Herein lies the fundamental question: are the Scriptures reliable?

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In June, I had the privilege of representing the Australian Church at the International Conference of the Wesleyan Church and at the North American General Conference. These were both excellent events, highlighting the rich international flavour of the Wesleyan Church internationally. These meetings held a particular historic significance; through decisions made at these conferences, the international delegates will, in future, have their representation at the International Conference and no longer at the North American General Conference. This is a big change for us all, but it is indicative of the exciting move toward internationalisation that is transforming our church. The next International Conference is scheduled to be held in Antigua, the Caribbean in 2012. Why not plan to be there!

Discussion at these conferences was dominated by the singular theme that Wesleyans must be careful not to slide into some form of liberal excess such as we see overtaking so many churches around the globe. I hear the same concern at home in the South Pacific, especially as we discuss our membership standards. We needn't fear though; the Spirit of God is our power, working through the Word of God. In the last edition of the Australian Wesleyan I wrote on the priority of prayer in spiritual awakening. In this edition I am seeking to establish the second great pillar of spiritual awakening; the inspired Scriptures which make up the 66 books of the Bible. The Bible! It is the Sword of the Spirit and the Power of God for spiritual awakening in Australia.

It is interesting to track how attitudes toward the Bible have shifted since the 16th century Reformation. Martin Luther and others of the era reaffirmed the authority of the Bible as God's Word to the Church and to a lost world. However, it was through the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) that the modern study of hermeneutics (Bible study) was born in the Protestant Church. Schleiermacher and his immediate followers, Dilhey and Husserl, sought to capture the truths of the text by exposing the author's original intent. A significant shift in theory came through the later work of Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) who placed emphasis upon what the text meant to the modern reader, rather than to the original author. This perspective was developed in the work of teachers like Ricoeur and Gadamar.

For the Wesleyan who believes in the Holy Spirit's inspiration of the Bible, both perspectives are worthy. We understand that the original author wrote under the inspiration of the Spirit producing a manuscript flavoured by his/her personality but kept free from error by the Spirit. However, we also believe that the same Spirit guides the reader of the Scriptures today, revealing God's truth and making personal application in the life of the disciple.

Unfortunately, the next development in the study of hermeneutics was not so amenable to an evangelical viewpoint. Scholars now turned to the "methodological tools of suspicion and criticism"[i] when examining the Bible, and the foundations of inspiration came under attack. This philosophy of suspicion has been attributed to the influence of Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud.[ii] Under this approach the text was considered to be infiltrated by external ideologies, such as capitalism, cultural norms or the unconscious mind. The work of hermeneutics was now to diagnose the pathology that exists in all texts, thereby revealing the kernel of inspired text. This philosophical change marked a significant shift in hermeneutic studies with the slide away from belief in the fundamental integrity of the Bible.

The philosophy of suspicion was greatly advanced by the application of scientific study. Academic disciplines were applied to the Scriptures to determine authorship and authenticity, separating the inspired sections from those sections supposedly imposed by human authors. At the same time, the Bible was held up against scientific discoveries to determine which historic and scientific passages

of the Bible were credible. Underlying these studies was the assumption that science had proven to be reliable while the Scriptures had proven to be questionable. Of course, questioning parts of the Bible led to an uncertain view of the entire Bible. After all, who decides which parts are accurate and which parts are not? The progression from suspicion to Liberal Theology was inevitable.

Herein lies the fundamental question for those who study the Bible: are the Scriptures reliable, or are the sciences reliable? This does not mean that the Bible is usually in conflict with science or that science is usually wrong. In fact, science and the Bible often agree and the ancient Scriptures are proven to be a rich source of sociological and archaeological insight. However, when there is disparity, our culture has been taught that science is unquestionable, despite the record that science has of regularly revising its theories. The claims of the Bible, on the other hand, remain constant. The irony is that it requires an act of considerable faith to put such confidence in science.

The tension between the Bible and science is highlighted in matters that involve spiritual or miraculous activity. Science cannot explore these phenomena, and prefers to ascribe scientific explanations. Furthermore, there is no place for moral absolutes in a scientific study, so lifestyle decisions are ultimately left to individual opinion. Generally those who follow the view of "suspicion" settle for a position somewhere along the continuum between belief and unbelief, but the damage is already done; the Bible has been stripped of its moral certainty and is, at best, suggestive rather than authoritative.

The Wesleyan Methodist Church does not approach the Bible with suspicion! We are, unashamedly, evangelical. The Handbook of the Wesleyan Methodist Church states plainly that the 66 books of the Bible are "the inspired and infallibly written Word of God, fully inerrant in their original manuscripts and superior to all human authority." In saying this, we assert that the original manuscripts were never a mixture of Spirit-inspired text and human corruption. In their original form, they were without any error, even in matters of science and history. Furthermore, the Handbook goes on to assert that the Bible has been "transmitted to the present without corruption of any essential doctrine."[iii] This allows that some non-essential mistakes may have crept into the text today, but nothing of doctrinal significance. The outcome is that, when you open your Bible in the 21st century, you can trust that you are hearing from God Himself. Science cannot make that claim.
For it is written:
"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate."
Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age?
Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?[iv]

Having established the trustworthiness of the Bible, we must quickly add that we have not addressed the huge issue of interpretation. Learned, godly people have arrived at widely divergent conclusions after reading the same Bible text. So, while we assert the infallibility of the Scriptures, we approach these same Scriptures with a great deal of humility and we allow believers to discover the Spirit's leading for their own lives. The Bible is arguably the greatest miracle of our age, and the Spirit of God still speaks through it when we prayerfully read.

To reiterate the question of the last edition; are you praying regularly? Now add the next question; are you reading your Bible? You will hear God's voice when you combine these two essentials of spiritual awakening.

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[i] Anthony C. Thiselton, 1992. *New Horizons in Hermeneutics.* London: Harper Collins. p. 5.
[ii] F.P.A. Demeterio III, 2001. Introduction to Hermeneutics, *Diwatao* http:www.geocities.com/philodept/diwatao/introduction_to_hermeneutics.htm
[iii] The Handbook of the Wesleyan Methodist Church of Australia, 2005. Australia: Wesleyan Methodist Church. paragraph 107.
[iv] Romans 1:19-20 NIV