

**HOW TO UNDERSTAND  
THE RECOVERY QUADRILATERAL**  
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The Wesleyan Quadrilateral is a methodology for theological reflection credited to the Anglican priest Rev. John Wesley (1703-1791), who was leader of the Methodist movement in the late 18th century. The term is used to describe the principal factors that Wesley believed illuminated the core of the Christian faith. Wesley himself never used the phrase, which was a term coined by the 20th century American Methodist scholar, Rev. Albert C. Outler, Ph.D. (1908-1989). Outler was a Georgia-born American Methodist theologian who is generally considered to be the first United Methodist theologian and one of the most important Wesleyan scholars in the history of the church. He was a key figure in the 20th-century ecumenical movement. Outler is widely credited with being the first to recognize Wesley's method for theologizing—by using what Outler referred to as the Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Holy Scripture, Church tradition, Reason, and Experience. For Outler (1985), interpretation of Scripture is shaped by our Tradition, our Reasoning, and our Experiences.

The quadrilateral model can also be applied not only to religious denominations, but to the 12-Step recovery programs of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and Al-Anon as well.

### **The Recovery Quadrilateral**

As with other quadrilateral models, interpretation of Scripture in recovery is shaped by Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience. Each of these perspectives can be viewed as a lens that informs and affects each of the others.

**Scripture** is a cornerstone of recovery for most individuals who have found sobriety through AA—the fellowship that has helped more people stay sober than all other methods combined. The Big Book of AA (1939, 2001) is considered the source and summit. The other sacred text would be *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* (AA World Services, 1953, 2010), originally written by one of the co-founders of AA. Family and friends of alcoholics who seek their own recovery through Al-Anon Family Groups have a much wider range of books and pamphlets from which to choose. In Al-Anon, a text essentially has the imprimatur if it is Al-Anon Conference Approved (CAL) literature.

**Tradition** is reflected in the common practices and rituals of recovery groups through the past decades and across cultures and countries. There are some regional differences, although AA and Al-Anon meetings share almost equivalent liturgies anywhere they are found around the world. With some exceptions, there is an almost universal start time of 8:00 PM. Meetings begin and end of time, lasting about an hour. Meetings begin with the Serenity Prayer. AA meetings traditionally end with the Lord's Prayer or sometimes the Serenity Prayer.

**Reason** allows the individual to use discerning and cogent thought in understanding the program. This lens includes scholarly articles, historical archives, and early manuscripts. Reason includes *exegesis*, which is the discipline of extracting—grammatically and contextually—what a text says. In other words, it is the drawing out of a text’s meaning in accordance with the author’s historical context and discoverable meaning.

**Experience** refers to one’s personal understanding of the program in the light of his or her own life. Bill Wilson’s white light encounter with God was intensely personal and experiential. Lois Wilson’s shoe-throwing incident also was an experiential event.

**All Models Are Wrong**

When discussing conceptual models, it is always helpful to remember the words of the renowned British statistician George P. Box, Ph.D. (1919–2013): “Essentially, all models are wrong, but some are useful.”<sup>1</sup> Quadrilaterals, circles, bins, and lenses are simply alternative perspectives for understanding the 12-Step program.

**The Recovery Quadrilateral**

<p><b>Scripture</b>                  Big Book                  Twelve Steps                  Twelve Traditions                  Approved Literature</p>	<p><b>Tradition</b>                  Meetings                  Chips                  Slogans                  Sponsorship                  Group Conscience                  Serenity Prayer                  Closing Prayer</p>
<p><b>Reason</b>                  Picking up the phone                  Calling one’s sponsor                  Calling an Al-pal                  Using slogans</p>	<p><b>Experience</b>                  Picking up a chip                  Sharing one’s story                  Moral inventory                  Taking the fifth                  Making direct amends                  Prayer and meditation                  Performing service                  Sponsoring someone</p>

Figure 1. The Recovery Quadrilateral.

Taken together, the four elements of the quadrilateral bring the individual to a deeper understanding of the 12-Step programs of AA and Al-Anon.

## References

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## Notes

1. The adage is usually attributed to the British statistician George Box, Ph.D., who has been called one of the great statistical minds of the 20th century. The actual quote is as follows: “Remember that all models are wrong; the practical question is how wrong do they have to be to not be useful” (Box & Draper, 1987, p. 74).

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