

**“Honoring the Dialogue”
A Wesleyan Guideline for the Debate over Homosexuality**

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United Methodists invoke John Wesley as warrant in our current theological debates far more than did our counterparts earlier this century. Ironically, this has not yet created greater consensus among us on disputed issues. Perhaps this is because we turn to Wesley more for warrant in defending our developed views than for guidance in developing these views. This may seem like a strange characterization of a tradition that formulated the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral” as a self-description of its approach to theological reflection. But this title masks a crucial place where we often turn to Wesley more as a warrant than as a guide.

Polarization in the Current Debate

Consider the various appeals to the quadrilateral in the current debate over homosexual practice. Those who reject traditional injunctions against some forms of this practice often ground their arguments on the greater insight and tolerance that they believe we have gained in modern times through experience and reason. In this connection, they contend that Wesley’s distinctive contribution to theological methodology was *adding* present experience and reason as authorities alongside scripture and tradition. They see their move of giving primacy to experience and reason as an extension of Wesley’s precedent. In direct response to such claims, those who defend traditional prohibitions on homosexual practice have increasingly questioned the role of present experience and reason in theological reflection. They insist that Wesley subordinated these two entirely to scripture, and lament the dangers of his empiricist rhetoric. Where the opposing sides converge is in suggesting that ultimately one must choose between the contrasting authority of 1) scripture and tradition or 2) reason and experience in deciding theological issues.

Wesley’s Resistance to such Polarization

Wesley specifically refused to make such a choice. His frequent interrelated appeals to scripture, tradition, experience, and reason were intentional. He assumed that theology at its best had always engaged all of these. But he recognized that some Enlightenment voices were casting the authority of *present* experience and reason over against past authorities in a way that emptied scripture and tradition of any normative contribution to theological dialogue, which in turn was provoking reactionary calls from some Protestants for theology to be based on scripture *alone*. Faced with this polarization, Wesley refused to join either side.

His major reason for refusing a forced option between the authority of scripture in theology and that of experience, reason, or tradition was Wesley’s commitment to the unity of God’s truth. The God speaking in and through scripture is—according to scripture itself—the God who can be known in part through our life in the universe God has created and by the intellectual powers that God has gifted to humanity. This same God promised to guide the church into truth. As such, to reject experience, reason, or tradition in theology is ultimately to reject the authority of scripture as well.

But what about the rejection of scripture in favor of present experience and

reason? Here Wesley's fundamental objection was his recognition of the fallibility of human knowing. He had repeatedly found what he thought to be certain on the basis of reason or experience called into question, particularly by dialogue with the experience and reasoning of others. While this did not always lead him to surrender his view, it did convince him that experience was no self-evident or infallible guide to use in critiquing scripture. More importantly, it convinced him that all human understandings of our experience, tradition, and scripture itself are "opinions." They are *interpretations* that are fallible and should remain open to the possibility of reconsideration.

The Commitment to "Honoring the Dialogue"

Just as Wesley found that dialogue made him aware of the fallibility of his opinions, he found in dialogue the most helpful way to test opinions—seeking those which are most adequate. For theological opinions this involved overlapping dialogues: the way to develop more adequate opinions is an ongoing dialogue between scripture, tradition, experience, and reason; all read in dialogue with other interpreters. When Christians confront an apparent conflict between scripture and experience, for example, the way forward is not to debate which is more authoritative but to engage in the difficult (and often lengthy) dialogical reconsideration of our *interpretations* of each of these—and of tradition—until we build consensus around an interpretation that can "do justice" to all. Some examples going back to Wesley help illustrate this commitment to "honoring the dialogue."

Model 1: Apparent scriptural injunctions specifically overturned by other scriptures

Consider first the issue of allowing women to preach. Wesley stood in a tradition that rejected this practice, appealing to certain scriptures. But he also experienced God blessing the speaking ministries of his mother and female lay preachers. At first he navigated this tension by arguing the women were just "testifying." Eventually he proposed that the scriptural injunctions do not apply to extraordinary movements of the Spirit like Methodism. While this allowed women to preach in his time, it set them up to be excluded (often forcefully) from this role when Methodism became an "ordinary" church. The subsequent battle for full ministerial roles for women in Methodist traditions has been long and painful. While explicit commitment to "honoring the dialogue" was all too rare, an increasing consensus has finally gained hold that some of the passages used to prohibit these roles were misinterpreted, and more importantly that there is an internal scriptural critique of such prohibitions (see summary in Spencer).

Model 2: Scriptural injunctions not directed at distinctive modern practices

A related example is slavery. Wesley did not dispute the traditional assumption that there were scriptural allowances for slavery. He argued instead that what was allowed in scripture was not the debased form of slavery he witnessed in British colonialism. And he insisted that central themes of scripture (equality of creation and the command to love) call Christians to reject slavery in its present form. American Methodists increasingly polarized over Wesley's suggestion. Their attempt to legislate an elusive consensus led instead to a painful split. While it has taken much struggle, most have come not only to agree with Wesley about all modern forms of slavery, but to recognize a subtle challenge in scripture (e.g., Paul in Philemon) to the slavery of its own time.

Model 3: Distinguish in ministry between scripturally prohibited behavior and amoral orientation

A third example concerns scriptural prohibitions of drunkenness. The traditional way of understanding these prohibitions allowed drinking in moderation, assuming that those who drink to excess do so willfully and that the proper application of the prohibition was to chastise them for weakness of character. Wesley could echo this tradition, but his engagement with his Methodist people also persuaded him that some persons experience the desire for alcohol being a matter that escaped their control. He attributed this experience to the more powerful effects of recently-introduced distilled liquors. This led him to charge Methodists with mutual accountability in avoiding distilled liquor (and in moderate use of wines and beers).

Later Methodists realized that the overpowering affects of alcohol are not confined to distilled liquor. Many in America concluded that the way to help avoid drunkenness was to prohibit all alcohol. This solution proved politically unworkable and exegetically difficult to sustain. But evidence continued to grow that some persons experience a compulsion to drink that is not easily subject to their control. It also became clear that chastisement for their supposed weakness of character was more likely to intensify the destructive spiral of their compulsion than to help them deal with it.

These realizations did not call into question the biblical assessments of drunkenness, only the traditional assumptions about the causes of this destructive behavior and how the community of faith most lovingly and effectively helps persons deal with it. Increasingly the response of Methodist churches turned from chastisement to empathy and provision of support/accountability groups.

Model 4: Clarification and continuing defense of scriptural injunctions

A final example deals with economics. Wesley inherited an ethic which stressed

that all property ultimately belongs to God and enjoined surplus accumulation, particularly in the face of others' need. He recognized the challenge posed to this stance by the empirical arguments for laissez faire capitalism being issued by Adam Smith and others. While he incorporated minor adjustments in his teachings on the use of money in light of this challenge, Wesley steadfastly refused to reverse the basic conviction that the needs of others have a scripturally-sanctioned claim to our economic resources. The dialogue among later Methodists on economic issues has been brisk, with advocates surfacing for nearly every possible alternative, but our official statements have continued to challenge modern economic systems to honor the (biblical) claim of the poor to basic support.

Recasting the Homosexuality Debates as Alternative Models for “Honoring the Dialogue”

I have given four examples to make the point that there is no preset outcome or standard direction for the dialogue begun when traditional assumptions are called into question. Present challenges to traditional perspectives do not always win out. Nor should they inevitably be rejected. The key has been to “honor the dialogue” until a consensus can grow around an interpretation that does justice to all factors. If we recast the present debates over homosexual practice in these terms, rather than as a forced choice *between* scripture and experience, we might have a better chance of fostering a dialogue that can eventuate in significant consensus.

The dimensions that stake out the needed dialogue are fairly clear (for greater detail and discussion see suggested bibliography). The current debate arose as traditional injunctions against homosexuality were challenged. Some tried to ground this challenge in the argument that such injunctions were not really traditional, arising only in the medieval period. Continuing work by scholars on both sides of the debate has demonstrated that the injunctions were present from the earliest church. Such traditional warrant is significant, but not decisive in itself (slave codes were also present from the earliest church). Therefore scholars have gone on to probe traditional treatments, revealing the background assumptions of these treatments that homosexual behavior was rare, willfully chosen, and easily changeable.

These are the very assumptions that have been called into question in recent decades by experience—both informal experience and scientific investigations. While there is continuing debate over the exact percentage, homosexual orientation and practice is recognized to be statistically significant. Moreover, most agree that the attraction (homoeroticism) is not always a matter of personal choice or control. There are a variety of intensities of homoerotic orientation, and these are experienced to one degree or another as “givens.” It appears that psychological and social factors play some role—but only a limited role—in such orientation. There is growing evidence (particularly through twin studies) that genetic or biological factors are also involved; though this evidence shows as well that these factors function at most in predisposing, not rigidly determining, one's orientation.

Arguments for setting aside traditional injunctions of homosexual behavior often point to the possible genetic dimension as showing that homosexual orientation and practice is a “natural” variant of heterosexuality. Careful interpreters of genetics step in here to caution against the logical fallacy of deriving “what ought to be” from “what is.” The fact that there is a genetic predisposition to certain social behaviors does not necessarily mean that acting on this disposition is in the best interests of either the person or society (consider alcoholism, which also appears to involve genetic factors). That decision must be made against some standard for morality. For Christians this standard is normatively found in Scripture, though we disagree somewhat about whether we find there a set of definitive duties or a call to the utilitarian task of discerning what is “most loving” for all concerned.

There is also some disagreement over what scripture teaches about homosexuality. It is generally agreed that the few scattered explicit comments in scripture are uniformly negative, and that they are cast against an assumption of normative heterosexual union. But there is more question about which specific homosexual acts are forbidden, and why they are seen as wrong. At a deeper level it is agreed that scriptural injunctions focus on acts, never explicitly considering the status of homoerotic orientation in distinction from such acts. But there is less agreement on what conclusions to draw from this “argument from silence.”

A proposed analogy with the dialogue over economics (Model 4)

Some in the present debate take the Bible to be condemning both homoerotic orientation and all homosexual acts. They divide over how to relate this to scientific suggestions of genetic predisposition to homoerotic orientation. A few tout this as proof that the Bible is simply wrong, apparently assuming the self-evident reliability of current scientific opinion. Most are not ready to dismiss the Bible in this fashion. While willing to make some refinements, they have not been dissuaded that homoerotic orientation is primarily a consequence of responsible human choices, or that the orientation can be transformed. Rather than being a simple rejection of science, this could be seen as an approach to “honoring the dialogue” that parallels the Methodist refusal to abandon the biblical concern for the rights of the poor.

A proposed analogy with the dialogue over slavery (Model 2)

Others in the present debates contend that Scripture prohibits only certain homosexual practices, and insist that these are different than the practices Christians are being encouraged to endorse today. Specifically, they argue that biblical prohibitions are aimed at practices like pederasty, not committed monogamous relationships between homoerotic adults. They

then invoke such general scriptural principles as love and justice to support blessing these relationships. This is essentially an inverse form of Wesley's attempt to "honor the dialogue" in relation to slavery. The question it faces is whether the model works in the inverse. At the very least, the potential of locating specific implicit reversal of the explicit scriptural stance is ruled out in this inverse form (e.g., no one in Methodist debates suggests that scripture moves toward implicitly allowing pederasty).

A proposed analogy with the dialogue over women preachers (Model 1)

Still others are proposing something closer to the model of Methodist dialogue over the scriptural injunctions against women preaching. They do not claim that proper understanding eliminates all apparent prohibitions of homosexual practice. Rather they contend that careful study reveals that the reasons for these prohibitions were ceremonial and cultural, having little to do with enduring ethical principles. They then argue that the enduring principles of love and justice should lead Christians to accept certain types of homosexual practice. But unlike the case of women preaching, they have not been able so far to locate convincing examples of internal critique of the scriptural prohibitions on homosexual behavior.

A proposed analogy with the dialogue over drunkenness (Model 3)

There remains much discussion in current United Methodist debate over homosexuality that is hard to fit within the models considered so far. In particular, the counterbalancing statements in the *Book of Discipline*—affirming the sacred worth of persons with homoerotic orientation while rejecting homosexual practice—do not fit well. These statements were adopted piecemeal and doubts about their coherence have been raised all along. While it has not been explicit, they could be read as an attempt to "honor the dialogue" over homosexuality in a way analogous to the earlier Methodist consideration of drunkenness/alcoholism (for a non-Methodist exposition of this basic model see Grenz).

The distinction between orientation and practice would be central to such an approach. It would allow that homoerotic orientation is largely experienced as a "given," not simply a matter of choice. It would consider this orientation one of the expressions of brokenness (alongside physical handicaps, alcoholism, and the like) that some persons unfortunately struggle with in this life. It would insist that persons are not morally culpable for the orientation, but are responsible for how they deal with it. It would call them to avoid homosexual practice, while calling their Christian communities to empathize with them in the struggle they face and provide them with loving support. Its major challenge would be clarifying why every form of homosexual practice must be judged as contrary to the best interests of both the person and the community.

The Way Forward?

I believe that the possibility of moving beyond the current polarization in United Methodist debates over homosexuality would be increased if participants more intentionally framed and tested their arguments in terms of the models suggested above—or other models that they find more adequate. This framing would facilitate more immediate comparisons in the search for greater consensus about which proposal best "honors the dialogue" of scripture, tradition, experience, and reason. But, as Wesley saw clearly, this theoretical outcome is possible only if we also "honor the dialogue" in two very concrete and practical senses. First, taking his "catholic spirit" as our exemplar, we must show a particular care to defend the integrity and safety of those with whom we most disagree and those at the focus of our disagreement. Second, we must be willing to allow this process to work from the bottom up. The roots of authentic consensus lie in the "conferencing" of local bible studies, church school classes, clergy clusters, and the like.

Suggested Bibliography

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