Theological Method for a Man of One Book

Chuck Gutenson

In an essay entitled "Level Confusions in Epistemology," William Alston begins by observing that there are, generally speaking, two kinds of essays. First, there are those in which the writer advances a constructive proposal on the subject at hand; second, there are those which the writer "lays in the bushes" and offers criticism of someone else's constructive proposal. Alston goes on to say, regarding his essay: "Unfortunately, this essay is one of the latter type." Well, in my case, one might say there are papers in which the writer researches Wesley's theology in great detail, seeking to gain new insights into his implicit theological method with the ultimate goal of proposing a new way of understanding Wesley's methodological commitments. Or, one might say there are papers in which the writer simply seeks to explore the received wisdom regarding those methodological commitments with the much more modest intent of identifying questions and lacunae. Borrowing from Alston: "Unfortunately, this essay is of the latter type." So, let us set out upon our task recognizing that we shall probably plow no new ground, that we will certainly ask more questions than we answer, and that we will engage more in playful interrogation than in developing some new proposal vis-à-vis Wesley and theological method.

For those who are involved in methodological reflections on a daily basis, please feel free to nap for the next several minutes. However, it seems appropriate to pause to lay out methodological categories in order to establish the terrain. While there are a number of different ways to think about theological method, I find Ted Peters helpful in his identification of six constituent components to theological method. These are 1) purpose, 2) tasks, 3) presuppositions, 4) norms, 5) sources, and 6) procedures. Most of our attention will be focused on items three, four, five and six. Let us begin by giving a brief definition of each just to assure we are all on the same page.

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One can be very brief on the first two items: purpose and tasks. To say that purpose is a part of theological method is to claim that identification of the reason for and goals of the theological enterprise is, itself, a methodological question. What one hopes to accomplish and the reasons one has for undertaking theological development will play a significant role in determining the manner in which one will proceed. I have always found Karl Barth's understanding of purpose helpful. It can be paraphrased as follows: the purpose of theology is to serve the church, in particular as regards the church's call to proclamation. Given Wesley's recognition of the importance of proclamation (are not his most significant theological works in sermonic form?), it seems plausible that he would find Barth's claim reasonable. On the question of the tasks of theology, once again, I have found Barth's statement on the matter helpful. Paraphrasing again: the task of theology is to critique the church's distinctive talk about God. So, theologians engage in critical examination of the claims that the church is making about God and about his relation to the world, both to see if they are adequate and to see if they are conceptualized in a way that is "hearable" to the contemporary situation. Once again, given Wesley's focus upon proclamation, it is hard to imagine he would be uncomfortable with such a way of understanding the theological enterprise. This is pretty much all we shall have to say about the topics of the purpose and tasks of theology.

The term "presuppositions" is used within theological method pretty much as it is anywhere else. Presuppositions are those things, frequently implicit and subconscious, that we take utterly for granted and which we bring to the discussion table with us from the beginning. I side with Gadamer in seeing presuppositions as the necessary precondition for reflection and knowledge and, therefore, do not see the fact that we have presuppositions problematic. However, the more we are aware of the presuppositions that we (and, in this case, Wesley) bring to the theological enterprise, the more informed is our theologizing. When we use the term "procedures," we intend it in the broad sense of the mechanics of how one moves from theological "questions" to "answers" or their presentation. For example, one of the procedures in Wesley's theology that we will be particularly concerned to examine is the manner in which Wesley deploys Scripture within his sermons.

Without doubt, the two most significant questions concerning theological method regards identification of our "sources" and our "norms." Sources are those materials (taken in the broadest sense) that we consult in our attempt to determine either the relevant questions or answers to those questions. Theological sources include such wide ranging materials as Scripture, the writings of the early church fathers, the history of the church (including, for example, the history of doctrinal development, the history of interpretation, the development of liturgical practices, etc.), the history of culture, as well as the contemporary culture in all its varied manifestations. Finally, theological "norms" are those things which serve as the standards against which we test our theological conclusions and proposals. Different theological methods elevate different things to the status of "norm." For example, it has been argued by Nancey Murphy that the liberal theological tradition has elevated "experience" to the status of a norm; and fundamentalists have similarly elevated Scripture. While our examination will consider the last four components of theological method, these last two, the questions of norms and sources, will be the primary focus of our discussion.

What we have done so far, of course, is to take contemporary concepts (the six components of theological method just outlined) and laid them out in order to talk about the methodological commitments of John Wesley, who in all likelihood, never reflected upon these issues in quite this way. As far as I know, Wesley is nowhere particularly explicit about theological method in anything like the contemporary sense, though as with all who engage in theological reflection, a set of methodological commitments WAS functioning. Since Wesley is not explicit about method, we have to do what others have done before, which is to extrapolate in a reasonable fashion from the various things Wesley does and says. So, let us begin.

As with all theologians (or pastors or missionaries or dog catchers, for that matter), the impact of the presuppositions one brings to the table are of great significance. Of course, any definitive statement on this issue would extend far beyond the space available. So, we arrive at the first point where we will primarily identify questions that would require consideration in order to fully assess Wesley's method. First, one has to wonder how Wesley's contemporary philosophical and theological setting might have influenced him. It is interesting to reflect upon the major movements and players in these areas around Wesley's time. Wesley was born in 1703 and he died in 1791. This puts his birth about 60 years after the publication of Rene Descartes' "Meditations on First Philosophy," one of the founding documents of the modern philosophical enterprise. On the isles, John Locke died when Wesley was only one and Thomas Reid, the father of so-called "common-sense" philosophy, was born when Wesley was seven and David Hume was born the following year. Mr. Enlightenment himself, Immanuel Kant, was born in Germany when Wesley was 21 years old, and Wesley was 70ish before the watershed of Kant's work, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, appeared. The father of modern hermeneutics, Friedrich Schleiermacher, was not even born until Wesley's 65th year and Schleiermacher's most significant theological work, *The Christian Faith*, did not appear until about 30 years after Wesley died. And, of course, Schleiermacher's handwritten manuscripts on hermeneutics were not published until well after Schleiermacher's own death.

Well, it seems it would be pretty much impossible to exaggerate the space such a markedly different contextual setting would open between the sorts of presuppositions Wesley would have brought to the theological enterprise as would we. First, the raging philosophical debate of Wesley's time would have been the very different ways of knowing defended by the continental rationalists and the British empiricists. Discussions regarding the impact of empiricism upon Wesley's thought (especially, Lockean empiricism) are not new, but the radical turn to the self implied by the Kantian synthesis would not yet have been on the radar screen. Whether we are liberal or conservative theologically, we have all been influenced by Schleiermacher in at least two ways. The first relates to the turn to experience represented in the system of theology expressed in *The Christian Faith*. Would the set of moves made by Schleiermacher in response to the Kantian strictures on knowledge have had a noticeable impact upon Wesley's own thought? If so, how? The second significant impact of Schleiermacher's work is related to his role as "the father of modern hermeneutics." We take utterly for granted the history of hermeneutics that begins with Schleiermacher, continues through Dilthey, and which reaches its contemporary expression in the works of, say, Gadamer and Ricuoer. How would Wesley have

responded to recognition of the profound challenge represented by the task of interpretation? Further, of course, both higher and lower criticism were in their infancy (if that!) when Wesley lived and worked. How would the deliverances of these fields have changed the way Wesley theologized? Many of the issues we take utterly for granted were either not even on the table for discussion, or were just beginning to be so. As I noted at the outset, we cannot explore these issues in an essay of this sort, but they are but a few examples of matters that would need attention before we could adequately account for Wesley's own method. At this stage, it seems one would be justified in observing that Wesley, though technically in the modern period rather than the pre-modern, would have likely been influenced heavily by pre-modern (or if not pre-*modern* at least pre-*critical*, meant in the technical sense) ways of thinking.

While it might seem appropriate to turn our attention now to questions of Wesley's procedures, for reasons that will become apparent in due course, I want first to address matters relating to theological norms and sources. When it comes to the question of what constituted norms and sources for Wesley, we have all heard of the so-called "Wesleyan Quadrilateral." I must admit that, in my days of greater theological naivete, I thought the Wesleyan quadrilateral was both unique and clever. How could one object to a way of thinking theologically that assigned place to Scripture, the Christian tradition, our own individual and the community's experiences, and reason? Of course, only later did I come to discover that Wesley nowhere spoke of his method in these terms; and that it was actually a relative contemporary who had coined the phrase based upon his own study of Wesley's writings. Well, I still considered Wesley's approach unique, even if his method was more implicit than explicit. As my own theological education continued, however, and particularly as I read various systematic theologies, it became increasingly clear that the quadrilateral was hardly unique! In fact, what I generally say to students today is that all theological methods incorporate Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason, and the real question is not whether these components are present, but rather how they relate to each other. For example, both fundamentalists and liberals alike (and virtually all in between) embrace a role in theologizing for each of these four components. For fundamentalists (using the categories deployed by Nancey Murphy in *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*), the primary authority rests with Scripture and for those of a more liberal persuasion, the primary authority is with experience, but both are present. Of course, I have only used the categories "liberal" and "fundamentalist" as representing the opposite ends of a spectrum upon which all of us are somewhere located. However you put it, it seems clear that for Wesley, all four of these are present in some way; thus, before addressing their relative authority, let us expand briefly upon each as *theological source*.

There can be no doubt that, for Wesley, Scripture constitutes the source of which one must always be cognizant. Whenever some particular question arises, the Scripture is the first resource which one consults in effort to find material that will ultimately enable one to come to some conclusion on the matter. However, I think we should be cautious in how we word this and how we reflect upon the claim. For example, the language that I have just used carries a strong "epistemic" flavor to it—i.e., it seems to focus upon Scripture as a source to which one appeals in order to find ways to express and defend *truth claims*. I wonder if one could seriously debate that Wesley does this to some extent.

A thing about which one might puzzle a good deal more, however, is the question of whether this is exclusively or even primarily how Wesley understood Scripture. For example, Wesley's focus upon sanctification seems fairly clearly to indicate that Wesley's view was one that recognized the central importance of how one lives out the life of faith. Further, Wesley has been referenced as a "practical" theologian, which I take primarily to mean that he worried a good deal about Christian formation and the practices in which one engages as a consequence of one's formation. Minimally, this suggests that Wesley would have seen Scripture as a source of both right belief and right practice; or perhaps, even better, he would have simply denied the distinction thereby emphasizing the inseparability of practice and belief. In the contemporary theological setting, W. J. Abraham has asked whether we would not do better to think of Scripture as "means of grace" than as epistemic criterion, and one cannot help but wonder whether Wesley would have been sympathetic to the argument.

Much has been made of the extent to which Wesley embraced the significance of tradition. In some discussions, I have heard an attempt to distinguish between "small t" tradition and "capital T" Tradition. At the end of the day, however, I must admit some puzzlement at the distinction and cannot help but wonder if the question would not be put better over against questions of normativity. In other words, it is hard to tell exactly what would constitute the materials that are within the "capital T Tradition" that are not within the "small t tradition." On the other hand, it would be easier (though still somewhat complicated) to think of tradition as either source or norm depending upon the degree of authority each is given in finally determining the deliverances of the theological enterprise. One might say, for example, that for Wesley tradition is a source; while for Roman Catholics, tradition is a norm. As I have suggested, however, matters seem to me a good deal more complicated than that, for as Ted Peters notes in *God: The World's Future*, it is exceedingly hard to draw a hard and fast distinction between Scripture and tradition. Scripture itself is a deliverance of the tradition under the guidance of the Holy Spirit as are the other materials within the canonical heritage of the church, and in some sense, to say Scripture is normative is to say that the tradition is normative. Wesley, steeped in the early fathers as he was, seems to maintain a better perspective on all this than we in the contemporary setting do. An important question worth some reflection would be: what enabled Wesley to hold both a strong view of Scripture and a deep appreciation for the tradition? At this point, we merely note that tradition was a theological source for Wesley, and in our discussion of norms, we shall have to explore something of how this plays itself out.

In what sense does experience count as a "source" in Wesley's theology? Well, before we answer that, we must once again remind ourselves that the classical liberal sense of experience as a universal datum of all human existence that grounds all language and reflection about God is not yet in play within Christian theology in Wesley's day, and it seems pretty certain that the place given to experience within the Wesleyan quadrilateral has no similarity to experience as conceived in classical liberalism (though, no doubt, there are those who will debate with me on this point). It seems that appeals to experience as source is more of an appeal to the world of shared human experience and that the appeal is intended to serve as something more like an "evidence" for the theological claim

being made. So, for example, if one advances the claim that humans have a sinful disposition, one might inquire whether or not this would be *further* warranted by the sorts of experiences we have. Of course, experience can also serve as a source in the sense that it might raise for us certain questions of a theological nature. In other words, our experiences in the world put before us certain challenges and raise for us certain queries and these questions might turn out to be significant for our theological reflection. As with tradition, the question in relation to experience and theological method becomes one of priority—or, as we shall see momentarily, one of normativity.

In reflecting upon the sorts of skills that a good minister of the Gospel ought to have, Wesley once observed that after a knowledge of Scripture, the thing one needed most was training in "logic." He goes on to describe how skill in logic had enabled him to ferret out the hidden presuppositions and premises of his debating partners and thereby to expose the weakness in their arguments. What Wesley seems to have had in mind, based upon the immediate context of the claim, is the need to be skilled in using the canons of reason—to know what constitutes a good argument, to know how arguments lead to their conclusions, and to be able to understand the inter-relation between premises and between premises and conclusions. In short, I think it is this context that best enables us to understand the role of reason in the theological enterprise, and, as one might suspect, it calls immediately into question whether or not reason is a theological source. Is it the case that one consults reason for "raw data" which one will form into theological conclusions, given the right and appropriate other data? I think the answer is "no"—i.e., I think the tendency to categorize "reason" as a theological source is mistaken and that perhaps a more appropriate way to think of reason is as "tool." Reason does not provide material for arguments; rather it *enables us to assess* different kinds of data, to prioritize and assign weights to various and conflicting data, to discover subtle incoherences, etc. I have often heard it said, for example, that "reason" led old "so and so" (fill in with the theologian you are least in sympathy with) to the wrong kinds of conclusions. But this is clearly mistaken, is it not? On the one hand, one might indeed come to faulty conclusions by way of a given argument, but is this not always so for one of two reasons: 1) the presuppositions/premises were faulty or 2) the inter-relations between the premises and the conclusion is faulty. In either case, the blame for the faulty conclusion is not with reason, but rather with its poor deployment—which would only emphasize Wesley's concern that good ministers be able to reason well. That reason fits into Wesley's theological method is without question; we shall have to reflect a bit more, it seems, on the precise role it plays. However, I suggest that, strictly speaking, reason is not a "source."

Now, we must turn our attention to the question of norms. As noted earlier, a norm is something that serves as the standard against which we test our theological conclusions and proposals. It seems there can be little objection to the claim that, for Wesley, Scripture served as the norm for theological reflection. Of course, this claim hardly settles all questions for the theologian reflecting upon Wesley's writings, for it pushes the whole hermeneutic question to the side. In other words, even if we all accept the claim that Scripture is normative for Wesley (in fact, even if we agree with Wesley that Scripture is normative), we have not dissolved the possibility of theological disagreement because we still have to determine the meaning of those particular texts that we have decided are

normative for a particular theological question. And the history of the Christian tradition (even that sub-strand of the tradition known as Wesleyan theology!) readily shows that the very same texts can be given a variety of interpretations, and the very same questions can, therefore, be given a variety of different answers. This means that different theologians will draw different theological conclusions on the same questions. If, as it seems, the truth of this claim is irrefutable, one has to ask: is it really *Scripture* that is normative, or is it a *particular way of reading Scripture* that is normative? Pushing this further, if we are to accept the common claim that Wesley sees Scripture as normative (which, I argue, we must) and if we readily accept that different theologians who recognize Scripture as normative come to different conclusions about the meaning of a given text, we must ask ourselves how we would identify what constitutes a *particular way of reading texts*. If one claims Scripture is normative, one could be plausibly expected to answer the question: what warrants designating Scripture as normative? Once one recognizes that what is really functioning normatively is a particular way of reading texts, then one must be prepared to answer plausibly the question: what warrants reading texts in that way? Consequently, the next questions we will consider vis-à-vis a Wesleyan theological method are: how might we construe, in a more nuanced fashion, the manner in which materials function normatively in Wesley's method? And, what might plausibly warrant the deployment of theological norms in this manner?

In order to think about Wesley's utilization of materials normatively, we need to revisit some of the suggestive matters that we raised in our earlier discussion of the components that comprise the so-called Wesleyan quadrilateral—Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason. At this point, we need to consider a question that will guide our thinking for the next several minutes: can we really draw a hard distinction between "sources" and "norms" in Wesley's theological method or must we, rather, conclude that to some extent each of the sources function normatively in Wesley's overall theological method? Let us revisit those materials we called sources earlier in attempt to determine whether and, if so, to what extent each functions normatively.

You may recall that in the earlier discussion upon theological sources, when we came to reason, we questioned whether reason could be correctly identified as a source and, instead, suggested that placing reason within the category of "tool" was more appropriate. We are ready now to expand upon the notion of reason as tool a bit by observing that it is a tool that allows us to determine whether or not arguments are good ones—more specifically, whether they are sound and valid. To just this extent, then, it seems reasonably clear that reason functions normatively. In other words, to the extent reason provides a test for the soundness and validity of a given argument, it functions normatively in our theologizing. Now, we must be careful not to be misunderstood at this juncture, for I am not suggesting that reason be elevated to "trump" Scripture. Instead, I am suggesting that, as we move from biblical text to interpretation of the biblical text, we will have to test our interpretations, and one of the tests that we will have to consider is whether or not we have violated the canons of reason. It is not that reason functions normatively *over* Scripture, but rather that it functions normatively *over our interpretations of Scripture*. If we should, for example, come to an interpretation of Scripture that is incoherent with Scripture itself, the law of non-contradiction will help us identify that incoherence and,

perhaps, guide our re-thinking of the interpretation. If we take the canons of reason (the various argument forms that comprise the variety of valid arguments, for example) as merely an expression of the nature of truth and of the God who is the Lord of truth, then we can see that reason understood as described is not a *threat* to Scriptural authority, but rather an essential support of it. Would it not be reasonable to think that what Wesley had in mind when he talked about the importance of "logic" is pretty much what we have described here? So, in sum, what I am suggesting here is that reason within the Wesleyan quadrilateral functions normatively, but in a way that supports, rather than contradicts, other norms.

I fear that reflection upon the role of experience may not be as straightforward; nevertheless, we must consider whether or not experience functions normatively, at least in some sense, within Wesley's theological method. First, it is necessary that we recognize Wesley's own concerns for "enthusiasm," and consequently, remember that he had a healthy skepticism of experience and was cognizant of the fact that persons are easily misled by it. Second, contra modern liberalism, so I say, it seems that Wesley would have affirmed that Scripture, for example, has a norming role to play over experience. More directly, if our experience leads us to conclude that some behavior or belief is acceptable, but Scripture read rightly leads one to conclude that it is not, then Wesley's allegiance would have been to Scripture. In this case, Scripture would correct experience. However, again, we must ask: is there some sense in which experience plays a normative role? I think the answer is yes, though we must proceed with extreme caution, and once again, I find myself thinking that where experience might be normative is with regard to our *interpretations of Scripture*. Perhaps an example would help clarify the point. Let us consider a theological student who attends some seminary. While at that seminary, the student will have a wide variety of experiences—some with other students, some with professors, some with spiritual advisors, etc. As a consequence of these interactions, the student will find himself/herself being formed by those *experiences* in a particular way with certain sorts of theological commitments and with certain ways of reading Scripture, tradition, etc. It seems pretty clear that, whether we like it or not, these experiences do in fact function normatively over this student's interpretation of Scripture, tradition, etc.

To push this just a bit further, it is likely that all of us in this room would affirm the role of the Holy Spirit in guiding the contemporary church, as well as the early church, in its appropriation and interpretation of Scripture. Yet, must we not characterize the Holy Spirit's guidance in this fashion as experiential—something like an inner witness of the Spirit—and must we not affirm the normativity of this guidance? Of course, it seems we should affirm that it is normally the Holy Spirit's guidance of the *community of faith*, rather than of the individual, that is taken in a more normative fashion. It seems that Wesley has something in mind like what we are discussing here when he noted that experience could confirm something taught in Scripture (but what could this be but our interpretation of the Scriptural claims?), though experience could not prove something not contained in Scripture. In short, one has to wonder if it were not the case that experience functioned, for Wesley, as something of a "low level" norm in his theological method, though we must recognize that Wesley's cautions about enthusiasm remind us that experience can easily err.

Without doubt, one could easily write several essays of this length and still not adequately address the status of the tradition as theological source and as theological norm in Wesley's theology. We know, by now, the sense in which we will speak of tradition as norm—in the sense of norming our interpretations of Scripture. Perhaps one of the clearest examples of what I have in mind can be expressed by reference to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. As Billy Abraham has noted in his programmatic work *Canon and Criterion*, the early church found itself confronting heretical groups that were remarkably creative in finding their theological positions within the Christian Scriptures. He notes particularly the Gnostics who seemed quite able to "prove" their claims from just about any canon of Scripture you gave them. This is not particularly surprising, of course, as we've already noted that the biblical texts are best characterized as containing a "surplus of meaning" so that they can be plausibly read in a variety of ways. However, the early church was quite sure that some of those seemingly *plausible* interpretations were not, in fact, valid interpretations. One of the primary functions of this and the other creeds was to serve as a norm for acceptable readings of Scripture. Consider the trinitarian formulations of the NC creed; in effect, this creed norms our interpretations of Scripture so as to say, "if you read the biblical texts and come to some conclusion other than that God is trinitarian in nature, you have not read aright." I, with the early church, would argue that this is not to elevate the creeds over Scripture, but rather is to recognize the church's right, under the guidance of the Spirit, to say what its texts mean.

We must briefly note that there is another sense in which the materials that comprise the canonical heritage of the church function in a quasi-normative fashion. If one considers the liturgical practices, iconography, the canon of saints, etc., I believe that one is dealing with a set of materials that are normative in the sense that they establish, albeit loosely, the boundaries within which one may behave/believe without being normative in the sense of establishing the *only* ways in which one might behave/believe. In a sense, then, the tradition functions normatively to the extent it serves to norm our interpretations of Scripture as well as serving in a quasi-normative fashion in the establishment of "safe boundaries" for issues that extend beyond those explicitly addressed within Scripture. Of course, we must keep in mind our earlier observation that any attempt to draw hard and fast distinction between Scripture and the tradition is likely flawed from the outset.

This brings us to the last of component of the quadrilateral—Scripture. The centrality of Scripture can hardly be doubted in light of the extent to which Scripture and its interpretation has been in the midst of all aspects of our discussion so far. Further, it is rather difficult to imagine a persuasive argument denying that Scripture is absolutely central for Wesley; the question, as is often the case, is: what does it mean for Wesley to make Scripture theology's norming norm? Well, odd as it might sound, Scripture is also normative in the sense we have already discussed—namely, Scripture is normative in the sense that it norms our interpretations of Scripture. Wesley often used the term (and ones like it) "the general tenor of Scripture" in order to draw our attention to the fact that Scripture must be read holistically, not in a piecemeal, or "proof-texting" fashion. When Wesley references the general tenor of Scripture, he is reminding us that we must immerse ourselves in Scripture to the point that we can begin to see "the big picture"—to see how the various parts fit together to bear witness to God's great acts in salvation history. I wonder if

Wesley would be sympathetic to the early fathers in their affirmation of the Incarnation as norming for our reading of the Scriptures overall. Of course, Wesley shares with the fathers a strong soteriological focus, which suggests he might well be sympathetic to making the Incarnation central to our grasp of Scripture.

Clearly, it seems that we can argue that, for Wesley, Scripture functions normatively in the sense that the "general tenor of Scripture" norms our interpretations of Scripture. However, we really must say more than this, mustn't we, for it seems that Scripture is normative on a rather deeper level. How shall we articulate it? Perhaps we can get at it by saying that Scripture is normative in the sense that it is the premier source; in other words, we go to Scripture first for determining the life that pleases God. Scripture is also normative in the sense that, even granting that the biblical texts are subject to a multiplicity of plausible interpretations, no interpretation of Scripture that is inconsistent with the "general tenor of Scripture" can be taken as adequate. At perhaps an even deeper level, Scripture is normative in the sense of providing the base set of texts from which we engage the Spirit for the purpose of being formed into the image of Christ; it is through our interaction with Scripture that we are formed so as both to live and to think Christianly. While this is no doubt far too brief to do justice to the complexity of Wesley's position on the normativity of Scripture, it captures some of the important aspects of his thought.

Without even so much as a score card, I suspect that you all have recognized that I am arguing that all of what we called "sources" in our earlier discussion serve some sort of normative function within Wesley's theology as well. Some have argued that Wesley's method, rather than being characterized as a quadrilateral, should be imagined as a pyramid with Scripture at the top, indicating its normative status, with the other three (tradition, experience, and reason) as supports to Scripture. Is this image adequate? It is not clear that it is, for at least three reasons. First, I think it erroneously conceives "reason" as a source rather than as a tool as we mentioned earlier. Second, it places reason, tradition, and experience on an equal footing, and one has to wonder whether this does justice to the manner in which Wesley's theologizing is actually undertaken. Third, it does not adequately take into account the extent to which all four sources play a normative role in some sense. I must admit, at this point, that I struggle for a proposal that more adequately captures the interaction of the theological sources and the extent to which each functions normatively. This is an area where more reflection is needed; however, let me be so bold as to offer some thoughts on the direction that thinking might take. First, any way of conceptualizing Wesley's theological method must find a way to reflect the manner in which all these sources function both as source and as norm. Second, one might begin by reflecting upon the adequacy of a model that employs concentric circles. Imagine Scripture at the center, tradition comprising the next circle, experience the next, and with reason written in shaded gray, indicating a background presence across the image. This would capture the role of reason as tool rather than as source. Likewise, the model might communicate that experience is everywhere, but where tradition and Scripture overlap, they norm experience. Likewise, where Scripture overlaps tradition, it norms tradition. Of course, one could further subdivide experience so that some portion of experience is experience within the Christian community, and that experience could be seen as norm-

ing other experiences. By giving experience this overarching presence, we come close to Tillich who argued that experience must be conceived as the medium in which theologizing and the living out of the life of faith occurs.

Yet, this model is still inadequate. It fails entirely to recognize the reciprocal nature of the normativity of the sources. For example, as we noted, it is not merely that Scripture norms the tradition, but as we noted above, the tradition also norms the interpretation of Scripture so that in those places where the tradition chose to speak canonically (with regard to the Chalcedonian definition, for example), the voice of the tradition identifies the correct interpretation of Scripture, thus norming our reading and interpreting of Scripture. Second, this model does not provide an adequate means to recognize the distinction, for example, between the tradition speaking authoritatively on matters of doctrine and it speaking quasi-normatively on the sorts of boundary issues we noted. While I am convinced that the normal way of thinking and talking about the quadrilateral is in need of reconceptualization, I can take us no further here than identifying this set of issues and offering some reflections on what sorts of questions that reconceptualization ought to answer. The rest I will have to leave to other enterprising souls, or to some future work of my own.

This brings our discussion to the last topic I wish to visit briefly: a particular aspect of Wesley's "procedure." In particular, I am interested in reflecting momentarily upon the manner in which Wesley moves from text to sermon and upon the implicit procedures that enable him to make the moves that he does. Those who are familiar with Wesley's sermons often marvel at the manner in which he "stitches" together parts and pieces of biblical passages into his sermons. Let us take a look at an example from Albert Outler's *Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit*,

> The Scripture avers, that by one man's disobedience, all men were constituted sinners; that in Adam all died, spiritually died, lost the life and the image of God; that fallen, sinful Adam then begat a son in his own likeness; nor was it possible he should beget him in any other, for who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? That, consequently, we as well as other men, were by nature, dead in trespasses and sins, without hope, without God in the world, and therefore children of wrath; [so] that every man may say, I was shapen in wickedness, and in sin did my mother conceive me; that there is no difference, in that all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God, of that glorious image of God, wherein man was originally created. (end of Wesley citation)
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> Now, obviously, you can recognize that this language is, indeed, "biblical," but does it read as if it were "scissored-and-pasted"? Did you recognize that this passage, in its entirely, is composed of bits and pieces from Romans 5:19, I Corinthians 15:22, Genesis 5:3, Job 14:4, Ephesians 2:1, 12, and 3, Psalm 51:5, and then back home to Romans 3:22-23, in that order?[1]

Now, this is a very fascinating deployment of Scripture, is it not? In the space of but one paragraph from one of Wesley's sermons, he manages to stitch together piece-parts of 10

different verses and manages to do so in a fashion that at least appears quasi-seamless. Imagine you were a professor of, say, theology, hermeneutics, preaching, or Bible. Imagine that a student handed in a paper/sermon that looked like this—a paper/sermon that stitched together piece-parts of passages from all over Scripture. Now, imagine what kind of grade you would assign to such work! Or, imagine that you move into a new town, and you are visiting different churches. Imagine that the preacher in one of the churches you visit delivers a sermon that deploys Scripture in this fashion. Are you likely to visit there again? In short, the surface appearance of what Wesley is doing here gives a whole new meaning to the concept of proof-texting, does it not? No attention is given to surrounding context, no intertextual reference is brought out explicitly, no particular passages are named. Yet, Wesley not only seems to get away with it, but we attribute to him great insight in the process. So, what gives?

One could cite additional examples of such deployment of Scripture within Wesley's sermons, but the phenomenon is well known. The issue is: what warrants Wesley in this utilization of the biblical texts? I shall, by no means, attempt a definitive answer to this question; however, there are a few aspects of Wesley's approach to theology that might offer insight into his ability to deploy Scripture in ways that few of us can. First, Wesley's commitment to total and lifelong immersion in Scripture allowed him to develop a perspective that finally comes to grasp the fundamental nature of the *missio dei*—the divine project in the world. In turn, this allowed Wesley to come to synthesize huge portions of Scripture around his understanding of God's mission, and finally, that allowed him to stitch various texts together in the fashion noted. Second, and closely related, whenever Wesley spoke of the "general tenor of Scripture," he was explicitly acknowledging that our ability to hear Scripture is rooted in our ability to discern the overarching themes of the grand biblical narrative. An explicit awareness of the need to read this way, of course, makes one intentional in appropriating Scripture holistically. Now, what I am suggesting seems a bit paradoxical at first—i.e., a recognition that the biblical texts cannot be grasped in a piece-meal fashion is what finally enables Wesley to deploy them in what appears to be a piece-meal fashion. Third, I am of the opinion that Wesley's *soteriological focus*, which he shared with the early fathers, enabled him to appropriate Scripture rightly and, then, to be able to stitch it together around this theme. Fourth, and intimately related to the last point, one can wonder if this soteriological focus did not also lead Wesley to imitate the fathers in recognizing the extent to which a soteriological focuses leads to seeing the Incarnation as the hermeneutical key to Scripture. Finally, we cannot overlook the importance of Wesley's own pursuit of the sanctified life. Would we not expect one to interpret Scripture better as one becomes more conformed to the image of Christ? Not that this would guarantee correct interpretation in any particular case, but rather that the sanctified life would orient one better to hear the Spirit's guidance.

And, yet, while it seems every one of these factors would contribute to enabling Wesley to deploy Scripture in the way he does, I am left unsatisfied. Throughout the history of the church, there have been others that have immersed themselves in Scripture, have emphasized the need to read holistically, have seen the significance of the Incarnation as key to understanding Scripture, and have themselves grown in grace, and yet they come to rather different conclusions than does Wesley at a number of points. In

fact, there are many who would even go so far as to agree with Wesley on the respective roles of Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason in the theological enterprise—yet, with different theological conclusions. Theological conclusions that are enough different that if those theologians/preachers/etc. were to deploy Scripture in the fashion that Wesley does, we would be sure they had reached those "faulty" conclusions because they were engaged in "proof-texting"! So, at the end of the day, what do we say? That Wesley can get away with deploying Scripture as he does *because he agrees with us*?? None of us would be so crass as to admit this, but one, in a more sober moment, might at least recognize it as a possibility. My own inclination is to think that Wesley is at least *prima facie* warranted for making the moves he does because the manner in which he deploys Scripture within his largely implicit theological method is coherent with his broader set of theological commitments. In other words, his understanding of Scripture, of the purpose behind the grand narrative of God's acts in history, of the relative normativity of the different theological norms/sources, etc. comprise a coherent and plausible whole. Of course, a Calvinist, for example, might also be *prima facie* warranted in holding his or her own belief system for the very same kind of reasons. How shall we know who is *ultima facie* warranted—i.e., who is finally correct in the content of their theology? Well, either we shall have to await the eschaton, when the decisive in-breaking of God's rule settles these questions once and for all, or we shall have to await a brighter mind's reflection on these matters. In the meantime, we will have to be satisfied with our theological commitments being *prima facie* warranted and continue the dialogue with others in the same position.

Notes

1. Outler, Albert. *Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit*, Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1975, p. 10.