

The Wesley Quadrilateral

Scripture – In matters of faith and practice scripture is essential for theological reflection. It's authority becomes apparent when we appreciate the richness of the many kinds of writing in the Bible and learn their original source and purpose.

Scripture is relevant to our life experience. It also tests the past – such as the tradition of the Church and the changing ideas of right and wrong.

It reminds us that we are the people of the living Word. Writings that grew out of experiences of faith are now treasured by the community of faith.

Turning to scripture to discern God's will is a stimulating spiritual exploration well known to many and new to others.

Experience – is the soil out of which life grows and takes on meaning. The story of faith is the story of reflection and experience. Think of experience as putting things together, making sense of them, seeing patterns and purposes emerge.

For people of faith this includes experience of the presence of God. It involves our sense of ourselves as made in the image of God and as inhabitants in a world God loves.

Christian experience is varied and while all may be valid, none can claim to be absolutely right, over-riding the experience of other faithful people. The experience of love is both our safeguard and out liberation.

Scripture

Experience

Tradition – We are shaped by the past in ways that are subtle but powerful. We have received the faith from others. It has been expressed in acts of worship, in music, in convictions about personal conduct, and in responsibilities toward our neighbours.

Some of our tradition is set out in confessions of faith, in credos, which are efforts to say publicly what we believe. Often these come in times of crisis, or from wilderness experiences.

We have oral traditions also, as did those very young churches in the first Christian centuries.

A living Church has a lively memory, linked to a world of faith, which is discovered in and through tradition.

Tradition

Reason

Reason – is God's gift to the Church as well as to the individual.

Reason (or intellect) brings order to our theological thinking and therefore to our decisions and ultimately to our actions. We become more consistent, constant, dependable and steadfast.

Reason is necessary when dealing with new situations. It is the 'common' sense that makes the obscure clear.

Reason helps to guard against misguided interpretation of scripture, or faulty

interpretation of experience. It respects

innermost thought and individual insights,

while recognizing the interdependence of the whole of creation.

Using the Wesley Quadrilateral

Theological reflection begins by identifying the issue to be considered. It could be setting the budget, planning an anniversary, preparing a sermon, even confronting a dispute.

Now choose one of the areas of the quadrilateral. You may begin with any one of the four quadrants. Write down ideas and questions as you look at the issue from each of the four perspectives. What does experience teach you? What does scripture have to say to this issue? Are there traditions surrounding this topic? Are we reasoning clearly?

You will likely discover as you work (individually or together) that once you have put down the obvious points in each quadrant, new insights emerge. Sometimes completely new views of the issue come forward when you read over the four quadrants. You will find that scripture pushes against scripture, and that person's experiences differ radically.

As the work continues, the insights from one quadrant flow into the others and the lines begin to disappear. Something else happens. We discover that we are led into larger fields of truth (John 16:13). When we talk about scripture, we contribute what we do know, and we search for further knowledge, understanding and insights. When we apply reason, it takes everything we've got, plus the contribution of our neighbours. The quadrilateral makes us aware of both what we know and what we need to know. It opens up areas of spiritual growth for us.

The use of the Wesley Quadrilateral moves us toward the awesome conviction that our life is set in the presence of God, a greatness beyond our understanding (Psalm 145). Theological reflection does not reduce the profound mysteries of God to formulas or slogans. Out of it may come clarity about pressing current issues. Out of it may come creeds, confessions, statements, hymns, liturgies - all of them attempts to express what we believe.

When undertaken as a spiritual exercise, theological reflection quickens our faith, sets our daily concerns in a larger context, reminds us what we are called to be. It is a way of engaging in life.