TEACHING THE QUADRILATERAL

PRESENTED BY REV. T. GQWAKA

DATE: 07/11/2024

VENUE: MATHA RETREAT CENTRE – KING WILLIAMSTOWN

TEACHING THE QUADRILATERAL

If you are a member of The Methodist Church, you have probably heard of the Quadrilateral. It is sometimes called “John Wesley’s Quadrilateral,” despite the fact that John Wesley never used the word.

TEACHING THE QUADRILATERAL

The more accurate adjective to use is “Wesleyan.” This strange word is shorthand for the four ingredients used by people in The Methodist Church when we study, teach, discuss, argue about, and interpret God and God’s action and involvement in the world, the church, and in our individual lives.

TEACHING THE QUADRILATERAL

The Wesleyan quadrilateral contains the four ingredients of Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. All four of the ingredients are essential. God reveals God's self to us through each one. And each contributes to our understanding and experience of who God is and how God has acted in the past is acting now and will act in the future.

TEACHING THE QUADRILATERAL

Understanding and teaching the quadrilateral is important because it gives us a proven way of exploring, growing in, and living our faith in Jesus Christ. It is also a characteristic that distinguishes The Methodist Church from other Christian denominations.

TEACHING THE QUADRILATERAL

In this presentation we will explore what the Wesleyan quadrilateral is, why it is important, and how to understand and use it in your teaching. My goal here is to equip you to interpret and teach this important part of the Wesleyan / Methodist tradition to the congregation.

WHAT IS THE WESLEYAN QUADRILATERAL?

Theological reflection is one of the church's most important tasks. When I use the word "church" I am not referring to an abstract institution. Rather, I am referring to the gathered community of people who have been baptized "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

WHAT IS THE WESLEYAN QUADRILATERAL?

If you look closely at the Baptismal Covenant in The Methodist Hymnal (pages 33-39) you will see the church described as “Christ’s body”, “the family of Christ”, and “the household of God.” These terms are used deliberately so that all who hear them understand who the church is; that it is a “community of love and forgiveness.”

WHAT IS THE WESLEYAN QUADRILATERAL?

They also reveal that the God who became one of us in Jesus Christ is the source of the love and forgiveness given and received. All this is to say that the church is not an “it”, it is “us”, you and me together with Christ. Church is not something we do on Sunday morning. Church is the community of the baptized dispersed in the world every day of the week.

WHAT IS THE WESLEYAN QUADRILATERAL?

The church comes together to worship, learning, and fellowship on Sunday. At the close of worship Christ sends his brothers and sisters (Romans 8:12-17) into the world as people who are forgiven, loved, and free. In worship we are fed on his word in prayer, hymns, Scripture, and sermon. He invites us to his table where sins are forgiven and he gives himself to all who will receive him in the bread and cup.

WHAT IS THE WESLEYAN QUADRILATERAL?

Christ then blesses and sends his sisters and brothers, the church, into the world to be his witnesses and channels of his grace for a hurting and broken world. Theological reflection helps the people of the church understand more clearly who and whose they are.

WHAT IS THE WESLEYAN QUADRILATERAL?

The Wesleyan quadrilateral provides a method for doing theology. It is a way of exploring God, ourselves, and our relationship with God. Let's stop briefly here to dispel any anxiety you may have about "doing theology." Many Christians are suspicious of theology. Many more are intimidated by it, believing that only the "professionals" are qualified to "do theology."

WHAT IS THE WESLEYAN QUADRILATERAL?

Of course, the “professionals” are the clergy and seminary and college professors. If this article does one thing for you, I hope it helps you realize that whenever you talk about, teach, and write about God you are doing theology. In God’s reality, all of God’s people are theologians.

WHAT IS THE WESLEYAN QUADRILATERAL?

Theology and doing theology is the work of the whole people of God. It is not, and was never intended to be, the preserve of the "professionals." The Wesleyan quadrilateral is the method given to the people called Methodists to help us to do theology.

WHAT IS THE WESLEYAN QUADRILATERAL?

It's also important to understand that doing theology in the Wesleyan theology is not an exercise in naval gazing. It is not to do theology for theology's sake. The purpose and goal of doing theology is to lead people and the church toward holiness of heart and life.

In other words, theological reflection is one of the means through which individuals and the baptized community grow in loving God, loving neighbours, and loving one another as Christ loves us. Love is the guiding principle and goal.

WHAT IS THE WESLEYAN QUADRILATERAL?

The emphasis on love means that there is no doctrinal test that people must pass before they are admitted as members of The Methodist Church. We see this in the fact that we do not have a catechism or doctrinal confession that guards the entrance of the church.

WHAT IS THE WESLEYAN QUADRILATERAL?

"There is only one condition previously required of those who desire admission into these societies: 'a desire to flee from the wrath to come, and to be saved from their sins.'… Such a society is no other than a 'company of men [and women] having the form and seeking the power of godliness, united in order to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they may help each other work out their salvation'".

WHAT IS THE WESLEYAN QUADRILATERAL?

Granted the language here sounds strange to our 21st century ears. It means all that was required to become a Methodist was a desire for faith in God and a willingness to live that faith out in their daily lives. The Methodists historically have been Christians who sought to know and love God through loving those whom God loves as God loves them. They were, and are, more concerned with how people live than with what they believe.

WHAT IS THE WESLEYAN QUADRILATERAL?

For the Methodists, the purpose of doing theology together is to grow in knowledge and love. A Scripture text that John Wesley often quoted to summarize the Methodist approach to theology is Galatians 5:6, “For in Christ Jesus … the only thing that counts is faith working through love.”

WHAT IS THE WESLEYAN QUADRILATERAL?

The quadrilateral, therefore, is an expression of this uniquely Methodist approach to Christian faith and life. We take doctrine seriously, but we do not allow it to determine who is in and who is out. We leave that up to God and God's grace given freely to the world in Jesus Christ. While other denominations are confessional (Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed).

WHAT IS THE WESLEYAN QUADRILATERAL?

This means that members of each of these traditions must learn a catechism which is a summary of belief and doctrine in question and answer form. The Methodist Church is not a confessional church. It does not require its members to memorize a catechism. In its place The Methodist Church has doctrinal standards. These are contained in a collection of documents that include the Articles of Religion of The Methodist Church, The Confession of Faith of The Evangelical United Brethren Church, John Wesley's Standard Sermons, Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament, and The General Rules of The Methodist Church.

WHAT IS THE WESLEYAN QUADRILATERAL?

We see here that, historically, becoming a Methodist emphasizes belief and behaviour, faith and life. This balance is one of the distinctive of the Wesleyan / Methodist tradition.

WHAT IS THE WESLEYAN QUADRILATERAL?

The sources for Methodist theological reflection are Scripture, the Works of John Wesley (sermons, writings, journal, and letters) the Hymnal, the Book of Worship, and the laws of the church. It is important to notice one of the sources for our theological life together is the Works of John Wesley. His sermons, writings, journal, and letters emerged from his pastoral ministry. Wesley was not a “systematic” theologian.

WHAT IS THE WESLEYAN QUADRILATERAL?

He was a practical, pastoral theologian. (Systematic theology is often the negative foil against which practical theology defines itself as a discipline. Practical theologians worry that systematic theology is committed to a detached objectivism and finality, and that it denies or resists the influence of context thought). His writings and preaching reflect the depth and breadth of his reading and study.

WHAT IS THE WESLEYAN QUADRILATERAL?

But he applied all his learning toward interpreting the gospel of God in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in light of the needs and experiences of real people's lives. Wesley engaged the culture and reached out to all in a language they could understand and to which they could respond.

WHAT IS THE WESLEYAN QUADRILATERAL?

The sources for Methodist doctrinal standards and theological reflection reveal emphasis holiness and an emphasis on balance between faith and life. In other words, Methodist / Wesleyan theology all boils down to knowing and experiencing the love of God with all the heart, soul, mind, and strength and living out that love by loving the neighbours as ourselves.

INGREDIENTS OF THE WESLEYAN QUADRILATERAL?

The Wesleyan Quadrilateral is composed of the ingredients of theological reflection, teaching, and practice: Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. The goal of doing theology in the Wesleyan spirit is “holiness of heart and life.”

INGREDIENTS OF THE WESLEYAN QUADRILATERAL?

This means that our thinking, studying, talking, and writing about God are all directed toward finding ways to grow in our love of God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength; and to live out that love of God through loving our neighbours as ourselves. A life guided by and filled with the unconditional, self-giving love of God is the “outcome” we desire.

INGREDIENTS OF THE WESLEYAN QUADRILATERAL?

The ingredients of Scripture, tradition, reason and experience work together toward helping the church live out its mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ who seek to grow in holiness of heart and life.

INGREDIENTS OF THE WESLEYAN QUADRILATERAL?

The Quadrilateral has four ingredients that (Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience), when used together in proper proportion, helps Christians to understand and grow in their love of God, neighbours, and one another. It helps us recognize how God is working in the world, in the church, and in our individual lives.

INGREDIENTS OF THE WESLEYAN QUADRILATERAL?

A common mistake is to see the quadrilateral as a four-legged stool or table; each leg being equal and bearing the same weight. This is not an accurate way of looking at the quadrilateral because, while all of them are important and essential, the four ingredients are not equal in weight. This is why the metaphor of making biscuits gives us a more accurate way of understanding and interpreting the nature and function of the Wesleyan quadrilateral.

INGREDIENTS OF THE WESLEYAN QUADRILATERAL?

Scripture is like the flour, Tradition is like the milk and shortening, Reason is like the baking powder, and Experience is like the salt.

SCRIPTURE IS LIKE FLOUR

Scripture is the primary source for Christian theology. It is where God reveals God's self to the world. Scripture contains the witness of God's work and relationship with the world through the Hebrew people, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the witness of the apostles and the early church.

SCRIPTURE IS LIKE FLOUR

The Bible contains God's word of love, freedom, healing, compassion, justice and hope for a world that is hurting and oppressed by the powers of sin and death. It is God's story of love and justice for the world into which God invites us to find our story, where it intersects with God and God's project of forgiveness, healing, and liberation.

SCRIPTURE IS LIKE FLOUR

Scripture is like the flour in the biscuit recipe because, as flour provides the “stuff” of the biscuits, the Bible provides the foundation for understanding Christian faith and life. Christian theology begins and ends with and within the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. This is what John Wesley meant when he proclaimed himself to be a “man of one book.”

SCRIPTURE IS LIKE FLOUR

He did not mean that Scripture was the only source that leads us to God and exploring God's mystery, presence, and power. Wesley read widely in his exploration of God, from his contemporaries in the Church of England and other traditions such as the Quakers and Moravians.

SCRIPTURE IS LIKE FLOUR

He also studied the writings of the early fathers and mothers of the early church, including the Western (Roman Catholic and Protestant) and Eastern (Greek Orthodox) traditions. All of which began and ended with Scripture. It is the foundation for understanding and interpreting Christian faith and life.

TRADITION IS LIKE MILK AND SHORTENING

Tradition helps us to read and understand Scripture. Through it we are connected to those who have gone before; who have read, struggled with, and prayed Scripture. Tradition is the living witness of the good news of God given to the world in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

TRADITION IS LIKE MILK AND SHORTENING

Through the witness of the vast tradition of the one holy universal church of Jesus Christ we can know who and whose we are: children of God by adoption through the power of the Holy Spirit in the name of Jesus Christ (see Romans 8:12-17). The tradition also teaches that the church is the living, breathing, witnessing body of Christ in the world.

TRADITION IS LIKE MILK AND SHORTENING

The baptized are members of this body each given a unique gift that contributes to the body's life and mission of being a sign community for the kingdom of God.

TRADITION IS LIKE MILK AND SHORTENING

The church is not the kingdom but the world should get a glimpse of what it is like when it encounters the church. Tradition brings the witness of Scripture to life and makes it visible as a living, breathing presence and witness in the world.

TRADITION IS LIKE MILK AND SHORTENING

The primary sources for learning and participating in Wesleyan Christian tradition are The Methodist Hymnal and Book of Worship. The tradition of the church is contained in its liturgies, prayers, hymns, creeds, and affirmations of faith.

TRADITION IS LIKE MILK AND SHORTENING

These provide the context for people to encounter God and to make them available to the transforming, liberating, healing power of grace in sacraments, worship and prayer.

TRADITION IS LIKE MILK AND SHORTENING

Tradition brings us into God's presence and sends us into the world to walk and serve with Christ in his work of bringing good news to the poor, release to the captives, opening the eyes of the blind, let the oppressed go free (Luke 4:18).

TRADITION IS LIKE MILK AND SHORTENING

Other important sources for engaging tradition are John Wesley's standard sermons, his notes on the New Testament, and laws of the church. All of these are, to some degree, interpreting Scripture and helping us to apply its message to life today.

TRADITION IS LIKE MILK AND SHORTENING

Wesley is a helpful guide for us today because in him we have a masterful synthesis of both the Western (Catholic and Protestant) and Eastern (Orthodox) traditions. His interpretation of the gospel was informed by a wide variety of sources from both major expressions of the Church.

TRADITION IS LIKE MILK AND SHORTENING

In the history of the church, we have the historic expressions of The Methodist and Evangelical United Brethren traditions (Articles of Religion, Confession of Faith, and the General Rules).

TRADITION IS LIKE MILK AND SHORTENING

These provide a summary of Christian faith and life for the church. History of the church also contains the polity, or structure and discipline around which the life of The Methodist Church is organized. This is an interpretation of what the Scripture has to say about ordering the life of the church for mission and ministry.

TRADITION IS LIKE MILK AND SHORTENING

Its purpose is to help the church to live out its Scriptural mandate to make disciples of Jesus Christ, “baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that (Christ) commanded” (Matthew 28:19-20a).

TRADITION IS LIKE MILK AND SHORTENING

Tradition is like the milk and shortening because it is the living expression of Scripture. It helps us read, struggle with, and live the promises, commands, and hope contained in Scripture.

REASON IS LIKE THE BAKING POWDER

Jesus said, “You shall love the Lord your God with all of your heart, and with all of your soul, and with your entire mind” (Matthew 22:37). God sheds light on God’s word through the gift of reason. God gives us the freedom to question, think, and teach in order to watch over one another in love.

REASON IS LIKE THE BAKING POWDER

As the baking powder makes the biscuits light and fluffy, reason allows the light of God to illuminate and animate Christian faith and life. Reason opens our minds to interpret and understand God's word in Scripture and through tradition. Reason helps us to perceive and recognize God's presence at work in the world and in human lives.

REASON IS LIKE THE BAKING POWDER

Most importantly, it helps us to be aware of God’s majesty and mystery. In other words, reason equips us to know how much we don’t know which leads to humility.

REASON IS LIKE THE BAKING POWDER

Finally, reason helps to prevent us from making Scripture an idol and tradition into traditionalism. Reason, tempered with humility, helps us to relate to Scripture and tradition as means of grace, as places where God promises to meet us in order to form our character more and more into the character of Christ.

REASON IS LIKE THE BAKING POWDER

It helps to prevent us from making them into the end of and sources of faith and life in Christ. In other words, reason, with humility, helps us to make sure we are worshipping and serving the living God and not Scripture and tradition.

EXPERIENCE IS LIKE THE SALT

The little bit of salt in the biscuit recipe is there to do two things. It reacts with the baking powder to help the biscuits to rise, to give them a light and fluffy texture. And it enhances the flavour provided by the flour, milk, and shortening. The salt doesn't create the flavour; it brings it out and magnifies it. That is what experience does for Christian faith and life.

Experience is our real-life encounter of God-with-us in our ordinary, every-day life. These encounters with the divine bring us to and keep us with God. They inform our thinking and understanding of who God is and how God works in the world (reason) and breathes life into our reading of Scripture and living out of the tradition.

EXPERIENCE IS LIKE THE SALT

Experience is the Holy Spirit's work in, with, and through us that gives life and meaning to the good news of God for the world in Jesus Christ. Experience allows the Holy Spirit to work in us to make faith vital and life-giving. It forms us into channels of God's grace for the world. We become living witnesses for Jesus Christ in the world and follow his teachings through acts of compassion, justice, worship, and devotion under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

EXPERIENCE IS LIKE THE SALT

Experience is like salt because it adds flavour to Scripture, tradition, and reason and makes them taste good. “O taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are those who take refuge in him” (Psalm 34:8).

CONCLUSION

The Wesleyan Quadrilateral gives us a rich and vital way for seeking truth, knowing, loving, and serving God, and for making disciples of Jesus Christ who have the form and the power of godliness. The four ingredients (Scripture, tradition, reason and experience) work together to help Christians grow in holiness of heart and life.

CONCLUSION

However, it’s important for us to understand how the four ingredients work together. This is why comparing the quadrilateral to making biscuits works well. All the ingredients (flour, milk, shortening, baking powder, and salt) work together to create something that is good to eat.

CONCLUSION

However, it is only good to eat if each ingredient is used in proper quantities. This is to say that the quadrilateral is not equilateral. Each ingredient is essential and plays a vital role. But the desired outcome (holiness of heart and life) is only possible when the components are used and combined in correct proportion and relationship to one another.

THE END