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What Adventists Can Learn from John Wesley

by *David R. Larson*

The Wesleyan Quadrilateral

Even though John Wesley never used the term, he is credited with a distinctive way of thinking about controversial issues called the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. This term honors the way Wesley did his theological work as leader of the Methodist revivals and spiritual grandfather of Adventism. It is a method that formulates Christian views and values by interweaving interpreted lines of evidence from four sources:

1. Scripture
2. tradition
3. reason
4. experience.

Instead of basing his convictions on any one of these, Wesley interpreted and drew on evidence from all four. I believe we Adventists should do the same.

This method presupposes that God, though greater than the whole universe, is omnipresent. We can therefore learn about our Creator from Scripture and from other sources as well. Wesley's method also presupposes that humans are finite and fallible. We therefore need a system of checks and balances to keep us from going astray. The Wesleyan Quadrilateral invites us to follow truth about God and about ourselves wherever we find it. It also reminds us that, if they are all valid, our various interpretations will converge and cohere in mutually reinforcing ways.

One possible objection is that the Wesleyan Quadrilateral undercuts the authority of Scripture. But John Wesley insisted that the Bible is the Christian's primary source of truth and value, as do all others who use his method properly. This method does not invite us to integrate Scripture, tradition, reason and experience, but rather to form our own interpretations of the evidence gathered from each of them. This point is as straightforward as it is significant: if our interpretations of Scripture are sound, they will dovetail with our interpretations of tradition, reason and experience. Likewise, if our interpretations of tradition, reason and experience are sound, they will fit with our interpretations of Scripture. This is what happens when things are going well.

But things do not always go well. Sometimes our interpretations of the evidence from the various sources do not cohere; sometimes they do not converge but diverge instead. When this happens with respect to an important matter, we must reconsider everything to see where we have made

our mistake. Perhaps we have misinterpreted evidence from tradition, reason or experience. Or perhaps we have misunderstood evidence from Scripture. Or perhaps we have made more than one error. Because we cannot know in advance where we made our error, we must be willing to review and, where necessary, revise all of our interpretations of all the evidence from all of our sources, biblical and nonbiblical alike. This can make us uncomfortable, especially if we have grown accustomed to looking at things in a particular fashion. But there is no other way to seek and find the truth. Once again, whenever our interpretations do not converge and cohere, the difficulty is not with Scripture, tradition, reason or experience themselves, but with our own appropriations and applications of the evidence we acquire from each of them.

There can be a proper difference between what a portion of Scripture once meant and what it ought to mean for us today. For this reason, it is not correct to state that interpretations of the Bible are to be based on nothing but the Bible, either as a description of how Wesley studied Scripture or as a prescription of how we should do so. Other interpreted evidence also counts. To take just one example, we know that the continuation of human life on this planet depends in part on our recognizing that the Bible's command to "be fruitful and multiply" meant something different to those who first heard it than it must mean for us today. And we know this, not only by studying Scripture, but also by pondering the density of the human population in our world. As this illustration indicates, an understanding of both contexts, that of the text and that of our own lives, is essential for interpretation.

We must encourage our interpretations of evidence from Scripture to correct and inform our interpretations of evidence from tradition, reason and experience. We must also encourage our interpretations of evidence from each of them to correct and inform our interpretations of Scripture. This interchange, this give and take among our various interpretations, must continue until we reach an appropriate equilibrium that does as much justice as possible, for now, to all the relevant considerations.

As this suggests, the Wesleyan Quadrilateral provides a wholistic method of studying Scripture. Wesley's approach applies to the vexing issue of women's ordination facing the Seventh-day Adventists, Wesley's spiritual children, today.

Women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church." (1 Cor 14:34,35 NRSV)

Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. (1 Tim 2: 11,12 NRSV)

In view of these verses, would we let Ellen White deliver a sermon in our church on Sabbath morning if she were alive today? I certainly hope so! After all, at least four lines of evidence suggest that we would do well to listen to her, or to any other qualified woman, even at church on Sabbath morning. Taken together, these four considerations lead to the conclusion that the Bible's occasional injunctions against allowing women to speak in church should be applied

locally, not universally.

No one alive today knows precisely and completely why women in the congregations to which these ancient letters were first addressed were advised to keep silent. Some make reasonable conjectures about the matter, just as all of us can imagine circumstances today in which it would be best for women not to speak in church until conditions improved. But it would be a mistake to make such accommodations to human difficulties the standard by which everything must always be measured. To make that error would be to confuse the eternal with the temporary, the universal with the local, the ideal with an effort at attainment.

Bible

We learn from Scripture that some groups of people are not more human or more valuable than others. The creation stories of the Bible, unlike those found elsewhere, declare that all groups of humans are created out of the same dust of the ground and that men and women, as symbolized by the rib of Adam out of which Eve was fashioned, are composed of the same material. Neither is intrinsically superior to the other. Instead, men and women are created in the divine image as equal partners.

The Bible recognizes, of course, that men and women both sin and that their faithlessness toward God results in a disruption of their own relationships. In this disordered state of affairs, men often become more and more tyrannical. In the same sinful state, women often become ever more skillful in the arts of devious manipulation. The whole of Scripture traces this accelerating cycle of mutual abuse with stark and painful clarity. Although it is not pretty, this picture of things is true to life.

The good news is that this is not the end of the story. God is actively at work in every moment of every life seeking to bring about healing and reconciliation. The biblical story of God's attempts to heal the wounds caused by sin between men and women is not one of steady progress. It writhes with twists and turns, ups and downs, starts and stops. But God will not rest until all humans have had an opportunity to be reconciled with their Maker and with each other. This reconciliation will establish mutually beneficial relationships between men and women. It will enable them at long last to interact like the equal partners God intends them to be.

The high point of this biblical drama so far occurred in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, the One who most clearly revealed what God is like and what we can become. The stories Jesus told, the friends Jesus enjoyed, the supporters Jesus appreciated, and the disciples to whom Jesus appeared after his resurrection all included women in surprising and soothing ways. For Jesus, healing the wounds caused by sin between men and women was a very high priority.

Christian History

Unfortunately, this was not always the case for all of those who were disciples of Jesus in subsequent generations. Some historians have found that, already in the first century, it is

possible to trace the origins of struggle between an impulse to prolong and extend the healing gestures of Jesus toward women and the contrary impulse to keep women in subservient roles as long as possible. These conflicting impulses probably produced much controversy in the early church, which might help explain the range of statements we now find in the oldest Christian literature.

When we consider the history of Christianity over the centuries, we see a similar pattern. On the one hand, there is the impulse to heal, liberate and empower women for their own sakes and for the sakes of those whom they can then serve more effectively. On the other, there is the contrary impulse to restrain and restrict women from developing all their gifts, and to produce theological justifications for doing so. It is difficult to imagine, for instance, attitudes toward women more hostile than those of Tertullian in the 3rd century or more ignorant than those of Thomas Aquinas in the 13th. And yet there are occasions, as in some of the sermons to women by Martin Luther in the 16th century and in some of the remarks about marriage by Jeremy Taylor in the 17th, in which the healing impulse emerges, even if only in partial and painful ways. It is not difficult to discern which of these impulses, the healing or the hurtful, is more harmonious with the life and ministry of Jesus, something that should make us exceedingly reluctant to do anything today that might place us on the wrong side of this ongoing and sometimes difficult struggle.

Reason

We come to the same conclusion when we consider the matter from the perspective of that form of human reason we call moral philosophy. One of the basic rules of moral thought is that "equals in equal circumstances ought to be treated equally." This rule, which is so congruent with human reason that virtually no one contests it, does not deny that people differ and that these variations, if pertinent to the issue at hand, can justify treating people in alternative ways. It insists, however, that the differences that are supposed to legitimate such discrimination be clearly relevant. All can agree, for example, that it is not necessary to be able to see in order to have a successful career as a singer, but that it is necessary to have good vision in order to be a skilled surgeon. For this reason, we are justified in excluding persons who cannot see from surgical specialties, but not warranted in denying them singing careers if they can truly perform. Likewise, differences in gender, though in some contexts they justify treating men and women differently, appear irrelevant to questions about an individual's qualifications for speaking at church. The burden of proof in this matter clearly rests upon us who assert otherwise. We must be able to show why the gender of a woman necessarily and automatically disqualifies her from being an effective speaker. We dare not discriminate against women in this regard unless we have sound reasons for doing so. We must not allow irrelevant, and therefore irrational, considerations to determine our choices on such an important matter.

Experience

We can learn what we ought to do from our own experience as well. Jesus said that we can distinguish true from false spokespersons for God, not by their race, nationality, economic class

or gender, but by the harvest of their lives and words. "You will know them by their fruits," he said. "Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit....Thus you will know them by their fruits." (Mat 7:16-20 NRSV)

This is a most important test. An individual's qualifications for speaking in church on Sabbath morning rest, in large measure, on the results, good or bad, of allowing him or her to do so. If there is serious doubt about the matter, there is no substitute for giving the individual an opportunity to be heard, albeit at first in contexts where his or her capacity to do damage is limited even if things don't go well. Only in this way can we avoid the twin errors of including people who are not qualified and excluding them for the wrong reasons. What Gamaliel, who was "respected by all the people," said of Peter and other friends of Jesus applies here as well: "If this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them--in that case you may even be found fighting against God!" (Acts 5: 38, 39 NRSV)

The various lines of interpreted evidence we have considered--Bible, Christian history, reason and experience--all lead to the same conclusion: When it comes to deciding who will be permitted to speak in our churches on Sabbath morning, our guiding phrase must be "gifts, not gender." This outcome is so compelling, all things considered, that if we resist it we often feel a need to introduce distinctions that soften our conclusions. One of these is the distinction between allowing women to speak in church, which can be permitted, and allowing them to do so in ways that challenge the authority of the male leaders of the congregation, which cannot be permitted. But the very fact that we feel a need to introduce this distinction, which is not explicitly announced in the New Testament, demonstrates how difficult it is for all of us, no matter who we are, to apply the Bible's rare prohibitions of allowing women to speak in church both literally and universally. If we apply these verses literally, we do not apply them universally. If we apply them universally, we do not do so literally, but introduce distinctions that qualify their plain meaning. I find it more faithful to Scripture, Christian tradition, human reason, and our own experience, to interpret these verses as they read, but to apply them only where they fit local needs.

As these considerations suggest, I am convinced the Wesleyan Quadrilateral enables us to think about the roles and places of men and women in the church in helpful ways. I am also convinced, however, that this method of studying the Bible is very fruitful no matter what the topic. Besides, as spiritual grandchildren of John Wesley, we Adventists will do well to preserve and promote this valuable treasure from our own past.

This paper is an abridgement of a longer and more detailed study of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. For a complimentary copy, please write to David Larson, Faculty of Religion, LLU, Loma Linda, CA 92350.

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