

DISCUSSION ON HOW THE U.S. FOURSQUARE DOCTRINE COMMITTEE DOES THEOLOGY

Foursquare US Doctrine Committee

Background/Introduction—

The Foursquare *Declaration of Faith* is the doctrinal statement of the Foursquare Church. This doctrinal statement is binding for US Foursquare ministers, provides a baseline of doctrinal boundaries and accountability for Foursquare churches around the world, and elaborates the core of what Foursquare believes: “Jesus Christ Savior, Baptizer with the Holy Spirit, Healer and Coming King.”

Interestingly, the *Declaration of Faith* has not been modified since it was originally drafted by Aimee Semple McPherson in 1923. The doctrine in the *Declaration of Faith* is clearly Pentecostal in nature. Yet, it also has some unique features when compared to other Pentecostal denominations. One distinct feature is its statement on “Moderation.” Among other things, a “middle-of-the-road” sensibility is noticeable in the balanced and moderate doctrinal positions sketched out in the *Declaration of Faith* and has been evident in Foursquare’s overall attitude towards and approach to the use of formal doctrine throughout its history. Nathaniel Van Cleave notes, “This relative doctrinal tranquility can probably be traced to Aimee Semple McPherson’s positive teaching and her position of moderation in all things; in essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity.”¹

Admittedly, this attitude and approach may have contributed at times to a neglect of theological and doctrinal depth and precision in The Foursquare Church. For that reason, questions of how best to interpret the *Declaration of Faith* as it relates to doctrinal boundaries and “essentials” for licensed ministers is hereby addressed by the US Doctrine Committee. As the Foursquare movement celebrates its centennial year of existence, its philosophy and method for doing theology are still being developed. This is to be expected given the relative youth of the movement within the larger Christian tradition and the dynamics of rapid and significant changes around the world over the past hundred years. Recognizing that there are many ways to “do theology,” the following is the US Doctrine Committee’s attempt to describe the current methodology it employs in seeking to articulate and clarify the *Declaration of Faith*.

The Committee’s goal is to create dialogue among its ministerium around the *Declaration of Faith* to help discern **1)** what is biblically “essential” within Foursquare; **2)** what is “non-essential” (interpretively flexible); and **3)** what is clearly outside Foursquare’s understanding of each Article. This same approach can then be embraced for dialogue regarding other theological, biblical, and social issues not addressed in the *Declaration*, such as the kingdom of God, hermeneutical practices, biblical leadership, LGBTQ+ perspectives, etc.

¹ Nathaniel M. Van Cleave, *The Vine and the Branches: A History of the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel* (Los Angeles: International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, 1992), 24.

1. Sources of Authority—

The task of theological and biblical discernment and decision making in the Church is for the purpose of helping clarify, embrace, and practice the Greatest Commandment (Mark 12:29-31). The task includes five main sources of guiding authority: Scripture, tradition, community, reason, and experience.² These sources have provided Christian communities critical balance and accountability in the task of doing theology since the earliest days of the Church. For example, the first instance of Christian communal discernment we find in the history of the churches is passed on to us by Luke in Acts 15. In this case, the elders and apostles, led by James and guided by the Spirit, sought discernment by looking to Scripture, their tradition of understanding and applying the Scripture, and their lived experience of the Spirit in community (Acts 15:6-29).

- **Scripture** is the primary and definitive source of doctrinal authority and soundness for the Foursquare Church (Article 1). Scripture is comprised of inspired and authoritative texts that must be read and interpreted in partnership with the Holy Spirit that gives attention to grammar, historical context, authorial intent, genre, and literary form in conversation with the whole Protestant canon and God’s entire redemptive Story.
- **Tradition** is that which has been handed down both in the “Great Tradition” of the Christian Church (what we might term creedal Christianity), and in more narrowly defined subsets of the Christian tradition (Western, Protestant, Pentecostal, Foursquare, etc.). Utilizing the tools of history, tradition gets us in touch with **such a great cloud of witnesses** (Hebrews 12:1) who have gone before us that “gives us guidance but also the freedom to re-express the Tradition...we need to have a profound respect for our past without giving it the final authority.”³
 - “The Christian tradition gives us access to the best efforts of other Christians to think faithfully about Scripture and life. In listening to other Christians, past and present, near and far, we acknowledge that our own wisdom is limited, and we recognize and rejoice in the work of God in the lives of others. As we learn about past Christians, we find guidance and direction for our reflections in the present...listening to the tradition helps us practice humility. It helps us recognize our limits and lets us learn from others who share the faith.”⁴
- **Community** is the particular faith community that gathers and evaluates Scripture, historical data, tradition, and stories (experiences) in the process of theological discernment. A community’s historical situation, cultural patterns, collective identity, and shared theological beliefs influence and guide how it interprets its sources of authority and engages in constructive dialogue with other communities of faith. For us, we are doing theology from a Pentecostal,

² These include the four sources of authority widely recognized as the Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. “Community” is also included as a separate source of authority in order to acknowledge how the particular historical and cultural context of a group shapes and guides their reading and understanding of the other sources of authority toward a particular goal. Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 382.

³ Scot McKnight, *The Blue Parakeet—2nd Edition*, (Grand Rapids: MI, Zondervan, 2018), 35.

⁴ Beth Felker Jones, *Practicing Christian Doctrine: An Introduction to Thinking and Living Theologically* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 19-20.

and even more narrowly a Foursquare, perspective while also presenting theological conclusions for that same community.

- **Experience** is our personal and collective encounter and interaction with the presence of the Holy Spirit at work in us and in the world (see 1 Corinthians 14:29-33).
 - “Experience serves not only to illuminate the meaning of the text but also to confirm the testimony Scripture in the hearts and lives of the community.”⁵
 - “When we speak of *experience* as an authority for theology, we refer not just to the religious experience of individuals but also to the experience of the community of faith collectively. Private revelatory experiences may prove edifying, but they can claim normative status in the interpretation of Scripture only insofar as they are received and validated in the wider experience of the community.”⁶
 - “The God the Bible reveals is one who continues to interact with believers in tangible, transformative ways that allow God to be encountered and, hence, experienced. For this reason, experience serves as an important resource for Pentecostal theology.”⁷
- **Reason** is understood as interpreting sources of authority logically and coherently. Reason plays a vital role in the interpretation and theological reflection of Scripture (such as in analyzing the grammar, semantics, structure, genre, and historical and cultural dimensions of a biblical text, the relationship of texts to one another, etc. to derive theological conclusions).
 - “Reason enables the analysis of religious experience...it drives hermeneutics and bridges the gap between text and experience. Without it there is no common mind within congregations or denominations.”⁸

2. Dialog—

We seek to do theology in dialog with one another by creating spaces for “dialogical education” and collaboration. “Dialogic Education takes place through dialogue, which means opening up dialogic spaces in which different perspectives can clash or play together and new learning can occur. But dialogic education is not only education through dialogue, it is also education for dialogue, meaning that as a result of dialogic education learners become better at learning together with others through dialogue.”⁹ This high value of the Spirit’s guidance through discussion and dialogue was used by the Jerusalem Council when the apostles and elders met to consider this question, resulting in the dialogue-based conclusion after much discussion that **“it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us”** (Acts 15:6-7, 28).

⁵ Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 1996), 211.

⁶ Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 1996), 210-211.

⁷ Peter D. Neumann, “Experience: The Mediated Immediacy of Encounter with the Spirit,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Pentecostal Theology*, ed. Wolfgang Vondey (London: Routledge, 2020), 92.

⁸ William K. Kay, “Reason: Widening the Sources of Pentecostal Theology,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Pentecostal Theology*, ed. Wolfgang Vondey (London: Routledge, 2020), 81.

⁹ Rupert Wegerif, “Dialogic Education,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, March 2019). <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.013.3963>

3. Application—

In formulating our theological conclusions, we do not want to simply describe how we *think* about God or a particular set of doctrinal issues, we want to carefully consider how such conclusions ought to shape how we *live* as individuals and as a community (Matthew 7:24-27). We have a responsibility to not only do our best to hear God’s Word, but also to decide how to respond to that Word in the practical circumstances of our lives (2 Timothy 3:17). If the sources of authority described above are truly authoritative for us, then we must do the work of discerning and articulating, with the help of the Holy Spirit, how they might work together to practically guide us toward better loving God, ourselves, and our neighbors in the everyday life situations and circumstances in which we find ourselves.

4. Contextualization—

Context, based on relationship and cultural sensitivity, is important for us to consider not just in developing ministry models and leadership strategies, but also in doing theology. For example, this is what the early Church did “in seeking to understand the work of God in their particular setting that made connections with those in their context...theology was shaped by what was being asked, how it was being asked, and what people were wrestling with in their settings. It was contextual — reflecting the influences and methods of their audience — but the very brilliance of Christianity is that it was not limited to a specific context but was adaptable to addressing established concerns while also being able to be shared with new settings...this involves doing the challenging work of expressing how Christianity can respond to these challenges and, even more importantly, adapt to new contexts, incorporating the insights, cultural expressions, and challenges of that context without losing its own core identity in the process.”¹⁰

We see this, for example, in the “asks” of the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:29) and in the different application of, **Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord** (Ephesians 5:22) within the modern Western world vs. a Muslim context. Foursquare’s high value of indigenous empowerment further requires such contextualization.

¹⁰ Patrick Oden and Peter Goodwin Heltzel, Introduction to *The Dialogic Evangelical Theology of Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen: Exploring the Work of God in a Diverse Church and a Pluralistic World*, eds. Peter Goodwin Heltzel, Patrick Oden, and Amos Yong (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2022), 2.