*This is one of a number of Ancillary Papers relating to the report of the Marriage and Relationships Task Group that is being presented to the Methodist Conference in 2019. The report itself, entitled God in love unites us can be found and downloaded from* [*www.methodist.org.uk/MandR19*](http://www.methodist.org.uk/MandR19)

*The report does not depend on these papers. They have not been presented to the Conference or approved by any formal body in the Methodist Church. They have been written as background papers or to help the Task Group think through some particular issues as it sought to come to a mind and develop its views in writing its report. They are not necessarily the considered view of the whole of the Task Group, but are offered here in the hope that some may find them stimulating, challenging or illuminating.*

**ANCILLARY PAPER C:**

**SCRIPTURE, EXPERIENCE, REASON AND TRADITION**

C1. Our approach as a Task Group to a theological understanding of relationships and marriage is informed by the interplay between scripture, tradition, reason and experience.[[1]](#footnote-1) Of these, scripture (the Bible)is of supreme importance. The other elements of tradition, reason and experience are each linked to it in essential ways in discerning and receiving divine revelation. For Methodists, that divine revelation is both the source of the doctrines of their faith, and the supreme rule of their faith and practice. According to Clause 4 of the Deed of Union of the Methodist Church in Great Britain, the revelation is recorded in the Holy Scriptures. But the Deed of Union leaves open the question about the ways in which individual verses in the scriptures and the overall narratives of the scriptures together help constitute the divine revelation on any particular topic. So there still need to be processes of discernment and interpretation, in which Jesus promised the Spirit would lead us.[[2]](#footnote-2)

C2. Consequently, in dealing with a topic like relationships and marriage, the Church cannot ignore the Bible. At the same time, the Church cannot simply pay lip service to the Bible, or make idols out of particular verses without reference to the rest of scripture. It is not enough to say “for the Bible tells us so” unthinkingly or unprayerfully. Neither the Old Testament nor the New Testament (and still less the whole Bible) are monochrome or homogenous. The Bible acknowledges diversity, sometimes using or celebrating it, but at times (as in the various letters in the New Testament) struggling to understand whether there were limits to what could be affirmed; and, if there were, what those limits might be.

C3. Similarly, on some subjects scripture appears to accept the social norms of its particular day, with little comment on them or acknowledgement of changes in them. The example of the Bible’s near silence on the rights and wrongs of the institution of slavery – an accepted part of most ancient life - has often been commented upon.[[3]](#footnote-3) In our context, the move from widely-practised polygamy in the Old Testament to monogamy in the New Testament, happens with practically no scriptural recognition or appraisal whatsoever.[[4]](#footnote-4)

C4. The Bible also provides examples of God’s people re-interpreting and re-applying scriptures to new circumstances and contexts. Thus, the book of Acts and other New Testament texts show that when the apostles and other early Christians referred to the Hebrew scriptures, they not only quoted them, but also re-interpreted them and used them to help people understand what God had been doing in the events involving Jesus. In this they followed the example of Jesus himself, who is shown in the gospels to be quite capable of making points and stating morals. But he also often speaks enigmatically or in parables, telling stories that do not just make a particular point but also stimulate the imaginations of people then and now, confounding their expectations, and leading them to see in new ways God’s love and grace working in the world and in their lives.

C5. The question is not therefore *whether* the Church uses the Bible, only *how*. The Bible is not in itself a doctrinal text-book. It carries its doctrinal insights as the record of an apostolic people seeking to be faithful to God. The way we read it has been described as the people of God gathering round the Word of God, sharing their insights into the gospel in order to discover the Holy Spirit’s insights amongst the people.[[5]](#footnote-5) From small house groups and classes, to the annual Conference, Methodists have always sought to discern God’s truth and will in this way through what they call ‘Christian Conferring’.[[6]](#footnote-6) It is in that process that we move from reading or listening to particular passages of the Bible to hearing God speaking to us in them and through them.

C6. As well as the importance of scripture, Methodists have always placed a great emphasis on giving their testimony to personal **experience**. In other words, they have valued highlyspeaking of their reactions to their encounters with God in the contexts of their daily lives, both as individuals and as groups. But experience cannot be used as a ‘knock down’ argument to end any discussion or resolve a question. When we talk of our ‘experience’, we are trying to articulate our understanding of what is happening to us. That in turn means that we are interpreting it. There is, therefore, always a danger that we will interpret it inadequately, or even mis-interpret it. To counter that, we need to bring our stories into contact with those of others (including the ones that we find in the Bible), comparing and contrasting them, identifying the effects of culture and history on the way we think and speak, seeking to deepen our understanding and to correct potential mis-interpretation.

C7. All of these things require the proper application of **reason**. We are called to love God with our minds as well as with our hearts; and God has provided us with reason as a means of doing this. It is through the use of reason that we put our faith perspectives, particularly those drawn from the scriptures, alongside insights from the arts and sciences, business, politics, and other ways of reflecting on human experience, and bring them to bear upon each other.

C8. It is also important that we put our understanding of Christian faith and experience alongside those of others. Those ‘others’ include both Christian groups elsewhere in the world in our time, and also those who have gone before us. Together, all those accounts make up what is known as the **tradition**. ‘Tradition’ literally means ‘that which is handed on’. It is important to recognise that what is handed on is not monochrome or homogenous. There are a plurality and diversity of voices, often originating in different contexts and therefore reflecting differing perspectives.

C9. There is therefore a continuing process of conferring and discerning, of allowing the Spirit to guide us into all truth.[[7]](#footnote-7) Through it, what is handed on from generation to generation, from group to group, and from individual to individual is, above all, Christian faith. This is an experience that is at once both personal and corporate. It is a way of believing, praying, loving, and sharing, which goes back to the beginnings of the Gospel as recorded in the scriptures.[[8]](#footnote-8)

1. Sometimes known as the “Quadrilateral”, a term first proposed by Albert Outler in his Introduction to *John Wesley* Oxford UP 1964 as a description and analysis of what Methodists implicitly did, rather than a statement of something that the Wesleys or early Methodists explicitly said. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Eg John 16:13 “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth”. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. At various points (not least in Philemon) Paul addresses how the gospel might affect master-slave relationships in the Christian community, but does not propose the abolition of slavery as such. The biblical words often translated as “servant” are also the ones used for “slave”. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 2:6 are often quoted as stating that bishops and elders (and presumably therefore men in general) should only have one wife. The basic principle is then traced back to a saying of Jesus in which he quotes Genesis 2:24 [Mark 10:7-8; Matthew 19:4-6]. In the version that Jesus quotes it, the phrase is “the two shall become one flesh”, and the emphasis on “two” (and, presumably, only two) is repeated in a phrase added after the quote from Genesis. But this is a quotation from the Greek Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Scriptures made between the third and the second century BC. The earlier Hebrew simply talked of “man” and “woman”, and “they shall become one flesh”. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This phrase builds on material in Carlos Mesters *Defenseless Flower: A New Reading of the Bible* Orbis Books, 1989. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See section on “the Purpose of the Conference” in the 2007 Conference Report *The Review of the Conference*. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. John 16:13 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This paragraph is drawn from *Called to Love and Praise* paragraph 1.2.9. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)