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The Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Scripture, Tradition, Reason And Experience As A Model Of Evangelical Theology



Synopsis

In this important study, Thorsen assesses John Wesley's use of sources for theology. Although Scripture was his highest source, Thorsen shows how Wesley made use of other sources as well.

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Customer Reviews

Those interested in the roots of the Wesleyan way will profit from perusing Donald A.D. Thorsen's *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience as a Model of Evangelical theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, c. 1990). Thorsen taught at Azusa Pacific University, and this treatise reflects his thoroughly academic concerns--extensive footnotes, at times technical theological discussions, extensive quotations. Yet the use of the "Quadrilateral" enables him to bring coherence and system to Wesley's thought, and I find the book quite worthwhile. In Thorsen's opinion, "Perhaps Wesley's most enduring contribution to theological method stems from his concern for catholicity in including experience along with Scripture, tradition, and reason as genuine sources of religious authority" (p. 125). Now Wesley himself never proposed any tidy, teacher-friendly "quadrilateral" as a paradigm for Wesleyanism. Albert Outler, in the 1960's, first proposed the notion, so it is "a modern attempt to summarize the fourfold set of guidelines Wesley used in reflecting on theology" (p.21). As Thorsen insists, so long as it is understood as a helpful "heuristic tool," not a rigid corral within which to contain wily mustangs, the quadrilateral enables Wesleyans to better conceptualize their theology. If one wanted a more accurate "geometric figure as a paradigm for Wesley," he says, "a tetrahedron--a tetrahedral pyramid--would be more

appropriate" (p.71). But please, Dr. Thomsen, the "quadrilateral" is awkward enough! So let's have no talk about tetrahedrons! As a practitioner of the Anglican via media tack—ing gracefully between the winds of Protestant—ism and the currents of Roman Catholicism, John Wesley naturally sought to study and utilize, to recognize and reconcile, diverse truth-tests. He probably followed his father's advice, published as *Advice to a Young Clergyman*, and studied "logic, history, law, pharmacy, natural and experimental philosophy, chronology, geography, the mathematics, even poetry, music or any other parts of learning" (p.50). Thus he favorably cited, in various con—texts, the worth of Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience. Of the four, of course, Wesley primarily relied upon Scripture. In a letter written early in his ministry, Wesley said: "I allow no other rule, whether of faith or practice, than the Holy Scriptures" (p.127). He often claimed to be a "man of one book" and affirmed the Reformation principle of sola Scriptura. Yet he took solus to mean "pri—marily" rather than "exclusively." Other sources of truth, so long as they complement and stay sub—ordinated to Scripture, add to man's grasp of God's Truth. Tradition, especially that of "Christian antiquity," formed Wesley's second source of authority. The Fathers of the Church, the Ecumenical Creeds, the Anglican Books of Homilies, all enabled one to more wisely interpret God's written Word. Though innovative in many ways, Wesley had a deeply conservative streak and largely shared Vincent of Lerins' notion that that which "is truly and in the strictest sense 'Catholic,'" is that "which has been believed everywhere, always, and by all" (p.158). Living in the "Age of Reason," Wesley shared much of his era's high regard for the logical work—ings of the mind. Although called an "enthusiast" by some of his critics, he staunchly rejected the label. "It is a fundamental principle with us," he said concerning the 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" (p.169). He valued Aristotle's logic. He told his preachers that, as Thorsen says, "knowledge of logic is se—cond in importance only to knowledge of Scripture" (p.196). He praised John Locke's empirical epistemology and developed what George Cell has called a "transcendental empiricism," arguing that we have "spiritual senses," just as we have physical senses; by rightly using them we can make sense of our existence. The fourth side of the quadrilateral, experience, may have been Wesley's most distinctive contribution to Christian theology. He always sought to place it in its proper place, subordinate to other sources of authority, but he listened carefully to personal testimonies and sought to understand thereby God's ways with man. "Perceiving--literally feeling--God's presence is a powerful epistemological guarantee for the truth of Christian belief" (209). Yet personal experience is particularly persona, so its data, its life-changing power, cannot be generalized as a pattern for all mankind. As Wesley said, there is

"irreconcilable variability in the operations of the Holy Spirit on the souls of men" (p.218).

Experiential confirmation of the Gospel's truth indicates the faithfulness of God to the believer. But one must never confuse the experiential consequence with the true cause, which is the living Christ of the Gospel. Having explained the Wesleyan way--the Quadrilateral--Thorsen suggests it provides a healthy common ground for today's Evangelicals. Its openness, its ecumenical leanings, its tradition of freedom, could afford Evangelicals from various backgrounds some shared perspectives and ways to think together more constructively. His notes and bibliography indicate thorough research and provide considerable amplification on the text. It's the kind of treatise which pastors as well as professors, thoughtful laymen as well as college students, should read in order to get a balanced understanding of "Wesleyan" theology.

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