



Why am I WELS?

A denomination comparison by Pastor James Hein

Used in conjunction with Bible study in March, 2024

Several years back, the United Methodist Church launched a multimillion dollar advertising campaign, targeting young Americans, with the slogan “Open Minds. Open Hearts. Open Doors.” I was reminded of this as my wife mentioned to me she heard a UMC promotional ad run while listening to Spotify Radio the other day. If you don’t know, Spotify is a music listening tool aimed primarily at young Facebook users – precisely the demographic the UMC is now attempting to reach.

The Methodist Church has dropped approximately 3 million members in the past 40 years or so (from 11 to 8 million members). Thus, the massive advertising efforts.

Some would look at the “Open Minds. Open Hearts. Open Doors.” motto and suggest that it’s a beautiful depiction of God’s unconditional and inviting love. They would even point to various national awards the slogan has won as validation that it is a good tagline. Others, cynics, might say that this motto was simply abbreviated from the longer slogan which included “Open Closets, Open Biblical Interpretation, and Open to Multiple Pathways to Salvation.”

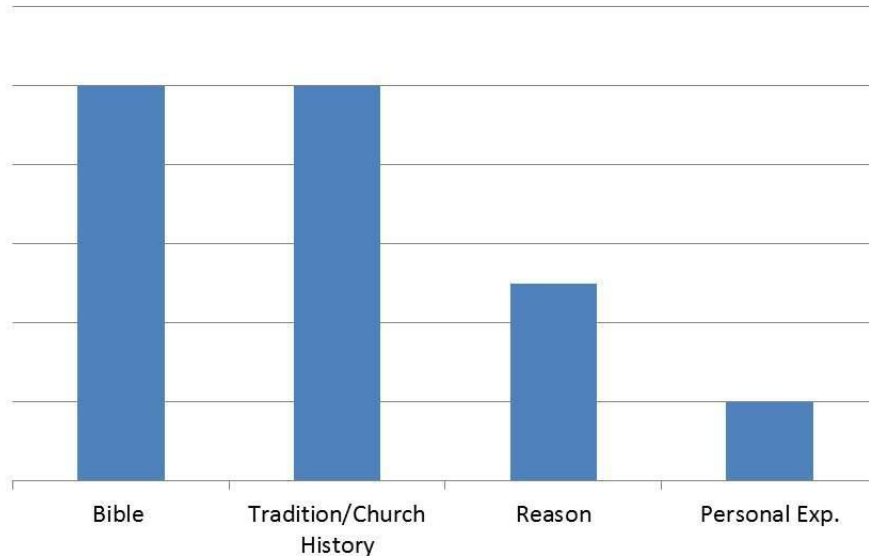
To be fair, in official documentation, in their *Book of Discipline*, the UMC has repeatedly reaffirmed “homosexual practice” to be “incompatible with Christian teaching” consistently since 1972. But in practice, the UMC has more often than not simply tried to avoid such taboo cultural questions. And when official votes have been taken on such issues, the results have been, by no means, overwhelming. Having now read a number of documents and blogs by Methodist members, it’s clear to me that those within the Methodist Church perceive it, to a degree, as a church without an identity, a body that doesn’t know what it stands for anymore. This is all a little strange to me since I personally feel that one of the main reasons why I’m a pastor in the church body that I’m in today is because of the brilliant teaching of the man often credited as the theological father of the Methodist Church – John Wesley. So how did studying John Wesley affirm my Confessional Lutheran beliefs? In my second year of systematic theology at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Prof. Rich Gurgel exposed me to something called the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. Fortunately for me, as I’d taken no math courses since high school, this quadrilateral had nothing to do with geometry, but theology. The term “Wesleyan Quadrilateral” was actually coined by Albert Outler, but was based on Wesley’s teaching.

In simple terms, John Wesley stated that the reason why we all arrive at the theological conclusions that we do is based on what we emphasize as authoritative while we’re forming our doctrinal beliefs. There are four pillars that every Christian (and Christian denomination) use to filter their beliefs – 1) the Bible, 2) Tradition/Church History, 3) Reason, and 4) Personal Experience. Every single Christian church or church body emphasizes these to differing degrees when they establish their beliefs. This understanding of biblical interpretation is *THE* reason why you see so many different denominations out there.

I learned this Wesleyan Quadrilateral thing at about the same time that I’d started dating a girl named Adrian (now my wife) who’d had an Assembly of God background, furthering my curiosity about other denominations. When I figured out that you could use the Wesleyan Quadrilateral to graph churches and what they emphasize in doctrine relative to other churches, I did. I started looking very carefully at different denominations’ theological backgrounds and confessions of faith and charted them.

Let me give you a brief glance at what I'm talking about, with some explanation. Now bear in mind, EVERY Christian denomination, by definition of them being Christian, is going to use the Bible. Therefore, it is not sufficient to say that "we use the Bible to form our beliefs." Don't be fooled when people say that. The question is whether or not any additional factors strongly influence your doctrine.

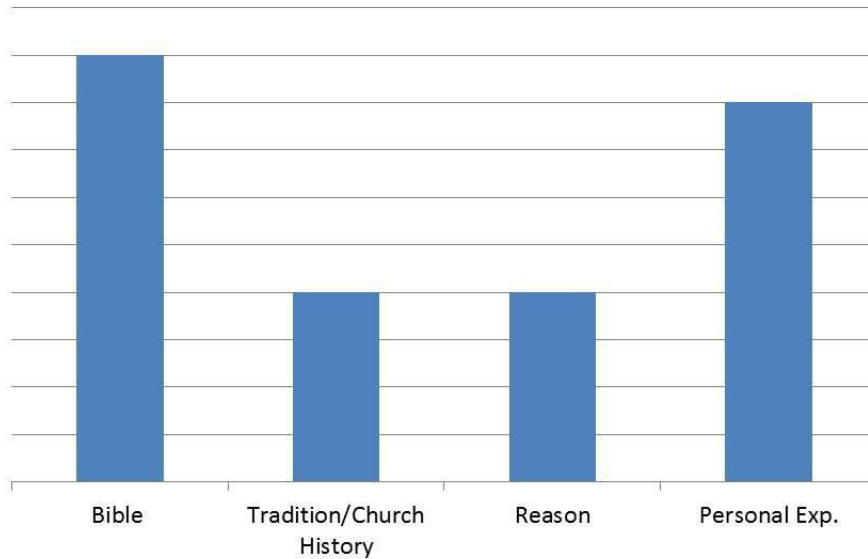
ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH



The Roman Catholic Church certainly accepts the Bible as the inspired Word of God. Nonetheless, church leadership is perceived to have the right to repeatedly reinterpret what Scripture says. The Catholic doctrine of papal infallibility would suggest that church leadership has the same weight and authority as the Bible itself does. The problem with that, of course, is that everyone, including the RCC would freely admit that humans are flawed and sinful, and therefore even humans in important and influential positions can and do make mistakes. The RCC has openly acknowledged mistakes in church history by church leadership (e.g. Sale of indulgences; Spanish Inquisition). If you truly believe that the Bible is inspired and inerrant, but that humans make mistakes, wouldn't that naturally suggest that it is a dangerous position to take in suggesting that the pope holds the same type of authority that the Bible itself does? For the two to be on equal levels of authority, then the pope must be perfect (which he is not) or the Bible must be imperfect (which it attests it is not – 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Peter 1:20-21). Since all humans, even church leaders past and present, are flawed, they must necessarily be weighted less in the formation of doctrine in order for us to have a correct biblical interpretation.

CHARISMATIC CHURCHES

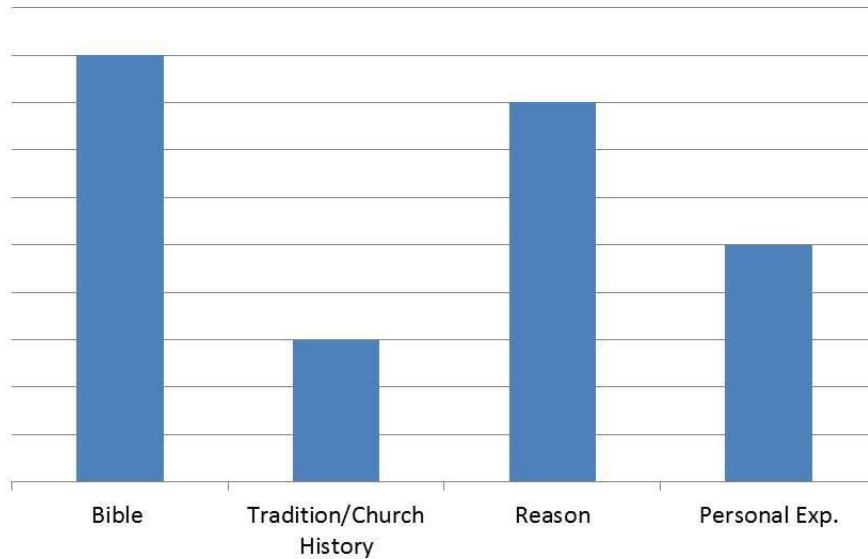
(E.G. ASSEMBLY OF GOD, MANY NON-DENOMINATIONALS)



While I'm certainly speaking in general terms here, churches that strongly emphasize the spiritual gifts of individuals often have a tendency to overemphasize individuals at the expense of *the* individual (Jesus). They additionally tend to come out of an Arminian theological background which places a great deal of importance on free will and personal decisions. Most Arminians will be able to tell you the date on which "I made *my* decision for Jesus", a teaching that would fly in the face of what the Apostle Paul says about us all being spiritually dead by nature (Eph. 2:1-10). Charismatics value *feeling* the power of Christ in your life. But the reality is that we all know our feelings have led us down dangerous paths before, and therefore, we cannot trust them wholeheartedly. Some days I might *feel* like the greatest Christian on the planet. Other days I might *feel* like the worst heathen there is. But my perception of self counts little towards my eternal welfare. In other words, my status before God is not ultimately based upon what I feel. It's based upon God's verdict of me through Jesus (Rom. 8:1). Since feelings are part of the flawed and fallen human state, they must necessarily be weighted less in the formation of doctrine in order for us to have a correct biblical interpretation.

REFORMED CHURCHES

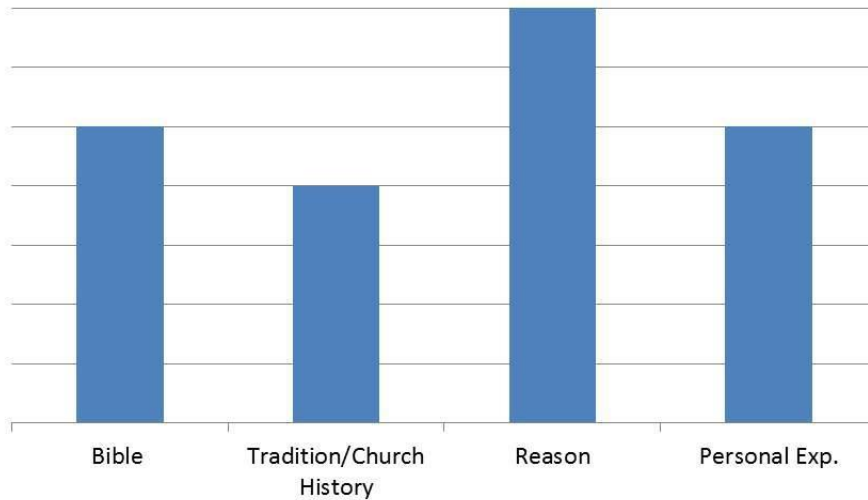
(E.G. PRESBYTERIANS, CONGREGATIONALISTS, MANY BAPTISTS)



Reformed churches generally practice the theology of John Calvin, one of the major players in the Protestant Reformation. Calvin was originally trained as a humanist lawyer and his humanist leanings are often reflected in his theology. For instance, Calvin believed that the thing which separates us humans from animals, aside from our souls, is our intellect, our rational capacity. Therefore, he also tended to believe that God would not present anything in the Bible that was beyond the realm of man's logic. This led Calvin to such teachings as his famous "Double Predestination" – the idea that God predetermined the eternal destiny of every human being, choosing some to eternal life through Christ, and others to everlasting punishment for their sin. The troublesome implication here is that this understanding of God's foreknowledge turns God into an ogre who capriciously and arbitrarily sentences some to heaven and some to hell. The even bigger problem is that while double predestination sounds somewhat logical (since the Bible does certainly speak of predestination – Rom. 8:29; Eph. 1:5; 1 Peter 1:1-2), it is NOT biblical. You will find no part of the Bible that talks about God foreordaining anyone to go to hell. In fact, you'll find the opposite, that God wants all people to be saved (1 Tim. 2:4). This is clear evidence that Reformed theology relies too heavily upon reason in the formation of doctrine. Since reason is part of the flawed and fallen human state, it must necessarily be weighted less in the formation of doctrine in order for us to have a correct biblical interpretation.

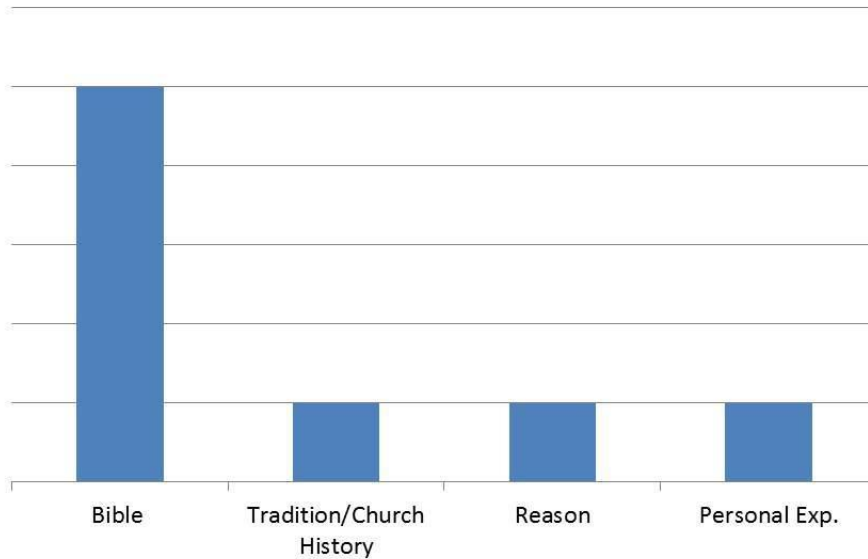
MAINLINE PROTESTANT CHURCHES

(E.G. ELCA, EPISCOPAL CHURCH, UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST, UNITED METHODIST CHURCH, AND THE MORE LIBERAL SEGMENT OF MANY REFORMED CHURCHES)



I won't spend too much time here, but Mainline Protestant denominations have been bleeding a slow death in membership for many years now, in part, because they don't know what they stand for anymore. When you compromise the Bible as even one of your true authorities, you lose yourself as a church. As liberal theology crept into Mainline Protestantism in the 20th century, teachings like the Creation Account, the Global Flood, Predictive Prophecy, and really anything of a miraculous nature, including belief in Jesus' actual physical resurrection, was lost almost entirely in many churches. As I mentioned earlier, the irony behind this for Methodists is that they still promote the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. [See for yourself](#). The dilemma, however, is that Wesley himself was not suggesting that all four pillars (Bible, Tradition, Reason, Experience) *should* contribute equally to your formation of doctrine, only that they *do* contribute to every church's doctrine. The more Methodist literature you read today though, the more you get the impression that, as with many Mainline Protestant churches, all four of these pillars contribute rather equally to what they believe.

CONFESSIONAL LUTHERAN



This is why I'm WELS Lutheran. The church I belong to and pastor in learns from the faith of the saints who have gone before us (Heb. 13:7), but also recognizes that these leaders were great not because of their perfect faithfulness, but because of their profession of Christ's faithfulness. Therefore, traditions, customs, and rituals developed by leaders of previous generations, while helpful, are not mandated by God nor should they be elevated to the status and authority of God's Word. Additionally, the church I belong to and pastor in values reason as a blessing from God for applying his Word to our lives (James 1:22) and for subduing his creation (Gen. 1:28), but also recognizes that it would be inappropriate to subjugate the Bible to flawed human reason, especially since there are undeniably "hidden" components of God's Holy Will (Isaiah 45:15). And finally, the church I belong to and pastor in values personal experience. We regularly encourage Christians to tell of the great things that God has done for us (Deut. 3:24) and to use the resources the gospel gives us for humility and confidence and perspective and optimism (Rom. 8:28). But my church also recognizes that a sinner, even a believing one, living in a sinful world, is going to experience highs and lows and that whether I *feel* God in my life or not, I can *know* he's there (Matt. 28:20).

As I was studying to become a pastor, I became very sensitive to this question: Was I becoming a Confessional Lutheran minister simply because this is the faith I was raised in and spoon fed? Was this merely the path of least resistance? Through comparative denominational study, I became convinced that what I have here in this particular church body is a very unique, very healthy approach to biblical interpretation. It's an approach that acknowledges both the inerrancy of the Bible and the potential pitfalls of Church Tradition, Human Reason, and Personal Experience, and thereby identifies the Bible as the clear and supreme authority by which we formulate our beliefs. I'm certainly not suggesting that this would be the only church body in which you'd find true believers; wherever the gospel is proclaimed, the Holy Spirit is working and winning hearts (Rom. 10:17). But if God is known most

decidedly through his inspired Word, then it only makes sense that I'd want to be in a church that had the safest, healthiest approach to interpreting that Word.

People choose the church they belong to for a variety of reasons – family background, friendship ties, a specific ministry, style of worship, appeal of a pastor, proximity to the church, etc. But if “church” is the design of God to help bring believers closer to him and to one another (Eph. 2:19-22), it seems fairly obvious that the *main* reason for choosing the church that we do would be sound Biblical teaching – the thing that the Bible itself says is the way to know Jesus (John 5:39), and therefore know salvation (2 Tim. 3:15).

In all honesty, if I was selecting a church simply based on external preferences, I don't know that I'd choose the WELS. I'm not positive that the general worship style resonates with me. I don't know that the general church programs best connect with either the talents or needs of the average person in the 21st century. I don't know that the general church governance and administration that is used is the most efficient way to organize hundreds or thousands of God's people. But I'm a very big fan of our approach to biblical interpretation. In other words, I drive this car not for its style, nor for its comfort, nor for its efficiency, but primarily for its safety features (i.e. correct understanding of the Means of Grace – the gospel in Word and Sacraments).

Some might say that my assessment of other denominations or of my own church body is unfair and exaggerated. That's fine. I'd simply encourage you to investigate for yourselves. Try not to be too anecdotal in your research – e.g. “I knew a Baptist once who.....” Rather, try to look at the documented teachings of the church bodies themselves, perhaps through their own [official websites](#). Let me know if you come to the same conclusion that I do.

ONE FINAL NOTE: In a society that I'm convinced is now officially post-Christian, I generally try not to come across as overly denominational, simply Christian. It becomes very confusing for those 75% or so of people not regularly attending church when you start pitting one church body against another. That said, there are occasions when it's a worthwhile exercise to clarify the fundamentals of what it means to be a Christian (the example pointed to in the above post being the acceptance of the Bible as ultimately authoritative).

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