



Lectio divina – a Methodist reflection

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Lectio divina is a term used particularly in the Catholic and Orthodox traditions to refer to the spiritual or devotional reading of the Bible. Methodists have practised lectio divina without calling it that. This paper addresses the challenge of sustaining this vital Christian discipline in our often uncongenial contemporary world. The paper explores Wesley's own guidance on the matter, and goes on to explore how questions and difficulties raised by recent biblical scholarship can be faced, worked through and, where appropriate, 'baptised' into a more devotional approach to Scripture. Paul Ricoeur's concept of 'a second naivety' – coming back to Scripture with a deepened simplicity which is no longer simplistic – can be helpful in this task.

DEVOTIONAL READING • BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP • WESLEY'S TEACHING •
SUSPICION • SEARCH • PAUL RICOEUR • MEDITATE • CONTEMPLATION

Many Christians today live their lives without reading the Bible regularly. Many do not have the opportunity; many more find devotional reading of the Bible difficult. Even if, in these busy days, people manage to make time for it, there is much in the Bible which is obscure, not obviously relevant and even offensive. Consequently, 'what is neglected is reading the Bible formatively, reading in order to live'.¹

In this short paper I consider how we may refresh our Bible reading and our praying by, first, relating Wesley's teaching about reading Scripture to older traditions about *lectio divina* – the spiritual reading of Scripture – and, second, reflecting on the practice of *lectio divina* in the context of the contemporary ecumenical movement and of biblical scholarship.

Lectio divina – an Introductory definition

Enzo Bianchi, founder of an ecumenical monastic community in Italy and now a confidant of Pope Francis, writes:

Lectio divina, which finds its roots in the Jewish tradition of Bible reading and the patristic hermeneutical legacy, is the art of making the transition from a biblical text to our life ... The four steps of *lectio divina* – *lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio*, *contemplatio*² – represent the progressive deepening of our understanding of the biblical text. Our act of reading becomes an encounter with the living Lord.³

Bianchi goes on to define *contemplatio* as follows:

[It] refers not to mystical or ecstatic experiences but to a level of communication inexpressible in words: silence, tears, the presence of the lover to the beloved, discernment of the Lord's unutterable presence.

He further adds – in words reminiscent of Wesleyan teaching – that '*contemplatio* also indicates the work accomplished in us by the Spirit ... in a word, love that overflows'.

It hardly needs to be said that Methodists from the time of Wesley onwards have practised *lectio divina* without calling it that. They have practised at least three of the essentials – reading, meditating and praying – as part of their daily

Christian discipline. (Contemplation, by its very nature, is more difficult to assess, and I return to this later on.)

Today the picture is more fragmented and patchy. Modern pressures have conspired to make more difficult the discipline of reading Scripture and praying – including the silence of contemplation. But, first, we need to examine Wesley's own legacy in this matter.

Wesleyan foundations

'All inspired scripture has its use for teaching the truth and refuting error, or for reformation of manners and discipline in right living' (2 Timothy 3:16, REB translation). 'Scripture' here probably means, as Wesley recognised, those writings we call 'the Old Testament'.⁴ However, from the Church Fathers onwards, it was taken to apply to the whole Bible, and for them, as a recent study notes, 'the most important term in this passage is *ophelimos*, which means "profitable" or "useful"'.⁵ So this much-discussed and variously translated text refers not so much to the authority of 'Scripture', but to its purpose.

In his *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*, John Wesley, aware – as we have just noted – that the writer is probably referring to the Old Testament, reasons that, if the Old Testament alone had been able to make 'Timothy' 'wise unto salvation', 'how much are the Old and New Testaments together able, in God's hand, to make us more abundantly wise unto salvation'. He has this to say about the phrase 'inspired of God': 'The Spirit of God not only inspired those who wrote it, but continually inspires, supernaturally assists those that read it with earnest prayer.'⁶

The need for the help of the Spirit in reading the Bible is a recurring theme in the writings of the Wesley brothers. John, in his Preface to 'Notes to the Old Testament', observes that 'Scripture can only be understood through the same Spirit whereby it was given'⁷. Charles, in his hymns, makes the same point. For example:

Come Holy Ghost, our hearts inspire,
Let us thine influence prove ...
Unlock the truth, thyself the key,
Unseal the sacred book.

Another hymn begins with a similar prayer:

Come, divine Interpreter,
Bring us eyes thy book to read ...

In his 'Notes on the Old Testament', John Wesley is characteristically down to earth in his advice on how to read the Scriptures 'most effectively'. The six points he goes on to make here represent, in effect, his method for *lectio divina*. He begins with a caustic challenge: 'It is no part of my design to save either learned or unlearned men from the trouble of thinking. On the contrary, my intention is to make them think.' He goes on: 'This is the way to understand the things of God: "meditate thereon day and night".'⁸

So what were Wesley's six guidelines? First, set aside a little time morning and evening, if possible, and read – again, if possible – a chapter each from Old and New Testaments. Next, the reader's purpose is important: 'read ... with a single eye to know the whole will of God, and a fixed resolution to do it'. To do this, the reader must have 'a constant eye to the analogy of faith' and its 'fundamental doctrines'. In other words, be rooted in Christian tradition and experience.⁹

Wesley's two remaining guidelines refer to prayer: 'serious and earnest prayer should be constantly used before we consult the oracles of God'. The reading of Scripture should also end with prayer, 'that what we read may be written in our hearts'. (I note again the similarity with the earlier definition of *contemplatio* given by Enzo Bianchi.) Finally, '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 heart and lives.'

Christians of other traditions familiar with the practice of *lectio divina* would recognise a spiritual affinity with the method of reading Scripture which Wesley advocates here. A hymn of Charles Wesley offers a valuable cameo of early Methodist practice:

'When quiet in my house I sit,
Thy Book be my companion still ...
And search the oracles divine,
Till every heartfelt word be mine.

The same teaching occurs in John Wesley's sermon 'The Means of Grace'. Wesley lists, first, prayer, 'whether in secret or with the great congregation; searching the Scriptures, which implies reading, hearing and meditating thereon and receiving the Lord's Supper'. So the regular practice of *lectio divina* – though not known as such as far as I am aware – was common among Methodists from the beginning. It was an individual and corporate discipline, certainly in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The Methodist class meetings, together with the class (ie, membership) ticket (obligations of membership printed on the back), reinforced this personal discipline.

In the course of the nineteenth century, the class meeting in the British Methodist Church declined, and, with that decline, it is likely that Methodists met together less frequently for shared Bible study. Before I turn to the contemporary scene, however, there are two important words to linger over: 'search' and 'meditate'. The phrase 'search the Scriptures' was clearly important to both the Wesley brothers. John returns to its meaning later in his sermon 'The Means of Grace'. The expression, as Wesley notes, comes from John 5:39, referring to Jewish practice. (The Hebrew equivalent for the Greek *eraunate* here was a technical term in Rabbinic Judaism for the study of Scripture.) Wesley also notes a similar expression in Acts, used of the Bereans (17:11–12), repeating his earlier explanation of 'searching' as 'reading, hearing and meditating'.¹⁰

Wesley's *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* sheds some light on the context in which he offered his teaching about the reading of Scripture. He has stern words for the kind of Christian 'enthusiasm' which had led some to abandon searching the Scriptures, because they say 'God writes all the Scriptures on my heart. Therefore, I have no need to read it.'¹¹ This context of theological controversy in the eighteenth century – comparable with the combative context of John 5 – may help to explain Wesley's fondness for the phrase 'search the Scriptures'. But what did Wesley mean by the word 'meditate'?

It is difficult, naturally, to discern the nature of Wesley's inner spiritual life. Henry Rack, author of perhaps the finest biography of Wesley in recent decades, has some interesting observations. After noting the more outwardly discernible characteristics, in particular Wesley's meticulous, if not obsessive, concern with the right use of time, regular times set aside for prayer and detailed self-examinations, Rack comments: 'Most elusive of all is Wesley's inner life ... His outward practice is obvious enough ... There is every reason to suppose that, as the diaries ... show, he maintained a routine of prayer and meditation three

or four times a day.' What is most striking is the testimony, quoted by Rack, of a contemporary: 'He thought prayer to be more his business than anything else; and I have seen him come out of his closet with a serenity of countenance that was next to shining.'¹²

The quality of Wesley's prayer life can hardly be doubted. Bianchi would have recognised in Wesley one who practised *contemplatio*. It is possible, however, that this word, whether in Latin or English, is a word that Wesley shied away from. (Others far more conversant than I with the writings of Wesley may be able to tell us.) The lifelong stamp of early influences on Wesley is clear. But were there gaps in his reading, if not his experience?

From recent writers like Francis de Sales, Jeremy Taylor and William Law, Wesley drew his discipline of prayer, his rigorous use of time and, above all, the centrality of love in Christian faith and practice. Traces of Law's influence, for example, can be clearly seen. Law's chapter on prayer places great emphasis on rising early, rather than sleeping 'immoderately'. Perhaps Law's comment on the first Christians particularly appealed to Wesley; 'When you look into the writings and lives of the first Christians ... all is reality, life *and action*' (my italics).¹³

Yet we may wonder about the absence of other influences on Wesley. Gordon Wakefield notes the breadth of the 50 volumes of Wesley's *Christian Library*, but goes on to say: 'The omissions are important: no medieval mystics, no Carmelites, no great reformers, no St Anthony, St Augustine, St Anselm, St Bernard, St Thomas (except indirectly through the Puritans)'. Wakefield even ventures a criticism of Wesley: perhaps the gaps are due to 'a combination of ignorance' and 'unscholarly haste', busy man that he was. All of this 'may have bequeathed to Methodist theology a certain lack of discrimination'.¹⁴

So I end this section with an observation and a question. It is clear that Wesley practised and urged his followers to practise what earlier Christian tradition called *lectio divina*: reading, praying and meditating upon the Scriptures. It may be that, for him, 'meditation' naturally led to 'contemplation'; the testimony to his 'shining countenance' suggests that it did. My question is whether he commended 'contemplation' to his followers. Perhaps its associations with enclosed religious orders, and his fear of 'quietism', led him to avoid the word. What is more certain – and more urgent – is our need today to rediscover the practice of contemplation. But, first, we must examine the place in all this of modern biblical scholarship: its challenge and its contribution.

Lectio divina and biblical scholarship

Many Methodists continue to read the Bible regularly at home, and many value meeting with their fellow Christians for shared Bible study. More would do so, if there were the opportunity. But some have reservations about Bible study groups – for many reasons. Forty years ago, I started a house group in a church of which I had pastoral charge. The question arose of whether it would be a Bible study group. As I recall, about half the congregation said they would come if it was, and the other half said that, if it was, they wouldn't.

Many influences and changes in the so-called 'developed' world have made the Bible far less familiar to Methodist congregations than it once was. In Britain, I note the decline and near disappearance of a second Sunday service, changing patterns of worship, a growing neglect of readings from the Old Testament and epistles and the decline of biblical preaching. Cutbacks in the time ordinands spend in training have not helped. All of this – and, not least, the pace and busyness of modern life – has contributed to a steep decline in biblical literacy in the churches.

A crisis about Scripture has been creeping up on us for a long time. Much post-Enlightenment thought, theology and philosophy has resulted in the questioning of traditional tenets of Christian faith, and of older understandings of the Bible. No authority has been above question – including Holy Scripture.¹⁵

In a prophetic lecture given in the 1980s to Church leaders in the north of England, theologian David Ford warned that they should not underestimate the impact of secular influences, including the media, on Christian people. Slowly but surely, even without their realising it, a person's faith could be eroded, unless there were powerful influences – notably worship, prayer and Scripture – to counter it all. For example, how is a contemporary Christian to evaluate the accuracy of a newspaper article or TV programme about the Bible? How vigilant and discerning are we when we read those medleys of information, opinion, distortion and propaganda which we call 'newspapers'? There are searching challenges for the Christian disciple living in a post-Christian, secular and – with the dominance of neo-liberal economics – idolatrous society.

In all of this, what has been, and what might be, the contribution of biblical scholarship? What contribution can it – or must it – make to our spiritual reading of Scripture? An essay title which a colleague of mine (an Old

Testament scholar) once gave a class of Methodist ordinands expresses the situation well: 'Is biblical scholarship a help or a hindrance in reading the Bible?'

First, there is no putting the clock back. As with the theory of evolution, we cannot unsay or 'unthink' what has been said and thought. To mention only a sample of countless questions about the Bible: can we now know anything for certain about the history of Israel before the reigns of David and Solomon, or even (as some scholars would say) before the Babylonian exile? Are the first two chapters of Luke's Gospel history or aggadic,¹⁶ the writer's pious, imaginative reflections on what we call 'the Old Testament'? How historical are the resurrection narratives of the Gospels?

Historical questions such as these can be unsettling. The list could go on. Newer disciplines – notably 'narrative criticism' – have shed new light on the Gospels and brought more questions. However, two fundamental questions are relevant for us: how much does all of this matter, and how are the faithful to deal with it all in their spiritual reading of the Bible – that is, their practice of *lectio divina*?

The answer surely must be that we work through what we can, baptise into Christ what we can, and put aside, at least for the time being, what we cannot deal with. By 'baptise into Christ' in this context I mean, 'use to enrich our practice of *lectio divina*'. In the end, what matters is how biblical scholarship may inform, illumine and deepen our understanding of Scripture.

There is no shortage of examples. 'Wives, obey your husbands' has become one biblical text which has understandably become notorious to many female readers of the Bible. What we now know of the social context in which Paul and his followers gave their teaching helps us to see why they said what they did, why it should not be interpreted today in a wooden, literal way, and how, nevertheless, this unpromising text might shed light on the daily give and take of family life today.

To give another example, archaeological discoveries at Corinth and its environs, or at Pompeii and elsewhere in Italy, have enriched our understanding of the letters to Corinth and of the Pauline house churches.¹⁷ Similarly, what archaeology has found *and not found* has corrected and enlarged our understanding of the Old Testament.¹⁸

Reader-response criticism, feminist criticism and postcolonial criticism have also brought sharp challenges to bear on the reading of the Bible. Again, the clock cannot be put back, despite the well-intentioned prayer about the theory

of evolution: 'Lord, may it not be true, or, if it is, at least let it be hushed up.' All three, in different ways, have contributed to, and oblige us to acknowledge, what has been called 'the hermeneutic of suspicion'. Two examples of 'suspicion' must suffice. The elderly woman who had been a slave warned her grandson to be wary in reading the letters of St Paul. She clearly had in mind the injunction, 'Slaves, give entire obedience to your earthly masters ...' (Colossians 3:22, REB translation; cf. Ephesians 6:5). Two female readers of 'Wives, be subject to your husbands ...' (Colossians 3:18; cf. Ephesians 5:22) found it impossible to say at the end of the (public) reading, 'This is the word of the Lord.'

So how can a person engage in a spiritual reading of the Bible if she or he is suspicious of it? First, we should acknowledge that it was necessary and right that biblical scholars, over the last three centuries or so, established a measure of autonomy over against the Church. They didn't have to believe, for example, that Matthew's Gospel was the first to be written, even though the Church for centuries had believed that. No Church can *tout simple* dictate the meaning of a biblical text, if that meaning flies in the face of unambiguous or well-nigh certain historical and literary evidence to the contrary. That is a vital gain.

But it cannot be the whole story. What is biblical scholarship to do with its new-found autonomy and freedom? And how are Christians to respond – especially in their understanding and reading of Scripture? I suggest that many contemporary Christians – Catholic and Protestant alike – may have a great deal to work through in the process of practising *lectio divina*.

Baptising biblical scholarship into Christ: towards a 'second naivety'¹⁹

Enzo Bianchi helpfully sets the scene for us here:

The process *lectio divina* sets in motion is a very human one: by listening we come to know, and by knowing we come to love. We begin by making the effort of 'leaving ourselves' in order to bridge the chronological and cultural distance that separates us from the text: this allows us to accept the text in its otherness, as we would in any relationship with an other.²⁰

'Accepting the text in its otherness' is one vital way in which biblical scholarship can help us in reading the Bible spiritually. As many have noted over the years,

quoting L. P. Hartley's novel, 'the past is a foreign country; they do things differently there'. There is a vital interpretative issue at stake here. The more familiar we are with a biblical text, the more likely we are to misconstrue or distort the meaning. We assume its meaning, or we accept what we have been told about its meaning – and yet both interpretations may be wrong. Or we find the text difficult or obscure, and, again, in our puzzlement, we easily mistake its meaning.

Biblical scholarship – I am speaking generally, here – often makes the biblical text stranger still *before* it brings illumination. So, as Bianchi says, we have to 'leave ourselves' in order to bridge 'the chronological and cultural distance' between us and the text. The analogy of a conversation for this process is a good one: we seek to engage in an honest – even 'no-holds-barred' – conversation with the Bible, and that often means putting questions to the text, and trying to hear the questions which the text puts to us. And all this we do with the Spirit's help so that through that engaged, honest, prayerful conversation we may encounter the living Christ.

The twentieth-century philosopher Paul Ricoeur offers two valuable ideas to help us in this process. First, he speaks of a 'double hermeneutic', of critical 'suspicion' and then, equally crucial, a post-critical 'retrieval'.²¹ In his own words, 'Hermeneutics seem to me to be animated by this double motivation: willingness to suspect, willingness to listen; vow of rigor, vow of obedience.' Ricoeur concludes: 'The idols must die – so that symbols may live.'²²

The resonances here with the Christian ascetical tradition and the way of 'unknowing' are unmistakable. 'Suspicion' may seem an unduly negative word. Yet if we are serious about Christian apologetics – that is, beginning where people are – we are bound to help people outside and inside the Church who are suspicious about the Bible to engage prayerfully with it. This is where Ricoeur's 'double hermeneutic' becomes important; we work through the doubts, questions and suspicion to what he elsewhere calls 'a second naivety' – a concept that has a biblical foundation: 'Truly I tell you, unless you turn round and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of Heaven' (Matthew 18:3, REB translation).

The spiritual odyssey envisaged here for some will be a journey from a hermeneutic of suspicion; for everyone it will be a journey to a hermeneutic of love, and that is the context for some brief concluding remarks.

Conclusion

The practice of *lectio divina* has occupied a central place in Christian tradition, and no doubt will do so as long as there is a Church 'militant on earth'. Terminology may vary, but shared essentials are unmistakable: prayerful, engaged attention to Scripture in the presence of the Lord with the enabling light of the Spirit.

There is an urgent need to recover and encourage the practice of *lectio divina* in the churches. As this paper was being completed, a local Methodist friend drew my attention to *Too Deep for Words: Rediscovering Lectio Divina*, by an American Catholic. It notes the contemporary need to rediscover not only the practice of *lectio divina* but also of contemplation. Contemplation may be 'a strange land', but it will make us 'not less concerned for the world we live in, but more'. The author concludes her discussion with the intriguing, perhaps prophetic, words of Karl Rahner: 'The Christian of the future will be a mystic, or he (*sic*) will not be a Christian at all.'²³

This is an ecumenical path. An English Puritan once observed: 'Tell me what you see in your Bible, and I will tell you what kind of person you are.' His words can be adapted: 'Share with me what you have found in Scripture, that I may understand how your tradition has shaped and enriched your understanding of it.' There will be times, no doubt, when we have to say to Christians of other traditions: 'I find it hard to see what you see in this passage.' That need not surprise or disturb us – we are still brothers and sisters in Christ. A hermeneutic of love, after all, embraces not just the text, but those with whom we read it.

To end where I began: the Scriptures are given that they might be *ōphelimos* – useful to the Church, forming us in the likeness of Christ. The practice of *lectio divina* leads us in two directions at once: the way of contemplation and the way of mission – a suffering apostolate. The two ways are not contradictory, but one and the same. In our contemplation we wait in silence in the presence of the crucified and risen Christ; in mission we encounter that same Christ at the heart of a suffering world.

Notes

1. Eugene H. Peterson, *Eat This Book. The Art of Spiritual Reading*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2006, p. xi.
2. That is, reading, meditation, prayer and contemplation.

3. Enzo Bianchi, *Words of Spirituality. Towards a Lexicon of the Inner Life*, London: SPCK, 2002, p. 45.
4. John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*, London: Epworth Press, 1976, p. 794.
5. Michael Graves, *The Inspiration and Interpretation of Scripture: What the Early Church Can Teach Us*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014, p. 17.
6. Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*.
7. *The Message of the Wesleys: A Reader of Instruction and Devotion*, compiled by Philip S. Watson, London: Epworth Press, 1964, p. 162.
8. *The Message of the Wesleys*, p. 162.
9. *The Message of the Wesleys*, p. 162.
10. *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 1, Sermons 1 (1–33), ed. Albert Outler, Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1984, p. 387.
11. John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, London: Epworth Press, 2007, p. 89.
12. Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, London: Epworth Press, 1989, p. 544.
13. William Law, *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* (first published 1728), London: Fontana, 1965, p. 132. For Law's chapter on prayer, see pp.128–144.
14. Gordon Wakefield, *Fire of Love*, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1976, pp. 20–21.
15. See, for example, A. E. Harvey, *Is Scripture Still Holy? Coming of Age with the New Testament*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012.
16. David Instone-Brewer makes reference to 'the type of *aggadic* "sermon filler" which is likely to be composed. David Instone-Brewer, *Traditions of the Rabbis from the Era of the New Testament*, vol.1, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004, p. 151.
17. See, for example, Anthony C. Thistleton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000, p. 617ff., and Peter Oakes, *Reading Romans in Pompeii: Paul's Letter at Ground Level*, London: SPCK, 2009.
18. For example, my *Who on Earth is God? Making Sense of God in the Bible*, London: Bloomsbury, 2014, ch. 2.
19. This section draws on Anthony Thistleton's discussion of Paul Ricoeur in *The Modern Theologians*, ed. David F. Ford, Oxford: Blackwell, 1997, pp. 531–532.
20. Bianchi, *Words of Spirituality*, p. 45.
21. Thistleton, drawing on Ricoeur's *Freud and Philosophy* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 1965), in Ford (ed.), *Modern Theologians*, p. 531.
22. Ricoeur's conclusion in *Freud and Philosophy*, in Ford (ed.), *Modern Theologians*, p. 532.
23. Thelma Hall RC, *Too Deep for Words: Rediscovering Lectio Divina*, New York: Paulist Press, 1988, pp. 49, 53. Peterson is especially helpful on contemplation (*Eat This Book*, pp. 109–117); for example, "contemplative" is a designation that any of us can accept for ourselves and one that we all should ... All contemplatives are failed contemplatives' (pp. 112–113).