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Chapter Five **The Enriching Role of Experience**

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“I’m tired of having my interpretations of Scripture dismissed simply because they aren’t orthodox. Everyone interprets Scripture from his or her experience, study and reason. Are we supposed to turn off our minds and let traditionalists think for us?”¹

It would be hard to find a more representative glimpse of the current debate over the so-called “Wesleyan Quadrilateral” among United Methodists than this excerpt from a recent letter to the editor of the *United Methodist Reporter*. It illustrates that the lines in the debate typically find their most forceful expression in off-the-cuff remarks rather than in careful programmatic presentations. It captures the level of passion permeating the debate. It reflects the tendency of the opposing parties to frame the debate in terms of a stark dichotomy: *either* we think for ourselves by relying on our individual experience and reason, *or* we submit ourselves to tradition. And it uses the words “reason” and “experience” as if their meanings are self-evident.

There is nothing wrong with passionate involvement in a debate when one is convinced that vital truths are at stake. However, it is important in these situations to insure that our passion does not override honest consideration of alternative views. Such evaluation could result in clarifications that facilitate constructive progress in the discussion. With this potential in view, I want to offer some clarifications about the nature of experience and the various possible roles that experience might play in theological reflection, drawing on the example of John Wesley’s appeals to experience. Reflection on this example should be informative for the present United Methodist debate, since Wesley’s emphasis on experience was formative of our interest in this topic. I will begin by using it to challenge the apparent assumption of many participants in this debate that the meaning of “experience” is clear, or unambiguous.

Alternative Conceptions of Experience

Consider the following situation: A patient of a group medical practice is slated for surgery and insists on “the benefit of experience” in the operation. A puzzled nurse responds “Well, if you insist, but most of our patients consider it a benefit to have anesthesia so that they do *not* experience the operation!” The patient retorts rather curtly “I did not mean that I want to feel the operation, but that I want a physician with experience in this procedure.” “In that case,” the helpful nurse replies, “you will want Dr. White. She has not performed the surgery before, but she has had it herself, so she will understand what you are going through!”

As this hypothetical case shows, “experience” can be a very ambiguous term. There is no reason to assume that theological discussions escape this ambiguity. On the contrary, it is quite likely that some of the confrontations over using experience in making doctrinal decisions result from the opponents having in mind different conceptions of experience. This means that an initial step in building greater agreement on the legitimate contribution of experience to Christian life and teaching would be to clarify the major alternative conceptions of this ambiguous entity.² Sorting out the three conceptions that create the humorous miscues in our hypothetical case is a good place to begin.

Conscious Awareness of Being Affected by an Event or Action

The first miscue in the conversation of our hypothetical patient and nurse arose when the nurse assumed that the patient’s request for “experience” was a request to remain conscious so that he could be aware of the subjective affect of the operation upon him. This use of “experience” to denote consciously undergoing an event or action is a common one. It can be clearly seen in Wesley’s question “Art thou acquainted with the leading of [God’s] Spirit, not by notion only, but by living experience?”³ As the question illustrates, this use often emphasizes the subjective dimension of being affected in direct contrast with a merely objective or abstract consideration of the source of the affect.

The Oxford English Dictionary points out that this use of “experience” takes on particular prominence in religious traditions that highlight the need for a “felt” personal relationship with God.⁴ Since Methodism is the specific example cited, it is not surprising that

instances with this stress abound in Wesley. One of the clearest cases is a letter where he insists that even if a man is morally upright and attends all the proper religious ordinances, “he is not to think well of his own state till he experiences something within himself which he has not yet experienced ... a sure trust and confidence in God ... the love of God shed abroad in his heart.”⁵

Sympathetic Understanding Derived from Similar Subjective Experience

The second miscue in our hypothetical case came as the nurse tried switching to a closely related meaning of “experience.” The basic concern of this meaning is still with the subjective dimension of undergoing an event or action, but the focus shifts from the occasion of being affected itself to the insight gained through this occasion which enables us to sympathize with others who undergo similar events or actions. While this second meaning is less common in culture at large, and in Wesley, a good example of it can be found in his prefatory comments to his edition of Thomas à Kempis’s classic book *The Imitation of Christ*:

... the great practical truths of religion, the mysteries of the inward kingdom of God, cannot be fully discerned, but by those readers who have read the same things in their own souls. These cannot be clearly known, but by those who derive their knowledge, “not from commentaries, but experience;” who, by living the life of Christ, by treading in his steps, and suffering the will of God to rule in them as it did in Him, have attained to what the heart of a natural man cannot conceive ... inward, practical, experimental, feeling knowledge.⁶

Practical Skill Developed through Repeated Performance

The patient’s intended meaning of “experience,” which our nurse kept missing, related not to any subjective affect on the person undergoing an operation but to the practical skill developed by the physician performing the operation. This is the sense in which we speak of “experienced” professionals and artisans. We typically are trying to designate persons who have become adept at their trade, not by book instruction alone, but by long practice under a variety of circumstances. This connotation is suggested in Wesley’s praise for those Methodist society members who have “more skill or more experience” with visiting the sick, and those preachers who are

“deeply experienced in the work of God, accustomed to train up souls in [God’s] way.”⁷

Practical/Moral Wisdom Derived from Life-long Learning

As we move beyond the senses of “experience” suggested in my opening example, in search of other senses evident in Wesley’s writings, the first addition to note is closely related to the sense just treated. Just as we can develop skill in a craft or trade by long-term practice, it has long been recognized that we also can develop wisdom about the “art of living” through the challenges and opportunities encountered over the course of our life. This wisdom typically integrates practical insights with moral sensitivities, which explains why Wesley stressed that those chosen for leadership roles in the church should have the benefits of the experience that comes with age.⁸ Of course, Wesley recognized that this is not an automatic process. For wisdom to grow with age, we must remain sensitive and willing to learn, particularly to learn from our mistakes. This sensitivity is reflected in Wesley’s hope—expressed when the congregation at the Foundery in London was evidencing a revitalization after over two decades of stagnation—that he and his brother Charles would not quench the Spirit here this time, as they had before, because they had “learned experience by the things we have suffered.”⁹

Practical Test or Trial as Means of Determining Truth

Against the backdrop of the recognition that living through the practical trials of life can be a source of moral/spiritual wisdom, it is easier to understand another use of “experience” in Wesley that sounds quite odd to modern ears. This use equates “experience” with the action of using practical tests or trial-and-error to determine truth. It was a common use in English prior to Wesley, as reflected in Wyclif’s 1388 translation of Genesis 42:15 (where Joseph announces that he is going to put his brothers to a test) as “Now I shall take experience of you.”¹⁰

While it still found resonance in Wesley, this use of “experience” was well on the road to becoming obsolete.¹¹ A good way to capture its distance from present assumptions is to note Wesley’s complaint against the emerging professionalization of medicine in his day. He faulted them with “setting experience aside” and building medical

research instead on hypotheses.¹² By this he was protesting their tendency to discount traditional folk cures that had been discovered through centuries of trial-and-error, accepting only those cures whose effectiveness could be explained by modern scientific methods. While Wesley appreciated the prominent role of empirical observation in modern science, he questioned the assumption that reliable insights into truth emerge *only* in professional environments where research is focused on testing prespecified hypotheses. He was convinced that we should continue to value the way that truth is discovered through the accidents of life and ordinary trial-and-error, even in a field like medicine.¹³

This conviction is reflected in Wesley's *Journal* by his frequent inclusion of instances of discerning truth through ordinary events or trial-and-error. One quaint example is his account of how experience delivered him from his fear of camping out when circumstances required him to sleep outdoors; the test proved that it was not detrimental to his health.¹⁴ A more important example is his argument that experience demonstrates that the Lord's Supper is a "converting ordinance," since many of his followers had found in practice that their conversion could be traced back to when they overcame the traditional inhibitions and approached the Table.¹⁵ This example should alert us that many of his appeals to experience in relation to doctrinal disputes involve seeking truth through such practical testing.

Observation of Facts or Events as a Source of Knowledge

The main reason that many of Wesley's peers did not join him in championing a continuing role for the type of practical testing depended on in earlier times for determining truth was that they were searching for a method that would provide greater certainty. They lived in the period after the medieval assumption that all truth was firmly established and reliably conveyed in tradition had been challenged and abandoned. While early Renaissance thinkers had optimistically predicted that this change would spawn a tolerance of conflicting viewpoints in Western culture, the actual result was armed conflict between competing orthodoxies in both the religious and political fields. In desperation, early Enlightenment thinkers groped for a way to resolve the intellectual differences between the competing parties, so that the fighting could stop. The most influential figures decided that the only hope lay in finding a method of

determining truth which could be publicly verified and provided absolute certainty.¹⁶

The irony of this noble Enlightenment venture is that philosophers ended up fighting among themselves about where the reliable means to certainty could be found—was it in the logical purity of reason or the objective facticity of empirical observation? The latter option came to dominate British and North American colonial thought in the eighteenth century and stamped an enduring empiricist cast on modern Western culture. The word “experience” took on a distinctive meaning under this empiricist cast. It now denoted verifiable *observation* of present facts and events (with experiments aimed more at enhancing the possibility of observation than at trial-and-error testing), or the knowledge gained from such observation.

Wesley developed a strong commitment to formal Enlightenment empiricism through his Oxford education.¹⁷ More importantly, he shared the larger culture’s tendency to associate empiricism with “common sense.” Thus, when a detractor of Methodism asked mockingly whether Wesley had gotten his knowledge of the possibility of deliverance from sin by some special inspiration, he retorted sharply “No; but by common sense. I know it by the evidence of my own eyes and ears. I have seen a considerable part of it; and I have abundant testimony, such as excludes all possible doubt, for what I have not seen.”¹⁸ This popularized empiricism is evident in a significant percentage of Wesley’s uses of “experience,” including many instances invoking it in support of theological claims. He often emphasizes that the evidence he has in mind is publicly verifiable by specifying “daily experience” as demonstrating claims such as the need of newly converted persons for further spiritual transformation, since they are not instantaneously freed from the “seeds” of unholy attitudes and desires.¹⁹

The Mediated Nature of Human Experience

The six conceptions of experience just surveyed likely cover the range that Wesley would have been able to distinguish, if pressed to do so, because they were all current in his day. Dictionaries indicate that the first and last conceptions, in particular, remain in common use. However, the careful observer will sense that a unique twist is typically given to these two conceptions today. This twist is hinted

at in the quote that opened this chapter, with its emphasis on *each individual's* experience. By contrast, we just noted Wesley's emphasis on the public verifiability of empirical observation, and he was characteristically skeptical of unusual (i.e., highly individual) accounts of the subjective affect of encounter with God.²⁰ Behind this difference in emphasis lies our cultural confrontation with the mediated nature of human experience, which was just beginning in philosophical circles in Wesley's latter years.

This confrontation can be best understood by comparing it with the optimism of the Enlightenment empiricists. We saw above that their initial hope was to locate a method that could generate absolutely certain knowledge. Most of them soon conceded, under rationalist critique, that knowledge based on inductive observation of particulars would always fall short of logical certainty. However, they still optimistically maintained that this knowledge was *objective* (revealing things as they truly are) and *categorical* (true for all persons, cultures and times). This confidence was based on their assumption that the mind was a purely receptive instrument in the knowing process, contributing nothing of its own to an individual's knowledge.

Through the eighteenth century it became increasingly hard to overlook the point that this empiricist assumption did not square with the reality that persons of good will and mental competence often disagree in their observational reports of the same event or "fact." While there have been various attempts to get around it, the conclusion that this reality has forced upon most philosophers is that our minds contribute actively to observation (and other types of "experience"). As Immanuel Kant formulated it in an influential thesis: all human experience is *interpreted* experience, because it is *mediated* through our preexisting intellectual concepts.

The potential skeptical implications of this thesis were offset for Kant himself by focusing on interpretive concepts that he believed were universally-shared and invariant, like space and time. Even before Einstein could nuance this assumption, most of Western culture was being influenced by sociology and psychology to focus instead on the cultural and individual ways that our interpretations of experience vary. The cumulative result of this is the current tendency, at least in popular culture, to reduce experience to mere "perspective." Few any longer assume that experience provides knowledge that is objective and categorical. Instead, experience is assumed to provide simply my perspective (either as a typical white,

middle-aged, middle-class, North American male; or as a unique individual) on what I take to be reality! The obvious questions about 1) whether my perspective corresponds in any way to how things truly are, and 2) what claim it has against other varying perspectives, are at the heart of the vigorous debates going on in late twentieth-century Western culture.²¹

The insistence on honoring each individual's experience in our opening quote reflects that these questions are also central to current United Methodist debate over theological method. It might appear that Wesley has little to offer in dealing with such questions, since he predated their broad cultural emergence. But if we look closely, we can see his dawning awareness of the mediated nature of human experience, and of the challenges it would entail.

One of the early glimmers of this awareness is in Wesley's sermonic distillation of his major treatise on *The Doctrine of Original Sin*. The original treatise could serve as a showcase of the Enlightenment optimism within which he was trained. The central argument was ostensibly an objective empirical survey of human behavior, past and present. It drew on Scripture, but only as a historical record. And it concluded boldly, based on the evidence cited, that the universality of sin should be obvious to "even the most careless, inaccurate observer."²² In comparison, the sermon that distilled this treatise just two years later was more reserved. Here Wesley begins with the biblical affirmation of universal human sinfulness. He then maintains that daily experience confirms this affirmation, but he immediately adds the qualification that those who have not been regenerated by God's grace typically do not discern this confirmation!²³ In this move he was conceding that empirical observation is not as immediate or publicly verifiable as his earlier treatise suggested.

To be sure, this concession does not rule out the continuing optimistic assumption that all who *have* received the benefits of regeneration discern God's truth and God's work in their lives immediately, rendering objective and categorical knowledge. If Wesley was holding on to such an assumption at this point (1759), ongoing reflection upon his spiritual journey was rapidly undercutting it. This can be illustrated by his changing evaluation of the role of Aldersgate within that journey. A variety of factors helped Wesley to recognize how certain instilled expectations had influenced his initial interpretation

of what he attained at Aldersgate, and the correlated negative assessment of his spiritual status before that event. As he progressively decided that several of these expectations were unwarranted or unwise, he was compelled to offer a revised interpretation of the role of Aldersgate in his spiritual pilgrimage.²⁴ In this act of revising Wesley was conceding—at least implicitly—that not even the regenerate can avoid having their experience mediated through their preexisting expectations and conceptions.²⁵

The recognition of the mediated character of human experience evident in these concessions is admittedly embryonic. Even so, Wesley showed some discernment of the temptations that highlighting this character would pose for theology. The most radical temptation has been to embrace a skeptical denial that we can know whether there is even such a thing as “reality,” let alone that our interpretations fit reality. Such total skepticism, while conceivable in theory, is quite rare because it is so hard to live out in practice. Even the - rigorous skeptic David Hume acknowledged that he still looked forward to supper and socializing with his friends at the end of the day (which is why Wesley dismissed Hume’s skepticism with such disdain).²⁶

Somewhat more common is the polar temptation to rule out any reliance upon experience in seeking truth, accepting the skeptics’ assumption that its mediated character renders experience totally subjective. Wesley was confronted with such a total disqualification of experience in reaction to his emphasis on a personal experience of the witness of the Spirit. In response, he willingly allowed that some people “may fancy they experience what they do not,” but he strongly rejected the suggestion that such cases demonstrate that every consideration of experience would inevitably degenerate into “enthusiasm.”²⁷ We will see below why his response would be the same today, when the reactionary suggestion to dismiss all consideration of experience is more commonly heard in relation to theological methodology.

The most subtle, and most frequent, temptation in post-Enlightenment theology has been to invoke the perspectival nature of mediated experience as a preemptive shield against any suggestion that we submit our personal experience to broader accountability—to retort, for example, “That is only *your* perspective. I am

entitled to my *own!*” This type of response easily degenerates into a situation like Wesley warned of among some Christian mystics, where one finds “as many religions as books because each makes his [or her] experience the standard of truth.”²⁸ Wesley recognized that the fundamental problem with such situations is not that we have failed to show proper respect to some abstract orthodoxy, but that we are failing to respect one another enough to allow that a sister or brother might have a more adequate sense than our own of how to live faithfully as God’s people in the world.²⁹ That is why he continually exhorted his Methodists about the importance of “Christian conference” in nurturing our lives of holiness and made discussion of debated theological claims central to his annual “conferences” with his preachers.³⁰

One obvious application of Wesley’s exhortation to confer with others would be to include *him* in our present conversations about the theological implications of accepting that all human experience is mediated. This could be particularly helpful since his response to a growing awareness of this reality stands in strong contrast with the broad current tendency to accept the reduction of experience to “individual perspective,” thereby casting it into the dichotomous relationship with tradition and Scripture. If we will consider Wesley’s alternative seriously, it might help us to develop an enriched conception of experience and a broader awareness of the roles of experience in Christian life.

The Varied Roles of Experience in Christian Life

Wesley’s emergent recognition of the mediated nature of human knowledge did not lead him to abandon any of the conceptions of experience identified above. Rather he took this reality into account in the way that he selectively utilized these conceptions within the roles that he discerned experience playing in Christian life. To appreciate his moves we will need to look beyond our focal issue of the contribution of experience to doctrinal decisions. This is only one of the roles that Wesley attributed to experience. Identifying the other roles that he discerned, and noting how he correlated certain conceptions of experience to certain roles, will help highlight the insights that his example can offer into our focal issue.

Providing Empowerment for Christ-like Living

There is no disputing the common assertion that experience plays a prominent role in Wesley's overall theology. However, it is important to recognize that a major portion of his actual appeals to experience were not directly concerned with either formulating or testing doctrinal claims. They reflected instead his emphasis on the contribution of experience to providing the assurance that empowers us for Christ-like living. This role is captured in his frequent claim that we human beings are incapable of loving God or others until we first experience God's love for us.³¹ Far from being mere rhetorical flourish, this claim reflected Wesley's central assumptions about how we are able to act in moral ways—i.e., his "moral psychology."³²

Wesley worked out his moral psychology in correlation with his empiricist commitments about human knowledge. Enlightenment empiricists denied the rationalists' suggestions that truth exists in the human intellect prior to encounter with the empirical world, or that the mind creates truth by imposing rational order upon sensory experience. They insisted instead that truth can only be acquired *responsively* through our sensory encounter with the world. Translated to the issue of moral psychology, this insistence led Wesley and many others in his day to reject the intellectualist model that dominated current Christian moral thought. This model assumed that humans naturally enact whatever they are rationally convinced is right. On this assumption, the primary task involved in moral formation is rational instruction or persuasion. While Wesley appreciated the need for such instruction, he stressed that it was inadequate by itself, because it failed to appreciate that the human will—like the human intellect—is a *responsive* instrument.

To put this point in a practical example, Wesley's emphasis entailed that no amount of rational instruction alone could enable a child to express love for others if that child had never personally experienced love from others. If we want to help such emotionally-deprived children to love, we must begin by creating opportunities for them to receive love. Only as their wills are "affected" in this way will they be inclined and empowered to love in response.

This "affectional" moral psychology lies behind Wesley's emphasis on the witness of the Spirit. He viewed the witness of the Spirit as God's active personal communication of love to us. And he believed that it is only as we are inwardly affected by this witness and

become conscious of God's love that we are enabled to live truly Christ-like lives, loving God and others.³³

Ironically, though this belief grew out of his application of empiricist themes to moral psychology, it also led to Wesley's major point of difference with most Enlightenment empiricists. Since they equated "experience" with observation by the natural senses, and since God does not appear directly to these senses, they typically allowed knowledge of God only on the basis of rational inference from experience. Wesley feared that such secondary inference could not provide sufficient confidence in God's love to empower our Christian lives. This led him to postulate that God created us with a set of "spiritual senses" in addition to our physical senses, so that we can be directly affected by spiritual realities like God's loving embrace.³⁴ This proposal involved more than adding another set of senses to the Enlightenment model. Wesley was actually rejecting the appropriateness of the Enlightenment conception of experience, with its focus on objective observation, for explaining experience's empowering affect upon Christian life. His alternative was the conception of experience as direct inward awareness.³⁵

The extent to which Wesley insisted on the directness of the affect of the Spirit's witness eventually put him at odds with both classical Protestant and contemporary Anglican theology. In these realms a fear of "enthusiasm" had led to the subordination of any possible direct witness of the Spirit concerning our Christian status to the "indirect witness" of publicly-discernible Christian virtues.³⁶ While Wesley agreed that these virtues would characterize truly Christian life, he refused to make their presence foundational to our confidence in God's loving embrace. This would be to resort again to mere inference, and possibly to works-righteousness.³⁷ To protect against such dangers, Wesley maintained that we directly perceive (rather than infer) that virtues like love and joy in our lives are the "fruit of the Spirit." This claim, which opponents labeled an assertion of "perceptual inspiration," became a focus of Anglican criticism of Wesley. While he was forced to offer in response several qualifications pointing to the mediated nature of experience, Wesley clung to the basic insistence that our awareness of the Spirit's work is by direct affect.³⁸

In essence, Wesley was suggesting that our awareness of God's love for us is analogous to our awareness of our own affections. Before this suggestion is dismissed, I would note that it has had some recent sophisticated defenses. But I would add that if these defenses

are judged convincing, Wesley's basic suggestion would need to be appropriated in a manner that takes the mediated nature of our awareness of our own affections more explicitly into account than his dawning sensitivity allowed him to do.³⁹

Providing Seasoned Guidance for Our Spiritual Pilgrimage

For all of his insistence on our need for empowerment, Wesley was well aware that empowerment alone does not guarantee Christ-like living. Raw energy can destroy as easily as it enlivens; the difference lies in how wisely it is used. So, where do we look for wisdom concerning how to "put to work" that gracious empowerment that God is "working in us"? A second set of Wesley's appeals to experience highlight its role in contributing such enrichment.

The type of experience assumed in these appeals is no longer our immediate inward consciousness, because this is precisely what needs the benefit of wise guidance. Failure to seek such guidance can result in what Wesley viewed as true "enthusiasm," the confusing of mere imagination with the leading of the Spirit.⁴⁰ To guard against this we must "test the spirits." While Scripture is central to this testing, there is the parallel need to test our individual interpretation of Scripture! Extending Wesley's own moves in this direction, the way out of this circle is "conference" with others. Such *corporate* testing can help us discern when our preconceptions are distorting our spiritual experience. This potential is heightened if we include in the dialogue those who have the benefit of *long-term* experience in the Christian life.

Wesley's personal benefit from corporate long-term experience is reflected in the mature pastoral advice he gave about allowing for a variety in God's ways of initiating a saving relationship in our lives (advice quite different from that which he gave immediately after Aldersgate!).⁴¹ Given his own case, one can understand Wesley's concern that his Methodist followers benefit from dialogue with the wisdom of those past and present saints who have gained experience through the course of their spiritual pilgrimage.⁴² To make this wisdom available he republished numerous spiritual biographies of saints through the ages (as models to be imitated) and gathered many of their written proverbs and manuals for spiritual formation in his fifty-volume *Christian Library*. He also cited them repeatedly. In a particularly revealing case, he invoked the seasoned wisdom of an

early Christian mentor to caution those reveling in their new conversion “experience” that since they were actually still *unexperienced* they would be prone to the false assumption that this one event delivered them from all inclination to sin.⁴³

One insight we can gain from Wesley in this regard is that he assumed gathering and sharing this type of experience was a central task of theology! This assumption was in keeping with earlier Christian precedent. By contrast, the historical course of Western academic theology progressively isolated materials devoted to sharing wisdom about spiritual guidance and formation from those devoted to consideration of doctrine—and denied the former truly theological status. From a Wesleyan perspective, this must be seen as one of the major weaknesses of contemporary theology, and the fledgling attempts to reclaim a model of theology that is enriched by practical wisdom should be heralded.⁴⁴

Providing Public Evidence of Central Christian Teachings

There is no need to argue in the academy for the theological status of the next role of experience evident in Wesley’s appeals. The task of providing a public defense of the central Christian claims has a long and distinguished theological career. It is occasionally suggested that Wesley shied away from this apologetic task. In reality, he simply rejected the rationalist approach that had become standard in apologetics, in favor of an Enlightenment empiricist approach. For example, he was convinced that simple observation of the order in the universe around us points to an all-wise Cosmic Designer. To demonstrate this, he compiled a multi-volume *Survey of the Wisdom of God in Creation* that summarized the current findings of scientific observation and periodically sermonized on the evidence that these findings provide for God.⁴⁵

Defending the existence of God is only one agenda of traditional apologetics. Another was to defend the claims that Christianity makes about the nature of God and humanity which differ from claims of other religions. Wesley’s commitment to an empiricist apologetic comes through in this regard as well. He frequently appeals to “daily experience” to confirm such central Christian claims as inherited depravity and the liberty of the human will from determinism.⁴⁶

The appeal to such publicly-verifiable experience is no accident, since the traditional goal of apologetics was to convince outsiders. If

we broaden this goal to include enriching one's own conviction of the truth of Christian teaching, we begin to overlap with the first role of experience discussed above, because our empowerment is correlated to our conviction. This makes it significant that it is largely in cases of such overlap that Wesley emphasizes how our inner awareness of God's working can confirm Christian claims, including the central claim of the definitive revelation in Scripture.⁴⁷

Part of Wesley's motivation for turning from reason to experience in his apologetic was likely his growing conviction of reason's inability to prove any theological claim conclusively.⁴⁸ His Enlightenment rhetoric can often leave the impression that he believed experience could attain this goal. However, at other times he speaks more modestly (and in keeping with mediated experience) of such apologetic considerations simply strengthening confidence that Christian faith-claims are compatible with broadly-accepted human knowledge.

Providing Guidance in Doctrinal Decisions

We come now to the role of experience that is most focal to the present debates over theological method. This role concerns not how experience can help demonstrate the truth of established Christian teachings but the logically prior issue of how it might help the Christian community in discerning what to teach. Actually, the issue is usually how we discern what to *keep* teaching! The formulation of Christian doctrine has seldom been initiated by some official theological body and then offered to the community of believers (and when it has, it was often not "received"!). Instead, from the earliest days of the church theological claims have typically emerged out of a variety of grass-roots settings and situations, and the doctrinal task has been to discern which of these claims warranted strong refutation, which could be considered fanciful but harmless, and which should be endorsed or nurtured for broader acceptance.

Wesley's pastoral role in the Methodist movement positioned him to confront the task of doctrinal discernment often—both in justifying to the larger church why Methodists should keep teaching their distinctive claims and in assessing the unconventional currents within his movement. My co-authors show how he embraced the long-standing roles for Scripture and tradition, as well as a role for reason, in carrying out this task. He also self-consciously appealed to

experience on frequent occasions as both a source and a criterion for doctrinal discernment.

Behind Wesley's appeals to experience were two theological convictions. First, he considered humanity's sensory and affective capacities to be divine endowments intended to help us perceive God's revelatory and salvific overtures. While he allowed that human fallenness has dulled and distorted these capacities, he was confident that God continued to uphold them graciously in their intended purposes.⁴⁹ Second, Wesley affirmed that God's self-revelatory activity is not limited to its normative expression in Christ, being evident as well (to the discerning) in the created order that we observe and in which we live out our practical lives.⁵⁰

While Wesley affirmed a substantive role for appeals to experience in discerning doctrine, it was never a solitary role. The example in his work that is most likely to suggest the contrary is *The Doctrine of Original Sin*. We noted above that his Enlightenment rhetoric in this treatise verged on defending this doctrine on the basis of empirical observation alone, but we also saw that his later sermonic distillation made clear that he was actually appealing to experience to confirm central biblical teachings. As this might suggest, Wesley's use of the various resources for doctrinal reflection was ultimately *dialogical*. It was not a matter of simply using whichever resource seemed more helpful, or of playing one resource off against another, but of conferring among them until some consensus was found. His expectation of such consensus was based on the assumption that it is the same self-revealing God being encountered through Scripture, tradition and experience—when each of these is rightly and rationally utilized.

Several desired contributions of experience to this dialogical process are evident in Wesley's various appeals. The most rudimentary contribution is help in clarifying the intended meaning of claims found in Scripture or tradition. An example would be his argument that Paul's claim "the love of money is the root of all evil" must mean only that it was the most prolific root of evil, not that it is the only root, because "sad experience daily shows" that there are a thousand other roots of evil in the world.⁵¹

A closely related contribution is testing possible interpretations of Scripture or tradition (including proposals for how to correlate apparently disparate claims within these sources). This is often what is taking place when Wesley appeals to experience to "confirm" a

doctrine derived from Scripture.⁵² Most of these appeals were on issues where his distinctive interpretation of Scripture was being challenged—such as, whether a sense of assurance is essential to justification, or whether believers continued to struggle with an inclination to sin.⁵³

A third way that experience can contribute to the dialogue among the various resources is by suggesting and testing contextual applications of general principles found in Scripture or tradition. This contribution is implied in Wesley's response to a criticism that the band groups he instituted in Methodism were not biblical: "these are also prudential helps, grounded on reason and experience, in order to apply the general rules given in Scripture according to particular circumstances."⁵⁴

Carrying this a step further, doctrinal issues can arise that are not addressed definitively in Scripture or earlier tradition, even in terms of principles. Wesley recognized that experience would have to play a fairly substantial role in deciding such issues. As a case in point, since he believed that Scripture was silent on the question of whether God works entire sanctification gradually or instantaneously, experience became his primary resource for settling it.⁵⁵

One other dialogical contribution is evident in Wesley's various appeals to experience in doctrinal disputes. This contribution relates not to discerning whether a particular theological claim is acceptable, but whether it is central or essential to Christian faith. Between the poles of claims judged dangerously wrong and those considered essential to Christian faith there have always been a range of theological suggestions that were deemed allowable "opinions" but judged unworthy of greater doctrinal endorsement. Wesley assumed that scriptural and traditional warrant played roles in discerning where specific theological proposals fit within this spectrum, but his distinctive emphasis was on experiential evaluation of how the proposal either helped nurture or undercut holiness of Christian life!⁵⁶

What kind of "experience" could provide such an evaluation? The first insight in answering this question is to note that Wesley's emphasis on experience in the sense of individual subjective consciousness stayed fairly confined to the role of empowering Christ-like living. While this empowerment might flow in part from experience *confirming* Christian claims, Wesley specifically rejected the suggestion that he encouraged his followers to *derive* rules of conduct, let alone doctrine, from such inner "feelings."⁵⁷ This comes through even in his sermons

on the witness of the Spirit. While he presented the *event* of the witness as a matter of individual inward consciousness, his argument for affirming the *doctrine* of the witness of the Spirit started with his proposed scriptural warrant and then invoked the specifically corporate test of multiple public testimonies to verify his reading of scripture.⁵⁸

This focus on something public, corporate, and hopefully long-term was characteristic of Wesley's appeals to experience for purposes of doctrinal discernment. One form this took was his careful observation (as a "scientist" of spiritual realities) of the lives of his Methodist people and of the general populace. The best example is his prolonged consideration of the possibility for Christians to attain entire sanctification in this life. While Wesley believed that this possibility was affirmed in Scripture, he willingly acknowledged that if there were no living examples of attainment his reading of Scripture would be suspect. This led him to inquire routinely into how many had claimed such attainment, whether their lives evidenced a depth of Christian love and holiness to match this claim, and whether this character persisted over time.⁵⁹

The focus on a public, corporate, and long-term reality is even clearer when Wesley's appeals to experience involve the meaning of practical testing. These cases express his conviction that a central experiential test of disputed doctrinal issues is the long-term practical effects of each alternative in the life of the Christian community. To take just one example, he became increasingly vocal in rejecting the doctrine of unconditional election to salvation (and the interpretation of Scripture supporting it) because "repeated experience shows that it is not wholesome food—rather to [believers] it has the effect of deadly poison."⁶⁰

Of course, simply making the *object* of his observation and practical testing corporate would not insulate Wesley from the potential distortions of his mediating preconceptions. He shows some awareness of this liability when he criticizes appeals to practical experience by his opponents for focusing too selectively in their consideration.⁶¹ Though he never defended it in these exact terms, his emphasis on "conference" provided a means to help Wesley take this liability into account. Conference offered him access to other experiencing *subjects* who could test and enrich his preconceptions.

One way in which Wesley benefitted from conference in doctrinal discernment was by consulting the seasoned wisdom of past saints.

As he acknowledged in the preface to his *Sermons*, he routinely turned to the writings of those departed ones who were “experienced in the things of God” when he struggled with how to understand something in Scripture.⁶² In consulting such past figures Wesley was (largely unconsciously) challenging the Enlightenment’s “prejudice against preunderstandings” that had blinded it to how it prejudicially favored the experience of contemporary socially-privileged observers over all other human experience—past and present.⁶³

His implicit challenge to Enlightenment assumptions went further as Wesley found his perspective enriched (often in unanticipated ways) by formal and informal conference with contemporaries from very different social settings than his own. As one case in point, his extended interaction with gifted women in his movement eventually discredited his inherited prescriptions against women preaching.⁶⁴ Likewise, his frequent immersion in the lives of the poor in his societies helped him to see economic matters in a new light. He remarked for example that he had “lately had more experience” concerning instances of wronging widows and orphans that caused him to reconsider his initial assumption that the majority of English merchants were honest.⁶⁵

While these last examples should not be idealized, they support the insight that the experience which most benefitted Wesley in doctrinal reflection was not the elite observational experience of the Enlightenment scholar, let alone the elite inner experience of certain caricatured forms of mysticism.⁶⁶ It was the pastoral wisdom that is nurtured by practical testing in the daily corporate life of the Christian community and is enriched by conferring broadly with the experience of others, past and present.

Providing the Goad and Goal of Theological Reflection

There is one other major role of experience evident in Wesley’s theological activity, and it also contrasts with confinement of theology to the elite of the academic community. This role is best seen in historical perspective. Early Christian doctrinal reflection emerged in intimate connection with daily Christian life. The central contributing figures were pastors seeking to help their flocks live more faithfully as Christians. As a result, the ongoing corporate life (i.e., the “experience”) of the church served as the typical stimulus or goad, and the ultimate goal, of all their doctrinal reflection. Trained

in an Anglican context with its emphasis on the precedent of the first four Christian centuries, Wesley imbibed this early model of theology. In keeping with the model, he tended to engage doctrinal issues only at the time, and to the extent, that they emerged within the ongoing life of the Methodist movement. And he insisted that the highest purpose of Christian doctrine was providing practical guidance for Christian life in the world. By contrast, Western academic theology more generally has progressively severed this connection of theology to the daily life of the Christian community. The end result is that academic theology today is largely written by scholars for scholars in response to scholarly questions, and is seldom read by pastors—let alone the broader community. This is not to say that professional theologians are happy with this situation! Many are seeking ways to reintegrate doctrinal reflection into the life of the church. In this search, Wesley’s model of privileging the daily corporate life of the Christian community as the *goad* and *goal* of (as well as an important *guide* in) doctrinal reflection is receiving new appreciation.⁶⁷

Experience as Dialogical Partner

We began by noting how present United Methodist debate over theological method tends to frame the issue in terms of a stark dichotomy between valuing *my* experience or accepting *the* tradition. By now it should be clear that this way of framing the issue reflects the impact of both the Enlightenment critique of tradition and the subsequent questioning of the Enlightenment’s naive claim to absolute certainty. The perplexity created by this dual impact is how to avoid the besetting total relativism of post-Enlightenment culture without lapsing into uncritical traditionalism.

I have tried to show that we have a resource for addressing this perplexity in Wesley, with his dawning awareness of the limitations of Enlightenment certainty yet his refusal to embrace total relativism.⁶⁸ His way of dealing with this tension offers several potentially enriching counterpoints to tendencies in our present discussion, particularly in connection to the role of experience in Christian life and thought.⁶⁹

To begin with, Wesley’s recognition of the multi-faceted nature of “experience” calls into question the sharp contrast between experience and tradition that is so common in the current debate. This is

particularly evident with the sense of experience as “seasoned wisdom.” Such wisdom is a major component of tradition (including Scripture!). Thus, any adequate conception of the relation of experience and tradition must recognize overlaps alongside any contrasts.

This recognition calls into question the tendency of both sides in the current debate to view the role of experience in doctrinal discernment as that of an autonomous authority (which they either affirm or reject) weighing in against the authority of tradition or Scripture. Wesley’s more dialogical model of the contribution of the various criteria to doctrinal discernment stands as a promising alternative for our consideration.

Just as the various criteria must be kept in dialogue with one another, Wesley stressed the necessity of conference within the community of faith as we seek to interpret and apply the criteria. His example puts a particular stress on including past voices in this conferring, which are often slighted today. At the same time he reached beyond academic professionals to bring others into the conference, including some of the excluded voices that are rightly the focus of concern today.⁷⁰ Such truly inclusive conference holds the best hope for helping contemporary United Methodists to recognize our own preconceptions and achieve some mutual accountability.

Finally, Wesley’s overall practice of making the ongoing life of the Christian community the typical *goad*, a fruitful *guide* and the ultimate *goal* of his doctrinal reflection stands in sharp contrast to the distance between our privatized experience and our professionally-marginalized theology.

United Methodists have been at the forefront of those seeking to enrich our experience by including the experience of excluded contemporaries. If we were to add Wesley’s experience to this mix, it could help in recovering a truly enriching role of experience in our lives and theology!

Notes to Chapter Five

1. Letter to the editor, by Dolores Klinsky Walker, *United Methodist Reporter* 143.11 (2 August 1996): 2.
2. My survey is informed by the article on “Experience” in *The Oxford English Dictionary* (Revised edition; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989) 5:563–64; P.L. Heath, “Experience,” *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan, 1967) 3:156–58; and James Alfred Martin, Jr., “Religious Experience,” *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987) 12:323–30.
3. *Farther Appeal*, Pt. II, §III.9, *Works* 11:258.
4. See definition 4b.
5. Letter to Dr. Henry Stebbing (25 July 1739), §6, *Works* 25:671.
6. *The Christian’s Pattern; or, a Treatise of the Imitation of Christ*, Preface, §III.6, *Works* (Jackson) 14:207–8.
7. See respectively Sermon 98, “On Visiting the Sick,” §II.3, *Works* 3:390; and *Journal* (5 June 1772), *Works* 22:336.
8. See how often he adds this comment in *NT Notes*: Matt. 16:21, Matt. 23:34, John 17:13, Acts 22:19, Rom. 15:14, & Titus 2:3. But note as well his recognition that experience and age do not always go together, in Letter to Miss March (27 December 1774), *Letters* (Telford) 6:132.
9. *Journal* (14 October 1769), *Works* 22:207.
10. Cited in definition 1a in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.
11. While Wesley did not include a definition of “experience” in *The*

- Complete English Dictionary* (Third ed., London: Hawes, 1777), note that his definition for the closely related word “experiment” was “a proof, trial.”
12. See *Primitive Physick*, Preface, §9, *Works* (Jackson) 14:310.
 13. See *Primitive Physick*, Preface, §§4–7, *Works* (Jackson) 14:308–10.
 14. *Journal* (28 August 1736), *Works* 18:171.
 15. *Journal* (27 February 1740), *Works* 19:158.
 16. The best account of this project, focused on René Descartes, is Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (New York: Free Press, 1990).
 17. Cf. the discussion of epistemology in Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood, 1994), 27–28.
 18. *Letter to the Author of the “Enthusiasm of Methodists, etc.”*, §32, *Works* 11:374. See also *The Doctrine of Original Sin*, Part IV, Essay I, Sec. II, *Works* (Jackson) 9:386; where Wesley argues that claiming this life provides true happiness is “contrary to the common sense and experience of every thinking man.”
 19. Sermon 8, “The First-fruits of the Spirit,” §II.5, *Works* 1:239.
 20. See *Journal* (6 September 1742), *Works* 19:296; where Wesley interviews several persons who had testified about “feeling” the Spirit’s work. He affirms their claim in relation to feeling the work of the Spirit of God in bestowing peace and joy and love. But he was much more skeptical of such things as feeling the blood of Christ running down their arms.
 21. These debates are often framed in the language of coming to terms with our “post-modern” cultural situation. A good introduction to the issues involved is *The Truth about the Truth: De-Confusing and Re-Constructing the Postmodern World*, ed. Walter Truett Anderson (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1995).
 22. *Doctrine of Original Sin*, §II.13, *Works* (Jackson) 9:176.
 23. Sermon 44, “Original Sin,” *Works* 2:172–85, esp. §II.2, p. 176.
 24. See the discussion of these moves in Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Mirror and Memory: Reflections on Early Methodism* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1989), 106–49; and Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 124–27.
 25. Relate this to Wesley’s concession already in 1750 that we cannot be sure that “invincible ignorance” (our prejudices) does not influence all of our beliefs; in Sermon 39, “Catholic Spirit,” §I.5, *Works* 2:84.
 26. See Hume’s *Treatise of Human Nature*, 1.4.7; cf. Wesley, Sermon 128, “The Deceitfulness of the Human Heart,” §II.7, *Works* 4:158.
 27. See Sermon 11, “The Witness of the Spirit, II,” §V.2, *Works* 1:297.
 28. Letter to Mary Bishop (19 September 1773), *Letters* (Telford) 6:44.
 29. See Letter to Mrs. Ryan (28 June 1766), *Letters* (Telford) 5:16: “You appear to undervalue the experience of almost everyone in comparison of your own.”
 30. See his insistence that there is no holiness but social (i.e., com-

- munal) holiness in *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, Preface §§4–5, *Works* (Jackson) 14:321; and Sermon 24, “Sermon on the Mount, IV,” §I.1, *Works* 1:533–34. On the role of conference in deciding doctrine, note the agenda for Wesley’s conferences with his preachers set out in the Minutes of the very first meeting (25 June 1744), *Works* (Jackson) 8:275.
31. E.g., *The Character of a Methodist*, §13, *Works* 9:39; Sermon 10, “The Witness of the Spirit, I,” §I.8, *Works* 1:274; Sermon 24, “Sermon on the Mount, IV,” §III.2, *Works* 1:542; and Sermon 120, “The Unity of the Divine Being,” §17, *Works* 4:67.
 32. For more on Wesley’s moral psychology, see Randy L. Maddox, “Holiness of Heart and Life: Lessons from North American Methodism,” *Asbury Theological Journal* 51.1 (1996): 151–72.
 33. Cf. Sermon 10, “The Witness of the Spirit, I,” *Works* 1:269–84; Sermon 11, “The Witness of the Spirit, II,” *Works* 1:285–98; and Sermon 45, “The New Birth,” §IV.4, *Works* 2:201.
 34. Sermon 19, “The Great Privilege of Those Born of God,” §I.1–10, *Works* 1:432–34; Sermon 45, “The New Birth,” §II.4, *Works* 2:192; and Sermon 130, “On Living Without God,” *Works* 4:169–76.
 35. Note how he equates the witness of the Spirit with “inward feeling” in *Second Letter to the Author of “The Enthusiasm of Methodists etc.”*, §20, *Works* 11:399; and Sermon 11, “Witness of the Spirit, II,” §II.6, *Works* 1:288.
 36. For a handy summary of this material, see Jeffrey Chamberlain, “Moralism, Justification, and the Controversy over Methodism,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 44 (1993): 652–78, esp. 668–70.
 37. Cf. Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 130.
 38. See the discussion of the perceptibility of grace in Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 128–29. The charges against Wesley are evident throughout the appeals gathered in *Works*, Vol. 11. The debate was clouded by the failure of some of Wesley’s opponents to recognize that he was using “inspiration” in a traditional sense of “animating or exciting”(cf. *Ibid*, 121–22). One of his major qualifications is that while we experience the fruits of the Spirit’s inspiration inwardly, we must turn to the Bible to determine whence they come; in *Letter to the Rev. Dr. Rutherford* (28 March 1768), §III.1, *Letters* (Telford) 9:381.
 39. The most significant defense of Wesley’s basic notion (without reference to him per se) is in William Alston, *Perceiving God* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), esp. 250. For an example of how this notion might be appropriated in our post-Enlightenment setting, see William J. Abraham, “The Epistemological Significance of the Inner Witness of the Holy Spirit,” *Faith and Philosophy* 7 (1990): 434–50, esp. 447–48; and Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 131.
 40. See his Letter to Thomas Maxfield reproduced in *Journal* (29 October 1762), *Works* 21:396; and Sermon 37, “The Nature of Enthusiasm,” *Works* 2:46–60.
 41. See esp. Letter to Dorothy Furly (21 October 1757), *Letters* (Telford) 3:230; and Letter to Mary Cooke (30 October 1785), *Letters* (Telford) 7:298.

42. On Wesley's interest in the spiritual exemplars of the Early Church see Ted A. Campbell, *John Wesley and Christian Antiquity: Religious Vision and Cultural Change* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1991), 55–71. Then note his appreciation of what some older members of the Methodist societies have learned by “dear-bought experience” in Sermon 98, “On Visiting the Sick,” §III.5, *Works* 3:394.
43. Sermon 43, “The Scripture Way of Salvation,” §I.7, *Works* 2:159. I emphasized “unexperienced” because it was inserted by Wesley to explain the term “unskillful” in Macarius’ text (cf. Wesley’s *Christian Library* [1749] 1:97).
44. I think of works like Roberta C. Bondi, *Memories of God: Theological Reflections on a Life* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1995), 7–11.
45. The most complete edition is the corrected 4th ed. (London: Maxwell & Wilson, 1809), 5 vols. For more on Wesley’s empirical apologetic for God and debates about it, see Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 34–35 (including endnotes).
46. On depravity, see *Doctrine of Original Sin*, Part II, §II.20 (Jackson 9:295), Part III, §II (Jackson 9:318), Part III, §VII (Jackson 9:338), Part IV, Q. 1, §3 (Jackson 9:361); and Sermon 44, “Original Sin,” §II.2, *Works* 2:176. On human liberty, see Sermon 116, “What is Man?” §11, *Works* 4:24.
47. Perhaps the best example is in his Letter to Conyers Middleton, §II.12–§III.12, *Letters* (Telford) 2:383–87. Cf. Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 32.
48. See Letter to Samuel Furly (21 May 1762), *Letters* (Telford) 4:181; and Sermon 70, “The Case of Reason Impartially Considered,” §II.1–2, *Works* 2:593–94.
49. See the discussion of Wesley’s anthropology, including the role of Prevenient Grace, in Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 65–93.
50. Cf. his affirmation, “the World around us is a mighty volume wherein God hath declared himself”; in *Survey of the Wisdom of God* 2:125.
51. Sermon 21, “Sermon on the Mount, I,” §I.3, *Works* 1:476.
52. Note his formal defense of using experience to confirm Scripture in Sermon 11, “The Witness of the Spirit, II,” §V.2, *Works* 1:297.
53. E.g., Letter to Charles Wesley (31 July 1747), *Works* 26:255; and Sermon 13, “On Sin in Believers,” §III.7, *Works* 1:323. Note that in both cases he argues that his opponent’s position was contrary to Scripture as well as to experience. In reality, experience had helped him decide the most adequate understanding of Scripture on both issues.
54. *Plain Account of the People Called Methodists*, §VI.7, *Works* 9:269.
55. See Sermon 83, “On Patience,” §§11–12, *Works* 3:177–78. Cf. his Letter to Ann Loxdale (12 July 1782), *Letters* (Telford) 7:129, where he refers to experience as “the strongest of all arguments.” One must qualify this by remembering that he was dealing with a case on which he believed that Scripture was silent.
56. See Randy L. Maddox, “Opinion, Religion and ‘Catholic Spirit’: John Wesley on Theological Integrity,” *Asbury Theological Journal* 47 (1992): 63–87, pp. 75–76.

57. See *A Second Letter to the Author of "The Enthusiasm of Methodists etc."*, §20, *Works* 11:399; and *Letter to the Bishop of London*, §6, *Works* 11:337. Note as well his response to reliance on the "Inner Light," in *Letter to a Person Lately Joined with the People Called Quakers* (10 February 1748), *Letters* (Telford) 2:116–17.
58. See esp. Sermon 11, "Witness of the Spirit, II," §III.6, *Works* 1:290.
59. Cf. *Thoughts on Christian Perfection*, Qq. 37–38, *John Wesley*, 297–98; *Letter to Mrs. Ryan* (28 June 1766), *Letters* (Telford) 5:16; *Letter to Charles Wesley* (9 July 1766), *Letters* (Telford) 5:20; *Letter to Charles Wesley* (12 February 1767), *Letters* (Telford) 5:41; and *Letter to Miss March* (30 November 1774), *Letters* (Telford) 6:129. Cf. the *Letter to John from Charles Wesley* (28 February 1741), *Works* 26:52.
60. "Reasons Against a Separation from the Church of England," §III.2, *Works* 9:339–40. Cf. *Predestination Calmly Considered*, §86, *Works* (Jackson) 10:256; and Sermon 110, "Free Grace," *Works* 3:544–59.
61. Cf. his response to the appeal to experience by the quietists in Sermon 24, "Sermon on the Mount, IV," §III.6, *Works* 1:545.
62. Preface to first volume of *Sermons*, §5, *Works* 1:105–6.
63. See the discussion of this in Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (revised edition, New York: Crossroad, 1992), 265ff.
64. This story is told well in Paul W. Chilcote, *She Offered Them Christ: The Legacy of Women Preachers in Early Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993).
65. *Doctrine of Original Sin*, Part I, §II.11, *Works* (Jackson) 9:228. See as well in this regard: Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley's Evangelical Economics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), esp. 47–69; and Pamela D. Couture, *Blessed are the Poor? Women's Poverty, Family Policy and Practical Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), 119–34.
66. These examples of Wesley actually being benefitted by conference need to be balanced against his clear self-image that he came to his conferences with his preachers to dispense "light" (i.e., insight) while all he expected to derive from them was "heat" (i.e., motivational encouragement); cf. *Journal* (16 February 1760), *Works* 21:240.
67. For more on these points, see Randy L. Maddox, "Recovering Theology as a Practical Discipline: A Contemporary Agenda," *Theological Studies* 51 (1990): 650–72; and Maddox, "John Wesley – Practical Theologian?" *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 23 (1988): 122–47.
68. Note in this regard how he can admit that even the Anglican articles and homilies are products of fallible authors, yet insist that they are still *more* worthy of affirmation than most human compositions, in "Ought We to Separate from the Church of England?" §II.2, *Works* 9:569.
69. The reader may want to compare these suggestions to two recent (opposing) contributions to the present debate: John B. Cobb, Jr., *Grace and Responsibility: A Wesleyan Theology for Today* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 59–76; and William J. Abraham, *Waking from Doctrinal*

Amnesia: The Healing of Doctrine in the United Methodist Church (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995) 61–63. Note as well how Wesley’s model meets some of the concerns expressed in Owen C. Thomas, “Theology and Experience,” *Harvard Theological Review* 78 (1985): 179–201. Most of Wesley’s points find some mention in ¶68 of the United Methodist *Book of Discipline*, but they are presented in such grab-bag fashion that they have had little constructive impact on the debate.

70. See in this regard, Monika Hellwig, *Whose Experience Counts in Theological Reflection?* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1982).