

DOING THEOLOGY: A DISTINCTLY METHODIST APPROACH

— James Ellis Griffeth

Part One: Introduction

Methodism has for many years approached theology with an open-mindedness that some have mistaken for doctrinal laxity.

Many have quoted and endorsed John Wesley's cooperative embracing of other Christians with "If your heart is as my heart, give me your hand." Actually Mr. Wesley was a more astute theologian than that statement would indicate.

Wesley was open-minded, but he also had a keen and discerning mind and was quick and effective in offering theological correctives to his contemporaries. He was, in fact, a staunch teacher and defender of the basic premises of the Christian faith.

Two other quotations from Wesley make that clearer:

1. "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; and in all things, charity."
2. "As to all opinions which do not strike at the root of Christianity, we think and let think."

Meanwhile, even with religious toleration and theological diversity, Methodists have always endorsed a core of doctrinal standards. These standards have not, however, been expressed as litmus tests by which Methodists separated themselves from other believers.

Our theological standards have been approached as a living core of beliefs "revealed in Scripture, illuminated by tradition, vivified in personal and corporate experience, and confirmed by reason." (2012 *Discipline*, pp. 55) Our various beliefs are then evaluated utilizing all four of these elements.

Albert Outler, perhaps the greatest American Wesley scholar of the past generation, referred to the combination of Scripture, tradition, experience and reason as the "Wesleyan quadrilateral" and the phrase has stuck for a number of years although Wesley himself never used it.

Perhaps it is best to understand the four elements of the "quadrilateral" as being in a dynamic relationship (maybe even dynamic tension) with each other and with each one contributing to the other. Although we Methodists have always affirmed the primacy of Scripture, we are aided in approaching theology by evaluating every theological idea *via* Scripture, tradition, experience and reason.

Every time we overvalue one element or undervalue another element we end up with unbalanced theology. We have all known persons who emphasized their experience with God, but seemed to care little for serious Bible study or careful thinking. Most of us have known people who knew a lot about the Bible or a lot about doctrine, but seemed to have little experience with or relationship with our living God.

I believe that when we are well grounded in all four aspects of the quadrilateral, we are likely to be on solid ground as faithful believers.

In the following sections, I will say more about each of the four elements of the quadrilateral. Meanwhile, I invite you to ponder how well balanced you are in your theological approach.

Part Two: Scripture

As I stated in the first section, our theological standards as Methodists have been approached as a living core of beliefs “revealed in Scripture, illuminated by tradition, vivified in personal and corporate experience, and confirmed by reason.” (2012 *Discipline*, pp. 55)

I also suggested that a key to a healthy and vibrant faith is the keeping of those four elements of the “quadrilateral” in balance with each other.

In this section I want to lift up Scripture as the “first among equals” of the four elements of the quadrilateral. One of the rallying cries of the Protestant Reformation of the early 1500’s was *sola scriptura* (scripture alone) as the source of the good news of God for the salvation of the human family. This came against the Roman Catholic emphases of that day on tradition and reason to the neglect of Scripture.

Our Protestant forebears then spoke of the “primacy of Scripture,” that is, Scripture is the first and foremost resource for us in our understanding of the ways of God and God’s desire for our salvation.

“Primacy of Scripture” may be a better term for us than “Scripture alone.”

One could argue that the Scripture is a product of the tradition. While we affirm that Scripture is inspired by God, we also acknowledge that it was written down and edited and translated by fallible human beings. And certainly the interpretation of the Scripture over the centuries has been a product of the church tradition. But because we affirm that Scripture was inspired by God, we also affirm that it takes first place ahead of the centuries-old tradition, which brings it to us.

In that same vein Scripture has primacy over our personal and communal experience. To be sure, our own personal experiences and our experience as a community of faith help us to identify with and understand the various experiences reported in Scripture. And the experiences of the people of faith as recorded in the Scripture give us clarity and encouragement and hope in dealing with our own experiences. At the same time Scripture offers a wonderful corrective on those days when we are tempted to “follow our feelings” in directions that are not compatible with Scripture.

Without the use of reason we cannot begin to comprehend Scripture. Reason is a powerful tool for comprehending all aspects of life around us. But reason alone does not bring us the good news of God’s love for us in Jesus Christ. Scripture brings us that good news, and we thank God for the capacity of reason to help us comprehend that good news.

Perhaps in today’s terms, Scripture is best understood as the “sourcebook” of our faith. It is the primary resource on which our faith is built, although we are grateful for the contributions of tradition, experience and reason to assist us in our faith journey.

Sadly, the Scripture is a battleground for some Christians, pitting some factions within congregations or denominations against other factions within those congregations or denominations.

From my point of view, the trouble begins when folks fail to see the Scripture for what it is, namely a collection of writings **inspired by God** and written down by faithful, but fallible,

human beings at various times over more than 1000 years and occasionally edited by other faithful, but fallible, human beings along the way.

When folks seek to interpret “inspired by God” as “dictated by God” and to use words like “inherent, infallible, literal word of God” to describe the Scripture, they are locking themselves into one interpretation of Scripture. And it is not an interpretation that will stand the test of tradition, experience or reason.

When folks try to read the Scripture as a scientific textbook (especially regarding creation) and fail to see that the Bible came to us in its present form 1500 years before the development of the scientific method, they pervert both science and scriptural faith.

Thanks be to God, we have the freedom and the encouragement to see Scripture for what it is, a treasure trove of grace-filled good news about the mighty acts of God on behalf of human beings, culminating in the great news in Jesus Christ our Lord. We celebrate God’s gift to us of **Scripture!**

Part Three: Tradition

As I stated in the first section, our Methodist theology has been approached as a living core of beliefs “revealed in Scripture, illuminated by tradition, vivified in personal and corporate experience, and confirmed by reason.” (2012 *Discipline*, pp. 55)

I also suggested that a key to a healthy and vibrant faith is the keeping of those four elements of the “quadrilateral” in balance with each other. This article’s focus is on **tradition**.

Sometime back I was evaluating the written theological work of a United Methodist candidate for ordination. In discussing tradition, he proudly wrote of the congregation he was serving and its great tradition “going back over 100 years.” I found myself writing in the margins of that candidate’s paper, “Be aware that the Christian tradition is 2000 years old and our Judeo-Christian tradition is 4000 years old. 100 years is rather short in comparison”

Being aware of the great heritage we have received through that long and noble 4000 year-old tradition helps us to keep grounded in the things that have survived the test of time. It also helps us not to be carried away by ephemeral trends that have little substance and little connection to our primary mission as the people of God.

Previously we remembered the primacy of **Scripture**. We also remembered that Scripture is a product of the tradition. We believe that Scripture is inspired by God. We also believe that it was written down and edited and translated by fallible human beings, who were living their lives within the context of their community of faith.

Undeniably the scriptures came to us in the context of the tradition inspired by the Spirit of God. Conversely, the better we understand the tradition out of which Scripture arose, the better will we understand the Scripture itself.

In that same vein, tradition impacts our personal and communal **experience**. No one knows better than Southerners the joys and burdens of growing up rooted in the traditions of family and community. The joys come from knowing who we are and whose we are. Within the Christian tradition there is both joy and freedom in knowing that our identity as children of God is sealed by our experience of the saving grace of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. And there is joy in having the good and brave examples of faithful men and women across the centuries as mentors and guides.

Sometimes the burden of family and community tradition is that we are not given permission to be different than those who have a claim upon us. In those times we are grateful for the Christian tradition, with its encouraging stories of faithful men and women, who, across the centuries and in the face of great opposition, struck off in new and bold directions following the call of God upon their lives.

Certainly, at least in the western world, tradition has taught us how to think and explore and, therefore, has teamed up with our God-given **reason** to open up a wonderful world of ideas and explorations. As new vistas are opened to us by reason and exploration, a thorough grounding in the great tradition of 4000 years will help us to know which new possibilities are consistent with the aims and goals of the Kingdom of God and which are likely to lead us away from what God intends for God's creatures and God's whole creation.

We believe in the primacy of Scripture and seek to be "people of the book." We are also grateful for the contributions of tradition: (1) 232 years of Methodist church experience, (2) almost 300 years of Wesleyan Christianity, (3) almost 500 years of Protestant Christianity with the contributions of Luther, Calvin, Armenius and a host of others, (4) 1500 years of pre-Protestant Christianity with the contributions of apostles, martyrs, missionaries, translators like Jerome, leaders like Gregory, scholars like Augustine and Aquinas and Anselm, teachers, monks, nuns and preachers, and (5) 2000 years of pre-Christian Jewish heritage of God's dealing with our ancestors in Exodus and Exile as well as conquest and kingdom.

We celebrate God's gift to us of **tradition!**

Part Four: Experience

As I stated in the first section, our Methodist theology has been approached as a living core of beliefs "revealed in Scripture, illuminated by Tradition, vivified in personal and corporate experience, and confirmed by reason." (2012 *Discipline*, pp. 55)

I also suggested that a key to a healthy and vibrant faith is the keeping of those four elements of the "quadrilateral" in balance with each other. This article's focus is on **experience**.

A common expression in our culture is, "There is no substitute for experience." And we know that it is profoundly true. If we have need of a physician, a plumber, an auto mechanic or a hairdresser, we want someone with experience, not a raw rookie. For that reason, the training for most professions and vocations includes supervised experience.

When we are choosing persons for leadership roles in the church, we also look for persons who have experience, not only in the sense of having proven expertise in the tasks that they are to do, but also in the sense of having walked the Christian journey enough to have experienced the activity of God upon their lives.

We are also careful to distinguish between experience and enthusiasm. We value persons who are enthusiastic about their faith. But we are also wary of those who exhibit enthusiasm, but show little depth in their faith experience. Enthusiasm alone is a bit like "being in love with love." Christian experience is more like knowing that we are loved by God — and then loving God in return. Christian experience is a lifestyle of interactive love with God on a daily and lifetime basis.

We, Methodists, cherish the "Aldersgate experience" of John Wesley wherein Wesley felt his "heart strangely warmed" and felt that he did "trust in God for salvation." What we sometimes

underestimate is how Wesley's Experience with God grew and deepened and expressed itself in ministry for 53 years thereafter. What we underestimate even more is how Wesley's preparation for experiencing God for the first 35 years of his life prepared him to recognize and incorporate that experience when it did come to him.

That helps us see that the experience of God is both instantaneous and a lifelong pursuit.

Given the mystery of the doctrine of the Trinity, sometimes people speak of their personal experience with God as a "personal relationship with Jesus Christ." Others may speak of being touched (or visited) by the Holy Spirit of God. In either case persons are describing the awesome experience of having their lives encountered by and changed by the Holy One.

Previously we remembered the primacy of **Scripture**. We also remembered that Scripture is a product of the experience. We believe that Scripture emerged out of the faithful experience of human beings who had encountered the mighty power of God in the midst of their lives and had then been inspired to tell and write the story.

Additionally, as later people of faith encountered God, both in Scripture and in their own personal and communal experience, they began to recognize and practice the expressions of faith that contribute to authentic lives of faith. And so experience influenced the development of church **Tradition** and Tradition served to authenticate faithful experience.

Certainly, at least in the western world, experience has taught us how to think and explore and, therefore, has teamed up with our God-given **reason** to assure us that we are loved immensely by God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Moreover, we utilize our human reason to help us distinguish true Christian experiences from ephemeral events that are merely exciting or enthused or temporarily fascinating.

We believe in the primacy of Scripture and seek to be "people of the book" and we honor our Tradition as well. We are also grateful for the contributions of experience: (1) awareness of the presence of God within us individually, (2) awareness of the presence of God among us corporately, (3) awareness of the presence of God among the people of God historically, and (4) awareness of the promise of the presence of God to us eternally.

We celebrate God's gift to us of **experience!**

Part Five: Reason

As I stated in the first section, our Methodist theology has been approached as a living core of beliefs "revealed in Scripture, illuminated by Tradition, vivified in personal and corporate experience, and confirmed by reason." (2012 *Discipline*, pp. 55)

I also suggested that a key to a healthy and vibrant faith is the keeping of those four elements of the "quadrilateral" in balance with each other. This article's focus is on **reason**.

John Wesley and the Methodist movement came along about a century after the Age of Enlightenment began to make a serious impact upon the lives of "everyday folk" in Europe. Those of us living in the 21st century have lived all our lives enjoying the contributions of the Enlightenment: scientific investigation, logical thinking, rational inquiry, and the inventions that grew out of all of that.

All of those contributions of the Enlightenment were often summarized by the term **reason**. We are aware that the largest influence of the Enlightenment was on those who were sufficiently educated to comprehend the sea change of intellectual life that it brought. The "everyday folk" in

the 1700's were being impacted by the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution, which was growing out of the inventions that were being spurred by Enlightenment exploration and thought.

In Wesley's day, Enlightenment-connected **reason** was perceived to be a threat to true Christianity, which, up to that time, had been dispensed by the church authorities on a "take it or leave it" basis, with little allowance for input from the pew.

Many advocates of the Enlightenment welcomed the threat to Christianity. They were embracing the newly discovered potential of human beings and enjoying the advances that people were making. Many of them also believed that Enlightenment **reason** would soon make religion obsolete.

Some church leaders feared and opposed the emerging insights of Enlightenment reason out of concern that such **reason** would destroy the Christian faith.

That "either/or" thinking is expressed in the heretical motto at the bottom of the Griffeth heraldic shield. It reads in Latin, *Non crux sed lux*. Literally it translates, "Not the cross, but the light." What it means is "Not Christianity, but the Enlightenment." Lordy, how our ancestors embarrass us! 😊

Against that background, it is remarkable that Wesley and the other early Methodists were able to embrace both Christian faith and Enlightenment reason. Rather than falling into an "either/or" dichotomy, Wesley embraced faith and reason as companions that learned from each other without harm to either!

Over and over in Wesley's writings we read such phrases as "the marriage of knowledge and vital piety." Reading Wesley's sermons reminds us that he was well versed in the **reason** of the Enlightenment and utilized it as a tool for deepening faith. Reading Wesley's journals and his 1747 book of home medical remedies, *Primitive Physic*, reveals his fruitful exploration of various Enlightenment themes, including Ben Franklin's electrification experiments.

We have seen how **Scripture**, **Tradition** and **experience** have informed each other and have strengthened each other in the Christian faith across the life of the church. Now we see how reason becomes a vital fourth partner in the informing and strengthening of faith. Put bluntly, **Scripture**, **Tradition** and **experience** teach us how to reason about faith and reason helps us to think analytically and creatively about **Scripture**, **Tradition** and **experience**.

As "people of the book" we believe in the primacy of **Scripture** and we honor **Tradition** and **experience** as well. We are also grateful for the contributions of **reason**: (1) the application of learning and logic, (2) the understanding of the world around us and the understanding of the context and culture of the Bible and the history of the church, (3) the capacity to evaluate the experiences occurring to us and within us, and (4) the attainment of knowledge that deepens "vital piety."

We celebrate God's gift to us of **reason**!