

WESLEYAN QUADRILATERAL

By Bishop Pete Torio Jr.

Introduction

According to Dr. Thomas Oden, Wesley's theological method may be summarized as "the authority of Scripture understood in the light of tradition, reason and experience." This formulation does not make tradition, reason and experience as equal in authority to God's Word as revealed in the Bible.¹

*In the homily on "The Promise of Understanding," Wesley wrote: "It is the Divine Spirit 'who worketh in us both to will and to do of his good pleasure,' of this, experience, and reason, and Scripture convince every sincere inquirer," which is God's "particular method of working."*²

The authority of Scripture understood in the light of tradition, reason and experience for theological reflection had been popularly known in Methodism as the Wesleyan Quadrilateral.³ As strongly stated, the Quadrilateral is not an "Equilateral." The four sources and pillars of Christian faith and praxis are not equal in authority. This is the essential and uncompromising thesis of this evangelical Methodist understanding of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral.

SCRIPTURE

Divine Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures

The Bible is not the product of human initiative, invention, or ingenuity. 2 Peter 1:20 – 21 is instructive on this: "²⁰ Above all, you must

¹ Thomas C. Oden, "God and Providence," John Wesley's Teachings, Volume 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 81

² John Wesley, "The Promise of Understanding," B 4:284, sec. 1.3; Oden, 81

³ The original generation of the "Quadrilateral" as we now call it was either spelled out or implied in John Wesley's writings. Thomas Oden mentions the Sermon on "Original Sin," the sermon on "On Sin in Believers," and in the "Appeals"; "On Sin in Believers," B 1:318 – 319, J V:144 – 156; Alternatively, Wesley listed Scripture, reason, and experience as doctrinal norms in "The Repentance of Believers," sec. 1.2, and on other occasions "Scripture, reason, and Christian antiquity," as in his preface to his collected works, Volume 1 (1771). This method, as defined more fully by Albert C. Outler, Donald Thorsen, And Charles Yrigoyen, appears in some form in all United Methodist Disciplines written after 1968 and revised in 1988; quoted from Oden, 81.

understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation of things.²¹ For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:20 – 21, NIV)

In "A Clear and Concise Demonstration of the Divine Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures," John Wesley argued that evil persons and angels could not have written the Scriptures. The holy character and message of the Bible contradict their own.

But even good persons and angels could not possibly write Scripture on their own. They can write good things on the basis of their human or angelic initiative, invention, or ingenuity, but what they write would not be classified as Scripture. They would only be good things, good writings.

Without the Holy Spirit of God, no prophecy would have been produced. This inspiration brings forth Scripture. Good persons and angels cannot say "Thus saith the Lord" when in fact they are the ones who said it. Scripture is the revealed Word of God. Without God and His revelation there is no Scripture.⁴

Thomas Oden explains it this way: "God's speech to us, of course, is written and addressed through human persons within different historical contexts, but its author and inspirer is God.⁵ We can take it for granted in reading the testimony of the prophets and the apostles that this is God's own self-communication⁶ to be taken with utter seriousness as reliable divine address."⁷

The Primacy of Scripture

Scripture is first in importance, rank, and significance in the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. The primacy of Scripture in theological reflection and action is essential if we are to understand our Wesleyan heritage correctly.

⁴ John Wesley, "A Clear and Concise Demonstration of the Divine Inspiration of Holy Scriptures," J XI:484, B 2:310 – 311

⁵ LW 2:62 – 69, 90, 100, 104; 5:245; Oden, 74

⁶ LW 2:148, 3:127; B 11:291, 504; Oden, 74

⁷ John Wesley, "A Clear and Concise Demonstration of the Divine Inspiration of Holy Scriptures," J XI:484, B 2:310 – 311; Oden, 74

Reading the mind of John Wesley, Thomas Oden emphasizes that reason and experience do not become our masters in understanding the revealed Word of God.

Long before modern hermeneutics, Wesley made clear that “the Church is to be judged by Scripture, not the Scripture by the Church.” The Scriptures both the Old and New Testaments guide the judgments of the Church. Wesley added, “And Scripture is the best expounder of Scripture. The best way, therefore, to understand it, is carefully to compare Scripture with Scripture, and thereby learn the true meaning of it.”⁸

Wesley’s exegesis focused on the practical application of Scripture in walking in the way of holiness.⁹ Christian experience becomes a confirming exercise, not a determining force, in wise and balanced forms of Scriptural interpretation. Scripture, when experienced, acts as a corrective to rash and imbalanced interpretations.¹⁰ Reason and experience in this way become servants, not masters, of the believers’ understanding of revelation history.¹¹

John Wesley was determined to live his Christian life as a man of one book. He said, “O give me that book! At any price give me the Book of God! I have it. Here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be *homo unius libri*.¹²

Like John Wesley, the Apostle Paul understood that Scripture is important in leading us to faith. He wrote to Timothy: “¹⁴ But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it ¹⁵ and how from childhood you have known sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶ All scripture is inspired by God and is^[a] useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that the person of God

⁸ John Wesley, “Popery Calmly Considered,” J X:142, sec. 1.6; Oden 68

⁹ MOB, 89 – 96; Oden, 69

¹⁰ B 4:246 – 247; 9:378 – 379; 11:509; Oden, 69

¹¹ B 3:16, 200 – 201; 4:198 – 199, 219; Oden, 69

¹² SOSS, pref. 5; B 1:104 – 105; Oden, 65

may be proficient, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:14 – 17, NRSVUE).

The Scripture is meaningful for its redemptive (“salvation through faith in Christ Jesus), instructive (“teaching”), corrective (“for reproof, for correction”) and transformative (“training in righteousness”) purpose.

Practical Guide to Reading the Holy Scriptures

We do not only read the Bible. We also understand and interpret it. According to Thomas Oden, John Wesley followed Martin Luther and John Calvin in their approach when they read Biblical passages. This approach includes understanding each word, text in context, preferably in the original language, grasped analogically in relation to the whole message of Scripture.¹³

John Wesley enumerated five practical steps to enable serious Bible study:

- 1) Set apart a specified daily time for Scripture study.
- 2) Read the Hebrew Bible in conjunction with the New Testament, reading both “with a single eye to know the whole will of God, and a fixed resolution to do it.”
- 3) “Have a constant eye to the analogy of faith, the connection and harmony there is between those grand, fundamental doctrines, original sin, justification by faith, the new birth, inward and outward holiness.”
- 4) Let your reading be surrounded by earnest prayer, “seeing Scripture can only be understood through the same Spirit whereby it was given.”
- 5) Pause frequently for honest personal self – examination.¹⁴

Let us not forget one important truth in our Bible study. The Lord Jesus

¹³ Oden, 71

¹⁴ ENOT, pref. 18, I; lx; cf. B 1:58 – 59, 106; 2:102 – 103; 4:5 – 6, 246 – 247; 9:201, 353, 378 – 379; 11:169, 504, 509; Oden, 71

Christ is the central message of Scripture. He said: “⁴⁴ Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” ⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, ⁴⁶ and said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, ⁴⁷ and that repentance for^[a] the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. (Luke 2:44 – 47, ESV)

In conclusion, we have re – affirmed the primacy of Scripture in our understanding of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. We have also re – affirmed that our Lord Jesus Christ is the supreme revelation of the redeeming and saving grace of God. Let us now study the role of tradition, reason and experience in our Christian thought and action.

TRADITION

Tradition is a supportive voice that illuminates and confirms the truthfulness of the Word of God in sacred Scripture. By tradition, Wesley refers to the Apostolic tradition that had been preserved and enriched in the course of history by the great Christian teachers of antiquity. Wesley was steeped and imbued in the Anglican tradition of honoring ancient Christian teachers and ecumenical councils and their documents. Coming from the first five centuries of Christianity, these are highly – esteemed by classic Anglican scholars.

Like John Wesley himself, Oden concedes that Tertullian, Origen, Athanasius, Augustine, Chrysostom, Polycarp, and other Church fathers are neither perfect nor untarnished. All of us are.

The Apostle Paul speaks for many of us in his testimony: “¹⁵ This saying is reliable and deserves full acceptance: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners”—and I’m the biggest sinner of all. ¹⁶ But this is why I was shown mercy, so that Christ Jesus could show his endless patience to me first of all. So I’m an example for those who are going to believe in him for eternal life” (1 Timothy 1:15 – 16, CEB).

Having said that, we are deeply grateful that in the power and wisdom of God the great mothers and fathers of our Christian faith left us their legacy of Biblical teaching and diverse examples of holy living. John Wesley expresses his high respect to these heroes and heroines of the faith when he said:

The Scriptures are a complete rule of faith and practice; and they are clear in all necessary points. And yet their clearness does not prove that they need not be explained; nor their completeness, that they need not be enforced...The esteeming [of] the writings of the first three centuries, not equally with, but next to, the Scriptures, never carried any man [or woman] yet into dangerous errors, nor probably ever will.”¹⁵

Biblical and doctrinal traditions continue to shape and influence our Christian faith and practice. As we appreciate such legacies from our past, we must also recognize that they are inextricably woven into our Christian lifestyle and character. We may not be consciously aware at all times because they are simply and substantially part of the good things that God endowed us in our spiritual journey.

Ellen Goodman puts it this way, “Traditions are guideposts driven deep in our subconscious minds. The most powerful ones are those we can’t even describe, aren’t even aware of.”¹⁶ Loving God and neighbor are truly Christian traditions and they are practiced seamlessly in daily life and they do not need to be consciously the result of our volition or intention all the time. We just walk the talk and live the faith. Naturally.

Church history and tradition have their rightful place in our collective memories and Christian reflections. But without Scripture, they are devoid of the solid foundation that the inspired Word of God provides. The same can be said of the next important pillar of the quadrilateral: reason.

REASON

¹⁵ LCM, J X:14; Oden 86

¹⁶ Textappeal, “19 Insightful Quotes About Culture,” Culture Shocks Blog; <https://textappeal.com/cultureshocks/insightful-quotes-about-culture/>; Accessed on November 24, 2025 (8:55 PM)

A true Wesleyan appreciation of reason and its importance begin by accepting it as a gift from God. In John Wesley's essay entitled "The Case for Reason Impartially Considered," he writes: "In all the duties of the common life, God has given us our reason for a guide. And it is only by acting up to the dictates of it, by using all the understanding which God hath given us, that we can have a conscience void of offence towards God and towards man [humanity]."¹⁷

John Wesley disagrees with the ancient mystics for their tendency to oppose the use of reason. He knows "of no method of bringing any to the knowledge of the truth, except the methods of reason and persuasion."¹⁸

In his "Compendium of Natural Philosophy," the founder of Methodism also states: "Christianity requires our assent to nothing but what is plain and intelligible in every proposition. Let every man [and woman] have a full conviction of the truth of each proposition in the gospel, as far only as it is plain and intelligible, and let him believe as far as he understands."¹⁹

Even in loving God and neighbor, we must do so mindfully. Faith in God is strengthened by the clarity and conviction that disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ intellectually assert.

In the words of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, we find this affirmation:

³⁷ Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind."^[a] ³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹ And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' (Matthew 22:37 – 39, NIV)

But reason can never stand alone. Thomas Oden sums up John Wesley's thoughts from "The Case of Reason Impartially Considered."

Reason can define, think about, and conceptually order ideas of the virtues. It can describe and elicit to some extent actual

¹⁷ John Wesley, "The Case of Reason Impartially Considered," B 2:592, sec. 2:10; Oden, 93

¹⁸ John Wesley, "On Laying the Foundation of the New Chapel," B 3:568, sec 2:11; Oden, 94

¹⁹ John Wesley, "Compendium of Natural Philosophy," J 11:448 – 449; Oden, 94

behavioral excellences, such as wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice. But reason falls short into engendering faith, hope, and love, on which the blessed life depends. This means that reason cannot make us happy unless it is rightly related to the ground of happiness, faith in God that loves all in God and God in all.²⁰

Finally, let us briefly look back to John Wesley's views on the fourth pillar of the quadrilateral: experience.

EXPERIENCE

The truth of Scripture, the affirmation from tradition and the logic of reason are richly confirmed in our Christian experience. In his homily on "The Witness of the Spirit," John Wesley writes:

And here properly comes in, to confirm this Scriptural doctrine, the experience of the children of God – the experience not of two or three, but of a great multitude which no one can number...It is confirmed by your experience and mine. The Spirit itself [Himself] bore witness to my spirit that I was a child of God, gave me an evidence hereof, and I immediately cried, "Abba, Father!" And this I did (and so did you) before I reflected on, or was conscious of, any fruit of the Spirit.²¹

Perhaps the most important personal experience of every disciple of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ comes from the joy of conversion. John Wesley made sure that he recorded his own from his famous 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."²²

While it is correct to accept the validity of Christian experience, both John Wesley and his later interpreter Thomas Oden warn of any tendency

²⁰ John Wesley, "The Case of Reason Impartially Considered," B 2:598 – 600, sec 2.10; Oden, 99

²¹ John Wesley, "The Witness of the Spirit," pt 2, B 1:290, sec. 3.6; Oden, 111

²² JJW, May 24, 1738, B 1:475, sec. 14; Oden, 112

to exalt one's personal experience as the defining standard for all others to idolize. Thomas Oden warns, "Modern Christianity, whether liberal or evangelical, has all too many examples of those who appeal to private experience exalted above historical experience of believers whose lives have been transformed by the gospel."²³

Conclusion

The Bible itself knows how to put tradition (Luke 24:44 – 47; Acts 4:8 – 12; cf., Psalm 118:22), reason (Isaiah 1:18; 1 Peter 3:15), and experience (John 4:42; 9:25 1 John 4:14) in proper perspective. But as children of God, we have clarity of purpose in our sense of conviction, because we know that the Word of God as revealed in Scripture is the Word of life that we firmly hold (Philippians 2:14 – 18). In the words of the Apostle Paul:

¹⁴ Do everything without grumbling or arguing, ¹⁵ so that you may become blameless and pure, "children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation."^[a] Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky ¹⁶ as you hold firmly to the word of life. And then I will be able to boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor in vain. (Philippians 2:14 – 16, NIV)

To God be the glory! Amen!²⁴

Questions for Discussion

- 1) Read 2 Timothy 3:14 – 17. As disciples of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, we believe that the Bible is the standard of our Christian faith and life. How do we practice this belief?
- 2) Read 1 Timothy 1:15 – 16. What is the most important collective memory of Christian history and tradition that made an impact in your Christian life? What is the history and tradition that you remember to be the tipping point in the origin and formation of FEMC?

²³ Oden, 116

²⁴ FEMC Christmas Youth Assembly, December 2025

- 3) Read Matthew 22:37 – 39; Isaiah 1:18; 1 Peter 3:15. In what way is reason indispensable in our Christian reflection and action? Why is reason inadequate when it comes to engendering faith, hope and love?
- 4) Read John 4:42; 9:24; 1 John 4:14. How does Scripture confirm your experience? How does experience confirm Scripture?
- 5) What does it mean when you say, “Scripture, not culture” or “Scripture, not structure?” In saying so, does it reflect our Evangelical Methodist understanding of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral? Why?
- 6) R. Allan Culpepper, reflecting on Luke 20:1 – 5, shared these insightful thoughts and questions:

Those who are ordained or minister in a given tradition represent both God and their respective confessions. They are responsible both for maintaining the distinctive teachings and practices of that tradition and for correcting them when they fail to advance God’s redemptive work. But what does one do when the teachings and traditions of the Church fail to conform to the minister’s convictions regarding God’s purposes? How does one know where God’s responsibility lies?²⁵

²⁵ R. Allan Culpepper, “Luke,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, Vol. IX (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 379

