



“Why I’m Still a Methodist”
A Sermon by the Rev. David M. Felten

Hebrews 5.11-6a *(from the Message)*

I have a lot more to say ..., but it is hard to get it across to you since you’ve picked up this bad habit of not listening. By this time you ought to be teachers yourselves, yet here I find you need someone to sit down with you and go over the basics on God again, starting from square one—baby’s milk, when you should have been on solid food long ago! Milk is for beginners, inexperienced in God’s ways; solid food is for the mature, who have some practice in telling right from wrong. So come on, let’s leave the preschool fingerpainting exercises on Christ and get on with the grand work of art. Grow up in Christ!

The founder of the Methodist movement, John Wesley, was an innovator in many ways, not the least of which was his way of “doing “ theology. In fact, we’re called “Methodists” because Wesley’s classmates at Oxford were taunting him because he had a “Method” for everything. In a lot of ways, we’ve lost that characteristic as a denomination – and it’s sad. I remember growing up and having passionate evangelical friends who had all the answers to everything sewn up. They knew the exact answer to everything because God had informed them personally. They’d ask me, what do Methodists believe about this or that? I’d say, “Uhhhh, well, it’s not that simple...”. That kind of uncertainty has led to the impression with many that Methodists don’t believe in anything – or at best that Methodists only believe in potlucks (which we do really well!).

Most Methodists aren’t even aware of the very thing that makes us unique – and that is the fact that we don’t advocate a particular theology, but a “methodology”. Wesley made his decisions and worked through tough questions by working a “method”, a formula – a formula with four elements: Scripture, Tradition, Experience, and Reason. From the Church of England, Wesley brought an emphasis on Scripture, Reason and Tradition. His unique contribution was the element of personal Experience.

The initials, STER, spell steer – as I tell the Confirmands, they help steer your decision-making. And just like the wheels on the car, each element needs to be balanced and in alignment with the other three in order to get where you’re going.

Scripture: Wesley believed everything necessary for salvation is found in the Bible. Yet the Bible isn't to be read literally. It isn't a science or medical text book -- or even a history book. It's a beautiful collection of over 60 books from many authors living in many different situations and cultures, each expressing to the best of his or her ability their experience with the divine.

Tradition is "Church Tradition", what those who have gone before us have said about their faith. How has the church responded or behaved? What's worked in the past?

Experience was Wesley's contribution. How you experience God is important in your faith journey. What is your personal experience?

Finally, **Reason** is critical, not only in understanding how to read the Bible, but how to interact with a world the demands of which no Biblical author ever dreamed. God gave you a mind, so use it.

The Quadrilateral: These four sources together inform our faith and help steer our decision-making. It's what 's come to be known as the "Quadrilateral", the "four sides" It's absolutely essential to consider all four equally – keep those tires inflated and aligned properly! When you don't, you can start taking on the characteristics of some other ways of thinking. For example:

If you're a Southern Baptist, your Scripture wheel is HUGE. The Bible is emphasized over all else, it is to be read literally, and Reason and personal Experience are downplayed – in fact, Reason and Experience are tools of the devil. In many of the non-denominational churches, there's not a lot of institutional history, so even Tradition is a non-issue.

If you're driving a Catholic car, your Church tradition wheel is generally the over-inflated one. The determining factor in most decisions is "What does the Church say?" Historically it hasn't been the Catholic tradition to have lay people read much scripture at all – that's left up to the priests.

If you're an Episcopalian car, your Reason wheel might be dominant – Episcopalians are stereotypically more cerebral and logical.

If you're a Methodist car, if we're going to err anywhere (which we do regularly) it's usually on over-inflating the Experience wheel. We're likely to let sentiments like, "It just feels right!" dominate our decision-making. Personal experience wins out over everything else.

There is a danger if one of these is used to the exclusion of the others. (You know how the tires on your car being just a little out of alignment can make it seem like the car might shake something off)

And yet together, kept in creative tension, these four sources — Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience — can inform our faith, help us make decisions, and live out balanced, healthy lives in Christ.

Did you know that Indiana Jones was a Methodist? No kidding! At least he runs a pretty good Quadrilateral in "Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade" --

VIDEO CLIP (Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade): Choosing the chalice from among many protected by ancient Knight (Nazi sympathizer chooses golden cup and proceeds to turn into dust. Indy looks for something simple and humble and thus, "chooses wisely".)

Bad guy, bad decision making – note what he said as he dipped the cup: "This is the cup of the King of Kings", yeah, yeah, yeah. First off, don't risk your life taking the advice of someone who doesn't like you very much (Remember, the woman said, "Let me choose"?) He evidently let himself be swayed by Church Tradition more than anything. Look at the outrageously gaudy chalices many churches use – so he chose based on one of the criteria only.

But the good guy chooses wisely. Why? Scripture: Jones knew Jesus was a carpenter, hung out with the poor. That equals a humble cup. Tradition: although most Churches use gold or some other finery, it's only to venerate what was really a humble event. Reason: It makes sense that in first century Palestine, the cup of one who advocated non-material wisdom would be simple and unadorned. Experience: In his travels as an archaeologist, he'd probably run across dozens of examples of first century house-wares and knew exactly what to look for. Put them all together and Voila! Good decision.

The Quadrilateral is a methodology, not a theology. For Wesley, WHY you believe something is as important as WHAT you believe. How do you arrive at your convictions? That's one of the reasons why there's such a great diversity of beliefs among Methodists. Some tend to be very conservative theologically, and others are always pushing the envelope. It's how you run the formula that determines where you come out.

Confirmation class chose to run the formula on abortion: they struggled and finally decided: "not enough information". They wanted to know the circumstances of the woman, the pregnancy, the health of the unborn child. etc. etc. Run it yourself on some biggies: capitol punishment, on the war on terror, border and immigration issues, on how to deal with poverty in our country. Gets interesting fast – it also reveals our prejudices towards using just one wheel or another.

United Methodism has never been a "confessional" or "dogmatic" church. In fact, Wesley said, "As to opinions which do not strike at the root of Christianity," (which is a relationship with Jesus Christ), "we think and let think." That's our mantra. And that drives some people crazy.

There are several groups made up of millions of Methodists across the country, (going by the names of the "Confessing Movement" or "Good News") which are basically just confused. They are trying to pass legislation to make us into a confessional church (where you'll have to sign a belief statement to be part of the church), but they don't have a clue as to what being a real Methodist is all about. It's not about believing the

right stuff, it's about a process. They're the of kind people I think the author of Hebrews is talking to, those who want a simple answer to everything.

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In other translations, the Grow up in Christ, is something longtime Methodists will recognize: "Go on to perfection" It's about getting practice in telling right from wrong, and that takes work. It's not some sort of magic. We've never said, "Here's what you're supposed to believe, so sign your name on the dotted line and POOF, God loves you." It's about growing and struggling together to determine where God is leading us. That means wrestling with the real stuff of life and making decisions that reflect ones' convictions as a person of faith.

Stream of Thought: It's simple: "Choose wisely" How? By using the Quadrilateral: Scripture, Tradition, Experience, and Reason.

And that's why I'm still a Methodist -- I wouldn't be happy in a church where I was told what I had to believe in order to be accepted. We are people of a method – and in this crazy, conflicted, confusing world, I trust that the Spirit will lead us in the way we should go – and that balancing S, T, E, & R will be just the Method we need in the madness we call Methodism.

