

THOMAS C. ODEN, *JOHN WESLEY'S TEACHINGS*,  
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In 1994, Thomas Oden produced a volume entitled, *John Wesley's Scriptural Christianity*. The subtitle, *A Plain Exposition of his Teaching on Christian Doctrine* indicated the purpose of the work more clearly (as subtitles generally do). It was intended to lay out Wesley's 'systematic theology,' particularly for evangelical Christians in the Reformation and Catholic traditions who have generally not realized how comprehensive and systematic was the theology of this major figure who has shaped the 'third house' of evangelical Christianity, comprising Methodists, the holiness tradition, and later, the charismatic and Pentecostal traditions. Oden explained that he was not interested in conversing with 'nostalgic Wesleyan sentimentalists' (!), but with Christian lay persons and with working pastors 'craving their weekly nourishment of sermon ideas...' The first two volumes of this new 2012 publication, *John Wesley's Teachings*, are an expanded version of that project: Volume 1 on 'God and Providence,' and Volume 2 on 'Christ and Salvation.' Volume 3 on 'Pastoral Theology,' and Volume 4 which will be on ethics and society, expand the project into new areas.

A personal note explains that after years of working on his own three-volume work of systematic theology which intentionally eschewed idiosyncratic originality (my phraseology) in order to expound 'classic, historic Christian teaching,' and on editing the multi-volume *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, Oden is turning once again to his own branch of classic Christianity. He explains: 'I want to show how a particular branch of that patristic tradition, Wesleyan theology, had grown out of the same root of ancient ecumenical teaching.'

Volumes 1 and 2 begin with the same introductory chapter on the homily as a way of teaching Christian doctrine, on Wesley's Methodist 'Connection' as intentionally devised to promote spiritual formation, on Oden's purpose in writing, on Albert Outler as the mentor of contemporary Wesley studies, and on whether Wesley was a systematic theologian. Volume 1 then arranges the theological *loci* according to the traditional order of scholastic theology, rather more in the tradition of Richard Watson than of Wesley himself. The doctrine of God (specifically the attributes) is dealt with before the doctrine of the Trinity in Chapter One (reminiscent of course of Aquinas). Chapter Two on 'The Primacy of Scripture' is followed by three chapters reflecting Outler's now controversial 'Wesleyan Quadrilateral.' The four remaining chapters then deal with 'Creation, Providence and Evil', 'Man', 'Sin', and 'Original Sin'. The problem is thus delineated before the solution.

In Volume 2, 'Christ and Salvation', we come to the solution. This begins (as it surely should) with a chapter on Christology, but only five pages of seventeen are actually devoted to the doctrine of the Person of Christ, almost six to the Work of Christ, and a further six to Christology and soteriology as formulated in the 1784 Order for the Administration of the Lord's Supper.

Over against that total of seventeen pages devoted to Christology and objective soteriology (the atonement), eight of the following chapters are devoted to subjective soteriology – the work of the Spirit in us, Grace, Faith, Regeneration, Sanctification, and ‘On Remaining Sin after Justification.’ There are also chapters on Predestination and Eschatology, but the preponderance of the volume (almost 290 pages) is devoted to subjective soteriology, that is, to the experience of the Christian rather than to Christ and the gospel. (By contrast, William Burt Pope of Didsbury, whom Oden names as one of his mentors, devotes 226 pages of his *A Compendium of Christian Theology* to Christology and objective soteriology and approximately equal space (231 pages) to subjective soteriology.)

Does the balance in Oden reflect both the strength and the weakness of Wesleyan theology (with the exception perhaps of the Didsbury theologian): its focus on ‘repentance, faith, and holiness’ in order to awaken nominal Christians to become ‘real Christians,’ but on the other hand, its tendency to take almost for granted the central proclamation of ‘Christ crucified’? Oden appears to have demonstrated then that the Wesleyan ‘branch’ of classic Christianity really and truly needs to recognize more fully its dependence on the central trunk of the tree – the catholic doctrines of Christ and the Holy Trinity. Perhaps it demonstrates that the Wesleyan tradition needs to become more self-critical: that the branch needs to learn again to abide in the vine if it is not to wither and die or (worse) to be grafted on to some other tree.

Volume 3, ‘Pastoral Theology’ explores the riches of Wesley’s theology on ‘the cure of souls.’ Wesley’s writings provide for chapters on ‘The Office and Gifts of Ministry’, Pastoral Counsel’, ‘Soul Care’, ‘Pastoral Care for the Family’, and even ‘Pastoral Care for the family through its Life Stages.’ Chapters on Ecclesiology follow: ‘The Church and the Ministry of the Word’, ‘The Ministry of Baptism’, ‘The Ministry of the Lord’s Supper’, ‘The Unity of the Body of Christ’, followed by two final chapters on ‘Effective Church Leadership’ and ‘The Ministry of Evangelization’. This volume is also then a rich resource of Wesley’s thinking and Wesley was surely a pastoral theologian above all else with all the rich experience of seventy years of ministry to thousands upon thousands. But here the order Oden chooses is puzzling. Should we not first understand the doctrine of the Church before we think about ministry to individuals (or even families) within the Church? (The Nazarene Articles of Faith are in the wrong order too, putting individual experience before corporate ecclesiology.) And should we not understand that the ministry is first of all a call to preaching - the proclamation of the Word of God - before it can be pastoral counselling? Should the doctrine of the Church and of Word and Sacrament not shape the way we minister to those within the Church. Does the vine not precede the branches?

In summary, this is a valuable resource for ministers and lay readers. Oden tries to keep his own interpretation of Wesley in the background in order to let Wesley’s own voice be heard. He therefore presents no unifying theme for Wesley’s theology as is done, for example, by Randy Maddox (the ‘orienting concern’ of ‘responsible grace’) or Kenneth Collins (the ‘conjunction’ of ‘holy love and the shape of grace’). In fact of course, Oden cannot avoid interpreting Wesley by the very selection and ordering of the materials, but although Oden’s ordering according to the

traditional shape of scholastic Systematics may be somewhat different from Wesley's own ordering of his sermons, Oden does help us to see the theological strengths and weaknesses of both Wesley and the tradition which bears his name.