

Quadrilateral: Scripture, Tradition, Reason, Experience

Romans 1:1-2

August 24, 2008

Albert Outler taught at Duke, Yale and Perkins Theological Seminary. He was a scholar, a theologian, a historian. It was in his work in 1964 on John Wesley that the phrase *Wesleyan Quadrilateral* was first used. He coined the phrase in an attempt to summarize his observation that Wesley used four primary sources to develop his theological positions.

In the section on “Doctrinal Standards and Our Theological Task” in The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church the General Conference has attributed this four-fold model of theological inquiry and formulation to a broader group of our predecessors. The words used are: “Our forebears in the faith reaffirmed the ancient Christian message as found in the apostolic witness even as they applied it anew in their own circumstances.

“Their preaching and teaching were grounded in Scripture, informed by Christian tradition, enlivened in experience, and tested by reason.

“Their labors inspire and inform our attempts to convey the saving gospel to our world with its needs and aspirations.”¹

In his later years Outler expressed some regret for having coined the Wesleyan Quadrilateral phrase because he believed many were misusing it.² His concern was that some wrongly interpret a quadrilateral as having four equal sides. My math teacher wife confirms Outler’s observation. While a quadrilateral may have four equal sides, it doesn’t have to be such.

Outler’s view of Wesley’s use of scripture, tradition, reason and experience is that scripture is primary. It is the source we look to first. The first question to be asked needs to be “What does the Bible have to say?” The place of the other aspects of the quadrilateral is to inform our understanding of scripture. A better image might be to visualize scripture as a centerpiece or the top of a pyramid and the other three the sides of the pyramid. Scripture is the primary source and tradition, experience and reason are resources to illuminate and enhance.

While I understand Outler’s concern when it comes to matters of theology, when it comes to matters of social concerns there are quite frankly some issues the scriptures don’t speak to as specifically as some would have us believe. Too often then it becomes a battle of who can use the art of proof texting – that is, quoting scripture passages in an attempt to convince others that the scripture really does have something to say on a given issue – who can quote the most scriptures or twist the meaning of some to say what they want it to say.

In an article Outler wrote about his research upon which his quadrilateral observation was based he noted that Wesley himself was well aware that Scripture alone had rarely settled any controversial points of theological doctrine. Outler commented: “He and his critics had repeatedly come to impasses in their games of proof texting – often with the same texts!”³

One of the things I have found especially interesting and which I appreciate about Wesley was his aversion to having the doctrines of the church too narrowly defined. It was a matter of principle on his part. He allowed for wide variations in theology. He once commented that it was important “to think and let think.”

Make no mistake: Wesley was not wishy-washy with regards to what he believed. He was not indecisive about his position on theological or social issues. He simply wanted to honor the right of people who undertake the serious task of theological reflection to come to different understandings. Again, a quote from Outler: “Wesley’s refusal to provide the Methodist people with a confession for subscription was the conviction of a man who knew his own mind on every vexed question of Christian doctrine, but who had decided that the reduction of doctrine to any particular form of words was to misunderstand the very nature of doctrinal statements.”⁴

Now, despite our desire to pat ourselves on the back for being part of a denomination that claims such a profound formula for addressing the issues of the day, we really cannot claim a corner on the use of these four sources. In Pastor Kenneth Carder’s sermon “Tools for the Task” he reviewed the way the apostle Paul dealt with those he came in contact with following his conversion on the Damascus Road.

Paul was a Jewish scholar bent on ridding the world of Christians before his Damascus Road encounter with the Risen Christ. As far as he was concerned the things the Christians believed were dangerous. His ministry before his Damascus Road experience was to rid the world of Christians. Paul’s challenge after his life changing experience on the road to Damascus was how he was going to make sense of it and reconcile it with his previously held attitudes toward Gentiles.⁵

It was quite a challenge for Paul to go to Athens and share the good news with those who were university trained and steeped in Greek culture. How he looked at the world was different than those he came in contact with. His stock answers would not work there. They had different heroes than the ones Paul knew from his Jewish upbringing.⁶

The first tool Paul realized was at his disposal was the Hebrew Scriptures. He was well grounded in them. As a Pharisee he knew them inside out. So the first place he turned when he found himself in the middle of the marketplace in Athens – with idols to foreign deities all around and learned people all around ready to defend their views about those deities – the first place he turned to prepare himself to engage the well educated and cultured was the scriptures.

And so, it was with Wesley and it needs to be for us as well. It’s the ability of the scripture to inspire, challenge, and guide that necessitates our taking them seriously. It is in the stories and in the letters and in the sermons, prayers, hymns, parables, and visions we read about in it that God is able to transform, guide and sustain us.⁷

While I long ago gave up reading the Bible literally, I certainly still believe there is a timeless message in it. I marvel at the way it analyzes our human condition and the prescriptions we can glean in it about how the ills in our world can be handled. It’s as if there’s this voice from somewhere else that breaks in on the garbled noise of the headlines of the day.

I like this summarizing paragraph in Pastor Carder’s sermon: “Although the Bible reflects the cultural limitations of its inspired peoples, its deepest truths transcend and challenge all cultures. Even though its stories reflect the images of a prescientific age, the God-given insights beneath the images are relevant in every age. From the creation stories, with their emphasis on the interrelatedness of all existence and the responsibility of human beings as caretakers and shepherds of creation, to the prophets’ call and a social justice shaped by God’s vision of shalom, the Bible challenges our limited visions and fragmented lives. From Jonah’s judgment on

narrow nationalism to John's dream of a new heaven and a new earth, the Bible expands our horizons to include all peoples. From Jesus revelation of the nature and purpose of both God and true humanity to Paul's proclamation of salvation through grace alone, the Bible shapes, challenges, and transforms our lives and the world with a Transcendent Word."⁸

Another tool Paul relied on when he was trying to understand how he could help the Athenians understand the saving message of Jesus Christ was tradition. He was well versed in how to interpret and apply the Jewish tradition into new situations – the tradition he'd been trained in and that he knew. He knew the Torah and other literature grown out of it and he drew upon his knowledge of them when he confronted the Athenian. He connected the dots between the tradition he knew and that which was known by the Athenians.

Carder told a story in his sermon about a middle-aged woman who fought addiction to alcohol and drugs for years. Two years after she achieved sobriety, her husband and only child were killed in an automobile accident. The temptation to escape the pain by numbing it with her old habits was huge. However, she successfully remained clean. When asked how she was able to do it, she said: "Along with the support of friends, I held on to what our preacher said on Pentecost Sunday. The disciples had faced a terrible loss. Their world had come apart. They were told to wait in Jerusalem, the center of their traditions and values. When my world came apart, I decided that the only way to survive would be to hold to my deeply rooted values. Otherwise, I would get blown away by life."⁹

Dorothy called my attention to a similar story on the front page of the Dispatch on Friday morning. It was the story of young Tyler Jones, a sophomore student at DeSales. He has lost both his mother and father in the last couple of years. His sister, Kelsie, says that she admires his spiritual resilience. "His faith, it's good," she said. "I feel like I need someone like that to help me through things."

Tyler's girlfriend and her family are relocating soon. The article notes that Tyler refuses to let the prospect of another loss demoralize him. God, he believes, is shaping him. "People like me have got to have that ... that 'it' factor – that 'I'm going to make it no matter what.'"

Some days, Tyler makes it by sweating in pads and helmet, on a grassy, worry-free oasis. Other days, he makes it while standing in a church service, singing softly to the strumming of an acoustic guitar words like: *And like a flood, His mercy reigns. Unending love, amazing grace.* The article concluded with: "The past year has brought clarity to the words his father spoke only days before he died: *Unexpected events are what shape a person's soul.* At 16, he doesn't think he's anywhere close to being a man. But Tyler Jones certainly doesn't feel like a boy."¹⁰

Sometimes when dealing with what life sends our way it helps to be able to rely on what we have learned about how others have made it through. Sometimes it helps to remember the creeds and liturgies of the church. Sometimes it helps to recall the stories of our faith or a hymn or two.

And then we remember the way Paul was able to meet the Athenians at their point of experience. That is, he acknowledged their current beliefs – their current desire to search for the ultimate. He accepted the insights they had come to know through the help of their tradition and heroes. He didn't try to introduce them to his concept of God as if they didn't have their own concept. Instead he used some of their understanding of things and infused them with some of the things he believed to be similar.

We live in a pluralistic world and we need to remember that despite the conflicting voices that compete for our attention, “*God is present in and with every person and in all of life. God is not present with some and absent from others. All persons experience the reality of God in whom ‘we live and move and have our being’ (Acts 17:28, NRSV). Not all persons, however, know that it is God whom they experience.*”¹¹

“In Jesus Christ, God has claimed all of life as the realm of God’s presence – including smelly stables, foreboding crosses, peaceful hillsides, and empty tombs. All persons have been claimed as members of a loving household and as birth-givers of divine grace – including unmarried pregnant servant girls, uncultured fishermen, abused women of the street, outcast Samaritans, Roman soldiers, unclean lepers, and dying thieves.”¹²

Paul also used the fourth source of the quadrilateral – reason. Paul could really meet the Athenian philosophers at that altar. Paul attempted to connect the Greek culture to the God made known in Jesus Christ by drawing upon the insights of some of the well-known philosophers of that day. “Reason, motivated by love and marching under the banner of faith, can be a fertile field in which the seeds of eternal truth grow to maturity. In 1768, John Wesley wrote in a sharply worded reply to a theologian at Cambridge University, ‘To renounce reason is to renounce religion ... (for) all irrational religion is false religion.’”¹³

Several years ago, when cults were considered a real danger to young Christians, a professor at the Church of God Winebrenner Seminary in Findlay, Ohio, wrote a book Not For a Million Dollars in which he offered details of some of the things that contributed to that movement.

One of the things he noted in his work that has stuck with me over the years is the idea that persons who are most susceptible to the cults are persons who weren’t taught to think for themselves as they were growing up. He observed how they would show up on a college campus and were “love bombed” by the cults. The cults offered them easy answers – easy solutions to the dilemmas of life they faced. They fell prey to those who believed they were being of service to them by offering to think for them – make decisions for them – keep them comfortable. John Powell said that one of the most important things we can do to protect the young people of our world is to make sure that our homes and our Sunday Schools are places where they are taught to think – are offered occasions to question, to doubt, to challenge and not made to conform to our way of thinking.¹⁴

There it is – a quick summary of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral – an important tool for us to use whenever we are faced with a dilemma about what we believe or how we should act. It’s a good guide and one we probably should learn some more about and utilize more in our journey through life. Scripture, tradition, experience, reason – it’s a formula for determining theology, positions on social issues – a formula for life.

Let us pray.

1. The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2004), p. 41.
2. www.goodnewsmag.org/magazine/1JanFeb/jfo5Quadrilateral.htm.
3. Albert C. Outler, “The Wesleyan Quadrilateral – In John Wesley,” Edited by Jason Gingerich for the Wesley Center for Applied Theology at Northwest Nazarene University, 2000.
4. Ibid.

5. Kenneth L. Carder, Sermons On United Methodist Beliefs (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), p. 44.
6. Ibid. pp. 44-45.
7. Ibid. pp. 45-46.
8. Ibid. p. 46.
9. Ibid. p. 45.
10. Kristy Eckert, "Amazing Grace," The Columbus Dispatch, August 22, 2008.
11. Sermons On United Methodist Beliefs, p. 48.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid. from "John Wesley and The Wholeness of Scripture," *Interpretation*, July 1985, p. 251.
14. John Powell, Not For A Million Dollars (), p.