

“Vital Orthodoxy” A Wesleyan Dynamic for 21st Century Christianity

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The impending 300th anniversary of John Wesley’s birth is a natural occasion for both Methodists and the larger church to spend some time reflecting upon what significance his life and thought might have for our own engagement in Christian mission in the twenty-first century. This reflection is surely warranted by the impact of early Methodism on its cultural setting. But many North Atlantic Methodists, on both sides of the water, are also drawn to the topic because of a sense of ambiguity about the present. On the one hand we sense our continuity with our heritage. On the other hand, we have concerns about our ecclesial bodies: our membership numbers have been in decline; our members often lack an adequate sense of Christian teachings, let alone distinctive Methodist teachings; and the ecumenical commitment bequeathed to us by Wesley has kept alive—particularly in Britain—the question of the legitimacy or wisdom of continuing existence as a distinct church.¹

In light of these dynamics, one could imagine a variety of ways of engaging the topic of “the Methodist articulation of faith.” It could be the question of whether present-day Methodists actually *do* articulate faith; and if not, how we might help them to do so. Alternatively, it could focus more on the *character* of the faith that Methodists articulate: Is it the faith of the church catholic, or is it distinctive in some significant way? If it is distinctive, does it hold a contribution which we might offer the church catholic? Yet again, the question could focus on whether the task of *articulating* faith is an appropriate concern for Methodists; should they instead, for example, simply devote their energies to serving those in need?

While the list could go on, I find questions within these three major foci to be particularly common in contemporary North Atlantic Methodist discussions. Rather than pursuing only one of the foci, I thought it might be helpful to trace the blend itself back to our Wesleyan roots, and to probe what insights

¹An early, and influential, expression of the sense of concern among United Methodists was Richard B. Wilke, *And are We Yet Alive? The Future of The United Methodist Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986). The concern remains evident in the four volumes published out of a five-year study of *United Methodism and American Culture*, edited by Dennis Campbell et al. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997–99). For similar sensitivities in the British Methodist Church see Jane Craske & Clive Marsh, eds., *Methodism and the Future: Facing the Challenge* (London: Cassell, 1999); and Brian E. Beck, “The Elusive Methodist Identity: Who are We?” *Epworth Review* 27.4 (2000): 22–30.

John Wesley's convictions about articulating faith might offer for both our Methodist communities and the larger church as we ponder how best to live out our mission today. While many twentieth century Methodists appear to have doubted that Wesley could have much to offer the "modern" church, in our emerging post-modern setting, as David Ford has felicitously put it, "we are free in a new way to recognize what is of value in premodernity, modernity, and postmodernity."² So I will trace out Wesley's convictions, presenting them as various dimensions of a concern for "vital orthodoxy," and we can see what recognitions emerge.

I

The first dimension to highlight in Wesley's concern for vital orthodoxy is his emphasis on the personal *vitality* of one's faith. Wesley's conviction of the importance of this dimension was heightened by his interactions with the Moravian tradition, a pietist strand of continental Protestantism. Pietism emerged in self-conscious contrast to "dry orthodoxy" or scholasticism. The tension between these two was often cast in terms of the way in which "faith" is to be viewed as essential to Christian life—is it "faith" as an objective set of correct beliefs, or "faith" as a subjective commitment of the person? Put in classical terms, is it the "faith that is believed" (*fides quae creditur*), or the "faith that believes" (*fides qua creditur*)? Pietists feared that too many Christians equated Christian faith with mere affirmation of orthodox Christian teachings. As a counterbalance, their definitions of faith focused—sometimes in a one-sided fashion—on the subjective dimension of one's personal assurance of God's love for them and their responsive commitment to God.

As the Methodist movement took form after Aldersgate Wesley made it clear that he did not see himself advancing any doctrinal claims beyond the established teachings of the Anglican Church. Rather he identified the mission of his movement as transforming *nominal* Christians into *real* Christians.³ And when asked to define what it meant to be a "Methodist," his answer in the 1742 pamphlet on *The Character of a Methodist* was typical:

a Methodist is one who has 'the love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost given to him'; one who 'loves the Lord his God with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his mind, and with all his strength'. ... And while he thus always exercises his love to God ... this commandment is written in his heart, that 'he who loveth God, loves his brother also.' ... His obedience is in proportion to his love, the source from whence it flows. And therefore, loving God with all his heart,

²David F. Ford, *The Shape of Living: Spiritual Directions for Everyday Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1997), 21.

³See in this regard, Kenneth Collins, "The Motif of Real Christianity in the Writings of John Wesley," *Asbury Theological Journal* 49.1 (1994): 49–62.

he serves him with all his strength. ... Lastly, as he has time, he ‘does good unto all men’—unto neighbours, and strangers, friends, and enemies. And that in every possible kind; not only to their bodies, by ‘feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting those that are sick or in prison’, but much more does he labour to do good to their souls, as of the ability which God giveth.⁴

Notice how this “articulation” of Methodist faith dwells on its subjective character while leaving the doctrinal content of that faith largely implicit. In this focus Wesley clearly aligned with the concerns of pietism. If he offers anything distinctive in the description, it may be the integral nature in which he connected our awakened love for God with our love for our neighbor.

Of course, Wesley would be the first to insist that this verbal description of the character of a Methodist is not the key articulation, or clear expression, of faith that he was concerned to provide for the church and the surrounding society. His real desire was to help nurture *living* articulations in the world. As he expressed this desire in 1743:

This is the religion we long to see established in the world, a religion of love and joy and peace, having its seat in the heart, in the inmost soul, but ever showing itself by its fruits, continually springing forth, not only in all innocence ... but likewise in every kind of beneficence, in spreading virtue and happiness all around it.⁵

II

It is one thing to accept implicitly the doctrinal content of Christian faith, while choosing to emphasize the need for its subjective appropriation. It is another thing to suggest that concern for an adequate understanding of this doctrinal content makes no contribution to developing vital Christian piety, or perhaps is even inversely related to this development. While few pietists drew the contrast in such stark terms, this was the danger sensed by those championing the opposing emphasis on “orthodoxy” as vital to Christian identity.

Was Wesley prone to this danger? Did he see any positive connection between affirming orthodox doctrine (what he often called “holding right opinions”⁶) and cultivating vital piety? Interestingly, his comments on this topic over the course of his life follow a pattern analogous to that which many theorists claim is typical of cognitive development: 1) an early narrow dualism that affirms one’s inculcated tradition unquestioningly against all others; 2) a contrasting dissatisfaction with such dualism as one progres-

⁴*The Character of a Methodist*, §§5–16, in *The Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984—) 9:35–41. Note: hereafter referred to simply as *Works*.

⁵*Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, §4, *Works* 11:46.

⁶For more on this, see Randy L. Maddox, “Opinion, Religion, and ‘Catholic Spirit’: John Wesley on Theological Integrity,” *Asbury Theological Journal* 47.1 (1992): 63–87.

sively encounters cases that this dualism cannot account for, frequently resulting in the espousal of cognitive relativism; and 3) a mature equilibration that reaffirms commitments without claiming absolute certainty.⁷

According to Wesley's own testimony, during his early years he essentially identified the doctrinal opinions and religious practices conveyed in his Anglican training with Christianity *per se*. If someone differed with him on these opinions or practices, they were likely to be adjudged as less than genuinely Christian.⁸

Over time his exposure to the spirituality of non-Anglican groups such as the Moravians, and his corresponding disillusionment with the spirituality of some of his "orthodox" Anglican fellow-ministers and overseers, inclined him to doubt the necessary connection between right opinions and genuine Christian life. His strongest expression of this doubt was in his *Plain Account of the People Called Methodists* (1748), where he claimed that one of the points that Methodists chiefly insisted upon was "that orthodoxy, or right opinions, is, at best, but a very slender part of religion, if it can be allowed to be any part of it at all."⁹ In this claim Wesley verged on cognitive relativism.

Cognitive relativism does not necessarily implicate one in an all-inclusive relativism. Indeed, it frequently invokes (at least implicitly) some other criterion of truth—be it conduct, affections, or whatever—in relation to which the affirmation of any particular intellectual claims is purportedly irrelevant. In Wesley's case, that other criterion was "genuine religion," or the nurturing of "right tempers" (Christ-like character dispositions).¹⁰ By this point (1748), Wesley had rejected any absolute identification of holding right opinions with possessing right tempers. Indeed, he appeared to suggest that the holding of such opinions may be irrelevant to developing or maintaining right tempers.

Naturally, such an apparent suggestion called forth numerous criticisms and demands for clarification. Wesley repeatedly had to explain this quote in later letters and apologetic writings. Central to these explanations was the insistence that he had not been claiming that holding right opinions was

⁷For a helpful summary see William G. Perry Jr., "Cognitive and Ethical Growth: The Making of Meaning," in *The Modern American College*, edited by A.W. Chickering (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1981), 76–116.

⁸Cf. *A Second Letter to the Author of Enthusiasm of Methodists, etc.*, §44, *Works* 11:422–23; and Letter to Printer of the *Dublin Chronicle* (2 June 1789), §3, in *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, edited by John Telford, 8 vols. (London: Epworth, 1931) 8:140. Note: hereafter referred to as *Letters* (Telford).

⁹*Plain Account*, §I.2, *Works* 9:254–55.

¹⁰For a discussion of Wesley's mature "moral psychology," with its emphasis on the role of holy tempers, see Randy L. Maddox, "A Change of Affections: The Development, Dynamics, and Dethronement of John Wesley's 'Heart Religion'," in *"Heart Religion" in the Methodist Tradition and Related Movements*, edited by Richard B. Steele (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 2001), 3–31.

totally unrelated to developing right tempers; rather, he had been stressing that, in and of itself, such correct theological understanding did not *guarantee* that one would personally embrace what they knew and live by it.

But this distinction merely focuses the real questions: Do right opinions *contribute* to the development of right tempers? Conversely, does the affirmation of wrong opinions *inhibit* this development? The most interesting aspect of Wesley's later clarifications of his original claim is the progression noticeable in response to these questions. In 1751 he remained concerned to stress that, in a truly religious person, right opinions—in themselves—were a “very slender part” of religion, though he noted that admitting this did not necessarily imply that wrong opinions were not an hindrance to religion.¹¹ By 1756 he qualified the statement that holding right opinions was a slender part of genuine religion with the claim that it was a “considerable help” to developing right tempers.¹² By 1763 he was not only admitting that right opinions were a great help to developing genuine religion, he now explicitly argued that wrong opinions were a great hindrance thereto.¹³ By 1766 he was agreeing with the claim that right tempers simply could not subsist without right opinions, though he still argued that right opinions might subsist without right tempers.¹⁴ And finally, in 1790 he was quick to follow a claim that orthodoxy was not absolutely necessary to salvation with the comment that wrong opinions in religion naturally lead to wrong tempers and practices; consequently it is our “bounden duty to seek a right judgment in all things.”¹⁵

Thus Wesley's mature ministry was characterized by a nuanced balance, recognizing that there is no infallible connection between right opinions and right tempers, yet confidently affirming that right opinions *generally* promote Christian life and character. This assumption comes through clearly in a sermon written late in his life (1789) titled “Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity.”¹⁶ The sermon opens with Wesley asserting that the reason Christian groups around the globe had done so little good in the world was that they were producing so few real Christians. He then identified three factors of typical church life that together account for this lamentable state: first, in too few churches did members attain any adequate understanding of Christian doctrine; second, many of those churches which provided members with doctrinal instruction lacked corresponding provision of appropri-

¹¹*Second Letter to the Author of Enthusiasm of Methodists, etc.*, §46, *Works* 11:425.

¹²Letter to James Clark (18 September 1756), *Letters* (Telford) 3:203.

¹³*Letter to the Bishop of Gloucester*, §I.12, *Works* 11:479.

¹⁴*Some Remarks on 'A Defense of the Preface of the Edinburgh Edition of Aspasio Vindicated'*, §2, in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson, 14 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958) 10:348. Note: hereafter referred to as *Works* (Jackson).

¹⁵Sermon 127, “On the Wedding Garment,” §15, *Works* 4:146.

¹⁶Sermon 122, “Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity,” *Works* 4:86–96.

ate Christian discipline; and third, of churches which provided both doctrine and discipline, there remained in most a broad absence of the specific Christian practice of self-denial.

Note how Wesley here makes instruction in doctrine foundational to the formation of real Christian life/character. To understand his conviction of this importance we need to recall that Wesley imbibed through his Anglican tradition the early church's understanding of theology as fundamentally a practical discipline.¹⁷ This understanding recognizes that we humans are "meaning-seeking creatures." We are not content for life merely to happen, we struggle to make sense of why it happens; and we do not typically act out of mere impulse, our choices about how to act are guided by our deepest convictions about the ultimate nature and purposes of life. The pattern of these orienting convictions is our functional "worldview," whether we can articulate it in distinct doctrines or not. This means that the *primal* dimension or embodiment of Christian theology is as the worldview that orients believers' lives in the world. As Paul put it, Christians perceive things rightly and act appropriately only when they have the "mind of Christ" (Phil. 2). That this involves holistic dispositions, not merely intellectual convictions, is evident from Paul's parallel emphasis on Christians nurturing the "fruit of the Spirit" (Gal. 5).

Paul's passionate appeal for Christians to emulate the "mind of Christ" reflects the reality that this orienting worldview is not unilaterally infused by God at one's conversion. Neither does it emerge effortlessly over time, or manifest itself spontaneously whenever it is needed. It must be cultivated, as part of an intentional process of growing in Christ-likeness. Wesley clearly saw the task of aiding this cultivation as central to the work of his movement and of the church at large. The wholistic nature of Christian life that he believed should result from such cultivation is evident in his 1749 letter to Conyers Middleton:

A Christian cannot think of the Author of his being, without abasing himself before [God]. ... He has a continual sense of his dependence on the Parent of good for his being, and all the blessings that attend it. ... The ruling temper of his heart is the most absolute submission, and the tenderest gratitude, to his sovereign Benefactor. ... And as he has the strongest affection for the Fountain of all good, so he has the firmest confidence in [God]; a confidence which neither pleasure nor pain, neither life nor death, can shake. But yet this, far from creating sloth or indolence, pushes him on to the most vigorous industry. ... As he knows the most acceptable worship of God is to imitate [the One] he worships so he is continually labouring to transcribe into himself all [God's] imitable perfections; in particular, justice, mercy, and truth. ... Above all, remembering that God is love, he is conformed to the same likeness. He is full of love to his neighbour. ... And this universal, disinterested love is productive of all right affections. It is fruitful of gentleness, tenderness, sweetness; of humanity, courtesy, and affability.¹⁸

¹⁷For broader consideration of this point, see Randy L. Maddox, "Formation and Reflection: The Dynamics of Theology in Christian Life," *Quarterly Review* 21.1 (Spring 2001): 20–32.

¹⁸Letter to Conyers Middleton (24 January 1748–49), *Works* (Jackson) 10:67–69.

Persons whose lives evidenced this integral connection of Christian worldview commitments with the affections and actions that comprise authentic Christian piety were, in Wesley's mature view, the ideal embodied Methodist "articulation" of faith.

III

While Wesley came to appreciate deeply the value of doctrinal instruction in forming such persons, he also became convinced that not all doctrinal claims contribute equally in this enterprise. This is evident in his comments on the question of what doctrines are "essential" or "fundamental" to Christian faith.¹⁹ This question was posed in Wesley's day by the challenge of the divisions in the Western church created by the Reformation. Those who sought to restore greater unity among these divided groups often argued that there is a hierarchy of doctrine: some doctrines are "essential," and must be affirmed by any truly Christian tradition; but many other doctrines were classed as "non-essentials," which the various traditions were free to affirm but ought not require of others as a test of fellowship or "orthodoxy". The crucial area of debate among proponents of this distinction, of course, was how to determine which doctrines fit in a particular category. The criteria most often invoked in this debate were the scriptural and traditional warrant for particular doctrines, as well as their rational clarity.

All of these elements are echoed in Wesley's various comments concerning whether specific doctrines should be considered "essential." If there is anything distinctive, or at least characteristic, of his own evaluation of the relative importance of various doctrines it is his concern with their *therapeutic impact*, as demonstrated in personal and corporate Christian experience. Among those clear teachings which have scriptural and traditional warrant, the ones that were most conducive to developing Christ-like tempers were judged most essential. And if the alternative understandings of a doctrinal issue were all compatible with, or fostered rather than undercutting, authentic Christian life then the choice between them was not a matter of essentials.²⁰ In keeping with this focus on therapeutic impact, Wesley frequently designated important teachings as "wholesome doctrine"—i.e., doctrine that restores and preserves spiritual health.²¹

What doctrines did Wesley consider to fit in this category? He never gave a definitive list. In fact, he explicitly questioned whether there could be such a final list, in light of human finitude and invincible prejudices.²² At the same

¹⁹For more details on the following summary, see Maddox, "Opinion, Religion," 72–78.

²⁰For particularly clear invocations of this criterion, see *A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion, Pt. III*, §1.9, *Works* 11:277; Sermon 73, "Of Hell," §1, *Works* 3:31; and the definition Wesley agrees to in the Letter to John Newton (14 May 1765), *Letters* (Telford) 4:297.

²¹For example, see his comments on 1 Timothy 6:3, 2 Timothy 2:2, and Titus 2:1 in *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*.

²²Sermon 55, "On the Trinity," §2, *Works* 2:376.

time, he frequently identified specific doctrines, or groups of doctrines, as essential. Central Christian claims about the existence of a loving God who is revealed in Christ are among those identified. But the four doctrines that were mentioned far more often than any others were 1) original sin, 2) justification by faith, 3) the new birth and 4) holiness of heart and life.²³

These four doctrines frame the question of how one understands the nature of our human problem and the nature of God's salvific response. Wesley's efforts to renew the church in his native Britain convinced him that a major reason why churches of the day were producing so few real Christians was the prevalence of an inadequate understanding of the "salvation" that Christianity offers. For far too many this salvation was reduced simply to the forgiveness of sins and resultant guarantee of eventual entrance into "heaven above." Nothing was more central to Wesley's life-long ministry that challenging this anemic conception of Christian salvation. He recognized that there had been some tendency in Christian tradition to play two biblical themes concerning salvation off against one another. One of these themes is epitomized by Romans 1–3, where our most basic human problem is the guilt by which we "fall short of the glory of God" and the crucial aspect of salvation is God's unmerited gift of justification. The other theme can be represented by Romans 7–8, where the deepest impact of sin is our spiritual debilitation ("What I want to do, I cannot!") and the key gracious gift of God is the empowering and healing presence of the Spirit. Wesley consistently and perceptively wove these two themes together in his doctrinal instruction on the nature of sin, grace, and salvation. The following quotes are representative:

(1) *Two-fold Nature of Sin: Guilt and Disease*

[Our sins], considered in regard to ourselves, are chains of iron and fetters of brass. They are wounds wherewith the world, the flesh, and the devil, have gashed and mangled us all over. They are diseases that drink up our blood and spirits, that bring us down to the chambers of the grave. But considered ... with regard to God, they are debts, immense and numberless.²⁴

(2) *Two-fold Nature of Grace: Mercy and Power*

By 'the grace of God' is sometimes to be understood that free love, that unmerited mercy, by which I, a sinner, through the merits of Christ am now reconciled to God. But in this place it rather means that power of God the Holy Ghost which 'worketh in us both to will and to do of his good pleasure.' As soon as ever the grace of God (in the former sense, his pardoning love) is manifested in our soul, the grace of God (in the latter sense, the power of his Spirit) takes place therein. And now we can perform through God, what to [ourselves] was impossible ... a renewal of soul after His likeness.²⁵

²³E.g., *An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, §12, *Works* 11:49; Sermon 45, "The New Birth," §1, *Works* 2:187; Sermon 53, "On the Death of George Whitefield," §III.1, *Works* 2:341; and Sermon 107, "On God's Vineyard," §V.5, *Works* 3:516.

²⁴Sermon 26, "Sermon on the Mount, VI," §III.13, *Works* 1:586.

²⁵Sermon 12, "The Witness of Our Spirit," §§15–16, *Works* 1:309–10.

(3) *Two-fold Nature of Salvation: Pardon and Healing*

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, its original purity; a recovery of the divine nature; the renewal of our souls after the image of God in righteousness and true holiness, in justice, mercy, and truth. This implies all holy and heavenly tempers, and by consequence all holiness of conversation.²⁶

Since emphasis on the themes of sin as disease and salvation as healing is particularly characteristic of Eastern Orthodoxy, a growing number of scholars have noted the resonance that they see between Wesley and this Eastern branch of the Christian family.²⁷ While this resonance would not require direct dependence, the reading that Wesley did of early Christian theologians who wrote in Greek surely contributed to his conviction about the therapeutic nature of salvation. Thus, a truly Methodist “articulation” of faith would need to preserve in its overall balance this *vital* theme so key to Eastern *Orthodoxy*.

IV

Another way in which Wesley’s theology resonates with that of Eastern Orthodoxy is in their shared embrace of the early Christian model of theology as a practical discipline. We noted above how this model assumes that the holistic worldview that orients believers’ lives in the world is the primal dimension of theology, and that this worldview must be formed. I want to turn our attention now to how this primal dimension is formed. Since the worldview in question is holistic, the early church found that effective formation involved a variety of activities aimed at invoking and shaping beliefs, affections, and character dispositions. They came to prize most highly as “theologians” those persons who crafted such practical-theological materials as hymns, liturgies, catechetical orations, and spiritual discipline manuals. These materials established the rhythms and provided the repeated narrative and themes that helped to instil Christ-likeness deeply in believers’ hearts and minds.

In other words, the early church found that right belief, or a balanced Christian faith, is most effectively formed by *right worship (orthodoxia)*. It was in keeping with this early church precedent that Wesley understood himself as being a theologian.²⁸ His extensive literary efforts were focused on

²⁶A *Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion, Pt. I*, §3, *Works* 11:106.

²⁷On the emergence of this emphasis, see Randy L. Maddox, “John Wesley and Eastern Orthodoxy: Influences, Convergences, and Differences,” *Asbury Theological Journal* 45.2 (1990): 29–53. The most recent work exploring this resonance is *Orthodox and Wesleyan Spirituality*, edited by ST Kimbrough Jr. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2002).

²⁸Cf. Randy L. Maddox, “John Wesley – Practical Theologian,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 23 (1988): 122–47.

providing his Methodist people with the same types of doxological materials. For example, recognizing the role of basic “life-narratives” in forming and expressing one’s worldview, he particularly exhorted his Methodists to live in the story of Christ, and the stories of exemplary Christians (a rich set of which he provided for their reading), so that their orienting narrative might be reshaped in keeping with the pattern of Christ. And acknowledging the formative impact of those favorite songs that embed themselves in our memories and being, he edited a series of hymnbooks as guides for sustaining and shaping the Methodist people.

Importantly, the practical-theological formative task involves more than just producing such literary materials. It also involves careful pastoral shaping of formative practices. This is what Wesley had in mind in his sermon “Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity” when he emphasized the need for proper doctrine to be supplemented by proper discipline. The type of discipline Wesley had in mind can be seen in the three “General Rules” of his movement. All those who desire to seek “salvation” in its full biblical sense are exhorted to 1) do no harm, 2) do as much good as they can for others, and 3) regularly participate in “all the ordinances of God.”²⁹ The third exhortation reflects Wesley’s deep conviction that regular participation in the means of grace is essential for Christian life. He repeatedly denounced the folly of those who desire “the end without the means”—that is, who expect growth in faith and holiness without regular participation in the means through which God has chosen to convey grace.³⁰

Wesley’s mature appreciation of the need for wholistic balance in Christian formation is important to note. His earliest writings characteristically emphasize scripture reading, sermons, and prayer (all of which address us intellectually) as the means to insure Christian living. Lists of recommended “ordinances” or means of grace after Aldersgate are both more extensive and more diverse. They include items ranging from such universal Christian practices as fasting, prayer, eucharist, and devotional readings to more distinctively Methodist practices like class meetings, love feasts, and special rules of holy living.³¹ As Henry Knight has argued, the balance of items on these mature lists reflects Wesley’s bi-focal concern that his people not only experience the empowering presence of God but are also formed in the character of God.³² If one wanted a short motto to capture this

²⁹See *Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies*, Works 9:69–73.

³⁰For a few of the best known examples, see Letter to Count Zinzendorf and the Church at Herrnhut (5–8 August 1740), Works 26:27; Sermon 16, “The Means of Grace,” Works 1:378–97; and Letter to William Law (6 January 1756), Letters (Telford) 3:366.

³¹E.g., *Journal* (25 June 1740), Works 19:157; *The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies*, §§4–6, Works 9:70–73; Sermon 16, “The Means of Grace,” §II.1, Works 1:381; “Large Minutes,” Q. 48, Works (Jackson) 8:322–23; and Sermon 98, “On Visiting the Sick,” §1, Works 3:385.

³²Henry Knight III, *The Presence of God in the Christian Life: John Wesley and the Means of Grace* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1992), 11, 35ff.

characteristic balance in a Methodist articulation of faith, it would be hard to do better than the proverb from the early church that Wesley was fond of quoting: “The soul and the body make a [human]; the Spirit and discipline make a Christian.”³³

V

The dimensions of Wesley’s concern for “vital orthodoxy” that we have considered so far are all formative in focus. Left by themselves, they could suggest a strong conservatism—that Wesley encouraged Methodists to form people in the traditional understandings of Christianity, asking no questions about the adequacy of these understandings. This was certainly not the case with him, nor has it typically been the case in the history of the church.

It was particularly not the case in the early church, with its emphasis on theology as a practical discipline. Their production of formative theological materials repeatedly spawned normative theological reflection. It sparked debates not only over the adequacy of particular practices for forming a Christian worldview but also over alternative conceptions of this basic worldview and alternative proposed implications of the worldview for concrete action in the world. To cite just one example, a proposed liturgy addressing prayers directly to the Holy Spirit provoked a debate in the early church that led naturally into the range of issues concerning God’s triune nature.³⁴

Like the early church precedent he strove to emulate, Wesley’s theological activity also included frequent engagement in normative reflection. One of the striking characteristics about this engagement is his repeated appeal to scripture, tradition, experience, and reason—in a variety of combinations—as warrants for normative claims. This characteristic led Albert Outler to coin the term, the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral.”³⁵ Some have taken this term to imply that Wesley was unique in thus interrelating these four. He would not have thought so, and neither did Outler. Theological reflection at its best has always engaged these various sources/criteria. If there is anything unique in Wesley’s example, it is the intentionality with which he did so.

This intentionality was necessary because Wesley pursued his theological reflection in the context of the emerging Enlightenment, with its rejection of all *merely traditional* authorities. He recognized that some Enlightenment voices were casting the authority of *present* experience and reason over against *past* authorities in a way that emptied scripture and tradition of any normative

³³Cf. *Journal* (17 August 1750), *Works* 20:357; Sermon 122, “Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity,” §7, *Works* 4:90; and Letter to Adam Clarke (3 January 1787), *Letters* (Telford) 7:362.

³⁴Cf. Basil’s *On the Holy Spirit*.

³⁵Cf. Ted A. Campbell, “The ‘Wesleyan Quadrilateral’: The Story of a Modern Methodist Myth,” in *Doctrine and Theology in The United Methodist Church*, edited by Thomas Langford (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1991), 154–61.

contribution to theological dialogue. And he was aware of the reactionary calls this provoked from some Protestants for theology to be based on scripture *alone*. Faced with this polarization, Wesley consciously refused to join either side.³⁶

His major reason for refusing a forced option between the authority of scripture in theology and that of experience, reason, or tradition was Wesley's commitment to the unity of God's truth. The God speaking in and through scripture is—according to scripture itself—the God who can be known in part through our life in the universe God has created and by the intellectual powers that God has gifted to humanity. This same God promised to guide the church into truth. As such, to reject experience, reason, or tradition in theology is ultimately to reject the authority of scripture as well.

But what about the rejection of *past* authorities like scripture and tradition in favor of present experience and reason? Here Wesley's fundamental objection was his recognition of the fallibility of human knowing. He had repeatedly found what he thought to be certain on the basis of reason or experience called into question, particularly by dialogue with the experience and reasoning of others. While this did not always lead him to surrender his view, it did convince him that experience was no self-evident or infallible guide to use in critiquing scripture or tradition. More importantly, it convinced him that all human understandings of our experience, tradition, and scripture itself are “opinions.”³⁷ They are *interpretations* that are fallible and should remain open to the possibility of reconsideration.

Just as Wesley found that dialogue made him aware of the fallibility of his opinions, he pointed toward dialogue as a particularly helpful way to test opinions—seeking those which are most adequate. For theological opinions this involved overlapping dialogues: the way to develop more adequate opinions is an ongoing dialogue between scripture, tradition, experience, and reason; all read in dialogue with other interpreters. When confronted with an apparent conflict between scripture and experience, for example, the way that Wesley tried to move forward was not to debate which was more authoritative but to engage in dialogical reconsideration of his *interpretations* of each of these—and of tradition—seeking an interpretation that could “do justice to all”.³⁸

For Wesley then, an adequate articulation of faith will honor the distinction that Jaroslav Pelikan has drawn between authentic tradition, as the living faith of the dead, and traditionalism, as the dead faith of the living.^{39A}

³⁶Cf. W. Stephen Gunter, et al., *Wesley and the Quadrilateral: Renewing the Conversation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997).

³⁷Cf. Maddox, “Opinion, Religion.”

³⁸For more on this model, and consideration of such examples as women preaching and slavery, see Randy L. Maddox, “Honoring the Dialogue,” *Circuit Rider* 22.6 (Nov/Dec 1999): 24–27.

³⁹Cf. Jaroslav Pelikan. *The Vindication of Tradition* (New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 1984), 65.

proper concern for vital orthodoxy involves not only the need to form people in the faith, but also the openness to reforming the faith when this is warranted.

VI

In his early Enlightenment context, Wesley faced more than just internal calls for reforming the faith and practice of the church. There were also voices challenging the church from the outside, questioning the validity of Christian faith per se. Despite occasional protesters like Tertullian and (the early) Barth, the attempt to respond to such challenges—traditionally called “apologetics”—is not only a legitimate theological enterprise, it is an inescapable one. At the very least, believers seeking to “honor God with their minds” will strive to resolve for themselves apparent conflicts between their religious convictions and broadly-accepted human knowledge.

Wesley often took it upon himself to offer guidance to his Methodist people in this regard. He did so in a context where some were offering “foundationalist” apologetics that proposed to demonstrate Christian worldview claims objectively and with absolute certainty, while others rejected such attempts, arguing that all Christians can do is “confess” their faith. On occasion Wesley took on the strong polemical tones of his age—particularly in debates with deists. But more characteristic of his engagement in this dimension of the theological enterprise is his (eventually, five-volume) *Survey of the Wisdom of God in Creation*. In this work Wesley enters into extended dialogue both with the findings of modern science, and with several different interpreters of these findings. The final product is a progressive description of the levels of creation, from the molecular to the stellar, with periodic pauses to comment on the wisdom and goodness of God as the best explanation for such intricacy and apparently purposeful design.⁴⁰

While Wesley’s glosses occasionally seem to suggest that any reasonable person who considered such evidence would be compelled to believe in God, this must be seen as rhetorical. He elsewhere explicitly denied that reason alone could ever conclusively prove this—or any other—theological claim.⁴¹ The witness of the Spirit was also necessary. As such, I would suggest that his agenda for apologetic engagement was more modest, namely helping *strengthen* the religious convictions of his readers (and himself!) by showing how these convictions “make sense” of broadly-accepted human knowledge. Note how this purpose comes through in his conclusion to the

⁴⁰One of the best surveys of this dimension of Wesley’s work is John W. Haas Jr., “John Wesley’s Vision of Science in the Service of Christ,” *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 47 (1995): 234–43.

⁴¹See 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.

Survey, where he takes on the role of a steward speaking to God:

I have not looked upon thy works inconsiderately, and passed them over as ordinary things. But I have studiously and diligently searched into them. ... And this observation did not rest in the bare perusal of the works themselves, or in the searching out, so far as that could be done, their immediate natural causes. But I traced their being, dependence, and government unto thee, the First Cause of all. And by this tracing of things to their original, I was led to a demonstrative conviction, that there is a God, who is the great cause, both of their being and motions: yea, that there is but one God; that he is most powerful, most wise, knowing all things, governing all things, supporting all things. Upon these convictions, I was *strengthened* in the belief of thy holy word, which had so great a congruity with these truths. And upon these convictions, I did learn the more to honour, reverence, and admire thee; and to worship, serve and obey thee.⁴²

If Wesley's precedent is the standard, no authentically Methodist "articulation" of the faith will resort to either mere fideism or strong foundationalism. It will instead engage dialogically the larger world of thought and life in which it is situated.

VII

Hopefully the preceding survey sparked some recognitions of common concern between Wesley's engagement in Christian mission and our own. Standing within the early stages of the Enlightenment, Wesley could affirm several of its valid concerns without embracing some of its more hegemonic tendencies. A good example is his wholistic sense of human motivation, as contrasted with either the dominant Enlightenment intellectualism or the reactionary romanticism that this dominant strand spawned on occasion. Equally instructive is Wesley's implicit sense of the constructed nature of understandings of truth, and the crucial role of "communities of plausibility" in this construction. Many of us standing in the wake of a broad "Enlightenment about the Enlightenment," amid the resulting debates over the most appropriate shape of post-modernity, are seeking an analogous discernment of cultural themes of our day.⁴³

This recognition would seem sufficient warrant for including consideration of Wesley's convictions about Vital Orthodoxy in any dialogue about effective Christian mission in our own cultural situations. But if we truly honor Wesley's precedent in this dialogue, we will not simply repeat the responses he made in his day. Part of his effectiveness was how Wesley related his deepest theological convictions and concerns to the specifics of his context. To the degree that our context differs from that which he faced,

⁴²John Wesley, *A Survey of the Wisdom of God in the Creation, or A Compendium of Natural Philosophy*, 5th edition (London: Maxwell & Wilson, 1809), 5:197–99.

⁴³The phrase "Enlightenment about the Enlightenment" is Hans-Georg Gadamer's. For a helpful survey of different models of post-modernity, see Walter Truett Anderson, "Four Different Ways of Being Absolutely Right," in *The Truth about the Truth* (New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 1995), 110–16.

any continuing advocacy of those convictions and concerns would have to take on an appropriately distinctive shape. Let me close with a few suggestions of what this recontextualization might involve.

The contrast between Wesley's situation and our own is perhaps starkest in relation to his first concern—Vital Orthodoxy vs. Mere Orthodoxy. Wesley could assume that most persons he encountered, in churches and in culture at large, were aware of and (at least nominally) affirmed basic Christian teachings.⁴⁴ As such, he could frame his initial emphasis in terms of making one's assumed faith more vital. We would be ill advised to take this as our general starting emphasis, because we can no longer assume such awareness of Christian teachings, in culture at large or often even in the churches! But let me be clear. I am not suggesting that the problem we face is atheism, or the absence of religious beliefs in our society. Rather, I would agree with Clive Marsh that North Atlantic societies are better understood as “post-atheist” in nature!⁴⁵ It is not the absence of religious worldviews that confronts us, but the plethora of them, and broad uncritical appropriation of inchoate combinations of these. In this context it is not sufficient simply to encourage people to embrace their existing nominal faith more strongly and experientially. Through history, and again quite recently, we have been reminded that some construals of faith traditions can be disastrous both for the participants and for those around them when embraced enthusiastically.

This means that in our setting we will need to take more seriously, from the beginning, the second dimension of Wesley's concern for Vital Orthodoxy—the need for forming (which, in light of what I just argued will typically mean *reforming*) our members and seekers in the basic Christian worldview. And we face obstacles here that Wesley did not, for we stand the other side of the broad cultural influence of thinkers like Kant and Rousseau. Whether the suggestion was that unhampered reason alone would suffice to motive truly moral action, or that imposed moral assumptions served only to thwart our native moral spontaneity, powerful cultural forces have led many in our settings to doubt the need for, or wisdom of, intentional formation. Part of our challenge, thus, is to renew both in broad intellectual life and at the level of local communities of faith an appreciation for this formative task.⁴⁶

This brings us to the third dimension of Wesley's concern for Vital

⁴⁴It became common in twentieth-century descriptions of British cultural history (and in related studies of early Methodism) to portray eighteenth century society rapidly embracing secularism. This reading has rightly been called into question by (among others) J. C. D. Clark, *English Society, 1660–1832*, 2nd edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

⁴⁵Cf. Clive Marsh, *Christianity in a Post-Atheist Age* (London: SCM, 2002).

⁴⁶For an excellent example on the broad cultural level of what I have in mind, see the analysis and critique of modern Western culture in Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

Orthodoxy—the pastoral wisdom of nurturing Christians in an authentically *balanced* Christian worldview. Here Wesley’s present descendants have much to learn from their progenitor. In our efforts to fit into our Western Christian settings we have tended to immerse ourselves less broadly in the range of the Christian traditions than did he. As one result, the soteriological themes of Romans 1–3 have often overshadowed those of Romans 7–8 in our convictions about the nature of the human problem and God’s salvific activity. Add to this the impact of a notion of therapy championed by some dominant schools of psychology, where the goal is mainly to accept yourself as you are, and it is little wonder that many present-day Methodists doubt the possibility of significant spiritual/moral transformation in this life. If we could recover Wesley’s more balanced model of salvation, it would be a service not just to our own communities but to the church as a whole and to the larger world in which we live out our mission.

Of course, in keeping with the fourth dimension of his concern for Vital Orthodoxy, Wesley would be the first to remind us that it is not enough simply to agree upon a balanced understanding of the Christian worldview. We must undertake the creative, and time-consuming work of articulating this understanding in practical-theological forms that serve to “get it into the bones” of our people. This is another place where North Atlantic Christianity in general suffers under the impact of the dominant intellectualist strand of the Enlightenment. We have broadly reduced the range of what Wesley called the “means of grace” to those that address directly our reason—namely, scripture reading, sermon, and prayer. The obvious assumption is that the intellectual conviction arising in response to exhortation will be sufficient to effect dependable moral action. Perhaps the most ironic expression of the limitations of this assumption at the moment is the Radical Orthodoxy movement. While I am sympathetic with much of their evaluation of central Enlightenment themes, it is striking that they have largely confined their efforts to hortatory cultural critique. Even their defense of themes like the need for embodying the faith have been expressed to date only in intellectual argument. What we have is not a movement seeking to embody the actual practices that might help form Christians to discern and resist the corrupting aspects of our culture, but a collection of scholars exhorting us of the need for such a movement.⁴⁷ There is a role for such hortatory voices within the larger mission of the church, but this mode of interaction is not the primary form of *orthodoxia* as traditionally understood.

When we move to the fifth dimension of Vital Orthodoxy—namely, Wesley’s openness to normative debate over the adequacy of existing understandings of Christian teaching—we are on ground more familiar to most North Atlantic Methodists. Over the last century we have found ourselves

⁴⁷See the perceptive analysis of R. R. Reno, “The Radical Orthodoxy Project,” *First Things* 100 (February 2000): 37–44.

submerged in, and sometimes torn apart by, such debate. What we have too seldom experienced is the emergence of authentic consensus around the debated issues. Why is this so? I would suggest two contributing factors. The first is that we are reaping the results of our inattention to adequate theological formation in our communities.⁴⁸ If we are providing laity and clergy alike with too little grounding in the biblical roots and traditional wisdom of the faith, it is little wonder that our debates in the church fracture along the same lines as debates in society at large. If a greater consensus is to emerge, it will not be from political efforts to influence votes at official meetings, but from such efforts as the Disciple Bible Study and Christian Believer series in The United Methodist Church, which offer theological formation for all members in the church. The second factor inhibiting development of authentic consensus in our normative theological debates is that Wesley's present heirs are more content than he was to accept the polarized model of the relationship between scripture and tradition, on one hand, and reason and experience, on the other.⁴⁹ This casts the debates from the start more in terms of choosing sides than of "honoring the dialogue."

The last dimension of Wesley's concern for Vital Orthodoxy—the apologetic task—is one that Methodists took seriously throughout the twentieth century. They engaged it in a variety of modes, ranging from popular preaching to philosophical monographs.⁵⁰ These efforts should surely continue in our postmodern setting, though they will need to be less foundationalist in tone than many twentieth-century examples. They will also likely be more contextual in form, engaging specific challenges in specific settings, rather than offering a general defense of *the* faith.

Overall, what Wesley's precedent calls us to is a concerted effort to raise up Christians who embrace holistically their faith and live it out joyfully in the world around them. Nothing less than this can be considered a truly "Methodist" articulation of the faith!

⁴⁸This point is made sharply (verging on caricature) in Philip R. Meadows, "The 'Discipline' of Theology: Making Methodism less Methodological," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 36.2 (2001): 50–87.

⁴⁹Compare, for example, the approaches of William J. Abraham, *Waking from Doctrinal Amnesia: The Healing of Doctrine in The United Methodist Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), esp. 56–65; and John B. Cobb Jr., *Grace & Responsibility: A Wesleyan Theology for Today* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), esp. 155–76.

⁵⁰Note the emphasis on preaching in John Munsey Turner, "Preaching, Theology, and Spirituality in Twentieth-Century British Methodism," *Expository Times* 111.4 (January 2000): 112–17. In the North American setting it is characteristic that the philosophical tone of Boston Personalism allowed it to be the first broadly influential school of Methodist theology.