

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

people." The least that this can mean is that the essence of his message still stands available in his bare texts—open to all who will give him a fair reading. It also means, however, that he must be read and pondered rather than revered at a distance, or cited from hearsay—or ignored. By the same token, he deserves as open a mind as one may bring to him: always with a special awareness of his practical concerns for Christian faith and praxis, in his actual times and circumstances. The rudiments of his teachings, and something of their applicability in other times and situations, may be grasped by serious readers of all sorts, without the benefit of editors and interpreters. This is as it should be.

Even so, Wesley's bare texts conceal much that is greatly significant, both for an understanding of his thought and for perspectives on his place in the history of Christian thought and in contemporary ecumenical theology. His deliberate oversimplifications have helped many of his readers to miss the range and richness of his theological learning. In this way, though, they also miss the scope and aptness of his quotations and allusions (biblical, classical, historical), as well as his grasp of the tangled web of the controversies which he was inclined to resolve without exposing his readers to their complexities. A consequence of this has been an obscuration of his theological sophistication and originality, which remain largely unacknowledged. Methodists and non-Methodists alike have been left unaware of the clashing traditions that converged in him, of his passion for transcending barren polarizations (theoretical and practical), of his distinctiveness as a people's theologian. It has been all too easy—both for Methodists and the others—to leave him in his traditional Methodist cocoon.

It is, therefore, the hope—and proposal—of our group that Wesley Studies be freshly reoriented toward new levels of methodological sophistication, critical rigor, and ecumenical outreach. The aims of such a move would be a clearer view of Wesley as a contemporary resource: his evangelical gospel linked to an active concern for Christian nurture and discipline; the depth and breadth of his theological and secular culture realized; his skills in the arts of communication and organization; his genius for gathering Christians

into effective networks of mutual aid and welfare; and his passion for transformation—of persons and society. The resulting perspective would position Wesley more credibly within the Christian tradition as one of a special breed of servant-pastor-evangelist-teacher-reformers who have sought and found their ministerial vocations among the disadvantaged and alienated. It would also make him a far richer and more relevant resource for contemporary Christians and our perplexities.

The time is ripe, we believe, for fresh studies of Wesley in the contexts of cultural history as well as church history. Such a new phase of Wesley Studies would be self-consciously critical, historical, and ecumenical. And yet it would also aim at making him available as a fruitful teacher of Christians in our times. It would seek to discover the confluence in Wesley's thought of a variety of Christian traditions, the emergence of a distinctive view of salvation (focused on the doctrine of grace and the order of salvation), together with a consistent emphasis upon discipline in the Christian life, in our love both of God and of neighbor. It would recognize in him the tradition of meditative piety that stretches back to the medieval mystics, and beyond them, to the spirituality of the ancient Fathers, with their stress upon human participation in the divine life revealed in Christ by the power of the Spirit. It would see his constant emphasis on salvation by grace through faith—life in grace, life under grace, from grace to grace—from the first stirrings of conscience on to the fullness of grace in holiness. It would seek to analyze Wesley's inheritance from the Reformations of the sixteenth century (Lutheran, Calvinist, Anglican, "Radical," and Catholic) and his heroic effort to select the best from each. It would recognize his avoidance of all extremes: solifidianism, antinomianism, moralism, sacerdotalism. It would seek to appreciate his social and political interests, his multiple ministries to the needy and oppressed, his interest in physical and mental well-being, his concerns about health, nutrition, and effectual health services. It would recognize his interests and involvements in the issues of economic justice and human rights.

Any such approach to Wesley and his times obviously calls for critical and interdisciplinary scholarship at the highest level. It would, on principle, look toward both historical reconstruction and constructive efforts to update the Wesleyan legacy in current situations, whatever they may turn out to be. There would also be ample room here for the specialist, in selected areas of research, and for the generalist as well. The future of Wesley Studies lies in many hands, in many countries—in a responsible pluralism of interests.

There is, of course, no thought of exalting Wesley's authority as anybody's court of last resort in matters of doctrine or praxis. We would, in fact, reject any such notion, just as we reject proof-texting from Wesley as a mode of appealing to his authority. Methodists (and other Christians) have no other final authority in doctrine or praxis beyond or besides the Word of God in Scripture—"read, marked, learned and inwardly digested"—under the guidance of the Spirit. But all Christian groups (and individuals) have influential mentors and teachers whom they ought gladly to share with others. In this sense Wesley is, or ought to be, such a mentor to the people called Methodists—and not to Methodists only, since there are many others who can profit from him greatly.

Our interest in Wesley's authority, therefore, is less in the man himself than in the complex of authorities by which he chose so willingly to be guided. This complex has been identified as the so-called "Wesleyan Quadrilateral" (which may or may not be a wholly apt metaphor, since one of its sides is much more than equal to the other three). What the Quadrilateral means to point to, in its first instance, is the primacy and sufficiency of Holy Scripture in the general sense of the Anglican Article VI, entitled, "Of the Sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures for Salvation: Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation. . . ." (In Wesley's revision in the *Sunday Service*, it appears as Article V.) The Scriptures are, in this view, the primal font of Christian truth. But since they must be interpreted in every succeeding age and in each new cultural context, there is also a need for the positive aid of Tradition, understood as the collective wisdom of the Christian community in all centuries and all

communions. Such interpretations, however, must also be guided by reason. Wesley expressly excludes interpretations that lead either to logical absurdities or to indictments of God's goodness. This is a demand for clarity and cogency in all Christian formulations. None of this, however, will suffice until all are given life and power by "the inner witness of the Spirit that we are children of God." This is the Christian experience that turns sound doctrine into living faith. (Wesley's experience at Aldersgate stands as the most familiar instance of this in Methodist memories.)

This four-fold complex of guidelines, with Scripture understood as their fundament, stands as an ample and applicable authority for Christians in every age and situation. As a theological base, such a set of authoritative norms deserves more careful analysis and evaluation than it has had thus far, in Methodism or elsewhere, and a careful pondering of it would prove a useful exercise for other Christians as well.

As a group, then, we are eager to encourage this new era of Wesley Studies that we envisage. It would help provide a more adequate hermeneutic for reading Wesley in the light of his sources and for the updating of his most distinctive ideas for use in new contexts. In it, Wesley's own preferences will be appreciated: for plain truth over speculation, for pluralism over dogmatism, for doctrine normed by coherence rather than ordered topically into a system. And, again on principle, such a new era will make room for a variety of interests, exposed to dialogue and fruitful interaction.

A very high level of biblical expertise will be needed in the study and evaluation of Wesley's ways with Scripture, since Scripture was for him not only the unique and sufficient source of revelation but also a sort of second language in which he thought and prayed as well. But this would open a way toward wider and deeper probes into the problems of biblical hermeneutics in general—most especially the universal relevance of biblical revelation in other times and other worldviews. Thus the Bible would become a deeper bond of shared faith than any other source for Christian self-understanding.

Competent church historians will be indispensable in the setting of background. They need to notice and evaluate his

knowledge and use of the Fathers of the church, his awareness of the chief options in historic Christian teaching, East and West, his selective inheritance from his more English background: Anglicanism from Cranmer (the *Homilies*) to Pearson (*On the Creed*), the traditions of Puritan devotion, and the inchoate movement called "Christian Platonism" (from Malebranche to Norris to Law). Another set of historical problems arise from his role as a transitional figure between historic orthodoxy and pietism, on the one hand, and between pietism and Enlightenment, on the other. This would be a necessary background for questions about historical continuities and discontinuities in Methodism after Wesley. Where in Wesley, if at all, is the corrective to our subsequent Methodist histories of separated and rival churches, all claiming him as founder, but with so little of his catholic spirit?

Constructive theologians of many different interests are needed to assess the continuing visibility of Wesley's doctrinal and ethical outlook—on human selfhood and its true potential; on the paradoxes of free grace and free will, on the crucial point of the divine initiative (its *pre-venience*) and all human responses. His doctrine of salvation needs pondering—his combination of a Protestant doctrine of sin and a catholic doctrine of grace. There may also be guidance for modern Christian thinkers in Wesley's catalytic way of theologizing—viz., firm and funded theological views open to interaction with others without loss of integrity, evangelical in their grounding and catholic in their intention, whose deeply humane concern for human fulfillment grounds all hope in God's grace.

If any such new future in Wesley Studies is to unfold, it seems obvious to us that it must be supported by more ample scholarly resources than those currently available. We are, therefore, agreed that the new critical and annotated edition of Wesley's *Works* begun at the Oxford University Press some years ago is an urgent priority. We are eager to see that edition carried through to completion, at the highest level of quality and distributed at the lowest possible cost to students. We have been reminded by Professor John Leith of the positive correlations between successive new editions of

Calvin's works and significant advances in Calvin Studies; we recognize similar correlations in such cases as Martin Luther, Jonathan Edwards, and the early Fathers. The dismaying news that Oxford University Press has abandoned its commitment to the *Wesley Works* project makes it appropriate, we believe, that this Institute express to the appropriate authorities our shared deep concern that alternative ways and means be found for its completion.

(Apropos this issue the plenary of the Oxford Institute unanimously adopted the following resolution—Ed.)

The Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies, after careful study and discussion, endorses the fundamental importance of a critical text of John Wesley's writings. The publication of the Wesley corpus is one of the most important contributions we can make to ecumenical Christianity. These texts are important in the history of Christian thought and are essential to a more adequate understanding of John Wesley, of the influences upon his life and thought, of his role in his era and in the Methodist societies, and in the resources he bequeathed to the ensuing Methodist traditions. This publication effort must be completed and to this end we not only offer our endorsement but also commit ourselves to help build that base of support which will move this project to completion.

Part II: "A Provisional Agenda"

Given an adequate edition as a prospective resource (and even in advance of its appearance in toto), we were able to agree on a partial and provisional agenda for the future in Wesley Studies. We are aware that none of the following twelve items is new; the list is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive. We offer it as an outline of examples of what would be involved in a more complete and fruitful phase of Wesley Studies. Our aim is less to define the field with any finality than to open it up.

1. We would begin with an obvious and commonplace generalization: the need for more adequate basic skills in Wesley Studies and in their cognate fields: linguistic, historical, theological, psychological, liturgical. If Wesley Studies are to be taken seriously by others, their standards of historiographical rigor must be equal to those in other subdisciplines of careful scholarship.

2. We see an equally pressing need for a range of research tools, which would provide basic information truly useful (and convenient) for many readers and for Wesley specialists in particular. These would include: (a) a concordance of main terms; (b) a cross-referenced index of names, topics quotations, and their sources; (c) a dictionary of aphorisms and familiar sayings; (d) an ampler "Sermon Register" with places, dates, texts, summary charts, and graphs. Finally, (e) we need an annotated bibliography of Wesley's readings, with cross-references to his use of them. In each case, such "helps" should be keyed to all available editions, as well as the new one, if and as it becomes available. Such a set of resources would facilitate the work of the upcoming generation and their successors.

3. This, in turn, requires a comment on one of the more ironic aspects of the current state of Wesley *biography*. Much of our understanding of Wesley's thought and continued relevance depends upon the testimonies of the man himself and the impression he left upon his contemporaries who knew him or knew about him. And yet, in Wesley's case, much of the primary source-data for a fully credible biography are not available to scholars generally (and much more of it is extant than is presently accessible). This lamentable state of affairs cannot be remedied without more adequate editions of the *Diaries*, the *Journal*, and the *Letters*—and without more comprehensive studies than we have now of the Methodist people in the eighteenth century. We gratefully acknowledge the unique contribution of Professor Martin Schmidt (especially his "new" data from the Moravian archives) even as we also wonder at his judgment that Wesley's theological development virtually ceased in 1738. We recognize both the promise and perils of psycho-history; yet we would stress the need for sufficient history to support whatever psychological generalizations that are proposed. There can, of course, be no thought of an embargo on biographical research and interpretations. For the time being, however, we would urge more reserve in the credulous use of existing biographies, more caution in our own biographical hypotheses, and more modesty in our conclusions. What is

crucial, in all instances, is careful documentation, tested evidence, and credible narration.

4. We heartily commend the extension of the field of Wesley Studies to include the partnership in ministry of the two Wesley brothers, John and Charles. We recognize the mirror images of the same basic theological perspective in John's prose and Charles' poetry. But given the heavy overlay of long-standing stereotypes in this field, we would emphasize how much further work is needed here: e.g., a new "Osborn" at the level already established by Frank Baker in *Representative Verse of Charles Wesley*, together with a new critical edition of Charles' prose: his *Journal*, *Sermons*, and *Letters*. This will, of course, require collaboration between historians, literary critics, and hymnologists. From still another angle, we need more light shed on the tensions between the two brothers (and between Charles and the Methodist preachers), with special reference to their irreconcilable differences about "churchmanship." The bonus from such efforts would be new perspectives on the ecclesiological confusions that have been endemic in Methodism ever since, especially with respect to the meaning of ordination and the nature of the ministerial office.

5. Another hopeful horizon of inquiry is defined by the problem of growth and development in John Wesley's thought and self-understanding. His development falls naturally into three distinct periods: (1) from childhood through the end of the Georgia mission; (2) from 1738 to 1765; and (3) from 1765 to 1791. We have been intrigued by Professor Fowler's pioneering probes into the question of stages in Wesley's own faith, and would be eager to have them supplemented by extended correlations between developments in Wesley's *faith* and of his *theology*. We are especially interested in the continued reshaping of Wesley's emphases (e.g., a more parnetic theology and a theology of culture) during his last decades. The Revival in its second generation (from 1760s to the 1790s) was decisive in its own way—its history has yet to be explored in depth. Consequently, a cluster of problems has been ignored, or obscured, by the conventional Methodist historical stereotypes.

6. The study of Wesley in the light of his sources will require more interdisciplinary training and collaboration than we have been accustomed to. His sources were drawn from a wide range of disparate fields: the Bible, the classics, Christian Antiquity and its extensions in church history, the Anglican Reformation, the subsequent controversies between the Puritans and the Arminians, and, finally, the world of contemporary culture in which he was so deeply immersed. Disciplined curiosity here would turn up a full budget of interesting projects: topical monographs (for example, on "Wesley and the Fathers"); collations and analyses of *A Christian Library* and *The Arminian Magazine*; fresh interpretations of the so-called "Puritan" and "Anglican" traditions in Wesley—and in Methodism after Wesley. Moreover, given Wesley's wide-ranging use of sources, we also need a more careful study of his so-called "eclecticism" and its theological import. We would also welcome further reflection on the distinctive character of Wesley as folk-theologian (or peoples theologian). We need to see the crucial differences between religious leaders who are able to accommodate their academic competence to the higher ends of more direct communication with uncultivated hearers and readers, and those popular preachers who have no special academic competence to conceal.

7. Wesley professed himself *homo unius libri* ("a man of one book")—a curiously unbiblical phrase. This flaunting of the flag of *sola Scriptura* ("Scripture alone") poses a cluster of crucial and unresolved questions about Wesley's principles for the interpretation of Scripture. What were his rules in this crucial theological task? What is the import of his special stress on "the analogy of faith" (by which he meant "the general sense of Scripture," governing our exegesis of its parts)? Biblical scholars, knowledgeable in the history of interpretation, must be enlisted here. But they must be willing to learn from a precritical man who lived in the Scriptures and saw the world through the eyes of its writers rather than the other way around. It would be a crucial gain if we who live now in a postmodern world could recover a sense of the revelatory power of Scripture that could match

Wesley's precritical (and yet rational) confidence in the Scriptures as "the oracles of God."

8. There has always been a subtle symbiosis between great leaders and their people; to know either requires a knowledge of both. In Wesley's case, much information about his plain people has yet to be utilized properly. If part of his genius was his ability to move at will among various strata of British society and to function effectually in each, this fact must be correlated with his self-understanding of ministry. For all his passion for the poor and their acceptance of him as one with them (a topic now being fruitfully studied by John Walsh and others), he also worked with people in the "artisan class," with "people of the middling sort," and with some numbered among "the high and the mighty." What, if anything, is implied here as to the possibilities of ministries that may transcend classes and castes in one measure or another? What are we to make of Wesley's chosen role as mediator between high culture and the sensibilities of the poor? Whence his interest in health and health services, for those without physicians? What can we learn from *Primitive Physick* besides the obvious fact that it was, indeed, primitive? What, moreover, are the theological and ethical grounds for Wesley's concerns about justice and human dignity, poverty and its relief, slavery and oppression. How do we reconcile his commitments to social reform with his abhorrence of violent revolution? What are we to make of his thoughts about the use of money and his lifelong denunciations of riches (which is to say, the accumulation of wealth beyond the limits of one's morally justified needs)?

9. Another frontier still largely unexplored in collaborative study is the complex phenomenon of the interdependence of the Evangelical Revivals in America and Britain in the eighteenth century, and afterwards. Those who know the Wesleys and their work seem only rarely to recognize that George Whitefield's greatest impact may have been in America and that Jonathan Edwards was eagerly read in Britain. Clearly, we have here a network of connections that needs to be seen as a whole—in even a larger picture than the one drawn by Michael R. Watts in his pioneering work, *The Dissenters* (chapter 5). With the American context in mind, we