

DENOMINATIONAL IDENTITY IN A WORLD OF THEOLOGICAL INDIFFERENTISM: SOME INSIGHTS FROM JOHN WESLEY AND ‘THE PEOPLE CALLED METHODISTS’

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This article examines the importance of denominational identity for the early Methodists and its implications for us today. John Wesley clearly believed God had raised up the Methodists to live and proclaim the message of scriptural holiness. The challenge of maintaining the ethos of the Methodist communities required close attention to those critical elements that shaped both their lives and their beliefs. Evidence is presented of Wesley's commitment to focus on the 'essentials' that defined his movement, while leaving room for diversity on 'non-essentials' to allow for cooperation in mission between different Christian traditions. Having identified these critical elements in Wesley's own day, the question is asked how this might be applied today, not only in a local church setting but also for those involved in theological education and ministerial formation.

Introduction

In the last ten years or so there has been a spate of books, articles, and conferences expressing concern about evangelical identity and denominational identity. Recently the Assemblies of God raised questions about the current importance and practice of speaking in tongues within their movement. Many Reformed denominations are seeking to return to a more robust form of Calvinism and my own denomination (Church of the Nazarene) is concerned about the loss of our Wesleyan heritage, particularly the emphasis on holiness of heart and life.

The focus of this paper is not to examine whether the current concerns are valid, nor is it to examine all the possible reasons for this loss of 'identity.' Instead, I want to look briefly at one particular concern highlighted by many denominational scholars and leaders—

the lessening of an emphasis on 'our theological understanding' in favour of a more generic approach to Christian belief and practice. This reflects the desire to lower the perceived barriers to involvement in church by nominal or non-Christians (being 'seeker-sensitive') and the widespread adoption of one style of worship by evangelical churches (the 'praise' service) that emphasises positive feelings but has minimal theological content. Given the link between belief and practice, should we seek to re-establish what we once believed was important in forming our communities (for example, in such areas as salvation, ministry, and mission)? Do we approach this best by re-shaping practice or by re-emphasising our doctrinal heritage? I want to approach this from the theological framework established by John Wesley in which belief and practice are intimately linked. In my opinion the loss of key theological emphases contributes to the loss of 'spiritual astringency' experienced in so many of our churches. I believe that what Wesley had to say has implications for our day, and many of the key lessons can be applied to other denominational settings.

From the early 1740's Wesley was clear in his own mind that the pursuit and propagation of holiness of heart and life was the very reason that Methodism existed:

By Methodists I mean a people who profess to pursue...holiness of heart and life, inward and outward conformity in all things to the revealed will of God; who place religion in an uniform resemblance of the great Object of it; in steady imitation of him they worship in all his imitable perfections; more particularly in justice, mercy, and truth, or universal love filling the heart and governing the life.¹

Wesley believed that the Methodists were 'called to propagate Bible religion through the land—that is, faith working by love, holy tempers and holy lives.'² More explicitly, he believed that 'this doctrine ['full sanctification'] is the grand depositum which God has lodged with the people called Methodists; and for the sake of

¹ John Wesley, *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984-), vol. 9: *The Methodist Societies*, Rupert E. Davies, ed., (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984-), 123-24 (hereafter cited as *Works*). Note the exhortation on pp. 124-125, where the social nature of the 'pursuit' is emphasised. See also *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), Vol 14:329 (hereafter cited as *Works* (Jackson)).

² John Telford, ed., *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley*, 8 vols (London: Epworth Press, 1931), 6:291 (hereafter *Letters* (Telford)). 6:291

propagating this chiefly He appeared to have raised us up.’³ Wesley admitted that the reality for most Christians was that this experience came to them just before death, but all could know it now by faith if only they had that expectation. The creation and nurturing of that expectation was the central task of Methodism. Early in 1767, Wesley thought that preaching on perfection had been lost throughout most of the country, so he encouraged the preachers ‘to speak plainly and to press believers to the constant pursuit and earnest expectation of it.’⁴ At the upcoming 1768 Conference in London it was to be determined ‘whether all our preachers or none shall continually insist upon Christian perfection.’⁵ ‘Shall we go on in asserting perfection against all the world? Or shall we quietly let it drop? We really must do one or the other; and, I apprehend, the sooner the better.’⁶ Obviously the decision was made to continue to preach, teach and model holiness of heart and life in the Methodist societies.

Wesley’s Understanding of the Role of Theology in the Christian Life

Albert Outler maintained that Wesley’s theological genius lay in the area of practical theology, where ‘doctrinal opinions were to be valued for their service to vital faith.’⁷ He believed that Wesley always sought to avoid a split between belief and behaviour, while being careful to keep the distinction between ‘faith itself and all conceptualizations of faith.’⁸ He would allow for differing opinions on doctrinal formulations provided they did not undercut the life of faith. Theology was to be done in the midst of society where the practical concerns of persons seeking how to live the Christian life

³ *Letters* (Telford), 8:238. See also John Wesley, *Minutes of Several Conversations, between the Rev. John Wesley, A.M. and the Preachers in Connection with Him. Containing the Form of Discipline Established among the Preachers and People in the Methodist Societies* (London: G. Whitfield, 1797), 1. Wesley’s *A Short History of the People Called Methodists* is instructive for tracing the growing number of testimonies to Christian perfection, especially during the holiness revival of 1760-63; see *Works*, 9:426-503. See also *Works*, 24:121; *Works* (Jackson), 10:455-56.

⁴ *Letters* (Telford), 5: 46-47. In preaching on perfection, Wesley advised: ‘But we must speak very tenderly on this head, for it is better to lead men than to drive. Study to recommend it rather as amiable and desirable than as necessary.’ See *Letters* (Telford), 3: 213; *Works* (Jackson), 8:286.

⁵ *Letters* (Telford), 5:61, 88.

⁶ *Letters* (Telford), 5:93.

⁷ Albert C. Outler, ed., *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), iv.

⁸ Outler, *John Wesley*, 27.

were paramount. Wesley was always open to new light being shed on his theological understanding of his relationship with God, and thus he actively sought the contributions of others to his theological development.⁹ Conceding that Wesley was flexible in his theological understanding does not mean that he was a theological vagrant. Mildred Bangs Wynkoop proposes that as one studies all the changes Wesley makes,

...it becomes obvious that he is discovering the difference between the 'substance' of doctrine and the 'circumstance' of it, a category of analysis which he considers of real importance. In other words, some truths are firm, and biblical study and experience continue to prove them firm. They are the 'fundamentals,' such as the truth that men may be saved from all sin in this life. The method, time, adaptation to imperfect humanity and a host of other questions having no direct scriptural word, yield their truth to us as to Wesley, only in experience. As important as these truths may be, they are not revealed truths, but historical and in that sense peripheral. Wesley did not consider any question relative to faith beneath his dignity or unworthy of his concern. But he did not fall into the trap of confusing the circumstance with the substance of Truth.¹⁰

Randy Maddox observes that Anglicanism in Wesley's time was particularly focused on the first four centuries of the Church, where theology was a practical discipline to guide the character and practice of the Christian.¹¹ The discipline of study, instruction and pastoring was directed towards forming a thoroughly Christian worldview in the believer. The role of the theologian (who was normally a pastor) was to understand and then communicate the nature of the relationship between God and humanity, integrating reflection on anthropology and soteriology with that on the nature of

⁹ Edgar W. Thompson, *Wesley: Apostolic Man: Some Reflections on Wesley's Consecration of Dr. Thomas Coke* (London: Epworth Press, 1957), 14-15.

¹⁰ Mildred Bangs Wynkoop, 'A Hermeneutical Approach to John Wesley,' *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 6:1 (Spring 1971): 15-16 (hereafter cited as *WTJ*). See also Mildred Bangs Wynkoop, *A Theology of Love: The Dynamic of Wesleyanism* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1972), 302-62; Rob L. Staples, 'Sanctification and Selfhood: A Phenomenological Analysis of the Wesleyan Message,' *WTJ* 7:1 (Spring 1972): 4-7; A. Skevington Wood, 'Lessons from Wesley's Experience,' *Christianity Today* 7 (April 1963): 5-6.

¹¹ Randy L. Maddox, 'John Wesley: Practical Theologian?,' *WTJ* 23:1-2 (Spring-Fall, 1988): 122-47. See also Don A. Thorsen, 'Experimental Method in the Practical Theology of John Wesley,' *WTJ* 24 (1989): 117-41; Randy L. Maddox, 'Wesleyan Resources for a Contemporary Theology of the Poor,' *Asbury Theological Journal* 49: 1 (1994): 36-44.

God. This made theology a very practical concern that sought to communicate its truths primarily through catechisms, liturgies, commentaries and spiritual discipline manuals. Much of the theologising was in response to the needs and questions of the Christian community.¹² Maddox identifies Wesley as having this same set of concerns with his 'praxis-related theology' that was developed from, and communicated through, a variety of forms: creeds (the Articles of Religion), liturgies (*Book of Common Prayer*), sermons (the Homilies and his own sermons), commentaries (*Explanatory Notes on the Old Testament* and the *New Testament*), hymns, conferences, occasional essays, catechetical materials, educational and devotional material (*Christian Library*), journals and letters. He concludes that Wesley clearly pursued serious theological activity in the forms common to his Anglican setting and appropriate to the early Christian model of practical theology.¹³ Furthermore, 'Wesley's primary interest in the formation of Christian character shapes his discussion of theological issues and provides his theological emphases.'¹⁴ For Wesley, doctrines were not ends in themselves but guidelines to help his people know how to tell the gospel story and live it with integrity.¹⁵ The goal of the life of faith was holiness, with his understanding of Christian perfection as the 'most distinctive single element.'¹⁶

¹² Maddox, 'John Wesley: Practical Theologian?,' 123. For many, this makes Wesley an outstanding pastoral theologian; see for example William J. Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 9.

¹³ Maddox, 'John Wesley: Practical Theologian?,' 130-33. See also Maddox, 'Respected Founder/Neglected Guide: The Role of Wesley in American Methodist Theology,' *Methodist History* 37:2 (1999): 72; Maddox, 'Reading Wesley as a Theologian,' *WTJ* 30:1 (Spring, 1995): 7-54.

¹⁴ Thomas A. Langford, 'The United Methodist Quadrilateral: A Theological Task,' in *Doctrine and Theology in the United Methodist Church*, Thomas A. Langford, ed. (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1991), 239. It is why Wesley's *Christian Library* has more biography than any other genre of literature.

¹⁵ Langford, 239.

¹⁶ Outler, 30. He continued to develop and nuance this understanding of Wesley; see the bibliographic listing of Outler's writings in Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994), 396-97. One of the critical articles is Albert C. Outler, 'A New Future for Wesley Studies: An Agenda for 'Phase III',' *The Future of the Methodist Theological Traditions*, 34-52. See also Frank Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England* (London: Epworth Press, 1970), 117.

“The True, the Scriptural, Experimental Religion” of the Heart

Building on the experiential and theological discoveries of the first part of his ministry, Wesley believed that love and relationship were crucial in terms of defining the essential nature of God and human beings. The perspective from which he approached the task of theologising comes from his conviction that the essential nature of God is love and that all other facets of his nature, character and purposes are in harmony with this. Human beings are created in the image of God, and the interrelationship between God and his creation is characterised by a relationship of love. The implication here is that salvation has to be understood within a framework of relationship between the Lover and the beloved (focusing on ‘the heart’).

I say of the *heart*. For neither does religion consist in *orthodoxy* or *right opinions*;...A man may be orthodox in every point...he may think justly concerning the incarnation of our Lord, concerning the ever blessed Trinity, and every other doctrine contained in the oracles of God. He may assent to all the three creeds—that called the Apostles’, the Nicene, and the Athanasian—and yet ‘tis possible he may have no religion at all...He may be almost as orthodox as the devil...and may all the while be as great a stranger as he to the religion of the heart.¹⁷

It is for this reason that Wesley can define the essential nature of Christianity as ‘the true, the scriptural, experimental religion’ of the heart.¹⁸ God’s plan of salvation has to do with the restoration of a relationship of love based on trust, rather than the intellectual command of doctrines and conformity to rules and regulations. This makes personal and community transformation the critical test of correct theological reflection, formulation, and application.

With the focus on love, Wesley believed that God usually began his work in the heart: ‘Men usually feel *desires* to please God before they *know* how to please him. Their *heart* says, “What must I do to be saved?” before they *understand* the way of salvation.’¹⁹ Doctrinal

¹⁷ *Works*, 1: 220-21. For a thorough discussion of Wesley’s views on ‘opinions’ and a list of references to his writings that mention them, see n. 65, p. 220. On ‘heart religion,’ see *Works*, 1:698; 11:272-74; 26:179; *Works* (Jackson), 11:11; *Letters* (Telford), 4:302-03.

¹⁸ *Works*, 1:105-06.

¹⁹ *Works*, 11:479.

understanding may open up the possibility of a person entering an experience, it can challenge their experience or affirm it, but it cannot substitute for it. Even knowledge of Scripture itself cannot substitute for a relationship of love.

For how far is love, even with many wrong opinions, to be preferred before truth itself without love? We may die without the knowledge of many truths and yet be carried into Abraham's bosom. But if we die without love, what will knowledge avail? ²⁰

Gregory Clapper argues that 'heart religion' is Wesley's 'orienting concern' theologically; that is, it 'gives consistency to, and provides guidance for, the various particular theological activities that a thinker undertakes.' This influences the selection, interpretation, relative emphasis and interweaving of theological affirmations and practices.²¹ This is in harmony with the common observation amongst Wesleyan scholars that Wesley's whole theological enterprise can be identified as a 'theology of love'.²²

In his sermon, 'A Caution against Bigotry' (based on the text of Mk 9:38-39) Wesley reminded his people not to think they were the only truly Christian church in either theological opinions or praxis, but to embrace members of other churches who also served the gospel and were fruitful in their ministry.²³ A similar point is made in the sermon, 'Catholic Spirit' in which he emphasises unity in doctrinal essentials and being gracious over matters of opinion.²⁴ Wesley's 'catholic spirit' was not, however, a 'speculative latitudinarianism,' an 'indifference to all opinions,' nor a 'practical latitudinarianism,' with its indifference to public worship and the

²⁰ *Works*, 1:107. See also *Works*, 9:84-85; 26:223; *Works* (Jackson), 10:73. See his positive evaluation of the holy character of 'heretics' like Montanus and Pelagius in *Works*, 2:555-56; *Letters* (Telford), 4:158.

²¹ Gregory S. Clapper, 'Wesley's "Main Doctrines" and Spiritual Formation and Teaching in the Wesleyan Tradition,' *WTJ* 39:2 (Fall 2004): 100. Clapper draws his material from Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 18-19.

²² Some of the best and most succinct accounts of this are to be found in David L. Cubie, 'Wesley's Theology of Love,' *WTJ* 20:1 (Spring, 1985); W. Stanley Johnson, 'Christian Perfection as Love for God,' *WTJ* 18:1 (Spring, 1983); Kenneth J. Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007); Wynkoop, *Theology of Love*.

²³ *Works*, 2:63-78.

²⁴ *Works*, 2:81-95. It is in this context that we have his oft-quoted reference from 2 Kings 10:15: 'Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thy heart...If it be, give me thine hand.'

manner of performing it.²⁵ Wesley insisted each person must be a faithful and committed member of a local congregation, while having an attitude of openness, love and encouragement toward others.²⁶ There were a number of doctrines he deemed to be essential to being a Christian and not a matter of 'opinion.'²⁷ For example, he was concerned with the rising popularity amongst Christians of the viewpoint that human beings were innately good, and in opposition to this view he staunchly upheld the doctrine of original sin.²⁸ The subsequent doctrines of justification and the new birth were equally 'fundamental.'²⁹ In 'The Principles of a Methodist Farther Explained' (1746) he wrote: 'Our main doctrines, which include all the rest, are three, that of repentance, of faith, and of holiness. The first of these we account, as it were, the porch of religion; the next, the door; the third is religion itself.'³⁰ When defending his doctrinal position on justification, salvation, faith and the work of God in accomplishing them, he writes that he does

²⁵ *Works*, 2:87-92. See also *Works*, 11: 477-79; *Letters* (Telford), 3:201-03.

²⁶ *Works*, 2:93-95.

²⁷ For an analysis of Wesley's varying lists of 'essential doctrines' see Ted A. Campbell, 'The Shape of Wesleyan Thought: The Question of John Wesley's "Essential" Christian Doctrines,' *Asbury Theological Journal* 59:1 & 2 (Spring/Fall 2004): 27-40. See also Jerry L. Walls, 'What Is Theological Pluralism?,' *Quarterly Review* 5:3 (1985); Randy L. Maddox, 'Opinion, Religion and "Catholic Spirit": John Wesley on Theological Integrity,' *Asbury Theological Journal* 47:1 (1992); Howe Octavius Thomas, 'John Wesley's Awareness and Application of the Method of Distinguishing between Theological Essentials and Theological Opinions,' *Methodist History* 26:2 (1988); Howe Octavius Thomas, 'John Wesley's Understanding of Theological Distinction between "Essentials" and "Opinions",' *Methodist History* 33:3 (1995).

²⁸ Wesley published his lengthiest treatise against this understanding; see 'The Doctrine of Original Sin: According to Scripture, Reason, and Experience,' in *Works* (Jackson), 9:191-464. It was followed later by a sermonic abridgement ('Original Sin,' 1759), which he regarded as a key doctrinal statement; see Outler's introduction to the sermon in *Works*, 2:170-72. The critical foundation for his belief in original sin and why he regarded it as an essential Christian doctrine was the clear teaching of the Scripture, confirmed by 'daily experience'; see *Works*, 2:172-76; *Letters* (Telford), 4: 67.

²⁹ *Works*, 2:187. See also *Works*, 21:444, 56.

³⁰ *Works*, 9:227. In a letter to George Downing and to various clergymen Wesley mentioned 'three grand scriptural doctrines - Original Sin, Justification by Faith, and Holiness consequent thereon'; see *Letters* (Telford), 4:146, 237. A similar list is given in a letter to Lady Huntingdon in John R. Tyson with Boyd S. Schlenther, *In the Midst of Early Methodism: Lady Huntingdon and Her Correspondence* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2006), 104-05. To the Earl of Dartmouth he mentioned 'righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost...given only to those who are justified by faith'; see *Letters* (Telford), 4: 147. To James Knox it is 'Justification by Faith and Holiness' which is to be experienced and not just understood; see *Letters* (Telford), 4: 303.

‘instil’ into the people a few ‘favourite tenets...as if the whole of Christianity depended upon them’ and these are frequently summed up as: faith working by love, loving God and neighbour with one’s whole being and doing all the good one can as a consequence.³¹

It is clear that Wesley contended for a gracious acceptance of diverse views on matters of theological opinion, provided that one’s personal life and relationships were characterised by the transforming power of God’s love. He seemed to be content to accept the essentials of the faith as they were expressed by the classical creeds of the early church and his own Anglican heritage. In the final decades of his ministry he did admit the need for these essentials to be understood to some degree in order to prevent heart religion becoming a fixation on feelings, lacking any anchoring in the classical theological affirmations of faith. He explicitly acknowledged the role of the theological teaching of the early church, as well as the sixteenth and seventeenth century Anglican formularies expressed in its homilies, articles and liturgy. He felt this gave a firm foundation from which to read, interpret and apply the classical consensus of the faith to his own day. Within this framework, he was perfectly happy to cooperate with other churches and their leaders in the propagation of the gospel and in service to the community. However, that did not mean Wesley was indifferent to the theological and practical context that shaped the spiritual formation of his own people.

The Methodist Ethos

In a sermon reflecting on the rise and development of the Methodist movement, Wesley emphasised that...

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* [emphasis mine] 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 with regard to all their tempers, words, and actions, namely, the oracles of God. They were one and all determined to be *Bible-Christians*...And indeed unto this day it is their constant endeavour to think and speak as the oracles of God.³²

³¹ *Works*, 11:128-29.

³² *Works*, 3:504. See also *Works* 3:496; 4:145-46; *Works* (Jackson), 13:258-61.

Wesley remained confident that a sound interpretation could only arise from first grasping the whole picture of salvation revealed in Scripture, rather than beginning with isolated proof texts which could easily be manipulated to prove almost any doctrinal or practical point. For example, when considering the nature of 'real religion,' he reminded his people that 'it runs through the Bible from the beginning to the end, in one connected chain. And the agreement of every part of it with every other is properly the analogy of faith.'³³ He commented in another sermon: 'How small a number will you find that have any conception of the analogy of faith! Of the connected chain of Scripture truths, and their relation to each other. Namely, the natural corruption of man, justification by faith, the new birth, inward and outward holiness.'³⁴ He appealed for his Methodists to consider this question: 'Hath not the whole word of God been delivered to you, and without any mixture of error? Were not the fundamental doctrines both of free, full, present justification delivered to you, as well as sanctification, both gradual and instantaneous? Was not every branch both of inward and outward holiness clearly opened and earnestly applied?'³⁵ Methodism 'is the religion of the Bible...So that whoever allows the Scripture to be the Word of God must allow this to be true religion.'³⁶ Wesley believed that the Methodists were 'called to propagate Bible religion through the land - that is, faith working by love, holy tempers and holy lives.'³⁷

According to these [the oracles of God] it lies in one single point: it is neither more nor less than love—it is love which 'is the fulfilling of the law', 'the end of the commandment'. Religion is the love of God and our neighbour...This love, ruling the whole life, animating all our tempers and passions, directing all our thoughts, words, and actions, is 'pure religion and undefiled.'³⁸

More explicitly, he believed that 'this doctrine ["full sanctification"] is the grand depositum which God has lodged with the people called

³³ *Works*, 2:483.

³⁴ *Works*, 4:89. See also *Works*, 2:501.

³⁵ *Works*, 3:516.

³⁶ *Works*, 3:585-86. See also *Letters* (Telford), 6:123.

³⁷ *Letters* (Telford), 6:291.

³⁸ *Letters* (Telford), 6:189. See also *Works*, 2:462-63, 70; 3:22, 99, 117.

Methodists; and for the sake of propagating this chiefly He appeared to have raised us up.’³⁹

Wesley was convinced that the faith community played an essential role in promoting and maintaining holiness of heart and life. It had become obvious that the continuance of his message and movement could not simply depend upon his extensive written sermons, tracts and other published materials. The life and ministry of each local society was crucial; particularly the preachers and the doctrinal clarity and persuasiveness of their sermons on Christian perfection. His letters to the preachers were filled with exhortations to remain faithful to the task of consistently proclaiming Christian perfection in spite of opposition from within and without the Methodist movement.⁴⁰ He knew that sermons on Christian perfection were not always gladly or regularly given by his preachers, and at every Conference they were asked: ‘Are you going on to perfection? Do you expect to be perfected in love, in this life? Are you longing after it?’⁴¹ In March 1772 he complained to Charles Wesley, ‘I find almost all our preachers in every circuit have done with Christian perfection. They say they believe it; but they never preach it, or not once in a quarter. What is to be done? Shall we let it drop, or make a point of it?’⁴² Yet in May 1773 he felt able to declare, ‘In most parts of this kingdom there is such a thirst after holiness as I scarce ever knew before. Several here [Cork] in particular who enjoy it themselves are continually encouraging others to press after it. And two of our travelling preachers who for some years disbelieved it are now happy witnesses of it.’⁴³ He wrote to members of the societies and asked about their preachers, ‘Does he preach Christian perfection clearly and explicitly?’⁴⁴ He commented on the circuit at Launceston in 1776:

³⁹ Letters (Telford), 8:238. See also John Wesley, *Minutes of Several Conversations*, 1; Wesley, ‘Short History,’ *Works*, 9:426-503. See also *Works*, 24:121; *Works* (Jackson), 10:455-56.

⁴⁰ See for example *Letters* (Telford), 6:111, 224, 226, 240, 376; 7:92, 98-99, 206, 352. See also *Works* (Jackson), 8:326.

⁴¹ Wesley, *Minutes (1803)*, 14. They were also asked if they were reading the *Sermons*, the *New Testament Notes*, the *Plain Account* and the *Appeals*.

⁴² *Letters* (Telford), 5:314.

⁴³ *Letters* (Telford), 6:25-26. See also *Letters* (Telford), 7:219, 77.

⁴⁴ *Letters* (Telford), 5:166. For other letters exhorting preachers and society leaders to encourage others to seek perfection, see *Letters* (Telford), 5:242, 254, 257, 261-62, 291, 306, 312, 6:97, 357, 359; 7:90, 153.

Here I found the plain reason why the work of God had gained no ground in this circuit all year. The preachers had given up the Methodist testimony. Either they did not speak of perfection at all (the peculiar doctrine committed to our trust), or they spoke of it only in general terms, without urging the believers to 'go on to perfection', and to expect it every moment. And wherever this is not earnestly done the work of God does not prosper.⁴⁵

In the letters to the preachers themselves there is a continuing refrain regarding the content and frequency of their sermons on Christian perfection. Doctrinally, the sermons were to stress that this was a definite, instantaneous work of grace subsequent to the new birth, receivable by simple faith alone and it was to be expected now. Wesley was insistent that his preachers were to proclaim the reality of Christian perfection continually, explicitly and insistently (preaching for a decision 'now'). Those who spoke against Christian perfection were no longer to lead or preach.⁴⁶

The lay members of the societies were to be equally active in promoting Christian perfection, and Wesley was glad to record their experience as he heard about it by correspondence or through his own visitation.⁴⁷ He advised one of his lay leaders, 'Your own soul will be quickened if you earnestly exhort believers without fear or shame to press after *full* salvation as receivable *now*, and that by simple *faith*.'⁴⁸ In seeking Christian perfection, it was important that the lives of his people be models for others to follow. He told Mary Bishop that 'Sister Jane's experience is clear and scriptural' and was a good model for her own spiritual experience.⁴⁹ Miss March was reminded that 'it is certain no part of Christian history is so profitable as that which relates to great changes wrought in our souls: these, therefore, should be carefully noticed and treasured up for the encouragement of our brethren.'⁵⁰ Personal experience was not only important for encouragement, it was also important in understanding and explaining how the experience of Christian

⁴⁵ *Works*, 23:28. See also *Works*, 22:400, 60; 23: 234, 304, 79, 92; *Letters* (Telford), 7:216, 259, 276, 283; 8:184.

⁴⁶ *Letters* (Telford), 8:188, 255 and Wesley, *Minutes* (1803), 146.

⁴⁷ See for example *Letters* (Telford), 5:315; 6: 37, 38; 7:98, 176, 193, 226-27; 9:518-21. Wesley continued to record testimonies in his *Journal* accounts for this period; see for example *Works*, 22:233-34, 36, 72, 76, 82, 345-46, 49-50, 75, 423, 32-35, 41, 44, 60, 62, 69; 23:6, 10, 24, 48, 130, 35, 37, 40, 65, 69, 87, 91, 204, 13, 34, 38, 45, 69, 317, 23, 37, 49, 55, 58, 75, 405, 15; 24:9, 11, 13, 33, 89, 128, 33, 69.

⁴⁸ *Letters* (Telford), 6:13. See also *Works*, 23:10; *Letters* (Telford), 6:59, 233.

⁴⁹ *Letters* (Telford), 5:290. See also *Letters* (Telford), 5:261-62; 7:167.

⁵⁰ *Letters* (Telford), 5:237.

perfection may be realised. Pastoral care was to be a priority within each society and Wesley informed Elizabeth Ritchie that 'one admirable help toward conquering all is for believers to keep close together, to walk hand in hand, and provoke one another to love and to good works. And one means of retaining the pure love of God was the exhorting others to press earnestly after it.'⁵¹ If there was no expectation of perfection, few would seek after it and there would be few, if any, testimonies to the experience. This underscores the vital importance of the Methodist community, where believers were taught to read and interpret the Scriptural text in the light of God's plan of salvation as understood by Wesley. He published a definitive collection of hymns for his people as an essential element of their spiritual formation and the promotion of Christian perfection. In the preface he made the point that it was large enough...

to contain all the important truths of our most holy religion, whether speculative or practical; yea, to illustrate them all, and to prove them both by Scripture and reason...The hymns are...carefully ranged under prayer heads, according to the experience of real Christians. So that this book is in effect a little body of experimental and practical divinity...In what other publication of the kind have you so distinct and full an account of scriptural Christianity?⁵²

The conduct of the believers needed to be regulated and not simply left to personal freedom, as this opened the door to enthusiasm. On the other hand, Wesley recognised the danger of replacing a dependency on the work of the Spirit with a mechanical application of the Methodist general rules.⁵³ This made it important to consult with those experienced in the ways of God over such questions,⁵⁴ as this was an 'appointed means which it generally pleases God to bless.'⁵⁵ Here again there is a strong emphasis on the living authority of the Holy Spirit, to be discerned by the faith community in harmony with the Scriptures.

The lives of the members of the societies were significant as models for seekers to follow and as sources of spiritual experience

⁵¹ *Letters* (Telford), 6:94. See also *Letters* (Telford), 8:80, 156.

⁵² *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists* (1780) in *Works*, 7:73-74. The structure of the hymnal laid out Wesley's mature understanding of the *ordo salutis*; see the contents (77-78) and the first section of the introduction to the volume (1-22).

⁵³ *Letters* (Telford), 5:344. See also *Letters* (Telford), 6:263; 7:224.

⁵⁴ *Letters* (Telford), 5:278; 6:58, 126, 127, 178, 239.

⁵⁵ *Letters* (Telford), 6:237.

and encouragement.⁵⁶ Methodists needed to improve their understanding of the doctrine and practice of Christian perfection as much as possible in order to be of help to others and to minimise difficulties in these areas. Wesley encouraged his people to read widely in order to enhance their understanding of Methodist doctrine and practice. He told them that this 'can no otherwise be done than by reading authors of various kinds as well as by thinking and conversation. If we read nothing but the Bible, we should hear nothing but the Bible; and then what becomes of preaching?'⁵⁷ He stressed the importance of reading and subsequent Christian conversation amongst the members of the societies. There was a danger that his people would read the wrong material or things that were less than helpful for their spiritual journey. Sorting this out was not easy without a great deal of experience, so he urged his people to keep to Methodist publications (including those Wesley had translated and/or edited), where they would find all that they needed, 'speculative or practical.'⁵⁸

Thomas Langford has proposed the term 'ethos' as a good way to describe Wesley's references to the role of the community of faith in theological reflection and application.⁵⁹ This can be defined as its characteristic nature, attitudes and values; its way of viewing and living in the world. The emphasis is then on its dynamic, relational qualities rather than a static, formally-defined belief system. It was in this sense that Wesley strongly treasured the heritage of the early Church (especially of the first three centuries), the Church of England (particularly of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries),⁶⁰ and his own emerging Methodist movement.⁶¹ This latter point is critical.⁶² Over time a distinct Methodist ethos arose shaped by its

⁵⁶ See for example *Letters* (Telford), 5:261-62, 290; 7:167.

⁵⁷ *Letters* (Telford), 6:129-30. See also *Letters* (Telford), 8:247 and Wesley, *Minutes* (1803), 33.

⁵⁸ *Letters* (Telford), 6:125-26, 201.

⁵⁹ See Langford, 'Introduction,' *Doctrine and Theology*, 11-13.

⁶⁰ *Works*, 4:393-94. He regarded the Church of England as a 'scriptural church' and valued its authority 'only less than that of the oracles of God.' See for example *Works*, 9:308; 11:117, 63-71, 85, 290; 26:49-50; 419, 26; *Letters* (Telford), 3:245.

⁶¹ In a letter Wesley said, 'This is the scriptural way, the *Methodist* way, the true way'; see *Works*, 26:489.

⁶² Neither Campbell nor Jones in their analysis of Wesley's theological authorities makes reference to Methodism itself; see Scott J. Jones, *John Wesley's Conception and Use of Scripture* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1995), 169-76; Ted A. Campbell, 'The Interpretative Role of Tradition,' in *Wesley and the Quadrilateral: Renewing the Conversation*, W. Stephen Gunter et al, eds. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 63-75.

Anglican roots but with conspicuously Wesleyan features: the sermons, hymns, liturgy, testimonies, society rules and accountability structures, conferences, letters, the growing corpus of Methodist writings and edited works, all largely bearing the stamp or seal of approval of John Wesley himself. Angela Shier-Jones sees this as the most important factor in understanding Methodism and the way it theologises as a community.⁶³ Wesley upheld the authority of the community above that of any individual, no matter how exalted. This was why his Methodist Conferences were so important - especially in helping to understand and teach Christian perfection.⁶⁴ The contribution of the community to understanding what was involved in practical discipleship was critical; Wesley especially valued the experience of the saints in these communities to illuminate and provide clear examples of the teaching of the Scriptures.⁶⁵

While Wesley did not elevate doctrine over heart experience, he argued that heart experience would not long survive without a clear biblical and doctrinal foundation. The Methodist people were so dependent on lay leaders and local preachers (who were often not formally educated in divinity) and it was vital that their experience be formed by a sound theological understanding. As the Methodist movement developed, Wesley overtly included it as an essential faith community for his people, and explicit references to antiquity and the Church of England decline. He believed that Christians could not afford to ignore the theological essentials established on a firm scriptural foundation by the early Fathers, and the Church of England, but if the message and experience of Christian perfection was to be kept alive, then the theology and practice of the Methodist community itself was critical to this task.

The dialogue and debate with his critics outside of Methodism was conducted at the level of doctrinal substance, but this type of conversation was not to be imported into his societies. Material on the substance is primarily found in his sermons, the *Notes*, and several smaller treatises, where Scripture is paramount - both in formal quotations, inexact references and allusions. The language

⁶³ Angela Shier-Jones, *A Work in Progress: Methodists Doing Theology* (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2005), 3-11 especially. See also Shier-Jones, 'Conferring as Theological Model,' in *Unmasking Methodist Theology*, Clive Marsh et al, eds. (London: Continuum, 2004), 82-94; Stephen Dawes, 'Revelation in Methodist Practice and Belief,' in *Unmasking Methodist Theology*, 114-16.

⁶⁴ *Works*, 21:165.

⁶⁵ *Works*, 1:592-611. See also *Works*, 2:239.

and imagery of the sermons are shaped by the Bible and they are rich with direct references to Scriptural texts. However, when we move to the pastoral advice given in his letters, the lack of direct or indirect reference to Scripture in comparison with the sermons and treatises is noticeable. He constantly urges them to read Methodist publications (largely his own), and these are rich in Scripture – but Scripture that has already been interpreted and applied by Wesley and other sympathetic writers. His people are rarely referred to the Bible text on its own, which surely indicates the vital importance of the perspective of the reading community and Wesley's determination that this be a Methodist community.

In his pastoral writings a number of vital affirmations emerge. Wesley strongly maintained the intimate link between the living voice of the Spirit and the written word of Scripture. The Scripture was always to be applied by the Spirit and so there was an emphasis on the Christian experience of the reader(s) rather than merely life experience in general. However, it was vital that his people listen to the Spirit and read the Bible within a Methodist framework; particularly the Methodist hermeneutical approach of working with the analogy of faith rather than seeking proof texts. The role of personal and community expectation and experience was vital. He constantly urged them to listen to Methodist preachers, participate in Methodist worship, and read Methodist works, with Wesley's own sermons and other writings being of critical importance. His people needed to have regular conversation with those who were either testifying to Christian perfection or diligently seeking it, for without community support and encouragement many would simply give up. There were constant references to personal testimony (both spoken and written), as well as the importance of the Conferences and other Methodist meetings.

It was in this living laboratory that the circumstance of Christian perfection was to be worked through and the conditions needed to be as favourable as possible. Wesley believed that to enter into endless disputes and argumentation over the nature and experience of Christian perfection would be completely counter-productive, as it tended to undermine the necessary trust in God's promises and faithfulness. This is why Wesley constantly urged his people not to read, hear or converse at length on spiritual matters with those who would deny the Methodist understanding. This explains his many cautions against the misuse of reason. It was a fine tool in debate with his critics, but could easily undermine the 'simple trust' (faith) so necessary if his people were to experience and maintain a

relationship of perfect love. In the societies it was common sense and wisdom that were to be in evidence, not philosophical argument. As in every relationship of love, the acids of doubt, discouragement and criticism were fatal, hence the strategic role of the societies to provide an atmosphere (ethos) of encouragement and support. Wesley's life and ministry demonstrates the central importance of the community of faith in theologising and the continued health of Methodism is inextricably tied to the Spirit-formed ethos of its own community.

Conclusion

In the history of the church as a whole, let alone our own denominations, there has always been a tension between 'faithful remembering' and 'reformation/renewal.' The challenge for churches and theological colleges is to enable a faithful preservation of our denominational 'heritage' while helping to articulate our beliefs and practices in relevant and appropriate forms for today. In western societies like ours there is the ever-present temptation to value innovation and novelty for its own sake, to adopt 'success models' (so often defined in terms of numerical growth) from other theological frameworks that are often antithetical at heart to our own ethos. There is no problem with learning from others and adopting/adapting their programs, methods and techniques as long as we carefully discern whether these will enhance our life and witness as Wesleyan communities or eventually be destructive of them. In his 'Thoughts upon Methodism' (1786), John Wesley wrote:

I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am afraid lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power. And this undoubtedly will be the case unless they hold fast both the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out.⁶⁶

The importance of maintaining a clear Wesleyan ethos is underlined by Wesley's specific identification of 'doctrine, spirit and discipline' as the core constituent elements in the spiritual formation of the people called Methodists. His concerns were valid ones and history has borne out that they were not misplaced in the subsequent history of the wider Wesleyan movement.

⁶⁶ *Works*, 9:527.

Arising from this brief overview, there are a number of points that we need to consider in terms of the life and formation of our own Wesleyan communities. If we believe our contribution to the Body of Christ is still an essential emphasis, how deeply are we committed to that purpose? It will not happen simply by accident or as a by-product of some other concern, but will require us to be intentional - our key leaders (both ordained and lay) must actually believe, live and share that biblical message. We will need to be clear about, and committed to, the doctrines and practices reflective of the purpose, with a willingness to say 'no' to that which hinders its fulfillment, no matter how popular or successful they may be in other contexts.

Wesley was able to insist on his Methodist people working with certain community structures and forms, while he could also direct those exercising ministry in these settings to a large degree. He was able to insist on his people substantially limiting their theological input to that which he approved. All this made it easier to set the theological framework for the spiritual formation and mission of the Methodists. The range of resource materials available to us today is vast compared to his day and we are unlikely ever to recover the degree of control that Wesley was able to exercise over the early Methodist community. The challenge of obtaining and then maintaining the kind of ethos regarded as essential by Wesley is significant, and I intend to give attention to this issue in a future paper.