

## THE 'WESLEYAN QUADRILATERAL': THE STORY OF A MODERN METHODIST MYTH

TED A. CAMPBELL

In 1982 the Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies met in Keble College, Oxford. Towards the end of that Institute, an international committee was formed to consider the subject and venue for the next Institute (which was held in 1987). A number of North American delegates suggested that the subject of the next institute should be the "Wesleyan Quadrilateral." British delegates were puzzled at this proposal, but put on a brave face, none admitting publicly that they didn't know what a "Wesleyan Quadrilateral" might be. A Cambridge professor turned to a befuddled colleague and explained in whispers, "I think that's meant to refer to Wesley's use of scripture, tradition, reason, and experience." Of course, by that time, the term had become a commonplace in North American Methodist circles.

Indeed, since the adoption of a new theological statement in 1972 which held up scripture, tradition, reason, and experience as "Doctrinal Guidelines in The United Methodist Church,"<sup>1</sup> this fourfold locus of religious authority has gained remarkable acceptance as a tool for theological analysis and as a starting point for the recovery of the Wesleyan theological tradition in a modern ecumenical context. The fourfold pattern has served as an important teaching tool in United Methodist and other theological seminaries and in church school literature, and has provided a critical means for evaluating theological claims within that tradition.<sup>2</sup> Although its specific formulation has shifted, the fourfold pattern of "Theological Guidelines" survived the serious revision of the United Methodist doctrinal statement by the 1988 General Conference.<sup>3</sup> In discussing the "myth" of the "Wesleyan Quadrilateral," then, I do not mean at all to devalue the importance of this fourfold pattern. The very fact that it has provoked serious debate among Methodists on a central theological issue is convincing evidence of its service.

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<sup>1</sup>*The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 1972* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1972; hereafter cited as "1972 *Discipline*"), par. 70, 75-79.

<sup>2</sup>An example of the fourfold pattern used as a tool for theological and ethical analysis is found in Dennis M. Campbell, *Doctors, Lawyers, Ministers: Christian Ethics in Professional Practice* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1982). United Methodist confirmation materials have also stressed the "quadrilateral."

<sup>3</sup>*The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 1988* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1988; hereafter cited as "1988 *Discipline*"), par. 69, 80-86.

The formulation has presented problems, however. From a systematic viewpoint, the 1972 statement of this pattern seemed to many to lack sufficient clarity in general, and, in particular, to lack a sufficiently clear assertion of the primacy of scripture in doctrinal and practical reflection, and this concern prompted the 1988 General Conference's revision of the statement of "Theological Guidelines." From an historical perspective, the notion that this fourfold pattern can be attributed to, or easily found in the works of, John Wesley has to be seriously questioned. This article addresses the latter issue, in particular, by attempting to give a narrative of how United Methodists came to hold the notion of the "Wesleyan Quadrilateral," and by considering what basis this notion may have in the teachings of John Wesley.

### The Development of the 'Wesleyan Quadrilateral'

The notion of the "Wesleyan Quadrilateral" basically developed from the work of mid-twentieth-century Methodists engaged in various phases of the ecumenical movement. There had been an earlier debate about Wesley's understanding of religious authority, sparked, when in the late nineteenth century, some Anglicans and Methodists, influenced by the Oxford Movement, pointed to Wesley's fondness for Christian tradition.<sup>4</sup> They were answered by trumpet-blasts from George Croft Cell and others early in this century who were intent on showing Wesley's affinity to the Protestant Reformers, including his affirmation of *scriptura sola*.<sup>5</sup> Following a somewhat different line, some early-twentieth-century Methodists in Britain and North America claimed Wesley as a kind of foreshadowing of Schleiermacher in his stress on the centrality of religious experience.<sup>6</sup> None of these, however, attempted to show the interplay of these various sources of authority in Wesley's thought, as some versions of the "Quadrilateral" would try to do.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup>See, for instance, R. Denny Umlin's works, *John Wesley's Place in History* (London: Rivington's 1870) and *Churchman's Life of Wesley* (London: SPCK, revised edition, 1880), or David Baines-Griffiths, *Wesley the Anglican* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1919).

<sup>5</sup>George Croft Cell, *The Rediscovery of John Wesley* (Lanham, New York, and London: University Press of America, 1984; reprint of 1835 edition), passim; Cf. William Ragsdale Cannon, *The Theology of John Wesley with Special Reference to the Doctrine of Justification* (Lanham, New York, and London: University Press of America, 1974; reprint of 1946 edition; this work is a revision of Cannon's 1942 dissertation), 20-21, where Cannon argues that Wesley reasserted *sola scriptura* against the Deists.

<sup>6</sup>Herbert Brook Workman, *The Place of Methodism in the Catholic Church* (London: Epworth Press, 1921); a similar argument was laid out by the North American Methodist Umphrey Lee, *John Wesley and Modern Religion* (Nashville: Cokesbury Press, 1936).

<sup>7</sup>An important exception to this generalization is Stanley B. Frost's Marburg dissertation entitled *Die Autoritätslehre in den Werken John Wesley's* (Munich: Verlag Ernst Reinhardt, 1938), although unfortunately, Frost's work received very little attention in English-speaking circles.

The notion of the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral” was foreshadowed in Colin W. Williams’s consideration of “Authority and Experience” in his influential textbook, *John Wesley’s Theology Today* (1960).<sup>8</sup> Williams, an Australian Methodist, wrote from the perspective of the ecumenical movement, attempting in particular to interpret Wesley’s relevance for Methodists relating to that movement. It was this concern that structured Williams’s attempt to understand Wesley’s doctrine of authority in relation to that of various confessional traditions, and that perhaps led Williams to focus on Wesley’s *sources* of authority. Williams’s five subject headings reflect these sources: the first two have to do with scripture, the rest discuss tradition, experience, and reason. Thus, the four elements of the “quadrilateral” were already present in Williams’s account. This was a critical development, because *John Wesley’s Theology Today* became the standard textbook for students of Wesley’s thought in the 1960s and beyond.

Williams’s discussion began by outlining three distinctive understandings of theological authority: the “Catholic” (focusing on tradition), the “Classical Protestant” (focusing on scripture), and the “Free Church Protestant” (focusing on immediate inspiration).<sup>9</sup> His conclusion was that Wesley essentially reflected a “Classical Protestant” doctrine of authority grounded in the final authority of the Bible, but he argued that Wesley’s view was nuanced (and ecumenically relevant) in its positive attitudes towards tradition and religious experience.<sup>10</sup> In this way, Williams combined the late-nineteenth-century Anglican claims about Wesley’s “high Church” attitude towards tradition and the early-twentieth-century claims about Wesley’s revival of a distinctively Protestant doctrine of biblical authority. His work lay in the immediate background of the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral.”

It was within a decade of Williams’s text that the fourfold pattern of religious authority emerged in Methodist theological discussion, at first as a result of the merger of the Evangelical United Brethern Church and The Methodist Church. The 1968 General Conference that united these denominations mandated a theological Study Commission to develop a new doctrinal statement based on the Methodist Articles of Religion and the E.U.B. Confession of Faith. The committee, chaired by the late Professor Albert C. Outler, began its work and by the specially called General Conference of 1970 was able to issue an interim report.

The interim report of 1970 indicates that the Committee had scrapped the idea of combining the Confession and the Articles, and had begun to focus on the development of a new doctrinal statement. It enunciated the fourfold pattern of religious authority under the heading of “The

<sup>8</sup>*Op cit.* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1960), 23-38.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 37-38.

Wesleyan Concept of Authority.” “Wesley,” the document states, “was sensitive to the demand for credible authority and he tested his own teaching, and that of others, within a four-element compound of interdependent norms,” which is referred to later in the document as a “quadrilateral.”<sup>11</sup> In a series of paragraphs (all under the general heading of “Authority”), the document discussed scripture, tradition, experience, and reason.

The use of the term “quadrilateral” to describe the fourfold pattern would have come naturally to Professor Outler, who first used it (though not without regrets later).<sup>12</sup> The “Lambeth Quadrilateral” of 1888 was well known in ecumenical circles. In it, the Lambeth Conference of Bishops of the Anglican communion laid out what they understood to be four essential conditions for a reunited Christian church. Professor Outler borrowed the term from this context as a description for what he understood to be John Wesley’s fourfold understanding of religious authority.

Between 1970 and 1972 the notion of the quadrilateral clearly caught on, for the doctrinal statement adopted by the United Methodist General Conference of 1972 (with less than twenty dissenting votes, and after only brief discussion) expanded on the 1970 document’s section delineating the fourfold pattern. Some significant changes occurred in the 1972 statement, however.

In the first place, the 1972 statement did not utilize the term “quadrilateral,” and did not attribute the fourfold pattern to John Wesley in the way that the 1970 statement had done. Rather than being titled “The Wesleyan Concept of Authority” (1970), the 1972 discussion of the fourfold pattern falls under the heading of “Doctrinal Guidelines in The United Methodist Church.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, the 1972 statement purported to be a *contemporary* statement of guidelines for theological reflection in The United Methodist Church.

In the second place, the 1972 statement expanded all of the sections on religious authority, including the section on scripture, but left the earlier assertion of the primacy of scripture in a considerably more ambiguous state. The statement placed scripture, tradition, reason, and experience under equal subject headings, thus conveying an impression of equality among them. A concluding section on “These Guidelines in Interaction” did assert that “There is a primacy that goes with Scripture, as the constitutive witness to the biblical wellsprings of our faith. In practice, however,” the statement goes on to say, “theological reflection may find

<sup>11</sup>[Theological Study Commission of The United Methodist Church], *The Theological Study Commission on Doctrine and Doctrinal Standards: An Interim Report to the General Conference*, [no place of publication given; date is presumably early 1970].

<sup>12</sup>Albert C. Outler, “The Wesleyan Quadrilateral—in John Wesley,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 20:1 (Spring 1985), 16

<sup>13</sup>1972 *Discipline*, 75.

its point of departure in tradition, 'experience,' or rational analysis."<sup>14</sup> Although the second sentence does not strictly falsify the first, the connective "however" left the notion of scriptural primacy in some doubt.

Finally, it is worth noting that in the 1972 statement, both "experience" and "reason" are assigned distinctly contemporary meanings: "experience" refers both to specifically religious experience and our general experience of the world, and "reason is taken to mean "rational analysis" ("logical coherency" in the 1970 statement). In both cases, Wesley's stresses are missing, both his stress on "experimental religion," and his typically eighteenth-century British sense of reason as reflecting on experience.

Despite the near-unanimous vote which approved it, the 1972 statement did not go long without criticism. Professor Leroy Howe of Perkins School of Theology criticized what he perceived as the general ambiguity of its statement on religious authority.<sup>15</sup> Dean Robert Cushman of Duke Divinity School criticized the ambiguity of its assertion on scriptural primacy: it ". . . takes back with the left hand what it gives with the right," as he put it.<sup>16</sup> Later criticisms were enunciated by the Nazarene historian Timothy Smith, who felt that United Methodism had jettisoned scriptural primacy in giving equal authority to scripture, tradition, reason, and experience; the quadrilateral, as he saw it, was construed as an "equilateral."<sup>17</sup>

The United Methodist General Conference of 1984, aware of these criticisms, established a new Theological Study Committee, chaired by Bishop Earl Hunt, to revise or replace the 1972 statement. From the first, the Committee was determined to make the primacy of scripture more explicit, and this intent was clearly carried through in the statement that was adopted by the 1988 General Conference. In early drafts of their proposed statement, the four elements of the quadrilateral were not given equal subject headings: one section was entitled, "The Primacy of Scripture," and a subsequent section was entitled "Tradition, Experience, and Reason."<sup>18</sup>

In the statement as passed by the General Conference of 1988, however, the four subject headings were retained<sup>19</sup> Like the 1972 statement, the 1988 statement does not utilize the term "quadrilateral," and

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<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 78-79.

<sup>15</sup>Leroy T. Howe, "United Methodism in Search of Theology," *Perkins Journal*, Fall 1974, 13-16.

<sup>16</sup>Robert E. Cushman, "Church Doctrinal Standards Today," *Religion in Life* (1975), 409-410.

<sup>17</sup>Timothy Smith, an unpublished paper delivered to the Wesley Studies Working Group of the 1982 Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies.

<sup>18</sup>[Committee on Our Theological Task of The United Methodist Church], "Report of the Committee on our Theological Task to the General Conference of The United Methodist Church" [n.d., distributed in 1987], 26 and 27.

<sup>19</sup>1988 *Discipline*, 80-86.

does refer to the four elements as “Theological Guidelines.” The statement is expanded in two important respects: the four “Guidelines” are understood as both “sources” and “norms” of theological reflection, and the description of each has been thoroughly revised. Like the 1972 statement, the 1988 statement purports to be a contemporary assessment of theological guidelines, and not an historical description of Wesley’s thought. But the new statement is preceded by an historical preface explaining how “Wesley believed that the living core of the Christian faith stands revealed in scripture, illumined by tradition, vivified in personal experience, and confirmed by reason.”<sup>20</sup> The statement goes on to detail some particular aspects of Wesley’s uses of each of these authorities. In this respect, the statement is more careful about the historical claims it makes, but only raises in a critical way the historical issues surrounding Wesley’s own understandings of theological authority.

It is interesting to note that throughout this process, the fourfold pattern, whether stated as an historical pattern or a contemporary theological formulation, has come to be referred to almost uniformly by United Methodists as “the Wesleyan Quadrilateral,” despite the fact that the 1972 statement did not claim it as Wesleyan. Presumably what has happened is that the language of the 1970 statement (which was a statement about Wesley’s understanding of authority) was remembered in a kind of oral tradition or communal memory, and so was applied rather inappropriately to the 1972 statement. One might speculate that the quadrilateral notion was found helpful by Methodists principally as a means of combating uncritical views of scriptural authority. Here would be a powerful, subliminal motive for attributing the fourfold pattern of the 1972 statement to John Wesley: it would give the rejection of uncritical views of scriptural primacy the weight of Methodism’s deepest roots. But put in this way – attributing the fourfold pattern as such to John Wesley – the notion of the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral” is quite problematic.

### **The Fourfold Pattern and John Wesley**

In order to examine the extent to which the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral” may be grounded in Wesley’s teachings, it will be important to note, in the first place, what can be said in defense of the “Quadrilateral” as a “Wesleyan” conception. Professor Outler defended the fourfold pattern as grounded in John Wesley in an article entitled “The Wesleyan Quadrilateral – in John Wesley.”<sup>21</sup> He made several cogent points in this article. In the first place, Outler pointed out that Wesley did use throughout his career what we recognize as scripture, tradition, reason, and experience as doctrinal norms. That is to say, Wesley was not in any simple sense

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>21</sup>Outler, 7-18.

a *homo unius libri*.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, and perhaps even more critically, Outler showed that there are in Wesley certain indications of conceptual patterns which link various ones of these four elements together, and from which a fourfold pattern might be inferred. Wesley fell heir to an Anglican theological tradition in which scripture, Christian antiquity, and reason all functioned together in the formulation and evaluation of Christian teaching and practice.<sup>23</sup> There are two passages in Wesley's works where such a framework is given. Wesley's doctrinal treatise on "Original Sin" (1756) is formally titled "The Doctrine of Original Sin, according to Scripture, Reason, and Experience."<sup>24</sup> So at least those three stand as conceptually linked categories of doctrinal authority. Second, the preface to the first collected edition of Wesley's works (1771) has the following statement: "So that in this edition I present to serious and candid men my last and maturest thoughts, agreeable, I hope, to Scripture, reason, and Christian antiquity."<sup>25</sup> "Christian antiquity," Professor Outler reasoned, is an element of Christian tradition, other elements of which Wesley utilized on other occasions as doctrinal authority. Thus, putting these two statements together, and understanding "Christian antiquity" as representing at least an element of Christian tradition, one could infer the fourfold "Quadrilateral" of scripture, tradition, reason, and experience as a conceptual framework implied in Wesley's works.

There are at least two problems involved with this inference. In the first place, I think, it is not appropriate to conclude on the basis of these two passages that there must have been a consistent, fourfold conception of religious authority *in Wesley's mind or thought*. As in so many other areas, Wesley's theology and practice developed over the years, sometimes with major shifts in theological emphasis (such as his being convinced of the doctrine of assurance by the Moravians), sometimes with relatively minor shifts in emphasis. One cannot infer a static (or simply consistent) fourfold conception on the basis of an emphasis in 1756 on three of the four elements, and an emphasis fifteen years later on two of those three with another added to them.

A more crucial problem with the fourfold pattern involves the identification of "tradition" as an element in the pattern. I do not mean at all to deny that "Christian antiquity" or the teachings and practices of the Church of England would fall under what we would term as "tradition" in a post-Tractarian or modern ecumenical sense of the term. But here is precisely the problem: whereas "Scripture," "reason," and "ex-

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 13-16.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 9-10.

<sup>24</sup>John Wesley, "The Doctrine of Original Sin, according to Scripture, Reason, and Experience" (in Thomas Jackson, ed., *The Works of the Reverend John Wesley, A.M.* [14 volumes; London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1872], 9:191).

<sup>25</sup>Preface to 1771 edition of the *Works*, par. 4 (cited in Jackson, 1:iv).

perience” stand as clear conceptual categories in Wesley, I am not aware of an eighteenth-century conceptual category (or a term) answering to “tradition,” in its modern sense. In fact, the term “tradition” very often carried negative connotations in the Reformation and post-Reformation periods. Wesley would have been familiar with the assertion in the first Homily of the Church of England that one must rely upon Scripture, and not “the stinking puddles of men’s traditions.”<sup>26</sup> There are indeed two places in Wesley’s works where he linked together in a conceptual framework scripture, Christian antiquity (or “the primitive church”) and the Church of England, but this does not answer to the conceptuality of the fourfold pattern, since this broad description of the sources for Wesley’s thought includes Scripture.<sup>27</sup> To restate the point: there simply doesn’t seem to exist in Wesley a conceptual category answering to “tradition” as conceived in the “Quadrilateral,” that is, as describing God’s work in the church after the scriptural period, in the same manner as there *are* conceptual categories for scripture, reason, and experience. The fourfold pattern, then, is asymmetrical in its mixing of properly eighteenth-century and non-eighteenth-century conceptual categories, and so should not be attributed to John Wesley as such. At this point, I would recall that the 1972 and 1988 statements in the United Methodist *Discipline* can be excused, at least insofar as they do not overtly attribute the fourfold pattern to John Wesley (although the preamble to the 1988 statement comes very close). The “myth” is the continuing legitimation of the fourfold pattern by historically attributing it to John Wesley.

### Conclusion

I have been tempted, after a couple of years of reflection on these issues, to make a case that here we have an instance of the development of a modern version of the traditioning process. Perhaps we could identify Colin Williams as “E,” Albert Outler as “J,” and the 1970 draft of the Theological Study Commission (the only official text in which “quadrilateral” appears) as “P,” with Wesley himself as a kind of *Urtext*. The notion of the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral,” then, would be an intricate composite of these sources, formed under the crucible of Methodist involvement in the ecumenical movement, and then found almost indispensable by Methodists themselves in their defense of a progressive attitude towards biblical authority.

<sup>26</sup>“A Fruitful Exhortation to the Reading of Holy Scripture,” Part I; *Certain Sermons or Homilies Appointed to be Read in Churches in the Time of Queen Elizabeth of Famous Memory* (London: SPCK, 1890), 2.

<sup>27</sup>John Wesley, sermon “On Laying the Foundation of the New Chapel, near the City-Road, London” II:3 (Jackson 7:423-424); idem, “Farther Thoughts on Separation from the Church,” pars. 1-2 (Jackson 13:272-274).

But this might lessen the contemporary significance of the "Wesleyan Quadrilateral," which, as I have remarked at the outset, has been remarkably helpful. A rather odd thing has happened: the Methodists, who at mid-century were accused of being "short on theology,"<sup>28</sup> have forged in the last thirty years a powerful tool for discussing the classic issues of the theological *prolegomena*. This tool has precedents in the Christian tradition in general, in the Anglican tradition in more particular respects, and specifically in John Wesley. But for all these precedents, it should be clear that the Quadrilateral" is a distinctively *modern* tool, and perhaps for that reason all the more remarkable.

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<sup>28</sup>*Life* November 10, 1947; cited in Walter N. Vernon, *United Methodist Profile* (Nashville: Graded Press, 1959), 7, note 1.