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The Wesleyan Quadrilateral and Teaching Biblical Studies

Michael R. Cosby

The *Wesleyan Quadrilateral* receives a great deal of attention within the Wesleyan tradition. Albert Outler coined this term in the 1960's to describe the four-fold approach that John Wesley used when reflecting on theological matters: *Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience*. Widespread abuse of the expression later caused Outler to regret formulating it, but he continued to defend the Quadrilateral as an accurate description of Wesley's theological method (Outler 1986, 16).¹ It remains a useful model for theological reflection if one understands that Wesley did not place equal authority in each of the four elements. The fact that he hyperbolically called himself *homo unius libri* ("a man of one book"),² clearly illustrates the special role the Bible played in his thinking. Although he read widely in many kinds of literature (Jones 1995, 18-19), Scripture for him was fundamental; and tradition, reason and experience functioned in supportive roles, not as coequals (see Jones 1995). Donald Thorsen describes the quadrilateral as a three-sided pyramid with Scripture as the foundation upon which the others rest (Thorsen 1990, 71).

An approach that is biblically based, yet openly embraces input from reason, tradition and experience, holds great value for professors of Biblical Studies. It provides a middle ground — a place where professors and students can escape the raging currents of right-wing and left-wing

¹ Scott Jones argues that Wesley used a *five-fold* model: Scripture, Ancient Apostolic Church, early Church of England, reason and experience (1995, 81-94, 169-76, 222-23). Randy Maddox (1994, 36, 267-268 n.71-76) provides a helpful set of references to Wesley's works wherein Wesley appeals to the elements of Scripture, tradition, reason and experience.

² Wesley used this expression in the preface to his 1746 *Sermons on Several Occasions* (*The Works of John Wesley*, 14 vols. [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975-1983] 1.105); and in "On God's Vineyard," 1.1 (*Works* 3.504).

fundamentalisms. Nevertheless, given my own history, I see extreme irony in my endorsement of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral as a paradigm for teaching the Bible.

I grew up in a fundamentalist church that would judge such an approach to be dangerous, if not heretical. My church prided itself in being Bible-centered, and I assumed that the universal standard of authority for all true Christians was perfectly clear: the Bible (as correctly interpreted by our group, of course, which claimed not to rely on any human traditions). My Christian subculture fostered a distrust of *reason*, because human intellect was viewed as so distorted by sin that one must not trust it. In addition, I was taught the evils of *tradition*, for “people who rely on tradition rely on human words instead of on God’s words.” And I was instructed not to build doctrine on *experience*, because “those who base their beliefs on subjective events instead of on the Bible are easily led astray.”

On various occasions church members warned me against going to college, because “that’s a good place to lose your faith.” They derided professors, “who ignorantly exalt human intellect, promoting lies by teaching things that contradict the Bible.” I was to be separate from the world, believing the truth proclaimed in Scripture and rejecting the wicked, worldly wisdom that alienates people from God.

What caused my radical shift from a fundamentalist to a Wesleyan paradigm? In a word, education. During my graduate work, I became painfully aware that presuppositionless exegesis does not exist. I was confronted with the sociology of knowledge, learning that all people interpret what they read or hear in light of their own experiences. The belief that we can understand the Bible without being hindered by human traditions vanished like a morning mist when the light of reason came over my horizon. I learned that every Christian group has its own historically situated standards for how it determines what is authoritative for doctrine and practice. There is no such thing as being purely “biblical.” We are all influenced by certain paradigms. We might modify or even reject some of these as we struggle to formulate theological positions, but we do not have the ability to operate completely as free agents “under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.”

Making this transition was agonizing. As my own horizon expanded after reading books on hermeneutics, I endured a painful process of realizing that I had to replace my fundamentalist paradigm with a more adequate model.

I try to remember this personal turmoil as I teach Biblical Studies, for a significant number of Messiah College students come from fundamentalist churches. Although our college brochures explain that we are “rooted in the Anabaptist, Pietist, and Wesleyan traditions of the Christian Church,” many of our students do not represent these heritages. In our theological mix, therefore, I help students learn to read the Bible more responsibly; and part of this involves understanding the roles played by tradition, reason, and experience as they analyze biblical stories. Rather than permitting them to claim complacently that they know biblical TRUTH, or allowing them smugly to assert that they are simply “led by the Spirit,” I help them to recognize and evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of their own assumptions. My goal is not to clone students in my image or demand that they adopt my theological perspective, although I acknowledge that the Wesleyan paradigm I have embraced shapes my teaching.

The Anglican Background of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral

John Wesley was raised and trained in the Anglican Church, and many of his positions flow naturally from this theological tradition. Several centuries prior to Wesley, Anglican leaders attempted to promote what they called the “Middle Way” (*via media*) between Continental Protestantism and Roman Catholicism (Gunter 17-37). They avoided both the Protestant Reformation insistence on *sola scriptura* (by Scripture alone) and the Catholic emphasis on tradition (Church hierarchy establishes doctrine). Yet they argued *with* Catholicism that the world runs on the basis of rational principles that humans can discern by reason, apart from Scripture. And *with* the Reformers they insisted that Scripture holds primacy when determining doctrine and practice. Anglican leaders viewed salvation as the primary focus of the Bible. They also saw major importance in certain parts of Church tradition. They appealed to the writings of the ancient Church (Patristics), not the teachings of the contemporary Catholic Church. However, they did not view this as submitting to such writings as to an authority, for “the Anglican

theologians were true to the Fathers as long as the latter followed Scripture as their primary authority” (Gunter 33).

Unlike the Puritans, the Anglicans distinguished between the authority of Scripture for beliefs about doctrine and practice, which it addresses, and other areas of daily life which it does not. Whereas the Puritans believed that the Bible addresses all aspects of life, the Anglicans did not; and thereby they gave a more open endorsement of the value of human reason. Thus, they articulated the primacy of Scripture while also affirming the valuable roles of tradition and reason. And unlike the Protestant Reformers, Anglicans did not attempt to write systematic theologies, because they did not trust such systems. “On the contrary, the Anglicans intentionally instilled adaptability in their theological method so as to avoid the strictures of systematization and to keep the Church of England centered on ... ‘the primitive faith’” (Thorsen 1990, 44). Wesley’s debt to his Anglican heritage is immense.

Wesley’s View of Scripture

The Bible played the central role in Wesley’s theology, providing “the most basic authority for determining Christian belief and practice” (Maddox 1994, 36). He not only believed that Scripture is inspired by God, he also called it infallible (Jones 1995, 18-31; 1997, 50-51). Modern fundamentalists would heartily endorse this term, yet they would oppose his actual approach to the Bible. “Wesley interpreted the Protestant *sola Scriptura* (in good Anglican fashion) to mean that Scripture is the *primary*, rather than exclusive, Christian authority” (Maddox 1994, 37). He held a high view of Scripture, but Wesley was not an inerrantist in the modern sense of the term, and he would have opposed “the biblicism of later Protestants who pitted the Bible against all secular knowledge” (Jones 1997, 58). Wesley saw no problem with integrating biblical teaching with modern science. He sought “to present his theological work in a way that was consonant with the best in contemporary scientific investigation rather than contrary to it.... to bridge rather than obliterate differences between theology, philosophy, and science” (Thorsen 1990, 59-60).

Wesley lived in the early days of critical study of the Bible, encountering the developing methods and results of such study at Oxford.

He was convinced of the value of reading Scripture in its original languages. He understood the issues of textual criticism, using the best available Greek text (Johannes Bengel's) for his own translation of the New Testament (an update of the Authorized Version!). And he drew upon respected biblical scholarship in preparation of his *Explanatory Notes Upon the Old Testament (OT Notes)* and his *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament (NT Notes)*. (Maddox 1994, 37)

Philosophically, his reliance on the best scholarly methods of his day puts him at odds with fundamentalism, and his Bible-centered approach to life puts him at odds with many critical scholars. His is a middle way.

Wesley fostered an attitude of theological tolerance, emphasizing that true, heart-felt religion is not mere knowledge of orthodox creeds, for Christians can hold many different views on nonessential matters (Thorsen 1990, 79). Wesley was eclectic, drawing insights from many different Christian groups. He believed in the reasonableness of Christian faith, but he rejected the view that it is "a closed system or mathematical set that could be finally determined" (Thorsen 1990, 88-89). This attitude has been both a blessing and a burden for his theological heirs, for many have embraced his openness to reason but abandoned his focus on Scripture.

Scott Jones laments the way many United Methodists have abandoned Scripture as the rule for faith. In a pointed example, he says "A seminary student once told me why he joined The United Methodist Church: 'I was in college and got acquainted with the campus minister at the Wesley Foundation. He said that Methodists were much better than my denomination, because you could believe anything you wanted to, and drink beer. It sounded great to me.'" Jones then goes on to describe the lack of interest in biblical teaching among United Methodists:

In many congregations our children graduate from years in United Methodist Youth Fellowship and Sunday school without being able to identify Abraham, Moses, Mary Magdalene, or Paul.

When asked to find 1 Corinthians in a Bible, they start looking in the index. Many adults begin Disciple Bible Study without any comprehension of how the Old and New Testaments related to each other. (1997, 39)

Many Methodists applaud not being weighed down by the Bible when formulating their beliefs, tipping the scales far more toward the authority of reason and experience. Jones pointedly asserts, "John Wesley would be appalled" (1997, 40).

Applying Wesley's Approach to the Bible

I follow Wesley's *middle way*, maintaining the Bible as the center of reflection on theology and practice, while at the same time employing the tools of modern scholarship.³ Scripture plays a foundational role in my efforts to formulate positions on issues pertaining to ethics, morality, and daily life.⁴ Yet the formative nature of Scripture based on the Wesleyan Quadrilateral differs radically from the harmonizing, fundamentalist paradigm of my youth.

A number of factors greatly complicate looking to the Bible for norms of belief and practice. Characters in the Bible exhibit a wide range of moral and ethical behaviors. Divergent teachings

³Some scholars would object, saying that I am simultaneously treating the Bible as Scripture (realm of faith) and as bible (realm of logical, academic search for truth) — see, e.g., Philip Davies (1995). My response is that I work within my faith tradition and use historical-critical methods (which now are also part of the church's tradition) as a means of further elucidating the biblical text in a quest to understand its contemporary significance. I'm deeply concerned about ultimate issues and I want my students to talk about these in class. For a well-articulated argument that professors need to address the religious concerns of students, see Kimberly C. Patton (1997, 831-849).

⁴Models for this approach may be seen in works by Methodist scholars such as Richard B. Hays (1996), who maintain a deep commitment to the authority of Scripture even as they work as practitioners of contemporary NT scholarship.

contained in this anthology of ancient Mediterranean writings pose a constant challenge. In addition, the heterogeneous theological backgrounds of my students, as well as their biblical illiteracy, also complicate this quest. Many in my classes have very little experience reading the Bible, despite growing up in Christian homes. Students cannot apply what they have not read, so in my introductory classes I have them read broadly through biblical books representing various genres.

Because I cannot assume my students have biblical knowledge, I do not use books about the Bible as main textbooks. I use the Bible itself as the main text and secondary books as supplements. If a NT survey or introduction to the Bible is the main textbook, most students typically do not get around to reading the primary source. In order to do well in class, my students cannot avoid reading Scripture. I function something like a tour guide, leading them on a trek through ancient Mediterranean cultures. The Bible is the main book for this tour, but I help them see that the biblical authors did not write with us in mind. For their words to speak clearly to us, we must understand their culture and attempt to hear as from their world.

Perhaps John Wesley would not approve of my goal to show students what a foreign book the Bible really is. But until they understand the distance that separates us from the biblical authors, they tend to make anachronistic applications that oppose the probable intent of the ancient authors.⁵ I

⁵Modern literary theories tend to exclude authorial intention as a legitimate concept when analyzing written texts. Although I understand the impossibility of ever confidently being able to assert that we fully understand the intended meaning of a biblical author, I believe that this remains a legitimate, though impossible-to-attain, goal to pursue. Knowing as much as we can about the ancient Mediterranean world helps to limit our possible readings of a text to those which would have been possible for the authors. I reject the idea that all careful readings, regardless of how anachronistic they might be, are good ones. Of course, all our efforts to comprehend are based on our own experiences, which are culturally conditioned. But through cultural anthropology we have made significant progress

therefore expose them to the "pastness of the past" in an effort to help them see the relevance of Scripture to the present.⁶ Underlying my cultural-anthropology approach is the belief that Scripture can, in fact, have a great deal to say about contemporary life. With this Wesley would certainly agree.

In my syllabi, I provide study questions designed to facilitate acquisition of basic hermeneutical skills. Most video-generation students need substantial assistance in learning to read the Bible carefully, and my questions focus their attention on matters they would normally skim past. As they learn to read for content, however, they become increasingly aware of the diversity contained in the Bible, and this frequently causes a certain amount of stress. So I seek to facilitate a shift away from viewing the Bible as a large, legal "code book" into which Christians look to find laws for living. I suggest that, instead of seeing the Bible as a set of eternal laws to obey unquestioningly, we should view much of it more as a collection of *case studies* that we can use to reflect on the best possible ways to navigate through life.⁷

This approach draws upon the OT Wisdom philosophy of learning how to apply maxims to different situations in life. The wise individual learns that applying proverbs requires an astute ability to see which sayings apply to which situations. To use a modern analogy, the opposite sayings "Look

in determining ancient Mediterranean norms. Much work remains, and always human efforts will be contingent; but to give up the search for what Paul, for example, *meant* to communicate to his readers in Corinth, Galatia, Rome, etc., is irresponsible for those who seek guidance from his words.

⁶For humorous examples of recent misunderstandings of cultural cues, see Richard Shweder's, "Santa Claus on the Cross," 72-78. On p. 73 he tells of "a visitor to Japan who wandered into a department store in Tokyo, at a time when the Japanese had begun to take a great interest in the symbolism of the Christmas season. And what symbol of the Christmas season did the visitor discover prominently on display in the Tokyo department store? Santa Claus nailed to a cross!"

⁷I am indebted to Alden Thompson (1991, 6-10) for the contrasting terms "code book" and "case book."

before you leap” and “he who hesitates is lost” are both valid, but it requires wisdom to know when to apply one and not the other. Only a fool would think that all proverbs apply to every circumstance. Similarly, NT texts sometimes give opposing views on similar issues. For example, Romans 13 argues forcefully that governments and governing officials are established by God and deserve honor and obedience. Revelation, on the other hand, condemns the same Roman government endorsed by Romans 13 as demonic, completely opposed to God, and destined for divine destruction. Only after analyzing each document to see its overall message, and thereby try to understand why each author wrote what he did, can Christians responsibly apply such texts to areas such as Christian social and political involvement. Knowing when teachings do and do not apply is partly method, partly art, and mostly wisdom gained through experience.

The shift from “code book” to “case book” initially produces uncertainty; but as the semester progresses, students catch on and begin to move away from the harmonizing that many learned in their churches. My goal is to maintain Scripture as the central focus of Christian reflection. In so doing, however, I help students appreciate the difficulties in moving from texts written for people in ancient Mediterranean cultures to modern Christians living in vastly different cultural contexts. This endeavor can best be accomplished through careful use of reason and experience, in light of tradition.

Wesley’s View of Tradition

One must be cautious when affirming Wesley’s respect for tradition, for he both venerated and rejected it, depending on what one means by tradition. When he associated it with human traditions given equal veneration with Scripture within the Catholic Church, he viewed the word with suspicion. In these cases Wesley’s criticism was largely directed against the Council of Trent, which recognized the traditions “preserved in the Catholic Church by a continuous succession” as having binding authority along with Scripture (*Works*, Jackson ed., 3, 10:141; from Jones 1995, 63). “His ‘Roman Catechism, with a Reply Thereunto’ . . . reflected a typically Protestant view of the corruption of Catholic traditions” (Jones 1995, 64). Elsewhere he “urges hearers to rely on Scripture, and not ‘the stinking puddles of men’s traditions’”

(in "The first Homily of the Church of England"; see Campbell 1997, 65). On other occasions, however, Wesley was quite irenic with Catholics of his day, as may be seen in his "Letter to a Roman Catholic" (*Works*, Jackson ed. 10:80-86), where he gently affirms common beliefs. As an Anglican, he had an abiding respect for history, particularly the writings of the early church and of the English Reformation.

Thorsen (151) explains that "in the preface to the first collected edition of his works (1771-74), Wesley stated the purpose of the edition: 'I present . . . my last and maturest thoughts, agreeable, I hope, to Scripture, reason and Christian antiquity'" (*Works*, Jackson ed., 1.iv.). Although a major motivation for looking to-primitive Christianity was to find positive examples of committed Christian behavior (Campbell 1991, 55-71), Wesley also sought to construct a *practical* theology (thoroughly demonstrated in Maddox 1994). He sought normative patterns for his Methodist movement (Campbell 1991, 73-74), and because Wesley believed that the writings of such early Christians as Clement, Ignatius, and Polycarp represent the purest age of the church, he looked to these for insight. In the introductory comments to his own edition of the Apostolic Fathers, for example, he quotes William Lake: "The authors of the following collection, were contemporaries of the holy Apostles. . . . We cannot therefore doubt, but what they deliver to us the pure Doctrine of the Gospel; what Christ and his Apostles taught" (see Campbell 1991, 75).⁸

Wesley also viewed Tertullian, Origen, Clement of Alexandria, Cyprian, and to a lesser extent, Chrysostom, Basil, Ephrem Syrus, and Macarius as presenting much beneficial teaching, but he valued them less than the earliest writers (Thorsen, 151, citing *Works* [Bicentennial ed.] 2.543). Because he believed that Patristic writers made many mistakes, he was cautious and selective when using their

⁸The quotation of William Wake's preface to *The Genuine Epistles of the Apostolic Fathers* (London: Richard Sare, 1693) is from Wesley's *A Christian Library*, 50 vols. (Bristol: Felix Farley, 1749-1755) 1:1.

works. Wesley strongly believed that "Christian life degenerated rapidly after Constantine gave official status (and riches!) to the Church" (Maddox 1994, 43).

Although Wesley was open-minded and eclectic, reading widely from various religious traditions, he rejected the Catholic approach of elevating tradition to the same level as Scripture. He "identified Methodism with 'the religion of the whole church in the purest ages,' which he associated especially with the church of the first three or four centuries and with the English Reformation" (Campbell 1997, 67). In this regard he was much like the Anabaptists and Pietists in their attempts at restoration to the pristine ideal of the early Church. Yet later in life he "became increasingly aware that there were problems in both doctrine and life from almost the beginning of the Church" (Maddox 1994, 43). He finally concluded that tradition helped one to clarify Scripture's general principles. "In this sense, later Christian teaching might legitimately go *beyond* Scripture. However, it should never go *against* Scripture" (Maddox 1994, 43).

Applying Wesley's Approach to Tradition

As a New Testament scholar, I am quite aware that conflicts between early Christians are readily apparent throughout the NT, although they are particularly obvious in such texts as Galatians and 1-2 Corinthians. Restoration efforts based on idealizing the past are not the best way of dealing with the very real problems of the present. Nevertheless, embracing Wesley's concern to find good models for behavior can be beneficial if we recognize the struggles of the saints we seek to copy. Theology which focuses more on producing good behavior than on presenting systematic explanations of doctrine resonates nicely with the Anabaptist, Pietist, and Wesleyan heritages of Messiah College. We look to *all* eras of the past, as well as to *all* branches of Christianity in the present, to find worthy models of saintly behavior. However, not all our students share the faculty's ecumenical openness.

Some students attending Messiah College share Wesley's distaste for the word tradition, but unlike Wesley they do not read broadly from other Christian traditions. A high percentage come from independent Bible churches. They have little awareness of the past and view "tradition" as a negative

word. They imagine that they are being purely "biblical," drawing their authority for life entirely from the Bible. Some of their pastors castigate those who value tradition, asserting that real Christians follow the Bible, not human tradition (special abuse is sometimes directed against the Catholic Church and the Pope). Ironically, some of these pastors function dictatorially, "pontificating" what their congregations must believe in order to be "true Christians." Anyone who differs from their edicts is held under suspicion as a heretic.

Consequently, another of my teaching goals in Bible classes is to help students see that we *all* live in light of tradition, whether we know it or not. Giving them a limited historical perspective on biblical interpretation is therefore important. One way that I sensitize them to the role of tradition is through having them do exegesis papers in which they must use sources representing a wide range of theological perspectives. This frequently alerts them to the fact that equally committed and very intelligent people come to different conclusions when evaluating the same evidence. Classroom debates of hotly contested issues also help. When students see that not everyone in class shares their individual perspectives, this often leads them to re-examine their own beliefs.

When students begin to understand the sociology of knowledge, some quickly migrate toward a position of relativism — an easy transition in our postmodern era. Because I view this as counterproductive for Christian faith, I try to help them understand the importance of commitment within ambiguity (see Sharon Parks 1986). Although we can never prove the deepest dimensions of our faith, we can evaluate traditions to determine which are most responsible. We can and should critique our own traditions in order to determine if some beliefs need to be modified, but a tradition-less life is virtually impossible. Tradition provides a vital link with the founding events of Christian faith, and an appreciation for history is important. Therefore I build into my classes certain components that enable students to gain greater respect for other traditions. Because many of them operate in a historical vacuum, this is a challenge.

Wesley's View of Reason

Wesley appreciated both the value of reason and its limitations. Unlike teachers in the anti-intellectual, fundamentalist churches of my youth, Wesley denied discrepancy between reason and faith. He said, for example, "I would as soon put out my eyes to secure my faith, as lay aside my reason" ("A Dialogue between an Antinomian and His Friend" [1745], in Jackson ed. 10:267; see Miles, 79). He asserted that "It is a fundamental principle with us [Methodists] that to renounce reason is to renounce religion, that religion and reason go hand in hand, and that all irrational religion is false religion" ("To Dr. Rutherford," March 28, 1768, *Letters* [Telford ed.] 5:364; see Thorsen, 169). Wesley believed that people are created in God's image, and reason is part of this divine reflection. Although he thought that God's image in humans is damaged by sin, he argued that reason remains God's gift and should be used reverently and thankfully. When Wesley was accused of irrational fanaticism in his approach to Christian faith, he forcefully defended his own reasonableness. "As a fellow of Lincoln College at Oxford he taught logic, Greek, and rhetoric – all subjects that promote critical reasoning. He recommended to students and later to pastors, his abridged translation of a classic text on logic. Wesley's close training in logic is evident throughout his writings, some of which . . . read like examples in a logic textbook" (Miles, 82-83).

Yet Wesley also appreciated the limits of reason, saying, "All knowledge which we naturally have is originally derived from our senses" ("On the Discoveries of Faith," *Works* [Jackson ed.] 4:29; from Miles, 86). Reason plays a vital role, but it cannot of itself produce anything. By maintaining the view that all human knowledge begins with experience, Wesley sided with the Oxford Aristoteleans (empiricists) in their debates with the Cambridge Platonists over the nature of reason. Rebekah Miles perceptively compares his view to mining coal:

Reason is a pick ax, not the coal mine itself. A pick ax, no matter how sharp and strong, will not produce coal on its own; you have to take it to the mine and dig. And, conversely, a coal mine itself, no matter how rich and potentially productive, will not release one lump of coal unless you

have a tool to work with. A pick ax will get you no coal unless you have a mine; a mine will yield no coal unless you have a pick ax. Thus, for Wesley, reason is a necessary tool, but it is not to be regarded as an independent source of knowledge. (Miles, 78-79)

Even in the spiritual realm, he argued that knowledge of God comes through experience. He believed that God awakens the spiritual senses of Christians so that they may come to experiential knowledge of spiritual realities, but this knowledge is incomplete.

Wesley said that reason of itself can lead to limited understanding of God, but detailed knowledge of God comes through the Scriptures. Humans cannot come to direct knowledge of God simply by observing nature and reflecting on the universe. Faith is prerequisite, and faith does not result from reason. In addition, he argued that reason can reflect on virtues such as love but is powerless to produce them. Neither can reason give happiness in the absence of faith, hope and love. Even at its best, human reason is limited and unable to grasp everything. And at its worst, reason leads humans away from the truth. Wesley taught that it must be used in conjunction with the spiritual graces and within community to be profitable (Miles, 93-99; Thorsen, 187-200). Wesley saw great value in "conferencing," gathering together pastors to discuss issues of theological/practical concern. He considered their combined insights to be more valuable than those of any individual working in seclusion.

Applying Wesley's Approach to Reason

Adopting Wesley's view of reason challenges Postmodernism's contention that humans cannot perceive reality, and thereby rejects the belief that everything is merely subjective interpretation.⁹ Wesley might share the popular critique of Modernism's arrogant optimism in human achievement (e.g., the movie

⁹For an intriguing collection of essays on Postmodernism, see *The Truth About the Truth: De-Confusing and Re-Constructing the Postmodern World*, ed. by Walter T. Anderson (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1995).

Titanic), but he would also argue that humans have a God-given ability to perceive reality that transcends the boundaries of enculturation.

Although many Christians today resist post-modern relativism, they often unconsciously adopt some of its principles. My students, for example, are a curious blend of relativism and denominational dogmatism. At Messiah College the average student is not particularly skeptical about the nature of perception, and a significant number have a wholesome perspective on human reason. Some enter with a fundamentalism-inspired, anti-intellectual bias (a rather disconcerting position for people pursuing higher education), but this differs from post-modern skepticism. Others arrive with a charismatic zeal that suspiciously views academic reasoning as cold and lacking dynamic experience, and this creates rather obvious difficulties for professors. Still others come with a modernist devotion for human intellect and achievement that borders on worshipping the mind. These students are so heavily indoctrinated by an evolutionary model of human achievement that, for all practical purposes, science and technology reign as king and queen on their universe's throne. The percentage of committed relativists is not substantial, although sadly (from my perspective), a number move that direction as a result of their academic work. With such a mix there is little possibility of assuming any sort of common philosophical basis for reading the Bible.

So another of my teaching goals is to endorse the value of reason, while at the same time keeping its limited nature clearly in view. I affirm that human reason is a God-given, though limited, gift from the Creator — an extremely valuable ability that we must learn to use effectively in order to live responsibly. It is not something to be held under constant suspicion. Neither is it something to be worshiped, for human knowledge is limited and always up for evaluation in light of new evidence.

Thus, I try to convince students that the mind is a gift from God to be used to the fullest potential. To probe and question does not challenge God but compliments the Creator's amazing creativity. Yet I argue that science, for example, cannot answer all of life's questions; indeed it is limited

by its own traditions, which also need to be critiqued and modified.¹⁰ I want students to see learning as a life-long enterprise, and I model that in the classroom. I cannot answer all their questions, and I am not shy about admitting it. They need to understand that I too am still learning and wrestling with issues. In this honest admission of limitations, however, I argue that relativism is not a satisfactory position. Some answers are vastly superior to others, and they must develop their reason in order to evaluate competing truth (or anti-truth) claims. "Commitment within ambiguity" is not a despairing position but a responsible perspective for limited human beings.

When students recognize that personal experience plays a major role in shaping our theological perspectives, they can better benefit from studying alternative viewpoints. Exposing them to other world views broadens their horizons and deepens their ability to critique their own positions. They begin to understand that other traditions may have much to offer and should not be rejected outright. And even if they choose not to incorporate new elements into their own theological perspectives, they will hold their own positions with greater humility and less dogmatism. Commitment to a position need not breed

¹⁰For an interesting exploration of the dimensions of human perception, see George Johnson (1995). Using the different confessional communities located in the Los Alamos area of New Mexico (research scientists, Native Americans, Roman Catholics, Pentecostals, fundamentalists, etc.), Johnson creatively juxtaposes the various ways that these groups explain the mysteries of the universe. In one example that is particularly helpful when considering science, he says, "Our search for truth has carried us along a single branch of the tree of knowledge until we are so far out on a single twig at the end of a certain limb that we are powerless to imagine how it could be otherwise. What if, at the end of many other twigs, there are equally valid — maybe better — ways of explaining the world? We would never know. We can't jump from our leaf to the next, leaping across the terrifying vacuum of empty conceptual space. To get to another leaf, we would have to retrace our steps, go back down the twig, the branch, the limb, perhaps all the way to the trunk, and start the climb all over again" (p. 6).

intolerance of others, no matter how deeply we hold our beliefs. Wesley argued that love must characterize Christians.

Wesley's View of Experience

Wesley emphasized the importance of "heart religion" and warned against dead orthodoxy. To study the Bible and not experience the power of relationship with God was a troubling thought for him.

I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist, either in Europe or America. But I am afraid, lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power. And this undoubtedly will be the case, unless they hold fast both the doctrine, spirit and discipline with which they first set out. ("Thoughts upon Methodism," *Works* [Jackson ed.] 13:258; from Thorsen, 201-202)

The condition of many Methodist congregations today indicates that Wesley's fears were legitimate; and Methodist colleges, universities, and seminaries have contributed more than their share to this lack of spiritual vitality. Wesley would be shocked at the biblical education that some United Methodist seminaries provide as a means of equipping men and women for ministry.

Too many professors seem to think that the primary goal of teaching classes in biblical studies is to produce skeptics.¹¹ An all-too-common attitude is that one must choose between spiritual enthusiasm, with its naive, fundamentalist approaches, and the life of the enlightened skeptic, who looks with disdain on those who have an ignorant, yet confident faith. There is a middle way, a *via media*. As Richard Hays argues, we should employ a hermeneutic of trust instead of a hermeneutic of suspicion (Hays 1997). He calls upon biblical scholars to stand humbly before God as sinners who "come to the texts of scripture expecting to find the hidden things of our hearts laid bare and expecting to encounter there the God who loves us" (223).

¹¹For an interesting attack on this, see Levinson (1993, 24-33). John J. Collins (1993, 743-743) gives a pointed response to Levinson, criticizing Christian and Jewish neo-orthodox.

Applying Wesley's Approach to Experience

Education can be enriching for the soul as well as enlightening for the mind. It can draw from the best of both, encouraging spiritual dynamism and at the same time engaging the latest biblical scholarship. The middle way engages the mind and the heart, allowing the religious nature of the Bible to lead us toward character formation.

Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza aggressively challenges the notion of "value-free detached inquiry ... dispassionate scholarship ... unencumbered by contemporary questions, values and interests" (Fiorenza 1988, 6-7). She argues that, in order to enable students to interact with the "ethical consequences and political functions of biblical texts, . . . biblical studies will have to overcome the institutionalized dichotomy between graduate training in the university and ministerial education in schools of theology" (Fiorenza 1988, 15). Fiorenza calls upon scholars to make their work far more accessible to the general public and directly address societal issues in their writings and in their teaching. Although her own feminist agenda so overpowers her use of the Bible that scholars such as Richard Hays rightly criticize her hermeneutics and her conclusions (Hays 1996, 266-282), her call to relevance is well taken.

Combining academic rigor with a vital interest in contemporary relevance does justice to the study of Scripture. After all, the NT documents address important issues of belief and practice, and we should interact with these. To ignore the issues of spirituality, morality, ethics, and character formation that are central to the documents themselves is simply irresponsible.

Robert Coles, a Harvard professor of psychiatry and medical humanities, issues a similar challenge to all professors in a *Chronicle of Higher Education* editorial.

Over 150 years ago, Ralph Waldo Emerson gave a lecture at Harvard University, which he ended with the terse assertion: "Character is higher than intellect." Even then this prominent man of letters was worried . . . about the limits of knowledge and the nature of a college's mission. The intellect can grow and grow, he knew, in a person who is smug, ungenerous, even cruel.

Institutions originally founded to teach their students how to become good and decent, as well as broadly and deeply literate, may abandon the first mission to concentrate on a driven, narrow book learning, a course of study in no way intent on making a connection between ideas and theories on one hand and on the other, our lives as we actually live them. (Coles, A68)

Coles gives a poignant example of one of his students who dropped out of Harvard because she could no longer tolerate what she called the phoniness of the university. After complaining in particular about the crude behavior of a student who was earning top honors in his course work (including ethics classes), she said, "I've been taking all these philosophy courses, and we talk about what's true, what's important, what's *good*. Well, how do you teach people to *be* good? What's the point of *knowing* good, if you don't keep trying to *become* a good person?" Coles concludes by urging professors to give assignments that force students to take seriously how what they are studying connects with the way they live. Should not such integration also be a dominant concern in Biblical Studies courses?

Students in both secular and Christian institutions often take Bible classes out of personal interest in what Scripture says about contemporary life. They are asking "So what?" questions of application, and holistic education does not shy away from such issues, even under the guise of separation of church and state. We must engage questions that focus on personal application. Academic study of the Bible will of course be unsettling to students who discover that their paradigms for reading Scripture are inadequate. But addressing moral and ethical concerns should be equally unsettling as they grapple with issues of justice, morality and responsible spirituality. Merely dispensing information such as that found in Kümmel's *Introduction to the New Testament* (1975) mocks the nature of the NT documents. When professors devote most of the time in a Bible class to dealing with theories of authorship and composition, and neglect the larger issues these documents were written to address, they fail in their teaching duties.

Randy Maddox observes that Wesley "insisted that the highest purpose of Christian doctrine was providing practical guidance for Christian life in the world." He pointedly adds,

By contrast, Western academic theology more generally has progressively severed this connection of theology to the daily life of the Christian community. The end result is that academic theology today is largely written by scholars for scholars in response to scholarly questions, and is seldom read by pastors — let alone the broader community. (Maddox 1997, 126)

Maddox would quickly add that academic study of the Bible cannot be synonymous with Sunday School. But it should enhance character formation and spiritual development, not lead to their destruction. Ironically, so many faith-casualties teach biblical studies classes that faith depletion is often built into the system. We professors must ask hard questions about the implications of our teaching methodologies and the content of our classes.

Summary

Between the theological fundamentalism of the extreme right and the methodological fundamentalism of the extreme left exists a *middle way*. The Wesleyan Quadrilateral endorses the value of Scripture, tradition, reason and experience, while placing primary emphasis on the Bible as the foundational document for faith. Implementing this model avoids the extremes of denigrating reason or seeing it as paramount. It endorses the benefits of studying various traditions while at the same time encouraging commitment to our own traditions, even as we evaluate the validity of particular parts of our traditions. And it insists on contemporary relevance, calling people not only to dialogue with the moral, ethical, and spiritual content of the Bible, but also to work on character formation and be inspired to social and political action.

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