

THE [WESLEYAN QUADRILATERAL](#) EXPLAINED

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, taught that the way to understand any form of Christian knowledge was to place it in the context of four perspectives: scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. By this he meant that regardless of whether one began with scripture (any particular passage of the bible), tradition (the teaching of the community, or church), reason (rational thought, based on logic or evidence), or Christian experience (the sense of what is right within the Christian's inner Spirit or outer experience), each of the four perspectives, brought to bear on the subject, clarifies or challenges the initial beginning point.

One scripture can be clarified or challenged by other scripture passages – For Wesley, scripture was the first and foremost perspective for understanding scripture. If one passage is hard to comprehend or stomach, we may find clarity by looking at related passages. For example, the language of “virgin” in the narratives of Matthew and Luke only, is not the same as the language in the original (“maiden”) in the prophecy of Isaiah 7. There “Emmanuel (God with us)” in Isaiah is prophesied to come by the time a maiden's infant is weaned – about 2 years. The earliest Christian writings, the gospels of Mark and letters of Paul do not contain any reference to this nativity. John envisions Jesus as “pre-existent” – a matter available to insight and faith, rather than observation. Similarly, “violent” images of God are challenged by the weight of scripture pointing to the “love” and “forbearance” and “grace” of God.

A particular scripture can be clarified or challenged by tradition – or by what the church community says. Some literalist churches insist on the virginal conception as a fundamental doctrine. It demonstrates the supernatural power and presence of God in history. Other church communities hold different perspectives. The Roman Catholic Church, via its eminent scholar Raymond Brown, recognize this as a symbolic teaching where the issue raised by the Gospels is less about Mary's sexual history, and more about the meaning of her child's life, showing Jesus as a holy human, opposing the claims of Caesar Augustus who made the same claims of being Lord and Saviour of the World.

The scripture can be clarified by reason – virgin births are hard to find in reality. The literary qualities of Matthew demonstrate the evangelist was intent on showing Jesus to be in the form of Moses. Virginal births were a dime a dozen in Greek and Roman mythology, so Luke's interest shows Jesus to be commensurate to that of Augustus; Luke is showing Jesus to be a divine being, opposing the claims of Caesar Augustus who made the same claim of being “Lord and Saviour of the World.” The lack of interest in, or witnesses to, the conception or the birth, as in Mark and St. Paul, implies the virginal conception was not a matter of belief necessary for a saving faith. Likewise if Jesus is truly like us in every way, a miraculous conception gives him extra powers not available to mere mortals.

The scripture can be clarified by the Christian's experience – our Spirit may thrill to God's love and gift of Jesus ... in either the literalist or literary interpretation of the passage. We may have had experiences either of the presence of God challenging the laws of biology and physics, or of working within the wondrous laws of biology and physics.

In summary, the Quadrilateral does not provide proof of any particular conclusion; rather it identifies on what basis and amount of evidence a particular claim for truth rests.

