



The Marks of a Methodist

Week 2: Wesleyan Quadrilateral

Brian Mattson - 07/19/2026

In 1972, while writing and planning what would become a seminal record in rock and roll history, a young musician had an epiphany. Pink Floyd released *The Dark Side of the Moon* in 1973, which explored themes about the pressures of everyday life, greed, conflict, mental health, and death. Widely regarded as one of the greatest albums of all time, the cover art is instantly identifiable with the album and the band. The prism, taking white light from one side and dispersing it into the visible color spectrum, acts as a metaphor for songwriter Roger Waters's new understanding about life, almost as if he was seeing for the first time. His epiphany was that he realized he was in the middle of living, not waiting for it to begin.

"The year that we made that record was the year that I had a sudden revelation personally, which was that this was it. I had the strangest feeling growing up, and I know a lot of people share this, that childhood and adolescence and one's early adult life are preparing for something that's going to happen later. I suddenly thought at 29, 'Hang on, it's happening. It has been right from the beginning, and there isn't suddenly a line when the training stops and life starts.' "

- Roger Waters

This sentiment is captured perfectly in the iconic songs, *Time* and *Breathe*. The idea that life is not some far off distant future, but rather right now, and the clock is ticking. Not some countdown to death, but a reminder that life is made up of today and tomorrow, hours and minutes to be made meaningful by what we do with them. Nearly 230 years after John Wesley's epiphany about God's grace, another Englishman had a similar experience. A new way of looking at life that gave color to the world.

Last week, I talked about John Wesley's heart-warming, eye-opening encounter with God's grace on Aldersgate Street in May of 1738. It was a moment that seemingly came out of nowhere, while also being a new realization at the end of a longer journey. It was an experience that propelled Wesley and the Methodist Movement into a new future. A future shaped by God's grace and a call to move towards perfectly loving God and neighbor.

As Christ-followers, we believe that Jesus was the embodiment of God's grace and showed us what makes a life truly meaningful. In Wesley's theology—that is the ways we think about God—there is wider doctrine and narrower dogma. He eschewed the flaws of people-centered structure found in the Catholic church, while simultaneously pushing back on the systematic tendencies of the Reformers. Wesley famously used the phrase *think and let think* about spiritual issues or understandings that fall outside of established church doctrine. He was open to discussing and debating ways to interpret scripture and the teachings of Jesus, rather than discounting anyone who disagreed. This made Wesley different from others before him, and as such, our theological heritage has a uniquely Wesleyan flavor.

His theological interpretation and application focuses on his central concern for salvation, notes Wesleyan scholar Donald Thorsen. According to Wesley, the end goal of true religion is "salvation, and the means to attain it, faith." Wesley continued, "that these two little words—faith and salvation—include the substance of all the Bible, the marrow as it were, of the whole Scripture."

The substance of the Bible—actually reading, studying, and putting into practice those words—is all you need to know for salvation. Nothing more, nothing less. Here’s how it sounds in our Articles of Religion from the *Book of Discipline*:

The Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation; so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man that it should be believed as an article of faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation.

Now, salvation is a complex and loaded word in Christianity. In different denominations, it might mean different things. It is common in our current world to hear the term “saved” in regards to giving our lives to Christ or reserving our place in heaven, but the word, historically, has a much richer and more complex meaning. Biblically speaking, salvation has a wide range of ideas, such as renewal of creation, forgiveness, healing, reconciliation, redemption, sanctification, newness of life, adoption, and glorification. In Western Christianity, the term salvation has come to mean a very specific, transactional event. We hear things like, “I was saved at church camp” or “I was saved at a revival,” and I think what people are implying is that they *weren’t* going to heaven and now they *are*.

In our Wesleyan theology, we don’t synthesize salvation into a specific time and place. According to Wesleyan scholar, Donald Thorsen, Wesley believed **salvation represents a complex, progressive event in which believers receive the grace to live holy lives**. It’s my personal interpretation as well to say that salvation began with a new understanding of God’s love, thus marking a starting point for the rest of my life’s work. I have been saved *from* the sins of this world—greed, selfishness, etc.—and I have been saved *for* the good works modeled by Jesus—loving my neighbor, seeking God, and advocating for justice. Here’s how salvation and living new lives sounds in the Message translation:

It wasn't so long ago that you were mired in that old stagnant life of sin. You let the world, which doesn't know the first thing about living, tell you how to live. You filled your lungs with polluted unbelief, and then exhaled disobedience. We all did it, all of us doing what we felt like doing, when we felt like doing it, all of us in the same boat. It's a wonder God didn't lose his temper and do away with the whole lot of us. Instead, immense in mercy and with an incredible love, he embraced us. He took our sin-dead lives and made us alive in Christ. He did all this on his own, with no help from us!

Saving is all his idea, and all his work. All we do is trust him enough to let him do it. It's God's gift from start to finish! We don't play the major role. If we did, we'd probably go around bragging that we'd done the whole thing! No, we neither make nor save ourselves. God does both the making and saving. He creates each of us by Christ Jesus to join him in the work he does, the good work he has gotten ready for us to do, work we had better be doing.

- Ephesians 2:1-5, 8-10

So our salvation comes through faith, and our faith is made real in the works we do as Christ-followers. It's in the way we live as Jesus seekers. It's in how we love as the children of God. But reading the Bible and coming to clear conclusions and solid answers is sometimes easier said than done. We don't want to be too formulaic about the whole endeavor, but are there some guardrails or tools that will help shape and guide us on the way? I have a suggestion.

In what has since been coined the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, John Wesley practiced his theology using four sources. He asserted the primacy of scripture, the traditions of the ancient church, generational knowledge of humankind, and our lived experience as all important to the understanding

of God's love and the Christian life. These four sources for interpreting a life of faith—scripture, tradition, reason, and experience—became ingrained in the Methodist way. Even now, our *Book of Discipline* affirms the importance of this in our tradition: **“The United Methodist Church holds that the living core of the Christian faith was revealed in Scripture, illuminated by tradition, vivified in personal experience, and confirmed by reason.”**

It's important to know that Wesley never used the term Wesleyan Quadrilateral. It came much later from scholars who studied his work. Wesley very much named all four of those sources for interpreting faith, but he was not concerned with formulating a systematic theology. As a practical theologian, Wesley was more interested in how we go about living our faith in tangible ways. Faith was neither all about brain knowledge, nor all about our good works. It was about a holistic approach that married the head and the heart.

Some people have tried to explain the Wesleyan Quadrilateral as just that: a shape with four equal sides. That's somewhat misleading in that Wesley never believed all four parts were equal in importance. Some people explain it as a three legged stool where the seat is scripture and the three legs are tradition, reason, and experience. Still others use a variation of a Venn diagram with scripture as the outer circle and the spot where the other three circles overlap is the location of Biblical truth and understanding. All of these help explain and give structure to the idea, but a life of faith is hard to boil down in absolutes or flow charts. So let's take each of these four sources apart and then put them back together with a different analogy at the end.

Wesley famously called himself *homo unius libri*—a man of one book. He took the Bible seriously. He was raised in a strict Anglican household with regular scripture study part of their daily routine. As he continued to grow and mature following his Aldersgate experience, scripture still played a primary role in the Methodist movement. Wesley's biblical focus shifted from rote memorization and routine to its sufficiency for salvation and holy living.

Wesley was not a slave to scripture. He was not authoritative in his approach to biblical interpretation. Although scripture was the fountainhead of Christian theology, other sources of religious authority could confirm or enhance the truth of the Word. Thorsen, again, notes that Scripture was *the only authority sufficient for salvation, but Wesley also felt the freedom and necessity of appealing to tradition, reason, and experience.*

The next part of the quadrilateral is tradition. This is such a broad definition. How can we narrow down what traditions or whose traditions are worthy of influencing our theology? Carla tried to start a new tradition of having a lobster in the children's Christmas pageant last year. Does that count? For John Wesley, tradition was mostly made up of his own Anglican upbringing, the historical creeds, and the practices of the early church. The practices and doctrine developed from the Church Fathers and the ecumenical councils give shape to our faith today, they also connect us to the routines and rituals of previous generations.

By reason, Wesley meant the ways our brains use logic to process decision-making, sound judgments, and emotional responses. A lot has changed in the last 250 years in the academic world, so I think it's safe to assume our understanding of the natural world, cosmology, genetics, and a whole host of other advancements would be included in the category of reason. After all, how silly would it be to espouse a life of well-reasoned faith—one that includes using our brains—if we just decide to discount widely accepted scientific knowledge?

And the last part of the quadrilateral is experience. United Methodist theologian, Joel Green says, "Experience, for Wesley, encompassed both the inward testimony of grace in the believer's life and the outward observation of the created order and of human life in community." In our modern context, we might think this is akin to saying we all experience God individually and live our faith in unique ways. While this can be true, what Wesley means by the word *experience* is the partaking of

sacraments—baptism and communion—and the living out of Jesus' teachings. The promises of scripture are made real when we actually go about our lives with renewed purpose, individually and collectively.

You put those four together and you have the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. Or maybe not. Maybe it's several circles, or even a stool. I propose a different analogy altogether. What if we think more like Pink Floyd? You remember the cover art from *The Dark Side of the Moon*? What if Wesley's theological construct was more like a prism that we could use to give color to a life of faith?

You probably remember learning about prisms in science class at school. Light would shine through and then be dispersed onto the wall in a rainbow of color. It was like magic. And as you moved the light around, the direction and intensity of the color danced around the walls. What if, in a way, that's what the quadrilateral is supposed to function like? A tool to understand God and scripture in ways that color the world.

Let's say that scripture is the light and the prism represents the historical traditions and creeds of the Church, the vast Christian experience, and the knowledge passed down through generations. When the light shines, we can see things more clearly, but when we pass that same light through the prism, we are awakened to a completely new way to understand the Word. There is nuance and beauty that wasn't there before. There is depth and breadth to this new way of seeing the light. We haven't lessened the importance of scripture by using other tools in our toolbox. We have, in fact, given it more ways of becoming new to our lives and the lives of others around us.

I get a sense of this analogy at my own house. We live in an old craftsman from 1923 with leaded glass French doors, and as we come and go from the house at different times of day, the sun passes through those doors and little rainbows appear on our walls and floors. A reminder that a new angle or different perspective can produce new and beautiful colors. I've been

reminded of this in my own theology, too. Because of people I've met, places I've been, and experiences I've gone through, I see scripture in new and exciting ways when I look at it now. Not just words on a page to memorize, but ideas that challenge me still as I try to understand and put them into practice.

Because that's what John Wesley's theology was after. He wasn't interested in creating structure. He was interested in opening eyes. Changing lives. Warming hearts. Salvation is here, right now, and it's bursting with color. It's not far off in the distance or in some other spiritual realm... actually it's in those places too... but it's also among us. The challenge for us is to use this prism to look at scripture in new and exciting ways. The words we've read once, maybe a couple times, can become new again. Perhaps you will see a rainbow of color where you once only saw shades of gray. This kind of abundant life, as Jesus calls it, is available right now. What Roger Waters recounted about his own life, can be true for us, too. "It's happening. It has been right from the beginning." We were blind, but now we see.

"Here's another way to put it: You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don't think I'm going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand—shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven."

- Matthew 5:14-16