2

A New Future for Wesley Studies: An Agenda for "Phase III"

Albert C. Outler

In his presentation, President Norwyn Denny warned us against pedantry and dalliance in our undertakings for this fortnight. It crossed my mind, as he was speaking, that *Wesley redivivus* might also have given us a similar admonition—even if, as I think, with a rather different nuance. Once he had alienated himself from this university, Wesley rarely commended that special sort of "leisure" that we have planned for ourselves in this Institute (*scholē*, in its original sense). Besides, his scorn for pedantry, dalliance—*and trendiness!*—was about equal. We remember how both Dr. Johnson and the Countess of Huntingdon used to complain of his busy-ness. Even so, he clung to his academic title as "Fellow of Lincoln College" long after it was appropriate, and he was subject to occasional twinges of nostalgia for "the groves of Academe." For example, in 1772, he could share with his brother a wistful backward glance *(Redde me vitae priori)* and pose a curious question: "What have I been doing these thirty years past?" Moreover he had invented a quasi-collegial device of his own (calling it a "conference"); it was designed to function as a sort of "institute of theological studies." We would not wish to imitate its format; we would do well to adopt its basic concerns.

On the one side, Wesley was a very public person, accustomed to nearly constant exposure—both to admiring followers who often failed to understand him and to disdainful critics who rarely tried. By stages, he eased into a complex leadership role—founder, patriarch, cult hero of "the people called Methodists"—with effortless aplomb.

Meanwhile, he continued to shrug off his critics with at least a slight whiff of self-righteousness. In his old age, he was the best known "private person" in England; he recounts his last visit to Falmouth (at age eighty-six), where "the people, high and low, lined the street from one end of town to the other, out of stark love and kindness, gaping and staring as if the King were going by" (*Journal*, Aug. 18, 1789; cf. other triumphal processions cited in Richard Watson, *Life of John Wesley*, (1831, p. 168). Popular reverence had also generated an astonishing iconography along with a mass of relics and portraitures (unaccountably diverse!). I think, though, that even he might have winced, as I did, at the poster (preserved in The Morley Collection, Wesley College, Bristol) that depicts his bodily assumption into heaven, with a full complement of adoring cherubs and angels!

On the other side, he was indefatigable author, editor, publisher—and he meant for his writings to be read. For his "plain people," he cultivated a "plain style" (with Glanvil and Tillotson as models) and had become rather smug on this point (cf. his preface to *Sermons on Several Occasions*, 1787). His quotations were copious and careless; his citations were negligent. He oversimplified complex issues with never a qualm. At the same time, he had out a weather eye for more sophisticated readers as well ("men of reason and religion" who shared his own taste for *The Spectator* and *The Gentlemen's Magazine*). Even for his "plain people" he would drop casual classical tags and allusions, as if to remind them of his academic credentials! But note that he rarely left them untranslated.

It seems to me unlikely, therefore, that he ever expected to be pored over by succeeding generations of scholars or ever to have his sources checked out by nitpicking editors. Why should he have? His own self-understood vocation was that of heralding an updated, simplified version of "the faith once for all delivered to the saints"—in and for his own time and place. His self-chosen role as mentor to the Methodists was geared to their immediate needs and focused on the near future as it unfolded. He was aware of the radical challenges to Christian orthodoxy by the deists and freethinkers, but he died with no more than a dim inkling of the drastic

transvaluations that were even then reshaping the European mind. He was more deeply influenced by Enlightenment views than has generally been recognized; he was catholic-spirited long before his time. But he was no more the prototype of modernism (as in Umphrey Lee's retrojection) than he was the Calvinist whom George Croft Cell "rediscovered."

Thus it was that the vast bulk of his writings were produced for his own people, with other readers only incidentally in view. This clearly is the case with his *Explanatory Notes* and *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists* (1780). It seems also true of *The Arminian Magazine* (1778 et seq.), that marvelous montage of jewels and junk. *The Works* (1771–74) and the *Sermons* (1787–88) may have had a wider audience in mind, as did the *Journal* (from 1735). *A Christian Library* (1749–55) was aimed at a theologically sophisticated public (which throws some light on the fact that it had no more than a single edition in Wesley's lifetime; it was obviously an editorial miscalculation).

The point here is that, in nearly two centuries since his death, the study and interpretation of his writings has been largely a business of the Methodists alone: by them and for them. This self-enclosed pattern helps us identify what we might label "Wesley Studies, Phase I." In it, the chief stress was on the intimate links between Wesley and Methodism. Wesley Studies, Phase I began with a disgraceful contention over Wesley's literary remains between John Whitehead, Thomas Coke, and Henry Moore; it was followed by John Pawson's feckless handling of the surviving manuscripts. We can only guess as to what we may have lost from the original legacy. Much was salvaged by Thomas Jackson, whose editions of *The Sermons* in 1825 (two volumes) and *The Works* (1829–32) are still our chief reliance for more than half the Wesley corpus. The Zondervan reprint's claim (in 1958–59) of being based on "the authorized edition . . . of 1872" is off by a full forty years. Wesley Studies, Phase I, therefore, has been largely dependent on bare texts (some incomplete, some extracted from other authors, some even spurious). It has

been staunchly denominationalistic in temper, ardently triumphalist in tone.

The first notable exception here was a biography of Wesley by Robert Southey in 1820. This is still a very interesting essay and certainly the best written of all the Wesley biographies. Its appendix, with its collection of Alexander Knox's comments on Wesley's character and theology is still valuable (and of more than passing interest to a Methodist Institute meeting at Keble College, since Knox was a spiritual mentor to Keble and Pusey and, as such, something of a link between the Evangelical and the Anglo-Catholic Revivals). Southey's unexpected venture (which criticized Wesley's personality but admired his complex contributions to British Christianity) was promptly denounced by John Gibson Lockhart (in *The Quarterly Review*) on the ground that its subject was unworthy of the labors of England's Poet Laureate. Most cultivated Britons were inclined to agree. But the controversy outraged the Methodists and called forth a counterattack in Richard Watson's *Life*; this helped stabilize the Wesley hero cult already flourishing, and which still survives. This cultic aspect has been yet another characteristic feature of Wesley Studies, Phase I—from the great days of Jabez Bunting on down to our time.

Left with Wesley to themselves, the Methodists proceeded to evolve a cluster of stereotypes that we know so well and which have shaped our own images of him: the hide-bound father, the peerless mother, young Jacky marked off as a special "brand plucked out of the burning," the Holy Club, "Aldersgate," the great evangelist taking the whole world for his parish, the invincible debater—and of course, above all, the founder of METHODISM. Given Methodist triumphalism and their own biases, *non*-Methodists were content to acknowledge Wesley's remarkable zeal and practical gifts but otherwise to ignore or denigrate him as a theologian. I grew up with encyclopedias and textbooks that were satisfied to link Wesley with Methodism and let it go at that. In the old *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, there was a short pithy identification of Wesley that still sticks in my mind: *"energisch, herb, und fanatisch"* ("vigorous, sharp-tongued and fanatical").

Methodists, by and large, were content with their patriarch on his pedestal. A pragmatic warrant for this was that, meanwhile, they were enjoying one of the really great success stories in the whole history of the expansion of Christianity. Their triumphalism had much to sustain it. Luke Tyerman said what most Methodists took for granted: "Methodism is the greatest fact in the history of the church" (*Life and Times* [1870], vol. I, p. 1). The anonymous reviewer of Curnock's first volume in the new edition of Wesley's *Journal* (in the *Times Literary Supplement*, Nov. 18, 1909) held the same view: "Methodism is, perhaps, the most extensive religious system, outside of Islam, among those who owe their origin to, and still derive an impetus from, the life of one man."

Wesley Studies, Phase I was, therefore, the scholarly aspect of a denominationalism preoccupied with itself and its founder. Such narcissism still continues; it accounts for an important fraction of Britain's tourist business every year. One is forever hearing Methodists recount their gratification at having walked where Wesley walked, at having stood in pulpits where he preached, at having been in the room where he died—at having had a special showing of those "digs" of his at Lincoln (misidentified as they are). Wesley "relics" are scattered over the world in museums and homes. Indeed, it would be interesting to know how many in this company have no Wesley relics of their own. For myself, I do not reckon eighteenth-century literary Wesleyana as "relics," but, if you think I should, then even I am something of an iconodule.

In living memory, however, triumphalism has fallen out of fashion (partly because there have been fewer and fewer recent triumphs!). A new ecumenical spirit has spread through the Christian community at large. At the same time, the rise and fall of "Enlightenment Christianity" has brought us to a new postmodern era in which nineteenth-century liberalism seems less and less robust. Thus, with the faltering fortunes of Methodism generally (with welcome exceptions here and there) and with the waxing of ecumenical historiography, Wesley Studies, Phase I have come to be more and more outmoded. Denominational church history has been demoted; triumphalism has been muted by

sophisticated historians as bad form and bad history. The great issues that wracked the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries have been refocused. The Second Vatican Council marked an ending of the Roman Catholic Counter-Reformation. The presuppositions of nineteenth-century liberalism have called for thoroughgoing reevaluation—despite the persistence of old memories and old labels.

One of the effects of this basic shift in historical perspective has been a representation of the eighteenth century in a new light. This in its turn has prompted a second phase in Wesley Studies with less emphasis on the Wesley-Methodist symbiosis and more emphasis on one or more angles of interest in Wesley as a theologian in his own right. Motivations in Phase II have been varied: "ecumenical," as in the studies of R. Newton Flew (*The Idea of Perfection*) and Father Maximin Piette (*John Wesley in the Evolution of Protestantism*, 1937); and "antiecumenical," in the sparkling contempt in Ronald Knox's chapters on Wesley (*Enthusiasm*, 1980). In G. C. Cell and Franz Hildebrandt the concern was to link Wesley more closely with Calvin and Luther; in E. P. Thompson, there was a passion to indict Wesley for his social views; in Bernard Semmel, there has been a more credible effort to describe *The Methodist Revolution* as a different sort of social transformation. The shared twin features of Phase II—however diverse otherwise—have been: (1) the concern to rescue Wesley from his Methodist cocoon, and (2) to probe more deeply into one or another basic aspect of his thought and praxis. Here one thinks of John Deschner, Harald Lindström, Ole Borgen, John Walsh, and especially of Martin Schmidt.

One of the negative effects of the weakening of the Wesley-Methodist symbiosis has been the emergence of a full generation (or more) of Methodist theologians whose thought has been touched quite lightly by Wesley himself (save for the purposes of occasional incantation). The list here is long; the easier way to make the same point is to count off the number of contemporary Methodist theologians and ethicists of real stature, who reflect an identifiable debt to Wesley as decisive mentor. How many fingers would such a counting call for? Moreover, there are more and more trendy

Methodists who, having helped topple Wesley from his pedestal, now propose to pack him off to history's limbo. Non-Methodists find this a mite baffling. They remember the Wesley hero cult, and they wonder what will happen to a movement that lacks the wit and will to transvaluate its chief legacy.

There is a third subgroup in Wesley Studies, Phase II. These are the Methodist theological partisans of one or another of the current coterie-theologies; their interest in Wesley is confined to his possible use of them as "authority" for their own convictions, rooted in other traditions. This is not to argue for or against this coterie-theology or that, nor even to question the legitimacy of selective appeals to a selected authority. There is a crucial prior question involved and it is a methodological one. How far are these various appellants really interested in Wesley's theology itself? How competently are their appeals grounded in the primary texts taken as a whole? Eisegesis, even in a good cause, is still bad hermeneutics!

One of the distinctive achievements of Wesley Studies, Phase II has been to lift Wesley out of his Methodist matrix. And yet the question of the reassignment of his place in church history (and in contemporary Christianity) has been largely left open. This suggests two inherent weaknesses in the model (with some notable exceptions, of course). The first is its general indifference to the history of Christian thought as a whole. The other is a partial or biased reading of Wesley so that their separated parts do not quite match his whole. There is a special problem about Wesley's relevance for postcolonial Christianity in Latin America, Asia, and Africa. In these contexts today, he is bound to appear as overlaid by the thick crust of his British provincialism and thus in urgent need of artful and responsible indigenization. But if such a thing can be done with John Bunyan, why not with John Wesley? Besides, there are Charles' hymns to help!

In any case, the question of Wesley's proper place in church history, on the one hand, and in current ecumenical theology, on the other, remains open and a problem. The proposal that Wesley belongs among the really great doctors of the church is preposterous on its face. We know of other

figures in Christian history who, in their times and places, were great and shining lights—and yet who now languish in oblivion—save in the most sophisticated summations of Christian memory. One thinks of men like Johann Gerhard, Martin Chemmitz, Johann Heidegger, Francis Turretin, Richard Baxter, and Horace Bushnell—great ones all and now forgotten, to our loss. Will Wesley join them presently—and should he? But if he is not a theological supernova, nor yet ready for limbo, what then? How much has he still to contribute to the issues with which we are struggling and those we are passing on to generations yet to come? Questions like these have not yet been fully formulated nor rightly answered to the satisfaction of critical historians or devoted ecumenists. But they have opened up a new horizon of inquiry that might properly be labelled Wesley Studies, Phase III.

Such a third phase would not propose to repudiate the positive residues of Phases I and II—although such a phase would be less interested in the Wesley-Methodist symbiosis and more concerned with ecumenical theology and praxis. Its first goal is that of basic reorientation—the repositioning of Wesley in his own time and place, against his larger background, and in as wide a historical context as possible. But all of this is still in order to enable an application of Wesley's relevance to issues in *our* times and *our* futures. Phase III is the effort to get beyond Wesley as Methodist patriarch toward a more fruitful place for him in the larger scene, historical and ecumenical.

For me, such a notion of yet a third phase of Wesley Studies was changed from a vision to a programme on a summer's day in 1957—in Frank Baker's parsonage in Hull. Two decades before, I had taken a doctorate in patristics and had been engaged in the fruitful absurdity of trying to master the history of Christian thought as a whole (in support of a still more grandiose project: viz., the modern dialogue between Christianity and current secular wisdom, as focused in the human sciences). The point, however, was that nowhere in my education or career had Wesley ever been regarded as other than a great evangelist and denominational founder. For example, my cherished friend and colleague, H. Richard

Niebuhr had come by his image of Wesley as a defective Calvinist, largely on the basis of Professor Cell's book, without a firsthand examination of the Wesley corpus itself, so far as I ever knew: "Wesley's essential Calvinism has recently been described by Professor Cell, though it may be that the great Methodist's limitation lay at the point of his frequent unawareness of this [Calvinistic] presupposition of his gospel" (*The Kingdom of God in America*, 1937, p. 101).

Over the years, I had read Wesley on my own, partly out of loyalty (he was a hero to my father), but more out of a historian's curiosity as to where he rightly fitted into the development of Protestant thought between the Puritans and Schleiermacher. My general impression was of a creative mind in fustian; an antidote to both moralism *and* solifidianism—but not one comparable in theological stature, say, to Jonathan Edwards. When, therefore, in the editorial board of *A Library of Protestant Thought*, we were threshing out a format for that collection of readings, it crossed my mind that Wesley might very well have a volume of his own—just as we had planned for Richard Baxter, Horace Bushnell *et al*. Jonathan Edwards was already being published by the Yale Press—a project that has now stretched out for more than thirty years.

My proposal drew scoffs from my non-Methodist colleagues, who reminded me that it was I who had proposed the original title for the library: viz., "Protestant *Thought*." Later, when an outside group of specialists in Reformation and post-Reformation history was polled about inclusions and allowable omissions, the project least supported by them was a solo volume for John Wesley. How Wesley got his volume is another story, but it turned out that I got the assignment to edit it. It was then that the real shocks began—especially to a generalist like me, long since accustomed to working on critical editions already prepared by specialists, together with the usual pile of sophisticated secondary literature in which the essential spadework has already been done by my elders and betters. My naïve questions about holographs and sources met with unedifying answers and led to the discovery of how tightly Wesley had been cocooned by the Methodists and how easily ignored by others. The Curnock *Journal* is almost wholly preoccupied

with Methodist affairs and not very critical of Wesley's self-serving reportage. Besides, who then could check out the deficiencies in his claims of having decoded the *Diaries*? Sugden's *Standard Sermons* had a few critical comments on Wesley's theology but within a Methodist ambiance that is nearly total. Besides, what Sugden was really interested in was the question of "doctrinal standards" *for Methodists*; this allowed him to ignore the last two-thirds of the sermon corpus.

The secondary literature was dominated by the familiar stereotypes. Critical questions went unasked—or were answered stereotypically. I discovered, in England, that such primary texts as had survived were in safe enough hands but not then in safe quarters. The contrast between the Wesley archives and the Baxter archives in the Doctor Williams Library was embarrassing. There was no reliable inventory of what Wesley had read, nor any convenient collection of his sources. In short, what I had supposed would be a fairly straightforward task turned into a bafflement—and the conviction came readily that Phase III would never unfold if other Wesley scholars had to replicate my experience. Meanwhile, my colleagues nodded smugly at my complaints and hinted broadly that this was a fitting comeuppance for so ill-starred a venture. One of them (a Pascal specialist) mumbled something about silk purses and sow's ears.

In Frank Baker, however, I had finally found a Wesley specialist such as I could never be but who was ready and able to help with my project. He, too, had discovered the limited usefulness of Wesley Studies, Phase I—although he has always been more preoccupied with the man himself and less inclined than I to speak of a "Methodist cocoon." But he had conceived of a new, critical edition a decade earlier and had begun work on a proper bibliography to supersede Greene. Baker's expertise got me over many a hurdle that had balked me up to that point. Thus, with his aid and that of many others (historians, classicists, specialists in English literature) Wesley got his volume in the *Library*—and, for all its flaws (plainer now after twenty years more study), it has continued to outsell the other volumes by a ratio of ten to one and remains the only volume of the eighteen still in print. Many

people (including those at the Oxford University Press) have found this unaccountable.

Actually, though, it was I who profited most from this project, because in the process, muddled as it was, I had discovered a more interesting theological resource than even I had expected. Here was valuable light shed on many of my other queries: about eighteenth-century linkages between "orthodoxy," "pietism" and "Enlightenment." The project has gone on enriching my own theological understanding of contemporary issues. Wesley's rhetoric takes a bit of getting used to, but there *is* "plain truth for plain people" in it. There is also a sort of catalytic theology there, designed to interact with other theologies (earlier and later) without losing its own integrity, and without forcing Christian doctrines into a rigid mold. It is a theology less interested in the order of Christian *truth* (as in school theologies generally) than in the Christian *life*. Its specific focus is the order of salvation as an eventful process that stretches across the whole horizon of Christian existence. Its axial theme is *grace*, which makes it Christocentric and yet also pre-eminently pneumatological. For Wesley the Holy Spirit is the Lord and Giver of *Grace* as well as the Lord and Giver of Life. Thus, "prevenience" is not a stage of grace but the crucial aspect of grace in all its manifestations. It signifies the divine initiative in *all* spirituality, in all Christian experience. Wesley's theology is intensely evangelical but it looks also toward the ethical transformation of society. It is concerned with "third alternatives" to all the barren polarities generated by centuries of polemics. It is a linkage theology between historic orthodoxy and the Enlightenment, between radical Protestantism and ecumenical Christianity. In short, what I had found in Wesley was a theologian who looked better without his halo—who was, on principle, in dialogue with Christians in many different traditions in his own day precisely because he had been in such fruitful dialogue with so much of the Christian tradition before him. He has, therefore, become an important theological teacher for me, and I am convinced that this could happen in other cases. This is why I have kept looking beyond Phases I and II. It has been the warrant for investing two extra decades of drudgery

and excitement in the task of making his sermons available in fuller context.

I hope I am not misconstrued as claiming that Dr. Baker, or even Dr. Baker and I, *invented* Phase III. Historiographical perspectives have natural histories of their own. What has happened over the past three decades is the rise of a new sort of interest in the field and folk theology. Other scholars of diverse backgrounds have also discovered Wesley in new dimensions—one thinks of Timothy Smith, Robert Cushman, W. R. Cannon, Richard Heitzenrater, Bernard Semmel *et al*. One can go on from them to rejoice over the promising crop of younger scholars on whom any new future for Wesley Studies really depends.

But it must also be said, however, that Phase III is, up to now, more a vision than an achievement, more of a beginning than a full-fledged movement. This would illuminate Ronald Gibbins' instinctive reflex, in his review of the paperback reprint of the Wesley volume in *A Library of Protestant Thought*: "So much has been written about the life and work of John Wesley that one is always suspicious of *any* new treatment." He could have added, "just as we have grown suspicious of all the old ones."

And yet all of this should help explain my excitement and earnest hopes for this particular session of this Institute and the inclusion in it of a separate working group on Wesley Studies. Despite the gains of the past two decades, I am not yet wholly confident that Phase III is here to stay. There are still low moments when I have this sinking feeling of having been playing Sisyphus—the right rock up the wrong hill! On the other hand, the signs multiply that a more favorable reappraisal of Wesley as an ecumenical theologian is taking place. I know of two Methodist universities that have designed special programs in Wesley and Methodist studies—and most of our seminaries are taking this more seriously. Professors Kretschmar and Friess have allotted him a chapter in their new series on classical theologians. There is a respectful footnote in Hendrikus Berkhof's *Christian Faith* (pp. 426-27). Topical seminars have begun to appear on the programs of the American Academy of Religion; one is planned for the next session of the American Historical

Association. Conferences on Wesley as a theological resource have been held in Australia; others are planned for in Latin America and elsewhere. A private foundation in the United States is helping to underwrite the graduate education of a score or more of so-called "Wesley Fellows." Last year, a quite discerning question about Wesley *as theologian* appeared in the Oxford Honors Exam in Theology—the first one of its kind that I have noticed since I began to take those examinations as a private hobby in 1939.

Even so, a consensus as to the requisite scholarly definitions of the state of the question in Phase III has yet to be formulated—its agenda is not yet firmly in place. Wesley's impact in contemporary theology is still in the process of being tested. Our work in this Institute could, therefore, make a real difference in opening up a real future in Wesley Studies, if indeed there is to be one.

As I see it, there are at least three crucial issues in any such future:

The *first* is methodological; all theologies claiming to be Wesleyan must be based on the whole Wesley as he was (and not on this aspect or accent in his thought and praxis). Like every other enterprise in historical interpretation, he must be investigated on his own grounds and in accordance with his own theological intentions—which were not, in the first instance, denominational nor sectarian. This would enable us to begin to transcend the tragic polarizations in the Wesleyan traditions in the nineteenth century that still haunt us and hobble our mission in the world. We need to clarify the grounds on which Wesley still stands as an authority for us, insofar as he does. This cannot refer to Wesley's authority in himself; it can only point us to that authoritative complex to which he gave his own allegiance and to which we may give ours: Scripture, "Christian Antiquity," reason, and experience.

An inference from this will make a *second* point: Wesley must be read in light of his sources—and therefore within the larger ecumenical perspectives of historic Christianity. He worked in and from scripture—and so must we—but also the classics, the Fathers, the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, and the contemporary worlds he lived in. He was no antiquarian;

more than once I have thought I could hear a few ghostly snorts while I was struggling with an intricate footnote. But he was a man of tradition—and as his way of gathering up and weaving together so much of the Christian tradition is better understood, his theological oversimplifications will be less readily misconstrued. Reading Wesley calls for trifocals: one part of the lens focused on his own background, another on the seventeenth century, and a third on possible projections into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—in that order. To move from our concerns to his and back again and to call this "Wesley Studies" is to miss the richness of the heritage he left us, and to diminish the contributions which we might share with other Christians—and other humans—in our times and in those to come.

Third, however, the justification for the drudgeries entailed in serious Wesley Studies must be sought in their perspective relevance for contemporary Christians (and not Methodists alone) in our current commitments to evangelism, renewal, and social transformation. Here, two fruitful ideas emerge as obvious: contemporary theology must be ecumenical and Wesley's is just that. Again, the idea of *development* is central in contemporary historical study (as one can see in Professor Pelikan's magisterial survey, *The Christian Tradition*). We must not claim too much for Wesley's historical consciousness, but we may claim he was more of a pioneer in grasping the idea of development than most of his contemporaries—and felt freer than most to develop his own ideas, as the revival unfolded.

In any future for Phase III, Wesley's role as a folk theologian (or people's theologian) will have to be plumbed more carefully and the secrets of his success in communicating complex notions to simple folk must be sought out. Here was a man who dedicated a competent theological training to the tasks of pastoral leadership of plain people, and who drew much of his own developing understandings from their responses. In such a perspective, his distinctiveness would be more apparent: the Anglican evangelist as devoted to the sacramental means of grace as if he were a rector; the eighteenth-century reformer with conscious ties to both the church Fathers and the radical Protestants, and who may be

laid alongside other pastoral theologians like Henry Scougal. The result would be a richer sense of theology as *scientia practica* ("faith in order to action"). This would make it possible, as Wesley comes to be better known, that the traditional Methodist emphasis upon sanctification and perfection could be seen as integrated in a more comprehensive view of grace in the order of salvation. This would then recognize how comprehensive Wesley's view of salvation really was—a continuum of God's gracious acts that reaches from the first stirrings of conscience to the fullness of faith and to the full restoration of the divine image.

The problem of a credible hermeneutics for Wesley is, as I know, a vexed one. Its nub, or so it seems to me, is whether the fact that Wesley never produced a systematic exposition of his theology (and never intended to) is to be reckoned as a weakness to be remedied or as a strength to be exploited. Here, much depends on whether one sets the notion of "systematics" over against its simple antithesis, "unsystematic" and whether one uses the term "eclectic" as pejorative (a synonym for "haphazard"). There is, however, another possibility: viz., to think of theology as coherent reflection upon Christian living, with all its natural divagations. Wesley knew the history of systematic theology, from Peter Lombard's *Sentences* to Philip Melancthtons's *Loci* and in the heroic labors of the Protestant dogmaticians. He himself relied heavily on John Pearson's *Exposition of the Creed* (which comes as near to a "systematics" as seventeeth-century Anglicanism can show). But Wesley also knew that the bulk of significant Christian literature, from the Scriptures, to the Fathers, to the classics of devotion, to the liturgies, had focused on Christian *life* and the intimations of Christian truth that could be drawn therefrom.

For better or for worse, then, Wesley *chose* to formulate his teaching in unsystematic forms: sermons, tracts, letters, hymns. He could claim that "every serious man who peruses these sermons will therefore see *in the clearest manner* what those doctrines are which I embrace and teach, as the essentials of true religion" ("Preface" to *Sermons on Several Occasions*, 1746). He could speak of his collection of hymns (1780) as "a little body of *practical divinity*." His axial theme, which organizes all else in his thought, is grace, and the focus of all his thinking about grace is on the order of *salvation*. The real measure of Wesley's mind is the consistency and clarity with which he managed the connections between this axial theme and all the other facets of his thought.

It goes without saying that Methodists and other Christians are, and must be, free to do their theologizing in any genre that they find edifying. This allows for responsible efforts to produce a Wesleyan "systematics" (in the tradition of Watson and Pope), just as it also allows for other organizing principles (for example, in Professor Geoffrey Wainwright's thoroughly Wesleyan *Doxology*). What matters in any case is that all such theologies should bear the marks of careful basic homework in the Wesley texts. This is an equal prerequisite in any other efforts to update Wesley and make him relevant. Thus, I propose a slogan for Methodist theologies (comparable to current trends in other traditions we know): Back to Wesley and his sources, and then forward—with his sense of heritage and openness to the future as one of our models.

In whatever patterns Methodist theologies may continue to develop, it will be crucial for them to strike for new balances between faith and life. It *is* our task "to spread Scriptural holiness over these lands." But *scriptural* holiness has always had the whole trajectory of grace in view—and Methodism has been ill-served by those who have minimized this wholeness for whatever reason. For surely what is most interesting and truly creative in Wesley was his comprehensive vision of the Christian life: life in and from the Spirit (from repentance to justifying faith, to reconciliation, assurance, and regeneration, to sanctification); and life in and under grace as an eventful process punctuated by conversions, disciplined by the moral imperatives of holiness (personal and social).

The future of Wesley Studies so conceived depends, more than we may have realized, on a new edition that will enable such studies to go forward more expeditiously than is possible at present. We know how studies in other traditions have been spurred and sustained by critical editions; it is even more crucial in our case. But you should also know that

the Wesley Works Project has just now suffered a severely damaging blow. Three volumes have been published by the Oxford University Press and a fourth, now in page proof (i.e., the 1780 "Collection of Hymns"), will be published. But the Oxford Press has now abandoned the project, leaving us with no assured alternatives. It may well be that this Institute could offer counsel and guidance in this crisis—if there is, in fact, an honest consensus among us as to its importance.

New edition or not, however, the future of Wesley Studies, Phase III really depends upon an agreed agenda that could serve all interested scholars in all traditions as a baseline for their own investigations and commitments. Each of us must already have some such agenda in mind, and it is the specific business of Group One to hammer out some such programme as part of its *report*. (The report, as agreed to by our group, appears on page 53.) The point to be stressed here is that such an agenda is not the business of antiquarians only but of all men and women who are interested in testing the possible significance of Wesley less as *patriarch* than as *mentor* (along with many others) so that those who seek such a future can bring to it an added richness from the Christian tradition to which Wesley stands as a crucial witness.

Methodists and other Christians have still much to learn about the possible role and function in Christian theologizing of what we have called "the Wesleyan Quadrilateral"—his four-fold guidelines: of Scripture as primal font of Christian revelation, of tradition (Christian Antiquity) as the sum of the collective Christian wisdom in response to the truth revealed in Scripture; of reason as the Godgiven discipline of ordering our conceptions as cogently as ever we can; of experience as the assurance of God's reconciling love in Christ, received as a special assurance of God's unmerited favor. We have much to gain from a reconsideration of Wesley's correlation of soteriology and pneumatology, the person and work of the Holy Spirit in the Mystery of Salvation.

The way beyond the schisms that still disrupt our oneness in Christ is not a backward step to some older (nineteenth century) notion of holiness of the social gospel (especially as if these were antithetical!). The way forward will come clearer as we recover the Wesleyan vision of Christian existence and

all that it entails for faithful Christians in a world where justice must be served or the gospel will not get a hearing. Such a conspectus would provide a fruitful context for all our other concerns in this Institute: for the correlation of salvation and justice conceived in an evangelical mode, for effectual evangelism aimed at social transformation as urgently as personal conversions (and yet not more so!), faith development without a rigid scheme of entelechies, a substantive sacramentalism without sacerdotalism.

No one has yet refuted the validity of Robert Chiles' evaluation of *The Theological Transition in American Methodism* (1965) from its original (i.e., Wesleyan) orientations—in the late nineteenth century and thereafter: (1) from revelation to a rationalistic hermeneutics; (2) from original sin to moral man; (3) from free grace to free will—and I would add (4) from Montanism to Pelagianism. It would also seem that what has happened in mainline American Methodism has its counterparts in other branches of the Methodist movement. It may be that, for some of us, there is no strong will to reverse these deformations, no earnest urgency to recover the form and power of historic Christianity for our times and for our futures. But to desist in these endeavors would be to cut the taproot of our Wesleyan heritage and to foreclose our future as evangelical Christians. On the other hand, if and when such an urgency returns, anywhere in the Christian community, Wesley ought to be accessible as a fruitful resource for Christian self-understanding and hope. If, however, he is to be appropriated as such a resource, he must become better known by more adequate methods of analysis and interpretation. For him to be better known, he must be studied more carefully, in his context and in the light of his sources. Wesley Studies, Phase III is, therefore, aimed at making Wesley credible once again to *our* own "plain people" and yet also to the whole of the Christian community. This, of course, is no end in itself. The virtue of our heritage must be sought in its power to open a new future where catalytic theologies will do more than polemical ones to enliven the chemistries of Christian thought and action—a new future under the rule of grace.

If any such prospect as this is viable, I cannot think of a likelier place for it to be affirmed than by *this* company, in *this* place, in *this* fortnight. For what, pray tell, are our real alternatives? It is because I see our times as in deep crisis and because I believe that Wesley Studies have a positive contribution to make in such times, that I regard this conference as a possible landmark occasion that will call us and others to an even firmer commitment to the recovery of the heritage—as a hopeful prologue to a really new future. Who amongst us would wish for less?

Wesley Studies

Working Group Paper

Part I: "The Horizon of Inquiry"

Where two or three informed Methodists are gathered together, a reference to John Wesley can be counted on sooner or later. It need not always be germane or accurate but it signifies his unique place in Methodist hearts and minds. In our Working Group on Wesley Studies, we were steadily aware of this place and thus would begin our report with a grateful acknowledgment of our debts to all who have helped to fashion the traditions of Wesley Studies thus far.

We are also eager to disavow any notion of a Methodist monopoly of Wesley Studies; such a thing would be contrary to any of his own intentions. He was at home in the Christian tradition at large and in the whole of the Christian community. His sermon on "Catholic Spirit" was a conscious bid for mutual recognition, between separated Christians, of their oneness in Christ and in love. One of our chief concerns, therefore, is that Wesley might now be exhibited as the ecumenical churchman he understood himself to be. Contrary to the denominational engrossments that have tended hitherto to obscure Wesley from non-Methodists, we are eager for Wesley to be shared by all (and not by church folk only) as an important resource for contemporary theology, ethics, and human culture.

We are equally eager to disavow any notion that the field of Wesley Studies be regarded as a preserve for scholars only. This, too, would be a gross distortion of his intentions. As he said so firmly, his concern was for "plain truth for plain