

PASTOR'S NOTES. Sources of Truth

*First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.* (2 Peter 1:20-21, NRSV)

Among our Methodist churches, the term "Wesleyan Quadrilateral" has become a politically-charged term; apparently some assume that it means we can pick and choose what we believe and still be a good Christian. For me, this concept has been exceedingly helpful, not as a rule for truth, but as a description of how we actually arrive at truth. Let me try to explain.

When a person is deciding what is true, they might look first at the world around them. Many would say they know what is true from EXPERIENCE. Our accumulation of experiences creates our own personal history, but for truth we also depend on others' history and experiences. We can call this TRADITION. In addition to this, we critically evaluate experiences and traditions to see that they make sense. We can say that REASON is a part of our search for what is true.

Those of us who are religious have a special part of our tradition written out in SCRIPTURE. For many it may be the most important part of their tradition. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist and related churches, was to have said that:

*Christian truth is propounded in SCRIPTURE, illuminated by TRADITION, confirmed by EXPERIENCE, and allowed by REASON.*

This four-sided view of truth is what we call the "Wesleyan Quadrilateral." Wesley understood these in specific ways: Scripture refers to the 66 books of the Protestant Bible (the Catholic and Orthodox Bibles include extra books); Tradition for him referred specifically to the traditions of the church; Experience referred specifically to the view of someone who has received the Holy Spirit and has been born again to new life in Christ (in other words, not the experience of the old life, when we could see only evil and meaninglessness in the world); and REASON recognizes that while we can never fully understand spiritual truth, we seek a faith that is coherent in itself, coherent with the rest of our lived experience, and as comprehensive as possible.

So for Wesley, scripture was the starting point, and the arbiter of the four. My observation is that this quadrilateral is a helpful way of describing how all of us arrive at truth. Roman Catholics, for instance, officially declared in 1543 that SCRIPTURE and TRADITION are equal sources of truth; they did not speak of EXPERIENCE or REASON, but they are still a part of the life of Catholic persons, though to a lesser degree. For example, those persons who challenge their Roman Catholic Church on current issues are persons who are place a higher value on experience than other Catholics.

This quadrilateral could also describe an atheist; they would understand EXPERIENCE in a more general sense, but many would claim that it and REASON are the most important criteria. However,

over time, they also develop TRADITION, and while they may not value any SCRIPTURE, for some of them there may be particular traditions that are so important that they are treated almost like scripture.

And while Wesley was interested in Christian truth, a person seeking scientific truth would be mostly concerned about EXPERIENCE in the sense of scientific observation, but also the observations of others and theories that become part of the scientific TRADITION, usually critically evaluated by REASON, with a low view of SCRIPTURE (though a believing scientist might take their religious tradition into account).

In the 1500s, many Christians broke with the Roman Catholic Church; we call most of these groups Protestants. A key issue for these groups was a distrust of many Church traditions and a desire to put the Bible first. At the time the Bible was written and read in the Latin language and only understood by the priests. But now the printing press and Bible translations made it possible for everyone to read the Bible in their own language. Churches like ours where people could now read the Bible rejected many of the Church traditions as “un-Biblical” and became “Bible first” churches. Many churches today insist that they are either “Bible first” or “Bible only” churches.

Unfortunately, this is unlikely the case, and I think that it is partly because many don’t realize that they depend on all four criteria, whether or not they realize it. Many who claim to be Biblical rely on their own tradition, including their traditional ways of interpreting the Bible. If a person is truly “Bible-first,” then at any point the Bible would lead one to question a tradition, they must be willing to lay that tradition aside. Many “Biblical” leaders are unwilling to do this.

This leads me to what is one of my primary life principles. I choose to be a “Bible-first” person. I decided some time ago after reading the Bible, and becoming suspicious of many of the religious and secular traditions in life, that I was either going to live by own sense of truth (an “Experience-first” outlook) or I was going to live by something outside of my own mind. While the Bible does not contain everything about God – nothing in our grasp can do that – it does give us more than enough of what we need to sense the divine beyond us and see an image of God who creates, loves, delivers, and saves.

Will Graham, writing about his grandfather Billy Graham:

*One night at Forest Home, he walked out into the woods and set his Bible on a stump—more an altar than a pulpit—and he cried out: “O God! There are many things in this book I do not understand. There are many problems with it for which I have no solution. There are many seeming contradictions. There are some areas in it that do not seem to correlate with modern science. I can’t answer some of the philosophical and psychological questions Chuck and others are raising.”*

*And then, my grandfather fell to his knees and the Holy Spirit moved in him as he said, “Father, I am going to accept this as Thy Word—by faith! I’m going to allow faith to go beyond my intellectual questions and doubts, and I will believe this to be Your inspired Word!”*

<https://billygraham.org/story/the-tree-stump-prayer-where-billy-graham-overcame-doubt/>

So I would ask each of you to consider for yourselves how you arrive at truth, whether you are willing to be a “Bible-first” person.

*All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.*  
(2 Timothy 3:16-17, NRSV)

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ken".