

Today's Faithful Followers...Lost in the Wilderness?

What a paradoxical thought! Or is it? Can an individual who follows someone or something faithfully actually be lost? Thousands of devoted churchgoers around the world are living in a religious wilderness asking the same question, fearing they've reached the end of their potential for growth and fulfillment. But this may be just the *beginning!*

The wonderful thing about today's Christians is that we come from a colorful assortment of religious and theological backgrounds — traditional, as well as hybrid spin-offs of mainstream denominations. And while we may be more different than alike in many ways, we do share commonalities such as striving to be "faithful followers" and longing to find that "special something" outside ourselves for spiritual guidance and cultivation. Unfortunately, we're also united in a state of frustration. We're angry and frightened because we don't know what we're looking for; we don't know how or where to find it; and we have no idea how to get where we long to go.

Even though we may be lost, it's comforting to know we're not alone. And the good news is we have the ability to deliver ourselves from the desolation of our religious wastelands. How? By using a unique tool that will help point the way to a meaningful life journey and engage us in a more sacred relationship with God, our community, and each other! That tool is the **Theological Compass**.

The Theological Compass

If you are or know a hiker or back packer, you know two of the most important tools he or she carries during every journey are a compass and map. Both instruments, while vital, have different purposes. Merriam-Webster's online dictionary defines a compass as *any of various magnetic devices that indicate direction*. And a map is identified as *a detailed plan or explanation to guide progress toward a goal*. Outdoorsmen who've traveled the road before and are familiar with the general path may rely more on the map; a proven pathway from Point A to Point B outlining the regional architecture. The back packer who's embarking on a first-time voyage in unknown surroundings needs the compass for basic orientation; the path and destination will unfold with every step he or she takes.

The Theological Compass gives spiritual seekers direction; it doesn't provide a pre-determined path or objective. Rather, like an earthly compass, it gives the gifts of **Scripture, personal experience, tradition, and reason** — cardinal, directional headings to help each of us navigate the path to the divine experiences we desire.

► **North = Scripture**

In Western culture, **North** signifies the primary direction used (explicitly or implicitly) to define all other directions. As the core of our Christian faith, **Scripture** is most closely related to this orientation, serving as the central "point of reference" from which our faith evolves and defines the other aspects of our complex spiritual existence.

The Scriptures are also a common resource that ties our current Christian culture with that of the past — and all those who've made this same spiritual journey before us.

▶ **South = Personal Experience**

On the physical plane, **South** designates a “foundation” or base. It can also signify “moving up or toward something.” Through religious interpretation, **personal experience** is the starting point in our lives where we identify and categorize everything we see. We must use what we experience as the groundwork to move toward a more well-formed appreciation of God’s grace and His all-encompassing presence in our lives.

When we share our personal experiences in conversation with “fellow travelers,” we benefit by enriching our own existing theological concepts.

▶ **East = Tradition**

In archaic religio-philosophy, **East** is sometimes said to be the place from where wisdom comes. It also symbolizes a “beginning”; the sun rises in the east to begin a new day, and various groups of people have migrated from the east to start new lives.

Tradition is like the eastern heading in that it can represent a new religious perspective for us. While our traditional beliefs have passed the test of time, they shouldn’t be regarded as rigid laws. Tradition should be open to modification as a result of the ongoing questions that arise from our personal experience and reasoning.

▶ **West = Reason**

Today, the definition of **West** may be most commonly associated with the destination of travelers searching to find their paths in a new land. In this sense, **reason** is the closest spiritual counterpart to west. By using our gift of reason we can decide for ourselves if our current religious path is the best one for us. If not, it may be time for us to find our way in a new land.

In covered wagon days of the Old West, it wasn’t uncommon for settlers to journey from one land to another, putting down roots and creating communities. Yet over time and for various reasons, they would be compelled to make the difficult decision to abandon everything they knew and rebuild their lives from scratch in a new location, all for the sake of a *better* existence. As Christians, we’re often faced with the same issue. We might feel the need to dismantle our current formation of faith and cast aside all we’ve come to know in order to re-establish a better, more mature faith — a faith that offers a more intimate communion with our God, that encourages questioning for personal growth, and that allows us to celebrate our God-given gift of reason.

A New Direction Puts Us Back on Course

The Theological Compass is a wonderful, meditative tool that provides a process we can use the rest of our lives to never feel lost or helpless again, and to reach a better place spiritually and emotionally. We don’t have to be fearful or anxious that we don’t know what our exact destinations are at this very moment because the trip along the way has so much to offer!

Physically, we’re the same people of faith we were in the beginning. But enlightened with the gifts of knowledge and grace the Compass offers, we now know how to be passionate but not indignant about our beliefs and can celebrate our religious differences as well as our commonalities.

As children of God we continue to seek and question. But this time, we are far from being without direction.

Addendum: The Concept Behind the Compass

As United Methodists, we have an obligation to bear a faithful Christian witness to Jesus Christ, the living reality at the center of the church's life and witness. To fulfill this obligation, we reflect critically on our biblical and theological inheritance, striving to express faithfully the witness we make in our own time.

Two considerations are central to this endeavor: the sources from which we derive our theological affirmations and the criteria by which we assess the adequacy of our understanding and witness.

The concept behind the Compass began with theological guidelines established by John Wesley, an eighteenth-century Anglican minister and Christian theologian who was an early leader in the Methodist movement. Wesley believed that the living core of the Christian faith was revealed in Scripture, illuminated by tradition, vivified in personal experience, and confirmed by reason. More information regarding the doctrinal standards and our theological task can be found in *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*.

This concept was named the **Quadrilateral** by Rev. Dr. Harry Pothoff and Dr. Albert Outler, who chaired the Theological Commission of the newly established United Methodist Church during the 1972 General Conference.

The unique association of Scripture, tradition, personal experience, and reason with directions on a compass to more thoroughly engage us in our time is the inspiration of **Rev. Paul Kottke**, senior pastor at **University Park United Methodist Church**. Each Sunday and throughout the week Paul leads his congregants in a meaningful, ongoing journey to experience God's grace through worship, education and personal growth; to form Christian community through congregational life; and to reach out with empowering compassion to those in need.

If you're looking for a church family with whom you can journey, grow, and enjoy a loving and accepting fellowship, we invite you to visit University Park United Methodist Church.

Know that you'll be welcomed, no matter from which direction you've come, or which direction you're headed!

