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BIBLICAL THEOLOGY AND WESLEYAN THEOLOGY:

1994 WTS Presidential Address

by
George Lyons

Biblical theology is an historical and theological discipline in the throes of an identity crisis. For the past two decades it has been increasingly uncertain of its subject-matter and an appropriate method for addressing it. This is not merely to repeat the alarm sounded in 1970 by Brevard S. Childs' *Biblical Theology in Crisis*.¹ He referred to the demise of a post-World War II neo-fundamentalist trend in American systematic theology which had alleged to depend upon the Bible and the supposed biblical world view as its primary, if not sole norm.² By biblical theology I mean the synthetic and integrative exegetical enterprise that attempts to inform, not replace, systematic theology. For the most part, I restrict my remarks to New Testament theology.

The so-called "biblical theology movement" of which Childs wrote was only one of many victims of the social and theological upheavals of the 1960s. The antiphilosophical and antirational tendencies of its "biblicist view of revelation" could not exclude "the rest of human knowledge

1. Philadelphia: Westminster Press.

2. See Werner Lemke, "Theology (OT)," *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (ABD), 6 vols., 2nd ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6:453; and Henning Graf Reventlow, "Theology (Biblical), History of," trans. Frederick Cryer, ABD, 6:490.

from Christian accounts of God and the world.”³ Robert Morgan correctly insists that even if the NT provided a uniform doctrinal system (which it does not), contemporary belief could not simply repeat it because belief in a God who relates to the world invokes (in principle) all human experience and knowledge, and that varies from age to age. Biblicism denies this problem and positivistic historicism ignores the question of God.⁴ Wesleyan theology, which acknowledges the normative Status of Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience, would seem to be well suited to the task of biblical theology.

History. Biblical theology as a discipline has its roots in the Protestant Reformation. The Reformer emphasis on Scripture as the sole source and norm for all matters of faith provided the soil from which biblical theology sprang. From its beginnings in the sixteenth century it has self-consciously defined itself as over against dogmas and traditions that were perceived as inadequately biblical in character. The designation “biblical theology” did not appear until the seventeenth century. Old and New Testament theologies as distinct disciplines came into existence toward the end of the eighteenth century. The earliest biblical theologies were essentially topically arranged Scriptural proof-texts listed under the headings of dogmas of Protestant theology. Due primarily to the influence of German Pietism and the Enlightenment, during the eighteenth century the orientation of biblical theology shifted from dogma to history.⁵ And its opponent was no longer Roman Catholicism, but Protestant scholasticism.

Pietism “was primarily concerned with the temporal and sequential unfolding of revelation in the Bible.” It emphasized personal experience, moral living, and the edifying message of the Bible “set forth in its own right and according to its own categories.”⁶ Biblical theology was also aided by Enlightenment rationalism’s “aversion to dogmatic religion” and its belief in a religion “in conformity with the demands of reason.”⁷

The discipline of biblical theology is the historical offspring of the unlikely marriage of the Pietism and Rationalism in a chapel constructed

3. Robert Morgan, “Theology (NT),” ABD, 6:474.

4. Ibid, 6:475.

5. Lemke, 449; i.e., “The meaning of Scripture was to be ascertained with careful attention to the historical context out of which it arose and to the specific nuances of biblical words and concepts” (p. 450).

6. Ibid, 450.

7. Ibid.

jointly by the Protestant Reformation and the Scientific Revolution. Most scholars date its birth in 1787 and identify Johannes Gabler as the attending midwife. Gabler's 1787 lecture, "On the Proper Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology and the Specific Objectives of Both," was the birth announcement. Toward the end of the eighteenth century, G. L. Bauer set a precedent, customary to the present, by publishing the first works to bear the names Old Testament theology (1797) and New Testament theology (1800-1802).⁸

During the nineteenth century biblical theology increasingly shifted from a presentation of the theological concepts of the Bible, systematically arranged, to the history and evolution of the religion of Israel and the early church. This was accompanied by a de-emphasis on the Bible as special revelation and a greater emphasis on its parallels with other religions. Liberated from the constraints of church dogma, biblical theology frequently has become an unwitting slave to the current "philosophical assumptions and cultural presuppositions of its own age."⁹

New Testament theology is the child of both modern biblical scholarship and Christian theology, originating in the tense environment of eighteenth-century German Protestant theology faculties of secular universities. These professors, "whose standards of truth were dictated by critical reason," saw their mission as training clergy "to think and preach theologically from an authoritative scripture."¹⁰ As a by-product of its origins, biblical theology is less a sub-discipline of biblical and theological studies than "one of the fields in which the forces of faith and reason meet. It is Christian theology engaging with an area of modern knowledge that is of central importance for its own identity, and biblical studies wrestling with its material's own definition of its subject-matter."¹¹

The original aims and ingredients of New Testament theology are now largely ignored by academic biblical scholarship. But these goals remain indispensable for any Christian theology that depends heavily on

8. See Lemke, 451; Robert Morgan. "Theology (NT)," *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*[DBI], eds. R. J. Coggins and J. L. Houlden (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 690; idem. ABD, 476.

9. Lemke, 451-52 (quotation from 452); Morgan, ABD, 476-77.

10. Morgan, DBI, 689.

11. Morgan, DBI, 689. Lemke (456) refers to Old Testament theology as "boundary discipline." Morgan (ABD, 6:474) suggests that New Testament theology contributes to the "bridging operation . . . necessary to relate the Scriptures to modern theology."

Scripture. New Testament theology survives as a precariously endangered species. Neo-conservative theologians have blunted its critical edge, while secular influences have dulled its religious and theological aims. The deepening hostility between traditional Christianity and modern rationalism has placed New Testament theology at risk from both sides. It is a stepchild that neither parent-discipline seems disposed to claim.

For nearly eighteen hundred years Christians saw no need for the discipline of New Testament theology. But it is as surely the product of Pietism as is Wesleyanism. If New Testament theology disappears as a discipline, will Wesleyans attend its funeral? Will it be missed? Or will we read its obituary with the same dispassion with which we read those of total strangers?

Definitions. What is New Testament theology? In one sense its subject-matter should be obvious. It is the New Testament, of course. But in another sense its subject-matter is problematic. Even the question, “What is the New Testament?” requires a nuanced answer. It is at once a collection of historical documents and sacred Scripture. Christian tradition understands the New Testament to be the Word of God preserved in human words in history. But the contents of the New Testament are not obviously theology. There are four accounts of the life and work of Jesus, a selective account of the earliest period of the Christian church, a disparate collection of pastoral letters, and an assortment of visions, but nothing like theology in the usual sense of the word.

Is the significance of the New Testament to be found in the events the New Testament reports—particularly the Christ-event? Or is it to be found in the earliest oral stages of reflection on these events, in the Gospel narratives of the life and teachings of Jesus? Or is the significance of the New Testament to be found in Paul’s and others’ self-consciously theological reflections on and applications of these events and narratives? Is it in the canonical combination of all of these? Is it in the scholarly reconstructions of the foundational events or the “theology” of the founders of the Christian movement? Or is it in the preacher’s announcement of them as good news on Sunday morning? Or is it rather in believers who live out of their trust in God on a daily basis in the marketplace?

The crucial issue in contemporary biblical theology remains the problem posed by Gabler from its beginning, that is, distinguishing the descriptive and normative dimensions of its task. Does its subject matter merely describe what the earliest Christians believed, thought, taught, hoped, and required? Or does it also prescribe what all subsequent Chris-

tians must believe, etc.? Do the convictions and experiences of Christians expressed in the New Testament still inform contemporary concerns in any nonnative sense? Our answer shapes our understanding of New Testament theology. If we take seriously both the past and the present, New Testament theology presupposes both exegesis and hermeneutics. It depends on the tools and techniques of both historians and literary critics. Its concern must be to discover what ancient authors intended to communicate to their original hearers.¹² But what of contemporary hearers for whom the Bible still exercises a constitution-like authority? How are we to discern the manner in which the results of historical exegesis are relevant to modern readers who stand in continuity and discontinuity with the earliest Christians?

We must be self-conscious about what we mean by New Testament theology. Do we refer to theology contained in the New Testament or theology that is somehow derived from the New Testament? Gabler's concern was the latter. He distinguished theology based on and rooted in the New Testament from dogmatic theology based on church tradition. Conservative scholars tend to refer to New Testament theology as a theology contained within the New Testament. This presumes the existence of an underlying theological unity inherent beneath its surface. Does such a unity exist?

Although we usually speak of New Testament theology, it might be more appropriate to speak of several New Testament theologies. If we presume a coherent New Testament theology, where it is to be found? Of what does it consist? What is its unifying center? Inevitably, works that identify themselves as New Testament theology are predetermined by their authors' preconceptions of their subject matter.¹³ If one believes in

12. "Only a literary theory which insists on textual determinacy. . . is likely to meet the needs of NTT, because without that, Scripture could mean anything and would lose its capacity to challenge and perhaps redirect the interpreter and the Church" (Morgan, ABD, 6:481).

13. This, of course, includes their definitions of theology. Some use the term so broadly as to apply to "every pronouncement concerning God" or "every religious expression." Others define it so narrowly as to limit it to "a coherent, logical, necessary system of general ideas in terms of which every element of our experience concerning matters relating to God can be interpreted." Hendrikus Boers (*What is New Testament Theology? The Rise of Criticism and the Problem of a Theology of the New Testament* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979], 13) considers the first view inappropriate. Based on this narrow definition, there is obviously no theology in the New Testament, although there is a great deal that may appropriately be called theological.

the constitution-like authority of the Bible, no Christian theologian has the option of simply ignoring it and being inventive, even if the Bible cannot provide the formal categories for constructing a theological system.¹⁴

John Wesley considered the Bible to be neither the product of nor the presentation of a coherent theological system. Its concern was not with theoretical abstractions, but with practical, holy living. And so was his. Wesley considered the historical meaning of Scripture the necessary foundation for its practical, edifying, authoritative, contemporary application. But the primary role of Scripture, for Wesley and the Wesleyan tradition, has been with what we would call today “spiritual formation.”

In the Reformation and Enlightenment traditions, Wesley recognized the necessity of historical biblical interpretation. But Wesley refused to make biblical study a merely academic exercise, a game for antiquarians. He recognized that biblical theology and religion are inseparable. So also the descriptive task identifying what biblical writers believed and how they behaved—and the prescriptive task—identifying what is requisite to contemporary Christian faith and practice—were distinguishable but interdependent. Wesley wrote, “I apply no Scripture phrase either to myself or any other without carefully considering both the original meaning and secondary sense, wherein (allowing for different times and circumstances) it may be applied to ordinary Christians.”¹⁵ Wesley was not content with the purely antiquarian interest in what the Bible meant originally. His main concern was to discover the contemporary significance of the ancient text. He insisted that the continuity between the two periods had to be discovered inductively by attentive listening to what Scripture said, and not merely deduced from what Church tradition said, often ingeniously read back into Scripture by means of allegorical interpretation. Wesley and Wesleyans insist that whatever is not found in Scripture is not to be made an article of faith.

In conservative theological traditions the general truth and authority of the New Testament have been taken for granted and the contemporary task seen as identifying and communicating its theological content. The problem is, of course, that different theological traditions disagree funda-

14. Boers, 19.

15. John Telford, ed., *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, AM.*, 8 vols. (London: Epworth, 1931), 2:206—” To Thomas Church, Vicar of Battersea and Prebendary of St. Paul’s, concerning his *Remarks on the Reverend Mr. John Wesley’s Last Journal*,” February 1745, 3.5.

mentally on what that crucial content is and how it is to be communicated.¹⁶ As a theological discipline, New Testament theology must be a synthesizing account of the religious and theological message of the New Testament. It must seek to integrate the beliefs that come to expression in varied ways throughout the New Testament. “Theology is all about the great wholes, the world-views which determine and dominate the day-to-day handling of varied issues.”¹⁷ Synthesis, integration, and coherency are crucial goals of New Testament theology. But where is the organizing center of the New Testament?

Center: Unity and Diversity. The most obvious identification of an organizing center is the consistent preoccupation of most New Testament books with Jesus Christ.¹⁸ Upon closer inspection, however, it becomes apparent that even the Christological understanding of the various New Testament authors is hardly uniform. The New Testament apparently offers not one, but many Christologies. The life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth prompted various attempts to interpret his relationship to God and God’s ancient people, utilizing various Jewish and Hellenistic paradigms in the process.¹⁹

Among the other unifying biblical themes proposed have been: grace, God’s love and kingdom, justification by faith, reconciliation, life “in

16. Morgan, *DBI*, 690.

17. N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 3.

18. C. F. D. Moule indicates that the “common factor holding all together is the person of Jesus Christ the historical Jesus acknowledged as continuous with the one now acknowledged as the transcendent Lord” (*The Birth of the New Testament*, 3rd ed., Harper’s New Testament Commentaries [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981], 17. James D. G. Dunn makes essentially the same claim in his *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990) passim: as does John Reumann, *Variety and Unity in New Testament Thought*, Oxford Bible Series (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 290.

19. The church’s convictions about the decisiveness of the Christ-event in the history of salvation compelled it to read the Hebrew Scriptures in novel ways wending its way through paradigm shifts and hermeneutical accommodations. Christological diversity is not an artificial problem created by modern critical scholars to justify their existence. Already in the first century Paul complained of those whose divergent message of Jesus threatened to lead his converts astray (2 Cor. 11:1-6). How would the apostle assess the various Christologies canonized in the New Testament? Are all of the various New Testament Christological titles complementary? What larger unity gives them coherency?

Christ,” holiness, life in the Spirit, new covenant—community new age—eschatology, resurrection, promise-fulfillment, salvation, “salvation history,” shalom (“peace and well-being” in Hebrew), *kerygma* (from the Greek word for “preaching” or “proclamation”). None of these is without foundation in some New Testament passages or in the experience of Christians. In fact, denominations have defined their reason for existence around such answers.²⁰

It was not modern biblical scholars who first recognized the diversity of early Christianity and the New Testament it produced or the difficulties this presents contemporary interpreters. We may take the two leading apostles as examples.²¹ Paul does not hesitate to take Peter to task for failing to act “consistently with the truth of the gospel” (Gal. 2:14). Nor does the author of 2 Peter hesitate to take issue with Paul’s view of the immediacy of the parousia (2 Pet. 3:1-13). And, although he finds parts of Paul’s letters “hard to understand,” he recognizes them as “other scriptures” alongside the Old Testament (2 Pet. 3:15-16, NRSV).

James D. G. Dunn insists that “the unifying and distinctive core of Christianity in the beginning centered irreducibly on Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, “the fact of diversity [is] something inescapable in every attempt to bring that unifying core to concrete expression.”²² Dunn continues: “Any and every Statement of the gospel in the New Testament is historically conditioned and context specific. The word of God speaks to the human condition in its diverse specificity.”²³ Hans Kung notes that “because the New Testament was never intended to be a *summa theologiae*, we must reject any harmonization of the texts that dissolves the differences in a violent manner.”²⁴

There is a considerable breadth in the canon. Diverse statements on the same issue are allowed to stand side by side within the New Testament, suggesting that Christians did not consider such diverse views con-

20. Reumann, 4. Chapter 4 (pp. 27-34) explores “Ways Proposed Toward New Testament Unity.” Chapter 17 (pp. 288-292) assesses them.

21. Ibid, 4-6, cites these and others.

22. Dunn, xxi-xxii

23. Dunn, xxi.

24. Hans Küng, *Theology for the Third Millennium: An Ecumenical View*, trans. Peter Heinegg (New York: Doubleday, 1988), 72.

tradictory, but rather complementary—the ingredients of a larger whole.²⁵ The latest books of the New Testament offer something of “a catholic synthesis of several strands and tendencies (and factions) within earliest Christianity.”²⁶ The ecumenical creeds expose the theological assumptions and accommodations that motivated the canonical process.

The diversity of the New Testament is a reflection of a number of dominating individuals—Peter, Paul, John, James, and others—and geographical influences—in particular Syria, Asia Minor, Greece, Rome, North Africa, and Egypt. John Reumann aptly compares the putting together of the canon to the assembling of a freight-train in a railroad yard, with cars bearing the identifying marks of their various companies of origin strung together in one train, headed on the same mainline for a common destination.²⁷ The inclusion of a book within the New Testament canon tended to mute, or at least soften, its distinctive voice much as a choir absorbs the voices of its individual members into a harmonious unity, which is not to be confused with monotonous unison. The church’s insistence on the plenary inspiration of Scripture locates the divine authority of the Bible in its wholeness, not in its individual parts.

John Wesley recognized the Bible as a collection of books produced by and for various Jewish and Christian communities in different times and places. Its books were accepted as authoritative by these communities, not in isolation, but as parts of a normative collection. This collection represented not merely the consensus, but also the diversity of these communities. Wesley knew that the Bible did not speak with one voice on

25. What eventually came to be considered heresy in the early church was not the tolerance of diversity within canonical limits, but intolerance. “The biggest heresy of all is the insistence that there is...only one orthodoxy” (Dunn, 366). Nevertheless, the canon does not truly represent “the full diversity of first-century Christianity” (Dunn, xxx). On the contrary, it reflects the breadth of acceptable diversity” that emerged over time as an informal consensus of early Christian leaders and just ordinary believers (Dunn, xxxi). Dunn’s “inquiry into the character of earliest Christianity,” *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, persuasively demonstrates the canonized diversity the New Testament tolerates on the role of tradition, the use of the Old Testament, concepts of ministry, patterns of worship, sacraments, the Spirit and Christian experience, and even at the very center on the person and work of Christ.

26. Dunn, xxix.

27. Reumann, 20. For a fuller discussion of the canon, see Harry Gamble, *The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning*, Guides to Biblical Scholarship (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985).

every subject. Different biblical emphases as well as different interpretations accounted for the coexistence of such disparate theological traditions as Arminianism and Calvinism within the Anglican Church of Wesley's day. His catholic spirit disposed him to tolerate, even celebrate, such diversity. Wesley vigorously protested against the distortion in later ages of the Scriptural meaning of the words "heresy" and "schism." He insisted, "Both heresy and schism, in the modern sense of the words, are sins that the Scripture knows nothing of: but were invented merely to deprive mankind of the benefit of private judgment, and liberty of conscience."²⁸

Wesley was not personally ambivalent in his theology—he was an Arminian, a "liberal" by contemporary standards. And, of course, Wesley believed that his personal notions were correct and depended upon the Bible. But he knew that, as a human, he was subject to ignorance and errors. Thus, he wrote, "I impose my notions upon none: . . . I make no opinion the term of union with any man: I think and let think. What I want is holiness of heart and life. Those who have this are my brother, sister, and mother"²⁹

Any discussion of the biblical canon raises several difficult questions: How is the New Testament to maintain its stability as a fixed text while retaining its adaptability as a text that is meaningful in new situations? Is the New Testament's origin as a book produced by the church to be taken as seriously as its officially acknowledged status as the church's rule of faith and practice? If the New Testament is such a rule, who determines how it is to be interpreted and applied? The New Testament books did not arrive with authoritative exegeses attached, nor have heavenly yearbooks been published regularly since to keep it up to date.

Because the New Testament is literature, it has at least two contexts, the historical and the literary. As a historical discipline, New Testament

28. John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*, on 1 Cor.11:17-22.

29. John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 14 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker; reprint of the 1872 ed.), 13:238-41; cited in Roy Nicholson, "John Wesley's Scriptural Catholicity," *The Preachers Magazine*, 52 (Sept. 1977), 21. Wesley insisted that, apart from a commitment to certain basic doctrines, he was willing to think and let think (*Works*, 8:101). I write as a biblical scholar within the Wesleyan tradition, not as a Wesley-scholar. Thus, I make no attempt to cite the recent critical editions of Wesley's works, preferring instead the more widely available popular edition.

theology concerns itself with the contingent³⁰ as well as the coherent. It takes seriously the fact that the New Testament emerged within history in response to a host of real-life historical situations. As a discipline driven by preoccupation with a defined body of literature, New Testament theology also takes seriously the literary character of the canon. Because it considers both the historical and the literary, it asks, Why did a New Testament author write what and as he did? What occasioned his writing and what purpose did he hope to achieve by doing so?³¹

Scholars who focus on the New Testament as a historical document tend to see it as a window. Their interest is behind the text in the sources, oral traditions, and events the New Testament presumes. Those scholars who focus on the New Testament as literature tend to see it as a mirror. Their interest is the meaning that lies on this side of the text in the narrative, plot, characters, and values that impact contemporary readers. The choice is whether to go to the looking-glass (with all its threats of narcissism) or through the window opened by historical criticism (with all the problems of an antique world behind it).³²

Alongside the central focus of the New Testament on Jesus—from a variety of perspectives—is the even greater prominence of the New Testament's calls for its readers to respond in faith to him—in a variety of ways. A Wesleyan New Testament theology need not be dogmatic even in its theological reflection upon faith in Jesus Christ because its real concern is to give an account of the foundational encounters with Christ, which may serve as the basis for judging the faithfulness of contemporary encounters with him. The object of its study is early Christian religion as much as it is New Testament theology. It is also to part company with a central tenant of our Protestant heritage.

Canon Within the Canon. The Protestant Reformation became inevitable when Martin Luther discovered that church dogma and Scripture were contradictory in fundamental ways. Reformation theology

30. That is what Dunn (xxi) means by “historically conditioned and context specific.”

31. Wright, 8. Within the New Testament literature, arguments should be distinguished from assertions, proofs from rationalizations. New Testament theologians cannot assume that the argument a biblical author used to make a point to his readers was the same route by which he came to hold the position he espoused. Pragmatic motives determined that authors choose “arguments likely to be understood and seen to be valid” by those they hoped to convince (11).

32. Reumann, 285-86.

arises from the conviction that Scripture alone—not church tradition, or experience, or reason—is to be the authoritative, normative, legitimizing focus for contemporary church life and belief.³³

Prior to the eighteenth century, there seemed to be little, if any, awareness of the difference between dogmatic and biblical theology. The church toward the end of the second century began to accept as canon authoritative and normative those “apostolic” writings we now know as the New Testament. Yet the church came to realize at the same time that these writings were subject to a variety of interpretations. Even heretics laid claim to them. Therefore, the church identified the content of the canon with tradition in particular, the catholic creeds. These creeds were the church’s “rule of faith,” the interpretive grid that determined what the authoritative documents could be taken to mean. Church tradition was equated with apostolic tradition. What was believed everywhere, always, by everyone, was identified with the correct interpretation of Scripture. “This standard held a firm position for more than a thousand years in opposition to all claims of heretics to the scripture.”³⁴

The church was oblivious to the subtle changes that had occurred in its theology over time. It tended to domesticate and harmonize the New Testament to support church tradition. Although the Reformers called this practice into question, they could not ignore the reality that the Bible was subject to varying interpretations. Luther attempted to resolve the problem by proposing that Scripture was its own interpreter and Christ its center. Classical Protestantism reads the New Testament through the filter of a “canon within the canon.” The “canon within the canon” allowed Luther to identify those parts of the New Testament that were judged more inspired and authoritative than the others. But his criteria were scarcely objective. Luther’s negative experiences with the Roman Church and his rediscovery of justification by faith alone, apart from works disposed him to read all of the Bible from the perspective of Romans and Galatians and to relegate to secondary status, books like James and Revelation that could not easily be reconciled with his central canon.³⁵

33. See Leonhard Goppelt, *New Testament Theology*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1981), 1:256.

34. Goppelt, 1:252.

35. Reumann (21) notes that claims of inspiration played little role in shaping the NT canon, because many books that were eventually excluded claimed for themselves or were claimed by their advocates to possess the same inspiration as those that were included.

It is true that the four Gospels and the letters of Paul were the earliest books to be canonized, and that they, in turn, became norms by which other books were tested and eventually included in or excluded from the canon. This was analogous to the situation of the Old Testament canon, in which the place of the Law and the Prophets was secured well before the Writings. But does this mean that “the gospels, like the Pentateuch, are foundational? It is the case that “the epistles of Paul are like the prophets in applying and advancing the significance of the great redeeming event”?³⁶ Are the remaining books in both collections, which appeared much later and are obviously more diverse than the foundational canon,³⁷ of secondary canonical status? Or are the later canonical books the synthetic integrative, and corrective glue that gives this diverse collection its cohesive character? Or, once the canon has been decided, are such distinctions in rank of any significance? If later is better, why not include the so-called Apostolic Fathers and the ecumenical creeds as virtual canonical authorities? But if earlier is better, should we not be waiting with baited breath for the latest pronouncement from the “Jesus Seminar”?

What compels us to draw the boundaries of New Testament theology at the limits of the New Testament canon? No early Christian document appeared historically with the label “canonical” attached. It is not likely that any New Testament author wrote with the intention or expectation of adding his work to the existing body of Jewish scriptures. Nor did these authors write with an awareness of some grand synthesis of which their works become integral parts. The criteria by which Christian documents were later included in or excluded from the canon probably tell us more about the tastes of the church of subsequent centuries than about the earliest church.³⁸ The existence of the canon reflects decisions—arbitrary and

36. Reumann, 98.

37. See Reumann’s general discussion of “The Rest of the New Testament Books” on pp. 97-103 and in more detail by grouping on pp. 105-275.

38. Appeals to the apostolic origins and inspiration of the NT documents are obviously secondary justifications. Not everything apostles wrote came to be considered canonical (witness Paul’s earlier [Cor. 5:9] and intermediate [2 Cor. 2:4; 7:8] letters to Corinth and the Laodicean letter [Col. 4:16]). And not only books by apostles are included in the NT. Among the names of non-apostles attached to NT books are Mark, Luke (Luke-Acts), James, and Jude. Contemporary NT scholarship, which challenges the traditional ascriptions of a majority of the remaining books, only complicates matters further. Appeal to the alleged apostolic teaching of a NT book, regardless of the identity of its author, is an obviously circular argument.

political or divinely arranged and providential, depending on ones presuppositions—of the church of a much later period. Judging from the excluded literature that survives, we cannot claim that the canonical books were either representative of earliest Christianity or of the earliest of the Christian books written. It is futile to speculate concerning the character of the books that we know once existed, but have since been accidentally lost or deliberately purged.

Although Wesley was a Protestant, the influence of Catholic tradition mediated through the Church of England led him to avoid some of the extreme positions of the Reformation tradition on the subject of Scripture. Whereas Protestants in principle insisted that Scripture alone was to be the source of all Christian faith and practice, Wesley self-consciously included tradition, reason, and experience as complementary sources. They confirm, illuminate, and apply the message of Scripture. In actual practice, of course, no religious tradition depends solely on Scripture. Subtly and often unconsciously, other factors inevitably exercise their influence.³⁹

Wesley also avoided the presumption that there exists a “canon within the canon.” Wesley’s canon included even the Apocrypha. Wesleyans, of course, hold to the narrower, Protestant, sixty-six-book canon. But, like Wesley, the intent of our articles of faith with respect to the plenary inspiration of Scripture is to guard against the danger of taking individual books of the Bible as normative alone. “Any major hook of the Bible taken by itself and pressed to its logical conclusion will lead to heretical distortions.”⁴⁰ Wesley’s insistence on attending to the entire canon partly accounts for the prominence he assigns to sanctification—holy living, not as a competitor to justification, but as its necessary complement.

The early Protestant Reformers produced no biblical theologies. Their Protestant successors institutionalized the Reformation into a scholasticism that was easily as dogmatic as that of Roman Catholicism. Biblical theology emerged from Pietism as an attempt to reform the Reformation, to call Protestantism to experience the spirituality of the ancient Christian tradition. Wesleyan theology is an expression of these

39. Robert Johnston, *Evangelicals at an Impasse: Biblical Authority in Practice* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1979).

40. Raymond Brown, *The Critical Meaning of the Bible* (New York: Paulist, 1981), 32.

same eighteenth-century influences—both pietism and rationalism—that gave birth to the discipline of New Testament theology. Wesley insisted that Christian experience was the necessary test of sound biblical interpretation. “Experience is not sufficient to prove a doctrine unsupported by Scripture.” But, “experience is sufficient to confirm a doctrine grounded in Scripture.”⁴¹

Goal. In 1787 Gabler defined the goal of New Testament theology as arriving at a proper dogmatic theology, one that was firmly based on biblical theology. To achieve this end he believed that it is necessary to distinguish carefully the various aspects of the theological task: religion from theology, biblical theology from dogmatic theology, biblical theology in the broad (true) sense from biblical theology in the narrow (pure) sense. He argued that “if the Bible was to be reestablished as the...basis of theology, it would have to be investigated by a discipline that was independent of dogmatic theology, with accountability only to the biblical material which it had to interpret.”⁴² His goal in all of this was “to contribute to church renewal rather than sanction stagnation.”⁴³

In 1972 Ernst Kasemann identified the goals of New Testament theology as the movements from analysis to synthesis and from theory to practice.⁴⁴ Because of the increasingly complex nature of New Testament studies and related disciplines, no one can hope to master the entire field any longer. A division of labor and specialization has become necessary. But the required analysis of minutiae should aim toward collaborative synthesis, lest the forest be lost among the trees.⁴⁵ Likewise, unless the conjunction of theory and practice is the goal of New Testament theology, “the discipline loses its distinctive character, its concrete roots, and it ceases, too, to be indispensable and binding.”⁴⁶ Kasemann acknowledged that these necessary tasks are extraordinarily difficult—perhaps unachievable in this world.

41. *Works*, 5:132-33.

42. Boers, 24-25.

43. Boers, 26. Biblical theology was not “designed to replace systematic theology, only to make it more biblical” (Morgan, ABD, 6:475).

44. Ernst Käsemann, “The Problem of a New Testament Theology,” *New Testament Studies* 19(1972/73), 235.

45. “Something like an intelligible and organized whole must be mirrored even by the part” (Kasemann, 236).

46. Käsemann, 236.

In 1976 James Robinson defined the goal of New Testament theology as the analysis of the texts of primitive Christianity, historically and philologically, “in such a way as to bring to expression their valid content so that it emerges as a serious alternative for modern times, capable of being decided for or against, without being falsified in the process of translation into modern alternatives.”⁴⁷ The goal of New Testament theology is to express the message of the New Testament “so that...the average [person] can once again either reject angrily or accept happily the theology of the New Testament.”⁴⁸

But cynicism has settled in. In 1990 Heiki Raisanen urged biblical scholarship to go “beyond New Testament theology,”⁴⁹ which he characterizes as both misguided and impossible. He seeks to rehabilitate William Wrede’s nineteenth-century liberal agenda, producing a history of the development of early Christian religion.⁵⁰ But, as Wrede recognized, our knowledge of early Christian history is filled with such large gaps that “a relatively complete history of early Christianity cannot be reconstructed” apart from extensive speculation.⁵¹

Method. If we join the optimists in the pursuit of New Testament theology, fully achievable or not, the question remains as to the proper method for doing it. Is it appropriate for New Testament theology to follow Gabler’s lead in distinguishing between divine revelation and human contingencies within the New Testament? Is it possible to sift what is true and eternally valid from what is time-bound and temporary, the essential from the incidental?

Many contemporary New Testament scholars have little interest in the traditional agenda of New Testament theology. The New Testament does not function as a vital authority within their world-view. Their interests in the New Testament are purely antiquarian. The results of their biblical studies are not personally compelling, but only historical curiosities. They have no interest in rehabilitating the normative claims of an ancient collection of documents by means of the pseudo-scholarly discipline of

47. “The Future of New Testament Theology.” *Religious Studies Review* 2, 1(1976), 17.

48. Robinson, 22.

49. *Beyond New Testament Theology: A Story and a Programme* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990).

50. This is, according to Käsemann. “unattainable” (237).

51. Käsemann, 238.

New Testament theology. They operate on the historicist assumption that only history, not theology, is academically respectable. Their interests lie in identifying the history of early Christian religion and theology. They suppose that the consistent application of historical methods imply a purely historical aim.⁵²

For such scholars, New Testament theology is a purely descriptive exercise. For conservative-evangelical scholars, “New Testament theology will inevitably have a prescriptive role in the larger discipline of Christian or dogmatic theology.”⁵³ Our task as Wesleyans is not simply to choose sides and retreat into the safe confines of our ecclesially defined sanctuaries and ignore or snipe at those on either side. As James Dunn reminds us, “The more demanding task is to recognize that there is truth, or at least potential truth in both ways of viewing New Testament theology, and to attempt some kind of rapprochement or positive interaction between them.”⁵⁴

Conclusions. Loyalty to the primacy of Scripture gives Wesleyans a deep dissatisfaction with the easy conclusions of church dogma, even Wesleyan dogma. To be Wesleyan is to read the Bible with no prior constraint as to what it may mean. But it is also to submit biblical interpretations to the tests of tradition, experience, and reason. In these and other ways, Wesleyan theology and biblical theology have much in common.

Are there any lessons Wesleyan theology learn from the history of biblical theology? Is there only one theology that is legitimately Wesleyan? Must we choose between Wesley and the nineteenth-century Holiness Movement? Can we ignore all that has transpired since the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, including our own experience? How should we approach the diversity among and the tensions within the various contributors to our tradition? How are we to decide whether new solutions to old questions may legitimately claim to be Wesleyan? What place may we give to contributions from beyond our tradition—from Fundamentalism, Liberalism, Neo-Orthodoxy, etc.? What are the tolerable limits to Wesleyan pluralism?

52. Morgan, DBI, 690.

53. James Dunn, “The Task of New Testament Theology,” *New Testament Theology in Dialogue: Christology and Ministry*, eds. James Dunn and James Mackey (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 2-3.

54. Dunn, “Task,” 3.

When I set out to do this presidential address, my original ambition was to give a detailed account of the changes in the approach to biblical studies within the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition as reflected in the thirty years of the *Wesleyan Theological Journal*. But the task of digesting the more than fifteen inches of journal pages proved to be more formidable than I had imagined. What became obvious in this abortive effort, however, was that there has been a marked hermeneutical shift during the history of the Society. Despite the frequent appeals to the doctrine of biblical inerrancy and to proof-texts supporting the doctrine of entire sanctification in the early years of the Journal, systematic theological and philosophical presuppositions were often more determinative than were exegetical conclusions. We have, in my judgment, made significant progress toward a more exegetically based theology. But we have also become more descriptive and less normative in our approach to the Bible. Have scholarly sophistication and objectivity made us reluctant to move from descriptions of what biblical writers said-or what Wesley and nineteenth-century holiness figures thought-to normative conclusions? Have we traded holiness scholasticism for Wesleyan antiquarianism?

If we are to avoid the inevitable distortions of individual biases, preconceived ideas, and the subjectivity of personal experience. Wesleyan theology, like New Testament theology, should be a corporate task. We should hold ourselves accountable both to responsible scholarship and to the community of faith. Our efforts should be increasingly collaborative. This is not an appeal for jointly authored scholarly tomes, but for renewed dialogue with Wesleyans who are not biblical scholars, systematic theologians, or church historians. The academy should be given a voice in the sanctuary. But we also should reckon with the reality that many who occupy the pews in our churches are uncomfortable with what they think we academics are saying and doing. It is not enough for us to bemoan the Fundamentalist leavening that has subverted our heritage in many quarters. Our task is to build bridges of understanding, not to make targets of others.

It is my conviction that the mission of the Wesleyan Theological Society is to wed intellectual rigor and spiritual fervor in the spirit of John Wesley, who was both an traveling evangelist and an Oxford don. Some today find it hard to imagine a professor in one of the finest universities in the world being instrumental in the revival of vital Christianity in eighteenth century England. “Both the Opponents and the partisans of complicated people like [Wesley] tend to deal with them by flattening them out,

reducing them to one-dimensional figures. It is in fact easier to deal with a one-dimensional [Wesley], easier to put him in his place and keep him there, under control.”⁵⁵

As the theological and spiritual heirs of the evangelical revivals of the eighteenth century and the holiness revivals of the nineteenth century, we dare not ignore the legacy of John Wesley. We cannot follow the path of blind zeal of those followers of Wesley who, after his death, deliberately destroyed a good portion of his personal library, uncomfortable with the breadth of his reading. Nor can we follow those who still call themselves Wesleyans, but wander in the pathless wilderness of pluralism or inhabit the desert of sterile scholarship. We cannot be truly Wesleyan and think of our tradition with the guarded reserve that antique dealers exercise when they happen upon well-preserved examples of quaint, even beautiful eighteenth and nineteenth-century furniture. If we are truly Wesleyan we will not assign canonical authority to the works of either John Wesley or nineteenth-century holiness authors. If the Bible is indeed our norming norm, Wesleyan theology must be fundamentally informed by biblical theology.

55. Said of the Apostle Paul by Victor Paul Furnish, “On Putting Paul in His Place,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 113(1994), 4.

WESLEYAN FAITH SEEKING BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING

by
Frank Anthony Spina

Given the particular topics I propose to discuss in this article, a title with the phrase “Wesleyan hermeneutic” in it might at first glance have seemed appropriate. After all, when Wesleyans *qua* Wesleyans interpret the Bible, is it not axiomatic that they employ, or should employ, a “Wesleyan hermeneutic” While the answer to that question may appear obvious, I submit that the issue is too complicated for a simple response. There are a number of reasons why this is so.

For one thing, since in the strictest sense “Wesleyan hermeneutic refers to the presuppositions and methods used by John Wesley himself, only a bona fide scholar of Wesley could legitimately outline his approach. However, not having studied Wesley’s mode of biblical interpretation in detail, I have no considered opinion regarding his interpretive strategy.

Second, and perhaps more important for present purposes. “Wesleyan hermeneutic” implies an agreed upon method. But this belies the fact that Wesleyan interpretive procedures are too varied to warrant such a singular designation. There is no hermeneutic that underlies and unifies the work of Wesleyans (Lyons 63; Langford 1984, 140: 1991, 236; Birch 127: (Outler 1991 [“Primitivism”], 156; 1991 Quadrilateral”], 35). In fact I contend that Wesleyans have appropriated a confusing and incoherent combination of pre-critical, anti-critical, critical, and post-critical approaches. The rubric “Wesleyan” is not sufficiently elastic to cover this diversity.

A third reason for shying away from the phrase “Wesleyan hermeneutic” is that the theoretical grounds required to undergird such a

conception, at least as usually conceived, are inadequate. If there is something that finally ought to be called a “Wesleyan hermeneutic,” it requires a more radical rethinking of the nature of Scripture and the context in which biblical interpretation rightfully occurs.

Wesleyan Academic Training

This reluctance to embrace a so-called Wesleyan hermeneutic is in part a function of the training I received at two Wesleyan institutions and the dilemma with which this training left me.

In college most of my teachers carefully distinguished themselves from Fundamentalism and Liberalism, typing themselves variously as “conservative, ““evangelical,” or “Wesleyan.” They insisted that they occupied the middle ground between the extremes of Fundamentalism and Liberalism.¹ Nonetheless, these teachers agreed in at least one important sense with these two allegedly incompatible positions—they’ also read the Bible historically. For that reason, W. F. Albright and those who more or less followed him were advocated as judicious if not infallible guides for understanding the Bible. We students were taught that this way of treating the Bible avoided the extreme historical nihilism characterized by the German higher critics on the left and the naive historical positivism of American Fundamentalism on the right. An added benefit accrued in that there was enormous respect for the scholarship of the “Baltimore School,” identification with which placed one squarely in the intellectual mainstream. Another bonus was that some Albrightians were credited with being sensitive to the church and having a feel for biblical theology (e.g., Wright; Bright).

In seminary I studied with professors who were mostly in tune with my college mentors. But others were not. Their positions were actually aligned with what I had been taught was characteristic of Fundamentalism. Predictably, the conflict between these two groups centered on the legitimacy of biblical criticism. At the same time, for all their disagreement, the focus for both camps remained on history and its import for biblical teaching. The main questions were: What did the Bible say had happened?; What extra-biblical evidence corroborated or undercut the Bible’s claims?; and, What was the significance of the events recorded? Histori-

¹I have described this situation more fully in an unpublished lecture presented as part of Seattle Pacific University’s Centennial Lecture Series (1991): “Biblical Scholarship in a Wesleyan Mode: Retrospect and Prospect.” A printed version of this lecture is available upon request.

cal background and context were never far from the discussion, Yet notwithstanding their position on these matters, all my instructors unabashedly affirmed their Wesleyanism. This was troubling, for it meant that one or the other was wrong in contending that Wesleyanism made a difference for biblical studies. Worse this impasse suggested the possibility that Wesleyanism was completely irrelevant to the respective stances.

My confusion was compounded when I tried to factor in inductive Bible study, a method whose value for Wesleyan biblical interpretation was all but taken for granted.² It is not that I resisted this approach; to the contrary. I appreciated it for taking the biblical text seriously on the one hand and for being a guard against eisegesis on the other. Rather, my confusion was a function of two problematic issues. One was the limits placed on induction. It appeared that one was to study inductively only up to a point. A number of higher critical theories arose precisely because of an inductive reading. But this was impermissible since the theory of biblical authority that was often operative precluded what for all the world seemed to be the text's plain meaning. I began to suspect that the inductive method, for all its positives, was being used to deflect the very issues it sometimes brought to the surface.

The second and more confusing problem turned on the fact that the inductive method was not supposed to be geared to any theological tradition, Wesleyan or otherwise. To the contrary, it was specifically designed to prevent the interpreter's being influenced by a given theological tradition. As a matter of fact, we were told over and over that this was a great strength of the inductive approach.³ But if that were the case, what was Wesleyan about it? And why was this approach considered quintessential for Wesleyans? In my more cynical moments I mused that had Mortimer Adler devised the method, his famous how-to book would have been

²Wayne McCown asserts without qualification, "The dominant hermeneutic in the movement [i.e., Wesleyanism] is called the inductive method (McCown 1992, 161). See later in this W.T.J. issue the honoring and basic concerns of Dr. Robert A. Traina, a leading teacher of "inductive" Bible study.

³When I joined the religion faculty of Seattle Pacific University in 1973, I was informed that the curriculum had been self-consciously weighted toward biblical studies and away from theological studies. This was because theology was conceived of as a deductive enterprise whereas biblical study was inductive, the former was "subjective and therefore allegedly" distasteful for any students or constituents who espoused contrary theological positions. But as an objective discipline, it was believed that inductive Bible study would not engender Constituency criticism, at least as this was related to theological issues.

entitled *How To Read a Book, Including The Bible*. There was nothing the least bit theological about it. If it was not theological, a fortiori it was not Wesleyan either. Granted, as an antidote to scholastic and dogmatic treatments, the inductive method was a step in the right direction. But its relationship to the Church and theology remained unresolved.

In sum, though grateful beyond words for the valuable instruction my college and seminary professors provided. I cannot shake the impression that they were ultimately confused about the nature and function of the Bible when considered from a theological perspective. I believe that this confusion persists and has had a corrosive effect on a Wesleyan treatment of the Bible particularly, and perhaps on Wesleyanism generally. I turn now to show that the confusion to which I refer has by no means disappeared.

Pre-Critical Interpretation

It virtually goes without saying that pre critical biblical interpretation has been and continues to be practiced by many Wesleyans. Almost certainly this is true in lay circles and a percentage of the clergy as well. It may seem unfair even to mention laity and clergy in an academic forum except to point out that, if pre-critical practices are widespread there is apparently little in the tradition that militates against their use. To pose the question more sharply, why is it that what Wesleyan scholars teach and write has had such a negligible impact on how the Bible is read, studied, taught, or preached in the church?

I should clarify that by “pre-critical” I do not mean merely any method that antedates the rise of biblical criticism in the Western intellectual tradition. Properly understood and qualified, we would do well to encourage a revival of pre-critical interpretation, not so much in terms of exegetical conclusions as in terms of the theological construals that were operative in many pre-critical ecclesial communities (cf. Steinmetz). Rather, I have in mind a more pejorative nuance. Hartley alludes to one sort of pre-criticism when he speaks of a “traditional approach” that seeks “to indoctrinate through the exposition of . . . Scriptures.” He probably has in mind a variety of scholasticisms in which the Bible is searched for texts supporting doctrinal positions that on other than strictly biblical grounds have already been adjudged as orthodox. This is to be contrasted to historical criticism and the inductive method, both of which were supposed to challenge the circular reasoning thought to be endemic in a scholastic approach (Hartley, 58; Munn. 78; Langford 1991, 235).

There are other kinds of pre-criticism evident in the church. Moralistic readings, in which biblical characters are presented as “plastic saints

abound.⁴ Another pre-critical construal regards the Bible as a seamless garment whereby any text can be used as the interpretive key for other without showing through careful textual analysis that the texts were designed to be read in light of each other. Yet another kind of pre-criticism engages in a naive supernaturalism, at the same time failing to consider the theological denotation of some miracle accounts and naturalizing others by relegating them to ordinary phenomena in which the timing was just right (e.g., Hartley, 61).

This is only an illustrative list. Whether Wesleyan scholars participate in such endeavors in significant numbers is hard to know. But that is beside the point. The larger issue is why what we do as scholars has had such minimal impact on the church's use of the Bible. Why do pre-critical approaches continue to survive if not thrive given the putative efforts of Wesleyan scholars to foster a different interpretive climate? By posing this question I do not mean to lay all the blame for hermeneutical confusion on laity and clergy. The latter has correctly intuited that a great deal of work performed by Wesleyan biblical scholars, for all its erudition, is hardly indispensable to the church's mission.

Anti-Critical and Critical Approaches

Whereas pre-critical exegetical practices in the tradition are ascertained mostly by anecdotal and impressionistic forms of evidence, the presence of anti-critical approaches is much easier to document. In point of fact, it is all but impossible to discuss critical practices in Wesleyan circles without at the same time discussing anti-critical perspectives. Any-one familiar with the history of the Wesleyan Theological Society will have no difficulty recalling its version of the "battle for the Bible." The sides in this dispute are readily recognizable. Anti-critical Wesleyans ten to view most of the results and many of the methods of historical criticism as not only wrong but antithetical to an orthodox conception of Scripture. Conversely, critical Wesleyan scholars are prone to view man of the results and most of the methods of historical criticism as at least plausible if not "assured" and, correctly understood, fully compatible wit; an orthodox conception of Scripture. This is nothing less than the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy, Wesleyan style.

⁴If the testimony of my university students is any indication, moralistic interpretations of biblical materials is common in the Sunday Schools of many evangelical denominations.

To be sure, a great many Wesleyan scholars have protested vociferously that their theological heritage cannot be explained in terms of this confrontation (e.g., McCown 1992, 148. 158). Given the contours of Wesleyan theology, taking into account not only Wesley's own theological impulses but Pietism and the American Holiness Movement as well, the burden of proof is surely on those who would characterize Wesleyanism as a sub-set of Fundamentalism (Spina 1991). Nevertheless, in actual practice Wesleyans have participated in this acrimonious debate to a far greater degree than one would have thought possible given their frequent protestations that they were "above or beyond the battle."⁵ Wesleyans are far more likely to distinguish themselves from Fundamentalism on the issue of their ostensive doctrinal distinctive, sanctification, than on any perceived differences in a doctrine of Scripture.

Rather than amassing quotes from discrete essays and books to make my point, I call attention to two recent books. They show that there has been for a long time a Wesleyan version of the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy. The first is *The Wesley Bible* [KTWB], edited by A. F. Harper and published in 1990. It is an annotated study Bible using the text of the New King James Version. The second book is the *Asbury Bible Commentary* [=ABC], edited by B. E. Carpenter and W. McCown and published in 1992. It is a one-volume commentary on the whole Bible using the text of the New International Version. Regardless of their different purposes, these two books afford an excellent glimpse into Wesleyan biblical scholarship since they were commissioned to be written by Wesleyans fly Wesleyans from a distinctively Wesleyan perspective. Furthermore, the number of scholars participating in these two projects insures a wide sampling of the best in Wesleyan biblical scholarship today.

TWB's theological orientation is clearly stated in the preface: In faithfulness to God and to our readers, it was deemed appropriate that all participating scholars sign a statement affirming their belief in the verbal and plenary inspiration of Scripture, and in the inerrancy of the original autographs" (TWB, xiii). William Cannon put forth the position of the ABC: "The purpose of the Bible is simply to present God's plan of salvation, and those who wrote it were inspired by the Holy Spirit to convey to humankind the story of redemption, and in this regard [*italics mine*] their work is perfect and without fault or blemish" (ABC, 18).

⁵Munn's contention that the fundamentalist impulse within Wesleyanism derives chiefly from circles other than biblical scholars is, it seems to me, wishful thinking (Munn, 77-84).

Cannon clarifies his position by explicitly rejecting inerrancy and verbal inspiration; “Rather than speak of the inerrancy of Scripture or verbal inspiration, it is much better to speak of the indefectibility of the Bible or its infallibility, the breathing of the Holy Spirit on its authors to assure their accuracy in presenting *Gods plan of salvation* [italics mine] in its perfection” (ABC, 18). In short, TWB contains a statement indistinguishable from a bona fide Fundamentalist position, whereas the ABC highlights the Bible’s salvific purpose. The latter accords with the array of “sufficiency” statements found in many Wesleyan communions, Parenthetically, there is a consistency in TWB not shared by ABC, since the scholars contributing to the former had to agree to its confession on Scripture whereas the scholars contributing to the latter were, to the best of my knowledge, not even told about its position on Scripture until it appeared.⁶

Unfortunately, comparing these two works detail for detail is difficult since some scholars wrote for both volumes. Thus, some contributors to TWB were also invited to participate in the ABC project. But reciprocity was precluded because TWB was ostensibly limited to scholars willing to sign an inerrancy statement. Yet, this circumstance should occasion little surprise. As long as I have been in Wesleyan circles there has been an assumption that the inerrancy folk represent the conservative wing, whereas those refusing to espouse inerrancy evince a liberalizing impulse. Be that as it may, suffice it to say that after accounting for the difficulty created by this overlap, a comparison of the major textual cruxes shows that authors of TWB *in the main* adopt exegetical conclusions compatible with an inerrancy paradigm whereas authors of the ABC *in the main* entertain at least moderately critical conclusions.

Without doubt the scholars I have placed in the Fundamentalist camp, as well as those I have in effect placed on the “left,” will vigorously contest my categorization. Those who espouse criticism not only resist being labeled liberals, but insist in addition that their mostly moderate criticism and accompanying high view of Scripture situates them not only to the

⁶Curiously, when I presented an oral version of this essay at the 1994 meeting of the Wesleyan Theological Society in Dayton, Ohio, several scholars who had contributed to TWB complained that they had never been asked to sign a statement affirming inerrancy or anything else. The first time they knew about the inerrancy statement, they insisted, was when the publication first appeared!

left of Fundamentalism but far to the right of Liberalism as well.⁷ These scholars tend to see themselves as “Evangelicals” occupying the middle of the road (Hartley, 62; Thorsen, 41).

Those I have labeled Fundamentalists likewise will be unhappy. Fundamentalism is currently viewed in almost exclusively negative terms. It is perceived as obscurantist, rigidly narrow, anti-intellectual, arrogant, and literalistic. Accordingly, Fundamentalism is no longer primarily a theological rubric but a psychological one. Understandably, virtually all who once were pleased if not proud to call themselves “Fundamentalists” have opted for “Evangelical.” However, in spite of this semantic shift, historically Fundamentalism was an identifiable ecclesiastical movement with its own rationale and integrity. It has not been helpful to treat it as a personality disorder! Wesleyans who happen to agree with Fundamentalists regarding Scripture may, of course, call themselves whatever they like. But, in point of fact, Wesleyans who accept the inerrancy paradigm do not differ meaningfully from classic Fundamentalism or most contemporary Evangelicalism on the doctrine of Scripture.

Relative to the inerrancy debate among Wesleyans, I aver that it is not particularly germane where John Wesley stood. Those holding to inerrancy have little trouble citing statements Wesley made that would appear to place him squarely on their side. Likewise, those believing that inerrancy cannot be squared with Wesley argue that he used the critical methods available to him and generally treated Scripture more flexibly than an inerrancy position reasonably permits (Scroggs, 415-17; McCown 1983, 752-53; Langford 1984, 140-43).

More to the point, nothing that Wesley believed changes the tact that in terms of intellectual history he was not *reacting* to modernity. But Liberalism and Fundamentalism are largely inexplicable except as reactions to modernity (Mickey 111-12). Some in the Christian world were firmly convinced that modernity had to be squarely faced. Philosophy, science, and historiography were trading in truth-claims, the denial of which was adjudged to be hopelessly uninformed and backward. There was no choice but to accommodate Christianity to modern ways of thinking. Otherwise, the faith would become little more than a relic of a superstitious, indefensible, and credulous past. Christian religion would become unpalatable to an increasingly educated and sophisticated world if it did

⁷See the comment by Thorsen that most Wesleyans are “somewhere between the two” [i.e.. between inerrancy=Fundamentalism and criticism=Liberalism] (Thorsen, 41).

not make peace with modern epistemic claims. This is the liberal theological impulse.

Others were equally adamant that a Christian faith exposed to the onslaughts of modernity would be profoundly and irreparably damaged. Many modern ideas were inimical to the gospel and had to be steadfastly resisted, especially those having to do with epistemology. To combat modernity's insidious encroachments, a barrier thought to be impregnable was erected, the doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture. The conviction obtained that any weakening of this line of defense would eventuate inevitably in defeat. This is the fundamentalistic theological impulse.

Arguably, both of these responses to modernity were to an extent justified. Fundamentalism has not been given sufficient credit for insisting that many features of modern thinking are corrosive to a pervasively Christian account of reality. Unfortunately, its analysis was better than its solution. Perhaps more damning to inerrancy than any number of specific and well-known objections is that it ultimately is based on a form of rationalism and historical positivism that is a product of the very modernity allegedly being rejected.

For its part, Liberalism appropriately summoned the church to come to terms with modernity. The latter's achievements were too impressive to ignore. Modernity was not about to go away. Liberalism should be affirmed for trying to rethink Christian faith in ways that took modernity seriously. At the same time, Liberalism could not have underestimated more the extent of modernity's threat. Modest revision was one thing, wholesale capitulation if not unconditional surrender was quite another. I hasten to add that those I have typed as moderately critical Wesleyans are not Liberals in this sense. Notwithstanding, it is permissible to ask whether the self-styled "moderates" have thought carefully enough about the theological underpinnings of the critical task in which they engage. Merely rejecting naturalistic assumptions may still underestimate the crucial theological issues involved in the acceptance of the critical agenda.

In any case, none of this affects the fact that it would be completely anachronistic to explain Wesley's thought primarily as a reaction to modernity. Wesley was not the only pre-modern Christian theologian who made incidental statements that appear to support an inerrancy paradigm. But the more penetrating question is whether inerrancy *as a reaction to modernity* and as an *orienting principle* is compatible with Wesley's general theological method or his exegesis.

I am convinced that neither the inerrancy paradigm nor the moderately critical paradigm is explicable apart from modernity (Hauerwas 35).

If this is true, then in what meaningful sense can either of these approaches be made compatible with Wesleyanism?

Post-Critical Approaches

Perhaps because of implicit disillusionment with the methods just outlined, or simply because of the lure of contemporary intellectual trends, many Wesleyans have gone “beyond” to one or another of the so-called post-modernist positions. It is difficult to ascertain whether post-modernism is primarily a reaction to the hegemony of modernity’s epistemological claims, a substitution of subjectivity for modernity’s vaunted objectivity, or a celebration of a glorious relativism in which we cannot be sure why we believe what we believe, but we are gloriously happy, confident and even smug believing it! Then again, post-modernity may be nothing more than the muddled *Zeitgeist* that follows modernity (Stanley 23-43).

John Stanley argues that various post-modern approaches to Scripture are compatible with what he calls a “holiness hermeneutic.” For him, this eventuates in the following hermeneutical posture: (1) the interpreter accepts the presuppositions of faith over against scientific detachment; (2) the interpreter is eclectic, employing whatever critical or post-critical methods are required; (3) the interpreter values intertextuality and the allusive nature of the biblical text; (4) the interpreter is open to the Spirit’s role in interpretation, not only with the ancient author but with the contemporary interpreter and the community receiving the interpretation; and (5) the interpreter is uneasy with dominant cultural paradigms (Stanley 28-37). In addition, Stanley cites appreciatively the efforts of other Wesleyan scholars who have gone beyond the historical paradigm not only by exploring the relationship between a “holiness hermeneutic” and historical criticism, but also by adopting newer methods, including, for example, canonical criticism, rhetorical criticism, and sociological analysis (Stanley 31, 41, fnn. 38-39). To these may perhaps be added the so-called “liberation hermeneutics” involving gender, race, socio-political disenfranchisement, and economic marginalization.

Though precise definitions remain elusive, there are now a number of self-styled post-modern hermeneutical approaches. Wesleyans, no less than anyone else, are counted among the variety of post-modernist practitioners. Indeed, according to Stanley, there has been a natural progression, a veritable evolution, which may be traced on a continuum proceeding from critical to post-critical methods, that is, from modernity to post-

modernity. Carpenter makes a similar point: “Currently, a multifaceted and interdisciplinary approach is being developed. Anthropology, sociology, psychology, poetics, and linguistics, in addition to various new perspectives such as feminist, Third World (liberation) viewpoints are offering helpful insights to mine the riches of these ancient revelational documents” (Carpenter 135).

This tends to confirm my thesis. Given in Wesleyan circles at least a residue of pre-critical treatment of the Bible, the considerable strength of anti-criticism that remains, the practices of critical moderates, and the growing number of post-modern approaches, there is no denying that within Wesleyanism an array of hermeneutical methods persists. It is possible to discover Wesleyans virtually anywhere along a continuum stretching from pre-modernity (i.e.. pre-critical) to post-modernity (i.e. post-critical).

In this light, the nagging question presents itself: How can hermenetical diversity of this magnitude be said to derive legitimately from Wesleyan theological sources or impulses? Since many of these approaches assume radically different epistemological stances, not to mention incompatible if not mutually exclusive construals of the nature and function of Scripture - some of them rejecting the category “Scripture at the out-set - is it not naive to think that any and all of these approaches can be employed simply depending on what the individual interpreter decides is best for his or her circumstance? There is no question that the Bible may legitimately be studied from any number of perspectives: as ancient literature, as a potential source for historical reconstruction, as a cultural artifact, as political propaganda, as data for observing the development of language. as expressive of differing ideologies, etc. But none of these require a self-conscious acceptance of the Bible as “Scripture, which is a *theological* category.

Whatever else it means to be Wesleyan, or to approach Scripture as a Wesleyan, it cannot mean something besides a theological approach. Wesleyan theology, as a *theology*, is not sufficiently eclectic or catholic that “one size fits all.” Approaches to the Bible which ignore or undercut the basic premises requisite to a full-orbed theological understanding of Scripture cannot be appealed to as though those premises are irrelevant to the hermeneutical task. It is difficult to avoid the impression that what is often referred to as a “Wesleyan hermeneutic” is little more than the adoption of a particular interpretive technique by scholars who consider themselves “Wesleyan” on grounds having nothing to do with the

hermeneutic in question. Has sufficient effort been exerted to determine first the inner coherence of the Wesleyan theological dynamic and second whether the technique being employed is finally compatible with the aforementioned dynamic? Unless this question is taken seriously, I fear that the prevailing confusion in Wesleyan circles will remain.

Wesleyan Hermeneutical Eclecticism

This is not to deny that there are a number of interpretive methods which have afforded excellent insights into the biblical text. Seen from one perspective, it would be folly to maintain that there is a univocal hermeneutic available which Wesleyans qua Wesleyans must embrace. In that sense, there emphatically is no Wesleyan hermeneutic.” At the same time, accepting a measure of hermeneutical eclecticism or taking a position between perceived hermeneutical poles still leaves certain fundamental issues unresolved. It makes a great deal of difference whether one is working at the level of “details” that are ascertainable on the “surface” of the text or whether one is working at a more “structural” level to read the text as Scripture. The question is whether it matters that the text is “structurally” (i.e., by virtue of the church’s theological claim) Scripture rather than something else. Accepting the Bible as “Scripture” requires a different reading.

Consider, for example, the matter of the Bible’s essential subject matter, something about which I find almost no discussion among Wesleyans. Critical scholars and anti-critical scholars alike assume that the Bible’s subject matter is history. The referent of the text is something that happened in space and time. On this view, what is authoritative is a series of events “behind” the text whose insignificance and import one must infer. It is at this point that there is no compelling difference between Fundamentalism and Liberalism. They are both oriented to Enlightenment historiography. To be sure, one is predisposed to regard every biblical narrative as more or less straightforward historical reporting largely corroborated by the archaeological record (see Wiley 206: TWB 1953-1960, 1980-2000), whereas the other is committed to treat the text as only one potential source of historical information. But regardless of whether the Bible is conceived to be maximally or minimally a historical chronicle, its subject matter remains history.

At the other end of the spectrum, post-modernists have abandoned the security promised by irrefragable rules of historical evidence. One result is that the text is seen as a hermetically sealed fictive world the

mythic value of which the reader is invited to contemplate. There is an enormous attraction to this and other new literary approaches because of the startling and delightful discovery that biblical literature is exquisitely artful, sophisticated, and imaginative (see Alter; Alter and Kermode; Steinberg). I value these literary studies, for they attend to the intricacies of the text and uncover interpretive possibilities that were not even imagined until recently. Nonetheless, it is highly doubtful that appreciating the Bible's literary dimension takes seriously enough the fact that in theological terms the Bible is more than a literary classic and must be read first and foremost as the church's Scripture. There is no question that the Bible is literature. But that is not the same as saying that reading it *as literature* is tantamount to reading it *as Scripture*.

Then again, some incline toward the Bible's "preferential options" - for the poor, women, minorities, the politically marginalized - and interpret the text as an ideological expression which alternately advances or retards the agenda of the preferred group. Without a doubt, it is foolhardy to ignore one's social location when engaged in interpretation. We have to strive mightily not to read our own cultural biases into a text. We have to be willing to let the text challenge whatever our privileged status happens to be and call it ultimately into question. Using the lens of this or that preferential option is to that extent justified. Yet, regardless of how worthy a preferred group happens to be, no group's social location can be the primary context for interpretation. If it is only ideology remains and the Bible becomes a battleground for "interest group hermeneutics". Surely something more theologically apposite is necessary.

Equally, there is much to be said for canonical criticism as pioneered by James Sanders. His understanding of the way sacred traditions function in a religious community, the dynamics of textual resignification, and the vital process of biblical intertextuality deserve a wide hearing. But in the final analysis I question whether the Sanders proposal is based on a theological construal that finally takes Scripture seriously as Scripture. In my view, Sanders views the work of the contemporary interpreter as *parallel* to rather than derivative of Scripture (Spina 1992, 75-78). The primary purpose of Scripture for him is to provide a paradigm for appropriating contemporary religious traditions. This grounds Scripture in an anthropology wherein the community's self-identity is paramount rather than in a theology wherein God's initiatives and claims on the community of faith are paramount.

Unresolved Issues

In sum, there is no reason why Wesleyans may not benefit substantially from the many hermeneutical options currently available. The academy has provided an impressive number of tools which biblical scholars can apply to the interpretive task. However, the academy is singularly unsuitable as the starting point for interpreting the Bible as Scripture. Proper interpretation of the Bible as Scripture must be grounded in the church of Jesus Christ. Ours is a theological and spiritual task. As historians, literary critics, linguists, form critics, or whatever, we may offer to the church a plethora of helpful insights for understanding the Bible. But interpretation that is a function of Christ's church must have a theological basis that transcends, informs, and transforms academic training and academic location. More decisive than any other qualifying adjective, we are first and foremost ecclesial interpreters. In the history of the Wesleyan Theological Society, there have been perhaps three related but separate emphases regarding Wesleyanism and the Bible. One was the debate centering on whether inerrancy or some other paradigm was appropriate to a Wesleyan construal of the nature and function of Scripture. A second involved the legitimacy or illegitimacy of the critical method of biblical study. A third has featured the issue of hermeneutics: How is Scripture rightly to be interpreted?

As important as these discussions have been, and to some extent continue to be, I submit that they have not been sufficiently comprehensive or penetrating regarding the role of the Bible in the life of the church. At the very least, I suggest that discussing the following topics would turn our conversations in a more productive direction. These are not listed in the order of importance, nor are they by any means exhaustive.

Possible New Directions

First, it is imperative to revisit what Scripture" as a *doctrinal* conception signifies. For all the ink that has been spilled on the nature and function of Scripture, I am not convinced that we even mean the same thing when we say "Scripture." It is on this point that I find the work of Brevard Childs so discerning. Unfortunately, collapsing the work of Childs and Sanders into a discipline called canonical criticism - a misconstrual of which I have been guilty - has distorted some crucial issues (Spina 1982; cf. 1992).

More important than any individual exegetical treatment or critical assessment, it is how Childs conceives of Scripture *theologically* that

most merits consideration. For him, the biblical canon is neither a divinely superintended recording of history whose theological import we are to infer nor an arbitrary “freezing” of the community of faiths sacred traditions which furnishes guidelines for actualizing our own traditions. Rather, from the beginning of the traditioning process right up to the final stages of canonization, a profoundly theological and hermeneutical process was in operation. Since the traditions were received as religiously authoritative, they were transmitted with a view toward maintaining a normative function for subsequent generations. This “canon-consciousness” is integral to the formation of the literature and is not obviated by the presence of so many different compositional techniques (Childs 70-71). This does not mean that ancient Israel “had” a canon, which claim would be historically naive and completely anachronistic. But it suggests that Israel’s traditions were conscious of canon in the sense that from beginning to end they reacted to God’s revelatory actions by generating editing, and appropriately modifying written traditions, all with the purpose of transmitting an authoritative and indispensable witness to all subsequent generations of the faithful.

This is why the Bible’s orientation is substantially theological: that is, its very *raison d’être* is to witness to its subject matter: divine revelation. Such a witness is of necessity theological. Thus, continuing to see theology as only one element in Scripture rather than its essence constitutes a failure to comprehend the nature of Scripture. For example, as long as we view biblical books like Samuel and Kings as more or less historical in thrust and books like St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans as more or less theological in thrust, we have badly misconstrued the nature and function of Scripture.⁸ The common criticism that the Bible does not “do” theology the way theologians execute their task is not cogent, since it is the formal impulse of Scripture that is theological rather than its material modes of expression (contra Lyons 67). In my view, understanding Scripture along these lines has the potential of revolutionizing and energizing preaching, emphasizing the importance of regular and systematic Bible

⁸In my judgment, the failure to appreciate the theological nature of Scripture is reflected in something as mundane as assigning space in the *Asbury Bible Commentary*. Romans was assigned virtually the same number of pages as 1-2 Samuel, though the latter is significantly larger than the former. It is difficult to escape the impression that behind such assignments is the view that Romans, as a theological book, has more to say to the Church than 1-2 Samuel which is primarily *historical*.

reading in worship, changing the focus of biblical instruction in colleges, universities, and seminaries, and reclaiming a more central role for the Bible in the common life of the church.

More needs to be said about the proposal that Scripture is primarily a witness to divine activity or revelation. That is, the referent of the text is not history per se, a fictive literary world, religious ideas, legitimations of this or that ideology, or timeless propositions and aphorisms. Instead, the referent of the text, its essential subject matter, is nothing less than God and God's revelatory interactions with and communications to the receptor community. This is why the church not only seeks to pursue the nature of the one divine reality among the various biblical voices, but also wrestles theologically with the relation between the reality testified to in the Bible and the living reality known and experienced as the exalted Christ in the present (Childs 86). One of the reasons so many pre-critical interpreters deserve our attention is that they tended to see Scripture along these lines. An example of the rupture that occurs when Scriptures function as witness is misconstrued is the absurdity, expressed in the Scofield Reference Bible, that a text can be inspired, true, inerrant, and irrelevant! How can a witness to divine activity ever be considered irrelevant?

This by no means suggests that the biblical text should be "flattened" as a set of statements which are individually authoritative as witnesses to God's revelation in Israel and in Christ. It is the Scripture *as a whole* that constitutes the witness; no single part can ever be considered apart from that whole. This is why the very notion of canon as a *theological* conception is more important than the idea of canon in historical terms. It is by attending to the scope of the whole canon that we begin to see how the canonizers built into the text a variety of means for how one part of Scripture should be read in the light of another part, or how relative values might be assigned to different sections. Our task is not to "make" the Scriptures relevant to the church today, but to ascertain the theological relevancy that has been deeply embedded in its text by the traditions of the community of faith who witnessed to God's revelatory actions. None of this is vitiated by the "raggedness" of the canon or the canonical process. Perfection is not the goal; sufficiency is.

Likewise, understanding Scripture in these terms requires a concomitant reappraisal of historical and critical methods. These methods, limited as they are for getting at the theological substance of Scripture, are nevertheless indispensable for revealing the contours of the canonical witness. The primary function of critical methods should not be to reconstruct bib-

lical history in ways amenable to modern historiography or to establish an ostensibly pristine pre-canonical text. Rather, critical methods should be used to ascertain how the community expressed in the canon its historical witness to God's self-disclosure in Israel and Christ. I have never been more persuaded that many of the goals and conclusions of historical criticism are dead wrong. This has sometimes been due to failures of criticism's own inner logic and sometimes because the questions it asks of Scripture are of no or little interest to the content and intention of Scripture as theologically conceived. At the same time, I have never been more persuaded that we must be free to apply the full range of critical methods to the canonical witness. If the goal is reading the Bible *as Scripture*, there is nothing to fear and everything to be gained from a properly critical reading. Thus, we need more historical critical investigation, not less. But it must be put to the service of ends other than those that have been dominant among the critics for so many decades.

We do well to heed Karl Barth's admonition that the critics were not critical enough. Barth believed that the critics were naive in failing to recognize the gap between the "historical sense" and the meaning imbedded in the text as the result of revelation. No human method or effort could get at the latter. Understood theologically, divine revelation can only be apprehended with divine assistance (prevenient grace!). The fact is, it is quite impossible to separate culturally conditioned human words in the Bible from God's word. All of the Bible is culturally conditioned; none of it is immune to the effects of having been written and transmitted by human beings. For Barth, this impasse could be bridged only by the analogy of faith, which is nothing more or less than correspondence between an act of God and an act of a human subject. The act from God's side is self-disclosure; from the human side it is faith in that self-disclosure. God must make the human understanding conform to the divine utterance (McCormack 325-332). The fear that critical methods will uncover a human Bible is ill-founded. There is no question that the Bible is human, but God is able by grace to speak through that human vessel in a way that suffices to make us wise unto salvation. Seen from this perspective, criticism is our ally rather than our foe.

Equally, *Wesleyan* biblical interpretation, no less than *Christian* biblical interpretation, must be securely grounded in the historic and present Church. While this sounds platitudinous if not tautological, it is a crucial matter whether we operate as autonomous individual interpreters who grant privileged status to an alleged objective or scientific perspective or

whether we function primarily as “doctors of the church.” As its “doctors,” the church’s rule of faith is the presupposition of our work. Quintessential Protestant principles such as *Sola Scriptura*, the internal witness of the Holy Spirit, or the priesthood of all believers, are vitiated if they are invoked to support private or secular renderings of Scripture (McCormack 336; Hauerwas 27). To be sure, it hardly improves matters to counter individualistic interpretation with dogmatic, obscurantist, or naïve appeals to some implicit Protestant version of the magisterium. At the same time, the Church is in the end the final arbiter of how Scripture is read and interpreted. Thus, the Church will always be in a dialectical relationship with its canon, simultaneously confessing that its rule of faith derives from the biblical witness and that its rule of faith may be corrected, made more apposite or given more careful nuances by that same biblical witness. This dialectical activity is, of course, carried out under the tutelage of the Holy Spirit.

This is a problem of such complexity that our very best efforts toward a solution doubtless fall short. Still, directing our energies to this problem would, I believe, contribute considerably more to the vitality of Wesleyan thought than many of the issues that have occupied us heretofore, especially since we emphasize so readily the importance that ecclesiastical tradition had for Wesley. Unfortunately, Wesley’s historic emphasis has been rendered ineffectual in light of the fact that no substantive attempt is made any longer to acquaint exegetes with the church’s interpretive tradition. Several generations of Wesleyan interpreters have been trained without any meaningful exposure to the church’s vital history of interpretation. What does it reveal about us that in many of our seminaries students may study a variety of ancient Near Eastern languages to get at the “historical background” of the Bible, while the languages that would give us access to the church’s exegetical tradition are virtually ignored? I would even go so far as to suggest that acquaintance with the rabbinical interpretative traditions would have a salutary effect on Old Testament exegesis. Be that as it may, how can we continually laud Wesley’s respect for and appeal to church tradition given the fact that our own commitments to that same tradition have become so anemic?

There are perhaps two aspects to recovering a robust view of the church’s interpretive tradition in our exegetical endeavors. One involves attending to the history of interpretation for heuristic reasons. Being aware of the methods used or directions taken by biblical interpreters in various eras of the church is extremely valuable. It is possible to be

informed by these earlier efforts without being blind to whatever mistakes or excesses obtained. Even egregious interpretations may have some positive value in that they underscore the church's struggle to make sense of texts whose "plain" meanings appeared hopelessly irrelevant.

For the most part, the church has tried to hear God speak in the biblical texts. The difficulty of hearing a divine utterance through many texts led to some of the elaborate methods to "get behind" the text to a moral, religious, or theological sense. Rather than dismissing these efforts as nothing more than pre-modern ineptitude or prejudice, it might be more instructive to sympathize with the problems confronting interpreters operating in differing periods of church history. Just as a knowledge of the church's deliberations that eventuated in the ecumenical creeds enables one to comprehend more adequately the actual theological issues that were at stake, so a comparable awareness of the debates over Scriptures meaning throughout the life of the church should be seen as beneficial if not requisite.

A second aspect involves awareness of the fact that the church's interpretive tradition cannot be reduced merely to the aggregate of comments made by any and all individuals who happened to engage in biblical interpretation sometime in the life of the church. Just as there is a theological tradition in the church with an upper case -T- and a lower case -t-, so there is *Tradition* and *tradition* in the interpretive realm. The Church's interpretive tradition is no less selective than its theological tradition.

According to Mark Burrows, the medieval theologian Jean Gerson tried to develop an "ecclesial hermeneutic" in which two features were paramount. One was the holiness of the interpreter; that is, the exegete had to be completely caught up in the spiritual, moral, and sacramental life of the church. Valid interpretation could not be detached in and ways from spiritual disciplines and church life. Thus, instead of viewing commitment to the church as a bias impeding proper interpretation - as "modern" epistemology in its inception had it - it is precisely this predilection toward the church and its rule of faith that fosters proper interpretation.

A second feature of Gerson's program took seriously the realization that the church's interpretive tradition was indeed selective. For the most part the church had indicated, at least informally, which interpretations and which interpreters were broadly sanctioned. This was not to transform any particular interpreter or interpretive tradition into a magisterium. Rather, it was an attempt on the church's part to distinguish between

exegetical approaches that were viewed as broadly compatible with the rule of faith or orthodoxy and exegetical approaches which were viewed as broadly incompatible with the rule of faith or orthodoxy (Burrows 152-172). The ecclesiastically oriented interpreter begins the task informed by and committed to that interpretive tradition which the church has adopted as its own. Because part of the church's rule of faith is that Scripture is the source of its faith and life, the interpreter need not be in bondage to the tradition. Otherwise, Scripture's voice would be effectively silenced.

But it is possible to take the tradition seriously, to be informed by it, and even to be committed passionately to it, without merely finding in Scripture what one set out to find in the first place. Should not Wesleyans be supportive of an exegetical task in which the church's interpretive traditions are viewed as guideposts rather than roadblocks? However this question is answered, the necessity of asking it seems to me to be beyond dispute.

Finally, as Wesleyans who are "seeking understanding" in the biblical witness, we need to re-evaluate the great gulf we have placed between "biblical theology" and "systematic theology." To be sure, these are separate disciplines, requiring different training and the application of different skills. But it is a major error to regard biblical theology principally as a descriptive task and systematic theology' as a constructive one. It is not the job of biblical theologians to amass "facts" which may the!] be used K by systematians. Biblical theology that is carried out in the service of the church must be thoroughly informed by theology. Likewise, systematic theology that is carried out in the service of the church must be thoroughly informed by the biblical witness. How could it be otherwise? Biblical theologians approach the Bible in the first place because of the church's confession relative to the nature and function of Scripture. As biblical theologians engage in the exegetical and expository task, they should never lose sight of the church's rule of faith.

The goal is to ascertain, assess, and proclaim the text's witness to divine revelation. That witness is subsequently brought to bear on the church's theological positions. Nothing could be more ecclesiastically oriented or theological than that! To put the issue more sharply, it is a fair question to ask whether biblical theologians who do not regularly read systematic theology or who remain relatively uninformed about the church's belief system can in fact do their job well. Our goal ought not to be discerning some illusive "Wesleyan hermeneutic." Rather, our goal ought to be entering the biblical world fully equipped as Wesleyan theologians.

Similarly, systematicians must have more than an elementary acquaintance with the biblical witness. Biblical cadences and impulses need to permeate the work of constructive theology. The Bible should be “second nature” to the theologian. Systematic theology is after all a function of the church. That church confesses the Bible to be an indispensable, authoritative, and sufficient source for its faith and life. It is arguable whether any theological work that is not saturated with biblical lore or at least fraught with biblical background deserves the designation “Christian.” If that is true of Christian theology generally, it *a fortiori* is a given for Wesleyan theology.

Because of the inordinate influence of the academy, the theological disciplines have become specialized to the extent that intramural conversation is almost impossible. That is a most unfortunate situation for an educational enterprise which seeks to be coherent and integrated. But for theological education, whether that occurs in the Christian university, seminary, or the Church, such a situation is deplorable and ultimately self-defeating. Anecdotes abound about the fact that in many seminaries biblical studies, systematic theology, and homiletics have virtually nothing to do with one another. This is because the church, for all the rhetoric to the contrary, has not set the agenda. If this is not turned around, the church will be further impoverished by being cut off even more from exposure to the classic theological disciplines.

The first requirement of a Wesleyan is to be a Wesleyan in the most robust sense of that term. If that admonition is taken seriously, there is no need for another. This is because being shaped by a Wesleyan rule of faith demands that we live constantly and comfortably in the “strange world of the Bible.” Conversely, being immersed in that biblical world will have the effect of keeping the rule of faith dynamic, invigorating, challenging and constitutive. Wesleyan faith, if it is true to its own inner logic, will always be a faith seeking biblical understanding.

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TOWARD A WESLEYAN HERMENEUTICS OF SCRIPTURE

by
Robert W. Wall

Not long ago, I asked another Wesleyan biblical scholar, Professor Richard Hays of Duke Divinity School, whether he thought it possible to construct a Wesleyan hermeneutics of Scripture. He responded only by wishing me “good luck,” adding that once he was asked to read a paper on this very topic, only to give up in complete frustration. Even though Hays did allow that the possibility exists in theory, one may well wonder with Stanley Fish whether “theory’s day is dying and the hour is late.”¹

Indeed, I suspect this essay will be read by post-modern pragmatists like Fish as yet another “last minute” attempt to build yet another theoretical model, this one supposing the possibility and importance of a distinctively Wesleyan approach to Scripture. They may wonder why I make the effort, which seems to them too parochial and anachronistic. For justification, they may even appeal to Frank Spina’s survey of those biblical scholars serving Wesleyan communions, which shows that scant connection apparently exists between the core convictions of their Wesleyan heritage and their actual exegetical conclusions.² By this evidence, one is

¹Stanley Fish, “Consequences,” in *Against Theory*, ed. W. T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 128. But see A. Bloom’s biting response to Fish’s point in *Giants and Dwarfs* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 13-31.

²F.A. Spina, as found elsewhere in this journal issue.

tempted to agree that no interpretation of Scripture is or can be distinctively “Wesleyan” in either methodological or theological interest.³

Before responding to such a pessimistic analysis, let me note that this non-relationship between Wesleyan theology and Wesleyan biblical interpretation is characteristic of the entire modern academy. Most Scripture scholars are still engaged in a variety of “descriptive” tasks, while theologians are left to settle the normative claims of faith and witness. At issue is whether theological reflection is any longer a methodological interest of modern biblical scholarship, or whether the subject matter of biblical teaching is even useful for theological discourse. In my view, most biblical scholars remain largely disenchanted with human relations and current audiences, and seem more concerned with disciplinary tasks that seem relevant to the text *qua* text rather than with the ultimate issues of life which are of a theological sort. It comes as no small surprise, then, that the results of modern biblical scholarship are not very conducive to theological reflection.⁴

Yet, especially the recent emergence in the postcritical milieu of “canon” as a heuristic category of biblical-theological reflection challenges this status quo on at least two different fronts.⁵ On the first, an emphasis on the canonicity of Scripture concentrates its subject matter and final “shape” as normative for every Christian confession of and witness to God (as *norma normata*): the whole of Scripture constitutes a certain compass for a biblical people. By the very nature of its subject matter

³I appreciate the keen insight and civil ecumenism reflected by G. Lyons’ important essay, “Hermeneutical Bases of Theology,” *WTJ* 18 (1983), 63-78. I join his efforts in encouraging holiness scholars to become more current and “critical” in their hermeneutical methods. My proposal, however, is grounded in the hope that these same scholars become more *self-critically* “Wesleyan” in their reading of biblical texts.

⁴S.M. Schneiders begins her work, *The Revelatory Text* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991), with a similar critique of guild protocol. Following the lead of H-G. Gadamer, she argues that most scholars are primarily interested in historical “information” rather than in interpersonal “transformation,” in particular methods leading to data-collection rather than in understanding leading to universal truth. The “full” meaning of a biblical text pursues the information it may yield, but as a means to its more existential aspect-meaning that explains “self” in relation to God and neighbor, community and creation. I stand with Dr. Schneiders in these criticisms.

⁵See R. W. Wall, “Reading the New Testament in Canonical Context” in *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation*, ed. J. B. Green (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Eerdmans, forthcoming). Also, my “Introduction” to R. W. Wall and E.E. Lemcio, *The New Testament as Canon* (*JSNTS* s 76, Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), 15-26.

as God's word, then, Scripture helps to draw the church's theological boundaries and supply the language and grammar of normative Christian faith.⁶ This precious conviction about Scripture's authority as a written "rule of Christian faith" asserts that the church's collection(s) of sacred writings bear(s) trustworthy witness to the Sacred One and accordingly must receive our most devoted attention. In this sense, we continually move toward and position ourselves before the canonical texts as sacred ground where we expect to hear the "voice" of the Lord God Almighty.⁷

⁶This point concentrates the "canonical approach" to biblical interpretation pioneered by B. S. Childs, already in his programmatic "Interpretation in Faith" *Interp* 18 (1964) 432-49, but then brilliantly introduced in his commentary on *Exodus* (OTL, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974) and *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979). In his work Childs addresses the question: which form of the biblical text bears witness to the truth about God and God's salvation most acutely and accurately for Christian readers? While Childs would deny that the text in its final, canonical form has a monopoly on the Gospel truth, he would contend that this particular placement of the Gospel truth has been privileged by the church to be normative or "canonical" for its faith and life. The biblical text in its final, canonical form is the primary medium, then, of Christian theological interpretation and reflection (following K. Barth). For a balanced critique of Childs' canonical approach, see J. Barton, *Reading of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 77-103. The more polemical objection raised by J. Barr in his *Holy Scripture: Canon, Authority, Criticism* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983) that the canonical form is not necessarily 'superior' (at least in an historical sense) has since been nicely handled by M. Brett in his *Biblical Criticism in Crisis?* (Cambridge: University Press, 1991).

⁷I am aware that this particular aspect of a canon's importance, as the authoritative and distinctive deposit of divine revelation, is currently under sharp attack. Most of this criticism is concentrated by the claim of a canon's special character and unique importance on its readers. Typically there are two observations made: (1) Each canon shares certain qualities with other canons, which seems to undermine the claim of its special character. Therefore, to place confidence in one canon but not in another requires an act of non-rational faith. For this reason, Childs underscores the canonical role of Scripture to bear witness to Jesus Christ, whose particular life and vocation justifies the "special character" of the Christian canon. (2) Especially M. Foucault argues that every canon privileges and legitimizes a particular ideology (whether socio-political or intellectual). Further, canons of various disciplines and groups are used by those "priests" in charge to maintain their power over the rank-and-file by controlling which texts are used and by determining the rules by which the "official" meaning of these texts is discerned. For this reason, Childs also underscores the importance of a holistic reading of Scripture, which provides ample illustration and justification for ideological diversity among its diverse Christian readership. Scripture bears witness to, in J. A. Sanders' apt phrase, a "pluralizing monotheism." It delineates a debating ground on which self-correcting and mutually-informing conversations take place, which promise even greater clarity in the church's hearing and obedience to God's Word.

Yet, to posit an “objective” witness to God in the whole of the canonical texts says nothing about how the faith community retrieves it in order to nurture its theological understanding. In fact, Scripture’s timeless and trustworthy “truths” find their way into the community’s life only by every new effort to reinterpret their meaning for today—discoveries of original meaning hitherto hidden.”⁸ It is, in fact, the canonicity of Scripture that both justifies and requires its interpretation for believers today (as *norma normans*).⁹ Sometimes faithful interpretation merely confirms the faith of our foreparents. More often, however, the talented interpreter of Scripture responds to a hermeneutical crisis, when Scripture itself fails to exercise its canonical authority because its community of faithful readers finds its teaching either incomprehensible or irrelevant.¹⁰

But “there’s the rub.” While the Christian Bible is an authorized medium of divine revelation for the church, it nevertheless comprises texts that remain severely gapped in two different ways:

(1) Many biblical texts are “intertexts,” composed with other biblical texts in mind and heart, and still other texts, unknown or unintended by the author, that come to the interpreter’s mind in canonical context.¹¹ The talented interpreter listens for echoes of other biblical texts, however low

⁸F. Kermode, *Forms of Attention* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, -1985), 75.

⁹Throughout the history of forming the Christian Scriptures (as well as the Jewish Scriptures), the idea of a biblical canon was concerned not only with the question of a normative literature, but also with the question of its proper interpretation. To accept the canonicity of the Christian Bible is to insist that interpretation must be done again and again on it in search of God’s will and word for each and every new situation. While Scripture’s multivalency and the interpretive situation’s fluidity allow for great freedom, methodological and theological controls do exist which limit and even rank the possible meanings made of a canonical text. Certainly only a few interpreters have requisite authority or “talent” to find God’s will and word in Scripture. More importantly, the subject matter of interpretation must never disagree with the subject matter of Scripture, which bears witness to the God made flesh in Christ Jesus.

¹⁰See M. Fishbane’s brilliant analysis of this point in “Inner-biblical Exegesis,” in *The Garments of Torah* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1992), 3-18.

¹¹I suspect that most NT writers wrote their compositions with their Scriptures in mind. The writings of the NT are christological midrashim on the OT. However, the case that biblical texts are intertexts can be made quite apart from authorial intentions. That is, whether or not biblical texts were composed with other biblical texts in mind, the simultaneity of Scripture commends its intertextuality, and is a canonical rather than authorial property.

their volume, and looks for allusions, however dim their reflection, that link biblical texts together, the one glossing and thickening the meaning of the other.¹²

(2) There remain other gaps of the full meaning of biblical texts that the interpreter slips into in order to complete the meaning of the text for the current faith community. Therefore, the “plain sense” of every canonical text unfolds throughout its history as every talented interpreter adapts its meaning to ever-changing social locations. Biblical interpretation always revises the meaning of Scripture, as well as the faith tradition of its readers, with the authority to transform the terms of present faith and witness under the aegis of the Spirit. For this reason, interpretation is a necessary but disturbing activity, which presumes that the talented interpreter makes the timeless ever timely for a particular community of Scripture’s faithful but skeptical readers.

Note the importance of “*theological location*” as a tacit but critical feature of the interpreter’s social context: the talented hermeneut is also a faithful tradent.¹³ If the interpreter’s faith is keenly Wesleyan, the rendering of Scripture’s full meaning should necessarily underscore and embellish the (especially soteriological) accents of the Wesleyan theological tradition. This is the particular “gap” of Scripture’s meaning that is filled by a Wesleyan’s interpretation of Scripture. This affirmation of a particular theological perspective, embodied and conveyed in “*privileged interpretations*” of Scripture, should *intend* to form and even transform the faith of believers who not only belong to that same faith tradition but are enabled to preserve its theological perspective. Rather than discrediting privileged interpretations as lacking sufficient “objectivity,” then, the

¹²The intertextuality of Scripture only underscores the fundamental importance of what Childs commends as the “holistic reading of Scripture,” where Scripture’s final shape as well as the entirety of its subject matter lead us in edifying conversation with God’s Word *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), pp.717-27.

¹³In his important book, *The Soul of the American University* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), George Marsden well notes that while the post-modernist challenge to the myth of objectivity in the academy has concerned social class and gender, this same line of inquiry could be applied to religious commitments and values as well (433-35). That is, the interpreter’s core convictions about God also lead to a particular understanding of the subject matter of one’s inquiry. Marsden argues, of course, that the public academy, especially that which upholds a democratic people, ought to tolerate and provide a forum for different religious commitments even as it supports the diversity of social class and gender.

church should celebrate and advance them as an aspect of the interpreter's vocation.¹⁴

Of course, we must recognize that every faith tradition is inherently gapped. Therefore, the scholar's search for the Wesleyan meaning and significance of biblical texts should not be marked by a triumphalism, which has discredited some of our work in the past. Nor should we fall prey to the romanticism that fails the critical task. A Wesleyan interpretation of Scripture must allow for countervailing accents that are also well supported by the "plain sense" of canonical Scripture, as well as by other non-Wesleyan interpretive traditions.¹⁵ To presume the simultaneity between every faith tradition of the whole, without also adequately discerning the importance of each in turn, undermines the integral nature of the "one holy, catholic, and apostolic church," thereby distorting its full witness to God.

That is, while Scripture's message for the whole church will surely be distorted without its Wesleyan meaning, so also will its message be distorted if understood only in Wesleyan terms. The mutual criticism that engages and learns from other interpretive traditions and from the full witness of Scripture only deepens the significance of each part which makes up the whole church and its biblical canon. We are all scholars of the church of God, who should embrace the catholic task of nurturing the theological understanding of those believers in our care "for building up the whole body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and knowledge of the Son of God" (Eph. 4:12-13).

My concern is the prospect of a Wesleyan approach to Scripture, and I seek to proffer a theoretical frame of reference that guides in the forma-

¹⁴In this sense, I continue to unpack the thesis illustrated by "Law and Gospel, Church and Canon," *WTJ* 22 (1987), 38-70. From a Pentecostal perspective, the very same point is made nicely by J. C. Thomas, "Women, Pentecostals and the Bible: An Experiment in Pentecostal Interpretation," *JPT* 5 (1994), 41-56. In his essay, Thomas argues that faithful interpretation of God's Word occurs only when the discrete roles/experiences of Spirit, community, Scripture, and teacher are properly integrated. When one of these authoritative voices" lacks volume, a distortion of meaning will result.

¹⁵According to P. Ricoeur, the "sense" of a text is ascertained by properly arranged words and logically developed ideas. Critical exegesis arrives at this "sense" on which all (ideally) might agree. Only on this basis of what a text actually says can readers then determine its "full" meaning-both its truthfulness and contemporary significance-for their more particular and differentiated lives and faiths. See P. Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory* (Fort Worth: TCU Press, 1976), 8-22.

tion of Christian faith and belongs in a privileged way to the Wesleyan tradition. In my view, such is needed in response to the practical failure among most Wesleyan scholars to produce a vital scholarship from and for the Wesleyan church community. Sharply put, we have been too easily domesticated by the influences of the modern academy (theological methods) and of evangelical Protestantism (theological convictions). If the goal of biblical interpretation for the church is praxis, then a model of interpretation that features a Wesleyan theological reading of biblical texts must help to shape the theological understanding and spiritual vitality of its Wesleyan constituency. Only then will the Wesleyan voice be preserved into the next generation for the church catholic.

A Wesleyan Conception of Scripture

I propose one such model of a Wesleyan interpretation of Scripture in order to continue our conversation together.¹⁶ Because theoretical models have a certain structure, which then insures the transmission of the interpreter's theological and methodological interests, what follows is an attempt to re-conceive select features that constitute a Wesleyan approach to biblical interpretation.

Recall my earlier observation that *hermeneuts are tradents*.¹⁷ That is, interpreters of Scripture participate in particular histories of interpretation consisting of methodological and theological interests, whose intention is to preserve the identity of a particular people within and for the wider

¹⁶Much of what follows agrees, in different words and methodology, with J. Stanley's "postmodern" scheme recently introduced in his "Postmodern Holiness." One of the more intriguing features of his essay is Stanley's extended autobiographical introduction, which is characteristic postmodern commentary. Autobiography underscores the contextual cast of interpretation and helps to frame meaning as-at least in part-subjective, self-critical and provisional. As Stanley clearly indicates, the postcritical interpreter *does* consider the literary and historical "evidence" of critical exegesis in determining the meaning and significance of a biblical text. There is a sense in which the "full" or objective meaning of a biblical text is the integral collection of the interpretive community's various subjectivities, including those belonging to holiness interpreters like Stanley.

¹⁷Of course, Gadamer also links the interpreter with the history of a tradition. Yet, rather than the deposit of core convictions and moral values found in "classic" texts, which the interpreter then translates for the "next generation," a tradition is itself hermeneutical. That is, there exists certain hermeneutical presumptions and protocols that also belong to a tradition which must guide the interpreter when translating a tradition in and for a new context.

interpretive community. I proceed from the conservative assumption that Wesleyan interpretation participates in an interpretive history inaugurated by the Wesleys. The programmatic model of Wesleyan hermeneutics, which continues to support this particular history, was forged especially by John Wesley-by his conception and use of the Scriptures.

Before I stand on the shoulders of others to find my way in this matter,¹⁸ let me agree with my colleagues in Wesleyan studies that the founder and framer of our particular history was himself an early modern interpreter of Christian traditions, canonical and ecclesial (esp. patristic and Anglican), whose interpretations were informed by his own intellectual culture and personal experience.¹⁹ It seems wrongheaded for us to assume, then, that the *subject matter* of Wesley's interpretation of Scripture is somehow normative for current Wesleyan interpreters, fixed in his time for our time. Rather, what remains from Wesley in retrospect is the core *conception* of biblical interpretation, however vague and sometimes muddled in practice, which continues to "filter" a Wesleyan meaning of Scripture down to those whose contingent crises, cultural and theological, threaten to undermine a distinctively Wesleyan confession and incarnation of the Bible's normative witness to God for today. In what follows, I

¹⁸Since I am not a scholar of Wesley nor the son of one, my evaluation of recent studies of Wesley's view of Scripture is more "instinctive" than academic. Forgive me if my "instinct" is to select only those features which agree with my hermeneutical assumptions. With that qualification, my consideration of several recent studies of Wesley's idea of Scripture and its interpretation has found most helpful for this discussion the fine study by S. Jones, *John Wesley's Conception and Use of Scripture* (Ph.D. diss., SMU, 1992), which promises to set the standard for this topic in Wesley studies. Also useful is D. Thorsen's *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral* (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Zondervan, 1990), 125-50, whose discussion of this topic is more theologically interested; W. Amett, *John Wesley - Man of One Book* (Th. D. diss., Drew University, 1954); and most recently, R. Maddox, *Responsible Grace* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, esp. 36-47

¹⁹Too much has been made of the well-documented inconsistency between Wesley's conception of Scripture and its interpretation, and his actual use of Scripture. What seems clear is that Wesley's Scripture is a "means of grace" and must always be subordinated to the ministry of salvation. Therefore, while pressing in theory for the authority of its "literal meaning," and even for the oracular character of its very words, Wesley's interpretation of Scripture is really midrashic-(and follows therefore the Bible's own unwritten rules of interpretation!) - often adding or subtracting from the biblical text in order to find its theological address in meanings that indicate the "way into heaven." I believe this is the case even though Wesley himself considered the "original" meaning an important feature of sound exegesis.

want to sketch four features of Wesley's conception and use of Scripture that are of decisive importance in my mind for a Wesleyan approach to biblical interpretation today.

1. The Sacrament of Scripture. Every perspective of Scripture's authority decisively shapes how the text is interpreted. Wesley's view of Scripture is no exception. As is well known, he claimed to be *homo unius libri*- a claim justified by even a cursory reading of his sermons and other works, where the primacy and sufficiency of Scripture is clear and certain. Wesley understood true Christianity to be a biblical religion. Yet, surely Outler is right in distinguishing Wesley's conception of biblical authority from the *sola Scriptura* tradition of the magisterial Reformation.²⁰ Hence, for example, nowhere does Wesley appeal to Scripture as "infallible" nor posit divine revelation exclusively in the propositions of Scripture, verbally inspired by God.²¹ The Wesleyan objection to the fundamentalist Protestant formulation of biblical authority is not so much that it lacks empirical evidence, but that it lacks theological perspicacity. Not only does it seem to follow the errors of christological docetism, but it also fails to understand adequately the canonicity of Scripture. Let me explain this observation from a Wesleyan perspective, which views Scripture as a sacrament of divine revelation and is to be linked to Wesley's robust vision of divine grace.²²

First, the revivalist ethos shaped by Wesley's ministry shifted emphasis from the "faith which is believed" (*fides quae creditur*) to the "faith which believes" (*fides qua creditur*). The result was hardly to set aside the

²⁰"Methodists in Search of Consensus," in *What Should Methodists Teach?* (ed. D. Meeks, Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1990), 37.

²¹So R. Cushman, *John Wesley's Experimental Divinity* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1989), 81.1 caution us not to import back into Wesley's age those terms (e.g., "infallibility" or "inerrancy") which have taken on a more recent connotation during the "modernist vs. fundamentalist" debates of this century. Surely Wesley did not think Scripture "fallible" in its witness to God or any-thing less than an "infallible test" (his words) of faith and life. Rather, it is simply to contend that in consideration of Wesley's actual use of Scripture, especially in his preaching ministry, its authority is always *posited in and proven by its redemptive performance rather than in its "inerrant" propositions*. Thus, Jones argues that Wesley's appeal to the Bible's infallibility envisages Scripture's reliability as a source and norm for Christian doctrine, not the assured result of empirical analysis of its scientific or historical statements (Jones, 26-35).

²²L. Shelton, "John Wesley's Approach to Scripture in Historical Perspective," *WTJ* 16 (1981): 23-50; and followed by Thorsen, 136-37.

sacramental cast of true religion inherited from the Church of England, but rather to qualify it. Rather than merely a confession or confirmation of the believer's placement among the people of God, sacraments are the *via media* of the Sacred which issue in the transforming experience of salvation. In this sense, then, Wesley viewed Scripture as the privileged medium of God's self-disclosure. The reading and hearing of the biblical word in evangelistic preaching and pastoral teaching create the context wherein the word of God is heard and understood as the instrument of prevenient grace, thereby restoring human freedom and enabling the Spirit to bring people freely to saving faith in and fervent love for God. This is the primary role that Scripture performs, then, and on this basis its authority depends. God "authors" Scripture not to warrant some grand system of theological ideas to guide people in orthodox confession, but rather to lead sinful people into thankful worship of a forgiving Lord.

Despite his rhetoric to the contrary, there is ample reason, envisaged especially by his homiletical use of Scripture (see below), that Wesley did not think Scripture's authority to be unilateral and absolute but rather conversational and relational.²³ Rather than coercing faith, Scripture restores the human capacity to respond to God freely. Scripture's appeal is not primarily intellectual but affective and moral, and the ethics of its interpretation are therefore consequentialist. That is, Scripture invites the lost to be found: the poor to be rich in faith; the suffering to experience compassion; the marginal to find a caring community; and the one who hears and is enlightened by Scripture's invitation to new life is made responsible to accept it.

While the biblical promise of transformation is certain, it is also possible to resist. Scripture does not force compliance, even though its actual effect is more convincing than if issued as an edict. Since Scripture bears witness to a God who invites assent by loving concern and not by power plays, its canonicity as a sacrament of divine revelation is understood finally in a profoundly relational way: Scripture discloses God by inviting faith in a God-for-us, who is then confirmed by our concrete experience of God's grace.

Second, even as sacraments require priestly agency for their gracious effect, so also Scripture requires human mediation under the aegis of

²³For the difference between these two classes of authority, see Schneider, 55-59. An argument for a similar point is made by B. P. Stone, "Wesleyan Theology, Scriptural Authority, and Homosexuality," paper presented to the Wesleyan Theological Society, Dayton, Oh., 1994, 3-9.

Spirit and in “proper” consideration of other religious authorities.²⁴ Neither can Scripture interpret itself nor stand alone. The act of interpretation is therefore a collaborative enterprise, which looks above, around, and within in prayerful devotion, and reaches far behind to older Christian wisdom still available. A theological reflection upon Scripture takes place within a pluriformed whole which includes the whole of Scripture and the history of its interpretation as well as the interpreter’s own situation before God and among the community of neighbors.

While the role of the strong interpreter should be underscored according to this model, Wesley’s sacramental view of Scripture is not sacerdotal—a point even more fully embodied in the populism of the American Methodist experience. In this limited sense, Wesley’s hermeneutics are indeed more Protestant than Catholic. The authority of the interpreter is granted as “gift” rather than as “office;” the vocation is for ministry within a community of disciples who are also gifted, rather than for maintenance of a priestly hierarchy which then manages the spiritual and theological formation of the rank-and-file faithful. The interpreter’s real credentials are those of vital piety imbued by learning, which are then recognized by the congregation that alone grants authority for the interpreter to guide them into biblical understanding.

2. The Simultaneity of Scripture. In my opinion, the essential characteristic of the Bible for Wesley is its simultaneity. According to Wesley, to presume the simultaneity between every part of the whole, without also adequately discerning the “plain sense” of each in turn, undermines the integral nature of Scripture and distorts its full witness to God. On this basis, one might well contend that the critical aim of exegesis, which successfully exposes the pluriformity of Scripture, is “to put the text back

²⁴Cf. A. Outler, “The Wesleyan Quadrilateral—in John Wesley,” in *Doctrine and Theology in the United Methodist Church* (ed. T. Langford, Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1991), 75-88. In the same volume, T. Campbell demonstrates that the idea of a “quadrilateral” of religious authorities was conceived by Outler rather than by Wesley: “The Wesleyan Quadrilateral,” 155-61. According to Jones, Wesley actually appealed to five: Scripture, Reason, Christian Antiquity, Church of England, and human experience (80-136). While united and integral in witness to a single Godhead, when properly understood, only Scripture is competent to “norm” all aspects of the Christian’s life. Reason and the Fathers collaborate with Scripture in matters of theological understanding, whereas experience collaborates with Scripture in matters of life. I find most interesting Wesley’s appeals to the Church of England, which helps to draw the boundaries of that context of faith and life that Scripture then interprets.

together in a way that makes it available in the present and in its (biblical) entirety—not merely in the past and in the form of historically contextualized fragments.”²⁵

In this sense, then, the “plain sense” of individual biblical texts (e.g., Rom. 3:23) or of whole biblical traditions (e.g., Pauline), although foundational for scriptural interpretation, has value only in relation to this more holistic end. We should note and celebrate the fact that much of Wesley’s theological innovation appealed to the non-Pauline writings for its biblical justification. Indeed, especially his soteriology is possible only by the creative integration of the deeper-logic of Pauline teaching (which emphasizes justification by faith) and the non-Pauline teaching (which emphasizes sanctification by faithfulness), which are found together in the NT.²⁶

Perhaps Wesley presses for a more holistic reading of Scripture to correct the regrettable tendency of Protestant hermeneutics to prioritize the NT generally and the Pauline corpus specifically over the rest of the biblical canon. The pitfall of the Protestant hermeneutical tradition is its tendency toward a “canon within the Canon,” a reductionism which in its worse form approaches Scripture much like a church pot-luck supper, where one can eventually find something edible if one is hungry enough. Biblical interpretation takes from Scripture whatever appeals to the reader’s taste. Wesley clearly believed that every Scripture in every case embodied a straight-forward meaning (“plain sense”) that complied with the rest of Scripture (“wholeness”). Thus, “the Scripture of the Old and New Testaments is a most solid and precious system of divine truth. Every part is worthy of God, and all together are one entire body” (“Preface” to *Notes*, par. 10).

Wesley certainly agreed that the Christian Bible is the church’s “rule of faith” (or “analogy of faith”) by which authorized theological and moral boundaries are marked off around the confessing community. The theological subject matter of the “proper” interpretation of Scripture will never disagree with the subject matter which believers have always witnessed and confessed to be true about the God made flesh in Christ Jesus our Lord. Even though this point is a cardinal article of catholic hermeneutics, which comes to us from Irenaeus through Calvin to Wes-

²⁵So J. Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible, The Old Testament, and Historical Criticism* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), 79.

²⁶So Wall, “Law and Gospel.”

ley, the particular content of this confessed “faith,” which reflects biblical teaching, differs in important ways between faith traditions. Biblical interpreters whose faith is shaped by the accents of differing theological traditions will (and should) find different analogical meanings apropos to their particular theological and ecclesial locations.

It therefore seems crucial for us to describe the core convictions of this “divine truth” that unifies the whole of Scripture. In Wesley’s case, the grand themes that make up this “system of divine truth” are those which frame the *ordo salutis*—justification and sanctification, divine grace by human faith and works, love for God/neighbor and holiness of life.²⁷ Perhaps it even more apropos to our tradition to call this a “way of salvation,” since, more than a “system of divine truth,” it is an experience of divine grace that issues in a “way” of holy living. In any case, every part of Scripture, studied independently from the whole, bears witness to this same soteriological reality whether as promise (OT) or fulfillment (NT). That is, a Wesleyan approach to biblical interpretation will seek after and recover those meanings from every biblical passage that either calls (priestly task) or corrects (prophetic task) a “proper” understanding of salvation among Wesleyan believers.²⁸

One final point. D. Jacobsen contends that different hermeneutical programs are shaped by different religious sociologies and epistemologies, which result from fundamentally different views of Scripture’s authority and character that are deeply ingrained in a faith tradition and passed on to its interpreters. He argues that the socio-religious shaping of the Wesleyan tradition naturally inclines its biblical interpreters toward viewing their task as “open-ended and conversational.” Meanings made of Scripture are more fluid and contextual. Jacobsen believes this is so because Arminius (whom Wesley follows at this point) understood Scrip-

²⁷So S. Jones, 60, with many others. I have tried to summarize this same theological core in, “The Relevance of the Book of Revelation for the Wesleyan Tradition,” under the rubric “A Wesleyan Location for Hermeneutics” (paper presented to the Wesleyan Theological Society, Oklahoma City, 1993).

²⁸Childs defends the wholeness of Scripture by arguing that while the OT and NT sound different notes—one by Israel and the other by the Church—both bear witness to the same God and salvation. While the prophetic voices of Israel, congregated in the OT, issue God’s promise of salvation, the apostolic voices of the Church, congregated in the NT, claim that God’s promised salvation has been fulfilled through the messianic ministry of the Risen Jesus and has been made present in his Spirit. See *Biblical Theology of Old and New Testaments* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 721-22. This seems right to me.

ture's authority in functional terms, whether to confirm the actual experience of conversion or to interpret the holiness of life for a particular setting. In effect, the simultaneity of Scripture not only bears witness to the simultaneity of the church catholic, but also to every experience under heaven that is transformed by the grace of God. Those of Calvinist traditions, on the other hand, tend to press for a uniform interpretation of Scripture and its single meaning that justifies a creedal and uniform "orthodoxy"-one book, one faith. Scripture's authority is viewed in propositional terms to confirm the written text as the *vox Dei*.²⁹

3. The Soteriological Use of Scripture. According to Wesley, the proper interpretation of Scripture should lead people into the way and experience of salvation. In this sense, the Wesleyan "analogy of faith" is not only soteriological in theological content, so that the meaning made of every Scripture articulates the salvific purposes of God. The intended effect of Scripture's performance is also soteriological, so that the beneficiaries of sound interpretation will be liberated from their sin and its destructive results. The soteriological cast of Wesleyan hermeneutics is both theological and practical. In this light, Scripture's functional role is to facilitate saving faith, both its transformed life and transforming practice. For Wesley, the best evidence of Scripture's authority is the experience of a transformed life, since the deeper logic of his theological conception is that sound doctrine follows from and supplies an interpretation of the experience of divine grace. In this sense, then, Scripture not only nurtures theological understanding, but also the sort of person who knows and responds to God's Word.

Again, the revivalist ethos that helped to shape Wesley's conception of salvation also helped to shape this presumption of Scripture's useful-

²⁹D. Jacobsen, "The Calvinist - Arminian Dialectic in Evangelical Hermeneutics," *CSR* 23 (1993), 72-89. Jacobsen's intriguing conclusion is that Reformed hermeneutics is better suited for the mind-set of "modern" interpreting, while Wesleyan hermeneutics is better suited for postmodern interpretation. Indeed, the methodological interests of many conservative Reformed interpreters seem "positivistic." Their approach to a text is to capture the fixed meaning-perhaps from the mind of its author-for all time. Such positivism has utterly failed to convince or compel. On this basis, he predicts the ascendancy of Wesleyan interpretation within the postmodern evangelical subculture! The dialectical cast of postmodern hermeneutics, which moves in a controlled yet creative way between text and reader to locate its current meaning, seems better equipped to correct the pitfalls of modern interpretation.

ness. The idea of “scriptural holiness” presumes that Scripture functions to inspire an understanding of holiness that allows grace to form a new capacity for a holy life in the world rather than as the legal arrangement with God which only “cheapens” grace and allows sin and selfishness to persist. The God of Wesley’s Bible is no nominalist: God’s grace results in public and historical proof of God’s saving activity. Holiness is the primary characteristic of the transformed life that does not retire from the world, but resides as light in the midst of darkness. Nor does Scripture teach that holiness is a capacity of grace given only to a privileged few; rather, grace finds all, no matter their class or rank. Nor does Scripture bear witness to a quiet holiness that remains the inward evidence of personal salvation. Scripture forms an understanding of divine grace that is practical and participatory, empowering the believer’s ministry toward others in opposition toward everything and anyone that opposes the Creator’s good intentions for everything and anyone.

In making these observations, I am separating Wesley’s conventional rhetoric about Scripture’s importance from his core convictions about its practical usefulness, which were primarily pastoral and evangelical. Biblical interpretation is concerned with awakening a faithful commitment to God in the present rather than in researching the past in order to warrant an orthodox creedalism. It is this emphasis in Wesley, as several have noted, that agrees theologically and methodologically with the postmodern interest in human “liberation.”³⁰ I suspect there is a fairly robust hermeneutical agreement here as well, especially in understanding the interpreter’s role in facilitating the dynamic dialogue between text and context, where the word of God is located and where the preferred meaning of the biblical text effects saving faith in those who hear and respond to it.³¹ The conservative Protestant objection to the contextual cast of liberation exegesis, which moves from external referents in need of liberation to the biblical text for hope and direction, is rooted in the tacit positivism of the magisterial Reformation and its *sola scriptura* principle (see above), which more naturally moves from biblical texts to their author’s

³⁰Esp. T. Runyon, “Introduction: Wesley and the Theologies of Liberation,” in *Sanctification & Liberation*, (ed. T. Runyon, Nashville: Abingdon, 1981), 9-48.

³¹See C. Rowland and M. Comer, *Liberating Exegesis* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989).

intended meaning and only then to external referents.³² This seems similar to Wesley's tacit objection to Protestant hermeneutics as practiced by the mainstream clergy of the Church of England.

4. The Sermonic Midrash of Scripture. Let me start this final point with an impression, sharply stated. Wesley's hermeneutics are more midrashic than "rational," following the principles of premodern Jewish/Christian interpreters rather than those of modern Protestant interpreters of Scripture. In this regard, it seems significant to me that Wesley left behind no systematic treatment of Scripture's conception, no hard rules to follow when interpreting its meaning. Rather, his "real" (not rhetorical) conception of Scripture emerges when preaching.³³ In fact, Wesley himself would probably dispute the value of my theoretical construct and instruct us to listen again to him preach! The salient features of Wesley's unrecorded hermeneutics are embodied in his sermons, where he follows the methods of those who first reflected on the good news in Christ in the context of their own Scriptures and faith communities.³⁴

Admitting the limitation of using one model (Jewish exegesis) to inform another (Wesleyan exegesis), let me indicate two characteristics of homiletical midrash that parallel in my mind Wesley's use of Scripture in his preaching ministry.³⁵ Especially homiletical midrash is a "contempo-

³²My observation is similar to the criticism of Schüssler Fiorenza that an imperialist reading of Scripture seeks to establish timeless patterns and rules, whereas a liberationist reading of Scripture is "critically open to the possibility of its own transformation," *In Memory of Her* (New York: Crossroads, 1983), 34. That is, the meaning of Scripture is itself transformed by the interpreter's attempts to understand the will and Word of God for the current people of God.

³³Should we be surprised that the "tradition" which informed Wesley's faith included the *Book of Homilies*?

³⁴I am not arguing that Wesley self-consciously followed the methods of the biblical writers; however, perhaps a case could be made that apostolic hermeneutics was an aspect of Wesley's ideal of restoring apostolic Christianity to the Church of England. In this case, his use of Scripture was patterned after the biblical writers in pursuit of an authentically NT faith and order.

³⁵Current discussions of the intersection of Jewish and early Christian hermeneutics remain very complex and hotly contested between interested scholars, Jewish and Christian. In this brief discussion of midrash, I need to set aside the various historical (e.g., the *middot* of midrashic praxis) and literary (e.g., the genre of midrashim) problems in defining "midrash" and treat only the topic of midrash as an interpretive method, which itself is a complex and contested topic. See the still useful article by R. LeDeaut, "Apropos: a Definition of Midrash," *Interp* 25 (1971) 259-82; also, the introduction by J. Neusner, *What is Midrash?* (GBS, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).

izing” hermeneutic, suitable for a sacramental view of Scripture, which supposes that interpreters mediate between God’s Word and their own worlds. All truth which belongs to God is latent in Scripture and waits to be discovered at the appropriate time by the appointed interpreter. There can be no single, original sense of a multivalent Scripture that can effectively broker the Word of God for every people of God. Meanings change with time and place. Midrashic exegesis, therefore, does not pursue meaning with blinders on, but with a prior understanding of those historic contingencies or theological commitments that might threaten the community’s faith. The goal of biblical commentary is never simply to clarify the meaning of the biblical text per se, but rather to clarify how the text ciphers the messiness of the readers’ own context in order to liberate them from it. Midrash is not so much a commentary on Scripture as it is a commentary on life. Therefore, the interpreter’s anointing” is discerned as much by knowledge of the audience as by knowledge of the biblical text.

Biblical writers themselves felt some freedom in adjusting their own sacred texts, either in citation or by allusion, so they conveyed God’s Word for the new crisis of faith in the clearest manner possible. In this sense, congruence exists between text and life, not between text and text: the community’s rationale for submitting to its Bible as its Canon has less to do with the consistency of its propositions and more with its adaptability to the changing demands which threaten the legitimacy of our Christian faith. Further, biblical writers interpreted their own Bibles in ways which authorized a certain understanding of their community’s faith and life; the sacred text either cited or alluded to became God’s “commentary” on the context. A midrashic interpretation of the Bible underscores the importance of the situation of faith which the living God continues to address through the community’s Bible. Not only is authority understood in terms of the relevancy of the text for the ongoing context of faith (rather than in terms of, for example, propositional congruence), but the church’s ongoing interpretation of the Bible is controlled by how well interpretation “re-presents” the text in ways which have meaning for the context.

The literary structure of homiletical midrashim makes this point, since typically the opening commentary on biblical texts is but the means to a concluding appeal for the audience to have “stronger” (e.g., messianic) faith (as in haggadic midrashim) or a more obedient (e.g., Torah observant) life (as in halakhic midrashim). The form of Wesley’s homilies is strikingly similar. Exegesis of suitable scripture around a specific

theme leads by stages to an exhortation for self-examination, concluding with an appeal for holiness of life.

Second, what controls midrashic interpretation to keep it “on line” is its theological subject matter and its spiritual effect. Thus, the intertextuality of midrash follows the conviction that all Scripture coheres around a self-consistent body of themes (see above under “Simultaneity of Scripture”). In this case, Wesley’s sermons were centered by the grand themes of the *ordo salutis*, and became theological commentaries on how God’s salvation related to his audience in practical ways. Further, Wesley’s concluding appeals presume a transforming result. The preaching of Scripture intends certain results—conversion, repentance, changed life, moral action, deeper devotion, community building. Wesley never measured the orthodoxy of a sermon by theological proposition alone but by practical result as well. Indeed, the orthodoxy of biblical theology should always yield the orthopraxy of Christian perfection.

Conclusion

I conclude feeling even more tentative about the project of Wesleyan hermeneutics than when I began. Am I correct, however, to presume that we possess from Wesley a particular perspective on Scripture, and that this perspective forges in turn those presuppositions of biblical interpretation that help to shape in a decisive way what it means for Wesleyans to be the church and to act like the church should for the glory of God? Am I right to sponsor a hermeneutics whose agenda is to “retribalize” Wesleyanism in order to nurture, even to reform the theological understanding and praxis of the whole church? I think so. Moreover, the Wesleyan interpreter has primary loyalty to Wesleyan communions of believers, as prophet or priest. In this regard, the Wesleyan interpreter should cast biblical meaning/theology in a way that enables our particular cloud of Christian witnesses to understand and embody more fully a distinctively Wesleyan form of saving faith and holy life. What I am less certain of is how best to do this.

TOWARD A HOLINESS HERMENEUTIC: THE OLD TESTAMENT AGAINST ISRAELITE RELIGION

by
John W. Wright

As the study of the Old Testament struggled for its independence from theological dogmatics in the late eighteenth century, it quickly became enslaved to a new master, the history of Israel. Historical “reality” became the touchstone for biblical theology. As Hans Frei has argued, this era “exemplified a massive scholarly movement for which there was a direct convergence of the meaning of the biblical narratives with the shape of events to which they refer.”¹ Whether “liberal” or “conservative,” theologians and exegetes placed the authority of the biblical narrative “behind” the biblical text in history, i.e., the events or religion referred to within the biblical text.²

¹Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University, 1974), 95.

²“A basic division . . . existed in nineteenth-century Old Testament scholarship. The theological significance of the Hebrew Scriptures for critical scholars lay in its reflection of the ‘religious life’ of the people of Israel; for the orthodox apologists, the significance was found in the ‘historical truth’ preserved in the biblical writings. [But] both sides were committed to the history behind the biblical writings” (John W. Wright, “From Center to Periphery: 1 Chronicles 23-27 and the Interpretation of Chronicles in the Nineteenth Century,” in *Priests, Prophets, and Scribes*, ed. by Eugene Ulrich, et al.; Sheffield: JSOT, 1992, 28).

What is not so apparent, however, is the ecclesiological commitment that accompanied such a theological understanding. The ecclesiology of the magisterial reformation, itself anchored within a tradition of Constantinian Christianity, undergirded such an agenda.³ Both “liberals” and “conservatives,” Lutheran or Reformed, presupposed continuity between the Scriptures and the state religion of Israel.⁴ This tradition continues today. In general, scriptural authority lies behind the text in the divine revelation in history, either in the events of “biblical” Israel⁵ or in the ancient Israelite experience of God.⁶ In both cases, a commitment to the authority of the Old Testament has meant a commitment to the state religion of Israel.⁷ As holiness scholars have moved within the mainstream

³While space does not permit a defense of this statement, it is possible to see this ecclesiological difference, for instance, in Jewish exegetical hesitation to promote a universal reading of the Hebrew Bible for Jews and Christians alike. See John J. Collins and Roger Brooks (eds.), *The Hebrew Bible or Old Testament? Studying the Bible in Judaism and Christianity* (CJA 5; South Bend: University of Notre Dame, 1990); and John Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible, The Old Testament, and Historical Criticism: Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies* (Louisville: WJKP, 1993).

⁴See, for instance, the two “classical” OT theologies of the twentieth century: Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962-65); and Walter Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961-67).

⁵Cf., e.g., in a recent evangelical book on the “peoples of the Old Testament world.” Alan Millard states that the “distinctive feature of ancient Israel” is “God’s revelation of himself through its [Israel’s] history” (“Foreword” in *Peoples of the Old Testament World*, ed. by A. J. Hoerth, G. L. Mattingly, and E. M. Yamauchi, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1994, 10).

⁶See, for instance, Paul Hanson: “We turn to our scriptural heritage, therefore, as an essential dimension of our response to God in an ongoing, living relationship. We draw on the patterns of transcendent meaning that emerge in Scripture as a guide to our own effort to make sense of an often baffling world. It is not with a merely antiquarian interest that we look to the people of God in the Bible. They are our spiritual ancestors, and their encounters with God were instrumental in the formation of a concept of life that has been bequeathed to us as the foundation on which we can construct an authentic life of faith and humaneness. As people responding to the creative, redemptive God today, we represent an extension of the biblical community of faith” (*The People Called: The Growth of Community in the Bible*, San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986, 536).

⁷And often, by implication, a commitment to the scholars contemporary society; see, for instance, Paul D. Hanson, *Dynamic Transcendence* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978).

of professional biblical scholarship in America, they have tended to share this presupposition. There is no particular “holiness hermeneutic,” only the shared attempt to discover what the biblical text meant historically.⁸

This whole theological enterprise, however, currently teeters on the brink of collapse. Scholarship within the last twenty years has undermined past scholarship precisely at the point of the continuity between the theological perspective of the Old Testament and the state religion of Israel.⁹ Archaeological findings,¹⁰ new critical investigations of the biblical literature,¹¹ and developments in literary theory¹² have converged to bring a profound unsettledness to earlier “assured results of critical schol-

⁸See Sherrill F. Munn, “A Response to the Paper Presented by John E. Hartley,” *WTJ* 17:1(1982), 77-84. See now, however, John E. Stanley, “Elements of a Postmodern Holiness Hermeneutic Illustrated by Way of the Book of Revelation,” *WTJ* 28 (1993), 23-43 which shares a common ecclesiological starting point, and many of the same themes and concerns as this paper.

⁹Morton Smith’s *Palestinian Parties and Politics that Shaped the Old Testament* (New York: Columbia University, 1972; 2nd corr. ed., London: SCM, 1987) may be considered the groundbreaking work that brought this issue to light. See also works such as Giovanni Garbini, *History and Ideology in Ancient Israel* (trans. J. Bowden; New York: Crossroad, 1988); N. Peter Lemche, *Ancient Israel: A New History of Israelite Society* (Sheffield: *JSOT*, 1988); and Philip R. Davies, *In Search of Ancient Israel* (Sheffield: *JSOT*, 1992).

¹⁰See, for instance, Israel Finkelstein, *The Archaeology of the Israelite Settlement* (trans. by D. Saltz; Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1988) for the pre-monarchic period and David W. Jamieson-Drake, *Scribes and Schools in Monarchic Judah: A Socio-Archeological Approach* (*SWBA* 9; Sheffield: *JSOT*, 1991) for the monarch period. Each analyzes material remains that present a vastly different picture of Israelite history than that provided by the biblical text.

¹¹Especially prominent has been the re-thinking of the composition of the Pentateuch and its assignment to later dates than that given by the traditional documentary hypothesis. The crucial work in this regard is Rolf Rendtorff, *The Problem of the Process of Transmission in the Pentateuch* (Sheffield: *JSOT*, 1990). It has also been persuasively argued that rather than an early, fundamental institution within Israelite society, the covenant appeared relatively late within Israelite religion. Cf. L. Peritt, *Bundestheologie im Alten Testament* (*WMANT* 36; Neukirchen: Neukirchener, 1969) and Ernest Nicholson, *God and His People: Covenant and Theology in the Old Testament* (New York: Oxford University, 1986).

¹²For an early application of post-structuralist literary theory to the text of the Hebrew Bible, see Peter Miscall, *The Workings of Old Testament Narrative* (Philadelphia: Fortress; Atlanta: Scholars, 1983).

arship.”As a result, biblical theology remains in perpetual dis-ease.¹³ As we pass into a “post-Christian era” in the West, these results would seemingly doom biblical theological agendas shaped by the magisterial reformation.

Yet perhaps here also is an opportunity. Perhaps in the current ferment a specifically “holiness hermeneutic” may open a new space for an Old Testament theology. If the issue of biblical hermeneutics is ecclesiological,¹⁴ perhaps the ecclesiology of the American Holiness Movement, often at odds with the magisterial reformation, can provide a different hermeneutical approach to the theology of the Old Testament.¹⁵ It is the purpose of this paper to explore such a possibility. Drawing upon a “sec-

¹³While publications on OT theology have continued at an unprecedented rate in the last 20 years, this seems largely reflective of the uncertainty of what direction to take the field. As John J. Collins writes: “Biblical theology is a subject in decline. The evidence of this decline is not so much the permanent crisis in which it seems to have settled, or the lack of a new consensus to replace the great works of Eichrodt or von Rad. Rather the decline is evident in the fact that an increasing number of scholars no longer regard theology as the ultimate focus of biblical studies, or even as a necessary dimension of those studies at all. The cutting edges of contemporary biblical scholarship are in literary criticism on the one hand and sociological criticism on the other. Not only is theology no longer queen of the sciences in general, its place even among the biblical sciences is in doubt” (John J. Collins in *The Hebrew Bible and Its Interpreters*, W. H. Propp, B. Halpern, and D. N. Freedman, eds., Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990, 1).

¹⁴See Stanley Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scripture: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 7-44; and Stephen E. Fowl and L. Gregory Jones, *Reading in Communion: Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991). For the general theological perspective on which I depend, see Stanley Hauerwas, *After Christendom: How the Church is to Behave if Freedom, Justice, and a Christian Nation are Bad Ideas* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991).

¹⁵For Wesley, like those within the radical reformation, felt that Constantine’s conversion led to the corruption of the faith by merging “the Church and state, the kingdoms of Christ and of the world . . . that they will hardly ever be divided till Christ comes to reign upon earth”(Works, “Of Former Times,” VII: 164). See Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley’s Evangelical Economics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 38-43. For Wesley’s ecclesiology, see David Lowes Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1985; rev. 1992), 9-38 and especially, 140-42. For the populist, Jeffersonian development (and perversion?) of this ecclesiology within early American Methodism and the early American Holiness Movement, see Nathan Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University, 1989).

tarian” ecclesiology within the American Holiness Movement, I will explore the possibility that the Old Testament emerged largely as a polemic against the normative practice of Israelite religion. In other words, I will probe the thesis that the Old Testament itself is a “sectarian” document, a text whose authority arose as it shaped the identity of a faithful minority group. Rather than reflecting the history and practice of the Israelite majority, the Hebrew Bible contains the vision of the faithful minority of those devoted to Yahweh, and Yahweh alone. As a test case, I will examine “the image of God, male and female” (Gen 1:26-28) as a monotheistic response to Israelite polytheistic devotion to Yahweh and his consort, Asherah, a goddess whose presence is attested in the Hebrew Bible and confirmed by recent archaeological finds in Israel.

Yahweh and His Asherah: The Image of God, Male and Female

It is hard to overestimate the importance of the concept of the “image of God” in Christian anthropology. If possible, the concept plays an even more significant role within the Wesleyan theological tradition.¹⁶ Textually, the concept is anchored in Gen. 1:26-28. If the significance of a text may be measured by the amount of commentary it generates, this text is amazing. It has been seen as central to Israelite religion and anthropology. Curiously, however, few intertextual echoes of the text exist within the canon of the Hebrew Bible itself¹⁷ and gender implications seem to have had no effect on the patriarchy of ancient Israelite society.¹⁸ This situation changes, however, within Second Temple Judaism. Here the text

¹⁶For Wesley, it is humanity’s creation in the holy image of God and our subsequent marring by sin in the fall that sets the anthropological basis for his order of salvation, i.e., the restoration of this image by the grace of God (see “Justification by Faith,” *Works*, V:64-56). For the development of this in contemporary Wesleyan thought, see Mildred Bangs Wynkoop, *A Theology of Love. The Dynamic of Wesleyanism* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1972), 102-24, 145-48.

¹⁷Genesis 5:1, a recapitulation of Gen 1:26-28, and Gen 9:6 contain the only other references to humanity made in the “image of God.” As Claus Westermann states, “What is striking is that one verse about the person, almost unique in the Old Testament, has become the center of attention in modern exegesis, whereas it has no such significance in the rest of the Old Testament.” Claus Westermann, *Genesis* (BKAT, I; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchen, 1974), 148.

¹⁸For a brief survey of family structure in Israel and early Judaism, see C. J. H. Wright, “Family,” *ABD* (2:761-69). The patriarchal nature of this family is seen in its most common name, “the house of the father.”

seems to have formed the imagination of many within nascent Judaisms.¹⁹

This simple observation raises an interesting point. It would seem that Gen. 1:26-28 became significant only as canon, i.e., a text that formed a particular theological community-not because it reflected a popular historical religious belief or social practice, but because of its authoritative status as Scripture. The text does not seem to reflect the practice of Israelite religion. Ultimately, however, this text unleashed intertextual echoes that exceeded the conditions of its production, echoes not lost on the American Holiness Movement. In order to defend this claim, it is necessary to examine the evidence of at least one “image of God” found in Israelite religion within the material remains of ancient Israel and reflected in the Hebrew Bible. Then it will be possible to return to Gen. 1:26-28 to clarify an important exegetical issue and understand the theological context that the text addresses.

Yahweh and His Asherah as the “Image of God.”

Until fifteen years ago, the Canaanite goddess Asherah received little attention within the study of Israelite religion. She was deemed a foreign, deviant scourge rejected by the leaders of Israelite society.²⁰ Recently discovered inscriptions, however, have placed Asherah at the center of an important debate: Did Yahweh, the Israelite deity, have a consort?²¹ The inscriptions are not

¹⁹See, for instance, Jubilees 2:14 and *The Life of Adam and Eve* in both its Greek (Apocalypse of Moses) and Latin (Vita) forms. The concept plays an important role in Philo’s theology and even finds its way into the early Jesus tradition (Mark 10:6-9; GTh 106) and through the Jesus tradition, into Paul. For the development of this concept in earliest Christianity, see Dennis R. MacDonald, *There is No Male and Female: The Fate of a Dominical Saying in Paul and Gnosticism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987).

²⁰The most extensive pre-1970 study of Asherah is W. L. Reed, *The Asherah in the Old Testament* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University, 1949).

²¹The literature on this issue exploded in the 1980’s and continues to generate new scholarship. Perhaps the most accessible entry into the debate is found in the pages of the popular yet scholarly *Biblical Archeology Review*. See Ze’ev Meshel, “Did Yahweh Have a Consort?” *BAR* 5:2 (1979), 24-35; Andre Lemaire, “Who or What Was Yahweh’s Asherah?” *BAR* 10:6 (1984), 42-51; Ruth Hestrin, “Understanding Asherah-Exploring Semitic Iconography,” *BAR* 17:5 (1991), 58. For a more comprehensive introduction to both the biblical and extra-biblical materials, see Saul Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh* (SBLMS 34; Atlanta: Scholars, 1988).

without their own ambiguity and interpretative problems.²² Nonetheless, it has become increasingly apparent that we must answer this question in the affirmative: in both popular and official circles, ancient Israelites worshiped both Yahweh and his consort, Asherah.²³

Asherah's cult spread throughout the ancient Near East.²⁴ We know most about her role in Canaanite religion from Ugaritic texts found at Ras Shamra.²⁵ Here Asherah is the wife of the head of the Canaanite pantheon, El. Surrounded by her children, her "pride of lions," she has the ability to seduce El (thus her role within the fertility cult of Canaanite religion). Iconographic evidence and the Hebrew Bible agree that her statue, her cult image, was a wooden pole.²⁶ Thus it was believed that Asherah was a pagan Canaanite goddess, the type of goddess proscribed by normative Israelite religion, though occasionally introduced within Israelite practice in a syncretistic cult.²⁷

This position no longer seems plausible. A series of inscribed potsherds, found at Khirbet Kuntillet 'Ajrud, a pilgrimage site in northern Sinai, provides an entry point.²⁸ Two eighth-century inscriptions, blessing graffiti left at the site, explicitly link Yahweh with the goddess Asherah. While the texts possess their own ambiguity, one inscription reads, "I bless you by Yahweh of Samaria and by Asherata,"²⁹ while another reads, "I

²²See below.

²³To say that the field has arrived at a complete consensus on the issue would be inaccurate; see, for instance, the dissenting voices of D. Patrick Miller, "Absence of the Goddess," *Hebrew Annual Review* 10 (1986) 239-48, and Jeffrey Tigay, *You Shall Have No Other Gods: Israelite Religion in the Light of Hebrew Inscriptions* (HSS 31; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986). Yet the conclusion of religious polytheistic pluralism in Ancient Israel has become inescapable even within evangelical scholarship. See the excellent article by Richard S. Hess, "Yahweh and his Asherah? Religious Pluralism in the Old Testament World," in *One God, One Lord in a World of Religious Pluralism* (ed. Bruce Winter and David Wright; Cambridge: Tyndale House, 1991), 5-33.

²⁴See J. Day, "Asherah," *ABD* 1:483-7.

²⁵See Michael David Coogan, *Stories from Ancient Canaan* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), especially 96-101 for Asherah's role in the Canaanite pantheon as El's wife in relationship with Baal and the other gods.

²⁶See Hestrin, "Understanding Asherah."

²⁷See, for instance, W. L. Reed's conclusion that "the antipathy toward the Asherah on the part of the Hebrew leaders was due to the fact the goddess and the cult object of the same name were associated with the fertility religion of a foreign people and as such involved a mythology and a cultus which was obnoxious to the champions of Yahweh" (*IBD* 1:252).

²⁸For bibliography, see Hess, "Yahweh and His Asherah?" 19-20, fn 4.

bless you by Yahweh of Teman and by Asherata.” The inscriptions suggest a wide geographical spread of this dual devotion to Yawheh and Asherah, with Yahweh, first designated, the more prominent male deity. Though found in a southern site, the inscriptions locatively assign Yawheh to the north in Samaria as well as in Edom in Teman, a geographical association found also in Hab. 3:3. Furthermore, drawings accompanying the inscription on *Pithos A* clearly signify the cult image of Asherah.³⁰

Perhaps these data could be minimized as the deviant religious beliefs of a few wayfaring Israelites were it not for a similar tomb inscription found at Khirbet el-Qom, a site in Judah between Lachish and Hebron. Accompanied by a hand reaching up, itself possibly a symbol of Asherah,³¹ this eighth-century inscription reads: “Blessed is Uriyahu by Yahweh and Masaryahu by Asherata, he has saved him.”³² Again, devotion to Yahweh is accompanied by a female goddess, Asherah. Given that Uriyahu could afford a tomb with an inscription and its Judean location, it seems that devotion to Yahweh and Asherah existed among the Judean elite.

The evidence of the Kunjillet ‘Ajrud and el-Qom inscriptions have brought a new perspective to the Hebrew Bible and previously discovered archaeological data. Firm evidence has emerged which displays both the geographic, demographic, and chronological breadth of the devotion to

²⁹As explained above, while Asherata is, in my opinion, the most plausible translation, all three of these readings are possible. For the purpose of this paper, the precise reading makes no difference for all three readings indicate the existence of a female goddess alongside Yahweh in religious devotion in Israel. The attempt, however, to deny a relationship between the cult image of asherah and the goddess, Asherah, seems unfounded. As stated by Susan Ackerman, “In the ancient Near East the idol was the god. . . . To associate Yahweh with Asherah’s cult object or with some hypostasized female aspect of Yahweh is to associate Yahweh with Asherah” (*Under Every Green Tree: Popular Religion in Sixth-Century Judah*, HSM 46, Atlanta: Scholars, 1992, 63-4).

³⁰See R. Hestrin, “Understanding Asherah.” It is interesting to note that, on *Pithos B*, a group of devotees gaze upwards as if towards the sun, possibly as a cult symbol or image of Yahweh. See J. Glen Taylor, “Was Yahweh Worshipped as the Sun?” *BAR* 20:4 (1994), 60-61, 90.

³¹See R. Hestrin, “A Note on the ‘Lion Bowls’ and the Asherah,” *The Israel Museum Journal* 7(1988), 115-8.

³²See R. Hess, “Yahweh and His Asherah?” 32-33. For bibliographical data specific to Khirbet el-Qôm, see Hess, *ibid.*, 32 fn 44.

Yahweh with his consort in Israelite religious history. Perhaps most interesting is the study of the earliest cult object found at a known Israelite site, the beautifully preserved ninth century cult stand from Taanach. While earlier interpreted as devoted to Baal and Astarte or Asherah, J. Glenn Taylor has convincingly argued that the stand actually images Yahweh and his Asherah.³³ The stand contains no epigraphic evidence to aid its interpretation. Its iconography, however, reveals the same Israelite piety found in the Kunjillet 'Ajrud and el-Qom inscriptions.

Four tiers compose the stand. The first, uppermost level contains a horse below a solar-disk with wings, all flanked by freestanding pillars. The second tier contains an asherah, a wooden pole/tree with a pair of ibex reaching into it, with lions on its side. The third tier has a vacant space between two cherubim. There is no evidence that any image ever stood between the cherubim. Finally, the bottom, fourth tier has two lions, exactly like level two, which surround a naked woman with exaggerated breasts, a typical fertility goddess.

The key to the interpretation of this stand is the obvious identity (shown by the lions) between tiers two and four. Both tiers refer to Asherah, tier four personifying her image, tier two symbolizing her image in the asherah. Tiers one and three, therefore, would seemingly possess the same structure. Indeed, Taylor argues that such is the case, and that both tiers refer to Yahweh. Tier three personifies Yahweh's image as the one who sits between the cherubim (e.g., 1 Kgs. 6:23-38); however, since Yahweh had no human personification, the craftsman left the space empty. Tier one, then, symbolizes Yahweh with a solar image, an identification found directly and indirectly in the OT.³⁴ Israelite Tanaach worshiped Yahweh with his consort, Asherah. As in the inscriptions, Yahweh, the male deity, receives the highest devotion in the top tier, supported below by his "wife" Asherah. Yet the two belonged together in the Israelite mind, the image of God male and the image of God female.

³³The argument that follows depends heavily on J. Glen Taylor, "Was Yahweh Worshipped as the Sun?" *BAR* 20:4 (1994), 53-61, 90-1; *idem*, "The Two Earliest Known Representations of Yahweh," in *Ascribe to the Lord: Biblical and Other Studies in Memory of Peter C. Craigie* (ed. Lyle Eslinger and J. Glen Taylor; *JSOT* Sup 67; Sheffield: *JSOT*, 1988), 557-66; and *idem*, *Yahweh and the Sun: Biblical and Archaeological Evidence for Sun Worship in Ancient Israel* (*JSOT* Sup 111; Sheffield: *JSOT*, 1993).

³⁴See Taylor, *Yahweh and the Sun* and Hans-Peter Stahli, *Slare Elemente im Jahweglauben des Alten Testaments* (Freiburg/Göttingen: Unversitätverlag / Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1985).

While the above data take place relatively early in the history of Israel, evidence within the Hebrew Bible also indicates that this devotion continued throughout the sixth century, if not beyond.³⁵ Susan Ackerman has argued that the “image of jealousy” found in the gate in Jerusalem (Ezek. 8:3, 5) was an asherah, symbolizing the goddess of the same name.³⁶ Even more convincing is her argument that the joint worship of Yahweh and Asherah continued into the time of Third Isaiah, as attested in the cultic practice of burning incense on altars and sacrificing in gardens (Isa. 65:3).³⁷ While never condoned by the prophetic voices, both Ezekiel and Third Isaiah witness to a long and popular trajectory of Israelite worship of Yahweh and his consort, Asherah.

Unless we dismiss or ignore these data, the conclusion seems clear: Israelites imaged (the) god(s) as male (i.e., Yahweh) and female (i.e., Asherah). Yahweh, the male, owned the privileged place in the Israelite pantheon, with Asherah, the female, his subordinate. The evidence provided does not limit this devotion to a specific demographic, geographic, or chronological location. Israelites across many generations in various social strata, especially among the elite and within the cultus, imaged God as Yahweh and Asherah, a divine couple ensuring the fertility of the land. Though found elsewhere in the ancient Near East, Asherah was not a foreign import into normative Israelite worship, but an indigenous expression of normal Israelite piety.³⁸

“The Image of God, Male and Female” in Genesis 1:26-28. As Phyllis Bird notes, Gen. 1:26-28 has elicited untold amounts of commentary:

³⁵S. Olyan, in studying Asherah in the Hebrew Bible notes that polemic against Asherah emerges only in Deuteronomistic and later sources. See S. Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh*, 1-22. At Elephantine in the late fifth century, an offering list for contributions to the temple of Yahweh remains. At the conclusion of the list, however, the offering is divided up between three deities: Yaho (Yahweh), Ishumbethel (a male deity), and Anathbethel (a female deity). See *ANET*, 278-9.

³⁶S. Ackerman, *Under Every Green Tree*, 55-66.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 185-94.

³⁸Terminology used for El and applied also to Yahweh in early or archaic strata within the Hebrew Bible suggests that Yahweh replaced El in the Israelite religion through a process of assimilation. If so, it is possible to conjecture that in this process, Canaanites/Israelites maintained their devotion to Asherah, yet saw her as the wife of Yahweh, not El. For a similar hypothesis, see S. Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult*. For the adoption of terminology for El within Yahwistic circles, see M. Smith, *The Early History*, 7-12, 21-26.

A rare attempt within the OT literature to speak directly and definitively about the nature of humanity in relation to God and other creation, the statement is at once limited in its content, guarded in its expression, and complex in its structure. As a consequence, philologist and theologian are enticed and compelled in ever new contexts of questions and understanding to explore anew the meaning and implications of creation “in the divine image”-for it is this striking and unique expression, above all, that has dominated the discussion.³⁹

Indeed, the precise meaning of the image of God remains the crux in dealing with the passage. Yet the text also refers to a gender distinction within God’s creative act: “male and female God created them” (Gen. 1 :27c). As Bird again points out, “the critical question addressed to the Priestly account concerns the relationship of sexual distinction to the divine image.”⁴⁰ The “image of God, male and female” becomes the pressing issue arising from the biblical text.

“And God said, ‘Let us make *adam* in our image, according to our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, and the cattle and all the earth and everything that creeps upon the earth.’ So God created *adam* in his image; in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them and God said to them: ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, and every living creature that creeps upon the earth’” (Gen. 1:26-28).

Of all creation in the Old Testament, God only creates humanity, the *adam*, in the image of God. At one time, exegetes sought significance in the parallel expression “in our image, according to our likeness” (v. 26).⁴¹ While the terms do bear slightly different connotations, the expression exemplifies Hebrew parallelism. As Westermann states: “Both the nouns

³⁹Phyllis Bird, “‘Male and Female He Created Them’: Gen 1 :27b in the Context of the Priestly Account of Creation,” *HTR* 74 (1981), 129-30. For a good bibliographical entry into modern OT scholarship on the subject, see *Ibid.*, 129, fn. 2. For a more extensive treatment of the modern history of interpretation of the passage, see Gunnlaugur A. Jonsson, *The Image of God: Genesis 1:26-28 in a Century of Old Testament Research*, (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1988). For a historical typology of interpretations of the passage, see C. Westermann, *Genesis*, 147-55.

⁴⁰Phyllis A. Bird, “Sexual Differentiation and Divine Image in the Genesis Creation Texts,” in *Image of God and Gender Models in Judaeo-Christian Tradition* (ed. Kari Elisabeth Børresen; Oslo: Solum Forlag, 1991), 11.

⁴¹See, for instance, W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the OT*, vol.2, 122-23.

and the prepositions are interchangeable...; one verb covers both phrases we have not two but one expression.⁴² The phrase is adverbial in nature. It does not describe the nature of the *adam per se*, but the manner in which the *adam* was created by God, and thus, only indirectly the *adam's* nature. Thus, the controlling metaphor of the text is “the image of God.”

What does this phrase mean? Karl Barth's extended dialogue with OT scholarship within his *Church Dogmatics* established an influential interpretation, an interpretation that has almost become “canonical” among recent holiness theologians.⁴³ Overturning an earlier consensus that argued that the image of God denoted a concrete physical representation,⁴⁴ Barth argued instead that the image of God referred to the human capacity for relationship with God, a capacity conferred upon humanity alone (*CD* 3/1:183-206). Barth's interpretation, however, borrowed more from his commitments to dialectical theology than from the Hebrew Bible.⁴⁵ A new consensus, therefore, has rightfully emerged that has

⁴²Westermann, 145. An Aramaic text has been found on a cult statue with the Aramaic terms on it, both referring to the statue. See Paul-Eugene Dion, “Image et ressemblance en arameen ancien (Tel Fakhariyah),” *Science et Esprit* 34 (1982), 151-3.

⁴³See, most recently, H. Ray Dunning, *Grace, Faith, and Holiness* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1988), 150-7, and Michael Lodahl, *The Story of God: Wesleyan Theology and Biblical Narrative* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1994), 64-72. Nor are these scholars alone in this influence. Barth's influence even shaped Claus Westermann in the most extensive commentary on Genesis of the twentieth century. See Westermann, *Genesis*, 157-58.

⁴⁴See, especially, Paul Humbert, “L' 'imago Dei' dans l'Ancien Testament,” in *Etudes sur le recit du paradis et de la chute dans la Genese* (Memoires de l'universite' de Neuchantel 14; Neuchantel: Secretariat de l'universite, 1940), 153-75, and Ludwig Koehler, “Die Grundstelle der Imago-Dei-Lehre, Gen 1:26,” *ThZ* (1948), 16-22.

⁴⁵See J. J. Stamm, “Die Imago-Lehre von Karl Barth und die Alttestamentlich Wissenschaft,” in *Antwort: Karl Barth zum Siebzigsten Geburtstag am 10. Mai 1956* (Zollikon-Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1956), 94-5 and Bird, “‘Male and Female’,” 131-34. This is not to say that such theological interpretations of ‘the image of God’ are illegitimate. As Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. states, “The theologian is nonetheless perfectly justified in developing a *systematic* concept of the image of God, one including the whole range of respects in which human beings . . . resemble, reflect, manifest, reproduce, represent, or otherwise show likeness to God. And she may confidently refer to this set of likeness respects as the (systematic) image of God.” “Images of God,” in *Christian Faith and Practice in the Modern World: Theology from an Evangelical Point of View* (ed. M. A. Noll and D. F. Wells; Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1988), 52. Yet theologians should distinguish between the biblical image and the systematic image which they construct from the biblical text rather than projecting the systematic naively upon the biblical text.

returned to understanding the “image of God” in Gen. 1:26-28 as God’s concrete physical representation within God’s good creation.

The word “image” appears rarely in the Hebrew Bible. For Gen. 1:26-28, Gen. 5:3 is most instructive. In a key “toledoth” passage that structures Genesis 1-11,⁴⁶ Adam (now named) sires a son “in his likeness according to his image.” Seth, within the patrilineal descent of the priestly genealogy, physically represents Adam within the next generation: he bears Adam’s “image and likeness.” The same logic seems at work in Gen. 9:6 as well, also from the priestly writer. As humans are made in God’s image, a person shedding human blood must physically compensate by having their blood being shed. This corresponds well with the use of “image” throughout the Hebrew Bible. Here “image” most commonly refers to a cultic statue representing a divinity.⁴⁷ The priest/ prophet Ezekiel, with his social and theological affinities with the priestly writer, is no exception (Ezek. 7:20; 16:17). When not used in reference to a cult statue, the term refers to the iconographic representation of a human or animal in sculpture or painting.⁴⁸ While not precisely a technical term for an idol, image is not merely “a metaphor for likeness . . . concrete, formal, holistic-and ‘empty,’ lacking specific content.”⁴⁹ The term primarily designates the physical, iconographic representation of another living being.⁵⁰

⁴⁶See Joseph Blenkinsopp, *The Pentateuch: An Introduction to the First Five Books of the Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 58-59. As Blenkinsopp states about Gen 5:1-3, “The brief passage immediately after the title (5: 1b-2) links the genealogy with creation, and with the creation of humanity in particular; and the repetition of the phrase ‘in his likeness, after his image’ in the following verse (5:3) makes the point that the divine image is transmitted from the first man to his descendants” (Blenkinsopp, 72).

⁴⁷See Num 33:52; 2 Kgs 11:18; 2 Chron 23:17; and Amos 5:26. See also an Aramaic cognate used in this way throughout Daniel 2-3. This use of the term corresponds exactly to the Ararnaic use at Tel Fakhariyah. See n. 43.

⁴⁸In 1 Sam 6:5, 11, golden mice are made to represent real mice; in Ezek 23:14 paintings of males represent the physical desire for live males.

⁴⁹Bird, “‘Male and Female,’” 140.

⁵⁰It seems to me that the only reason that has held exegetes from grasping the full force of this conclusion is their own presuppositions about the supposed “anti-anthropomorphic” stance of the Priestly writer and the biblical prohibition from making images for Yahweh. It may be that no images are allowed to be made for Yahweh because one already exists: living human beings created in God’s image as God’s icon.

It is in this sense that ancient Near Eastern royal ideology enters into Gen. 1 :26-28.⁵¹ Throughout the ancient Near East, the kings promulgated an ideology that they represented the will of the divine on earth as the gods' vice-regent. Therefore, royal inscriptions depict the king as "the image of God." As summarized by Plantinga, "Creation in the image of God is at least *for the purpose of ruling*. Extrabiblical literature and recent archaeological discoveries heighten this likelihood: in remote parts of their domain ancient Near Eastern kings would sometimes place a statue, a *selem*, an image of themselves, to represent their dominion. In Gen. 1:26 the divine king similarly adorns his human vice-regents."⁵² The amazing thing about the Genesis text is how this royal ideology is "democratized." The image of God is not confined merely to one man, but to all humanity, male and female.⁵³ According to Gen. 1:26-28, created in the image of God means that God created human beings as the physical symbol or icon of God to represent God's rule within God's good creation.

This conclusion raises a second issue from the text, an issue that presses beyond the usage of "image" and the nuances provided by ancient Near Eastern royal ideology. Gen. 1:26-28 also introduces the gender distinction between male and female as related somehow to God's creative word. Does this gender distinction relate to the divine image and humanity's dominion or to the divine blessing for fertility and increase given to humanity, a blessing shared with all living creatures? Technically, the issue might be stated, Should Gen. 1 :27c be read primarily within the context of Gen. 1:27a-b or within the context of Gen. 1:28?

This issue is highlighted in a comparison of the readings of the text by Phyllis Tribble and Phyllis Bird. Tribble argues that Gen. 1 :27c, "male and female he created them," is rhetorically parallel to "God created *adam* in the image of God" (v. 27a) and "in the image of God he created

⁵¹For an excellent summary of this interpretation, see Bird, "'Male and Female,'" 140-44.

⁵²Plantinga, "Images of God," 54.

⁵³See, most recently, John van Seters, "The Creation of Man and the Creation of the King," ZAW 101(1989), 341: "Concerning Gen 1,26 and Ps 8 it has been clear for some time that the representation of the creation of mankind in these texts is dominated by royal ideology. With the new Babylonian text, however, it becomes virtually conclusive that the Priestly Writer has democratized the myth of the creation of the king in order to apply it to mankind in general. In this way mankind is created to be the ruler of the rest of creation."

him” (v. 27b). Thus the image of God is related to “male and female,” even as male and female are distinguished from God by the fact of their creation. She therefore concludes that “God creates, in the image of God, male and female. To describe male and female, then, is to perceive the image of God; to perceive the image of God is to glimpse the transcendence of God.”⁵⁴ Negatively, she concludes that “the use of the phrase ‘male and female’ in 1:27 does not itself signify the potential for human fertility but rather indicates, along with other items, the uniqueness of humankind in creation.”⁵⁵ She thus divorces Gen. 1:26-27 from Gen. 1:28.

Phyllis Bird, on the other hand, distinguishes V. 27c from V. 27a-b, thereby linking it with v.28. Bird argues that “the second statement” [v. 27cJ adds to the first [v. 27bJ; it does not explicate it.”⁵⁶ Bird reads the “male and female” in the broader context of the Priestly (P) emphasis on fertility and blessing, exhibited for humanity first in Gen. 1:28. Therefore, she concludes that:

The meaning and function of the statement, “male and female he created them,” is considerably more limited than is commonly assumed. It says nothing about the image which related *adam* to God nor about God as the referent of the image.... It relates only to the blessing of fertility, making explicit its necessary presupposition. . . . It is P’s own formulation, dependent upon his overarching theme of the sustainability (fertility) of the created order. It may also serve, secondarily, to link the creation narrative to the genealogically structured history which follows.⁵⁷

While Bird has rightly criticized Tribble and others who would artificially separate the gender reference in v.27 from the fertility blessing in v.28, she herself does not adequately account for the structural and rhetorical parallels that Tribble highlights between v. 27a-b and v. 27c. It seems that Bird can maintain her reading only on the basis of a strong, nearly hidden

⁵⁴Phyllis Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 21. For the full breadth of Tribble’s argument, see 12-30

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 19.

⁵⁶Bird, “Sexual Differentiation,” 17. See also *idem*, “‘Male and Female’.”

⁵⁷Bird, “‘Male and Female’,” 155.

presupposition that imaging God as male and female was foreign to Israelite religion, and especially to P.⁵⁸

It is precisely this presupposition that Israelite devotion to Yahweh and his Asherah calls into question. If within indigenous Israelite religion there was, as there seems to be, a notion of the physical icon of a god, male (Yahweh), and the physical icon of a goddess, female (Asherah), with obvious fertility implications, there is no need to separate artificially V. 27c, “male and female he created them,” from either *adam*’s creation in the image of God in V. 27a-b nor from the fertility blessing in v.28. Rather, the metaphors all originate within the same conceptual/social world within Israelite religion-cultic representations of the Israelite gods, both male and female, to ensure blessing.⁵⁹ V. 27c stands fully integrated with V. 27a-b in relating gender to the divine image in which humanity is created *and* with v.28 as the ensuing fertility of the *adam* for sustaining God’s good created order.

As Mark Smith suggests: “The imagery of the human in terms of the Divine in Genesis 1 seems to assume a divine couple, male and female, since the human person is created in the image of the Divine, partaking of both maleness and femaleness.”⁶⁰ Smith does not adequately recognize, however, what is vital to interpreting the text: the polemical nature of the Priestly re-interpretation of this “divine couple.” The Priestly writer projects god, male, and goddess, female (with the superior male and subordinate female, thus legitimating the patriarchal Israelite society) onto one God, the image of which is male *and* female. Within Gen. 1:26-28, then, humanity’s creation in the image of God signifies that fertility, God’s

⁵⁸Note the emphatic nature of Bird’s statement: “The idea that God might possess any form of sexuality, or any differentiation analogous to it, would have been for P an utterly foreign and repugnant notion. For this author/editor, above all others in the Pentateuch, guards the distance between God and humanity, avoiding anthropomorphic description.... Consequently, the word that identifies *adam* by reference to divine likeness must be supplemented or qualified before the blessing of fertility can be announced.” Bird, “‘Male and Female’,” 148. Note also she uses the presupposed monotheism of Israel to bolster this claim (148, fn. 49 and 50).

⁵⁹Gen. 1:26-28 parallels the imagery of the Kuntillet ‘Ajrud and el-QTm inscriptions and the Taanach incense altar with the combination of the physical representation of Yahweh and Asherah, the male god and female goddess, and the association with blessing.

⁶⁰Mark Smith, “God Male and Female in the Old Testament: Yahweh and His ‘Asherah,’ ” *JTS*48 (1987), 339.

blessing to enable the sustaining of God's good creation, arises from God's creation of male and female humans, simultaneously and equally created as the physical symbol or icon of God to represent God's rule within God's good creation.

Genesis 1:26-28 as a Polemic Against Israelite Religion.

Exegetes have previously read the creation narrative of Genesis 1 as a polemic, but always as a polemic against Israel's ancient Near Eastern neighbors.⁶¹ Without denying this, the text may contain a deeper polemic: a polemic of the Priestly writer against the cultic practice of Israelite religion, much like Ezekiel's polemic against the range of cultic practices within Yahweh's Jerusalem temple (Ezekiel 7). Given that the cultic devotion to Yahweh and Asherah was grounded in the very nature of the divine-god as male and goddess as female, the Priestly writer confronts the story at its most basic, fundamental stage, within the very nature of the Creator and the creation itself.

Beginning with the Israelite differentiated gender identity of Yahweh as male and Asherah as female, the Priestly writer denies this differentiation as *the* divine nature in two ways: (1) by including male and female within the (one) divine image; and (2) by transferring gender differentiation from the divine into human beings within the framework of the original creation. As a result, Gen. 1:26-28 opens up striking intertextual possibilities as it became and becomes Scripture, intertextual possibilities unusual within ancient Near Eastern creation narratives. Gen. 1:26-28 has a tendency to destabilize patriarchal structures by imaging male and female humans created both equally as God's physical representatives within creation and by defining God's one image as containing male and female dimensions. Further, by linking divine blessing with the creation of humanity, male and female as the image of God, the text functions to establish a social order based upon the equality of genders in care of God's good creation.⁶² Rather than reflecting normal ancient Israelite

⁶¹See, for example, G. Hasel, "The Polemic Nature of the Genesis Cosmology," *EvQ* 46 (1974), 81-102, and P. Bird, "'Male and Female,'" 143.

⁶²I would argue that this is exactly what we see within the intertextual echoes found within the early Jesus tradition (see D. MacDonald, *There is No Male and Female*). This life-form erupts occasionally within the history of the *ecclesia* as *ecclesiola* within it allow themselves to be formed by the story of the Scriptures. One might think, for instance, of the ordination of women within the nineteenth century American Holiness Movement.

experience or practice, Gen. 1:26-28 seeks to form a community based on a different story. In this story Yahweh alone is God-and human beings, male and female, are creatures, created as the visible icons of God.

The dynamics of the polemic against Israelite religious practice in Gen. 1:26-28 formulates interesting similarities, yet differences, between human beings and God. Sexuality begins in humanity in accordance with the divine creative word, but its relationship to God is more complex. Human beings, both male and female, are sexual and image God; God, though gendered as both male and female, is one and therefore beyond sexuality (that is, God is not a male who has a consort).⁶³ While affirming analogical language about God, the text strains analogical language to its breaking point. The divine nature bears an ineffable quality that takes God beyond the realm of human experience. Human beings, created in God's image and likeness, are also clearly unlike God.

Concluding Reflections: Toward a Holiness Hermeneutic

If this interpretation of Gen. 1:26-28 is persuasive, and if the dynamics of Gen. 1:26-28 represent the Old Testament as a whole (as I believe it does), it would seem that there is a sectarian, perfectionist, or "holiness" impulse embedded within the very fabric of Scripture itself. The text stands prophetically against the normal practice of Israelite religion, calling people forth in repentance to devotion to Yahweh alone as God. A "holiness hermeneutic" would both originate within and feed upon this impulse embedded within the Scriptures. Yet this sectarian impulse is not private, but political: it seeks to form a faithful community to tell and embody its narrative by word and life, even in opposition to other narratives that clamor for human allegiance.

A "holiness hermeneutic" would understand that, as in the early social history of the text, the text seeks, not to reflect or refer to a reality or history behind the text, but to create a new reality, a new place, a new community formed upon the vision of the text in faithfulness to the God witnessed within the text. Such an approach shifts the salvific impulse away from events "behind" the text that are referred to within the text and toward the history of the communities who possess the graceful character to embody the text within their own historicity.

A "holiness hermeneutic," therefore, would bring about some fundamental changes in understanding the historical and theological role of the

⁶³My thanks to Gary Knoppers for this insight into the text.

exegete. Within the discipline of Old Testament theology itself, this understanding would refocus the interest in the history of Israel from preexilic Israel (the history supposedly referred to within the text), to the emergence of early Judaisms (including early Christianity), the communities that accepted the text as Scripture in order to be formed by it.⁶⁴ The interaction between the text of the Scriptures and the social-historical conditions of its reading, whether in second-century BCE Israel, first-century CE Asia Minor, or nineteenth-century North America, becomes the object of study in order to understand how specific communities embodied the text within their common life. Moving from historical to constructive theology (if such a distinction may be made), the form of life shaped by the Scriptural discourse—what traditional holiness preachers might call reading in the Spirit—becomes the goal of theological reflection. Theologians, then, would work to help the contemporary church to embody faithfully the text within its own common life, and not have it subverted by forces which oppose the God revealed in the OT (in opposition to the God found “behind the text” in Israelite religion).⁶⁵

A “holiness hermeneutic” would no longer seek to obtain the objective, universal meaning of the biblical text, as if such a reading exists. Yet this does not lead to unbridled subjectivity in reading. The character of the exegete and his or her community must possess the grace-formed desire to take on the character of the biblical God revealed in the text. The “hermeneutical gap” that the exegete must overcome, therefore, is not primarily historical—getting from what the text meant to what it means, but

⁶⁴For the degradation of post-exilic Judaism with the classic discipline of OT theology, see Joseph Blenkinsopp, “Tanakh and the New Testament: A Christian Perspective,” in *Biblical Studies: Meeting Ground for Jews and Christians* (ed. L. Boadt *et al.*; New York: Paulist, 1980), 96-119, and *idem*, “Old Testament Theology and the Jewish-Christian Connection,” *JSOT* 28 (1984), 3-15.

⁶⁵This understanding is deeply rooted within the Christian-and Wesleyan-tradition. As recently argued by Randy Maddox, “as Wesley understood and practiced theology, the defining task of ‘real’ theologians was neither developing an elaborate System of Christian truth-claims nor defending these claims to their ‘cultural despisers’; it was nurturing and shaping the worldview that frames the temperament and practice of believers’ lives in the world. . . . The quintessential practitioner of theology was not the detached academic theologian; it was the pastor/theologian who was actively shepherding Christian disciples in the world” (R. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology*, Nashville, Tennessee: Kingswood Books, 1994, 17).

moral-given our sinfulness, how might we read and live the text faithfully.⁶⁶

Sanctification, re-formation into the image of God in Jesus Christ, becomes an important qualification for the exegete to interpret the Scriptures well. Exegesis becomes an act of moral commitment to the God witnessed to in the text and the community which the text seeks to call forth. As noted by L. Gregory Jones and Stephen Fowl, “unless Christian communities are committed to embodying their Scriptural interpretation, the Bible loses its character as Scripture.”⁶⁷ Given the nature of the biblical text, this is understandable. The “holiness” impulse embedded within it calls the text to function as Scripture, to form a community faithful to its narrative. Without this commitment to the “alternate discourse” within the Scriptures, the text loses its transformative power and becomes merely the Bible, a book that may be read like any other book.

A “holiness hermeneutic” would, therefore, re-place biblical authority. No longer would biblical authority exist within the religious history or experience of the Israelites (if it ever has). Biblical authority is not “behind” the text independent of its reading, but “before” the text in the life that the text produces. In essence, a “holiness hermeneutic” would shift authority from a Protestant “Scripture alone” to the “Wesleyan quadrilateral”-Scripture functioning within the tradition, the life of the church, with the aid of reason and experience. “To sustain this claim Christians need not believe that God dictated the text of the Bible to faithful scribes in ancient times. We do, however, need a view of Providence. Christian convictions about the canonical status of Scripture are sustained by a faith that the God who has called us to be the Church would not leave us bereft of the resources we need to follow that call faithfully.”⁶⁸

Interestingly, theologians have already begun shifting the issue of the authority of Scriptures to a question of their function within the church.⁶⁹

⁶⁶See Stanley Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scripture: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), especially 29-38.

⁶⁷Jones and Fowl, *Reading in Communion*, 20.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, 38.

⁶⁹Kern R. Trembath in *Evangelical Theories of Biblical Inspiration: A Review and Proposal* (New York: Oxford Press, 1987) has begun thinking through the nature of the inspiration of the Scriptures from this perspective. Working within the evangelical tradition and extending the work of William Abraham, Trembath argues that “the inspiration of the Bible’ should be taken to refer not to the empirical characteristics of the Bible itself but rather to the fact that the church confesses the Bible as God’s primary means of inspiring salvation within itself” (5).

To speak tautologically, the Scriptures bear authority only when they function authoritatively within the life of the church, and by extension, individual believers. The conservative evangelical theologian David Wells writes: “Two decades ago, the debate was over the *nature* of Scripture; today the debate should be about its *function*.”⁷⁰ In a very real sense, a “holiness hermeneutic” would render issues like the inerrancy debate meaningless. The real issue that emerges is how the Scriptures have and may function within the church to call human beings to faithful living in relation to the God of Israel, the God of Jesus Christ, rather than the nature of authority inherently residing in the Bible independent of its reading within the context of the church. Again, writes Wells: “The issue of inerrancy basically focuses on the *nature* of the Bible. It is entirely possible for those who have sworn to defend the concept of biblical inerrancy to function as if they had no such Word in their hands. Indeed, it happens all the time.”⁷¹ From a holiness perspective, Scriptural inerrancy is not an issue; Scriptural embodiment is. A holiness hermeneutic would shift biblical authority from “behind the text” in its historical accuracy or the experience of its authors-or even the Israelite community, to “in front of the text” as it was embodied within the social circumstances of its production and the history of its reception, and how it might be embodied within the contemporary community of believers.

A holiness hermeneutic, therefore, would have strong affinities with the questions raised by post-structuralist thought. Holiness exegetes, historians, and theologians would need a whole new set of questions. We need

no longer hear the questions that have been rehashed for so long: Who really spoke? Is it really he and not someone else? With what authenticity or originality? What part of his deepest self did he express in his discourse? Instead, there would be other questions, like these: What are the modes of

⁷⁰David F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams*(Grand Rapids: Eerdrnans, 1994), 212. As Wells shifts the issue from the authority of the Bible to its function, it is interesting to note that he begins to develop a NT and, one might well add, Holiness Movement doctrine of the “world” that results in an ecclesiology much closer to the Holiness Movement than the Constantinian tenets of Reformed theology (Ibid., 37-59) It may be that both Wells and the Holiness Movement draw on an aspect of early Puritan ecclesiology that also influenced Wesley.

⁷¹Ibid., 150.

existence of this discourse? Where has it been used, how can it circulate, and who can appropriate it for himself? What are the places in it where there is room for possible subjects? Who can assume these various subject functions? And behind all these questions, we would hear hardly anything but the stir-ring of an indifference: What difference does it make who is speaking?⁷²

Such questions are truer to the nature of Scriptures as an “alternate discourse,” a polemic against Israelite practice that always is intended to form a community based on its story of God.

Finally, to accomplish answers to such questions, a “holiness hermeneutic” as outlined in this paper would seek to “forge links between literary and social criticism.”⁷³ A narrative reading of the Scriptures must remain primary—the exegete and community are called on to embody this narrative by the nature of the text itself. Critical social-historical analysis of the text and Israelite history, however, can refine our understanding of the biblical imagery and its function within earlier communities. It may therefore both prevent the subversion of the text by other interests as well as help its faithful embodiment within the particular local worlds that the contemporary community inhabits. In more traditional holiness language, social criticism helps define the “world” as the forces to which the text responded and the “world” out of which the text calls us now so that we might live “Spirit-filled” lives faithful to Jesus Christ. A holiness hermeneutic, therefore, is sectarian in a critical, rather than an obscurantist manner.

A “holiness hermeneutic” as envisioned in this paper, then, opens a vast theological agenda, not merely for academically trained Ph.D. exegetes, but for church historians, systematic theologians, pastors, and

⁷²Michael Foucault, “What is an Author?” in *The Foucault Reader* (ed. Paul Rabinow; New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 119-20.

⁷³Janice Capel Anderson and Stephen D. Moore, “Introduction” in *Mark and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies* (ed. J. C. Anderson and S. D. Moore, Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992), 20. In addition to the test case in this paper, see a similar approach in Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988) and its sequel, *idem, Who Will Roll Away the Stone? Discipleship Queries for First World Christians* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994). Interestingly, Myers grew up and practices his faith as part of the evangelical Quaker community, a community with historical affinities with the American Holiness Movement from the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

laity as well. Understanding the Old Testament as a “sectarian document” calls the contemporary church to read the biblical text faithfully in order to avoid being absorbed by other discourses and powers. Ultimately:

For Christians, interpreting Scripture is a difficult task. But it is difficult *not* because one has to be a specialist in the archaeology of the ancient Near East, an expert in linguistics, or a scholar of the literature of the Greco-Roman world. Though ... Christians can learn important things about the Bible from the investigations pursued by people who do have such expertise, they are not necessary for wise readings of Scripture. Rather, the interpretation of Scripture (which as we have suggested is different from interpreting the Bible) is a difficult task because it is, and involves, a lifelong process of learning to become a wise reader of Scripture capable of embodying that reading in life.⁷⁴

If the holiness movement has this gift to give to the church in the form of a hermeneutic formed by its heritage, it will serve God well as Western culture moves into a post-modern, post-Christian age.⁷⁵

⁷⁴Fowl and Jones, *Reading in Communion*, 29.

⁷⁵A version of this paper was presented at the Wesleyan Theological Society in Dayton, Ohio, on November 4, 1994. I also wish to thank Brent Strawn, Michael Lodahl, and Gary Knoppers for helpful and insightful comments on an earlier draft.

PAUL AND SCRIPTURE IN THE SECOND TEMPLE: LIGHT ON THE WESLEYAN BIBLICAL HERITAGE

by
Timothy R. Dwyer

One of the traditional concerns for Wesleyans is the application of scripture through the lenses of tradition, reason, and experience.¹ Implicit in this formulation is the notion that scripture is filtered, limited, adapted, extended or reread, even reconstructed in the process of fulfillment. We work out the application of scripture with consideration of social factors, with studied thought, and via personal experience.

With concern for the scriptural heritage of Wesleyanism, this article seeks to ask some historical-exegetical questions of an earlier interpreter of scripture, the apostle Paul, to “fund”² and resource the issue of Wesleyan interpretation and application of scripture. It is sometimes overlooked that Paul was continually bringing his scriptural heritage to bear on the ministry situations he faced, reading, interpreting, and modifying. His process may inform ours. We will concentrate on the letter to the Galatians as scriptural interpretation in itself in its second-temple period context, and then raise some pertinent questions for contemporary Wesleyans.

¹Note John Wesley’s sermon, “The Nature of Enthusiasm,” where he directs people to consult the “oracles of God” and goes on to speak of reason and experience in determining the will of God.

²Walter Brueggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation: The Bible and the Postmodern Imagination*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993.

The Second Temple Period

Scholars have been concerned lately to place the earliest Christians within the context from which the movement arose, namely Judaism in the second temple period (c. 520 B.C.E. to 70 C.E.), with its issues and concerns. One of the major issues was the renewal or application of the Torah in new, changed situations. In light of this, J.D.G. Dunn has recently argued that Galatians, coming from late in the period, has “echoes of intra-Jewish polemic.”³ For Dunn, the dispute witnessed to by Galatians concerning issues like the applicability of circumcision is in wholly Jewish terms while the nascent church is still considered a part of Judaism. He finds the strongest evidence in Gal. 4:10 and 4: 17.⁴ While Dunn rightly places the dispute in the context of Jewish issues and polemical disputes of the second temple period, the nature of scriptural disputes in the time can be clarified and this in turn can place Galatians in a new light. It seems more fruitful to work from second temple issues to Paul rather than vice-versa.

The situation within which Paul’s moral/scriptural reasoning takes place is crucial, since many of late have focused on the Greco-Roman context. The renewal of interest in classical moralists and philosophers has led to a concern to compare the moral reasoning of Paul to Greco-Roman moral discourse.⁵ A better trajectory would be one which does not separate religion from ethics, and second temple Judaism clearly fits this.⁶ Specifically at stake, I contend, in the polemical disputes of the second temple period and thus Paul, is the concern to renew Torah and make it live by adapting the halakhah (teachings or legal issues) to new situations as they arose. New situations naturally bring new questions about the applicability and extension of older laws. Second temple debates contrasted maximalist and minimalist applications, adaptations, and modifications of Torah, and sectarian disputes often revolved around such issues.

In this article, we will first describe the practice of adaptation and modification of halakhah in applying it to new situations in the second temple period. Since canonical boundaries had not yet been fully drawn at

³J. D. G. Dunn, “Echoes of Intra-Jewish Polemic in Paul’s Letter to the Galatians,” *JBL*112(1993), 459-477.

⁴Dunn, *ibid.*, 470-473.

⁵Most prominent here is Abraham Malherbe, *Paul and the Popular Philosophers*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989.

this time, examples from the Persian period, the Maccabean era, and Qumran will be used, some of which are now extra-canonical, but were then part of the vast array of second temple literature. Then, an attempt will be made to fit Galatians into this stream. The goal is to work from Jewish issues to Paul, and not vice-versa. Finally, we will attempt to relate the way Paul dealt with his scriptural heritage to the way contemporary Wesleyans may relate to their scriptural heritage.

The Persian Period

The role of Ezra as a teacher and administrator following the return of the exiles is said to have much to do with intermarriage. Especially instructive is the legislation set in motion to mandate the divorce of all foreign wives in Ezra 10:3. Shecaniah, son of Jehiel, responds to Ezra's prayer and confession (chapter 9) by declaring:

We have broken faith with our God and married foreign women from the peoples of the land, but even now there is hope for Israel in spite of this. So now let us make a covenant with our God to send away all these wives and their children, according to the counsel of my lord and those who tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done *according to the law* (10:2b-3, italics mine).

The question naturally arises regarding the location of this law. Where in the Torah is there any indication of a provision dealing with the expulsion of foreign wives and the dispossession of their children?⁷ The closest one can come is Deut. 7:1-6, itself a pastiche (textual assemblage) from Ex. 23:32-33 and 34:15-16. The prohibition, however, is from intermarriage (not a stipulation of divorce) with the native, autochthonous Canaanite population, not *any* foreign wives. To go a further step, the Torah does not require an Israelite to *divorce* a foreign wife, nor dispossess children.⁸ Michael Fishbane points to the logic of Ezra 9:1-2, where

⁶The Epicureans, for example, rejected a divinely ordered cosmos, and the Cynics, of whom much is made in comparison to the NT, rejected any *nomos*. Cf. Peter Green, *From Alexander to Actium: The Historical Evolution of the Hellenistic Age*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990, 613, 621. Paul has been placed quite firmly in his Jewish context, as a Jewish person with Jewish concerns, by Alan Segal, *Paul the Convert* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

⁷Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985, 115.

⁸Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988, 189.

it is noted that the people of Israel, priests, and Levites “have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands with their abominations, from the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians and the Amorites.”

The first four are named in Deut. 7:1 (the Girgashites and Hivites are excluded). The Ammonites, Moabites, and Egyptians are added to the list, and, interestingly, occur in Deut. 23:3-8. The list concludes with the Amorites, who are also listed in Deut. 7:1. What has taken place is an intentional exegetical attempt to extend older pentateuchal provisions to new times.⁹ A prohibition against intermarriage is extended and modified to command divorce, and strictures against Canaanite locals are extended to all non-Israelites. This may well have taken place within the context of the *charedim*, a group which gave a rigorist interpretation of older laws for new times in the early post-exilic period (Is. 66:2, 5; Ezra 9:4, 10:3).¹⁰ Needless to say, not everyone agreed, since both Ruth and Esther, probably from the same period, highlight intermarriage to foreigners!¹¹ The way in which application can go, to extend or limit in modifying Torah for new situations, is at issue, and is justified exegetically (“according to the law”).

The new situation after the exile seemed to demand adaptation of previous laws. Combinations of rereadings occur. Nehemiah will add stipulations which occur nowhere in the Torah, such as the requirement of a payment of one-third of a shekel as a temple tax (10:32-33) and the provision for a wood supply (10:34). Rituals of fasting were added during this period (Zech. 7:3-7, 8:19) and there is a prohibition of divorce under certain circumstances (Mal. 2: 16).¹² Older halakhah can also be combined in new settings. For example, in 2 Chronicles 35:13 there is a blend of two older laws. One passover law had the meat roasted with fire (Ex. 12:9) and another had it boiled (Deut. 16:7), but the Chronicler blends the two, so now they “boiled the Pesach with fire.”¹³

⁹Fishbane, *op. cit.*, 116.

¹⁰Joseph Blenkinsopp, “A Jewish Sect of the Persian Period,” *CBQ* 52(1990), 5-20.

¹¹Donn Morgan, *Between Text and Community: The Writings in Canonical Interpretation*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990, 51.

¹²Joseph Blenkinsopp, “Interpretation and the Tendency to Sectarianism: An Aspect of Second Temple History” in *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition*, ed. by E. P. Sanders, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981, 6.

¹³It is interesting to note that this new combination overrides the forbidding of boiling in one of the stipulations (Ex. 12:9).

So, in the new situation following the exile, there is reapplication of older *Toroth*, sometimes limiting, sometimes adapting, sometimes combining or extending, but generally modifying the commands. One other factor must be mentioned here. In Ezra 10:3 the new adaptation is said to be followed “according to the Torah” (LXX, *nomos*). In 2 Chronicles 35:13, the new combination is said to be “according to the ordinance.” The new modification can be said to be Torah or an ordinance. We will return to this.

The Maccabean Era

In 1 Maccabees 2:29ff. it is reported that a group of Jews “seeking righteousness and justice” fled to the wilderness at the time of the installation of Gentile cults and a prohibition against circumcision. Troops of Antiochus followed the group into the wilderness and attacked them on the Sabbath. The resisters refused to fight and a thousand men are said to have been slaughtered. Mattathias and his friends learned of the slaughter, mourned, and noted that if all refused to fight on the Sabbath, their enemies would destroy them. So a decision was made. “Let us fight against anyone who comes to attack on the Sabbath day; let us not all die as our kindred died in their hiding places” (1 Macc. 2:41). A limitation is placed, “in the field” so to speak, on the application of the Sabbath command from the decalogue in new circumstances. In typical Jewish fashion, saving life takes precedence over the Sabbath strictures against work.

This is the renewing of a long-standing issue. The exact constitution of “remembering” and “keeping” the Sabbath day (Ex. 20:8) or “observing” the Sabbath day (Deut. 5:12) is unclear, and always required further interpretation. What exactly does it mean to keep or observe the Sabbath? Jeremiah 17:21-22 would extend Sabbath legislation to forbid burden-bearing within Jerusalem and removal of objects from one’s house, developing Deut. 5:12-14. Later, at Qumran, CD X.14-XI. 18 would extend and limit Sabbath practice to, for example, not helping a beast out of a cistern or pit if it fell in on the Sabbath, but helping with a ladder or rope a person so stranded (XI. 13-14, 16-17). At issue at particular times is the adaptation or modification of a statute when new situations and issues arise, and in new times unforeseen by the older commandment.

It is interesting that different sources from the same period can reflect differing views on issues. Shortly before the Maccabean era, Sirach advised: “Eat what is set before you like a well-brought up person” (Sir.

¹⁴Fishbane, *op. cit.*, 132-134.

31: 16a). In Daniel 1:8, certainly read with particular interest because of issues of defiling foods during the Maccabean era, Daniel refuses to “eat what is set before him.” It is quite interesting to note that 2 Kings 25:27-30 has Jehoiachin eat at the same table as the king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, without any mention of a concern about defilement.

Well known are the policies of Jason in 2 Macc. 4:7-9. Among other things, Jason is said to have established a gymnasium where youths wore the Greek hat. Such practices are called an extreme hellenization, “alien” and wicked. Yet, it should be noted that nothing explicit in the Torah forbids the existence of a gymnasium near the temple, or the wearing of Greek hats.¹⁵ What is specifically at issue is the application or adaptation of Torah, not Torah itself.

The rhetorical move which is common, however, is to refer to an adaptation different from one’s own as disobedience to Torah. In 2 Macc. 4:17 it is said that “divine laws” have been violated by Jason and others. Strictly speaking, it is not a violation of the “divine laws.” The issue may have been one of interpretation of the law rather than obedience/violation, the way one group would like to cast it. Interestingly, Jubilees, seen by many as contemporaneous, does not attack the institution of a gymnasium, nor does the Testament of Moses.¹⁶

One other brief example from the Maccabean era can suffice. In 2 Macc. 12:34-37 some of the Jewish soldiers fall in battle. It was discovered that they were wearing protective amulets underneath their tunics, which “the law forbids Jews to wear.” Since there is no explicit stricture against wearing such, we can note again that the adaptation, in this case an extension, of Torah can also be called law.

We have noted some ways in which modifications and adaptations of laws took place at two points in the second temple period. Sabbath laws are limited for the saving of life at one point, while unspecified “divine laws” would be extended to forbid gymnasium practices. Examples could be multiplied (e.g., setting aside priest’s food in purity in Judith 11:13 as a development, building perhaps on Is. 66:20). At issue is the application by a specific group in a new situation. When members of another group violate the adaptation, they are said to be violating “divine laws” and the

¹⁵Jonathan Goldstein, “Jewish Acceptance and Rejection of Hellenism” in *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition*, ed. by E. P. Sanders. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981, 77-78.

¹⁶Goldstein, *ibid.*, 80-81.

adaptation/modification is itself called the “law of Moses.”¹⁷ Before applying this to the work of Paul in Galatians, let us look at one further place in second temple history, not a period of time but a community, namely the Dead Sea sect of Qumran.

Qumran

Initial speculation was perhaps the greatest surrounding 4QMMT (“Some of the Precepts of the Torah”). The possibility was raised that it may be the most important of the Qumran texts. But with publication in 1994, doubts have emerged.¹⁸ Six copies have been found of a document thought to be a letter from the Teacher of Righteousness to the “Wicked Priest” in Jerusalem. At least one of the editors is not sure that it is a letter at all, but raises the possibility that it is a treatise, or a Deuteronomy-like document.¹⁹ The reconstruction of the sometimes-overlapping copies includes 21 lines of a calendrical document, 82 lines of halakhot, and 32 lines of an epilogue which speaks to those who disagreed with the views in the document. For our purposes, it is important to note that 4QMMT involves interpretation and extension of Torah, and that this interpretation can also go by the name Torah.

The title of the document comes from iii, 27: “We have sent you some of the precepts of the Torah.” It is crucial to note that this includes legislation regarding such things as pregnant animals. The legislators are of the opinion that a mother and its fetus should not be sacrificed on the same day. A fetus found in its dead mother’s womb may be eaten, but only after it has been ritually slaughtered (ii, 38). Regarding sacred food, the ruling is that the deaf should have access to it. This is probably an extension of Lev. 19:14 applied to sacred food. The legislators also find (ii, 58) that dogs, mentioned in Ex. 22:31 as outside the camp, and to whom meat can be cast, should not be permitted to enter the holy camp

¹⁷In CD XVI.2,5, one joining the Qumran sect and accepting its re-interpretations is said to be converted to the “law of Moses.”

¹⁸Elisha Qimron and John Strugnell, in consultation with Ya’akov Sussman and with contributions by Ya’akov Sussman and Ada Yardeni, *Qumran Cave 4-V: Miqsat Ma’ase Ha Torah. Discoveries in the Judean Desert X*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994. Also, cf. Elisha Qimron and John Strugnell, “An Unpublished Halakhic Letter from Qumran” in *Biblical Archaeology Today: Proceedings of the International Congress in Biblical Archaeology*, ed. by J. Armiti. Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1985, 400-407, and Lawrence Schiffman, “The New Halakhic Letter (4QMMT) and the Origins of the Dead Sea Sect,” *Biblical Archaeologist* 53(1990), 64-73.

¹⁹Qimron and Strugnell, *Cave 4-V, ibid.*

(here Jerusalem). Each of these are examples of application and adaptation of earlier laws.

Whether or not 4QMMT is a halakhic letter or a treatise, the concern for ongoing interpretation is quite clear. Questions and issues arise which are not dealt with earlier, such as the status of a fetus found within a sacrificial animal. The renewal and adaptation of legislation can itself be called Torah. Though it is not clear if there is a sectarian difference at stake, it can be said that a sectarian view is at issue.

As we now move to Paul and Galatians, we can see that the stream of which Galatians is a part historically is second-temple Judaism concerned for adaptation of earlier teachings for new situations and groups. After some reflections on Galatians, we will suggest some implications concerning adaptation of scripture in new situations for contemporary Wesleyans concerned with their scriptural heritage.

Paul and Galatians

There has been recent agreement that Galatians is an example of deliberative rhetoric.²⁰ Within this argument, one notices the place of the discussion surrounding *nomos*, most often translated “law” (a translation I will question later). It has been said that law is the most intricate doctrinal issue in Paul’s theology,²¹ and that would apply well to Galatians. Let us focus on (seemingly?) contradictory statements on law in Galatians.

Paul says in 2:19 that he has died to the law. As many as are under the works of the law are under a curse (3:10). No one is justified by law (3:11). Christ has redeemed believers from the curse of the law (3:13). The law is a temporary guardian and steward (3:23-25), which believers are no longer under. To be under sin and under law are parallel in 3:22 and 23. Though the Galatians wished to be under law, that would be slavery (4:21-5:1). In fact, if one is under the Spirit, one is not *under* law (5:18. Cf. Rom. 6:14-15; 1 Cor. 9:20; Gal. 3:23, 4:4, 5, 21). It would seem

²⁰George Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984); R. G. Hall, “The Rhetorical Outline for Galatians: A Reconsideration,” *CBQ* 106(1987), 277-287; David Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987), 206-208; Joop Smit, “The Letter of Paul to the Galatians: A Deliberative Speech,” *NTS* 35(1989), 1-26.

²¹Hans Joachim Schoeps, *Paul: The Theology of the Apostle in the Light of Jewish Religious History* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), 168.

that law has a very negative connotation in Galatians, so much so that one writer has said that “sonship and lawship” are mutually exclusive.²²

A problem arises when one also notes some very positive statements about “law” (*nomos*). For example, freedom is to be used as an opportunity to serve one another through love. In fact, the whole law is said to be fulfilled by obedience to Lev. 19:18, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (5:13-14). Also, by bearing one another’s burdens, believers fulfill “the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2). One is left with the notion that believers are not under the law, but fulfill the law. How can this be?

Needless to say, there have been numerous suggestions. It has been said by one important interpreter that Paul is simply inconsistent, and contradictions and tensions have to be an accepted feature of Paul’s theology.²³ In a polemical situation, the numerous problems (e.g., the contention that one must perfectly fulfill the law, which is foreign to Jewish thought) and self-contradictions expose Paul’s arguments as artificial.²⁴

Some would distinguish between “doing the law” and “fulfilling the law.” The believer would fulfill the whole law without being bound by its precepts, and is in fact never told to “do” the law.²⁵ The law is abolished, but naturally fulfilled.

Other interpreters would keep an older distinction between the moral and ritual law. The ritual law is abolished, and the believer is no longer under it, but should still keep the moral law, which entails things like lov-

²²L. L. Belleville, “‘Under Law’: Structural Analysis and the Pauline Concept of Law in Galatians 3:21-4:11,” *JSNT* 26(1986), 53-78.

²³Heikki Raisanen, *Paul and the Law* (Tübingen: Molir Siebeck, 1983), 11-12.

²⁴Räisänen, “Legalism and Salvation by the Law: Paul’s Portrayal of the Jewish Religion as a Historical and Theological Problem,” in *Die Paulinische Literatur und Theologie. Anlässlich der 50 jährigen Grundugs Feier der Universität von Aarhus*. Herausgegeben von Sigfried Pedersen (Aarhus: Forlaget Aros/Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1980), 81.

²⁵Stephen Westerholm, “On Fulfilling the Whole Law,” *SEA* 51/2(1986), 233; *ibid.*, “Letter and Spirit: The Foundation of Pauline Ethics,” *NTS* 30(1984), esp. 244; J. M. G. Barclay, *Obeying the Truth* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 142; and In-Gyu Hong, *The Law in Galatians, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 8J* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), esp. 178. He argues that Paul has adopted the phrase “law of Christ” (6:2) from his opponents, and that *ple~ob* in 5:14 means “satisfy the true intention of.”

ing one's neighbor.²⁶ This posits a distinction unknown in the Hebrew Bible, or in second-temple Judaism.

There is a view which sees the "law of Christ" as a new messianic Torah, replacing the old Torah with the ethical teachings of Jesus as a new kind of Halakhah.²⁷ A related view suggests that there is a difference between the Sinai Torah, which is abolished, and the messianic or eschatological Zion Torah, which is now to be fulfilled.²⁸

An interesting twist on the last viewpoint is that the law cannot be kept in the present age. It encloses humanity in sin and pronounces a curse for disobedience, but in the eschatological age of deliverance from sin (cf. Gal. 1:4) believers keep the law by walking in the Spirit. The age of the curse of sin is drawing to a close, and the age of obedience to the law is beginning. The statements of 2:15-5:1 are not intended as an abro-

²⁶Thomas Schreiner, "The Abolition and Fulfillment of the Law in Paul," *JSNT* 35(1989), 47-74; the related view equating law with legalism by R. H. Gundry, "Grace, Works, and Staying Saved in Paul," *Bib* 66(1985), 1-38. Both are disputing the views of E. P. Sanders (see below). Also, Brice Martin, *Christ and the Law in Paul*, Nov. Test. Supp. LXII (Leiden: Brill, 1989), 147, suggests that the believer should look to the "moral law" for guidance and, empowered by the Spirit, should endeavor to obey it. A nuance for Martin is that the Christian does not obey the law in order to be saved, but receives the gift of the Spirit and is able to fulfill the law. In light of E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), one wonders who believed that they were saved by keeping the law anyway, the objections of Gundry and Schreiner notwithstanding. An interesting recent twist on this view is that of the Jewish interpreter of Paul, Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994). Boyarin sees the spiritual sense of the law affirmed by Paul, namely the universal law of Christ, of love, or faith and the literal, carnal sense of the Jewish law denied (kashruth, circumcision, and the Sabbath). The law of Christ (Gal. 6:2) is the allegorical, spiritual fulfillment of the law of Moses. Cf. 132-134.

²⁷C. H. Dodd, "Ennomos Christou" in *Studio Paulina in Honorem Johannis de Zwaan Septuagenani*, ed. by J. N. Sevenster and W. E. van Unnik (Haarlem: Bohn, 1953), reprinted in *More New Testament Studies* (Manchester: University of Manchester, 1968), 134-148; John Strelan, "Burden-Bearing and the Law of Christ," *JBL* 94(1975), 266-276, which relates 6:2 to a dominical saying; and W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989 ed.), 136-146.

²⁸Peter Stuhlmacher, *Reconciliation, Law, and Righteousness* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 110-133.

gation of the law in every respect, but the law is deficient in the old age.²⁹ In the eschatological age, now breaking in, believers keep the law in the Spirit.

J. D. G. Dunn suggested recently that the problem with law in Galatians relates to issues of ethnic distinctiveness, such as circumcision, food laws, and festivals. Now that Christ has come, the law as a guardian of Israel's distinctiveness is at an end. In keeping some emphasis on the law in 5:13-14 and 6:2, Paul is trying to "have his cake and eat it too." He was not altogether successful at this attempt to try to retain some emphasis of the law while dispensing with others, according to Dunn. The "law of Christ" is probably Paul's summary for the traditions which documented the way Jesus lived, taught, and died.³⁰

Hans Hubner notes the paradox of 5:3 and 5:14. In 5:3 one should not be circumcised because then one would be a debtor responsible to keep all the law but in 5:14 all the law is fulfilled in the love command. The attributive position of "all" emphasizes the totality of the law. Hubner sees the reference to the love command as critical and ironical. The contrast between the totality of the law and a single saying ("love your neighbor") adds to the absurdity. Paul is hitting below the belt linguistically in his fight against the Jewish understanding of the law.³¹

The view of E. P. Sanders is important. He believes that Paul argues paradoxically by flinging his opponents' terms back at them in a way similar to 1 Cor. 1-2. In essence, he sees Paul as saying: "Besides, I can tell you the real way to fulfill the law: 'love your neighbor as yourself.'" Sanders does not believe that it is simply aspects of the law which are ful-

²⁹Frank Thielman, *From Plight to Solution: A Jewish Framework for Understanding Paul's View of the Law in Galatians and Romans*, Nov. Test. Supp. LXI (Leiden: Brill, 1989), 50, 86. The problem here is that circumcision (5:6, 11, 6:15), Sabbath-keeping (4:10), and food laws (2:11-15) are certainly not renewed for Paul in the eschatological age, following Thielman's scheme, and the two texts he uses to attempt to show that such laws were considered expendable, Pseudo-Phocylides and the Testament of Twelve Patriarchs, simply do not mention them at points. Thielman has argued from silence. Finally, his scheme comes down to keeping the "ethical demands to the so-called ceremonial demands" (p. 86).

³⁰J. D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul's Letter to the Galatians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 116-118, and *The Epistle to the Galatians* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993), passim.

³¹Hans Hubner, *Law in Paul's Thought* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1984), 37.

filled (i.e., “moral” aspects), or the law pursued in the Spirit which is fulfilled. The reference is also not to something distinct from Jewish scriptures. When Paul was speaking of how people should behave, there is no distinction between faith and law. To some degree, the law still functions as law,³² and Paul follows summaries well known in Judaism (e.g., Shab. 31a and Tob. 4:15).

Is there any way through these representative viewpoints? I believe there is. We should first note views on “law” (*nomos*) in the second temple period and in Paul, and finally more specifically in Galatians. Then, we need to remind ourselves of some characteristics of Paul’s time with regard to the ongoing application or limitation of law as noted earlier.

The term “law” (*nomos*) is found thirty-two times in Galatians, eleven times with the article and twenty-one times without it.³³ To what does it refer? Does it necessarily have a single reference, or might it have a range of references, depending on context?

Michael Winger sees in twenty-nine instances in Galatians either definite or possible references to the Jewish law.³⁴ The other three references are general or non-specific. The problem Paul has in Galatia is that the Jewish law should not be the Gentile law, or should not be observed by them. Winger begs the question of what the Jewish law might be.

Lloyd Gaston points in an important direction. He sees four senses of *nomos* at work in Galatians, with different senses found in different places. First, it refers at times to the covenant of grace given on Mt. Sinai to Israel, but only to Israel. Second, it refers at other times to the administration of order and retribution over the whole creation, through the principalities and powers. Third, it is equivalent to Scripture at other times, the revelation of God whose righteousness and saving power now extend to Gentiles in Jesus Christ. Fourth, it occasionally refers (Gal. 5:14, 6:2 and 13; Rom. 8:4, 13:8-10) to something for the fulfillment of which the Gentiles are redeemed.³⁵ For Gaston, “law” (*nomos*) functions differently for different groups. The problem is that his fourth option, potentially the most interesting and the most debated, falls into obscurity. What is it the

³²E. P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), esp. 97-114.

³³Hong, *op. cit.*, 122.

³⁴Michael Winger, *By What Law? The Meaning of Nomos in the Letters of Paul*. SBL Dissertation Series 128 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 78.

³⁵Lloyd Gaston, *Paul and the Torah* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1987), 71-76.

Gentiles fulfill? Let us go back to the ways Torah/law was used in the second temple period.

We saw that in Ezra 10:3 it was an application and extension of an earlier stipulation which was called “law.” A new combination of older legislation in 2 Chron. 35:13 was called an “ordinance.” When a rigorist interpretation of Torah is violated in 2 Macc. 4:17, it was said that “divine laws” were violated. Later, soldiers wearing amulets who died in battle are said to have worn that which “the law” forbade Jews to wear (2 Macc. 12:34-37). At Qumran as well, extension and application of Torah can be called Torah.³⁶ Add to this the general notion that during the second temple period the application of legislation in extensions or limitations was often in view, and we may see Galatians in a new light. First, let us note one other place where, like Galatians, there was a debate on the applicability of circumcision to a Gentile.

There is a well-known case found in Josephus’ *Ant.* XX.34-48. Helena, mother of Izates, king of Adiabene, is instructed in Jewish laws. Izates wants to convert, but his mother does not think circumcision is necessary, and neither does Ananias, a Jewish merchant teacher. Another Jew, Eleazer, urges circumcision, saying that Izates would be guilty of the greatest offense *against the law* by not being circumcised. Subsequently, the king undergoes circumcision.

It is important to note that it was traditional interpretation which applied circumcision to Gentile converts,³⁷ not the Torah itself. Once again we see, and this time in relation to circumcision of Gentiles, that an extension or interpretation of the “law” can also be called “law,” and such extension can be in dispute. Does this fit Paul and Galatians?

First, let us note an interesting use of “law” (*nomos*) by Paul in Phil. 3:5. Paul there says he was “circumcised on the eighth day, of the nation

³⁶Correspondingly, those who violate a particular group’s conception of obedience by extending or limiting the laws are said to be violating the laws themselves. First Enoch 5:4-6 places anathemas on other halakhic views, saying, “You have not done the commandments of the Lord.” The calendrical views of the group evident in the document are to be taught to Enoch’s son, Methusaleh, and are said to be a commandment. Examples of extension or limitation of legislation itself being called “law” in the second temple period could be multiplied (e.g., the Temple Scroll).

³⁷For example, in Judith 14:10, Achior the Ammonite is circumcised and ‘loins the house of Israel.’ Cf. Emil Schurer, *A History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, rev. and ed. by G. Vermes, F. Millar, M. Goodman, vol. III (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1986), 150-176.

Israel, from the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, according to the law a Pharisee.” I submit that the best way to render that final expression would be “according to interpretation of the law, a Pharisee.” It seems clear here that *nomos* has reference to the Pharisaic interpretation of the law, or the application and extension of the law taught and practiced by the Pharisees. The expression “law” can refer to its unique and distinctive elements of interpretation by a particular group. Can this fit Galatians?

Paul introduces the topic of circumcision in 2:3. Titus was not compelled to be circumcised. In 2:4, however, this “freedom” is threatened by false brothers. Gal. 2:7-9 makes a three-fold contrast: uncircumcision-circumcision (2:7), circumcision-Gentiles (2:8), and Gentiles-circumcision (2:9). A scheme has been set up that might look like this: circumcision= Jews=lack of freedom for Gentiles; non-circumcision=Gentiles=freedom. The topic of law is introduced in 2:16 with the threefold use of “works of the law,” which has been much debated (cf. 3:2, 5, 10). When Paul returns to the topic of freedom (4:22, 26, 31; 5:1, 13), it is in contrast to being “under law” (4:21) and circumcision (5:2-3, 6). In other words, being “under law” and “Gentiles being circumcised” are equated in 4:21-5:6. Also, and even more telling, is that circumcision in 5:2-3 is equated with being “justified by law” in 5:4. Note the scheme:

(5:2) If you are circumcised. . . Christ does not profit you;

(5:3) Every person circumcised . . . is required to keep the whole law;

(5:4) Whoever wishes to be justified from law . . . has been severed from Christ, has fallen from grace.

Being justified by law here is following an *interpretation* and *extension* of the law which would require circumcision for Gentile converts. Paul, on the other hand, would limit the application of the law of circumcision to Jews (note: “Titus was not even compelled to be circumcised, although he was a Greek,” in 2:3).

Thus, when Paul argues against “law” (*nomos*) in Galatians, at times it is an application and extension of the law that is at issue, the applicability of the law in new circumstances, specifically to Gentiles in Galatia. Thus, one could read some problematic verses in a new way: “If righteousness is through the law (of circumcision applied to the Gentiles), then Christ died in vain” (2:21). “By the law [of circumcision applied to Gentiles] no one is righteous before God” (3:11). “The law [of circumcision] is not of faith” (3:12). “You are not under the law [of circumcision]” (5:18). One should also note that “wanting to be under law” (4:21) and

“wanting to be circumcised” (6:13) involves the use of the same verb (also, cf. 6:12).

Thus, I contend that, when Paul is arguing against being under law (3:22, 4:5, 5:18) at times in Galatians, he is referring to being under an application of the law, which would extend circumcision to Gentiles, or, to put it positively, he is limiting an application of one part of the law.³⁸ The issue is not ritual law versus moral law, or “doing the law” versus “fulfilling the law,” or some other scheme. Following the second-temple context, the extension or limitation of law is what is at issue. There is a part of the law, however, which Paul will extend in application. This brings us to 5:14 and 6:2.

In Gal. 5:13-14, Paul picks up the catchword “love,” already used in v.6, to be repeated twice in 13-14, and again in verse 22. In a minimalist application of “law,” Paul will now apply law to a single expression: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18). The connection between “law” (*nomos*) and love need not be ironic (Hubner), but may well be exegetical. It is often overlooked that the verse following Lev. 19:18 in the *LXX* reads: “and you shall guard all my law.” Not only is the concept of “law” found, but it is also linked with “all.” Further, there is a similar statement in 19:34: “and you shall love him as yourself,” a command directed toward the “proselyte” in the *LXX*.³⁹ The link between Galatian Gentile “proselytes,” loving, and keeping “all the law” is a thoroughly exegetical one for Paul. Further, the expression from Lev. 19, “guard, observe,” is picked up in Paul’s argument. In Gal. 6:13 it is said that “the circumcised ones do not even observe the law.” Of course, this is not the case, since “observing the whole law” of loving one’s neighbor-proselyte is the concern, both in Lev. 19 and in Gal. 5.

I am suggesting that Paul is at home in a second-temple period context of discussions about the ongoing applicability of the law. This includes the use of “law” (*nomos*) to designate the application/extension/

³⁸It is sometimes overlooked how radical this move is. In Genesis 17:1-14, circumcision is part of an “eternal covenant” (*leberit olam*). Those who neglect will suffer the fate of being “cut off” from the people. Paul is not denying the covenant of circumcision with Israel, but is denying its ongoing application to Gentiles.

³⁹Albrecht Oepke, *Der Brief des Paulus an die Galater*. Theologischer Handkornmentar zum Neuen Testament. Berlin: Evangelische Verlagstalt, 1973, p.176, notes the connection in Leviticus between Lev. 19:18 (“the sons of your people”) and the alien (*ger*) in 19:33.

limitation as well as the original legislation. One can now face the conundrum of Paul's seeming contradiction of not being "under law," but yet "fulfilling the law" in a new way. Paul is arguing, as I see it, for a limitation of application of the teaching of circumcision, itself called law, to the Galatian gentiles, while also arguing for an extension of the application of another teaching, love for one's neighbor, also called law, to the Galatian gentile-proselytes. Paul swims within a Jewish stream of concern for ongoing application/extension/limitation of older legislation which in turn became, as it often did, an issue of heated partisan and sectarian debate.

The Wesleyan Biblical Heritage

Though we have made a detailed and lengthy detour from contemporary Wesleyan concerns, the argument has much to do with a Wesleyan understanding of the Christian scriptural heritage. Let us now turn briefly to these concerns.

In recent years, some Wesleyans have become more thoughtful about the distinctiveness of Wesleyan hermeneutics.⁴⁰ Not only is this reflection necessary for clarity of understanding of what it means to be Wesleyan, but it is crucial for ministers and churches with alternative hermeneutical practices now available to them. One way to appreciate the Wesleyan scriptural heritage and the concern for ongoing application of scripture is to look at the hermeneutics evident within scripture itself, as we have done with Paul.

In a brilliant recent book, Richard Hays argues that Paul's hermeneutics are, among other things, ecclesiocentric and give priority to Spirit-experience.⁴¹ This is quite heuristic for us. If, as I have been arguing, Paul saw places for limiting the application of scripture and other places for extending the application of scripture, Wesleyans can safely, yet daringly ask about contemporary places where application of scripture should be limited, based on Spirit-experience, reason, and an ecclesiocentric hermeneutic. Certainly this is already done at times (e.g., limiting the application of prohibitions on women in leadership, etc.). What other

⁴⁰Cf. Donald A. D. Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience as a Model of Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury, 1990).

⁴¹Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 84ff., 108. In Gal. 3: 1ff., for example, the reception of the Spirit by the Galatians apart from law (circumcision) is reason for a continuing Spirit-experience without circumcision.

issues, or even commands, might need to be limited today, as was circumcision in Galatia by Paul? Tradition, reason, and Spirit-experience within particular communities of faith do become significant resources that help believers work through such issues in a ecclesiological, yet gospel-centered hermeneutic.

Correspondingly, where should extension of older legislation take place? We have seen this as a concern in the second-temple period, and Paul argues in an interesting direction (quite strongly in Gal. 2:11-15) that table fellowship should not be limited, but should be extended. If one sees this as an “open commensality”⁴² which flattens hierarchies and shapes an egalitarian ethic and practice, in what ways might, say, churches and Christian colleges begin to enact this in their own praxis?

As Spirit-led communities reasoning from tradition and scripture, Wesleyan hermeneutics can become operative in a distinctive and fruitful way. Always at issue is the limitation/extension/adaptation of the application of scripture in dialogue with tradition, reason, and Spirit-experience in local communities of believers. The way Paul dealt with his scriptural heritage informs Wesleyans with their scriptural heritage by attending to his hermeneutics as scripture meets new, unforeseen circumstances in a community’s ongoing life in the world. The process is open-ended for contemporary readers since the modern “text” always waits writing by daring and bold communities of faith that reread, limit, adapt, and/or extend scripture, guided always by “faith working through love.”

⁴²This is from John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1991), 261-264.

WESLEYAN THEOLOGY, SCRIPTURAL AUTHORITY, AND HOMOSEXUALITY

by
Bryan P. Stone

Few ethical issues today raise the question of the authority of Scripture as decisively as homosexuality. At one level, there is, of course, the important question of whether the Bible condemns homosexuality¹ as explicitly and unequivocally as the Christian tradition generally has held that it does.² But at another level, even if we grant that the Bible clearly

¹It is common today to distinguish between homosexual *orientation* and homosexual *practice*. A number of Christians today, for example, would argue that, while a homosexual orientation or attraction might be compatible with Christian faith, engaging in homosexual acts never is. While this distinction is helpful, we should guard against drawing too neat a dividing line between *orientation* and *act* (is sexual fantasy, for example, a part of *orientation* or does it belong to the realm of *act*?). Nevertheless, for the sake of clarity, when I use the word “homosexuality” throughout this essay I am referring especially, unless otherwise indicated, to the practical expression of homosexual desires and attractions through deliberate homosexual relationships, activity, and union.

²There is a long list of those who have raised questions about the extent to which the Bible explicitly and intentionally addresses itself to homosexuality. D. S. Bailey’s influential treatment of the subject, *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition*, for example, offer a revisionist interpretation of the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, arguing that it contains no reference to homosexuality, but instead has to do with the violation of customs of hospitality to sojourners in the land. He also notes that it was not until well into the history of its interpretation that the Sodom story was explicitly linked with sexual sin. Other more recent interpreters, such as John McNeill (*The Church and the Homosexual*) or Letha Scanzoni and Virginia Ramey Mollenkott (*Is The Homosexual My Neighbor?*), have followed this basic line of reasoning while arguing that the Sodom story “must be studied in the context of the reprehensibility of *inhospitality* and *gang*

does condemn homosexuality, we are still faced with the issue of how we are to construe its authority for us on this matter. After all, the Bible also mandates capital punishment for homosexuality (Leviticus 20:13); yet how many Christians today would consent to such a strict penalty? Then, too, some of the Bible's harshest prohibitions against homosexuality appear in the context of culturally distant and seemingly trivial prohibitions against such practices as blending two kinds of fabric, planting fields with two kinds of seeds, cross-breeding cattle, and even sexual relations during a woman's menstruation. The question naturally arises as to whether the biblical injunctions against homosexuality fall in the same category as its instructions on ceremonial or cultural matters—whether, that is, they are so tied to the particular experience and circumstances of ancient cultures that they fail to retain any dogmatic or ethical authority for us today. This question could be asked not only of the references to homosexuality in Leviticus, but even of those in Paul's writings which appear to be heavily influenced by the peculiar experiences and customary values of his day (for example, the standard Stoic aversion to what-

rape” rather than as a clear example of homosexual attack (Scanzoni and Mollenkott, 65). Other scholars, such as Victor Furnish, find this revisionist interpretation unconvincing and stress the high likelihood of a sexual context for understanding the meaning of the word “to know” in the Sodom story (55). Furnish does point out, however, that the homosexual dimension in the story is not of uppermost importance to later biblical interpreters, such as Ezekiel, who describes Sodom's sin in terms of arrogance, pride, and a failure to help the poor (16:58-60).

As to Paul's statements about homosexuality in Romans 1 (including the only mention of lesbianism in the Bible), John Boswell has recently contended that Paul is here not referring to genuinely gay men and lesbians but to heterosexuals who have given up their “natural” orientations arbitrarily. Likewise, Scanzoni and Mollenkott conclude that the context for Paul's remarks on “unnatural” relations in Romans 1 is to be understood as that of *idolatry* and *lust*: “No reference is made to persons whose own ‘nature,’ or primary orientation, is homosexual, as that term is understood by behavioral scientists” (65).

Finally, there is also considerable debate around just what is meant by the terms *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* which appear in 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:9-10. Simply consulting any number of modern translations reveals the enormous variety of translations of these words, though it is clear that most scholars see in the terms at least some kind of reference to homosexual activity. The first of these, which certainly has a wide range of meaning, is taken by John Boswell to refer to “the morally weak,” while he understands the second to be referring to “the sexually aggressive.” In that case, Paul is not even explicitly referring to homosexuality in the two passages. Scanzoni and Mollenkott are willing to allow that, at most, Paul is referring to same-sex ‘abuses’ and not necessarily to all homosexual practice (69).

ever is “contrary to nature” (*cf.* Furnish: 62ff). If Paul’s appeal to what is “natural” and “unnatural” is little more than the expression of a general civic morality that he borrows from his own context and culture, to what extent, if the assumptions of that morality differ from our own contemporary experience, is his interpretation of homosexuality as a perversion of “natural” human functions (Rom. 1:26ff) authoritative for us today? Paul also depicts long hair length for men as an obvious violation of what “nature itself” teaches and as therefore dishonorable (1 Cor. 11:14), yet we don’t find very many Christians today forming coalitions or sending out newsletters and pamphlets in opposition to current hair styles.

This question of the relationship between our contemporary human experience and the nature and extent of biblical authority is critical for how we go about forming our position as Christians toward homosexuality. In fact, it is doubtful that homosexuality would even pose the crisis for biblical authority that it does today if it were not for the fact that our experience and knowledge has undergone significant change in this area over the last several decades. In the first place, we have witnessed a proliferation of psychological, sociological, and biological studies of homosexuality in recent years. Then, too, the gay revolution has resulted in the fact that more and more Christians (consciously) *know* homosexuals and (openly) *are* homosexuals. Surely it is not unwarranted to assume that this revolution in our “experience” has some impact on our conclusions about homosexuality, especially for those of us who take seriously the legacy of John Wesley with regard to the value of reason and experience in the reading, interpretation, and application of Scripture.

The problem we face today can perhaps best be posed by using an illustration. As a pastor, one of my most faithful church members was a gay man (and, of necessity, quite “closeted”). He was consistent, honest, Christ-like, compassionate, and devoted to God. His Christian testimony was clear both in word and in deed. But he was gay-and both he and his partner had been so for as long as they could remember. Now as a Christian who stands in the Wesleyan tradition, do I allow my understanding of what the Bible teaches about homosexuality to qualify my assessment of my gay friend’s Christianity? Is he not, perhaps, as Christian as the “fruits” of his life would indicate? Or do I allow my experience of my friend’s righteous life to qualify my understanding of the Bible and how it functions as an authority in my life with regard to the question of homosexuality? Or both? Or neither? What do we do when our experience appears to contradict the plain meaning of Scripture?

Obviously, a number of issues need to be addressed in order to move toward a resolution of this problem. In the first place, as already mentioned, there are significant exegetical concerns with regard to just what the Bible says on the subject-with what literary forms, for what purpose, and in what context. In the second place, there is also the enormous task of sifting through the profusion of social-scientific studies as well as a number of significant moral and political issues³ that bear upon the topic of homosexuality while shaping our experience of it and position toward it as Christians. The specific question I would like to explore here, however, is the logically prior question of just how these two sets of data-biblical and experiential-should be interfaced, if at all, and even more specifically whether there are resources within a Wesleyan systematic theology that offer constructive clues for building a model for that interface. It is my conviction that there are such resources and that their nucleus is the distinctively Wesleyan understanding of the relationship between *divine grace* and *human freedom*. It is this unique relationship, I believe, that can serve as a liberating and creative model and analogy for the way we assert the authority of the Bible, on the one hand, and the dignity and autonomy of human experience on the other.

The purpose of this essay, then, is not to state or defend a Wesleyan position on homosexuality, but rather to explore some of the fundamental assumptions about the relationship between biblical authority and human experience that typically lie below the surface when Christians debate this important issue and that, unanswered or unclarified, tend to cloud and distort that debate. The only conclusions with regard to homosexuality that I will attempt to draw in this essay pertain to the kinds of questions that must be asked and answered in order to form an adequate Wesleyan position on homosexuality today. Thus, this paper might more properly play the role of a *prolegomenon* to a Wesleyan position on homosexuality.

Grace, Freedom, and the Authority of Scripture

Wesleyans have for some time operated with the notion that Scripture, as a primary source of revelation, must be interfaced with the com-

³Today, for example, Christians find themselves facing not only the question of whether homosexuality is compatible with Christian faith, but questions concerning gay “marriages,” gays in the military, civil rights for gays in areas such as housing and employment, gay parenting, and the ordination of gays to Christian ministry.

plementary sources of tradition, reason, and experience, thus forming what Albert Outler several decades ago termed the “Wesleyan quadrilateral.” What makes this quadrilateral deserving of the label “Wesleyan” is generally understood to be a fidelity to Wesley’s own historical example as a model of how these various sources of religious authority coordinate with and complement one another. But the extent to which we can responsibly appeal to Wesley himself as an adequate model for theological method today is limited, however important his place as our theological model and mentor. As Outler himself admits:

Neither Wesley’s theology nor his methods are simple panaceas. They are not like the TV dinners that can be reheated and served up quickly for immediate use. They call for imaginative updating in the new world cultural contexts.... Wesley’s vision of Christian existence has to be reconceived and trans-valued so that it can be as relevant in the experience of the late twentieth century as it was to alienated English men and women in 1740! (1991: 36).

There are a number of problems in bringing Wesley’s theological method forward to the late twentieth century, especially his method of interfacing biblical authority with human experience. One of the first such difficulties is that Wesley himself is not always consistent in how he handles that interface. There are times, for example, when Wesley clings to the “plain, natural, obvious meaning” of the words of Scripture without so much as allowing the testimony or experience (both actual and potential) of human beings. This would be the case, for example, in Wesley’s sermon on “Christian Perfection” where he argues on the basis of 1 John 5:18 that Christians do not commit sin, regardless of what we might think on the basis of our experience or reasoning.

If any doubt of this privilege of the sons of God, the question is not to be decided by abstract reasonings, which may be drawn out into an endless length, and leave the point just as it was before. Neither is it to be determined by the experience of this or that particular person Let God be true, and every man a liar” (I: 105-106).⁴

⁴All citations of Wesley, unless otherwise specified, refer to the bicentennial edition of *The Works of John Wesley*, Frank Baker and Richard Heitzenrater, editors-in-chief.

For Wesley, of course, one may certainly adduce other texts to prove that a particular passage should not be taken at its face value.⁵ Merely because we might find it difficult (or even impossible!) to point within our experience to a non-sinful Christian in no way overturns the force of texts which claim that Christians do not sin.

At the same time, Wesley often does allow experience as a theological source, even in the very sermon just mentioned. Thus, while his argument for the sense in which Christians *are* perfect (so as not to sin) summarily excludes experience as even a complementary source. His argument for the sense in which Christians *are not* perfect (so as to be free from ignorance, mistakes, infirmities, or temptations) makes a very conscious appeal to human experience. All we have to do, says Wesley, is take a hard look at the lives of Christians and we will readily discover that Christians are not exempt from errors, illness, poor judgment, etc. It must be said, of course, that Wesley, in general, is rather conscientious about the positive value of human experience (especially *religious* experience—the experience of the heart) in shaping theological conclusions. There are even instances where it could be said that Wesley is willing to allow human experience not merely to confirm, but actually to qualify or temper the biblical message. In the case of allowing women to preach, for example, Wesley took quite seriously not only the testimony of women who claimed to have experienced a call to preach, but their own practical success in doing so, and this despite the “plain, natural, obvious meaning” of Paul’s admonitions to the contrary.⁶

A second obstacle to any easy imitation of Wesley today is the ever-widening gap between Wesley’s context and our own with regard to continuing developments in the historical-critical understanding of Scripture. This would include not only the tools and methods at our disposal in the study and interpretation of Scripture, but a more dynamic view of the relationship between canon and tradition than was commonly held in Wesley’s day, and a more keen awareness of the role of one’s experience, context, and socio-political biases in the process of reading and interpreting texts. This does not mean, however, that Wesley was not profoundly open to extra-biblical resources and scholarship or that he held to a sim-

⁵In the case of the issue of sin in believers, Wesley will allow New Testament passages only (cf. 1:111).

⁶Qualifying Paul’s instructions in 1 Corinthians 14:34 that women should be silent in the churches, Wesley adds in his *Notes on the New Testament*: “unless they are under an extraordinary impulse of the Spirit.”

ple, mechanical literalism unconcerned with the role of tradition, experience, reason, and the interpreting community in the process of biblical interpretation. On the contrary, Wesley can often seem to have much in common with pragmatic inclinations in contemporary theology that tend to view the Bible's authority in a strictly functional context. It can scarcely be denied, nonetheless, that we approach the Bible today with a number of different presuppositions, resources, opportunities, limitations, and challenges than did Wesley.⁷

A third obstacle to simple appeals to the historical Wesley as a model for contemporary theological method is the rather slippery nature of the very term "experience." It is commonplace in Wesleyan circles to find steady appeals to Wesley in support of a strong role for experience in theology; but we should ask whether the kind of "experience" to which Wesley generally appealed as a source of religious authority is the same as the kind of "experience" to which contemporary theology has made a turn.⁸ Wesley's reliance on experience is first and foremost an insistence on "heart-religion" as opposed to a kind of nominal Christianity that dryly examines Scripture with the aid of tradition and reason. His concern is that revelation be received in the heart as well as in the head, and that the subjective experience of new birth to which the Holy Spirit testifies in the heart of the believer be allowed to count for something in drawing theological conclusions.

Thus, when Wesley argues for the validity of experience as a source of religious authority, it is generally the "religious" experience of Christian believers that he is talking about rather than the more empirical and

⁷See Larry Shelton's warning against anachronistic projections onto Wesley's eighteenth-century hermeneutic ("strongly influenced by Patristic and Reformation sources" [38]) of uniquely twentieth-century concerns about the Bible's purpose and authority. For example, the fundamentalist appeal to selected Wesley texts for a variety of positions, ranging from the inerrancy of the original autographs of Scripture to the propositional character of divine revelation is in many ways guided by a nineteenth-century epistemology that is as foreign to Wesley as are the conclusions of modern form criticism or redaction criticism. As Shelton says about Wesley, "not only is he pre-critical in his approach to Scripture, but he is also pre-Fundamentalist" (40).

⁸See Donald Gelpi's *The Turn to Experience in Contemporary Theology*, which provides an interesting comparison of the influence of Kantian and Cartesian constructs of experience in contemporary theology with what he takes to be the more correct and helpful constructs of experience offered by the pragmatist philosophies of Royce, Dewey, and Pierce.

publicly verifiable kinds of common human experience that modern theology has come to find so important. This is not to say that Wesley completely disregards experience in this broader sense, nor is it to say that modern theology has made a definite improvement over Wesley to the extent that it has preoccupied itself with the more publicly verifiable data of human experience. In fact, because of the Lockean epistemological framework within which Wesley conceives religious experience and knowledge, the experience of the heart often seems like a brand of sense perception (albeit with spiritual rather than physical senses). But however “experimental” or “inductive” was Wesley’s own theological method, it is his appeal to specifically “religious” experience (i.e., the assurance of one’s salvation and the personal encounter of the individual with God) that dominates his thought and gives distinctive shape to his theological method—and this in something of a contrast to the broad direction being pursued by modern theology.

For these and other reasons, Wesley is an exceedingly difficult character to appeal to in any simple or straightforward way as a model for our theological method. I question, however, whether it is only a fidelity to Wesley’s *historical example* in handling the so-called “quadrilateral” that renders one’s theological method “Wesleyan” in the first place. Are there not distinctively Wesleyan *theological commitments* that also inform how we go about doing theology? How, for example, do we view the relative autonomy of human experience and reason vis-à-vis biblical authority, or how do we conceive of the whole notion of “authority” from the outset? One such theological commitment has to do with the nature and activity of God’s grace in human lives that Wesley brings to the theological round-table. If the relationship between divine grace and human freedom is one of the most (if not *the* most⁹) distinctive elements in the entire Wesleyan outlook, it is reasonable to assume that this element might well shape our

⁹Randy Maddox, borrowing from Gerhard Sauter the category of “orienting concept” (“the integrative thematic perspective in light of which all other theological concepts are understood and given their relative meaning or value”—Maddox: 10), argues convincingly that “responsible grace” is just such an “orienting concept” for John Wesley. “Responsible grace,” says Maddox, “is not simply a doctrine discussed by Wesley. It is a fundamental conviction about the nature of divine-human interaction which provided the distinctive slant to all of Wesley’s theology” (12). Unfortunately, Maddox does not go on to extend the usefulness of this orienting concept to a doctrine of biblical authority, though he does explore its importance for other major doctrines in systematic theology.

entire model of how, in practice, the relationship between biblical authority and human experience should function within the Wesleyan quadrilateral.

For Wesleyan theology, of course, grace is absolutely prior in all of human experience. Grace doesn't just appear as a remedy for sin. We couldn't even exist apart from grace. In fact, we couldn't even sin if it weren't for grace. Grace constitutes us as human beings and makes freedom possible. Furthermore, just as grace has priority in our experience, it is also universal. Grace not only touches every person's existence, it touches every aspect of a person's existence. Grace creates, convicts, guides, sustains, and redeems.

One way of understanding the distinctiveness of Wesley's view of grace and freedom is to contrast it, as he did, with either of two competing positions in his own day: (1) a view that saw grace as "super-added" to a fundamentally fallen and "un"-graced human nature (through the operation of the sacraments); and (2) a view that saw grace as irresistible and limited only to an "elect" few, identified by Wesley as the *Calvinist* view.¹⁰

Against the former position, Wesley believed that grace is *universal*-it is "in all" (III: 545) and this, quite apart from any merit or activity of human beings. According to Wesley, this grace "is found, at least in some degree, in every child" and "in every human heart" (IV: 163). Wesley agreed with the position that grace is "super"-natural, but since, to Wesley's mind, there is no person who is born in an "un-graced" state, the distinction between natural and supernatural is purely academic. We are all born graced and no one could even so much as exist apart from God's grace. Wesley describes the human situation as graced in the following way:

It does not depend on any power or merit in [us]; no, not in any degree, neither in whole, nor in part. It does not in any wise depend either on the good works or righteousness of the receiver; not on anything [we have] done, or anything [we are]. It does not depend on [our] endeavors [III: 545].

But if grace is "in all," it is also "for all," and so, against the Calvinists, Wesley affirmed that grace is *unconditional*. In other words, grace is universally present and not limited to a specific few. Furthermore, against the Calvinists, Wesley affirmed that grace is *resistible*. The power of grace should not be understood as producing or implying the passivity of

¹⁰Cf. Wesley's sermon, "Free Grace," (III: 544-563).

human beings. Such a view would be a misunderstanding of God's power and an attempt to model it after our own.

Ordinarily we think of power as (a) the ability to control or coerce others unilaterally and (b) the ability to resist change. It is natural, then, to assume that if God is more powerful than humans, (a) God must have supreme control and unilateral coercive power and (b) God must be supremely resistant to change. But as a number of philosophers and theologians in this century have shown, this move is a philosophical mistake that assumes perfection to be a *perfection of independence* rather than a *perfection of relatedness*, a *perfection of static endurance* rather than a *perfection of dynamic flexibility*.

John Wesley, I believe, had already captured something of this insight two centuries ago in his understanding of grace. Wesley envisions grace as supremely powerful without at the same time being coercive; as unsurpassingly perfect without at the same time being irresistible. Thus, the radical difference between our power and God's power is preserved in Wesley, but that difference is not understood as the difference between a baby and an adult. Conceiving of the grace and power of God *quantitatively* in contrast to ours turns out to be the problem. Even if we extended such a *quantitative* difference out to infinity, we still would not arrive at God's power—not because we simply cannot reach the maximum of God's power, but because it is not “more of the same” in the first place. Rather, the difference between our power and God's power is a *qualitative* difference that would be better imagined as analogous to the *qualitative* difference between the power of the cross and the power of the Roman legions. The first represents the power of persuasive, suffering love, while the second represents the power of the sword—coercive, manipulative, and domineering. For the Christian, it is the former power that is the more sovereign and effective power.

For Wesley, the “power” and “authority” of God's grace is persuasive and relational rather than coercive and static. Grace makes it possible for us to act—not by coercing us irresistibly, but by freeing us to act. In answer to the question, “Does not [God's] working thus supercede the necessity of our working at all?” Wesley replies: “First, God works; therefore you *can* work. Secondly, God works; therefore you *must* work” (III: 206). In this way, Wesley affirms the primacy and universality of grace without negating human freedom or human responsibility.

Wesley consistently sought to hold in balance the idea of divine sovereignty and purpose with human autonomy and freedom. It was precisely

at this point that his arguments over predestination flared up with the Calvinists. Wesley refused to speak of the sovereignty of God “as singly disposing [our] eternal states” (Outler, 1964: 438). His argument for human freedom points out the faulty logic of those who hold that what we do could ever both matter to God and be determined by God.

Shall the stone be rewarded for rising from the sling, or punished for falling down? Shall the cannon ball be rewarded for flying towards the sun, or punished for receding from it? (442)

In other words, if human freedom plays no significant role in our salvation, how can God assign punishment or reward for what we do?

Wesley insists that, rather than robbing God of “glory,” the affirmation of human freedom and the resistibility of grace helps to establish the sincerity and integrity of God. In “working out our own salvation,” God nevertheless has all the glory. This is because “the very power to ‘work together with [us]’ was from God. Therefore to [God] is all the glory” (448). Wesley is battling against that whole strain of classical Christian thought which cannot turn loose of its notion of power as fundamentally “coercive” and its notion of perfection as fundamentally “legal” or “static”; which prefers, as Outler says, “to measure God’s sovereignty by his freedom from the world” rather than “his victorious involvement *in* the world” (426).

Because of this unique and revolutionary synthesis, Wesley received a good deal of criticism. By emphasizing that grace is resistible rather than irresistible, he was accused of making God seem like a rather passive being. If God’s power is not defined as coercive, unchanging, unilateral power, so the argument goes, then God must not be very powerful at all! But Wesleyan thought refuses to give in to a “trade-off” mentality that only knows how to contrast grace and freedom rather than creatively interface the two. John Cobb, I believe, captures the essence of Wesley’s thought in this regard:

The human response is not an autonomous human act set over against a prior act of grace; for it can only occur as it is made possible by grace. Grace is, or at least includes, the gift of freedom. Apart from grace there is no freedom and hence no possibility of a human act. But grace *does* generate human freedom. There is no act of grace that simply determines the total outcome. By making freedom possible, even the freedom to reject the gift of freedom, grace both establishes its own absolute priority and also insures that the exercise of human responsibility plays a role in the outcome (4-5).

What we find in the Wesleyan mediating position between Catholic and Calvinist positions (at least as Wesley understood those positions) is a view that could well be described as a Christian humanism. God's will, initiative, and power are asserted emphatically, but not in a way that controls, negates, or overrules human freedom and autonomy. For Wesley, God is

willing that all [humans] should be saved, yet not willing to force them thereto; willing that [humans] should be saved, yet not as trees or stones but as [humans], as reasonable creatures, endued with understanding to discern what is good and liberty either to accept or refuse it (Outler, 1964: 450).

As Wesley says, every part of God's wisdom is

suited to this end, to save [us] as [humans]: to set life and death before [us]; and then persuade, not force, [us] to choose life! (450).

It is precisely at this point that I wish to extend Wesley's insights about the relationship between divine grace and human freedom to the problem at hand, namely, how we are to conceive of the relationship between biblical authority and human experience. If God chooses for humans to be saved not "as trees or stones" but "as humans," is it not also true that God communicates with us not "as trees or stones" but "as humans"? Does it not then follow that the Bible's authority for us as the primary source of God's revelation is its authority for us "as humans"-its appeal to and respect for our experience "as humans" rather than its authoritarian priority over or dictatorial disregard for our experience?

Simply put, *revelation* is an act of *grace*. It therefore ought to be understood as an act of grace. What we say about the relationship between divine grace and human freedom should not suddenly disappear or be shoved to the margins once we begin considering questions about the nature of biblical authority, revelation, and inspiration.

It must be admitted that Wesley himself is an ambiguous model, at best, in this regard. When it comes to the role of grace in the process of salvation, Wesley can emphasize its resistibility without at all believing he has jeopardized the sovereignty of God or the universality of that grace. But too often his insights about grace do not carry over to his views on revelation, inspiration, or biblical authority. Instead, as William Abraham has shown, Wesley often relies on a rather strict doctrine of divine dictation that tends to presume that the truthfulness and authority

of God's revelation will be increased by minimizing the degree of human freedom and creativity (and, thus, the possibility of human error) allowed in the process (1985:120-121; cf. 1982).

Perhaps this ambiguity in Wesley is the cause of the tragic oversight of much of contemporary Wesleyan evangelical theology as seen in its bifurcation of the nature of grace in saving the heart and the nature of grace in teaching the mind. When it comes to the latter, grace too often becomes viewed as irresistible, unilateral, and authoritarian, resulting in a view of the Bible as a lifeless deposit of oracles rather than as a living witness of faith. This kind of theological apartheid between epistemology and soteriology is as unwarranted by the most fundamental of Wesleyan theological commitments as it is contrary to the Johannine synthesis of knowledge and liberation in Jesus' statement, "you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32).

The distinctively Wesleyan relationship between divine grace and human freedom should be allowed to shape our understanding of both salvation *and* revelation. Not only does God save us "as humans" rather than as trees or stones," God also reveals truth to us and inspired the biblical witnesses "as humans" rather than "as trees or stones." What does it mean to be taught "as humans" rather than as "as trees and stones"?

Revelation as "Divine Pedagogy"

One of the few books that students in the fields of theology and education are equally likely to come across during their training is Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.¹¹ Few contemporary thinkers have addressed the philosophy of educating people "as humans" rather than "as trees or stones" as convincingly and with as much practical success as Freire. His thought is relevant to the above discussion because his concern is with both education and liberation, and with how these two are effectively linked together in human lives. There are a number of parallels between Freire's proposal for carrying out the process of liberating education and a model for interfacing biblical authority with human experience that builds on the Wesleyan paradigm of divine grace and human freedom.

Freire's primary point throughout *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is that any genuine involvement in the liberation of the oppressed requires a dia-

¹¹Freire's book has become something of a handbook for theological reflection in third-world countries and for the development of the "base community" churches that have exploded onto the scene by the tens of thousands in those same countries, especially Freire's native Brazil.

logical commitment to the learners as active human subjects rather than as passive inanimate objects. From the practical standpoint of developing a pedagogical method, this means for Freire the rejection of all “banking” forms of education where teaching “becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor” (58). This banking approach to education never challenges a student to critically consider reality and his or her role in shaping reality. The student is never encouraged to become “human.”

What Freire instead proposes is a “problem-posing” form of education which he calls *conscientizacao* (“conscientization”). Education according to this model dispenses with the vertical pattern of “banking” that approaches teaching as fundamentally a transferral of information. Instead, liberating education emphasizes “dialogue,” and its primary aim lies in its encouragement of learners to critically reflect on their situation and to move toward action and transformation. Freire’s method is controversial and has been perceived as subversive in many world areas because it teaches the poor to read, grasp their own condition, and do something about it.

Fundamental to the task of “problem-posing” education is a sincere regard for the experience and abilities of the one being taught. This requires not only an openness to dialogue, but genuine respect for that person’s ability to “name the world” (76ff). The task of teaching is not, however, a mere acquiescence to the knowledge and experience of the students. Far from it. “Consciousness-raising” takes place as those being taught are challenged to think about themselves and their situations in critical ways. Thus, liberating education is constituted, according to Freire, by “posing problems” to customary interpretations of life. On the one hand, the teacher must never merely discard the students’ interpretations of reality as being mistaken or infantile. On the other hand, the students’ interpretations must, nonetheless, be challenged and subjected to critical reflection especially with regard to those “limit-situations” (89) in their lives where seemingly insurmountable barriers to human freedom are to be discovered.

“Problem-posing” education is not aimed at revising, negating, replacing, or skirting around the experience of those being taught, nor is it aimed at dispensing mere information about the “facts” of their situation. By asking critical questions about students’ own interpretations of their experience and of their role and responsibility in shaping reality, problem-posing education creates crises both in the students’ understanding of

their situation and in the students' own self-understanding. The educational process, conceived and practiced along these lines, can hardly be mechanical or unilateral; neither can it be individualistic or private. The sharing of one's interpretation of reality opens the student to the questions of others and is essential to the aim of moving out, as Freire says, beyond narrowly partial or "focalized" views of reality toward "the comprehension of *total* reality" (99).

Critical reflection for Freire is not the end, but only the beginning of the process of "consciousness-raising." Critical reflection goes hand in hand with action to yield praxis—"reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (28). For Freire, action and reflection occur simultaneously; indeed, Freire even allows that critical reflection is action. What Freire wants to avoid is any dichotomy whereby "praxis could be divided into a prior stage of reflection and a subsequent stage of action" (123). But liberating action will never take place until the oppressed are able to get a handle on the limit-situations they face. It is then that they can move toward their own liberation. The oppressed must themselves move toward liberation-as subjects, not objects. While human beings can never save themselves by themselves (142), it also is true that human beings can never be liberated by others without their own consent and involvement. However much the process of liberation may be initiated by another, and however much others may play a crucial role in that process through consciousness-raising, as Freire says:

Attempting to liberate the oppressed without their reflective participation in the act of liberation is to treat them as objects which must be saved from a burning building... (52).

In other words, liberation is never a one-sided process. Indeed, it *cannot* be. The liberation of *free* beings simply cannot be unilateral or coercive or it isn't liberation. Why? Is it because we would-be liberators are not unilaterally or coercively powerful enough to achieve the liberation of the oppressed? If only we had more unilateral or coercive power, would we then be able to free the oppressed? Absolutely not! No amount of unilateral, coercive power can liberate others-not even (as Wesley might add) "divine" unilateral, coercive power!¹² This is true not because of

¹²All this is not to claim that there is no coercive dimension to God's gracious activity with human beings-moments of unilateral and irresistible power that influence the course of events whether we cooperate or not. As Randy Maddox notes, "It was Wesley's conviction that. . . God may on occasion irresistibly

power-limitations on our part (or on God's part), but because of the very nature of *freedom* itself and because of the very nature of *liberation* itself.

As Freire makes clear, the path to becoming free necessarily includes becoming a "subject." No amount of coercive power from another (again, even from God) can force a person to be a subject. What is required instead is a power that is far different (and far greater) than the power to invade, manipulate, and dictate. What is required is relational power—the power to influence persuasively through force of love, example, compassion, and dialogue. It is the power to make sense of our experience rather than the power to contradict or nullify our experience. It is my view that not only is Freire right in arguing that this is finally the kind of power that liberates human beings, but that this is through and through the kind of power that is characteristic of the saving and revealing grace of God discovered in Jesus of Nazareth. In the end, it is finally the respect for and compassionate identification with our human experience that inspires our trust in God and in God's authority for our lives. Perhaps that is why Paul could see in the event of Christ crucified the very "wisdom and power of God" (1 Cor. 1:24).

It should be readily apparent that Freire's pedagogical method offers rich resources for a Wesleyan understanding of the authority of Scripture, how that authority interfaces with human experience, and at what level. In the first place, if the authority of the Bible is an authority for us "as humans" and not "as rocks and trees," then that authority cannot simply rest on claims put forward by the church or even the Bible itself for its divine origin, as if our trust, assent, and obedience could thereby be commanded or coerced rather than inspired or aroused. So also, the Bible's authority can never finally lie in an alleged inerrancy of texts. Even if the texts of the Bible *are* inerrant, their authority for us "as humans" must still rest on the kind of credibility to our experience that could warrant our authentic and free consent to their message. In the process of salvation, grace does not "pull rank" on the human being. Why should we expect

constrain a person to perform a specific task in fulfilling divine providence." But, as Maddox adds, "such was never the case in relation to personal salvation" (13; cf. Outler, 1964: 433). Thus, however one construes the reality of "coercive moments" in God's activity (and such a construal would require nothing short of a full metaphysical treatment of the subject of divine grace and human freedom), such moments should never be understood in such a way as to lessen the role of human freedom, responsibility, and experience in the process of salvation. Wesley finds the proper balance in an interesting quotation from Augustine: "He that made us without ourselves will not save us without ourselves" (III: 208).

that it would be any different when it comes to the process of revelation? Revelation, if it is to function as revelation, must still be recognized as such by human beings. If the authority of the Bible as revelation is doubted by human beings today, perhaps that is not primarily the consequence of our sinful rebellion against proper divine authority, but of the fact that the Bible's authority is not understood to be rooted in the most fundamental questions and concerns of our existence.¹³ Here, again, the fallacy lies in thinking that the authority of Scripture is somehow enhanced by taking shortcuts around human experience. Authority that is located as a coercive or irresistible force outside of and over against human experience is no more than an authority over dogs and cats; it could be likened to the authority of a child over little toy soldiers. That is not really a "high" view of biblical authority, and no amount of pious chanting or religious foot-stomping can make it so.

The upshot of all this, of course, is that, regardless of how faithful or consistent to Scripture a Wesleyan theological claim or ethical position purports to be, it is not thereby exempt from the question of its credibility to human reason and experience (cf. Ogden: 4-6). Again, this is due not only to the *nature* of any and all authority that relates to us "as humans~ rather than "as trees and stones," but also to the *level* at which that authority relates to us-namely, at the level of our "interpretation" of experience (or at the level of "faith").

One recent thinker who has given extensive attention to the question of the *level* at which the Bible (as well as his own church's teaching magisterium) functions authoritatively for human beings is the Latin

¹³This is finally also the problem, as I see it, with standard appeals to the *testimonium internum Spiritus Sancti*. For example, H. Ray Dunning rejects grounding the authority of the Bible in either its alleged inerrancy or in the Bible's own testimony to itself. Instead, he appeals to the "internal testimony of the Holy Spirit" as a "special case" of Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace and, therefore, "extended to all men [*sic*] equally" (63). This, of course, leaves him with the problem of why all human beings do not accept the authority of the Bible. The culprit, for Dunning, is a prior "issue of existential authority" by which he means our own sinful hostility to God which translates into a resistance to the authority of the Bible. Could it be, however, that this prior issue of existential authority has as much or more to do with the heteronomous nature of the authority that is too often claimed for the Bible by the church-an authority that bypasses or is merely thrown at human experience from outside and above human experience?

American theologian, Juan Luis Segundo.¹⁴ It is noteworthy that Segundo likens the liberating power of revelation to just the kind of educational process or “pedagogy” we have been exploring.

For Segundo, the Bible is our authority as a teacher with regard to how we “punctuate” our experience (32-35). This happens not at the level of our learning “things,” but at the level of our “learning how to learn.” It is at this level that the Bible functions authoritatively for human beings:

. . . the divine plan does not consist in distributing correct information once and for all, but in furthering an educational process in which people learn to learn.... This pedagogy may be made up of provisional statements, but it is not *itself* provisional- thank God (78).

Within the Bible itself one discovers a remarkable diversity on such weighty topics as the origins of the world, the relationship of God’s covenant community to the rest of the world, what happens to the human being after death, and the role of human works in our justification by God. Placed side by side in a superficial, quantitative way, this diversity may look like contradiction. But viewed as a process of God’s leading us toward becoming more fully human and, thus, restored in the image of God, this pedagogy is an irreversible and infallible process of trial and error in which God respects our human limitations and frailties while pushing us beyond the comfortable seams of our experience and knowledge.

Within this educational process, the Bible constantly creates crises for our customary interpretations of experience by pressing us to re-think our lives in view of a “total” picture of reality. Revelation is not to be conceived, says Segundo, as “a mere providing of correct information about God and human beings, but as a ‘true pedagogy.’” Therefore, “we must seriously modify our conception of the relationship between revelation and truth” (245). Error is tolerated within the divine process of revelation because that is “the human way” of arriving at truth. In fact, as those of us who have been teachers know full well, a provisional allowance of students’ errors is often indispensable to the broader pursuit of truth. The authority of the Bible is not to be understood as the authority of a dictator to whom we must submit or forever perish. It is rather the

¹⁴*Liberation of Dogma* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992); *Faith and Ideologies* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984); and *The Liberation of Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1976).

authority of a companion and fellow-sufferer who has “been there” before, who knows our situation, who respects our “subject”-hood, who is well-trusted in the community, but who, at the same time, without overwhelming or negating us, challenges us and calls forth in us more than we ever thought possible.

The parallels between this view of revelation as an educational process and the Wesleyan interface of divine grace and human freedom are significant. In the first place, a Wesleyan can reasonably conclude that the Bible is “inspired” by God not in the sense of being a “deposit” of true information dropped down coercively on scribes who simply penned the words. “Inspiration” refers to the transforming power of grace that does not negate human frailty, error, and the other limitations with which we all live as human beings (for example, the patriarchy of the biblical witnesses), but rather enters into “dialogue” with our wounded and limited humanity and poses to it the possibility of a healed humanity. The Bible, in this view, has an authority for human experience analogous to the power that divine grace has for human freedom. Just as grace does not substitute for or bypass our freedom, the Bible’s authority does not substitute for or bypass our own exploration of and learning about the world and each other.

When revelation is understood as an educational process, we no longer see its movement *inquantitative* terms as the “addition” to a knowledge database of true information and the subtraction from that database of incorrect information. Revelation is, instead, a *qualitative* process that challenges our interpretation of our knowledge and experience and the way we synthesize that knowledge and experience into a concrete life praxis. On the one hand, then, the Bible always has something objectively new and different to bring to our situation. It is a word from God. It is “instruction.” It is “a divine pedagogy.”¹⁵ But, trust in that word from God is not a trust that surrenders (or is asked to surrender) our experience, nor is it a trust that begins (or is asked to begin) where reason leaves off. What Segundo says of the Old Testament is undoubtedly true of the whole Bible:

Thus, when we say we have “faith” in . . . the Old Testament—and in all of it—we mean that we are completely confident that by following the path laid out and posted there with

¹⁵ I borrow this phrase from Juan Luis Segundo who himself takes it from the Vatican II document, *Dei Verbum* 15.

incomplete and temporary things, as is the case in all education, we will always find ourselves confronting an ever greater truth, and a deeper wealth of meaning for our human existence. Such faith becomes more “rational” or, if you will, “reasonable” to the extent we do not feel bombarded with isolated “true” statements, but as in any pedagogical process, pushed toward crises that lead to discoveries. The Absolute whom we follow does not impose on us blind obedience to unintelligible mysteries, but rather guides us as free and creative beings toward a truth that is ever-deeper and more enriching (80).

Homosexuality and the Authority of Scripture

There is an old saying that authority is like soap—the more of it you use, the less of it you have. That could well be the thesis of this essay for, as I understand it, it is no part of the authority claimed for the Bible by Wesleyans to override, neglect, or subordinate to itself human experience any more than grace overrides, neglects, or subordinates to itself human freedom. On this view, those who purport to hold a “higher” view of Scripture than others—because they offer unswerving obedience to the Bible by allegedly bracketing or negating human experience, science, creativity, or reason—actually hold a very low view of Scripture.

Authority that is conceived of quantitatively and externally as unilateral and irresistible often looks impressive on the face of things (in the same way that a bomb, tank, or gun looks “powerful”), but tends to function at a very low level in inspiring faith, loyalty, and confidence on the part of those at whom it is aimed. The relationship of the Christian to Scripture turns out to be quite “inhuman.” Such a view of Scripture has little in common with the understanding of power and authority modeled in the Wesleyan vision of the relationship between divine grace and human freedom. Rather, it would be more “Wesleyan” to say that the full length and breadth of our human experience is the rich soil through which the Word of God enters into dialogue, thereby taking root, flourishing, and becoming something dynamic and liberating.

Of course, the Bible does pose problems to our experience. It radically challenges the way we interpret and learn from our experience. As Nigel Biggar puts it:

The fact of our condition is such that, because of creaturely finitude, we cannot think of anything except in terms of secular experience; and yet, because of our fallenness, we cannot treat that experience simply as a purveyor of what is true. Our

experience is never pure. It is always interpreted; and it is frequently interpreted wrongly. We cannot, therefore, choose between experience and divine revelation; we must endorse them both at the same time (83).

What does all this mean for the question of homosexuality? To some, the foregoing may seem like a long detour around the pressing subject with which we began. But, as I have tried to emphasize, how we proceed toward the formation of a Wesleyan position on homosexuality has everything to do with our presuppositions about the interface of biblical authority with human experience. To what extent, if at all, does knowledge and experience gained apart from the biblical texts (through science, testimony, observation, personal experience, etc.) have any validity in shaping our theological conclusions on homosexuality? On the basis of a Wesleyan understanding of divine grace and human freedom—and, by extension, of divine revelation and human experience—perhaps we are now in a position to formulate some of the more fundamental questions that must be asked and answered if we are to move toward a Wesleyan stance on homosexuality. I suggest four.

1. On a Wesleyan model of biblical authority, we are bound to ask, first, about the particular knowledge and experience of the biblical witnesses themselves when it comes to the subject of homosexuality.

If revelation does not supplant or negate human experience, but rather poses problems to experience at the level of how it is “punctuated,” then we must first inquire as to the experience and understanding of homosexuality available to the biblical witnesses. It is that experience and understanding, after all, which forms the soil in which God’s revealing grace inspires their remarks on the subject. We know, for example, that in ancient Israel homosexual practice was commonly associated with cult prostitution in connection with the worship of foreign deities. Likewise, homosexual practice in Paul’s day was basically exploitative and debaucherous—an exhibition of insatiable lust that expressed itself in a range of activities including the emasculation of boys for the lecherous satisfaction of others, brothel-keeping, slavery, and forced transvestitism (Furnish: 62ff). Then, too, it was also assumed that homosexuality was a conscious and voluntary choice by heterosexuals rather than an “orientation” deeply etched in one’s very identity as a person. As Furnish reminds us:

. . . not only the terms, but also the concepts “homosexual” and “homosexuality” were unknown in Paul’s day. These

terms, like the terms “heterosexual,” “heterosexuality,” “bisexual,” and “bisexuality,” presume an understanding of human sexuality that was possible only with the advent of modern psychological and sociological analysis. The ancient writers . . . were operating without the vaguest conception of what we have learned to call “sexual orientation” (66).

Do these ancient assumptions and contexts shape the biblical witnesses’ remarks on homosexuality? It should be clear by now that a Wesleyan has the best of reasons to believe that they do and not in a merely superficial way. This, of course, does not necessarily mean that Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 apply only to homosexual practice within the setting of cult prostitution, nor does it necessarily mean that Paul’s remarks on the “exchange of natural relations for unnatural” are irrelevant to our discussion of homosexuality today. It certainly does not mean that our task is one of trying to strip away the “husk” of the biblical witnesses’ limited and culture-bound experience in order, thereby, to expose a “kernel” of timeless truth. The reason for acquainting ourselves with the social worlds of ancient Palestine and other Near Eastern civilizations, as well as Greco-Roman culture at or around the time of Paul, is not so that we know what needs to be “distilled off” in order to reach the eternal and unchanging message of the Bible. It is so that we can gain clarity about how the Holy Spirit’s gracious interaction with the biblical witnesses empowered them to detect in the “signs of their times” the path to the recovery of the image of God, as well as particular obstacles to that recovery. What we are looking for in the Bible is not *more information* about homosexuality. We are looking for how the biblical witnesses “learned how to learn” from within their own context, experience, and understanding. What we are ultimately looking for is the movement, trajectory, and dynamics of an educational process leading us toward the fullest expression of the *imago dei* in our lives.

The question of the particular experience and understanding of the biblical witnesses, then, is not only *a fair* question; it is, for the Wesleyan, an indispensable question. The problems posed by revelation to the experience and understanding of the biblical witnesses make little sense, offer us few clues about our own lives, and therefore function with little or no existential authority for us, apart from our attaining at least some minimal degree of clarity concerning the nature of that experience and understanding, however different it may prove to be from our own.

2. We also should ask about how the biblical texts dealing with homosexuality (as well as other related texts) function within the broader educational process initiated by God to which the Bible bears witness.

For the Wesleyan, the type of approach that simply tosses out a list of biblical texts that condemn homosexual behavior, either preceded or followed by the statement “You be the judge!” is hardly a responsible approach to biblical authority. Such a strategy treats revelation *quantitatively* and fails to grasp the relationship between particular texts and the “problem-posing” educational process to which those texts bear witness and in which those texts play a part. Of course, how we understand the broader movement and direction of the “divine pedagogy” in Scripture will vary from tradition to tradition, but there is no avoiding the question of how we understand this fundamental dynamic within which we evaluate individual texts.

So, for example, the Wesleyan tradition maintains that the whole of Scripture points us toward the way of salvation, understood as our restoration in the image of God, and that such a restoration is normatively expressed in our conformity to Christ’s likeness that comes about through our union with and participation in the divine.¹⁶ The whole sweep of Scripture on this view is a process of God teaching us to become more fully human (and thus more holy!) as we are conformed to the image in which we were originally created. From Genesis to Revelation, that image is portrayed as an image of *freedom*, an image of *community*, and an image of *creativity*. Although each of these dimensions undergoes vast development through the Bible and is viewed from a wide array of perspectives, we nonetheless can detect a distinct process of “learning how to learn” when it comes to each. In the case of *creativity*, the human being is portrayed in the Bible as created fundamentally creative through work, play, worship, and love. That image is subsequently corrupted into a capacity that is at best barren and at worst inflexible, destructive, or even deadly. The entire compass of biblical revelation is a process of our moving from a relatively uncreative faith dictated by legal requirements and ritual duties to a more mature faith that places justice and mercy above sacrifice, to the kind of creative and dynamic faith to which Paul bears

¹⁶See especially K. Steve McCormick’s article, “Theosis in Chrysostom and Wesley: An Eastern Paradigm on Faith and Love,” for a reminder of how central to Wesley’s *ordo salutis* is the typically eastern emphasis on the deifying union with God, or restoration of the *imago dei*, that comes through the coincidence of divine energy and human freedom.

witness when he claims that “all things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable” (1 Cor. 6:12).

Here again, the work that is required to come to a Wesleyan position on homosexuality is considerable. Simply put, we can’t talk about the “biblical” view of homosexuality until we talk about the “biblical” view of what it means to be truly human. And that, of course, carries its own demands. In the first place, we must do justice to the way in which, throughout the Bible, a rich variety of witnesses point to the nature and recovery of our authentic humanity-and this despite the fragmentary and provisional nature of such witness when viewed from the vantage point of the entire pedagogical process. For example, instructions on dietary laws in the Old Testament appear rather obsolete and trivial when placed side by side with Paul’s ethic of liberty in the New Testament.

We must do justice to the normative witness to the nature and recovery of the image of God discovered in the apostolic witness to Jesus found in the New Testament. If we hold that in Jesus of Nazareth we have discovered the decisive revelation both of what it means to be fully human and of the path to the recovery of that authentic humanity, we cannot avoid asking how that revelation functions as the norm by which all other biblical witness is measured and evaluated. In the case of homosexuality, that is not as simple as asking what the earliest witnesses to Jesus understood him to be saying about homosexuality. For one thing, we have no such understanding on their part. What we do have is their understanding of the path to the recovery of our authentic humanity as that is discovered in Jesus. It is this understanding that serves as the criterion by which the appropriateness of all other biblical witness is measured and it is this understanding against which any talk about the compatibility of homosexual practice with Christian faith must finally be judged-both the talk about homosexuality that occurs explicitly in the Bible and our own talk about homosexuality today.

The divine pedagogy is a process of our coming to the truth about the possibility of our own existence as human beings in relationship to God, world, and neighbor. While that process is never finished and continually poses new challenges to our experience and understanding, we can with confidence claim that the process has a normative trajectory, dynamics, and goal. The point, however, is that the normativity of revelation lies not in the particular experiences or information available to the biblical witnesses, but in the divine educational process that poses problems for how that experience is interpreted or “punctuated.”

3. We should ask about our own experience and knowledge of homosexuality and how it differs, if at all, from that of the biblical witnesses.

It is perhaps at this point, rather than at any other, that the process of forming a Wesleyan position on homosexuality is likely to get short-circuited. Not only is our knowledge and experience constantly growing and changing on this topic, but the sources of that knowledge and experience are varied, complex, and often contradictory. Is homosexuality a volitional *conduct* or an *orientation*? Or both? Or neither? Is it a psychological state, the product of particular relational patterns experienced early in one's childhood, or is it, perhaps, a more innate phenomenon, possibly hormonal or genetic in origin? Is it hereditary? If it is an orientation, can it be altered? We are easily tempted to throw our hands up in despair and decide the whole issue on the basis of a few simple proof-texts from the Bible.

But if biblical authority does not bypass or override human experience, and instead appeals to it while challenging how we learn from it, the question of just what we know about homosexuality through extra-biblical sources is unavoidable. Even if it is objected that the scientific evidence and personal testimonies at our disposal are at best inconclusive and at worst contradictory, the contingent and fragmentary nature of our experience can never be an excuse for simply disposing of the question of that experience in favor of the experience of the biblical witnesses themselves. We must, of course, recognize the provisional and relative status of our experience, while subjecting it to the widest possible range of comparison and evaluation.

A Wesleyan understanding of experience is certainly not solipsistic. What is demanded is that we actively and aggressively seek out the experiences of others and hear as wide an assortment of voices as is possible, especially the voices of those who are most likely to be affected by our conclusions on homosexuality-gay men and lesbians themselves. All ethical issues have real people at their center and too often the church has failed to hear the voices of the very ones who are the most intimately involved in those issues. All this does not mean that a Wesleyan may still not conclude at the end of the day that homosexuality is utterly sinful and completely contradictory to God's will for human beings; but that conclusion must come only *as a conclusion*, and only after carefully hearing the evidence and listening to those persons who can be our best teachers about what homosexuality is and isn't—namely, the hundreds of thousands of real, hurting people who are involved directly.

The more remote and incomprehensible to our experience is a particular object or behavior (for example, homosexuality), the less we are able to interface our experience with biblical authority when it comes to thinking about that object or behavior. The message of the Bible ends up being received in a kind of “experiential vacuum” without any roots in the historical projects, concerns, and interests that shape and give meaning to our lives. Nor is it a question of simply “taking the Bible’s word” on the subject. In a Wesleyan model of the interface between grace and freedom, or revelation and experience, no one side of the interface can be bracketed without harming our understanding of the other side. Just as the power and sovereignty of grace is not made stronger by reducing or eliminating human freedom, so also the authority of the Bible is not enhanced by reducing or eliminating human experience and reason.

4. We also should ask how the educational process discovered in the Bible and carried forward by the Christian faith community is to guide and challenge our interpretation and understanding of homosexuality today.

We have seen how inimical to the Wesleyan model of grace and freedom is any view of biblical authority that relies on an understanding of revelation as a finished deposit of truth “bankrolled” by God in the pages of the Bible, to which our response is merely reception, conservation, and application. On the contrary, biblical authority is augmented rather than diminished to the degree that human creativity and experience is respected and appealed to by the divine pedagogy of grace. This means that “tradition” is more than simply an empty conduit for the handing on of divine “data,” but is itself ~ creative participant in that educational process. As Segundo says:

Faith is not the mere consequence of a passive, individual acceptance . . . of a word addressed to us by God. Thus, the faith community does not follow the *fait accompli* of a revelation wrought by God. It is an integral part of it (247).

Because our contemporary experience and understanding of homosexuality differ substantially from that of the biblical witnesses as well as from that of the antecedent Christian tradition, we cannot merely imitate their learning process in any easy, mechanical, or superficial way. Nor can their discoveries simply be superimposed onto our experience. It is one thing to detect how God’s revealing grace interacted with and posed problems for, say, Paul’s understanding and experience of human sexuality. It

is quite another to ask how God's revealing grace enters into dialogue with our own understanding and experience of human sexuality. Because of the dynamic character of the educational process that is divine revelation, and because of the real differences between our experience and that of the biblical witnesses, we should even be prepared for the possibility (and I underscore that I am talking only about a *possibility*) that a "yes" to homosexuality today may not be the precise opposite of a "no" to homosexuality in the Bible. That is because the relationship between "truth" and "error" is much more dynamic and fluid when truth is viewed *qualitatively* within an educational process rather than *quantitatively* as a unilateral "deposit" from God.

Slavery, for example, was for centuries assumed to be a permanent fixture in human society. Few people considered looking past a *quantitative* reading of certain New Testament references commanding slaves to be obedient to their masters (Eph. 6:5, Col. 3:22, 1 Tim. 6:1). Slavery was finally condemned as immoral only when Christians began to question the assumption that God's truth is a timeless and unchanging deposit and began to reassess the institution of slavery by interfacing their concrete experience of the personal and social effects of slavery with the broader witness in the Bible concerning the universal equality of all people (Acts 10, Gal. 3:28, Col. 3:11).

Whether a similar shift in the traditional Christian understanding of homosexuality is called for today is beyond the scope of the present inquiry. In a number of ways, the issue of slavery is not a fair parallel to the issue of homosexuality. For one thing, while we can construe a number of verses in the Bible as challenging the institution of slavery, it is virtually impossible to construe any biblical passages as being at all permissive of homosexuality. What is called for today, however, is a reassessment of homosexuality by interfacing our concrete experience and knowledge of the nature, origin, and consequences of homosexuality with the broader witness discovered in the Bible.

How and at what point(s) is this antecedent process of "learning to learn" able to guide and challenge how we interpret our experience and knowledge of homosexuality? In keeping with the Wesleyan understanding of the divine pedagogy as the path to the recovery of our true humanity as we are restored in the image of God, and in keeping with what we know about sexuality today as an integral expression of human identity, I suggest that the fundamental question revelation poses to our experience today is the question of whether, given what we know about homosexual-

ity (and sexuality in general), homosexual practice can in any way be construed as compatible with the image of God in which we are created and toward which we are being drawn by God's prevenient and sanctifying grace.

The more we know about human sexuality, the more we realize how central to who we are as human persons is this important dimension of our lives and how impossible it is to separate our sexuality (including our sexual "practice") from our very identity as persons. Sexual activity is not just a tool for procreation. So, if homosexuality is a sin, it is vastly different than sins such as murder, gossip, or adultery. Unlike other sins, children grow up hating and deceiving themselves for this sin which they did not will or want. If homosexuality is indeed a sin, it is an incomparably menacing form of sin, one that involves the human person at the core of his or her identity so that the often-repeated adage, "love the sinner, hate the sin," lands rather wide of the mark when it comes to homosexuality. We must inevitably ask, then: Is homosexual practice always incompatible with the *freedom*, *community*, and *creativity* that constitute our creation in the image of God?

In the first place, if the image of God is an image of *freedom* and if, throughout the entire Bible, we are pushed toward ever new understandings of the character and scope of that freedom, can homosexual practice ever be construed as a legitimate expression of that freedom, or must it always be only a trap, a seduction, a form of servitude, bondage, and oppression? To answer this question we must take a hard look at what we know and can learn about homosexual relationships today. Are these relationships ever characterized by the kind of authentic human freedom to which the biblical witness points? Or do heterosexual relationships have a distinct advantage over homosexual relationships when it comes to creating an environment where enslavement and bondage are minimized?

In the second place, if the image of God is an image of *community* and if, throughout the entire Bible, we detect the divine pedagogy challenging us to move beyond narrow, tribalistic, self-serving notions of community toward an understanding of community as mutual, nurturing, and liberating, can homosexual practice ever be construed as a legitimate expression of that "image-of-God" community, or must it always be only an expression of selfishness, alienation, and exploitation? Paul's experience certainly seems to be that homosexuality was fundamentally exploitative. Is the same thing true of our experience? Is there such a thing as the possibility of a homosexual relationship that does not reduce

sexuality to mere “sport” and that is not manipulative, domineering, self-centered, or decadent? The question of the image of God as an image of community also drives us to take account of the relationship between male and female that appears explicitly in the context of our creation in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). Just how central is heterosexuality to *imago dei*? Is homosexuality fundamentally a violation of our creation “as male and female” in God’s image?

Finally, if the image of God is an image of *creativity* and if, throughout the entire Bible, we find ourselves confronted with the possibility of moving beyond not only destructive and inflexible patterns of human living but also beyond narrow and mechanical understandings of human creativity as mere productivity or ritual, can homosexual practice ever be construed as a legitimate expression of authentically human creativity-creativity as it is intended by God—or must it always be only an expression of destructiveness, barrenness, futility, and sterility?

It is the answers to questions such as these, I hold, that can move us closer to a Wesleyan position on homosexuality today. These are certainly not the only questions that need answering. And obviously the answers to even these questions entail a tremendous amount of work and reflection. It is not now a few isolated verses in the Bible that become the texts by which we evaluate the compatibility of homosexuality with Christian faith, but the entire pedagogy that is the Bible itself. If homosexuality is inherently sinful, that is not, in the first place, because it contradicts six Bible verses, but because in some way it violates the image of God in which we have been created and to which the entire Bible is a faithful witness. Furthermore, not only are hard work and critical reflection required of us in such an endeavor, but so also are the disciplines of integrity and honesty. Our fear of where we may end up on an issue can never be allowed to override the integrity of the inquiry itself.

Perhaps there is something like a “coercive” moment to God’s grace that coincides eschatologically with God’s final purpose for the world, so that revelation overrides human limitation, error, and weakness—a moment in which we will “know fully just as [we] have been fully known” (1 Cor. 13:12). Until then, however, we must settle for our very “human” way of knowing and of our “creative venturing toward the truth” (Segundo: 118)—a way that relies upon and even values trial and error, that endures the limitations and contingencies of our experience, and yet rejoices in its richness and novelty.

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THE THIRD HORIZON: A WESLEYAN CONTRIBUTION TO THE CONTEXTUALIZATION DEBATE

by
Dean Flemming

During the past two decades the term “contextualization” has catapulted to the forefront of missiological and theological concerns. Originating in the conciliar movement, it was introduced in a 1972 report of the Theological Education Fund¹ as a replacement for the older term “indigenization.” It focused on the development of local theologies in the context of radical social and political change within a given culture, particularly in the Third World. Evangelical missiologists were quick to respond to the challenge posed by the concern for contextualization. Some concluded that, given its roots, the term “contextualization” was too misleading and ambiguous to be useful.² Most have adopted it, however, with some redefinition, as a way of expressing the need to adapt the biblical message into categories relevant to a given cultural context.³

¹Theological Education Fund, *Ministry in Context: The Third Mandate Program of the Theological Education Fund (1970-77)* (Bromily, U.K.: New Life ~egg, 1972).

²See, e.g., B. Fleming, *Contextualization of Theology: An Evangelical Assessment* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1980), 52ff.; J. O. Buswell III, “Contextualization: Theory, Tradition and Method” in *Theology and Mission*, D. J. Hessegrave ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 93ff.; C. H. Kraft and T. J. Wisley, eds., *Readings in Dynamic Indigenity* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1979), xixf.

³David J. Hessegrave, “Contextualization of Theology” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter Elwell (Grand Rapids, 1984), 271-272.

The concern for contextualizing the Christian gospel is, of course, nothing new. Many precedents for contextualization can be found within the Bible itself.⁴ The apostle Paul offers perhaps the prime model of enabling the gospel to speak anew to changing cultural and religious contexts, both in terms of his evangelistic missionary practice (e.g., Acts 14:8-20; 17:16-34.; 1 Cor. 8-10, esp. 9:19ff) and his contextual theologizing (e.g., the Christology of Colossians, 1 Cor. 15).⁵ The four Gospels, from one perspective, are four attempts to contextualize the gospel for different contexts and readers.⁶

Ultimately, contextualization is grounded in the incarnation principle; God chose to reveal himself in a specific time and place in human history and culture. Max Stackhouse points out that “contextualizing the faith” has been a part of the church’s mission throughout the post-biblical period.⁷ However, the matter has taken on new urgency and importance of late as non-Western Christians and those involved in cross-cultural theologizing have become more conscious of the “Westernization” of theology and of the need to transpose the Christian message into new historical and cultural situations. Today an enormous amount of energy is being expended on the theory, process, and problems associated with the contextualization of the gospel. This is demonstrated not least by the plethora of journal articles and book-length studies which try to address the issue.⁸

⁴For a discussion of the Biblical patterns of contextualization, see e.g., N.E. Ericson, “Implications from the New Testament for Contextualization”, in *Theology and Mission*, 71-85; D. S. Gilliland, “New Testament Contextualization: Continuity and Particularity in Paul’s Theology” in *The Word Among Us: Contextualizing Theology for Today*, D. S. Gilliland, ed. (Dallas: Word, 1989), 52-73; A. F. Glasser, “Old Testament Contextualization: Revelation and Its Environment” in *The Word Among Us*, 32ff.; J. R. Davies, “Biblical Precedents for Contextualisation,” *ATA Journal* 2 (July 1994), 10-35; D. J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 3-11.

⁵See D. E. Hemming, “Essence and Adaptation: Contextualization and the Heart of Paul’s Gospel,” unpub. Ph.D. Dissertation, U. of Aberdeen, 1987; cf. Gilliland “New Testament Contextualization.”

⁶D. Bosch, “Toward a New Paradigm of Mission” in *Mission in the 1990’s*, G. H. Anderson et al, eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 61.

⁷M. L. Stackhouse, *Apologia: Contextualization, Globalization, and Mission in Theological Education* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 4f.; cf. Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991).

⁸Consult the bibliographies in Hesselgrave and Rommen, *Contextualization*, and Gilliland, *The Word Among Us*.

In the Asian setting in which I currently minister, Christians rightly view contextualization not as an option, but as a necessity for the church.

Yet, all of the attention given to contextualization has not led to a consensus regarding its goals, methodologies, limits, and hermeneutical base. Even the definition of the term itself has proved to be extraordinarily slippery.⁹ Over a decade ago, Krikor Halebian concluded that “this nuclear concept has raised a concatenation of problems, many of them still unresolved.”¹⁰ It seems that there has been little progress since then to resolve much of this confusion. In general, Wesleyans have been rather slow to enter the debate.¹¹ Yet I believe there is an important and needed contribution Wesleyans can make to the discussion. This essay will focus on one aspect of the contextualization debate—the need for an adequate hermeneutic for the task of contextualization. I choose this particular aspect for two reasons: first, because hermeneutics lies at the very heart of what it means to contextualize the gospel; and second, because the understanding of Scripture and interpretation within the Wesleyan tradition has the potential to shed light on some crucial issues.

Hermeneutics and the “Third Horizon”

The problem of contextualization is largely a hermeneutical problem. Interest in contextualization corresponds to a growing recognition among interpreters that the gospel message came to expression in one cultural, social, historical, and linguistic context, while we live in another.¹² It is the intricate relationship between text and contemporary context that poses some of the greatest challenges for providing an adequate hermeneutical base for the task of contextualizing the gospel. Contextualization is therefore not simply a missiological concern. A number of interpreters have drawn attention to the considerable overlap between the concerns of contextualization and those of modern hermeneutical theory,

⁹See K. Halebian, “The Problem of Contextualization,” *Missiology* 11 (January, 1983), 96f.

¹⁰Halebian, “Contextualization,” 95.

¹¹It is noteworthy that there is no article on “contextualization” or “contextual theology” in the *Beacon Dictionary of Theology*. R. S. Taylor, et al, eds. (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1983)].

¹²Richard Muller, *The Study of Theology: From Biblical Interpretation to Contemporary Formulation* in Vol.7, *Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 201, cited in G.M. Burge, *Interpreting the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 169.

particularly of the so-called “new hermeneutic.”¹³ Notwithstanding the subjectivistic tendencies and limitations of the “new hermeneutic,”¹⁴ if it has taught us anything it is that interpretation is not a one-directional process. Meaningful interpretation takes place when the horizon of our own understanding fuses with the horizon of the text, to use the current terminology, although the horizon of Scripture must be primary for determining meaning.¹⁵

Discussions of the “new hermeneutic” generally are framed in terms of “two horizons”, i.e., the horizon of the first-century text and that of the contemporary reader or interpreter. However, recent missiological interests remind us that there is also a “third horizon.”¹⁶ This occurs when the Biblical message is communicated by the interpreter to another person or cultural group. It is this “third horizon” that is the particular concern of the task of contextualization. Just as barriers must be bridged in order for a contemporary reader to rightly understand the ancient biblical text, so there are also hurdles to cross when we move from the second to the third horizon. However, there is a difference in the two movements. When moving from the first to the second horizon, the burden of responsibility is on the reader/interpreter, i.e., the person in the second horizon. However, when the gospel moves from the second to the third horizon, the burden is *still* on the interpreter, who now becomes the *communicator* of the Christian message to a receptor audience. In both cases the primary responsibility is on the person in the second horizon, i.e., the interpreter/communicator.¹⁷

¹³See D. A. Carson, “Church and Mission: Reflections on Contextualization and the Third Horizon” in *The Church in the Bible and the World*, D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 213-57; C. R. Padilla, “Hermeneutics and Culture” in *Down to Earth: Studies in Christianity and Culture* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1980), 63-78; G. R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1991), 318ff.

¹⁴For a summary and evaluation of the concerns of the “new hermeneutic”, see A. C. Thiselton, “The New Hermeneutic” in *New Testament Interpretation*, I. H. Marshall, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 308-333.

¹⁵See A. C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 1980.

¹⁶The “third horizon” terminology has occasionally been used in relation to the hermeneutical dimensions of contextualization. See e.g., H. M. Conn, *Eternal Word and Changing Worlds: Theology, Anthropology, and Mission in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 188ff.; Carson, “Contextualization,” 218ff.

¹⁷Carson, “Contextualization,” 218-219.

Thus there must not only be a fusion of the first and second horizons, i.e., those of the biblical text and contemporary interpreter. There must also be a bridging of the second and third horizons, as the communicator attempts to identify with the receptor culture. Only then can meaningful communication of the biblical message take place. When the horizon of the receptors is shaped by a different culture, world view, and value system from that of the communicator, the potential for distortion of the meaning of Scripture is greatly increased. Unless the interpreter/communicator can adequately bridge the gap in *both* directions—that of the ancient text and the modern receptor culture—contextualization of the biblical message will be less than successful. This is what makes the task of the cross-cultural evangelist or theologian so difficult.

What has not always been recognized, however, is that this “third horizon” model relates not simply to what is usually seen as cross-cultural communication of the gospel. In a sense, contextualization must occur on a regular basis in *any* Christian ministry. Anytime one preaches a sermon, teaches a theology class, or shares the gospel with a group of college students, the message should be shaped by the context of the people to which it is being communicated.¹⁸ Every preacher/theologian stands in the middle between the horizon of the Bible and that of his or her receptor group, with the need to allow one’s own preunderstandings to be dynamically fused to both text and context. We may be competent exegetes and interpreters of the original meaning of the text. Yet, unless we are able to contextualize that meaning for a contemporary audience so that it has an impact comparable to that on the first hearers, the hermeneutical task falls short of its goal.¹⁹ Thus not only missionaries and non-Western Christians need to be engaged in a conscious effort at contextualization, but all those involved in Christian ministry and theologizing. Western theology in its various forms is every bit as much a contextualization as that being done in Asia and Africa today.

It is therefore important to look more closely at some of the key issues relating to the hermeneutics of contextualization and to ask what

¹⁸Burge, *Interpreting*, 170.

¹⁹It is encouraging that recent texts on hermeneutics from an evangelical perspective have begun to recognize the crucial role of contextualization for interpretation. See the valuable discussion in Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 318-338, who perhaps too broadly equates contextualization with “application” (318). Cf. W. W. Klein, et al, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, Dallas: Word Publishing, 1993), esp. 173-179, 424f.

Wesleyans have to say to these questions. This essay will highlight three specific areas of concern: (1) transformational hermeneutics; (2) the problem of the gospel core; and (3) transcontextual hermeneutics.

A Transformational Hermeneutic

In broadest terms, there are two fundamental approaches to contextual hermeneutics today.²⁰ The first assigns the primary control of meaning to the contemporary context itself. Frequently the notion of “praxis” serves as a kind of filter for interpreting Scripture. For example, some liberation theologians make the struggle against economic oppression a controlling grid which allows them then to redefine biblical concepts like “salvation” in terms of liberation of the poor and “sin” in terms of sociopolitical injustice.²¹ This context-driven model of contextualization is no doubt the dominant one in Asia and elsewhere in the Two Thirds World today.²² The product has often been a syncretistic version of the Christian message.²³ A second approach, which is normally advocated by evangelical contextualizers, gives principle control to the Biblical text for the meanings that are contextualized. The historic Wesleyan acceptance of the Protestant principle of the primary authority of Scripture for Christian faith and practice would clearly support the latter approach.²⁴ This is the kind of contextualization advocated in this paper.

Perhaps in an excessive effort to defend the objective nature of revelation against the dangers of the former approach, evangelicals sometimes have been overly restrictive in understanding the nature and goal of contextualization. Much of the discussion from an evangelical perspective has focused on the correct verbal communication of biblical content, i.e., a body of truth. This is reflected in some evangelical definitions of con-

²⁰See Carson, “Contextualization,” 220.

²¹Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 319.

²²In Steven B. Bevans’ valuable book on *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992), five of the six contextualization models he discusses could be said to fall within this general orientation.

²³See, e.g., the recent article by Peter K. H. Lee, who speaks of the “enactment or grafting of the New Covenant in a Confucian context of heaven and humanity in harmony in a framework of humane relationships of mutual obligations” as an example of the mutual borrowings between Christianity and Confucianism—“Contextualization and Inculturation of Christianity and Confucianism in the Contemporary World,” *Asia Journal of Theology* 7 (1993), 87.

²⁴See H. Ray Dunning, *Grace, Faith, and Holiness: A Wesleyan Systematic Theology* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1988), 55, 77.

textualization. Bruce Nicholls, for example, has defined contextualization as “the translation of the unchanging content of the Gospel of the kingdom into verbal form meaningful to peoples in their separate cultures and within their particular existential situations.”²⁵ On occasion the discussion has focused on an inerrantist view of Scripture as the hedge against relativism and syncretism.²⁶ In their valid critique of a situational approach to hermeneutics and theology, evangelicals at times have stressed the absoluteness of revelation and the objectivity of Biblical truth to the point that the praxiological dimension of Scripture is lost. What is not always recognized is that this rationalistic and “objective” hermeneutical perspective may itself be a form of contextualization.²⁷

This approach can lead to a truncated understanding of the gospel. An adequate contextual hermeneutic must involve more than transmitting a body of truth alone. Meaning cannot be detached from application and obedience. Paul Hiebert warns against contextualization that emphasizes the accurate communication of meaning, while ignoring the gospel’s emotive and volitional dimensions. The result is that “we are in danger of reducing the gospel to a set of disembodied beliefs that can be individually appropriated, forgetting that it has to do with discipleship, with the church as the body of Christ, and with the kingdom of God on earth.”²⁸

The dual Wesleyan emphasis on the soteriological purpose of Scripture and on the vital role of the internal witness of the Spirit in authentic-

²⁵B. Nicholls, “Theological Education and Evangelization Report,” in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, ed. J. D. Douglas (Minneapolis: 1974), 637. Cf. D. J. Hesselgrave, “The Contextualization Continuum,” *Gospel in Context* 2 (1979), 5, who defines “orthodox” contextualization as “taking the apostolic faith. . . : and accommodating... that faith (body of truth) to the people of a respondent culture in such a way that as much of its original meaning and relevance as possible will be preserved.”

²⁶See, e.g., D. J. Hesselgrave, “Contextualization & Revelational Epistemology” in *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy and the Bible*, ed. E. D. Radmacher & Robert D. Preus (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), esp. 730ff~ W. J. Larkin, Jr., *Culture and Biblical Hermeneutics*(Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), esp. 267ff.

²⁷See Goldsmith, “The Contextualization of Theology,” *Themelios* 9 (1983), 21-22. To his credit, D. I. Hesselgrave acknowledges that “the employment of ‘inerrancy’ language itself represents a contextualization” (“Revelational Epistemology,” 731).

²⁸“Critical Contextualization,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 11(1987), 108; cf. H. Conn, *Eternal Word and Changing Worlds: Theology, Anthropology, and Mission in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 18Sf., 229-235.

cating its validity can provide a valuable corrective to the more rationalistic and objective approaches to contextualization.²⁹ What is needed today is a “transformational hermeneutic.” The goal of contextualization must be the transformation of people in their concrete historical and cultural situations.³⁰ Our choice is not between “orthodoxy” and “orthopraxis.” Such a polarization is foreign to the gospel itself.³¹ Syncretism can occur equally at the level of behavior as at the level of theology. Wesley rightly stressed that application and obedience are essential to any understanding of Scripture.³² Likewise, Wesleyans hold that the Holy Spirit “subjectively validates the truth of Scripture in its spiritually transforming intent.”³³ The Wesleyan response to Scripture cannot be satisfied simply with correct belief. It must involve the disposition of the heart and will, which results in loving actions. The Spirit must speak through the Scripture to transform the interpreter as well as the receptors (i.e., those in both the second and third horizons) if the contextualized message is to ring true.

This orientation allows Wesleyans to do contextualization that is not bound by static traditions of biblical and theological interpretation and is free to adapt the saving import of Scripture to new settings. The validity of a given contextualization is determined not simply by its faithfulness to objective scriptural principles but is demonstrated in the actual transformation of the life and thought of the receptor through the work of the Spirit. We may be able to adapt the biblical teaching on holiness, for

²⁹On the approach to Scripture within Wesleyan thought, see D. W. Dayton, “The Use of Scripture in the Wesleyan Tradition,” in *The Use of the Bible in Theology: Evangelical Options*, R. K. Johnston, ed., 121-136; P. M. Bassett, “The Theological Identity of the North American Holiness Movement: Its Understanding of the Nature and Role of the Bible” in *The Varieties of American Evangelicalism*, D. W. Dayton and R. K. Johnston, eds. (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1991), 72-108; W. McCown, “Toward a Wesleyan Hermeneutic” in *Interpreting God’s Word for Today: An Inquiry into Hermeneutics from a Biblical Theological Perspective*, W. McCown and J. E. Massey, eds. (Anderson, IN: Warner Press), 1982, 1-30; R. L. Shelton, “John Wesley’s Approach to Scripture in Historical Perspective,” *WTJ* 16 (Spring 1981), 23-50.

³⁰Padilla, “Hermeneutics,” 75.

³¹Cf. Phil. 2:1-11, where the Christological statement of vv. 5-11 appears in a context of disunity and personal disagreements.

³²See McCown, “Hermeneutic,” 6f.

³³G. Lyons, “Hermeneutical Bases for Theology: Higher Criticism and the Wesleyan Interpreter,” *WTJ* 18 (Spring 1983), 71.

example, to our culture on a theological level, but if we do not internalize it and allow it to transform our lifestyles it is of little value. This necessitates, of course, that the receptors cooperate with the contextualization that is being done. Otherwise, the process breaks down. This “transformational” approach to contextual hermeneutics holds great promise for the church in the Two Thirds world, where people tend to have a more integrated approach to reality and where the abstract bifurcation of meaning and application seems quite foreign.

Wesleyans, therefore, can offer a mediating position between polarities within the contextualization debate. On the one hand, we must unapologetically affirm Scripture as the control and norm for all contextualization of the gospel over against those who find primacy in the contemporary cultural context for determining the substance of the faith. Yet at the same time we must recognize that any valid contextualization of the gospel includes a concern for “praxis” and results in the subjective transformation of both the interpreter and those to whom the message is proclaimed.

Hermeneutics and the “Gospel Core”

Much of the contemporary discussion of contextualization has focused on the relationship between form and content in biblical revelation. Is there a non-negotiable “core” of content to the biblical message? If so, can this gospel core be separated from the cultural forms of the Bible and then recast into new and relevant forms today? The issue goes to the heart of the hermeneutical basis for contextualization. Yet exegetes, theologians, and missiologists alike remain divided on its solution.

On one hand, many contemporary biblical scholars and theologians view the Bible as so culturally and historically conditioned that there is little or no normative content to be contextualized. Max Stackhouse observes that “contemporary biblical scholarship has so contextualized the texts that the very idea that texts can judge contexts is methodologically doubted.”³⁴ Further, a virtually unbridgeable gap is often perceived between the scriptural contexts and those of interpreters today.³⁵ The result is that something other than Scripture becomes the starting point for contextualization. For example, Methodist theologian S. Wesley Ariarajah from Sri Lanka has

³⁴M. Stackhouse, *Apologia: Contextualization, Globalization, and Mission in Theological Education* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 27

³⁵Stackhouse, *Apologia*, 27.

attempted to contextualize the gospel in the Hindu and Buddhist contexts of South Asia. However, his commitment to the radical cultural conditioning of all scriptures, including the Bible, leads him to conclude that “there is no reason why the Hindu Scriptures should not be meaningful and provide the context of faith for an Indian Christian.”³⁶

On the opposite pole are those fundamentalist interpreters who extend the notion of normativeness so broadly that they fail to do adequate justice to the historical character of Scripture. For instance, William Larkin, following J. Robertson McQuilkin, approaches contextualization from the standpoint that both the form *and* meaning of Scripture are normative unless the Bible itself clearly indicates otherwise.³⁷ Instead of developing criteria for normativeness and thereby determining what is transculturally binding in a biblical passage, he argues that we should be establishing criteria for *non-normativeness*.³⁸ Thus, everything in Scripture should be understood as binding on all times and cultures unless there is a specific scriptural limitation present.³⁹

This procedure has been rightly criticized as taking a static and ahistorical approach to both Scripture and culture.⁴⁰ While it is true that at

³⁶S. W. Ariarajah, “Towards a Theology of Dialogue,” *The Ecumenical Review* (January, 1977), 9, cited in B. Nicholls, “A Living Theology for Asian Churches: Some Reflections on the Contextualization-Syncretism Debate” in *The Bible and Theology in Asian Contexts*, B. R. Ro and R. Eshenaur, eds. (Bangalore: ATA and AETEI, 1984), 129. Cf. Ariarajah’s more recent work (*The Bible and People of Other Faiths*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992) in which he appears to consistently downplay the normative character of the Scriptural witness to the uniqueness of Christ. Ariarajah assumes that “the Christologies we have in the Bible are signposts” that simply “show how the early disciples and apostles struggled to understand the significance of Jesus for their lives and times” (68f.). He urges a rethinking of that Christology and a movement toward a more “theocentric” theology in light of contemporary religious pluralism.

³⁷W. J. Larkin, *Culture and Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), esp. 314-318; J. R. McQuilken, “Limits of Cultural Interpretation,” *JETS* 23(1980), 113-124; “Problems of Normativeness in Scripture: Cultural Versus Permanent” in *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible*, eds. E. D. Radmacher and R. D. Preus (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 207-240.

³⁸Larkin, *Culture*, 315f.

³⁹Larkin offers the following criteria for non-normativeness: (1) a limited recipient; (2) limited conditions for fulfillment; (3) a limited rationale; (4) a limiting larger context, *Culture*, 315ff.

⁴⁰See Alan Johnson’s critique of McQuilken in “‘Response’ to J. Robertson McQuilkin” in *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible*, 255-282.

times both Biblical form and content can be normative (as I will argue shortly), to make it an *a priori* assumption goes beyond either the claims or the general tenor of Scripture. We can observe the process of contextualizing forms to adapt to changing cultural situations within the Bible itself. For example, the New Testament records considerable flexibility in forms of worship, church order, and theological expression as the church moved from a Jewish to a predominantly Gentile environment.⁴¹

Donald Dayton points out that the Wesleyan tradition historically has rejected the more absolutist and ahistorical approaches to Biblical interpretation in favor of a more dynamic understanding of the role of the Bible in Christian life and thought.⁴² The difference in approaches can be illustrated by the contrast between the fundamentalist defense of the universal normativeness of passages dealing with women's silence in church (1 Cor. 14:34; 1 Tim. 2:11-12)⁴³ and the Wesleyan openness to women in ministry where that pattern is culturally appropriate. Women in holiness churches such as the Free Methodist Church and the Church of the Nazarene in the Philippines, for instance, tend to exercise a more significant role in pastoral ministry than is the case in the West.⁴⁴ However, a visible congregational leadership role for women in an Islamic setting might be so culturally offensive that it would be an impediment to the gospel. Once again, Wesleyans can offer a middle course between a wooden commitment to biblical forms and language - a commitment that prevents the meaning of Scripture from being adapted to new situations - and a radically historical approach that shifts the norm for contextualization from Scripture to the contemporary context.

We must still ask, however, about the essential content and the parameters of the gospel that are to be contextualized. Is there an identifiable "gospel core" within Scripture which can be isolated from its cultural

⁴¹See Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 327. Note the adoption of terms which had current usage in the Hellenistic religious culture (e.g., *kyrios*, *soter*, *logos*, *euangelion*, *mysterion*, *gnosis*, *metamorphosis*). Adoption of such linguistic forms does not imply acceptance of their contemporary meaning or world view that they came out of, however.

⁴²"Use," 133. But cf. P. M. Bassett, who demonstrates the tension between the classical Wesleyan approach to Scripture and one more akin to fundamentalism within North American Wesleyanism, "Theological Identity," esp. 76-95.

⁴³See, e.g., Larkin, *Culture*, 122f., 279.

⁴⁴See F. T. Cunningham, "The Early History of the Church of the Nazarene in the Philippines," *Philippine Studies* 41(1993), 68.

forms? Many evangelical interpreters believe there is. The matter becomes extremely slippery, however, when one tries to define precisely what constitutes the gospel core. Attempts to identify its content tend either to be so general that they have little meaning (e.g., “the *Bible itself* is understood as ‘the core’ out of which various key doctrines are to be emphasized”⁴⁵) or they are reductionistic (e.g., the historic person of Christ,⁴⁶ or Christ’s death and resurrection⁴⁷). Others try to delineate a specific core of doctrines which make up the essential Christian message, although there is no consensus on what these doctrines are.

Stackhouse, for example, discusses four doctrines that “provide the boundaries of what it means to be Christian”: (1) that humanity is fallen and in need of salvation; (2) that revelation takes place in history in the way that the Bible authoritatively indicates; (3) that the doctrine of the Trinity accurately points to how God can best be understood and what that means for life in the world; and (4) that Jesus is the Christ - the way, the truth and the life.”⁴⁸ While such formulations may be helpful for determining theological orthodoxy, it is questionable whether what is essential about the dynamic and transformational “good news” of the kingdom can be reduced to a prescribed set of dogmatic principles. Obviously it is not easy to determine precisely what a “non-contextualized” gospel looks like.

⁴⁵Bruce Fleming, *Contextualization of Theology* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1980), 65. Cf. Donald McGavran, who defines the “essential core of the Christian religion” as (1) belief in and allegiance to the Triune God; (2) belief in the Bible as the only inspired Word of God; and (3) “those great central facts, commands, ordinances and doctrines which are so clearly set forth in the Bible” as in “The Biblical Base from Which Adjustments Are Made” in *Christopaganism or Indigenous Christianity?* eds. T. Yamamori and C. R. Taber (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1975), 41-42.

⁴⁶B. Kato, B. H., “The Gospel, Cultural Context and Religious Syncretism” in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, 1216; cf. S. Athyal, “Toward an Asian Christian Theology” in *The Bible and Theology in Asian Contexts*, 51.

⁴⁷D. V. Allmen, “The Birth of Theology,” *IRM* 64 (1975), 44ff.

⁴⁸Stackhouse, *Apologia*, 170-182; cf. *The Willowbank Report* of the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelism, which, while admitting that the gospel defies reduction to neat formulation, identifies the heart of the gospel under the themes of “God as Creator, the universality of sin, Jesus Christ as Son of God, Lord of all, and Savior through his atoning death and risen life, the necessity of conversion, the coming of the Holy Spirit and his transforming power, Life fellowship and mission of the Christian church, and the hope of Christ’s return,” *Down to Earth*, 318f.

Even more problematic is the question of *how* to identify and isolate a gospel core. The dominant pattern of contextualization among evangelical missiologists has been the “translation model”⁴⁹ or the “kernel-husk” model.⁵⁰ It affirms that there is an essential, “supracultural” gospel core which must be stripped of its cultural clothing (or husk) in order that it may be “re clothed” in new cultural and linguistic forms, while the gospel message itself (the kernel) remains unchanged.⁵¹ In other words, the gospel must be “decontextualized” from the culture of the Bible before it can be recontextualized today.⁵²

Perhaps the leading articulator of the “translation” model is Charles Kraft, who bases his approach on the “dynamic equivalence” Bible translation theories of Eugene Nida and Charles R. Taber.⁵³ Kraft holds that the essence of Christianity is a supracultural message which exists above and beyond any culture-bound expressions of it. However, God has communicated this supracultural truth in human linguistic and cultural forms in the Scriptures.⁵⁴ The role of the interpreter, then, is to decode the supracultural gospel from its cultural trappings and then re-encode it “within the hearer’s frame of reference in such a way that both communication and response are dynamically equivalent to those of the original situation.”⁵⁵

Kraft is to be commended for his attempt to treat seriously both the normative gospel message and human language and culture in his

⁴⁹See Bevens, *Models*, 30ff.; W. A. Dyrness, *Learning About Theology from the Third World*(Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 27f.; cf. Sanneh, *Translating the Message*.

⁵⁰See Flemming, “Contextualization,” 25-32.

⁵¹A. R. Tippett, “Christopaganism or Indigenous Christianity?” in *Christopaganism or Indigenous Christianity?*, T. Yamamori and C. R. Taber, eds. (Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 1975), 14f.; M. Bradshaw and P. Savage, “The Gospel, Contextualization Report” in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, 1226; P. B. Watney, “Contextualization and Its Biblical Precedents,” Unpub. Ph.D. Diss. (Pasadena, CA: Fuller Theological Seminary, 1975), 75.

⁵²J. Buswell, “Contextualization,” 103, in D. I. Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 86.

⁵³E. A. Nida and C. R. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (Leiden: 1969); cf. E. A. Nida and W. D. Reyrburn, *Meaning Across Cultures* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1981).

⁵⁴C. H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979), 120f.

⁵⁵Kraft, *Christianity*, 282.

methodology and for his overall contribution to the contextualization debate. However, his approach raises some important questions. The first involves whether it is helpful to talk about a “supracultural core” within the Bible. The concept of a “supracultural” gospel that is separate from its cultural trappings exists only on an abstract, theoretical level. All of the Biblical accounts come to us in specific historical and cultural circumstances. We cannot minimize the historical nature of the Christian faith. A supracultural” gospel may exist, but we do not have access to it apart from some human cultural and linguistic formulation; i.e., we cannot know it *supraculturally*.⁵⁶ Cultural form and supracultural meaning cannot easily be separated like oil and water.

This has implications for the limits of dynamic equivalence.⁵⁷ Is it possible, for example, to substitute the Biblical form of the “lamb of God” with the “dynamic equivalent” “pig of God” in a Melanesian or African culture, where there are no sheep, without some distortion in meaning? Or, taking the matter to the extreme, could the “form” of the cross itself be replaced by some more culturally relevant means of execution? The point is that it is naive to think that some pure gospel essence can be easily abstracted from its cultural biblical forms and then repackaged without any change in meaning. As Robert Schreiter observes, “kernel and cultural husk are given together, even in the Bible, and they come to have a profound effect on each other over a period of time.”⁵⁸ Furthermore, attempts to isolate the “supracultural core” from its husk are open to reductionism and the subjectivity of the interpreter when it comes to determining how narrow or inclusive the “core” is.⁵⁹

The effort to identify which bits of the gospel are supracultural and which are culture bound will inevitably be skewed by the preunderstand-

⁵⁶S. Bevans, *Models*, 36; Carson, “Contextualization,” 349.

⁵⁷Bruce Nicholls argues that biblical meanings are to an extent intertwined with their cultural forms and world-views, in particular that of Hebrew-Semitic culture. To radically change the carrier culture, e.g., to a Chinese or an Indian culture and world view, would inevitably alter the message (*Contextualization: A Theology of Gospel and Culture*, Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1979, 45ff.; cf. “Towards a Theology of Gospel and Culture” in *Down to Earth*, 53f).

⁵⁸R. J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), 8.

⁵⁹See D. A. Carson’s critique of Kraft and D. von Almen at this point in “Contextualization,” 240f., 248ff.; cf. “A Sketch of the Factors Determining Current Hermeneutical Debate in Cross-Cultural Contexts” in *Biblical Interpretation and the Church: The Problems of Contextualization* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984), 19f.

ings of the interpreter. Consequently, the terminology of a “supracultural” gospel is somewhat misleading.⁶⁰ This is not to say that the message of the Bible is bound to Hebrew or Greek culture or that there are not theological and ethical principles that apply to all people in every culture. If meaning were unable to transcend culture, the gospel would never have broken out of its Jewish cultural roots and there could be no normative and living Word in its multiple cultural expressions today.⁶¹ What is needed is the process of understanding the eternal Word comprehensively in its historical context and then allowing its message to become incarnated in our concrete contexts.⁶²

A second problem with the translation model is that it minimizes the prophetic role of the gospel *over* culture. Kraft assumes that functionally equivalent forms to those in Scripture can be identified by the interpreter in virtually any culture and that the content will not change when it is reclothed in those forms. However, “cultural forms are rarely neutral with respect to the values of Scripture.”⁶³ While they sometimes support Biblical values, at other times they oppose them or remain ambiguous toward them. The translation model fails to provide adequate criteria for the critical function of the gospel over culture or for dealing with the problem of syncretism. For example, Kraft illustrates his method of contextualization with the list of qualities for Christian leaders in 1 Timothy 3. The functional equivalent for the Greco-Roman “form” of “managing a household well” (1 Tim. 3:4) would be the ability to manage a polygamous household in cultures that practice polygamy, such as the Higi in Nigeria.⁶⁴ But, is this truly an “equivalent” value? Can we take it for granted that Biblical passages that reject polygamy address simply a cultural form and have no judging function over cultural values and practices?

It seems, then, that the term “gospel core” is ambiguous and open to misunderstanding because it is tied to the “kernel-husk” model that bifurcates form and content, and because it often reduces what is essential in the Christian message to a narrowly-defined field of supracultural truths. What is needed is a way of understanding the gospel that pays adequate heed to its normative content, yet recognizes the close interrelationship

⁶⁰Harvie M. Conn asks whether the term “transcultural” might be an alternative to “supracultural,” *Eternal Word*, 202.

⁶¹ See Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 9-49.

⁶²Goldsmith, “Contextualization,” 20.

⁶³Dyrness, *Learning*, 28

⁶⁴Kraft, *Christianity*, 323-325.

between the elements of content, form, and context. One that acknowledges that the gospel is unchanging, but not static, transcultural, but not “supracultural,” transcendent, but not abstract.

Perhaps thinking in terms of the gospel “center” is a step in that direction.⁶⁵ The center of the gospel is not found in a limited “core” of doctrines, but rather in a redemptive event, i.e., God’s saving activity in Jesus Christ. The Wesleyan understanding of Scripture has emphasized that the Living Word stands behind the written Word and gives it soteriological meaning. The center is a focal point, but does not define strict limits to the heart of the gospel. That center finds a wide variety of expressions and elements within the Biblical message, all of which are rooted in the redemptive Christ event and interpret its meaning to humanity.

These are the great theological and ethical affirmations of the Bible, the revealed gospel message. Yet we must understand that these faith affirmations do not stand independent of concrete historical and cultural expression, even in Scripture. The good news does not address sinful humanity in a generic “de-contextualized” form. Whether it is Jesus the Messiah, the Lord or the Logos, whether God’s redemptive activity comes in terms of the new birth to Nicodemus, the kingdom of God in the Synoptics, justification by faith to the Romans and Galatians, or the superior sacrifice to the Hebrews, whether it speaks exodus for slaves, a warning and call to repentance for idolaters and perpetrators of injustice, or the demand to give up riches to the rich young ruler, it addresses concrete situations and human needs.⁶⁶

Thus there is a continual interaction between the constant biblical theological message that is rooted in God’s redemptive activity in Christ and its contextual expression.⁶⁷ It is this tension between the constant and the contingent character of Scripture that enables us to contextualize its message today without compromising its essential content. While Scripture is culture specific, it is not culture bound. The fact that the gospel center can speak to so many concrete situations within the Bible gives us hope and confidence that the normative message can be re-expressed in forms that will address an unlimited number of contexts and human needs today. Undoubtedly, different biblical expressions will speak more clearly to different contemporary situations.

⁶⁵Cf. Conn, *Eternal Word*, 296f.

⁶⁶See Conn, *Eternal Word*, 197.

⁶⁷See B. C. Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), esp. 23-108.

For example, the soteriological motif of justification by faith has played a dominant role since the Reformation in the theology of the West, where forensic thinking has a rich heritage. However, in cultures that do not share this conceptual background, other themes which may have more direct cultural parallels, e.g., reconciliation, redemption, Christ's victory over the powers, may need to have greater prominence, especially in the initial stages of proclamation. On the other hand, if we *only* express the biblical message in terms that are *already* compatible with a culture, the gospel can lose its critical function. In one sense, the gospel is foreign to every culture.⁶⁸

Yet we must stress, in light of the character of much of the contextualization being done today, that the starting point for the process remains the unchanging gospel message, not the specific and changing context. Too often doing contextual theology has meant listening to a particular culture, world view, or religious tradition and then allowing what we discover to determine our understanding of God and his message. The gospel which transcends any given culture must always transform the context rather than the other way around. To use an imperfect analogy,⁶⁹ a doctor draws from the medicines available to prescribe what patients need. Different treatments are needed by different patients. The same patient may need different prescriptions or dosages at different times as his or her health improves or fails. The patient's condition calls forth the medicine needed. However, the patient does not essentially alter the medicine or the doctor; they remain constant. It is the patient who changes as a result of the doctor's care.

In contextual theologizing, neither God nor the constant gospel are redefined by the context. But how the message is expressed and what aspects are emphasized will vary from context to context and also within a given context as the receptors change. Successful contextualization involves an interaction between gospel and context, in which the gospel transforms the context, while the context brings to light deeper levels of meaning from the gospel.

I believe the above understanding coincides well with the predominant Wesleyan approach to Scripture. Resisting both absolutist and relativistic paradigms, Wesleyans are able to take with full seriousness both

⁶⁸Bosch, "New Paradigm," 61.

⁶⁹I would like to thank my colleague Dr. John Nielson for suggesting the following analogy in critiquing this essay.

the historical conditionedness of Scripture and its normative and transcultural message that is rooted in God's saving action in Christ. We need not be bound either to an *a priori* attachment to the cultural and linguistic forms in which God's Self-revelation is inscripturated, or to some "supracultural" core of truth that stands in isolation from the concrete expression of the saving message. Instead, we must allow the Holy Spirit to enable us to fuse our own context with that of the culture and languages of the Scripture to determine the text's meaning in the present context. We seek to grasp the text's universal and normative message and then transfer that meaning back to our own situation, allowing it to transform our understandings and actions.⁷⁰

If we are operating on the third horizon level, we must also "exegete the context" to the extent that the meaning we have discovered can be heard and relived in the receptor context in a way that is genuinely comparable to its meaning in the original context. Failure to contextualize adequately produces a "gospel" that is something less than truly Christian. In the Two Thirds world, such a failure has resulted in the syncretism that is characteristic of many non-Western theological and behavioral expressions. In the West it manifests itself in forms such as the "health and prosperity" gospel and the amalgamation of Christianity with popular psychology.⁷¹ A gospel of materialism is as syncretistic as one that embraces animism. If a contextualized message or practice is not consistent with the normative biblical-theological message of Scripture, it is not an authentic expression of Christianity.

Authentic contextualization is not always straightforward. In some cases it may be necessary to adopt forms that are not directly derived from Scripture, especially at first, in order to insure that biblical meanings are truly communicated. For example, to be "born again" is not liberating good news to a Hindu unless much conceptual displacement occurs. Forms may be found within the culture that can be redefined and will communicate more adequately.⁷² In other cases, we may decide to retain the original scriptural form (e.g., "lamb of God" in a culture without

⁷⁰See Carson, "Contextualization," 249.

⁷¹Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 333.

⁷²Cf. Paul's appropriation and reinterpretation of the terms *metamorphosis* (Rorn. 12:2; 2 Cor. 3:18) and *pleroma* (Col. 2:9f.; cf. 1:19) from the pagan religious milieu. For a contemporary example, see Don Richardson's well-known example of the "redemptive analogy" of the "peace child" in the Sawi culture of Irian Jaya, *The Peace Child* (Regal Books, Glendale, CA), 1974.

sheep⁷³) and explain its meaning rather than risk message distortion by employing a functional substitute. Contextualization may involve critically evaluating existing beliefs and customs or even the overturning of one's entire conceptual framework, such as happens when the gospel penetrates Hindu or Buddhist world views. This kind of "critical contextualization" is done ideally by the local hermeneutical community as it wrestles with the implications of the biblical message for its culture.⁷⁴ The point is that contextualization is never simple; but it is both possible and necessary.

A Transcontextual Hermeneutic

If there has been an emerging consensus on any point in the contextualization debate, it has been that all theology is in a sense contextual.⁷⁵ This is because, as Sunand Sumithra reminds us, "all theology, as all human expressions, is inevitably conditioned by, and therefore relevant to, the theologian's particular context."⁷⁶ This understanding has not always been recognized, however. Paul Hiebert calls the period between 1800-1950 "the era of noncontextualization" in Protestant missions.⁷⁷ Western theology, and in particular the sixteenth-century Protestant confessions, were frequently assumed to be universally valid expressions of supracultural truth.⁷⁸ All that needed to be done was to indigenize the finished theological product. Not only was this approach to theology ethnocentric, but it produced a gospel that was foreign to the receptor culture

⁷³This example is, of course, not irrelevant to developed, industrialized cultures, including North America, which are increasingly remote from pastoral images.

⁷⁴Hiebert, "Critical Contextualization," 110.

⁷⁵See, e.g., Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 427; Goldsmith, "Contextualization," 19; 5. Sumithra, "Towards Evangelical Theology in Hindu Cultures" in *Bible and Theology in Asian Contexts*, 219.

⁷⁶Sumithra, "Towards an Evangelical Theology," 219.

⁷⁷Hiebert, "Critical Contextualization," 104-106.

⁷⁸See Conn, *Eternal Word*, 220-224. Likewise, sometimes the early Christian creeds are still treated as though they are timeless and absolute. E.g., Robert Webber sees the essence of Christianity, in "the naked truths of Scripture summarized by the Church in her early creeds," "Response to C. R. Taber, 'Is There More Than One Way to Do Theology?'" *Gospel in Context* (1978), 37. While they remain highly significant theological expressions for the entire Christian church, they are nonetheless contextual human formulations which reflect their Greek philosophical milieu. See Goldsmith, "Contextualization," 21.

and sometimes promoted the very kind of syncretism the Western missionaries tried to avoid.⁷⁹

Recent studies in Paul's theology have highlighted the contextual nature of the Reformation interpretation of Paul's doctrine of justification by faith, which was formulated out of a context where the chief issue was whether salvation could be attained by works or one's own merit. While I personally do not accept a good deal of the results of "new perspective" on Paul,⁸⁰ if its proponents have taught us anything, it is that Paul's context and concerns in expounding the gospel of righteousness by faith were not identical to those of the Reformers, nor could they have been. This does not mean, however, that the Lutheran emphasis on justification by faith alone is no longer needed or relevant today. Bruce Nicholls, for example, points out that, in a Hindu context characterized by the notion of *karma* and a complete lack of assurance of salvation, it is one of the greatest needs in a reformulation of a Christian Indian theology.⁸¹ This is also true in a predominantly Roman Catholic milieu like the Philippines. However, the expression and application of this concept in either of these contexts will be quite different from that of Luther and from one another.

Wesleyans likewise need to be reminded on occasion that Wesleyan theology is itself a contextualization. Wesley adapted the biblical theological message into forms that were appropriate for a particular historical, cultural, social, and religious context in eighteenth-century England. We must guard against treating Wesleyan theology as a distilled theological product, whose particular expressions and forms must be held onto at all cost. While the recent "return to Wesley" emphasis within Wesleyan theological circles has its merits, there is also a real danger of assigning an inflated level of authority to Wesley's language and contextual theological formulations.

I have struggled much with how the theological distinctives of Wesleyanism can be meaningfully translated into the Asian and Pacific island contexts of the students at the seminary where I teach. I believe that it is worth doing only because I believe Wesley was fundamentally a biblical theologian. This task is best carried out by Asian theologians them-

⁷⁹Hiebert, "Critical Contextualization," 106.

⁸⁰See E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (London: SCM, 1977); I. D. G. Dunn, "The New Perspective on Paul," *BJRL* 65 (1983), 95-122; *Romans 1-8* (Dallas: Word, 1988).

⁸¹Nicholls, *Contextualization*, 54.

selves.⁸² The results may come out with a different look and feel than either the Wesleyanism of eighteenth-century England or the particular version of twentieth-century American Wesleyanism in which I was schooled. For example, does Wesley's theological position on infant baptism, with its Anglican roots, apply without modification in a culture like the Philippines, where nearly all children are baptized into a Roman Catholicism that tends to be highly syncretistic and where that act is thought to be salvific?

One of the dynamics of Wesleyanism is its ability to adapt to new cultural, social, and intellectual climates in a way that some of the absolutist and systematically oriented traditions do not. Wesley's theology itself was a theology in process, not a static finished product. Consequently, insisting on "theologically correct" Wesleyan language does not make us more "Wesleyan." Only when we subject Wesleyan theology to exegetical and Biblical-theological rigor and allow it to speak dynamically to ever changing contexts do we remain genuinely true to Wesley and the theological tradition he spawned. This principle, of course, applies not only to Wesleyans in Asia and Africa, but to those in North America and Europe as well.

While recognizing that theology must be contextualized to be meaningful, we must at the same time distance ourselves from what Stackhouse calls "contextualism," i.e., the denial that there is anything universal or transcultural about the faith to be contextualized. Stackhouse critiques versions of liberation theology that insist that "everything of basic significance grows out of the contextual experience of those on the underside of the master-slave relationship."⁸³ Contextualism manifests itself in two forms, neither of which is acceptable for biblically-based theologians. The first is a *relativism* which celebrates an infinite number of contextual theologies, many of which are mutually exclusive.⁸⁴ The result is that no theology is able to transcend the ghetto of its particular historical situation and remains detached from the wider Christian community. A relativistic posture is currently found in many Two Thirds World theologies and within modern Western historical-critical biblical scholarship.

⁸²See D. L. Stults, *Developing an Asian Evangelical Theology* (Manila: OMF Literature, 1989). Missiologists generally accept that in addition to the traditional "three self" categories of indigenization (self-governing, self-supporting, self-propagating), a "fourth self," self-theologizing, must be recognized.

⁸³Stackhouse, *Apologia*, 8.

⁸⁴Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 427.

The other is an *absolutism* which dogmatizes one's own particular interpretation or theological position, "making it applicable to everybody and demanding that others submit too." The Wesleyan understanding of the catholic spirit resists either form of contextualism.⁸⁶ If we believe there is a normative text which brings meaning to and often critiques the context, then we must begin to think in "transcontextual" categories.⁸⁷ This does not mean simply uncovering some kind of pure, supracultural core from its various patterns of cultural dress. Rather, it involves allowing our various contextual insights and interpretations of the gospel to contribute toward a transcontextual theology and understanding of the Bible. Both contextualization and "transcontextualization" must stand under the authority of the Word of God and be guided by God's Spirit.

Wesleyans should be open to learning from the interpretations of Christians in other cultural contexts. We must recognize that we are part of an international hermeneutical community."⁸⁸ This means that every local interpretive community must assume the role of both teacher and learner. Interpreters can often detect the weaknesses and blind spots of other interpreters more clearly from the distance of another culture than from inside the same one.

There is much that Western Christians can learn from the hermeneutical and theological insights of their fellow-believers in the Two-Thirds World. For example, African and Asian Christians might critique the unbiblical individualism that often characterizes Western theology, since they may be able to grasp more clearly the corporate dimensions of the Biblical message. Or non-Western believers who regularly confront the

⁸⁵Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 428.

⁸⁶See I. Wesley, "Sermon XXXIX: "Catholic Spirit," in N. Burwash, *Wesley's Doctrinal Standards: L The Sermons* (Salem, OH: Schmuller, repr. 1967), 379-389. For a recent analysis of Wesley's understanding of the "catholic spirit," see Randy L. Maddox, "Opinion, Religion and 'Catholic Spirit': John Wesley on Theological Integrity," *Asbury Theological Journal* 47 (Spring, 1992), 63-87. Maddox concludes that the mature Wesley's notion of the catholic spirit did not entail doctrinal indifference or theological pluralism, nor did it sacrifice theological integrity in the essential Christian convictions. At the same time, it rejected the denominational zeal which overlooks areas of shared beliefs among Christians and recognized the fallibility of human perceptions and expressions of doctrinal truth. See especially 77-79.

⁸⁷See Stackhouse, *Apologia*, 6ff.

⁸⁸Hiebert, "Critical Contextualization," 107.

reality of the spirit world and the powers of darkness may have a more adequate hermeneutic of the Biblical teaching in this area than much of Western Christianity, which has tended to rationalistically “demythologize” such passages. In light of the upsurge of occultism in Europe and North America, the church in the West could benefit from this perspective. Surely Western Christians who find themselves in a context of fast-increasing religious and cultural pluralism can learn from their Asian evangelical counterparts who have struggled to develop a biblical-theological understanding of the uniqueness of the Christian message within a religiously plural and minority religious environment.

On the other hand, the Western theological tradition still has much to say to the churches in the Two-Thirds world. Some Christian missionaries and non-Western theologians have insisted that a truly contextualized theology can emerge in Africa or Asia only when it is free from any existing theological structure.⁸⁹ However, an interpretive *tabula rasa* is not only impossible; it fosters a highly subjective and ahistorical hermeneutic.

The idea of the church as a hermeneutical community reaches not only to the church in all cultures, but also to the church in all ages.⁹⁰ For example, the historic Western traditions may be able to provide a corrective to the African tendency to interpret the Old Testament in categories of African primal religion, e.g., reading ancestor worship back into Scripture.⁹¹ Historic Wesleyan distinctives, such as the call to ethical holiness and discipleship, the social and praxiological dimensions of holiness, the assurance of salvation, and prevenient grace as evidence of the Spirit’s work among all peoples for the purpose of leading them to salvation, all speak profoundly to today’s rapidly changing Asian social and cultural contexts.

Christians in every culture should be doing theology not merely for themselves, but with the goal of leading to a deeper, richer, and more “transcontextual” understanding of Biblical truth.⁹² Rather than following the trend toward more and more fragmented and provincial “theologies,” we must seek through our diverse insights a more “Biblical” theology. We

⁸⁹See von Allmen, “Birth,” 50; cf. the critique of von Allmen’s position in Carson, “Contextualization,” esp. 246-253.

⁹⁰Hiebert, “Critical Contextualization,” 110.

⁹¹See T. Tienou, “The Church in African Theology: Description and Analysis of Hermeneutical Presuppositions,” in *Biblical Interpretation and the Church*, ed. D. A. Carson (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984), 151-165.

⁹²Carson, “Contextualization,” 256.

greatly need one another, all the more in light of the forces toward rapid globalization at work in our world.

A transcontextual understanding of the gospel will require an attitude of humility and catholicity. I have marveled when attending theological and ecclesiastical conferences at how little thought is given to “how it will play” in Pune or Prague. Are those of us who are Wesleyans operating out of a Western interpretive tradition willing to truly listen to the insights of like-minded believers from Manila or Sao Paulo who have fused their *own* horizon with that of the Scriptures? Are we humble enough to allow ourselves to be corrected by them when necessary? Wesleyan interpreters and theologians cannot afford to operate out of a mono-cultural mindset. I have been learning, sometimes painfully, through the experience of teaching at an international multi-cultural seminary that, when I interact with those with different paradigms than my own, I begin to see more clearly the flaws in my own paradigms. In the words of David Bosch, “While acting locally, we must think globally, in terms of the whole church.”⁹³

The result is not a watered down “lowest common denominator” theology that is devoid of any critical edge. Rather, it is an “international hermeneutical spiral.” By this I mean that the church in its diverse cultural and confessional incarnations interacts with Scripture and interprets the normative gospel for its own context, while at the same time the theological understandings each community has gained enable it to contribute to an ever richer and clearer grasp of the Christian message. This process need not sacrifice theological integrity or doctrinal distinctives. It does, however, submit all particular theological formulations to the revealed Word of God. The Wesleyan catholic spirit and dynamic understanding of theology should enable Wesleyans to stand at the forefront of such an endeavor.

Conclusion

A Wesleyan perspective is important in the ongoing contextualization debate. As in many cases, a Wesleyan approach to Scripture and interpretation is able to recognize the tensions in some key issues and offer a mediating position that could help to lead us beyond some of the current polarities in the discussion. I conclude by noting three of these polarities.

⁹³Bosch, “New Paradigm,” 62.

(1) The Wesleyan emphasis on the soteriological purpose of Scripture and its ethical and social implications can provide the basis for a transformational hermeneutic—one that moves beyond narrow concerns for contextualizing of truth content alone to affirm that Scripture and not the context must control the process.

(2) The Wesleyan openness to the historical-conditionedness of Christian life and thought resists static hermeneutical models that espouse either a wooden commitment to Biblical forms or reducing the gospel to an abstract “supracultural core” of truth. At the same time, we acknowledge that all adequate contextualization must be rooted in the center of the unchanging gospel message, God’s saving activity in Christ. The interconnection between constant center and contextual expression enables the eternal Word of God to address people in relevant and transforming ways in the full range of human situations today.

(3) The Wesleyan catholic spirit is open to a truly “transcontextual” hermeneutic—one that rejects all forms of provincialism and “contextualism” and seeks in humility to learn from the interpretive insights of Christians in other cultures, to the end that we all come to a deeper and richer understanding of the faith. Authentic contextualization is far more than an academic exercise or a topic for scholarly debate. It is a missiological necessity for the whole church.

RECLAIMING THE TEXT IN METHODIST-HOLINESS AND PENTECOSTAL SPIRITUALITY

by
Charles Edwin Jones

In the first decades of the century, the Holiness and Pentecostal movements were close neighbors on the ideological landscape. Although of late excluded from Methodist power structures,¹ the unstudied attitude of both movements remained identical, in most respects, to that of late nineteenth-century Methodism.² Both professed post-conversion experiences of purity and power which they identified as the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Both were convinced of the present activity of the Holy Spirit and were looking for the Lord's return. Many in each group had personal and family ties with members of the other. Sermons and testimonies of each abounded with allusions to biblical events and each sang

¹Future Pentecostals stood outside the established structures of the Holiness movement as well. Many had expected the General Holiness Assembly of 1901 to result in a distinctively Holiness church. Nearly all elements of the Methodist-inspired movement in North America were represented. Of the 123 endorsing and 229 attending the meeting, however, only three were destined to have ties with Pentecostalism. They were Abbie C. Morrow (Brown), evangelist and editor of the *Sunday School Illustrator*, New York [endorsed]; M. L. Ryan, editor of *Light*, Salem, Oregon [endorsed]; and Mrs. E. R. Wheaton, prison evangelist, Tabor, Iowa [attended]. See S. B. Shaw, ed., *Echoes of the General Holiness Assembly Held in Chicago, May 3-13, 1901* (Chicago, 1901), 12-14, 23-27.

²See Donald G. Mathews, "Evangelical America-the Methodist Ideology" in R. E. Richey and K. E. Rowe, eds., *Rethinking Methodist History: A Bicentennial Historical Consultation* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1985), 91-99.

from a repertoire reminiscent of the camp meeting and every-night mission of the recent past. Each sought to reenact the text of Scripture and had distinctive expectations about the manner in which reenactment should occur.

The Real Divide

Differences in typology created the impasse which throughout the common history of the two movements has characterized communication between them. Because Scripture is for each the infallible indicator of the witness and guidance of the Holy Spirit, the incompatibility of divergent means of approaching the biblical text has remained an unbridgeable chasm between them. Archetypal symbolism explains why each movement defines itself as Pentecostal³ and regards the other as decidedly not so. It lies at the heart of the self-definition of each. Removal of “Pentecost” and “Pentecostal” from Holiness church names in the second decade of this century was regarded by Holiness people as a necessary defense against a false definition of Pentecost and was accompanied by a sense of deprivation and loss. The commitment of glossolalic Pentecostals to literal reenactment of the text, on the other hand, prevented them from seeing the name changes as other than a sign of rejection of biblical truth.

Estranged not only from their spiritual mother but from one another, they quickly came to a stalemate. Both thought it was tongues-speaking more than any other characteristic which set converts to Pentecostalism apart from onetime Methodist-Holiness people. Focus on this assumption blinded both camps to the underlying cause of the impasse, namely that the real confusion lay in differences in the manner Scripture was to be appropriated.

The impossibility of the coexistence of both metaphorical and phenomenological reenactment of the text⁴ is placed in stark relief by examination of the biblical analogies used by the two movements: the Exodus typology of Wesleyan Holiness and the Pentecost typology of the Apos-

³“Pentecostal” was continued in the title of the Louisville paper edited by the Methodist-Holiness evangelist Henry Clay Morrison (1857-1942) until his death.

⁴Stanley Johannesen of the University of Waterloo believes that Pentecostalism destroys metaphor. See his “Remembering and Observing: Modes of Interpreting Pentecostal Experience and Language,” a paper given at the 20th annual meeting of the Society for Pentecostal Studies, Dallas, 1990.

toloc Faith.⁵ This disparity lay at the root of Holiness rejection of physical signs and of Pentecostal focus on healing and tongues.

Methodist-Holiness people reclaimed the text by means of metaphor. What they desired to epitomize was the experience of entire sanctification, which they said freed the believer from the “bent to sinning”⁶ and from fascination with worldly things. Christian perfection, which John Wesley regarded as the “grand depositum of the people called Method”⁷ was that aspect of the work of Christ which made possible freedom not only from acts of sin, but from the compulsion to sin. They believed that sanctifying grace, imparted initially in response to repentance and faith, was brought to fruition in the fully consecrated believer in a second experience of grace.

Because, however, Holiness advocates held that this crisis, variously known as entire sanctification, heart holiness, perfect love, the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and the rest of faith, was “the central idea of Christianity,”⁸ they did not contend for exclusive use of Methodist terminology in proclaiming it. Instead, they entwined vernacular idiom and doctrinal metaphor in sermon, song,⁹ and testimony¹⁰ in such a manner as to make the biblical event and personal experience synonymous. They combined biblical, literary, and commonplace images in such a way as to differentiate infancy and adulthood in the Christian life¹¹ and to make “second blessing” holiness comprehensible to multitudes both inside and outside the denomination.

⁵Apostolic Faith, the name first preferred by both proponents and opponents of glossolalic Pentecostalism, also was the title of early Pentecostal papers published in Topeka, Houston, and Los Angeles. This designation is used here to distinguish glossolalic Pentecostals from Wesleyan-Holiness people who, from the 1890s on, often used Pentecostal in theological discourse, nomenclature, and self-description.

⁶From Charles Wesley’s hymn “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling” (1747).

⁷Letter of John Wesley to Robert Carr Brackenbury, September 15, 1790.

⁸See Jesse T. Peck’s much-reprinted, often-abridged *The Central Idea of Christianity* (Boston: Henry V. Degen, 1858).

⁹See, for example, William McDonald and Lewis Hartsough, eds., *Beulah Songs* (Philadelphia: National Publishing Association for the Promotion of Holiness, 1879).

¹⁰See S. Olin Garrison, ed., *Forty Witnesses, Covering the Whole Range of Christian Experience* (New York: Eaton & Mains; Cincinnati: Curts & Jennings, 1888).

¹¹William Taylor (1821-1902) created this paradigm of sanctification in *Infancy and Manhood of Christian Life* (New York: Phillips and Hunt, 1867).

The literalism of early Pentecostalism dictated a different type of reenactment. Pioneers of the Apostolic Faith believed they had entered a dimension of spiritual power subsequent to and even more glorious than entire sanctification. They said that this latter-day “baptism of the Holy Spirit” was identical in every way to that experienced by the disciples on the Day of Pentecost, and thus they felt impelled to spread everywhere the good news of its transforming power. The providential means to this end, they believed, was literal appropriation of the text of Scripture. This they set out to do by welding elements of the soteriology of Methodist holiness¹² and the dispensationalism¹³ of some in the Reformed tradition¹⁴ into a new amalgam, the Pentecost of the latter days.

Different Metaphors

Methodist-Holiness people from Phoebe Palmer on had regarded the experience of the disciples at Pentecost as an archetype of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. To this, proponents of the Apostolic Faith added the typology of the early and latter rain. They read Peter’s exposition of Joel 2:28-32 on the Day of Pentecost as a prophecy of the revival of the phenomenon of Pentecost in their own times (Acts 2:16-21). This interpretation caused the fathers and mothers of the Apostolic Faith movement to regard themselves as eyewitnesses to the fulfillment of Joel 2:28 (AV): “And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions.”

The Pentecost of the first-century, they said, was the “former” or “early” rain of autumn and winter. Its twentieth-century counterpart was

¹²See Donald Dayton, *Theological Roots of Pentecostalism* (Metuchen, N. B.: Scarecrow Press, 1987), 87-113.

¹³See Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970); and Timothy P. Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming: American Premillennialism, 1875-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

¹⁴See Edith Lydia Waldvogel (Blumhofer), “The Overcoming Life’: a Study in the Reformed Evangelical Origins of Pentecostalism,” Ph.D. thesis, Harvard University, 1977. “Reformed” as used here is an extremely inclusive term. It includes dispensationalism and premillennialism and the teachings of John Nelson Darby (1800-1882), Charles Grandison Finney (1792-1875), Albert Benjamin Simpson (1843-1919), and John Alexander Dowie (1847-1907). “Non-Wesleyan” would probably be a more appropriate designation.

the “latter” rain of springtime described in Joel 2:23.¹⁵ This rain symbolized the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Study of Acts showed that the “former” rain had been signaled by tongues. The “latter” rain would be also. Tongues as the sign, they said, was the unbreakable link between the two.

Proponents believed the movement in which they united to be the divinely-commissioned instrument of the latter-day Pentecost. It was, they said, initiated, empowered, and directed by the Spirit. As such, it transcended every human tradition. Unlike many in the Holiness camp, however, few in the Apostolic Faith looked upon the reformation of Methodism as a worthwhile goal. Methodism, they believed, had been a forerunner of the latter-day Pentecost. It would flourish or wither as it embraced or rejected the new move of the Holy Spirit. They regarded themselves as the end-time counterpart of the apostles at Pentecost and considered the interval between the first and the twentieth centuries as a period of drought.¹⁶

The Methodist-Holiness movement, which had risen before the Civil War as an instrument of the revival of Christian perfection in the church, did not look upon perfect love as a grace for Methodists alone. Holiness, it said, was the birthright of all Christians. E. W. Pierce, sanctified in 1864 during a parsonage prayer-meeting in Wisconsin, articulated this widely-held conviction: “I ardently pray for the time to draw near when scriptural life-holiness shall be the accepted belief and practical experience in every denominational branch of the Christian Church.”¹⁷ Champi-

¹⁵“Be glad then, ye children of Zion, and rejoice in the Lord your God: for he hath given you the former rain moderately, and he will cause to come down for you the rain, the former rain, and the latter rain in the first month.” See also Job 29:29; Proverbs 16:15; Jeremiah 3:3, 5:24; Hosea 6:3; Zechariah 10:1; James 5:7.

¹⁶B. F. Lawrence, *The Apostolic Faith Restored* (St. Louis, Mo.: Gospel Publishing House, 1916), 116-119; and F. W. Farrar, *Darkness and Dawn; or, Scenes in the Days of Nero: an Historic Tale* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1892, c1891), 162-169. In an appendix Lawrence reprinted “The Glossolalia in the Early Church: Historical [!] Description from the Writings of [F. W. Farrar] the Late Dean of Canterbury,” by C. E. D. de L., which included a long excerpt from a novel by Dean Farrar set in the days of Nero. The author of the article expressed amazement that an Anglican, writing at such “long distance both of time and of spiritual power and experience” “from the Ancient Church,” could portray with such accuracy that which he as a Pentecostal had seen in his own time.

¹⁷ See Phoebe Palmer, ed., *Pioneer Experiences; or, The Gift of Power Received by Faith* (New York: W. C. Palmer, Jr., 1868), 195.

ons agreed with John Freeman Owen who declared: “Holiness is God’s choice and plan for us even if John Wesley had been a horse jockey and Hester Ann Rogers had been a fortune teller.”¹⁸

Allegiance to the universality of Methodism’s “peculiar” doctrine fueled Holiness desire to establish forums for its propagation outside the church. The most influential of these were the Tuesday Meeting for the Promotion of Holiness in New York and encampments of the National Camp Meeting Association for the Promotion of Holiness.¹⁹ So successful were these efforts that by 1886 more than two hundred cottage meetings, modeled after the one led by Sarah Lankford²⁰ and Phoebe Palmer in New York, were being held weekly. That year the cumulative total of National Association tabernacle and camp meetings stood at seventy-six. Through them, the Holiness message spread throughout the English-speaking world.

Among those seeking entire sanctification in these meetings were wives of business and professional men and clergy of the established denominations on the eastern seaboard. None were recent converts. Most were first and second generation city dwellers far enough removed from the rigors of country life to idealize it and well enough grounded in the Scriptures and *belles-lettres* to internalize metaphors based on them. While other less spiritually-minded members of the “leisure class”²¹ devoted themselves to club life, earnest Methodists pursued the “interior

¹⁸John Lakin Brasher, *Glimpses* (Cincinnati: Revivalist Press, c1954), 60.

¹⁹For history of the National Association, see Charles Edwin Jones, *Perfectionist Persuasion: the Holiness Movement and American Methodism, 1867-1936* (Metuchen, N. I.: Scarecrow Press, 1974); and Delbert R. Rose, *A Theology of Christian Experience* (Wilmore, Ky.: Seminary Press, 1958): revised and reissued by the Bethany Fellowship, Minneapolis, in 1965 and 1975. The 1975 edition has the title *Vital Holiness: a Theology of Christian Experience*.

²⁰Sarah Lankford (1806-1896) and Phoebe Palmer (1807-1874) were sisters. After Phoebe’s death, Sarah married Walter Palmer.

²¹Thorstein Veblen’s *The Theory of the Leisure Class: an Economic Study of Institutions*, published in 1899, describes the society created by sudden wealth and secularization. The shift of passion from piety to leisure can be traced easily in the careers of alumni of Wesleyan University, whose presidents Wilbur Fisk (1792-1839), Stephen Olin (1797-1851), and Cyrus David Foss (1834-1910) had been Holiness men. By the end of the century nine-tenths of its students were housed in fraternities. In 1907 the school severed its tie with the Methodist Episcopal Church. See David B. Potts, *Wesleyan University, 1831-1910: Collegiate Enterprise in New England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

life”²² in the parlors of like-minded city neighbors in winter and in mountain meadow and seaside²³ encampments in summer. Holiness camp meetings were remembered as occasions of great blessing. Many had received the blessing of entire sanctification during a camp meeting and forever after regarded its precincts as an emblem of the experience. In a letter “To the Conference of the Friends of Holiness, to be held in Wesley Chapel, Cincinnati, Nov.27, 1877,” Sheridan Baker described the connection in his own thinking between the grace of entire sanctification and the Holiness camp meeting:

By a case of obstinate Rheumatism, I have been almost entirely disabled for nearly all of the three past years. Though my sufferings have been very great at times, I have enjoyed a continuous and uninterrupted feast—a kind of “National Camp Meeting” in my soul all the time.²⁴

²²In 1846 Bowdoin College professor Thomas C. Upham (1799-1872) published his *Principles of the Interior Life*, which by reprinting and abridgment came to be regarded as a holiness classic. Congregationalist Upham first came into contact with the movement in 1839 through his wife’s Methodist new-found friends Sarah Lankford and Phoebe Palmer in New York. See Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1957), 105.

²³The seaside locations of the Ocean Grove, New Jersey, and Old Orchard, Maine, camp meetings led song-writers to unique allusive connections. In all likelihood Phoebe Palmer was an early camper at Ocean Grove. Christian and Missionary Alliance founder A. B. Simpson was an evangelist long associated with Old Orchard Beach. In the refrain of Palmer’s “The Cleansing Wave,” surfing in the incoming tide appears to represent the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Mrs Palmer testifies:

The cleansing stream, I see, I see!
I plunge, and oh, it cleanseth me!
Oh! Praise the Lord, it cleanseth me,
It cleanseth me, yes, cleanseth me.

Simpson, on the other hand, seems to regard the ocean as a metaphor for the mystery and grandeur of God. In “Launch Out,” he advises the spiritually minded to abandon human wisdom and to lay caution aside. He explains:

The mercy of God is an ocean divine,
A boundless and fathomless flood;
Launch out in the deep, cut away the shoreline
And be lost in the fullness of God.

²⁴See *Proceedings of Holiness Conferences Held at Cincinnati, November 26th, 1877, and at New York, December 17th, 1877* (Philadelphia: National Publishing Association for the Promotion of Holiness, 1878), 19-22.

The camp meeting, “a little heaven on the road to heaven,”²⁵ was regarded by many Holiness saints as a glorious place from which to make one’s departure for the better world. In 1918 an instance of such was reported by George N. Buell:

Brother Dick Albright went to glory at 10:30 o’clock this morning from the Wilmington, N.Y., camp, where he and his wife were laboring. We were singing “Lovelight All the Way.” While we were singing the chorus, his head fell back, and in a moment he was gone. The “lovelight” had gone with him all the way. He had often said he wanted to go to glory from a camp meeting, and God gave him his wish.²⁶

It was in these milieus that Victorian metaphors of Wesleyan doctrine and experience, such as Beulah Land, the Exodus, and the Altar of Sacrifice,²⁷ were to be integrated into the hermeneutic of full salvation.

Images of Full Salvation

Wesleyan-Holiness apologists do not rely on metaphor in establishing doctrine. They, however, make extensive use of it pastorally.²⁸ They dress the quest for sanctity in the cultural garments of the age, recalling the journey from sin to full salvation in a composite of images drawn from

²⁵John L. Brasher on the Hollow Rock Camp Meeting near Toronto, Ohio. Quoted in I. Lawrence Brasher, *The Sanctified South: John Lakin Brasher and the Holiness Movement*(Urbana: University of Illinois Press, c1994), 95.

²⁶See *Herald of Holiness* (Kansas City), 7 (Aug.14, 1918), 14.

²⁷Phoebe Palmer’s chief contribution to Methodist-Holiness pastoral theology was the so-called Altar Covenant. In an analogy based on Romans 12:1 (“I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service”), Mrs. Palmer likened the seeker to an offering placed on the altar of the Holy of Holies. As in the Old Testament where the sacrifice was sanctified when it touched the altar, so now the justified believer has the right to claim heart purity the moment consecration has fully been made, for the altar sanctifies the gift. The Altar Covenant was used with seekers after entire sanctification for more than a century. The struggle in the spiritual life of Mrs. Palmer which caused her to develop it is recorded in Thomas C. Oden, ed., *Phoebe Palmer: Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 107-130.

²⁸Evangelists Beverly Carradine (1848-1931) and William B. Godbey (1833-1920) made extensive use of metaphor. See, for example, Carradine’s *The Second Blessing in Symbol*(Columbia, S. C.: L. L. Pickett, ci 893). The scholarly, eccentric Godbey was one the harshest critics of Pentecostalism. See his *Tongue Movement, Satanic* (Zarephath, N.J.: Pillar of Fire, 1918).

the Exodus, Isaiah's prophecy of the end of exile in the Land of Beulah,²⁹ and John Bunyan's allegory of the "progress" of Christian from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City.³⁰

They portray the entirely sanctified as modern-day Children of Israel who upon arrival in the Promised Land recount their flight from sinful bondage. Each stage is symbolic. The Red Sea crossing signifies forgiveness of sins (justification);³¹ the forty years in the Sinai wilderness, struggle with the disposition to sin (the carnal mind);³² the Jordan crossing,³³ heart cleansing (entire sanctification); and the conquest of Canaan (the life of holiness). The Land of Beulah, a place from which Bunyan's pilgrim can see over into heaven, represents the rest of faith characteristic of the sanctified.³⁴ Sojourn there gives one heaven-in-the-

²⁹A figure of unwavering faithfulness in Isaiah 62:4 (AV): "Thou shalt no more be termed Forsaken; neither shall thy land any more be termed Desolate: but thou shalt be called Hephzibah, and thy land Beulah: for the Lord delighteth in thee, and thy land shall be married." The twentieth-century preference for the literal over the metaphorical is apparent in the Revised Standard Version of the Old Testament (c1952) which renders the Hebrew words Hephzibah and Beulah, "My delight is in her" and "married."

³⁰*Pilgrim's Progress* had an immense readership in the United States in the nineteenth century. See David E. Smith, *John Bunyan in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966).

³¹See Carradine, "The Two Crossings" in *The Second Blessing in Symbol*, 57-63.

³²See G. A. McLaughlin, *Inbred Sin* (Boston: McDonald & Gill, 1887); and S. S. White, *Eradication: Defined, Explained, Authenticated* (Kansas City, Mo.: Beacon Hill Press, 1954).

³³See Carradine, "The Two Crossings" in *The Second Blessing in Symbol*, 57-63. Celebrated by I. G. Martin (1862-1957) in "Out of Egypt into Canaan" (c1907):

I'm over the Jordan tide,
The waters did there divide;
I'm in the land of Canaan,
Abundantly satisfied.

³⁴See Brasher, *The Sanctified South*, 99. In her song "'Tis Marvelous and Wonderful" (c1919), Mr. C. H. Morris (1862-1929) testifies to the euphoria which she as a sanctified pilgrim experienced and anticipated:

"Twas only a foretaste of joys divine
In Canaan waiting for me,
Where sweetest of honey and milk and wine
Were dripping from every tree.

heart³⁵ even in adverse circumstances.³⁶ Holiness shines in the faces and marks the actions and ethics of all who reside in Beulah.³⁷ They vote for prohibition and inscribe “Holiness unto the Lord” on the walls of their chapels to remind themselves of the fact.

The Exodus typology³⁸ held endless fascination for Methodist Holiness song writers. In the course of a half century they explored every aspect of it. Stanzas which entwine several facets of the image, Scripture, doctrine, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, camp meeting, and natural setting, are linked by a refrain of testimony or shouting. M. J. Harris’ song “I’ve Pitched My Tent in Beulah,” written in 1908 during a camp meeting at Hollow Rock near Toronto, Ohio, is representative:

I long ago left Egypt for the Promised Land,
I trusted in my Savior and to His guiding hand,

If fellowship here with my Lord can be
So inexpressibly sweet,
O what will it be when his face we see,
When ‘round the white throne we meet?

Usage in Holiness circles varied. At times Beulah simply meant marriage. On her third wedding anniversary, November 20, 1903, the Texas Methodist farm wife Elizabeth Woolsey Spruce wrote in her journal: “Another year of Beulah life for us has closed. How soon will we be in eternity!” See her *Steps of a Good Man: a Personal Sketch of Elmer Spruce* (Oklahoma City, 1986), 17.

³⁵Heaven-in-the-heart motif is endemic to the Holiness message. Note Mrs. Palmer’s use of it in “The-Cleansing Wave”:

Amazing grace! ‘Tis heaven below
To feel the blood applied,
And Jesus, only Jesus know,
My Jesus crucified.

³⁶All was not euphoria. See Mary Mabbette Anderson, *Lights and Shadows of the Life in Canaan* (Columbia, S. C.: I. M. Pike, 1906). In 1929 this work was reissued by the Pentecostal Holiness Church in Toronto.

³⁷Brasher, *The Sanctified South*, 150.

³⁸See Martin Wells Knapp, *Out of Egypt into Canaan; or, Lessons in Spiritual Geography* (Boston: McDonald, Gill & Co.; Albion, Mi.: Revivalist Publishing Co., 1889, c1887); Beverly Carradine, *Beulah Land* (Chicago: Christian Witness Co., 1904); and James Blaine Chapman, *The Terminology of Holiness* (Kansas City, Mo.: Beacon Hill Press, 1947), 87-89, 91. For analysis, see Laurence W. Wood, *Pentecostal Grace* (Wilmore, Ky.: Francis Asbury Publishing Co., 1980), 37-100; and Jones, *Perfectionist Persuasion*, 35-46.

He led me out to victory thro' the great red sea,³⁹
I sang a song of triumph, and shouted, "I am free."

Refrain: You need not look for me down in Egypt's sand,
For I have pitched my tent far up in Beulah land;
You need not look for me down in Egypt's sand,
For I have pitched my tent far up in Beulah land.

I followed close beside Him and the land soon found,
I did not halt or tremble, for Canaan I was bound,
My Guide I fully trusted and He led me in,
I shouted, "Hallelujah, my heart is free from sin.

I started for the highlands where the fruits abound,
I pitched my tent near Hebron, there grapes of eschol found.
With milk and honey flowing, and new wine so free,
I have no love for Egypt. It has no charms for me.

Mrs. Harris' singer is no utopian as she sets out for the eternal city. Outwardly, the way for the sanctified is the same as for others. The difference, she believes, is an undivided heart symbolized by Beulah, the place of constancy in the internal terrain from which the sanctified can see over into heaven.

My heart is so enraptured as I press along.
Each day I find new blessings, which fill my heart with song.
I'm ever marching onward to that land on high.
Some day I'll reach my mansion that's builded in the sky.

She is in fact remarkably like Bunyan's Christian, who, late in his "progress,"⁴⁰ passes through Vanity Fair, a place identical in every particular to the City of Destruction from whence he had come. Vanity Fair and the City of Destruction are in fact the same place. It is Christian who

³⁹It is possible that "red sea" is set in lower case to permit an alternative reading of "blood of Christ." Similar treatment of "eschol" in the third stanza would seem to indicate careless editing instead.

⁴⁰Christopher Hill suggests that the pilgrimage of Christian, a member of the true royal priesthood, was inspired by the circuit "progress" of James I and Warden Woodward in Bunyan's time. A royal progress started and ended at the same point. See *A Tinker and a Poor Man: John Bunyan and His Church, 1628-1688* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989, c1988), 222.

has *changed*. Metaphorically *the entirely sanctified have heaven-in-the-heart* as they wander the wilderness of this world.⁴¹

Pentecost Reenacted

For their part, the fathers and mothers of the Apostolic Faith were caught up in what they believed to be the fulfillment of biblical prophecies. In particular, the relationship between the Pentecosts of the first and twentieth centuries dominated the thinking of disciples of Charles Fox Parham and William J. Seymour. Drawn from the fringes of society,⁴² these step-children of the Methodist-Holiness movement focused on spiritual power. Workers all in every-night missions, healing homes and training schools attached to them in Topeka, Houston, Los Angeles and elsewhere, these devotees expected to see Pentecost reenacted in every service. “The Comforter has Come!” (c1890), a Methodist-Holiness song with a didactic text by Francis Bottome (1823-1894) and a repetitive setting by William J. Kirkpatrick (1838-1921), is reputed to have been sung at every service during the Azusa Street revival in Los Angeles.⁴³ Seekers

41 See Jones, *Perfectionist Persuasion*, 40-41. In 1882 R. Kelso Carter, a Holiness man, revised “Deliverance Will Come.” In its final stanza the new song, “The Blood-washed Pilgrim,” describes the sojourner’s arrival in heaven, where upon passing over “the threshold,” he discovers that

The Crown, the Throne, the Sceptre,
The Name, the Stone so White,
Were his, who found in Jesus,
The yoke and burden light.

⁴²See Robert Mapes Anderson, *Vision of the Disinherited: the Making of American Pentecostalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

⁴³The song lent itself to *double-entendre*. The first two lines of the second stanza provide an example of potential readings available to singers of the two movements.

The long, long night is past,
The morning breaks at last;
And hush’d the dreadful wail
And fury of the blast.

To a Holiness singer, the night of sin and of double-mindedness is past. To a pentecostal singer, the long night of spiritual drought has ended and the latter-rain Pentecost has begun. It was not included in *Songs of Pentecostal Fellowship* (1924), the first song book published by the General Council of the Assemblies of God.

received the baptism of the Holy Spirit after the manner of Acts 2. They “tarried” for the enduement of power in an “upper” room. They sang in the heavenly choir. They were “slain by the Spirit.” Some thought they spoke in foreign languages unknown to them. Some abandoned medical treatment and took the Lord alone as healer. Some were rebaptized by immersion in order to be “buried with Christ in baptism.”

Focus on this tie was characteristic of their defenders as well. Reliance on it prompted D. Wesley Myland in 1910 to append a chart showing rainfall in Palestine from 1861 to 1907 to his work on the typology of the latter rain,⁴⁴ and led B. F. Lawrence in 1916 to excuse modern “abusers of the gift” by citing those “in the Corinthian Church.” He explained:

There are abuses of the gift among us; there were in the Corinthian Church. If ours are therefore false, so were theirs. We are sometimes condemned as heretical, but we are the only body of Christians on earth to whom the 12th and 14th chapters of 1st Cor. are applicable; we are the only body of Christians on earth who do not forbid to speak with tongues.⁴⁵

For both the individual believer and the movement, tongues had become the talisman of Apostolic authenticity and Pentecostal power, the seal of the Holy Spirit which could never be taken away.

This mind-set was to be reflected in the titles of Pentecostal apologetical works for over half a century. These include: *The Phenomenon of Pentecost* (1916), by Frank Ewart; *The Apostolic Faith Restored* (1916), by B. E. Lawrence; *How “Pentecost” Came to Los Angeles* (1925), by Frank Bartleman; *With Signs Following* (1926), by Stanley H. Frodsham; *The Promise Fulfilled* (1961), by Klaude Kendrick; and *Suddenly from Heaven* (1961), by Carl Brumback.⁴⁶ In the new movement the phenome-

⁴⁴For exposition see D. Wesley Myland, *The Latter Rain Covenant and Pentecostal Power, with Testimony of Healings and Baptism* (Chicago: Evangel Publishing House, 1910). The rainfall chart, pages 178-179, includes an explanatory letter from Jabob Eliahu of the American Colony dated Jan.12, 1909. See analysis in D. William Faupel, *The Everlasting Gospel: the Significance of Eschatology in the Development of Pentecostal Thought* (Ph.D. dissertation), University of Birmingham, 1989, 62-70; and Dayton, *Theological Roots of Pentecostalism*, 26-28, 32-33.

⁴⁵Lawrence, *The Apostolic Faith Restored*, 29.

⁴⁶For history of an attempt to recapture the typology, see Richard Michael Riss, *The Latter Rain Movement of 1948 and the Mid-Twentieth Century Evangelical Awakening*, M. A. thesis, Regent College, 1979.

nological supplanted the metaphorical. In it tongues became both sign⁴⁷ and symbol of the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

Recent Times of Testing

For inhabitants of the Beulah Land and the Upper Room, the first four decades of the new century were both the best and the worst of times. For mature Wesleyan-Holiness people, the example of flesh-and-blood saints and the impact of internalized symbols were at the height of their power. The elders had been nurtured directly or indirectly by the National Holiness evangelists-preachers immensely skilled in the use of “tropes, figures, comparisons, metaphors, similes, and other figures which have captured the imagination of the masses from time immemorial”⁴⁸-and could still be moved to the depths by the dying words of Alfred Cookman: “Sweeping through the gates washed in the blood of the Lamb,” and of John S. Inskip: “I am, O Lord, wholly and forever Thine,” declarations of high-mindedness at the time of utterance and well within the canon of plausibility.

For their children, however, the situation had vastly changed. Increasingly isolated devotees of the piety and culture of the Methodist-Holiness golden age, they eagerly shouldered the responsibility of perpetuating the doctrine and experience of entire sanctification, but found the decade-after-decade maintenance of a vocabulary of obscure hyperbole ever-more confining. They faced the prospect of rearing children in a Rousseauist environment devoid of appeal to sentiment, moral certainty, and sacred metaphor. Distrustful of current pedagogical trends and sensing that children taught to read by “Dick and Jane” found figurative aspects of the Exodus and of the saga of Bunyan’s pilgrim incomprehensible, holiness advocates turned to other facets of the example of Methodism in the previous century.

Safety, they believed, lay in building defenses about both message and ministry. To this end, the new Holiness churches replaced the age-old

⁴⁷Mark 16:17-18 (AV): “And these signs shall follow them that believe: In my name they shall cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; they shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover.” Note in the New International Version: “The two most reliable early manuscripts do not have Mark 16:9-20.”

⁴⁸Quoted in Brasher, *The Sanctified South*, 118, from an August 1897 article in, *Telephone*(Waco, Texas) concerning the recent session of a Holiness camp meeting there.

declaration required of Methodist ordinands, that they expected to be made “perfect” in this life, with one attesting to present enjoyment of the grace of entire sanctification. The churches also restated and expanded the Methodist General Rules to cover vicissitudes of the new age. In this framework, ethical rigorism characterized much of the preaching. Sons and daughters of the saints replaced outsiders as the focus of evangelism.

Introspection now became the hallmark of Holiness youth. Reacting to the death-knell warnings which interfaced with allusions to the Shekinah glory of times now past and passing,⁴⁹ Holiness children at times recounted experiences of guilt not unlike that of Epenetus Owen (1815-1890), who “when quite young” fell under “deep conviction of sin.”

One night he could not rest, his sins so troubled him; and not having succeeded in carrying out his resolves to do better, he called his mother and said to her, “I am so wicked I cannot sleep. I did not mind you, and was naughty to the children. What shall I do? I am afraid I shall be lost.”⁵⁰

Heart searching was not confined to the unconverted. Those seeking after entire sanctification were driven to introspection as well, and the rugged terrain traversed by seekers on the “death route” to the “second blessing” nearly eclipsed the vistas of the promised land of perfect love. Heavy reliance was placed on Mrs. Palmer’s altar covenant, which likened entire consecration to ritual sacrifice in the Old Testament. Seekers after entire sanctification were instructed to “lay on the altar” time, talents, ambitions, even the “unknown bundle,” and to “take the way with the Lord’s despised few.”⁵¹ Thorough-going consecration, they thought, would bring one into union with God, the church, and God-fearing parents.⁵² For some, this concerted and prolonged crusade to save from

⁴⁹See B. S. Taylor’s poem, “Forty Years Ago: the Old Camp-Meeting Times” [1914], in Jones, *Perfectionist Persuasion*, 143.

⁵⁰M. N. Downing, “Obituary [of] Rev. Epen[e]tus Owen,” in Epenetus Owen, *Sunshine: or Sermons, Poems and Sayings* (Utica, N.Y.: 1890), 253.

⁵¹Phrase from “I’m Going Through, Jesus,” by Herbert Buffum (1879-1939), a song often used in Holiness altar services. Ironically, the composer, successively a worker in the Volunteers of America and the Church of the Nazarene, spent the last three decades of his life working among Pentecostal groups. See Haldor Lillenas, *Modern Gospel Song Stories* (Kansas City, Mo.: Lillenas Publishing Co., 1952), 71

⁵²Both George McGovern and Gary Hart were reared in the Holiness movement. McGovern, the son of a Wesleyan Methodist pastor in South Dakota, traces his reaction to it in *Grassroots: the Autobiography of George McGovern* (New inaccurately) by Garry Wills, a Roman Catholic, in his *Under God: Religion and Modern Politics* (New

worldly conformity the children of the Holiness faithful had quite the opposite actual effect from that intended. Simple acts of adolescent rebellion in this era foreshadowed wholesale rejection of many of the convictions and standards of the elders in the decades following World War II.

For the Apostolic Faith, these decades were a time of testing when miracles of healing and charismatic personalities would share center stage. Differences over the prospect and process of sanctification, the nature of the Godhead and the formula used in baptism, the replacement of tongues with healing as the primary focus, and the excesses of some of its leaders would shake the very foundations of the new movement.

Tongues and prophecy posed unanticipated practical and theological problems. Some at the Azusa Street Mission in Los Angeles declared the banishment by the Spirit of race discrimination, only to see within months its reappearance in a split along racial lines, the result being a competing fellowship then formed by departing whites a few blocks away. Until they tested it, a few, including the former “Burning Bush” evangelist A. G. Garr, believed that the tongue they had been given was a foreign language usable in evangelism. They set out posthaste as missionaries to distant lands, trusting providence alone for sustenance. Others, upon discovering that in Acts baptism always was “in the name of Jesus,” insisted on being re-baptized by that formula. Many gave up belief in the Trinity as well.⁵³

For Methodist-Holiness observers, who from the beginning viewed the newer movement with a jaundiced eye, developments of the intervening decades served only to confirm suspicions concerning it. Few converts to the tongues-speaking group ever returned and Holiness people for the most part shunned even casual contact with it. Believing that the gift of the Holy Spirit always results in holiness of life, they wondered why moral failure was so frequent among recipients of the “baptism” evidenced by tongues. They believed the new Pentecost to be a crude caricature of the original and pursuit of the phenomenon of the latter rain a tragic sidetrack from the quest for sanctity.⁵⁴

York: Random House, 1977), 3-17. The impact of the Church of the Nazarene on Hart is charted perceptively (if at times inaccurately) by Garry Wills, a Roman Catholic, in his *Under God: Religion and Modern Politics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 29-50.

⁵³W. J. Hollenweger, *The Pentecostals: the Charismatic Movement in the Churches*(Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1972), 31-32.

⁵⁴See W. T. Purkiser, “Sanctification and Signs,” in his *Conflicting Concepts of Holiness: Some Current Issues in the Doctrine of Sanctification* (Kansas City, Mo., Beacon Hill Press, 1953), 63-81.

Spectacles of the miraculous had become commonplace. The command to “heal” of tent evangelist and radio preacher had long ago drowned out the groans in “tarrying” meetings of seekers after the “baptism.” Tongues as the initial sign to all of the baptism of the Holy Spirit was now thought to be distinct from tongues as a gift to some for the edification of the church. Speaking in tongues both as evidence and gift was now held to be the *sine qua non* of ministry,⁵⁵ a prerequisite which Pentecostal adjudicators monitoring preparation for ordination steadfastly refused to compromise. The gift of tongues and a winsome personality now appeared to take precedence over blameless conduct or solid preparation as prerequisites for leadership. Evangelists and faith healers were preferred over settled pastors, the charismatic over the ordered ministry. Both preparation and organization were *ad hoc*. The Pentecostal minister was first and foremost a pragmatic leader.

Pentecostals, for their part, regarded Holiness rebuffs to their aggressiveness as resistance to the Spirit Himself. They gloried in bridge-burning responses to their invitation of “there’s more” by some entirely sanctified brothers and sisters and treasured the presence of former Holiness people in high places among them as a validation of the new movement. Increasingly, Pentecostal compatriots viewed the behavioral standards of the entirely sanctified as puritanical and regarded focus on such as works-righteousness. Yet tongues-speaking groups relied almost solely on the musical repertoire of the Methodist-Holiness parent and sang with unabated zeal of the Land of Beulah and the Altar of Sacrifice⁵⁶ until past mid-century. Had they been so inclined, they could have noted how the out-of-fashion mind-set and the introspective bent of the older group seemed in fact to have saved it from full participation in the literalist tide which, during these years, swept over both conservative Protestantism and glossolalic Pentecostalism.

In future years, materialism, worldliness, and the pressures of modern life would chip away at the distinctives of both groups. Reenactment of the text of Scripture, metaphorically or literally, would no longer be in the

⁵⁵The struggle over this issue by Wayne A. Robinson, son of a pioneer Pentecostal Holiness minister, is recounted in his *I Once Spoke in Tongues* (Atlanta: Forum Rouse Publishers, 1973), 35-45.

⁵⁶Phoebe Palmer had almost been forgotten. Her Altar Covenant, however, was in universal use. “Is Your All on the Altar” (c1905), a popular invitation song by Elisha A. Hoffman (1839-1929), is representative of many in the Holiness repertoire based on it.

realm of expectation for either. Yet, as at the beginning, the gulf created by tongues-speaking as the initial physical evidence of the baptism of the Holy Spirit remained. It is the conviction of all in the Upper Room that this was that foretold by the Prophet Joel which enabled them to weather the storms that repeatedly have swept the Pentecostal landscape. It is the proclamation of this corollary of phenomenological reenactment which continues to mute communication between the hosts of Beulah Land and those of the Upper Room.

THE FUTURE OF BIBLICAL STUDIES IN THE WESLEYAN TRADITION: A THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE¹

by
Donald A. D. Thorsen

Christians in the Wesleyan tradition have always had a love for scripture. Since the time of John Wesley, there has been an ongoing concern for scripture, which includes reading and studying scripture and applying it to all matters of Christian faith and practice. To love, study and apply scripture represents a primary way in which Christians love God with their whole heart, soul, mind and strength, and their neighbors as themselves.

Wesley frequently expressed his passionate love for scripture. In the preface to his “Sermons on Several Occasions,” the primary compendium of his theology, Wesley exclaimed: “O give me that book! At any price give me the Book of God! I have it. Here is knowledge enough for me.”²

Thus it was appropriate that, at the thirtieth anniversary of the Wesleyan Theological Society in 1995, the theme was “Asserting Our Biblical Heritage.” Scholars in the Wesleyan tradition-as well as pastors and lay people-have placed high value on the primacy of scriptural authority, its inspiration and trustworthiness.

¹In his role as the 1995 president of the Wesleyan Theological Society, Dr. Thorsen prepared this essay for the theological seminar which he conducted at the annual convention of the Christian Holiness Association that convened in Portland, Oregon, April, 1995.

²Preface, 5, “Sermons on Several Occasions,” *Works* (Bicentennial ed.), 1:105

The theme “Asserting Our Biblical Heritage” was also appropriate because Christians outside the Wesleyan tradition sometimes misinterpret and caricature the biblical heritage of the holiness movement, represented by the Wesleyan Theological Society. To be sure, sometimes we are to blame for this dilemma because we appeal too quickly to the theological heritage that informs our Christianity rather than to our biblical heritage.³ Certainly we have not always been sufficiently careful to give thorough and critical responses to those who have questions with regard to that which we affirm in the Wesleyan tradition.

Recently the Wesleyan tradition - specifically the holiness branch of Wesleyanism - has come under attack as being part of the so-called fundamentalist leaven of anti-intellectualism among American evangelical Christians. In the book *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, which *Christianity Today* named the 1995 Book of the Year, Mark Noll laments the *damage* supposedly done by the holiness movement—along with pentecostalism and dispensationalism—to American evangelicalism. He says:

Evangelistic zeal, though it may often seem to impede thought, in fact turns out to be essential for a Christian life of the mind. In these terms, the movements that seemed to do such damage to evangelical thought - holiness, pentecostalism, dispensationalism—hid the most important thing behind a veil of secondary concerns.⁴

Noll presents a litany of accusations against the holiness movement, ranging from the advocacy of “the comforts of separated piety,” “anti-intellectualism,” “the dogmatic kind of biblical literalism,” “naivete concerning science,” and so on.⁵

It remains highly questionable whether Noll’s accusations can be fairly substantiated. But the indictment remains and will undoubtedly influence countless Christians throughout the world. We in the Wesleyan tradition must ask ourselves how we should respond to such accusations,

³For example, Melvin Dieter discusses the “Theological Milieu” of the Wesleyan view of sanctification before discussing the “Biblical Milieu” in *Five Views on Sanctification* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 21-36. This methodological approach was critiqued by authors presenting alternative views of sanctification (see pages 47-57).

⁴Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 249.

⁵Noll, *Scandal*, 120, 123, 124, 127.

especially with regard to an understanding of scripture and theology that emphasizes holiness.

The Heart of the Matter

Although we have not always maintained high standards of scholarship, the Wesleyan tradition makes an important contribution to Christianity because of its emphasis on biblical holiness. Holiness represents only one of the many important themes of scripture. But it is scriptural, and the Wesleyan tradition should do all that it can to uplift the banner of holiness. If it is to accomplish this task, there needs to be ongoing concern on the part of those who affirm the Wesleyan tradition to maintain a high standard of scholarship, especially in the area of biblical studies.

In order to continue making our distinctive contribution to Christianity, we need to assess our heritage of biblical scholarship and project for the future so that we can maintain our contribution to a biblical understanding of Christianity, regardless of whether or not it is widely recognized outside the Wesleyan tradition.

Our approach to this subject matter will be from a theological perspective. That is, we will assess biblical scholarship in the Wesleyan tradition as it pertains to the historic theology of the tradition. The author writes as a theologian rather than a biblical scholar. However, theological investigations in the Wesleyan tradition are founded on scripture. So the present and future status of biblical studies in the tradition are of tremendous importance.

Our assessment will proceed by investigating the theological foundation of the Wesleyan tradition—John Wesley, and his approach to biblical studies. Next we will investigate the present status of biblical studies in the Wesleyan tradition. In particular, we will focus on work presented in the Wesleyan Theological Society on the theme “Asserting Our Biblical Heritage,” which includes assessments of biblical studies in the past and present. We will then try to give a coherent summary of the situation by asking the following questions: Is there a Wesleyan hermeneutic? What is the role of historical criticism? What is the role of contextualization? Finally, we will assess contemporary critics of the Wesleyan tradition, particularly as found in Mark Noll (1994). Although it will be argued that Noll’s accusations against the Wesleyan tradition are largely unfounded or poorly argued, we will endeavor to glean from his book advice that is of grave import to the future of biblical studies in the Wesleyan tradition.

Wesley on Scripture

Much has already been written on the topic of Wesley's view of scripture, so there is no need to recite all that has been written on the subject.⁶ But it is healthy as well as enlightening to review the biblical foundation on which Wesley developed his thoughts and ministry.

Just as Wesley possessed a passionate love for scripture, he also presented a theology of scripture that affirmed its divine inspiration. "All scripture is inspired of God," said Wesley, and he offered four arguments for demonstrating divine inspiration.⁷ Wesley also affirmed the primacy of scriptural authority, representing a mainstay of Reformation theology. He said:

The faith of Protestants, in general, embraces only those truths as necessary to salvation, which are clearly revealed in the oracles of God. . . . They believe neither more nor less than what is manifestly contained in, and provable by, the Holy Scriptures. . . . The written word is the whole and sole rule of their faith, as well as practice.⁸

Wesley never viewed himself outside the circle of Reformation theology, though he did see himself as a corrective to biblical themes underemphasized in Protestantism. Most notably for our discussion was his emphasis on holiness of heart and mind. Perhaps John Wesley's brother Charles best summarized their intention to "unite the pair so long disjointed, knowledge and vital piety: learning and holiness combined."⁹

Although Wesley lived before the rise of historical criticism, which challenged the inspiration and authority of scripture, we can infer a sense

⁶For example, see William Amett, "John Wesley-Man of One Book" (diss., Drew University, 1954); Eugene Carpenter and Wayne McCown, eds., *Asbury Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 15-162 (Part I: General Articles); Wilbur Mullen, "John Wesley's Method of Biblical Interpretation," *Religion in Life* 47 (Spring 1978), 99-108; and Larry Shelton, "John Wesley's Approach to Scripture in Historical Perspective," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 16.1(1981), 23-50.

⁷2 Tim. 3:16, *Notes Upon the New Testament* 794. Cf. "A Clear and Concise Demonstration of the Divine Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures," *Works* (Jackson ed.) 11:484.

⁸"On Faith, Hebrews 11:6" (1788, sermon 106), 1.8, *Works* (Bicentennial ed.) 3:496.

⁹Charles Wesley, "A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists, 1780," Hymn 461, 1.5, *Works* (Oxford ed.), 7:644.

of his position. The eighteenth-century British deists, who were forerunners of nineteenth-century historical criticism, propounded non-supernatural interpretations, which Wesley rejected.¹⁰ But Wesley was open to critical historical questions that did not presuppose an anti-supernaturalism antagonistic to the intentions of the biblical authors. For example, Wesley made the following comments with regard to the stories of Noah in Genesis:

We may likewise reasonably suppose, that some traces of knowledge, both with regard to the invisible and the eternal world, were delivered down from Noah and his children, both to their immediate and remote descendants. And however these were obscured or disguised by the addition of numberless fables, yet something of truth was still mingled with them, and these streaks of light prevented utter darkness.¹¹

Another example can be found in Wesley's comments on the Old Testament books listed after the Pentateuch, including Joshua through Esther. He said:

Indeed it is probable they [i.e., the books of Joshua through Esther] were collections of the authentic records of the nation, which some of the prophets were divinely directed and assisted to put together. It seems the substance of the several histories was written under divine direction, when the events had just happened, and long after put into the form wherein they stand now, perhaps all by the same hand.¹²

Although Wesley was concerned to begin biblical interpretation by attending to its literal meaning, he did not preclude historical and critical questions relevant to the text.

Did this historical and critical questioning result in Wesley doubting the trustworthiness of scripture? On the contrary, his affirmation of the inspiration and authority of scripture resulted in him saying: "I allow no other rule, whether of faith or practice, than the Holy Scriptures."¹³ Did

¹⁰See "On Faith, Hebrews 11:6" (1788, sermon 106) *11.2 Works* (Bicentennial ed.), 3:499; and "Hypocrisy in Oxford" (1741, sermon 150) *1.3-4 Works* (Bicentennial ed.), 4:395.

¹¹"Walking by Sight and Walking by Faith" (1788, sermon 119), *9, Works* (Bicentennial ed.), 2:583.

¹²Preface to the Book of Joshua, *Notes Upon the Old Testament*, 1:701.

¹³"To James Hervey," 20 March 1739, *Letters* (Telford ed.), 1:285.

this preeminent regard for scripture prevent Wesley from entertaining any other religious authorities when reflecting upon matters of Christian faith and practice? No, Wesley contextualized his beliefs and actions within the context of church tradition, reasoning, and religious experience. That is, he interpreted scripture in light of traditional theological interpretations, logical coherence, and relevance to personal and social experiences. Scripture remained primary in his conception of religious authority, but tradition, reason, and experience were integrate~ as secondary, albeit genuine, religious authorities. This so-called quadrilateral of religious authorities-referring to scripture, tradition, reason, and experience-represents one of the distinctive contributions to the historical development of religious authority and theological method in the history of the Christian church.

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How are we to assess the past and present status of biblical studies in the Wesleyan tradition post-Wesley? That is a complex question which extends beyond the scope of this work. But we can begin to assess it by reflecting on works already designed to assess biblical studies in the Wesleyan tradition, especially that work presented on the theme “Asserting Our Biblical Heritage” at the thirtieth anniversary meeting of the Wesleyan Theological Society (1995). These works by scholars and pastors attempt to provide a prospective as well as retrospective regarding biblical studies in the Wesleyan tradition. Let us review that work within the context of several key questions related to contemporary biblical scholarship.

Is There a Wesleyan Hermeneutic?

One of the criticisms of any theological tradition-regardless of whether it is Lutheran, Calvinist or Wesleyan-is whether that tradition has so taken on a theological perspective that its interpreters of scripture are no longer capable of relatively objective, inductive studies. This question is especially relevant to biblical studies in the Wesleyan tradition because *inductive* Bible study has been an important self-description of its hermeneutics, that is, methods of biblical interpretation.¹⁵ On the other

¹⁴See Donald A. D. Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience as a Model of Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury Press, 1990), 19-20, 62, 100-102, 231-240.

¹⁵For example, the inductive Bible study method of Robert Traina widely influenced hermeneutics in the Wesleyan tradition; see *Methodical Bible Study* (Wilmore, KY: Asbury Theological Seminary, 1952). See also the material by and about Traina later in this issue.

hand, the question is often raised as to whether or not anyone can or should be objective in the approach to biblical studies. Regardless of this latter ongoing debate, should we not try to discern that which is characteristically Wesleyan or holiness-oriented in biblical hermeneutics?

Frank Spina surveyed biblical studies in the Wesleyan tradition over the past thirty years in the attempt to do an inductive investigation into how biblical studies has been done. The title of his study is “More Criticism, More History, More Bible: Wesleyan Faith Seeking Biblical Understanding.” There Spina argues that hermeneutical approaches within the Wesleyan tradition are diverse, spanning pre-critical, critical, anti-critical, and post-critical approaches to the study of scripture so that no one hermeneutic can “be said to derive legitimately from Wesleyan theological sources.”¹⁶ Spina notes, however, that biblical scholars undoubtedly benefit from “a number of valuable insights into the biblical text that result from the application of methods which Wesleyans employ.”¹⁷

That in which Spina is more interested is not the determination of a Wesleyan hermeneutic, but how “Wesleyans may benefit and even benefit greatly from the many hermeneutical options currently available.”¹⁸ Spina concludes by suggesting ways in which contemporary developments in biblical studies outside the Wesleyan tradition contribute to our future biblical studies. He neither expects nor desires someone to devise a Wesleyan hermeneutic, though he appreciates the intentions of those who attempt it.¹⁹ Instead he desires adding greater scholarly quality to current and future approaches to the study of scripture used by those in the Wesleyan tradition.

Robert Wall is more optimistic with regard to the shaping of a Wesleyan hermeneutic that can inform interpreters of scripture without distorting the Bible. He understands all of the criticisms leveled at any contemporary effort to develop a hermeneutic per se. But the distinctive thought, life, and ministry of the Wesleyan tradition demands some

¹⁶Frank Spina, “More Criticism, More History, More Bible: Wesleyan Faith Seeking Biblical Understanding,” plenary address, Wesleyan Theological Society Annual Meeting, Dayton, OH, 4 November, 1994 (found elsewhere in this issue).

¹⁷Spina, “More Criticism,” 6.

¹⁸Spina, “More Criticism,” 10.

¹⁹For example, Spina speaks appreciatively of the attempt by John Stanley to develop what Stanley calls a “holiness hermeneutic”; see John Stanley, “Elements of a Postmodern Holiness Hermeneutic Illustrated by Way of the Book of Revelation,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 26.1-2 (1993), 23-43.

accounting from a biblical perspective. Likewise, if the Wesleyan tradition is to continue contributing to contemporary Christianity, then it must work toward developing a Wesleyan perspective on hermeneutics. He says:

Sharply put, we have been too easily domesticated by the influences of the modern academy (theological methods) and of evangelical Protestantism (theological convictions). If the goal of biblical interpretation for the church is praxis, then a model of interpretation that leads in a Wesleyan reading of biblical texts must help to shape the theological understanding and spiritual vitality of its Wesleyan constituency.²⁰

Wall argues for a Wesleyan hermeneutic that includes four general characteristics. First, the *sacramental nature of scripture* suggests that “Scripture bears witness to a God who compels assent by loving concern and not by power plays. Its canonicity as a sacrament of divine revelation is understood finally in a profoundly relational way: Scripture discloses God by inviting faith in a God-for-us, who is then confirmed by our concrete experience of God’s grace.”²¹ Second, the *simultaneity of scripture* suggests “that the critical aim of exegesis, which successfully exposes the pluriformity of Scripture, is ‘to put the text back together in a way that makes it available in the present and in its (biblical) entirety.’”²² In particular, Wall considers the grand themes of the Wesleyan tradition to include those that frame the *ordo salutis* (order of salvation): justification and sanctification, divine grace by human faith and works, love for God/neighbor, and holiness of life.

Third, the *soteriological use of scripture* suggests that the proper interpretation of scripture should lead people into the way and experience of salvation.²³ Wesley and his followers have always emphasized the *sufficiency* of scripture for salvation. Fourth, the *sermonic midrash of scripture* suggests that there “can be no single, original sense of a multivalent Scripture that can effectively broker the Word of God for every people of

²⁰Robert Wall, “Toward a Wesleyan Hermeneutic of Scripture,” plenary session, Wesleyan Theological Society annual meeting, 4 November, 1995, 5 (found elsewhere in this issue).

²¹Wall, “Toward a ...,” 8.

²²Wall, “Toward a ...,” 9, quoting J. Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), 79.

²³Wall, “Toward a...,” 10-11.

God; meaningful meanings change with time and place.”²⁴ For example, biblical interpretation that takes place within the context of sermonic preaching (e.g., holiness preaching) helps to provide a midrash-like commentary on the Bible that is relevant and applicable to life.

In order to be faithful to scripture during changes in time and place, those who do biblical studies in the Wesleyan tradition need to take great care in doing a thorough and critical job of biblical studies. In particular, Wall states that they need to be faithful to the message of scripture rather than to any particular reading of scripture, even within the Wesleyan tradition. He says:

Truthfully, I do not think that the Wesleyan interpreter has primary loyalty to Wesleyan communions of believers. Whether as their prophet or their priest, the Wesleyan interpreter should cast biblical meaning/theology in a way that enables our particular cloud of Christian witnesses to understand and embody more fully our distinctive order of saving faith and holy life.²⁵

Scholars who represent the Wesleyan tradition are colleagues of others within the tradition and should be treated with appropriate collegiality. Sometimes people think that scholars are to be subservient to the Wesleyan tradition, serving primarily an apologetic function. But scholars deserve the same right to pursue their vocation as freely as other clergy and lay people within Wesleyanism.

What Is the Role of Historical Criticism?

Historical criticism represents the method or methods attempting to evaluate historical evidence in the biblical text. Such an intent is not in itself antithetical to biblical studies in the Wesleyan tradition because historical questions are of utmost importance to Christianity. Therein lies the problem, however, because biblical scholarship since the nineteenth century has progressively viewed the Bible as a human rather than a divinely inspired book. What, then, should the role of historical criticism be for biblical studies?

Spina clearly states his opinion in the title of his work: “More Criticism, More History, More Bible.” The problem is not with historical criticism, but with the presuppositions that undergird one’s hermeneutics. Likewise, Wall encourages biblical studies in the Wesleyan tradition not

²⁴Wall, “Toward a...,” 12.

²⁵Wall, “Toward a...,” 12.

by avoiding critical issues, but by doing a more scholarly job of presenting one's views in light of current hermeneutical trends.

Paul Livermore is an example of one who tackles head-on the presuppositions that too often undergird historical critical approaches to scripture. He describes "deconstructionism" as

the various literary methods of interpreting texts which find in them meanings and values that deliberately go beyond or apart from the intentions of their authors. In particular, these methods assume that language chosen by the authors betray existential, philosophical, political, social, and even spiritual concerns rather than realities they purport to discuss.²⁶

Such presuppositions are antagonistic to the intentions of scriptural authors and to the consensus of historic Christian teaching. Thus, an unrestricted use of historical criticism should be rejected for its reconstruction of "the history and ideas of the Scriptures along strictly naturalistic lines."²⁷

Livermore, however, does not reject historical criticism outright. Instead, he states that historical criticism "has made a real contribution to the study of the Scriptures. It has added to our knowledge of the various settings of the Scriptures, a significant gain."²⁸ Thus, if biblical scholars look carefully at what the church has taught over extended periods of time, extending back to the ancient church as well as to the Wesleyan tradition, they will be safeguarded from straying too easily from the truths of scripture.

The integration of historic Christian beliefs and biblical studies represents a theme of George Lyons' presidential address entitled "Biblical Theology and Wesleyan Theology."²⁹ Lyons has long advocated greater scholarly expertise in biblical studies, but laments the lack of interaction between his discipline and theological studies. In particular, he laments the lack of work in biblical theology, which can be defined as the organization of theological teachings in terms of the portions of the Bible where

²⁶Paul Livermore, "The Peril of Deconstruction," plenary session, Wesleyan Theological Society Annual Meeting, Dayton, OH, 4 November, 1995, 2.

²⁷Livermore, "Peril of Deconstruction," 15.

²⁸Livermore, "Peril of Deconstruction," 15.

²⁹George Lyons, "Biblical Theology and Wesleyan Theology," presidential address, Wesleyan Theological Society annual meeting, Dayton, OH, 4 November, 1995 (found on pp. 7-25 of this issue).

they occur rather than by topic. Biblical theology is not precisely the same as the academic disciplines of theology or biblical studies; thus, neither have emphasized its relevance or study. But Lyons is convinced that the future of biblical studies in the Wesleyan tradition requires greater consideration of the interconnectedness of the study of scripture and our theological views.

The primary way in which Lyons hopes to develop this interconnectedness is through the redevelopment of biblical theology as a scholarly pursuit in its own right. Regardless of the future of biblical theology, Lyons would want to emphasize that any development of biblical studies in the Wesleyan tradition requires greater consideration of historical-critical concerns, as well as those of other contemporary developments in biblical studies.

A similar concern for thorough and critical scholarship can be found in the systematic theology of Thomas Oden. Although Oden claims to present theology that is orthodox and ecumenical, his personal roots are deeply embedded in the Wesleyan tradition. Many within the Wesleyan tradition—as well as others in the Christian world—have looked to his theology as a way in which to dialogue with contemporary scholarship in a fashion that affirms historic Christianity as well as being critical of it. Oden affirms the value of historical-critical method, but proposes reforms which will prevent naturalistic and other presuppositions from distorting the truths of scripture.³⁰ His efforts to dialogue with contemporary biblical scholarship and attempted reforms in that area should motivate some in the Wesleyan tradition to engage in similar efforts for the sake of those biblical emphases dear to us.

What Is the Role of Contextualization?

Contextualization represents a contemporary concept often misunderstood and maligned. Simply understood, contextualization represents the attempt to adapt the expression of biblical and theological ideas to a given time, place, culture, or audience. Put more simply, contextualization represents the attempt to state biblical truths in up-to-date forms.

Dean Flemming, in his work entitled “The Third Horizon: A Wesleyan Contribution to the Contextualization Debate,” argues that a Wes-

³⁰For example, see “Addendum: A Modest Proposal for Christological Reform: The Theandric Person as History,” in Thomas C. Oden, *The Word of Life, Systematic Theology: Volume Two* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 2:527-534.

leyan perspective is important to the ongoing development of Christian contextualization. Flemming states that two fundamental approaches to contextual hermeneutics exist today. The first approach assigns the primary control of meaning to the contemporary context itself. This “relativistic posture is currently found both in many Two Thirds World theologies and within modern Western historical-critical scholarship.”³¹ The second approach, which normally is advocated by evangelical contextualizers, gives primary control to the biblical text for the meanings that are contextualized. Although Flemming advocates this kind of contextualization, he warns that there may occur a kind of “*absolutism* which dogmatizes one’s own particular interpretation or theological position, ‘making it applicable to everybody and demanding that others submit to it.’”³²

Flemming argues that the Wesleyan understanding of the “catholic spirit” resists either form of contextualization. He states:

As in many cases, a Wesleyan approach to Scripture and interpretation is able to recognize the tensions in some key issues and offer a mediating position that could help to lead us beyond some of the current polarities in the discussion: (1) the Wesleyan emphasis on the soteriological purpose of Scripture and its ethical and social implications can provide the basis for a transformational hermeneutic that moves beyond narrow concerns for contextualizing of truth content alone, but at the same time affirms that Scripture and not the context must control the process; (2) the Wesleyan openness to the historical conditionedness of Christian life and thought resists static hermeneutical models that espouse either a wooden commitment to Biblical forms or reducing the gospel to an abstract “supracultural core” of truth . . . ; (3) the Wesleyan catholic spirit is open to a truly “transcontextual” hermeneutic—one that rejects on the one hand all forms of provincialism and “contextualism” and, on the other, seeks in humility to learn from the interpretive insights of Christians in other cultures

³¹Dean Flemming, “The Third Horizon: A Wesleyan Contribution to the Contextualization Debate,” plenary session, Wesleyan Theological Society annual meeting, Dayton, OH, 4 November, 1994, 11; cf. 3 (found elsewhere in this issue).

³²Flemming, “The Third Horizon,” 11, quoting D. Bosh, “Toward a New Paradigm of Mission,” *Mission in the 1990’s*, ed. G. H. Anderson, et al (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 428.

and confessions, to the end that we all come to a deeper and richer understanding of the faith.³³

Of course, Flemming considers contextualization to be more than an academic exercise; it is a missiological necessity for the whole church. But first it is important to understand clearly the nature of one's biblical studies in order to avoid the pitfalls that sabotage both theology and ministry.

The Wesleyan quadrilateral provides an excellent context in which to do integrative work in the area of biblical and theological studies. Woodrow Whidden makes this point in the work entitled "*Sola Scriptura* and the Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Is 'No Creed But the Bible' a Workable Solution?" His answer is that *sola Scriptura*, simplistically understood, fails to answer the questions of diversity that arise even among those Christians who consider the Bible to be inspired and trustworthy. Whidden advocates that we be honestly self-critical with regard to how we do biblical and theological studies because all Christians entertain considerations of tradition, reason, and experience when deliberating on matters of faith and practice.³⁴ Such considerations are usually unconscious in the minds of Christians. Wesley and those who followed in his tradition simply want to become more conscious - more critical of how they actually go about doing their biblical and theological studies. The Wesleyan quadrilateral provides a helpful paradigm with which to gain greater clarity and confidence with regard to that which is believed and practiced.

The Wesleyan quadrilateral does not lead down the slippery slope to relativism, as some fear. Instead, Paul Bassett offers words of reassurance:

The fact that tradition, experience, and reason are sources of theological authority and reflection in dynamic conjunction with Scripture necessarily keeps religious thinking open to the creativity of the Spirit and it implies that the Spirit is not limited to the here and now. But this does not open the door to relativism. The creative Spirit is the same Spirit who enlivens and gives witness to the truth of Scripture. And it is the specific task of Scripture, within the quadrilateral, to serve as the

³³Flemming, "The Third Horizon," 12-13.

³⁴Woodrow Whidden, "*Sola Scriptura* and the Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Is 'No Creed But the Bible' a Workable Solution?" plenary session, Wesleyan Theological Society annual meeting, Dayton, OH, 5 November, 1994, 5ff.

foundation for “norming” the other norms, by the inspiration of the Spirit.³⁵

Greater self-reflection, greater critical focus, and greater regard for the concerns of contemporary scholarship in biblical studies do not need to threaten the Wesleyan tradition. On the contrary, such considerations should encourage the tradition toward greater self-understanding and greater persuasiveness with regard to its presentation to others of that which is considered the biblical foundation of Wesleyanism.

A Non-Wesleyan Assessment

Mark Noll is a well-known and well-respected professor of history at Wheaton College in Illinois. He has written numerous books and articles, and his opinions are read as authoritative in the evangelical community of Christians in the United States. That is why, in part, his opinions about Wesleyan and holiness-oriented groups are so troubling.

Noll’s current thesis about the scandal of the evangelical mind is that evangelical Christians contribute little to the intellectual fabric of the country. He attributes this weak if not anti-intellectual characteristic to a number of socio-cultural factors, including revivalism, revolution, and a cultural synthesis that occurred in the nineteenth-century United States.³⁶ With regard to hermeneutical and theological sources of anti-intellectualism in contemporary evangelical Christianity, Noll places primary blame on the holiness, pentecostal, and dispensational movements for what he calls the intellectual disaster of fundamentalism. He admits that “as one who does not believe that the distinctive teachings of dispensationalism, the Holiness movement, or Pentecostalism are essential to Christian faith, it is not surprising that I find the intellectual consequences of these theologies damaging.”³⁷ Noll thinks that these traditions deserve some commendation, but, in their defense or ministries on behalf of the supernatural, they resemble “cancer patients” who, “for the life of the mind, what survived was a patient horribly disfigured by the cure itself.”³⁸

³⁵Paul Bassett, “The Holiness Movement and the Protestant Principle,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 18.1 (Spring 1983), 21, quoted by Whidden, “*Sola Scriptura*,” 17.

³⁶Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 3; cf. 59ff.

³⁷Noll, *Scandal*, 142.

³⁸Noll, *Scandal*, 145.

Noll's specific concern with the holiness movement, which consists of more than the Wesleyan forms of the movement, is that it "bespoke a growing concern to experience the realities of Christian spirituality" at the expense of thorough and critical thinking in terms of biblical as well as theological studies.³⁹ Thus, it is Noll's opinion that people in the holiness movement too quickly "turned their eyes to Jesus, and the world grew very dim indeed," compounding "damage done when those excesses were grafted on to even longer-lived intellectual weaknesses" in the larger evangelical world.⁴⁰

How Should Wesleyans Respond?

How should we in the Wesleyan tradition respond to such damning criticisms? On the one hand, we could say that such claims are outrageous and not worthy of a response. But the problem with that option is that many agree with Noll, including the majority of contributors and subscribers to *Christianity Today*. So Wesleyans would be wise to take Noll's criticisms seriously and respond thoughtfully and not with knee-jerk reactions. Another response could be to say that Noll himself exercises poor scholarship in proving his thesis, at least with regard to the holiness movement, in terms of both the form and content of his historical and theological investigation. We could also become righteously indignant, I believe, with good reason. But then our concerns might quickly be dismissed as being too defensive. So, like Wesley, we must critique Noll's work with calmness and reason.⁴¹

First, Noll employs poor scholarship in his treatment of the American holiness movement. In chapter five of his book, entitled "The Intellectual Disaster of Fundamentalism," he makes his primary attacks against the holiness movement. Noll provides only three notations for his understanding of the holiness movement. The first two notations are references to four secondary resources, not all of which are directly related to the holiness movement.⁴² The other notation is a critique of the Keswick higher-life movement in Great Britain by the Welsh preacher D. Martyn Lloyd-

³⁹Noll, *Scandal*, 116.

⁴⁰Noll, *Scandal*, 144, 130.

⁴¹For example, see Wesley's "A Calm Address to our American Colonies," *Works* (Jackson ed.), 11:80-89, and "An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion," *Works* (Oxford ed.), 11:37-94.

⁴²Noll, *Scandal*, 115-116.

Jones.⁴³ None of the notations inspire much confidence in Noll's knowledge of the holiness movement in America, much less his severe critiques of it. An historian of Noll's stature would be appalled by a similar lack of documentation in the work of another scholar, especially considering his overall attack on the lack of intellectual expertise among his fellow evangelical Christians. Despite the fact that Noll considers his book a *cri du coeur* ("cry of the heart") rather than a scholarly historical investigation per se,⁴⁴ Noll must recognize that most of his readers assume that his work is based on impeccable historical knowledge.

By comparison, pentecostalism fares even worse than the holiness movement with regard to a lack of scholarly documentation. In chapter five of his book, Noll only provides one notation for his background information about pentecostalism, and there he provides only three secondary resources.⁴⁵ Similar to his discussion of the holiness movement, *no* primary resources are addressed in order to substantiate the severe criticisms of the two movements.

However, when we come to the discussion of dispensationalism, Noll provides numerous notations of both secondary *and* primary resources. More than twenty-five background resources are mentioned by Noll in discussion of dispensationalism, and - more significantly - approximately twenty-five primary dispensationalist authors and resources are mentioned in order to substantiate his criticisms of dispensationalism.⁴⁶ This preoccupation with dispensationalism rather than with the holiness movement and pentecostalism is reaffirmed throughout Noll's book.

Clearly Noll is more concerned with the effects of dispensationalism-good or bad, though mostly bad-than with the holiness movement and pentecostalism. Why is this the case? Perhaps Noll thinks that he needs to be very careful about how he criticizes dispensationalism. Perhaps dispensationalists are especially adept at defending their theology, or perhaps there are personal and professional reasons for why Noll takes such care to present his case against the effects of dispensationalism. For example, Wheaton College-where Noll teaches-has been influenced in the recent past by presidents who came from dispensationalist backgrounds. Since Noll dedicated his book specifically "To the faculty and

⁴³Noll, *Scandal*, 123-124.

⁴⁴Noll, *Scandal*, ix.

⁴⁵Noll, *Scandal*, 116.

⁴⁶See Noll, *Scandal*, 116-145.

trustees of Wheaton College,” perhaps there is something going on within that institution which would be difficult for an outsider to ascertain.

Regardless of Noll’s motivations for writing *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, his paucity of documentation seems to reflect little care about how he criticizes the holiness and pentecostal movements. Perhaps he is not interested in what they think, or perhaps he does not think they will respond, or—when if they do respond—what difference would they make. None of the previous options, however, presents a very positive view of our respective traditions.

Is There a Scandal of the Evangelical Soul?

The questions that I raise are ones that need to be raised and continue to be raised so long as the holiness movement, along with other movements, is unfairly maligned. It is a scandal of the evangelical soul as much as of the evangelical mind that the holiness movement and pentecostalism should be singled out for such criticism without providing a thorough historical evaluation of them. In the past I have lamented that the holiness movement has been relegated to the fringe of both Protestantism in general and evangelical Protestantism in particular. Hardly anyone seemed to notice or care about Wesleyanism. Now, however, I fear we have become a scapegoat for problems for which other evangelicals are equally if not more responsible.

It lies beyond the scope of this brief essay to present an apology for the holiness movement, especially as found within the Wesleyan tradition, in the face of the accusations Noll makes. It is sufficient for now to point out the limitations in Noll’s own scholarship with regard to his treatment of the holiness movement. But it seems clear that Noll is unaware or unappreciative of the positive contributions made by Wesleyan and holiness people on the intellectual well-being of Christianity. For example, Noll idealizes Jonathan Edwards but ignores the far-reaching effects of John Wesley - a contemporary of Edwards - as an intellectual as well as spiritual role model to many in America. Noll also fails to note that, from the beginning of the American holiness movement, there existed a concern for education and for developing institutions of higher education in many of the holiness denominations. Perhaps Noll overlooks this because the holiness colleges did not have the benefit of an intellectual foundation based on the centuries of theological and intellectual scholarship available to the Lutheran and Calvinist Reformed institutions of higher education. It is unfair to compare the intellectual developments of fledgling evangel-

ical movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with those that had their origin in the sixteenth century.

Noll also seems to minimize or overlook many of the intellectual liabilities of his own Calvinist Reformed tradition, including the vaunted Princetonian theologians about whom Noll idyllically reminisces. For example, in his discussion of fundamentalism, Noll makes no mention of *The Fundamentals* written during 1910-1915. Despite a few progressive ideas that can be found in them concerning such topics as evolution, these publications more than anything written by the holiness movement and pentecostalism (and perhaps even dispensationalism) define fundamentalism and the fundamentalist-modernist controversy in the first decades following the turn of the twentieth century. Deane William Ferm, for example, considers *The Fundamentals* to be the defining works of conservative and fundamentalist Christian thought, which affirms five so-called fundamentals of Christianity.⁴⁷

Nowhere does Noll consider the potential negative as well as positive impact of *The Fundamentals* on subsequent evangelical Christian thinking. Yet the issues discussed in *The Fundamentals* provided the doctrinal fodder for fundamentalist-modernist debate for decades to come. In fact, the so-called “battle for the Bible,” as articulated by such evangelical scholars as Harold Lindsell, continue to defend verbal inspiration in terms of inerrancy—a concept sometimes associated with the intellectual impoverishment of evangelical Christians.⁴⁸ But debates over verbal inspiration and inerrancy, continuing since the beginning of the fundamentalist-modernist controversy, have been more of a concern for those in the Calvinist Reformed tradition than for the holiness movement. So why is the holiness movement, along with pentecostalism and dispensationalism, singled out as *the* theological leaven for intellectual impoverishment among evangelical Christians?

This author actually agrees with Noll’s thesis that evangelical Christians as a whole have been lackadaisical and thus irresponsible with regard to the intellectual dimensions of Christian faith and practice. There

⁴⁷The fundamentals include the following: the verbal inspiration of the Bible; the virgin birth of Christ; the substitutionary atonement of Christ for the sins of the world; Christ’s bodily resurrection; and Christ’s second coming. See Deane William Ferm, *Contemporary American Theologies: A Critical Survey*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1990), 9.

⁴⁸See Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976).

is only disagreement with regard to how Noll determines the *sources* of intellectual impoverishment in American evangelicalism and, subsequently, its needed *solutions*. It grieves me that Noll should single out the holiness movement, pentecostalism, and dispensationalism as scapegoats for the intellectual woes of evangelicalism. He fails to investigate sufficiently the broader socio-cultural influences on America as a whole, as well as on American religion that is in opposition to the intellectual dimension of life.⁴⁹ He also fails to investigate sufficiently the other theological and denominational influences on evangelicalism that are at least equally blameworthy with regard to its intellectual shortcomings.

Conclusion

The Wesleyan tradition has a message of biblical holiness to proclaim to the world as well as to other Christians. It is not the only message that needs to be proclaimed, but it is a necessary one. However, if we want to be effective in our proclamation, then we in the Wesleyan tradition need to be as serious about our biblical studies as we are about any other aspect of the church. We do not need to be defensive about our tradition, though neither should we allow ourselves to become the scapegoat of anyone. How then should we live? More specifically, how should we live with regard to the future of biblical studies in the Wesleyan tradition?

Let us conclude with several exhortations that can be gleaned from the investigation contained in this work. We will begin on a very general *level and then proceed with morespecific comments regarding biblical studies*.

Generally speaking, Noll is correct in saying that we have not adequately cared for the intellectual aspects of our biblical and theological studies as much as we should. He is only incorrect in saying that the holiness movement, along with pentecostalism and dispensationalism, are *the* fundamentalist leaven of anti-intellectualism. Noll is also correct in saying that all who are a part of the Wesleyan tradition, as well as evangelicalism as a whole, need an alteration of *attitudes* which too often have downplayed rather than uplifted the promotion of intellectual pursuits. He says:

⁴⁹Other scholars differ with regard to the sources of the so-called scandal of the evangelical mind, evaluating the scandal from a broader socio-cultural as well as theological perspective. For example, see David Wells, *No Place for Truth, or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), and Os Guinness, *Fit Bodies, Fat Minds: Why Evangelicals Don't Think* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994).

For evangelicalism as a whole, not new graduate schools, but an alteration of attitudes is the key to promoting a Christian life of the mind. It is the same for evangelical scholars. The key thing is to work at it. The superstructures-appropriate institutions, lively periodicals, adequate funding, academic respect, meaningful influence-are not insignificant. Some attention is justified to such matters. But if evangelicals are ever to have a mind, they must begin with the heart.⁵⁰

Wesleyans need to place higher value on education and specifically on scholarship, especially within the areas of biblical and theological studies. Wesley was not afraid of education or scholarship, so neither should we be afraid of it in the endeavor to hold in creative balance both knowledge and vital piety.

Lest we be too idealistic, however, those of us in the Wesleyan tradition need to become more intentional about needed superstructures. For example, we should try to strengthen the scholarship of our institutions and periodicals. We should try to develop more funding or development expertise in general for the purpose of improving biblical scholarship. We should seek to work collegially with biblical scholars rather than see them as servants of the tradition. In addition, we should seek to extend our influence over matters of a biblical nature beyond our own tradition. None of these suggestions can occur easily or without personal and institutional cost. Thus, the question of *attitude* is of paramount importance. To what degree do we believe that we have been called to love God and our neighbor with all of our *mind* as well as our heart, soul, and strength?

Let us continue by reflecting more specifically on the field of biblical studies and ways in which to develop it in the future. Frank Spina is correct to say that we need more biblical studies that include the insights of historical criticism. We do not need to fear historical criticism per se, but only do a more thorough and critical job of evaluating naturalistic presuppositions that underlay biblical studies - a task that is exemplified in the work of Paul Livermore.

Robert Wall reminds us that Wesleyans do have a distinctive approach to their biblical and theological studies. Although we should not allow our theology to restrict our biblical studies, we should be able to make increasingly compelling cases for why our theology is biblical and relevant to Christianity as a whole as well as to the world at large.

⁵⁰Noll, *Scandal*, 249.

The development of biblical theology, as suggested by George Lyons, may provide a way for encouraging greater integration of biblical and theological studies. With regard to academic institutions, biblical theology may help to bridge the two disciplines of biblical and theological studies often separated by drastically different approaches to religious studies. With regard to the church, there needs to be ongoing concern that we do more than instill our history, doctrine, and polity. We should instill a lifelong desire to renew, deepen, and apply our biblical foundations.

We should rejoice in and develop the distinctive heritage of the Wesleyan quadrilateral, as mentioned by Woodrow Whidden. The interdependent religious authorities of scripture, tradition, reason, and experience have influenced the development of the Wesleyan tradition more than we realize. Rather than finding ways to avoid the quadrilateral, we should try to find ways in which to own that part of our heritage and develop it in ways that enrich our biblical studies, as well as the biblical studies outside the Wesleyan tradition.

Dean Flemming challenges us to contextualize our biblical and theological studies, that is, to make our Wesleyan tradition relevant to any given time, place, culture, or audience. This should be the mission of the church as well as its academic institutions. Although there may be inherent differences that inhibit mutual understanding, appreciation, and cooperation between the church and the academy, we all need to work toward the development of biblical and theological studies in ways that express the gospel in the most responsible and effective ways possible.

INTRODUCTION AND TRIBUTE TO ROBERT A. TRAINA

by
David R. Bauer

It is fitting that we should honor Robert Traina tonight, November 4, 1995, at the meeting of the Wesleyan Theological Society dedicated to the theme “Asserting Our Biblical Heritage.” Dr. Traina has devoted his entire professional life and his varied and remarkable gifts to the teaching of the Bible in the Wesleyan spirit and at one of the great theological seminaries of evangelical Wesleyanism, Asbury Theological Seminary.

Dr. Traina was born in 1921 in Chicago, the son of Italian immigrants. His father was a member of the Methodist Episcopal Church, but served as a lay pastor to the Italian Mission Free Methodist Church in Melrose Park, Illinois. In this church Dr. Traina was nurtured in the Christian faith and first sensed the call to ministry at the age of sixteen. He majored in religious studies at Spring Arbor and Seattle Pacific Colleges. While a student at Seattle Pacific, he became aware of the program at the Biblical Seminary in New York and matriculated there in the fall of 1943.

The Biblical Seminary in New York, founded in 1900 by the Yale-educated Wilbert Webster White, had gained a worldwide reputation for the “inductive method” of the study of the English Bible, a hermeneutical approach that focuses on the literary analysis of the text and in many ways anticipated what we now know as “literary criticism.” The goal was to allow the text to speak on its own terms, challenging all presuppositions and conforming the whole person to its message. Dr. Traina found this approach to be a liberating experience. He had come to seminary, according to his own account, with a deductive personality, and the inductive approach changed his orientation to life and the Bible.

Excelling as a seminary student, Traina was encouraged to serve the church as a teacher in theological education. He was appointed a faculty member by the Biblical Seminary upon his graduation. During his early years of teaching there, he became troubled at the lack of integration between English Bible and traditional exegesis. He judged that English Bible, as it was being taught at the Biblical Seminary, was not sufficiently comprehensive and specific. So he developed further the inductive method and its practical application, combining its traditional insights with the tools of traditional exegesis and setting forth the result in his book, *Methodical Bible Study* (1952). This book has been translated into several languages, has been used in scores of colleges and seminaries around the world, and is the universally recognized standard text on the inductive approach. No one in the Wesleyan movement has done more rigorous thinking about biblical hermeneutics or exercised more influence on the way the church thinks about interpretive methodology than has Dr. Traina.

While not unique to John Wesley or the Wesleyan tradition, the inductive method formed a significant dimension of Wesley's understanding of the role of the Bible in the church. In his "Address to Clergy" Wesley argues that skill in biblical interpretation ranks first among the essential qualifications for ministry:

No less necessary is a knowledge of the Scriptures, which teach us how to teach others; yea, a knowledge of all the Scriptures; seeing scripture interprets scripture; one part fixing the sense of another. So that, whether it be true or not, that every good textuary is a good Divine, it is certain none can be a good Divine who is not a good textuary.... Upon the mention of any text, do I know the context, and the parallel places? . . . Do I know the grammatical construction of the four Gospels; of the Acts; of the Epistles; and am I master of the spiritual sense (as well as the literal) of what I read? Do I understand the scope of each book, and how every part of it tends thereto? Have I skill to draw the natural inferences deducible from each text... and have I learned to apply every part of the sacred writings, as the various states of my hearers require?

In 1966, having earned his Ph.D. from Drew University, Dr. Traina accepted an invitation to join the faculty of Asbury Theological Seminary as Professor of English Bible. The next year President Frank Bateman Stanger asked him to assume the role of academic dean and vice president

for academic administration, an office he held from 1967 to 1975, when he resumed full-time teaching in English Bible. He retired in 1988. As academic dean of the largest institution of theological education in evangelical Wesleyanism, Dr. Traina did more than any other one person to shape the educational philosophy and curricular goals during what were Asbury's most formative years.

He was a model teacher of the Bible. No detail of the text escaped his careful scrutiny. What else can one say about a man who produced 428 transparencies on the Gospel of Mark? He was theologically oriented. For him, the Bible is the ultimate source of the church's theology and life. The question always was: What is the theological significance of this passage? What role does it play in the whole of biblical revelation? How does it confirm, clarify, or in some cases correct what Wesleyans have traditionally held? Finally, he exemplified the biblical message, including the biblical doctrine of Christian perfection, in his own life and in his relationship with students. He was utterly committed to their welfare and their learning. For them no sacrifice was too great.

In honoring Dr. Robert Traina we also recognize the contributions of all those who teach the Bible from the Wesleyan perspective, who instill in their students the same enthusiastic commitment to the study of the Scriptures that Wesley had when he declared in the "Preface to his Sermons on Several Occasions":

I want to know one thing, the way to heaven; how to land safe on that happy shore. God himself has condescended to teach the way: For this very end he came from heaven. He hath written it down in a book. O give me that book! At any price, give me the book of God!... Does anything appear dark or intricate? I lift up my heart to the Father of Lights...I then search after and consider parallel passages of Scripture, "comparing spiritual things with spiritual." I meditate thereon with all the attention and earnestness of which my mind is capable. If any doubt still remains, I consult those who are experienced in the *things* of God; and then the writings whereby, being dead, they yet speak. And what I thus learn, that I teach.

MY CENTRAL CONVICTIONS¹

by
Robert A. Traina

Please accept my heartfelt thanks to the Wesleyan Theological Society for the generous recognition given me in the form of the Lifetime Service Award to the Holiness Tradition. I accept it on behalf of all those who share the calling of teaching the Scriptures at whatever level. I appreciate deeply the important work of the Society, and I encourage and urge a keeping up of the good work! I hope we will continue to place due emphasis on the critical area of biblical studies, an area vital to us all.

My thanks also to David Bauer, esteemed colleague and friend, not only for his generous introductory tribute, but also, and more importantly, for the excellent way in which he is promoting inductive Bible study. It is persons like him who give me great hope for the future of biblical studies. In all this I am reminded again of the overwhelming grace of God, and also of the graciousness of all of you, my sisters and brothers and fellow-workers in Christ.

I set forth here some of my central convictions and concerns. My statements revolve around an issue which has burned itself into my consciousness and about which I feel strongly, namely, whether there may be a growing chasm between (1) our affirmation that Scripture and the God and Christ of Scripture are the supreme authority for faith and practice and (2) what we actually do in our theologizing and in our conduct. In

this regard, what we do is what we truly believe. No matter how orthodox our confession about Scripture, unless it controls our faith and practice, it loses its value. It may well be that our use of the so-called Wesleyan Quadrilateral has contributed to this problem.

There are several concerns and convictions that relate to this issue. The first is that one of the main reasons for the apparent growing dichotomy is the failure to test our faith and practice constantly by reference to specific biblical texts, interpreted properly in their grammatical, historical, literary, and canonical contexts. This failure obviously includes the use of “proof-texting,” whose dangers we all recognize. But even more important and more subtle is the tendency to think of Scripture in terms of broad motifs, such as the Trinity, Creation, and Incarnation, and then to fill in the details, not by a careful and proper examination of specific biblical texts, but rather by using data which come from theologians and theological systems, philosophy, the behavioral sciences, experience, and other sources. In such a case, tradition, reason, and experience tend to shape biblical motifs instead of the specific data of Scripture shaping them. This is not to say that these extra-biblical data are not important; rather it is to emphasize the danger of using them in such a way as to distort what are purported to be motifs grounded in biblical authority.

An experience I had in a class at Drew University comes to mind in this connection. In the midst of discussing various theological concepts, a member of the class, who became a well-known seminary professor and theologian, reacted to my constant reference to specific biblical texts by asking angrily, “Why are you always talking about Scripture?” The answer is obvious: “Because Scripture, and not theologians and theologies, is authoritative for me.” Unless we constantly test our theology and ethics on the basis of biblical texts and contexts, properly understood, we are bound to stray from the authority of Scripture. There is good reason why John Wesley was “a man of one book.”

A second conviction is that we need to take the discipline of biblical theology more seriously, especially as regards what Brevard Childs describes as the ultimate task of biblical theology, namely, determining the relationship between the two testaments. The beginning point of doing biblical theology is what Gerhardus Vos calls “exegetical theology,” that is, deriving theology from specific biblical texts, which harkens back to the first concern. The integration of these findings provides the basis for a biblical theology, including an understanding of biblical ethics. We are then ready to move to a biblically-based systematic theology. This move-

ment from exegetical theology to biblical theology to systematic theology would seem to be a logical sequence if Scripture is to be in reality our authority for faith and practice. And yet this sequence is often not taken seriously in our theologizing or, for that matter, in our curricular planning. As a result, Scripture is not truly normative because, among other things, we view it in terms of a “flat Bible” and we misuse the analogy of Scripture.

A third conviction is that the key to doing sound exegetical, biblical, and systematic theology is the proper use of inductive, inferential reasoning in contrast to a deductive approach, which may often be disguised as induction. There are, to be sure, different definitions of induction and deduction, and consequently different understandings of the relationship between them. Without taking the time to set forth a detailed rationale, I would propose three essential characteristics which should be included in inductive, inferential reasoning. One is that it should operate with premises, whether particular or general, which are supported by evidence. Thus the key question in developing such premises would be, “What is the evidence?” By this is meant primarily internal biblical evidence, although relevant extra-biblical evidence is also important. A second characteristic is that the inferential reasoning used be valid. And third, both premises and inferences should be open-ended, that is, subject to change when warranted.

Such induction emphasizes the primacy and priority of a direct, firsthand approach to the biblical text itself, with a view to allowing it to speak its own message and attempting to determine the meaning and intention of its implied writers. It should be recognized that such a lofty goal can never be fully realized. There is no such thing as perfect induction. There are no infallible exegetes. Induction is a quest more than an achievement. Wilhelm Dilthey was right in holding that all of us approach all texts with preunderstandings, and Rudolph Bultmann rightly held that there is no presuppositionless exegesis. But we need to attempt to become aware of our presuppositions and to subject them to the evidentiary test with a willingness to change them when warranted.

A fourth conviction flows from an approach based on inductive, inferential reasoning. It is that interpretation should be an attempt to arrive at past-historical meanings and should precede evaluation. Much of what goes awry in biblical studies results from approaching the Scriptures initially with presuppositions that include value judgments. Such is the case with Bultmann’s assumption that the universe is a closed continuum

which makes miracles impossible. He therefore interprets miracle stories as “myths” that need to be “de-mythologized.” Why not begin with the implied writers’ point of view, that is, that God can and does perform miracles, and then attempt to discover what the writers’ original intention and meaning were in including miracle stories? Then, and only then, is one in a position to evaluate the writers’ point of view, and to respond either in acceptance or rejection, that is, to decide whether to join the community of faith which by God’s grace produced Scripture. To use Thiselton’s language, first the past horizon, then the present horizon. To be sure, this sequence is not easy to follow, and there are those who doubt its possibility. But it is a logical and necessary sequence if the Scriptures or any other documents are to be examined as objective realities in their own right.

It should be stressed also that there is no need to believe in order to understand. The grace of God and the Holy Spirit can be at work to illumine even the minds of those who approach Scripture as unbelievers, as long as there is an openness, actual or potential, which is required by a truly inductive approach. Thus the proper sequence is: first understand, then assess. We need to avoid merging the two or reversing their sequence if Scripture is to function as authoritative in faith and practice.

A fifth conviction is that the approach to Scripture which allows it to speak for itself is a literary approach, understood in its broadest and most inclusive sense. It is the approach pioneered by Richard Moulton in his book *The Literary Study of The Bible*. What is called “literary criticism” is often too narrow and restrictive, and operates deductively on the basis of certain presuppositions. What we have in mind is the general thesis that the Bible consists of a collection of literary units, and that it can and should be approached as literature. Indeed, it can and should be approached like any literature. There is no need for a special hermeneutic, or for making a faith-commitment before interpreting Scripture. A general hermeneutic will suffice, without prejudice or favor.

Such an approach focuses on the final form of the canonical text. It is primarily synchronic, though also diachronic. It can make use of all that is valid in various approaches, including source analysis, form analysis, narrative analysis, redaction analysis, rhetorical analysis, discourse analysis, or any other kind of analysis, as long as the message of the writers of the canonical text is allowed to be heard.

Finally, I would emphasize the conviction that the church will not become biblically literate and thus be able to live and minister under the

supreme authority of Scripture without a major emphasis on teaching the Bible to its members. The best kind of preaching, which in my mind is expository preaching, will not suffice. Neither will the kind of “Bible teaching” which is monological and which amounts to another sermon, often in the form of a homily. The kind of teaching I have in mind is dialogical and interactive. It is participatory in the fullest sense of the word.

Such teaching cannot take place unless the participants are taught how to examine the text for themselves. Direct Bible study is not only informative; it is powerful and dynamic and life-transforming. The Scriptures have their fullest effect when no intermediary stands between the text and its reader. Experts have a very important role in the study and teaching of the Bible. But we must not reserve Bible study for the experts. The Scriptures originally were addressed to ordinary readers, not to experts. They should be studied by all in order to realize their salvific and normative purpose.

Our ultimate challenge and task, then, is to facilitate the functioning of Scripture, and of the God and Christ of Scripture, as the supreme authority for faith and practice. Whatever impedes the realization of this lofty goal should be discouraged and discarded; whatever contributes to it should be embraced and fostered. It is my hope and prayer that all of us together will join in this great endeavor.

BOOK REVIEWS

Irene Kraft-Buchmuller. 1992. *Die Frauen in der Anfangszeit der bischöflichen Methodistenkirche in Deutschland: Eine Untersuchung der eigenkirchlichen Schriften von 1850 bis 1914* (Beiträge zur Geschichte der Evangelisch-methodistischen Kirche, 41. Stuttgart: Christliches Verlagshaus. 72 pp. No ISBN.

Reviewed by David Bundy, Christian Theological Seminary, Indianapolis, Indiana.

Kraft-Buchmuller has here provided an examination of the roles of women during the formative period of Methodism in Germany. It is also a study of the periodical, *Der Evangelist*, which from May 1850 until 1914 served as the foremost medium of communication among German-speaking Methodists and between German Methodists and their largest constituencies. It is a carefully researched and documented study, albeit without reference to most North American publications on women in Methodism and its derivative traditions, material which could have nuanced, perhaps, the pages devoted to “The Methodist Heritage.”

The study begins with a quick survey of two aspects of the context: (1) the situation of women in German society in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, focusing on the women’s movements which grew out of the 1848 revolution, and (2) the situation of women in the Methodist tradition during and immediately after Wesley’s lifetime, noting that Wesley’s openness to some experimentation with regard to women’s roles in ministry was not continued after his death. Moving on to the foundations in Germany, the author notes that from the first founding of a Methodist congregation in Germany (Bremen, 1850), the adoption of American Methodist discipline provided for rigid boundaries between the genders, and that by 1856 women were expressly excluded from the priestly functions of the church.

In the periodicals and in the Methodist disciplines, women were discussed in idealized terms as wives, examples, family center, marriage partners, mothers, and housewives. Within the church, women could participate in women's youth and children's concerns as well as in the distribution of tracts. Ministers' wives had more status, were expected to be community models of the idealized Christian woman, and had some, albeit minimal, flexibility in ministry not allowed other women. Unmarried women were allowed wider spheres of participation, primarily as deaconesses (following the pietist model) and as missionaries. There was clearly dissatisfaction with this situation and Kraft-Buchmuller describes the development of the "women issue," the "Frauenfrage," as it surfaced in jurisdictional conferences from 1869 through the turn of the century, with women finally achieving lay representation in 1900.

The two primary ministries open to women within the Methodist context were the service ministries and mission work, an experience not unlike that of women in Methodism elsewhere in Europe and throughout the world. In both fields, women established institutions, raised funds and had influence in cultures ranging from the U.S.A. to India. The periodical *Heiden-Grauen Freund* was founded in 1885. Initially modeled after the U.S. Methodist women's missionary periodical entitled *Heathen Women's Friend*, it served as the instrument of the Frauen-Gesellschaft für auswärtige Missions Deutschland. Local women's missionary society organizations developed, and by 1887 there were twenty chapters with some 120 members. Despite the demonstrable success on foreign fields, there was little progress on the issue of women clergy in Germany. When the merger with the Evangelical United Brethren was effected in 1968, no Methodist woman in Germany had ever served a church as a pastor.

The first chapter of the story of women in German Methodism is a painful and hopeful narrative of women finding ways to live out their commitments to God and church in ministry. It was done in spite of the cultural context and in spite of the conservative opposition of most of the established male clergy. Unfortunately, this study does not explore the lives of key figures who are only names in the tense narrative, nor does it explore the relationship between the German and American churches as an influence in German developments. It is hoped that the research begun here will be expanded and continued into the next decades, and that a similar examination of the Evangelical United Brethren tradition in Germany will be undertaken. As it is, this volume will be an essential component of any discussions of the role of women in the Methodist traditions.

Albert C. Outler and Richard Heitzenrater, eds. 1991. *John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology*. Nashville: Abingdon Press. 572 pp. ISBN 0-687 20495-X.

Reviewed by Kenneth J. Collins, Asbury Theological Seminary, Fayetteville, North Carolina.

When Methodists talk about the sermons of John Wesley, they often have in mind the fifty-three pieces (often called standard sermons) contained in Edward Sugden's edition-an edition which has been reprinted on numerous occasions in the past, and by Abingdon and Francis Asbury Press more recently. However, with the publication of *John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology*, edited by the late Albert C. Outler and Richard Heitzenrater, this situation is likely to change.

This new anthology of Wesley's sermons, printed in an attractive paperback format, is conceived by its publisher, Abingdon Press, primarily as a tool for classroom instruction in Methodist history and theology and also as a supplement to Outler's earlier volume *John Wesley*. Like much in Wesley Studies today, the original impulse for the project came from Albert Outler himself and was afterwards supported by the Board of Directors of the Wesley Works Editorial Project, Inc. In fact, just a week before his death, Outler suggested a volume of sermons that would include a broad range of topics covering Wesley's entire career. Shortly thereafter, a list of primary (thirty sermons) and secondary (eight sermons) selections for the new collection was found among Outler's papers. However, this list is not really remarkable for which post-1770 sermons are included-there are actually few surprises here-but rather for which pieces are *not* selected from Wesley's own 1771 edition of the *Sermons on Several Occasions*. The following chart reveals the late historian's omissions.

Chart One: Sermons Not Included

The Almost Christian	1741
Awake, Thou That Sleepest	1742
The Marks of the New Birth	1748
Sermon on the Mount, Discourse 4	1748
The New Birth	1760
On Sin in Believers	1763
The Danger of Riches	1781
The Duty of Constant Communion	1787

Though there is no way of knowing in detail why Outler wished to exclude these sermons, Richard Heitzenrater and the editorial staff at Abingdon have decided to include all of them in the new collection. To be sure, the Methodist community, both laity and scholars alike, will appreciate this judgment.

If *John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology* is to emerge as a successful replacement of the *Fifty-Three Standard Sermons* (or the fifty-two of the Burwash edition), as Matthews suggests, then this collection must not only have the backing of such leading Wesley scholars as Outler and Heitzenrater, but it also must provide a more accurate and comprehensive view of Wesley's own theological and soteriological emphases than earlier editions. Along these lines, the future promise of the collection can be gauged, in part, by a consideration of two key questions. First, which standard sermons are omitted? Second, which sermons, numbered 54-151 in Outler's much larger critical edition, are, in fact, included?

With respect to the first question, the following chart reveals at a glance which traditional sermons are not found in the new volume.

Chart Two: Sermons of the Fifty-Three Standard Not Included

The Righteousness of Faith	1746
The First-fruits of the Spirit	1746
The Witness of Our Own Spirit	1746
Upon our Lord's Sermon on the Mount, I-III	1748
Upon our Lord's Sermon on the Mount, VII	1748
Upon our Lord's Sermon on the Mount, IX-XIII	1748
The Nature of Enthusiasm	1750
Wandering Thoughts	1762
Satan's Devices	1750
The Wilderness State	1760
Heaviness Through Manifold Temptations	1760
Self-Denial	1760
The Cure of Evil Speaking	1760
The Reformation of Manners	1763
On the Death of George Whitefield	1770

Though all of these sermons above have been cherished by American Methodists, especially in this century, the deletion of "The Cure of Evil Speaking," "The Reformation of Manners," and "On the Death of George Whitefield" is not likely to evoke much response since these works are peripheral, at best, to Wesley's larger theological design. On

the other hand, the omission of “The Wilderness State” and “Heaviness Through Manifold Temptations” may draw some criticism, especially from scholars, since it can be argued that their exclusion weakens the overall collection. That is, these sermons treat some of the very real difficulties of the ongoing Christian life in a serious and forthright manner difficulties which are not always addressed by either “On Sin in Believers” or “The Repentance of Believers.”

To illustrate this last point, in the sermon “Heaviness Through Manifold Temptations” Wesley disassociates spiritual heaviness from the issue of sin and repentance, at least in some respects, by noting: “I will not say that it [a clearer and fuller knowledge of inbred sin] must bring us into heaviness.” The source of the heaviness lies elsewhere; namely, in such things as disease, violent pain, nervous disorders, poverty, the death of those whom we love, and in the apostasy of a close friend. In other words, in this sermon John Wesley paints a very realistic picture of the Christian life as one that will, on occasion, include sorrow, pain, and failure even as one continues to trust a holy God. Without this important and sensitive sermon, then, the new anthology, oddly enough, runs the risk of being less realistic about the nature of the Christian life than John Wesley himself.

Second, the exclusion of “Self Denial” is likewise troubling, especially as our own age continues to grapple with the relation between personal and social ethics. More to the point, the sermon “Self Denial” not only provides a window on Wesley’s ethical and spiritual motivation, thereby rendering it intelligible, but it also informs those ethical pieces which are included in the anthology such as “On the Use of Money” and “On the Good Steward.” In other words, a denial of self, a subordination of one’s own will, a bracketing out of self-interest, all of these things coupled with “taking up our cross,” a task which is yet higher, constitute the necessary and irreducible motivation for the moral life, both personal and social. Lacking these emphases, the moral life remains uncritical, not sufficiently conscious of its own proclivity towards evil, its own tendency towards self-interest. Consequently, “Self Denial” is not a superfluous or minor piece like “The Cure of Evil Speaking,” but contains the first principles of Wesley’s entire moral endeavor. Its exclusion, therefore, is regrettable.

With respect to the second question, the next chart displays which of the “later sermons,” beyond Sugden’s traditional fifty three, are included in Abingdon’s Anthology. For illustrative purposes, they are divided according to the major categories utilized in the critical edition.

**Chart Three: Sermons Beyond the Fifty-Three Standard
Which Are Included**

A. Sermons on Several Occasions (1788), V-VIII

Spiritual Worship	1780
The Danger of Riches	1781
The End of Christ's Coming	1781
On Zeal	1781
God's Love to Fallen Man	1782
The New Creation	1785
On Working Out Our Own Salvation	1785
The Duty of Constant Communion	1787
The More Excellent Way	1787

B. A Miscellany of Published Sermons

Free Grace	1739
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C. Sermons Published in the Arminian Magazine

On the Omnipresence of God	1788
The Unity of the Divine Being	1789
Prophets and Priests	1789
Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity	1789
On the Wedding Garment	1790
On Living Without God	1790

D. Manuscript Sermons

The Image of God	1730
The One Thing Needful	1734

Clearly, the selections which are indicated in category "A" above are well chosen and demonstrate a familiarity with the content of Wesley's entire sermon corpus. However, given Wesley's repeated defense of the Methodist movement as a vital part of the Church of England, as well as his caution on many occasions against separating from this communion, it is difficult to understand why "Of the Church" was not incorporated into the anthology. This last point becomes even more troubling in light of the inclusion of "The One Thing Needful," a manuscript sermon which Wesley chose-with good reason-not to publish. To make matters worse, "The One Thing Needful" is actually redundant in this setting: it reiterates much of the content of the other manuscript sermon in the anthology, namely, "The Image of God."

In a similar fashion, the sermons listed in category “C” above are basically representative of their particular genre, that is, of those items which were published by Wesley in the *Arminian Magazine* from 1789-1792. However, this selection, once again, could have been enhanced by the addition of just one more sermon. Accordingly, if the purpose of the chronological arrangement of the sermons in the new anthology is to raise the issue of the continuity and discontinuity of the theological emphases of the early and the mature Wesley, then “On the Discoveries of Faith” obviously belongs in the volume. In particular, not only does this last sermon display Wesley’s conception of faith as *the* organ, par excellence, of spiritual reality, demonstrating that the Methodist leader held “intuitionist theories of religious knowledge” as Outler points out, but this sermon also provides an important window on the distinction between the “faith of a servant” and the “faith of a son,” a distinction which is integral to any assessment of the early and the mature Wesley.

Beyond a consideration of the composition of the anthology, a few other items warrant attention. First of all, on a more optimistic note, the brief introductions to each sermon, which are actually edited versions culled from Outler’s critical edition, are generally helpful to the reader. However, if this volume is intended for student consumption, as Matthews indicates, then Latin phrases such as *fides caritate formata*, found in the introduction to “The Law Established Through Faith Discourse II” should be translated. In addition, greater orientation, at times, is needed for lay readers in terms of the historical material provided in each introduction and against which each sermon is best understood. For example, the introduction to “The Original, Nature, Properties, and Use of the Law” could have been enhanced by including a brief comparison with both Luther and Calvin’s views on this topic.

Moreover, the careful reader of the introductions will soon notice that in each instance where Albert Outler had originally employed the phrase *ordo salutis* in his four-volume work, Richard Heitzenrater has substituted his own phrase “the way of salvation” (see “The Image of God,” “The Scripture Way of Salvation,” and “The More Excellent Way”). Outler’s choice, however, is much to be preferred since it not only suggests the structure, the unique fingerprint, of Wesley’s reasoned reflection about salvation (it is, after all, the *Wesleyan ordo salutis*), but it also suggests, in a way typical of Eastern Christianity, that redemption is a process. Heitzenrater’s language, on the other hand, while emphasizing the latter aspect, only hints at the former.

Despite the preceding criticisms, whether they pertain to the choice of sermons or to their introductory material, *John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology* deserves a serious reading by scholar and lay person alike. The overall project, the display of the whole Wesley from young man to seasoned leader, the inclusion, for the most part, of the heart of Sugden's corpus, the incorporation of many of the sermons written during the decade of the 1780's (Wesley's most prolific period, homiletically speaking), the attractive paperback format, and the joint authority of Outler and Heitzenrater are all elements which suggest that this work may well replace *The Fifty-Three Standard Sermons* in terms of popular consumption.

Richard B. Steele. 1994. *"Gracious Affection" and "True Virtue" According to Jonathan Edwards and John Wesley*. Metuchen, N.J.: The Scarecrow Press. 423 pp. ISBN 0-8108-2821-9.

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Richard Steele analyzes the historical and literary relationships between Jonathan Edwards and John Wesley. He states the primary subject of his work as "how Edwards and Wesley defended their conviction that the genuine knowledge of God incorporates cognitive, volitional, and affectional elements, rather than *where* they derived it from" (iii).

Seven chapters comprise the work, with the first three presenting background material. These chapters most retain the flavor of a revised dissertation as he supplies the justification for the study. Steele states his purpose for chapter one: "to establish the historical context within which Edwards and Wesley worked out their experimental theologies" (xi-xii). By historical context Steele does not mean the history of the "awakening" or general history of Puritan revivalism. However, since he uses the term "awakening" in this chapter primarily in association with Edwards and Wesley, he conveys the false impression that the Great Awakening originates primarily with these two theologians. He waits until chapter four to describe the Puritan revival movement (1600-1730) and thus to explain how Wesley and Edwards relate to the larger movement. In this chapter he reviews philosophical and theological positions on religious experience during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

In chapter two Steele sketches the voluntarist tradition on the affections by tracing the positions of Paul, Augustine, Calvin, and William Ames. The third chapter is a review of secondary literature in order to demonstrate the distinctiveness of his research. The key point is his disagreement with Frederick Dreyer's interpretation of John Wesley. He argues that Dreyer "overstates his case when he treats Edwards as a 'rationalist' who regarded knowledge as the apprehension of the intelligible properties of things, and Wesley as an 'empiricist' who regarded knowledge as the apprehension of the sensible properties of things" (88).

Chapters four through six are the focus of this work. In chapter four, he considers the biographical parallels and historical connections between Wesley and Edwards. One question Steele explores is how Edwards might have known about John Wesley. Steele develops a theory that information came largely through Edwards' contact with George Whitefield.

He shows how Whitefield's relationship with John Wesley could have resulted in certain opinions of Wesley being conveyed to Edwards by Whitefield.

I have two major questions regarding Steele's interpretation of the historical data. First, in his examination of their early religious experiences, Steele contends that one of the major differences was that Edwards had been exposed to conversionist preaching while Wesley had not. Steele's distinction is sound, but he might have drawn other conclusions. For example, the nurturing of Wesley's mother, Susanna, could be explained as a different style of conversion, instead of simply as "externally imposed discipline" (106-107). Steele restricts conversion to instantaneous experiences and excludes Christian nurture as a mode of conversion, and thus closes himself off to alternative interpretations of the data.

A second question concerns Steele's contention that "because of Edwards, Wesley found new conceptual categories for spiritual diagnosis and church revival" (157). While Wesley read, edited, and found useful Edwards' *Faithful Narrative*, the conclusion drawn by Steele needs further study. Moreover, while stressing the influence of Edwards upon Wesley, he diminishes some of the impact of the Moravians who taught Wesley that instantaneous assurance accompanied the conversion experience. One omission is Wesley's contact with Augustus Spangenberg who directly raises the issue of conversion and immediate assurance with John Wesley. The doctrine of assurance is key to both Wesley and Edwards.

Perhaps the heart of Steele's work is chapter five where he discusses Wesley's abridgments of Edwards' revival treatises: *Faithful Narrative*, *Distinguishing Marks*, *Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival*, *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*, and *The Life of David Brainerd*. Steele reviews the content and the publication history of both Edwards' original writing and the abridgments of Wesley. He compares the length of each section in the abridgment with that in the original and analyzes the relation of religious affectivity and moral virtue. The primary changes that Wesley made in Edwards' works were to delete anti-Arminian polemics, to modify hyper-Calvinist phraseology, and to eliminate references to the local American color of the revival that would hold no interest for a British audience.

Chapter six reviews the parallel and polemical writings of Edwards and Wesley, who responded to John Taylor about original sin, Lord Kames on the bondage of the will, and Francis Hutcheson concerning moral sense. Steele argues that the chapter shows their differences "as a

family feud within the Reformed tradition.” He judges that “their understanding of Christian spiritual experience (the ‘gracious affection’) and moral character (‘true virtue’) are in deep agreement” (270). Steele does acknowledge the difficulty of analyzing Wesley’s reply to Taylor because of his extensive use of quotations from other writers. He consults a sermon to clarify Wesley’s viewpoints, but he could have made a more extensive use of Wesley’s sermons. More importantly, Steele focuses on what places them within the Reformed tradition, but he does not show how their respective discussions flow from their differing traditions. For example, Edwards places his discussion of original sin within the context of justice, viewing salvation through the doctrine of original sin, while Wesley understands the doctrine of original sin through his experience of saving grace. Edwards begins with the doctrine of God, while Wesley starts with soteriology. This results in such differences as their positions on the status of unsaved infants. In his attempt to show the similarities between Wesley and Edwards, Steele sometimes blurs the distinctions that give insight to their diverse understanding of the issues.

Steele provides a good introduction to the study of John Wesley and Jonathan Edwards. His biographical chapter demonstrates the connections between the two. His study of the abridged and parallel works reveals their similar concern for describing and analyzing religious movements and their common interest in entering into public debate on the same theological issues. Steele correctly argues that Wesley and Edwards were closer together in their understanding of religious experiences than their theological differences might suggest.