

Practical Divinity

Volume 1

Theology in the
Wesleyan Tradition

Thomas A. Langford

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PRACTICAL DIVINITY
VOLUME 1
THEOLOGY IN THE WESLEYAN TRADITION

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PREFACE

This book is an introduction and an invitation. Introducing a theological tradition that is seldom considered in its entire breadth and continuing vitality, it issues an invitation for interested persons to go beyond this initial presentation to more detailed study.

The title, *Practical Divinity*, originated with John Wesley. The words describe his understanding of the nature and purpose of theology. The use of *Wesleyan Tradition* is the result of much discussion and serious consideration. This phrase was chosen in an attempt to indicate the inner life of the tradition and emphasize the theological core of this movement. The term does not refer to specific ecclesiastical structures within Methodism, such as Wesleyan Methodism in Great Britain or the Wesleyan Church in the United States, nor is it intended to exclude important parts of the movement, such as the Evangelical United Brethren. The word *Methodist* was not used because of its denominational denotations, although this is not an altogether happy decision, since *Methodist* may be a synonym for *Wesleyan*. The decision was made principally in order to root the tradition in John Wesley and to trace his influence among those who are his heirs.

The primary effort of this study is to present the thought of persons and of theological trends with accuracy and fairness. The connections drawn among these thinkers represent one way to depict diverse and often unconscious relationships. The chief goal is to be as inclusive as a reasonable structure will allow and as specific as space and movement will permit. One basic decision needs to be made clear: Only those theologians who have written enough to provide adequate material for general characterization have been discussed.

This volume is an effort to bring the sweep and dynamics of the Wesleyan tradition to the attention of a wide audience. Description, not criticism, has been the primary aim. Thorough assessments of many of the theologians discussed, of the multiple

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trends in Wesleyan theology, and of the relation of this tradition to developments in other traditions are necessary and ongoing tasks, which, it is hoped, this introduction will help to stimulate.

All scholarship is indebted to various predecessors and contemporaries. A wide-ranging survey such as this is especially dependent on many focused studies and monographs to provide detailed investigation of specific individuals, eras, and themes. I am conscious of indebtedness to many creative theologians and historical interpreters.

I wish to thank two individuals—Paul M. Bassett and Grant Wacker—who have generously reviewed the entire text. I especially thank my son, Thomas A. Langford III, who has contributed to the research, discussed ideas, and made stylistic suggestions. Other persons have helpfully commented on parts of the text: Charles W. Brockwell, Jr., Dennis M. Campbell, Robert E. Cushman, Richard P. Heitzenrater, Creighton Lacy, Helmut Nausner, and McMurry S. Richey. To all these, I am indebted.

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CHAPTER 1

A Living Tradition

A tradition is a stream through history. A stream may have neat clear banks, or it may flow across boundaries and be difficult to trace. Some streams seem to remain pure and carry their original water from source to estuary; others continually acquire new content and become mixtures from many springs. The headwaters of some streams are easy to locate, but others are almost impossible to discover. As with streams, so with traditions.

A historical stream is a tradition insofar as it possesses dominant characteristics and conveys an enduring sense of meaning. Tradition releases an inner pulsation that is felt, known by, and shapes those related to it, even if the basic awareness is not fully explicable. Tradition is organic. Staccato-paced sequential events do not, as such, make a cohesive, persisting movement. Traditions, connections of sense and sensibility, tie the past to the present and point, with tentative possibility, to the future. The effort of this book is to explore organic structure, distinctive characteristics, and continuing vitality of the stream of Christian witness to which John Wesley gave impetus.

The Wesleyan movement is one stream in Christian history. Its point of origin is clear and its dominant current can be traced rather well. But the stream does not have neat boundaries. It divides and sometimes flows together again; it often takes on the coloration of the terrain through which it has passed; it experiences expansion and contraction. But through its many changes there have persisted qualities derived from its original source.

There is a tradition through which the spirit of John Wesley continues. Wesley could not have guessed the issue of his work; and he probably would react with surprise, satisfaction, or chagrin at the resulting currents. But from his work sprang the headwaters to a stream that has continued to the present.

Within the Holy, Catholic, Apostolic Church

John Wesley was keenly aware of his heritage in the whole Christian tradition. He was rooted in Scripture as the primary witness to the Creatorship of God, the Lordship of Jesus, and the sustaining presence of the Holy Spirit. Wesley's *Christian Library*, a collection of sources in Christian thought extending from the early church to his own time, suggests the range of his interests and the literature he believed was important for his followers. In this collection, as well as in his extensive editing, he included writings from widely different eras and areas of Christendom, indicating his indebtedness to an impressive array of predecessors. He prized the earliest church; he read Eastern preachers and theologians; he cared for the Roman Catholic spiritual tradition; and he was receptive to the example of the saints.

Wesley's own history was set in England in the Western tradition of the Christian church, refracted through the Reformation and given specific form by the Church of England. But he always retained extended sympathies. To place his movement within the context of the Universal Church is both historically and theologically correct. This is the necessary point of beginning.

A new tradition began with John Wesley; a specific history grew from English origins to spread across the British world and then around the globe. This was an evangelizing movement that regarded the proclamation of the gospel as its primary task. This was an ordering movement that set goals of spiritual maturity for its followers. This was a serving movement that brought new claims of moral responsibility and new visions of hope.

Tradition does matter, because tradition deals with human history concretely formed and distinctively shaped. Tradition is the

formation of the Body of Christ in a specific history; tradition is the actual development of institution and persons, with their beauty and blemishes, their faith and failure, their bricks and blood. So the Wesleyan tradition is important, in its concrete actuality, for those who have been influenced by it.

The Wesleyan tradition has been built upon the foundation of John Wesley's sermons and biblical commentaries, "our doctrines"; has given moral shape to Christian life, "our discipline"; has sung the hymns of Charles Wesley, "our hymns"; and has studied Wesley's other writings and edited works, "our literature." These resources have given rise to dynamic life. Through continuity and change, the Wesleyan tradition has represented an ongoing reality as a part of the "Holy, Catholic, Apostolic Church."

Beginnings

The Wesleyan tradition had its beginnings in John Wesley (1703-1791). The genius of Wesley was expressed in his spirit; he was indomitable in his desire to love God first of all and to love his neighbor through Christlike service. This spirit propelled Wesley's revival movement and has been a sustaining power for his followers.

From his early life in Epworth through his school years, Wesley was devout and studious. He was a natural leader with firm commitments. At Oxford a group was gathered, and distinctive characteristics emerged: exact discipline, liturgical rigor, and visitation of prisons. The members of this small, covenantal community supported, criticized, and encouraged one another in spiritual growth. Generally ridiculed, the group was derided as The Holy Club, the Bible Moths, and the Methodists. The last name finally became fixed upon Wesley and his colleagues as a reproach. Nevertheless, from this beginning the Wesleyan, or Methodist, tradition began to grow. Many members of the original student group were transient, but one remained faithful—John's younger brother Charles (1707-1788). These brothers in the flesh became brothers in faith and common mission.

The early period of John Wesley's life was marked by unusual moral seriousness and disciplined piety. In 1725 he found new depth in the "holy living" tradition of Jeremy Taylor, a seventeenth-century English theologian, and placed great stress on moral achievement and personal religious endeavor. Then with the question of vocation pressing, the brothers volunteered for mission work among the Anglicans in Georgia: John served as a minister; Charles, also ordained, as private secretary to General James Oglethorpe. But their time in the New World was disappointing, and the growth that did take place was thoroughly agonizing. The brothers did not understand themselves well, and they understood the people they served almost not at all. They lacked sensitivity to common modes of life: they were overwrought in their spiritual searching; they worked ineffectively with the settlers: they were unable to evangelize the native inhabitants. Frustration brought retreat. Charles quickly returned to England and John soon followed.

On the voyage to America, a group of Moravians had impressed John with their possession of an assurance of their salvation. As they interrogated him about his own religious convictions, especially about his personal knowledge of Jesus Christ as his Savior, Wesley became distressed. He was uncertain whether he had had an experience such as they described. This concern, once created, continued while he was in Georgia, and upon his return to London he sought out the Moravian community. There Peter Böhler questioned and advised Wesley about his personal faith, further exciting the seeker's troubled spirit.

Wesley studied the doctrine of justification by grace through faith. This doctrine, he became convinced, was a faithful explanation of scriptural teaching and was, as a matter of fact, being realized in the lives of others. On May 21, 1738, Charles underwent a "conversion." John's experience soon followed. The climactic moment came on May 24. Wesley described the occasion in his *Journal*:

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing a change

which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away *my sin*, even *mine*, and saved me from the law of sin and death.¹

With a group of friends, John went to Charles' lodgings, and together they rejoiced and sang a hymn Charles may have written the day before.

Where shall my wondering soul begin?
How shall I all to heaven aspire?
A slave redeemed from death and sin,
A brand plucked from eternal fire,
How shall I equal triumphs raise,
Or sing my great deliverer's praise?

What John Wesley had experienced, he felt compelled to share: He was to proclaim this good news to everyone in every place; he was to "spread scriptural holiness over the land." Experimenting, adapting, risking failure, and meeting opposition, Wesley undertook his ministry afresh.

Strong leaders are seldom easy companions. Driven by a special sense of mission, such people move toward their goals with consuming intensity. John Wesley was such a leader. Surprisingly unconcerned about himself, he marked a path discovered only by tenacious and dangerous exploration. He was willing—indeed he desired—to expend himself and others for his mission. Everything was ordered for the sake of that enterprise. Personal life was arranged by its demands; corporate life was structured to serve its goals. Christian people were a community in mission, people on the way; and Wesley was compulsive in his drive, utterly disciplined by his task, disregarding smaller matters. He was never a relaxed companion; his affection and attention were beyond personal interest. His eye scanned large horizons. He traveled his own way, and others could follow... or not.

The goal was clear: to evangelize his nation. Compelled to share the gospel, he did so with immense energy. The impact of the renewal movement was extraordinary. John Wesley's career

was, according to a Victorian writer, one of "usefulness and locomotion."² He crisscrossed the country as he moved from Bristol to London to Oxford, then to Bath and Leicester, to Nottingham and Newcastle, and later to the reaches of Cornwall, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland. Traveling and preaching, he aroused the nation. "What Wesley did," one writer commented, "was to blow up the still living sparks into flame, to make all England glow as a furnace."³

The movement gained momentum as persons from all walks of life were captured by its fervor. Leadership came from priests of the Church of England William Grimshaw of Haworth and Vincent Perronet of Shoreham. And it came also from a rich variety of others: John Nelson, a stonemason from Bistall; George Story, a printer and publisher; Alexander Mather, a baker; Thomas Oliver, a cobbler; John Cennick, a schoolmaster.

There were also opponents. From the beginning, detractors challenged the movement. By the mid-40s some spoke of the "world against Methodism," and the force of the rejection was potent. With written ridicule and mob violence, the opposition attacked. Even a brief description is shocking: "In 1740 William Seward was first blinded, and then killed, by a Welsh mob, the first, but not the last, Methodist martyr. Many of the preachers were pelted, beaten, stampped on, kicked, stripped, thrown into ponds, dragged along the ground by the hair, drenched with water from fire-hoses, gored by bulls, farrad and feathered."⁴

Theological controversy arose also with the revival movement. Disputes over such doctrines as predestination and human freedom separated evangelical patriots. Wesley and George Whitefield, a friend from Oxford days and a premier evangelist of the era, moved apart. John Cennick and Lady Huntingdon affirmed Calvinist positions and not only parted from the Wesleys but soon broke with the established church.

In spite of opposition and internal conflict, the Wesleyan movement soon took distinctive shape. Newly formed mission life and a characteristic message developed. Organization of ways to share the gospel and nurture persons in Christian life was directed by concrete experience. "Societies" were formed—large

groups that assembled regularly for preaching and spiritual instruction; "classes" were organized—small gatherings of about twelve persons who met for counsel, collection of weekly contributions, and personal testimony; even smaller "bands" of four or five were encouraged for closer spiritual direction. The intention of these arrangements was to introduce the participants to saving faith and, through discipline, to bring faith to fruition.

Wesley sensed a mandate to reach the mass of people who were unchurched and had not heard the gospel. From Oxford days he had ministered to those who were beyond the pale of the church, and when George Whitefield pressed him to begin preaching outside church buildings, he agreed, although with some trepidation. On Monday, April 2, 1739, Wesley undertook his first field preaching. The text for this occasion was "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor." The first step felt firm, and one new possibility led to others. It was as though Wesley had crossed a ridge beyond which a fresh panorama appeared. He became an inveterate preacher, and resolute opposition could not prevent him from reaching the people and talking of God.

At that time, England was going through a period of population displacement from rural communities to manufacturing centers, cities where life was debased by "ignorance, squalor, and the habits of gin-drinking."⁵ The work of John Wesley, Sir Herbert Butterfield remarks, was an important factor for the people in the cities, "the most brutalized section of the population."⁶ In politics and economics, as well as in social conditions, England was undergoing rapid change, and John Wesley was a part of and influenced that change.

The relationship of any single movement to the total society, especially in a time of momentous change, is exceedingly complex. Wesley himself was aware of the tragic maladjustments that accompanied the Industrial Revolution. He was disturbed by bleak poverty, and he attempted personal and institutional reforms to help the poor and imprisoned. He instituted educational and economic opportunities. He defended widows and opposed slavery. Though he was never a revolutionary, John

Wesley's concern was for the people who were most maligned by the established order.⁷ He felt the poor had a special right to hear the gospel and, for the most part, he did not seek out or attempt to evangelize the upper classes. For instance, Wesley did not establish a single Methodist preaching post in any of the five most privileged boroughs of London. He worked with those in special need, and among the people he sought to serve, the movement developed rapidly.

The Wesleyan revival became a wave that would move across England, sweep over borders into Wales, Scotland, and Ireland, extend across the Atlantic into Nova Scotia, the other North American colonies, and to the Caribbean islands. Dominated by a sense of evangelistic mission, both under Wesley's direction and moving beyond his control, men and women carried the message, organized classes, engaged in works of charity, and withal, continued the Wesleyan mission. "The life of John Wesley," George C. Cell, an American interpreter, states, "spans the eighteenth century; his constructive influence, the modern world."⁸

The cause had content. There was a message to be proclaimed, a word to be heard. Wesley preached a theology of grace, and he intended to interpret grace faithfully. He was adamant about central truths. Yet he also exhibited an unusual graciousness of spirit toward theological rivals and attempted to establish unity among the diverse groups involved in the evangelical revival. Through his last decades he continued to lead; and his leadership was effective. He picked up a light and illumined a hemisphere. He continued to preach a clear and comprehensive message, a message that became the fountainhead of the Wesleyan theological tradition.

The Formation of Wesley's Theology

Wesley's theological views were not easily achieved, and they never became static. There were changes in emphasis and periods of recasting basic motifs—in 1725, in 1738, and in the period after

1760. Yet there is continuity in the development of persistent themes. The dominant characteristics of his theological perspective, characteristics that were formative of a tradition, should be delineated.

John Wesley appreciated his rich theological legacy and explored its resources. Samuel Wesley, his father, had indicated a study program in his "Advice to a Young Clergyman," prescribing a general education in logic, history, law, pharmacy, natural and experimental philosophy, chronology, geography, mathematics, poetry, and music—all constituting background. Then for the first three and one-half years in the parish, the young clergyman should study the Bible and the early Fathers; for the next three and one-half years, the writings of the English Carolines and Puritans.⁹ John Wesley underwent a similar discipline, and to understand Wesley, one must know something of his sources.

One clue to Wesley's sense of important streams in the preceding tradition is found in his selection of materials for the *Christian Library*, the fifty-volume theological resource published from 1749 through 1755. The most immediately obvious fact is that the *Christian Library* is exactly what Wesley said it should be: "Extracts From the Abridgements of the Choicest Pieces of Practical Divinity." Intended to nurture Christian living, these writings reveal Wesley's theological sensitivity. Theology is important as it serves the interest of Christian formation. Theology is never an end, but is always a means for understanding and building transformed living. There was little speculative interest involved in Wesley's theological investigations. He consistently turned theological reflection to practical service. Theology, in his understanding, was to be preached, sung, and lived. Consequently, volumes of the *Christian Library* are given over to actual life stories of people who embodied Christian truth: Philipp Melancthon, a Lutheran theologian; John Calvin; Gregory Lopez, a Roman Catholic Spanish missionary to Mexico; Robert Bruce, an Edinburgh minister.

It is important that the Wesleyan movement came into existence during the Enlightenment and therefore, from the beginning, has carried a modern sensibility. The Enlightenment

ushered in the modern period in Western culture. Philosophically, this perspective began with René Descartes (1596–1650) and on the English scene was propounded by Herbert of Cherbury (1581–1648) and John Locke (1632–1704). More revolutionary for the West than the Reformation, which continued to accept the dominant assumptions of medieval life, the Enlightenment challenged inherited convictions about God and affirmed the radical independence and competent rationality of human beings. Hence autonomous rational people came to be the chief assured reality. For Wesley, this meant that the basic struggle was not an intramural battle between churches for political status or correct doctrinal interpretation; the struggle was rather with a God-denying world, a world that did not believe. To this world a radical challenge must be issued through proclamation of the gospel by Christian preaching and action.

Theologically, the critical issue for Wesley—and this has been recognized from the time of John Fletcher and Alexander Knox to that of George Croft Cell and Albert C. Outler—is the tension that exists between salvation by holy living and salvation by faith alone. That is, if salvation is granted as a free gift of grace, apart from our works (and perhaps even in spite of them), then of what value are good works and a disciplined life? Wesley, as a persistently practical theologian, sought to hold these two dimensions together. Holy living had been a dominant preoccupation, but at Aldersgate, Wesley set priorities once and for all: Redemption is by grace through faith. But faith is embodied in love. Regeneration—spiritual rebirth—is given by God, and the resulting new life is expressed in love of God and neighbor. Wesley, Outler argues, made a significant contribution to the history of Christian thought when he recognized that the older Reformation tendency to polarize “faith alone” and “holy living” truncated the full Christian message. Wesley was convinced that the two must be held together, and he attempted to speak for this larger vision. Outler states that Wesley constructed a new theory of salvation,

based in part on classical Augustinian foundations (Christology, original sin, etc.) but that evangelized the Christian ethic and mor-

alized the Christian evangel, that linked justification and regeneration, that affirmed both the imputation and impartation of righteousness, that repudiated both human self-assertion and passivity. He turned out “rules” by the dozen but also with warnings that even the most scrupulous rule-keeping will get you only to the state of being an “almost Christian.” He developed intensive small group nurture and therapy for Christian maturation... But all of these were elements in his larger project: to describe and promote the Christian life as rooted in faith and fruiting in love.¹⁰

These themes will be explored in the next chapter. At the moment, the question is: From what sources did Wesley derive his position?

Wesley was most indebted to his immediate heritage. He was the son of Samuel and Susanna—who were originally dissenters, but had returned to the Church of England—and he was nurtured by their interests. He read the work of a variety of theologians, ranging from Puritans to Anglican high-church divines—Thomas Cranmer and John Preston, Ralph Cudworth, William Law, and Thomas Goad, among others.¹¹ In their writings he found positions that both formed and confirmed his views.

But Wesley’s indebtedness was even broader. In the Protestant Reformation, as it was transmitted by German Pietism, he found the foundation of “faith alone,” on which all else was built. The early church fathers and Eastern Orthodoxy enriched his notion of holiness. From Roman Catholicism he gained challenging examples of holy living and a literature on mysticism.¹² The panorama was wide and deep. His Epworth home taught him to read widely and critically, but it was his own creativity that achieved a dynamic complementarity of diverse themes. The richly textured fabric that Wesley wove from this broad background is his most distinctive theological accomplishment.¹³

From John Wesley’s life and thought, a tradition was born. By him, a past was reshaped. From him, a stream still flows, seeking to express, in changing contexts, his concern for practical divinity.

CHAPTER 2

Scriptural Christianity: John Wesley's Theology of Grace

Scriptural Christianity: John Wesley's Theology of Grace

about the world, about human beings must be said because the Scripture speaks. This principle was basic for Wesley and was contained in his theological bequest. Hence the two principal resources Wesley left his followers for their theological guidance were his sermons and his *Notes on the New Testament*.

The sermons are primarily a string of biblical quotations. He asserted, "I allow no other rule, whether of faith or practice, than the Holy Scriptures." And again, "My ground is the Bible... I follow it in all things, both great and small."¹ Wesley preached the message of the Bible and would claim to do no more. His New Testament notes followed the lead of such scholars of his time as Hugo Grotius (1583–1645), a humanist, and especially Johann Albrecht Bengel (1687–1752), a Pietist. His intention was not so much to make any interpretation final, as to make the biblical source central. He reflected this openness in all his work as he attempted to join genuine piety with sound learning.

The Scriptures are the prime source of Wesley's theology, but the Scriptures become God's Word only by the lively power of the Holy Spirit. As early as 1735 on his trip to Georgia, Wesley claimed that he could be God's messenger only as God, by the Holy Spirit, invigorated the scriptural message. The internal witness of the Spirit is a necessary companion to the objective word of the Bible.

Wesley took Christian experience to be a medium of theology, for scriptural teaching is confirmed in evangelical experience. A salient characteristic of Wesley's theology is that importance is placed on empirical data as well as on direct immediate experience.² Not primarily a speculative thinker, Wesley's interest in abstract exploration was limited. He was, however, acutely aware of personal appropriation of God's grace and was careful in his observations, especially since he believed the Holy Spirit to be directly influential in human experience. Christian experience is a gift; it is the point of intersection of God and persons. Such a conviction underlay Wesley's interest in Christian biography as a rich resource for understanding the possibility of human experience of God.

Biblical interpretation always stands in relation to a specific

Theology, for John Wesley, was intended to transform life. Always in the service of presenting the gospel, theology was to underwrite the proclamation of the grace of God given in Jesus Christ for the redemption of all people.

The grace of God, as the redeeming activity of divine love, is the center of Wesley's theology. The themes Wesley emphasized came from his conviction that God's gracious love is the dominant reality in human life. Grace is God's active and continuous presence. Definitively expressed in Jesus Christ, grace covers the entirety of life: It creates, redeems, sustains, sanctifies, and glorifies. The Bible and Christian experience witness to grace: Justification is by grace; regeneration is the work of grace; grace preventively takes initiative and may convey assurance of God's actual presence; grace leads to maturity in sanctification; undergirding the church's mission, grace is conveyed through preaching and ethical service and through the means God has established for relationship. Christian life is rooted and fulfilled in loving grace.

How is the grace of God in Jesus Christ known? What is the source of our knowledge? John Wesley believed that the Bible conveys this knowledge as its words are transported to experience by the Holy Spirit. Consequently, Wesley intended to be a biblical theologian. Scripture was the fundamental source of his theological expression; every doctrine must be measured against the standard presented in Scripture. What is said about God,

culture, and Wesley reflected his own history. He came to the Bible as an Anglican, and he read and put the Scriptures together in ways that interrelated the themes from that inheritance. John Wesley gained a standpoint from forebears in the faith and built his thought upon that foundation. But inheritance is to be tested by the Bible. When Wesley reclaimed an emphasis, such as the doctrine of sanctification, he did so because he believed it to be a biblical mandate.

For Wesley, the Christian tradition also played a crucial role in theological understanding. The experience of preceding witness and their contributions were of basic importance. Learned as a classicist, knowledgeable of Eastern Christianity, indebted to the Reformation tradition, and especially grounded in the Church of England, Wesley utilized all these traditions in interpreting the faith. He was remarkable in the breadth of his learning, in his willingness to accept from many sources, and in the ability to construct his work by studying that of others.

Theology should also make sense, Wesley believed, and he had confidence in human reason: common sense and clear thinking. Neither idolizing reason, as contemporary Deists tended to do, nor suspecting it to be perverse, as Luther in his zeal sometimes claimed, Wesley accepted reason as being useful for theology. The truth of Scripture, attested by experience, is ordered by reason. While he did not possess a particularly subtle mind, it was quick, clear, retentive, and agile, and he believed that clear statements are persuasive. His commitment to service preempted long delay in reasoning or acting. Wesley's intellect was a part of his total character: direct, disciplined, and decisive.

Theology, he reasoned, has a practical goal: Christian truth must be applied to both personal and social life. Doctrine is for the purpose of Christian nurture and service. Wesley insisted that theology must carry practical import. Undergirding preaching, worship, and love of neighbor, Christian doctrine helps effect a thorough transformation of life.

When these matters are combined, the results are clearly framed: Truth is expressed in God's definitive self-presentation in Jesus Christ as this is conveyed by the Holy Spirit. The holy

Scriptures are the primary source, and experience is the medium through which the historical and living Christ is made known to believers. Tradition, as the transmitter of the vital life of Christian community over time, instructs in the interpretation of that event as, again, the Holy Spirit brings the past to the present. In sum, the task of theology is to interpret the gracious presence of God rightly and to apply it effectively.

The following selection of theological themes is guided by Wesley's sense of God's grace. The constructive form of his thought is presented through the themes of justification, preventive grace, assurance, sanctification, the church, and the means of grace.

Justification

Justification by grace through faith was a central motif in John Wesley's thought. He was emphatic: Salvation is the work of God. Salvation is a gracious gift of God and it must not be confused with human achievement, with the exercise of human will, or with the faithful pursuit of a Christian style of life. Salvation is the work of God and of no other; justification is by grace.³ Charles Wesley emphasized this theme in many hymns.

At last I own it cannot be
That I should fit myself for thee:
Here, then, to thee I all resign;
Thine is the work, and only Thine.

It is significant that in Wesley's arrangement of his sermons, the very first is "Salvation by Faith." In this homily he stressed that a person's salvation is wholly dependent upon God's free unmerited grace. He wrote, "Grace is the source; faith is the condition of salvation."⁴ And, "It is this doctrine, which our Church justly calls *the strong rock and foundation of the Christian religion*."⁵

Wesley had to struggle to come to a clear understanding of the nature of justification. He grew up in an Anglican tradition, which viewed moral achievement as a means to salvation, and he

continued along this path through his time at Charterhouse and Christ Church, Oxford. The year 1725 was important, since it was then that the young, newly ordained Wesley began the study of Jeremy Taylor and became convinced of the centrality of "holy living" as taught by Taylor, Thomas à Kempis, and William Law. This study carried Wesley's moralism to new depths of commitment, and he was never to lose this commanding concern. He was, however, to change the foundation upon which it was built.

In 1738 at Aldersgate Street, he was converted to and subscribed to the chief doctrine of the Reformation: justification by faith. He had now found the base for true holiness. It was after this experience that he turned to an earnest examination of his own Anglican tradition. "I began," he wrote, "more narrowly to inquire what the doctrine of the Church of England is, concerning the much controverted point of justification by faith; and the sum of what I found in the *Homilies* I extracted and printed for the use of others."⁶ Wesley thought of himself as faithful to his own church (although he clearly selected his stream within that tradition) and to the central tenet of historical Christianity as renewed by the Reformation.

In the sermon "Salvation by Faith," he presented the meaning of justification:

This then is the salvation which is through faith, even in the present world: a salvation from sin, and the consequences of sin, both often expressed in the word *justification*; which, taken in the largest sense, implies a deliverance from guilt and punishment, by the atonement of Christ actually applied to the soul of the sinner now believing on him, and a deliverance from the power of sin, through Christ formed in his heart. So that he who is thus justified, or saved by faith, is indeed born again.⁷

The key phrases in this statement are "the present world," "deliverance," and "born again." So justification is actual deliverance from sin in present life; it issues into a new birth which begins maturation into the fullness of Christian living. Wesley's consistent central theme was salvation by faith—beginning in repentance and developing into a new life of holy living.

In his sermon "Justification by Faith," Wesley made his meaning clear: "The plain scriptural notion of justification is pardon, the forgiveness of sins."⁸ This definition was set against other interpretations of justification: "being made actually righteous" (which recalls sanctification); or clearing from Satan's accusations, clearing from the accusation of the law; or God's judgment of persons contrary to the real nature of things—that is, that God believes us righteous when we are not. In contrast to these positions, Wesley stated simply, "Justification is pardon, the forgiveness of sins."

Justification is necessary because all people are sinners. Wesley viewed the fallen nature of humankind with fundamental seriousness. Although created in the image of God and in righteous relationship with God, human beings have fallen. The image of God is distorted through the disobedience and fall of Adam. In freedom, Adam disobeyed the divine command and brought upon himself "death, sickness, and pain, and folly, and vice, and slavery."⁹ Wesley did not attempt to explain fully why Adam misused his freedom, but he did refer to "idolatrous self-love" as the root of evil.¹⁰ All people, as children of Adam, are participants in this Fall. Wesley understood Adam as the "federal head" or "representative" of the whole human race. As a result, fallen people are spiritually dead to God; they no longer possess the capacity for saving knowledge or love of God.

This theme pervades Wesley's writings. From his earliest extant sermon through his later development, he stressed this flawed condition of humanity. Reason, will, and liberty are not wholly destroyed, but they are drastically impaired and there is no resource for self-salvation. Corruption is ever present in human understanding, will, and affection. This debilitated condition necessitates grace to set human life right. Wesley could look with clear eyes at this fallen condition because he also knew that even the fallen are recipients of God's redemptive action. Human life, in its estrangement, is set within the context of grace; the atonement of Jesus Christ is the re-creating power of God's love.

Justification is by grace through faith; grace makes faith a possibility; for faith is a graciously enabled response to grace. In this

sense, "Faith, therefore, is the *necessary* condition of justification; yes, the *only necessary* condition thereof."¹¹ Now the issue tightens—What is faith? Wesley wrote,

I cannot describe the nature of this faith better than in the words of our own Church: "The only instrument of salvation" (whereof justification is one branch) "is faith; that is, a sure trust and confidence that God both hath and will forgive our sins, that He hath accepted us again into His favour, for the merits of Christ's death and passion."¹²

Faith, as Wesley defined it, is trust and confidence. It is response to the initiative of God. Human beings who were estranged from God are now, by forgiveness, drawn into positive relationship, a relationship with fulfilled meaning. Faith is knowledge of God, as God has prepared the way for and now prompts human response. Again Charles Wesley put this understanding into a hymn.

Author of faith, to thee I lift
My weary, longing eyes:
O let me now receive that gift!
My soul without it dies.

The source of faith is God. Wesley spoke of faith as "a divine supernatural *elenkos, evidence or conviction*, 'of things not seen, not discoverable by our bodily senses, as being either past, future, or spiritual.'¹³ There is no self-salvation. Justification is a free gift, the gift of God in Jesus Christ; and faith, the condition of justification, also is a gift given to fallen persons.

Now we move to more difficult territory, for Wesley explained that while faith is a divine gift, it also involves human concurrence. Faith is a human act conforming to God's prior and initiating act. To say that faith is a condition of the relationship of persons with God is not the same as saying that faith, of itself, produces the relationship. Faith is so integral to the relationship that it is a redundancy to say "faith" and also "relationship." One of Wesley's contributions was the movement from legal to personal

modes for interpreting the relation of God to persons.¹⁴ To "have faith" is to be already in relationship with God and to acknowledge the existence of that relationship. Hence "human concurrence" does not mean that God and persons should be separated in such a way that the activity of each upon the other is an external event that allows no interpenetration; God and human beings do not meet as solid balls which collide and then ricochet. They meet in the most intimate and mutually involving ways. There is integrity on the part of each, but there is also involvement, so that integrity is found in interdependence. There is no neat, traceable line between God's activity and human response, yet the reality of God's initiating grace and human response to it are both present. Faith is a double affirmation: It is an affirmation of the integrity of God and individuals, each by the other, each with the other. The priorities are clear: God is first in action and supreme in value; human acknowledgment is responsive.

Prevenient Grace

The issue of God's grace and human freedom comes to sharp focus in Wesley's doctrine of prevenient, or preceding, grace. He wrote:

For, allowing that all souls of men are dead in sin by *nature*, this excuses none, seeing there is no man that is in a state of mere nature. There is no man, unless he has quenched the Spirit, that is wholly void of the grace of God. No man living is entirely destitute of what is vulgarly called "natural conscience." But this is not natural: it is more properly termed "preventing grace." Every man has a greater or less measure of this, which waiteth not for the call of man.¹⁵

Again, he noted, "A naturally free will, in the present state of mankind I do not understand. I only assert that there is a measure of free will supernaturally restored to every man, together with that supernatural light which enlightens every man that cometh into the world."¹⁶ Human will, because of the Fall, is not free, but

through Christ's atoning work there is a universal preventient grace which restores human freedom.

For Wesley, preventient grace was most fundamentally revealed in moral conscience: But what does this imply for moral action or faithful response? There has been diversity of interpretation. On one end of a spectrum, one can find an understanding of preventient grace as a power given to human beings, an endowment of ability to take initiative and act righteously. There is no longer a "natural man," but only a graciously capable person. The emphasis in this case is on the power of humans to initiate movement toward God.¹⁷ In the middle position, preventient grace is interpreted as a conscience that can evoke repentance; people are, by grace, aware of their fallen condition and may or may not respond to God's gracious overture. Response, rather than initiative, is emphasized.¹⁸ At the other end of the spectrum, preventient grace has been interpreted in a more restrictive manner. Faith is altogether a gracious gift of God. The freedom of sinful humanity is only the liberty of rebellion; it is wholly negative. This freedom leads to despair; human inability is recognized, thanks to preventient grace; and also, thanks to preventient grace, humans cease to resist, and God's causality is able to operate.¹⁹

Wesley was rooted in the Bible. In Scripture he found the theme of divine sovereignty and also that of human moral responsibility, which implies freedom. He seemed to recognize that the only way to give place to both is not to release one to the other, but to put them into tension. Both themes are in the Bible, so both must be held in full integrity by theology. The theme of preventient grace allowed Wesley to relate divine sovereignty and human freedom, but to maintain the tension was difficult. He refused to cut the Gordian knot and so turned from both Augustine and Pelagius, and also from the early Reformers. This is one of the best illustrations of Wesley's intention to be faithful to Scripture.

Prevenient grace is an effect of the atonement of Jesus Christ. The grace of God in Christ creates a new possibility for human life, and to every human life God is antecedently and enablingly present. Charles Wesley expressed this:

Scriptural Christianity: John Wesley's Theology of Grace

Long my imprisoned spirit lay,
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray,
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light:
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed thee.

To draw God's sovereignty and human freedom together is difficult, but Wesley was determined to bring the two into dynamic relationship. To follow his thought, we must move with careful steps. Wesley insisted, with the Reformers, that justification and faith are gifts of God. They are established by grace. But how does grace operate? Wesley could not accept predestination as unconditional election, and he cataloged his reasons. Unconditional election carries the consequence of unconditional reprobation; this consequence was Wesley's main opposition, because he believed that unconditional reprobation is unjust. He also added that such a doctrine makes preaching vain, tends to destroy holiness, fosters pride, tends to anthropianism (i.e., lawlessness, which was probably Wesley's second most serious concern), creates a disregard for those considered reprobate, undermines acts of charity, and dishonors the loving God of Christian revelation. Wesley was uneasy with an exclusive emphasis upon omnipotence; he believed the attributes of God should be kept in careful balance, so that justice, mercy, and truth are in complementary relationship with omnipotence. Of basic importance was his desire to understand the divine-human relationship as set forth in the Incarnation. God's sovereignty is expressed in Jesus Christ. In Christ, God addresses individuals in a manner that allows and solicits response.

Wesley's opposition to predestination must also be set into the cultural milieu of the time. As an Enlightenment man, he saw an atheistic world as the object of the principal struggle, with the attack focused on scientific interpretations of human life. Wesley was fighting to escape the use of natural-science models to account for human character. In that battle he opposed the Deists, who affirmed God as creator but who saw him as detached from

the world; the influence of Isaac Newton, who interpreted the world with mechanistic models; and David Hartley, who argued that God had created the world as a system of inexorable necessity. Wesley explicitly mentioned these persons in his treatise "Thoughts on Necessity." He identified predestination with a mechanistic view of the world and a necessitarian view of human nature. In opposition, he intended to hold nature and grace together—not on the model of natural science or mechanical philosophy; but by affirming the distinctive character of human reason, action, and responsibility. In spite of his efforts, Wesley was unable to provide a completely adequate intellectual schema, but his sense was profoundly right as he attempted to protect an understanding of human nature as arising from the distinctiveness of personhood as graciously reconstituted by God.

There was for Wesley an "order of salvation," a dynamic movement of the Christian life from its inception to its fulfillment. Moving from conscience to conviction of sin, to repentance, to justification, to regeneration, to sanctification, to glorification, there is a pattern of gracious development. This development is built upon the active presence of the Holy Spirit as it encounters, wins assent, and transforms life. Hence justification results in regeneration. Forgiveness brings a changed condition of life. The old nature is set aside as new creation occurs. Those who are redeemed have been given a new nature, for they have had restored in them the image of God. Wesley was emphatic about the change that God's grace effects in human life; it is characteristic of his thought that he placed great emphasis upon the new life in Christ. This altered status is the most important fact of human existence; grace has changed the affections, the mind, and the will. Christians are new creatures, set once more in proper relationship with God and their neighbors.

Assurance

How does the believer experience justification by faith? Can a person be assured of justification? Through the middle period of

his development, John Wesley was especially interested in the issue of assurance. Prior to his Aldersgate experience, he tenaciously sought personal certainty of his salvation in terms of the sincerity of his faith; after Aldersgate, he preached assurance of God's justification as a necessary aspect of Christian experience. Later he relaxed this position and spoke of assurance as a privilege, but not a necessity of Christian experience.

What, more exactly, is meant by *assurance*? It is clear that Wesley was attempting to interpret actual experience as resulting from God's grace, but how did he develop his understanding? One scriptural reference was consistently used in stating his position—Romans 8:16: "The Spirit itself beareth witness with our Spirit, that we are the children of God." Wesley saw this verse in the larger context of its section of the chapter, which stresses that if we live by the Spirit, we have received the spirit of sonship and may cry, "Abba, Father." That is, assurance is given within the setting of vital and lively relationship and is the fruit of and witness of this relationship.²⁰

"We love him, because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). This was the focus of Wesley's emphasis on Christian experience. He was not attempting to express a novel view; rather, he was referring to the gracious covenantal relationship that runs through Scripture.²¹ Wesley's use of assurance was an alternative to the Calvinist doctrine of election. Emphasizing the initiative of God and human response, he described assurance as the assurance of love, the assurance of present pardon, the certitude of God's presence as sustaining positive relationship. Again, we hear Charles Wesley singing:

Arise, my soul, arise;
Shake off thy guilty fears;
The bleeding Sacrifice
In my behalf appears;
Before the throne my Surety stands, . . .
My name is written on his hands.
.....
My God is reconciled;
His pard'ning voice I hear;

He owns me for his child,
I can no longer fear:
With confidence I now draw nigh...
And, "Father, Abba, Father," cry.

One key to Wesley's thought is the distinction he drew, in his mature thought, between *servant* and *son* in the divine-human relationship.²² There is a servant relationship to God which is clearly ordered. But there is also the more complete life of the child of God. The relationship of a child to a parent is more complex, involves more freedom as well as responsibility, and offers more possibilities than that of a servant to a master. In the child-parent relationship assurance has a different basis: in place of legal order and social force, there is a developed trust and a knowledge gained from faithfulness.

Wesley thought in dynamic terms. Relationships are not static or finally set—there is interaction and constant renewal. It is clear that, although the basic stress was upon the assurance of God's justification, Wesley attempted to hold God's action in tension with human response, an arena in which he found fluctuation and change. He earnestly considered the actual character of relationships, which are at once both affirmation and question, assurance and doubt. At times one may be certain of a relationship—both of the love offered and the response made; at other times one may be certain of the love offered but uncertain of the ability to accept. Such variables contribute to the dynamics of actual relationships.

Over time, Wesley's understanding of the place of assurance in Christian life changed. Early in his career he stated that assurance is necessary for a complete relationship; where assurance is absent, relationship is incomplete. But, as he learned, this emphasis can be overplayed. In a letter to Richard Thompson, he remarked,

I agree with you, that justifying faith cannot be a conviction that I am justified; and that a man who is not assured that his sins are forgiven may yet have a kind or degree of faith, which distinguishes him, not only from a devil, but also from a Heathen; and

on which I may admit him to the Lord's supper. But still I believe the proper Christian faith, which purifies the heart, implies such a conviction.²³

Two points in this quotation are important. First, Wesley allowed for some disjunction between the positive relationship established by God's activity, and the variability of human response. God's love is firm, but human decision may waver or be misunderstood. Second, Wesley felt that "proper Christian faith" includes the conviction of assurance, a point he supported from church history, mentioning the early church—explicitly, Origen, Chrysostom, Augustine—and the Reformers, especially Luther.²⁴ To know God is to know God as Savior. To know God savingly is to be consciously aware of God's redemptive presence. Wesley claimed that assurance, the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and the revelation of Christ are all integrally related.²⁵ With a cry of discovery, he affirmed, "I know that I am accepted."²⁶

Thus justification and assurance of justification were related in John Wesley's thought; both were based on the gracious initiative of God; both were descriptive of the nature of the relationship that God has established with humankind. Faith is the antidote to human sin and opens the way to love. In these doctrines is laid a groundwork for the fullness of Christian life.

Christian Perfection

John Wesley always regarded himself as a biblical thinker; above all, he intended to be loyal to scriptural teaching. "When I began to make the Scripture my study (about seven-and-twenty years ago), I began to see that Christians are called to *love God with all their heart and to serve Him with all their strength*: which is precisely what I apprehended to be meant by the scriptural term perfection."²⁷ In some thirty New Testament passages, especially in the John letters, he found statements with which he had to come to terms. In 1 John 3:9, we read, "Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin, for his seed remaineth in him: and he can-

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not sin, because he is born of God." This theme became the goal of John Wesley's life and his ministry. Love for God is the central theme. Wesley had long prayed the Anglican collect for purity at Matins, at Evensong, and at the Eucharist: "Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of Thy Holy Spirit that we may perfectly love Thee."

To these influences must be added a rich lode mined from Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism. Christian perfection, for Wesley, was the practical dimension of Christian faith; it is there that belief takes its concrete character. This interest was always present in his thought. It had directed his earliest spiritual striving, was given a new foundation at Aldersgate, and gained strength in his later years. The idea of Christian perfection was the most distinctive aspect of Wesley's theology.

The founder of Methodism was a serious man; he was serious about his faith and about the commitment it represented. From the depth of his commitment he set before himself and his followers the ultimate goal of discipleship: the perfect love of God and of neighbor. Charles Wesley put the prayer for holiness into his hymns.

Refining fire, go through my heart;
Illuminate my soul;
Scatter thy life through every part,
And sanctify the whole.

Give me a new, a perfect heart,
From doubt, and fear, and sorrow free;
The mind which was in Christ impart,
And let my spirit cleave to thee.

The claim of Christian perfection was astonishing. Most traditional Protestants could not accept such a notion, for while Christ does save people in their sin, this is not salvation from sin, they said; full salvation is at the final time, not in this life. Wesley argued that such a notion limits God's ability to affect human life. He could not escape the theoretical possibility of God's redeeming power, for surely the Holy Spirit can convey such transfor-

mative power. But where was the proof? Where were the examples to which he could point? Wesley looked among his own followers and discovered some who he felt were examples of Christian perfection. His chief evidence, however, was found in the biographies of saintly people: Gregory Lopez, Gaston Jean Baptiste de Renty, and especially Brother Lawrence. These were lives graced by God and brought to the white heat of divine love.

The perfect love for God! This ideal has a venerable history in Christian spirituality. The ultimate goal of the spiritual life is the simple, single-minded love for God; it is the worship of God with the whole heart. To love God carries with it a love for and a commitment to neighbor. Sanctification is two-dimensional; it is a response to the Great Commandments.

Sanctification is built upon justification and constitutes the goal, or true end, of human life. Justification opens the way to a new life; sanctification is the heart of religion and the goal of Christian living.²⁸ Love for God is the actual fruiting of mature Christian life. Justification, wrote Wesley,

is not the being made actually just and righteous. This is *sanctification* which is, indeed, in some degree, the immediate fruit of justification, but, nevertheless, is a distinct gift of God, and of a totally different nature. The one [justification] implies what God does for us through his Son; the other [sanctification] what he works in us by his Spirit.²⁹

Theology cannot be separated from ethics; gracious ordering is continuous, from the point of beginning to the consummate realization of human life.

Christian holiness is first a gospel, and only then a quality of Christian life. George Croft Cell has spoken of the "Wesleyan reconstruction of the Christian ethic of life in an original and unique synthesis of the Protestant ethic of grace and the Catholic ethic of holiness."³⁰ Wesley was clear: God's grace is the ground of beatitude. Holiness is a gift of grace, not an achievement; it is the active work of the Holy Spirit to which the human spirit is called to respond, evoking love as the dominating motive of life.

The fruition of sanctification is conformity to the mind of Christ; always, for Wesley, the Holy Spirit reinforces our life in Christ. Christian perfection is progressive, a continual renewal of love and growth in love. Both realized and being realized, it is a love that matures into greater love.

Wesley was not content to speak only of possibility, nor was he satisfied with partial realization of the goal of human life. There was, consequently, a strong emphasis on entire sanctification. Entire sanctification is one stage in the process of Christian life. New birth, which occurs instantaneously, is followed by a gradual sanctification, which may lead to an instantaneous event of entire sanctification. A subsequent gradual development should also follow this event. By grace, human beings cooperate with God in gradual sanctification, but, Wesley stressed, instantaneous sanctification is exclusively God's work. Perfect deliverance from sin culminates in a positive perfection in love and obedience. Human life is fulfilled in holiness.

To love God necessarily carries with it a love for neighbor; sanctification implies, or more exactly, includes, the moral life. Sanctification is neither a personal spiritual cosmetic nor a gathering of moral merits. Sanctification, as having the mind of Christ, implies servanthood; it is expressed as an unrestrained caring for peoples. The new life is ethical in content. In his Covenant Service prayer, Wesley phrased his commitment this way: "Put me to what Thou wilt, rank me with whom Thou wilt—put me to doing, put me to suffering."

The experience of sanctification is the restoring of the defaced image of our creation. As fallen, persons have forfeited their authentic humanity; as sanctified, they are restored to and mature in the life that God intends. Human life is graced and reaches its goal of true joy.³¹ Wesley was aware that new birth into Christ can degenerate into sentimental emotionalism, ineffective religiosity, or irrelevant piety. The new person still lives in the flesh and in the world, so the necessary corollary to liberation is discipline: the sanctified life is shaped by God's demands and human faithfulness.

It has been said that Charles Wesley's hymns always begin on earth and end in heaven. So it is with John Wesley's theology. He

was firmly convinced of the coming day of Christ, which is not yet, but toward which humankind, with the whole creation, is moving. For Wesley, it was necessary to stress God's ultimate victory; but it was also important to affirm the penultimate reality of God's presence, now experienced as life that is drawn to God in increasingly focused love. John Wesley had a doctrine of final things, an eschatology, in which God's kingdom is being presently realized even as it points toward a consummating future. The Christian lives with the lively hope that God, who has begun a good thing, will fulfill it in the day of Jesus Christ.

The Church

The Holy Spirit challenges believers to full maturity in Jesus Christ; and the Holy Spirit gathers believers into worshipping and serving communities. The church is the community of the Holy Spirit. In his revision of the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England for Methodists in America, Wesley retained this article: "The visible Church is a congregation of faithful men in which the pure word of God is preached and the sacraments are duly administered according to Christ's ordinance in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same." Wesley emphasized three qualities which the article indicates are essential to a visible church: living faith, preaching, and due administration of the sacraments.³² For Wesley, preaching, as faithful witness to the Word, is the inaugurating reality of the life of the church, and the holiness of the church is a holiness that God graciously bestows. Further, Christ is present in unbroken continuity in the sacraments; and the gathered community is drawn together by the Holy Spirit, which then disperses the community in mission.³³ It was Wesley's effort to be comprehensive, and to insist upon emphases drawn from various church traditions, that was distinctive of his understanding of the church.

Although Wesley did not include the three orders of the ministry—bishops, elders, and deacons—as part of his basic interpretation, legitimate ministry remained important, and he viewed

validly ordained ministers as crucial. Wesley honored the established order; the right to administer the sacraments was a privilege conferred by the Holy Spirit and by the church. Yet he appointed lay people to the explicit task of preaching. As late as 1789 he argued that there were both prophetic and priestly roles in the ministry. His lay preachers were prophets and were to preach the Word; but they were not priests and therefore were not authorized to administer the sacraments.³⁴

What about ordained priests? Wesley rejected the claim that there had been an unbroken succession of bishops as a third order of ministry; but just what Wesley meant has been the subject of much research and debate.³⁵ He believed there has been a succession—that is, a continuous stream of ordination. But this continuity had not always been effected by bishops of a third order, since elders (presbyters) had, at times of necessity, discharged this episcopal function. Such action, for Wesley, constituted a valid ordination.

The church, Wesley believed, was primarily a continuation of the apostolic witness. Christ alone is the foundation of the church, and witness to the Word is witness to Christ, to his total work and benefits. Witness to Christ creates a community centered in the worship of God and extended through faithful mission. Undergirding the church, there is the persisting presence of Christ in Word and Sacrament. There is a continuous dependence upon God's grace and a flowering of faith in the love for God and neighbor.

Means of Grace

For John Wesley, regular observance and utilization of the means of grace were requisite for growth in Christian life. The necessary presupposition of his discussion of the means of grace was the atonement of Jesus Christ, in which the guilt brought upon all people by Adam is canceled by the righteousness of Christ.³⁶ Means of grace are provided for the enrichment of Christian life. Consequently, prayer, fasting, Christian confer-

ence, and Bible reading are conveyors of God's active presence; among more ordinary means are the preached Word of God and the Lord's Supper. All these means are "ordinary" in the sense that they are the usual ways in which God works to help people recover what was lost in the Fall. But none of these means is absolutely essential. The freedom of God is maintained; God may, in divine wisdom, work through extraordinary means. But in Scripture, Christians are commanded to utilize the ordinary means; therefore the Christian should pray, fast, study the Bible, hear the preached Word, and partake of the Lord's Supper.

In the atonement, Jesus Christ expressed the redeeming grace of God. The presence of the Holy Spirit applies redemption to human life by convicting, justifying, and sanctifying human beings. The sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper also convey grace. Although baptism is not, in an absolute sense, necessary for salvation, it is the ordinary means of justification, a way to wash away guilt.³⁷ Through baptism, justification is conveyed and new birth is given. Baptism draws persons into the body of Christ.

A tension ran through Wesley's thought. The work begun in baptism should result in repentance, faith, and obedience. Through these steps a person should grow steadily in grace and holiness. Nevertheless, it is evident that baptismal grace often is not utilized and the covenant is broken. And because people violate the relationship established in baptism, remedial action is necessary. Hence Wesley preached for a new sense of sinful alienation, for repentance, and for a new affirmation of God's redemptive love in Jesus Christ. The issue, Wesley insisted, is not baptism, but actual Christian experience.³⁸

Baptism is the initiating representation of God's redeeming grace, but it is efficacious only when it is followed by actual repentance and conversion. Consonant with his emphasis upon evangelical experience, Wesley insisted that the redemptive work of Christ must be appropriated by persons. There is no mechanical transportation of grace; the decisive moment occurs when the Holy Spirit encounters the human spirit and evokes belief and continuing spiritual maturation. From his tradition, Wesley had

learned to regard baptism as the washing away of original sin; from his observation of life, he was convinced of the necessity for bringing all people, even those who had fallen again after baptism, to an experience of faith.

The Lord's Supper is basic to spiritual nurture and is the supreme rite for conveying the grace of God. Typically, Wesley drew from many sources in an effort to comprehend the meaning of this sacrament. The eucharistic meal has three time-dimensions: (1) It represents the suffering of Christ, which is past, and therefore is a memorial meal; (2) it conveys the fruits of those sufferings in present graces; and (3) it assures believers of glory to come.³⁹ The Kingdom's coming, presence, and ultimate fulfillment are held together.

The once-and-for-all act of Jesus Christ is continuously evoked by the Holy Spirit. And the Spirit leads into the future: The past issues into the present and persists into the future. The sacrament of the Lord's Supper is "A Pledge of Heaven"; it is a foretaste of the communion of the saints, an anticipation of participation in the heavenly feast. The Eucharist prepares us for and assures us of our final destiny, for in this meal we are partakers in Christ, in his death and resurrection.

Participation in the Lord's Supper is twofold: a physical taking of the bread and wine, and a spiritual appropriation of the true body and blood of the Lord. These two dimensions are distinct aspects of a single unity. The bread and wine are the physical symbols that Jesus used and that continue to be used, but it is the presence and power of the Holy Spirit that conveys the vital and genuine empowerment of this sacrament in human life.

Wesley was careful to indicate that the presence is in the bread and wine, but not in a substantial or physical manner—Christ is actually present through the Holy Spirit. The hymns of Charles Wesley concentrated on the great objectivities of the faith:

Come, Holy Ghost, Thine influence shed,
And realize the sign;
Thy life infuse into the bread,
Thy power into the wine.

Effectual let the tokens be,
And made by heavenly act.
Fit channels to convey Thy love,
To every faithful heart.

Here we come to a distinctive point in Wesley's position—that the Lord's Supper can be a converting sacrament. This meal is not reserved for established believers, nor is it an act that is open only to the established Christian community. It is, obviously, a sacrament for believers—as a remembrance, a present vivification, and a future hope—but it also may be a means of conversion. The only invitation offered is to those "who do truly and earnestly repent" of their "sins . . . and intend to lead a new life, following the commandments of God." Participation in the eucharistic meal can be the inaugurating event in Christian faith. But though this sacrament may serve as a converting ordinance, it continues to be a confirming ordinance as well. Holy Communion may be the point of the beginning of Christian life; it is certainly the medium for growth in and enrichment of Christian living.

Conclusion

For Wesley, the gracious love of God found its definitive expression in Jesus Christ. In a basic sense, grace is Jesus Christ. Grace is the specific expression of God's nature and will, an incarnate and continuing presence. From the center in Jesus Christ, implications radiate, ranging from the prevention of God to justification, regeneration, assurance, sanctification, means of grace, and final glorification. The grace of God, expressed in and defined by Jesus Christ, becomes inclusive of life.

John Wesley presented a comprehensive, biblically responsible theology of grace. Fidelity to the Scriptures leads along distinctive paths. Indebted to many, he also made his own emphases. Wesley did not intend uniqueness; rather, his great desire was to be faithful to the canonical Scriptures and the rich Christian tra-

dition, to be attentive to the data of Christian experience, and to use his mind responsibly. These intentions were fused by a passionate love for Christ and an indomitable will to serve as a faithful disciple. In his own time, and since, his theological work has challenged people to respond and to follow.

CHAPTER 3

Interpreters and Successors: Wesleyan Theology in Great Britain in the Nineteenth Century

The subject [Methodist Doctrine] takes us back to the beginnings of the movement. There are two errors which we have at once to confront: that of assigning a doctrinal origin to the system, and that of making its origin entirely independent of doctrine.¹

—William Burt Pope

Through its first century several persons played important roles in the theological development that was an essential part of the Wesleyan tradition. To provide a sense of this development in Britain, we shall look at John Fletcher, Adam Clarke, Richard Watson, William Arthur, W. B. Pope, and Hugh Price Hughes. The historical sweep and range of positions are wide, but these theologians represent some of the characteristic formations of the tradition: They hold together piety and learning, intense love of God and of neighbor, biblical authority, and ethical living.

John Fletcher

Time does not divide neatly in human history, and one pivotal figure does not necessarily succeed another. John Fletcher was Wesley's contemporary and was invited to become Wesley's successor; he was also the most important early interpreter of Wesleyan themes in theology. But Fletcher died before Wesley. In order to describe the importance of Fletcher and his work in the