



ROAD TO HOLY DISCERNMENT

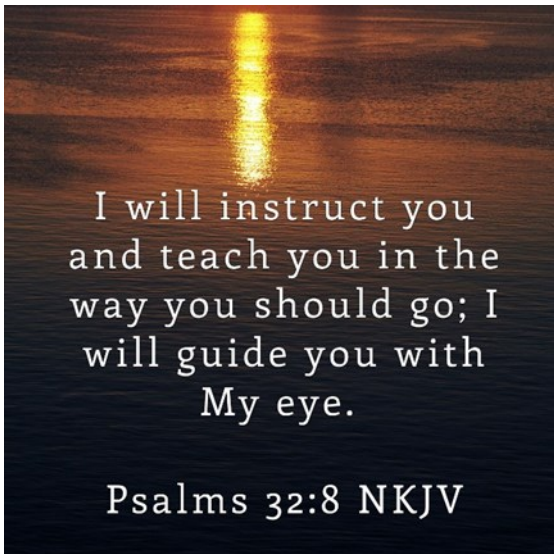
Doing God's will....finding common ground.

March 2024
Volume 11

Lent is often described as a time of preparation and an opportunity to go deeper with God. The Lenten season is therefore a perfect time for us to examine the beliefs of the United Methodist Church, Methodism, and Bethany as we continue to discern where God is leading us as a congregation and as individuals. For this reason, the *Road To Holy Discernment* will focus on our beliefs during the 40 days of Lent through a series of "What We Believe" newsletters.

Proverbs 22:6

Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.



This edition of the "What We Believe" series will look at John Wesley's "**General Rules**". There are three General Rules summarized as:

- ◇ Do no harm
- ◇ Do Good
- ◇ Attend upon all the Ordinances of God

General Rules

- The General Rules were developed by John Wesley in 1743 as guidelines for membership in the Methodist societies.
- The Rules are a simple and concise description of basic Christian practices, described by Wesley as "means of grace".
- They are a guide on how to live as faithful disciples of Jesus, fulfilling the vows of baptism.

The General Rules are found in Part III, Paragraph 104 of the 2016 United Methodist *Book of Discipline* and have been included in every previous edition of the *Book of Discipline*.

Do No Harm

This General Rule starts by saying “*By doing no harm, by avoiding evil of every kind, especially that which is most generally practiced, such as:*” and then provides a list of items that Christians should not do. Many of these items still apply as written in today’s world while others may seem a bit out of date or strict by current standards. However, the intent of this rule is still as applicable today as it was in 1743 - do nothing that would harm your relationship with God or that would cause harm to one of your brethren.

Do Good

This General Rule starts by saying *By doing good; by being in every kind merciful after their power; as they have opportunity, doing good of every possible sort, and, as far as possible, to all men:*” and then provides a list of items that Christians should do. The intent of this rule is for us to be Christlike in our actions and by offering Christian charity to everyone in need both physically and/or spiritually.

Attend upon all the Ordinances of God

This General Rule starts by saying *Attending upon all the ordinances of God; such are:* and then provides a list of actions we should be taking to sustain and promote our spiritual growth. These items include worship, prayer, sacraments, and reading scripture.

Copy and paste the link below into the browser of your choice to view paragraph 104 of the 2016 ***Book of Discipline***. This paragraph provides the General Rules in their entirety.

<https://www.umc.org/en/content/the-general-rules-of-the-methodist-church>

What We Believe (Theological Task)

This newsletter article looks at the “Theological Task” as provided in the 2016 ***Book of Discipline*** and what this means for United Methodists.



All scripture is given
by inspiration of God,
and is profitable for doctrine,
for reproof, for correction,
for instruction in
righteousness: That the
man of God may be perfect,
thoroughly furnished
unto all good works.

2 Timothy 3:16-17

DailyVerses.net



The Theological Task is found in Paragraph 105 of the 2016 *Book of Discipline (BOD)* and involves four items: Scripture (Holy Bible), tradition, personal experience, and reason. John Wesley believed that the living core of the Christian faith was “revealed in Scripture, illumined by tradition, vivified in personal experience, and confirmed by reason”. This four-pronged belief is often referred to as the “**Wesleyan Quadrilateral**”.

2 Thessalonians 2:15 (KJV)

Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle.

Acts 17:2 (KJV)

And Paul, as his manner was, went in unto them, and three sabbath days reasoned with them out of the scripture

Romans 12:2 (BBE)

And let not your behavior be like that of this world, but be changed and made new in mind, so that by experience you may have knowledge of the good and pleasing and complete purpose of God.

Theological Task

Let's take a look at the Theological Task – why it is important, what is it, and what it means.

Why it is important:

In the name of Jesus Christ we are called to work within our diversity while exercising patience and forbearance with one another. Such patience stems neither from indifference toward truth nor from an indulgent tolerance of error but from an awareness that we know only in part and that none of us is able to search the mysteries of God except by the Spirit of God. We proceed with our theological task, trusting that the Spirit will grant us wisdom to continue our journey with the whole people of God. (Paragraph 105, Page 89, 2016 BOD)

What it is:

In general, theology is our “attempt to articulate more clearly our understanding of the divine-human encounter and thereby become more fully prepared to participate in God’s work in the world.”

Specifically, the Theological Task, though related to the Church’s doctrinal expressions, serves a different function. Our doctrinal affirmations assist us in the discernment of Christian truth in ever-changing contexts. Our theological task includes the testing, renewal, elaboration, and application of our doctrinal perspective in carrying out our calling “to spread scriptural holiness over these lands.” (Paragraph 105, Page 80, 2016 BOD)

The Theological Task is critical and constructive:

Critical – It is critical that we continually test our expressions of faith by asking “*do they provide the Church and its members with a witness that is faithful to the gospel as reflected in our living heritage and that is authentic and convincing in the light of human experience and the present state of human knowledge?*”

Constructive – It is constructive in that “*every generation must appropriate creatively the wisdom of the past and seek God in their midst in order to think afresh*”

The Theological Task is individual and communal:

Individual – It is individual in that “*it requires the participation of all who are in our Church, lay and ordained, because the mission of the Church is to be carried out by everyone who is called to discipleship.*”

Communal – It is communal in that “*it unfolds in conversations open to the experiences, insights, and traditions of all constituencies that make up United Methodism. This dialogue belongs to the life of every congregation.*”

The Theological Task is contextual and incarnational:

Contextual – It is contextual in that “*God’s eternal Word comes to us in flesh and blood in a given time and place, and in full identification with humanity.*”

Incarnational – It is incarnational in that it is “*grounded upon God’s supreme mode of self-revelation, the incarnation in Jesus Christ.*”

The Theological Task is essentially practical:

Practical – It is practical in that our task is “*to incorporate the promises and demands of the gospel into our daily lives.*”

What it means:

While we acknowledge the primacy of Scripture in theological reflection, our attempts to grasp its meaning always involve tradition, experience, and reason. Like Scripture, these may become creative vehicles of the Holy Spirit as they function within the Church. They quicken our faith, open our eyes to the wonder of God’s love, and clarify our understanding. (Paragraph 105, Page 84, 2016 BOD)

The following quote is from the Wesleyan Church website and while it is not in the United Methodist BOD or UMC website, it provides a fair understanding of the purpose of the Wesleyan “quadrilateral”. *The Bible as found in the Old and New Testaments is the foundation and standard for what we believe and practice questions arise, however, over interpretation. Scripture alone rarely settles controverted points of doctrine or practice. When detailed exegesis (i.e. critical interpretation of Scripture) among the best of biblical scholars fails to stem the tide of debate, we turn to tradition, reason and experience to clarify our understanding. They function as cooperative partners in our interpretation of the Bible, not as judges. They are ancillary sources, not usurpers of Scripture’s primacy, helping us grasp God’s word with greater clarity.*

The “Wesleyan Quadrilateral” is a set of tools to be used for aiding in scriptural interpretation while undertaking our “Theological Task”. What does each part of the quadrilateral (scripture, tradition, experience, reason) mean?

Scripture - *Scripture is considered the primary source and standard for Christian doctrine (Per UMC Website Glossary).*

Tradition - *Tradition is experience and the witness of development and growth of the faith through the past centuries and in many nations and cultures (per UMC Website Glossary). Christianity does not leap from New Testament times to the present as though nothing were to be learned from that great cloud of witnesses in between. For centuries Christians have sought to interpret the truth of the gospel for their time (Per 2016 BOD, Paragraph 105, Page 85). In other words, how the Bible has been interpreted around the world over the last 2000 years helps us understand what God's Word means to us today.*

Experience - *Experience is the individual's understanding and appropriating of the faith in the light of his or her own life (Per UMC Website Glossary). Our experience interacts with Scripture. We read Scripture in light of the conditions and events that help shape who we are, and we interpret our experience in terms of Scripture (Per 2016 BOD, Paragraph 105, Page 87). In other words, your personal experience(s) help shape what God's Word means to you.*

Reason - *Through reason the individual Christian brings to bear on the Christian faith discerning and cogent thought (per UMC Website Glossary). By our quest for reasoned understandings of Christian faith we seek to grasp, express, and live out the gospel in a way that will commend itself to thoughtful persons who are seeking to know and follow God's ways (Per 2016 BOD, Paragraph 105, Page 88). In other words, we use our brains to draw a reasonable conclusion of what God's Word means to us based on scripture, tradition, and experience.*

It should be noted that John Wesley did not actually create the "Wesleyan Quadrilateral". The tenets of scripture, tradition, and reason actually come from an older Anglican theological practice. To these three tenets, Wesley added the tenet of experience to form what is now referred to as the "Wesleyan Quadrilateral". The term "Wesleyan Quadrilateral" was actually coined by Methodist theologian Albert Outler (1908 – 1989) in the 20th century.

