁴ See, Henry Robert Plomer, *A Short History of English Printing, 1476-1898*, (London, 1900), 63, 146, 197. All prices have been calculated at www.measuringworth.com).

Erik Davis, in *Techgnosis: Myth, Magic and Mysticism in the Age of Information*, has suggested that far from suppressing religion and spirituality, technology has often been the catalyst for mystical breakthroughs, whether it has been the printing press, the telegraph, radio, television, or more recently the Internet.⁵ Davis describes the spirituality that is derived from technology as significantly Gnostic, a Gnosticism that is highly individualistic and often esoteric. Books, just like the Internet become disembodied minds and disembodied presence, ghosts without a machine, if you will. It should come as no surprise that there is a concept being kicked about online called “cybergnosticism” that celebrates the freedom that cyberspace gives to disembodied presence. Furthermore, according to Harold Bloom in, *The American Religion*, the American religion of choice is essentially a Gnostic religion.⁶ Is Davis correct? Can there be an unintended consequence to the quasi-gnostic element of melding technology and spirituality even in the pious notion of “reading the Scripture”?

It may be observed at this point the use of reason, experience, and tradition has a significant influence on the way that Scripture is read. They form the basis of the hermeneutic we bring to the text. Even the fiercest critics of the quadrilateral admit that Scripture cannot be interpreted on its own. Through the act of reading, Scripture is ultimately mediated through the symbiotic nature of

⁵ Erik Davis, *Myth, Magic and Mysticism in the Age of Information* (New York: Random House, 1998), 10-38.

⁶ Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992).

language. But because of the nature of text as technology it can still be a purely privatized experience.

All one really has to do is look at what the privatization of Scripture has done to both ecclesiology and the sense of Christian community. It has been a double edged sword of a different kind. While it has empowered the individual, it has often diminished the individual's sensed need of community and asserted an autonomous authority without consideration of a collective conscience. My own case study of preference is the funny thing that happened to the Bible on its way to the American frontier. Among other things, it fell into the hands of the American Bible Society. Now this seems innocent enough. And far be it from me to criticize a group for wanting to encourage *individuals* (I want to place special emphasis on this word) to read the Bible. But this single event is a matrix, both literally and metaphorically, of several phenomena.

Founded in 1816, one of its main objectives was, "not merely to provide a sufficiency of well printed and accurate editions of the Scriptures; but also to furnish great districts of the American continent with well executed Stereotype plates, for their cheap and extensive diffusion throughout the regions which are not scantily supplied, at a discouraging expense; and which, nevertheless, open a wide and prepared field for the reception of the revealed truth."⁷ Protestant piety is fused with affordable technology. After the American Civil War, the Bible Society sought to place Bibles into the hands of westward moving settlers. Bibles were now not just cheap enough to be bought. They were cheap enough

⁷ Edwin S. Gaustad, *A Documentary History of Religion in America to the Civil War* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993, p. 330.

to be given away. The Bible may now be placed into every open hand that wanted one. The Bible was slowly but surely being transformed from “our” Bible, into “my” Bible. It had become personal property in the truest American sense. And this was the frontier. The mythology of America’s “rugged individualism” was being cultivated and coupled with vast expanse that did little to nurture a sense of sacramental Christian community. On the frontier the Bible did not just meet technology. It encountered Jeffersonian democracy and its values of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” In a sense the Bible fell off the pulpit and into the pew, and from the pew into pious Protestant hands and homes. And for Methodists, who were struggling with a perennial shortage of ordained clergy who alone were capable of administering the sacraments, this had significant (some might even say disastrous) consequences. In effect the American frontier sheered away the sacraments leaving mainly the Bible in the pew and the conversion experience as the single most important event shaping one’s Christian formation and not the sacraments. Into this vacuum were sucked revivalism, camp meetings, and the conversion experience, where the pulpit was central, not the communion altar.

Is all this to suggest that reading the Bible is a bad thing? Not at all. But it is to suggest that “searching the Scriptures” in the Wesleyan sense includes more than just reading.

Meditating

Among other things, it also consisted of meditation. Wesley uses the word meditation in a way that suggests he assumes we know what he means, or in the very least that we know how to go about meditating. If one looks at his diaries and the number of entries he made regarding meditation it is obvious that he spent time daily meditating, often using words such as “zealous,” “fervent,” or “attentive.” Prayer, reading, and meditation were listed together so often that they seem like a single act. He encouraged his preachers saying,

From four to five in the morning, and from five to six in the evening, to meditate, pray, and read, partly the Scripture with the Notes, partly the closely practical parts of what we have published (*Minutes*, Q. 29).⁸

Through meditation one comes to learn a “thorough knowledge” of the Scripture as to its “sacred and literal” meaning.⁹ In the Preface to his *Explanatory Notes on the Old Testament* Wesley wrote,

If you desire to read the Scriptures in such a manner as may most effectually answer this end, would it not be advisable, (1.) To set apart a little time, if you can, every morning and evening for that purpose? (2.) At each time, if you have leisure, to read a chapter out of the Old, and one out of the New, Testament; if you cannot do this, to take a single chapter or a part of one? (3.) To read this with a single eye, to know the whole will of God, and a fixed resolution to do it? In order to know his will, you should, (4.) Have a constant eye to the analogy of faith, the connexion and harmony there is between those grand, fundamental doctrines, original sin, justification by faith, the new birth, inward and outward holiness: (5.) Serious and earnest prayer should be constantly used before we consult the oracles of God; seeing "Scripture can only be understood through the same Spirit whereby it was given." Our reading should likewise be closed with prayer, that what we read may be written on our hearts: (6.) It might also be of use, if, while we read, we were frequently to pause, and examine ourselves by what we read, both with regard to our hearts and lives. This would furnish us with matter of praise, where we found God had

⁸ John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, in 14 vols. Thomas Jackson, Ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1979), VIII:314.

⁹ John Wesley, “An Address to the Clergy” (London: 1756), ¶ 7.

enabled us to conform to his blessed will; and matter of humiliation and prayer, where we were conscious of having fallen short. And whatever light you then receive should be used to the uttermost, and that immediately. Let there be no delay. Whatever you resolve, begin to execute the first moment you can. So shall you find this word to be indeed the power of God unto present and eternal salvation.¹⁰

By now some may be recognizing in Wesley what is more commonly known as “lectio divina,” which is of course, a means of meditating on Scripture, consisting of reading, meditating, praying, and contemplation. It was Wesley’s belief that through a sacred reading of the text and a meditation on the text, the same Holy Spirit who inspired the Biblical writers also inspires Biblical readers to read and discern the meaning of Scripture. Without the Holy Spirit any means of grace is ineffectual.

We allow likewise that all outward means whatever, if separate from the Spirit of God, cannot profit at all, cannot conduce in any degree either to the knowledge or love of God... Whosoever therefore imagines there is any intrinsic power in any means whatsoever does greatly err, not knowing the Scriptures, neither the power of God. We know that there is no inherent power in the words that are spoken in prayer, in the letter of Scripture read, the sound thereof heard, or the bread and wine received in the Lord's Supper; but that it is God alone who is the giver of every good gift, the author of all grace; that the whole power is of him, whereby through any of these there is any blessing conveyed to our soul. We know likewise that he is able to give the same grace, though there were no means on the face of the earth. In this sense we may affirm that with regard to God there is no such thing as means, seeing he is equally able to work whatsoever pleaseth him by any or by none at all.¹¹

It must be said Wesley recognized that Scripture cannot be properly understood without the Holy Spirit, but the Holy Spirit and grace may be experienced without Scripture. Meditation is the posturing of one’s self to a

¹⁰ John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes on the Old Testament* (Bristol: Pine, 1765), ix.

¹¹ John Wesley, “The Means of Grace,” *The Sermons I, The Works of John Wesley*, Albert Outler, ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), I:382, ¶ II.3.

position of openness to the Holy Spirit. For an experience of the Holy Spirit is an experience of grace, and an experience of grace is an experience of the Holy Spirit. In Wesley's pneumatology, the Holy Spirit *is* grace. In doing so it is also to place one's self in the position of experiencing the Holy Spirit at this point in time is to position one's self in a position of "hearing."

There is obviously a great deal of potential for abuse, particularly given what happened to Scripture on the American frontier. Whether its pietism or mysticism, the result is exacerbated by an individualism that can easily be directed to a subjective authority that is now spiritually authorized. It might be helpful at this point to raise a distinction between subjectivity and subjectivism. At best, the act of meditation leads to subjectivity in the Kierkegaardian sense. As Kierkegaard himself put it, "When subjectivity, inwardness is the truth, the truth becomes objectively a paradox; and the fact that truth is objectively a paradox shows in its turn that subjectivity is the truth.... The paradoxical character of the truth is its objective uncertainty. This uncertainty is the expression for passionate inwardness, and this passion is precisely the truth."¹² The truth of Scripture in this sense becomes located in the subjectivity of the reader during the act of meditation, which in itself is something akin to "passionate inwardness." At worst the radical individualism that has plagued much of Western society potentially leads to subjectivism, ethical relativism, and ironically, nihilism. When two individuals who are utterly convinced by the convictions of their subjectivism, it becomes a case of the irresistible force

¹² Kierkegaard, S. *Concluding Unscientific Postscripts*, David Swenson, trans. (London: OUP, 1941), 183.

encountering the immovable object. The only thing capable of dislodging subjectivism is often pragmatism and the need to accommodate the other. Reading and meditating must be balanced by something else, such as hearing and practicing. Perhaps it is the work and presence of the Holy Spirit alone that enables the one who reads and meditates out of the closet of prayer and solitary devotion to encounter the “other” as the basis of community.

Hearing

After reading and meditating on Scripture the next thing one must do is hear Scripture. Ideally, Wesley wanted Methodists to attend the hearing of Scripture every morning- that is to start each day not just with an act of devotion, but with an act of worship. This meant attending a Methodist society meeting for the exposition of Scripture and an exhortation from Scripture.¹³ Now keep in mind that eventually the Model Deed meant that, in theory at least, Wesley did not tolerate anything being taught in one of the Methodist preaching houses that was not consistent with the Standard Sermons, the Explanatory Notes, or the Minutes. It would be easy to focus on this aspect of hearing as nothing more than dogmatic reinforcement. In other words, what one heard when one attended to the hearing of Scripture was the reinforcement of a Wesleyan hermeneutic, at least in theory. But the move Wesley makes here is much more profound. It is the return of the individual and his/her devotional reading of

¹³ Just as an aside, I am convinced that early Methodism was nothing less than a 12 step program for recovering sinners. Step One. You are powerless of sin. Step Two. There is a Triune God who can deliver you from sin. Step Three. The Triune God can and will if you allow God to do so...

Scripture back to the community. If one is listening, it means someone else is reading, giving an exposition, or even exhorting (and in early Methodism this certainly included hearing the voice of a woman!). Here is a good opportunity to more clearly define the term. What we mean by “hearing” Scripture includes not just the reading aloud of the text. It includes the exposition of the text along with its exhortation. Hearing includes all this. Hearing also constitutes two or more. All one needs then is the name of Jesus and the Christ is there.

The argument could be made, and I don’t have time here to adequately make it, that Scripture is most at home when being heard. It was meant to be read aloud to an eager and listening community. Hearing is a communal act. This would coincide well with John Zizioulas’ insistence in his seminal work, *Being as Communion*, that communion is an ontological category. Hearing reflects the ontological status of communion. It is the best corrective for “reading” and “meditating” on the Scriptures only and the greatest corrective against Gnosticism. The closest Wesley comes to an ontological statement on being as communion is found in at least two places. The first is in a sermon.

Christianity is essentially a social religion, and that to turn it into a solitary religion is indeed to destroy it. By Christianity I mean that method of worshipping God which is here revealed to [humankind] by Jesus Christ. When I say this is essentially a social religion, I mean not only that it cannot subsist so well, but that it cannot subsist at all without society, without living and conversing with other men. And in showing this I shall confine myself to those considerations which will arise from the very discourse before us. But if this be shown, then doubtless to turn this religion into a solitary one is to destroy it.¹⁴

¹⁴ John Wesley, “Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount, Discourse the Fourth,” *The Sermons I, The Works of John Wesley*, Albert Outler, ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), I:531, ¶ I.1.

The second is actually found in a preface to a hymnal, compiled in the throes of the quietest controversy. The hymnal is a most appropriate place for this comment if you think about it. Wesley was well aware that reading and meditating on Scripture and stopping at that was prone to mystical abuses.

Speaking of the mystical writers, he wrote,

For the religion these authors would edify us in, is solitary religion. "If thou wilt be perfect," say they, "trouble not thyself about outward works. It is better to work virtues in the will. He hath attained the true resignation, who hath estranged himself from all outward works, that God may work inwardly in him, without any turning to outward things. These are the true worshippers, who worship God in spirit and in truth." For contemplation is, with them, the fulfilling of the law, even a contemplation that "consists in a cessation from all works." Directly opposite to this is the gospel of Christ. Solitary religion is not to be found there. "Holy solitaires" is a phrase no more consistent with the gospel than holy adulterers. The gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness. "Faith working by love" is the length and breadth and depth and height of Christian perfection. "This commandment have we from Christ, that he who loves God, love his brother also;" and that we manifest our love "by doing good unto all men; especially to them that are of the household of faith." And in truth, whosoever loveth his brethren, not in word only, but as Christ loved him, cannot but be "zealous of good works." He feels in his soul a burning, restless desire of spending and being spent for them. "My Father," will he say, "worketh hitherto, and I work." And at all possible opportunities he is, like his Master, "going about doing good."¹⁵

Already, we are getting ahead of ourselves by seeing a connection between hearing and doing, but there are a couple more points to be made before we get there.

One is this- for Wesley, the greater ecclesial context for "hearing Scripture" was not just the Methodist Societies. It was the Church of England. This meant that ultimately, reading and meditating on the Word could not be separated from Table. For example,

¹⁵ John Wesley, Charles Wesley, *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (London, 1739).

The more he hears and reads, the more convinced he is; and the more he meditates thereon day and night. Perhaps he finds some other book which explains and enforces what he has heard and read in Scripture. And by all these means the arrows of conviction sink deeper into his soul. He begins also to talk of the things of God, which are ever uppermost in his thoughts; yea, and to talk with God, to pray to him, although through fear and shame he scarce knows what to say. But whether he can speak or no, he cannot but pray, were it only in 'groans which cannot be uttered'. Yet being in doubt whether 'the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity' will regard such a sinner as him, he wants to pray with those who know God, with the faithful 'in the great congregation'. But here he observes others go up to 'the table of the Lord'. He considers, Christ has said, 'Do this.' How is it that I do not?¹⁶

The broader liturgical context of hearing Scripture in the context of experiencing the Table was the *Book of Common Prayer*. The Anglican definition of the visible “church” was after all, as defined in Article 19, where “the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly ministered according to Christ’s ordinance in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same.” On the road to Emmaus, do not our hearts burn within us when Jesus opens up the Scripture to us; and, are not our eyes opened when Jesus breaks bread for us? It is precisely this liturgical context that combats the Gnostic tendencies created through the merger of technology and piety with the abuse of disembodied presence. The true litmus test for community is the celebration of the Eucharist, which is why “cyber community” is such a deplorable oxymoron.

Wesley has pointed us in the right direction here, but it is up to us to use our theological imaginations, if you will, to think about the implications of this. Listening to Scripture today means listening not just to the text. It means also listening and paying attention to the reader’s own theological context.

¹⁶ John Wesley, “The Means of Grace,” *The Sermons I, The Works of John Wesley*, Albert Outler, ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), I:394, ¶ V.1.

Hermeneutics arise from contextual theology, and (like it or not) reason, experience, and tradition. In this case context does not just mean the context of Scripture. It means to also listen to the context of the one reading the Scripture. This act of acknowledging the reader and his/her context let us call *listening*. We *hear* God's word, and we *listen* to its reader. Let's put it another way. When we hear the meta-narrative, we are also listening for a narrative. When we listen we acknowledge the other's experience of sacred reading.

Today, listening is an act of diversity and an important step in what Wesley has called the "catholic spirit." The catholic spirit of hearing and listening is truly a means of grace, becomes the theological foundation of another thing Wesley referred to as a means of grace- the "conference." We obviously do not have time to fully explore this, but "conference" is as much an act of listening as anything else. If nothing else, listening should be seen as an act of Eucharistic hospitality. The word "hospitality" is being offered here as an alternative to the word "inclusive." Hospitality in this sense is not just the act of an individual. It is the act of a community bound by bread. The stronger the sense of community, the greater the significance of hospitality. There is perhaps no greater sense of hospitality than Eucharistic hospitality. The one body shares the one loaf. But it is a very diverse body of Christ indeed that shares in the breaking of that one loaf.

But Christ did not just die to make us diverse. Christ died to make us one. The true point of diversity is reconciliation. Consequently, Wesley wrote,

“...embrace every opportunity of hearing 'the word of reconciliation.'”¹⁷ The meaning of reconciliation in this context referred specifically to reconciliation with God. But Wesley would eventually expand the notion of reconciliation to include the children of God to each other.¹⁸ The point of “hearing” and “listening” is not the recognition of diversity. Diversity is the means. The teleological nature of searching the scripture is reconciliation to God and neighbor, so that God and neighbor may be authentically and genuinely loved and reconciled. Gene Knudson Hoffman has suggested that compassionate listening is the first step to reconciliation, and has been used in the Palestine/Israel conflict. Perhaps one of the reasons we often have such an issue with the original quadrilateral is that it does not require us to engage in the act of compassionate listening, not just to one but to all.

Perhaps more than anything, the diverse body of Christ needs to engage in the act of compassionate listening. It is through compassionate listening we hear others read the Scripture. The work of compassionate listening and the work of reconciliation is most difficult, but most necessary if we are to pray, “forgive us our trespasses/debts/sins as we forgive the trespasses/sins/debts of others. We hear in this 200th anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade, the children of slaves read the Scripture to us. It is an act of reconciliation to listen to the descendents of slaves sing the hymn of a former slave trader every time they sing “Amazing Grace.” The true reconciling church engages in listening to

¹⁷ John Wesley, “Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount, Discourse the Fifth,” *The Sermons I, The Works of John Wesley*, Albert Outler, ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984) I:570, ¶ V.12.

¹⁸ John Wesley, “The Lord our Righteousness,” *The Sermons I, The Works of John Wesley*, Albert Outler, ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), I:449, ¶ 2.

all the voices, gay and homophobic voices; feminist and angry white male voices; the black, Latina, and Asian voices with the racist voice. Listening is often bloody and always difficult work, but once we hear the Word do we really have a choice? Can we do anything other than carry out the work of reconciliation?

Doing

Yet, listening and hearing are not the final step in searching the Scripture. Admittedly, in his mentioning of “searching the Scriptures” he never actually included “doing”. But, in several places where he mentions “meditation” he followed it up with “obeying” and “doing” what was discovered there. He was consistently using James 1:22 to make the connection between being “hearers of the word” and being “doers of the word” also.¹⁹ In doing so Wesley also calls us into “doing” what we have discovered through reading, meditation, and hearing. “Doing” the Scripture is an extension of community and incarnating the Word which has been made flesh in Jesus Christ. “Doing the Scripture” is actually a useful phrase. There is no linguistic or grammatical problem with using the phrase, “reading the Scripture.” Neither is there a problem with “hearing the Scripture.” Perhaps it is most fitting that the phrase “doing the Scripture” be deliberately and intentionally employed and make it grammatically correct. We are, after all, not just to be hearers of the word only, but doers also. Perhaps it just as important to do Scripture as it is to believe Scripture. The end result of “searching the scripture” is not just orthodoxy, but “orthopraxy” not just believing

¹⁹ E.g. John Wesley, “The Danger of Riches,” *The Sermons III, The Works of John Wesley*, Albert Outler, ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986), 230, ¶ 4.

what is right, but doing what is right also. Acts of piety always lead to acts of mercy in the Wesleyan way. Reading the scripture always leads to “doing” the Scripture.

In the way David Watson has reinterpreted the General Rule, the acts of mercy are better understood as acts of compassion and acts of justice. It is an act of compassion to give a cup of cold water in the name of Jesus. It is an act of justice to find out why the person is thirsty to begin with. It is an act of compassion to feed the hungry. It is an act of justice to find out why they are hungry. It is an act of compassion to clothe the naked. It is an act of justice to find out why they are without clothes to begin with. If this is true, and I certainly think it is, then the whole point of “searching the Scripture” is to bring us into a worshipping community who seeks reconciliation and justice. Justice is not when one gets what one deserves. Justice is when we get what God wants us to have. When understood this way, justice becomes grounded not in law, but in Gospel and grace. The greatest act of justice is removing the impediments between God’s gifts and God’s people. That is “doing the Scripture.”

Wesley’s entire notion of Scripture searching takes us from an act of piety to an act of mercy. In the course of that journey there is a move from that of the solitary individual, to the individual in community. Perhaps such a move is one way to break the stranglehold Gnosticism and individualism has had upon pietism and evangelicalism in our age. If that is the case it would then seem as though through “searching the Scripture” we have discovered a profound way to “serve our present age.”