

The Quadrilateral

TEXT: Acts 15:1-21

Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on February 12, 2023

One of the pieces of my biography that I haven't talked a lot about is my field education in seminary at Emory. While the rest of the student body typically spent a year in a clinical setting and a year serving in a church role, I was part of a test group of students who were trained to be conflict mediators for the Justice Center of Atlanta, a placement our group kept for the full two years.

This was the early 90's and, in those days in Georgia, you didn't have to be a lawyer to be a mediator. In fact, being a lawyer (as some students were), or even having one of the parties in your mediation bring in their lawyers, was seen as an added hurdle to be overcome, since mediation is such a different beast than the adversarial process of prosecution and defense that attorneys are trained to use.

Each of us in the group, two of whom have now gone on to be United Methodist bishops, had our assigned day to sit in the Atlanta court to receive civil and some criminal cases referred by the presiding judge. In our second year, in addition to the load of court cases, we also were assigned to church conflicts in the area, mediations that often involved many more people and factions than was the case in the court-ordered cases. Then, every week, a couple of us brought a case study to our group from the mediations we had done so we could reflect on the nature of justice.

That beginning to my formal ministry made me especially interested in conflict resolution—how it worked or didn't; when to give up and when to keep trying; and what systems helped or hindered the process of achieving what everyone felt was fair and just.

If you've ever held a position of leadership, you know that some personality traits can make resolving conflicts more difficult. I knew that going in. But one of the many, many things I learned across those two years was that, irrespective of any issues with difficult personalities, there are also *systems* that can make a truly just resolution almost impossible to achieve.

On the flip side, there are systems that can help all sides feel like justice has been accomplished, even if nobody comes out with whatever they thought they wanted at the outset. Mediation is a system; and while it's not the right system for everything, I was absolutely flabbergasted at the healing and creative resolutions I witnessed in my mediation room.

We're going to look at Paul's healing solutions to the conflicts in his churches in the coming weeks, along with the recommendations of Jesus in Matthew 18. But since Methodism has its own system for working out conflicts and since I think the early church did something similar in the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15, I want to pause and look more closely at both of those things. I'll start with the system and then we'll use that as a lens to look at both Acts 15 and our current day.

John Wesley was the Anglican priest who began the Methodist movement in London in the 18th century. While Wesley didn't lay this out systematically, those who have studied Wesley's writings came up with a name for the process that Wesley used to make decisions for the movement and the churches that eventually came from it. They call it the Quadrilateral...it's spelled out as the sermon title in your bulletin.

So now you have a big fancy word to throw around and impress people. But the concept is fairly simple: Wesley considered four things in working out a thorny issue—thus the "quad" in quadrilateral. The four things were: Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience.

The rallying cry of the Protestant Reformation two centuries before had been "Sola Scriptura!" "Scripture alone!" But Wesley had no doubt seen what we see a lot of today—Christians trying to work out their conflicts with dueling Bible verses. As we've been talking about since August, that kind of use of the Bible totally misunderstands what the Bible is at its core.

Wesley thought about things with both depth and breadth, and he recognized that trying to make decisions based *only* on what Scripture said was not going to solve much. He gave Scripture a lot of weight, in fact he gave it more weight than any of the other three things individually. But those other three things: The traditions of the church, basic human reason, and lived human experience could, and sometimes did, add up and override the accepted interpretation of a passage of Scripture.

My favorite example of that from Wesley's life was how he came to allow and finally even to ordain women preachers. He watched women sharing the gospel in public and saw that their messages were bearing fruit. Some of the women drew thousands of people at a time, bring many people into the fledgling movement.

Wesley well knew the Bible passages that said women shouldn't speak in church and shouldn't have authority over men. And he wrestled a long time because of it. He valued Scripture greatly and didn't go against it lightly. And the tradition of the Anglican church had followed that guide.

But he finally could not ignore the fact that the Holy Spirit was blessing and using women...even to convert and teach men. His experience taught him a different view. He also had an educated and accomplished mother, Susannah Wesley, and he saw no valid reason to think that women couldn't perform as well as men.

So, Wesley began ordaining women, beginning with a woman named Sarah Crosby who he licensed to preach in 1761. He then went even further to preach against the notion that women should be submissive. It was Wesley himself who removed the word "obey" from the marriage rite that he sent to the United States in 1784.

So, he gets a lot of credit from me. Unfortunately, he couldn't bring himself to go as far as allowing women to have voice and vote in the Conference, which was and still is the ruling body of Methodism. So, after Wesley's death, the men of the Conference voted that women could no longer be ordained and Methodist women didn't get the privilege back again until 1956, a mere four years before I was born.

In the case of early Methodism, the Quadrilateral as a system worked, but didn't have staying power because Wesley didn't apply it evenly. But he wasn't the first to go beyond the bounds of the Bible to solve a conflict in the church. In fact, the catch-22 for the "Sola Scriptura" folks is that the perfect example of that lies in the Bible itself. In the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15. They didn't go full Quadrilateral, but they hit three of the four areas.

I've mentioned this early Council before. It happens about the year 50, when the Jewish followers of Jesus are trying to deal with their success in converting Gentiles to their movement. As the number of Gentiles grow, and as the movement spreads to majority Gentile areas, more and more people were asking whether Gentiles really had to become Jews first in order to follow Jesus.

The sign of the covenant God establishes with Abraham in Genesis is circumcision, so that practice stands in for the entire Law of Moses in the argument, which is laid out in the first verse of Acts 15. This takes place in Syria, where Paul and Barnabas are teaching: "Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.'" That kind of language set Paul and Barnabas on fire and they brought it straight to the Judean capital of Jerusalem.

Verse six tells us, "The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter." So that's who comes together, a system of decision-making that had already become the tradition for the early movement. There's more tradition to consider, next voiced by Peter who says, "You know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers." He's referencing a story you can read in Acts 10.

So Peter has double traditional authority. He was one of the original twelve disciples of Jesus and the other apostles and elders recognized the special calling he talks about in Acts 10. Tradition? Check.

But Peter isn't finished. He goes on to remind them of his *experiences* of God blessing the Gentiles through his message, even though they were not circumcised. Next up are Paul and Barnabas, who also tell of their experiences among the Gentiles. Experience? Check.

Third to speak is James, the leader of the Jerusalem church, and he brings in Scriptural support for including Gentiles, quoting the prophets Amos and Isaiah, including the words, "so that all other peoples may seek the Lord—even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called." And he issues the ruling you heard in the Scripture reading. Scripture? Check.

As I've said before, the Council's decision had a host of unintended consequences. In my own analysis, I think that's because they didn't fully utilize the "reason" part of the Quadrilateral in their thinking. To be fair, the Age of Reason, otherwise known as the Enlightenment, was in Wesley's day some 1600 years later, so it's hard to fault them.

But the missing piece was not reasoning through the effect of the Council's decision to basically establish two sets of rules—one for Jewish believers and one for Gentile believers, even when they worshipped together under the same roof. All of the conflicts we see in Paul's letters, including the letter to the church in Galatia, which is entirely about this, all came AFTER the decision of the Council in Jerusalem.

The Council did solve the largest issue around whether Gentile followers of Jesus had to be circumcised. The answer was no, and they deserve enormous credit for going that far. It's hard to overestimate the amount of both Scripture and Tradition that had to be overcome to get there; and keeping the requirement was probably the only way to reach any solution apart from a total split. In hindsight, they just postponed the total split for another century or two; although they certainly gave it the good, old college try.

I think the Quadrilateral and other systems like it are enormously helpful tools in resolving religious conflicts...whether they are conflicts between groups and factions within a church or denomination or whether they are conflicts between individuals. The Bible is a very important source for guidance; but it can contradict itself and often the context doesn't translate well. If you can think of any conflict within or between churches that has been solved by dueling Bible verses, please share it with me. I can't think of one; and I've seen plenty that have made the conflict worse.

It's not wrong to reference Scripture in a religious conflict. In fact, I agree with Wesley that it's necessary. But it will not be solved by Bible verses alone.

Typically, the different segments of the Christian faith...and even different Christians as individuals...focus on one of the four areas, sometimes to the exclusion of the others. Protestants as a whole tend to put most of their eggs in the Scripture box, while Roman Catholics rely mostly on the Tradition box. Within the Protestant arm of the church, the Pentecostal traditions go heavy on experience, the mainline churches on reason, and the fundamentalist churches on Scripture. What Wesley recognized is that you can't just ignore any one of those categories because all of them have God as their source.

Use Scripture. Give Scripture a ton of weight. God gave it to us. But look other places too. Use your brain...use reason. God didn't just make brains to amuse neurosurgeons. Use them. Look at tradition. Some traditions have outlived their usefulness, but don't throw out something that 2,000 years of Christians have found helpful without deep and serious reflection. Maybe it's something you don't appreciate now, but will grow to love at another stage of your life or Christian walk.

And, certainly, don't ignore the experience of yourself or of others whose testimony you trust. Are there signs that God is in this? Is the fruit of the Spirit evident? Am I really willing to say that God cannot work in this way? Are disciples being made here? Can love take this form in these circumstances?

When emotions are heated, a good system can guide us through. Maybe not perfectly, but better than the alternatives. Wesley's Quadrilateral and the Council of Acts 15 give us snapshots of systems for the faithful. The Bible has guidance and we should pay attention to that. But God is still speaking through our lived

experience and the experiences of others, both from our past and from our present. And our brains are not meant to be styrofoam filler for our skulls. God speaks through all of it. May we listen. Amen.