

“Confirmation for Everyone: Scripture, Tradition, Experience” 2 Thessalonians 2:13-17
 First Presbyterian Church of Salt Lake City
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Hear the Word of the Lord from Proverbs 2:1-6 (NLT) **“My child, listen to what I say, and treasure my commands. Tune your ears to wisdom and concentrate on understanding. Cry out for insight and ask for understanding. Search for them as you would for silver; seek them like hidden treasures. Then you will understand what it means to fear the Lord, and you will gain knowledge of God. For the Lord grants wisdom! From his mouth come knowledge and understanding.”**

And from the gospel of Luke 10:27 (NRSV) **“Jesus answered, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.’**

And finally, from 2 Thessalonians 2:13-17 (NRSV), **“But we must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the first fruits for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the truth. For this purpose, he called you through our proclamation of the good news, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter. Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope, comfort your hearts, and strengthen them in every good work and word.”** This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

This morning, we continue our series on “Confirmation for Everyone,” exploring some of the basic tenets of Christian faith that would normally be part of a ‘catechesis’ or ‘confirmation’ class. Our goal in this series has been to outline some of the distinctives of our beliefs, to invite all of us—whether you’ve been a Christian for five minutes or five decades—to really think about what it means to be a follower of Jesus; specifically, a follower of Jesus in a Protestant Reformed tradition like the Presbyterian church. In the last 3 weeks we’ve talked about who Jesus Christ is and what Jesus Christ has done to bring us salvation, both personally/individually and on a larger cosmic scale in the redemption of all things. Last week we dove into what is often the confusing and heady doctrine of the trinity, exploring how God is somehow three-in-one. This is big-picture sort of theology we’ve been talking about.

This morning we’re going to talk about how we come to know that something is true or trustworthy. How do we make decisions about what it is we believe?

I mean, how do you make decisions? Anybody have a Magic 8 Ball growing up **(SHOW Picture 1)** I did. You know, you ask it a “yes or no” question and shake it up, and the 8-Ball’s answer slowly appears in the window. I’ll admit, I used it mostly to ask questions about the boys I liked in middle-school or to try and predict how well I’d do on a test. And though I don’t want to take the magic out of it for you, there’s only 20 possible answers inside the 8-Ball. **(SHOW Picture 2)** 10 in the affirmative, 5

noncommittal, and 5 in the negative. Fascinating little toy... but I sure hope folks aren't making real decisions this way.

How many of you find yourself using the standard "Pro and Con" list when you've got a choice to make? I do this all the time, subconsciously for sure, but I put my Pro-Con list to paper from time to time. It can be tough to sift through various options when we're trying to make an important decision. Which is why if you google, "*how to make the right decision*," the web is going to send you to a bunch of articles, like "Five Tips to Help You Make Hard Decisions" from Good Housekeeping, or "How to Make Great Decisions, Quickly" from the Harvard Business Review, or "Seven Steps to Effective Decision Making," by the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth. There's a lot out there to help you make a tough choice.

But how do we, as people of faith, make decisions about what we believe... about what is true and trustworthy, and worth giving our lives to? I mean, we face so many ethical and social choices. This is less about which car should I buy, and more about what you believe. Think about that... how do you come to your beliefs about God? How do you decide which social issues matter? Does your faith inform how you vote, or spend your money, or raise your kids?

Is there a decision-making framework available to us, for rightly understanding who God is, what the Bible really means, and how we ought to live in light of that? Is there something that can help us talk about God with conviction and confidence?

The answer is absolutely, yes. We are part of a faith tradition that is deeply rooted in theological rigor and who takes quite seriously the task of thinking about God. For example, pastors in our tradition require all sorts of formal training (graduate level education, Hebrew/Greek, theology, psychological evaluation, chaplaincy, 10 full days of exams). We are not a church that asks you to check your brain at the door. You are encouraged to think, to question, to doubt, to learn here. I know for many of you, that's one of the key reasons you're here. You left a tradition that asked for blind faith and obedience, and you were desperate to find a place where your questions were valued and taken seriously. It is one of the things I love most about our Protestant Reformed tradition. We don't just want you to think, we expect you to think here. Just like that Proverbs passage declared, we seek after wisdom and understanding, believing that God gave us our reasoning abilities and intelligence to be used. We take seriously Jesus' call to love the Lord our God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our strength, and with all our MIND.

So, let's talk about how we do that in our tradition more broadly, because various theologians throughout history have offered several models that are quite helpful. One such model (**SHOW Picture 3**) comes as a gift from the Methodist's (Albert Outler) and is called the "Wesleyan Quadrilateral." It involves moving through 4 quadrants as faith-related decisions need to be made: scripture, tradition, reason, and experience.

We always begin with **SCRIPTURE**... what does God's word say? Is there anything in the bible that might speak directly to the issue we're addressing? If not, are there general principles found in scripture that might help us here? The careful reading of scripture must be taken seriously. Remember, Jesus didn't throw out the Old Testament law and prophets just because there were parts that needed some significant updating and reinterpreting. He knew the scriptures, he lived in the

tension with the Torah, did the careful work of helping his disciples interpret it in their own contexts, and he reframed many folks' poor understanding of the bible. He did this... ALL THE TIME. So, in the example of Christ we start with scripture—God's Holy Word—as our bedrock and firm foundation. Scripture has primacy as we seek to discern what to believe. I hope you are all reading scripture regularly... not just here in church, but in your everyday lives. This book will change your life. So, we start with scripture.

Next, we look to **TRADITION (Church History)**. What has the church done over time with this issue before us? Are there any creeds or confessions from our Christian Tradition that can speak to this matter, that can help us hold on to what is really true? In the 2 Thessalonians passage we read a moment ago, this is precisely what Paul is encouraging the church to do. He is telling a bunch of anxious church folks, who really aren't sure what they should believe—since new beliefs and preachers seem to pop up every day—to **“stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter.”** Paul tells them, don't be swayed... remember what you already know. Hold onto the gospel message, hold onto what you were taught. Such important advice. Not sure what to do or what to believe? What does the church teach? Where does our tradition stand? We look to the past, to the example of the church's history and tradition to help us discern right belief and right practice. History has something important to offer us.

Third, we look to **REASON** and explore what we've come to learn and know scientifically and empirically in our world. We use our critical thinking; we rely on research to inform our opinions. We take seriously our intelligence as we discern pressing issues. Think of the shift when we understood that the world was round, rather than flat. Or how the inventions of electricity or WIFI changed the world. Or what we've come to learn about climate change or cancer treatments or mental illness. When faced with an issue of what to believe, we look to scripture and we look to historical tradition, but we also use reason to help us better understand the world we live in.

Finally, we engage our **EXPERIENCE**. The reality is that we've all been born into a specific time, place, and culture, all of which has shaped us more than we recognize. Even more, we've been through things that have shaped how we see the world. Things as big as losing a parent, or serving in the military during a war, or moving to a new city, or living with a chronic illness... and then things as seemingly small as being an only child, or having a food allergy, or going to college out of state. Our experiences shape us profoundly. So, we never ignore how much our experience informs what we believe, but rather name it and bring it into the conversation as we make decisions and discern changing beliefs.

So that's the Methodist's model, with their Wesleyan Quadrilateral; scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. The Episcopal, Anglican and other reformed traditions (all the way back to Thomas Aquinas, Richard Hooker) tend to use a different metaphor; the “Three-Legged Stool” or sometimes a “Cord of Three Strands” (**SHOW Picture 4**) Here you've got Scripture, Tradition, and Reason OR Experience. You'll notice that they combine or interchange reason and experience, because they naturally inform one another. What we're able to discern by reason, is limited by our experience... and vice versa. What matters about this third leg of the stool is that we take seriously what shapes our worldview and informs our beliefs. We rely on reason and experience.

Many other contemporary theologians, like Richard Rohr for example, have held onto the three main components, but they've shifted the imagery to a tricycle. **(SHOW Picture 5)** Here the front wheel is experience (including reason), while the back two are scripture and tradition. I find this to be a particularly compelling metaphor, first because a tricycle is something that moves. There is movement to a tricycle, just as there is movement in us as we discern our beliefs, grow in faith, and come to understand more and more about God. More importantly for this discussion, the tricycle is compelling because experience—again, this includes human reason—is front and center. Since each person's experiences are unique, each person's understanding and expression of faith will also be unique. Friends, there is no "one size fits all" or objective litmus test for spirituality.

Now, just because these folks name experience as the front wheel does not mean they're suggesting that scripture and tradition are somehow less important. Absolutely not. They're just being honest about how incredibly influential our individual experience and collective reasoning really is. To pretend that we aren't reading scripture through the lens of what we've been through would be a lie. Or to act as if our understanding of church tradition isn't impacted by collective reasoning is dishonest.

Experience and reason matter. Think about it... outside of your own personal, lived, inner experience of a good and loving God, any descriptors you might have for God are just words, ideas, or things you been taught to believe about God. And sure, we can get behind much of this pretty easily. We can say, "Yep... this makes sense. I choose to believe this or that about God." But a relationship with God is about way more than regurgitating what we've been taught through scripture and tradition. The goal of faith, the whole point of following Jesus, is that we would definitively move... from mere belief systems to an actual inner experience of God. Which is why I can get behind putting that first wheel of the tricycle as experience. Because our faith is not so much about ticking off a checklist of beliefs (there's a place for that)... it is about being transformed by the love of God. It is about an entirely new life in Christ.

Even more, until someone has had some level of personal experience, there's really no point in asking them to try and follow the ethical ideals of Jesus or to really understand all our Christian doctrines beyond a basic level. It just won't work. We quite simply don't have the power to obey and follow Jesus' teachings—such as loving others like we love ourselves, or forgiving our enemies, or choosing humility—except in and through union with God's Spirit, through an encounter with the living God. All our theological doctrines... like the Trinity, or salvation by grace, or the mystery of Incarnation... they don't have the kind of meaning that changes your life until you've personally encountered God.

Here's an example. Christians speak of the "**paschal mystery**" all the time. Paschal Mystery is just the churchy term for the process of loss and renewal that was modeled in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Suffering and death leads to resurrection, and not just in Christ, but in our life as well. Jesus shows us that death is never the final word. We believe that death has lost its sting because it has been swallowed up in resurrection life. We see it modeled by Christ and we're promised that it's true for us too. And sure, we can affirm the "paschal mystery"... by singing lovely hymns, by participating in Lord's Supper, we can wear a cross necklace, or even get a cross tattooed

on our body. “Death and resurrection,” is a doctrine to which most Christians intellectually assent all the time; but for many, they’ve simply worshiped it in Jesus, thanked him for it, and rarely, if ever, transferred it to their own lives.

However, when we have personally experienced the bottom fall out in our own lives and then seen God get us back on our feet, when we have personally felt like death was the final word only to be surprised that resurrection was somehow on the other side of our suffering... well then, the theological affirmation of the paschal mystery is really understood. When our experience has been one of death and resurrection... well then, the way we understand and interpret scripture and church tradition, it has a whole lot more meat on its bones. Now we get it.

Scripture, tradition, experience/reason. Not sure what to believe... not sure what to do with all the pressing issues of our day? Not sure how to live out your faith? This is a great place to start. So... is drinking alcohol okay for you? How much of your money should you give away? Should you support the legal right to get an abortion? Should you use paper or plastic? Should you eat meat? Should you send your kids to public or private or charter or homeschool? There are a million decisions before us in this life... but you don’t face them alone. Use the scripture-tradition-reason/experience model. A quadrilateral, a 3-legged stool, a cord of three stands, a tricycle. The point is to engage at a deeper level... allow God to speak to you in all the ways God speaks.

Finally, I want to leave you with one more image to consider in our “Confirmation for Everyone” series. **(SHOW picture 6)** As might be obvious to you, you’ll notice that various faith traditions tend to focus on one leg of the stool more than others. In our own tradition, we put our emphasis on the leg of scripture. The Bible has place of primacy for Presbyterians (open bible, pulpit, trained clergy). The leg of tradition/church history is clearly where our Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox friends land. More than scripture or reason, they look to the church and to church history to determine their beliefs. And then when we get into the leg of experience, we find our charismatic/Pentecostal/evangelical friends, who prioritize personal devotion, an individual “me and God” relationship, and encourage a spiritual or emotional experience of encountering God far more than other traditions do.

But here’s the thing... if we’re using the stool metaphor, let’s remember that we’re actually NOT supposed to lean too heavily on any particular leg. That’s the whole point of the metaphor... the stool can only stand if all the legs are equally relied upon. And when they’re not... **(SHOW Picture 7)**... we are in very real danger of distorting belief. Think of the shameful history of Christians on issues of slavery, antisemitism, and gender discrimination if you need examples. The goal is keep the table balanced, in our larger faith traditions and in our spiritual lives, more personally. It can be easy to lean too heavily on one particular leg, only to discover you’ve got a broken stool.

So, friends, whatever it is the might be weighing on you today, whatever pressing decisions you face... God is with (and within you) as you discern the truth and the right path to take. We don’t need to fret. There’s no need for anxiety. Turn to God, seek his Holy Word, let our rich history be your guide, and engage you mind. Amen.