

THE PROMISE OF JOHN WESLEY'S THEOLOGY FOR THE 21ST CENTURY: A DIALOGICAL EXCHANGE

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As one of the members of the working committee that put this Wesley studies program together, I thought it would be helpful to have a free and open discussion with respect to two of the more engaging interpretations of Wesley's theology and their likely consequences for twenty-first century Methodism. I was therefore very gratified when I learned that Dr. Bill Faupel chose as the title of our session: "Wesley Studies in the 21st Century: Controversies, Challenges & Hopes," a title that suggests the promise of a more dialogical approach to a number of salient issues that face the Wesleyan community today.

At a leading conference such as this we must not only explore methodology in a self-reflective way, but we must also consider the historiographical question itself in the field of Wesley studies, and all of this for the sake of critical, wide-awake, thinking. Put another way, in the midst of the various readings of Wesley's theology, and there are many, we must be attentive not only to the artifacts of history, in terms of texts and traditions, but we must also carefully discern how these elements are employed by interpreters to tell a story, to construct a distinct and artful narrative, that will always be a function, at least to some extent, of their own social location. Indeed, in Wesley studies today, the truth be told, there are many John Wesley's. Take your pick: There is the Cobb Wesley, the Maddox Wesley, the Runyon Wesley, the Wood Wesley, and yes, there is even the Collins Wesley. Historiography, then, in this context simply means that there are different ways of telling the story and that we must be attentive to all that makes up that difference.

In light of these concerns, I would like to offer a framework that can empower us to get at the heart of the various readings of John Wesley's theology today. It's a

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framework, interestingly enough, that is inclusive not exclusive, and it, therefore, embraces three worlds.

The first world is that of the text itself, that is, Wesley's own writings in their eighteenth century context, in terms of letters, journals, diaries, hymns, and theological treatises etc. Here the task of the historian and theologian is not simply to ascertain the text, in what looks like lower criticism, but also to take note of its language, motifs, themes and rhetorics, in what looks like literary criticism. Moreover, in this first world what Wesley said may be far more important than what Wesley read.

The second world, which corresponds to historical criticism, examines the traditional and historical sources that fed into Wesley's own theological reflections. Here the writings of Eastern fathers, Puritans, English Reformers, Cambridge Platonists, Caroline Divines, Moravian and German Pietists, as well as Wesley's own eighteenth-century Anglican tradition all come into play. Now though this second world is clearly important in fleshing out the elusive Mr. Wesley, to borrow a phrase from Heitzenrater, I have attended my share of Wesley conferences in which scholars have waxed eloquently and at length on the putative influence of Ephrem Syrus and Pseudo Macarius hardly mentioning the name of John Wesley at all. It's almost as if the Methodist and Anglican traditions were not broad or catholic enough to warrant such attention. While mindful of the influence of a diversity of historical sources, I nevertheless think Wesley's theology and Methodism itself are important enough to be "the main dish."

The third world is akin to theological criticism and it not only takes the social location of the various interpreters of Wesley's theology into account, as a proper and necessary concern of Wesley studies, but it also attempts to bridge the gap between the eighteenth century and the twenty-first. To be sure, not all of what Wesley believed and taught can be brought forward into our contemporary setting without some form of translation, certainly not in terms of his educational practices with respect to children, to cite just one example. In a real sense, we are simply at a different place, so to speak, a different social location, than John Wesley was. Theological criticism takes that difference into account and renders it intelligible.

So then, in light of these methodological concerns, I would like to explore six areas of key differences between Maddox's and my own reading of John Wesley's theology.

FIRST, WESLEY'S SOURCES

A distinction must be made between the Eastern Fathers and Eastern Orthodoxy: that Wesley was in some sense influenced by key Eastern Fathers is affirmed; that he was influenced by Eastern Orthodoxy as a discrete theological tradition to any significant degree is denied.

Even when the allowance is made that Wesley favored some of the writings of the Eastern Fathers, when he reproduced, for example, some of the homilies of Pseudo Macarius in his *A Christian Library*, Wesley nevertheless painstakingly removed every reference to the Eastern notion of theosis and substituted his much preferred and Western term sanctification.

A second distinction must be made between the notion of *similarity of ideas* and *direct causation*; that Wesley's understanding of entire sanctification or holiness was similar to

that of the Eastern Fathers is clearly affirmed; however, that the Eastern Fathers were the major source of Wesley's insights in terms of the nature of holiness is denied.

Who influenced Wesley here? It was none other than the triumvirate of Thomas à Kempis, Jeremy Taylor, and William Law—that is, two Anglicans and a Roman Catholic. Indeed, Wesley states all of this quite clearly at three key points throughout his career in his Aldersgate Narrative in 1738, in a missive to John Newton in 1765, and in a *Plain Account of Christian Perfection* the following year. Moreover, whenever Wesley refers to Eastern Orthodoxy as a Discreet Tradition, his comments are almost always negative. He exclaims:

The gross, barbarous ignorance, the deep, stupid superstition, the blind and bitter zeal, and the endless thirst after vain jangling and strife of words, which have reigned for many ages in the Greek Church, and well-nigh banished true religion from among them, make these scarce worthy of the Christian name, and lay an insuperable stumbling-block before the Mahometans.¹

Beyond this, Wesley had little contact with eighteenth century Eastern Orthodoxy, other than the fiasco of having the Greek bishop Erasmus ordain some of Wesley's lay preachers. Such limited contact between Wesley and the Eastern Orthodoxy of his own age is surely a troubling fact for those contemporary interpreters who would like to maintain that the Methodist leader looked quite favorably upon this tradition. Wesley had traveled to Hermhut, so to speak; he never went to Constantinople.

SECOND, THE BASIC ORIENTING CONCERN OF WESLEY'S THEOLOGY

The *Style of Wesley's Practical Theology* is Conjunctive: It is Both/And, not Either/Or. The grand project of much of Wesley's theological career according to Albert Outler was the task of articulating "faith alone" and "holy living," a Protestant emphasis and a Catholic one. Other conjunctions in Wesley's theology, emblematic of his third way, include law and gospel, grace and works, as well as justification and sanctification among others.

In light of the conjunctive *Style* of Wesley's theology I disagree with Maddox that the axial theme of Wesley's theology, its orienting concern as he puts it, is "responsible" grace. I disagree on two counts:

First of all, in Wesley's theology it is not merely responsible grace, but law and grace—and all of this in a typically Western, even Protestant, tension. The Methodist leader maintained that grace is most often "normed" grace. In other words, it arises and flowers in a valuational, prescriptive context and is illuminated by the moral law of God. Indeed, without this other half of the *conjunction*, so to speak, an axial theme of grace would perhaps quickly devolve into presumption, self-will, sentimentality or the antinomianism (in the sense that willful sin is allowed to continue with *regularity*) that Wesley so rightly impugned. On the other hand, tell comfortable middle class congregations simply that God is gracious or that the Most High loves them and they will hardly thank you for the trouble.²

Second, there is a conjunction not only in terms of law and grace, but also in terms of grace itself, for though all grace is responsible, if we view its human-ward aspects, not all grace is cooperant as Maddox contends, if we view its God-ward aspects. To be sure,

grace also entails the sovereign activity of God as both Luther and Calvin had maintained, what Wesley explored in his own theology as the grace of God *alone*. Indeed, grace as favor, as sheer utter gift, informs both the juridical theme of justification *as well as* the therapeutic theme of sanctification, both initial and entire. Wesley learned this crucial Protestant insight from Peter Böhler and applied it to regeneration in 1738 and to entire sanctification in 1741: "Exactly as we are justified by faith, so are we sanctified by faith. Faith is the condition, and the *only* condition of sanctification, *exactly as* it is of justification."³

Some, however, during the eighteenth century, just as today, failed to discern the proper balance of these graces and maintained that both repentance and the remission of sins are sheer gifts. "Not so," Wesley writes in 1754, "for man cooperates in the former, but not in the latter. God *alone* forgives sins."⁴ To be sure, the reluctance of some scholars to acknowledge that grace for Wesley entailed, in some sense, the activity of God *alone*, held in place by Wesley's instantaneous motif, is borne out in the nearly exclusive synergistic reading that some employ. But this "Catholic" or "Eastern" reading of Wesley, though clearly popular among American, if not British Methodists, can be questioned in light of Wesley's own depiction of the divine role with respect to those who unfortunately fall from grace. In his sermon, "The Great Privilege of Those Who are Born of God," for example, Wesley elaborates:

But if we do not then love him who first loved us; if we will not hearken to his voice; if we turn our eye away from him, and will not attend to the light which he pours upon us: his Spirit will not always strive; he will gradually withdraw, and leave us to the darkness of our own hearts.⁵

Notice that the grace of God in this context is not limited or restricted by human response. However, if a nearly exclusive synergistic reading of Wesley's soteriology is offered and is drawn too tightly, neglecting the insights of the Protestant reformers, especially in terms of the sheer gratuity of grace, then the divine freedom, itself, will at least be misunderstood and possibly eclipsed. In this reckoning, once the initial or prevenient action of the Most High occurs, then God is virtually limited to responding merely to human *response*. And this dynamic is precisely what Maddox suggests as he quotes Wesley in support of a "tight" synergism: "God does not continue to act upon the soul, *unless* the soul reacts upon God."⁶

However, Wesley actually filled out his thought in this sermon and broke out of this type of restrictive synergism by underscoring divine freedom, graciousness and mercy. Again, God gradually (and no doubt reluctantly) withdraws from the sinner indicating, quite clearly, that the Lord *continues* to act, repeatedly woos the rebellious soul, at least for a time, though there is *no* human response at all. This is a truth that the Moravians, Lutherans, and Wesley himself understood quite well: God is remarkably gracious, and at times acts alone—sometimes in the face of human impotence; at other times in the face of human rebellion. Not simply cooperant grace, but the conjunction of cooperant and sovereign grace.

THIRD, CONVERSION

In his book, *Responsible Grace*, Maddox writes: "the mature Wesley appreciated childhood conversion experiences but hardly considered them the norm. Indeed, he encouraged educational nurture of children precisely to help prevent the departure into sin that is presupposed by dramatic conversions." p. 226-227.

In light of Maddox's observations on conversion, here and elsewhere, a number of questions emerge:

Will educational instruction really keep down the carnal nature and prevent the "departure into sin" as Maddox suggests?

Is conversion to real, proper Scriptural Christianity, to use Wesley's own idiom, required for everyone or is it unnecessary for those children who have grown up in comfortable middle class homes, children that are both well churchied and well-fed?

Furthermore, is conversion only for those "sick souls" among us, to use the language of William James,⁷ and not for those sanguine, cheery types who have never sensed a need for a radical renewal having always considered themselves to be Christians?

On the contrary, to deny that all people must be converted or born again, beyond the graces of infant baptism, that is, to reject the twice born model championed by Wesley as applicable in every case, is to fail to recognize the depth and extent of original sin in all its unbelief, alienation and pride, an Augustinian notion richly imbibed by Wesley himself.

Again, is the Christian life all positive, a matter of nurturing and educating the good that is already there? Does not the new birth, itself, entail a death of the old, a crucifixion of self, a genuine dying with Christ? Accordingly, the continuity of process, must be matched by the discontinuity, the concluding work of actualization, a truth that Wesley learned from the Moravians. That is, aspirants to God's grace, cannot simply evolve into the new birth or into entire sanctification for that matter; they cannot simply be nurtured into conversion as if it were an open-ended and ever positive process. Why is this so? It is because these significant works of grace are preceded by nothing less than the discontinuity of death. The new does not utterly appear out of the nurturing of old; rather, the old must die. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer has reminded us in his classic text, *The Cost of Discipleship*: "When Christ calls a man...he bids him come and die."⁸ All of this, then, highlights the significant truth that though conversion may not be dramatic or its exact time even remembered, it is nevertheless an actualized, instantiated change that is momentous, life-changing, and in its best sense an instance of God's transcendent and glorious grace.⁹

FOURTH, THE TEMPORAL ELEMENTS ENTAILED

Wesley's preferred theological style, in the midst of his many sources, is also evident in that he held together both process *and* instantaneousness with respect to both the new birth and entire sanctification.

Though the temporal dimensions of Wesley's practical theology are often explored largely in a chronological way, closer examination of Wesley's language reveals that these same dimensions should also, more importantly, be considered in a *soteriological way*; that is, as a reflection of the larger issue of faith and works. Indeed, the instantaneous elements of Wesley's *via salutis*¹⁰ are his principal vehicles for underscoring not only grace as the *favor* of God, but also the crucial truth that it is the Almighty, not humanity, who both forgives sins and who makes holy. By way of analogy, then, observe Wesley's language in his sermon, "The Scripture Way of Salvation," as he demonstrates that temporal elements (with respect to entire sanctification) are expressive of the relation between faith and works. He states:

And by this token may you surely know whether you seek it by faith or by works. If by works, you want something to be done first, before you are sanctified. You think, 'I must first be or do thus or thus.' Then you are seeking it by works unto this day. If you seek it by faith, you may expect it as you are: and if as you are, then expect it *now*.¹¹

This means, of course, that interpretations of Wesley's doctrine of salvation which identify the so called Western juridical aspects of redemption (that is, justification or forgiveness) as instantaneous, and the "Eastern" therapeutic aspects (that is, sanctification) as largely processive are wide of the mark. Indeed, the instantaneous motif, a part of the rich heritage of the Reformation that was mediated to Wesley, naturally informs justification, the new birth and entire sanctification—all of which are gifts of God's wonderful, even enchanting, grace. To be sure, Wesley knew full well that prostitutes and thieves sometimes entered into saving grace far more quickly than the "virtuous" or "respectable" who still suffered under some vain illusions about their own inherent goodness or of what contributions they could make to "bring about" redemption. And in terms of entire sanctification itself, Wesley writes:

But if there be no such second change, if there be no instantaneous deliverance after justification, if there be none but a gradual work of God (that there is a gradual work none denies) then we must be content, as well as we can, to remain full of sin till death.¹²

FIFTH, THE STANDARDS OF REDEMPTION

Wesley clearly affirmed a gracious liberty for the sons and daughters of God that apparently falls through the gaps in Maddox's typology of penalty, plague and presence with respect to the important matter of sin. For example, Wesley exclaims: "An immediate and constant fruit of this faith whereby we are born of God, a fruit which can in no wise be separated from it, no, not for an hour, is power over sin; — power over outward sin of every kind; over every evil word and work;...and over inward sin."¹³

Now when some of Wesley's peers heard of this great liberty of the children of God, as Wesley preached it, especially in terms of freedom from the power of sin, they balked and offered a number of qualifications to this teaching. One such qualification took the

form that a Christian believer, one who is born of God, is not one who does not commit sin, but who does not commit sin *habitually*. Wesley responded to his erstwhile critics by considering the example of a drunkard who argued that the state of his soul was well since he was not drunk *continually*. In a letter to William Dodd, Wesley states:

I tell my neighbour here, 'William, you are a child of the devil; for you *commit sin*: you was drunk yesterday' 'No, sir,' says the man, 'I do not *live or continue in sin*' (which Mr. Dodd says is the true meaning of the text), 'I am not drunk *continually*, but only now and then, once in a fortnight or a month.' Shall I tell him he is in the way to heaven or to hell? I think he is in the high road to destruction, and that if I tell him otherwise his blood will be upon my head.¹⁴

Indeed, though Wesley affirmed that "A Christian is so far perfect as not to commit sin. This is the glorious privilege of every Christian; yea, though he be but 'a babe in Christ,'" Maddox repudiates this glorious liberty and actually accuses Wesley of being, of all things, a Donatist for affirming it.¹⁵ Here Wesley's soteriology has not simply been explicated; it has also been redefined.¹⁶

SIXTH, ENTIRE SANCTIFICATION

Maddox's gradualistic reading of Wesley's soteriology is no more pronounced and its consequences no more acute than when he explores the doctrine of Christian perfection. Largely neglecting the instantaneous motif and its function in Wesley's theology, Maddox essentially identifies entire sanctification with mature, adult Christian states. Consequently, the experience of children and young people is neglected if not outright repudiated. Maddox states: "Entire sanctification (or Christian Perfection) is not an isolated reality for Wesley, but a dynamic level of maturity within the larger process of sanctification, the level characteristic of *adult* Christian life."¹⁷

The evidence from Wesley's own writings, however, belies this reading and indicates quite clearly that those who are young, even children, may enjoy the very highest graces of God. On September 16, 1744, for example, Wesley wrote in his journal: "I buried, near the same place, one who had soon finished her course, going to God in the full assurance of faith when she was little more than four years old."¹⁸ Since the phrase "the full assurance of faith" in Wesley's writings corresponds to Christian perfection, the reference is remarkably clear. Later, in 1764, Wesley took note of the sheer gratuity of grace in the life of a twelve year old girl:

I have seldom known so devoted a soul as S— H—, at Macclesfield, who was sanctified within nine days after she was convinced of sin. She was then twelve years old, and I believe was never afterwards heard to speak an improper word, or known to do an improper thing. Her look struck an awe into all that saw her. She is now in Abraham's bosom.¹⁹

Moreover, a decade later, in a letter to Miss March, Wesley waxed eloquently on the notion that a great work of grace can take place in a relatively short period of time.

"[God] makes young men and women wiser than the aged;" Wesley declared, "and gives to many in a very short time a closer and deeper communion with Himself than others attain in a long a course of years."²⁰

So then, heart purity must not be confused with chronological maturity. The young among us, even college students, may receive entirely sanctifying grace though they are not yet mature in so many ways. But as they grow, spiritually speaking, it will be a pure heart that will mature, and like Jesus, they will increase in "wisdom, grace and age." (Luke 2:40)

CONCLUSION

In the days ahead, as scholars continue to examine the various Wesley's that are being brought forth into the twenty-first century, it may prove helpful to be mindful of the three worlds we have already introduced: the historical and traditional sources that make up any reading, the texts of John Wesley, himself, in his eighteenth century setting, as well as our own social location as contemporary members of various interested communities.

Indeed, attentiveness to these three worlds may lead some to conclude that Maddox has not simply described Wesley's theology in the midst of his sources, but that he has also re-constructed it and in ways that, in some instances, at least, may actually belie Wesley's own texts themselves. Again, all of this may in time lead to nothing less than a re-symbolization, a re-visioning, of the historic Wesleyan faith, not in terms of the Eastern fathers, but in terms of some of the prevailing assumptions of contemporary Methodism.

Beyond this, as we think of other Wesley scholars and their contributions during this past century, we take note that we have been treated to the Marxist liberationist Wesley as well as the socially liberal Wesley, among several other portraits. However, it may finally be time in the twenty-first century, with all of the problems that Methodism currently faces, to consider that much neglected and often criticized portrait of the Methodist leader: John Wesley as nothing less than an eighteenth century English Evangelical.

NOTES

1. Thomas Jackson, ed., *The Works of John Wesley*, 14 vols. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1978), 9:217.

2. Unfortunately the moral law plays such a small role in Maddox's major theology. It is only mentioned five times in the text; once in the notes, and in a minor excursus of about three of four pages. That's it. In fact, Maddox has almost as many references to Aldersgate, in a negative sense, as he does to the moral law in his book *Responsible Grace*. See Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville, Tennessee: Kingswood Books, 1994), pp. 100 ff.

3. Albert C. Outler, ed., *The Works of John Wesley*, Vols. 1-4. *The Sermons* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 2:163.

4. John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament* (Salem, Ohio: Schmul Publishers), p. 288.

5. Outler, *Sermons*, 1:442.

6. Cf. Randy L. Maddox, "Responsible Grace: The Systematic Perspective of Wesleyan Theology," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 19, no. 2 (Fall 1984): 13. Emphasis is mine.

7. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), p. 78ff.

8. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Second ed. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1960). p. 7. For a view that contends some children have "never faced in any direction

but in the direction of God." See William Barclay, *Turning to God—a Study of Conversion in the Book of Acts and Today* (London: The Epworth Press, 1963), p. 93-94.

9. In his book *Aldersgate Reconsidered* Maddox categorizes different interpretations of Wesley's Aldersgate experience in the following way. Under the heading 1900-1963: Aldersgate as Partisan Theological Warrant, he lists:

-Revivalist Readings: Aldersgate as the Model Conversion Experience [*Aldersgate Reconsidered*, p. 139.]

-Holiness Readings: Aldersgate as Entire Sanctification [*Aldersgate Reconsidered*, p. 141.]

-Pentecostal/Charismatic Readings: Aldersgate as Wesley's "Baptism in the Holy Spirit" [*Aldersgate Reconsidered*, p. 142.]

And under the heading

1963 to the Present: Questioning Partisan Readings of Aldersgate, he states:

"The last three decades have witnessed a dramatic professionalization in the field of Wesley studies." [*Aldersgate Reconsidered*, p. 144.]

Beyond these designations, this scholar argues elsewhere:

"Conservative Methodists were influenced by revivalist currents and their 'twice-born' psychology which emphasized a dramatic conversion experience. Aldersgate often became for them the model of such a conversion. Meanwhile, 'liberal' Methodist theologians were beginning to take Wesley seriously as a theologian and to relate him to contemporary theological trends." [See Randy L. Maddox, "Celebrating Wesley—When?," *Methodist History* 29, no. 2 (January 1991): 67-68.]

In light of this material it must be asked, is the listing of revivalist, holiness and pentecostal/charismatic interpretations under the heading of partisan theological warrant accurate? More important for the task at hand, is it fair? Furthermore, is it really the case that it is only the liberal Methodist theologians who are beginning to take Wesley seriously and not evangelicals as well?

10. For more on this issue, Cf., Kenneth J. Collins, *The Scripture Way of Salvation: The Heart of John Wesley's Theology* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1997), pp. 185-90.

11. Outler, *Sermons*, 2:169. Emphasis is mine. In his sermon, "The Repentance of Believers," Wesley reveals that the instantaneous aspect of entire sanctification is crucial with respect to the actualization or realization of heart purity in the life of the believer. Cf., Outler, *Sermons*, 1:346.

12. *Ibid.*, 1:346.

13. *Ibid.*, 1:419. Emphasis is mine. Later Wesley will clarify his teaching here and distinguish freedom from the guilt, power, and being of sin, especially in his sermons "Sin in Believers," and "Repentance of Believers." Cf. Outler, *Sermons*, 1:327.

14. John Telford, ed., *The Letters of John Wesley, A.M.*, 8 vols. (London: The Epworth Press, 1931), 3:169.

15. Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, p. 164. Maddox apparently rejects Wesley's teaching that one cannot remain a proper Christian in the face of open, willful sin. However, a question that Maddox has failed to address is "how can initially sanctifying or regenerating grace (that grace which not only makes *holy* but which is also the very substance of redemption), remain given the disobedience and rebellion entailed in open, willful sin?"

16. Maddox writes criticizing traditional evangelical understandings of the new birth: "The limitations of an exclusive 'twice-born' model of conversion are even more pronounced for the late Wesley (on our reading), with his valuation of the faith of the servant of God as justifying faith!" See

Randy L. Maddox, "Continuing the Conversation," *Methodist History* 30, no. 4 (July 1992): 239. Beyond this, this popular scholar criticizes the evangelical teaching that justification and regeneration every occur simultaneously, never one without the other. He writes: "The demand for a *conjoined* experience of initial justification and regeneration per se violates the basic point of the late Wesley's understanding of the faith of a servant..." [See Randy L. Maddox, "Continuing the Conversation," *Methodist History* 30, no. 4 (July 1992): 241.]

17. Randy L. Maddox, "Reconnecting the Means to the End: A Wesleyan Prescription for the Holiness Movement," *The Wesleyan Theological Journal* 33, no. 2 (Fall 1998), p. 43.

18. Reginald W. Ward, and Richard P. Heitzenrater, eds., *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 20. *Journals and Diaries III* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988), p.39.

19. Jackson, *Works*, 12:333.

20. Telford, *Letters*, 6:132. This evidence, of course, does not deny the fact that although Wesley believed that entire sanctification was a present possibility for all who are justified and born of God, he nevertheless realized, in a very pastoral way, that most people would not enjoy such liberating grace until just prior to death. Cf. Jackson, *Wesley's Works*, 11:388 and Telford, *Letters*, 5:39.