

# Wesleyan Quadrilateral

## Discerning God's Will: A Process

Portions of this text were taken from an article by Elaine A. Robinson, Assistant Professor of Theology and Methodist Studies at Brite Divinity School, Texas Christian University, Fort Worth TX

The process of discerning God's "heart and mind" and putting Christian beliefs into practice in changing circumstances was central to John Wesley's ministry and theology.

In discerning the truth of God, Wesley scholars indicate that he made a considerable contribution to modern theological method. This contribution is today called the "Wesleyan Quadrilateral".

The Quadrilateral, derived by the Methodist scholar Albert Outler from Wesley's works, views a four-point method of discerning God's mind and heart, with Scripture, Tradition, Experience and Reason in dialogue. The 1996 Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church affirms that Wesley believed that the living core of the Christian faith was revealed in Scripture, illumined by Tradition, vivified in personal Experience and confirmed by Reason.

Tradition is the collective wisdom of the church in interpreting Scripture. Experience is to the person what tradition is to the whole Christian community. Reason is the critical discipline used in judging the credibility of all interpretation. Tradition, Experience, Reason are ways of understanding and interpreting the Scripture.

The quadrilateral is not a geometric metaphor, as if the square had four sides, all equal. Rather, Wesley's view is that Scripture is central and normative. The principle which the Quadrilateral seeks to display is the interdependence of all four authorities under the primacy of Scripture. In other words, we must scrutinize the Bible in light of church Tradition, personal Experience and logical Reasoning to see its truth fully.

Perhaps a different graphic, shown in the diagram at right, better illustrates the interdependent relationship of the four with Scripture as central and core.

Although some might think of the quadrilateral as Wesley's "method" for theological reflection, today this approach helps us express and live out our faith and discern God's truth.

### Scripture

Scripture facilitates a deeper understanding of the ways and will of God. Its revelatory capacity is essential to discipleship in its witness to the person and work of Jesus Christ and to the acts of God in history. The Bible remains a source of deepening and guiding our faith, and, in our postmodern era, it is a place where all Christians gather as equals to be fed and nourished by God's Word.

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### Tradition

Tradition, which includes both our Methodist faith and Christian heritage, provides us with the wisdom of the past and promotes accountability in discipleship. The witnesses of the past provide guidance for today by enabling us to see both the faithfulness of our forebears and the ways in which they strayed from faithful discipleship. Tradition can thus enable us to embrace diversity and foster community, while holding us accountable to something larger than ourselves. Even as Jesus Christ critiqued the religious tradition of his heritage, he remained steeped in its teachings and practices. This was true for John Wesley and his renewal movement. It remains true for us today.

### Experience

The third source, Experience, is often misunderstood and is most in danger of feeding the postmodern tendency toward relativism. Experience, in Wesley's understanding, refers to a vital experience of God's grace, one that is affirmed within the broader Christian community—past and present—that holds us accountable to the gospel. This Experience of God can be one of personal assurance or wandering in the wilderness; it may call us to prophetic critique or priestly compassion toward others. The experiential dimension of our faith journey is most fully expressed in the love God shows toward us and our response to that love, without which discipleship is impossible.

### Reason

Finally, Reason can and does continue to shape our discipleship, even as postmodernism illuminates its limits. Reason is a God-given gift that enables us to interpret Scripture, Tradition, and Experience in light of the world in which we find ourselves. Reason allows us to study and grow in knowledge and to make judgments about discipleship in the world. When we use the gift of Reason to shed light on the Bible, Tradition, and Experience, our Christian formation deepens, taking on new forms and shapes in different eras and changing circumstances.

Properly understood, the Wesleyan quadrilateral provides us with a bridge enabling us to carry our basic Christian beliefs into the world. It offers us a way to practice our faith and grow in our discipleship in the midst of our evolving postmodern context.