# Read Faithfully: A Dynamic View of Scripture

2 Timothy 3:16-17

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Indoor plumbing came to the US in the 1840s, but it didn’t become widely available until the 1880s. Up to this point, everyone used outhouses, and the idea of having a room *inside* *your house* where you relieve yourself sounded outrageous and gross. And it wasn’t just individual households that debated whether to move the outhouse inside but also the church. While some people were open to the idea of indoor plumbing, others thought it was unholy and indecent to go to the bathroom inside God’s house and used a literal reading of Deuteronomy 23:12-14 to argue their point:

Designate a place outside the camp where you can go to relieve yourself. As part of your equipment have something to dig with, and when you relieve yourself, dig a hole and cover up your excrement. For the Lord your God moves about in your camp to protect you and to deliver your enemies to you. Your camp must be holy, so that he will not see among you anything indecent and turn away from you.

Thankfully, as indoor plumbing became common in public places, people started reading this passage in its historical context, and now we don’t have to use outhouses on Sunday mornings![[1]](#endnote-2)

While this is a funny example of how a static reading of the Bible doesn’t always serve us well, there are others that have caused great harm.

In the 1840s through the 1860s many Christians in the south were staunchly opposed to idea of ending chattel slavery in America. They built an entire culture and way of life around this dehumanizing institution and could not imagine a world without it. Many pastors, leaders, and laity insisted on a literal reading of passages like Ephesians 6:5-8 to argue that slavery was not only acceptable but part of God’s design for the social order:

Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart.

Fortunately, with the transformation of American culture overtime, most Christians came to repudiate the evils of slavery and to see these passages, not as the literal and infallible words of God, but as part of the ancient culture in which they were written.

We also see how an overly simplistic reading of passages like 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 was used to harm women:

Women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is something they want to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.

For centuries (up to the present day) people have insisted that these are the infallible words of God and that women should not be pastors or leaders in the church. Thankfully, many Christian denominations, including the United Methodist Church, came to see these kinds of passages, not as divinely inspired prohibitions, but as part of the patriarchal culture of the ancient world, thereby opening the possibility of female ordination. Today, we have many women pastors who faithfully lead congregations in service to the mission of Jesus.

These examples show how our interpretation of the Bible changes through time. Throughout Christian history, various groups in the church have argued for a particular interpretation of a biblical passage, but after more prayer, reflection, discussion, discipleship, and ministry, sometimes through multiple generations, a more faithful reading is discerned. This new understanding often moves away from a static literalism and seeks to discern the spirit of the text and what it might mean for people today. When this happens there are usually people who disagree and say that those engaging in this kind of work are undermining the authority of scripture and corrupting authentic Christianity.

Much of the conflict centers around our scripture reading taken from 2 Timothy 3:16-17: “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that the person of God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.” A careful reading of these verses raises an important question. What exactly do we mean by “inspired”?

Some argue that divine inspiration points to some kind of divine dictation. The authors of the Bible simply wrote down what they heard God say, and what they recorded was preserved as the literal, infallible words of God. Consequently, when someone recites scripture, they are essentially quoting God. But this view of inspiration is fraught with problems.[[2]](#endnote-3)

Perhaps most importantly, the authors of scripture did not usually see themselves as passive secretaries taking audible dictation from God, and this is not how the leaders of the early church understood inspiration either. It is also not how our founder, John Wesley, talked about the authority of scripture. While he was a man of his time and did not have access to modern methods of biblical interpretation, Wesley acknowledged the humanity of the biblical authors and the importance of their own deliberation and participation in the writing process. He also understood the importance of interpreting scripture in context and drawing on the best scholarly principles of his day.[[3]](#endnote-4) Finally, most reasonable people today who love and study the Bible would be extremely reluctant to say that they are simply quoting God when reciting scripture. Rather, we understand that we are trying to figure out what specific passages meant to people in the ancient world and what they mean for us today, and we try to do this with some modicum of spiritual and intellectual humility.

So, what’s the alternative? If inspiration is not a kind of divine dictation, and the words of the Bible cannot simply be quoted as the literal, infallible words of God, then what makes the Bible special? This is an important question for those in the Wesleyan tradition. John Wesley himself taught that the Bible is the most basic authority for determining Christian faith and practice, and an essential part of United Methodist doctrine is that we are rooted in scripture. The Bible is both the source of our faith and the measure of our spiritual authenticity. However, instead of a static view that demands a literal reading of scripture across the board, we embrace a dynamic understanding of inspiration in which the Bible becomes the living Word of God as we engage it in power of the Holy Spirit and are transformed into the image of Christ.

When we say that the Bible is inspired by God, we are saying two things: (1) that God did something in the hearts and minds of the original authors, and (2) that God does something in *our* hearts and minds when we read it faithfully in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Considering the biblical authors, we believe that God chose certain men and women and certain communities to have unique experiences of God’s saving power. As they prayerfully wrestled with the implications of these experiences, they were inspired by God and guided by the Holy Spirit to see God and the world in radically new ways and to capture these revelations in stories, laws, hymns, wisdom sayings, gospels, letters, and apocalyptic visions. Through ongoing reflection, prayer, and worship (and, in most cases, a long history of oral tradition), God helped the people gain more clarity about the message God was trying to communicate. Eventually God inspired or prompted the authors to write these things down in such a way that future generations could have access to God’s revelation and experience the saving power mediated through it.

In addition, when we talk about divine inspiration, we are also describing something that God does in *our* hearts and minds as we prayerfully read it together with other Christians. The Greek word that is translated in 2 Timothy 3:16 as “inspired” is a compound word apparently invented by the Apostle Paul: “*theopneustos,*” which literally means “God breathed out*.”* So, a literal translation of this verse would be something like, “All scripture is God breathed out.”

Obviously, this phrase is metaphorical. God does not literally have a body with lungs, and therefore doesn’t literally breathe like we do. To associate breathing with God is to engage in anthropomorphism, which means to attribute human qualities to God so we can better understand what is inherently a mystery. Furthermore, as a metaphor, this phrase does not have a precise meaning; it is open to different interpretations. And when we try to interpret it, we run into a problem. The phrase does not appear anywhere else in the Bible. If others had used the same wording, we could compare usage, helping us get a better idea of what the author of 2 Timothy meant. But we don’t.

Given these challenges, it can be helpful to draw a connection between 2 Tim. 3:16 and Genesis 2:7 where it says that God *breathed* into the nostrils of the first human being, animating him to life. This helps us to see how the biblical idea of inspiration, which is connected to the metaphor of divine breath, is about God bringing something to life.[[4]](#endnote-5)

As we have already noted, we believe that God moved in the hearts and minds of the biblical authors, prompting them to record important stories in the life of God’s people. God breathed into their hearts and minds, bringing to life a desire to record what God was revealing. Likewise, when we read the Bible prayerfully with other Christians, God breaths into our hearts and minds, making the words of scripture come alive in us. In this way, God inspires us to be more like Jesus and transforms us from the inside out.

Connecting the inspiration of scripture with the renewing power of God’s grace is what seems to be most important to our founder John Wesley. Rather than focusing on exactly how God inspired the writers of scripture, he emphasized how God works through scripture to awaken us to our spiritual corruption and guide our spiritual transformation. When describing this transformation, he insisted that the Bible should be the “constant rule of all our tempers, all our words, and all our actions.”[[5]](#endnote-6)

Consequently, the more faithfully we read scripture, the more God transforms us into the image of Christ, and the more we are transformed into the image of Christ, the more faithfully we read scripture.

This is the true test of our faith, including how we understand the authority of the Bible: Does it make us more like Jesus? Does it more deeply reshape our hearts and minds according to the law of love? If it does, we will read with more wisdom, discernment, passion, humility, and openness. Instead of forcing our agenda on the Bible, trying to squeeze it for a single, infallible meaning, we can surrender our addiction to certainty and open our hearts to the work that God wants to do in us as we ponder scripture.

When was the last time you heard God speak through the Bible? How has God moved through your reading of scripture to make you more gracious, loving, and forgiving? How has meditating on scripture awakened you to the presence of the living God and rooted you more deeply in peace, love, and joy in the Holy Spirit? At the end of the day, it really doesn’t matter if we can nail down exactly how God inspired the writers of scripture or exactly how God inspires us today. If we are honest, there is more mystery here than we would like to admit. What is most important is how our reading of scripture is making us more like Jesus.

While there is no magic method that guarantees a faithful reading, there is an ancient spiritual practice that has helped Christians through the ages listen for the still small voice of God. The practice is called *lectio* *divina* and it unfolds in five simple steps.[[6]](#endnote-7) There is a handout in your bulletin that you can use to follow along.

First, select a passage of scripture on which to focus. There are many different reading plans and devotionals that can help, or you can simply pick a book of the Bible such as the Psalms or one of the four gospels. Second, read this passage very slowly, and when something strikes you as interesting, helpful, or challenging, stop reading and make a note of this observation. Third, believing that God may be trying to say something to you in this passage, begin to pray, asking God why this word, image, or verse is capturing your attention. Spend some time prayerfully reflecting on this until you make some connections. Sometimes it helps to journal or record your thoughts. Fourth, once you get an idea of what God might be trying to say to you, pray and ask God to show you how to apply this message in your everyday life. What will you do today having heard God speak to you? Finally, spend about five minutes in silent meditation. The goal of silence is to simply to be with God without distraction and let the message move from your head to your heart. Some people find it helpful to take the words they have heard from God and silently repeat them to the cadence of their breath, remembering that God can breathe on you in the process and resurrect you to new life.

What would it be like for you to use the handout and practice this form of meditation on scripture? Over time, it has been transformative for me, and I invite you to try it over the next several days in hopes that it will be transformative for you too. Amen.

***Lectio Divina***

***Handout for Read Faithfully by Mark Reynolds***

As you read scripture, what grabs your attention? What word, image, or verse speaks to your *heart*? Write this in the space below.

Close your eyes, and memorize the word, image or verse it in your heart.

Ask yourself: What is God trying to say to me? Reflect on this in personal and concrete ways to discover where you need insight, encouragement, correction, or change. Write your thoughts below.

Say a prayer, being honest with God about what you are feeling and thinking. What do you need to do in obedience to God? Write a concrete and specific application below.

Take some time today to close your eyes, take a deep breath, and clear your mind. Sit in stillness and silence with God. It may help to focus on your breathing. As distractions come, simply observe them without judgment, let them go, and return your focus to the cadence of your breath. The goal is to relax into the presence of God without an agenda. To simple *be* with God.

1. Adam Hamilton, *Half Truths: God Helps Those Who Help Themselves and Other Things the Bible Doesn’t Say* (Abingdon 2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. In addition to the examples given below, there are serious textual problems. First, it is difficult to say that the Bible is the immutable, infallible word of God when we do not have any original manuscripts of the Bible. Rather, we have multiple handwritten copies of parts of the Bible, many of which come to us in fragments. While these copies are generally close to one another in what they say, there are variants, places where the wording is different. When trying to compile the Bible in its original language, scholars must decide which variant is most likely what the biblical author intended. This requires them to make interpretive decisions that may prove mistaken later down the road if we find more writings. This means that the interpretive decisions of scholars are *built into* the Bible as it comes to us from its original language. Second, someone must interpret the Hebrew of the Old Testament and the Greek of the New Testament into English, which also requires interpretation. Like many English words, Hebrew and Greek words can have different meanings depending on context, and when scholars try to translate passages, they often disagree on what word best communicates the intent of the author. This is why we have more than 100 translations of the Bible. So, when we consider the decisions that scholars make about variants in the original language and the decisions they make when translating into English, we see that the Bible is made possible not only by the interpretations of the biblical writers but also of many different scholars who have worked for decades to compile the version you hold in your hand today. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Kingswood 1994) 36-40. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. See Adam Hamilton, *Making Sense of the Bible* (HarperOne; reprinted edition 2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. See Wesley’s sermon, “Dives and Lazarus” (quoted in Maddox, *Responsible Grace*). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. iii For more information, see Mark Reynolds, “[Shaped By Scripture: Two Different Ways of Reading the Bible](https://revmarkreynolds.com/2015/06/29/shaped-by-scripture-two-different-ways-of-reading-the-bible/),” [www.revmarkreynolds.com](http://www.revmarkreynolds.com), June 29, 2015: <https://revmarkreynolds.com/2015/06/29/shaped-by-scripture-two-different-ways-of-reading-the-bible/>. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)