

THE
DISCIPLESHIP
PLACE

Exploring John Wesley's Theology



SESSION 5

The Quadrilateral: Scripture and Tradition

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PRINCIPAL CONTRIBUTOR

**NOTES**

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She has published articles in the Wesleyan Theological Journal and has contributed to two books, including *Heart Religion in the Methodist Tradition and Related Movements*. Her full-length book, *Singleness of Heart: Gender, Sin, and Holiness in Historical Respective*, won the Wesleyan Theological Society Book of the Year Award in 2002. Leclerc is an active member of the Wesleyan Theological Society and the Wesleyan-Holiness Women Clergy Association. She resides in Nampa, Idaho, with her husband and son.

The Quadrilateral: Scripture and Tradition

SESSION OVERVIEW

Why a Quadrilateral?

The Bible

Tradition

Application

Exam

Discussion Guide for Mentor and Participant

LEARNER OBJECTIVES

At the end of this session, you should be able to:

- appreciate the meaning and function of Wesley's quadrilateral.
- understand the doctrine of inspiration.
- define Wesley's analogy of faith as a hermeneutical principle.
- explore Wesley's preference for Early Church and Anglicanism as the tradition.

INTRODUCTION

Consider the nature of Wesley's famous quote:

God himself has condescended to teach the way; for this very end he came from heaven. He hath written it down in a book. 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* [a man of one book] (*Preface to Sermons on Several Occasions, from Outler, p. 88*).

WHY A QUADRILATERAL?



NOTES

Wesley himself never used the phrase quadrilateral. It was a Wesley scholar, Albert Outler, who coined the phrase as a way of explaining Wesley's understanding of religious truth.

There are four parts of the quadrilateral, but we must not view them as equal parts. Scripture was primary to Wesley. It would perhaps be more appropriate to speak of Scripture as authoritative, with a trilateral supporting it. The supporting parts are tradition, reason, and experience.

The purpose of the quadrilateral is to act as a type of check-and-balance. To use a strong example, if someone said he or she had an experience where God told him or her to have an affair, this would obviously be checked—stopped short—by Scripture, in the Ten Commandments.

In a similar way, if I interpret Scripture in isolation from community, from reason, or from what others have experienced, my interpretation should be checked and perhaps corrected by these other sources as well. Scripture, then, is rightly interpreted in dialogue with the other sources, just as Scripture serves as the ultimate check of the other three. Again, Wesley never laid this out directly, but it was his theological method; it was his way of doing theology and biblical interpretation.

THE BIBLE



NOTES

The Bible is the primary source of religious truth because it is a special revelation of God that witnesses to the final revelation of God in Christ. The issue of the Bible's authority should be raised at this point. Let's explore why the Bible is authoritative.

Fundamentalist traditions believe the source of the Bible's authority is found in its being inspired directly from God; it is inerrant, and therefore trustworthy and authoritative. The issue of inerrancy is a debate that began toward the first part of the 20th century, so to ask Wesley himself about the Bible's inerrancy would not be logical because of the dates he lived. However, it is not an irrelevant question to ask Wesleyans.

While more conservative traditions would argue the Bible is inerrant in all things, those following Wesley qualify such a statement: the Bible is inerrant in all things pertaining to our salvation. Those in more conservative (fundamentalist) churches embrace a dictation theory of inspiration. This implies God gave the authors of Scripture each word to write down. Therefore, if God wrote every word then the Bible is without error in every respect—in its science, history, and cosmology.

At the opposite end of the continuum on inspiration would be an understanding of Scripture as a purely human book. There is no claim at all about inerrancy at this extreme. Those who hold this position say the Bible is a production of only human writers.

In the middle, or the *via media*, is the doctrine of plenary inspiration. God inspired the authors of Scripture in such a way their human, historical, cultural situation is not set aside, but utilized. Not just their hands—as in a dictation theory—but also each writer's mind and experiences are used by God in order to convey God's love, purposes, and plan of redemption for humankind. God's salvation is perfectly revealed to us. Scripture is perfectly trustworthy in the purposes for which it was inspired: salvation and holy living, according to Wesley and his followers. In a way, this is freeing. If, for example, the Bible seems to contradict itself when listing some historical chronology, its authority does not fall for Wesleyans. Those who are more conservative need to preserve and defend the Bible as perfect in every respect, for if it seems contradictory even in a minute detail, its authority falls.

 **NOTES**

Wesley had a great deal of advice about how to interpret Scripture. He was very aware of the crucial necessity of finding the context of a passage and avoiding proof-texting. He used the original languages. He investigated the historical and cultural situation in a text. Ultimately, Wesley developed what is called the analogy of faith. This phrase refers to a connection of biblical doctrines that arise out of the “whole tenor of Scripture.” We should ask of every passage in the Bible: what does it add to our understanding of human sin, justification by faith, new birth, and present inward and outward holiness? As Maddox states, “He believed that it was the shared articulation of these truths that gave the diverse components of Scripture their unity. Accordingly, he required that all passages be read in light of these truths” (p. 38).

However, we might reasonably ask if the Bible deals with other issues. Wesley would answer, of course, issues that do not address the essential doctrines of sin, salvation, and sanctification should be seen as nonessentials. Wesley drew a distinction between essentials and nonessentials because he was concerned for Christian unity. Christians often disagree and even argue over nonessentials, dividing the Body of Christ. He believed we should think and let think. We should humbly allow other Christians to hold other opinions on issues that are not essential to our salvation. This principle should inform our Wesleyan-holiness, Nazarene worldview. For example, the Church of the Nazarene has resolutely resisted binding its members to a certain view of how the world began or how the world will end, believing these to be in the realm of speculation, and ultimately nonessential to our life in God and our quest for holiness. Ultimately then, the Bible finds its authority in its faithful witness of Christ as well as its truth of salvation through Christ and the way it has been experienced and verified by believers through the centuries.

TRADITION



NOTES

Through the centuries the community of faith has interpreted Scripture. The Roman Catholic branch of Christianity has put weight on the Church's interpretation of Scripture to such a degree we can legitimately say Scripture and tradition have equal authority in Catholicism. On the other extreme, parts of the Protestant Reformation were so adamant that tradition had been corrupted a pronouncement of *sola scriptura*, or Scripture alone, became a battle cry.

Once again, Wesley takes a middle position (*via media*). Tradition is not equal to Scripture's authority, but tradition can aid in a faithful, corporate interpretation of the Bible; but which tradition? Wesley held two points on the time line of Christian history as most significant.

First, he held the Early Church writers in very high esteem. Wesley preferred the Pre-Nicene period and the works of Eastern writers.

Second, Wesley saw Anglicanism itself as a new embodiment of the Early Church ethos. Was Wesley biased at this point? Of course he was. Each of us would want to hold that our denomination, whatever it may be, is the clearest expression of the Christian faith; otherwise, we would seek it elsewhere.

Wesley was not static or rigid, however, in his Anglican thought. He had a more dynamic relationship with Anglicanism, particularly with its Articles of Religion, and even edited them at will for his Methodist people. Ultimately, tradition was not a static entity for Wesley but rather the truth of the gospel in the hands of people. This is found in Wesley's understanding of apostolicity, or Scripture coming directly from the original apostles. It is not a lineage from the apostles that assured truth. It is the faith of the apostles expressed in new ways for new generations that gives tradition its dynamic and authoritative quality.

APPLICATION

**NOTES**

1. Write a short definition of Wesley's quadrilateral. List some additional examples (other than those mentioned in this session) where the quadrilateral works.
2. Write a reflection paper on what you understand is the doctrine of inspiration. Include a discussion of different theological interpretations of Scripture.
3. Write your reaction to the following quote from Phineas Bresee: "In essentials unity, in nonessentials liberty, and in all things, love." In what sense is the Bible inerrant for a Wesleyan?

EXAM



NOTES

1. Wesley frequently used the term quadrilateral.
 - A. True
 - B. False
2. The purpose of the quadrilateral is to act as a type of check-and-balance.
 - A. True
 - B. False
3. _____ is NOT one of the four parts of the Wesley quadrilateral.
 - A. Scripture
 - B. Reason
 - C. Tradition
 - D. Culture
4. The Bible is the primary source of religious truth because it is a special revelation of God that witnesses to the final revelation of God in Christ.
 - A. True
 - B. False
5. Fundamentalist traditions believe the source of the Bible's authority is found in its being inspired directly from God; it is inerrant, and therefore trustworthy and authoritative.
 - A. True
 - B. False
6. The issue of inerrancy is a debate begun during Wesley's day.
 - A. True
 - B. False
7. Wesley drew a distinction between essentials and nonessentials because he was concerned for Christian _____.
 - A. love
 - B. peace
 - C. joy
 - D. unity
8. Wesleyans believe the Bible is inerrant in all things, not just salvation.
 - A. True
 - B. False

**NOTES**

9. The phrase "analogy of faith" refers to a connection of biblical doctrines that arise out of the "whole tenor of Scripture."
 - A. True
 - B. False

10. Wesley believed tradition had been corrupted so a pronouncement of *sola scriptura*, or Scripture alone, became his battle cry.
 - A. True
 - B. False

11. Followers of Wesley believe the Bible is inerrant in all things pertaining to salvation.
 - A. True
 - B. False

12. It is the faith of the apostles expressed in new ways for new generations that gives tradition its dynamic and authoritative quality.
 - A. True
 - B. False

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR MENTOR AND PARTICIPANT



NOTES

Be prepared to discuss the following with your mentor.

1. Your definition of Wesley's quadrilateral. Talk about additional examples (other than those mentioned in this session) where the quadrilateral works.
2. Share your reflection paper on what you understand is the doctrine of inspiration.
3. Discuss your reaction to the Bresee quote: "In essentials unity, in nonessentials liberty, and in all things, love." Share in what sense the Bible is inerrant for a Wesleyan.