

“I do indeed live by preaching”: John Wesley and the Preaching Life

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Why Read Wesley’s Sermons?

The idea for this project has slowly developed during twenty five years of preaching within the Methodist tradition in North America. It represents the fruit of an ongoing conversation with John Wesley, who once wrote “I do indeed live by preaching,”¹ and to whom I have consistently returned with new questions concerning our contemporary homiletic confusion. Indeed, the largest part of this conversation with Wesley reflects my own search for a fuller understanding of the vocation of the “preaching life,” or what it might mean to confess, “I indeed do live by preaching.” I will summarize this in the following manner: an exemplary human witness demonstrating congruence between God’s self - gift in Jesus Christ and the manner of a preacher’s being, living, and speaking which is the fruit of the gracious empowerments of the Spirit. Or to put this differently: the “beauty of holiness” indwelling and suffusing a preacher’s intentions, words, and actions.²

¹ Cited in Albert C. Outler, “Introduction” to *Works, Sermons I., The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Albert C. Outler (Bicentennial Edition, Nashville: Abingdon, 1984ff.) 13. I am deeply indebted to Outler’s introductory comments in preparing this paper. Hereafter references from this edition will be included in the text as *Works*. Sections of this paper will be included in a larger project, *John Wesley, Homiletic Theologian: A “Preaching Life”* (Abingdon, forthcoming). Subsequent chapters will attempt to situate Wesley’s preaching within his historical, ecclesial, and theological contexts, and to discuss the role of his sermons in relation to the larger corpus of works. In addition to Outler, the most recent full length treatment of Wesley’s understanding and practice of preaching is William Doughty, *John Wesley: Preacher* (London: Epworth, 1955). While not explicitly cited, Wesley’s essay, “An Address to the Clergy” has been most instructive for me. *The Works of John Wesley, Vol. X. “Letters, Essays, Dialogs, Addresses”* ed. Thomas Jackson (reprint ed., Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 1984) 480-500.

² In addition to Outler’s work, I have learned much from Steve D. Long, *John Wesley’s Moral Theology: The Quest for God and Goodness* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005); Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994); Thomas A. Langford, *Practical Divinity: Theology in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983) Vol. I; Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995).

While Wesley's work has been widely studied by historians, theologians, evangelists, and scholars of liturgics, moral theology, ethics, and spirituality, the significance of his ministry (as preacher - pastor - practical theologian) deserves renewed attention for the practice of preaching. The first purpose of this paper, then, is to describe the need for a fresh reading of Wesley's sermons in the hope that his homiletic pedagogy, a vision of what it is to "live by preaching," or the "preaching life," will contribute to a renewed understanding of the person and work of a preacher, grounded in, and expressive of, the wisdom, love and goodness of the Triune God. An additional aim will be to suggest a way of discerning the wisdom and authority of Wesley's sermons in light of God's self - communication in Christ, the source and end of all holiness, who by the Spirit's love draws and builds up a holy people that, in being his Body, proclaims God's salvation to the world.

This is especially urgent in our time, since what is overlooked in much contemporary homiletic practice is the real possibility that "preaching," although numerically successful, done with sincerity and skill, and perceived as culturally "relevant," but without the love, wisdom, and goodness engendered by the Spirit - "faith working through love" - is indeed capable of directing us away from our final end of enjoying God. This is because the most important "practical" matters related to preaching are spiritual and moral, rather than methodological and technical, and have primarily to do with knowing, loving, and speaking what is true and good. For this reason, the vocation of "preacher" consists in becoming a particular kind of person, one whose life and speech are sanctified by the Spirit through living faith in the crucified and

risen Lord whose gospel we have been called to believe and are sent to proclaim.³

Richard Lischer writes,

The person of the preacher is a good example of a topic that was of great importance for the medieval church but is now seldom discussed in homiletics. Most homiletic treatises from Augustine through the Middle Ages deal with the formation and holiness of the one appointed to preach ... Despite the interest in spirituality in both the church and popular culture today, however, one does not discern a revival of the classical preoccupation with the holiness of the preacher.⁴

It is the steadfast love, wisdom, and goodness of God that creates the conditions for and constitutes the virtue of constancy for speaking the truth in love. Christians in general, and preachers in particular - as obedient and exemplary witnesses of the gospel - have been called to follow the way that is Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word who reveals, restores, and perfects our humanity as created and redeemed for imaging God's holiness. Or to put this differently; sermons, as a means of grace, as a graced activity of both speakers and listeners, are expressions of practical wisdom that flow from the gift of living faith to the end of holiness, loving God and the neighbor in God, thus moving participants toward happiness in God.⁵

For this reason, Wesley's homiletic pedagogy is well - suited to address our contemporary need for the liberation of preachers *and* preaching - what I am calling "the preaching life"- from captivity to the "tyranny of the practical" which divides and separates a preacher's intentions, affections, and practice - the content, character, and

³ I have discussed this matter in Michael Pasquarello III, *Christian Preaching: A Trinitarian Theology of Proclamation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006).

⁴ Richard Lischer, "Introduction" in *The Company of Preachers: Wisdom on Preaching, Augustine to the Present*, ed. Richard Lischer (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) xiv.

⁵ Cf. Maddox, "The Means of Grace and Response," *Responsible Grace*, 192-229.

communicative, action of preaching - into privatized faith and productive, technical reason.⁶ Although admired for its presumed “effectiveness,” this dualistic arrangement separates God and humanity, which imprisons human speaking within an autonomous realm of communication which is deeply inhospitable to the gifts of grace, faith, and ultimately, communion with God.⁷

This divine/human division betrays what Wesley referred to as a kind of “practical atheism” (*Works*, I, 517). In our time, this separation renders preaching theologically and morally incoherent, so that the vocation of preaching is defined apart from the workings of divine grace, and is easily tempted toward becoming a mere function of technology and “will to power” in the illusion that reality is capable of being possessed, mastered, and controlled.⁸

Yet as an intellectual and moral, and thus, fully human activity, the practice of preaching, as a means of grace, creates the conditions for, and contributes to, the love, wisdom, and goodness of its participants. Such fruitfulness is an expression of rightly ordered loves - for God, the self, and others - “love choosing wisely” that transcends utility and self - interestedness in serving the Word to which the vocation of preaching is internally related as its source and goal.

My hope is that a post - Christendom church, in its need for liberation from cultural captivity, will benefit from a fresh discovery of the “irrelevance” and “uselessness” of John’s Wesley’s homiletic pedagogy. If so, Wesley’s vision of the

⁶ See the discussion of the “tyranny of the practical” and related matters in Bryan P. Stone, *Evangelism After Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness* (Grand Rapids, Brazos Press, 2006).

⁷ Here I have benefited from the introductory argument in Long, *John Wesley’s Moral Theology*.

⁸ I am indebted to Maddox for the reference to Wesley’s use of “practical atheism” as a way of describing visions of Christian life and practice separating God and humanity. Cf. *Responsible Grace*, 322.

“preaching life” may indeed provide a hopeful alternative to popular visions of homiletic excellence for which efficacy is primarily dependent upon *sola cultura* (culture alone).

By *sola cultura* I am referring to an excessive dependence upon methods, models, strategies, technologies, and theories that are justified by cultural accommodation (either academic or popular), the production of quantitative results, and other “useful” outcomes that are external to *Christian witness that is justified by the efficacy of the Word through the gracious empowerments of the Spirit arousing the heart of a preacher whose primary desire is the spiritual good of his or her hearers.*⁹ By turning to Wesley, my hope is to discern a way of hearing, living, and proclaiming the gospel that itself is congruent with, and participates in, the grammar or wisdom of the gospel: “faith working through love.”¹⁰ The comments of Methodist theologian Julian Hartt speak to our time,

The love which God has spread abroad in our hearts has a deep and lasting quarrel with methods of doing the church’s business which compromise, when they do not violate, the essential integrity and freedom of persons. Evangelistic programs which slavishly incorporate techniques and attitudes of super-salesmanship are a good case in point. Resort to these illicit weapons is often dictated by concentration on quick and visible returns, and is often justified by claiming that people have got to be ‘sold’ a gospel which they really need, whether or not they are really aware of the need.¹¹

Arguably, the most pressing need of contemporary homiletic practice is a rediscovery of the “preaching life” as the embodied expression of intelligent and passionate witness to

⁹ See the insightful comments on the plain passionate style of preaching in Debora K. Shuger, *Sacred Rhetoric: The Christian Grand Style in the English Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988) 14-55.

¹⁰ See Outler’s extensive introductory comments on Wesley’s formulations of holiness in *Works, I*.

¹¹ Julian Hartt, *Toward a Theology of Evangelism*, reprint ed. (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2006) 89.

the living God who calls us to know him in himself and to love him for himself. Such grace, or God's self - sharing, is grasped by attentiveness to the Spirit's witness and receptivity to the self - giving, other - receiving love of Christ which creates both the content and character, the *what* and *how* - of the being and action of a preacher.

Andrew Moore has argued that the meaning of Christian language, or the grammar of Christian faith, is learned by God's involvement in human life, and it is not primarily from theology that we learn how to use Christian discourse correctly; it is from God's action among his people through the Spirit of Jesus. Thus it is *God* who is the grammar of faith, since it is God, in the person of Christ and the power of the Spirit, who teaches that which cannot be learned from practices or rules. Doctrine and its interpretation in theology are secondary to that which it informs - the church's proclamation and performance of the gospel - which is alone its basis or foundation.¹²

Thus without God's incarnate activity there would be no Christian discourse, since Christ is the One to whom Christian practices intend: "The material context of the grammar of faith is the presence of God in Christ ... the church bears faithful witness to God's language spoken in Christ by the Spirit's declaring and enacting God's conforming of the world to his word according to the wisdom of Christ."¹³ Because its source and end is the incarnate Word through the indwelling Spirit, the "preaching life" commits us to both being and doing, to life and living a life, and to speech and speaking. Or to put this in Wesleyan terms, the "spiritual wisdom" or "way" of the preacher is engendered by

¹² Andrew Moore, *Realism and Christian Faith: God, Grammar, and Meaning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 99-101.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 102.

the love of God, and for the love of God, and love for everything else, including ourselves, for the enjoyment of the Triune God, which is our final end and happiness.¹⁴

In many Christian contexts, however, the understanding of the integral relation of the person and work of the preacher - the “preaching life”- has been obscured by a division of who a preacher is and what a preacher believes from how a preacher speaks; the separation of homiletic character, confession, and conversation. Hartt describes the kind of activity the church resorts to when its faith and life, or theology and practice, are divided.

Well, we can see plainly that the church is very zealous to build itself up. There is great zeal in this department. Evangelistic enterprises are programs of zealous ecclesiastical aggrandizement In this zeal for its own aggrandizement the church advertises its contributions to culture. It elicits support and loyalty for itself on the ground that it is a repository and guardian of moral and spiritual values. This seems to be a unique claim, one that competitor institutions cannot make with comparable validity or with so straight a face. People are asked by the church: ‘Do you want to know what makes for a meaningful and truly successful life? If you do, join the church, support the church.’ What other institutions in our society makes such claims for itself?¹⁵

In our time, such culturally accommodated strategies are deeply shaped by enthusiastic but uncritical use of managerial, therapeutic, consumerist, and entertainment means that serve self - justifying ends rather than the justification of humanity by God’s pardoning

¹⁴ On Wesleyan spirituality see the excellent essay by Geoffrey Wainwright, “Trinitarian Theology and Wesleyan Holiness” in *Orthodox and Wesleyan Spirituality*, ed. S.T. Kimbrough (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2002) 59-80.

¹⁵ Hartt, *Toward a Theology of Evangelism*, 95.

love to the end of imaging the character of Christ through the gracious empowerments of the Spirit.¹⁶ David Cunningham comments on the loss of character,

The persuasive role of character was seriously devalued during the Enlightenment. The rise of experimental science emphasized the goal of neutrality, which was thought to be guaranteed only through radical detachment: subject and object were thus torn asunder. On this view, an experiment needed only to take place under properly controlled conditions; the character of the experimenter was irrelevant. Empirical experimentation tended to focus attention away from how things appear in nature, and toward exceptions to the rule. This narrow focus contributed to the reduction of the meaning of ethos from a complex, holistic *habitus* to a mere series of rules and regulation.¹⁷

This functional vision, which functions according to the assumptions of Enlightenment deism, is closed to the realities of grace, the Spirit, and sacramental realism. God is an engineer (or technician) who acts from a distance upon a world that is a machine; while people and ideas, words, and emotions are parts within the machine and moved by the willful and “effective” use of power - even in the name of “ministry.” Wesley expressed concern over such arrangements that had policed God out of the world.

Thus almost all men of letters, both in England, France and Germany, yea, and all the civilized countries of Europe, extol “humanity” to the skies, as the very essence of religion. That this great triumvirate, Rousseau, Voltaire, and David Hume, have contributed all their labours, sparing no pains to establish a religion

¹⁶ For a good discussion of these issues see David E. Fitch, *The Great Giveaway: Reclaiming the Mission of the Church from Big Business, Parachurch Organizations, Psychotherapy, Consumer Capitalism and Other Modern Maladies* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005).

¹⁷ David S. Cunningham, *Faithful Persuasion: In Aid of a Rhetoric of Christian Theology* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991) 107.

which should stand on its own foundation, independent of any revelation whatever, yea, not supposing even the being of a God. So leaving him, if he has any being, to himself, they have found out both a religion and a happiness which have no relation at all to God, nor any dependence upon him. It is no wonder that this religion should grow fashionable, and spread far and wide in the world. But call it “humanity,” “virtue,” “morality,” or what you please, it is neither, better or worse than atheism. Men hereby willfully and designedly put asunder what God has joined, the duties of the first and second table. It is separating the love of our neighbor from the love of God. It is a plausible way of thrusting God out of the world he has made (*Works*, 4:69).

When discussions of God, the True, the Beautiful, and the Good are deferred, shifting attention from consideration of intentions, affections, and virtues to theories and technologies of communication, the *full humanity* of the preacher (intention, affection, practice) is diminished as an exemplary witness to the holiness of Christ suffusing human life and speech. An additional consequence is loss of hope in God’s providential activity in sanctifying the *full humanity* of the church to be an obedient, exemplary witness to creation’s renewal by the wisdom and love of its crucified and risen Lord. Hartt describes the mystery of the Kingdom proclaimed and enacted by Jesus, which transcends but also transforms our human capacities by his humility and love.

In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus Christ asserts as his divine mission the proclamation of the kingdom of God (cf. Luke 4:16-21) ... But the love demanded by the Kingdom, and which is possible only in the Kingdom, is utterly beyond all worldly and egoistic tactics and strategies whereby we hope to wrest

advantage for self from all others and achieve, if possible, positive possession of them and mastery over their destinies ...¹⁸

A Way of Reading Wesley's Sermons

Wesley's homiletic pedagogy can serve as reliable guide for recovering a vision of the preaching vocation that is dependent upon, participates in, and contributes to the renewal of the divine image in human creatures through sanctifying grace: a "grammar" of participation in the life of the Triune God. Only God's inexhaustible self - communication, made know through the missions of the Word and Spirit, is capable of transforming our human capacities for excellence in homiletic wisdom as evinced by keen intellect, deep piety, and virtuous action. Nicholas Lash describes well the integral relation between divine and human authority,

The God whom we traditionally confess as Christians is transcendent, wholly mysterious; wholly other: whom we confess as Father. But this same God has expressed himself concretely in our history, has become part of the form and meaning and texture of that history, as a man. Where the authority of truth is concerned, no man effectively exercises authority in respect of others unless he persuades, by the quality of his life, and character, and speech. The God whom we confess is a God whose self - expression as a man has convinced us, wooed us, compelled us to answering recognition, love, and trust ...if we appeal too exclusively to external authority, then we shall be implicitly appealing to the authority of a God who is simply alien to our human experience, who simply

¹⁸ Hartt, *Toward a Theology of Evangelism*, 28.

contradicts it and stands over against it. Such a God is not the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has breathed his Spirit into our hearts.¹⁹

The more proficiency in the performance of functional tasks are focused upon as the primary goal of and authority for the church's ministry, the less pastors will possess a quality of practiced goodness (what Wesley referred to as "common sense"), the capacity for speaking and acting wisely and well within particular times, places, and circumstances to the end of knowing and loving God, or being who we are in Christ. Joe Jones describes the nature of such "practiced" wisdom,

Because faith is an intentional action, it is as much a knowing - how as it is a knowing who, a knowing that, and a knowing what. Faith is knowing - how to live within the distinctive discourses and practices of the faith; knowing how to love and praise God, to give thanks to God, to pray to God, and to witness lovingly to God for others ... In this sense, faith's knowledge are also practical knowings ... This practical knowing of faith is faith as wisdom.²⁰

In *Back to the Rough Ground*, Joseph Dunne provides an extended discussion of practical wisdom, the knowledge we live by, exploring the instrumentalist approach to practice that frames objectives in advance, anticipates plans, controls the moves one will make, and then evaluates both the activity and its results in terms of "effectiveness."²¹

Following the moral philosophy of Aristotle, Dunne argues persuasively that practice is irreducible to external techniques or methodical procedures; that it requires a kind of non-technical, personal, and participatory knowledge which cannot be framed in terms of

¹⁹ Nicholas Lash, *Voices of Authority*, reprint ed. (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2005) 11-12.

²⁰ Joe R. Jones, *A Grammar of Christian Faith: Systematic Explorations in Christian Life and Doctrine* (Lanham: Rowan & Littlefield, 2002) II. 527.

²¹ Joseph Dunne, *Back to the Rough Ground: Practical Judgment and the Lure of Technique* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993) 235.

detachment, universality, and control, that, while presuming to be merely “practical,” actually embodies a definite kind of theory in itself.

Dunne defines this type of activity as a kind of “making” specified by a maker who determines its end or goal in advance. “*Techne* then is the kind of knowledge possessed by an expert maker, it gives him a clear conception of the why and wherefore, the how and with what of the making process and enables him, through the capacity to offer a rational account of it, to preside over his activity with secure mastery.”²²

In contrast to the activity of making, or producing, that typically proceeds under the illusion of individual mastery and control by means of acting externally upon the raw material of one’s work, Dunne discusses the shared activity of practice which is conducted in public places in cooperation with others, with no ulterior purpose or goals external to the practice, and with a view to no object or outcome detachable from the moral intentions and qualities exemplified by those who participate in the practice. This definition of shared communal activity can arguably be extended to Christian practices such as worship, interpreting Scripture, preaching, pastoral ministry, evangelization and Christian catechesis. Moreover, this kind of activity is carried out in such a way to realize and demonstrate as its end, moral virtues or excellences that are valued by a particular community and constitutive of its whole way of life. Dunne interprets this kind of activity as the embodiment of *phronesis*, or practical knowledge, “knowledge in action” that is personal, interior, experienced, insightful, and committed.

In questioning the attainability of technical mastery over these areas an alternative to the technicist picture has been developed. In this alternative picture, practical knowledge has been shown as a fruit which can grow only in the soul of a person’s

²² Ibid., 319.

experience and character; apart from cultivation of this soil, there is no artifice for making it available in a way that would count. In exposing oneself to the kind of experience and acquiring the kind of character that will yield requisite knowledge, one is not the kind of epistemic subject that has been canonized by the modern tradition of philosophy. One is at the same time a feeling, expressing, and acting person; and one's knowledge is inseparable from one as such.²³

Dunne's description of the difference between these two different modes of activity helps to illumine the practical wisdom of the "preaching life" as a union of the person and work of the preacher that is ordered by, through, and toward attentiveness to knowing, loving, and delighting in God. Thus when preaching is reduced to a matter of following "how to" steps - the practical application of techniques for the making of certain outcomes - its character is limited to the kind of knowledge possessed by an "expert" belonging to a specialized craft, while the vocation of "preacher" will be redefined as a person whose primary understanding is of particular rules that underlie the production of objects or practical effects.

On the other hand, when preaching is seen as a Christian practice, the character, or ethos, of the preacher will be defined by the character and activity of God, the person and work of Christ, the Word, the calling of Israel and the Church, the office of pastor, and the liturgical ethos of the Christian assembly. The preaching life will be grounded in a community of love, wisdom, and goodness flowing from Spirit - endowed dispositions and habits, moving and directing its members to think, feel, and act well. Such virtues will be demonstrated in an exemplary manner by men and women who possess the necessary habits for speaking "to the right person, to the right extent, at the right time,

²³ Ibid., 358.

with the right aim, and in the right way,” or as Wesley states, “the love of God and man not only filling my heart, but shining through my whole conversation.”²⁴ Dunne

concludes this kind of action will require a form of kenosis or self - emptying,

.... its divesting of itself of godlike notions and coming to accept that it cannot have and therefore must no longer aspire to a god’s eye view for the human condition. And this movement away from detachment, sovereignty, and imperturbability has at the same time been a movement into and a taking upon itself the burdens of finitude, contingency, and situatedness. In subverting the Cartesian subject, it has been reincarnating the real person in the world of history and language, actions and involvement with other people - and, of course, in his/her own affective and bodily being.²⁵

I am proposing a way of reading Wesley’s sermons that seeks to discern the practical wisdom embodied in and articulated by his homiletic pedagogy.²⁶ By engaging Wesley as a conversation partner within the communion of saints, we stand to learn from and with a theologian of the Christian life whose practical divinity displays a quality of intention, affection, and action characterizing, albeit imperfectly, what it is to “live by preaching,” or the “preaching life.”

Thus instead of “favoring the experience of contemporary socially privileged observers over all other human experience,” we would do well to consider the experienced wisdom of the saints.²⁷ Stephen D. Long has persuasively argued that

²⁴ Wesley, “Address to the Clergy,” 485, 499.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 374.

²⁶ See the excellent discussion of modern reductionistic uses of Wesley’s work in Long, *John Wesley’s Moral Theology*, 15-36, 71-124.

²⁷ Randy L. Maddox, “The Enriching Role of Experience” in *Wesley and the Quadilateral: Renewing the Conversation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997) 125.

modernity's reliance upon technical method and thinking, aligned with will-to-power, has lost the rich texture of language, the truth which is disclosed in a narrative context, and the practices within which the church hears, interprets and knows how to live before God: "The more Christianity seeks relevance to the technical rationality in which modern western culture ends, the more it forsakes any orienting power in the world." He continues,

The modern era ends with the dominance of technology which is characterized by the repetition of the obsolete and the emergence of the 'new and improved.' These notions have allowed technology to shape being, yet the recurring cycle of obsolescence/new creation is itself part of a historical tradition ... technology is the completion of the Western metaphysical tradition, a tradition that ends in nihilism ... Nihilism's death of god puts theology out of work [which] is to deny theology any shaping force in history ... Like a virus that works on one's operating system, mimicking its functions, nihilism and its technological fascination overtakes Christianity, rendering it inoperative.²⁸

I would suggest that a major symptom of this virus, and one which "mimicks" Wesley's experimental divinity, can be seen in the current homiletic preoccupation with "practical application." This is an inclination to reduce all aspects of Christian faith, life, and speech to principles of prediction, explanation, and control that can be derived from pragmatic experimentation with "what works" - yet without the guidance of transformed judgment.²⁹ *In other words, while many pastors work as if their primary task is to identify the needs of people, doing "whatever it takes" to reach them by utilizing the*

²⁸ Long, *John Wesley's Moral Theology*, 15-16.

²⁹ On the relation between Trinitarian doctrine and moral judgment see L. Gregory Jones, *Transformed Judgment: Toward a Trinitarian Account of the Moral Life* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1990).

latest “new and improved” methods, they appear to have forgotten that the primary need of the church is remembering what the Triune God is always and already doing through the work of Christ and the Spirit to draw the whole creation into joyful and loving communion within himself as the final end of all activity and desire.

Wesley’s preaching wisdom, on the other hand, offers an extended example of evangelical theology which is dependent upon the whole of Scripture and which aims to assist itinerating Methodists in preaching the gospel more faithfully so the “people called Methodists” would know and love the true God more truly in the world. His sermons served the needs of people in diverse conditions and circumstances, communicating the fruit of his own prayerful study and obedient following of a scriptural way of salvation which was the primary desire and intention of his life and ministry.³⁰

Thus as a skilled preacher, pastor, and spiritual guide who is deeply experienced in the work of God, Wesley’s practical judgment, which was shaped over six decades on the “rough ground” of evangelization and catechesis, offers a form of Christian wisdom which has a distinctive character, “experimental statements and restatements of his vision of the Christian life.”³¹ If, for Wesley, the practice of preaching was a means of grace for both preacher and people, his sermons may still serve as gracious invitations and guides for our deeper understanding of, and fuller participation in, God’s wisdom mediated through Christ by the Spirit for the art of living and speaking the gospel that builds up a holy people in communion with the Triune God.

Reading Wesley’s sermons in this manner invites us to immerse our lives in the first order language of Scripture, a practice which is part of, and prepares us for, a way of

³⁰ See the discussion by Outler in the introduction to *Works, I.*, 38ff.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 97.

life committed to following Christ and proclaiming him by faith that works through the Spirit's love.³² Because Wesley's homiletic pedagogy aims to foster obedient hearing and living of the gospel, its wisdom is capable of forming us in the "preaching life," since both progress in holiness of life and the cultivation of homiletic wisdom require the sanctification of our thoughts, desires, and words. Wesley's sermons continually call us back to Scripture for this end; a way of living into the fullness of its message and scope in light of the Trinitarian wisdom of the Church that is centered in Christ and communicated by the Spirit's love.³³

Because Wesley was devoted to the work of preaching and the formation of preachers, his theological work was carried out in the context of practice, "I indeed do live by preaching," just as his theological and pastoral judgments emerged from, and fed back into, this practice. Reading his sermons as the work of a "practical theologian" is crucial for grasping his homiletic wisdom and for reviving interest in a vision of the "preaching life" that reunites the person and work of the preacher.³⁴

Moreover, it is significant that Wesley saw the Christian moral life primarily as the recovery of the image of God in the human creature, an image that has been effaced but which is restored in Jesus Christ through the means of grace by which the Spirit renews us in his likeness, God's saving gift expressed through the virtues of faith, hope, and love. Preserved by the doctrine of the Trinity, this way of speaking of our renewal in the image of God takes place by the embodiment of a new way of being and living which the Holy Spirit gives internally and which becomes inherent to our human capacities.

³² Here I am indebted to the work of Scott J. Jones, *John Wesley's Conception and Use of Scripture* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995).

³³ On Wesley's hermeneutics, see Geoffrey Wainwright, "John Wesley's Trinitarian Hermeneutics" *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (Spring, 2001) 7-30.

³⁴ Cf. Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 26-47.

This is a participation in Christ's righteousness, the "mind of Christ" through which the Spirit sanctifies the believing person for expressions of outward righteousness in the company of others; the way of joyful obedience, loving God and neighbor with words and actions that are considerate of particular times, places, and circumstances.³⁵

For Wesley, the moral life of Christians and the life of the preacher cannot be separated, since the fullness of our human nature has been assimilated by God's gracious activity in Christ, and is best understood in terms of infused gifts, beatitudes, and virtues rather than rules, principles, or external obligations. Thus when Wesley's sermons are read in light of this moral teaching, they provide fresh insight "preaching life" that unites the person *and* work of the preacher, the study of doctrine *and* Scripture, and the practice of spiritual *and* moral wisdom, within the life and mission of the church.

Wesley was the reluctant founder and pastoral leader of an order of itinerant preachers which was raised up during the eighteenth century in response to an urgent need for evangelization and catechesis (thus sharing many similarities with our time).³⁶ The aim of Methodist preaching was a combination of evangelizing those not yet converted and exhorting, onto holiness of life, the justified who were supposed to be "going on to perfection." In order to further this mission, Wesley personally set out to provide Methodist preachers with examples of practical wisdom which is required for this task. This intention amounted to a great deal, since he expected his ministers to invest as much as five hours a day in reading and prayer. But the very keystone of this homiletic pedagogy was Wesley's published sermons.

³⁵ Long, *John Wesley's Moral Theology*, 171-202.

³⁶ Horton Davies, *Worship and Theology in England: Vol. III, From Watts and Wesley to Maurice, 1690-1850; Vol. IV, From Newman to Maritneau, 1850-1900*, reprinted ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) III. 143-209.

If, for Wesley, oral sermons were to serve proclamation, invitation and conversion to Christ, then written sermons were for nurture and education, schooling in the practical wisdom of “preaching Christ” in all his offices as was appropriate for the spiritual and moral condition of hearers. Sermons were the primary medium for communicating what Methodists believed and were to be about. In other words, the sermons provided a grammar of faith working through love, or holiness, by which “the people called Methodists,” including ourselves, might be persuaded to order their life and speech in responding to the wisdom of God in Christ through the gracious empowerments of the Spirit.³⁷

Outler observes that Wesley regarded the *Preface to the Sermons on Several Occasions* as definitive of his entire project of publishing sermons, “the aim here is to set the mood for a mutual understanding between the evangelist and his readers, a point of reference for their interpretations of his doctrine, rhetoric and spirit.”³⁸ Wesley writes that his primary as a preacher is soteriological in the fullest sense: “I want to know one thing, the way to heaven - how to land on that happy shore.” This is the way of salvation that has been made known by God, who has condescended to teach us for this end, and who has come to provide the way to this end. And this way is the scope of Scripture as a whole, as Wesley exclaims, “O, give me that book! At any price give me the Book of God (*Works*, I.104)!”

Wesley provides a brief but insightful description of the “preaching life” in both its contemplative and active form. He views his work as a whole which is primarily devoted to knowing God, and an activity of disciplined reading and speaking by which he

³⁷ Cf. the discussion by Outler in the introduction to *Works*, I.

³⁸ *Works* I.103. Here Outler’s wording, “doctrine, rhetoric, and spirit” may correspond to Wesley’s “intentions, affections, and practice.”

seeks to know the way that leads to the fullness of life with God. Thus it is God who engages the mind and heart, touching the intellect and the will, in granting knowledge and love of him-self. This is the means by which Wesley seeks wisdom, “I lift up my heart to the Father of lights,” desiring to obey what he receives, “If any be willing to do thy will, he shall know.” Relying upon the Spirit’s guidance, he immerses himself into the fullness of Scripture, “with all the attention and earnestness of which my mind is capable.” Seeking wisdom beyond his discoveries, he converses with those, “experienced in the things of God, and then the writings thereby, being dead, they yet speak.” It is only then, having directed his earnest attention to the whole of God’s Word in Scripture, and having consulted with the experienced wisdom of the whole Church, that Wesley presumes to speak (*Works*, I.106).

In recovering the wisdom of the “preaching life” it is important to note that Wesley united theology and spirituality, mystical and moral theology, and prayer and pastoral practice in the conviction that preaching is a true way of realizing and exemplifying what it is for us to be human; made in the image and likeness of God and conformed to the Son by the Spirit’s love, “the way to heaven.” Thus the more we are conformed to God by the wisdom of Christ, the more we will know him, and the more we know him, the more we will be drawn to him in love, and the more we are drawn to him in love, the more we will speak and act in union with the incarnate Word by whom we have been created and redeemed.³⁹ Wesley describes the range of homiletic wisdom that is available to discerning readers,

³⁹ My understanding of these matters has been helped by Long’s excellent discussion in *John Wesley’s Moral Theology*, 125- 164.

I have accordingly set down in the following sermons what I find in the Bible concerning the way to heaven, with a view to distinguish this way of God from all those which are the inventions of men. I have endeavored to describe the true, the scriptural, experimental religion, so as to omit nothing which is a real part thereof, and to add nothing there to which is not. And herein is more especially my desire, first, to guard those who are just setting their faces toward heaven (and who, having little acquaintance with the things of God, are the more liable to be turned out of the way) from formality, from mere outside religion, which has almost driven heart - religion out of the world; and secondly, to warn those who know the religion of the heart, the faith which worketh by love, lest at any time they make void the law through faith, and so fall back into the snare of the devil (Works, 106).

The vocation of the “preaching life,” or to “live by preaching,” is an invitation to take up a way of rigorous study, prayerful devotion, and loving obedience in discerning the Word of God spoken in Scripture with the guidance of the Spirit’s grace. Wesley unites theology and practice in the content, form, and expression of his sermons, making him a compelling exemplar and guide in learning to live and speak the grammar of holiness, or “faith that works through love.”