

## Chapter 2

# METHODISTS IN SEARCH OF CONSENSUS

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Whatever one might wish to make of the symbolic linkages between the Wesleys and Oxford, they can scarcely be stretched to include this particular venue for the first plenary session of this Institute. Here we are, in a lecture hall of the University Museum. Most of us found our way here from Somerville College and St. Hugh's, along the sidewalks of Keble—none of this, however, with any Methodist patina. We are at the scene of the discomfiture of Bishop Samuel Wilberforce by Dr. Thomas Huxley in their famous debate about Darwin and evolution. There is indeed more than a tinge of irony in our being here at all. The sight of dozens of Methodist theologians from the world around, wending their ways through one of the world's notable collections of Mesozoic fossils, recalled for me a striking aphorism by a distinguished paleontologist friend of mine, when we were hashing over the challenging notions of "punctuated evolution." "Don't forget" said he, "that nobody killed the dinosaurs. The atmosphere changed and they died."

But, hallowed in Methodist lore or not, this is a good place to remember the long succession of choke points in world history, of one sort or another, since time immemorial. And this helps us recall that, in the view of increasing numbers of thoughtful people all over the globe, we stand even now at another one of those "punctuations" in human history when our expectations of the human future can no longer be projected by the simple extrapolation of any of our various familiar "pasts," labelled as "our traditions."

It may be that all times are felt as "times between the times." Human life itself is a succession of "spans" in which "heritages" are received (in whole or part), appropriated (less or more), transvalued (for good or ill) and handed onto the oncoming generations (faithfully or not). This is the root-meaning of the term "tradition;" *tradere* can mean "to hand on;" it can also mean "to betray" (as in I Cor. 11:23). Some "epochs" are bridge-like, facilitating the transition from a half-remembered past on toward a half-

expected future. Now and again, however, there are these radical discontinuities (call them "crises," "revolutions," "watersheds" as you will), when accustomed cultural "atmospheres" are altered; when no shared past suffices to project the probable future.

The evidence has been accumulating now for some time that ours is such a time of *atmospheric* change, in almost every quarter of the globe. Take, as one example from a dozen, the alterations of our hopes for a bright human future. When I was young, there was a hymn that distilled the optimism of the times, dominated as they were by what looked like a promising "Euro-centered" global culture:

The day of dawning brotherhood  
Breaks on our eager eyes  
And human hatreds flee before  
The radiant eastern skies.<sup>1</sup>

I can remember how hopeful it all once sounded. Now it sticks in our throats.

The rate of these changes of atmosphere and "consciousness" in human self-awareness seems to have accelerated in the past three decades. The once lush bowers of our "Western" utopianisms (including the Marxist versions, too) seem to be withered and seared. The world I knew in its summertime and autumn has come to have a wintry look; only a few of us are left from then to rake up the fallen leaves from

... those boughs which shake against the  
cold. Bare, ruin'd choirs,  
Where late the sweet birds sang.<sup>2</sup>

We cannot tarry longer to argue all this out or debate what such doomsaying portends. It is enough for our purposes to proffer a tentative thesis that what is now going on is something different from those "paradigm-shifts" that Thomas Kuhn has taught us to recognize in the history of Western scientific revolutions. The Kuhn-type shifts occurred, and still do, within the unfoldings of the processes of a relatively stable "world" of scientific inquiry and technological transformation. What some of us think we see now is more like one of those complex tectonic slippages between the "quarters" of the globe ("Western," "Eastern," "Northern," "Southern").

What our current foreseers are pointing to is what Langdon Gilkey spoke of, some ten years ago, as "the death of the Western deity of progress"<sup>3</sup> and the consequent "grief-work" of the children and grandchildren of the Enlightenment. I grew up with many progressive souls happily enchanted with the human prospect of the "heavenly city" being brought

down to earth (i.e., chiefly in Europe and North America; where else?) and there being radically secularized for export to the rest of the world—again, for the benefit of the whole of humanity; what else?<sup>4</sup> Another way of noticing these basic changes in cultural self-understanding is to compare, say, J. B. Bury's famous *Idea of Progress* (1920)<sup>5</sup> and Robert Nisbet's more recent *History of the Idea of Progress* (1980). The contrast is stark, but it reflects much less a body of new data than a profound alteration of perspectives on the "new" human scene.<sup>6</sup>

From the other side, we are aware of the reaction of a "new" and frankly gnostic utopianism-in-renascence, focused in "the human potential movement," ESP, reincarnation, parapsychology, etc. Its emerging canon is previsedged in *Gnosis: A Journal of the Western Inner Traditions* and in the more familiar *New Age Journal*, with its "official" 1988 *Guide to New Age Living*. For a thoughtful appraisal of these new developments from the older utopianisms, cf. David Toolan, S.J., *Facing West from California's Shores: A Jesuit's Journey into New Age Consciousness* (New York: Crossroad, 1987).

What is happening, or so it seems to me, is an emergent cultural crisis of global proportions, in deep discontinuity with the patterns of the past five centuries or more, with little or no consensus among observers as to the probable, or even desirable, shape of "the world to come." On the one hand, the epoch of the European dominance of the planet—colonialism, faith in science and technology as panaceas—has lapsed. The notion of idealized humanity as the "essence" of religion (as in Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, (1841)<sup>7</sup> has lost credibility even among the secular humanists. The "European millennium" (9th to the 19th centuries) is past or passing, with no clear vision yet discernible of what may come hereafter.

On the other hand, the Christian cause has always been at risk insofar as it has ever yoked its fortunes to any given culture at any time, anywhere. Hellenism nearly did it in, followed by Caesaropapism, and after that, feudalism, with its unholy alliances between throne and altar, church and state. The iconoclasts have rarely been helpful, but neither have the "domesticators," who managed to douse the spark in what was meant to be a revolutionary maxim: "The Christians live *in* the world [any world] but are not *of* it [this particular earthbound domain or any other]."<sup>8</sup> There are many tasks for Christians in times of crisis, but one has always been primary: to search out and seek renewal of those priorities in the gospel message that surpass any and all cultural particularities. Thus, in the opening stages of an epoch which does not even have an identifying prae-nomen as yet ("post-Enlightenment," "post-colonial," "post-modern," or whatever), one of our imperatives is to do what we can to identify the vital residues of perennial Christian teaching, wherever they are to be found,

and to reweave these into the fabric of the new future, with all its baffling cultural pluralisms.

One of the obvious "signs" of these "post-everything" times is the rediscovery and acknowledgment of the hidden depths of the human talent for self-stultification and social "deconstruction" (about which the biblical narrative is so graphic, even if there is scarcely anything that pretends to "explain" it all). Some of us may gag at the phrase, "original sin." We may leave Wesley's sermon of that title unread; we may reject its thesis. We may try to "explain" the chilling horrors of "man's inhumanity to man" by appeals to psychological or political casualties. But the harsh realities of the human insufficiency to achieve its own incurred ends (both the well-intentioned ones *and* the malevolent ones), remains.

Despite all our scientific and technological prowess, we now see "the mystery of iniquity" in garish new lights (one needs only to mention AIDS, or "world hunger," or pollution, or The Bomb, or whatever). Wesley abridged the Anglican Article "Of Original or Birth-Sin," but he kept its gist ("the corruption of the nature of every man, whereby [they are] very far gone from original righteousness and of [their] own nature inclined to evil, and that continually").<sup>9</sup> What are Methodists (so many of them Pelagian without overt avowal) going to do about the possible updating of any such stark first premise in Christian anthropology?<sup>10</sup>

Many of us might readily agree that the traditional answers to these ancient perplexities have been too doctrinaire, especially in the West, with its heavy emphasis on sin as guilt and on grace as commutation (as in St. Anselm—and in Protestant scholasticism). But even those of us who (with Wesley) feel more at home with the Eastern traditions—about sin as the tragic spoliation of the divine image—have failed thus far in a credible reformulation of the older traditions of salvation as the restoration of that image by the grace of "participation."<sup>11</sup> Thus, we are equally hard pressed to provide a wholly credible version of authentic *gospel* for the wretched of the earth (the wretched poor, the wretched rich, the wretched powerless and the wretched powerful—the tragic multitude whose hearts are "restless" because they have not found their proper "rest" in God).<sup>12</sup>

From the beginning, Methodist theologies have been taprooted in soteriology and salvation and have struggled heroically with these deeply biblical concerns in whatever their human circumstances. And Methodists who know their origins will know in advance that "ideologies" of any sort (including "orthodoxy") have never been enough—yesterday, today, or whenever. This would remind us that any prospect of being "new creatures in Christ" in a new age (or any age) depends upon something transcultural, the awareness of which Wesley identified, in different *verbal* forms, as the distinctive Christian fundamentals. Take, for example, a late summation:

I mean those [truths] which relate to the eternal Son of God and the Spirit of God—to the Son, giving himself to be a propitiation for the sins of the world; and to the Spirit of God renewing men [and women] in that image of God wherein they were created.<sup>13</sup>

If such language sounds quaint, what we have is a hermeneutical problem. If such basic notions are incredible or incapable of credible reformulation, then a very different question arises—not more “difficult,” theoretically, but far more ominous in terms of the Christian faith itself. For the *Christian essentials* are pre-European and non-“Caucasian” and have already had a tortuous history of challenge and response from crisis to crisis, from culture to culture. This, one might have thought, is the point of Galatians 3:22–26 and of the good news that we “are all one in Christ Jesus.” But Methodists should take particular notice of Wesley’s special accent upon *pneumatology*, as one of the crucial clues to his Christology, which, in turn, is the key to his biblical hermeneutics in general.

Another “sign” of the new times ahead is the growing awareness of the paradox (or is it only an habituated confusion?) of Christian unity-in-diversity and allowable diversity in Christian unity. There was a time, as in the New Testament and early church, when diversity-in-unity could be taken for granted. Yet very soon the questions about diversity had to cope with “heresy”: that was the point at which differences (often “non-theological”) generated unreconciled division. Presently, however, as the ideal of unity came to be absolutized, this begat dogmatism and mutual rejections as the unnatural consequence. The first stages of *modern ecumenism* included the forevision of a recovered unity as a correlative of our utopian hopes and expectations in other spheres of human interest, as well. We cannot tarry to speak of the altered atmosphere in a post-utopian ecumenism.<sup>14</sup>

It may be enough to note that the ancient bipolarities of the church catholic and the churches local (as the biblical integer of the “Body of Christ”) have more lately been distorted by the church curial (dispersed amongst the “denominations”), leaving the cause of Christian unity at the “grass-roots” more hopeful than it is currently anywhere in “the upper circles.”

Methodism has had its own history framed by these larger developments and now has its future complicated by them. Wesley and most of the early Methodists took unity-in-diversity for granted; Wesley’s notorious disparagements of “orthodoxy” and “opinions” were reckless, partly because he could take the “bottom-line” of classical Christian teaching for granted.<sup>15</sup> It is better balanced to realize that this was his ill-chosen way of rejecting dogmatism as a *method* and of reaffirming the older traditions of “catholic spirit”—which is to say, Christian unity as *koinonia* in Christ, among those already consented in *essential Christian doctrine*.<sup>16</sup> John

Wesley cannot be absolved of responsibility in the standard preference among Methodists for emotivist theologies, or for the unrealistic assumptions about our generic identity as a tribe of denominational clans. It is hard to read Wesley's last letter to Methodists in America without a pang:

... Time has shaken me by the hand and death is not far behind [as indeed it was, only 30 days later]. . . . See that you never give place to one thought of separating from your brethren in Europe. Lose no opportunity of declaring to all men that the Methodists are one people in all the world, and that it is their full determination so to continue.<sup>17</sup>

It was a noble vision, then and now—but it did not correspond to the facts then or thereafter. But the Methodists were not a “no people,” either (as in I Peter 2:10) and still are not. This is why, as dissentient as we are, we have deep feelings of family ties binding us together.

I recall once asking Bishop Paul Ellis how “free” his Free Methodists were. His response was reflex: “At least as free as United Methodists are *united!*” And we both understood our kinship not only in Christ but also in our shared traditions, even as we also recognized the deep anomalies in our respective histories, in which our diversities-in-unity had been tilted in the wrong direction. And we both understood that at the heart of our shared tradition was a trinitarian doctrine of the Holy Spirit that we had learned from Scripture and Wesley and that Wesley had learned from Scripture and early Christian tradition.<sup>18</sup>

There is much else that we can learn from Wesley about the sort of consensus that we shall need in an uncertain future, if we are to continue to fulfill our mission as Methodists—even as we look ahead to the sublation of our denominations into that larger unity that God has willed for us. Moreover, because this mission is rooted in a heritage that reaches back through space and time (a heritage that does not start with the Wesleys), we ought to be able to recognize its relevance in any epoch that may be coming up.

I have already confessed to my suspicions that what some of us in my generation were taught to think of as the Ecumenical Second Coming has now, for the time being, been put “on hold” by the church curial. I share a deep anxiety about the current situation with a wise old Benedictine friend who spoke in a recent private letter of “our bleak ecumenical outlook *ad interim.*” This is why I am so concerned, during that interim, about new approaches to the vexed problem of *intercommunion*—no plastering over, ignoring the serious difficulties involved, no cheapening of the grace of Eucharist unity. But the painful business of shared prayer and witness without communion cannot be prolonged forever, and “private eucharistic hospitality” is unacceptable, on principle. We must have carefully safe-

guarded, "occasional" shared Eucharists, rightly understood as *eschatological signs* of a Christian future yet to come. "Even so, Lord Jesus, come quickly!"

Most of us are already involved, one way or another, in the current renaissance of Faith and Order questions in the World Council of Churches and in ecumenical ventures all over the world. There is, for example, nothing new and not much final in the now famous *Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry* document, but the unprecedented interest that it has aroused betokens a new level of consciousness among the people of God. There is "The Lima Liturgy" which has been widely received and experimented with, in many likely places—and a few very "unlikely" places, too. There is a vigorous beginning of a new and mildly audacious quest for consensus as to spirit and content of "The Apostolic Faith" that the Christian motley could confess together. There is even hopeful talk about another World Conference on Faith and Order before the century is out (five years ago, the date was "set"; now it is indefinite).

There is much in all of this ecumenical ferment that is encouraging; and we can take pride in the involvement in the "new ecumenism" of many from our younger generation of Methodist leaders. We should take note of the pre-European orientations of Christianity in its origins, the non-Caucasian components in its early context, its emergence and stabilizations in what has come to be called "the Near East" (actually, the Eastern Mediterranean littoral). Christianity, in its ante-Nicene decades, was the faith of an illicit community widely diverse and unaccountably united (in any of the scenarios of "unity" to which most of us are accustomed). This is not to substitute "history" as a distraction from our exigent current crises; only to suggest added resources for our understanding of the current scene and some options for Christians that seem to have been ignored by current Christian partisans. The early Christians were also scorned by those entrenched in power but they understood Christian "martyrdom" in ways that made more of a difference than some of us may have realized—within the community and in the pre-Constantinian "world."<sup>19</sup>

This suggests a Christian future (which could include a Methodist future, too, linked to "new" patterns of Christian unity, which is to say, the old patterns updated). In any such future, Christian identities and continuities will be rediscovered, historical distortions identified, and the "unpredictable" prepared for. This is why, even as a cradle Methodist, I find the current interest in "The Nicaenum" (which I first learned *about* in seminary) to be a promising rallying point for ecumenical consensus—if, that is, the phrase includes the christological bracketings of Nicaea (325 A.D.), Constantinople (381), Jerusalem ("St. Cyril's Creed," ca. 318), Chalcedon (451), and the clarifications of Maximos the Confessor (ca. 662).

In the process, *Nicaenum* needs very much to be conjoined both to “*The Apostolicum*,” and to the *regulae fidei* of the ante-Nicene church. For the taproots of both traditions are deeply biblical, monotheistic, and trinitarian—and in the face of new polytheisms, an integration of all this will become increasingly important, even though it will be difficult.

Moreover—and for Methodists, this may be more relevant than we have recognized—the text of 381 was the first “ecumenical creed” with an explicitly trinitarian pneumatology. In this pre-European tradition, the primacy of Scripture is everywhere acknowledged and nowhere reduced to biblicism.<sup>20</sup> The “orthodoxy” of the old creeds can be queried,<sup>21</sup> but their authority has been ignored only at the expense of dire impoverishment. Such an impoverishment will be no less serious in the coming age than in earlier episodes of emotivism in church history.

Finally, any updating of “the Apostolic Faith” will take us backward to a theological perspective and methodology that antedates Western preoccupations with “systematic theology” and what has come to be labelled “scholasticism” (including the tradition in which the Wesleys were trained and against which they revolted). But it also points *forward* to the possibility of a theology that is imbued with the biblical and patristic spirit and thus can survive the bankruptcies of Western dogmatisms and “Enlightenment liberalism,” in which “liberalism” has been so comfortably domesticated.

At the heart of all the various *theological* ventures, before “scholasticism” captured the Christian mind in the West, there has been a methodological impulse (in varying measure) to understand human speech about God as chiefly reverential and apophatic: to speak carefully of God as if in *God's presence (coram Deo)* rather than as object (albeit “the Religious Object” or “Being”); in the Bible and in the patristic church, God was more of a *Mystery* than a “problem.” St. Augustine’s *Confessions* is the most familiar example of such a theology (often at levels of very high abstraction!). Here prayer and speculation are mingled in unembarrassed intimacy (*praesentia Dei*) and it is presupposed that God’s “presence” is a pneumatic operation (“by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit”). In the famous Anselmian formula, *fides quaerens intellectum* (faith in search of critical understanding, *intellecta*) the operative term is *faith*, the sort of life-giving faith that is a gift of God’s own self, as *Holy Spirit*. Thus, it has always been a mere prejudice to suppose that a pneumato-centric theology needs to be less than trinitarian, once one comes to think of the Christian *mysterion* as focused, Eastern-style, as *presiding* in “sacred things” in the *epiclesis* (the prayer to the Holy Spirit). It is the premise in every *epiclesis* that it is the Holy Spirit, and no priest or liturgy, who actualizes Jesus Christ as really and immediately present, not only in the Eucharist but in human hearts



and history.<sup>22</sup> Thus it is that the Spirit is understood as Godself revealing “the deep things of God” and thereby leading the faithful in every age and context into “the mind of Christ” (1 Cor. 2:9–16). This ancient notion of true Christian *spirituality* (as in Romans 8:9–21 and 2 Cor. 3:6–18) was spoken of in various ways by many thoughtful Christians, (in prose and poetry, as in *Veni, Creator Spiritus*) long before it was rhymed in eighteenth century rocking-horse couplets by a populist hymn-writer, echoing in iam-bics his older brother’s sermons on “The Witness of the Spirit”:

Spirit of Faith, come down,  
 Reveal the things of God,  
 And make to us the Godhead known,  
 And witness with the blood.  
 ’Tis thine the blood to apply  
 And give us eyes to see:  
 Who did for *every* sinner die  
 Hath surely died for *me*.

No man can truly say  
 That Jesus is the Lord,  
 Unless thou take the veil away  
 And *breathe* the living word.  
 Then, only then, we feel  
 Our interest in the blood  
 And cry with joy unspeakable,  
 “Thou art my Lord, my God!”

O that the world might know  
 The all-atoning Lamb!  
 Spirit of Faith, descend and show  
 The virtue of his Name:  
 The grace which *all* may find,  
 The saving power impart,  
 And testify to all mankind,  
 And speak in every heart.

Inspire the living faith  
 (Which whosoe’er receives,  
 The witness in himself he hath  
 And consciously believes);  
 The faith that conquers all  
 And doth the mountains move  
 And saves whoe’er on Jesus call,  
 And perfects them in love.<sup>23</sup>

Here is a *trinitarian* pneumatology: biblical, patristic, and perennial. And all this is preface to my suggestion that a crucial step toward consensus

among Methodists of all sorts would be a re-centering of our theologies of the divine-human interaction (*perichoresis*) in pneumatology. It has been in our tradition to speak of the prevenience of the Holy Spirit's actions, in grace in all of its modalities, and also of the absolute divine initiative in all things, from creation to apocatastasis (Acts 3:21). And if something like this was at the heart of the Wesleys' vision of Christian existence, it is plausible that the heirs to that vision should have something of real importance to share amongst themselves and others—as the ecumenical and interfaith dialogues try to climb out of their present ruts.

Three decades ago, in the course of trying to flesh out my barebones acquaintance with the history of Christian doctrine in terms of its *development*, I began to see a Wesley more interesting and resourceful than his hagiographers had made him out, and someone rather different from the stereotypes in the minds of my fellow-historians with which they have been supplied, largely by the Methodists themselves! I had already “learned” from the stereotypes that Wesley was not a theologians' theologian, that he was not a “complete” or systematic theologian, that he was content to accept and borrow from many traditional statements very much as they stood (as in *A Christian Library* and *The Arminian Magazine*). But even with his eclectic methods and his eristic ways of trying to cope with the barrenness of religious formality and with the irresponsibilities of antinomianism, there was in the Wesleys a fresh focus on *grace* as a pneumatological key to the interpretation of Christian existence. It seemed to me then, and still does, that heirs to this synthesis (not new, but not conventional either) ought to understand, at least as well as any other Christian tribe, the realities of the rule of grace, since they would have been taught from the beginning that it is the Holy Spirit who is “pre-eminently” the Giver of Grace.<sup>24</sup> All of this has made it seem clear to me that in the Wesleys there was an integrated theological agenda that reached back into the founts of classical Christianity and, therefore, could be made to look forward into a “post-everything” age with a soteriology that is ecumenical enough to be of genuine interest and relevance to men and women who are no longer confident of *self*-salvation.

For they, too, had set out to save their own souls—in dead earnest—and had failed. John's first reported conversion was in 1725, from “levity” to an “entire dedication to God.” This gave him a Pelagian syllogism. First premise: an entire devotion of one's life to God is a precondition of salvation. Second premise: I have made such a dedication. Conclusion: I am entitled to the *hope* of God's salvation.<sup>25</sup> A second conversion (1727) was a mystical illumination—not unlike St. Augustine's experience recounted in *Confession VII* (not the more climactic one in Book VIII). This preoccupation with self-salvation shows up in his rejection of the Epworth

“living” (and with it, his filial duties). It also set him up as an easy target for the challenges of the Moravians (Peter Böhler, et al.). But it also gave him hopeful glimpses of “the promise; but it is afar off.”<sup>26</sup>

The conversion (“Aldersgate”) of May 24, was a good deal more than an acquiescence in the Moravian arguments, much more than a “strangely warmed heart,” (his self-analytic phrase that has become a misleading slogan for Methodists ever since). It was a final and sincere “Yes” to Spangenberg’s pointed queries, just mentioned. “Does the Spirit of God witness with your spirit that you are a child of God? . . . Do you know Jesus Christ? . . . Do you know that he has saved you?”<sup>27</sup>

“Aldersgate” was Wesley’s “experience” of “assurance” (clearly the operation of the Holy Spirit) of pardon and salvation and, since it was so utterly spontaneous, it was his confirmation of the truth of the doctrine of salvation by faith *alone*. It was, for him, a reenactment of Romans 8 (after ten years of Romans 7, and especially of vv. 19–24!). But a strange ambivalence continued as an aftermath for many months. He still spoke of “heaviness.”<sup>28</sup> On Sunday, May 28, he “waked in peace but not in joy.” That summer, in Marienborn, “when the congregation saw Wesley to be *homo perturbatus* and that his head had gained an ascendancy over his heart, . . . they deemed it not prudent to admit him to the Holy Communion.”<sup>29</sup>

“Aldersgate” was *the* decisive moment in John Wesley’s career and it is meet and right to celebrate it, even as Methodists have these 250 years, so long as it is clear that its only vicarious effect is insight and inspiration. But better than pilgrimages, and railway engines *in memoriam*, would be for us to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest his cluster of seven sermons from the formative days of the Revival (Nos. 5–12), and then round them off with the two “discourses” on “The Witness of the Spirit,” plus their complement, “The Witness of Our Own Spirit” (foil and counterfoil to the polarities of objectivity and subjectivity in Christian spirituality). Together, this cluster amounts to a neat demonstration of a theology born of the intellectual love of God and a theology *praesentia Dei*.

What is evident in these sermons (though not more so than in other distillations throughout the corpus) is the evangelical core of Wesley’s version “the Apostolic Faith”: *salvation by grace through faith*.<sup>30</sup> Christian life is “life in Christ,” “life in the Spirit”: life informed and matured by the Spirit’s gifts and fruits. The energy in Christian existence comes from the Spirit’s initiative (prevenience is of its essence), in all the modalities of grace, at every stage of the restoration of the ruined image of God—ruined, that is, but not destroyed.

Wesley’s talk about such a trajectory of grace is full of the biblical metaphors for the Spirit’s immanence and spontaneity: “breath” and “breathing,” “wind” and “glowing,” “spiration,” “inspiration,” “respira-

tion.” These are clues to Wesley’s complex epistemological views that we have not taken sufficient pains to analyze or update. He was a “rationalist,” but in a special sense; an “empiricist” of sorts, a “romantic” without exuberance and a “common-sense realist” who never read Kant; but *not* (despite many proof-texts to the contrary) a biblical “literalist” and also not properly a “scholastic.” To label him “an apophatic theologian” is, I think, correct but not very helpful, in the light of the relegation of that Eastern tradition to the margins in the West, associated with eccentrics like Nicholas of Cusa, or to “mystics” like Malebranche and the Cambridge Platonists.<sup>31</sup> For Wesley, *God-in-se* is unknown and unknowable, incommunicable in demonstrative language. Religious language never succeeds in *defining* the “religious reality.”<sup>32</sup> But God is *Self*-communicating—in creation, history, Torah, prophecy, and, above all, in Jesus and the church. Especially in the New Testament, these “disclosures” are identified as operations of the Holy Spirit and almost always with a christocentric focus. Thus, “life in the Spirit” is a richly laden metaphorical phrase about the human potential as designed—and still being designed:

[In the new birth] the Spirit, or breath of God is immediately inspired, breathed, into the new-born soul; and the same breath which comes from God returns to God. As it is continually received by faith, so it is continued back—by love, by prayer and praise (love, prayer and praise being the breath of every soul which is truly born of God). And by this new kind of *spiritual respiration*, spiritual life is not only sustained but increased, day by day, together with spiritual strength, motion and sensation—all the senses of the soul being now awake and capable of “discerning spiritual good and evil.”<sup>33</sup>

Here, then is a spirituality that is unselfconsciously biblical, patristic, and “objective.”<sup>34</sup> It is therapeutic in the redeemed and revolutionary in its social implications. Its agenda is the entire consecrations of the whole of life to God (the intellect emphatically included) but less with pious advertisement than in actual ethical transformations. It breathes an Eastern air with its emphases on the divine-human *perichoresis* (interaction), on “participation” and “perfection” as *teleiosis* (“perfecting perfection”). This gives it an odd scent in Western nostrils (sensitive as we have been to clues from courtrooms and codices). But the interesting question here is not which tradition is “better or worse,” but whether the perennial truths in each tradition may survive into a post-Western future—and how, even now, they could help rescue Methodism from its current and various domestications.

Christian spirituality has had a tendency, in some cases, to generate more solemnity than real “joy,” and in others, to prompt ecstasies that lose touch with reality. . . . Remember Wesley’s report, after “Aldersgate”:

"I waked in peace but not joy." Once the Revival had begun to flourish, Wesley began to find a vital balance between earnestness and joy, of joy as the aura that goes with absorption in significant function. Thereafter, he finds it easy to speak of "holiness and happiness" in the same breath. There is, indeed, a sort of "ode to joy" in "The Witness of Our Own Spirit," par. 16-17; where "joy" is reckoned specifically as a fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:22):

I rejoice because the sense of God's love to me hath, by the same Spirit, wrought in me to love *him*—and to love, for his sake, every child of man, every soul that he hath made. I rejoice because I both see and feel, through the inspiration of God's Holy Spirit, that all my works are wrought "in him, yea and that it is he who worketh all my works in me. . . ." This is not a "natural joy". . . . Christian joy is in obedience; . . . we rejoice in walking according to "the covenant of grace. . . ." <sup>35</sup>

This way of doing theology is not "systematic" (in the Western sense) but it is not incoherent or obscurantist, either. It has its doctrinal integrity but this functions less as normed (e.g., *Augustana Invariata!*) than norming—and if this seems a mere quibble, we have a serious hermeneutical misunderstanding of the difference between mechanical and organic norms. For Wesley, the theological *crux*, in questions of theological method, lies in the difference between formal constructs of all sorts ("orthodoxy," "orthopraxy," "prophetic passion," ideals—in his day the term "ideology" had not been coined) and various evocations of the realities and into the realities and imperatives of the Encompassing Mystery through insights vouchsafed to the eyes and ears of faith, hope, and love by the Holy Spirit—and thereby rendered efficacious (Matt. 7:15-23). There is less "relief" in authentic Christian "assurance" than there are imperatives that are implicit in "the Rule of God." The Christian life is aimed at the complete sacralization of life (what Wesley meant by "holiness of heart and life"). It is the whole "harvest of the Spirit" (Gal. 5:22-23). This is actualized in personal life and society by "faith that is energized by love" (and never mindless love at that).

As Wesley grew old, this vision of sanctification stretched out to wider horizons and became less and less doctrinaire. One can see this especially in a cluster of five sermons from the years of 1788-90.<sup>36</sup>

True religion is right tempers toward God and man. It is, in two words, gratitude and benevolence. . . . It is the loving God with all our hearts, and our neighbors as ourselves. . . . This begins when we begin to know God by the teaching of his own Spirit. As soon as the Father of spirits reveals the Son in our hearts and the Son reveals the Father, the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts. Then, and not till then, we are [truly] happy. We are happy, first, in the consciousness of God's favor, which indeed is better than life itself; then in all the heavenly

tempers which he hath wrought in us [in our creation as persons] by his Spirit; again, in the testimony of his Spirit, that all our [good] works please him; and lastly, in the testimony of our own spirits, that "in simplicity and godly sincerity, we have had our conversation [life-styles] in the world." Standing fast in this liberty from sin and sorrow, wherewith Christ hath made them free, real Christians "rejoice evermore, pray without ceasing, and in everything give thanks." And their happiness still increases as they grow up into the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ."<sup>37</sup>

Such a way of theologizing—in the presence of God and the People of God—is, admittedly, homiletical, nonanalytical, not without an abundant share of inconsistencies and fixed ideas. Its value increases, however, as it is mingled with the whole range of Christian fundamentals as they have been pondered and developed in and through the crises that have threatened the identity and continuity of the gospel across the centuries. But it is this evidence of Wesley's "at-homeness" in the Christian tradition as a whole (in Scripture and the church) that suggests a durable *consensus fidelium* that can surpass cultural contexts and that can undergird the church ecumenical, in an altered future. It saved him from *biblicism*, *traditionalism*, *rationalism*, and *narcissism*. It could provide contemporary Methodism a way of escape from cultural relativism, triumphalism, and the confusions of contemporaneity (confusions that have become chronic in a process of accelerating change).

We can learn much about our Methodist theological heritage in Britain and North America from Thomas Langford's helpful source-books, *Practical Divinity: Theology in the Wesleyan Tradition* (1983) and *Wesleyan Theology* (1984). But we need to learn much more about the Methodist traditions on the European Continent, in Africa, Asia (especially in Malaysia, Singapore, and now South Korea), in Australasia and Latin America, and the residual influences of Methodism in the "united churches" in which Methodists have cast their lot (as in Canada and India). We need to learn, non-defensively, how modest the expectations are from non-Methodist quarters as to what "World Methodism" may have to bring, by way of doctrinal treasures, into the shared offertory of the Great Ecumenical Eucharist. We have nothing to compare with the *Augustana*, with Calvin's *Institutes*, or the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*. We do not even have an anomaly like *The Confession of Dositheus* (in Orthodoxy). Indeed, in the Methodist denominations with origins in *The Methodist Episcopal Church* of 1784 and 1808, we have no official creeds, since Wesley, in his hasty abridgments (1784) of the Thirty-nine Articles, simply struck out Article VIII *in toto* and nobody in "The Christmas Conference," or thereafter, has thought to put it back!

Even so—and despite our other de-traditionings over two centuries—there is still a legacy of doxological theology in Methodism (as Geoffrey Wainwright has sought to remind us in his notable volume, *Doxology*, 1980). Traditional Methodist theology has been less liturgical than pneumatological, more akin to evangelical catholicism (sacramental but not sacerdotal) than to evangelical Protestantism (on points like *sola Scriptura*, predestination, single justification, and “holiness”). We ought to have been less easily domesticated and denominationalized, *in principle*, than we have been in sad fact. And insofar as our heritage is alive, it makes for a still promising linkage between the pre-European Christianity that Wesley regarded as paradigmatic and the Evangelical Revival and its “enthusiasms” (in which he flourished),<sup>38</sup> and the “post-whatever” epoch that looms so vaguely before us. Most Methodists whom I know are in heart-to-heart engagement with the daily turmoils of their current crises, as indeed they ought to be, with as much wisdom as they can muster and as little self-righteousness as their partisan zeals will allow. But we must also be engaged in reclaiming our heritage, which reaches not only to the Wesleys, but far behind them, to older Christian wisdoms still viable. And this means a *new* (old?) view of “Tradition and traditions”—wherein “Tradition” is understood as God’s *actus tradendi* of the Logos, and where “tradition” is recognized as the perduring identity and continuity of what was begun at Pentecost (constitutive and bound at the least to what Wesley reduced to “the Scriptures and the Primitive Church”).<sup>39</sup> This would give us more clarity in distinguishing “Tradition” from “traditions,” which chiefly denotes those ecclesiastical mores and customs of whose variety there shall be no end.

At the heart of our Wesleyan legacy is an ample vision of grace—the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ which is the love of God manifest in the *koinonia* of the Holy Spirit—and this has given us the core of whatever consensus we have ever had or can hope for in the times ahead. Any such consensus must allow for variety in formulation; it must require an unfeigned acknowledgment of its imperatives to holiness—the love of God and neighbor. The need for grace is radical, the offer of grace is real, the gift of grace is consummate in Jesus Christ, the Giver of grace is the Holy Spirit (Lord and Life-Giver!). The community of grace is our shared *koinonia* in the Body of Christ joined to the Head and to itself through its “members.” The reception of free grace is by true repentance and faith, the rule of grace is the Rule of God, the sign of grace is grateful, self-giving love, the tasks of grace are defined by human wretchedness and need, the confidence of grace is that nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord. What of this (other than its verbal dress) would Methodists have to reject, *de fide*? What needs to be added or

altered, save by implication or emphasis? Could we, then, take a focus on grace as the nucleating notion of a Methodist consensus?

In such times there is bound to be an honest question about Methodism's future. Do we still agree with the early Methodists that we "were raised up," *ad hoc* and *ad interim*, "to reform the nation[s], especially the church[es]," and to spread "scriptural holiness over the lands?" And if these tasks are still unfinished, what are our continued reasons for being? Are we not still committed to those primal Kingdom-tasks: to be more truly effectual instruments of God's peace and righteousness—peace and righteousness in the churches and the world? But would we or would we not be more faithful to God's design for us if we were willing to lose our denominational lives if that would hasten the *communio in sacris* that Jesus prayed for and that the Father wills—a unity-in-sacred-things that cherishes all the diversities that enhance *community* and that allows all other concerns to ease off, or slip away? Otherwise, have any of our denominations a first or even a second lien on any future worthy of the Christian name?

The Wesleys framed the Christian future within the original metaphors of liberation and pilgrimage, from the Exodus and the sojourn in Sinai. In 1762, Charles turned this eschatological vision into a hymn for Christian pilgrims in his day, and any other. It is a hymn that has been better known and loved better in other parts of Methodism than in America; The United Methodist Church has discarded it from its next new *Hymnal*. But one of the truly great moments of my life, among many, was joining in its full-throated affirmation as the closing hymn at the "Re-opening of Wesley's Chapel" on All Saints Day, 1978. I hope, therefore, that its message is never lost among us—and certainly not its vivid understanding of the trinitarian base of our upholding faith in the gracious *Providence* of the Triune God. We shall, I think, need such a faith more in the years ahead than we can know now:

Captain of Israel's host, and guide  
Of all who seek the land above,  
Beneath thy shadow we abide,  
The cloud of thy protecting love.

Our strength, thy grace; our rule, thy Word  
Our end: the glory of the Lord.  
By thine unerring Spirit led,  
We shall not in the desert stray;  
We shall not full direction need [lack]  
Or miss our providential way.  
As far from danger as from fear,  
While love, Almighty Love, is near.

Amen. ♪



## NOTES

### Chapter 1: Prospects for Methodist Teaching and Confessing

1. See *Apostolic Faith Today*, Faith and Order Paper No. 124, ed. Hans-Georg Link (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1985).

### Chapter 2: Methodists in Search of Consensus

1. Ozora Davis, "At Length There Dawns the Glorious Day," *The Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: The Methodist Publishing House, 1932), 469; it has been dropped from the new *United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989). Cf. the even more exalted utopianism of J. Addington Symonds "These Things Shall Be: a Loftier Race . . ."; this too, has fallen of its own weight.

2. William Shakespeare, *Sonnets*, 73.

3. Langdon Gilkey, *Society and the Sacred* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), p. 13.

4. Carl Becker spelled out this vision of human self-sufficiency in a once famous little classic that I first read in graduate school, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth Century Philosophers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965 [1932]).

5. 1920; cf. especially the edition published in 1951 for "The Century of Progress Exposition" in Chicago (1951), with Charles Beard's rousing introduction (New York: Dover Publications).

6. Frank Manuel's comment on his lifetime's study of utopias, in *Daedulus* (Spring 1987), is typical: "Those of us who have in the flesh experienced the sharp discontinuities of the past half-century . . . may feel in our bones the unity and continuities of Western culture. [The notion] still colors our historical apperceptions, but it has long since ceased to determine our thinking" (p. 145). When Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West* (trans. Charles Francis Atkinson [New York: Alfred A. Knopf]) appeared in English, in 1926-28, it was received with disbelief by all true believers and, presently, the author was muzzled by Hitler. More attention was paid to Robert Heilbroner's *Inquiry into the Human Prospect* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1974); see p. 138 especially. Lately, the trickle has become a flood (e.g., Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978); Jean-Francois Revel, *Comment Les Democracies Finissent* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1983); Konrad Lorenz, *The Waning of Humaneness* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1987); Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (New York: Random House, 1988). This is the centenary year of Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward, 2000-1887* (New York: Hendricks House, 1887), a million copies of which were sold in its first decade. It would now be safe to offer prizes to Methodist scholars under sixty who have ever read it front to back.

7. This tradition of the idealization of humanity has had many partisans, and still has; cf. Thomas Sheehan, S.J. [sic], *The First Coming* (New York: Random House, 1986): "At last, Christianity is discovering what it always was about: not God, or Christ, or Jesus of Nazareth, but the endless unresolvable mystery inscribed at the heart of being human," p. 227.

8. Cf. *Epistle to Diognetus*, V-VI; see also I Peter 1:22-25..

9. Cf. "The Fullness of Faith," Albert C. Outler, ed., *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 279.

10. Why has Karl Menninger's question, in *Whatever Became of Sin?* (New York: Hawthorn House, 1973)—posed so plaintively by a *psychiatrist*—been left to hang in the air, especially by our social activists and our special-interest theologians?

11. As in 1 Peter 1:2–8; cf. the important monograph of David Balas, S.O. Cist., *Metousia Theou* (Rome: Liberia Herder, 1960).

12. Cf. Augustine, *Confessions* I, 1.

13. Sermon 85, "On Working Out Our Own Salvation," paragraph 2, *Sermons*, 3:200.

14. Cf. my comments in the Ainslie Lecture of 1984, "Ecumenism in a Post-Liberal Age."

15. A collection of his disdainful hyperboles about "orthodoxy" would run past a page or so; they may be checked out from the indices of the various editions (none of which is exhaustive). A competent dissertation on *theologia* and *theologoumena* in Wesley would be very useful; the times, however, are not favorable for such a project. Taking "the Christian essentials" as *given*, he could give vent to his frustrations with the dogmatists: "Orthodoxy, I say, or right opinions, is but a slender part of religion at best, and sometimes no part at all." *Letters*, (Telford), 3:185; cf. *ibid.*, 203 and 2:293. "I trample upon opinion, be it right or wrong . . ."; but cf. *ibid.*, 14, "I speak of such opinions as do not touch the foundations." Even in extreme old age (1789) he can still speak of "orthodoxy" as a "religion of opinions"—indeed, as an "idol" (Sermon 120, "On the Unity of the Divine Being," paragraph 15, *Sermons*, 4:66).

16. Sketched out sparsely in "Catholic Spirit" paragraphs 12–14, *Sermons*, 2:87–88; more formally (and problematically) in the open "Letter to a Roman Catholic," paragraphs 6–12, *Works*, 10:81–83. See also "Thoughts Upon Methodism" (1786), *Works*, 13:258–61.

17. To Ezekiel Cooper, *Letters* (Telford), 8:259–60, Feb. 1, 1791.

18. A prescient call for such a pneumatological focus as an ecumenical resource today may be seen in Fr. Kilian McDonnell, O.S.B., "A Trinitarian Theology of the Holy Spirit?" in *Theological Studies*, 46 (June 1985), 191–227.

19. Christians with an eye to the future might try testing W.H.C. Frend's "conclusion" in *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1965): "The story of persecution and martyrdom, extending through 500 years of the history of the Ancient World . . . still has its lessons today" (p. 571).

20. One of the ecumenical landmarks of our time was provided by Jaroslav Pelikan (then of Chicago, and scion in a long succession of Lutheran pastors) to our Faith and Order Commission on Tradition and Traditions, under a startlingly un-Lutheran title, "*Scriptura Sola Numquam Sola Est.*"

21. As by Theodore Runyon, in his working paper for Group Six, for this Institute.

22. Cf. "Epiclesis," in G.W. Lampe (ed.), *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1961), p. 526.

23. If one prefers better prosody and diluted pneumatology, there is also Bryan Foley's recent "Holy Spirit, Come, Confirm Us" in the *New Catholic Hymnal* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1971).

24. But cf. David Coffey, an Australian Roman Catholic, *Grace: the Gift of the Holy Spirit* (Manly: Catholic Institute of Sydney, 1979). See also my Cato Lecture for 1982, "The Rule of Grace."

25. Cf. his conversation with Spangenberg on these points, in *Journal and Diaries*, 1:145–6 (Feb. 7, 1736).

26. Journal for Easter, April 2, 1738, *Journal and Diaries*, 1:233.

27. Both the "bated-breath" and the "laid-back" "psychohistories" of the "Aldersgate" experience have been less helpful than was intended. We would do better to concentrate on Wesley's own report: the theme of human participation in the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4) that appeared in his matins reading, his disheartened note to John Gambold in the afternoon, his numbness at vespers (despite Purcell's splendid setting for the *De Profundis* (Ps. 130), the passive verbs in the account of the "warmed heart" (Wesley's only *active* role seems to have been his taking note of the clock-time: "about a quarter before nine")! It has often been noted that the "Aldersgate story" quickly fades from sight in subsequent *Journals*; it has not been

noted often enough that its substance reappears elsewhere throughout the corpus: in the "John Wesley-John Smith Correspondence," *Letters*, 26:138-294 (May 1745-48) and in the two "discourses" on "The Witness of the Spirit," Sermons 10 and 11, *Sermons*, 1:285-98 and Sermon 12, "The Witness of Our Own Spirit," *Sermons*, 1:299-313—and many times thereafter.

28. And, later wrote a sermon about it, Sermon 19, "Heaviness through Manifold Temptations," *Sermons*, 2:222-35.

29. Cf. *Memoirs of James Hutton* (Daniel Bonham, ed. 1856) p. 10; note that Benjamin Ingham was welcomed at the same eucharist from which John Wesley was excluded.

30. Cf. Ephesians 2:8; why is this text so easily turned on its head, as if it read "saved by faith through grace?"

31. Cf. my "Revelation and Reflection: A Comment in Favor of an Apophatic Theology," *Perkins Journal*, (Winter, 1973); see also *The Cambridge Platonists*, ed. Gerald R. Cragg, "A Library of Protestant Thought" (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968).

32. Cf. Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), p. x, 97ff., and 153-61.

33. Sermon 19, "The Great Privilege of Being Born of God," *Sermons* 1:434-5, paragraph 1:8, but see also 1:7-10. For still another nuancing of the striking phrase, "spiritual respiration," see Sermon 45, "The New Birth," *Sermons*, 2:192-94, paragraph II:4-5, and *A Farther Appeal*, Pt. III, ch. III, paragraph 22, *Appeals*, pp. 305-6, *et passim*. For a safeguard against obscurantism, cf. *ibid.*, paragraph 9. For pneumatology in "the elder Wesley," cf. Sermon 117, "On the Discoveries of Faith," *Sermons*, 4:31-2, paragraph 7; 118, "On the Omnipresence of God," *Ibid.* 4:42; 47, paragraphs, I.2., III.6; Sermon 120, "On the Unity of the Divine Being," *Ibid.* 4:66-7, paragraphs 16-17.

34. Cf. Sermon 11, "The Witness of the Spirit, II," *Sermons*, 1:288-93, paragraphs III, 1-9, and paragraph 5 especially.

35. *Ibid.*; the fullest statement of this *perichoresis*, of God at work in us and we in God is in the late, great Sermon 85 (1785), "On Working Out Our Own Salvation," *Sermons*, 3:199-nk1

209.

36. a. Sermon 117, "On the Discoveries of Faith" (June 11, 1788), *Sermons*, 4:29-38.

b. Sermon, 118, "On the Omnipresence of God" (Aug. 12, 1788), *Sermons*, 4:39-47.

c. Sermon 119, "Walking by Sight and Walking by Faith" (Dec. 30, 1788), *Sermons*, 4:49-59.

d. Sermon 120, "The Unity of the Divine Being" (April 9, 1789), *Sermons*, 4:61-74.

e. Sermon 130, "On Living Without God" (July 6, 1790), *Sermons*, 4:169-76.

They are interesting for two reasons at least: one, they express Wesley's mature pneumatology; two, fragmentary as they are, they share a tone and tenor of a serenity still vital and alert. They have helped me greatly in the bewilderingments of my own senescence, but they could be edifying at any stage on life's way. They represent a folk-theology that is carefully critical and unselfconsciously reverent, *coram Deo et hominibus*.

37. "On the Unity of the Divine Being," *op. cit.*, paragraphs 16-17.

38. Cf. Sermon 37, "The Nature of Enthusiasm," *Sermons*, 2:46-60.

39. Note the *pairing* of the two, in his fateful letter to "Our Brethren in America," *Letters* (Telford), 7:237-9, September 11, 1784.

### Chapter 3: Righteousness and Justification

1. Sermon 5, "Justification by Faith," *Sermons*, 1:182.

2. *Certain Sermons or Homilies, Appointed to Be Read in Churches* (Oxford, 1638, first published in 1547); a reprint was edited by J. Griffiths (1859).

3. Albert Schweitzer, *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*, trans. William Montgomery (New York: Henry Holt, 1931). p. 225.