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## **“HONORING CONFERENCE”: WESLEYAN REFLECTIONS ON THE DYNAMICS OF THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION**

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### ***Introduction***

It is a distinct privilege to offer this essay in honor of Russell E. Richey, as we celebrate his contributions in scholarship and teaching over a career dedicated to cultivating greater self-understanding among “the people called Methodists” in North America.<sup>1</sup>

While my academic training focused in contemporary theology, not church history, I sensed early on a kinship with Richey’s work. This is because I encountered during my doctoral studies the writings of Hans-Georg Gadamer, which increasingly convinced me that all theological reflection is born out of, takes places within, and contributes to an ongoing tradition of thought and life. This conviction was deepened by the reflections of Alasdair MacIntyre on “living traditions” as historically extended, socially embodied arguments over how the future possibilities which the past makes available to the present are best realized.<sup>2</sup> One implication of this growing conviction was that I became evermore skeptical of the tendency in the academy to confine historical studies and theological reflection within isolated silos.

I sensed in Richey’s writings on North American Methodism one who similarly resisted strong disciplinary separations and chafed

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<sup>1</sup>The capstone to this career is his prominent role in producing the two-volume text: *The Methodist Experience in America* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000–10).

<sup>2</sup>See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn., New York: Crossroads, 1992); and Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (3<sup>rd</sup> edn., University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), esp. 222–23.

against the model of the “neutral observer” reigning in the scholarly guild of historical studies. Making this explicit, Richey recently described his work as “theologizing out of history, letting history speak normatively and constructively, doing theological history (not historical theology).”<sup>3</sup> But, echoing MacIntyre’s emphasis on the living nature of tradition, Richey was quick to add that he was not calling for a return to a golden age. Rather, he invites us to use the historical narrative as a glass or mirror to view not only what lies behind us, but to see more clearly the various forces that have shaped us, and to envision our future possibilities.<sup>4</sup>

I can think of no better description for what I offer in this essay. My goal is to contribute to current debate about what ought to characterize Wesleyan/Methodist practices of theological reflection. I approach this task through consideration of the dynamics of theological reflection in John Wesley and (briefly) in the ongoing Wesleyan/Methodist tradition. But, like Richey, this is not because I think that this earlier practice was ideal. Rather, I turn to Wesley’s precedent for perspective on what has shaped the tradition in which we stand, as well as insights for our current socially embodied arguments over what features of the tradition should be most emphasized (or downplayed) in its continuing development.

### ***Backdrop of Recent Debate about the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral”***

Some might wonder what more can be said about the dynamics of theological reflection in John Wesley; have these not been captured for us in the striking image of the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral”? Indeed, am I not one of the scholars who contributed to articulating this image?<sup>5</sup> Thus, I need to begin with a few comments on the origins

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<sup>3</sup>Russell E. Richey, *Doctrine in Experience: A Methodist Theology of Church and Ministry* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2009), xiii.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, xvii.

<sup>5</sup>As one of the co-authors of *Wesley and the Quadrilateral: Renewing the Conversation*, edited by W. Stephen Gunter (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997). The most significant earlier treatments of this image are William J. Abraham, “The Wesleyan Quadrilateral,” in Theodore Runyon (ed.), *Wesleyan Theology Today* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1985), 119–26; Albert Cook Outler, “The Wesleyan Quadrilateral in Wesley,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 20.1 (1985): 7–18; and Donald A. D. Thorsen *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990).

of this particular image, highlighting reservations about it from nearly the beginning—even by Albert Outler, who coined the term.

While no scholar has claimed that the term “quadrilateral” appears in John Wesley’s writings, it became increasingly common in the twentieth century to note that Wesley appeals at various times to four major warrants in theological argument: Scripture, the early Church and the Church of England standards (a characteristic Anglican delineated sense of “tradition”), reason, and experience.<sup>6</sup> He often appeals to two or three of these jointly. His most common conjunction in certifying a position as Christian is to argue that it is both scriptural and rational. Examples can also be found of joint appeals to Scripture and “tradition,” or Scripture and experience. Finally, there are instances of appeals linking Scripture, reason, and “tradition”; or Scripture, reason, and experience.<sup>7</sup> There are no known examples that invoke all four warrants at the same time.

Albert Outler joined those highlighting these elements at least as early as 1968. In an article on the theological accents of the Methodist tradition, he spoke of how Wesley modeled the “dialogue” of this “four-fold complex” in theological reflection, contrasting Wesley’s approach with one-sided alternatives of “biblicism, traditionalism, rationalism, and narcissism.”<sup>8</sup> The year that this article appeared, Outler was selected to chair a Theological Study Commission for The United Methodist Church, charged with developing a doctrinal statement for the new denomination (a union of The Methodist Church and The Evangelical United Brethren). The commission initially considered crafting a doctrinal statement to replace the

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<sup>6</sup>An early example is Paul Waitman Hoon, “The Soteriology of John Wesley” (Edinburgh University Ph.D. thesis, 1936), 343. More influential was Colin W. Williams, Chapter 2, in *John Wesley’s Theology Today: A Study of the Wesleyan Tradition in the Light of Current Theological Dialogue* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1960), 23–38.

<sup>7</sup>For citations of each of these combinations, see notes 72–75 in Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994), 267–68.

<sup>8</sup>Albert Cook Outler, “Theologische Akzente,” in C.E. Sommer (ed.), *Der Methodismus* (Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1968), 98–100. Outler provides a similar contrast in “Wesleyan Quadrilateral in Wesley” (p. 16), substituting “empiricism” for “narcissism.”

prior MC Articles of Religion and EUB Confession of Faith. But this goal was soon set aside, in favor of affirming both of the earlier standards as “foundational documents” and focusing attention on setting these in historical context and developing guidelines for the task of ongoing theological reflection. The interim report of the commission (to a special session of General Conference in 1970) included a section on “The Wesleyan Concept of Authority” which spoke of how Wesley “tested his own teaching, and that of others, within a four-element compound of interdependent norms.”<sup>9</sup> This language echoes Outler’s earlier article. But the report also introduced “quadrilateral” as a term to capture Wesley’s practice, the first known use in this regard.<sup>10</sup> Outler later acknowledged that he suggested this term as a metaphor for capturing Wesley’s theological dynamics, drawn by the ecumenical allusion to the “Lambeth Quadrilateral,” a list of four elements adopted by Anglican Communion in 1888 as essential to any potential reunited Christian Church.<sup>11</sup> He was hoping that it would suggest the ecumenical promise of Wesley’s approach to theological reflection.

Whatever the potential positive allusions, Outler soon began to regret coining the term. Late in life he lamented that he had underestimated “the number of literal-minded people who would construe it in geometrical terms and draw the unintended inference that this downgraded the primacy of Scripture. . . . It was a fault, it was a grievous fault, and grievously have I suffered from it.”<sup>12</sup> This concern helps explain why the term “quadrilateral” (though not the four elements) was absent from the final report of the Commission,

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<sup>9</sup>The Theological Study Commission on Doctrine and Doctrinal Standards, “An Interim Report to the General Conference” (released as a pamphlet in 1970, with no publication details), 7; quoted in Cambell, “Wesleyan Quadrilateral,” 156.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 4, 8.

<sup>11</sup>Albert Cook Outler, “Through a Glass Darkly: Memories, Forebodings, and Faith,” in Bob W. Parrott (ed.), *Albert Outler The Churchman* (Anderson, IN: Bristol House, 1995), 453–71; here, 463. This was Outler’s actual manuscript. His oral version, which differs slightly at places, was transcribed and published as “Through a Glass Darkly: Our History Speaks To Our Future,” *Methodist History* 28.2 (January 1990): 77–91; see p. 86. The four elements of Lambeth are: (1) Holy Scriptures, (2) the Apostle’s and Nicene Creeds, (3) Baptism and Eucharist, and (4) the historic episcopate.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.* See also “Wesleyan Quadrilateral in Wesley,” 16.

which was adopted at the 1972 UMC General Conference and incorporated into the *Book of Discipline*.

But official exclusion did little to slow the rapidity with which the phrase “Wesleyan Quadrilateral” spread through popular and scholarly debate in Methodist and broader circles. The phrase has become a motto for the proper approach to theological work for some, albeit a motto reflecting a range of emphases and images (even on tee shirts!).<sup>13</sup> It has become a central focus of critique for others, in diagnosing what is wrong with current Wesleyan (and particularly United Methodist) theology.<sup>14</sup> The criticisms run the range from near *ad hominem* attacks, to reductive accounts of the political motives for or against use of the phrase, to some significant historical, theological, and philosophical challenges. Among other things, the resulting debate led to revision in 1988 of the statement placed in the 1972 UMC *Book of Discipline*.<sup>15</sup>

I have no interest in chronicling stages in the debate over the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral” any further.<sup>16</sup> Neither will I undertake defending the specific phrase against its critics. While I agree with Outler’s larger concern, I have never considered “quadrilateral” an ideal image for capturing the dynamics of John Wesley’s theological

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<sup>13</sup>The most developed scholarly example is Thorsen, *Wesleyan Quadrilateral* (reprinted in 2005 by Emeth Press). See also his website: <http://www.wesleyanquadrilateral.com/>. An “image” search on Google will yield a number of depictions, including the tee shirts.

<sup>14</sup>The strongest critical voice (in a change of view after his 1985 article cited earlier) has been William J. Abraham; see *Waking from Doctrinal Amnesia: The Healing of Doctrine in The United Methodist Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 57–59; “What’s Right and What’s Wrong with the Quadrilateral?” *Canadian Methodist Historical Society Papers* 13 (2000): 136–50; and “What Should United Methodists Do with the Quadrilateral?” *Quarterly Review* 22.1 (2002): 85–88. Many of Abraham’s criticisms are echoed in David Pratt Morris-Chapman, *Whither Methodist Theology Now? The Collapse of the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral”* (Tiverton: Methodist Sacramental Fellowship, 2010). Available online: [http://www.sacramental.org.uk/MSF/Annual\\_Conference\\_%26\\_Lecture.html](http://www.sacramental.org.uk/MSF/Annual_Conference_%26_Lecture.html).

<sup>15</sup>A good sense of the issues and developments in this revision can be gained from the documents gathered in Thomas Langford (ed.), *Doctrine and Theology in the United Methodist Church* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1991).

<sup>16</sup>See the insightful accounts in Ted Allen Campbell, “The ‘Wesleyan Quadrilateral’: The Story of a Modern Methodist Myth,” in Langford (ed.) *Doctrine and Theology*, 154–61; Ted A. Campbell, “Authority and the ‘Wesleyan Quadrilateral,’” in Charles Yrigoyen Jr. (ed.), *T & T Clark Companion to Methodism* (New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 61–72; and the opening section of Andrew C. Thompson, “Outler’s Quadrilateral, Moral Psychology, and Theological Reflection in the Wesleyan Tradition,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 46.1 (2011): 49–72.

reflection. I used the four-element pattern heuristically in 1994, in the section of *Responsible Grace* devoted to Wesley's theological method, but specifically rejected any connotation of equality among the elements—speaking instead of “a unilateral *rule* of Scripture within a trilateral *hermeneutic* of reason, tradition, and experience.”<sup>17</sup> I joined my co-authors in repeating this description three years later in *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral*.<sup>18</sup> However, I was becoming dissatisfied by then with any such geometric imagery, as might be sensed from a passage in my chapter: “Wesley's use of the various resources for doctrinal reflection was ultimately *dialogical*. It was not a matter of simply using whichever resource seemed more helpful, or of playing one resource off against another, but of conferring among them until some consensus was found.”<sup>19</sup> In essence, I was returning to the imagery of “dialogue” in Outler's original essay.

I have invoked the metaphor of “honoring the dialogue” in some subsequent settings.<sup>20</sup> The purpose of this essay is to elaborate on that metaphor. But I have also decided to reframe it a bit, as “honoring conference.” I was drawn in this direction by some of Richey's essays, where I noted his concern to reflect the actual languages of Methodist people.<sup>21</sup> The language of “conference” is one that draws his specific attention. He highlights its identification as a means of grace and suggests that neglect of this role in the later tradition resulted in a “missed opportunity for ecclesiology.”<sup>22</sup> I will be attending to the language of “conferring” (and related imagery) in John Wesley where the focus is more on theological reflection—that is, its role in seeking the most adequate human understandings and appropriations of divine revelation.

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<sup>17</sup>Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 46. See the “heuristic” qualification in note 71, p. 267.

<sup>18</sup>Gunter (ed.), *Wesley and the Quadrilateral*, 142.

<sup>19</sup>Maddox, “The Enriching Role of Experience,” in Gunter (ed.), *Wesley and the Quadrilateral*, 122.

<sup>20</sup>E.g., Randy L. Maddox, “‘Honoring the Dialogue’: A Wesleyan Guideline for the Debate over Homosexuality,” *Circuit Rider* 22:6 (Nov/Dec 1999), 25.

<sup>21</sup>See particularly, Russell E. Richey, *Early American Methodism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 82–97.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 65–81; esp. p. 80. Richey seeks to redress this missed opportunity in his own reflections on ecclesiology in *Doctrine in Experience*.

## *Dimensions of John Wesley's Practice of Conferring in Theological Reflection*<sup>23</sup>

Engaging the Bible, as a witness to and setting of divine revelation, was central to John Wesley's Christian life and to the spiritual communities that he helped gather and lead. Consider his elderly reflections on the early movement at Oxford University:

From the very beginning, from the time that four young men united together, each of them was *homo unius libri* – a man of one book. God taught them all to make his “Word a lantern unto their feet, and a light in all their paths.” They had one, and only one rule of judgment in regard to all their tempers, words, and actions, namely, the oracles of God.<sup>24</sup>

It is characteristic that Wesley's primary focus in this quote is on the Bible as the rule or guide for Christian *practice*. But he also valued it as the rule of Christian *belief*, insisting that he regulated his theological convictions by Scripture.<sup>25</sup> This role is a bit more prominent in the widely quoted passage from Wesley's preface to the first volume of his *Sermons*, which begins:

I want to know one thing, the way to heaven—how to land safe on that happy shore. God himself has condescended to teach the way: for this very end he came from heaven. He hath written it down in a book. O give me that book! ... Let me be *homo unius libri*. Here then I am, far from the busy ways of men. I sit down alone: only God is here. In his presence I open, I read his Book; for this end, to find the way to heaven.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>This section summarizes points developed and documented much more fully in Randy L. Maddox, “The Rule of Christian Faith, Practice, and Hope: John Wesley on the Bible,” *Methodist Review* 3 (2011), 1–35. Readers desiring such detail should consult this online essay. [www.methodistreview.org](http://www.methodistreview.org).

<sup>24</sup>Sermon 107, “On God's Vineyard,” I.1, *The Bicentennial Edition of The Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984–) 3:504. Cited hereafter as *Works*.

<sup>25</sup>See his letters to William Dodd on 5 Feb. 1756 & 12 Mar. 1756, in John Telford (ed.), *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.* (London: Epworth, 1931), 3:157–58, 167. Hereafter cited as *Letters* (Telford).

<sup>26</sup>*Sermons on Several Occasions*, Vol. 1 (1746), Preface, §5, *Works*, 1:104–6.

## “A Man of One Book” *Comparatively!*

Read in isolation, this passage could suggest that Wesley was a *biblicist*, relying solely on the Bible for all matters. But Wesley responded to the claim of some of his lay preachers, “I read only the Bible,” with strong words: “This is rank enthusiasm. If you need no book but the Bible, you are got above St. Paul (who requested to be sent some books).”<sup>27</sup> As Wesley explained his stance more carefully in *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, to be *homo unius libri* is to be one who regards no book *comparatively* but the Bible.<sup>28</sup>

While Wesley’s point in this qualification is the preeminence of the Bible over other books, one might catch hints of the fact that Wesley read the one Book itself “comparatively.” He did not limit himself to the translation that was currently standard in the Church of England (commonly called the King James Version). He conferred with other English translations, as well as versions in French and German. And he valued over all of these the Bible in its original languages of Hebrew and Greek, which he often cites in his sermons and letters.

Going a step further, Wesley owned at least four versions of the Greek New Testament, because he was aware that there is no pristine copy handed down from the earliest church. Rather, we have multiple manuscripts, with numerous variant readings. Among the versions he owned was John Mill’s two-volume set, which gathered in footnotes the most complete list at the time of variant readings in these manuscripts. The distinctive English translation that Wesley provided for *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* often corrects the Greek text that was used for the KJV (the *Textus Receptus*), by conferring with these variant readings and with the arguments of scholars about which might be most reliable.

Finally, it is clear that Wesley conferred as needed with scholarly tools like lexicons, concordances, and commentaries for help in reading the Bible. Perhaps most surprising is his use of historical critical resources that began to surface in the later seventeenth

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<sup>27</sup>1766 *Minutes*, Q. 30, *Works*, 10:340; also as “Large Minutes,” Q. 34, *Works*, 10:887.

<sup>28</sup>*Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, §10, in Thomas Jackson (ed.), *The Works of John Wesley* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), 11:373. Cited hereafter as *Works* (Jackson).



century. While he was uncomfortable with the reductive intent of some scholars who highlighted historical and literary parallels between the Bible and surrounding cultures, Wesley found that studies of the customs of the ancient Israelites and the early Christians enriched his reading of the Bible—so much so that he published an abridgment of one for his lay preachers.<sup>29</sup>

### **Read Comparatively the Many Books in the One Book**

Another characteristic often attributed to biblicism is the assumption that Scripture is always clear (perspicuous) to the ordinary reader and is uniform in its teachings throughout. Striking a different tone, Wesley's comments in the preface to *Sermons* continue:

Is there a doubt concerning the meaning of what I read?  
Does anything appear dark or intricate? . . . I then search  
after and consider parallel passages of Scripture,  
“comparing spiritual things with spiritual.” I meditate  
thereon, with all the attention and earnestness of which my  
mind is capable.<sup>30</sup>

Wesley recognized that readers often must labor to understand particular scriptures, and that a central resource is conference with other parts (or books) of the one Book. He specifically encouraged his followers to read a portion of *both* testaments each morning and evening, rather than confining themselves to favored portions of Scripture.<sup>31</sup> He also modeled conferring with the whole Bible. We have records of him preaching on texts from every book in the Protestant canon except Esther, Song of Songs, Obadiah, Nahum, Zephaniah, Philemon, and 3 John.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>*The Manners of the Antient Christians* (Bristol: Farley, 1749); an abridged translation of Claude Fleury, *Les moeurs des Chrétiens* (Paris: Clouzier, 1682).

<sup>30</sup>*Sermons*, Vol. 1 (1746), Preface, §5, *Works*, 1:106.

<sup>31</sup>See, for example, his Letter to Margaret Lewen (June 1764), *Letters* (Telford), 4:247.

<sup>32</sup>See the list compiled by Wanda Willard Smith on the website of the Center for Studies in the Wesleyan Tradition at Duke: <http://divinity.duke.edu/initiatives-centers/cswt/research-resources/register>.

## Read the One Book in Conference (and Conspiracy) with the Spirit

Before exploring any more of Wesley's recommendations for our human role in reading Scripture, we need to return to the elision (...) in my second extract from Wesley's preface to *Sermons*, because it contains one of Wesley's deepest convictions about Christian life in general and study of Scripture in particular. Here is the extract with the missing material:

Is there a doubt concerning the meaning of what I read?  
Does anything appear dark or intricate? I lift up my heart to  
the Father of lights: "Lord, is it not thy Word, 'If any man  
lack wisdom, let him ask of God'? Thou 'givest liberally  
and upbraidest not.' Thou has said, 'If any be willing to do  
thy will, he shall know.' I am willing to do, let me know,  
thy will." I then search after and consider parallel passages  
....<sup>33</sup>

Wesley's emphasis on the role of the "inspiration of the Spirit" in all of Christian life is reflected here. His typical use of this phrase is broader than considerations of the production of the Bible. In the *Complete English Dictionary* (1753) that Wesley published to help his followers read Scripture and other writings, he defined "inspiration" as the influence of the Holy Spirit that enables persons to love and serve God. This broad use of the word trades on the meaning of the Latin original, *inspirare*: to breathe into, animate, excite, or inflame. The broader understanding is evident even when Wesley uses "inspiration" in relation to the Bible, as in his comments in *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* on 2 Timothy 3:16. He affirms God's guidance of the original authors, but his focal emphasis is encouraging current readers to seek the Spirit's inspiring assistance in reading Scripture! As he put it elsewhere (quoting Thomas à Kempis), "we need the same Spirit to *understand* the Scripture which enabled the holy men of old to *write* it."<sup>34</sup>

While Wesley clearly was encouraging readers to confer with the Spirit for guidance in understanding Scripture, his fundamental concern was personal *embrace* of the saving truth in Scripture. He recognized that such embrace, such "true, living Christian faith ... is

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<sup>33</sup>*Sermons*, Vol. 1 (1746), Preface, §5, *Works*, 1:106.

<sup>34</sup>*Letter to Bishop of Gloucester*, II.10, *Works*, 11:509.

not only an assent, an act of the understanding, but a disposition which *God hath wrought* in the heart.”<sup>35</sup> So he laid particular stress on the Spirit’s *inspiring* presence that enables this embrace, inviting us to “breathe back” (or con-spire) what is graciously offered.<sup>36</sup>

### **Read the One Book in Conference with Other Readers**

Bearing in mind this foundational dependence upon the Spirit’s empowering and guiding presence, let me draw our attention again to Wesley’s preface to the first volume of *Sermons*. After encouraging his readers to pray for help and stressing the need to compare scripture with scripture, Wesley continues, “If any doubt still remains, I consult those who are experienced in the things of God, and then the writings whereby, being dead, they yet speak.”<sup>37</sup> The crucial thing to note in this concluding line is not just that an individual might turn to other books to help understand the one Book, but that we as individuals need to read the Bible in conference with other readers!

Several dimensions to this need deserve highlighting. Note first that Wesley identifies consulting particularly those “more experienced in the things of God.” His focal concern is not scholarly expertise (though he is not dismissing this), but the contribution of mature Christian character and discernment to interpreting the Bible. Where does one find such folk whose lives and understanding are less distorted by sin? One of Wesley’s most central convictions was that authentic Christian character and discernment are the fruit of the Spirit, nurtured within the witness, worship, support, and accountability of Christian community. This is the point of his often (mis-)quoted line that there is “no holiness but social holiness.”<sup>38</sup> As he later clarified, “I mean not only that [holiness] cannot subsist so well, but that it cannot subsist at all without society, without living

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<sup>35</sup>See Sermon 18, “The Marks of the New Birth,” §3, *Works*, 1:418 (emphasis added).

<sup>36</sup>See this image in Sermon 19, “The Great Privilege of Those that are Born of God,” III.3, *Works*, 1:442.

<sup>37</sup>*Sermons*, Vol. 1 (1746), Preface, §5, *Works*, 1:106.

<sup>38</sup>See the helpful discussion of this matter by Andrew C. Thompson, “From Societies to Society: The Shift from Holiness to Justice in the Wesleyan Tradition,” *Methodist Review* 3 (2011): 141–72.

and conversing with [other people].”<sup>39</sup> While the class and band meetings that Wesley designed to embody this principle were not devoted primarily to bible study, they helped form persons who were more inclined to read Scripture, and to read it in keeping with its central purposes.

I hasten to add, secondly, that Wesley’s emphasis on the value of reading the Bible in conference with others was not limited to considerations of relative Christian maturity. It was grounded in his recognition of the limits of *all* human understanding, even that of spiritually mature persons. He was convinced that, as finite creatures, our human understandings of our experience, of earlier Christian precedent, and of Scripture itself are “opinions” or interpretations of their subject matter.<sup>40</sup> God may know these things with absolute clarity; we see them “through a glass darkly.” Wesley underlined the implication of this in his sermon on a “Catholic Spirit.”

Although every man necessarily believes that every particular opinion which he holds is true (for to believe any opinion is not true, is the same thing as not to hold it); yet can no man be assured that all his own opinions, taken together, are true. Nay, every thinking man is assured they are not, seeing *humanum est errare et nescire*: “To be ignorant of many things, and to mistake in some, is the necessary condition of humanity.”<sup>41</sup>

Wesley went on in the sermon to commend a spirit of openness in conferring with others, where we are clear in our commitment to the main branches of Christian doctrine, while always ready to hear and weigh whatever can be offered against our current understanding of matters of belief or practice. His goal for this commended conferring is clear—to seek together *more adequate* understandings of the topic being considered.

The final dimension to highlight about Wesley’s call for reading the Bible in conference with others should be obvious: it is vital that we do not limit our conferring to those who are most like us, or those

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<sup>39</sup>See respectively, *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1739), Preface, §§4–5, *Works* (Jackson) 14:321; and Sermon 24, “Sermon on the Mount IV,” §I.1, *Works*, 1:533–34.

<sup>40</sup>For 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.

<sup>41</sup>Sermon 39, “Catholic Spirit,” §I.4, *Works*, 2:84.

with whom we already agree. We should remain open to, and at times seek out, those who hold differing understandings. Otherwise, we are not likely to identify places where our understanding of something in Scripture (usually shared with those closest to us) might be wrong! That is why Wesley specifically invited any who believed that he presented mistaken readings of the Bible in his first volume of *Sermons* to be in touch, so that they could confer together over Scripture.<sup>42</sup>

### **Read the One Book in Conference with Christian “Tradition”**

Among those outside of his circle of associates and followers whom Wesley was committed to including in conference over the meaning of Scripture were Christians of earlier generations. As he noted, our primary means of hearing their voice is through their writings.

It is widely recognized that John Wesley valued the writings of the first three centuries of the church, in both its Eastern (Greek) and Western (Latin) settings. He specifically defended consulting early Christian authors in a published letter to Conyers Middleton, insisting that consultation with these writings had often helped Christian readers avoid dangerous errors in their interpretation of Scripture, while neglect of these writings would surely leave one captive to misunderstandings currently reigning.<sup>43</sup>

In both his formal definitions and his practice Wesley tended to jump from the early church to the seventeenth-century Anglican standards (which he viewed as closely reflecting the early church) in his consideration of Christian precedent. When pressed to justify this move, Wesley highlighted 1) the proximity of the early writers to biblical times, 2) their eminent character, and 3) a special endowment of the Holy Spirit upon them.<sup>44</sup> By contrast, his reason for restricting authority to this period was his belief that Christian life degenerated rapidly after Constantine gave official status (and riches!) to the church.

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<sup>42</sup>*Sermons*, Vol. 1, Preface, §§8–9, *Works*, 1:107.

<sup>43</sup>A *Letter to the Reverend Dr. Conyers Middleton* (4–24 Jan. 1749), *Letters* (Telford), 2:325.

<sup>44</sup>E.g., Preface to “The Epistles of the Apostolic Fathers, St. Clement, St. Ignatius, St. Polycarp; and the Martyrdoms of St. Ignatius and St. Polycarp,” *Works* (Jackson), 14:223–4; and *An Address to the Clergy*, §I.2, *Works* (Jackson), 10:484.

## Read the One Book in Conference with the “Rule of Faith”

As Wesley’s justification reflects, his strongest interest in the ancient church was their model of Christian practice.<sup>45</sup> But he also valued early precedent in doctrine. One precedent deserves special attention. From the beginning, Christians faced the reality that Scripture can be invoked for a range of claims—some mutually contradictory. This resulted in appeals within the early church to a communally agreed standard or guide for interpreting Scripture. The guide was often designated the “rule of faith,” reflecting the typical Latin translation of Paul’s advice in Romans 12:6 for exercising the gift of prophecy according to the “analogy of faith” (κατὰ τὴν ἀναλογίαν τῆς πίστεως). It was understood to embody the core theological convictions handed down by the apostles and to capture the central narrative of God’s saving work in Scripture. In its most developed form (the Apostles’ Creed is a key example) it highlighted the implicit trinitarian form of God’s saving work. The “rule of faith” gathered the early church’s sense of what was most central and unifying in Scripture, to aid in reading the whole of Scripture.

The topic of the “rule of faith” became a battle ground during the Reformation. Saint Augustine had defined it as the teachings in “the more open places of the Scriptures and in the authority of the church.”<sup>46</sup> Some teachings and practices had been advanced on the “authority of the church” through the medieval period that the Reformers judged contrary to clear biblical teaching. In response they championed “Scripture alone” as the rule of faith. But for most Protestants this did not mean rejecting the value of some communally-shared sense of the central and unifying themes in Scripture when trying to interpret particular passages. They changed the name for this shared sense to the “analogy of faith,” reflecting Paul’s Greek text, as one expression of their concern to stick close to Scripture. But they typically defended under this label the practice of consulting at least the Apostles’ Creed when seeking to interpret Scripture correctly.

Wesley inherited through his Anglican standards this Protestant commitment to Scripture as the “rule of faith,” interpreted in light of the “analogy of faith.” He also inherited the impact of Protestant

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<sup>45</sup>Ted A. Campbell demonstrates this point at length in *John Wesley and Christian Antiquity* (Nashville: Kingswood, 1991).

<sup>46</sup>Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, Book III, par. 2.

debates that elevated attention to topics of the dynamics of individual salvation in communally-authoritative guides to reading of Scripture. These topics was particularly important for those Protestants concerned with piety and holy living, like Wesley. As a result, his specific articulations of the “analogy of faith” tend to focus on four themes: the corruption of sin, justification by grace through faith, the new birth, and present inward and outward holiness.<sup>47</sup>

Wesley’s focus on these topics has led some interpreters to fault him for a one-sided “personal-salvationist” reading of Scripture. If this charge is meant to imply that Wesley ignored or downplayed the redemptive work of the triune God, it must be rejected. It is true that Wesley devoted far fewer sermons to the Trinity than, say, to justification by faith. But this is because he assumed that his Trinitarian commitments were generally shared among his Anglican peers; he was focusing on areas of misunderstanding and disagreement. As Geoffrey Wainwright has shown, Wesley’s reading of Scripture was actually deeply shaped by his trinitarian convictions.<sup>48</sup>

Wesley’s commitment to reading the Bible in light of the trinitarian (and other) themes affirmed in the Apostles’ Creed is embodied in his advice: “In order to be well acquainted with the doctrines of Christianity you need but one book (besides the New Testament) — Bishop Pearson *On the Creed*.”<sup>49</sup> John Pearson’s volume was an exposition of the Apostles’ Creed, which Wesley’s parents had commended to him and was a text during his study at Christ Church in Oxford. This was the theological text that Wesley himself most often assigned to his assistants and recommended to his correspondents.

In other words, Wesley’s description of himself as a “man of one Book” should not mislead us from recognizing that he generally read that Book in conference with the broadly shared Christian “rule of faith” and his more specific high-church Anglican commitments.

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<sup>47</sup>*Explanatory Notes upon the Old Testament*, Preface, §18, *Works* (Jackson), 14:253; and Sermon 122, “Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity,” §6, *Works*, 4:89.

<sup>48</sup>Geoffrey Wainwright, “Wesley’s Trinitarian Hermeneutics,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 36.1 (2001): 7–30.

<sup>49</sup>Letter to Cradock Glascott (13 May 1764), *Letters* (Telford), 4:243; referring to John Pearson, *An Exposition of the Creed* (London: John Williams, 1659).

## Read the “Book of Scripture” in Conference with the “Book of Nature”

One of the commitments nurtured in Wesley by his Anglican upbringing was a higher emphasis than in some other Protestant circles for studying God’s revelation in the natural world (the “book of nature”) alongside of studying Scripture. Wesley’s central interest in studying the natural world was to strengthen the faith awakened by Scripture and deepen our appreciation of God’s power, wisdom, and goodness. But his reading of current studies of the natural world also helped him test and reshape inherited interpretations of Scripture.<sup>50</sup>

For a fitting example, return to the preface of the first volume of *Sermons* and note Wesley’s line: “I want to know one thing, the way to heaven—how to land safe on that happy shore.” Wesley is reflecting here a long development in Christian history. Although Scripture speaks of God’s ultimate goal in salvation as the “new heavens and earth,” a variety of influences led Christians through the first millennium to assume increasingly that our final state is “heaven above.” The latter was seen as a realm where human spirits, dwelling in ethereal bodies, join eternally with all other spiritual beings (a category that did not include animals) in continuous worship of God. By contrast, they assumed that the physical universe, which we abandon at death, would eventually be annihilated. Wesley was taught this understanding of our final state, and through much of his ministry he affirmed it as obvious and unproblematic. But in the last decade of his life he began to reclaim boldly the biblical imagery of God’s renewal of the whole universe, specifically championing the notion that animals participate in final salvation.<sup>51</sup> What led to this change? A major factor was his study, in his sixties, of some current works in natural philosophy (the closest term for “science” at the time) that utilized the model of the “chain of beings.” Central to this model is the assumption that the loss of any type of “being” in creation would call into question the perfection of

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<sup>50</sup>See Randy L. Maddox, “John Wesley’s Precedent for Theological Engagement with the Natural Sciences” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 44.1 (Spring 2009): 23–54.

<sup>51</sup>See Sermon 60, “The General Deliverance,” *Works*, 2:437–50; and Sermon 64, “The New Creation,” *Works*, 2:500–10.



the Creator. Prodded by this emphasis, Wesley began to take more seriously the biblical insistence that God desires to redeem the whole creation.<sup>52</sup>

### ***Examples of “Honoring Conference” in Theological Discernment—in Wesley and Beyond***

The instance just recounted hints at the broadest dynamic of “honoring conference” that characterized Wesley’s theological reflection at its best. Confronted by an apparent conflict between current “scientific” accounts of the natural world and his current understanding of Scripture, Wesley did not simply debate which was more authoritative. He reconsidered his interpretations of *each*, seeking an understanding that *honored both*. In this way he upheld the authority of Scripture, while embracing the contribution of broad conferencing to understanding Scripture. To gain a richer sense of this dynamic, I will explore two other case studies of “honoring conference” in Wesley, tracing the trajectory of his consideration over into the later Wesleyan/Methodist tradition.

#### **Case Study of Women Preaching**

The first case concerns whether women should be allowed to preach. Wesley was raised in a tradition that barred women from this role, appealing to apparent injunctions in the New Testament (1 Cor. 14:33–34; 1 Tim. 2:11–14), as well as a reading of Genesis (reflected in Timothy) that depicts women as created inferior and subordinate to males and as more susceptible to deception. Wesley’s embrace of this stance through the early 1750s can be seen in the comments on 1 Timothy 2:11–14 in *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* (1755).<sup>53</sup>

But early in his life Wesley also observed God blessing the speaking ministry of his mother. And as the Methodist renewal movement

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<sup>52</sup>See the discussion in Randy L. Maddox, “Anticipating the New Creation: Wesleyan Foundations for Holistic Mission,” *Asbury Journal* 62 (2007): 49–66.

<sup>53</sup>Wesley reproduces here without change the comments of Johann Bengel that the injunction is against “public teaching,” based on the woman being “originally the inferior” and that a woman “is more easily deceived, and more easily deceives.”

spread in the 1750s, he began to observe a similar blessing on the witness and exhortations offered by some of his female followers.<sup>54</sup> The result was a growing tension between his understanding of the teachings of Scripture and his sense of God’s initiative in the renewal movement.

At first Wesley navigated this tension by arguing that the women were just “testifying.” This satisfied few, and he was increasingly pressed to justify allowing women (or lay men) to “preach.” What is most significant is the stance that Wesley consciously refused— namely, setting aside a clear injunction in Scripture by appeal solely to the present guidance of the Holy Spirit (as he understood the Quakers to do).<sup>55</sup> Instead he searched more deeply in Scripture, seeking a solution that honored *both* the teachings there and God’s blessing of the revival.

The first fruits of this conferring with Scripture appeared in 1755, in an essay that Wesley wrote to explain how he and his movement were loyal to the Church of England, given his support of practices like lay preaching. In the essay Wesley defended lay preachers on the grounds that in the beginning of the Christian church “both the evangelists and deacons preached. Yea and women when under extraordinary inspiration. Then both their sons and daughters prophesied, although in ordinary cases it was not permitted to ‘a woman to speak in the church’.”<sup>56</sup> Note the appeal both to the earliest “tradition” and to specific scriptural texts (Acts 2:17, quoting Joel 2:28) to qualify—but not set aside—the apparent clear teaching of another text (1 Cor. 14:35). Wesley’s new solution was that Scripture provides an exception for extraordinary movements of the Spirit (like Methodism) from its standard injunction against women preaching.

But why would Scripture provide such an exception if women were created inferior to men, if they are less intellectual, less

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<sup>54</sup>For more details on the following summary, see Paul Wesley Chilcote, *John Wesley and the Women Preachers of Early Methodism* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1991); and Earl Kent Brown, *Women of Mr Wesley’s Methodism* (New York: Edwin Mellen, 1983).

<sup>55</sup>See his description of how the Methodist practice of allowing women to preach differed from that of the Quakers in his letter to Sarah Crosby (Dec. 2, 1777), *Letters* (Telford), 6:290–91.

<sup>56</sup>“Ought We to Separate from the Church of England?” III.2, *Works*, 9:573

courageous, and more easily deceived?<sup>57</sup> Wesley continued to *confer*—between Scripture and his observations of God’s work, between scripture text and scripture text, and with other readers of Scripture—in pursuing this deeper question. The best evidence is *Explanatory Notes upon the Old Testament*, which he published in 1765. Wesley relied heavily on other commentators in producing this text, particularly Matthew Henry’s *Exposition of the Old Testament*.<sup>58</sup> He reproduces Henry’s comment on Genesis 3:6–8 that Eve was the “ringleader” in the transgression (and the suggestion that Adam was not present at the time, or he would have prevented it!). But he also includes Henry’s insistence that the greatest guilt belonged to Adam. More importantly, Wesley endorsed by inclusion Henry’s comment on Genesis 5:2 which insists that Adam and Eve were “both made in God’s likeness; and therefore between the sexes there is not that great difference and inequality which some imagine.”

Wesley may have reached this revision of his inherited reading of Genesis as early as 1757. In that year he included in his extended volume on *The Doctrine of Original Sin* an excerpt from Thomas Boston. The point of including Boston was to buttress Wesley’s general argument about human sinfulness. But Wesley made an important omission in his excerpt. In describing creation, Boston argued that both the man and the woman had dominion over the lower creatures, and then added “but man had one thing peculiar to him, to wit, that he had dominion over woman also.” Wesley deleted this line, apparently because he no longer agreed with it!<sup>59</sup> How strongly Wesley came to affirm the basic equality of women to men, as both created in God’s image, shines through in his later years in the

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<sup>57</sup>These are characteristics that Wesley seems to affirm up into the middle 1750s with little question; cf. *A Letter to the Reverend Dr. Conyers Middleton* (Jan. 1749), §III.2, *Letters* (Telford), 2:384; and *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*, Acts 17:4.

<sup>58</sup>See the analysis in Robert Michael Casto, “Exegetical Method in John Wesley’s *Explanatory Notes upon the Old Testament*: A Description of His Approach, Uses of Sources, and Practice” (Duke University Ph.D. thesis, 1977).

<sup>59</sup>Compare Thomas Boston, *Human Nature in its Four-fold State* (10<sup>th</sup> ed., Edinburgh: Lumisden, 1753), 13 to *Doctrine of Original Sin*, Part VII, *Works* (Jackson), 9:436 (bottom of page).

sarcasm he uses against those who claim to be the champions of “liberty,” but restrict political rights only to (free) males.<sup>60</sup>

The emerging intersections of Wesley’s searching of Scripture cleared the way for him to permit women like Sarah Crosby to “preach” at least as early as 1761.<sup>61</sup> That is not to say that Wesley became a vocal advocate of women preaching. He still assumed that this practice was scripturally prohibited as a norm, the only exception being extraordinary movements of the Spirit. This may help account for why Wesley generally did not publicize the women whom he allowed to preach. Consider the report published in *Gentleman’s Magazine* concerning events in Plymouth, Devonshire on September 8, 1775:

A woman preacher, who accompanied Mr. John Wesley to Plymouth, held forth upon the parade, and brought together the greatest concourse of people that had ever been seen there; the novelty of a woman Methodist preacher having drawn half Plymouth to hear her.<sup>62</sup>

Wesley describes preaching twice in Plymouth on this day in his *Journal*, but makes no mention of the woman preacher accompanying him!<sup>63</sup>

In part because of such ambiguity, Wesley’s solution for “honoring conference” among Scripture, “tradition”, and his observations of the Spirit’s work in the revival proved short-lived. While it permitted some women to preach during his life, it set them up to be excluded from this role (often forcefully) when Methodism became an “ordinary” church. But this did not terminate the process of conference! Advocacy of full ministerial roles for women continued in churches descended from Wesley’s ministry. The debates this generated were long and often painful, contributing to some of

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<sup>60</sup>See *Thoughts Concerning the Origin of Power* (1772), §§8–15, *Works* (Jackson), 11:48–50; and *Some Observations on Liberty* (1776), §19, *Works* (Jackson), 11:99. Note particularly his aside that males may have stronger limbs, but not stronger reason, in *Thoughts*, §11 (11:49).

<sup>61</sup>See the discussion in Chilcote, *Women Preachers*, 65.

<sup>62</sup>*Gentleman’s Magazine* 45 (1775): 451; drawn to my attention in Helmut Renders, *Andar como Cristo Andou: A salvação social em John Wesley* (São Bernardo do Campo: Editeo, 2010), 296.

<sup>63</sup>*Journal* (Sept. 8, 1775), *Works*, 22:465.

the fractures in the movement.<sup>64</sup> Explicit commitment to “honoring conference” was all too rare. But the overall process led to an increasing consensus that some of the passages used to prohibit these roles could be interpreted differently; and more importantly, that there is an internal scriptural critique of such prohibitions. A good example is the statement on “Women in Ministry” in the current *Manual* of the Church of the Nazarene:

The Church of the Nazarene supports the right of women to use their God-given spiritual gifts within the church, affirms the historic right of women to be elected and appointed to places of leadership ... including the offices of both elder and deacon. The purpose of Christ’s redemptive work is to set God’s creation free from the curse of the Fall. Those who are “in Christ” are new creations (2 Cor. 5:17). In this redemptive community, no human being is to be regarded as inferior on the basis of social status, race, or gender (Gal. 3:26–28).

Acknowledging the apparent paradox created by Paul’s instruction to Timothy (1 Tim. 2:11–12) and to the church in Corinth (1 Cor. 14:33–34), we believe interpreting these passages as limiting the role of women in ministry presents serious conflicts with specific passages of scripture that commend female participation in spiritual leadership roles (Joel 2:28–29; Acts 2:17–18; 21:8–9; Rom. 16:1, 3, 7; Phil. 4:2–3), and violates the spirit and practice of the Wesleyan-holiness tradition. Finally, it is incompatible with the character of God presented throughout Scripture, especially as revealed in the person of Jesus Christ.<sup>65</sup>

The key point to note here is that the move to ordination of women in Wesleyan and Methodist churches was not *in the face of* scriptural teaching but on a conviction of *honoring* Scripture, rightly interpreted through conference with the whole of God’s revelation, within a community of obedient and charitable readers. It was also a move in dynamic continuity with Wesley.

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<sup>64</sup>See Jennifer M. Lloyd, *Women and the Shaping of British Methodism: Persistent Preachers, 1807–1907* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2009); and Jean Miller Schmidt, *Grace Sufficient: a History of Women in American Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999).

<sup>65</sup>Church of the Nazarene, *Manual, 2009–2013* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 2009), ¶903.5. The second paragraph was added to this statement in 2001.

## Case Study of Alcohol and Drunkenness

A second case that sheds light on the dynamics of “honoring conference” concerns consumption of alcohol. The traditional way of understanding scriptural prohibitions of drunkenness is captured in Susanna Wesley’s words to her teenage son Samuel, away at school:

Proper drunkenness does, I think, certainly consist in drinking such a quantity of strong liquor as will intoxicate and render the person incapable of using his reason with that strength and freedom as he can do at other times. Now there are those that by habitual drinking a great deal of such liquors can hardly ever be guilty of proper drunkenness, because never intoxicated; but this I look upon as the highest kind of the sin of intemperance. But this is not, nor I hope ever will be your case. Two glasses cannot possibly hurt you, provided they contain no more than those commonly used. Nor would I have you concerned, though you find yourself warmed and cheerful after drinking ’em, for ’tis a necessary effect of spirituous liquors to refresh and increase the spirits; and certainly the divine Being will never be displeased at the innocent satisfaction of our regular appetites. But then have a care. Stay at the third glass.<sup>66</sup>

This traditional stance allowed drinking alcohol in moderation (i.e., temperately), because it assumed that those who drink to excess do so willfully, not out of compulsion—at least at the beginning of the practice. It also suggested that the proper application of the scriptural prohibition was to chastise such intemperate drinkers for weakness of character.

The traditional stance was undergoing some modification in eighteenth-century England, because of the introduction of cheap distilled liquors (what they called “drams”) like rum. The medical and religious community increasingly condemned drams-drinking as a cause of disease, both mental and physical. A few began to suggest that drams (unlike beer, wine, and other milder spirits) could easily overpower the will of persons, rendering intemperance itself

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<sup>66</sup>Letter to Samuel Wesley Jr. (May 22, 1706), in Charles Wallace Jr. ed.), *Susanna Wesley: The Complete Writings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 52–53. See also her letter of October 11, 1709, which repeats this advice, attributing it to George Herbert (p. 71).

a type of disease.<sup>67</sup> John Wesley's pastoral engagement with a range of persons in the Methodist revival led him to adopt this modified form of the traditional view. He enforced the scriptural injunction against drunkenness by charging Methodists with mutual accountability in avoiding distilled liquor or drams. But throughout his life he continued to assume (with his mother) that "the divine Being will never be displeased" with temperate consumption of milder spirits.<sup>68</sup>

Wesley's modified stance carried over into the early nineteenth century among his followers on both sides of the Atlantic. But it became increasingly clear from experience that the overpowering affects of alcohol were not confined to distilled liquor. Everyday life and lay ministries like the deaconess movement also highlighted how abuse of women and children was tied to excessive drinking of alcohol by husbands and fathers. Reflecting their post-millennial conviction of participating in God's emerging reign of justice and peace, many Methodists (in the northern part of the United States in particular) began to call for total abstinence from all alcohol as the only way to "avoid drunkenness."<sup>69</sup>

While their larger concern stands in clear continuity with both Scripture and Wesley, this call posed an interpretive question: What of the use of wine in Scripture, even by Jesus? In a recent book Jennifer Woodruff Tait skillfully probes the resulting debate at its height in the nineteenth century.<sup>70</sup> She makes clear that the various alternatives all appealed to more than Scripture alone. They contended over which stance fit authentic tradition, which was consistent with the findings of recent science, which accounted for everyday experience, and particularly which was in keeping with the stress on a

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<sup>67</sup>See Roy Porter, "The Drinking Man's Disease: The 'Pre-History' of Alcoholism in Georgian Britain," *British Journal of Addiction* 80 (1985), 385–96.

<sup>68</sup>Note his rejection of William Cadogan's call for total abstinence from wine in *Journal* (October 9, 1771), *Works*, 22:290. Cf. Ivan Burnett Jr., "John Wesley and Alcohol," *Methodist History* 13.4 (1975), 3–17.

<sup>69</sup>Both the initial stance and the growing change are traced in Clive Field, "'The Devil in Solution': How Temperate were the [British] Methodists?" *Epworth Review* 27.1 (2000): 78–93; and Raymond Pierce Cowan, "From 'Noble Cordial' to Sin: Early American Methodists Confront Alcohol," *Atlanta History* 38 (Winter 1995): 5–19.

<sup>70</sup>Jennifer L. Woodruff Tait, *The Poisoned Chalice: Eucharistic Grape Juice and Common-Sense Realism in Victorian Methodism* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama, 2011).

clear mind and reason in the reigning philosophical currents of the day. They all sought to “honor conference”; they differed in how to achieve this. In the case of tradition, for example, did one account for the earlier stance on moderate use of alcohol as 1) a corruption of biblical witness, 2) a concession to pre-modern hygiene, or 3) pastoral prudence that remained instructive. Similarly, was biblical “wine” really fermented?

The voices arguing for the absence of alcohol in the wine jars at Cana and the original communion cup were also pushing for the abolition of all alcohol from present society. Their political solution (Prohibition), like their exegetical arguments, eventually proved unworkable. Alcohol returned to public settings and preaching generally returned to chastising those who abused alcohol (or, for holiness and most mainline Methodists, those who even consumed alcohol) about their weakness of character.

Once again, the interpretive stream did not end here. Evidence continued to grow that some persons experience a compulsion to drink alcohol that is not easily subject to their control. It also became evident to social workers, pastors, and others that chastising such persons for their weakness of character was more likely to intensify the destructive spiral of their compulsion than to help them deal with it. These realizations did not call into question the biblical assessments of drunkenness, only traditional assumptions about the causes of this destructive behavior and how the community of faith can most lovingly and effectively help persons deal with it. Over the second half of the twentieth century the response of Methodist churches turned increasingly from chastisement to empathy. The provision of support/accountability groups became the accepted way of honoring the best insights from Scripture, tradition, personal experience, the findings of science, and other sources.<sup>71</sup>

### ***Some Reflections on “Honoring Conference”***

Having sketched several dimensions of Wesley’s practice of conferring in theological reflection, and probed the dynamics of

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<sup>71</sup>For a survey of the shifting Methodist stance on use of alcohol in England, see George Thompson Brake, *Drink: Ups and Downs of Methodist Attitudes to Temperance* (London: Oliphants, 1974). No similar broad overview of North America has appeared yet.



“honoring conference” in two case studies, I turn to some reflections on the adequacy of this metaphor for conveying desirable dynamics in current theological reflection in Wesleyan/Methodist circles. The reflections are developed by noting criticisms that have been made about the adequacy of the image “Wesleyan Quadrilateral” and asking whether “honoring conference” might better address or avoid these concerns.

### **Rooted in Historic Wesleyan Language**

My first point is relatively minor. Some critics of “Wesleyan Quadrilateral” emphasize that the term “quadrilateral” does not appear in Wesley. While this fact would not preclude its possible adequacy for describing Wesley’s practice, an image more rooted in historic Wesleyan language seems preferable. “Honoring conference” echoes strongly the focus of the annual conferences that Wesley held with his preachers, the first of which (in 1744) set the agenda of items typically considered: 1. What to teach; 2. How to teach; and 3. What to do; that is, how to regulate our doctrine, discipline, and practice.<sup>72</sup>

### **Highlights the Importance of Spiritual Formation**

Of course, such formal theological dialogue was not the most fundamental embodiment of conferencing in early Methodism. That foundation was the class and band meetings, which focused on spiritual support and accountability.<sup>73</sup> But this fact may be another strength of the metaphor. One significant criticism of how “Wesleyan Quadrilateral” has come to function in popular debate is that it creates the illusion of an objective method for determining Christian truth, overlooking the role of spiritual disciplines in forming Christian readers/theologians.<sup>74</sup> The wholistic character of conferencing

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<sup>72</sup>“Minutes,” June 25, 1744, §1, *Works*, 10:124 (see also the agenda on p. 120).

<sup>73</sup>For a good overview, see Thomas R. Albin, “‘Inwardly Persuaded’: Religion of the Heart in Early British Methodism,” in Richard B. Steele (ed.), *Heart Religion in the Methodist Tradition and Related Movements* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2001), 33–66.

<sup>74</sup>See especially Philip R. Meadows, “The ‘Discipline’ of Theology: Making Methodism less Methodological,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 36.2 (2001): 50–87; and Thompson, “Outler’s Quadrilateral.”

in early Methodism may help keep this vital role more in mind in “honoring conference.”<sup>75</sup>

### **Interrelates Doctrinal Formation and Theological Reflection**

A closely related criticism of the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral” is that it focuses Methodist identity and attention on a supposed unique method for contemporary theological reflection, rather than on an enduring set of doctrinal convictions.<sup>76</sup> Put another way, it focuses theological energy around deciding debated issues, with little attention to the importance of conveying and nurturing core doctrinal convictions.

This criticism seems justified regarding some popular appropriations of emphasis on the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral.” For example, it is not uncommon to hear United Methodists claim that the defining theological conviction of the tradition is our *belief in* the quadrilateral. Surely not! Our core theological convictions concern the Triune God, and God’s gracious work in creation, revelation, redemption, sanctification, and so on—as affirmed in the Articles of Religion and the Confession of Faith. The “quadrilateral” is, at best, a commended method for seeking and evaluating new insights into the implications of these convictions, including any necessary rethinking of inherited understandings of the convictions. We *believe in* God; we officially *commend using* the “quadrilateral.”

Some of Albert Outler’s commendations of the “quadrilateral” may have contributed to popular confusion on this distinction. Examples would include his claim that Wesley rejected “confessionalism” in any of its conventional meanings, and his tendency to contrast “theological systems” and “juridical statements of doctrinal standards” with the quadrilateral as a more characteristically

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<sup>75</sup>Admittedly, this is not guaranteed. For example, while the “Guidelines for Holy Conferencing” designed—with reference to Wesley—for United Methodists when discussing disputed issues are very helpful on the dynamics of gracious dialogue, they make no mention of spiritual formation as an important foundation for holy conferencing. (Guidelines available at [www.umc.org](http://www.umc.org).)

<sup>76</sup>This criticism has been put most forcefully by William J. Abraham, in *Doctrinal Amnesia*, 57–59; and “Discerning Unity in Essentials,” in Donald E. Messer and William J. Abraham (eds.), *Unity, Liberty, and Charity* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 66–67.

Wesleyan way of belief.<sup>77</sup> But a close reading of Outler at these points makes clear that he was primarily contrasting “mere orthodoxy” (intellectual affirmation alone) with *personal embrace* of the truths of Scripture (Outler consistently equates “experience” with such personal embrace, a point to which I will return below).

In reality, both Outler’s address to the 1972 UMC General Conference on behalf of the Theological Study Commission, and the text produced by the Commission that was adopted into the *Discipline* by that General Conference make clear that United Methodists are accountable to “the central core of common Christian teaching that we share with other Christians,” as we seek to reflect responsibly on new questions and on debated issues in the tradition.<sup>78</sup> At the same time, the section on “Our Theological Task” that was adopted focuses almost exclusively on *normative* reflection about such unresolved issues, with little acknowledgment of the *formative* task of nurturing new generations in the tradition. This makes all the more striking one of Outler’s last reflections before his death upon the debates over the 1972 statement:

Our current doctrinal confusions do not arise from latitudinarian statements. They come from the breakdown in our effectual traditioning of the living classical Christian tradition in the Methodist teaching ministry over the past century, the same traditioning process that worked so wonderfully well during the first Methodist century.<sup>79</sup>

Outler’s praise of the first Methodist century reminds us that John Wesley put as much emphasis on the *formative* task of theology as he did on the *normative* task. He devoted much of his theological energy to the production of catechisms, catechetical sermons, Bible study aids, and the like. His example illustrates that the formative and normative tasks are integrally interwoven in any *living*

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<sup>77</sup>Outler, “Through a Glass Darkly,” 460 (p. 83 in *Methodist History*); and Outler, “Wesleyan Quadrilateral in Wesley,” 16.

<sup>78</sup>See Albert Outler, “Introduction to the Report of the 1968–72 Theological Study Commission, Langford (ed.), *Doctrine and Theology*, 22; and *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, 1972*, ¶70, “Our Theological Task,” particularly the section on “United Methodists and the Christian Tradition” (this became ¶69 in the 1976, 1980, and 1984 *Discipline*).

<sup>79</sup>Outler, “Through a Glass Darkly,” 468 (p. 89 in *Methodist History*).

tradition.<sup>80</sup> We are initiated into traditions by being nurtured in their core convictions—usually long before we are capable of critical reflection on these convictions. Some may try to reduce this to mere “indoctrination.” But, at its best, it prepares us for truly fruitful critical reflection, *in conference with others*—probing the implications of our imbibed convictions for new issues and challenges, as well as reflecting on the adequacy of current understandings of the convictions themselves.

### **Stresses Reception by Community**

Moreover, the fruit of this critical reflection is not just for our present benefit. Wesley’s paragraph in the preface to the first volume of *Sermons* about reading Scripture comparatively concludes: “What I thus learn, that I teach.”<sup>81</sup> One form of this teaching was formative materials for his Methodist people, But Wesley also offered his insights to the larger Christian community, hoping that they might be received and incorporated into their traditioning process, to shape future generations.

Many of Wesley’s insights concerned issues long debated in Christian circles. The natural tendency in these debates is to caucus with those who concur with one’s current stance. While examples of Wesley pursuing this course are not hard to find, more striking are instances when he tried to encourage dialogue among persons of differing perspectives, seeking to build broader consensus. His recognition of the difficulties that this involves is evident in the objections that he tried to forestall in a letter inviting the fragmented elements of the evangelical revival to gather in conference about promoting greater cooperation, respect, and consensus:

“But it will never be; it is utterly impossible.” Certainly it is with men. Who imagines we can do this? That it can be effected by any human power? All nature is against it, every infirmity, every wrong temper and passion .... The devil and all his angels are against it. ... All the world, all that know not God, are against it, though they may seem to favour it for a season. Let us

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<sup>80</sup>For more discussion of these interrelated dimension of the overall task of theology, see Randy L. Maddox, “Formation and Reflection: The Dynamics of Theology in Christian Life,” *Quarterly Review* 21.1 (Spring 2001): 20–32.

<sup>81</sup>*Sermons on Several Occasions*, Vol. 1 (1746), Preface, §5, *Works*, 1:106.

settle this in our hearts, that we may be utterly cut off from all dependence on our own strength or wisdom. But surely “with God all things are possible” (Matt. 19:26).<sup>82</sup>

The two case studies of “honoring conference” presented earlier bear witness to both the difficulties of building consensus in matters of doctrine and practice, and its possibility—through the patient guidance and support of the Holy Spirit. Among other things, these studies make clear that enduring broad consensus cannot simply be imposed by legislation, it must be nurtured and “received” in communal conference over time. The studies also suggest that “grassroots” conferencing is as central to this process as more formal efforts.

### **Rejects Strong “Foundationalism”**

For communal conference to be fruitful, the participants need to appreciate with Wesley the fallibility of their understanding of the matter under debate. As he insisted, “*humanum est errare et nescire.*” This does not mean that all human understandings are woefully wrong, but that we should always remain open to the possibility that our current understandings can be improved upon (and ready to assess carefully any proposed alternatives, to discern whether they are improvements or not).

This stance of epistemic humility provides a helpful backdrop for considering another criticism that some have raised against the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral.” William Abraham has placed the indictment most vigorously, charging that “the quadrilateral weds us to the kind of evidentialism which insists that somehow all our beliefs, if they are to be rationally permitted, have to be worked up by everyone from scratch” (i.e., a strong “foundationalism”).<sup>83</sup>

Behind this indictment is Abraham’s assumption that the “quadrilateral” was embraced by its proponents primarily “to provide an epistemology for Christian theology, a proposal about what constitute the criteria for rationality, justification, and knowledge in

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<sup>82</sup>Circular Letter reproduced in *Journal* (19 April 1764), *Works*, 21:457.

<sup>83</sup>Abraham, *Doctrinal Amnesia*, 62. See also Abraham, “What’s Right and What’s Wrong,” 139–40.

theology. . . . It is a deontological theory of justification.”<sup>84</sup> In other words, Abraham discerns behind the proposal a conviction that we are not justified in holding our theological beliefs (or commending them to others) until we can show that we have fulfilled our epistemic duties in acquiring and testing the beliefs. The “quadrilateral” itself is then an attempt to enumerate these epistemic duties. There are hints of such an agenda in Albert Outler, when he speaks of the “conjoint recourse” to the fourfold guidelines as a way for “seeking *intellecta* for our faith.”<sup>85</sup>

By contrast, many proponents of such “conjoint recourse” in theological reflection focus less on this *epistemic* concern than on the *normative* concern of seeking convictions that are adequately Christian. Abraham is aware of this alternative construal. He dismisses it for failing to be “an epistemological claim” or to provide “a whit of information on the truth or falsity of Christian . . . doctrinal proposals.”<sup>86</sup> But this appears to fault the alternative mainly for failing to emphasize the task that he happens to consider more pressing—an epistemology of theology.

The concern with articulating and defending an appropriate epistemology for theology runs as a major thread through Abraham’s corpus of publications, including his recent book subtitled “John Wesley and the Foundations of Christian Belief.”<sup>87</sup> One of his goals in this book is to challenge modern Wesleyans who have adopted a “Barthian vision of theology in which any attempt to look for support for divine revelation is seen as dangerous and incoherent” (p. 72). Abraham builds his case in part by noting occasions where Wesley engages in a type of natural theology, though he immediately acknowledges that Wesley is less consistent in such appeals than Abraham believes to be optimal, and that some of

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<sup>84</sup>Abraham, “What’s Right and What’s Wrong,” 137. James K. A. Smith makes the same general assumption in rejecting the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral” as a type of “correlationist model,” in *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006), 123–25.

<sup>85</sup>Outler, “Wesleyan Quadrilateral in Wesley,” 16.

<sup>86</sup>This is his response to my portrayal in *Responsible Grace*, 36; see Abraham, “What’s Right and What’s Wrong,” 144–45.

<sup>87</sup>William J. Abraham, *Aldersgate and Athens: John Wesley and the Foundations of Christian Belief* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010). See also his much more developed account of these issues in Abraham, *Crossing the Threshold of Divine Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

Wesley's specific apologetic moves need to be reformulated (see pp. 73–75). Abraham also makes clear throughout the book that he (like Wesley) has no interest in a “strong foundationalism,” where one seeks to demonstrate the truth of Christian teachings without dependence on the Holy Spirit for inspiring faith or a necessary role for (special) divine revelation.

I concur with Abraham's sense that Wesley stands nearer to him than to the described “Barthian” alternative within his spectrum of stances on seeking support for divine revelation.<sup>88</sup> At the same time, Abraham aims toward a type of “moderate foundationalism.”<sup>89</sup> Wesley was more inclined to speak of apologetic efforts as helping *confirm* faith born of the witness of the Spirit than as providing a foundation for that faith.<sup>90</sup> His stance might better be developed as a *dialogical non-foundationalism*, assuming a consensus (rather than deontological) theory of justification. But the main point I would make is that Wesley's typical focus in “honoring conference” was indeed *normative*, seeking to insure that his theological convictions were adequately Christian.

### **Rejects Strong “Methodologism”**

There is another dimension to Abraham's criticism of the quadrilateral as inherently wedded to “evidentialism” that deserves comment. He contends that this model entails that each individual must tackle “every theological problem by working through all the relevant evidence to be culled from the sources of scripture, tradition, reason, and experience” (i.e., what we might call a strong “methodologism”).<sup>91</sup> Abraham then notes that such an expectation is unrealistic for finite minds to carry out with any degree of seriousness. He also recognizes that it overlooks the multiple plausible readings of each of the sources.

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<sup>88</sup>Though I think his presentation of Barth is overdrawn.

<sup>89</sup>He does not use this phrase in the book, but has confirmed it in private conversation. Cf. his recent comment that his approach of “canonical theism” is open to a range of views on foundationalism, in William Abraham, et al., *Canonical Theism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 5 (Thesis XXIII)

<sup>90</sup>See Maddox, “John Wesley's Precedent,” 41–43.

<sup>91</sup>See Abraham, *Doctrinal Amnesia*, 63; and “What's Right and What's Wrong,” 140.

The expectation is indeed unrealistic, leading me to wonder how many proponents of the “quadrilateral” intend to convey it in this strong sense. I certainly do not. I have been presenting the conjoint consideration of these resources as a communal undertaking (not an individual task), as typically a long term process, and the achievement as a stance of stable confidence in one’s views—yet open to the possibility of new insights leading to renewed conferring!

At the same time, Abraham’s charge provides a good setting for asking how scholars have characterized Wesley’s theological method. Some in the early twentieth century come close to the “methodologism” that Abraham rightly dismisses. For example, Edward Sugden was persuaded that Wesley “first worked out his theology by strict logical deduction from the Scriptures; and then he corrected his conclusions by the test of actual experience.”<sup>92</sup> More detailed is Paul Hoon’s claim that Wesley’s procedure for arriving at a doctrine was first, to derive it from and formulate it on the basis of Scripture; second, to test and modify it in accord with experience; third, to test it by reason; and fourth, to test it by tradition.<sup>93</sup> Continuing in the same vein, but with a contrasting order, the interim report of the Theological Study Commission to the special UMC Conference in 1970 asked,

By what appeal should we today decide in disputed matters? Wesley gave us interacting scales to weigh our faith. The order of these sources is important: first, scripture itself; then the historical interpretation of scripture which we call “tradition”; then individual experience and, finally, reason.<sup>94</sup>

These crisp descriptions of Wesley’s method imply that he started *de novo*, and proceeded in a set order in formulating his doctrines. As the earlier case studies show, neither of these assumptions stand up to examination. Few of Wesley’s theological convictions were initially “chosen” in a conscious comparative manner. Rather, most were instilled by his familial, ecclesial, and educational nurture. It was typically when something or someone called an aspect of this appropriated theology into question that Wesley began to

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<sup>92</sup>In *Wesley’s Standard Sermons*, ed. E. H. Sugden (London: Epworth, 1921), 1:196 fn2.

<sup>93</sup>Hoon, “Soteriology of John Wesley, 343.

<sup>94</sup>“Interim Report,” 66.



reflect on whether to retain, revise, or replace the conviction at issue. Likewise, his reconsideration of theological convictions was rarely methodical in the classic academic sense: he dealt with issues as they arose in his spiritual life or his ministry among his people, he dealt with them drawing on the sources and criteria most relevant to the particular situation or audience, and he usually dealt only with the specific aspects of a doctrine at issue. These characteristics of Wesley's theological activity are often considered to be detriments in the academy. But they are viewed by many today as worthy of emulation in theology pursued in integral relation to Christian life and witness in the world.<sup>95</sup>

### **Alludes to the Contextuality of Theological Reflection**

Renewed emphasis on theology as a *practical discipline* stands behind another stated reservation about the “quadrilateral” image.<sup>96</sup> As Thomas Langford notes, the image does not specifically highlight that “for John Wesley all of these elements—Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason—are integrally related to *praxis*.”<sup>97</sup> Langford was using “praxis” to express the dynamic interrelationship of human action and reflection. The term connotes “creative action, inspired by critical reflection, that gives rise to both change and insight.”<sup>98</sup> These, in turn, give rise to new creative action.

Human praxis takes place within particular contexts. This led Langford to propose adding “setting” as a fifth “mode of interaction” in theological reflection.<sup>99</sup> A more thoroughgoing way to embrace his point would be to underscore the contextual nature of *all* elements in theological reflection—of Scripture itself, of the range of Christian articulations and embodiments of the faith in the past, of individual and communal experience in various contemporary

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<sup>95</sup>See Randy L. Maddox, “Reclaiming an Inheritance: Wesley as Theologian in the History of Methodist Theology,” in R. L. Maddox (ed.), *Rethinking Wesley's Theology for Contemporary Methodism* (Nashville: Kingswood, 1998), 213–26.

<sup>96</sup>See Randy L. Maddox, “Recovery of Theology as a Practical Discipline: A Contemporary Agenda,” *Theological Studies* 51 (1990): 650–72.

<sup>97</sup>Thomas Langford, “The United Methodist Quadrilateral: A Theological Task,” in Langford (ed.), *Doctrine and Theology*, 238 .

<sup>98</sup>Dermot Lane, *Foundations for a Social Theology: Praxis, Process, and Salvation* (New York: Paulist, 1984), 4.

<sup>99</sup>Langford, “United Methodist Quadrilateral,” 239–43.

settings, and of the larger cultural and socio-economic currents impacting present Christian life and witness.

The image of “honoring conference” may be less likely to mask this contextual nature of theological reflection. Serious conferring leads to growing recognition of the distinctiveness of our conversation partners, and thereby to deepened sensitivity to our own contextuality. Serious conferring is also the most promising avenue for nurturing points of shared insight and concurrence among persons in varying contexts.

### **Resists the Modern Polarization between Past and Present Authorities**

As a movement birthed with the “modern age,” philosophical currents defining that age in the North Atlantic world have been prominent contextual factors in Wesleyan/Methodist conferencing. In Wesley’s day, for example, some voices in the emerging Enlightenment posed the authority of *present* experience and reason over against *past* authorities in a way that emptied Scripture and tradition of any normative contribution to deciding theological issues. It became increasingly common through the modern age to assume a forced option between norming one’s theology by Scripture and tradition or norming it by unconstrained present historical-critical, empirical, and philosophical investigation.

This assumed polarization made its way into Methodist circles. A fitting, if moderate, example is John Cobb’s emphasis on “relatively autonomous reason and experience” standing in judgment over Scripture and tradition.<sup>100</sup> In reaction to such claims, other Methodists have insisted on distinguishing the “*transcending authorities* of Scripture and tradition (as the means of God’s self-revelation to the world)” from the “*immanent authorities* of reason and experience.”<sup>101</sup> And at least one has specifically criticized the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral” for collecting these four elements together, because “the

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<sup>100</sup>John B. Cobb Jr., “The Wesleyan Quadrilateral,” in *Grace and Responsibility* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 155–76; here, 173–74.

<sup>101</sup>Meadows, “‘Discipline’ of Theology,” 52.

history of modern theology shows all too clearly that reason and experience will win every time over against Scripture and tradition.”<sup>102</sup>

Is the historical evidence really this one-sided? The two case studies of “honoring conference” provide some counter-evidence. Wesley recognized the emerging polarization and refused to join either side, seeking a theological stance that would *do justice* to his present experience and the created order as well as to Scripture and “tradition.” Some echoes of this commitment resounded through later Methodist theology, though many clearly came to doubt that it was possible to reach interpretations providing such broad balance.

More importantly, the most recent history of theology has witnessed a growing *post-modern* awareness of the contextuality, prejudices, and limitations of the modern age. Carefully appropriated, this postmodern awareness provides fertile ground for reclaiming the precedent of “honoring conference” in Wesleyan/Methodist theological reflection.<sup>103</sup>

### **Affirms the Multiple Functions of Scripture and Tradition**

The strongest voice criticizing the pairing of Scripture and tradition with experience and reason is again William Abraham. He refers to the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral” as a “hasty shotgun wedding” uniting Enlightenment “epistemological concepts” (experience and reason) with something entirely different—Scripture and tradition, which he refers to as “ecclesial canons.”<sup>104</sup>

The contrast that Abraham is drawing has proven a bit unclear to readers. For example, “ecclesial canons” could be read as standards for truth-claims that are normative only for the Christian community (*ecclesia*), in contrast to the Enlightenment standards which claim to be universal. But Abraham sharply denies that Scripture and tradition are epistemological concepts in any sense. On the other hand, when he reiterated this denial recently, he added that

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<sup>102</sup>Abraham, *Doctrinal Amnesia*, 63.

<sup>103</sup>Two helpful discussions of this postmodern turn are James K. A. Smith, *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006); and Merold Westphal, *Whose Community? Which Interpretation?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009).

<sup>104</sup>See Abraham, *Doctrinal Amnesia*, 61–62; and “What is Right and What is Wrong,” 140–41.

these canons do generate “rigorous epistemological reflection and theorizing.”<sup>105</sup>

In another setting, Abraham presents the contrast as pitting epistemological criteria (reason and experience) against “means of grace and salvation” (Scripture and tradition).<sup>106</sup> He stresses how the latter pair functioned soteriologically in the earliest church, and traces the historical trajectory by which modern Christians came to view them instead primarily as epistemic norms. His presentation has again sparked diverse readings. Some are convinced that Abraham presents a forced option—Scripture and tradition are *either* valued as means of grace *or* they are valued as epistemic norms. Others take him to be making a claim about (*strong*) priority between two legitimate uses.

Whatever one decides about Abraham’s intentions, an approach to “honoring conference” that draws upon Wesley’s precedent will surely join Abraham in affirming as most central the role of Scripture and a range of traditional practices in drawing us into and nurturing us along the Way of Salvation. But, with Wesley, they would want to be clear in affirming as well the role of Scripture and key traditional resources as the “rule of faith” within the Christian community.

### **Embraces Insights and Wisdom from the Range of Christian Tradition**

What all should be included among these traditional resources? In his articulation and defense of the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral,” Albert Outler consistently defined “tradition” in a broad sense, as “the collective Christian wisdom of other ages and cultures between the apostolic age and our own.”<sup>107</sup> The appropriate historical response was to note that John Wesley never used the word “tradition” in this expansive sense, limiting his formal ascriptions of normative Christian precedent to the early church and his contemporary Church of England standards. But those making this historical point have generally followed it with the judgment that the best way to honor Wesley’s lead in appropriating wisdom from early Christian belief and

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<sup>105</sup>See Thesis XII and Thesis XXII in Abraham et al., *Canonical Theism*, 3, 5.

<sup>106</sup>William J. Abraham, *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), 1.

<sup>107</sup>Outler, “Wesleyan Quadrilateral in Wesley,” 11.

practice would be to engage in a critical appropriation of the breadth of Christian history.<sup>108</sup>

In other words, the continuing Methodist practice of “honoring conference” has led us to embrace a broader and more dynamic understanding of tradition than bequeathed by Wesley. As Outler insisted, this is not a reversion to “traditionalism,” where past precedent is considered inviolable. Rather, it is recognition of the Christian Tradition—and the various “traditions” that make it up—as a continuing conference about its very nature. Thus, we consult the breadth of Christian precedent (in belief *and* practice), seeking the wisdom that can be gained from the church’s miscues and blind alleys as well as its points of consensus and exemplary models.

### **Engages the Full Range of Divine Revelation**

But why should one appeal to any Christian precedent in theological reflection? Or to Scripture, for that matter? And to what else might one appeal? Any adequate response to these questions will be grounded in convictions about divine revelation.

Wesley’s deepest reason for refusing the forced option between the authority of Scripture in theological reflection and that of experience, reason, or “tradition” was his conviction of the unity of God. The God speaking in and through Scripture is—according to Scripture—the God who has chosen to be revealed in part through God’s handiwork in the created order and by use of the intellectual powers with which God has gifted humanity. This same God promised that the Holy Spirit would guide the church as it seeks to understand the truth revealed in Christ. While Scripture also recognizes the distorting impact of human sinfulness on discerning the revelation in these resources, it insists that God has not left us without a “witness” in our fallenness (a claim central to Wesley’s emphasis on “prevenient grace”). As such, to exclude consideration of these other factors in theological discernment is ultimately to reject the authority of Scripture as well.

How best might we identify the dimensions of God’s self-revelation beyond Scripture and tradition to which Wesley and his ecclesial descendants have appealed? Albert Outler set the precedent for

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<sup>108</sup>See in particular the discussion and conclusion in Ted A. Campbell, “The Interpretive Role of Tradition,” in Gunter (ed.), *Wesley and the Quadrilateral*, 63–75.

much of the later discussion in highlighting “experience” as a third element in theological reflection. Outler’s specific articulation of this element was actually quite confined. He focused the role of “experience” almost exclusively in terms of personal appropriation of the insights “deposited in Holy Scripture, interpreted by the Christian tradition, [and] reviewed by reason.”<sup>109</sup> Here he is echoing Wesley’s pietist emphasis that Christian truths must be received in the heart, because the experience of grace gives Christian faith its “existential force.”<sup>110</sup>

Outler’s focus carried over into the UMC Theological Study Commission, which stressed in “The Wesleyan Concept of Authority” section of its 1970 interim report that “the conjoint truth of Scripture and tradition must be personally *experienced*.” The report went on to equate experience with the “inner witness of the Spirit” and defined it as naming “the vital transit from the objective focus of faith to its subject center, from ‘dead faith’ (correct belief) to ‘living faith’ that justifies and saves.”<sup>111</sup> Similarly, the statement on “experience” in “Our Theological Task” adopted by the 1972 UMC General Conference defined it as “the personal appropriation of God’s unmeasured mercy in life and interpersonal relations.”<sup>112</sup>

There is no question that Wesley emphasized the personal experience of the love of God shed abroad in one’s heart, and personal appropriation of the saving truth of Christ’s work. But these emphases fall primarily within his wholistic account of the “moral psychology” of Christian life.<sup>113</sup> By contrast, he was suspicious of an overly individualistic and interior focus when seeking to discern authentic Christian teaching, as can be seen in his warning against forms of Christian mysticism where “each makes his [or her] experience the standard of truth.”<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>109</sup>Outler’s Introduction to Wesley’s sermons in *Works*, 1:60–61.

<sup>110</sup>See Outler, “Wesleyan Quadrilateral in Wesley,” 10–11.

<sup>111</sup>“Interim Report,” 7–8.

<sup>112</sup>*Book of Discipline of the UMC, 1972*, ¶170( ¶169 in the 1976, 1980, and 1984 *Discipline*).

<sup>113</sup>See Randy L. Maddox, “A Change of Affections: The Development, Dynamics, and Dethronement of John Wesley’s ‘Heart Religion,’” in Richard Steele (ed.), “*Heart Religion*” in the *Methodist Tradition and Related Movements* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 2001), 3–31.

<sup>114</sup>Letter to Mary Bishop (September 19, 1773), *Letters* (Telford) 6:44.

Accordingly, Wesley's appeals to experience in discerning and defending Christian truth typically refer to *public*, *corporate*, and *long-term* realities—like God's blessing of the preaching ministry of lay men and women.<sup>115</sup> This comes through even in Wesley's sermons on the witness of the Spirit. While he presents the *event* of the witness as a matter of individual inward consciousness, Wesley's argument for affirming the *doctrine* of the witness of the Spirit starts with proposed scriptural warrant and then invokes the corporate test of multiple public testimonies to support his reading of Scripture.<sup>116</sup> His recognition that a lack of such testimonies would count against his reading reflects the dynamic of "honoring conference," where corporate testing helps us discern when our preconceptions are distorting our reading of Scripture, of tradition, and of our individual experience.

The statement on "experience" in "Our Theological Task" adopted in 1972 hints at some of these larger dynamics by stressing that our personal experience of God's accepting love will affect our total understanding of life, and that broader human experience will affect our understanding of our personal religious experience. The rewrite of this section adopted by the UMC General Conference in 1988 went much further in highlighting Wesley's precedent for relating individual experience to corporate experience—as found in the church and in the common experiences of all humanity.<sup>117</sup>

Several scholars have been critical of even this revision as still too focused on personal experience. Part of their concern has been to encourage greater attention to social and political dimensions of human life. But another emphasis has been on attending (as Wesley did) to the broader created order. This has led some to call for adding "creation" as a fifth element in a "Wesleyan Pentalateral."<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>115</sup>See Maddox, "Enriching Role of Experience," 107–27.

<sup>116</sup>See esp. Sermon 11, "Witness of the Spirit, II," §III.6, *Works* 1:290.

<sup>117</sup>See ¶69 in the 1988 UMC *Discipline* (¶104 in the current 2008 *Discipline*).

<sup>118</sup>Particularly Luiz Wesley de Souza, "'The Wisdom of God in Creation': Mission and the Wesleyan Pentalateral," in H. A. Snyder (ed.), *Global Good News* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 138–52. See also Howard Snyder, "The Babylonian Captivity of Wesleyan Theology," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 39.1 (2004), 17–24; Helmut Renders, "Estudos de Gênero e método teológico: corporeidade e androcentrismo como temas permanentes do quadrilátero wesleyano brasileiro," *Estudos da Religião* 24.39 (2010): 91–196; and Renders, "Graça, salvação e teologia da sustentabilidade como tema da teologia wesleyana: discussões, acentos e contribuições," *Teocomunicação* 40.2 (2010), 213–37.

I share the concern of these scholars for engaging the full range of divine revelation in theological reflection. But I wonder whether any geometric image can capture all of the relevant dimensions. A more general image like “honoring conference” would seem to be preferable, particularly if it helps us remember that we are always dealing with our human *understandings* of the various dimensions, which must remain in conversation with the range of other dimensions and with other interpreters of this range.

### **Appreciates the Instrumental Role of Reason**

If Outler’s articulation of “experience” has proven problematic, his articulation of the role of reason in Wesley’s theological reflection has been widely received. He helped make clear that Wesley valued reason not as a primal source of knowledge or revelation, but as a divinely gifted faculty to be used (either well or poorly) to understand, compare, and respond to the claims of God’s revelation in Scripture, tradition, and the created order.<sup>119</sup> This role of reason is integral to the assumptions of “honoring conference” in theological reflection.

### **Honors the Primacy of Scripture**

As noted in my opening discussion, one of the earliest and strongest criticisms of the image of the “quadrilateral” (and of the 1972 statement on “Our Theological Task”) was that it seemed to call into question the primacy of Scripture. It was viewed as treating Scripture as one among four independent, and equally authoritative, sources for theological reflection. Some might worry that the image of “honoring conference” is liable to the same charge, particularly with my rejection earlier of a supposed standard method of starting with Scripture.

But I would suggest that “honoring conference” is the most authentic way within the dynamics of actual theological reflection to

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<sup>119</sup>See his characteristic language of accepting “the disciplines of critical reason” in Outler, “Wesleyan Quadrilateral in Wesley,” 10. Compare Wesley, Sermon 70, “The Case of Reason Impartially Considered,” §I.2, *Works*, 2:590; and Rebekah Miles, “The Instrumental Role of Reason,” in Gunter (ed.), *Wesley and the Quadrilateral*, 77–106.



fulfill the concern for the primacy of Scripture. If we take seriously the commitment to do justice to our understanding of all relevant sources of divine revelation in theological discernment, we will never be comfortable adopting a stance that violates our current understanding of the clear teachings of Scripture. To be sure, we could be wrong in that current understanding, but it is precisely by continuing to “honor conference” that we are most likely to become aware of the fact.

Moreover, there is nothing in the dynamics of “honoring conference” that would suggest all sources of input are equal. Like Wesley, we can value Scripture as the witness to and locus of God’s definitive revelation in Christ. We can also join Wesley in recognizing that this does not mean that Scripture is the *sole* vehicle of that revelation. He fully endorsed the Anglican Article of Religion on the *sufficiency* of Scripture as containing “all things necessary to salvation.” But he was quick to remind folk that there are many pressing issues for Christian life and practice that Scripture does not address directly or exhaustively. Here we need to bring in as well the wisdom of tradition, the insights of careful study of nature, and so on.<sup>120</sup>

Where it is most important to join Wesley is in appreciating how God’s self-revelation in Scripture helps discern divine revelation in its other expressions, while these other expressions help us in understanding better and applying God’s self-revelation in Scripture.

### ***Is “Honoring Conference” Distinctively Wesleyan?***

One other concern raised about the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral” deserves mention. While many have debated whether it is *authentically* Wesleyan, others have questioned the implication that it is *distinctively* Wesleyan. They have contended that the dynamics which this image tries to capture can be evidenced in theological reflection at its best long before Wesley and far beyond Wesleyan/Methodist circles.<sup>121</sup> Wesley would surely hope that this was true. My guess is that Albert Outler would also agree. He can speak at times of Wesley

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<sup>120</sup>See, for example, his defense of class meetings in *A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists*, §II.10, *Works*, 9:263.

<sup>121</sup>For one example, see Roger E. Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief* (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 56.

supplementing the current Anglican emphasis on Scripture, tradition, and reason by adding experience, but he immediately comments that this “added vitality without altering the substance” (remember how Outler focused Wesley’s appeal to “experience”).<sup>122</sup> Likewise, the interim report of the Theological Study Commission (chaired by Outler) which introduced the phrase “quadrilateral” to describe Wesley’s practice, also referred to the four elements as the “classical quadrilateral.”<sup>123</sup>

Whatever the case about claims for the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral,” let me be clear that I am not contending that the practice of “honoring conference” is *distinctive* of either Wesley or the Wesleyan/Methodist tradition. I believe that the dynamics which this image hopes to capture are characteristic of Christian theological reflection at its best across the spectrum of varying traditions within the Christian family. I have mainly wanted to demonstrate that they are at home in the Wesleyan/Methodist tradition and deserve to be taken seriously.

Of course, this raises one final question. If the practice of “honoring conference” is not what distinguishes the Wesleyan tradition within the larger Christian family, what does? Is it only our distinctive elements of polity? Or is there also a distinctive theological stance that serves to connect us to our Wesleyan roots and to shape our ongoing conference together? To frame the question another way, if the major Christian traditions share the commitment to “honoring conference,” why do they arrive at different (but predictable) conclusions so often?<sup>124</sup>

As David Kelsey and others have shown, one significant factor in accounting for this fact is that theologians (and the traditions they shape) are drawn to alternative “working canons” in reading Scripture—that is, alternative key sets of texts which they consider to be most clear and central, and through which they read the rest of Scripture.<sup>125</sup> I have argued elsewhere that Wesley was drawn to texts that emphasize God’s universal pardoning and transforming love,

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<sup>122</sup>Outler, “Wesleyan Quadrilateral in Wesley,” 10.

<sup>123</sup>“Interim Report,” 4.

<sup>124</sup>Cf. the comment about shared commitment to the “quadrilateral” failing to produce shared conclusions in Thompson, “Outler’s Quadrilateral,” 57.

<sup>125</sup>See David H. Kelsey, *Proving Doctrine: The Uses of Scripture in Modern Theology* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1999), esp. 163–67, 193–96.

particularly the epistle of 1 John.<sup>126</sup> This would suggest that a key characteristic of “honoring conference” today in a distinctively Wesleyan way would be reflection of these central emphases in his interpretive approach, even as we test and refine his approach through ongoing conference with the whole of Scripture and the range of other readers.

### ***Conclusion***

Let me conclude by saying that I am not primarily concerned to replace the image “Wesleyan Quadrilateral” with that of “honoring conference.” In the first place, I recognize that no metaphor is fully adequate, or entirely immune to misunderstanding. One of the strengths of the “quadrilateral” image that many (including myself) have appreciated is its explicit challenge to one-sided alternatives like biblicism, traditionalism, rationalism, and empiricism. My goal has been to build on this strength by cultivating an even richer sense of the dynamics of theological reflection, and deeper appreciation for authentic conferencing in that reflection. If I accomplished this to any degree, it can stand as a fitting tribute to the scholarly contribution of Russell Richey, who once described his project as “making the quadrilateral an operative methodology, a way of doing theology, not itself a doctrine to be subscribed.”<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>126</sup>See Maddox, “Rule of Faith,” 26–30.

<sup>127</sup>Russell E. Richey (with Dennis M. Campbell & William B. Lawrence), *Marks of Methodist: Theology in Ecclesial Practice* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), 13. See also his comments on the *Book of Discipline* in Richey, *Methodist Connectionalism: Historical Perspectives* (Nashville: General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, 2009), 25.