

## What Makes Theology “Wesleyan”?

Sarah Heaner Lancaster  
Catherine Keller  
Donald A. Thorsen  
Dennis C. Dickerson  
Charles M. Wood

### *Abstract*

In an address to the 1982 Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies, Albert C. Outler outlined an agenda for what he called “Phase III” of Wesley Studies, proposing a slogan for Methodist theologies: “Back to Wesley and his sources, and then forward—with his sense of heritage and openness to the future as one of our models.” Subsequently, much work has been done in the area of Wesley Studies to illumine Wesley and his sources. This has led to questions about the possibility of, and need for, what might be called a “Phase IV” of Wesley Studies—moving beyond Wesley Studies *per se* to apply the results of research in the area more broadly to the constructive theological work that is now being carried out in the life and thought of the body of Christ (and not only in those church traditions having a historical connection to John and Charles Wesley). Some theologians use Wesley and Wesleyan themes in their work, but they may or may not self-consciously identify themselves as standing in the broad Wesleyan (or Methodist) tradition. Some make specific reference to or use of the theology of John and Charles Wesley in their own constructive theological work; others do not. The panel discussion presented here, from a Wesleyan Studies Group session at the 2008 Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, focused on the question of whether a “Phase IV” of Wesley Studies can yet be discerned by addressing the question “What makes theology ‘Wesleyan’?”

## *Introduction: Sarah Heaner Lancaster*

The Wesleyan Studies Group (WSG) of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) began meeting in 1984 (with roots in a roundtable discussion and consultations from 1981 through 1983). Only two years before, in 1982, Albert C. Outler had delivered an address entitled, "A New Future for Wesley Studies: An Agenda for Phase III," to the Seventh Oxford Institute of Methodist Studies in which he had summarized the state of scholarly research on John Wesley and sought to set an agenda for future research.<sup>1</sup> Outler described "Phase I" as focusing primarily on the link between John Wesley and Methodism, done by and for Methodists. This research treated Wesley as a "hero" for a particular Church, and it was often "denominationalistic" and even "triumphalist in tone."<sup>2</sup>

As denominationalism began to be replaced by an ecumenical spirit, scholarly studies of John Wesley underwent a shift into what Outler described as "Phase II." Scholarship in this phase saw Wesley in a wider context than simply Methodism, and it began to probe specific areas of his thought. By reducing Wesley's "hero" status within Methodism, though, and opening the question of his place in larger Christian history, scholars were faced with the question of whether he deserved to be remembered as an important figure in Christian history at all. "Phase III" then, for Outler, needed to be a period of positioning Wesley in his context so that his place in the larger backdrop of Christian history could be seen more clearly, and Outler hoped that by doing so, his theological descendants would be able to see more clearly Wesley's relevance for new times and places.

The WSG, then, began at a time when a particular vision for Wesley studies had been articulated clearly and persuasively. In its formation, though, the WSG did not restrict itself to John Wesley. The title "Wesleyan" rather than "Wesley" was intended to be broad enough to encompass other influential people in this stream of history who shared the last name but who were not John (for instance Charles and Susanna). It was also intended to include research into figures who did not bear the name "Wesley" at all, but who contributed significantly to the movement begun and nurtured by the Wesley brothers. Recognizing that this movement produced groups and Churches that were not

<sup>1</sup> The entire address may be found in M. Douglas Meeks, ed., *The Future of the Methodist Theological Traditions* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), pp. 34–52. It is also posted on the website of the Oxford Institute for Methodist Studies (accessed April 14, 2009): [http://www.oxford-institute.org/meetings/1982/04\\_1982\\_Outler.pdf](http://www.oxford-institute.org/meetings/1982/04_1982_Outler.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Outler, "A New Future for Wesley Studies," p. 37.

always called "Methodist," the term "Wesleyan" could be extended even to the study of groups that had roots in Methodism but had achieved their own status and independence from Methodists. The WSG did not restrict its study of any of these groups or figures to the field of history. Sessions at AAR were intentionally planned to encourage multi-disciplinary study. With this approach, the WSG has thrived for more than twenty years, and has been the launching point for much important scholarly work in the field of Wesleyan Studies.

At the 2007 meeting of the AAR, the first session of the WSG prompted discussion that led to the panel presentations recorded on the following pages. A few of the papers at this session had moved beyond research about what a figure from the past had thought into proposing in their conclusions some constructive suggestions for how the ideas under discussion should be thought of in our own time. Respondent Richard P. Heitzenrater noted with a reference to Outler's 1982 address that with this constructive turn Wesleyan Studies showed signs of moving into "Phase IV." The members of the WSG Steering Committee, which is responsible for setting the program each year, were interested in taking up this idea of "Phase IV" in a panel discussion at the next annual meeting. The committee charged the co-chairs Sarah Heaner Lancaster and Rex D. Matthews with the responsibility of organizing such a panel.

One of the first questions that had to be addressed was how to instruct the panelists to approach their presentations. The designation "Phase IV" did not by itself give content to the kind of study that might be done, and Outler himself had not hinted at a fourth phase. Was there some way, then, to place the question of constructive work on the table that would, not only give the panelists guidance, but also provoke reflection and conversation? Matthews remembered a 1999 book review essay in *The Christian Century* by Philip Meadows entitled "Following Wesley" in which Meadows proposed several possible answers to the question "In what sense can Wesley be claimed as a source for theology today?"<sup>3</sup> Matthews summarized and adapted the categories from Meadows' essay and distributed them to the panelists as a possible framework for their preparation. The categories did indeed prompt ideas for the panelists, and some of them refer directly to the list that Matthews sent:

<sup>3</sup> Philip Meadows, "Following Wesley," *The Christian Century* (Feb. 17, 1999): 191–95. The article reviewed two related works: Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998); and Randy L. Maddox, ed., *Rethinking Wesley's Theology for Contemporary Methodism* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1998). The latter volume is a collection of essays dedicated to Runyon.

### *Approaches to Wesley's Theology Today*

(1) ***Wesley is theologically prescriptive.*** This approach treats Wesley either as a model theologian whose thought is still constitutive of the theological enterprise, or as one who established specific orienting concerns and priorities which still lie at the heart of, or are centrally related to, the theological task today.

(2) ***Wesley is theologically instructive.*** This approach does not attempt to replicate Wesley's own message and method today; instead it attempts to discern primary emphases or "central trajectories" of his thought which can then be suitably recast for our very different times.

(3) ***Wesley is theologically supportive.*** This approach attempts to mine the substance of Wesley's message for theological insights that can illumine present concerns, whatever may be the source or origin of those concerns. By beginning with present concerns, looking back to Wesley for supportive theological insights and arguments, then returning to the present, this approach seeks to avoid the simplistic celebration of a glorious heritage and the anachronistic correlation of present questions with Wesley's past answers.

(4) ***Wesley is theologically suggestive.*** This approach tries to connect Wesley's thought with issues that go beyond the horizon of his own concerns. It typically begins by pointing out the inadequacy of Wesley's own thought and practice for our situation, but goes on to develop the incipient or apparently premonitory themes in Wesley that are relevant to the contemporary context. One variant of this approach attempts to extend the original logic and intention of Wesley's own thought so as to make them useful or applicable in the new context. Another variant uses Wesley's thought as a launching pad for a line of argument that is admittedly discontinuous with his own thinking.

(5) ***Wesley is theologically irrelevant.*** This approach may acknowledge Wesley as a denominational founder or heroic religious leader from the past who should be honored and celebrated as such, but does not find his theology to be relevant to or helpful with the concerns of the present. A variant may appeal to Wesley's thought in general ways as a warrant for claims or positions that are not directly or organically related to his own core theological concerns.

This list of categories places the focus, as Outler himself did, on John Wesley, but the question of constructive relevance need not be limited to him. Phase IV may begin with John Wesley, but it may grow to include other signifi-

cant figures in the tradition. (In fact, the 2007 Wesleyan Studies Group papers that launched this discussion were about Charles Wesley.)

The panelists of the 2008 WSG session in Chicago each provided distinct perspectives that can illumine the ongoing work of Wesley studies. From lived theology to formal analysis, from tentative suggestion to central ideas, theologians in the twenty-first century find fertile ground for reflection in John Wesley's work. If the field is indeed moving into Phase IV, these different voices may be demonstrating that the phase will have significant variations within it. When asked to do so, the panelists all readily agreed to revise for publication the opening comments they gave at the beginning of the session in Chicago, and the result is the composite text presented here (in an altered order).

First, **Catherine Keller** (Drew University), recounts her autobiographical discovery of Wesley through his influence on others. After some initial reluctance, she has developed a connection to Wesley that is fluid, like the oceanic imagery that she employs. In various ways, Wesley draws her reflection beyond himself to the depths of God.

Next, **Donald A. Thorsen** (Azusa Pacific University), explains how he understands his theology as "Wesleyan" even though he no longer belongs to or attends a Methodist-related church. Describing Wesley's thought as a "theology of holy love" Thorsen identifies six key concepts in this theology that particularly mark Wesley's concerns. These key concepts have instructed Thorsen's own theological work as a "Wesleyan."

**Dennis C. Dickerson** (Vanderbilt University) then brings to the conversation a perspective drawn from the rich history of African American Methodism and focuses on lived theology. He identifies social holiness as the mark of what is genuinely "Wesleyan" and therefore the point of contact for a reinvigoration of Wesleyan theologizing. He recalls specific witnesses to social holiness who can serve as models and inspiration for theology that is not simply academic, but that engages the world in a Wesleyan way.

In contrast to the approaches of his colleagues, **Charles M. Wood** (Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University) takes up the topic by engaging in a formal analysis of the term "Wesleyan theology" rather than trying to identify specific content that would be "Wesleyan." The broadly conceived tradition of the Wesleys may serve as resource, not simply for Methodists/Wesleyans but for the larger Christian community, it may serve as norm for Christians within the specifically Methodist/Wesleyan heritage, and it is also a body of work on which theologians can and should reflect critically. Theology needs to

consider the Wesleyan tradition in all three ways because all three tasks belong to constructive theological reflection.

What cannot be presented here is the discussion that ensued in Chicago, which was characterized by one long-time WSG member as “one of the best I have attended at the AAR in recent years.” That member continued:

The presentations . . . led to a fruitful discussion among many prominent Methodist and Wesleyan theologians present in the session. This fruitful interchange was due largely, I believe, to the fact that session was so well designed and prepared. While the plenary discussion was mostly among senior scholars, several young scholars posed penetrating questions. After the session I heard nothing but enthusiastic appreciation from the attendees. It was a moment in which the several generations of scholars genuinely affected and encouraged each other by honesty about the difficulties of being a Wesleyan theologian in the academy and the church. I had the sense that there was a profitable future to this discussion.

How Wesleyan theology will be constructed in the twenty-first century is still very much an open question, but this panel discussion provided a valuable start for an important conversation, and *Methodist Review* hopes to encourage the continuation of the conversation and contribute to its “profitable future” by presenting this article to its readers.



### *Catherine Keller*

When rivers return to the sea, carrying their sediments and nutrients, for good and for ill, they form a delta.

The sea is an excellent figure of the fullness of God, and that of the blessed Spirit. For as the rivers all return into the sea, so the bodies, the souls, and the good works of the righteous return into God. . . .

— John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, in *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson, 3rd. ed., 14 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 11:435–36.

In Wesley's trope of the divine ocean—the primal *tehom*—the delta is a zone of profound relationality.<sup>5</sup> Whether, however, all Wesleyan rivers return into Wesley is another question. I was honored and a bit surprised, given the narrow rivulet of my own contribution, to be invited to comment upon the question of Wesley's theological influence on or relevance to my work.

I find Rex Matthews's adaptation of Philip Meadows' five categories helpful for thinking about theological precedents.<sup>6</sup> A precedent is an antecedent that has become an exemplar, privileged over other antecedents to influence the present. Protestants are always a bit nervous about granting any theologian a privilege that belongs *sola* to *scriptura*. And when we do, as in the late-twentieth-century attempt to subordinate Methodism to a so-called ecumenical consensus forged at Nicaea and Chalcedon, it seems to require a catholicizing move in order then to funnel the self-designated orthodoxy through Wesley. Such moves render Wesley "theologically prescriptive," a category one inflection. To be a *precedent* is not necessarily to function in Matthews's sense as a *prescription*, which later offers itself as the sole or normative model.

I started at the opposite end, with category five: for me, Wesley was "theologically irrelevant." He didn't seem to me offensively patriarchal, just not particularly deep. I hadn't yet encountered his oceanic fullness. I came from an uncomfortably reformation-based background, and landed as a doctoral student at Claremont with passionate interest in John Cobb's philosophical Christianity but none at all in his Methodism. But when I came to Drew a couple decades ago and found myself living among some marvelous Methodists who happened to remain intentionally Wesleyan, I got interested in what they found interesting about Wesley. When Marjorie Suchocki delivered herself on the matter of "Coming Home: Wesley, Whitehead, and Women" at our Tipple Vosburgh Lectures in the late 1980s, I got it.<sup>7</sup> Yet my feminist resistance to any proliferation of paternal authorities—even when sororally mediated—was stubborn. But of course feminism is born in part from a wounded desire for good fathers, nurturers of the daughter's gifts. My heart was finally warmed to Wesley by way of a fortunate patrilineage: it was Cobb's *Grace and Responsibility*

<sup>5</sup> The Hebrew word *tehom* refers to those primal, oceanic depths churning "in the beginning" of the Genesis narratives. For a return into God's fullness and an exploration of creation not *ex nihilo* but *ex profundis*, see Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (London: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> See p. 10 above.

<sup>7</sup> Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, "Coming Home: Whitehead, Wesley, and Women," *The Drew Gateway* 59/3 (Fall 1989).

that finally made theological sense for me of the hints I'd been garnering for years. Sanctification takes time!<sup>8</sup>

In this reading, Wesley fosters a practical theology of non-coercive grace in a panentheistic relationalism; in further contrast to the classical Reformers, it is open to the future, firmly counter-determinist. But like the Reformers, its primary precedent is scripture. Unlike them it is transdisciplinary, interested in the sciences of the time. It was experimental in institutional structure, active on behalf of the rights of the oppressed, even animals. This is the Wesley behind process theology, joining a vocabulary of grace, sanctification, and the Holy Spirit with that of initial aims, concrescences and the consequent nature of God.

Other streams of Wesleyan thought then began to matter more to me. I was struck by Wesley's importance to Jürgen Moltmann. My seminary teacher Doug Meeks' collaborations with Moltmann, and then his shared interest with Cobb in issues of global economics, now appeared to be rather more non-accidentally Methodist. Ted Runyon's triad of *orthodoxy*, *orthopraxy*, and *orthopathy* recaptured the contextualism of Wesley's theological practice for a new context, a new creation.<sup>9</sup> I became aware of Methodist liberation theologians like José Míguez Bonino and Néstor O. Míguez who were making use of Wesley as precedent but not as sufficient prescription.<sup>10</sup> I came to appreciate the work of un-Methodist Wesleyans like Tom Oord, who facilitates fertile conversations between Wesleyan, evangelical, radical orthodox and process theologies.<sup>11</sup> And I learned from theologian (and Drew alum) Michael Nausner, the postcolonial Wesleyan theologian in Germany.<sup>12</sup> Such variegated Wesley-

<sup>8</sup> John B. Cobb, Jr., *Grace and Responsibility: A Wesleyan Theology for Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995).

<sup>9</sup> Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998).

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, José Míguez Bonino, "Wesley in Latin America: A Theological and Historical Reflection," in *Rethinking Wesley's Theology for Contemporary Methodism*, ed. Randy L. Maddox (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1998), 169–82; and Néstor O. Míguez, "The Old Creation in the New, the New Creation in the Old," in *Wesleyan Perspectives on the New Creation*, ed. M. Douglas Meeks (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2004), 53–92.

<sup>11</sup> See Bryan P. Stone and Thomas Jay Oord, eds., *Thy Nature and Thy Name is Love: Wesleyan and Process Theologies in Dialogue* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2001).

<sup>12</sup> Michael Nausner, "Geistgewirktes Mit-Sein: Methodistische Ekklesiologie als Ausdruck globaler Verbundenheit," in *Ekklesiologie aus freikirchlicher und römisch-katholischer Perspektive*, Hrsg. Burkhard Neumann (Patmos Verlag: Paderborn, 2009). For a brief survey of the breadth and depth of Methodist thought, in addition to the works already noted, see M. Douglas Meeks, ed., *Trinity, Community, and Power: Mapping Trajectories in Wes-*

ans do not comprise a school or a party line, but my handle on a net holding strong amidst the conflicting currents of Methodism. It is the relationalism itself—with that prescient metaphor, the *connection*—that attracts me. It intertwines with the relationalism of the ecology, feminism and any theology of planetary responsibility.

In the famous passage cited by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as first usage of the word "react," Wesley enunciates a radically relational claim: "God does not continue to act upon the soul unless the soul re-acts upon God."<sup>13</sup> This reciprocity is couched in pneumatological language: God "will not continue to breathe into our soul unless our soul breathes toward him again. . . ." This inter-breathing Spirit echoes the oceanic rhythm of "return into God." This is not a quiescent but an activist spirituality. Randy Maddox observes "how closely Wesley ties the affirmation that grace is *responsive* to the insistence that it is also *responsible*—it is only as we react, that God acts more fully in transforming our lives."<sup>14</sup>

The saving grace is perilously resistible—dependent upon our free response for its actualization. Where synergy has been replaced by what we might call "monergy," the logic of a sovereign omnipotence predetermining our salvation pumps up the imagery of God as an imperial patriarch. Relationality in the Wesleyan synergy takes the place of a unilateralist monergy. So it is with Wesley's influence—it is not coercively irresistible but synergistically attractive.

When I appeal to Wesley, I am in category 2, being instructed by him. I don't remain there; often I am in 3, supported by Wesley, usually in 4, appreciating some resonance of his insights. I suspect this locates me not in Wesley Studies but in a supplemental version of the fourth phase of Methodism, glad for the hand in hand and the heart for heart. What would matter most to Wesley amidst the chaotic creativity of our present moment is not the return to Wesley but to the divine ocean—at any moment. Wesley still shapes a mighty delta.

I'll close with an oceanic psalm from the other Wesley:

*Wesleyan Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2000); and Joerg Rieger and John Vincent, eds., *Methodist and Radical: Rejuvenating a Tradition* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2003).

<sup>13</sup> Sermon 19, "The Great Privilege of Those that are Born of God," §III.3, in *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984—), 1:442. Cf. *A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion, Part I*, §1.3–5, in *Works* 11:106–108.

<sup>14</sup> Randy L. Maddox, "Nurturing the New Creation: Reflections on a Wesleyan Trajectory," in *Wesleyan Perspectives on the New Creation*, 31; cf. 21–52.

Thou didst thy mighty wings outspread,  
 And brooding o'er the chaos shed  
 Thy life into th' impregn'd abyss;  
 Thy vital principle infuse,  
 And out of nothing's womb produce  
 The earth and heav'n and all that is.<sup>15</sup>



### *Donald A. Thorsen*

I have long called my theology Wesleyan, but I did not always do so. My earliest theological training occurred, growing up, in a Free Methodist Church. The denomination is an evangelical offshoot of Methodism, founded as part of the Holiness Movement in the nineteenth century. However, as a youth, I did not identify my beliefs, values, and practices as being Wesleyan, Methodist, or Holiness. Most people in churches do not care a great deal about theological and ecclesiastical monikers.

I attended Stanford University as a Religious Studies major and Asbury Theological Seminary for a M.Div., and both schools greatly expanded my theological worldview. However, when I attended Princeton Theological Seminary, I realized that I definitely disagreed with the Reformed traditions with regard to my beliefs, values and practices. Instead, I found myself drawn back to Wesleyan theology, and I completed my Ph.D. in Theological and Religious Studies at Drew University, where I focused on the theology of John Wesley.

If there is a particular word or theological concept one could use to describe Wesley's theology, then the words *holy* or *holiness* would seem obvious choices. In fact, I think that holiness embodies much of how Wesley conceived of God, God's loving relationship with humanity, God's offer of salvation—both for people's justification and sanctification—and how God wants to work through believers to transform the world into a more righteous, just, healthy, whole, and indeed holy place. Unfortunately, people nowadays—including those who call themselves Wesleyan—caricature holiness in ways that distort

<sup>15</sup> Charles Wesley, "Hymn to the Holy Spirit," 28 (1776) from *Hymns of Petition and Thanksgiving for the Promise of the Father*. See Michael Lodahl, *God of Nature and of Grace: Reading the World in a Wesleyan Way* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2004), 9f.

Wesley's understanding of it. I think that holiness can and should be recovered as a descriptor of Christian theology, especially among those from a Wesleyan perspective. The recent *Holiness Manifesto* represents a helpful restatement of holiness for the twenty-first century.<sup>16</sup>

As indispensable as holiness is to Wesleyan theology, I think that love represents a more essential descriptor of Wesley's theological and ecclesiastical legacy. I was strongly impressed by the primacy of love in Wesleyan theology after reading *A Theology of Love: The Dynamic of Wesleyanism* by Mildred Bangs Wynkoop.<sup>17</sup> Wynkoop talks about how Wesley emphasized a Spirit-filled life, whose essence is love. She describes love as the dynamic of holiness in personal relationships. Those relationships include the need for holiness between people and God, people and themselves, and people and others—individually and socially. Wynkoop concludes with one of the most helpful descriptions that I have ever read of Wesley's understanding of sanctification and the perfection of Christian love.

Despite Wynkoop's insightful guidance in interpreting Wesley, I modify it. Rather than referring to "a theology of love," I prefer to talk about "a theology of holy love." Wynkoop, I think, would agree with the modification. The words holiness and love both need to be included in describing Wesleyan theology. Holiness includes emphasis upon God's righteousness and justice; love includes emphasis upon God's relationality and salvation. Holiness and love represent key foci within the entirety of Wesley's beliefs, values, and practices. Love still seems to have a place of priority in his theology, though love cannot be fully understood and put into action apart from holiness.

Given these preliminary comments, how can or should theology be described as Wesleyan? Of course, there have been many attempts to do so throughout church history. I do not presume to give the only or even the best description of what makes theology Wesleyan. What I can do is describe, in summary form, how Wesley affected my theology. Moreover, I can share key concepts that I consider helpful in encapsulating the essence of Wesleyanism.

Using the typology provided by Rex Matthews, I would say that Wesley is theologically *instructive* of my beliefs, values, and practices.<sup>18</sup> I certainly do not consider him *prescriptive*, but there are central concepts (themes, trajectories)

<sup>16</sup>Kevin W. Mannoia and Don Thorsen, eds., *The Holiness Manifesto* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 18–21.

<sup>17</sup>Mildred Bangs Wynkoop, *A Theology of Love: The Dynamic of Wesleyanism* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press 1972).

<sup>18</sup>See p. 10 above.

that I consider more than just *supportive* in dealing with the breadth and complexities of life. At the same time, I do not refer to Methodism as representative of my theology. Of course, I no longer belong to or attend a Methodist-related church, though I still describe my theology as Wesleyan. Methodism is *suggestive* for me, but it is not generally constructive for my theology. Occasionally I refer to my theology as Holiness-oriented, but only as found in contemporary expressions of it, for example, the *Holiness Manifesto*.

There are six concepts that I, at least, find instructive in calling my theology Wesleyan. The concepts are not exhaustive of Wesley's theology, and they certainly are not exhaustive of subsequent developments in Wesleyan, Methodist, Holiness, Pentecostal, evangelical, and other theological traditions that have drawn—to greater and lesser degrees—from Wesley. But these six concepts represent a constellation of theological ideas that signify more than the sum of the parts. At this time, let me briefly list them, along with systematic doctrines historically associated with the concepts. The theological concepts and doctrines are not identical, nor are they exhaustive of either the concepts or the doctrines. But in this presentation I like to be “methodical,” though the methodical nature of Wesley and the Methodists had far more to do with the Christian life rather than systematic theology.

(1) **A love-centered doctrine of God.** Wesley emphasized the love of God more than the sovereignty of God, characteristic of Reformed traditions and other Christian theologies. Although Wesley considered God sovereign, sovereignty does not preclude relationships with people that are genuine, reciprocal, and loving. Conceiving of God primarily in terms of love permeates other Christian doctrines, since the doctrine of God impacts all other beliefs, values, and practices. Even the doctrine of the Trinity reflects the loving, relational nature of God. Consequently, the nature and works of Jesus and the Holy Spirit should be conceived primarily in terms of love.

(2) **A Quadrilateral-centered doctrine of religious authority and theological method.** If the so-called Wesleyan Quadrilateral is a myth, as some critics of it have suggested, then it is a useful myth. A dynamic understanding of how Wesley affirmed the interdependent relationship between the primacy of scriptural authority and the genuine, albeit secondary, religious authority of tradition, reason, and experience encourages theology that is relevant, constructive, and effective for life and ministry. Of course, it is important to bear in mind Wesley's emphasis on the primacy of scripture. In addition, he functioned with a critical understanding of biblical interpretation and its applica-

tions to life and ministry, which reflects the use of the quadrilateral in interpreting scripture.

(3) **A synergistically-centered doctrine of humanity.** Although the image of God (*imago Dei*) may include many characteristics, people's ongoing freedom of choice (free will, or free grace, as Wesley implied) centrally represents their nature and potentiality. Although God's grace pervades all of life, facilitating people's freedom, they still need to act responsibly in synergistically partnering with God for salvation and the Christian life. Such freedom is incorrectly caricatured as Pelagian or semi-Pelagian. On the contrary, Wesley's views more closely reflected the semi-Augustinian views characteristic of Catholic, Orthodox, and Anglican churches. Freedom of choice represents an aspect of God's image inclusive of all people, regardless of gender, race, culture, language, nationality, and other differences sadly used to divide, rather than unite people.

(4) **A holiness-centered doctrine of salvation.** God intends people to be saved holistically, renewing relationship between God and people, through Jesus Christ, and nurturing them, through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, toward holiness (or Christ-likeness, love for God and neighbor, etc.). Salvation involves a so-called right heart or experience of God (orthokardia, orthopathy, or orthoaffectus) as well as right belief (orthodoxy) and right action (orthopraxis). Wesley was hopeful—indeed, optimistic—with regard to the degree to which God works in the lives of people toward their entire sanctification, understood primarily as love for God and neighbor.

(5) **A "no holiness but social holiness"-centered ethics.** Although this quote is usually taken out of context, it nevertheless can describe Wesley's social consciousness and activism. There is no split between personal and social ethics. Ethics are relevant to the relationship people have with themselves, others, and God. There is no greater need for a social concept of ethics than there is today, which includes social advocacy as well as compassion ministries. Methodist churches in the Holiness Movement were leaders in social activism during the nineteenth century, just as United Methodism has given leadership in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

(6) **A "Catholic spirit"-centered doctrine of the church.** Of course, the church is also to be one, holy, apostolic, and proclaim the gospel in word and deed, but the inclusive nature of Wesley's "catholic spirit" inspires a universal understanding of churches and their ministries. A catholic (or universal, ecumenical) spirit should undergird the life and service of churches. Their service or ministries include, among other things, evangelism, discipleship, sacra-

ments, spiritual disciplines, study, activism, and ecumenism. In endeavoring to show love for others, Wesley advocated a holistic understanding of the church and its ministries.



### *Dennis C. Dickerson*

I bring to this discussion a perspective from African American Methodism. The concept and practice of social holiness constitutes an essence of Wesleyan theology that singularly identifies Methodist adherents and distinguishes them from others affiliated with various religious bodies. Although ministers and members in other sects are heirs to traditions for societal renewal, few can draw on a well articulated link between scriptural/spiritual holiness and social holiness. It is axiomatic that the scriptural/spiritual holiness that Wesleyan believers embrace must be lived out primarily in public spheres rather than in private devotional practices. Though these two elements are inextricably bound, they must be expressed within a witness and work aimed at realizing the “new creation.” Moreover, I contend that those who worry about the decline of Wesleyan theological identity or the disappearance of a specifically articulated Methodist way of theologizing and behaving might turn to social holiness as a point of re-entry to the writings and witness of John and Charles Wesley.

In 2000 Robert Thomas, Jr., an activist pastor in the African Methodist Episcopal Church who had been elected and consecrated a bishop in 1988, inserted in the *The Doctrine and Discipline of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* a crucial addition to the collect for the consecration of deaconesses. Bishop Thomas’s jurisdiction in the Midwest included St. Matthew AME Church in Detroit where the “mother” of the civil rights movement, Rosa Parks, served as a stewardess. Previously, Parks had been a stewardess at St. Paul AME Church in Montgomery, Alabama. As a stewardess, Parks helped to prepare the Eucharist each month; at the same time she was also serving as secretary of the local chapter of the NAACP. These were her roles when she spearheaded the now famous Montgomery bus boycott on December 1, 1955. There was a clear link between Parks’s understanding of her Eucharistic duties and her social responsibilities. Bishop Thomas theologized Parks as a stewardess and social activist and concluded that Wesleyan social holiness integrated these spheres of Parks’s Methodist being. Hence, Bishop Thomas, who consecrated

Parks as deaconess in the Michigan Annual Conference, proposed, with the concurrence of the AME General Conference of 2000, language that revised the deaconess service of dedication. The passage reads as follows:

It becomes the deaconess that she shall be pious, chaste, temperate in all things, modest, humble, industrious, and devout, as she is to serve the Church of God and to His praise and glory. Throughout the history of the Church, God has been pleased to call and qualify certain women for the gentle and holy service of ministering to the Church and the ministry. Such women were Deborah, Mary, the Holy Mother, Eunice, Lois, Priscilla, Lydia, and Phoebe. And in the latter days He has been pleased to own and bless the labors of Sister Sarah Gorham, *Sister Rosa Parks*, and many others. May the Lord bless and acknowledge these persons according as He has blessed the ministration of all holy women. May they withdraw themselves from all worldly cares and vocations and give themselves up entirely to the ministrations of the Church and to suffering humanity.<sup>19</sup>

The insertion of Parks's name in the company of Deborah, Mary, Eunice, and others recognized the Wesleyan link between scriptural/spiritual holiness and social holiness. Her Wesleyan witness in Montgomery became a paradigm meant to instruct others about the urgency of social reconstruction and its grounding in the Methodist theology.

Parks was not a singular figure in the social holiness sphere. James M. Lawson, Jr. was a major theoretician and activist in nonviolent direct action in the civil rights movement. An ordained United Methodist minister and a veteran pastor of congregations in Tennessee and California, Lawson emerged from a background in the AME Zion Church and in the Methodist Church's segregated Central Jurisdiction. He also drew vigor and inspiration from Methodist pacifist movements which included both black and white clergy. His attraction to Gandhian nonviolence built on these Methodist foundations which tied him to Wesleyan social holiness. There are similar testimonies concerning civil rights activists James Farmer, a founding father of Congress of Racial Equality, and Joseph Lowery, longtime head of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Like Lawson, they were reared in the black Methodist religious culture of the Central Jurisdiction.

<sup>19</sup>*The Doctrine and Discipline of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, 2004–2008* (Nashville: AMEC Sunday School Union, 2005), p. 516 (italics added).

Like Parks, AME civil rights leaders Oliver Brown, the plaintiff largely responsible for the Supreme Court suit, *Brown v. Board of Education*, A. Philip Randolph, the labor leader and tactician of grassroots mobilization, and Archibald J. Carey, Jr., another benefactor of CORE and a major civil rights spokesman in Chicago, pursued a lived religion anchored in social holiness modeled in Richard Allen's activist ministry. Social holiness seems embodied in the social witness of Methodists who took seriously their faith and its impact in a temporal world poised for realization of the "new creation."



### Charles M. Wood

Among the questions we panelists were asked to consider were these: "Does use of the adjectives 'Wesleyan' or 'Methodist' serve to define or shape, or to limit or restrict, the scope of constructive theological reflection? In what ways is the theology of the Wesleys seen as authoritative or instructive for constructive theology today—or is it?"

I want to use these questions to address briefly what we might call the formal or conceptual rather than the substantive side of the issues we are given to think about. That is, rather than trying to identify distinctive Wesleyan theological content or a distinctively Wesleyan theological approach, I want to ask what putting the adjective "Wesleyan" in front of the noun "theology" might imply so far as "the scope of constructive theological reflection" is concerned. I will have three points, all predicated on regarding the work of John and Charles Wesley as *tradition*. By their "work" I mean to designate not just their varied literary output but their activity and accomplishments as a whole. The three points I want to make about some possible roles of this body of tradition in theological reflection will yield three distinct senses of the term "Wesleyan theology."

(1) As tradition, the work of the Wesleys is a resource for contemporary theological reflection, and "Wesleyan theology" might then be construed in one sense as theological activity aimed at exploring this resource and proposing ways of making use of it. Those pursuing Wesleyan theology in this first sense are likely to be affiliated somehow with Christian communities that trace their origins to the Wesleyan revival, and to see this work as part of their theological vocation in that ecclesial setting; but they need not be: they might, for example, be Christians of other traditions who for one reason or another have

taken a particular interest in this one. The concern here in any case is to discover whatever insights this body of tradition might have to offer on the issues with which Christian theology is presently concerned.

(2) This Wesleyan corpus is not only a resource for Christian theology in general and for Wesleyan and Methodist communities in particular; within many of these latter communities, it also has a normative status and function, or at least some part of it has. Some of this material constitutes explicit standards of doctrine in various denominations, while much of the remainder exercises a less formal but still influential "norming" role in one way or another. "Wesleyan theology" in a second sense, then, might be construed as theological activity aimed at understanding how these doctrinal norms are to be applied, and then applying them to the contemporary life and witness of the community. "Wesleyan theology" in this sense might undertake to discern to what extent some act of witness undertaken in the name of this community is in accord with its own principles; or, in a more constructive vein, it might attempt to propose ways of achieving that aim in the current situation, whatever that might be.

The distinction between these first two senses of "Wesleyan theology" is that while the first is an attempt to retrieve from Wesleyan tradition insights and possibilities that might be fruitful for Christian practice today, the second involves testing insights and possibilities for Christian practice (whatever their origin) with regard to their consistency with the community's Wesleyan identity. That is, it is concerned with answering the question, "Is this an authentically Wesleyan understanding of this matter?" or "What would be a genuinely Wesleyan position on this issue?" (In a more explicitly denominational context, the question might be, "Is this view consistent with our standards of doctrine?" or "What statement or action best expresses our doctrinal commitments on this subject?")

These two senses of "Wesleyan theology," and the two uses of Wesleyan tradition they involve, bear some analogy to the two main kinds of authority ascribed to scripture in post-Reformation Protestant dogmatics: causative authority (scripture's role in bringing us to the knowledge of God) and normative or canonical authority (scripture's role in adjudicating controversies as to what the church should be teaching). The mention of scripture conveniently brings us to the third point.

(3) Wesleyan "tradition" is abundantly clear as to its own provisionality. The Anglican Articles of Religion that Wesley affirmed and (in adapted form) commended to his followers clearly proclaimed their own accountability to scripture: "... whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not

to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation.”<sup>20</sup> In his own writings, John Wesley frequently appeals to his readers to examine his claims in the light of scripture—and of various other considerations, a fact giving rise, for better or worse, to the notion of the “Wesleyan quadrilateral”—and to correct him where he is in error. This appeal is certainly at least a rhetorical device, and the degree to which Wesley himself was in fact patient of correction by others is a matter best left to historical investigation; but in any case the crucial principle is on record, in material that belongs to the doctrinal standards of most, perhaps all, Wesleyan denominations. Theologians affiliated with these denominations have some responsibility to make good on this: that is, not only to ask whether present or proposed statements and practices are in accord with our Wesleyan/Methodist doctrinal standards, but also to examine both those statements and practices and the doctrinal standards themselves with regard to their adequacy in the light of considerations that pertain to the validity of any Christian witness whatsoever. And so a third sense of “Wesleyan theology” follows: critical theological examination of the material that constitutes normative Wesleyan tradition. Here, the adjective “Wesleyan” points neither to a resource nor to a norm, but rather to the subject-matter under critical scrutiny.

If the first and second senses of Wesleyan theology involve, in different ways, undertaking a responsibility *to* this tradition, the third sense points to a responsibility *for* this tradition; that is, a responsibility to hold it accountable within a broader context of Christian theological inquiry. The first sense amounts to taking this heritage seriously and dealing with it fairly and honestly as a potential resource for the contemporary church. The Wesleyan theologian in this sense is responsible to the Wesleyan heritage in the same way that a reputable scholar in any field is responsible to his or her data. The second sense involves exercising a responsibility to the Wesleyan heritage for whatever is being said and done in its name. It comes into play whenever there is a concern to determine whether a particular claim, stance, or act is or would be “really Wesleyan.” The third sense is an act of accountability for the Wesleyan heritage: how adequate are the distinctive resources and commitments of this tradition to the task of bearing Christian witness? To what extent is the church of Jesus Christ—which, as the Westminster Confession remarks, can be “some-

<sup>20</sup> Article VI in the enumeration of the Church of England; Article V in Wesley’s enumeration; see *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 2008* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2008), ¶103, p. 61.

times more, sometimes less visible"—visible in the various branches of the Wesleyan tradition? What factors in that tradition tend to promote, and what factors tend to impede, its participation in the life and work of the one holy catholic and apostolic church?

I believe these three senses of "Wesleyan theology" are compatible with each other (that is, not mutually exclusive) and that the enterprises they name can be, and often are, fruitfully interrelated in practice. At least, I find them so in my own work. Nevertheless, I do not ordinarily think of my theological work as Wesleyan theology, nor would I describe myself as a Wesleyan theologian. As a member of The United Methodist Church, I am more inclined to think in "United Methodist" terms than in "Wesleyan" terms. I am, or at least I aspire to be, a United Methodist theologian in something quite close to all three of the senses I have just given to "Wesleyan theology," and perhaps especially to the second and third senses. That is, part of my theological vocation as a member of this denomination is to participate in its ongoing effort to be faithful to its own doctrinal commitments, and part of my theological vocation is to participate in its ongoing efforts to test its doctrinal commitments.

It is my specific ecclesial location that makes "United Methodist" a more apt qualifier than "Wesleyan" for this particular effort, at least as I see it. To call myself a Wesleyan theologian would be likely to mislead my hearers either as to my denominational affiliation or as to my theological expertise, or both. Although I have taken "Wesleyan theology" as the subject of inquiry in these reflections in accord with our common theme, much the same points could be made—with some interesting and instructive variations—with other, more denominationally-specific, adjectives substituted for "Wesleyan." The variations might have to do in part with the ways different branches of the Wesleyan/Methodist tradition—United Methodist, African Methodist Episcopal, Free Methodist, and so on—tend to handle matters of doctrinal and theological identity and responsibility.

Even more interesting and instructive might be a comparison of some answers to the question "What makes theology 'Wesleyan'?" with some answers to questions such as "What makes theology 'Lutheran'?" and "What makes theology 'Reformed'?"



*About the Authors*

**Sarah Heaner Lancaster** is Professor of Theology in the Bishop Hazen G. Werner Chair of Theology at Methodist Theological School in Ohio. She was co-chair of the Wesleyan Studies Group of the American Academy of Religion 2002–2008 and is the author of *Women and the Authority of Scripture: A Narrative Approach* (Trinity Press International, 2002).

**Catherine Keller** is Professor of Constructive Theology at the Theological School of Drew University, where she has directed the annual Drew Transdisciplinary Theological Colloquium since its inception in 2000. Her most recent book is *On the Mystery: Discerning Divinity in Process* (Fortress Press, 2008).

**Donald A. Thorsen** is Professor of Theology and Chair of the Department of Advanced Studies at the C. P. Haggard Graduate School of Theology, Azusa Pacific University. He is a past president of the Wesleyan Theological Society, and his publications include *An Invitation to Theology: Exploring the Full Christian Tradition* (Hendrickson Publishers, 2008).

**Dennis C. Dickerson** is James M. Lawson, Jr. Professor of History at Vanderbilt University. He currently serves as the official historiographer of the AME Church and as editor of *The AME Church Review*. His publications include *Religion, Race, and Region: Research Notes on AME Church History* (AME Sunday School Union 1995) and *A Liberated Past: Explorations in AME Church History* (AME Sunday School Union, 2003).

**Charles M. Wood** is Lehman Professor of Christian Doctrine and Director of the Graduate Program in Religious Studies at Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University. His most recent books are *The Question of Providence* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2008) and *Attentive to God: Thinking Theologically in Ministry*, co-authored with Ellen Blue (Abingdon Press, 2008), and *Love That Rejoices in the Truth: Theological Explorations* (Cascade Books, 2009).