

# An Approach To Understanding Reality

*How do we determine what is real about Jesus, life, the universe and everything, in order to pursue it passionately?*

We all have different views of life and different perspectives, which ultimately result in us landing on certain understandings and convictions about what is real and true. No matter how convinced we are that our way is the right way, or that our view of God is the most accurate, we have certain lenses through which we look at the world and through which we build a picture of reality.

As followers of Jesus we place high value on the Hebrew and Christian scriptures—what we now call the Old and New Testaments in the Bible. We cherish the Bible and believe that God speaks to us in unique ways through it. In all we say and do, we seek to be instructed by the rich resources given us in the Bible: stories, poetry, letters, histories and more.

Another lens we look through is our cultural traditions. Our upbringing, family life and religious background significantly influence how we see the world. Likewise what we have experienced in life firsthand for ourselves makes a significant impact and creates another lens. If we are used to having a lot of control over outcomes in our life we will most likely have a different view of the universe than if we were very poor or had little control over circumstances. Not only that, our rational thought plays a big part. We often deem something to be untrue if it does not “make sense.” Rather than seeing these “lenses” as negative, we see them as a normal and healthy part of the human experience. But we also recognize that it can be helpful to be aware of them so that we can both understand how they may have played a role in determining our own unique view of reality, and also so that we can apply them in creating a balanced view of what we believe to be true.

## The Wesleyan Quadrilateral

We are not alone in this practice of viewing reality; John Wesley took a similar approach. Wesley was an Anglican priest in 18th century England who experienced significant spiritual renewal and eventually founded the Methodist movement, which became an important denomination throughout the world and especially in North America. Wesley described a four-fold approach to understanding reality, which became termed the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. Wesley maintained that, as followers of Jesus, we look through four important lenses to determine what is real and true: (1) Scripture, (2) Tradition, (3) Experience, and (4) Reason.

At Cedar Ridge, we have not set out to try to “follow” the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, but we have found it to be a helpful way to describe how we see truth and reality. We are encouraged to know that we are not alone in taking an approach like this. Let’s look at each element of the quadrilateral.

### 1. Scripture

As stated earlier, we cherish the Bible. Scripture has a huge, central role in our spirituality and the way we follow Jesus. Through scripture, we can form an understanding of God as we engage with its deep teaching, history and poetry. Through scripture, we encounter Jesus’ life and teaching and we center our spiritual thinking and practice around it. However, even though scripture is very central for us, we do not take a literal, fundamentalist approach. We recognize it as very ancient writing and respect it so much that we take great care in its interpretation and application.

But the Bible does not replace Jesus as the center of our faith. We are followers of Jesus and we see Jesus as the center of scripture. Jesus is the Word of God, and no writing could ever replace that. We don't worship the Bible or our own interpretations of it. We all view the Bible through various lenses and perspectives to determine our own interpretation. That's why there have been so many different views about scripture through the ages. Rather than considering this a problem, we view it as part of the richness of the Bible. In fact, it seems clear that we all bring the other "lenses" of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral to bear on our interpretation and handling of the Bible.

## 2. Tradition

Wesley placed great value on the traditions of the church, and the truths, practices and understandings that have been passed down through the generations. Cedar Ridge is a multi-denominational church that values greatly the church traditions of the past 2000 years. We can view tradition in 3 ways:

- a) **Historical tradition:** Ever since the time of Jesus, spiritual understanding has been passed on through relationships. This is the way Jesus operated. He didn't write a book to capture the truth in his message; he gathered people and lived it out through relationships. The apostles "caught" this message and passed it on through their relationships and influences, those they influenced passed it on, and so on. Over the early centuries, some of this understanding about the way of Jesus was written down. Some of it became scripture and was included in the Biblical canon. Some writings did not become part of the Bible, but have been preserved—such as writings by the "Early Church Fathers" (Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, Irenaeus of Lyons, et al). Much was not written down, but passed on in the traditions of the church. Over time, different churches emphasized different ways of expressing this understanding—and hence the diversity of expression we have today. That is why we look back throughout church history and embrace ancient traditions and practices that have been tried and tested over time to aid us in our spiritual understanding and development. In this way we have a family connection, generation by generation, all the way back to Jesus. That is an incredible thing!
- b) **Cultural tradition:** Whether we have a religious background or not, we have all been hugely influenced by the cultural milieu in which we grew up and now live. In fact, to a large extent, we are products of our culture, and it has a huge impact on how we see life. Whether you call the same person a freedom fighter or a terrorist is largely dependent on where you live and how that fight affects you. Someone born and bred in Baltimore, Maryland will have a very different view of life to someone born in an Amazonian tribe. If you are a slave in 18th century United States the story of the Exodus will have a sharply different meaning than for a 21st century Sunday school student in the white middle class suburbs of Chicago. Women will generally have a different understanding of Mary (the mother of Jesus) than men.
- c) **Local tradition:** Not only do the larger forces of history and culture influence our perception of reality, but so do the more specific ones of our local situation. The fact that we have certain friends, that we belong to a certain church community, that we read certain books and listen to certain podcasts, or radio or TV shows, all influence how we see life. All of us are where we are today (including spiritually) because of relationships with other people who have helped, developed and supported us. Each of us can point to at least one person in our lives who helped pass on the reality of Jesus to us.

When we consider all these forms of tradition (historical, cultural and local) we endeavor to respond in two ways. First, we want to celebrate them and acknowledge how enriched we are by them. Part of this is a realization that we do not have a single thought or understanding in isolation; all of our greatest thoughts about God, all of our most profound understandings and experiences have been influenced by the presence of others in our lives. Moreover, in being aware of this connection to others, we are led away from independent thinking and begin to value the thinking of others. We might have a particular view about spiritual truth, but we should always weigh that against scripture and tradition—the historic traditions of the church and also the local traditions of our relationships. If our understanding seems to differ with ancient traditions we should be careful. That does not mean we are wrong, it does not mean we shouldn't challenge anything. Many of the great spiritual reformers and leaders throughout history have challenged traditional belief. Jesus himself challenged the religious establishment of his day, but remained deeply connected to and respectful of its tradition, and so too we ought to be respectful and careful. Likewise, the opinion of those around us matters and we should not disregard it. This is the safeguard of community. We don't have to all agree, but through respect and listening to one another, our understanding and experience of reality can be enriched and deepened. If those around me have a different opinion to me, that ought to have some impact on me, and challenge my own understandings—and this is particularly true when it comes to interpreting scripture.

Our second response to tradition ought to be one of careful awareness. Not all tradition is good (and clearly the church has developed some particularly harmful ones throughout the ages) and becoming more aware of how we have been influenced can help us to unravel some of the confused, unhelpful or destructive ways we view life and spirituality as religious people.

### 3. Experience

Wesley also maintained that faith has to be practical. It has to work in the real world. We too value the human experience. We bring our own experience to bear on what we believe to be true. For example, the reason most of us feel comfortable walking or driving across a bridge is not necessarily because we have a deep understanding of the engineering of the bridge, but because we have done it time and time again and found it to be reliable. We've also seen others do it (perhaps as children) and learned from their experience.

That doesn't mean our belief cannot contradict our experience—that's the challenge of transformation. In one sense Jesus came to challenge our experience of life, but he also helps us make sense of our experience. Let's think for a moment about issues of social justice. On the one hand, Jesus validated the experience of injustice that many groups experienced (slaves, lepers, ethnic groups, women, etc.). He helped his followers reinterpret scripture and tradition in light of that experience. Scripture and tradition were being used as "truth" by the religious establishment (such as the Pharisees) to justify the unfair way some people were being treated. People experienced this as fundamentally wrong but their adherence to a certain interpretation of scripture and tradition overrode this experience.

But Jesus took that experience, validated it, and from that basis helped people to see scripture and tradition in a different light. A great example of this is found in Matthew 9:

*As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow Me," he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him. While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your Teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?" On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and*

*learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."*

Matthew 9:9-13 (New International Version)

Jesus' religious tradition was that it is wrong to eat with sinners and unclean people like tax collectors. But Jesus validates the injustice of this and reinterprets scripture (he quotes the Hebrew prophet Hosea 6:6) in a new light.

But that's not all. Jesus also taught us that the deeper, most real and fulfilling aspects of life are experienced in giving up one's power, control, wealth, and right to success. In that sense, he challenges our experience that being an insider, being popular, powerful and influential are important. From Matthew again:

*"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."*

Matthew 6:19-21 (New International Version)

Then Jesus said to his disciples:

*"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?"*

Matthew 16:24-26 (New International Version)

In these instances Jesus (through the scriptures) challenges our experience.

Another way in which experience is important spiritually is in our devotion to Jesus in the here and now. We are not just following the teachings of Jesus or his example. We believe Jesus is actually present to us now through the Holy Spirit. We can encounter God through a direct present relationship, not just through the Bible or tradition.

#### **4. Reason**

Wesley emphasized that faith should engage our whole being, including our mind. That is not to say that we should think we can understand everything. Mystery is an important part of our understanding of God, and we do not espouse a purely rational approach to reality. But we all apply reason in determining what we believe to be true, and that is not necessarily a bad thing. Some people have used scripture and tradition to explain some very bizarre things: like slavery and racism for example. But it just doesn't make sense that some people are superior to others based on the color of their skin and our reason has caused us to challenge that reality. In the 16th century, when Copernicus first postulated that the Earth was not the center of the universe but rather revolved around the sun, this was against the established church's interpretation of scripture and tradition. To be fair, it also went against most people's experience because we see the sun, moon and stars apparently moving around us and we don't have any sense that we are moving at 60,000 m.p.h. around the sun. The church opposed this theory, but Copernicus held his ground because of his reasoning based on the facts he observed. Later, in the 17th century, when Galileo championed Copernicus's theory, church opposition became strong

and violent. But eventually reason prevailed, and it's hard to imagine that any one of us would espouse that the sun revolves around the Earth, nor would we equate any sense of spirituality with holding to that notion.

In the same way we might apply reason to various aspects of belief. It doesn't seem to stand to reason to persecute or exclude certain groups of people. When the scripture says:

*I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent.*

1 Timothy 2:12 (New International Version)

this just doesn't seem reasonable. We bring other factors to bear on this, such as other parts of scripture, the tradition of our own community, and our own experiences, and we use reason to work through it all. This is not an attempt to create our own truth, nor to avoid the challenge of scripture, but rather an honest endeavor to truly understand.

## **Our Approach to Scripture**

The Bible is so important to us and has been so important throughout church history that it merits taking a slightly more in-depth look at how we approach it at Cedar Ridge. The following points summarize our approach and the place that scripture holds in our community.

### **1. We deeply cherish the Bible**

We hold the Bible to be real, relevant and true. Scripture plays a huge, vital role in our spirituality and the way we follow Jesus. Through scripture we can deepen our understanding of God as we engage with its teaching, history and poetry.

### **2. We approach the Bible with humility**

We recognize that the scriptures are several millennia old, written in ancient languages and in totally different cultures to ours. The Bible has multiple authors, all kinds of genres of literature, and is often not easy to understand. We approach it carefully, both in interpretation and application, recognizing that we may not always fully understand either. As a practice, we don't expect to be able to just open it, pick out a few verses and understand immediately what it means. We need a lot of help to understand—from historic traditions, from others we respect, and most of all from the Holy Spirit. This is a process, and we patiently give it time by making a practice of reading scripture and allowing it to challenge us.

### **3. We believe the Bible to be inspired by God**

Our conviction is that the scriptures are inspired by God, both the Hebrew (Old Testament) and the Christians ones (New Testament). They contain a reliable, coherent, overarching narrative of the love of God for the world, and a distinct challenge to receive and share that love as a way of life. They contain profound and timeless wisdom and truth, and we treasure them as such. But we recognize that these scriptures did not just fall out of the sky! We don't view inspiration as meaning God just handed them over to us directly and already written. In that sense, we have a very different approach to scripture than, say, the Islamic tradition, which teaches that the Islamic Scriptures (the Qur'an) were dictated directly to the Prophet Mohammed while he was in a trance-like state by the angel Gabriel and he recited these (Qur'an means "recital") to be written down. The Christian approach to scripture (to which we adhere) is that the creation of the Bible was a much more complex and subjective process involving people, their thoughts, opinions, strengths and weaknesses. So for us, the inspiration of scripture is a

dynamic process that requires us to engage with the Spirit of God every time we read. We don't just take a static, literal approach, but a thoughtful, contextual and even, at times, critical one as we constantly seek the inspired voice of God in scripture.

#### **4. The Bible is a human book**

The beauty and majesty of the Bible is that it was, through God's inspiration, written by normal limited human beings, with their human grasp of language, and their human imagination and understandings. It was edited by humans; manuscripts were copied by humans and passed from generation to generation. It has been protected by humans over centuries, and both translated and interpreted by humans. This does not take away from its splendor or special place. Rather it takes on greater beauty in its stories, poetry, history and teaching. It is also a literary wonder; a human one, in which we can see ourselves. All this means that we do not equate scripture with the direct voice of God. Rather, it is in reading scripture that we can hear God's voice.

This may seem a subtle distinction, but if we equate scripture to God's voice then we fail to recognize the human vessel through which it has come, and we could use scripture in unhelpful and oppressive ways. The fact that it was written through humans means that it has the human elements of time, culture, language and social setting. We recognize that at times the Bible seems prejudiced, sexist and even violent in ways that do not seem congruent with the way of Jesus. Rather than blame this on a prejudiced, sexist, violent God, we see the limits of humanity in this. That is why we approach scripture with care, seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit to truly hear God's voice.

#### **5. The Bible is part of the community of God**

We cannot see the Bible as independent from the Christian (or Jewish) tradition. It is a product of our story and of our community over centuries. As followers of Jesus, we have accepted the Hebrew scriptures, passed onto us by the historic Jewish community, and we have the Christian scriptures (New Testament) today because of difficult decisions made by the Christian community centuries ago. In fact different Christian traditions have different views of what should be included in the Bible, i.e., different views about whether certain writings are inspired by God or not. Most of these writings are related to the Hebrew scriptures and are known as the Apocrypha. Books like 1st and 2nd Esdras and the Prayer of Manasses, have been included by the Roman Catholic tradition but rejected by Protestants. The Eastern and Slavonic Orthodox traditions have tended to include them as scripture but choose different combinations of writings to the Roman tradition.

Most of the content in the Christian scriptures was written in the 1st century and circulated widely among the early church in the 2nd century. Writings at the time included those of the apostles and early church fathers that did not make it into the final canon of the New Testament, and in the 3rd century there was debate about which writings were inspired by God. By the end of the 4th century, a series of councils of early church leaders (such as the Council of Hippo in 393 and the Council of Carthage in 397) resulted in the 27 books of the New Testament becoming canon. Certain books were left out, such as the Gnostic writings; and other books have been found since, such as the Gospel of Judas.

All these decisions about what is canon and what is not were made by human beings who were seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In other words, the reason we say the Bible is inspired by God is because the community of Christ, through a careful process over several centuries, deemed that it was inspired. This was not done randomly; writings were evaluated on 3 main criteria:

- Written by apostles or close associates (i.e., authority given by Christ)

- Content is in accordance with teachings of all other books in the New Testament (i.e., intrinsic consistency)
- Had been used by the churches since written, and had proven their value in life and worship

Interestingly, it's not hard to see how tradition, reason and experience (the other 3 elements of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral) were lenses through which the early church looked in determining inspiration. We do the same today in interpreting the Bible.

Whatever way we look at it, the Bible we love and cherish today came to us through a very human community process. It's not hard to see how that process itself could be inspired by God, but that action was carried out through human beings like us. This does not detract from scripture for us, but rather roots scripture in our historic tradition and in our spiritual community. It makes us value it even more, as we recognize the way God has chosen to involve human beings in integral ways in creating, assembling and preserving scripture. We see ourselves as intrinsically interwoven into the fabric of scripture, and we see interpreting scripture as a community enterprise, where we don't just make it mean what we want it to mean, but we listen to other parts of the community.

### **6. We take a narrative approach to the Bible**

We don't see the Bible as primarily a rulebook, statement of doctrine, textbook, or operations manual. Rather we see it as a narrative; the story of God's incredible, redeeming love for humanity. All kinds of different genres of literature are used to tell this story (history, poetry, prophecy, apocalyptic, gospel, letters, etc.) all of which require different approaches and different means of interpretation, but all of which are ultimately interpreted in the light of this theme of love and redemption.

### **7. We see Jesus as the center of the Bible**

Jesus is the center-point of this story and is the ultimate authority for us in how we interpret scripture. This is an important issue because often the Bible is seen as the ultimate authority, and Christ is only someone we see through the Bible. At Cedar Ridge, as followers of Jesus we see Jesus as the ultimate truth and authority and the Bible is something that we see through and in light of Jesus. The Bible itself ascribes ultimate authority to Jesus:

*Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."*

Matthew 28:18-20 (New International Version)

*Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

Philippians 2:9-11 (New International Version)

Jesus himself encouraged us to see him as giving ultimate meaning to the scriptures. Jesus is what causes the story of scripture to make sense. Here's what he said to the Pharisees:

*You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.*

John 5:39-40 (New International Version)

Interestingly in this last passage Jesus seems to be cautioning us about thinking we can obtain “life eternal” (the deep, real, true life of God) from scripture. That can only come from Jesus himself. John seems to go even further by saying Jesus is the Word of God:

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The Light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.*

*The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

John 1:1-5 & 14 (New International Version)

## **8. We read the Bible as a practice**

We see reading the Bible as a vital part of our spiritual practice and an essential part of our transformation. We read it as a story of God’s love, bearing in mind the historical setting, and we consider ourselves an integral part of this ongoing story. We read with the whole context in mind, looking at larger sections as a whole, rather than picking a verse here and there, to ensure that we catch the larger flow as well as the specifics. We study the Bible—not just academically or scientifically, but seeking to interact with the Spirit of Christ: we look for Jesus to be revealed. We do this through various traditional practices such as *Lectio Divina* (“divine reading” where we read slowly, meditate on and listen to God speaking through the text) and *Ignatian* reading (using our imaginations to put ourselves in the story), Bible study, as well as devotionally and meditatively.

We place particular emphasis on the gospels because they teach us so much about Jesus, and through them we hear Jesus’ own words. The rest of the New Testament is the story of the early community of followers living out the teachings of Jesus, and commentary on the teachings and way of Jesus. The Old Testament is the history and context that gives so much more meaning and depth to our understanding of Jesus. We take those parts very seriously, but we are careful to interpret for instance Paul’s writings and the Hebrew Law and prophets in the light of Jesus. We don’t see the Bible as a black and white list of dos and don’ts but a beautiful love story inspired by God through which we encounter the living Christ. What is so remarkable is that in all Jesus’ efforts to share his love and life with the world, he chose not to write a book. It seems that greater than his desire to give us the written word was his desire to give us the Living Word... Jesus himself.