

Rev. Phil Blackwell • Sunday, April 3, 2016  
Text: John 20:19-31



First United  
Methodist Church

DOWNTOWN FOR GOOD

203 Wisconsin Avenue | Madison, WI 53703  
608-256-9061 | [www.fumc.org](http://www.fumc.org)

“The Wesleyan Quadrilateral” . . . John Wesley never talked like that. He never referred to a “quadrilateral” as a process for determining what we believe and do as Christians. But it is a pattern that a revered church historian of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Albert Outler, saw in Wesley’s works -- Wesley’s 65 years of preaching sermons, writing books, engaging in public discourse, teaching his itinerant Methodist ministers, and translating poems and hymns into English.

In Outler’s view, John Wesley had four angles of approach to determining what constitutes faithful living: scripture, tradition, experience, and reason. He called it the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral.” Eventually, Outler was upset with himself for using that term because he was afraid people would turn it into the “Wesleyan Equilateral.” Outler was a traditional biblical purist, so, no, not all four sources of authority were equal in his mind. The scripture is primary, Outler insisted, but it is not unitary. Ultimately, to discern the truth of any issue, we have to touch all four bases. We can start anywhere among them and, giving scripture a privileged place, still we must consider tradition, experience, and reason.

This is how we in the Wesleyan tradition come to know what we know about the Christian faith and its implication for our lives. We can put ourselves in the same position as Thomas when he asks in the Gospel of John, “How am I to know that Jesus is risen? I cannot just take your word for it, accepting your experience as if it were mine. No, I am aware of what the ancient texts have said, I know what our forebears have thought and promised, but I need to experience it for myself. And I need to conduct my scientific examination of seeing the nail holes in his hands and touching the wound in his side.” Here is a rigor of investigation that would make John Wesley proud.

I had an ethics professor, James Gustafson, who said that the challenge is to make decisions “in the interstices,” in the middle. If something is “black or white,” then there is no ethical determination to make. But it is in all the grey areas in between, living as we do “in the interstices,” that we must be rigorous in knowing what we know. The rigor is represented in the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. As our denomination’s **Book of Discipline** puts it, “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.”

So, **revealed in scripture**. The Bible is not a book; it is a library. It is a collection of 66 books by Protestant counting, a few more in the Roman Catholic edition. These books were written over thousands of years by several different authors in many different places. There is history – Samuel and Kings; there is pre-history – Genesis and Exodus. There is poetry, the Psalms; there is wisdom in Job and Ecclesiastes; there are the major prophets, Isaiah and Jeremiah, and the minor prophets, Zephaniah and Malachi. We count 37 books in what we call “The Old Testament.”

And then, there is “The New Testament,” 27 books including the four gospels, all the same story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, but told very differently – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The history book, The Acts of the Apostles. Probably the oldest materials in the Christian collection are the letters of Paul and Peter. And then, that final book of imagination and vision, Revelation.

Wesley insisted that we read the Bible in community, with one another, otherwise we can come up with some pretty idiosyncratic interpretations. Remember that Shakespeare said that “the Devil can quote scripture for his own cause,” and we can misuse the text, too. So, it is not just throwing out a Bible verse to justify a prejudice; it is a matter of disciplined study.

I just finished reading a book I asked for as a Christmas gift, **The Love of God**, by Jon Levenson, a Hebrew scholar at Harvard. It is 200 pages of a dense explication of a single biblical concept, the love of God moving in two directions: the love of God for us, and our love of God. The book contains the explication of complex Hebrew terms, the interpretations given them in the rabbinic tradition, what the scholars of the Middle Ages made of the concept, and what changed in Jewish understanding of the love of God after the Enlightenment.

Remember that the books of the Bible were not written in English; it all is in translation. It is cannot be, as one stalwart is reputed to have said, “If the King James Version of the Bible was good enough for Jesus, it is good enough for me.” Scripture -- “primary,” yes, but as a subject of disciplined study in community.

Revealed in scripture, **illumined by tradition**. John Wesley was a traditionalist, insisting on remaining in the fold as an Anglican clergyman even when the hierarchy wanted to rid the Established Church of him. His theory of grace was too expansive, his embrace of the Holy Spirit too enthusiastic, his willingness to minister to the commoners too vulgar. When the Bishop of Bristol refused to appoint him to a parish, Wesley proclaimed, “The world is my parish!” Talk about turning a necessity into a virtue! For the next 50 years he seldom preached in a pulpit at 11 a.m. on a Sunday morning, but in the market square, in the open pit mine, in the simple meeting house.

But he would not let go of the rich tradition of the Anglican Church, which is directly descended from the Roman Catholic Church, and at the same time he held firmly to aspects of the Protestant Reformation which fortified his Methodist impulses. Illumined by tradition with one foot in the Roman Catholic world and the other in the Protestant world. That is one reason that the United Methodist Church is not a doctrinal church. We do not claim that there is one creed, and only one, that portrays the Christian faith, but rather we embrace a history of creeds, each one revealing some aspect of the prevailing truth.

When we celebrate the Sacrament of Baptism, we are experiencing the living faith of an ancient tradition. When we celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion, we are placing ourselves at the table of an historic enactment of the Christian faith. When we sing hymns and follow a liturgical pattern of expression, we are living out of the abiding gift of our broad base of traditions that define Methodism.

Early in my years in ministry some colleagues showed me the power of the liturgical calendar, how we move from Advent to Christmas to the Epiphany, and on to Lent, Easter, and the Pentecost. It has kept me from getting stuck in one place; it has shown me how Holy Communion can be solemn during Lent and joyous now in the Easter season. And then this same clergy group showed me the genius of the lectionary, the three-year cycle of readings for each Sunday – an Old Testament reading, a psalm, an epistle from the New Testament, and a gospel reading. We seldom read all four on a Sunday, but we always read the gospel because it is the text in which Jesus comes closest to us in our lives. In my very first summer before I was introduced to the lectionary I preached everything I had learned in my seminary class on Matthew, and it was only the end of August. Now what? The tradition of the lectionary keeps us moving.

Revealed in scripture, illumined by tradition, **vivified in personal experience**, this is the one John Wesley received most criticism for championing. It sounded too undisciplined, too open to abuse, you know, when someone says, “I did it because God told me to.” Wesley meant something quite strict by it; it is not just a validation of any personal experience we might have, like giving academic credit for “life experience.” What do we experience in life that validates what we believe? We know the dramatic turning point of the familiar hymn: “I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see.” “How have you experienced that in your own life?” Wesley might ask. Or, as he did ask, “How is it with your soul?” And not only “you,” singular, but also “you” as a community. As a congregation, when have we found our way? When have our eyes been opened to a new reality?

The front page story in the Wisconsin State Journal on Friday . . . breaking news. In the midst of all of the idiocy of the political campaigning here is the story of a downtown congregation, First Church, that has had its eyes opened to a critical need. We saw children, infants, sleeping outside at our front door because there was no room for them at the Salvation Army facility. “No room at the inn.” So, with the inspired leadership of Karen Andro and a host of church members on the outreach team, we have devised a plan for making classroom space downstairs available for homeless children and their families as an overflow site for the Salvation Army’s ministry. There are complexities, question marks, challenges, policies and procedures to refine . . . but once our eyes were opened, we could not shut them again. We need the help of everyone involved in this church to make it work. As we work together we answer Wesley’s question of how it is with our soul. At the same time, we ask the city and the county and the state, “Where is your soul?”

And so, too, it is with our work on gender identity issues, and the environment, and race, and incarceration, and public policy, and all of the other eye-opening revelations of what it means to be a city center congregation “downtown for good.”

Revealed in scripture, illumined by tradition, vivified in personal experience, and **confirmed by reason**. John Wesley said that he was “a man of one book,” the Bible, but, in fact, he read and wrote extensively. Go to the modest home across the courtyard of Wesley’s Chapel in London and see a sampling of the hundreds and hundreds of books he owned and read and some of which he taught as a lecturer at Oxford University. He was fascinated by science and studied medical advancements, especially in the use of electro-magnetic forces. When someone criticized the Methodists for being too enthusiastic and unthinking, Wesley countered, “Sir, are you awake? For us all irrational religion is false religion.” The life of the mind matters; it is a gift from God.

So, when we read scripture reasonably we know that the “ends of the earth” referred to in Genesis (1:9) and the “four corners of the earth” mentioned in Revelation (7:1) are not representing a biblical insistence that the world is flat, but both are poetic ways of referring to the extremities of our knowledge of the world. We learn from science, so when Galileo and others prove new ways of seeing the universe, our theology must adapt. A gift of the scientific method to theological thinking is the need for constant self-correction; what we know for sure must always be open to question.

And maybe science can learn from the church. When we held our five-week Lenten discussion on race in Madison, we called it, “Of One Blood.” That is the description of the entire human race in Acts 17:26, we all are of one blood. Well, as I shared with you before, my authority in the area of apes and evolution, Russ Tuttle, confirms that the notion of “race” is a social construct, not a hematological one. There is no difference in the blood of people whom we assign to different races. We all are one, just as Paul preached in Athens.

So, there we have it . . . the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. We can start at any point, but we must be rigorous enough to touch all the bases. And in so doing, we actively are approaching the living core of the Christian faith in a disciplined Methodist fashion.

Amen.