

What Is the So-Called Wesleyan Quadrilateral?

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The “Wesleyan Quadrilateral” is a contemporary term fashioned by Albert Outler (in the 1960’s) to define his perception of a four-fold approach John Wesley used in theological reflection.¹ Outler observes that Wesley’s “special genius” in terms of theological method was to add “experience” to the traditional Anglican triad of Scripture, tradition and reason.² Understanding that Wesley never used the term “quadrilateral,” Outler implements it (sans any geometric hierarchical intent) to delineate four elements which are distinctive to the Wesleyan theological method: Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience.³ These four elements are interdependent, each being a source of authority for theological inquiry.

Although all four authoritative components are apparent in Wesley’s writings, Scripture is clearly primary and superior to the others.⁴ The authority of Scripture is derived from its revelatory effect on the individual, culminating in the experience of

¹ Michael R. Cosby, "Using the Wesleyan Quadrilateral to Teach Biblical Studies in Christian Liberal Arts Colleges," *Teaching Theology and Religion* vol. 4, no. 2 (2001): 72.

² Albert Cook Outler, "The Wesleyan Quadrilateral in John Wesley," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* vol. 20, no. 1 (Spring 1985): 10.

³ *Ibid.*, 8,14.

⁴ Donald A. D. Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Scripture, Tradition, Reason & Experience as a Model of Evangelical Theology* (Nappanee, Indiana: Francis Asbury Press, 1997), 127.

personal salvation.⁵ As such, the central importance of Scripture to Wesley was its soteriological purpose, the saving truth evident in its pages.⁶ John Wesley frequently spoke of “the whole of Scripture” or “the general tenor of Scripture,” by this he was indicating his wholistic view of the consistent doctrinal message of salvation.⁷

The primacy of Scripture in Wesley’s life is indicated by his self designation of *homo unius libri* (a man of one book).⁸ For John Wesley, Scripture was not simply an object of theological reflection, but the *living* words of God; through the pages of Scripture, God was personally speaking to him.⁹ In his conversation with Scripture, Wesley understood two authoritative ways in which Scripture functions, as source and as norm. In terms of source, Scripture is the place from which the basic Christian doctrinal teachings are acquired. The teachings of Scripture are to be considered in their entirety, irrespective of how unpalatable some might be to Christian individuals. With respect to the norm, Scripture provides an ultimate authority in resolving disputes about whether specific teachings or behaviors are Christian or not. Serving as the norm for Christian thinking, and settling questions relating to Christian faith and practice, Scripture is unaccompanied as our rule of faith.¹⁰

⁵ Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral*, 137.

⁶ W. Stephen Gunther et al., *Wesley and The Quadrilateral: Renewing The Conversation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 132.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 53

⁸ Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral*, 67.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 128

¹⁰ W. Stephen Gunther et al., *Wesley and The Quadrilateral*, 48.

In terms of religious authority, Scripture remained first and foremost as Wesley's rule of faith; however immediately following Scripture in influence was church tradition. Tradition provided a fundamental extension to the witness of Scripture, supplementing church doctrine where Scripture had remained quiet and providing historic insight to "dark or intricate" passages.¹¹ Wesley's understanding of tradition was different from contemporary notions denoting a normative understanding of Christian history. In developing his appreciation of tradition, Wesley focused on Christian antiquity and the Church of England, highlighting the purity of the ancient Church and the Elizabethan era.¹² Finding the purity of the church nearest its apostolic roots, John Wesley sought a "revival" of this early apostolic faith. Relying more on the foundational documents of Anglicanism than the living authority of his day, Wesley believed these documents reflected the purity of apostolic convictions. In character, tradition was a source of renewal and revitalization of the Church.¹³

Implicit in Christian tradition was a role more than illustrative content or curiosity; it was a "living spring" of Christian insight.¹⁴ In its authoritative role, tradition best functioned by illuminating and bringing Biblical truths is to life, providing a plenary sense or meaning to Christian beliefs.¹⁵ Wesley regarded tradition as a wealth of knowledge, illuminating the Scriptures and providing impetus for theological reflection.

¹¹ Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral*, 153, 168.

¹² W. Stephen Gunther et al., *Wesley and The Quadrilateral*, 64-65.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 69-74.

¹⁴ Albert Cook Outler, "The Wesleyan Quadrilateral in John Wesley," *WTJ*, 13.

¹⁵ Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral*, 155, 163.

But not all tradition deserved the same unquestioned confidence. In its second tier, tradition was not regarded as inspired or infallible, resulting in Wesley not hesitating to disagree with early church fathers or the writings of the Church of England. Wesley was careful in his selection and use of church tradition, weighing it against Scripture and reason for correct interpretation.¹⁶

Wesley extensively employed reason as a source of religious authority in evaluating the credentials of tradition and theological implications of Scripture. As a constitutional element of being human, reason was regarded to be a unique gift from God to mankind, separating us from the beasts.¹⁷ A part of the Enlightenment era, Wesley was empirical, championing reason as a tool or capacity for understanding and rejecting the notion of reason as an independent source of knowledge.¹⁸ While information and content can be extracted from Scripture, tradition, and experience, reason yields no content of its own, absent the input of the others. While reason is of no use without the data of Scripture, tradition, and experience, information derived from these three cannot be formulated and assimilated without reason.¹⁹

John Wesley while faithful to the primacy of Scripture, appreciated reason's authoritative role in understanding and communicating the soteriological message it contained. Wesley regarded reason as essential to the Christian and saw no inconsistency between it and the authority of Scripture. For Wesley, reason reflecting upon Scripture

¹⁶ Ibid., 154,158.

¹⁷ Ibid., 127, 170.

¹⁸ W. Stephen Gunther et al., *Wesley and The Quadrilateral*, 85, 89.

¹⁹ Ibid., 77-78.

provided reliable saving knowledge of God.²⁰ While asserting the religious authority of reason, Wesley understood reason was limited. Reason cannot produce the essentials of Christian life without faith, and the revelation of Scripture. Given the fallenness of man, reason is subject to error and God has limited our reason to humble us.²¹ Wesley never claimed that he received faith through reason but he did claim the reason was compatible with faith.²²

During Wesley's day, Scripture, tradition, and reason were three sources of theological reflection emphasized by the Anglican Church (of which Wesley was a part). Wesley's additional insights into experience as a source of religious authority are regarded by many to be his greatest contribution to the development of Christian theology.²³ Wesley's concept of experience was both empirical and experiential. Empirical knowledge of experience is concrete in nature, perceived by the natural senses, and generally capable of corporate (public) assessment. Experiential knowledge of experience is derived from personal or interpersonal understanding and insights, perceived by the "spiritual senses," and difficult to assess publicly because of its individualistic nature.²⁴ Wesley believed religious experience (both corporate and personal) confirmed scriptural truth and enhanced Biblical interpretation as it coincided

²⁰ Ibid., 78-79,94.

²¹ Ibid., 99.

²² Ibid., 79.

²³ Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral*, 201.

²⁴ Ibid., 203-204.

with the truth of Scripture.²⁵ By affirming the experiential aspect of religious faith, Wesley sought to shelter Christians from spiritually lifeless orthodoxy and cultivate the vitality of a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ.²⁶ The knowledge of God's presence (similar to Wesley's own heartwarming experience at Aldersgate) in the life of the individual Christian authenticates the salvation experience, bearing out what is already known to the individual through Scripture.

Wesley's keen awareness of experience included perception of its limitations. The individualistic nature of religious experience could easily evolve in misinterpretation of its meaning. Authentic religious experience is not something so private and subjective that it cannot be understood by others. Conscious of this, Wesley maintained that religious experience must be vetted for its faithfulness to Scripture. All three antecedents Scripture, tradition and reason can be used to substantiate interpretation of religious experience.²⁷

It was never Wesley's intention to create a "theological method," much less a "quadrilateral." However in his corpus of writings the implementation of the four elements as well as his application of a "theological method" is evident. Contemporary theologians would do well to apply Wesley's theological method of inquiry. Those utilizing Wesley's name in application of the four authorities of the quadrilateral should remain faithful to his unyielding affirmation that Scripture is primary among the four, always subordinating the other three authorities.

²⁵ Ibid., 216.

²⁶ Ibid., 201.

²⁷ Ibid., 221-222.

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