

“STANDARD SERMONS” HISTORY FOR HISTORY’S SAKE, DENOMINATIONAL MANIFESTO, DOCTRINAL “STANDARD.”

DAVID H. TRIPP

John Wesley’s sermons produced results—not always exactly those which he intended or foresaw. After the last University sermon which his college or the university risked entrusting to him, his notes were sent for¹:

C.C.C. Sept’ 24, 1744

Sir,

Your last requires little more besides the acknowledging the favour of it. D^r Richard Pococke you mention was admitted Clerk of our College on the 3^d of february, 1721, and took his degrees in Law, as you observe. The affair of Wesley Isic^l I have had but little concern in, besides the mortification of hearing him preach for about an hour or more: For when I sent the Beadle for his Notes, which he deliver’d to me sealed up, he told me it was well he went so soon for ’em, for he found him preparing to go out of town. I was at Queen’s College when the notes were brought to me, before 12 o’clock, where I was engaged as one of M^r Mitchell’s Trustees for his Benefaction there in auditing the year’s Account, as he by his Will has appointed to be on every Bartholomew day. Being thus disappointed of summoning M^r Wesley before proper persons, I thought it adviseable to keep his notes in my own Custody till the Vice-Ch^r came home, who was expected in a little time: and to whom I deliver’d ’em, only not under seal. I suppose it will not be long ere the Vice-Ch^r does something in that affair, tho’ it is now a busy time with him, just at the removal of the office from himself to the Rector of Lincoln, where Wesley is still Fellow. I am,

Sir, your very humble servant,

J. Mather.

David H. Tripp is senior pastor of Salem United Methodist Church in Bremen, Indiana.

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The Vice-Chancellor of the University of Oxford did apparently nothing to call Mr. Wesley to heel, and in any case the sermon in question survived to enjoy the status of one of the "Standard Sermons" in parts, at least, of the Methodist family of churches. What exactly that status is, and what may be the implications of the very notion of "Standard Sermons," is our present concern.

The matters discussed here have a different import for each of the member churches of the world Methodist family. The constitutional and doctrinal decisions of any one of them may be untenable in any of the others. Nonetheless, the churches of this family will retain at least some interest in one another, and, we may hope, some sense of responsibility for and even accountability to one another. The World Methodist Council and Conference and the Oxford Institutes of Methodist Theological Studies offer arenas in which the issues of Methodist doctrine as an issue of ecclesial fidelity will naturally present themselves for debate and prayer. This contribution by one who has served in the British Connexion and now serves in The United Methodist Church, addresses chiefly the questions facing those two churches, but with an attempt to highlight aspects of the matter which concern all the Methodist family.

The 2000 United Methodist *Book of Discipline* (in continuity with earlier editions) offers us, on p.71, the following somewhat puzzling paragraph:

THE STANDARD SERMONS OF WESLEY

[Bibliographical Note: The Wesleyan "standards" have been reprinted frequently. The critical edition of Wesley's *Sermons* is included in *The Works of John Wesley*, vols. 1-4 (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1984-7).]

"Our Doctrinal History" (*Discipline* 102.2, pp. 52-53) assures us that "Wesley's Sermons," although not specified in the early editions of the Methodist Episcopal *Discipline*, nonetheless provided "the traditional standard exposition of distinctive Methodist teaching," and subsequently "models of doctrinal exposition." How exactly this is supposed to have been achieved, "Our Doctrinal History" does not suggest, since this utterance does not pretend to be a historical study but a "legislative enactment." (This characterization was decreed infallibly *ex cathedra* by Decision 538 of the Judicial Council, so it must be right.)

The non-committal wording of the current *Discipline* silently reflects an interesting area of uncertainty which, if it has not done so already, will affect unhelpfully the denomination's sense of identity, certainly presents historical theology with an anomaly, and most definitely confronts historical exponents of the (United) Methodist tradition with a problem. As one who has been tasked with teaching United Methodist History, Doctrine and Polity, I have had to face the identity question, the historical anomaly and the historical problem, in company with students. It is important to record that the majority of our U.M. students, in my experience, care very much for these things, because they see doctrine as the cornerstone of Christian mission and denominational fidelity.

As to the issue of denominational identity, I offer a personal testimony. It comes from a British setting, very different from elsewhere in the world Methodist family. There is no reason why patterns which obtain in one place should be used as a criterion of guideline

for what is done anywhere else; but if the world Methodist family has any real coherence, it must surely be in the area of doctrine. Within the confessional family, we need at least to be informed about what is happening throughout that family, and to be ready to give account to one another.

When given a "Note to Preach" in 1956 by the Superintendent Minister of our Circuit, I was instructed to read "the Forty-Four Sermons" and (if possible) also "the Notes" as part of what was required if I was to be admitted as a Local Preacher on Trial. This will sound very odd in American United Methodist ears, unless you are familiar with the original Methodist way of doing things. The Superintendents (the bishops of British Methodism) have limited geographical areas, Circuits, to govern. In each Circuit, worship is led by the ordained Ministers who are stationed in that Circuit by the Conference, in collaboration with the Local (as distinct from the Itinerant) Preachers. Since the Local Preachers outnumber their (itinerant and other) ordained colleagues by a vast proportion, most Methodist services in Britain are conducted by Local Preachers. For obvious reasons, the British Connexion takes great care of its future Local Preachers, both in what it demands and in what it offers. Local Preachers "On Note" are under the tutelage of one or more of the Local Preachers, to gain practical experience, and one of the Circuit Ministers will advise them, in consultation with the Connexional Local Preachers Department, as to their biblical, systematic and homiletic/liturgical studies, which require in principle two years at least. Before setting out at all on this Local Preacher path, let alone on the further stages which lead some onward to the itinerancy and ordination, each candidate must find out what the Methodist Church stands for, and decide whether she or he can honestly serve as a representative of that position.

This discovery and this decision therefore confront the beginner with "the Sermons" and "the Notes" at an early stage. These texts do not, of course, constitute the entire doctrinal platform of Methodism. The 1932 Deed of Union (para. 30) spells out that Methodist doctrine is defined by

- a) the divine revelation recorded in Holy Scripture (note the careful wording, which leaves room for a variety of stances as to the nature and effects of biblical inspiration),
- b) the "fundamental principles of the historic creeds"—which commits the denomination to the orthodox Christian commitment, both in traditional formulation developed informally (the "Apostles' Creed") and as made explicit by the Church's representative decisions at crucial turning-points (Nicaea, Constantinople, Chalcedon).²
- c) "and of the Protestant Reformation"—which in practice means the English Reformation, together with the Free Church critique of the state version of that Reformation, and the Arminian reading of the Reformed tradition;

and

- d) these doctrines are "contained in Wesley's Notes on the New Testament and the first four volumes of his sermons. Of these texts in particular it is carefully noted that they "are not intended to impose a system of formal or speculative theology on Methodist Preachers, but to set up standards of preaching

and belief which should secure loyalty to the fundamental truths of the Gospel of Redemption and ensure the continued witness of the Church to the realities of the Christian experience of salvation;”

and

- e) there are Methodist convictions on specific points of controversy, especially vis-à-vis certain episcopal and anti-sacramentarian bodies: on the ordained ministry, divine vocation, the need for ordination, the priesthood of all believers, the dominical sacraments and their obligatory status.

New candidates for the Preachers’ Plan are not required to tackle all of this at the outset: just “the Sermons” and, ideally, “the Notes.” Not that this limitation was simply a concession to easily bewildered tyros! In the “Model Deed” (para. 6), which governs the use of Church property, the local trustees are made responsible for excluding any preacher or teacher “who shall maintain promulgate or teach any Doctrine or Practice contrary to what is contained in certain Notes of *lin some forms of the text* “on”l the New Testament commonly reputed to be the Notes of the Reverend John Wesley and in the First Four Volumes of Sermons commonly reputed to be written and published by him ...” One of the concerns of this paper is to consider what these enactments mean now for world Methodism: what, if anything, are we to make of these “Standard Sermons”? How do we identify them? Interpret them? Employ and respond to them as doctrinal standards?

As soon as I set out, 40 years ago, to discover what *world* Methodism—not just the British and British-related half of it—stands for, I discovered that American Methodism does not accord “the Sermons” the same status that they enjoy officially in Britain. None of the Methodist Episcopal or Methodist Episcopal, South or Methodist Protestant *Disciplines* listed them—or the *Notes*—among the statements of the Methodist position. Wesley’s sermons (in later years, in F. J. McConnell’s collection, *Wesley’s Sermons and Selections*) might appear in reading lists for ministerial candidates. As basic texts for doctrine and discipline, however, we find only Mr. Wesley’s abridgment of the Articles and a version of his and Charles’ *General Rules*.

What exactly is the status of the “Standard Sermons” in The United Methodist Church? Students of the *Discipline* know that this has recently been a disputed issue. Richard P. Heitzenrater argued in the Fall 1985 issue of *Quarterly Review* that the only standards of doctrine which are unambiguously “established” in the American Methodist tradition are the Articles of Religion. He might reasonably have also noticed the fact that in United Brethren in Christ and Evangelical Association traditions, through all their vicissitudes, the Confession of Faith and the Articles respectively have stood alone in this capacity; the addition by the Evangelical Association of explanatory riders on the subjects of sanctification and Christian perfection made no essential difference to this situation.. In particular, he pointed out that the 1808 General Conference rejected a motion to list the Sermons, the Notes, and Fletcher’s *Checks to Antinomianism* among the doctrinal standards. The Spring 1987 issue of *Quarterly Review* contained a dissenting view from Thomas C. Oden, in whose judgment Wesley’s Sermons and Notes on the New Testament, and also the “Doctrinal Minutes,” which had been referred to as authoritative by American Conferences before the 1784 “Christmas Conference were, *a fortiori*, denot-

ed by all subsequent references in Methodist constitutional documents to "established standards" of doctrine. Frank Baker's apparently neglected study of "The Doctrines in the Discipline" generally favors Oden's position, but would also imply that the "Doctrinal Tracts" would have an equal claim to be "established standards." Just how welcome such a conclusion would be, with all its practical implications for teaching and preaching and the required studies of aspirants to ministry, is a topic for fascinating speculation.

We must note that, in the United Methodist Church's Constitution, the Restrictive Rules as they have stood since the 1968 union (Section III, para. 16, Articles I-II), preclude the revocation, alteration or change of the Articles and of the Confession of Faith, but do not extend that protection to any other instrument. Article I further forbids the General Conference to "establish any new standards or rules of doctrine contrary to our present existing and established standards of doctrine." Since this prohibition is contained only in Article I, as derived from the preceding Constitution of the Methodist Church (section 2, para. 9), it may be read as being in apposition to the entrenchment of the Articles, and therefore (by parity of reasoning) as being also in apposition to the entrenchment of the Confession of Faith. (It would be embarrassing if further study of the two confessional documents were to reveal an unnoticed incompatibility between the Articles and the Confession — say, on the nature of sanctification — so that the Restrictive terms of Article I were to strike down Article II). Clearly, the negotiation of the 1968 union and that of the United Methodist Constitution left some work undone. One such omission was of the spelling out of the status of the Sermons and the Notes. We must assume, not that the responsible negotiators were careless, but that the question had simply not been raised in their experience, nor in the experience of those who appointed them and to whom they reported. Be that as it may, the status of the Sermons and the Notes is undefined, but clearly not on the same footing as the Articles and the Confession. To this extent, at least, Heitzenrater seems to be essentially correct, however uncomfortable that the conclusion may be.

Before we leave the subject of the Restrictive Rules, we must observe that in the future greater precision will be needed if we are to see them in a clear historical light. The 1808 text, repeatedly appealed to but not carefully cited, allowed for revision of *all* the elements of the constitution, after consultation with the Annual Conferences. The absolute entrenchment of articles and society rules and right to trial is a later development of 1832. This detail may seem trivial, but here again we meet an ominous symptom: the degree to which history is appealed to without the facts being checked suggests that we are, collectively, not loving God very much with our minds.

What is the meaning of "established"? Richard Heitzenrater's research suggests, as already observed, that the statutory process has not given the Sermons (or the Notes) a status comparable with that of the Articles and the Confession. There is no body of precedent in doctrinal trials to which appeal can be made to determine whether or not the Sermons have been cited or otherwise used to test the orthodoxy of any specific doctrine or of the proponent of any particular doctrine.³ When an unofficial move was made among British Wesleyans⁴ to appeal to the Sermons as testimony against modernizing trends in theology, the Wesleyan Conference responded with a resolution defining the authority and role of both Sermons and Notes as "Standards of preaching and belief"

rather than decrees “intended to impose a system of formal or speculative Theology” — a response which must be examined more fully further on. This moment of decision, as well as being important in the history of British Methodism, and all the more significant because it led to the wording of the Deed of Union of British Methodism in 1932, is even more interesting for this present study because the essential impetus came from the wider circles of world Methodism — in this case, from the long independent Methodist Church in Canada. No such moment of decision has faced the American General Conference.

The absence of the Sermons (and Notes) from any body of judicial precedent is all the more significant because the branches of American Methodism have from early times prescribed procedures for trials for doctrinal cause. The present title of the chargeable offense, whether alleged of a clergyperson or lay member (*Book of Discipline 2000*, ¶ 2624) is “dissemination of doctrines contrary to the established standards of doctrine of the United Methodist Church” (the denomination being now specifically defined than in the 1996 *Discipline*). The earlier Methodist formulations specified “doctrines which are contrary to our Articles of Religion.” About 1880, both in the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, the phrase, “or established standards of doctrine,” was added. The addition is of uncertain interpretation: is it in apposition to “the Articles of Religion,” or (as is the more natural reading) does it refer to additional, unnamed, standards, written or unwritten, statutory or customary? A partial answer seems to have been felt necessary and therefore to be provided by the forms of words given in the 1939 (i. e., the first) *Discipline* of the Methodist Church, U.S.A. (see paras. 621, 674, 643, 665). Bishops may be charged with “disseminating, publicly or privately, doctrines which are contrary to the Articles of Religion, or the established standards of doctrine;” other Travelling Preachers’ doctrinal offenses may be “contrary to our Articles of Religion, or to our other existing and established standards of doctrine,” which in turn may or not mean exactly the same as the peril awaiting Local Preachers of teaching “contrary to our Articles of Religion, or to our other present existing and established standards of doctrine.” What difference is made here between “existing” and “present existing”? Were these terms inserted in case the General Conference might need to add new doctrinal laws? It must be assumed that any such measures would, in accordance with the Restrictive Rules (1939: paras. 9:1 and 422:1), carefully avoid being “contrary to our existing and established standards of doctrine.” The curious varieties of wording remained essentially unchanged throughout the history of the Methodist Church (U.S.A.), into its final (1964) *Discipline*, ¶¶ 921, 944, and 961.

Another way in which “standards” might be “established” is in their being required reading for candidates for ministry, in the manner apparently contemplated in “Our Doctrinal History” under the term, “the traditional standard exposition of distinctive Methodist teaching.” The lists of prescribed reading for prospective preachers must be noticed. The tale is complicated, and one example, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, must suffice. The 1878 *Discipline* requires candidates for admission on trial to read Wesley’s sermons on Justification by Faith and the Witness of the Spirit, and probationer’s to read successive volumes of his sermons (presumably from T.O. Summers’ four-volume edition) in each year of their probation. In 1886, the probationers have the numbers of the sermons spelled out: I-XXVI (and Notes on Gospels and Acts), first year; XXVII-LII (and Notes on Epistles and

Revelation), second year. The Mexican preachers on probation read I-IX, first year; XV-XX, second year; XXXIV-XXXIX, third year; XL-XLVII, fourth year — and not the Notes. (The Sermons are entitled "Wesley's Doctrinal Standards," which suggests the use of Burwash's Canadian edition.) Move on to 1890, and, while these requirements remain, there are now rules for Local Preachers. Candidates for Deacon's Orders read the Notes, and refer to the sermons, while candidates for Elder's orders read Sermons I-II. 1898 sees additions for Japanese preachers: Sermons I-XII, first year; XIII-XXV, second year; XXVI-XXXIX, third year; XL-LII, fourth year. Mexican Local Preachers, aspirants for the Diaconate, read *Justification by Faith and Witness of the Spirit*; aspirants for the eldership, "Wesley's Sermons." 1902, and the German Preachers appear. As usual, *Justification by Faith and the Witness of the Spirit* engage the attention of those to be admitted on trial. First-year probationers seem to leave Wesley alone — one would suspect a misprint here, because the second year leap into the sermons at XXVII-LII, were it not that the same omission occurs in following editions. German Local Preachers who are candidates for the eldership read Vol. I of the Sermons. The Sermons have a secure place in this scheme — subject, it seems, to their availability in translation — at least in the case of the travelling preachers.

What of the doctrinal conditions for church membership? The "General Rules" assume that would-be Methodists themselves assume the conventional orthodoxy of the Prayer Book, but require only that we profess to desire to be saved from our sins (which assumes God, as the one sinned against, and the Atonement, as the means of salvation, and the Spirit, the Giver of life), and to flee from the wrath to come (which assumes judgment by Christ). The further requirements as to use of the means of grace assume the divine institution of the sacraments and the divine authority attached to the searching of the Scriptures. In the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, members were required to profess acceptance of the Articles of Religion. In various parts of world Methodism, differing stipulations have been laid down as to profession of belief by members, most often in the form of the Apostles' Creed (as effectively in the United Methodist *Discipline...2000*, ¶. 216: "profess their faith in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth; in Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Spirit"); but the Sermons have never been mentioned in this context. This is entirely unsurprising. The sermons are, by their very nature, if they are standards at all, standards for preaching and for preachers. However, there is also a general agreement among the miscellaneous Methodist Disciplines that lay members are subject to stricture if they disseminate doctrines contrary to Methodism's established standards. "Dissemination" suggests the assumption of a teaching role, or something more than purely individual action, but only specific cases would call for precise determination. How, in any such cause, the Sermons could be cited as authorities, remains unclear.

Another possible sense of "established"—which overlaps with the possible meanings of "standards"—is that of "landmark documents," a phrase applied to the Articles and Confession by the 1972 Statement on Doctrinal Standards. The appellation has been deplored,³ for several reasons, particularly that it relegates the documents to the rank of monuments which are no longer muniments — that is, of historically interesting and once important decisions which may no longer be binding on or even significantly helpful to people of the present. James F. White has warned us⁶ that the most destructive thing we can do to symbols is to display them in museum show-cases. Unlike muniments, which,

however old, preserve effective legal title to rights or property, mere monuments can be ignored, or admired without commitment, or even apologized for.⁷ Certainly, the Articles have been officially characterized⁸ as having a historical role, as placing Methodism within the classical tradition of Reformed Christianity, but this characterization was not intended to remove them from a normative role by historical remoteness.

Another, and very different, reason to deprecate this title is the ambiguity of the term "land-mark." It may refer to some conspicuous feature of the landscape by which we may find out where we are, or to which we may wish to make our way. From a nautical point of view, however, it is an object on the shore which may indeed tell mariners where they are in relation to land, but will usually also warn them away from rocks and shoals: the land-mark will always be something to espy from a safe distance. When the framers of the 1972 report chose this expression, they surely did not consciously choose a metaphor with these negative undertones; but symbols work by a sort of undertow — they have a habit of commending themselves to us for subliminal reasons which we should not wish openly to admit, and of working upon our subconscious to produce effects quite opposite to those which we thought we intended.

Another sense in which these sermons may be "established," not in a juridical sense but in terms of conscious affirmation and considered attention and respect, is in the arena of study. The *Discipline* no longer includes prescribed reading lists; discretion is left to those who teach—and to those who study—United Methodist History, Doctrine and Polity. This situation allows the Sermons to be seen and appreciated in relation to each of these three areas of research. The texts can hardly be interpreted justly without regard to their historical setting; they are *ex professo* statements of doctrine; and their character is more normative for the character and functioning of (United) Methodist polity and governance than polity and governance are normative for their interpretation.

It is in the teaching context that we must most directly and explicitly ask ourselves what we are looking for in the Sermons, and what expectations are based on our understanding of their status. Are they evidence for the theology of John (and, in the case of one sermon and several hymns adduced in whole or in part, of Charles) Wesley? Are they a historical indication of where our denomination once stood? Are they a standard for us now? To the first question we must add a supplementary: is the theology of John (and Charles) Wesley *per se* normative for (United) Methodism? To the third question a further supplementary must be added: which Sermons exactly are we considering? These questions do not divide tidily!

The theology of the Wesleys, or of John Wesley alone, cannot be taken as a norm for Methodist teaching. The Wesleys, firstly, were subject to higher doctrinal authorities, to which their heirs are also subject: the divine self-revelation recorded in Holy Scripture, indisputably; and certain doctrinal decisions in the course of Christian history, arguably. (These include the admission of the Gentiles; the assertion of divine creatorhood against Gnosticism and the deity of the Second and Third Persons of the Trinity against Arianism and Macedonianism; the definition of the New Testament canon; the Reformation position on grace and faith). Secondly: if certain Wesley texts are accorded a constitutional status, this can only be by a specific act or instrument, and the texts will be specified. **The status will not depend on authorship.**

This is not to say that the historical study of the entire corpora of the writings of the Wesley brothers is unimportant. The Wesleys and Fletcher are our honored forebears and elder colleagues in the interpretation and advocacy of the Gospel. They represent the first formative period in our particular strand of Christian tradition. In the case of John Wesley, one question is both historical and of canonical importance: what precisely did he leave for his successors as a legal matrix for our doctrinal identity?

The first delineation of the Methodist doctrinal stance was in the Model Deed of 1763, which requires every person appointed to preach in Methodist chapels i.e., houses of worship which were not parish churches of the Church of England should preach "no other doctrines than are contained in Mr. Wesley's *Notes upon the New Testament* and his four volumes of *Sermons* by him published." The four volumes published to that date were I, II, and III (36 sermons) and IV (7 sermons), which had appeared in 1746, 1748, 1750 and 1760 respectively; an undated second edition of Vol. III had added a further sermon, on "Wandering Thoughts." Vol. IV had included with the sermons several tracts: *Advice to the Methodists with Regard to Dress* (John Wesley), *The Duties of Husbands and Wives*, *Directions to Servants*, John Wesley's *Thoughts on Christian Perfection*, and *Christian Instructions extracted from a late French Author*. These are clearly not sermons, and most are not of Wesley's composition.

In 1771, John Wesley issued a collected edition of his *Works*. The first four volumes of the final thirty-two included the forty-four sermons, together with a further nine, (which had been printed separately in 1758, 1765, 1767, 1768 and 1770), and, in Vol. IV, the tracts on dress, on husbands and wives, on children and on servants, and the opening of *An Extract from Mr. Law's Treatise on Christian Perfection*, which was continued in Vol. V. In this series of four volumes, the order of the sermons on the previous editions was altered. The editor of the third edition of Wesley's *Works*, writing in 1831, assumed that the Model Deed referred to the first four volumes of the 1771 *Works*, and that the 53 sermons therein contained were those which, with the *Notes*, embodied the doctrines of the Methodist (that is, the Wesleyan Methodist) Connexion.

In 1787-8, Mr. Wesley issued what was to be his last edition of his *Sermons*, in eight volumes. Vols. I-IV were, in both content and order, as those of 1746, 1748, 1750 (plus "Wandering Thoughts") and 1760. This was the edition of which a copy was bequeathed in Mr. Wesley's will to every preacher in the Connexion.

The (British) Wesleyan Conference judged it necessary, because of questions raised by historical research, and resultant doubts affecting the construction of the Model Deed of 1832, to seek legal advice as to which edition of the *Sermons* is authoritative. The opinion of Counsel, Mr. Owen Thompson, was that the reference to the "first four volumes of *Sermons*" must be to the 1787-8 edition, explicitly entitled as being of *Sermons*, which would therefore include 44 sermons, ("Wandering Thoughts" being one of them), but not the Tracts. This opinion was adopted by the Wesleyan Conference,⁹ and inherited by the Uniting Conference of the Methodist Church of Great Britain in 1932.

Although this issue, and the method of resolving it by legal interpretation of a legal instrument, have been found amusingly and uniquely British and eccentric (this may or may not be a tautology), it is not irrelevant to Wesley's own intentions and his understanding of a church's constitution and discipline. The reversion in the final edition of the

Sermons to the form assumed in the Model Deed is probably, as Albert Outler himself observed,¹¹ a move to ensure legal and moral consistency for the Methodist Societies and their preachers. Another, more personal, motive may have been the desire to be able still to assert that he himself was and had been since 1738 doctrinally consistent, against the charges of enemies who accused him and the Methodists in general of being blown about by every wind of doctrine.

We must also notice the use which Wesley made, in his apologetic, of the Homilies of the Church of England, themselves sermons, and sermons which were formally given by the Church of England official status as doctrinal platform and at the same time as pastoral models. *This duality of function is most important to any realistic appreciation of the "Standard Sermons."* The Homilies are not cited as the work of any individual¹¹ — Wesley shows no interest in whether Cranmer wrote any particular Homily or Homilies, and there is no clear evidence whether he knew anything about their varied authorship — but as expressions of the mind of the Church of his allegiance and ordination. (Allegiance first: he could not receive a University degree, let alone be ordained without signing the Articles). Although Mr. Wesley did not go so far as to claim for his *Sermons* a status comparable with the Homilies,¹² no informed contemporary observer could be unaware that the *Sermons* were to fulfil for the Societies a role analogous with that played by the Books of Homilies for the Church of England. (John Wesley could hardly have foreseen to how insignificant a role in the Church of England the Homilies were destined to be limited).

There is, all things considered, a persuasive case for the position that the Forty-Four "Standard Sermons" have a distinct status as a denominational platform for world Methodism and therefore for United Methodism in particular. There is also a case for recommending to United Methodism an account of its confessional statements and their relationship comparable with the stance of the British Methodist Deed of Union: firstly, the revelation recorded in Scripture; secondly, the crucial decisions of the Early Church; thirdly, the reprinting decisions of the Reformation; fourthly, the distinctive emphases of (world) Methodism. Such an account would then continue to examine what has in American Methodism come to called, with regrettable lack of criticism, the "Wesleyan Quadrilateral,"¹³ — though that is too large a topic to be broached here. The enlarged body of the "Fifty-Three" Sermons would then be usable as a commentary by John Wesley himself on the application of the standard of practical divinity set up by the Forty-Four.¹⁴ By the same token, the rest of the Wesley corpus, in its historical context, with due notice paid to the developments in John Wesley's views,¹⁵ would retain its significance as a very important, but not the only significant, and not the normative, phase of Methodism's doctrinal history.

The use of the Forty-Four as a standard in the teaching of (United) Methodist doctrine in its form as practical divinity must present teacher and class with interesting questions of exegesis. One such is obviously this: is there any plan detectable in the Sermons as set out in the "first four volumes"? (This matter is important for interpreting the Standard Sermons as a confessional statement, and also for curriculum planning. If we can argue for a considered sequence in the set of forty-four, then, especially if we have to frame a curriculum around a selection of the material, we shall be at pains to pick out sermons from cardinal points in the overall pattern, if that can be done). The division by the con-

tents of those four volumes (quite apart from the additional material included in the original publications) is entirely unhelpful. Suggestions that there is such a detectable order have been put forward by notable scholars,¹⁶ and it is with some diffidence that I offer yet one more schema. At least, these various suggestions agree with the magisterial observation of Dr. Frank Baker,¹⁷ that "It is quite clear that these volumes were deliberately prepared as a body of preached doctrine rather than a collection of favourite sermons. This very deliberateness was yet another means of identifying the Methodists, and became another instrument for securing their independence of the church [sc., the established Church of England]."

We may divide the Forty-Four into four groups: One—which might be entitled "The Manifesto," on Salvation by Faith and the Imperatives of Salvation; Two—"Life in the Spirit and the New Birth"; Three—"Christianity in its Native Form," or "The Great Privilege (and Responsibility) of Those that are Born of God"; and Four—"Cautions and Correctives for the Christian Warfare." These four groups do not correspond to the contents of the successive volumes of the first or any edition, and vary in length: seven in the first (I-VII) and in the second (VIII-XIV), 14 in the third (XV-XXVIII) and 16 in the fourth.

The first group exhibits an unmistakable manifesto character. Four sermons (I, V-VII) state, as the essential doctrinal basis of the Christian life, salvation/justification by, the righteousness of, faith. This is not simply the vital principle of Protestantism (and therefore of the Church of England): it is that vital principle because it is in itself vital to life given by grace, and the only foundation upon which life can be lived as restored by the sovereignty of God. The urgency of the need to build upon that foundation, the foundation of Christ himself, in order to receive that holiness without which none shall see God, is the burden of Sermons II and III, while Sermon IV asserts that these principles are conspicuously ignored in contemporary, nominally Christian, England, and specifically in the professedly Christian University of Oxford. This series spring from the period of 1738 and the immediately following years, which John Wesley himself, in his *Short History of Methodism*,¹⁸ identified as the start of the revived preaching of salvation by faith, and as the effective inception of the Methodist mission in its definitive form.

The second group addresses the strategy of the quest for holiness on the principle of faith: life in the Spirit. Living as those freed from condemnation (VIII), believers know and comport themselves as adopted children (IX); both the Spirit in person, and their own spirits in growing consonance with the Spirit, assure them of this relationship (X-XI). The support divinely provided in the Means of Grace (XII) must be used in faith (no merit, no magic); the divine purpose pursued by the divine will in these means is the Circumcision of the Heart (XIII). It is significant that this sermon, the only one of the Forty-Four which antedates the personal crisis and theological transition of 1738, is now employed to indicate both the continuity of the now rectified and completed programme with the quest undertaken in Oxford days, but also amplified with a crucial correcting section (I.8; lines 4-14 on p. 155 of the 1944 London edition). The addition attests to the assuring "revelation of Christ in our hearts," the gift of "a sure confidence in His pardoning mercy, wrought in us by the Holy Ghost." The new birth is further described in terms of its first-fruits (XIV).

The third, longer, group of sermons moves on to depict the new life in detail. After an introduction (XV) on "the Great Privilege of those that are Born of God" (i.e., freedom

from sin), the single source of XVI-XXVIII is Our Lord's own authoritative account in the Sermon on the Mount of "Christianity in its native form," (XVII: IV), "as delivered by its great Author" — that is, not merely the founder of a religion, but as the One who depicts this life and is also the One who gives it, and has promised that those who look into this law of liberty will be perfected "as our Father which is in heaven is perfect." The Beatitudes are clearly portrayed (XVI-XVIII) as the foundational passage, for this summary but emphatic reference to Matthew v. 21-48 occurs here, instead of an exposition of it in its canonical position, which would follow Sermon XXI. The passages after the Beatitudes are in pairs of related topics: salt of the earth and the reaffirmation of the Law (XXI, XXII); the treasure of the heart and serving two masters (XXIII, XXIV); judging and entering through the narrow gate (XXV, XXVI); false prophets and insincere protestations of devotion (XXVII, XXVIII).

The concluding fourth group addresses specific areas of spiritual danger and challenge, in terms of Cautions and Correctives. Antinomianism is confronted, in sober practical terms, in XXIX-XXXI. Fanaticism ("Enthusiasm"), both a danger in revivalism¹⁹ and a convenient stalking-horse for critics of revival, is handled in XXXII. After this area of polemic, it is natural to caution against bigotry (XXXIII) — specifically, bigotted prejudice against Methodism and lay preaching — and then to appeal for catholicity of spirit (XXXIV). The Methodist teaching on Christian perfection is defended and explained (XXXV), and guidance is offered for specific difficulties in the spiritual life (XXXVI, XXXVII). It is at first glance surprising then to return to Original Sin and the New Birth (XXXVIII, XXXIX); but these subjects are placed here to deepen the awareness both of the need for God's healing of the soul, and of the abiding need for the immediate operation of life-giving grace. Discussion then returns (XL-XLIV) to dangers and opportunities of the Christian life: loss of faith and love; depression; self-denial; control of the tongue; the use of money.

Teaching the Forty-Four, or a selection of them, as part of a confessional platform (and a United Methodist History, Doctrine and Polity syllabus cannot avoid doing this) will consider them under the aspect of a denominational standard in homiletical shape. By their very presentation in this shape, the Sermons ask to be evaluated *as sermons*. This evaluation will not be a simple procedure, and will be very frustrating and unrealistic until the historical context is allowed for. Those pieces that were in fact delivered as sermons were addressed to an exceptional auditory, and in a setting where they functioned as programmatic manifesto: addressed to the University of Oxford, they were in effect addressed to the Church of England at large. (This observation would have applied with equal force if they had been addressed to the University of Cambridge). The remainder are apparently meant for reading, rather than for uttering and hearing. We shall not now (if ever we did) offer the Standard Sermons as models of individual sermons, but as models of sermonic intent: "to find the way to heaven" (Preface, para. 5). John Wesley based the sermons on Scripture, by means also of consultation with "those who are experienced in the things of God." We note, however, that experience, simply as experience, is not normative. The Sermons, like the *Notes* and "our hymns," are not designed so much to reflect, as to *direct* experience.

The Standard Sermons assume, with limited reference or discussion, the framework of Christian orthodoxy. Their particular format belongs less within the genre of doctrinal divinity than of "practical divinity" (to stay with the 18th-century nomenclature), but this

fact should not mislead us as to their theological seriousness. In the Wesleys’ early days, the advice given to persons intending to read for orders by a major authority, Daniel Waterland,²⁰ was to begin deliberately with practical divinity, that is, by reading sermons from selected authors, both Anglicans and others. The sermons assumed doctrinal divinity, and fed back a keen existential interest into the study of the text of Scripture and of controversial divinity. To cite a Wesleyan Methodist theologian of the last century, F.W. Macdonald:²¹ “Devotional theology is the flower of which dogma is the root.”

In what sense would a class be asked to *evaluate* a text that has a standard status, even as “standards of preaching and belief”? In the case of the Forty-Four, the invitation is already given by the author, and that applies to them both as sermons (or homiletic essays) and also even as a doctrinal platform. Mr. Wesley invites (and hence the church which maintains his selected four volumes in a standard role also invites) those Christians who differ from us in judgment to show us a better way, by gentle persuasion. No other denomination does this – and that includes such churches as profess to have no creed but the Bible; Methodism *does* have doctrinal instruments additional to Scripture, and the Sermons form one of them. John Wesley’s invitation to others to offer correction has been characterized as gently ironic. But it still has the air of sincerity. Have we the courage to repeat the invitation, and to live with the resulting responses?

THE “STANDARD SERMONS” BY TITLE, AND BY PLACE IN THE EDITIONS

The “44” <i>[No.; Title; first known date of publication]</i>	The “53” <i>[and in WJW]</i>	Not among the “44” Anthology
[Vol. I: 1746]		
I: Salvation by Faith (1738)	1	p. 39
II: The Almost Christian (1741)	2	p. 61
III: Awake, Thou That Sleepest (1742)	3	p. 85
IV: Scriptural Christianity (1744)	4	p. 97
V: Justification by Faith (1746)	5	p. 111
VI: The Righteousness of Faith (1749)	6	om.
VII: The Way to the Kingdom (1746)	7	p. 123
VIII: The First-Fruits of the Spirit	8	om.
IX: The Spirit of Bondage and Adoption (1746)	9	p. 133
X: The Witness of the Spirit, I (1746)	10	p. 145
	11: The Witness of the Spirit, II (1767)	p. 393
XI: The Witness of our own Spirit (1746)	12	om.
	13: On Sin in Believers (1763)	p. 359
	14: Repentance in Believers (1767)	p. 405

	15: The Great Assize (1758)	p. 311
XII: The Means of Grace (1746)	16	p. 157
[Vol. II: 1748]		
XIII: The Circumcision of the Heart (1733)	17	p. 13
XIV: The Marks of the new Birth (1748)	18	p. 173
XV: The Great Privilege of Those that are Born of God (1748)	19	p. 183
	20: The Lord our Righteousness (1765)	p. 381
XVI: Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount, Discourse I (1748)	21	om.
XVII: Discourse II (1748)	22	om.
XVIII: Discourse III (1748)	23	om.
XIX: Discourse IV (1748)	24	p. 193
XX: Discourse V (1748)	25	p. 207
XXI: Discourse VI (1748)	26	p. 223
XXII: Discourse VII (1748)	27	om.
XXIII: Discourse VIII (1748)	28	p. 239
XXIV: Discourse IX (1748)	29	om.
XXV: Discourse X (1748)	30	om.
XXVI: Discourse XI (1748)	31	om.
XXVII: Discourse XII (1748)	32	om.
XXVIII: Discourse XIII (1748)	33	om.
XXIX: The Origin, Nature, Properties [Property, 1771] and Use of the Law (1750)	34	p. 255
XXX: The Law Established through Faith, I (1750)	35	p. 267
XXXI: The Law Established through Faith, II (1750)	36	p. 277
XXXII: The Nature of Enthusiasm (1750)	37	om.
XXXIII: A Caution against Bigotry (1750)	38	p. 287
XXXIV: Catholic Spirit (1750)	39	p. 299
XXXV: Christian Perfection (1750)	40	om.
XXXVI: Wandering Thoughts (1762) [in 2 nd edn of Vol. III]	41	om.
	[N.B. retained in 1787/8 edn.]	
XXXVII: Satan's Devices (1750)	42	om.
	43: The Scripture Way of Salvation (1765)	p. 371
XXXVIII: Original Sin (1759)	44	p. 325
XXXIX: The New Birth (1760)	45	p. 335
XL: The Wilderness State (1760)	46	om.

XLI: Heaviness Through Manifold Temptations (1760)	47	om.
XLII: Self-Denial (1760)	48	om.
XLIII: The Cure of Evil-Speaking (1760)	49	om.
XLIV: The Use of Money (1760)	50	p. 347
	51: The Good Steward (1768)	om.
	52: The Reformation of Manners (1763)	om
	53: On the Death of Mr. Whitfield (1770)	om.

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NOTES

1. Printed in *Notes and Queries* [London], 4th Series, No. 84 (August 7, 1869), p. 114, from *Rawlinson Letters*, Vol. XXIX, No. 102, Bodleian Library [Oxford], text supplied by W.H.Bliss of the Bodleian. It was of this sermon that John Wesley wrote [*Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 1: *Sermons I: 1-33*, ed. Albert C. Outler, Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1984, p. 158]: "It was not my design when I wrote ever to print the latter part of the following sermon. But the false and scurrilous accounts of it which have been published almost in every corner of the nation, constrain me to publish the whole, just as it was preached, that men of reason may judge for themselves."
2. Cf. Rupert E. Davies, *Making Sense of the Creeds*, London, Epworth Press 1988, and H. Maldwyn Hughes, *Christian Foundations: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine*, Revised Edition, London, Epworth Press 1933 (an American edition of the earlier version was published as *Basic Beliefs*, New York, Cincinnati, Chicago, Abingdon Press, 1929).
3. In British Methodism since the 1932 Union, I am aware only of these doctrinal cases: as to the Virgin Birth (acquittal); as to the Divinity of Christ (conviction; the decisive criterion seems to have been the historic Creeds); on the possibility of "Christian atheism" (conviction; appeal to Scripture and the Creeds, but really to the entirety of the Christian tradition); on "the conferring of what purports to be baptism upon persons who have already been baptized at any time" (appeal to Methodist custom and usage, with allusion to "one baptism" in the Nicene Creed, and the *ephapax* quality of Baptism assumed in the New Testament). Whether British Methodism would consent to the development of a case-law approach to doctrinal trials is quite unclear—legal advice has discouraged it unequivocally. American Methodism is not likely to adopt such a method.
4. The situation is described by Martin Wellings in "Throttled by a Dead Hand? The

'Wesleyan standard' in nineteenth and early twentieth century British Methodism," *Methodist History* XXXVII (1998-1999) 162-174. The precipitate is found in the Wesleyan Conference *Minutes*, 1917, p. 375; 1918, p. 247; 1919, p. 264; 1920, p. 264-5; John S. Simon ed., *Wesleyan Methodist Church: A Summary of Methodist Law and Discipline being a New Edition of 'The Large Minutes' prepared by Order of the Conference*, fifth edition revised to the Conference of 1923 by John Elsworth, London, Methodist Publishing House 1924, 277-8. Behind the British decision stands the work of the Canadian Nathanael Burwash, in whose personal and professional history the Standard Sermons has played a determinative role: see Marguerite Van Die, *An Evangelical Mind* [Kingston / Montreal / London, McGill-Queen's Studies in the History of Religion, 3], McGill-Queen's University Press 1989, esp. pp. 20, 61, 74, 100-101, 152. The connection is shown by H. Maldwyn Hughes, *Wesley's Standards in the Light of To-Day*, London, Epworth Press 1921.

5. On the negative overtones of "landmark" language, note Robert E. Cushman, "Church Doctrinal Standards Today," *Religion in Life* XLIV/4 (Winter 1975) 401-411, esp. 403.

6. See James F. White, "A Good Word for William Dowsing," as reprinted in revised form in *Christian Worship in North America. A Retrospect 1955-1995*, Collegeville, Liturgical Press 1997. 45-50.

7. Cf. Albert C. Outler, "An Olive Branch to the Romans, 1970's-Style: United Methodist Initiative, Roman Catholic Response," [on the 1970 General Conference reassuring Roman Catholics that Articles XIV, XIX, XXI, XXIV, XXV, XXVIII, XXX, and XXXIV of the Anglican XXXIX and Articles XIV, XV, XVIII, XIX, XX and XXI of the Methodist XXV belong to "a time of reckless strife" and "old, unhappy, far-off tales / And battles long ago"], *Methodist History* XIII/2 (January 1975) 52-56.

8. Note the authoritative episcopal remarks of Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury in their introduction to the 1792 *Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America. With Explanatory Notes...* (Philadelphia, Tenth Edition, n.d.), p. iv: "...the articles of religion maintained, more or less, in part or in whole, by every reformed church in the world." (By "reformed," we must understand "Protestant," as in the terminology of the English Coronation Oath: "the Protestant Reformed Religion.")

9. Wesleyan *Minutes*, 1914, pp. 614-626; Appendix V (pp. 571-9) in Simon & Elsworth *Summary*, etc. (see N. 4).

10. Albert C. Outler, in *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 1: *Sermons I. Sermons 1-33* (ed. Albert C. Outler), Nashville, Abingdon Press 1984), 43-4.

11. For John Wesley's citation of the Homilies and short titles of those cited or alluded to, note *Works* [1872 edn] I: 90 II: 454 Curnock: "the words of our Church"; 164 III: 101 Curnock: as evidence of the doctrine of the Church of England, 215 II: Curnock: of Salvation; 224 III: 274-5: "fundamental doctrines of the Church"; III: 30 IV: 425 Curnock: true ... faith; V:61 III: 233 Sugden: for Rogation Week, 239 III: 430 Sugden: of Salvation; VII: 204 [in general; their binding nature]; VIII: 23 [of Salvation], 31 [of the true, lively and Christian faith]; 54 [of Salvation, two quotes]; 55 [of true ... faith; of good works annexed unto faith; on fasting]; 73-4 [against the fear of death]; 74 [on the Passion]; 75 [on the Resurrection; on the Sacrament]; 103 [on true ... faith; on the Resurrection; for Whit-Sunday]; 104 [on ... receiving ... the sacrament]; 104-5 [for Rogation Week]; 105 [true ... faith; on the Sacrament; on certain places of Holy Scripture; for Rogation Week]; 129 [true .. faith]; 130 [true ... faith]; 473-4 [true ... faith]; 503 [in general] 507 [W. and others led to true view of faith, after return from Georgia, by reading the Homilies]. The Homilies are anonymous. The authors of those cited are reckoned to be: Thomas Cranmer (of Salvation; of the true, lively and Christian faith; of Good Works annexed unto Faith), anonymous (against the Fear of Death); Edmund Grindal [?] (of fasting); Erasmus and others unidentified (for them which take offence at certain places of the Holy Scripture); anonymous, via Taverner's *Postils* (concerning the Death and Passion of our Saviour Jesu Christ; of the Resurrection of our Saviour Jesus Christ);

John Jewel [probably] (of the worthy receiving and reverent esteeming of the sacrament of the body and blood of Christ); anonymous (for the days of Rogation Week). See G. E. Corrie, ed., *Certain Sermons*, Cambridge 1850, pp. x-xiii. Wesley never mentions authors; he quotes the Homilies as Church utterances, not as those of individuals.

12. Cf W.J. Sparrow Simpson, *John Wesley and the Church of England* (London, SPCK for the Literature Association of the Church Union, 1934, p. 89): "An independent Standard of Doctrine is here [in the 1784 Trust Deed] set up. But that is an attitude which no member of the English Church, least of all one of its clergy, can consistently adopt. It is obvious that no man can raise a commentary which he has written, and sermons which he has delivered, into a Standard of Doctrine which must be followed by all his adherents, within the limits of a Church which has distinctive Standards of its own. The doctrinal Authority of the English Church is here by implication overruled, and another authority established in its place."

13. There is no room here for a discussion of the "Quadrilateral." The concept has not yet acquired an official status in British Methodism, though moves in that direction are detectable.

14. On the value of the added sermons. see Sugden, *The Standard Sermons*, Vol. II, 148-150.

15. A topic of continuing interest; in addition to the standard expositions of John Wesley's thought, note A.S. Graves, "Wesley's Variations in Belief, and the Influence of the Same on Methodism," *Methodist Review* LXIX (March 1887) 192-211; Helen Foss, "John Wesley's Thought Development," *Methodist Review* LXXXV (November 1903) 893-908; John Allen Knight, "Aspects of Wesley's Theology after 1770," *Methodist History* VI/3 (April 1968) 33-42.

16. Particularly Nathanael Burwash, *Wesley's Doctrinal Standards, Part I* (1881), and Kenneth J. Collins, *Wesley on Salvation* (1989).

17. Frank Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England*, London, Epworth Press 1970, p. 110, after a demonstration from the Sermon Register that the selected sermons were not simply the ones most frequently preached nor from the texts most frequently preached on.

18. In the 1872 reprint of *John Wesley's Works*, VIII, 347-351.

19. The grossest aspects of the issue (which was not confined to the Methodist phases of the Evangelical Revival) and of the polemical literature, are, for good reasons, not noticed in this sermon. Note Albert M. Lyles, *Methodism Mocked: The Satiric Reaction to Methodism in the Eighteenth Century* (London, Epworth Press, 1960); Cedric B. Cowing, "Sex and Preaching in the Great Awakening," *American Quarterly* XX/3 (Fall 1968) 628-644, for an earlier phase of the Evangelical Revival.

20. Daniel Waterland, *Advice to a Young Student. With a Method of Study for the First Four Years*, first written before 1700, published in 1729 or 1730; in his *Works*, 3rd edn., ed. William van Mildert, Vol. IV (Oxford, University Press MDCCCLVII), pp. 393-415. John Wesley read this in 1731: see V, H, H, Green *The Young Mr. Wesley: A study of John Wesley and Oxford*, [1961], London, Wyvern Books edn., 1963, p. 296. Jean Ness, a student in the Colloquium on Standard Sermons of Wesley at the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Indiana (Fall Semester 2000) remarked in class that the Forty-Four Sermons gave her the impression of being addressed as if to a theological seminary. This observation is very astute. Waterland's and also Wesley's assumption is that, in a church, and in a voluntary movement, both of which had yet to adopt the Tridentine notion of a seminary, much preparation for ministry would take place by directed reading — in, as it were, a seminary without walls. A personal observation: in recent ecumenical dialogue between the North and South Indiana Conferences and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, Indiana-Kentucky Synod, I was startled when senior United Methodist colleagues were themselves startled by the suggestion that the Sermons (or the *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*) could be cited as evidence of United Methodist teaching, since in their seminary days no such view had been mentioned. The effect of such a turn in a conversation in the setting of inter-church encounter can better be imagined than described.

21. F.W. Macdonald, *The Dogmatic Principle in Relation to Christian Belief* [Fernley Lecture 1881], London, Wesleyan-Methodist Book-Room 1881, p. 17. Milton S. Terry, in his contribution to "The Essentials of Religion according to John Wesley," in the *Proceedings of the Fourth Ecumenical Methodist Conference ... Toronto ... 1901* (Cincinnati, Jennings & Graham, n.d.), pp. 190-191, singled out "A Caution against Bigotry" and "The Catholic Spirit" as keys to the issue, and developed a summary of Methodist doctrine as: all are sinners, all have been redeemed by Christ, all are called to receive that redemption in obedient faith, all who obey this call and thus believe are elect, all who obey and persevere shall be saved. This summary may well have influenced W. B. Fitzgerald's "Four Alls" in his *The Roots of Methodism* (London, Charles H. Kelly 1903, p. 173). Terry's research into the Sermons lies also behind his proposed new set of Methodist Articles, which survives as the basis of the Confession of faith of the United Evangelical Church and of its continuing descendant, the Evangelical Congregational Church (see Harold P. Scanlin, "The Origin of the Articles of Faith of the United Evangelical Church," *Methodist History*, XVIII/4 [July 1980], 219-238.) For Terry, the Sermons offered a guide, not only to what Methodism teaches, but also to the direction and manner in which Methodism's doctrinal statements might best be reformulated.