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## METHODIST THEOLOGY

Methodism emerged in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century as a renewal movement within the Church of England. The branch of this movement led by John and Charles Wesley has grown through the past two centuries into a global family of Methodist churches, in addition to spawning several Wesleyan ‘holiness churches’ and conveying through the latter some characteristic theological emphases to the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements (see CHARISMATIC MOVEMENT; PENTECOSTAL THEOLOGY<sup>1</sup>). John Wesley established the major theological precedents for this family of churches, which reflect his commitments as an Anglican priest, at the outset of the ENLIGHTENMENT, who embraced key emphases from Continental *Pietism*.

Wesley was trained in and embraced the ‘Anglican’ reframing of the Church of England in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, with its vision of providing a ‘middle way’ between the Reformed and Catholic churches (see ANGLICAN THEOLOGY). Thus, while he stressed SCRIPTURE as the norm for theological reflection – at times referring to himself as ‘a man of one book’ – he also valued the creedal affirmations and theological voices of the early church as guides in interpreting Scripture. Wesley’s training at Oxford cultivated interest in several Greek patristic theologians. These added voices served as a counterweight to the dominant influence of AUGUSTINE’S thought in western Christian theology on such issues as TOTAL DEPRAVITY, UNCONDITIONAL ELECTION, and pessimism about the possibility of attaining Christ-likeness in this life. This counterweight allowed Wesley, like most Anglicans, to adopt a moderate ARMINIANISM and to stress the importance of ‘holy living’.

Another Anglican trait which Wesley shared was affirmation of the contribution of reason to theological reflection. But he was uncomfortable with the rationalist stream of the emerging Enlightenment. Shaped by

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<sup>1</sup>Items in small caps are themes, persons, etc. treated elsewhere in this volume.

the Aristotelian tradition at Oxford (see ARISTOTELIANISM), Wesley valued reason not as an independent source but as a processor of knowledge, organizing and drawing inferences from the input of Scripture, TRADITION, and experience. As this suggests, Wesley aligned more with the empiricist stream of early Enlightenment thought. But he did not share the skepticism of advocates like D. Hume (1711–76). Rather, Wesley embraced the ‘common-sense’ assumptions that human knowledge is at best probable, not infallible, and that our sense impressions are generally reliable indicators of reality.

Attention to experience was also central to the pietist dimension of the Methodist revival. Wesley championed a personal experience of assurance of God’s love as typical of ‘real Christianity’. This emphasis was expressed a few times in the strong contrast ‘that ORTHODOXY, or right opinions, is, at best, but a very slender part of religion’ (*Works* 9:254–55). When questioned, Wesley denied that he was dismissing all concern for DOCTRINE in Christian life; he was stressing that Christian life involved more than *mere* affirmation of correct doctrine.

But Wesley went on to suggest a hierarchy of significance among theological claims. He affirmed that there are core doctrinal convictions, central to 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 Wesley was quick to insist that there is room for legitimate variation of ‘opinion’ in philosophical articulation of these core doctrines. 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 his sermon “Catholic Spirit,” Wesley encouraged allowing for alternative ‘opinions’ on these debates while maintaining Christian fellowship with all who agree on the ‘main branches of Christian doctrine’. As an example, while Wesley staunchly rejected unconditional PREDESTINATION, he usually classed this difference with G. Whitefield (1714–70) and the Calvinist wing of the Methodist revival as a matter of ‘opinion’, affirming their full standing in the church.

At the same time, Wesley tired of Calvinist Methodist preachers using preaching houses that he had built to turn audiences against Arminian theology. So Wesley developed the ‘Model Deed’, which restricted the pulpit in his preaching houses to those who preached in accordance with his four published volumes of *Sermons* (1746–60) and his *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* (1755). This set a precedent for Wesleyan Methodists that their theological teaching and reflection should emulate not just Wesley’s embrace of the core doctrines of the whole Christian family but also his characteristic ‘opinions’ on other

major theological issues (while showing irenic openness to those of other ‘opinions’).

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. Wesley sent over for the new church an abridged set of the Articles of Religion of the Church of England, to serve as the articulation of core Christian doctrine, while continuing the expectation of preaching in accordance with characteristic emphases as found in 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 in place. So does Wesley’s precedent of bringing tradition, reason, and experience into engagement with Scripture in theological reflection (see WESLEYAN QUADRILATERAL).

Wesley’s response when asked about the distinctive doctrines of Methodism was often to deny that there were any, emphasizing instead a distinctive concern for spiritual life (e.g., *Works* 9:33). At other times he allowed that Methodists placed special emphasis upon certain traditional doctrines, particularly in the area of SOTERIOLOGY. Wesley’s concern in this area was to reclaim the holistic account of the human problem and God’s salvific response that is evident in Scripture. 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. Wesley’s longest single treatise was devoted to *The Doctrine of Original Sin* (1757). 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.

Turning the focus around, Wesley was equally concerned to reject depictions of depravity as the *final* word about humanity (or, of all but the ‘elect’). Convinced that ‘God’s mercy is over all God’s works’ (Ps 145:9), Wesley insisted that God reaches out in love to all persons in their fallen condition. Through that encounter, which Wesley termed ‘prevenient GRACE’, 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 Wesley’s dominant soteriological concern – countering the tendency to restrict present salvation largely to forensic JUSTIFICATION. As he 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’ (*Works* 11:106). Wesley placed sanctification at the center of soteriology, valuing justification as the ‘doorway’ into this larger focus. He called his people to ‘holiness of heart and life’

nurtured in the full range of the ‘means of grace’, affirming the possibility of attaining *entire* sanctification, or ‘Christian Perfection’, in this life. The possibilities, limits, and dynamics of sanctification have been central to Methodist proclamation and debate ever since.

Given the coherence of the Christian worldview, Wesley’s focal concerns in soteriology were reflected in characteristic emphases (or ‘opinions’) within the other loci of theology. For example, he identified God’s reigning attribute as **love** – in specific contrast with sovereignty. Accordingly, he privileged a ‘parent’ analogy for God over the analogy of a sovereign lord. He also placed strong emphasis on the responsive relationship between God and humanity, which opened the door for many later Wesleyans to critique atemporal models of God’s existence.

Wesley’s most characteristic emphasis in Christology was on valuing 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 (see **THREEFOLD OFFICE**).

A characteristic that stood out to Wesley’s peers was his heightened attention to the work of the Holy Spirit. It begins with Wesley’s stress on the **ASSURANCE** of God’s pardoning love, or the ‘witness of the Spirit’, which evokes and empowers our responsive love for God and neighbor. This ‘new birth’ makes possible the journey of sanctification, or growth in the ‘fruit of the Spirit’. Then there is Wesley’s concern to reclaim (within the Western tradition) the ‘gifts of the Spirit’, like the gift of preaching, for lay men and women.

Finally, it is important to note that 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 embrace 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.

John Wesley’s era in Methodist theology was dominated by his contributions – sermons, catechisms, hymn collections, etc. Developments following his death were shaped by Methodism’s transition into an independent church. In England Methodists tended to align with the dissenting traditions, playing down many of the Anglican threads in Wesley’s thought. In the United States, the stronger pressure was a primitivist mentality that ‘all we need is the Bible’. Moreover, in a situation where most Christians who accepted a role for theological standards conceived of them along the lines of J. CALVIN’S *Institutes*, Wesley’s *Sermons* did not measure up. This pushed Methodists to develop scholastic compends of theology. These compends were generally conservative in scope and more ‘Protestant’ in tone than Wesley’s precedent. The most prominent example is Richard Watson’s (1781–1833) *Theological*

*Institutes* (1823–24), the standard Methodist theology text for over fifty years.

Toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Methodist theologians in both England and the U.S. 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 him as a forerunner. The more common tendency was to ignore Wesley’s writings as products of an outmoded age.

In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> 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 Wesley’s soteriological balance. This renewed interest spawned an ongoing project to provide a critical edition of Wesley’s works, and a growing range of scholarly engagements with Wesley’s theology.

Far from encouraging parochialism, engagement with Wesley has led to interaction with his wide range of sources and a broadened dialogue with ecumenical Christianity. Similarly, attention to Wesley’s proposed parallel between God’s synergistic transformation of our lives and God’s synergistic transformation of social-political structures has provided a fruitful perspective for engaging the various liberation theologies that emerged in the last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (see LIBERATION THEOLOGY). Wesley’s emphasis on the responsive nature of God’s interaction with humanity has placed Methodists in prominent roles within debates over the adequacy of PROCESS THEOLOGY and OPEN THEISM. Finally, Wesley’s underlying assumptions about the nature and purpose of theology have proved helpful in addressing issues of contextualization as Methodism has spread across the globe.

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