

# The Real Wesleyan Quadrilateral

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It is now often commonplace to read about the **Wesleyan Quadrilateral**, though John Wesley did not use the term himself. It is generally agreed that these four sources were the basis for his public ministry and in particular, the way he developed his theological conclusions. These four sources were first referred to as the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral” in 1964 by United Methodist ecumenical theologian and scholar Albert C. Outler in a collection of Wesley’s works edited by Outler and simply entitled John Wesley. The four areas are:

- **Scripture**    - **Tradition**  
- **Reason**       - **Experience**

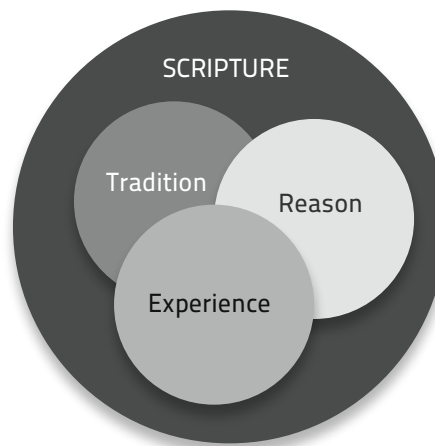
Scripture refers to the inspired and sufficient written word of God, the 66 canonical books of the Bible. Upon this foundation church traditions are adopted which relate fully with the biblical text, and those which are inconsistent are (hopefully) discarded. Reason is received as a gift from God intimately related to being created in the image of God, and as human beings we experience the reality of God’s love, mercy and grace.

It is interesting to note the reflection of Albert Outler on his formulation, “There is one phrase I wish I had never used: the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. It has created the wrong image in the minds of so many people and, I am sure, will lead to all kinds of controversy.”

Over time, various images have been used for the quadrilateral - four equal squares has been a significant one. The problem here is that the Quadrilateral is seen as “equilateral,” and all four “sources” for authority and decision-making are depicted as equally weighted. This was never a more disturbing image than the Maslow pyramid model of hierarchy - in this image, one is hard pressed to

work out what is the top, though in progressive Christian circles one does not have to guess too hard.

I believe a good image showing the best intent is that based around circles, with scripture as the main circle and the other parts in smaller circles inside - scripture being the centre and connector; the overarching source of our revelation. Scripture is to be viewed as the foundation on which the other sources are built.



Where are we today? I believe the latest Uniting Church Assembly confirmed that experience is now the cornerstone for many Uniting Church delegates, and it is personal experience - not the experience of the church or in the context of Wesley - the conversion experience of God’s love.

It was evident in much of the debate and discussions during the plenary sessions, but especially during the times to consider homosexuality and same- sex marriage.

Scripture is marginalised as there is now a standard viewpoint among some progressive Christians that as the Bible does not explicitly exclude same-sex marriage then it must be okay today because the experience of progressive Christians allows it.

Tradition is expanded to include a variety of different religious sources and certainly not limited to the tradition of the Church.

Reason is not related to prayer for wisdom and discernment in relation to the conscience, but rather humanist science and the best of

human rationality is proclaimed.

And finally Personal experience is linked to a simple re-writing of the Bible as the basis for the quadrilateral toward one’s own personal ideological theology: “this is my experience so it must be right”.

In essence, the 14th Assembly had a tendency to focus on personal story and experience, usually with a secular base in order to highlight the perceived need to revise the Church’s position on marriage, including the right to perform the marriages of friends (if legislation changed in Australia), and the validation of one’s personal relationship by being married in the church.

It is very difficult to have a discussion using Scripture as a foundation when this type of personal experience is the context, so what can we do?

Well, we can simply keep proclaiming the truth as evangelical members did at the 14th Assembly, often resulting in derision and judgement, an irony that pseudo-tolerant people were of course not able to see.

We need to keep helping our members understand what is the right basis for their theology and true right relationships. Many ordinary members are sadly becoming more marginalised in their local congregations, particularly as liberal progressive ministers play up their own experience and supposed knowledge. We can all play a role through our own reading, the use and dissemination of the excellent Christian resources around now, especially on marriage (the ACC website has a wealth of material). We can also help people to come back to focus on the Bible and the church and tradition as properly understood, with reason related to discernment and wisdom and experience validated by the Bible, rather than experience being validated by our own experience. Above all returning to the centrality of Scripture will help people to focus again on Jesus Christ who calls us to be one in unity, rather than the God of diversity in unity.

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