

## BOOK REVIEWS

THOMAS C. ODEN. *John Wesley's Teachings*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012. 3 vols. published to date (Revised edition of *John Wesley's Scriptural Christianity*, 1994). Vol 1 *God and Providence* pp. 240; Vol 2 *Christ and Salvation* pp.319; Vol 3 *Pastoral Theology* pp. 304 (Vol 4 *Issues of Ethics and Society* is yet to be published).

These books are a revised and greatly expanded version of Oden's 1994 book, *John Wesley's Scriptural Christianity*. The series is intended as a readers' guide to John Wesley's doctrine and practice, demonstrating his adherence to the work of the early church Fathers and the core teaching of the Reformation. The focus is largely on Wesley's own writing with minimal clarification and commentary, so that the modern reader can understand Wesley's intent in 'everyday modern English' (1:13). The three volumes issued thus far cover the major Christian doctrines and the nature and practice of the Christian ministry, seeking to provide scholarly resources for the Wesleyan family of churches and evangelicals generally. Oden seeks to recover the vital historic roots of the Wesleyan movement while providing a 'reference work for identifying the range of Wesley's ideas and opinions' (1:29). This is enhanced by extensive indexing of each volume and the provision of further reading selections for exploring the topics of each chapter more fully. The book achieves its purposes in the main and makes a very useful addition to the library of anyone interested in Wesley, his theology and its pastoral/practical implications.

The first volume specifically covers the doctrines of God and Trinity, revelation, theological method, creation, human nature and sin. In each case the chapters utilise extensive material sourced or quoted from Wesley himself, with additional recommended readings. The second volume I think is the strongest of the three in providing a clear picture of his understanding of the order of salvation. It begins with the Person and Work of Christ before covering the key soteriological doctrines, the Person and Work of the Holy Spirit and eschatology. The third volume concentrates on the nature of the pastoral office, its varied tasks, the sacraments and ecclesiology, particularly in terms of leadership and evangelism. Each chapter in the three books is set out clearly, with headings and sub-headings that are drawn largely from Wesley's own writings, enabling the reader to follow his train of thought.

The strength of each volume lies in Oden's desire to let Wesley speak for himself. There is inevitably some clarification, minimal explanation and commentary from Oden himself and this necessarily reveals Oden's mind, and not necessarily Wesley's, on these matters. The selection of material used is from the whole Wesley corpus and the footnote references enable other selections to be studied. This is where the books really contribute to those interested in Wesley and Wesleyanism. The second volume is especially helpful in enabling readers to engage with Wesley on the controversial points of his soteriological framework that are so often misunderstood and misrepresented, particularly in the areas of grace,

predestination, assurance and sanctification. Oden does a very good job of demonstrating the links between Wesley, the early Fathers and the Reformers. This is particularly true for the section on grace, where the agreements with Augustine and Calvin are brought out - even if not everyone would agree with Oden's reflections.

The strength of this work is also its weakness. Each book is clearly set out according to Wesley's own priorities when dealing with the doctrinal and practical issues of his own day. The questions raised are predominantly those of Wesley's time, not ours. This gives the reader a strong sense of the historical setting of Wesley's thought and ministry but leaves many issues of our day either not addressed or only superficially addressed. For example, Oden gives us Wesley's understanding of creation and time, showing how classically orthodox they were. Today some pointed debates have arisen on our acceptance of *creatio ex nihilo*, the relationship of God to time, the implications of free will and providence, the nature of original sin, Spirit-baptism, the nature of justification, and the human constitution. Wesley has material that enables us to engage with the modern questions, but the style and content of the book make this hard to do effectively. In many ways it is the third book that shows this weakness most by following Wesley's own classical understanding of the nature of pastoral ministry and its work. It does not provide easy access to Wesley's own material that can be utilised in the current debates surrounding such things as the continued need for ordination or the current forms of the institutional church. While the sacraments are covered, there is almost nothing on his rich conception of the means of grace, especially his understanding of works of piety and works of mercy. The section on the pastoral care of the family fails to engage the dominant social and personal problems we face today; for example, divorce, drugs, human sexuality, the nature of marriage, euthanasia, and pornography. To be fair, this may be covered in the final volume of the series but I would have thought it a vital part of a chapter explicitly on the family. What will not help the reader seeking to pursue current Wesleyan scholarship is that the material listed for further reading is overwhelmingly pre-1990 and there is very little after 2000. The Wesley bibliography supplied by Ken Collins of Asbury is a very useful resource to overcome this (<http://www.asburyseminary.edu/files/wesley-bibliography-feb-2013.pdf>).

The real strength of these books lies in giving the general reader, as well as students, easy access to the richness of Wesley's thought and practice. From their pages, the reader can trace many other passages in Wesley's rich corpus that will help them to build a fuller picture of his theology and practice. Oden has done an outstanding job of capturing so much of Wesley's material in three relatively small volumes. It is not possible adequately to cover every aspect of Wesley's thought and practice in this limited scope, and there will always be personal preferences involved in the selection of material and topics. Letting Wesley speak on his own terms and within the framework of the questions of his own day does mean that it will require a

lot more work by the reader to work through a Wesleyan response to many contemporary theological and practical issues. Overall, I think they are a worthwhile addition to any library.

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*The Salvation Army Handbook of Doctrine* London: Salvation Books, 2010. \$23.50, available from Salvationist Supplies, Sydney and Melbourne.

Salvationist Handbooks of Doctrine have come a long way since the first edition appeared in 1881. While the doctrines have remained unaltered, each new Handbook has reflected the thought-forms and style of the era in which it was written. The 1998 edition, entitled *Salvation Story*, represented a significant departure from its predecessors and, with its impressive workbook, proved to be an excellent resource for personal, congregational and basic theological study. The earlier Handbooks set out each doctrine in concise, almost homiletical style, along the lines of Maldwyn Hughes' Methodist doctrine book, *Christian Foundations*. The 1998 authors chose a more contemporary, narrative style.

Following the warm reception afforded *Salvation Story* and its creative approach to the teaching of the denomination's faith some were disappointed to learn that it was to be succeeded by a new *Handbook of Doctrine*. Thus it was good to discover that the best of *Salvation Story* and its study guide is to be found in the new work, plus a lot more. It is written in a style both scholarly and readable. It represents a middle-of-the-road theological position - evangelical without being fundamentalist - and respectful of contemporary scholarship without embracing liberalism. It is clearly committed to the spirit of Wesleyan teaching 'in which Salvation Army doctrine has its roots' (p.140), with that tradition's emphasis on a free, sure, and full salvation and 'Wesley's distinctively optimistic understanding of the workings of God's grace' (p.123). It sets out the positions of those with whom Salvationists do not agree in a spirit of Christian courtesy. For example, in a fine discussion regarding the teachings of classic Calvinism and that of the Army (the Arminian-Wesleyan position) it says, 'it is important to remember that both Calvinism and Arminianism are systems of theology which were developed by godly, scholarly, biblically-focused Christians. Both trace their roots to the Bible and contain elements of truth. The Calvinist emphasis on the absolute sovereignty of God can be traced in Scripture, as can the Arminian insistence on the free will of humanity' (p.188). Such rancour-free language is a mark of mature writing and of a movement come of age.

Many will welcome the inclusion of the International Spiritual Life Commission Report, as well as a fine chapter on the doctrine of the Church. This Commission, which was held over five weeks in 2009, provided helpful statements on such issues as Baptism, Holy Communion and worship. While

no significant changes were made to the Army's long-held position on the sacraments, the statements were irenic, pastoral and helpful.

The Handbook contains what it terms a 'lectionary' of major Church and Salvationist Festivals and special days, each of which is linked to an appropriate section of the work's doctrinal study. This will be of value to the creative corps officer and worship leader. It contains a brief but useful description of many of the major figures in church history, and glossaries of theological terms and English usage. It does, of course, give a new definition to the word 'lectionary.' Perhaps 'Calendar' would have been more appropriate.

The work provides a solid exposition of Salvationist theology while at the same time introducing the reader to the wider world of theological scholarship. It does this in such a way as to not overwhelm the reader. Every topic is presented in bite-sized chunks and is accompanied by built-in study resources. These are all practically focussed, relating the respective doctrines to the mission of God's people, their personal witness and their spiritual life. Throughout there are suggested group activities, as well as Bible studies, and useful tools for preaching and teaching the doctrines. This is a unique book amongst theological textbooks, combining as it does solid theology with practical resources.

As with all theological writings, there are items (or at least one item) which some readers will find disturbing. One such is a paragraph in its chapter on Scripture, 'The Word of the Living God.' In the context of a well-written statement we read

The inspiration of the Bible provides a foundation for our understanding of the reliability of the divine revelation in Scripture. It is uniquely inspired in a way that is different from other writings or works of art. However, this does not mean that the Bible is infallible or inerrant, so that it is incapable of misleading and contains no human error (p.11).

Most in the Wesleyan tradition have not endorsed the doctrine of inerrancy as generally held by contemporary evangelicals. However the statement quoted is gratuitous, unnecessarily creating a barrier between Salvationism and the wider evangelical community. It is also pastorally unfortunate, as many Salvationists *do* affirm biblical inerrancy. Nothing would have been lost, and much gained, by the omission of this statement. It should be noted that the paragraph in question goes on to say

Whereas we believe that the overall message of the Bible is inspired and reliable, each individual passage must be read and interpreted carefully, in context and with careful reference to the whole of biblical truth.

Again, the suggestion that initial opposition to Calvin's predestinarian teaching found its origins within the Anabaptist movement, and that 'the fullest expression of that Anabaptist reaction was found in the works of

Jacobus Arminius' (p.140) will also cause some eyebrows to be raised. While some similarities exist between the teachings of the Anabaptists and Arminius, the latter had a much stronger emphasis on divine grace. In fairness, the book is packed with references to church history and historical theology and these are overwhelmingly useful and accurate. It should also be acknowledged that historical events such as the one just referred to are interpreted differently by scholars and writers.

Larger than its predecessors, the *Handbook* is a hard-cover work with a conservatively-designed dust jacket and a user-friendly format and type face. It is visually attractive, instructive to the mind and resource-filled for ministry and mission (even if the statement on the Scriptures cited above prompts a call for a revised edition). It avoids the solipsism sometimes evident in older Army writings, and could well be a useful resource for others within the Wesleyan family. It certainly would be beneficial for those within the wider Wesleyan family to get to know what their Salvationist cousins believe.

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