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Theology of John and Charles Wesley

Randy L. Maddox

When “Methodism” was first identified—and criticized—within eighteenth-century British religious life, the most frequent target was George Whitefield. As this reminds us, there was a Calvinist strand of early Methodism that existed in some tension with the strand led by John and Charles Wesley. While a few remnants of Calvinist Methodism can still be found, it was the Wesleyan wing of the movement that flourished and spread across the globe, shaped by the theological contributions of the Wesley brothers. As a result, Methodism today is generally equated with its Wesleyan form and theological emphases.

Historical Background to John and Charles Wesley’s Theological Stance

The theological emphases of John and Charles Wesley, including points of divergence from their friend Whitefield, are best understood in light of the theological spectrum of their day. This spectrum was broad, due to the history that lay behind it.

The original split of the Church of England from Rome was more over jurisdictional matters than theological concerns. Henry VIII was no champion of Protestant agendas. Through his reign there were mixed influences of moderate Lutheranism and currents of the Reformed tradition with strong continuing Catholic sympathies. When Edward VI was enthroned (1549) the Reformed influences grew stronger, but this was abruptly halted by Edward’s death and the ascension of Mary Tudor (1553), who attempted to restore Roman Catholic primacy in England. While Mary’s short rule produced several hundred martyrs, it did not accomplish her broader goal. Elizabeth I quickly renewed the autonomy of the Church of England from Rome, and provided stability for this status through her extended tenure on the throne (1558–1603).

The Elizabethan church is often described as a *via media* (middle way) between Rome and Geneva (as center of the Reformed tradition). This description may fit when considering issues of church organization and liturgical

practice. Its adequacy for capturing the theological tone of this period is less clear. It suggests that the mainstream of the church held to moderating views on central issues like predestination and justification. Recent studies have built a strong case that the majority of church leaders and educated laity in the Elizabethan church were instead solidly Reformed in theological commitments, and stress how this identity carried over through the reign of James I (1603–25).¹

When Charles I took the throne in 1625, William Laud and some associates were given key leadership roles in the church. They emphasized episcopal authority, sacramental piety, and the use of liturgy and symbolism in worship, while downplaying or rejecting predestinarian theology. They justified these stances by appeal to a model of the *via media* that now did cast Geneva as the antipode to Rome. But for many English clergy and laity their moves appeared to be a covert reversion to “popery.” Reaction contributed to the outbreak of civil war in 1642 and the subsequent martyrdoms of Laud (1645) and Charles I (1649).

The Commonwealth government that displaced Charles I was dominated by Puritans and set about transforming the Church of England toward a presbyterian polity and replacing the *Book of Common Prayer* with a Reformed *Directory of Public Worship* and the *Articles of Religion* with the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. These were heady times for Puritans, but short-lived. Continuing political chaos led to the recall of Charles II to the throne in 1660, and soon after the restoration of the church to its pre-war standards of doctrine and practice. This was capped by the Act of Uniformity of 1662 which forced some 2,000 Puritan clergy out of the established church, effectively ending the dominance which Reformed or Calvinist theological emphases had held within the Church of England for over a century.

This dramatic change left the stream of seventeenth-century theologians who shared the emphases of Laud and supported Charles (hence, known as the “Caroline divines”) as the new centrist position within the Church of England. Since those who remained loyal to prayer-book religion and episcopacy during the interregnum had laid special claim to the title “Anglican,” this term has come to be reserved by most scholars to designate those *from this period forward* who stand in the stream flowing from the Caroline divines.

One of the deep concerns of the Caroline divines was to demonstrate continuity of their church with the broad Christian tradition, particularly in its primitive form. This led to a distinct flowering of patristic studies, and a particular interest in reintroducing many of the Eastern (Greek-writing) Christian theologians that had been relatively neglected in the (Latin) West.² Lest this be seen as a turn to antiquarianism, it is important to note that these divines often invoked the example of the early Christian apologists as warrant for equally engaging the Enlightenment emphases on reason and scientific

explanation spreading in British culture. Indeed, the most characteristic feature of emerging “Anglican” theology was its methodological emphasis on the importance of *integrating* consideration of scripture, tradition, and reason—as opposed to the one-sided alternatives of biblicism, traditionalism, or rationalism.

The Caroline divines generally shared Laud’s view that the doctrine of unconditional reprobation makes “the God of all mercies to be the most fierce and unreasonable tyrant in the world.”³ This placed them in the Arminian camp of the current debates in the Reformed arena, even if their rejection of the Augustinian model of God’s unilateral action in salvation drew more from alternative voices in the Early Church than from Jacob Arminius or other Remonstrants.

The Caroline divines also shared a deep uneasiness with antinomian themes developed by some Reformed writers defending justification by faith *alone*. Jeremy Taylor was particularly prominent in developing an alternative conception of justifying faith, which emphasized the vital connection of true faith with obedience and love. Drawing on the title of one his books (*The Rule and Exercises of Holy Living*), those contemporaries who shared Taylor’s stress are often designated “holy living divines.” For some scholars they epitomize the regrettable turn from authentic Reformation theology toward moralism; for others, they represent a long-needed reintroduction of Eastern Christian emphases in spirituality into the Augustinian West.⁴

Toward the end of the reign of Charles II there were mounting calls to broaden the range of accepted doctrinal emphases and liturgical practices within the Church of England, with a goal of reincorporating the Puritans who had been pushed out into (minimally tolerated) dissenting churches in the 1660s. This support crumbled when James II succeeded to the throne in 1685. James had converted to the Roman church and pushed to include Roman Catholics in the circle to be embraced—or at least tolerated. For the vast majority of his citizens, including the Anglican bishops, this was too much. The staunchly Reformed William of Orange, who was married to James’s daughter Mary (also Protestant), was encouraged to invade and soon drove James into exile. William was then put on the throne, with support for this move gathered in part by issuing the Act of Toleration in 1689, which granted freedom of worship to all dissenting Trinitarian churches *except* Roman Catholics.

In opting for toleration of the Puritan dissenters (rather than their incorporation), the Anglican stance of the Church of England was solidified. But William’s replacement of James II also triggered a rebalancing of this stance. A group of nine bishops and over 300 clergy refused to take the Oath of Allegiance to William and Mary, on the grounds that they had sworn the same oath to James II—who was still alive—and could not break it. These

“non-jurors”⁵ were strong Anglicans, putting particular stress on conformity to the teaching and practice of the Early Church. Part of their hesitation was the lack of precedent in the Early Church for supporting a revolution against a reigning sovereign. When they were deprived of their positions in 1689, becoming a splinter tradition that dwindled over the coming century, the Anglican stance of the established church was left less “primitivist,” and somewhat less “high-church.”

In contrast with its predecessor, the eighteenth century was void of major political changes that directly shifted theological stances in the Church of England. From the final stage of the Stuart reign under Queen Anne (1702–14) through the successive Hanoverians (George I, II, and III) the general Anglican commitments of the church remained in place. There was a relative tone of peace and unity within the church. The differences that were present are best understood as varying *tendencies*, rather than as aggressively competing parties.⁶

The most significant divergent tendencies related to the cultural spread of Enlightenment convictions. To be sure, these convictions took more moderate expression in Britain than they did in continental Europe, and were generally less antagonistic toward religion.⁷ If anything, they reinforced the Arminian and holy living emphases characteristic of Anglicanism. But they also posed challenges for the Anglican emphasis on the unity of Christian tradition, scripture, and reason. In particular, the Enlightenment tendency to question *traditional* authority opened the door to suggestions that later doctrinal formulations (like the doctrine of the Trinity) were not organic developments from scripture but ill-fitting metaphysical impositions upon it. This inclined a growing number of Church of England clergy toward the “latitudinarian” stance that only the clear teachings of scripture should be considered essential to affirm, placing traditional doctrinal elaborations in the category of non-essential “opinions.” A much smaller, and more radical, group of deist “free thinkers,” like John Toland and Matthew Tindal, rejected the privileging of scripture, turning to “natural religion” as the normative basis for belief and practice.

One other dynamic in eighteenth-century religious life that must be mentioned is the evangelical revival that bubbled up in continental European pietism, spilled over to Britain, and spread to North America.⁸ At the core of this “religion of the heart” was the concern not to equate Christian identity with mere church affiliation or intellectual affirmation of Christian doctrine. In reaction to their perception of such tendencies, pietists emphasized the importance of a *personal* faith in Christ’s atoning work that is evidenced by a specific *experience* of assurance (the “witness of the Holy Spirit”). They also developed some innovative structures and practices to nurture this personal experience of faith.

John and Charles Wesley's Stance within their Theological Context

The Wesley brothers had connections with most of the currents just surveyed. Their grandfathers on both sides—John Westley (c. 1636–70) and Samuel Annesley (c. 1620–96)—were Puritan clergy expelled from the established church when Charles II was recalled. Yet both of their parents opted, as young adults, to return to the established church. Samuel and Susannah clearly shared the Anglican convictions concerning predestination, holy living, primitivism, high-church spirituality, and the like. Their most famous disagreement was over William of Orange replacing James II, which Samuel supported while Susannah joined in the “non-juror” dissent. Thus John and Charles imbibed classic Anglican sensibilities in their youth, including the deep appreciation for Early Church doctrine and practice championed by the non-jurors. These commitments were reinforced by their Oxford training, which privileged the writings of the Caroline divines. But they were also exposed to the currents of Enlightenment thought in their academic work. And on their trip to Georgia they made contact with the emerging evangelical movement in its Moravian form. This contact facilitated their spiritual renewal in 1738, and the beginnings of the Methodist revival.

Interweaving these influences, the mature theological stance of both John and Charles Wesley was Anglican at its center, shaped by the holy living divines, with overtones of the non-jurors' particular appreciation for the earliest church. It was also permeated throughout by the pietist emphasis on experiencing the empowering work of the Holy Spirit. Grounded in this focus, the brothers shared a notable willingness to draw upon moderate Reformed voices (within the earlier established church and present dissenting traditions) and recent Roman Catholic mystical writers (mainly in France and Spain).⁹ Both the focus and the breadth of these commitments are evident in the remnants of the brothers' personal libraries.¹⁰ The core of the collections is composed of Anglican doctrinal standards and the writings of Early Church fathers. This is surrounded by the works of Caroline divines like Benjamin Calamy, John Pearson, and Robert Sanderson; holy living divines like Richard Allestree and Jeremy Taylor; and eighteenth-century Anglican stalwarts like Francis Atterbury, John Potter, and William Wake. But there is also a solid representation of pietist writers and moderate Puritan voices like Isaac Ambrose, Richard Baxter, and Isaac Watts, along with a sprinkling of Roman Catholic authors. Significantly, the same focus and breadth are evident in the selection of writings that John Wesley recommended to his Methodist people in the fifty-volume *Christian Library* (1749–55).¹¹

This raises the question of how the Wesley brothers conceived the relationship between their focal convictions and their openness to those with differing convictions. John was more articulate on this point than Charles, and a bit

more pliant.¹² Prior to their contact with the Moravians, both John and Charles were ardent defenders of the high-church Anglican stance on most issues. This fervor was redirected as they embraced the pietist emphasis on personal assurance of God's love as the heart of "real" Christianity. John once expressed this new emphasis in the contrast that "orthodoxy, or right opinions, is, at best, but a very slender part of religion."¹³ When questioned, he denied that he was dismissing all concern for doctrine in Christian life; he was only stressing that Christian life involved more than *mere* affirmation of correct doctrine. But over time John sketched a hierarchy of significance among theological claims that overlapped somewhat with latitudinarian emphases. He affirmed that there are core doctrinal convictions, central to scripture and the early creeds (Trinity, incarnation, human sin, atonement, etc.), that are essential to Christian life and constitutive of Christian identity. Those who deny these convictions place themselves outside the Christian fold. But he was quick to insist that there is room for legitimate variation of "opinion" in philosophical articulation of these core doctrines.¹⁴ Moreover, there are a number of theological debates that are less clearly defined in scripture and the creeds, and are, correspondingly, less pivotal to authentic Christian life. In the sermon "Catholic Spirit," John encouraged his readers to allow for alternative "opinions" on these debates while maintaining Christian fellowship with all who agree on the "main branches of Christian doctrine."¹⁵ As a specific case in point, while he staunchly rejected unconditional predestination, John Wesley usually classed this difference with Whitefield and the Calvinist wing of the Methodist revival as a matter of "opinion" that should not rupture their cooperation in ministry.¹⁶

Forms of John and Charles Wesley's Theological Activity

The Anglican setting of John and Charles Wesley is reflected in the dominant forms of their theological activity.¹⁷ Through the second millennium, as specialized academic institutions took over the task of training clergy, it became common in Western Christianity to identify serious theological activity with the curricular forms in this new setting—compendiums, *summae*, systematic theologies, apologetic treatises, and the like. This stood in some contrast with the Early Church, where theology was centered in the pastoral task of guiding the formation of Christian belief and character in believers, and the most prized forms were materials like hymns, liturgies, catechetical orations, and spiritual discipline manuals. When Henry VIII severed the continental oversight of the Church of England, the leadership he put in place turned to the Early Church for normative guidance. Embracing the earlier precedent, they privileged the theological forms of liturgies (the *Book of Common Prayer*) and catechetical sermons (the *Homilies*), alongside the *Articles of Religion*.

Likewise, manuals for clergy candidates in the Church of England, including the one that John Wesley read before his ordination, typically stressed that “theology is doubtless a *practical science*” and located its focal task in the work of pastoral theologians (or “divines”) guiding Christian communities.¹⁸ Thus, John and Charles Wesley naturally understood their role as shepherds of a renewal movement within the church to be the work of divines. They were also readily drawn to exercise this task through forms likely to impact the range of believers.

One form that they prized was hymnody. John’s early *Collections of Psalms and Hymns* (1737, 1738, 1741) were among the first to introduce congregational hymns into formal Anglican worship.¹⁹ While Charles soon proved the more gifted creator of hymns and other religious verse, John’s appreciation for the formative power of this genre led to publishing a series of hymnbooks for Methodist (and broader) worship, including the definitive 1780 *Collection of Hymns for the People called Methodists* that he characterized as a “little body of experimental and practical divinity.”²⁰ Charles complemented John’s broader volumes with booklets of hymns on each of the major Christian festivals, as well as collections for use in family worship, etc..

Preaching was another prominent activity of both brothers. They valued sermons for more than just their motivational impact, viewing them as significant means of shaping the faith and actions of believers. After all, they inherited from their father the Anglican privileging of sermons as a key way for pastoral theologians to convey to their congregations “the whole body of divinity.”²¹ This was surely John’s goal in publishing the volumes of his *Sermons on Several Occasions*, as models for his lay preachers and to benefit the larger Methodist family.

Early Church and Anglican precedent also help explain the amount of time that John devoted to producing other practical-theological materials for the movement—such as re-crafting the liturgy in the *Book of Common Prayer* to provide the *Sunday Service* for his followers in North America after they won independence from the British crown and established church, gathering selective *Explanatory Notes* to guide lay readers through the Old and New Testaments, and republishing numerous abridgements of his favorite devotional and catechetical materials by other authors. Isabel Rivers has even argued that John’s *Journal* may be the most important work of “practical divinity” in the eighteenth century.²²

This latter valuation points toward an important distinction. Eighteenth-century English authors typically identified three genres of theology: 1) practical divinity, focused on nurturing and forming believers; 2) doctrinal or speculative divinity, concerned with articulation and defense of specific doctrines as normative; and 3) controversial divinity, devoted to criticizing on rational, historical, or scriptural grounds the beliefs and practices of rival

groups. There is obvious overlap between the concerns of each genre, but their focal purpose drew the varying genres toward different literary forms. Practical divinity found a natural home in “first-order” forms used in Christian worship and devotional practice—liturgy, catechisms, prayer guides, and the like. The other two genres were more often expressed in essays, tracts, and monographs.

The majority of the Wesley brothers’ publications fit within the focus and literary forms of practical divinity. John repeatedly defended this preference by a quote from the Early Church: “God made practical divinity necessary; the devil, controversial.”²³ But both John and Charles recognized that the formative task of pastoral theologians required attention at times to normative and apologetic concerns. Charles typically remained in lyrical mode when addressing these concerns, as in his satirical attack on unconditional election in *Hymns of God’s Everlasting Love* (1741–42). It is hard to imagine singing many of these in corporate worship, and few found their way into John’s collections. John more conventionally adopted tracts or essays when focused on normative or apologetic concerns. Some of his essays were book-length, with *The Doctrine of Original Sin* (1757) being the longest monograph he ever published.

Shared Convictions of John and Charles Wesley’s Theology

What characteristic theological convictions are found in this range of materials from the hands of John and Charles Wesley? A comprehensive survey is beyond the scope of this essay.²⁴ But a general orientation will aid readers in preparing for further study. The brothers shared broad areas of agreement on theological matters. Thus, hymns of Charles are often the best illustrations of points that John makes in sermons. But there were also some points of tension. I will highlight central shared convictions before touching on the most prominent tensions.

To begin with theological method, the brothers strongly endorsed the Protestant emphasis on the primacy of scripture. Indeed, they placed study of scripture at the heart of Christian life. John encouraged Methodists to read both the Old and New Testament daily, providing them with the *Explanatory Notes*; while Charles adopted a routine of writing reflective hymns on passages of scripture (a type of lyrical *lectio divina*). But the brothers rejected any suggestion that theology could be based on scripture *alone*. In good Anglican fashion, they valued the insights of tradition in interpreting scripture, and frequently appealed to both reason and experience in defending a theological stance.

This means that inquiry into John or Charles Wesley’s convictions on a theological issue should always begin by noting what they shared in common

with broader Christian tradition and their Anglican peers. Too much focus on their distinctive claims is likely to overlook central assumed convictions, and thereby distort the claims it highlights. The precedent of the brothers is more promising. They typically endorsed the Anglican standards, then highlighted their concern by appeal to the standards. A good example is John's publication (encouraged by Charles) of an extract from the *Homilies* early in the revival, to defend their embrace of the pietist emphasis on assurance of one's saving relationship to Christ. The extract placed in italics every insistence in the selected homilies that defined faith as including a *sure trust and confidence* in God's mercy.²⁵

In this same vein, the Wesley brothers typically rejected attempts to define Methodism by its distinctive doctrines, emphasizing instead a distinctive concern for spiritual life.²⁶ At most, they were willing to concede that Methodists placed special emphasis upon certain traditional doctrines, particularly in the area of soteriology. Their characteristic concern in this area was to reclaim a more holistic account of the human problem and of God's salvific response.

On one front this meant defending the universal reality of human spiritual need, in the face of idealized accounts of human nature by some Enlightenment thinkers. John's *Doctrine of Original Sin* (1757) was devoted to this concern. Characteristically, the treatise focuses less on debates over inherited guilt, or the modes of transmitting depravity, than on demonstrating the shared human experience of spiritual infirmity and bondage. Imagery of spiritual infirmity permeates Charles's hymns as well.

Turning the focus around, the Wesleys were equally concerned to reject depictions of depravity as the final word about humanity. As good Anglicans, convinced that "God's mercy is over all God's works" (Ps. 145:9), they insisted that God reaches out in love to all persons in their fallen condition. Through that encounter, which they termed "prevenient grace,"²⁷ God awakens sufficient awareness and upholds sufficient volitional integrity that we can *either* responsively embrace God's deeper salvific work in our lives *or* culpably resist it.

This brings us to the brothers' dominant soteriological concern—countering the tendency of many to restrict the present benefits of salvation largely to forensic justification. As John put it: "By salvation I mean, not barely (according to the vulgar notion) deliverance from hell, or going to heaven, but a present deliverance from sin, a restoration of the soul to its primitive health."²⁸ Both John and Charles placed sanctification at the center of soteriology, valuing justification as the doorway into this larger focus. They called their Methodist followers to "holiness of heart and life" nurtured in the full range of the "means of grace." One of their enduring contributions was emphasis on the many ways in which the Lord's Supper sustains Christian life, epitomized in the 1745 collection of *Hymns on the Lord's Supper*.²⁹

Given the coherence of the Christian worldview, these focal concerns in soteriology were reflected in characteristic emphases within the other loci of theology. For example, both John and Charles present God's reigning attribute as love—in specific contrast with sovereignty. They also placed strong emphasis on the responsive relationship between God and humanity, which opened the door for some later Wesleyans to question atemporal models of God's existence.³⁰

The Wesley brothers stood with the Anglican Articles of Religion in affirming the two natures of Christ and the role of Christ's death in satisfying God's justice. But several scholars have noted how Charles's hymns in particular offer a rich range of images for appreciating that Christ's death not only atoned for guilt but freed us from slavery to sin, convinced us of God's wondrous love, and renewed us in the divine image.³¹ Their broader soteriological concerns also led the brothers to emphasize relating to Christ "in all his offices"—not just as the priest who atones for guilt, but also as the prophet who teaches the ways in which we are to live, and as the king who oversees the restoration of wholeness in our lives.

Moving to pneumatology, the Wesley brothers focused more attention on the work of the Holy Spirit than was common in their Anglican setting. It began with stress on the assurance of God's pardoning love, or the "witness of the Spirit," which evokes and empowers a believer's responsive love for God and neighbor. They then emphasized how this "new birth" makes possible the journey of sanctification, or growth in the "fruit of the Spirit." Add to this John's concern in particular to reclaim (within the Western tradition) the "gifts of the Spirit," like the gift of preaching, for lay men and women. The combination of emphases led a contemporary opponent to characterize their movement as "Montanus revived."³² More recently, scholars are prone to see this recovered emphasis on the work of the Spirit as a significant contribution to the renewal of Trinitarian theology in Anglicanism.³³

Divergences between John and Charles Wesley

The shared convictions of the Wesley brothers were substantial and broad ranging, contributing to the coherence of their movement. But there were some areas of divergence in view, which found echoes in the broader movement. One prominent difference concerned the potential of a split between Methodists and the Church of England. Charles was clearly the stronger "Church Methodist."³⁴ He was committed to the revival of *The Church of England*, while John was more committed to the *revival* of The Church of England. This difference played over into their disagreements on other topics, such as the use of lay preachers.

Some differences between the brothers may have reflected their personalities. John was generally healthy and optimistic in outlook, while Charles endured significant physical suffering and was frequently melancholy.³⁵ This possibly contributed to their divergence on the question of whether suffering was integral to spiritual growth. Charles readily spoke of the “sad necessity of pain” for growth in holiness, while John consistently rejected such causal connection.³⁶ On this point Charles stands closer to the classic spiritual emphasis on the “dark night of the soul.”

Moving beyond the relative contribution of suffering, John and Charles diverged sharply in the aftermath of the perfectionist controversy of the 1760s over the stress they had earlier placed on attaining *entire* sanctification, or “Christian Perfection” in this life. While John continued for some time to encourage hope that one could enter into this experience soon after justification, Charles increasingly ridiculed such hope and discouraged anyone from testifying to the experience.³⁷ The possibilities, limits, and dynamics of sanctification have been central to Methodist proclamation and debate ever since (see the article on Methodism and the Holiness Movement).

One other divergence is worthy of note. John Wesley’s optimism about the transformative impact of the Spirit in individual lives led him to embrace an early form of postmillennialism in his later years. This move was reflected in his encouragement of the Methodist people to get involved not just in works of mercy but also in the work of social transformation.³⁸ By contrast, Charles took on the apocalyptic tones of premillennialism in the midst of natural disasters and wars during the 1750s, then retreated to the eschatological agnosticism typical of amillennialism in his later years.³⁹

Reception and Transmission of Wesleyan Theology in Methodism

The theological contributions of John and Charles Wesley played a significant formative role in the early development of Methodism. They also continue to hold some type of *normative* status in most bodies of world Methodism. This role goes back to the “model deed,” which was adopted in 1763, in response to Calvinist Methodist preachers using preaching houses that John Wesley had built to turn audiences against Arminian theology. The deed restricted the pulpit in these chapels to persons who preached in accordance with the four volumes of John’s *Sermons* currently in print (1746–60) and his *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* (1755). This set a precedent for Methodists in the Wesleyan wing of the movement that their theological teaching should emulate both the Wesley brothers’ embrace of the core doctrines of classic Christianity and characteristic Wesleyan emphases within these doctrines.

This precedent was formalized when the remnants of the Methodist societies in North America were gathered after the Revolutionary War and

organized as The Methodist Episcopal Church in 1784. John sent over for the new church an abridged set of the Articles of Religion of the Church of England, to serve as the affirmation of core Christian doctrine. He also expected them to continue preaching in accordance with his *Sermons* and *Notes*. Although the two sides of this expectation are not formally adopted in every current branch of the Methodist family of churches, the general expectation remains.⁴⁰

When attention turns from formal expectations to the realities of practice, it is arguable that the continuity of Wesleyan themes in Methodist theology is due more to the popularity of some of Charles's hymns than to John's doctrinal publications.⁴¹ After John's death, Methodists in England tended to align with the dissenting traditions. This was even more the case in North America, where the main peers surrounding Methodism were Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Baptists. In these peer settings theological standards were generally conceived on the model of John Calvin's *Institutes*. They made clear that John Wesley's *Sermons* did not measure up! This pushed Methodists to develop scholastic compendiums of theology. These compendiums were generally conservative in scope and much more Protestant in tone than Wesley's precedent. Indeed, the compendiums rarely cited either Wesley brother, and then almost exclusively in the section on soteriology. The most prominent example is Richard Watson's *Theological Institutes* (1823–24), the standard theology text in Methodist circles for over fifty years.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, Methodist theologians in both England and North America were interacting more with currents in their culture. They also turned attention to the new theological trends being championed in Germany. This resulted, by the turn of the century, in a stream of "modernist" or "liberal" Methodist theologies. Mixed within this stream were concerns for cultural apologetics, for undergirding the Social Gospel, and for addressing the challenge of the historical and natural sciences. Many of these agendas resonated with Wesleyan emphases, and there was the occasional attempt to claim John Wesley as a forerunner. The more common tendency was to ignore his writings as products of an outmoded age.

In the mid-twentieth century the optimism of liberal theology was subject to critique by the movement known as Neo-orthodoxy. Methodists who resonated with this critique, but who were less comfortable with the one-sided alternatives being championed, began to reclaim the Wesley brothers' soteriological balance. A landmark in this renewed theological interest was the volume on *John Wesley* that Albert C. Outler published in 1964, as part of Oxford University Press's Library of Protestant Thought. It sold more copies than any other volume in the series, demonstrating growing interest in Wesleyan theology in Methodist circles and beyond.

This interest fueled the growth of Wesley Studies as a scholarly field through the second half of the twentieth century. The Oxford Institute of Methodist

Theological Studies began gathering scholars for periodic conferences in 1958, with the Wesleys as a frequent focus of attention. A new scholarly journal on *Methodist History* was launched in 1962. The Wesleyan Theological Society was formed in 1965, issuing its own *Wesleyan Theological Journal*. A Wesleyan Studies Group was organized at the American Academy of Religion in 1982. In 1988 Abingdon Press launched the Kingswood Book series, dedicated to Wesleyan and Methodist scholarship. The Charles Wesley Society was added to the mix in 1990. And chairs of Wesley Studies have been established at such universities as Duke, Southern Methodist and Vanderbilt, as well as several research centers.⁴²

This growing scholarly interest has been paralleled in many of the denominations in the Methodist family by increased expectation of studying the theological writings of the Wesley brothers in ministerial education.

Growing Edges in Study of the Theology of John and Charles Wesley

As scholarship on the theology of the Wesley brothers developed, some interpretive issues emerged. Most of these are finding resolution. For example, there is now broad agreement about the need to take their Anglican stance seriously, avoiding readings that lean too heavily in either a Protestant or Catholic (East or West) direction. Similarly, the importance of studying the range of the brothers' writings, not just those given "official" status in Methodist settings, is generally acknowledged. Finally, most scholars concur on the need to recognize—but not exaggerate—the transitions in John Wesley's thought between his early writings (1733–38), his middle writings (1738–65), and his most mature theological works (1765–91).⁴³

In recent decades, about ten books or dissertations have appeared annually on John and Charles Wesley, as well as several journal articles. At their best, these embrace at least the first half of the task that Albert Outler articulated for "Phase III" of Wesley Studies in 1985: analyzing the Wesley brothers on various topics with a broad and nuanced sense of their context and their sources.⁴⁴ A perusal of recent dissertations will notice several focal themes.⁴⁵ There has been significant interest, for example, in clarifying John Wesley's epistemology, showing that his "empiricism" is grounded in the Aristotelian logical tradition at Oxford and stands in some tension with John Locke.⁴⁶ Another topic of high interest has been John's grounding of the holy life in the "tempers" or "affections," exploring resonance with the model of a "virtue ethic" in Aquinas and others.⁴⁷

While focus on John still predominates in theological studies, there are promising signs of Charles receiving more scholarly consideration. A fitting exemplar is the insightful contextual analysis of the theme of suffering in

Charles's hymns, which shows how the hymns helped early Methodists make sense of and draw spiritual benefit from the suffering that they endured.⁴⁸

Returning to John, the range of topics being considered has broadened in recent years. For example, there has been attention to the theological dimensions of his interest in medicine and the natural sciences.⁴⁹ Likewise, suggestions of the significance of his theological account of conversion and sanctification for psychology have led to a series of interdisciplinary articles, and even the creation of The Society for the Study of Psychology and Wesleyan Theology.⁵⁰

As this suggests, many of the recent studies are building on their careful contextual study with exploration of the second half of Outler's vision for Phase III: continuing the trajectory that John and Charles began, addressing new issues in light of their characteristic convictions and concerns.

Editions of John and Charles Wesley's Theological Writings

The long standard, and still broadly used, collection of John Wesley's *Works* was edited by Thomas Jackson, and released in 1829–31. There are many limitations to this edition. In the first place, it is not complete. Not only was Jackson unaware of some of John's writings, he omitted portions that he thought reflected badly on Wesley. For example, in the setting after Methodism had separated from the Church of England, Jackson omitted items where Wesley stressed his connection to the Church (such as the extract from the *Homilies*.) Secondly, Jackson is not consistent in which edition of various Wesley publications he prints, nor does he indicate variants between editions. Thirdly, Jackson only rarely indicates the sources from which Wesley drew many of his publications. Finally, Jackson's edition provides little introductory material or annotations to set Wesley's writings in context.

One of the key moments in Wesley Studies was the launch in 1960 of the Wesley Works Editorial Project, dedicated to producing the first critical edition of John Wesley's writings.⁵¹ It addresses all of the shortcomings of the Jackson edition, and much more. Sixteen out of the projected thirty-five volumes are now in print as *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*. They have become the standard for scholarly study of John Wesley.

Until the *Bicentennial Edition* is complete, however, it will be necessary for students to draw as well on the Jackson edition, as well as other resources listed in the Select Bibliography. Readers should be aware that there is a cd-rom version of the major sections of the *Bicentennial Edition* that are in print.⁵² For convenience, this cd-rom also includes the complete Jackson edition. The Jackson edition is also available online in several locations.⁵³

The situation is somewhat similar regarding Charles Wesley's works. Once again, Thomas Jackson issued *The Journal of Charles Wesley* (1849), a two-volume set that included a selection of private letters and poems. This was soon complimented by a thirteen-volume set of *The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley* (1868–72), edited by George Osborn. Both works have significant limitations. Fortunately, students have a growing set of scholarly editions as alternatives. The select bibliography lists print editions of Charles's sermons, his manuscript journal (in more complete and accurate form than in Jackson), and the poetry that Charles left in manuscript which Osborn omitted. Print editions of all of Charles's letters are in process.⁵⁴ In addition, readers should note the project to make all of Charles's poetry available online in annotated edition at the Center for Studies in the Wesleyan Tradition.⁵⁵

For Further Reading

John Wesley's Works

The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley. General Editors, Frank Baker & Richard P. Heitzenrater. Nashville: Abingdon, 1984ff. [Volumes 7, 11, 25, and 26 appeared first as the *Oxford Edition of The Works of John Wesley*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1975–83.]

A Christian Library: Consisting of Extracts from and Abridgments of the Choicest Pieces of Practical Divinity Which have been Published in the English Tongue. 50 vols. Bristol: Farley, 1749–55.

Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament. 3rd edition, 2 vols. Bristol: Graham and Pine, 1760–62 (many later reprints).

Explanatory Notes upon the Old Testament. 3 vols. Bristol: Pine, 1765; reprint ed., Salem, OH: Schmul, 1975.

John Wesley's Prayer Book: The Sunday Service of the Methodists in North America. Edited by James F. White. Akron, Ohio: OSL Publications, 1995.

The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M. 8 vols. Edited by John Telford. London: Epworth, 1931.

A Survey of the Wisdom of God in the Creation, or A Compendium of Natural Philosophy. 4th edition. London: J. Paramore, 1784.

The Works of John Wesley. 14 vols. 3rd ed. Edited by Thomas Jackson. London: J. Mason, 1829–31; reprint ed., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1979.

Charles Wesley's Works

The Manuscript Journal of the Rev. Charles Wesley, M.A. 2 vols. Edited by S T Kimbrough Jr. & Kenneth G. C. Newport. Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2008.

The Sermons of Charles Wesley: A Critical Edition with Introduction and Notes. Edited by Kenneth G. C. Newport. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

The Unpublished Poetry of Charles Wesley. 3 vols. Edited by S T Kimbrough, Jr. & Oliver A. Beckerlegge. Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 1988–92.

Introductory and Survey Studies

Abraham, William J. *Wesley for Armchair Theologians*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005.

Collins, Kenneth Joseph. *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace*. Nashville: Abingdon, 2007.

Maddox, Randy L. *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology*. Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994.

Rattenbury, J. [John] Ernest. *The Evangelical Doctrines of Charles Wesley's Hymns*. London: Epworth, 1941.

Notes

1. A good survey of scholarship on this period is Dewey D. Wallace Jr., “*Via Media? A Paradigm Shift,*” *Anglican and Episcopal History* 72 (2003): 2–21.

2. See esp. Leslie W. Barnard, "The Use of the Patristic Tradition in the Late Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Century," in R. Bauckham & B. Drewery, eds., *Scripture, Tradition and Reason* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), 174–203; and Robert D. Cornwall, "The Search for the Primitive Church: The Use of Early Church Fathers in the High Church Anglican Tradition, 1680–1745," *Anglican and Episcopal History* 59 (1990): 303–29.
3. William Laud, "Answer to the Lord Say's Speech," in *The History of the Troubles and Trial of ... William Laud*, 2 vols. (London: Richard Chiswell, 1695–1700), 1:503.
4. Compare the negative evaluation of Taylor in C. FitzSimons Allison, *The Rise of Moralism: The Proclamation of the Gospel from Hooker to Baxter* (Wilton, CT: Morehouse Barlow, 1966) with the positive evaluation in Rowan A. Greer, *Christian Hope and Christian Life* (New York: Herder, 2001).
5. *Jurare* in Latin means to take an oath.
6. See John Walsh & Stephen Taylor, "Introduction: the Church and Anglicanism in the 'long' Eighteenth Century," in *The Church of England, c. 1689–c. 1833* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 1–64.
7. Cf. Roy Porter, "The Enlightenment in England," in R. Porter & M. Teich, eds., *The Enlightenment in National Context* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 1–18; and David Bebbington, "Revival and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century England," in A. Walker & K. Aune, eds., *On Revival. A Critical Examination* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003), 71–86.
8. Good overviews are Ted Campbell, *The Religion of the Heart* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991); and W. R. Ward, *The Protestant Evangelical Awakening* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992).
9. Cf. Robert Clarence Monk, *John Wesley: His Puritan Heritage*, 2nd edn. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1999); and Jean Orcibal, "The Theological Originality of John Wesley and Continental Spirituality," in R.E. Davies and E.G. Rupp, eds., *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain* (London: Epworth, 1965), 1:83–111.
10. See <http://www.divinity.duke.edu/wesleyan/research/wesley.html> for a set of articles detailing these collections.
11. See the analysis in Monk, *John Wesley*, 247–54.
12. For more details on what follows, see Randy L. Maddox, "Opinion, Religion, and 'Catholic Spirit': John Wesley on Theological Integrity," *Asbury Theological Journal* 47/1 (1992): 63–87.
13. For example, *A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists*, I.2, *Works*, 9:254–55.
14. For example, Sermon 55, "On the Trinity," §3, *Works*, 2:376–77.
15. Sermon 39, "Catholic Spirit," *Works*, 2:81–95.
16. His fluctuating sense of what is at stake in the debate over unconditional election is traced in Allan Coppedge, *John Wesley in Theological Debate* (Wilmore, KY: Wesley Heritage Press, 1987).
17. For a more detailed discussion of what follows, see Randy L. Maddox, "John Wesley—Practical Theologian?" *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 23 (1988): 122–47.
18. See George Bull, *A Companion for the Candidates of Holy Orders* (London: Richard Smith, 1714), 18. John records reading this in his Oxford diary on 18 September 1725.
19. Anglican worship to that point was typically restricted to singing psalms. Hymns were more common in dissenting traditions and the continental pietists. Wesley's early collections are available at http://www.divinity.duke.edu/wesleyan/texts/jw_poetry_hymns.html.
20. See the preface, §4, *Works*, 7:74.
21. Cf. Samuel Wesley, *Advice to a Young Clergyman* (London: Rivington, 1735), 56.
22. See Isabel Rivers, "Dissenting and Methodist Books of Practical Divinity," in Isabel

- Rivers, ed., *Books and their Readers in Eighteenth Century England* (New York: St. Martins, 1982), 152.
23. E.g., *Journal* (19 November 1751), *Works*, 20:407; and Letter to Joseph Benson (31 July 1773), *Letters* (Telford), 6:35.
 24. For John, see the survey volumes by Collins and Maddox in the select bibliography; for Charles, see the volumes by Rattenbury and Yrigoyen.
 25. See *The Doctrine of Salvation, Faith, and Good Works, Extracted from the Homilies Of the Church of England* (Oxford, 1738), Sections I.9, I.13–15, II.2, and II.3. There is no such use of italics for these passages in any prior edition of the *Homilies*.
 26. For example, *The Character of a Methodist*, §1, *Works*, 9:33.
 27. They could also use the term “preventing grace.” In both cases, the emphasis is on God’s grace coming before (*pre vene*) our response.
 28. *Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, Pt. I, I.3, *Works*, 11:106.
 29. See Daniel B. Stevick, *The Altar’s Fire: Charles Wesley’s “Hymns on the Lord’s Supper”* (Peterborough: Epworth, 2004).
 30. Cf. Bryan P. Stone & Thomas J. Oord, eds., *Thy Nature and Thy Name is Love: Wesleyan and Process Theologies in Dialogue* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2001).
 31. See John R. Tyson, *Charles Wesley on Sanctification* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986) 115–55; and Peter Schmiechen, *Saving Power: Theories of Atonement and Forms of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 298–99, 305.
 32. James Clark, *Montanus Redivivus: or, Montanism revived, in the Principles and Discipline of the Methodists*, (Dublin: Aunders, 1760).
 33. E.g., Jason E. Vickers, “Wesley’s Hymns and Prayers,” in *Invocation and Assent: the Making and Remaking of Trinitarian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 169–189.
 34. See Gareth Lloyd, *Charles Wesley and the Struggle for Methodist Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).
 35. Note John’s description of this difference in his *Journal* (15 December 1788), *Works*, 24:116–17.
 36. See Charles Wesley, *Short Hymns on ... Holy Scriptures* (Bristol: Farley, 1762), 2:184; and the comparison of the brothers in Tyson, *Charles Wesley*, 261–68.
 37. For more details see Tyson, *Charles Wesley*; and S T Kimbrough Jr., “Charles Wesley and the Journey of Sanctification,” *Evangelical Journal* 16 (1998): 49–75.
 38. See Randy L. Maddox, “Nurturing the New Creation: Reflections on a Wesleyan Trajectory,” in M. D. Meeks, ed., *Wesleyan Perspectives on the New Creation* (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 2004), 21–52.
 39. Compare his *Hymns for the Year 1756* to hymn 16, stanzas 5–6, in *Hymns for the Nation* (1781).
 40. See Ted A. Campbell, *Methodist Doctrine: The Essentials* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999).
 41. For details on what follows, see Randy L. Maddox, “Reclaiming an Inheritance: Wesley as Theologian in the History of Methodist Theology,” in R. Maddox, ed., *Rethinking Wesley’s Theology for Contemporary Methodism* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1998), 213–26.
 42. A convenient list of these centers can be found on the website of the Duke Center for Studies in the Wesleyan tradition: <http://www.divinity.duke.edu/wesleyan/research/index.html>.
 43. See Randy L. Maddox, “Reading Wesley as Theologian,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 30/1 (1995): 7–54.
 44. Albert C. Outler, “A New Future for ‘Wesley Studies’: An Agenda for ‘Phase III,’” in M.D. Meeks, ed., *The Future of the Methodist Theological Traditions* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), 34–52. See also Richard P. Heitzenrater, *The Elusive Mr. Wesley*, 2nd edn. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 387–94; and Henry Derman Rack, “Some

- Recent Trends in Wesley Scholarship,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 41/2 (2006): 182–99.
45. Cf. http://www.divinity.duke.edu/wesleyan/docs/Recent_Dissertations.pdf.
 46. On this topic, see particularly the expansion of a portion of his dissertation by Mark T. Mealey, “Tilting at Windmills: John Wesley’s Reading of John Locke’s Epistemology,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 85/2–3 (2003): 331–46.
 47. The most detailed dissertation has just been published: Edgardo Colón-Emeric, *Wesley, Aquinas, and Christian Perfection: An Ecumenical Dialogue* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009). See also D. Stephen Long, *John Wesley’s Moral Theology ... The Quest for God and Goodness* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2005).
 48. Joanna Ruth Cruickshank, *Pain, Passion and Faith: Revisiting the Place of Charles Wesley in Early Methodism* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2009).
 49. Cf. Deborah Madden, “A Cheap, Safe and Natural Medicine”: Religion, Medicine and Culture in John Wesley’s “Primitive Physic” (Atlanta: Rodopi, 2007); Madden, ed., *Inward and Outward Health’: John Wesley’s Holistic Concept of Medical Science, the Environment and Holy Living* (London: Epworth, 2008); and Thomas J. Oord, ed., *Divine Grace and Emerging Creation: Wesleyan Forays in Science and Creation* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2009).
 50. For a sense of this discussion, see the dedicated issue of *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 23/2 (2004); and the website for SSPWT, <http://home.snu.edu/~brint/sswpt/>.
 51. See Frank Baker, “The Oxford Edition of Wesley’s Works and Its Text,” in K. E. Rowe (ed.), *The Place of Wesley in the Christian Tradition* (1976), 117–33.
 52. The current cd-rom does not include every volume published, only completed sections, so it contains the four volumes of *Sermons*, the seven volumes of *Journals*, and the *Collection of Hymns* (vol. 7).
 53. The best organized site for this and other public-domain Wesley texts is the Wesley Center at Northwest Nazarene University: <http://wesley.nnu.edu/>.
 54. Kingswood Books is planning to issue his “journal letters.” Editions of his broader correspondence are underway at both Kingswood and Oxford University Press.
 55. See: <http://www.divinity.duke.edu/wesleyan/texts/index.html>.