

Quadrilaterals or Milking Stools

What considerations shape our Methodist thinking and practice in today's world?

I would imagine that many people reading this column would expect one simple answer to your question. “That’s easy,” they would say “As Methodists we are guided by scripture.”

After all, in the preface to his collection of sermons, John Wesley put it like this **“I am a creature of a day. I am a spirit come from God, and returning to God. I want to know one thing: the way to heaven. God himself has condescended to teach me the way. He has written it down in a book. Oh, give me that book! At any price give me the book of God. Let me be a man of one book.”**

For Methodists then our supreme authority in knowing about God and discerning what is true is the Bible. We say that scripture is the inspired word of God. We affirm that it contains all things necessary to salvation. It guides us, not only in our understanding about God but also in our grasp of how God wants us to live.

Sounds very easy, doesn't it! Just read the Bible, believe what it says, do what it teaches and all will be well. If only it were that simple! The difficulties arise when we realise that the Bible itself needs to be interpreted and explained. Verses taken out of context can lead to all sorts of misunderstandings and disagreements. Sometimes Christian believers read the same text and sincerely see things differently. People read the same Bible and can come to totally different conclusions about things like pacifism, Sabbath observance, women preachers, alcohol consumption, sexual behaviour and many other issues.

John Wesley knew that. For that reason he advocated other means of receiving guidance from God. In the 1960s Albert Outler, an American Methodist theologian, coined the term the *Wesleyan Quadrilateral* to describe how Wesley did his theology. Of course, Wesley, the “man of one book” held scripture to be the supreme authority. When however scripture was not clear on an issue he turned to “Tradition” – what had been done and understood in the Church from the earliest times. Wesley encouraged his preachers to read the writings of the early church fathers especially those of the first few centuries. Their understanding and insights carried great weight and were not to be easily discarded.

Then there was “Reason”. God had made us rational thinking beings. Human reason, by itself, cannot get at spiritual truth. We have to be sufficiently humble to realise, as Isaiah pointed out, that God's thoughts are not our thoughts. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit however Wesley believed that Christians were meant to exercise their God given reason to weigh up and reflect on scripture taking into account the thinking

of those who had gone before. “To renounce reason”, he said, “is to renounce religion”.

Finally the fourth consideration was “Experience”. If a person was a true believer then spiritual truths would be confirmed and come alive in their daily lives. The Holy Spirit would use scripture to bring gospel truth to the heart. Experience on its own was never enough and would lead to all sorts of delusions and self deceptions. The man who says “God told me to leave my wife and find someone else.” clearly is setting his own imagination on a higher level than what the Bible teaches.

So there we have it – the Wesleyan Quadrilateral – Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience. Poor Albert Outler! He quickly came to regret his excursion into geometry. He wrote **“It has created the wrong image in the minds of so many people and, I am sure, will lead to all kinds of controversy.”**

He wasn’t far wrong. The trouble has been that some Methodists have mistakenly understood the Quadrilateral to mean that the four sides are of equal importance and authority. In 2000 Howard Mellor the then Principal of Cliff College bemoaned the way in which, in modern British Methodism, the four elements were being used like “theological lego”. People felt that they could appeal to one or other of them as it suited their case. People appealed to scripture for example on issues of social justice, to experience on issues of sexuality and to tradition on discussions of liturgy and church practice.

Outler never meant to give the impression that Wesley saw the four elements as of equal weight. A better image that has been suggested is an old fashioned three legged milking stool resting on a solid stone floor. The floor is scripture and the three legs of Tradition, Reason and Experience are of equal length but all resting upon the foundation of Scripture. In more recent years Donald English has suggested the model of a baby’s mobile hanging over a cot. The central point is Scripture and suspended from it hang the other three items.

Chris Wynn gives a helpful example of all this. Last year in the USA a leader called Harold Camping announced that the Lord would return in May 2011. When May came and went he altered the prediction to October. Incredibly many people took him seriously even the second time. Now, let’s use the Quadrilateral. Scripture tells us that no-one knows the hour when Christ will return. Tradition tells us that history is littered with similar false predictions. Reason tells us that having been wrong in May he was very unlikely to be right in October and Reason..... well, enough said!

That is of course an extreme example. You might however perhaps like to use Wesley’s method to help you think through issues that give rise to debate and discussion in the Church today. What about euthanasia, or abortion or matters of human sexuality? What about human rights, equality legislation or making poverty history? I think I’ll stop here. It’s time for you to do the maths!

