

WHAT IF WESLEY WAS RIGHT?

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What if Wesley was right?¹

Silly question. We attend to Wesley because we all believe that Wesley was right, not right about everything, to be sure (“beware of panegyric, particularly in London”),² but right about the things that matter. And if Wesley was right, about what he was most right about, then perhaps we should be uncomfortable. I suspect that some of us attend to Wesley not so much because we believe Wesley was right, but because we think he was interesting. We have a Wesleyan affinity, we are part of the “Wesleyan tradition,” we are curious about Wesley, or we find him useful in explaining something else that interests us more than Wesley: “Wesley, the organizational genius of the eighteenth century,” or “Wesley, the Tory for all seasons,” or some other merely academic interest. As a sometime academic myself, I have some admiration for those who can muster enthusiasm for such matters. But not much.

What if “our Old Daddy” (Asbury’s somewhat mocking title for Wesley) was not just interesting but also *right*? We may be uncomfortable because if Wesley was right in what he thought and taught, then we may be wrong. To ask, *What if Wesley was right?* is to allow ourselves to be challenged by Wesley’s grasp of reality.

And if we should be so engaged by him, interrogated by him, and if we find ourselves thinking about God with him, why, we might again become theologians. We might again believe that there is nothing more important to talk about and no one more important to listen to than God.

So if you have a mainly archaeological interest in Wesley as a set of ancient texts, a man who was remarkable rather than a man who was right, this essay may have nothing to say to you.

If Wesley was right, then a conference about Wesley can be dangerous as we endeavor to protect ourselves against Wesley by talking about him rather than daring to allow him to talk to us. (Wesley's dreaded "almost Christian"³ comes in many forms.)

To answer *What if Wesley was right?* we need to think what Wesley thought. The most challenging task of thinking with Wesley is that we must become theologians. That is, we must begin where he began.⁴ To read Wesley is to be in the presence of a man who has been assaulted by the living, speaking, active, interactive personality of the triune God. To read Wesley's *Journals* is to be with a man who is driven, moment by moment (even the most mundane), thought by thought (even the most trivial) by a robust, resourceful God. (Only a man who had the stupidest idea of luck—which Wesley did not—or the most extravagant notions of particular providence—which Wesley did—could rely upon casting lots as a method of intellectual discernment.)⁵

WHAT IF WESLEY WAS RIGHT ABOUT GOD?

Wesley was more a medieval theologian than he was a modern one. He inherited the robust trinitarian faith that had been worked out in the early centuries of the church. God is not an idea, an abstraction, a source of meaning, a wholly other, a general concept, or a technique to help us make it through the day; God is the One who presently, directly speaks, creates, intrudes, demands, commands, passionately loves, continually transforms. Wesley's biblical interpretation is a sort of anti-interpretation in which he assumes that God speaks through Scripture, every word of it. Rather than assume that the task of the interpreter is to make the

text more meaningful to sophisticated, modern people who drive Volvos, Wesley seems to assume that the task of the text is to make the interpreters' lives more difficult.

As Wesley wrote to his father, at the heart of the Methodist movement is a "habitual lively sense of our being only instruments in His hand, who can do all things either with or without any instrument."⁶ Much of American popular religion is instrumental—religion valued on the basis of its alleged personal or social utility. Wesley assumes that the reader is instrumental to the biblical text.

What respectful, deferential, intellectually constrained Deist could write so sensuously?

1 Rise my soul with ardor rise,
 Breathe thy wishes to the skies;
 Freely pour out all thy mind,
 Seek, and thou art sure to find;
 Ready art thou to receive?
 Reader is thy God to give.

3 Friend of sinners, King of saints,
 Answer my minutest wants,
 All my largest thoughts require,
 Grant me all my heart's desire,
 Give me, till my cup run o'er,
 All, and infinitely more.⁷

Wesley assumes a God of plenitude, a God who is extravagantly, abundantly revelatory ("my cup run o'er, / All, and infinitely more"). Most of us have been trained, when we're thinking about God, to assume deprivation. We lack enough information about God to speak with any authority about God.

6 Since the Son hath made me free,
 Let me taste my liberty,
 Thee behold with open face,
 Triumph in thy saving grace,
 Thy great will delight to prove,
 Glory in thy perfect love.

7 Since the Son hath bought my peace,
 Mine thou art, as I am his:⁸
 Mine the Comforter I see,
 Christ is full of grace for me:
 Mine (the purchase of his blood)
 All the plenitude of God.

If Wesley was right about God, then we are wrong. We hear Wesley from within a dysfunctional family where death is normal, and we have become so respectful of God that we have silenced God. John Milbank accuses contemporary theology of dying under the grip of a “false modesty” in which theology finds it impossible to declare anything with conviction. We say that we are so respectful of the ineffable mystery of God. In reality, we are reluctant to speak about God for fear that in the process we might discover a God who says something definitive and authoritative to us. Spent Calvinism, sliding into a renovated Deism, has triumphed. God is all distant concept, abstraction, and essence, a never-speaking, revealing, troubling subject. We’ve got just enough God to give our lives a kind of spiritual tint without so much God as to interfere with our running the world as we please.

I have just listened to the taped sermons of sixty of the preachers who are under my care. Many of their sermons were lively and engaging, and most congregations would hear them gladly on a Sunday. Yet in a depressing majority of these sermons there was little indication that the content of the sermon or the engine driving the proclamation was the gospel of Jesus Christ. Other than that, they were fine sermons.

One sermon began well enough, the Second Sunday of Christmas, Luke 2, young Jesus putting the temple elders through their paces, abandoning Mom and Dad. After reading the text, and noting Jesus’ amazing ability to stupefy professional scholars, the preacher then sailed off into a veritable shopping list of things *we* needed to do. We were told that we must resolve, in the coming year, to be more proficient in study of God’s word. We should strive to “increase in wisdom and in stature.” We ought to spend more time with our families (despite Jesus’ abandonment of his own family).

Note how quickly, how effortlessly, and how predictably the preacher disposed of a story about Jesus and transformed it into a moralistic diatribe about us. Moving from a text that simply declares what Jesus did and, by implication, who Jesus is, the preacher turned to a moralistic rant on all the things that we need to do if we (lacking a living, active God) are to take charge of our lives and the world.

This is what Barth condemned as “religion,” defined in *Romans* as “a vigorous and extensive attempt to humanize the divine, to make it a practical ‘something,’ for the benefit of those who cannot live with the Living God, and yet cannot live without God.”⁹

Of course, most congregations that I know love such moralistic Deism. The subtext is always, “You are gods unto yourselves. Through this insight, this set of principles, this well-applied idea, you can save yourselves by yourselves.” Whether the preacher is an alleged theological conservative or a would-be liberal, we’re all Schleiermacherians now. Theology is reduced to anthropology because unlike Wesley, we’re obsessed with ourselves rather than God. God is humanity spoken in a resonant, upbeat voice backed up with PowerPoint presentation. Our noble Arminianism really does degenerate into Pelagianism when the divine gift of divine-human synergism loses its divine initiation. My image of us United Methodists on Sunday morning is that we come to church with pencil and pad ready to get our assignments for the week: “This week, church, work on your sexism and racism, and be nice to salesclerks. Come back next week and I’ll give you another assignment.”

Wesley’s much touted “Catholic spirit” was right to draw the line at extending the open hand of fellowship to Deists. Though Wesley might have been wrong in his belief in the reality of witches, he was right in his belief that the Deists’ disbelief in witches was not to be trusted because of their truncated theological imaginations.¹⁰

Reaching out to speak to the world, we fell in facedown. Too troubled by our expectations of what our audience could and could not hear, we reduced the gospel to a set of sappy platitudes that anybody could accept and no sensitive, thinking person could resist. “Open minds, open hearts, open doors.” Our testimony got reduced to whatever the market could bear. In the process of such

“preaching,” distinctive Christian speech was jettisoned, and the discourse of instrumental, utilitarian, therapeutic Deism is the dominant homiletic mode. Finney’s pragmatism triumphs. Atheistic, simplified wisdom now dominates popular preaching (Warren’s *Purpose Driven Life*) because preaching is no longer an expression of the peculiar actions of a triune God. People on top—well-fed, well-empowered people—always love Wisdom literature because of its lack of a God who either judges or redeems. Well-fixed people always want therapy more than salvation. We thus violated Barth’s “first axiom of theology”—the first commandment, “thou shalt have no other gods before me.”

Today the Methodist movement, at least in its North American and European vestiges, suffers from the debilitating effects of a truncated theology. We are attempting to revive a church on a too-thin description of God. Whereas Wesley’s robust trinitarianism produced a vibrant, experimental, missional, adaptable ecclesiology that rejoiced in radical manifestations of the work of the Holy Spirit among ordinary people, today a virtually deistic view of God has rendered a dispirited, ossified ecclesia that in so many ways appears to be organized as a defense against the Holy Spirit. I marvel at Wesley’s determination to deal with all organizational and missional questions from a theological point of view. Wesley was open to development and to change of the very structures he had created because he was determined to worship a living God whose perichoretic, trinitarian nature demanded a certain sort of institutional embodiment.

Sometimes as Methodists we need to be reminded of the vibrancy of Wesley’s theology from surprising sources. Church growth guru Paul Borden, fresh from creating a virtually new, burgeoning denomination among once dispirited American Baptists in California of all places, spoke with authority to our pastors recently. When asked, “What qualities do you most desire in pastors who are employed to start new congregations?” Borden replied, “They must be joyfully trinitarian and orthodox in their theology, stressing the redeeming work of God in Jesus Christ.” I thought I was hearing Wesley.

Ecclesialogically, when the name *God* designates a stable, abstract essence rather than an active, reaching Trinity, then inter-

nal maintenance displaces external mission. The ministry that once was sent now becomes almost exclusively settled and parochial. The church that once planted congregations in thousands of places in order to follow Jesus everywhere is left behind by Jesus as we maintain and subsidize thousands of little churches that have long since ceased to bear any of the visible marks of the church and Jesus moves on to his next area of conquest.

Wesley's "conjunctive theology" (Ken Collins) in its complexity and tensive holding together of seemingly disparate emphases (knowledge and piety, sacramentalism and evangelism, faith and good works, justification and sanctification, personal holiness and social holiness, reason and enthusiasm, and so on) is just the sort of intellect that is produced by the worship of a complex God for whom Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, these three, are one.

If Wesley was right, then the best thing about John Wesley was the three-personed God who met Wesley at Aldersgate and elsewhere. As I read him, Wesley didn't so much love the poor as he loved the God who for our sakes became poor (Phil 2:6-10). He was not so much an organizational genius of the eighteenth century as a man who experienced firsthand the reality of the incarnation. Methodism, Wesley kept contending, was solely a miraculous work of God. He was not so much a great pastoral theologian as someone who was trying to figure out what had happened to scores of ordinary eighteenth-century English people after God had gotten to them in the miraculous movement called Methodism.

But if Wesley was right, then the trinitarian God may not be done with the Methodist movement yet; then God may find a way to meet us again in the present age. When we've got a resurrected Christ, we always have more future than past. God give us more theologians and fewer historians. Limp, static, inoffensive, and uninspired, merely contemporary views of God can be judged and corrected by our encounters with Wesley. When I read Wesley, I find that one of the Trinity's prominent attributes is not order, righteousness, or even love—it is momentum. Wesley's God is truly God in action, intruding everywhere. So whereas Dr. Whitehead emphasized, in his funeral sermon for Wesley, the pacifying, steadying effect upon the general population, I celebrate the

potentially dislocating, disruptive effect of his robust view of a living God.

Thus Wesley may be able to rise up and speak to us yet, for he believed in an active, personal God who can kill and make alive, who refuses to be silenced, who loves to make a way to us when we presumed there was no way. If Wesley was right.

TRANSFORMING GRACE

My friend Stanley Hauerwas is fond of saying that when contemporary Anglicans talk about the incarnation, they don't know what they are talking about, and when Methodists speak today of grace, we know even less. Without the personality of a trinitarian God to give it specificity and content, "grace" becomes a vaguely benign spirit of divine beneficence toward an already benign humanity. Today, we're more inclined to "accept our humanity" than to worship a God who means radically to change us and to enlist us.

For Wesley, grace was the constant, moment-by-moment, active working of God in us that gives us a different life, indeed, a different world, than we would have had if God had left us alone. Without God we wretched sinners can do nothing, thought Wesley; with God we being-sanctified saints can do all things. Wesley took the Moravian one-time experience of spiritual enlightenment and made it a lifetime process of daily awakening to what grace can do among us: what we have learned from Randy Maddox to call "responsible grace." As early as 1733, Wesley preached the "one thing needful" as a soul that was being transformed by constant encounter with a living God.¹¹

A transformed life is the anthropological result of a theological claim—"The best of all is God is with us." A trinitarian God never stops being Creator *pro nobis*, transforming everything that God touches. One of the most memorable impressions of Dick Heitzenrater's *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* is his depiction of the Spirit-induced heroism of ordinary Methodists. For Wesley, the transforming Holy Spirit was more than personal and subjective; it was corporate and ecclesial. Wesley delights to report

the transformative work of the Holy Spirit on thousands of ordinary folk, even more than his delight in chronicling the results of the Holy Spirit on himself. Transformed lives confirmed Wesley's pneumatology.

At Aldersgate, Wesley experienced verification of the truth he had heretofore preached. As Heitzenrater puts it, at Aldersgate, "a long tradition of propositional certainty of faith met the power of a personal experience of the faith."¹²

Robert W. Cushman first told me that it was not so much Aldersgate that transformed Wesley but field preaching. Field preaching was against just about everything that Wesley had been educated to be for. I love Wesley's surprise at the response God gave to his field preaching. About the same time as Jonathan Edwards was marveling at *The Surprising Work of God in the Conversion of Many Hundred Souls in Northampton* (1737), Wesley was stunned by the effect of his field sermons at Bristol. When I read Wesley's *Sermons*, I share Wesley's shock that anybody was moved by his preaching. I find little to account for his homiletic effect other than a God who loves to raise the dead and to speak despite us.

As you know, Wesley's full embrace of both forgiveness and radical personal transformation sent Lutherans and Calvinists through the roof. On the cross, Jesus didn't just do something about our guilt; Jesus defeated the kingdom of Satan and established the kingdom of God; Jesus re-created the world and us, making us into a new people who had a fresh start in life. What Lutherans and Calvinists thought wrong was Wesley's extravagant assertion that something radical was done, is being done to sever our desires from their evil affections and to infuse us with robust craving to live a life of love toward God and neighbor.¹³

Don't you find it revealing that Wesley expended so much theological energy defending his notion that human beings could actually contribute something to their salvation? We must spend our time defending the divine side of divine/human synergy. It's not radical for us to think that we save ourselves by ourselves. What's radical is to assert a God who is able to work signs and wonders. In my efforts to prod denominational renewal, I would say that disbelief in a God who is able to do among us what God demands

from us is the biggest impediment to renewal. The Enlightenment still holds our imaginations captive, and that captivity is killing us.

This Oxford Institute is concerned with matters of ecclesiology and missiology. May I begin the conversation by stating my belief that the God who transforms lives formed the basis of Wesley's ecclesiology? A sent ministry is what you get with a God who loves to go on "processions" (as the Fathers put the sending work of the Trinity). Why do we contemporary Wesleyans wring our hands over our alleged lack of an ecclesiology when, seen from one angle, that's all Wesley did—ecclesiology? His vision of God being so great and so lively as massively to transform the lives of ordinary eighteenth-century English people is an ecclesiology worth having—if Wesley was right.

Our great challenge in ecclesiology is that we've made salvation personal and subjective (William James has won). For Wesley salvation was always corporate. His elaborate, detailed attention to the life of the body is a rebuke to our religion-as-subjectivity. The wrong turn we took in frontier revivalism nurtured under William James, brought to flower in capitalism, is now running shamelessly among us as evangelicals wreak havoc in a church that once embodied holiness. Everything is reduced to "the message"—some trite expression suitable for a bumper sticker. Rather than transformation, preaching's goal becomes communication and acceptance of "the message" rather than life-changing encounter with Jesus the Messenger.

A best-selling book of 2006 says it all: *Leaving Church*.¹⁴ Our God *dis-incarnate* determines that we all must disembody our faith and leave church in order to follow the governmentally approved *ordo salutis*—saving ourselves by descending ever deeper into our subjectivity. Because of our limp theology, our anthropology becomes too stable, and the purpose of our preaching is adjustment, confirmation rather than conversion. Preaching thus becomes another means of self-cultivation as well as a well-reasoned defense against true transformation.¹⁵

Wesley's ecclesiology has proved difficult for us heirs of Wesley to maintain, not because Wesley was too strict or too obsessive but because his was an ecclesiology that requires a certain sort of God to sustain it, namely, Wesley's lively trinitarian God of constant

processions. Only a person who has a most extravagant notion of the miraculous power of God could devote nearly one-fourth of his first collection of *Sermons* to expositions of the Sermon on the Mount, taking with direct seriousness the ability of God to produce people who could live the lives assumed by the Sermon on the Mount.¹⁶

- 11 Heavenly Adam, life divine,
 Change my nature into thine:
 Move and spread throughout my soul,
 Actuate and fill the whole:
 Be it I no longer now,
 Living in the flesh, but thou.
- 12 Holy Ghost, no more delay,
 Come, and in thy temple stay;
 Now thy inward witness bear
 Strong and permanent, and clear;
 Spring of life, thyself impart,
 Rise eternal in my heart!

If Wesley was right, then we have some serious theological work to do. If Wesley was right about God, grace, mission, and the church, then we've got lots to talk about. Thank God we've got someone as interesting as Wesley to converse with.

Go with me to a dilapidated ex-warehouse that is today the Church of Innerchange at the *interchange* of two major interstates in Alabama. There, in a ministry that ranges from Bible study to paint ball tournaments, the Innerchange Church ministers to hard-living blue-collar people. I'm there on a Sunday.

"Before you speak, we'll show a video clip," the pastor told me. (I don't approve of multimedia homiletics, believing that preaching ought to be done the way Jesus did it—stand and deliver without aid of technology.)

So just before I speak, a voice on the video says, "Why do you come to the Church of Innerchange?"

A young African American man looks into the camera and says, "I met Pastor Mike. I told him I had a drug problem that I hadn't

been able to shake. Pastor Mike told me, 'That's good. It's a sign that you know something's wrong in America. Lots of people aren't smart enough to know that God intends us for a better world. But drugs won't get you what you want. Let me show you Jesus.' I've been here ever since. One year, drug free. I couldn't have done it without Jesus and Innerchange."

A young woman, holding a small child, says, "One night my husband beat me so bad that I didn't leave the trailer for a week. I was so ashamed of how I looked. But the baby needed milk so I put on these sunglasses and a lot of makeup and went to the store. There, at the vegetable section, this woman comes up to me, takes off my glasses, and asks, 'What happened to you, honey?'

"I lied and told her I had a car accident. 'A man did this, didn't he?' she said. 'I know what that's like. Let me take you somewhere where you and your baby will be safe.' She brought me to Innerchange. This is the family I always knew God wanted me to have."

Through my own tears and inability to get up on my feet to preach, I mumbled, "So, Wesley was right!"

NOTES

2. What If Wesley Was Right?

1. My teacher Lee Keck got me thinking about the Oxford Institute in this way with his essay, "What If Paul Was Right?" in Christine Roy Yoder, Cathleen M. O'Connor, E. Elizabeth Johnson, and Stanley P. Saunders, eds., *Shaking Heaven and Earth: Essays in Honor of Walter Brueggemann and Charles B. Cousar* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2005), 133–39.
2. "Advice to Preachers, August 1, 1786," *Minutes*, 193–94.
3. See the 1744 sermon of that title.
4. Bishop Scott Jones lists "the ten essential doctrines" that tie Wesleyans together in very deep ways: Trinity, including Christology; Creation; Sin; Repentance; Justification; New Birth; Assurance; Sanctification; Grace; and Mission. While Jones's list is helpful, I think such essentialism is not the most fruitful way to listen to Wesley. Better to discern the impulse for and direction of his spiritual pilgrimage that encouraged him to join with fellow pilgrims in embodiment of the *imitatio Christi* in allowing God to transform God's world and their own lives.
5. "Nothing is so small or insignificant in the sight of men as not to be an object of the care and providence of God, before whom nothing is small that concerns the happiness of any of his creatures."
6. *Letters*, 25:257–58.
7. John 16:24, "Ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full." *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1739), 219–21.
8. Changed to "Mine I see, whate'er is his" in 4th ed. (1743) and 5th ed. (1756).
9. Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns, 6th ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 332.
10. Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 296.
11. Sermon preached at St. Mary's, January 1, 1733 (*Sermons*, 1:401–14).
12. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 1.
13. Lately I've become fascinated by the lively debate among Pauline scholars that is reframing the old justification vs. sanctification debate as it relates to Paul. Peter Stuhlmacher, for instance, has demonstrated that justification in Romans is not so much reclamation of the sinner in the individual's struggle with guilt, but the active compassion of God that transforms sinners and prepares them for active discipleship. Peter Stuhlmacher, *Revisiting Paul's Doctrine of Justification* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2001), 62. The old controversy between Catholics and Protestants, distinguishing between "imputed" righteousness

- (related only to sinners) and the Catholic view of “effective” righteousness that transforms sinners, cannot be sustained by reference to Pauline texts, says Douglas Harnick. The Reformation was wrong to buy into a view of justification that excludes sanctification. See Douglas Harnick, *Paul among the Postliberals* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2003), 57. Of course such sentiments are music to the ears of Arminians.
14. Barbara Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2006).
 15. Wesleyan Thomas Oden, in his *Pastoral Theology: Essentials of Ministry* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), 8, charges the contemporary mainline church with pastoral care that has become mere “antinomianism.” “Antinomianism is the weird, wild, impulsive, unpredictable sleeping partner of much contemporary pastoral care. It mistakes the gospel for license, freedom for unchecked self-actualization, and health for native vitalism.” Our once pushy sanctificationism has been tamed to be nothing more than therapy. We’ve lost interest in society and have climbed into the almighty, autonomous self. We’re Wesleyans, and ministry ought to have a considerably larger view of what is possible under God—nothing less than “reform of church and spread of holiness throughout the land.”
 16. Twelve of the original forty-four sermons were a series on the Sermon on the Mount—now Sermons 21–33, *Works*, 1:466–698. See also his equation of Christ’s law with the Sermon on the Mount in his “Letter to an Evangelical Layman” (20 Dec. 1751), §3, *Works*, 26:482.

3. Ecclesiology from the Perspective of Scripture in Wesleyan and Asian Contexts

1. Albert Outler, “Do Methodists Have a Doctrine of the Church?” in *The Doctrine of the Church*, ed. Dow Kirkpatrick (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1964), reprinted in Thomas C. Oden and Leicester R. Longden, eds., *The Wesleyan Theological Heritage: Essays of Albert C. Outler* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 211–26.
2. See A. W. Harrison, *The Separation of Methodism from the Church of England* (London: Epworth, 1945), 60, 61, and John M. Haley and Leslie J. Francis, eds., *British Methodism: What Circuit Ministers Really Think* (Peterborough: Epworth, 2006), 1–19.
3. For the meaning of *glocalization*, see the following section.
4. See Thomas L. Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), and *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century* (New York: Picador, 2007), 420–26.
5. J. D. Collins and Dr. and Mrs. Moses White were the earliest missionaries of the MEM to serve in China.
6. George Piercy, a farmer and a local preacher of Pickling Methodist Church in Yorkshire, was the first British Methodist missionary to serve in China via Hong Kong. The Methodist Church in Hong Kong was started by Chinese Methodists from Guangzhou and Foshan who started class meetings and worship in Hong Kong in 1882.