

The following collection of writings from John Wesley can be a clarifying example of understanding the different ways that God speaks to us. I will refer to them in our notes when we come to the section on epistemology.

The Wesleyan Quadrilateral

“It means the primacy of holy Scripture, as understood in the light of Christian Tradition, Reason, and Experience.” - Tom Oden:

John Wesley’s “Preface” - he intended to present his thoughts in a way that was “agreeable, I hope, to Scripture, Reason, and Christian Antiquity.” Christian antiquity, in this case, was described as “the religion of the primitive church, and of the whole church in the purest ages.” (JW Works)

An Examination of the Quadrilateral of Religious Authority

1. Scripture: “The Scriptures are the touchstones whereby Christians examine all, real or supposed revelations. In all cases they appeal “to the law and the testimony” to try every spirit thereby.” [JW Letters, III, 17]

2. Tradition: From the “Preface” to his 50 Volume Christian Library (1749-55).

“Such a collection of English divinity as (I believe) is all true, all agreeable to the oracles of God; as is all practical, unmixed with controversy of any kind, and all intelligible to plain men; such as is not superficial, but going down to the depth, and describing to the height of Christianity; and yet not mystical, not obscure to any of those who are experienced in the ways of God.” (JW. Works, XIV, 222).

3. Reason: “Common sense Christianity.” “It is a fundamental with us,” Wesley wrote, “that to renounce reason is to renounce religion, that religion and reason go hand in hand, and that all irrational religion is false religion.” [JW, Letters, VII, 61]

In his Standard Sermon, #70, “The Case of Reason Considered” Wesley had harsh words for those who “under-valued reason,” as well as those who “over-valued reason:”

“Why should you run from one extreme to the other? Is not the middle way best? Let reason do all reason can; employ it as far as it will go. But, at the same time, acknowledge it is utterly incapable of giving either faith, or hope, or love; and, consequently, of producing real virtue, or substantial happiness. Expect these from a higher Source, even from the Father of the spirits of all flesh. Seek and received them, not as your own acquisition, but as the gift of God.” [Sermon #70, “The Case of Reason Considered,” JW Works, VI, 360].

“Plundering the Egyptians:” The people of God should learn whatever truth they can, from whom ever they can. The example of Wesley’s Primitive Physick (1747)

4. Experience: The “Witness of the Spirit.” John Wesley described the witness of the Spirit in this way: “... the testimony of the Spirit is an inward impression on the soul, whereby the Spirit of God directly witnesses to my spirit, that I am a child of God; that Jesus Christ hath loved me, given himself for me; and that all my sins are blotted out, and I, EVEN I, am reconciled to God.” (S.S. 10, “The Witness of the Spirit”)

True doctrine creates vital, living Christian experience.

But feeling (experience) does not create true doctrine.

As JW wrote: “that some consciousness of our being in favour with God is joined with the Christian Faith, I cannot doubt; but it is not the essence of it. A consciousness of pardon cannot be the condition of pardon.” [JW Letters, VII, 61]

In a similar way, religious experience was not a considered a primary theological proof; it was rather, understood to “confirm” biblical doctrines through living experience. JW put it this way: “It is objected “experience is not sufficient to prove a doctrine which is not founded on Scripture.” This is undoubtedly true; and it is an important truth; but it does not affect the present question [the witness of the spirit]; for it has been shown, that this doctrine is founded on Scripture: Therefore experience is properly alleged to confirm it” (S.S. “Witness of the Spirit”)