



Wesleyan Roots

What Makes United Methodism Distinct

PARTICIPANT HANDOUT



Unit 2: Understanding the Nature and Action of God

Session 5: Scripture In Light of Tradition, Experience and Reason

How Does God Communicate with Us?

We often think of our communication with God as both vertical and horizontal in nature. Our time of prayer and listening for God holds a more vertical aspect, while our time with human beings and creation illuminates God in a more horizontal way. One thing is certain: human beings yearn to be in a relationship with God and we believe God also seeks to be in relationship with us. This horizontal and vertical relationship is seen throughout the scriptures in the Old and the New Testaments.

United Methodists believe that the primary way we know God is through the scriptures. We understand that the Bible is a key means of our experience of God, and that it contains all things necessary for salvation. United Methodists generally do not understand the Bible to be authoritative in areas such as science. The Roman Catholic Church, which had for generations emphasized the Bible as a source for religious professionals, changed their approach during the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) emphasizing the study of scripture for laity.¹ Since that time, some of the best biblical scholarship has been done by Roman Catholic scholars.

Protestants were, from their beginning, oriented around scripture being the main source of divine revelation. In fact, one of the factors being “protested” by Protestants was extreme human authority. Instead of relying on a human being’s word, Martin Luther translated the Bible to German while under house arrest. Soon the printing press was invented and before long, laypeople had an opportunity to read the Bible for themselves, in their own language.

Some denominations adopt the doctrine of *sola scriptura* (“by scripture alone”) as their official source for theological discourse. Some, in fact, honor the Bible so much it seems

like they are worshiping the Bible itself. United Methodists understand that scripture is the “living word” which illuminates and points to the God we worship. We do not worship the Bible. We worship the triune God.

Four Criteria for Wesleyan Faith and Practice

We understand it is impossible for a person to read the Bible without using certain “lenses” through which we look at the text. Albert Outler (1908 – 1989) was the Wesleyan scholar who first put words to these “lenses” of faith for Wesleyan Christians. He called the Bible, along with three lenses, **the Wesleyan Quadrilateral**.² As such, United Methodists understand that we read and understand scripture through the “lenses” of tradition, experience, and reason.³

For United Methodists, scripture remains the primary source (*prima scriptura*) from which we learn about God’s revelation. When I teach about the understanding of *prima scriptura* to confirmation students and adults in my congregations, I also talk about the manner through which we derive our biblical understandings. I say that the Bible is our primary source of revelation insofar as it is read as a whole, in context, by a thinking adult. To unpack this a bit, in the United Methodist tradition we discourage “proof-texting.” In other words, we try not to have an idea in our mind and pull a verse or two out of the Bible that supports our idea. We generally strive to read the Bible more holistically, with the understanding that God has an overarching message, and that all scripture is to be interpreted within that understanding. One way to state this is that we tend to read the parts of the Bible by the whole. We confidently claim that the scriptures have something to say to us today. We recognize the cultural differences of the time and consider these factors as we read the scriptures. We also consider things like historical context. For example, when Jesus tells the parable of the

1 See The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, Second Vatican Council, 1965

2 Recent scholarship has been leaning away from the term Wesleyan Quadrilateral and toward calling the four criteria of scripture, tradition, experience, and reason by other names; however, there does not seem to be a consensus about alternate monikers.

3 *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church*, 2016. Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016. Pp. 83 – 88

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Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-31, we understand that he was speaking to the “super-religious” Jewish folks of his day who scorned Samaritans with a passion. The fact that Jesus made the Samaritan the hero of the story is particularly powerful once one considers that historical context. We also look at our faith and read scripture through the “lens” of Christian tradition. **Christian tradition** includes everything that has been passed down to us from our Jewish heritage and the Church since its earliest times. It includes things like the Nicene and Apostles’ Creeds, writings of Christians from over the centuries, official teachings of the Church in all its forms from the past, the theological content of our hymns, and even centuries of visual art such as paintings and sculpture. Growing up in the western part of the world, and greatly influenced by northern European history as most folks who were educated in the United States have been, I understand there is great overlap between historical events and the teachings of the Church at any given point in time. For example, John Wesley’s decisions about the Methodist movement in the United States were made in consideration of the Revolutionary War. John Wesley was a priest in the Church of England. He did not set out to form a “new” church but to revive the one of which he already was a part. When it came to America, however, he decided that a new church would have to be established if the Methodist movement was to survive.

At this point I want to emphasize that we learn much from Christian tradition handed down by those who have been on the margins of society. The Christian understandings gleaned from enslaved Black people and from Native Americans, for example, teach us much about faithfulness during oppression. We receive rich tradition from the Civil Rights movement in the United States, from Cambodia, Japan, the Congo, Christians in South Korea, and from people of faith all over the globe. We also receive richly from women throughout the history of Christianity, and others whose opinions were often set aside while male voices of Anglo-Saxon descent were emphasized. The truth is that all voices of the Church from its inception together form Christian tradition for United Methodists, and we are the better for it.

The third source of faith and our next “lens” is that of experience, both personal and corporate. In this context, **experience** refers to that of the greater Christian community, as well as to an individual Christian’s personal experience. For example, I read the Bible as an ordained, middle-class, woman living in North America. I cannot avoid that reality because it is who I am and where I come from. No matter how hard I might try, I cannot read the

Bible from the perspective of an 18th century African male, or from the point of view of a 21st century Latina woman living in Central America. I am not an immigrant to the United States, so although I honor the stories of immigrants, I cannot claim that story as my own. I do strive, however, to be open to opportunities to hear from people of different races, cultures, and backgrounds about how they read and interpret the Bible. My experience is mine alone, and it cannot help but influence my understanding of the Bible as I read. Furthermore, we have corporate experience to consider as well – the experience of the saints and all those who have witnessed to their faith in God. Both personal and corporate experience are powerful lenses that help us see what God has for us as we read the Bible and experience the living God.

The next source is the lens of **reason**. Although persons in some Christian traditions may try to read scripture without using reason, United Methodists believe this is not possible. We understand ourselves as created by God to be mindful and intelligent beings. Furthermore, the Wesleyan tradition honors questions about scripture and the Christian faith. We do not discourage questions, but rather we hold that “holy conversations” lead to a clearer, deeper understanding of God and the scriptures. These engagements of the mind and intellect are meant to ground us in our faith in God. The use of biblical commentaries, scholarly writings, and lively debates are all ways we address our deepest questions and grow in our relationship with God. I believe employing our reason, the source of many questions, is one of the ways we were created in God’s very image (see Gen. 1:27).

Putting the Criteria to Work in Real Life

The use of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral tends to be virtually automatic for Wesleyan Christians in that many of us do not frequently need to consciously process the criteria. However, using the four criteria intentionally can be a powerful way to add to our biblical understanding and our faith. As I encounter situations in life that leave me puzzled, I will intentionally ask myself:

1. What does the Bible say about this situation?
2. What can I learn about this from the tradition of Christians who went before me?
3. What does my experience, and the experience of the faithful people of God tell me about this moment?
4. What seems reasonable to me as one made in the image of God, as well as what seems reasonable to those who have deeply thought about and studied this issue or situation?

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An example of how this works might be found in the way the United Methodist Church understands divorce. In Matthew 5:32 and Matthew 19:9, Jesus teaches against divorce. At first glance this may seem restrictive to readers in our day and time; however, a careful reading of these texts through the lenses of tradition, experience, and reason demonstrates this passage to illustrate one of the ways Jesus helped his followers to show compassion to the marginalized. According to ancient Jewish law and practice, a wife could simply be “dismissed” at the pleasure of her husband for any reason, or for no reason at all. This was the “certificate of divorce” of which Jesus speaks in Matthew 19:7. A woman in this situation had very limited options. If her father would not receive her back into his home, she would be left to fend for herself which could

lead her to starve to death, or force her to enter into alternative means of earning income which would clearly break Jewish law. Removing a husband’s freedom to simply “dismiss” his wife was actually a means of protecting women of the time while increasing accountability for husbands.

Next time you find yourself perplexed by a question or situation, or have a decision to make, give the four sources of Wesleyan theological thought a try for yourself. I suspect you will discover it to be one of the great gifts of the Wesleyan tradition.

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United Methodist Identity Points:

- United Methodists believe the Bible is the central and primary source of God’s revelation to us and that it contains all things necessary for salvation.
- We read the Bible through “lenses” of Christian tradition, personal and corporate experience, and human reason.
- United Methodists encourage Christians to engage with the biblical text, ask questions, and give serious thought to matters of faith and practice. Questions are encouraged in the United Methodist Church. We do not “check our brains at the door” when we enter a church sanctuary or classroom.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

- Have you or someone you know ever followed the teaching of *sola scriptura*? How might such an understanding influence the way a person lives out her or his faith?
- In your opinion, what difference does it make to say we believe in *prima scriptura* (scripture as our primary source) rather than in *sola scriptura* (scripture as the only source)?
- Name a passage of scripture that you find confusing and apply the four criteria of the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral” to it. Think through the passage, along with the questions it raises, using scripture, tradition, experience, and reason. What was this like for you? Do you think this is a helpful way to approach biblical texts? Why or why not?