

CHRIST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

History Series: The History of John Wesley and the Methodist Church

Compiled by John H. Evans

Sabbath April 22, 2007

Part 26: Wesley's Theology: Foundations

Wesley himself tells us the sources and basis of his theology. It is referred to as the Wesley Quadrilateral.

SCRIPTURE	TRADITION
REASON	EXPERIENCE

1) **SCRIPTURE:** Wesley of course took the bible as his primary source of Christian belief and life. From a sermon of 1789: "I am determined to be a Bible Christian, not almost but altogether." Wesley read widely in classical literature, science and was well informed on the major question of the day. He did however read some scripture every day and immersed himself in its stories, images, themes and language. He repeatedly appealed to scripture in his preaching, writing and discussions. It is necessary though to use tradition, reason and experience to interpret the Bible and how to apply its message in an intelligent and effective way to everyday life. He always emphasized the plain meaning unless it was absurd to do so. He also always held that attention must be paid to context. The meaning is easily perverted unless one imbeds it in what comes before and after and in the overall message of the Bible.

2) **TRADITION:** From his earliest days in Epworth and throughout his life Wesley was interested in "Christian Antiquity" and the "primitive church". He read and studied men and women of Christian history and was convinced that they had something to say to every age. For the instruction of his followers he edited and published a fifty-volume set of selections of readings from Christian authors from the earliest time, the second century. He was also devoted to the *Book of Common Prayer* used by the Church of England. It had been put together in the century before Wesley. It provides a cycle of daily morning and evening prayers with psalms and other passages from scripture. We could do worse than make use of this. It has beautiful language.

3) **REASON:** The role of reason in religious faith and the relationship of faith and reason have a long history. I think we will once again be hearing more on this as the present Pope has chosen to give it prominence in the "public square" -- and rightly so. The 18th century is referred to as the age of reason in contrast to some preceding centuries referred to as the age of faith.

The work of Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo and most of all Newton, gave rise to the concept of the clockwork universe. In religion this spawned a movement called Deism. The underlying thought was that since the universe is governed by law there must be a lawgiver (or a watchmaker). Deism attempts to construct an entirely reasonable religion. It admits a supernatural Being who created the universe but then withdrew and holds Himself aloof. Thus, Deists deny miracles in scripture, the divinity of Jesus, the

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resurrection and the efficacy of His death on the cross. Several of the founders of our country were Deists, e.g., Thomas Jefferson. Obviously, Wesley rejected this system.

Wesley, and we today, have to deal with two camps. On the one hand are those who undervalue reason as a gift from God. This group values and emphasizes emotional intensity and confines reason to managing our everyday affairs. This is not Wesley's stand. He argued that a maturing faith seeks always to be grounded in sound reasoning and understanding.

On the other hand, Deists overvalue reason and do not admit to the validity of the experience of a saving faith. Reason by itself cannot produce relief from the self-knowledge that we have not done as we should. Thus, it seeks to belittle this inadequacy or deny it or make excuses to "get off the hook". Reason by itself cannot give rise to faith, hope or love, nor can it address some of our deepest questions.

Wesley consistently sought a balance. He argued with his critics and sought to convince his followers that faith and reason are partners. In a letter to Rev. Dr. Rutherford in 1768 he said: "It is a fundamental principle with us that to renounce reason is to renounce religion, that religion and reason go hand in hand, and that all irrational religion is false religion".

EXPERIENCE: Wesley identified two areas where we experience the presence and work of God. We can identify God in nature and in the lives of other people. We also have our own inward experience of God if we seek it earnestly and honestly. If it is authentic it will result in changed behavior and a changed life.

Wesley was called an "Enthusiast" by some of his critics due to his emphasis on inward experience. However, he did not promote highly emotional, disordered and misguided religious emotion. In fact, he was wary of such and was skeptical of them. In his view, genuine religious emotion must be disciplined and regulated by scripture, tradition and reason. He was always cautious about overly emotional and irrational religious fanatics.