

“For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us”: A Wesleyan Pneumatology of Scripture

Paul T. Walls Annual Lecture (2021)

“I would like to begin by acknowledging that we are gathered here on the traditional land of the first people of Seattle. Let us honor with gratitude the land itself and the Duwamish People past and present who first stewarded it for our benefit.”

Introduction¹

Among the many learning-curves I navigated during my 43 years of teaching scripture at SPU was the recovery of my father’s Pentecostal roots. Dad’s mother, Huldah Swanson Wall, was a fiery, tongues-speaking, revivalist who came from Sweden at the turn of the century to prepare herself for gospel ministry. After graduating from Nyack Missionary College, she and Grandpa, also a Nyack grad, came to the NW, Grandpa to plant churches and Grandma to preach revivals. By the providence of my birth, I was baptized into a thick language of the holy Ghost, esp. when visiting my grandparents in Bremerton. I was raised in a family that never detached our Bible practices from a charismatic language of the Spirit. While never explained, my parents embodied their belief that the Spirit actively led us in prayer, in our family devotions, in our Bible studies at church or in our living room, or whenever Mom took her kids with her as she made the rounds in our Richland neighborhood as a child evangelist. Our friend and colleague, Dr. Karen Winslow, was among those neighborhood kids.

I arrived on this campus in 1978 as a raw rookie with a lot of catchup ball to play. I am forever thankful that my anxious colleagues then, now dear friends, Frank Spina and Gene Lemcio, initiated me into the discipline of biblical theology, which is another name for a study of how we read the Bible as scholars of and for God’s global church. Gene introduced me to the work of Jim Sanders and Frank to the work of Brevard Childs who together helped shape fresh ways of approaching the church’s two-testament scripture honestly but principally as a *holy* text whose final literary form—the text we receive with and from the church—is the one sanctified by God’s Spirit as formative of a covenant-keeping community’s life with God. It seemed good to the holy

¹ The footnotes that have been added to this ms. of my public lecture (November 10, 2021) respond for the most part to various questions that have been raised by my colleagues and students following the lecture.

Spirit and to me, then, that I should integrate my reception of Grandma Wall's Pentecostal Spirit with my reception of the church's Spirit-formed scripture.

Along the way a deeper awareness of the Spirit's role in Bible practice was influenced by conversations with my colleagues, especially Jack Levison and Daniel Castelo whose instruction and personal examples of Spirit-filling continue to shape my thinking and practice of a pneumatology of scripture.

With that testimony as foreground, the primary purpose of tonight's Lecture is to plot a brief narrative of the Spirit's role in producing the church's scripture. The current intellectual problem this narrative addresses is described by Professor Lee McDonald who observes that the clear consensus of his fellow historians who quest in frustration for historical evidence of the Bible's origins, is that (quote) *"there is no text in antiquity that tells us how the Bible was formed – none. All we can do is draw inferences from what the church fathers say and how scripture was practiced in the earliest Christian churches."* Even the best guessers, and Lee McDonald is among the world's very best, can't supply a date or an occasion when the church clearly recognized scripture's final edition or a reason why the church fixed the shape and size of its scripture as it did, then to pass it on to subsequent generations of faithful readers. Some scholars claim the biblical canon has never been closed once for all. It's still open to revision. All we can say for the moment is that the global church is the Bible's principal residence; we receive the Bible with the church because we would not have a Bible without the church.

Tonight's offering is the precis of a much fuller and still future study in which Professor Castelo and I intend to propose a theological way of filling this missing gap that McDonald observes in the historical record. Rather than present a quest of ancient artifacts that probably do not exist, tonight's lecture proposes a theological account of scripture's origins that draws inferences from three famous NT texts to implicate and locate the HS's active participation in the Bible's composition, canonization, and ongoing communication as God's word for God's people. These three decisive narrative moments – composition, canonization, and communication – plot the beginning, the middle, and the holy end of the Bible's origins story.²

² There are also theological and practical problems that are addressed as subtexts of this paper. (1) Practical: move the modern historical project from the point of composition, which really is a dog that don't hunt, to the point of canonization the reconstruction of which is far more decisive for the exegetical task of meaning making. (2) I want to draw more firmly the lines between the church and its scripture, not only to claim on historical but also theological grounds, that the Bible is the church's book, not God's. I think the connection between the Bible and its authors, resident in Protestantism, has led to all kinds of distortions. My project intends to pressure the movement of our discussion of scripture's authority to the church's use of it in Christian formation but also to pressure the movement from scripture's beginning to its climax in the canonical process when the church formed its Bible to cooperate with the Spirit in forming itself into one holy catholic and apostolic church.

My take on the location and role of the HS in this story's plotline is cued by two elements retrieved from John Wesley's post-Aldersgate preaching that regard (1) the Spirit's witness to God's word, and (2) the Spirit's agency in using scripture to transform our capacity to recognize scripture's revelation of God's revelatory word. I contend that the Bible's origins in its final or canonical form is best understood as a Spirit-enabled recognition or inward discernment of what, in the words of one of scripture's most famous one-liners, "seemed good to the HS and to us." The Bible was not a magical production in the past, nor is its present interpretation self-evident. Biblical books didn't drop from heaven fully formed and ready to read, nor were they dictated by God in the theophanies of divinely inspired prophets and apostles who then wrote the words of God down, presumably in biblical Hebrew and Greek, as inerrant scripture without need for further editing. We receive scripture with and from Christ's church because the church was used by God's Spirit in the fulness of time to form and perform scripture. *In a sentence, the scripture we receive with the church is the existential byproduct of a faithful community's providential and pneumatic discernment of what seemed good to the HS and to us.*

Part One: Wesley's post-Aldersgate Pneumatology

My clipped discussion of Wesleyan pneumatology begins with this caveat. Wesley wasn't interested in the question of scripture's origins or with a pneumatology of scripture. His appeal to scripture was still deeply rooted in the Reformation's confidence that the Bible is God's primary means of conveying knowledge about God and a "scripture way of salvation." Wesley's Bible practices naturally followed: scripture's reliability was assured, its practice required, and the Spirit's use of it as a medium of divine revelation a divine necessity.

Moreover, Wesley assumed that scripture's origins resided in its apostolic and prophetic authorship. The Bible's inspired authors wrote scripture by God's appointment, and the church's scripture originated with their divinely inspired authorship. Accordingly, England's reception of the Reformation's affirmation of *sola scriptura* was founded on the KJV's recent translation of 2 Pet 1:21: "holy men of God (i.e., prophets and apostles) spake (i.e., wrote scripture) as they were moved (i.e., directly guided to do so) by the Holy Ghost."

While I disagree with this reading of 2 Peter and its use in securing the traditional Protestant formulation of scripture's authority³, my disagreements with Wesley about scripture's origins isn't the focus of tonight's Lecture. In fact, the historical question of the beginnings of Christian scripture is a battle waged by modern criticism that emerged after Wesley during the 19th century, doubtless cued in part by

³ See an example of Wesley's misreading of 2 Pet 1:21 (and 2 Tim 3:16) in "The Witness of our Own Spirit" (1.6).

Darwin's papers on human origins. But consider this example: Adolf von Harnack, one of the principal warriors in modern criticism's battle of the Bible, counted as many as 17 possible configurations of the NT that were still in play at the end of the second century. These many possible NTs—at least in the West—were pruned down by natural selection to a single NT, fixed and finalized by the church toward the end of the sixth century, and perhaps even later.

This sort of modern criticism has provoked a more practical question especially among evangelicals: how can believers know with reasonable certainty that the church collected and canonized a final edition of scripture that God's Spirit had in fact sanctified in the fullness of time as the textual medium of God's living and active Word? Wesley had become interested in a roughly analogous question of religious epistemology following his divine encounter at an Aldersgate prayer meeting in 1738 that left him with a "strangely warmed heart." Here's his question: how can we know with reasonable certainty that our sins are forgiven and that we have been adopted into God's household as God's children?

I will leave it to Professor Koskela to work out the details of Wesley's religious epistemology and to Professor Strong to work out the details of Wesley's revivalist pneumatology. My contribution to this discussion is more modest: I seek to retrieve two crucial elements from Wesley's post-Aldersgate preaching that detect a radicalized conception of the Spirit's agency in assuring believers that they are forgiven and are now members of God's household; I will then apply this conception of Spirit baptism to the question of scripture's origins. I propose that Wesley can help us secure a version of the Bible's origins story that is plotted by acts of pneumatic discernment in which faithful people come to recognize with reasonable certainty that the biblical texts the church collected and canonized are those that seemed good to the holy Spirit.

But my first text doesn't come from Wesley's canonical sermons or scripture but from SPU's statement of its "distinctively Wesleyan" faith. Even a cursory reading of the faith statement notes that it highlights the church's working relationship with God's Spirit. The Statement affirms that this university's legacy and present educational mission are grounded on the theological belief that the holy end of God's way of salvation is the renewal of human existence through the transforming agency of the holy Spirit. But our regeneration isn't self-regenerating like the electric battery of a Tesla. The university's Wesleyan rubric goes on to underwrite (quote) "the importance of the human response to the Spirit's renewing work, including the role of spiritual disciplines and practices such as prayer, worship, scripture study, and public witness." A participatory pneumatology if you will.

This idea is drawn in part from Wesley's sermon, "The Witness of our own Spirit" (#12), in which he resists the tendency to speak of the Spirit's internal witness as something done to us or upon us as though we are the passive recipients of God's promised gift of the Spirit. Our baptism in the Spirit, a gift of our salvation, forms what

Wesley calls a “joint testimony” or what I am calling “a participatory pneumatology.” In faithful response to our experience of the Spirit’s internal witness that assures us that we are forgiven and adopted as God’s children, we practice a Spirit-enabled life that resists sin and spiritual death. Wesley roughly follows Calvin’s idea of a witnessing Spirit here but understands the Spirit’s witness in the believer’s heart is unmediated and directly experienced as he did at that Aldersgate prayer meeting. Unlike Wesley, Calvin problematizes the testimony of human experience, still flawed by sinful nature, and so he appeals instead to scripture’s divinely inspired witness for confirmation of our salvation. Calvin opts for an indirect textual witness rather than a direct existential one. As the lyric sings it in that great Protestant chorus, “Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so.”

Now hear the difference in Wesley’s testimony of his Aldersgate experience: “I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I *did* trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He *had* taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.” Following his baptism in the Spirit at Aldersgate, Wesley would never have agreed with Calvin that our confidence in God’s providential acts in the history of salvation, whether of our adoption as God’s children or scripture’s way of salvation, is based only on what we find in biblical texts. The Spirit bears witness by sacred experience, God’s Spirit to our spirit, by which we recognize in an existential way what accords with God’s perfect will (cf. Rom 8:26-30).

At the epicenter of Wesley’s religious epistemology is an expansive and radicalized understanding of new birth. “If any doctrines within the whole compass of Christianity may be properly termed fundamental they are doubtless these two: the doctrine of justification and that of the new birth.” So begins Wesley’s canonical sermon on the “New Birth.” He goes on to preach that “as soon as one is born of God there is a total change in all his particulars—he sees the light of the world, he hears the voice of God, he feels the love of God shed abroad in his heart by God’s Spirit. And now he may properly be said to live.”

In his most consequential sermon, “The Great Privilege of those who are born of God” (#19), Wesley explains that while our justification occurs when we trust God because of Jesus to pardon us from the guilt of past sins, regeneration occurs when we are released from sin’s captive power to begin a new life under the direction of the Spirit. New birth involves a *supernatural* change in human nature. If God’s justifying grace puts us to rights with God, then God’s regenerating grace transforms the senses of our inmost soul. We become children of God, reborn in God’s image with new capacities for a participatory partnership with God. As Wesley put it, new birth occasions a vast, inward change (Wesley, 1:279). All the dispositions and competencies to discern God’s truth are given to God’s people *at our new birth* in the twinkling of God’s eye.

When drilling down on his post-Aldersgate sermons, one should note a shift of metaphors from Paul's law-court trope where the Spirit provides the decisive witness in granting adoption papers to those believers now pardoned from their sins, to 1 John's maternity ward where the forgiven are reborn with God's DNA. This change of metaphors from the justification of the pardoned to the sanctification of the newly born funds an important shift in how Wesley imagines God's full salvation from a household full of adopted kids from all kinds of backgrounds—Paul's inspired idea—to a household of newborns with an inherent capacity to discern God's truth and live according to Christ's likeness in a way that brings the Creator's intentions to realization. Here's my riff, then, on a Wesleyan pneumatology of scripture in a severely gapped sentence: The capacity of God's children to rightly discern what texts seem good to the holy Spirit is a native disposition of new birth that God's Spirit forms within the canonizing community because of Christ.

Part Two: Three biblical case studies of Scripture's origins story

The Spirit's post-Pentecost portfolio of tasks is promised by Jesus in the Passover discourse found in John 14-16. Among other actions, Jesus promises that the Spirit will continue to testify to God's truth, disclosed during his ministry, to all future disciples. In fact, John writes the fourth Gospel to index the Spirit's ongoing catechesis of the church. I would argue that the Spirit led in the church's production of a two-testament scripture as the Spirit's principal text for its instruction of Jesus's followers (cf. John 14:26).⁴

The beginning narrative moment: composition. Most agree that the first narrative moment of scripture's story of origins is its composition, including the FPMC which follows the Articles of Religion in affirming the singular importance of this narrative moment by asserting, "The Scriptures have come to us through human authors who wrote, as God moved them, in the languages and literary forms of their times." To

⁴ E. Radner's highly controversial expression of concern that "modern pneumatology" (including Wesleyan pneumatology) has become detached from its proper dogmatic location within Trinitarian thought is important to consider; *A Profound Ignorance* (Baylor). That is, the primary description of the Spirit's agency must be in relationship with the Father and Son (rather than, e.g., in human formation, nature/science, or social activism/transformation). My preface to this section of the Lecture, then, is an attempt to do this even if in need of much greater detail. The Spirit "proceeds" from the Trinity to engage in work that accommodates the exaltation and departure of the Son for his present priestly work until his coming again on behalf of the Father's plan of salvation and promise of an inheritance of blessings for all who endure to the end (see Hebrews for this). I would also add that the expression of what "seemed good to the holy Spirit" recognizes the Spirit as discerning and selective and not an "all things for everything" deity as some versions of modern pneumatology have it according to Radner's discussion. The Spirit can work with only certain kinds of people, chooses to do so in certain kinds of ways, and perhaps also on certain kinds of issues—issues, according to Acts, that threaten the community's unity and mission (cf. Eph 4:3).

secure this traditional Protestant claim, a pile of prooftexts from OT and NT is added.⁵ None of these prooftexts, however, concern the actual literary act of composing those biblical stories, lyrics, letters, and oracles that in the fulness of time became the church's scripture. In fact, no biblical author claims that he was divinely inspired, moved, or in any other way collaborated with God to author holy scripture. Ironically, the one text of which I'm aware that actually describes what an author is doing when composing a biblical text is rarely listed among the prooftexts that secure the Bible's religious authority: Luke 1:1-4, written as a prologue to the Third Gospel.

For the purpose of tonight's Lecture, I want to propose where in this prologue we might find the Spirit at work in what Luke describes as the literary production of his Gospel. Even a cursory observation notes that most of his prologue regards a narrator's literary art—the choice of genre to tell his story, his reception of memories about Jesus from his eyewitnesses, the rhetorical design of his story, the care he takes recording his research—a literary production that he brackets by stating his theological intention to write a narrative of fulfillment and then his pastoral purpose of doing so for Theophilus, Luke's patron, to confirm the certainty of his catechism's instruction.

We should also observe what this prologue does *not* mention: it doesn't mention who wrote the Gospel; nor does the anonymous storyteller claim to be writing scripture or indicate his awareness of writing a divinely inspired story. He states only that he is writing another narrative (διήγησις) to secure Theophilus's prior catechesis. And he does this by following the literary practices of the other storytellers of his Roman world.⁶

But, again, our question is where in Luke's description of his literary craft might we locate the internal witness of God's Spirit to the truth about Jesus, God's Son and our Lord? For this heavy lifting, I propose that we take a closer look at v. 3.

According to most English translations of the Greek original, Luke reports that he "carefully investigated" what he wrote down for Theophilus—a fair translation of

⁵ Deuteronomy 4:2; 28:9; Psalm 19:7-11; John 14:26; 17:17; Romans 15:4; 2 Timothy 3:14-17; Hebrews 4:12; James 1:21; Matthew 5:17-18; Luke 10:25-28; John 5:39, 46-47; Acts 10:43; Galatians 5:3-4; 1 Peter 1:10-12; Matthew 24:35; Mark 8:38; John 14:24; Hebrews 2:1-4; 2 Peter 1:16-21; 1 John 2:2-6; Revelation 21:5; 22:19.

⁶ See, however, C. A. Evans who claims that Luke is writing hagiography. Some may ask why not locate the Spirit here in L's writing of a διήγησις. I think the Spirit is more likely to be active in the hearing of God's word than in its writing. The repetition of "in the Spirit" in John's Revelation underscores only his Spirit enabled reception of the apocalypse and nothing of the hard work of translating what the prophet envisions and composing his finely crafted masterpiece based upon this. I note also the Pentecost narrative in the Book of Acts where the filling of the Spirit is made manifest in the hearing of tongues (cf. Acts 2:6). Nor is the writing of canonical texts mentioned in Acts as an "act of the apostles" or as an "act of the Spirit" even though almost certainly Acts was written after an early corpus of Paul's letters was in circulation. Paul's claim that he writes as a gifted "prophet" or perhaps as an apostle and therefore with authority, as he does in 1 Cor 14:37-38, is hardly equivalent to the claim that he is writing scripture. I doubt an observant Jew, like Paul, would ever admit to writing or adding to his biblical canon.

the Greek verb and adverb he used. Most scholars agree this verbal combination characterizes the scrupulous biographer who leaves no stone unturned in crafting a complete and accurate story of a person's life from cradle to grave—in this case an empty one. But D. Moessner has persuasively challenged this consensus by noting that Luke's use of the perfect participle of this verb, *parakoloutheō* (παρακολουθέω), when paired with the adverb he uses, *akribōs*, was well used in antiquity to convey a speaker's intimate familiarity with their subject matter forged over an extended period of time, typically during an apprenticeship by listening carefully to the instruction of one's masters.

Moessner imagines Luke learned the Gospel of Jesus then by attentively listening to story after story about him told by those itinerant storytellers mentioned in v. 2 who served in Luke's home church. Listening to these eyewitnesses of Jesus saturated him with a "thoroughly informed familiarity" of the Lord's life. The resulting composition, in Scott Spencer's nice phrase, is "less formally factual than faithfully familiar, the overflow of faithful adherence more than of rigorous research" (Spencer, 29).

It's this "thoroughly informed familiarity" of Jesus, formed by Luke's attentive hearing about Jesus's life told to him by "ministers of the word" that I propose we locate the Spirit's internal witness at work. The Spirit "opens Luke's ears" as Isaiah might put it (Is 50:5; cf. Ps 40:6) to hear the word of the Lord God Almighty disclosed in Messiah's life. What seemed good to the HS was made certain also to Luke and provided him with the Spirit-confirmed raw materials of Jesus's life that combined with his superb story-telling skills produced the first draft of the Third Gospel, so that Theophilus might know with certainty what he had been taught.

The middle narrative moment: canonization. Let me begin my telling of the middle moment of this narrative of origins by making an intentionally evocative claim: the Bible's real "origins" did not occur when its various authors were inspired by God to produce it, but much later when in the fullness of time the church canonized a collection of collected texts it recognized were sanctified by the Spirit to make people wise for salvation and mature for every good work. To support this claim, consider the story of the second Jerusalem Council found in chapter 15 of Acts.

This story is the centerpiece of the Book, not only because Luke places it in the exact middle of his story but because the problem that convened this Council is the watershed event of earliest Christianity. The problem that occasioned the Council was the conversion of an uncircumcised or ritually unclean Roman soldier, Cornelius, which teed up a question for all Torah-observant followers of Jesus—and the question they raise is spot on: should the church continue to practice circumcision as a divine necessity so that repentant non-Jews become ritually cleansed in order to enter the fellowship of a covenant-keeping community? After all, the Bible prescribes

circumcision as a purity practice demanded by Israel's God to mark out covenant-keeping members of God's household. Why not continue it as a purity practice?⁷

This is the question addressed by the Jerusalem conference of Acts 15. I propose that we read it this evening as a microcosm of the second moment of the Bible's origins story during which the church's selection of widely and often used compositions with apostolic connections were gathered into discrete collections and canonized in the fullness of time as the church's scripture once for all. The letter that published the conference proceedings is summarized in Acts 15:28; it begins with that famous one-liner, "For it seemed good (*dokeō*) to the Holy Spirit and to us"⁸ but then continues to

⁷ I would note that the initial statement of the issue at stake in 15:1, if used to gloss the official statement of the issue debated in 15:5, would imply that some members of the Jerusalem congregation had elevated circumcision of repentant non-Jews during Paul's mission (Acts 13-14) to a soteriological level: circumcision was necessary for the salvation of repentant non-Jews and not only for membership within a covenant-keeping fellowship, which seems the focus of the Jerusalem Council. The divine necessity of obeying the practice is its prescription in Genesis 17. I make this observation because the various "lines drawn in the sand" in the intramural conflicts that have faced the church since Pentecost are typically (and not only sometimes) raised to a soteriological level: salvation depends upon members not crossing the line drawn. In Acts 15 the issue was circumcision of non-Jewish believers and at church-related universities and institutions the issue is human sexuality. Non-negotiable lines in the sand have been drawn because our salvation depends upon it. Besides being—sharply stated—an unorthodox position since salvation is by no other name than Jesus, such a move is more difficult to sustain with respect to purity practices, e.g., than it is the core beliefs of our faith. To contest circumcision or same-sex marriage is simply not the same as contesting belief in the triune God or in the redemptive efficacy of the Cross. These beliefs are truly non-negotiable; a position on circumcision or same-sex marriage is not, even though one could claim either is secured by scripture. (In my experience debating different positions from scripture, I have found that attempts are made to secure virtually *every* position in every intramural squabble by appeals to scripture. This is certainly true of the current conflict over human sexuality if the issue at stake is reduced to the sex of our sexual partners rather than the kind of relationship within which sex embodies lifelong covenant-keeping devotion one for another.)

⁸ The antecedent of the "us" in this programmatic statement is debated. Tradition calls this letter the "Apostles' Decree," presuming that the decision was made by the church's apostles or episcopacy rather than by the entire congregation. My own reading of the entire narrative, however, notes that from beginning to end, this Council included in various ways and stages the entire church, beginning with the reception of the Antiochian delegation in 15:4, the raising of the critical question by members of James's Jerusalem congregation (15:5), the mention of the "entire assembly" in 15:12 (which however could refer only to the "apostles and elders" [15:6]), references to the "whole church" (15:22) and also to "the believers (*adelphoi*)" (15:23) in making decisions about the publication of conference proceedings, the assignment of Judas and Silas, called "prophets" (15:32), to represent the Jewish church (15:27) all suggest a much broader consensus than tradition would suggest. For its application and implication for today, I think who is in the room must represent each and every stakeholder group within the "whole church." The selection of these representatives is not unlike Paul's instruction about selecting elders to lead the local church in 1 Timothy 3. These are choices that consider public reputation and personal reliability of those chosen but also their spiritual maturity—their capacity to work well with the public but also with the holy Spirit. The "and us," then, isn't every member of the community but selected representatives of every group with a good track record—things implied by the letter's characterization of Paul and also of

demand that the church should “no longer ask more of its congregations than what is essential (*epanagkēs*).”⁹

C. Keener calls this text the “pneumatological climax of Acts” (3:2291). Keener observes that the inclusion of non-Jews in God’s household realizes what has been the holy Spirit’s intentions all along. What the Council recognizes as “essential” or normative to believe about covenant-keeping aligns with God’s eternal plan of salvation according to scripture.

I agree with Keener but will also suggest that this “pneumatological climax” of Acts is analogous of the holy end that climaxed the canonical process that resulted in the formation of scripture’s “essential” edition. That is, this same pattern plotted in Acts 15 lays tracks the church followed at the very moment the church recognized which texts among all those composed by the apostles, which were then preserved and edited by their first readers, then circulated and subsequently practiced by a catholic community of believers over several centuries, were discerned “essential” to the HS and so also for subsequent generations of believers.

This narrative of the Jerusalem Council, however, begs another related question: what sort of historical process would the holy Spirit participate in that would make known to the church which texts God hallows for holy ends? The repeated mention of careful listening to all sides of a debate is critical to such a process. More important, however, is the genre of testimony used to carry evidence to those who participated. The apostle Peter testified to the Spirit’s Pentecostal power in its baptism of convert

Silas and Judas. I thank Doug Koskela for pointing out that those invited into the room to contribute to this process of discernment—the “and us” of 15:28—not only represent stakeholder groups within the church and its mission(s) but also have different roles to perform within that process subject to their vocation or appointment by God within and for the church: Peter, an apostle-witness, Paul and Barnabas, missionaries, James, a pastor-teacher (Doug uses the language of “Magisterial office”), and Judas and Silas, prophets. The people invited into the room, then, not only serve a political role given authority to represent a subgroup within a community of one mind and soul also but an ecclesial role with spiritual charisms to exercise during the process. There is, for instance, someone who holds a magisterial office as pastor-teacher whose role is to read scripture in a way that confirms what others testified of God’s work at ground level. And of course within the narrative world of Acts there is no higher human authority than the apostle Peter whose apostolic witness speaks on behalf of the risen One (see my commentary on Acts 1:15 for this). The single sentence given to the role of Paul and Barnabas in Acts 15 measures the relative importance of the apostle Peter and missionary Paul (not an eyewitness of the historical Jesus and so unable to hold apostolic office) at this conference.

⁹ The use of *epanagkēs* in koine Greek refers typically to the inherent nature or quality of something, which then obligates its use. This definition is clearly instantiated in Luke’s narrative: the resolution of what is essential “purity” in response to the Pharisees’ question (15:5) is codified and repeated in a Lukan triad underscoring its importance (15:20, 29; 21:25). This definition of purity, then, is practiced as an “essential” in the missions of the church to Israel and to the nations according to Acts—a point made in particular in the story of Paul’s arrival in Jerusalem and his conference with the leaders of the Jewish mission, including James (21:18-26).

Cornelius, Paul and Barnabas testified to the Spirit's "signs and wonders" during their inaugural mission to non-Jews outside of Roman Palestine, and finally confirmed by the Rev. James's charismatic exegesis of scripture's prophetic testimony from Amos 9. Note this: Testimonies of God at work in history pepper and plot an extended process of discernment that results in an entire community's unified recognition of what seemed essential for the church to be the church.¹⁰

According to this biblical case study, the whole community's participation with the Spirit is vital, so that what seems good both to the Spirit and to us depends on community practices similar to those indicated in this story in Acts: fellowship under the care of an attentive episcopacy, the careful listening to the testimonies of God at work in human lives and history, an animated discourse in which different options are set out and defended, the use of scripture to interpret and confirm our experiences of God.¹¹ These are all characteristics also of the canonical process that led the church

¹⁰ Ironically, while James agrees with Peter, who vocalizes the gospel of Paul in his testimony, that salvation through grace is by faith in Jesus alone, he goes on to appeal to the same biblical Torah to contend that repentant non-Jews with whom Jews would now fellowship would need to retain an external purity outline is repeated holiness code (15:20, 29) in agreement with Torah's teaching for non-Jewish God fearers (cf. 15:21). See my commentary of this text in *Acts* (2002). The testimony of Peter's eyewitness to the Spirit's Pentecostal power disclosed both in the baptism of Cornelius and the "signs and wonders" of Paul's inaugural mission to non-Jews outside of Roman Palestine confirmed again what the risen Lord had commissioned Saul to do according to Acts 9 and the Spirit's various visitations of Peter according to Acts 10-11, confirmed by James's reception of scripture's witness in LXX Amos 9 as a proof from prophecy, that God's way of salvation now extends beyond Israel to include repentant but ritually unclean non-Jews. God's way of purifying God's people focused inwardly on the heart by faith (Acts 15:9-11).

¹¹ The presumption of a consensus "vote" in settling this debate between competing notions of purity may well be attributed to Luke's idealizing tendency as a storyteller. I would prefer a more theological understanding that presumes a consensus is the natural outcome of a process led by one Spirit within a community of "one heart and soul" (Acts 4:32). However, just what kind of consensus may be debated. My preference is to think of it more like a "scholarly consensus" in which scholarly agreements are held with differing levels of commitment and intentions, perhaps even including those who may disagree but who agree to remain silent "for the good of the order." Moreover, since Luke mentions nothing of the aftereffects of this decision among the more conservative members of the Jerusalem church, including those who caused the ruckus in the first place (15:1-2, 24) or of the Pharisees who raised the question of purity that was eventually discussed and debated by the Council. We do know that the church's mission to the Jews and the eventual "parting of the ways" between Judaism and Christianity in the second century certainly reflects the attrition of Jewish membership within earliest Christianity. I mention this only to suggest that this consensus about purity became increasingly "Pauline" as testified to by Peter in conference. We might consider 1 Corinthians as hermeneutical of a Pauline accommodation of the holiness code proposed by James as a way of maintaining this consensus or partnership with the holy Spirit; see my "The Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:1-21) in Canonical Context," in *From Biblical Criticism to Biblical Faith*. Edited by W. H. Brackney and C. E. Evans. (Atlanta: Mercer University Press, 2007), 93-101. This suggestion may also explain the odd story attached to the end of Acts 15 of the unexplained breakup of the partnership of Paul and Barnabas. Again, if this consensus is maintained by attrition of those who

catholic to recognize in the fulness of time which texts seemed good to the HS and therefore also to the church. It is on this basis, and none other, that we continue to grant authority to the scripture we receive and practice as God's word for God's people.

The aorist verb used in 15:28, *dokeō*, which I've translated "seemed good," connotes discernment of a consensus and is repeated three times in Luke's publication of conference proceedings in 15:22-29. The polyvalence of the verb's meaning observed in this narrative panel's repeated use of the verb signals in my mind that whenever the Spirit is given room to roam in any ecclesial process it will seek to lead us in recognizing what is essential to God. Read by Wesley's understanding of new birth—this "total change in all our particulars"—faithful believers are given the capacity to discern God's will as an experience of our spirits witnessing to God's Spirit when leading God's people to make decisions about what is essential according to God's will. It is at that moment, Wesley claims, that "we now may properly be said to live." And this is how we should understand the origins of the church's scripture. By its constant and catholic use of various apostolic texts the church was enabled to discern which texts the Spirit had selected and sanctified as the essential texts in the formation of God's people.

The endgame narrative moment: communication. Scripture's principal residence is the church, "the dwelling place of God in the Spirit" (Eph 2:22). It is there that God's people receive and use scripture with the Spirit who inspires scripture's every use to form a people who love God and all their neighbors as God loves them. The Spirit does not participate in the production of a sacred book that it then doesn't also purpose to actively use as an auxiliary of divine revelation and spiritual formation. Let me score this point in the strongest possible language: for us to argue loudly for scripture's authority but in a way that is detached from our practice of scripture in forming a people's life with God subverts the very reason the church formed and canonized the Bible in the first place. The church formed the Bible in order to form the church. To refer to a book as God's word without then studying it and seeking to obey its instruction

disagreed with any of the "essentials," one may speculate whether Barnabas lost enthusiasm for some of the missional implications of the Council's proposal and decided to go his separate way. In fact, the following story of Paul's circumcision of Timothy (16:3) and Barnabas' pick of Mark and Paul's of Silas may explain such a disagreement over "essentials." Again, a speculation that only purposes to explain how a consensus may be maintained over time by attrition of members of the original "and us" of Acts 15:28. One final note: the length of time it took the Jerusalem Council to reach consensus is not given by Luke. But discerning the will of the Spirit could take a consider length of time. The history of the Pentecostal practice of "tarrying on the holy Spirit," based upon its reading of Acts 1:3-5 and the risen Lord's instruction for the apostles to "wait" in Jerusalem for the promise of Spirit baptism to be realized, may provide useful examples of the manner and timing of a process of discernment to reach a community's discernment of the Spirit's disclosure of "the deep things of God" (1 Cor 2:10); see Daniel Castelo, "Tarrying on the Lord: Affections, Virtues and Theological Ethics in Pentecostal Perspective" *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 13.1 (2004): 31-56.

strikes me as a kind of blasphemy. For this reason, I want us to imagine how a third biblical text—perhaps the most famous passage in the Bible about the Bible—may help us locate the Spirit’s ongoing work in the church’s ongoing acts of communicating scripture as the Spirit’s auxiliary in forming a people belonging to God.

Consider Paul’s instruction to Timothy according to 2 Timothy 3:14-17. This is not a text about scripture’s production; it’s a text about its formative practices. Despite how this text has been used in the history of Protestant interpretation, you will note upon close reading that Paul says absolutely nothing to Timothy about inspired authors writing texts down in the distant past that we presently use as our scripture. Nothing. Nada. Zilch. The verbal tense of Paul’s exhortation is present, not past, and the predicates Paul uses are of his Bible’s (LXX) inspired usefulness. The naked sense of this verse, as Wesley would call it, concerns scripture’s inspired communication, not its composition.

In particular, Paul has created an adjective, *θεόπνευστος*, literally “God-breathing,” in v. 16, that helps us envision the present activity of God in breathing new life into God’s people when they practice scripture faithfully, whether for prophetic purposes to correct and rebuke bad theology or for priestly purposes to teach and train believers for wisdom and good works. In creating this special adjective, “God breathing,” Paul seeks to help Timothy and us imagine why scripture should be practiced to communicate God’s word to God’s people.

This arresting idea that God breathes into those texts we use to animate our life with God draws upon two well-known Bible stories that employ the two words that make us *theopneustos*: God (*theos*) and breathing (*pneustos*). One is the story of God’s creation of the Human in Gen 2:7 where God breathes into the Human and so enliven the Human to become a useful although as yet solitary tiller of soil. The second is from Ezek 37’s fantastical vision of a valley filled with the sunbaked bones of dead people—a prophetic trope of an exiled Israel without hope or life with God. The prophet envisions God sending God’s Breath from every corner of creation to breathe life into the dead and hope into the forsaken.

These two biblical stories of God-breathing reimagine a new birth, a new life with God. This is the idea that Paul locates in his theology of scripture according to 2 Timothy. New life in Christ is the profit margin of our Bible practices. Perhaps this is what the Pastor has in mind as well when famously observing in Hebrews 4:12 that God’s word is “living and active, sharper than any sword and so can penetrate to the believer’s soul.”

In this wonderfully poetic sense, then, I propose that we locate the holy Spirit in all those acts of God-breathing that faithfully use scripture in worship, instruction, mission, and personal devotions in ways that enliven and animate a community’s life with God.

Scripture's authority at its ecclesial address is not predicated on the identity or intentions of Spirit-inspired authors and editors,¹² or the divine nature of inerrant propositions, or the artfulness of its literary craft, or in any other attribute of the biblical text. Rather, scripture's continuing authority as God's word for God's people is confirmed over and over again by the evidence of the Spirit's inspiring presence whenever our Bible practices bring to maturation God's global purposes for God's global people.¹³

In this sense, the holy ends of a pneumatology of scripture may be observed in the very long history of redemptive and epistemic effects produced from the church's beginnings to the present day wherever and whenever our two-testament Bible is used prophetically to call God's people to repentance and in priestly ways to nurture the witness of the converted to the victory of God's love because of Christ.¹⁴

Readers of C. S. Lewis's Narnia mythology may recall that the breath of Aslan, the Messiah-like lion who plays the story's central character, brings to life all those creatures hardened into stone by the wicked witch. Lewis captures this creational sense of God's breathing as life-generating in a way that mirrors Paul's conception of scripture's inspiration as the continuing action of God's Spirit that animates and

¹² The modern conception of the divine inspiration of biblical authors (rather than of particular texts) is of a piece with Protestantism's definition of apostolicity in terms of historical figures. That is, the primary justification of scripture's authority is the divine inspiration of Christ's apostles whose verbal inspiration enables them to write sacred texts that are infallible in content and plenary in scope. What follows defines the divine inspiration of scripture differently and so shifts its basis for scripture's authority accordingly.

¹³ Let me add that Paul begins his second letter to Timothy with a fierce reminder that the spiritual charisms given to him at his ordination were not from a Spirit of timidity, but from a Spirit of power, love, and wisdom. Perhaps this same reminder is a subtext of this latter passage in 2 Timothy. That is, in teaching Timothy about scripture Paul is reminding him that his Bible practices, made living and active by God's Breath, will inform, form, and reform his own spiritual gifts to lead his congregation in Roman Ephesus to become a spiritually vibrant people that reverses timidity into power, hatred into love, and foolishness into wisdom. Perhaps then to experience "strangely warmed hearts" that leaves them challenged and changed.

¹⁴ It is one of the principal theses of the late W. J. Abraham's "canonical theism" that the church's epistemic criterion is divine revelation, most especially in the Son's incarnation and not scripture. The NT Letter, "To the Hebrews," begins by making a similar claim but in its adumbration of "God speaking" a "word" that climaxes in Heb 4:12-13 by the Pastor's assertion that "God's word is living and active," clearly both the incarnation and scripture (spoken by God) are revelatory words. Rightly, however, Abraham argues that scripture and all other auxiliaries of the Spirit function first and foremost soteriologically. These earthen vessels are transformed under the Spirit's direction into a "complex means of grace that restores the image of God in human beings and brings them into communion with God and with each other in the church;" *Canonical Theism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 3. While I think Abraham needed to develop a more adequate description of the overlapping relationship between scripture's role in revealing God's word and its role within the life of a congregation to cultivate a maturity that enables it to perform good works, I agree with this essential thesis of his "canonical theism" project.

enlivens a community whenever scripture is used in worship as a sacrament of the word, in catechesis as a word of truth, in mission to announce God's benefaction of all creatures great and small, and in personal devotions to hear a word from the Lord God Almighty that baptizes faithful readers into a newness of life with their risen Lord.

Altar Call

What does a covenant-keeping community do when it must determine what is essential for its life and mission at a moment of intramural conflict among its membership? SPU experienced such a moment last spring when we engaged in a sometimes illiberal discussion about human sexuality. There will be other hard moments to come. If this university's mission is "distinctively Wesleyan" as we promise, then we do well to settle our disagreements in the manner of our ancestors at the Jerusalem Council, who gathered together in sanctified conference to listen carefully to the testimonies of those directly involved who had experienced God's guiding presence in the matter before them.¹⁵

¹⁵The legitimate question may be raised whether the analogy of Acts 15 may be successfully applied to an institutional process of discernment: what does Jerusalem have to do with Athens? I remain deeply unsettled whether an ecclesial process of discernment is possible in a non-ecclesial setting like a church-related university. Many, in fact, want to maintain a separation between church and university to keep one at arm's length from the other in the name of academic or religious freedom. This certainly appears true of my ecclesial and academic homes where lines have been drawn in the sand that seem more like thick fortress walls of separation of the kind that forge enmity rather than peace (cf. Eph 2:11-18). What I would argue, however, is that the question remains the same no matter the particular setting whenever a professing Christian community, whether in Athens or in Jerusalem, seeks to settle intramural conflicts between church and academy of the kind the church-related academy is now facing over human sexuality: how might we include the holy Spirit in a "deliberation" (or a "process of discernment") that seeks after the mind of Christ? Naturally the issues at stake and the stakeholders of these issues will differ from setting to setting. The representatives of the special interest groups in one setting will include people in the room not found in the other. Different particulars related to different elements are deliberated that seek different ends but resulting from the same dilemma. But it strikes me that the disciplines and practices that allow the Spirit to move within us and among us are the same: testimony, attentive listening to reasoned debate of competing positions, prayer and worship, biblical and theological catechesis led by the community's magisterium. And then a tarrying on the holy Spirit until a "consensus" (unity, not uniformity) emerges within the group sanctified for this holy end. Again, the real question is not so much the shape and size of the group or the process; the real question is whether we are making "every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3). No doubt the fit and freedom is different in Athens than in Jerusalem. But to exclude the Spirit from any process is to condemn the process to wall-building rather than to "destroying the middle wall of partition, the hostility" that has been "killed through the cross" (Eph 2:14-16). I continue to ask SPU what does it truly mean for us to be a church-related university, even as I continue to ask the FMC to discern whether it is necessary for a FMC-related university to be "circumcised" in order to have "table fellowship" with the church?

In the case of Acts 15, the testimonies were of the signs and wonders of God's Spirit that confirmed that God's way of salvation included non-kosher folks. The entire community gathered to listen carefully to a civil debate between Peter and James and weigh their competing conceptions of purity by the words of scripture rightly read. They gathered to pray and worship in order to discern what seemed good and essential to the HS and then they acted upon it as God's will.

This, my brothers and sisters, is the way forward for us as well. Let SPU become a community of the Spirit that conferences together when facing conflict, that listens carefully to one another—to our testimonies, to our different opinions on the issues at stake, whether as prophets or as priests. Most especially, let us worship and sing Wesley together, let us study carefully scripture's relevant teachings and all other relevant findings from all our academic disciplines in a Spirit-drenched process that seeks to settle our differences in a process of discernment that agrees with what seems good to the holy Spirit and so to us.

By doing so, may we learn to think of one another not as rivals against whom we register unshakeable opposition but as partners in a common work that honors God and that God will hallow as Kingdom-fit and glory-bound.

Epilogue

(1) Spirit of faith, come down,
 reveal the things of God,
and make to us the Godhead known,
 and witness with the blood.
'Tis thine the blood to apply
 and give us eyes to see,
who did for every sinner die
 hath surely died for me.
(2) Inspire the living faith
 (which whosoe'er receive,
the witness in themselves they have
 and consciously believe),
 the faith that conquers all,
and doth the mountain move,
and saves whoe'er on Jesus call,
 and perfects them in love.

*Charles Wesley (Pentecost, 1746)*¹⁶

¹⁶ This is hymn #27 of CW's "Pentecost Hymns" composed a decade following Wesley's Aldersgate experience, which he understood in part as the realization of God's promise of the HS at Pentecost. The first stanza is commentary on his canonical sermons on the Spirit following that experience while the last stanza in particular anticipates Wesley's sermon 20 years later on the "Scripture Way of Salvation."