The future is always problematical. What its nature will be is a puzzle. A deep mystery surrounds it from any present perspective. It lies ahead of us like a difficult problem, something someday with which we will have to cope and attempt to solve. The future is dark, forbidding, uncertain. We are instinctively afraid of it simply because we do not know what it will be like. People are generally comfortable with what is familiar to them. The unfamiliar more often threatens than challenges them. The unpredictable defies anticipation, so that we can't deal in advance with it at all.

Therefore, what the future of our Methodist theological traditions will be, no one but God can say. Indeed, one wonders what future theology itself, regardless of any distinctive denominational pattern or the shape that any particular world communion may give it, will have in a secular oriented society or in a world dominated by atheistic materialism.

The question itself presupposes the continuance of life on this earth, the unbroken continuity of temporal existence for rational creatures like ourselves capable of making history and preserving it in written form. Such a future is probable, but it is not certain. We do not have to wait any more on God to end all temporal existence. We are now able to do it ourselves. We can bring about the end of the world without waiting for the second coming of Christ. We are a modern Faust, for we have sold our soul in order to possess the knowledge of nuclear power. But at the same time we are
Mephistopheles, too, for the destructive use of that power is determined by no one but us, so that we, not the devil, will cause our own destruction. We chase hither and yon trying to locate and overpower an enemy only to stop long enough to look at ourselves and realize that we are our own worst enemy.

Nonetheless, given the probability of the future, and recognizing as well its inscrutability, what can we reasonably expect regarding our Methodist theological traditions? The only way to consider the future is to anticipate it from what we discern is happening in the present and from what we know about the past. The present is preface, or prologue, to the future, and the past is that out of which the present is made. "The present," says Henri Bergson, "contains nothing more than the past, and what is found in the effect was already in the cause." 1 And Patrick Henry declaimed: "I have but one lamp by which my feet are guided, and that is the lamp of experience. I know of no way of judging of the future but by the past." 2 Ibsen's affirmation, which Eisenhower quoted in accepting the Republican Party's nomination for President in 1956, "that man is right who has allied himself most closely with the future." 3 sounds good to the ears but leaves the head empty, for it defines "right" in terms of the unknown. How can one possibly ally himself with that which does not even exist? The author of Ecclesiastes comes nearer the truth in his assertion: "The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done; and there is no new thing under the sun." 4 We might disagree with his statement that there is nothing new, but whatever new does come into existence is dependent for its creation on knowledge and wisdom from the past as well as the ingenuity and creativity expended on it at the time of its origin. Our modern skyscrapers have their antecedents in the pyramids, and the water mains and hygienic sewer systems of the present were anticipated and in a sense
conceived by Hezekiah's tunnel under Jerusalem in the distant past. "I believe," says Paula in The Second Mrs. Tamqueray, "the future is only the past again, entered through another gate." 5

John Wesley was a theologian without ever appearing to be one; and that, I think, is perhaps the basis of the perennial popularity of his thought and the strength of Methodist theological traditions in every age. For many generations, even for more than a century, his thought received little or no attention from theologians as such. As late as 1950, for example, Karl Barth had not read anything that Wesley had written and knew him only from secondary sources as a church leader, evangelist, and prophet. My own book, published in the late forties, opened his eyes to Wesley as a theologian; and, when I visited him in the summer of 1951, he had begun to read Wesley with appreciation and increasing admiration. I am sure Wesley did not realize himself that he was a theologian. He was a simple preacher, whose sermons displayed doctrinal content, which we now recognize as a distinctive theology, that adorns the Protestant tradition, and has its own proud place in the wide economy of God's grace.

Professor Albert C. Outler has characterized Mr. Wesley as a "folk-theologian", meaning thereby that his theological insights had been inspired by the moral and spiritual needs of the people and the doctrinal truths he conveyed to them in his preaching and writing were expressed in words that they could grasp and in thoughts that they could understand. Wesley, Dr. Outler says, "had mastered the secret of...simple profundity, the common touch." 6

That is why his brother, Charles, could so readily take John's theological thought and put it into hymns, the lyrics
of which found a number of their tunes in the music halls and often even the taverns of eighteenth century England. There are stately tunes as well, but the point is the Wesleyan hymns are such that the general public can sing them, and enjoy doing it. As people sing Charles's songs, John's theology captures their minds, and the cardinal doctrinal ideas of Mr. Wesley become the principles by which they live and form the content of their faith. There is such a thing as "the careless carefulness of art", where something appears so simple and obvious that an ordinary person says, "Well, why didn't I think of that?" But he didn't. And he didn't because he couldn't. One is able to appear careless in what he does because he has been so careful in preparation for it. Like the parables of Jesus, the teachings of Mr. Wesley belong to common life as lived by most people, but genius devised them, and the ordinary person to whom they appeal could never have conceived them.

Methodist theological traditions have an ecumenical appeal because they embody a variety of sources coming from the total body of Christendom rather than from a single segment. Much of Reformation theology is exclusive in nature. That is because it came out of controversy, indeed, was designed to differentiate Protestantism from Roman Catholicism against which it protested. To believe "this" meant for the Reformers of necessity to disbelieve "that". Sixteenth-century Protestantism is confessional. Creeds and formulae emerged in order to test the beliefs of adherents. There is little or no such confessionalism about Methodism.

"What, if I were to see a Papist, an Arian, a Socinian, casting out devils? If I did, I could not forbid even him, without convicting myself of bigotry," exclaims Mr. Wesley. "Yea," he continues, "if it could be supposed that I should
see a Jew, a Deist, or a Turk, doing the same, were I to forbid him either directly or indirectly, I should be no better than a bigot still."

The founder of Methodism exclaims: "O stand clear of this! But be not content with not forbidding any that casts out devils. It is well to go thus far; but do not stop here. If you will avoid all bigotry, go on. In every instance of this kind, whatever the instrument be, acknowledge the finger of God. And not only acknowledge, but rejoice in his work, and praise His name with thanksgiving. Encourage whomever God is pleased to employ, to give himself wholly up thereto. Speak well of him wheresoever you are; defend his character and his mission. Enlarge, as far as you can, his sphere of action; show him all kindness in word and deed; and cease not to cry to God in his behalf, that he may save both himself and them that hear him."

Wesley warns his followers in these words: "I need add but one caution: Think not the bigotry of another is any excuse for your own." 7

Wesley says that he does not either expect or desire of another that that person be of his opinion, nor is he willing to give up his own for that of another. Wesley believes the episcopal form of church government to be scriptural and apostolical. But if somebody else thinks that the Presbyterian or Independent is better, let him act accordingly. "My sentiment," says Mr. Wesley, "is, that I ought not to forbid water, wherein persons may be baptized; and that I ought to eat bread and drink wine, as a memorial of my dying Master; however, if you are not convinced of this, act according to the light you have. I have no desire to dispute with you one moment upon any of the preceding heads." 8

A Methodist is not distinguishable from others by the particular beliefs he holds, but rather by his traits of character and disposition of soul. A Methodist is one who
loves God and finds satisfaction in the things of God and in service to God's people. The marks of a Methodist, therefore, are happiness, hope, prayerfulness, love, obedience, and service. A Methodist is a person who is always happy in God; where hope is everlasting, stretching beyond this life into the next; who prays without ceasing; who loves his neighbor as himself; who is pure in heart and keeps all God's commandments; and who does good to all people, to both neighbors and strangers, friends and enemies.

Thus Wesley concludes: "If any man say, 'Why, these are only the common fundamental principles of Christianity!'... I know they are no other; and I would to God both thou and all men knew, that I, and all who follow my judgement, do vehemently refuse to be distinguished from other men, by any but the common principles of Christianity--the plain, old Christianity that I teach, renouncing and detesting all other marks of distinction. And whoever is what I preach, (let him be called what he will, for names change not the nature of things), he is a Christian, not in name only, but in heart and life." 9

Wesley had drunk of the Pierian springs of knowledge. His learning was broad as well as deep. His tutors were the Fathers of the Church as well as the sixteenth century Reformers. He had read and mastered Latin and Greek Catholic theology. He came after the Laudian reforms in Anglicanism. His was an interpreted and revised view of the Reformation. He was the descendant, not the immediate offspring, of Thomas Cranmer. He was much more the child of Thomas Hooker and his Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity. John Wesley's immediate teachers, and, I might add, most influential, were the Caroline divines of the seventeenth century, that golden age of English prose. He came to appreciate the power of tradition through the writings of Francis White, James Ussher, Herbert Thorndike, and Thomas Patrick. John Pearson and William Chillingworth had taught him the importance of the great creeds of Christendom. Richard
Field, Robert Nelson, and especially William Laud, had shown him the crucial significance of councils in the development of Christian dogma. Gilbert Burnet, Isaac Barrow, John Selden, and Richard Hooker had provided him with a pattern of theology, while the doctrine of salvation had been formed for him in the teachings of George Bull.

The rich devotional literature of Jeremy Taylor helped to determine Mr. Wesley's prayer life while he was a tutor at Oxford. The whole of seventeenth century Anglicanism, in its full theological and ecclesiological bloom, flourished in the work of John Wesley in the eighteenth century. In the realm of religious thought John Wesley in his time was almost a universal person. Like Sir Thomas More, two centuries earlier, he was a "man of all seasons".

Yet John Wesley was no mere eclectic, as some would have us think, a scissors and paste theologian, who only synthesized and pieced together the thoughts and opinions of others. He was not tossed to and fro by every turn of doctrine. Though he was modest and careful enough to master the history of theology before setting out to further its progress, further its progress, nonetheless, he did, and with the same ingenuity, skill, and originality as any of the other greats such as Luther and Calvin, on the Protestant side, and Aquinas and Augustine, on the Catholic side, had done who had gone before him. The materials he took from the past he used in terms of the problems and needs of his own present, and what he gleaned from others he adapted, skillfully and well, to his own basic principles and made everything serve his own sublime ends. There is nothing entirely new in theology anyway. What happens is a theologian discovers the poignancy and force and peculiar relevance of some one doctrine and then relates the rest of the doctrines to it and interprets the whole body of theology in the light of that one basic principle.
The basic principle for Luther was justification by grace through faith as it had been for the Apostle Paul, who had been Luther's theological master. Wesley, too, began at this very point, and his interpretation of this one issue was not radically different from Luther's. But his prolegomenon to the doctrine was not the same as Luther's, and what the doctrine produced in ethical understanding and moral and spiritual demands defined Methodist theology as distinct and separate from that of the Reformation. Both Luther and Wesley teach that justification, wherein God pronounces a sinner righteous and frees him from condemnation and the sentence of death, is entirely a forensic act, like pardon from the king, president, governor, or chief magistrate of the state, free and unmerited, the gracious act of divine mercy, based altogether on the sacrificial death of Christ on the cross in payment for the sins of others.  

"Christian faith is, then," writes Mr. Wesley, "not only an assent to the whole gospel of Christ, but also a full reliance on the blood of Christ; a trust in the merits of his life, death, and resurrection; a recumbency upon him as our atonement and our life, as given for us, and living in us; and in consequence hereof, a closing with him, and a cleaving to him, as our 'wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption', or in one word, our salvation."  

Luther wrote two centuries earlier in the same vein: "Wherefore it ought to be the first concern of every Christian to lay aside all trust in works, and more and more to strengthen faith alone, and through faith to grow in the knowledge, not of works but of Christ Jesus, Who suffered and rose for him, as Peter teaches, in the last chapter of his first Epistle; since no other work makes a Christian."  

Even faith itself for Wesley is little more than a particularization, or individualization, of grace—that mark or expression of grace within one human being. Certainly
faith for him is no human achievement. If it is the receptive agent of grace, and it is for him and for the Reformers as well, that receptive agent is also the gift of God. Faith as both belief and trust which claim the benefits of grace is itself an expression within the human being of divine mercy and favor. "Of yourselves," writes Mr. Wesley, "cometh neither your faith nor your salvation; 'it is the gift of God'; the free, undeserved gift; the faith through which ye are saved, as well as the salvation which he of his own good pleasure, his mere favour annexes thereto. That ye believe is one instance of his grace; that believing ye are saved, another." 14

However, the nature and condition of human beings prior to justification from the Wesleyan perspective is entirely different from that of the Reformation, where the anthropology of Saint Augustine rules supreme, unalleviated either by Eastern Orthodoxy teachings or even the modifications made by Latin Catholicism itself through the interpretations of Caesarius of Arles and the Synod of Orange in A.D. 539. With Luther and Calvin concomitant with original sin is predestination, so, to use Luther's famous analogy, the human will is no more than a saddle horse to be ridden by either God or the devil. 15 It goes whichever way the rider directs.

Though Wesley's anthropology is also based on the doctrine of original sin, nonetheless there is no trace of election or predestination inherent in it, and the concept itself is relieved of its viciousness by Wesley's insistence on human freedom even within the context of human depravity. Co-extensive with universal sin and guilt is the prevenient grace of God, which, like the air we breathe and the water we drink, is available to everybody, so that no one is arbitrarily shut out by God from the hospital of his mercy and his curative and restorative grace. God proffers forgiveness and justification to all people. They are lent by him the strength within
themselves to receive what he has to give them. But, also, on their own they have the freedom to remain in their natural state by refusing his offer. Human freedom, according to Wesley, is not powerful enough to generate faith, which always for him is divinely induced. But it is powerful enough to resist faith. Therefore, the deciding factor in the initial state of salvation is the person, not God, since God wills that all should be saved, and only the individual himself can determine otherwise. 16

By making prevenient grace the sole conditioning factor that enables natural man victimized by original sin and its accompanying guilt to accept justification, Wesley, like the Reformers and Augustine, gives all credit for salvation to God. But by making human freedom strong enough in natural man to resist grace, Wesley lays all the blame for a person's damnation on that person himself. God created us free, with a determinative will like his very own. He will, therefore, neither save nor damn apart from our own free decision. God remains eternally loyal to the basic nature of what he made in creation. Wesley in the revival always preached for a decision. His anthropology is such that what he asked his hearers to do finds validity in what he taught them to believe about themselves and the basic nature God gave them at their birth. This cannot be said of the anthropology of the Reformation and Augustinianism on which it rests.

B. J. Kidd's dictum on human nature could be John Wesley's as well: "And thus the Church adopted the fundamental position of Augustine, but dismissed his speculations. The doctrine of Grace is the doctrine of the Church. But thanks to his enemies who put in a plea for Nature, it is a doctrine freed from the ruthlessness with which Augustine caused it to be associated, and so rendered at last broadly human." 17
Justification for Wesley is the initial act in the process of salvation, while with Luther it is synonymous with salvation itself. Though with Wesley the sinner is justified for Christ's sake and is required to produce no personal claim on the merits of the Saviour (here he agrees entirely with Luther and the Reformers), at the same time what God does for the sinner when he forgives him of his sins, he does in the sinner through conversion by making him worthy of forgiveness. What God pronounces juridically in justification, he also effects morally and spiritually in the life and character of the person he justifies. Justification is an outward act. Conversion is an inner experience. But the two occur simultaneously, so that no one is justified who is not converted, and he who is converted is always justified. Therefore, the person becomes aware immediately of what has happened to him and is given by the Holy Spirit the assurance that Wesley himself got at Aldersgate that he is a child of God.

In this regard John Wesley lives in a different world theologically from that of the Reformers. Justification for Luther is a constant requirement, or, better said, a constant need of the Christian as long as he remains in this life. Falling into sin is a daily occurrence, and forgiveness for sin never ends. "To speak quite plainly," writes Luther in his Treatise on Baptism, "it is one thing to forgive sins, and another thing to put them away or drive them out. The forgiveness of sins is obtained by faith, even though they are not entirely driven out; but to drive out sins is to exercise ourselves against them, and at last it is to die; for in death sin perishes utterly.....

"...Sin, however, does not like to die, and for this reason it makes death so bitter and so horrible. Such is the grace and power of God that sin, which has brought death, is driven out again by its own work, viz., by death." 18 God covers the leprosy of our sin with the cloak of Christ's
righteousness and thereby justifies us for the sake of his own dear son and considers us as righteous whether we are or not. The Christian lives to the end only by faith, that is, trust in the righteousness of Christ, and in penitence prays constantly for the forgiveness of his sins. The grace of God is sufficient for forgiveness, but nature through death is that which in the end destroys sin.

But Wesley, in contrast to the Reformers, insists that personal righteousness can and must be obtained by the Christian in this life. To be sure, it is the gift of God, not a human achievement, but the person must possess and exemplify it before death if that person is so much as to see God, much less to live with him eternally.

Therefore, with Wesley justification leads to sanctification which is the long, continuing, and increasing phase in the process of salvation, the goal of which is perfection, where unselfish love of God and others becomes the sole determinative motive in a person's life. Here Wesley falls back on the age-old tradition of Catholic piety, Eastern and Western, Greek and Roman, the old world of good works, moral and spiritual, out of which the Reformation migrated to its new shores of justification by faith alone. Indeed, late in his career, Wesley went so far as to affirm the necessity for good works in the attainment of salvation: "Is not this salvation by works? Not by the merits of works, but by works as a condition.

"What have we then been disputing about for these thirty years? I am afraid about words, namely, in some of the foregoing instances.

"As to merit itself, of which we have been so dreadfully afraid: We are rewarded according to our works. How does this differ from 'for the sake of our works'? And how differs this from secundum merita operum? which is no more than, 'as
our works deserve'? Can you split this hair? I doubt I cannot." 

John Wesley agrees with Justin Martyr and the early Christian apologists and thereby supports fully the Orthodox and Roman Catholic contention that those who have never heard of Christ are not necessarily damned but are judged by God according to the moral understanding they have, to use Wesley's expression, "the light they have", that is, according to their fear of God and works of righteousness.

So important is the good life in the Wesleyan scheme of salvation that John Wesley disassociates himself entirely from the Reformation concept of justification by faith as being synonymous with salvation. At this point he writes almost intemperately against the teachings of Martin Luther: "Again, how blasphemously does he speak of good works and of the law of God; constantly coupling the law with sin, death, hell, or the Devil! and teaching that Christ delivers us from them all alike. Whereas, it can no more be proved by Scripture that 'Christ delivers us from the law of God', than he delivers us 'from holiness or from heaven'."

He styles Calvinism the antidote to Methodism, which he asserts is heart-holiness, while Calvinism "strikes at the root of salvation from sin, previous to glory, putting the matter on quite another issue." And that other issue is predestination and election. And this is what Wesley says about that issue: "But wherein lies the charm of this doctrine? What makes men swallow it so quickly?" The answer, he says, is: "(1) It seems to magnify Christ; although in reality it supposes him to have died in vain. For the absolutely elect must have been saved without him; and the non-elect cannot be saved by him. (2) It is highly pleasing to flesh and blood, final perseverance in particular."
By uniting the Reformation doctrine of justification with the Catholic teaching of sanctification, making the latter universal in its applicability to Christians, so that all who receive forgiveness for Christ's sake are endowed with grace sufficient to become saints, Wesley provides a moral dynamic to life that is revolutionary both in its ideal of personal holiness and in its goals for a just and righteous society.

In fact, Wesley was somewhat less than modest when he wrote: "It has been frequently observed that very few were clear in their judgement both with regard to justification and sanctification. Who has wrote more ably than Martin Luther on justification by faith alone? And who was more ignorant of the doctrine of sanctification, or more confused in his conception of it?.....On the other hand, how many writers of the Romish Church (as Francis Sales and Juan Castaniga, in particular) have wrote strongly and scripturally on sanctification, who, nevertheless, were entirely unacquainted with the nature of justification! insomuch that the whole body of their Divines at the Council of Trent, in their Catechismus ad Paroches, (catechism which every parish priest is to teach his people), totally confused sanctification and justification together. But it has pleased God to give the Methodists a full and clear knowledge of each, and the wide difference between them." 23

And I am far from modest, I am sure, but I trust that I am nonetheless within the range of truth, when I claim for our Methodist theological traditions a permanency within the body catholic as certain and sure as the doctrines of any other church either Protestant or Catholic, either Western or Eastern.

There is a vitality about them that is attractive and resilient in any age and among all people. They are anchored in the
conviction that we are dependent absolutely upon the grace and mercy of God and that our redemption is in Jesus Christ alone. But at the same time, they express confidence in the human spirit. Christ died for us, and the Holy Spirit lives in us, making us over again in the image of our Saviour and reminding us constantly that the God who forgives sin is both able and willing to destroy all sin in us and give us the power to live lives well pleasing in his sight while we are still here on earth. Full sanctification, or Christian perfection, is "the grand depositum," writes Wesley, "which God has lodged with the people called Methodist; and for the sake of propogating this chiefly he appeared to have raised us up." 24

And there is nothing egotistical or selfish in the human hunger for salvation and what a person does to receive it at the hands of God. Inherent in it is the bent to service. When one is "saved", he is eager "to save" others. The welfare of humanity here and now on this earth as well as hereafter in heaven is the hallmark of Methodist devotion. The Wesleyan blueprint for society is always and invariably the image of the Kingdom of God, but our work in its behalf is altogether here on earth. Wesley realized that we can only have a good and decent society when we populate it with good people. Hence he ministered to individuals and sought to convert and sanctify people, one by one. But at the same time he realized that the nature of a society is formed by its institutions and its laws, and he struggled for an existing social and political order, where human beings would be treated alike as children of God, assuring them of freedom, respect, and the opportunity to engage in productive labor. He wanted living to be enjoyable as well as responsible, making life here beautiful and holy and in anticipation of what it would be hereafter in the everlasting Kingdom of God.
"Christianity," wrote Mr. Wesley, "is essentially a social religion; to turn it into a solitary religion is indeed to destroy it." 25 The Kingdom of heaven, Wesley teaches, is but "the continuation and perfection of the kingdom of grace on earth." 26
THE FUTURE OF METHODIST THEOLOGICAL TRADITIONS

Footnotes


