

The Methodist Quadrilateral

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All Christian theology is contextual. When the Word became flesh God emptied himself of all but love. In Christ, God took to himself the flesh of a particular time and place; Jewish flesh in a remote town during the reign of Augustus Caesar. Theology attempts to make sense of this mystery and to explore its significance in a multiplicity of contexts. The process begins in the New Testament and has continued ever since. Wesley belonged within this theological tradition.

The American scholar Albert Outler reflecting on Wesley's theological method produced what has been termed the 'Wesleyan Quadrilateral'. Wesley's successors are encouraged to do theology within a dynamic framework of four components; scripture, reason, tradition and experience. The quadrilateral is a functional tool kit subject to context. There is nothing sacred about it.

Gill Dascombe has rightly argued that because we live in a very different context from the Wesleys we need a new quadrilateral 'if not to replace the Wesleyan one, then at least to lay alongside it' She has substituted 'wisdom' for Bible, 'science' for reason, 'culture' for tradition and 'community' for experience.¹ This paper goes much further. In my latest book, *Can these bones live?* I argue that the world context has changed so dramatically that a huge paradigm shift is required of Methodism. I conclude that our 'connexional system' is no longer fit for purpose and the Wesleyan quadrilateral is broken beyond repair.

A broken quadrilateral

Reason

Following the Jacobean strife and civil wars of the 17th century England longed for a period of peace. The Enlightenment, with its emphasis on reason, provided a new framework for settlement, growth and progress. The Wesleys were born into a situation of relative stability. Today following 9/11, Syria, Brexit and Trump we are drifting in the opposite direction. Violence and injustice underlies much of what is happening both locally and globally. We are living in apocalyptic times. In the rich West the rise of populism suggests that the tide of reason is fast ebbing away and may not return for some while. Reason has lost its cutting edge.

Experience

'Personal experience', even more so than in Wesley's time, is highly valued today. It is however to be understood differently. Experience for Wesley was linked with the inner witness of the Holy Spirit. Spiritual experience in the late 19th century continued as an important ingredient for Methodist theologians who, under the influence of Schleiermacher and Rudolf Otto, started to shift its emphasis. Today 'personal experience' has little to do with the Holy Spirit and everything to do with existential 'self-fulfilment'.

Bible

Wesley was a man of ‘one book’. Being an Oxford scholar he studied other books and encouraged his preachers, through the creation of his own library, to do the same, nevertheless the Bible remained central. Tradition, experience and reason were his main interpretive tools in his approach to the Bible. Methodism became a preaching movement where the message of the Scriptures was proclaimed and taught as a ‘living Word’. Wesley did not produce a creed as much as a *kerygma*. According to the Deed of Union our faith and our doctrines are based on ‘the divine revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures.’

Any consensus about the authority of the Scripture which may have existed once has long since disappeared. We have seven different ways of looking at the Bible from an evangelical fundamentalist position on the one hand and to sceptical liberalism on the other. The quadrilateral as a tool can be used in almost any way you want. Methodism’s overriding view can be summed up in the *Faith and Order* statement that ‘the Bible bears witness to God’s self-revelation, but the Word of God itself is far greater than the words of the Bible.’ This statement is broad enough to cover most viewpoints though the first part of the sentence tends to exclude the possibility that the Bible might indeed be **the** witness to God’s self revelation.

Tradition

What are we to make of ‘tradition’, the fourth component of the quadrilateral? The Wesleys were born into an Anglican tradition still bearing the marks of the Jacobean rebellion. John, unlike Charles, sat loosely within this tradition.

Throughout the 19th century Methodist tradition was reshaped by its inner conflicts with itself, the rise of non-conformity, American revivalism and the influence of the Oxford Movement. In 1932 Methodist tradition achieved some semblance of order in the compromises of the Deed of Union. At root are the ‘fundamental principles’ of the historic creeds, the Protestant Reformation and the remembrance of Methodism’s providential purpose.

The idea of ‘fundamental principles’ in our contemporary postmodern climate can mean almost anything. We have always been a pragmatic church supposedly ‘responding to the Spirit’ but what is proving to be a real threat to our future is our amnesia. The words ‘it ever remembers that in the providence of Gods Methodism was raised up to...’ Methodism today no longer ‘remembers’. Will a new focusing on our heritage and on our Methodist DNA restore memory?

A quadrilateral or quintilateral?

Does British Methodism with its ageing profile and falling numbers have a future in its present form? How significant is our apocalyptic context? In times of stability, economic growth, security and general optimism, churches can afford to be liberal in their beliefs and

more accommodating to culture. Not so in hard times! To survive, the edges of faith have to be sharpened up and identity more firmly established. The future Methodist Church will inevitably be smaller and much more focused. I am therefore proposing a different sort of quadrilateral or even a quintilateral.

SCRIPTURE

Donald English argued that the Bible was the ‘centre piece for our knowledge of God through Jesus by the Holy Spirit.’ He saw reason, tradition and experience revolving around the Bible like the dangling pieces of a baby’s mobile. That is not how *A Lamp to my Feet and a Light to my Path* views the Quadrilateral. Of course Donald was an evangelical. In making the Bible central he shared some common ground with those radicals within Methodism who also treated the Bible, particularly the message of the Gospels, with an equal seriousness.

If the church is to survive as a counter cultural movement in an apocalyptic age then Scripture must be primary. This was actually stated in the Methodist Catechism.

The Bible is thus the primary witness to God’s self-revelation, above all in Christ, within the formative events of the life of God’s people, pointing the Church of today to the present activity of God. ²

The Catechism then goes on to properly qualify this but in doing so creating a fuzziness around the notion of ‘primary’. What is ‘primary’ for the Methodist Church is ‘Conference’. I do not disagree with this except that the authority of Conference has increasingly become a fiction. In practice Conference has now become a rubber stamping showpiece rather than the primary discerning body of Methodism.

American Methodism has also struggled with the idea of the ‘primacy of Scripture’. I am not arguing for Biblical fundamentalism but rather taking my lead from Karl Barth who set out the three-fold nature of the Word of God as ‘revealer’, ‘revealed’ and ‘revealedness’.³ The Bible ‘**becomes**’ the Word of God analogous to the Word ‘becoming’ flesh. Putting a Methodist slant on this, it is the ‘preached word’ from Scripture which in the power of the Spirit becomes ‘the Word of God’. The Bible first of all interprets us, before we interpret the Bible! Only then do the other components play their part.

Unfortunately reason, tradition and experience, as I have shown above no longer have the viability which once they had. The context has so radically changed that I am proposing an alternative; a sort of quintilateral in which **faith, information, memory** and **mystery** revolve about the central primary pillar of **Scripture**.

FAITH.

One enduring feature of Methodism is its pragmatism. For grass roots Methodists, faith is a ‘doing’ faith. Wesley had to ‘preach faith until he had it.’ There is a complicated dynamic

contained within this sentence which goes to the heart of our Church. It reminds one of the old chestnut; which comes first ‘believing’ or ‘belonging’?

Timothy Keller in his book *Making Sense of God* says that ‘all varieties of secularism are sets of beliefs, not the simple absence of faith’.⁴ He argues that neither Christianity nor secularism can be demonstrably proven. Each person *chooses* their own paradigm of belief. It is a faith decision and other faith decisions follow. Within the Methodist paradigm some will place their faith in Conference, others in the Bible (as literally true), others will prioritize ‘reason’ and set their interpretation of the Bible within some ‘rational framework.’ Most will follow the unarticulated pattern and norms of their local church. Some, like myself, have chosen to make a faith decision about the Scriptures believing that the Bible, when preached, can **become** ‘the Word of God.’ The point I am making is that the authority we give to the Bible is something we ‘choose’ in a ‘faith’ decision. Having embraced a particular paradigm we then use reason to explain why we think this is the only way of looking at things.

The ‘liminal faith leap’ as described above is personal and existential but is it necessarily correct? The corrective comes in the realization that ‘faith is also corporate’. In the company of other Christians within the community of faith one’s own personal faith is challenged, shaped and moulded by the Holy Spirit. It is here that the traditional quadrilateral once played its part. Around my central pillar of Scripture I am proposing that **information, memory and mystery** should become the new qualifiers.

As with the traditional quadrilateral we have the problem of how to weigh each of these three components. I have argued that Scripture is primary from the point of view of the Word. I now contend that context must be primary from the point of view of ‘flesh’. Both are joined by faith. The three qualifiers are contextual.

The three qualifiers

INFORMATION

If we are to hear what God is saying in a particular place then we must ‘know’ the place. In our age of information overload the information we seek must be mainly limited by the local context. The first task is therefore to gather information about the context and discover all we can about it, not just by ‘fact finding’ but by gathering up stories, getting a feel for the community, meeting and talking to the people who live there. If the Word is to become flesh then the ‘flesh’ of that community must become part of my ‘flesh’. To ‘know’ the place one must become identified in heart, mind and soul with the people who live there. Information arises from incarnation.

MEMORY

Information on its own does not produce wisdom. It needs memory. A post-modern functional age such as ours does not place value on memory. In forgetting the past we repeat the mistakes of the past and learn nothing. Furthermore without memory we lose identity.

The American Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann highlights the importance of memory.⁵ He describes memory as a magnet which in drawing the people of God back to the past gives new stimulus to prophetic imagination in the present. It serves a subversive purpose, legitimates a newness marked by amazement and discontinuity and energizes new action. He sets out the principle that 'Only memory allows possibility'. I conclude that a church which suffers from amnesia has no future.

MYSTERY

A functional fast consumer context has no place for mystery. Mr Harding in *The Barchester Chronicles*, on hearing a sermon from Mr Slope arguing that the Word of God must not be smothered in 'the meretricious charms of melody', reflects 'if there is no music then there is no mystery and if there is not mystery then there is no God'.

God is clothed in mystery so the Trinity like the incarnation is incomprehensible. Mystery suggests, surprise, wonder, the unexpected. It has no name but comes from beyond to quicken the pulse, stimulate the imagination and fire the emotions. It has a numinous quality of beauty, terror and fear. Mystery happens at any time in any place to any person. In Wesleyan language it is an action of prevenient grace.

Thomas Traherne believed that the earth was 'shot through with heaven'. In his meditations and poems we find an exuberant delight in creation and childhood memories.⁶ Unless this 'numinous' quality touches the interactions of any quadrilateral or quintilateral we simply produce dead utilitarian theology.

Charles Wesley turned Methodist theology into sing-able poetry which entered our veins. The Conference can produce theological reports, Methodists can 'do' theology but it is not enough. We require the artists, the poets and the story tellers to shape our theology and our faith so that revelation retains mystery and information is transfigured by wonder.

The central pillar of Scripture around which my components of faith, information, memory and mystery move is 'the preached Word'. By preaching I do not limit this to standing in a pulpit and delivering an oration, though as 'one of Mr Wesley's preachers' this has remained my method. If we are to preach the Word in today's context we must take lessons from the poets, artists and creative story tellers. Just as Jesus used parables, stories, sermons, dialogues and declarations to ensure that people 'heard the Word' so must we.

Conclusion.

I have suggested that the traditional Methodist quadrilateral is broken. If we are to go 'back to the future', shed the trappings of Church and return to being a movement then a different

quadrilateral or quintilateral is required. Although I have taken a more radical step than Gill Dascombe I wish to affirm her closing words:

‘In our present age of radical individualism and personal isolation, shared religious experience brings us into deep, honest and unguarded community with others ... We are commanded to love one another and in 2000 years we have only just begun to scratch the surface of all that this can mean.’

NOTES

1. Gill Dascombe, ‘Reconceiving the Methodist Quadrilateral’ in John Vincent (ed) *Methodism Abounding: Christ and Methodism for the Twenty First Century*, Church in the Market Place, 2006, pp.5f.
2. Catechism for the people called Methodists, Question 52 (see Stephen Dawes ‘Revelation in Methodist Practice and Belief’ in Marsh, Beck, Shier-Jones, Wareing (eds) *Unmasking Methodist Theology*, Continuum, 2004, pp.109f.
3. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, Doctrine of the Word of God*, I/1 pp.98f
- 4.. Timothy Keller, *Making Sense of God*, H&S, 2016, p.215
5. Walter Brueggemann, *The Covenanted Self: Explorations in Law and Covenant*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999, p.23 & 27. ALSO *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1986, p.102.
6. Thomas Traherne, *Selected Poems and Prose*, Penguin Classics, 1992

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