

The Role of Doctrinal Confession in the Wesleyan Heritage

In the section on ‘The Church’ [paras. 23—27], the Nazarene *Manual* reminds us that the Church of God is composed of ‘all spiritually regenerate persons.’ This is true whether we are considering the Church universal, a particular denomination or a local church. We make explicit in paragraph 26 that church membership rests ‘upon the fact of their being regenerate’ and thus ‘we would require only such avowals of belief as are *essential* [emphasis mine] to Christian experience.’ This is then followed by eight very brief confessional statements (the ‘Agreed Statement of Belief’, paras. 26.1—26.8) that we see as being ‘essential.’¹ Most Christians (of whatever denomination) would be able to subscribe to these as they are little more than the material found in the Apostles’ Creed. The crucial requirement for membership in the church is spiritual life, not agreement with detailed theological propositions. Our approach to the relationship between doctrinal confession and spiritual life has been inherited from John Wesley and Methodism.

The Rise of the Study of Religion

According to Wilfred Cantwell Smith the ability to understand human discourse is the ability to understand the people and the community whose discourse it is. Some symbols, forms and doctrines are exceptionally durable, but what they ‘mean’ they always mean to some person or persons at some time and place.² Peter Harrison believes the critical change in the meaning of ‘religion’ occurred in seventeenth century England when many Protestant scholars began to

¹ *Manual Church of the Nazarene, 2001-2005* (Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, 2001). Paragraphs cited are from this edition.

² Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Belief and History* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1977), 16-19. See also Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Faith and Belief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 69-127; Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: The New American Library, 1964).

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use it to refer to a ‘system of ideas’ and their observable outworking and practices.³ The meaning of ‘religion’ shifted from a dynamic of the heart to an impersonal doctrinal system, from a personal to a propositional conception of truth. They could now write of one system of Christian belief over against other Christian systems of belief.⁴ In Harrison’s opinion, the dominant Protestant theology of the period sharply distinguished two sources of religious truth—revelation and nature. From this emerged the study of ‘natural religion’ and ‘revealed religion.’⁵ What is now ‘revealed’ is an ‘objective religion’ with propositions to be believed in order for salvation to be attained—it was no longer a revelation of God himself.⁶ This changed the focus to rational knowledge and understanding (propositional truth), and away from faith and love (relational truth).⁷ This was reinforced, according to Smith, by a change in the meaning of ‘belief.’ It altered from a reference to a relationship in which the note of trust is prominent to an acceptance of propositional truth based on argument or proof that is persuasive but without certain knowledge.⁸ Smith contends that you could not ‘believe’ in God in classical Christian usage without a personal encounter with him.⁹ The Christian first came to God through a personal encounter and then ‘believed’ in him. Faith is therefore prior

³ Peter Harrison, *The Bible, Protestantism, and the Rise of Natural Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 92-107. See also Peter Harrison, *‘Religion’ and the Religions in the English Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 1-3; Harrison, *Bible and Protestantism*, 1.

⁴ Smith, *Meaning and End*, 37-39.

⁵ Harrison, *‘Religion’ and the Religions*, 19.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 20-26. See also Smith, *Meaning and End*, 39-44.

⁸ Smith, *Belief and History*, 41-49. English has no verbal form for the word ‘faith’ (although Hebrew and Greek do) and so in English ‘to believe’ is used to represent this ‘act of faith’. The critical change came with the writings of John Locke (1632-1704), who defined ‘belief’ without reference to the personalising dimension, characterising it along with ‘assent’ and ‘opinion’ as accepting propositional truth. He used the word ‘faith’ for assent to any proposition upon the credit of the proposer.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 80-87. In the Bible faith is clearly associated with persons (God and neighbours), so faith in Christ involves first a recognition of who he is and then a total dedication to him. See his extensive analysis of the use of *pistis* and its cognates in Scripture, where the overwhelming reference is to God or Christ as persons, p. 72ff.

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to belief and theology is the conceptualisation for one's own day of that prior faith.¹⁰ In such a setting, John Wesley's emphasis on the experiential dimension (both personal and corporate) of the Christian faith would stand in contrast to the emerging 'objectification' of the faith amongst many of his scholarly contemporaries.¹¹ It is Wesley's approach that we in the Church of the Nazarene have inherited—theology as reflection on the faith, with faith being defined primarily as trust in a relationship rather than assent to propositional truth. Wesley clearly saw himself as the 'spiritual guide' of his people,¹² and at the heart of this image there is a destination known to the guide, who then seeks to enable others to arrive at the same destination. Wesley had a clear picture of what a personal relationship with God and neighbour looked like and the heart of his ministry lay in sharing how it might be personally experienced.

Wesley's Theological Perspective

From the very beginning of his Oxford years Wesley had visualised God's essential nature as love; a love displayed amongst the Persons of the Triune Godhead and to all of creation. God's desire for loving relationships then defines and shapes the expression of all the other divine attributes. Human beings, who are made in God's image, are also to be understood in terms of love and relationships; both with God and neighbour. The divine-human interaction is, therefore, to be defined by love and relationship and not by an intellectual comprehension of doctrine. From the beginning Wesley agreed with his mother's concern that 'practical divinity' would be the focus of his studies. Practical divinity was concerned with the

¹⁰ Ibid., 79.

¹¹ Ibid., 61-68.

¹² *Letters* (Telford), 5: 64. See also *Works* (Jackson), 10: 357; *Letters* (Telford), 8: 91, 168.

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essentials of the faith and not with speculative matters that were not essential for salvation.¹³

He became aware that Christianity must be more than simply an intellectual pursuit or a moral endeavour; genuine spirituality must involve the whole person. The common features in the writings he studied were decisive for Oxford Methodism and subsequent Wesleyan theology. In the face of theological bickering and division, these writers stressed a need to return to a simple religion based on the love of God, emphasising a unity in essentials of belief and toleration of differences in the more subtle theological distinctions. Christianity was not a matter for argument but for practice.¹⁴

In the preface to the first published edition of his *Sermons on Several Occasions*, Wesley outlined its purpose:¹⁵

I have accordingly set down in the following sermons what I find in the Bible concerning the way to heaven, with a view to distinguish this way of God from all those which are the inventions of men. I have endeavoured to describe *the true, the scriptural, experimental religion* [emphasis mine], so as to omit nothing which is a real part thereof, and to add nothing thereto which is not. And herein it is more especially my desire . . . to guard those who are just setting their faces toward heaven . . . from formality, from mere outside religion, which has almost driven heart-religion out of the world . . .¹⁶

The focus is clearly soteriology (“the way to heaven”) and this in turn is set within a framework of a relationship with God rather than intellectual knowledge and behaviour. The essential nature of this relationship is described in terms of faith working by love and Wesley defined faith primarily as trust (another relational term).

¹³ *Works*, 25: 160. While John never devalued intellectual preparation, the ‘academy’ always had to serve the actual needs of the ‘parish.’

¹⁴ Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Mirror and Memory: Reflections in Early Methodism* (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 1989), 101.

¹⁵ *Works*, 1:103.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1:105-06. See also the preface to his *Christian Library* in John Wesley, ed., *A Christian Library Consisting of Extracts and Abridgments of the Choicest Pieces of Practical Divinity Which Have Been Published in the English Tongue.*, 30 vols. (London: Thomas Cordeaux, 1819; reprint, First published in 1750 in 50 vols), 1:v-x.

The “true, the scriptural, experimental religion of the heart”

As an Anglican, Wesley followed the non-dogmatic approach to Christianity that discouraged the formulation of creeds, confessions, and systematic treatises, while emphasising the centrality of the community at worship, united by a common liturgy. When he wrote to his nephew Samuel Wesley on the definition of religion, he said: “I do not mean external religion, but the religion of the heart; the religion which Kempis, Pascal, Fénelon enjoyed: that life of God in the soul of man, the walking with God and having fellowship with the Father and the Son. . . Christ in you. . . Christ reigning in your heart and subduing all things to Himself.”¹⁷ He affirmed that a “catholic love” and a “catholic spirit” were the qualities that should be demonstrated in every Christian.¹⁸

. . . the kingdom of God is not opinions (how right soever they be), but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost. . . Shall we for opinions destroy the work of God, or give up love, the very badge of our profession? Nay, by this shall men know that we belong to the Lover of Souls, to Him who loved us and gave Himself for us.¹⁹

It was this conviction that gave him the confidence that he had correctly understood the nature of “religion”: “it lies in one single point: it is neither more nor less than love—it is love which ‘is the fulfilling of the law’, ‘the end of the commandment’. Religion is the love of God and our neighbour—that is, every man under heaven. This love, ruling the whole life, animating all our tempers and passions, directing all our thoughts, words, and actions, is ‘pure religion and undefiled’.”²⁰

. . . for in spite of all I can say they *will* represent one *circumstance* of my doctrine (so called) as the main *substance* of it. It nothing avails that I declare again and again, ‘Love

¹⁷ *Letters* (Telford), 8:218.

¹⁸ *Works*, 2:344.

¹⁹ *Letters* (Telford), 5:339. See also *Works*, 22:316; *Works* (Jackson), 13:264-67; *Letters* (Telford), 7:333.

²⁰ *Works*, 3:189. See also *Works*, 2:462-63, 70; 3:22, 99, 117, 292-307, 405.

is the fulfilling of the law.' I believe this love is given in a moment. But about this I contend not. Have this love, and it is enough. For this I will contend till my spirit returns to God. Whether I am singular or no in thinking this love is instantaneously given, this is not my 'most beloved' opinion. . . . Nay, I *love* (strictly speaking) *no opinion* at all . . . I want, I value, I preach the love of God and man. These are my 'favourite tenets' . . . 'more insisted' on by me ten times over, both in preaching and writing, than any or all other subjects that ever were in the world.²¹

He could recount how many had come to faith but could give no "rational account of the plainest principles of religion."²² The implication here is that salvation has to be understood within a framework of relationship between the Lover and the beloved, focusing on "the heart."

I say of the *heart*. For neither does religion consist in *orthodoxy* or *right opinions* A man may be orthodox in every point . . . he may think justly concerning the incarnation of our Lord, concerning the ever blessed Trinity, and every other doctrine contained in the oracles of God. He may assent to all the three creeds—that called the Apostles', the Nicene, and the Athanasian—and yet 'tis possible he may have no religion at all He may be almost as orthodox as the devil . . . and may all the while be as great a stranger as he to the religion of the heart.²³

Thus in writing to the teachers at Oxford, he said "Do you continually remind those under your care that the one rational end of all our studies is to know, love, and serve 'the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom he hath sent'?. . . that without love all learning is but splendid ignorance, pompous folly, vexation of spirit. Has all you teach an actual tendency to the love of God, and of all mankind for his sake?"²⁴

Since the focus was on love, Wesley believed that God usually began his work in the heart: "Men usually feel *desires* to please God before they *know* how to please him. Their *heart*

²¹ *Works*, 26:159-60. See also *Works*, 9:309; 26:203, 518; *Works* (Jackson), 10:347-48; *Letters* (Telford), 3:237; 4:34-35, 110-11, 134.

²² *Works*, 20:274. See also *Works*, 1:161-64, 75; 11:269-70, 477; 21:348; 21:20, 287; 26:362; *Works* (Jackson), 10:72-75. Note the close correlation of heart religion with scriptural Christianity and love.

²³ *Works*, 1:220-21. See n. 65, p. 220 for a thorough discussion of Wesley's views on 'opinions' and a listing of references to his writings that mention this. On 'heart religion', see also *Works*, 1:698; 11:272-74; 26:179; *Works* (Jackson), 11:11; *Letters* (Telford), 4:302-03.

²⁴ *Works*, 1:175-76. See also *Works*, 11:45; 26:475, 564-65; *Letters* (Telford), 3:203; 4:96-97.

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says, ‘What must I do to be saved?’ before they *understand* the way of salvation.”²⁵ Entering into and maintaining a loving relationship requires a far richer canvas than can be painted with a sterile series of propositions to be intellectually comprehended; it is far more the domain of the poet or artist, than that of the scientist. Little wonder that Wesley did not expect unanimity on matters of “opinion” regarding doctrinal reflection on the experience of salvation.²⁶

For how far is love, even with many wrong opinions, to be preferred before truth itself without love? We may die without the knowledge of many truths and yet be carried into Abraham's bosom. But if we die without love, what will knowledge avail?²⁷

Wesley noted that many problems arose because of misunderstandings rather than actual disagreements: “But if the difference be more in *opinion* than real *experience*, and more in *expression* than in *opinion*, how can it be that even the children of God should so vehemently contend with each other on the point?”²⁸ He believed that you can differ in opinions and expressions and still exercise the same faith and experience the same love of God: “It is true believers may not all speak alike; they may not all use the same language. . . . But a difference of expression does not necessarily imply a difference of sentiment. Different persons may use different expressions, and yet mean the same thing.”²⁹ Wesley acknowledged that there would

²⁵ *Works*, 11:479.

²⁶ *Works*, 2:79-80. On differing “religious opinions”, see also his sermon, “A Caution Against Bigotry” (1750). Here Wesley noted that the only place where there were no differences was recorded in Acts 4:32, shortly after the Day of Pentecost. This quickly passed as varying opinions and practices were soon seen even amongst the apostles; see *Works*, 2:69-70. He saw this attitude as a distinguishing mark of the Methodists; see *The Character of a Methodist* in *Works*, 9:32-42.

²⁷ *Works*, 1:107. See also *Works*, 9:84-85; 26:223; *Works* (Jackson), 10:73.

²⁸ *Works*, 1:451-52. See also *Letters* (Telford), 3:371-88.

²⁹ *Works*, 1:454. See his evaluation about the lives of some Trappist monks he read about in *Works*, 20:200. Note his strong approval of the holy lives of Thomas à Kempis and Frances Sales in spite of their “great mistakes” in *Works*, 9:85.

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always be differing opinions due to differing understandings arising from our limited knowledge of God and his ways.³⁰

It should be noted, however, that Wesley's "catholic spirit" was not a "speculative latitudinarianism," an "indifference to all opinions," nor a "practical latitudinarianism."³¹ Wesley insisted there were a number of doctrines that he felt were essential to being a Christian and therefore were not a matter of "opinion."³² Wesley staunchly upheld the doctrine of original sin as "the first, grand, distinguishing point between heathenism and Christianity."³³ The subsequent doctrines of justification and the new birth were equally "fundamental."³⁴ In "The Principles of a Methodist Farther Explained" (1746) he wrote: "Our main doctrines, which include all the rest, are three, that of repentance, of faith, and of holiness. The first of these we account, as it were, the porch of religion; the next, the door; the third is religion itself."³⁵ In *A Farther Appeal* he notes that he does "instil" into the people a few "favourite tenets . . . as if the whole of Christianity depended upon them" and these are frequently summed up as: faith working by love, loving God and neighbour with one's whole being and doing all the good one can as a consequence.³⁶

³⁰ *Works*, 2:86.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 2:87-92. See also *Works*, 11:477-79; *Letters* (Telford), 3:201-03.

³² For an analysis of Wesley's varying lists of "essential doctrines" see Ted A. Campbell, "The Shape of Wesleyan Thought: The Question of John Wesley's 'Essential' Christian Doctrines," *Asbury Theological Journal* 59:1 & 2 (Spring/Fall 2004): 27-40. See also Jerry L. Walls, "What Is Theological Pluralism," *Quarterly Review* 5, no. 3 (1985).

³³ *Works*, 2:182. He published his lengthiest treatise on this ("The Doctrine of Original Sin: According to Scripture, Reason, and Experience" found in *Works* (Jackson), 9:191-464). It was followed later by a sermonic abridgement ("Original Sin," 1759), which he regarded as a key doctrinal statement; see *Works*, 2:170-72.

³⁴ *Works*, 2:187. See also *Works*, 21:444, 56.

³⁵ *Works*, 9:227. See also *Letters* (Telford), 4:146-47, 237, 303.

³⁶ *Works*, 11:128-29.

The Relationship Between Doctrinal Confession and the “true, the scriptural, experimental religion of the heart”

Wesley’s theological understanding is in harmony with his understanding of the essential nature of Christianity as a relationship of love rather than a system of doctrine. This relational emphasis would seem to put a premium on the living voice of the Holy Spirit to persons in community, in harmony with the Scriptural witness.³⁷ Wesley continued to uphold his conviction that the true definition of religion was “not this or that opinion, or system of opinions, be they ever so true, ever so scriptural. . . [It is] walking in the love of God and man.”³⁸ This upheld the value of a relationship in love over doctrinal correctness centred in intellectual comprehension. This can be illustrated from his only sermon specifically focused on the doctrine of the Trinity (which he regarded as an essential doctrine). Wesley emphasised that it was belief in the fact of the Trinity that was critical, not any particular explanation of it.³⁹ Doctrinal “opinions” were not concerned with the essential “facts” of the faith and thus could not be the benchmark in deciding whether a person was or was not a Christian.

Whatsoever the generality of people may think, it is certain that opinion is not religion: no, not right opinion, assent to one or to ten thousand truths. There is a wide difference between them: even right opinion is as distant from religion as the east is from the west. Persons may be quite right in their opinions, and yet have no religion at all. And on the other hand persons may be truly religious who hold many wrong opinions. . . .

Hence we cannot but infer that there are ten thousand mistakes which may consist with real religion; with regard to which every candid, considerate man will think and let think. But there are some truths more important than others. . . . there are some which it nearly concerns us to know, as having a close connection with vital religion.⁴⁰

³⁷ *Works* (Jackson), 10:177.

³⁸ *Works*, 4:57. See also *Works*, 4:66-67; 23:38, 125.

³⁹ *Works*, 2:376-77, 83-84.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 2:374-76.

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This was clearly seen when Wesley preached the funeral sermon for George Whitefield, a staunch Calvinist and upholder of the very doctrines (predestination and election) Wesley so strongly opposed.⁴¹

Wesley continued to emphasise the need of the presence of the Spirit in a person's life as this enables a living relationship with God to be experienced, for "without this the purity of our doctrines would only increase our condemnation."⁴² Even though Wesley himself strongly upheld the need of doctrinal orthodoxy on the "essentials," he continued to affirm that it was not a crucial requirement for a person to experience God's salvation. In one of the last sermons he wrote, Wesley commented on some who said that no matter the change in people's hearts or lives, it was vital for them to have a clear doctrinal understanding of the "capital doctrines":

I believe the merciful God regards the lives and tempers of men more than their ideas. I believe he respects the goodness of the heart rather than the clearness of the head; and that if the heart of a man be filled (by the grace of God, and the power of his Spirit) with the humble, gentle, patient love of God and man, God will not cast him into everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels because his ideas are not clear, or because his conceptions are confused. Without holiness, I own, no man shall see the Lord; but I dare not add, or clear ideas.⁴³

With the rise of the Calvinist controversy in 1770, Wesley reminded Joseph Benson that very little is done in the world by clear reason.⁴⁴ However, he recognised that to focus on reason, logic and argumentation was to lose the debate. It seems that Wesley acknowledge that Calvinism was the more logical doctrinal system, and in writing to Charles Wesley, he acknowledged that "Just here we must stop reasoning or turn Calvinists. This is the very

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 2:341-43. Wesley's primary objection to the Calvinist doctrine of the absolute decrees was that they undercut the whole Scriptural picture of God as love; see for example *Letters* (Telford), 6:60-62, 224.

⁴² *Works*, 2:343.

⁴³ *Works*, 4:175. The "capital doctrines" were identified as "the fall of man, justification by faith, and of the atonement made by the death of Christ, and of his righteousness transferred to them."

⁴⁴ *Letters* (Telford), 5:203. See also *Letters* (Telford), 5:217.

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strength of their cause.”⁴⁵ He told Richard Conyers that if the Calvinists and the Arminians were to be reconciled, then God must first change the hearts of the Calvinists.⁴⁶

Conclusion

Many in the eighteenth century viewed Christianity as an intellectual system, centred on systematic theology; belief was then an intellectual quality involving the comprehension and application of propositional truth. This was certainly congenial to the developing Enlightenment approach to the study of religion and was popular with many Calvinists. While Wesley was influenced by these developments, he clearly rejected their main thrust in order to embrace Christianity as a personal encounter with God, a relationship based on trust, centred in the heart, and with an affinity for personal knowledge rather than abstract truth. In the light of this, Wesley contended for a gracious acceptance of diverse views on matters of theological opinion, provided that one’s personal life and relationships were characterised by the transforming power of God’s love. He seemed to be content to accept the essentials of the faith as they were expressed by the classical creeds of the early church and his own Anglican heritage.

The perspective from which Wesley approached the task of theologising comes from his conviction that the essential nature of God is love and that all other facets of his nature, character and purposes are in harmony with this. Human beings are created in the image of God, and the interrelationship between God and his creation is characterised by a relationship of love. It is for this reason that Wesley can define the essential nature of Christianity as “the true, the scriptural, experimental religion” of the heart. God’s plan of salvation has to do with

⁴⁵ *Letters* (Telford), 6:152-53.

⁴⁶ *Works*, 23:43.

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the restoration of a relationship of love based on trust, rather than the intellectual command of doctrines and conformity to rules and regulations. This makes personal and community transformation the critical test of correct theological reflection, formulation, and application. The critical observation to be made is Wesley's insistence that God is a God of love, and that the whole goal of salvation is to restore human beings to an enjoyment of that love in a relationship with God himself and with other persons. Furthermore, a loving relationship cannot finally be reduced to propositional statements in documents, carried out by third parties or limited to theoretical comprehension.

There is always going to be an element of mystery in our experience of God as a Christian Methodist community, since the relationship with him is finally beyond the limits of human comprehension and language. God as a Person in his relationships and communication focuses upon personal and not propositional truth. Love is the essence of the relationship and it is centred on the heart; therefore we should not expect or focus upon precision, exactitude, and rational systems. In such a setting, the character of those involved in the communication is of prime importance, rather than their ability to construct and convey a logical intellectual system. Pastoral theology is primarily concerned with fostering a relationship and assisting the transformation of character, both personal and community, rather than constructing rational doctrinal systems. Accordingly, belief in our Articles of Faith is *NOT* required for church membership; indeed, they cannot be as they are subject to change at every General Assembly. If we were to hold explicit belief in these Articles as a requirement of membership, then either the whole Nazarene church would have to retake its membership vows every quadrennium or else we would have members belonging to the church under different conditions. The Church of the Nazarene is true to its Wesleyan, Anglican and Catholic (i.e. early Church) roots by not requiring adherence to a lengthy and detailed creedal confession in order to join the church. Membership in the Church of the Nazarene rests on spiritual life

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rather than mental assent to a series of theological propositions. We have never required concurrence with a comprehensive system of doctrine in order to be a Nazarene—any more than such a thing was required by the early Church. In this we are being true our early Church and Wesleyan roots, which limited its creedal statements to ‘essential’ beliefs regarding the nature and person of the triune God, with a special focus on the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ and a number of brief statements on the nature and composition of the Church.