

John Wesley – Practical Theologian?

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When one reads secondary treatments of Wesley they repeatedly come across disclaimers of him being a “systematic” theologian. If an alternative characterization is listed, among the more common is “practical” theologian. One of our goals in this paper is to demonstrate the warrant for such a construal of Wesley as a practical theologian.

A more important goal is to overcome prevalent caricatures of what this entails. For example, it often appears that classification of Wesley as a practical theologian is intended to imply that he “dabbles” in theology when it fits his pastoral or evangelistic purposes but does not take doctrinal reflection seriously. We hope to demonstrate that this and related implications are distortions of Wesley’s practical theology.

To make this case we must place Wesley’s practical theology in its historical context. Until recently, such a contextual consideration has not only been lacking but almost impossible. Given the dominance, in the modern era, of the Western university model of Systematic Theology—with its accompanying application-discipline of Practical Theology, earlier understandings of “practical theology” were largely forgotten or distorted. However, this reigning model of Practical Theology is being called into question in recent discussions of theological methodology. These discussions have spurred historical investigation into earlier understandings of “practical theology.” They have also spawned calls for reformulating Practical Theology and, perhaps, returning to a model of theology *per se* as a practical endeavour.

Accordingly, we will begin with a summary of the emerging history of “practical theology.” Next, we will note some of the themes expressed in recent calls for recovering a model of theology as practical. Against this background, we can then more accurately assess Wesley’s model of a practical theology. We will conclude with some implications that his example suggests for any contemporary retrieval of a practical theology.

I. HISTORICAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF PRACTICAL THEOLOGY²

1. *Theology per se as Practical.* Early Christian practice suggests a two-fold understanding of “theology”—i.e., knowledge of God. At the most basic level it was understood as a *habitus* or implicit worldview that guides the temperament and practice of believers’ lives. This *habitus* was not assumed to be divinely implanted at conversion. It must be developed. Thus, the need for theology in its second major sense—the discipline of study, instruction and shepherding directed toward forming theology/*habitus* in believers.

The focus of theology/discipline was on understanding and communicating the nature of the *interaction* between God and humanity. That is, it integrated reflection on anthropology and soteriology with that on the nature of God. Indeed, it sought always to base even the most metaphysical reflections about God on the life of faith and to draw from these reflections pastoral and soteriological implications.³

As this description of theology/discipline suggests, it was carried out primarily in a pastoral setting by those concerned to shepherd Christian communities. As such, its concern was essentially practical; i.e. oriented to understanding and norming Christian life in the world. This practical nature was also evident in the primary forms of such theology/discipline: e.g., the production of catechisms, liturgies, commentaries, and spiritual discipline manuals. Properly pursued, such theological activities demand rigorous theological reflection. At the same time, they develop in response to, and seek to address, the needs and questions of typical Christian life—such as, “How should we pray?”, “What does this verse mean?”, “Should we call Jesus ‘God’?”, and “How should we train new Christians?”⁴

In early medieval Western Christianity the social location of theology began to switch to the newly emerging universities. As these universities became detached from their founding monasteries or cathedrals, they adopted an Aristotelian model of theology as a theoretical science concerned with the rational pursuit of knowledge *for its own sake* (theology/science). It was this shift that provoked the first debate, in the thirteenth century, over whether theology is really a practical science (i.e., dealing with humans and the things humans do—in light of God) or, rather, a primarily speculative science (i.e., concerned with understanding God *per se*). Thus ended the general agreement that theology as a whole was practical.

2. *Practical Theology as Spiritual/Devotional Theology.* The model of theology/science eventually came to dominate the universities. Likewise, they soon came to dominate theological debate and pastoral preparation. Thereby, theology/science became the *standard* model of serious theological activity. Among the consequences of this shift in genre were: 1) the primary *form* of theological activity became the preparation of comprehensive textbooks (*summae*) for university education, 2) anthropological issues and implications were largely confined to a single section of these textbooks, 3) the method of deciding theological issues increasingly became exclusively logical, 4) there often developed a useless subtlety of argument, 5) there was a prevalent danger of theological reflection crystallizing into petrified systems, and 6) doctrinal clarifications that were achieved had little influence on liturgy, etc. Overall, the relation of such theology to human life became problematic.

A closely related development was that “practical theology” was marginalized into a separate genre alongside theology/science. While the latter supposedly pursued a rigorous dispassionate analysis of truth as a whole, practical theology (increasingly under such names as mystical or spiritual theology) focused on understanding and inculcating Christian spirituality.⁵ Two things about this move are important. First, such practical theology was usually pursued by monastics so its relevance for the lives of non-monastics was limited. Second, implicit in the very distinction between the two genres is the troubling fact that doctrinal analysis and reflection on Christian life were drifting apart.

The Reformers reacted against this split between practical and doctrinal (academic) theology. They called for a return to pursuing theology *per se* as a practical science. However, their achievement was short-lived. Protestant Orthodoxy soon reappropriated the model—and the problems—of a theoretical theology/science. In reaction, Pietism increasingly rejected the relevance of such theology and developed an alternative practical theology oriented to (non-monastic) Christian spirituality. Overall, Orthodoxy construed Christian faith more as a set of intellectual affirmations than as a *habitus* that orients Christian life in the world, while Pietism lacked a clear affirmation that such a *habitus* was *formed* and *normed* by the careful doctrinal reflection of theology/discipline. Thus, the separation of doctrinal reflection and concern for Christian life continued to grow.

3. *Practical Theology as Non-Technical Theology.* While the marginalization of practical theology into spiritual theology was the dominant response to the ascendancy of the university model of theology/science, another understanding of “practical theology” was possible. It could be construed as a simplified version of academic theology prepared for the non-professional. Thus, we occasionally find “practical theology” used in the late sixteenth century for simplified surveys of scholastic theology—giving the major conclusions without the argumentation.⁶ These surveys were intended for students entering ministry rather than academic vocation. That is, “practical theology” became that taught “mere” pastors, while *true* theology was reserved for professional theologians! Imagine where this leaves the laity!

4. *Practical Theology as Moral Theology.* By the eighteenth century we find another use of “practical theology” within the university. While uncomfortable with considering devotional life an academic matter, they had developed a focused concern for Christian actions—in particular, *moral* actions. Apparently drawing on Aristotle’s distinction between *theoria* and *praxis*, they designated the study of Christian actions “Practical Theology” and the study of Christian beliefs “Theoretical Theology.”⁷

Two things must be noted about this development. First, “practical theology” had moved from being the genre of *all* theology, through being a genre of theology *outside* the university, to being now one university discipline alongside others! Second, this discipline of Practical Theology was *structurally separate* from primary doctrinal reflection.⁸ Given its current identification with moral theology, this raised even more intensely the basic problem we have already noted: “What is the relationship between what we believe and what we do?”

5. *Practical Theology as Popular Theology.* During the last third of the eighteenth century another important use of “practical theology” developed

in Germany.⁹ This time the development was *alongside* the university among the newly emerging educated middle-class. They constituted a *lay* audience interested in the major conclusions of recent theological reflection, though having neither the background nor the desire to consider all the details. Of particular interest to them were those aspects of theology that most immediately impacted the moral decisions of life. Accordingly, the genre of popular theology (frequently called “practical theology”) emerged—aimed at distilling such information and presenting it in terms understandable to this audience.

The concerns addressed by this genre of practical theology are admirable. Ironically, however, it appears to have accelerated the growing split between academic theology and lived piety—in two ways: 1) it moved the concern for relevance outside the purview of Theoretical Theology *per se* and 2) it formalized the assumption that non-professionals play no constructive role in theological reflection, but are merely an audience for its conclusions.¹⁰ As a result, this genre faded away—as fewer were able to stand in the gap between professional theology and popular audiences, and fewer still on either side assumed the other had anything of relevance to share.

6. *Practical Theology as Pastoral Theology.* In the nineteenth century Kant’s use of *practical* reason to establish the *theoretical* foundation of moral action undermined the reigning university distinction between Theoretical and Practical Theology. One result of this was to emphasize further the notion that Practical Theology was concerned merely to apply theories that Systematic Theology developed. A second result was to question whether general human life should still be considered its field of application. Particularly after Schleiermacher’s influential theological encyclopedia, this field was increasingly narrowed: first to ecclesial practice; and then, to the practice of clergy. That is, Practical Theology became a discipline for preparing ministers to handle technical aspects of their profession.¹¹

7. *Practical Theology as Glaubenslehre.* The model of Pastoral Theology came to dominate both Protestant and Catholic seminaries by the latter half of the nineteenth century. There was, however, an important alternative understanding of Practical Theology in Protestant circles during this time.

The Enlightenment had emphasized a distinction between theology (as rational ideas) and religion (as historical reality). This reinforced the suggestion of some Pietists that a truly practical theology would be one *derived* from consideration of the practice of piety. These influences lie behind Schleiermacher’s replacement of dogmatics with his *Glaubenslehre*—an articulation of the doctrine *currently expressed* in the life of the Church. Schleiermacher himself placed this task within the area of Historical Theology. However, the increasing influence of Hegel’s notion of “praxis” as the unfolding of the Idea implicit in history led many to call such a study of the historical embodiment/expression of beliefs “Practical Theology”—as contrasted with Systematic Theology’s abstract treatment of concepts.

Thus emerged the use of the term “practical theology” to designate an empirical investigation and articulation of the implicit convictions of contemporary Christian life. Such a Practical Theology was proposed as a direct alternative to the perceived traditional practice of imposing dogmatic definitions of faith upon the present church.¹² This use of “practical theology”

was short-lived in Protestant circles. The Neo-Orthodox turn in the twentieth century decisively rejected its assumption of the primacy of current church praxis over traditional teachings and belief. They believed the current church was verging on apostasy and called it back to the Word! In the process, they effectively reduced Protestant Practical Theology again to Pastoral Theology—and almost to homiletics alone!

II. CONTEMPORARY CALLS FOR RECOVERING THEOLOGY AS PRACTICAL

1. *Overcoming Practical Theology as Pastoral Theology.* One intense area of current debates about theological method has focused on the nature and goal of the specialty-discipline Practical Theology. The major concerns of this debate have been to overcome the effects of equating Practical Theology with Pastoral theology; namely, 1) the narrowing of its subject field to clerical practice, and 2) its construal as a mere “application” discipline. The reconceived Practical Theology that is advocated either becomes again essentially Moral Theology, or it is assigned the task of reflecting on current Christian *praxis*,¹³ with the goal of critically transforming it into more authentic forms. Obviously, this latter task entails mediating between current praxis and the normative convictions of Christian faith.

2. *Calls for Recovering Theology as Practical.* Once the specialty-discipline of Practical Theology is defined this broadly, however, one wonders what remains for Systematic Theology. Thus, many of those calling for a transformed Practical Theology have realized that they are really calling for the recovery of a model of theology *per se* as a practical endeavour—like that preceding the dominance of university theology.¹⁴ Their voices have joined many others stimulated by a variety of concerns in the theological arena.

For example, within the arena of ethics, attempts to overcome the separation between doctrinal theology and ethics—whose origin we noted—have supported this call. Even stronger support has come from the recent focus of political and liberation theologies on the interrelationship of religious belief and the socio-political realities of life. Perhaps the strongest support has come from the proponents of focusing the discipline of ethics more on understanding and cultivating the abiding virtues (character) which guide life than on determining abstract principles of ethical judgement. This emphasis on the need to *form* the cognitive and affectional character from which “proper” life flows carries clear parallels to the early Christian understanding of the relationship of theology/*habitus* and theology/discipline.

This parallel lends support to the growing contemporary argument that it is (praxis-related) activities like creating liturgies, composing hymns, and shepherding discipleship which are the primary forms of theology. This emphasis is not a rejection of rigorous, even complex, doctrinal reflection. Indeed, the concern for *legitimate* formation (or *reformation*) of character, requires doctrinal critique and norming of liturgies, etc. Such doctrinal reflection is *secondary*, however, in the sense that it is a step further removed from Christian praxis than the other activities.

Another contemporary theological movement that has lent support to the agenda of reconceiving theology as practical is the call to “deprofessionalize.” theology, allowing the “people” (*laos*) to participate and making the needs of the people a primary concern. This call differs from the “Popular

Theology” noted above because it demands more than a *translation* of academic theology for the laity. It calls for the *practice* of theology to be reformed so that it will involve the entire community more.

A final contributing force to the growing call for a practical theology is the rejection of foundational or primarily metaphysical approaches to theology, arguing that the primary function of doctrinal reflection is the norming of Christian discourse and life. A similar point is being made (without the critique of foundationalism) in recent descriptions of the basic Christian convictions and tempers as an interpretive worldview that guides Christian life.

3. *Characteristics of the Theology Desired.* Such are some of the forces that have coalesced to champion the cause of reconceiving theology as practical. What are the major characteristics considered essential to such a practical theology?

First, it would be inherently *transformative*. That is, it would seek not only to understand but also to correct Christian life.

Second, it would be *holistic*. It would consider and seek to norm not only the mind, but also the will and the affections. In other words, it would be concerned not only with *orthodoxy* but also with *orthopraxis* and *orthopathy*.

Third, it would clearly recognize the *primacy of praxis* in theological method. Existing praxis (Christian and general) would be both the starting point and final goal of theological activity. To say that theology starts with praxis is not to say that it derives its norms from praxis. Rather, it is to claim that the needs and challenges arising from Christian praxis in the world are what spark authentic theological activity.¹⁵ To say that theological reflection is always directed back to praxis is not to dispense with careful doctrinal reflection. Rather, it is to affirm the need for pursuing doctrinal reflection to the point of discovering the anthropological and soteriological implications of *all* doctrines. It is also to make the *indispensable* effort of relating that second-level doctrinal reflection to the primary theological activities that address directly the concerns arising from Christian praxis in the world.

Fourth, because of its connection to praxis, a truly practical theology would necessarily be *contextual*. It would not focus on the search for universal unchanging expressions of Christian faith. Rather it would undertake the demanding work of wrestling with both the Christian revelation and the individual socio-historical situation until it determined particular authentic embodiments of Christian faith. In the process it would protect against both irrelevance and relativism.

Finally, this theological activity would be inherently *occasional*, concerned more to address pressing issues as they arose than to formulate programmatically an abstract theological System.

III. PRELIMINARY DEFINITION OF WESLEY’S “PRACTICAL THEOLOGY”

With the historical analysis of the variety of meanings of “practical theology” in mind, we turn now to the question of whether, and in what sense, Wesley was a practical theologian.

Eighteenth century English authors typically divided religious literature into three main types: 1) doctrinal or speculative writings (concerned with articulating and defending specific doctrines and evidences, natural and

revealed, for Christianity), 2) controversial materials (concerned with demolishing on rational, historical or scriptural grounds, the beliefs and practices of rival groups), and 3) practical literature (concerned with helping the individual practice the Christian life).¹⁶

In general, Wesley used the same designations and corresponding definitions in describing his and others' theology (Divinity).¹⁷ For example, he frequently refers to "speculative divinity." On rare occasions this is used derogatorily to refer to a theology that *merely* speculates about issues—especially those not revealed in Scripture—without applying them to Christian life.¹⁸ More typically it is seen as a necessary partner to practical theology—the one dealing more with matters of Christian intellectual belief and the other with matters of Christian practice.¹⁹

As this suggests, Wesley's typical use of "practical divinity" is to designate literature which focused on nurturing Christian life.²⁰ His clearest examples of this type of material are *A Christian Library*²¹ and the 1780 *Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists*.²²

Likewise, Wesley clearly assumed the role of "controversial divinity," was to attack perceived errors and, thereby, defend one's understanding of the Christian truth.²³ While he professed not to enjoy such theological activity, he participated in it.²⁴ In particular, one would have to place here most of his open Letters (Telford) and appeals, the treatise on Original Sin, and much of the content of early volumes of the *Arminian Magazine*.²⁵

Besides these major categories, Wesley occasionally mentioned "mystical divinity"—which he castigated as seeking hidden meanings in ^{everything}²⁶—and "natural divinity"—which was concerned to demonstrate the nature and attributes of God from the creation.²⁷

In light of these usages, it is clear that Wesley considered at least *part* of his theological activity to be practical theology. Most of his interpreters make a stronger claim than this. They consider practical theology to be the *defining* type of his theological activity.²⁸ The question this raises, of course, is what *they* mean by practical theology—as ascribed to Wesley. A comparison of their apparent understandings with the history of "practical theology"—in reverse direction—might be illuminating.

1. *Glaubenslehre*? Since the model of a *Glaubenslehre* clearly postdates Wesley, one would not expect construals of his practical theology in this direction. However, there is an emphasis among some interpreters that comes close. They argue that Wesley avoided a dogmatic approach to theology, opting instead for an empirical, inductive, or experimental theology.²⁹ Such an argument could suggest that Wesley *developed* his theology from empirical analysis of contemporary Christian piety and life—like Troeltsch. Wesley would surely have rejected such a suggestion.³⁰

To be sure, Wesley allowed experience to play an important role in his theological method. Indeed, it can be argued that he assigned more of a role to experience than was common in Anglicanism of his day.³¹ However, his appeal to experience was always subordinate to the role of Scripture.³² The role of experience was to *confirm* interpretations of Scripture and to help *decide* issues not clearly revealed in Scripture.³³ Thus, when Wesley refers to his experimental divinity, he is affirming that his interpretations of doctrines have been confirmed and enlarged by consideration of Christian experience, not that they are derived from that experience alone. More-

over, Wesley does not identify this role of experience as the defining aspect of his practical theology.³⁴

2. *Pastoral Theology?* The narrowed definition of Practical Theology as Pastoral Theology also postdates Wesley, and clearly has very limited value in characterizing his approach.³⁵ He was concerned to train his lay preachers for their task. However, the training he provided was hardly limited to technical questions about pastoral duties.³⁶ He was more concerned with providing them with the basic knowledge they needed of Anglican and Methodist doctrine—through the Homilies, Sermons, Christian Library, etc. Moreover, he was just as concerned with the theological education of his lay members as that of his preachers.³⁷

3. *Popular Theology?* The model of Practical Theology as translating academic theology for laity was nearly contemporaneous with Wesley and is a more likely candidate for comparison. Albert Outler's now-famous designation of Wesley as a "folk theologian" makes roughly such an identification. Outler stresses in a folk theologian the abilities to simplify, synthesize and communicate the essential teachings of the Christian gospel to laity—i.e., to teach in "plain words for plain people."³⁸

It is clear that this concern for communication was important to Wesley.³⁹ However, there are two aspects of the model of Popular Theology expressed in Germany that do not appear to fit Wesley. First, Wesley's audience was not primarily the educated upper middle-class, but the lower classes.⁴⁰ As such, he was not as concerned to expose his people to "interesting" developments in recent academic theology as to ground them in the *basic* teachings of the Christian faith. Second, the model of Popular Theology suggests that it merely translates achievements made by others, rather than engaging in doctrinal formulation and correction itself. Such an implication was evident in Outler's early use of "folk theology" as well, but he has increasingly realized that this is inadequate for Wesley—who not only translates, but debates, clarifies and reformulates doctrinal claims.⁴¹

4. *Moral Theology?* Wesley had a clear concern for moral issues in his society and the lives of his people. This concern has led some to consider his theology preeminently a Moral Theology.⁴² Again, while understandable, this characterization could be misleading. We noted that the model of Moral Theology has typically assumed a division between its task and that of doctrinal reflection. No such separation is evident in Wesley. Rather, he exemplifies a more integrated investigation of doctrinal convictions and ethical concerns.⁴³

5. *Non-Technical Theology?* The model of Practical Theology as a non-technical version of academic theology for those entering ministry has not been correlated with Wesley by his interpreters. After all, he did not remain in the academy training ministers. At most, some tangential comparisons could be made between this model and Wesley's procedure of "digesting" theological works for his preachers and people.

6. *Spiritual Theology?* When it is remembered that Wesley is typically identified as a Pietist,⁴⁴ it is not surprising that the model of Spiritual Theology is often seen as definitive of Wesley's practical theology.⁴⁵ This is clearly in keeping with Wesley's own use of "practical divinity." However, it would not seem to do justice to the breadth of his theological activity. While Wesley clearly had a deep concern for nurturing Christian piety, it was not to

the exclusion of, or merely an application of doctrinal reflection—as increasingly characterized the development of the independent genre of Spiritual Theology.

7. *Theology as Practical*. Having suggested the inadequacy of the other identifications of practical theology as characterizations of Wesley’s overall theology, we come to our main thesis: When his work is considered as a whole, Wesley’s theological activity is analogous to the early Christian approach to theology *per se* as a practical endeavor.⁴⁶

IV. THE ANGLICAN SETTING OF WESLEY’S THEOLOGICAL ACTIVITY

To understand Wesley’s inclination toward the early Christian model of theology as practical, we need to note some differences between the Anglican tradition within which he was trained and the Continental theological setting of the changing definitions of “practical theology” noted above.

Anglicanism self-consciously sought to be a “middle way” between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. In particular, it believed that a return to the beliefs and practice of the early church would recover an authentic Christianity uncontaminated by the later disputes and splits. Therefore, Anglican theologians immersed themselves in the study of the first four centuries of Christian theology and life.

Among the elements of the early church which influenced Anglicanism was the model of theology *per se* as practical. The best evidence of this is the eventual *forms* of official Anglican doctrine. They were not *summae*, *encyclopediae*, or even *Institutes*. Rather, like the practical theology of the early church, they were creeds or confessions (The Thirty-Nine Articles), Liturgies (The Book of Common Prayer), catechetical sermons (The Homilies), and commentaries on biblical passages.⁴⁷ We will detail below how Wesley utilized these same forms for his theology.

The early church influence may also account for the fact that Anglican theologians of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries focused more on clarifying issues of theological method than on constructing “systems” of theology (the contemporaneous preoccupation of Continental theology). Indeed, they actively distrusted systems.⁴⁸ As such, the fact that Wesley never constructed a “system” would not have implied to them that he was not a serious theologian. By their standards, a serious theologian would strive to clarify the sources of theology and the methods for utilizing and weighting these sources. Judged accordingly, Wesley was not only conversant with the issues involved, he made an important contribution concerning the role of experience in formulating and testing theological assertions.⁴⁹

One result of the characteristics of Anglican theology was that the Orthodoxy/Pietism split had neither the same nature nor the prominence in seventeenth and eighteenth century England that it had on the Continent.⁵⁰ Anglican schools were not dominated by a scholastic method of theology.⁵¹ Correspondingly, English Pietists did not focus on the general nature of academic theology in their critique of the moral and spiritual laxity of the Church. They laid the blame more on liturgical practices, ecclesiastical arrangements, or the rationalist temper of Deism. Thus, Pietists actually held positions of respect *within* the university.⁵² As a result, Wesley was trained in a setting that typically held consideration of the practice of Chris-

tian life and doctrinal reflection together.⁵³ It is not surprising that he should do the same.

V. THE FORMS OF WESLEY'S THEOLOGICAL ACTIVITY

Our basic thesis is that Wesley was a serious theologian proceeding in terms of the early Christian model of theology as a practical endeavor. We have shown how his Anglican setting conveyed such an approach to him. A survey of the *forms* of his theological activity should demonstrate his actual embodiment of such praxis-related theology.⁵⁴

1. *Creeds*. First, it is clear that Wesley placed high value on the 39 Articles, both as an authentic expression of traditional Christian faith and as a catechetical aid. Indeed, he often recommended Bishop John Pearson's *Exposition of the Creed* as the best available source for studying Christian divinity.⁵⁵ Thus, when the American Methodists separated from the Anglican Church, it was entirely in character for him to undertake the theological task of editing the Articles,⁵⁶ and to urge strongly their adoption by the fledgling church, even though they already had his *Sermons* and *Notes*.

2. *Liturgy and Prayers*. Likewise, Wesley placed a high value on the liturgy of the Book of Common Prayer for both his personal spiritual development and that of his people.⁵⁷ Thus, he was equally concerned to provide the American church with a theologically-purified (and, as typical, abridged) version of this vital resource of theological formation.⁵⁸

Related to the Wesley's appreciation of the formal liturgy was that of devotional prayer. His first publication was actually a collection of such prayers. He published two other collections of prayers and a set of devotions for the days of the week and the Great Festivals.⁵⁹ While most of these materials were apparently extracted from others, they reveal Wesley's theological concern in their selection and editing, their organization, and their explicit doctrinal content.⁶⁰

3. *Sermons*. The third major form of Wesley's theological activity was the publication of sermons—parallel to the Book of Homilies and early Christian catechetical sermons. It is important to notice a key difference between Wesley's oral preaching and his published sermons. The former were primarily awakening messages aimed at the general public. The latter were chiefly concerned with the *nurture* and theological *education* of those within the Methodist societies.⁶¹ Thus, Wesley was concerned that his collected sermons deal with "all those doctrines which I embrace and teach as the essentials of true religion".⁶² He was also concerned to relate even the most speculative doctrines to the practice of human life.⁶³

4. *Bible Study Aids*. Another important form of Wesley's practical theological activity was the publication of biblical study aids, especially the *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*. As John Lawson has noted, the essential purpose of this work was not just to provide devotional reading, but to overturn the exegesis of customary Calvinist and Antinomian "proof-texts."⁶⁴ Wesley was convinced that his opponents' exegesis undercut Christian discipleship. Thus, the *Notes* were ultimately meant to provide the exegetical basis for the theological/spiritual nurture of his people.

5. *Hymns*. Surely, any consideration of the forms of Wesley's theology must include the various hymnbooks.⁶⁵ While Charles was the author of most of the hymns, John exercised strong editorial control over the joint hymnbooks. That they can, therefore, be considered authentic expressions of his theology needs no more proof than his own frequent reference to them in his doctrinal pieces.⁶⁶

It is clear that John and Charles were concerned that their hymns be not only artistically acceptable but also theologically appropriate.⁶⁷ After all, it is quite likely that the faith *sung* had more formative power on the Methodist people than any other expression.⁶⁸

6. *Conferences*. A sixth form of Wesley's practical theological activity was the holding of periodic conferences with his preachers. A perusal of the Minutes of these meetings shows that they were not the primarily administrative and motivational meetings typical today. Rather, they addressed the theological struggles within the revival, often resulting in clarification of distinctive Wesleyan emphases—hence the authority of their Minutes.⁶⁹ This is not to suggest that these Conferences paralleled early Christian Councils.⁷⁰ A better analogy would be early catechetical schools, for Wesley clearly served more as a teacher than as the moderator of a corporate quest for truth.⁷¹

7. *Occasional Essays*. Perhaps Wesley's most serious theological work were the open letters, appeals, and other essays meant to explain and defend his theological positions. For example, he considered his "Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion" the best presentation of his position.⁷² His longest original work was a reply to a treatise that denied the doctrine of original sin.⁷³ Also included here would be the *Arminian Magazine* with its series of doctrinal sermons and other writings. Together, these various letters and essays provide a good introduction to Wesley's theology.⁷⁴ More importantly, they are ideal examples of *occasional* theological reflection spawned by the controversies and needs of the Methodist movement.

8. *Catechetical Materials*. Wesley's sermons and the hymns could be considered catechetical in nature.⁷⁵ Beyond these general works, he edited and translated a French catechism for use in his schools. This catechism included both a summary of doctrine and a guide to Christian piety.⁷⁶

9. *Other Educational & Devotional Materials*. Besides the materials mentioned above, Wesley provided other devotional and educational resources for his people. Foremost was the *Christian Library* where he extracted or abridged selected pieces of "practical divinity," editing them with a discerning theological eye so that they would not mislead (and, *misform*) his people.⁷⁷ Also included here would be his edited histories of Christianity and of England, and the survey of the newly emerging natural sciences. Such works were meant not only to communicate information but also to inspire Christian devotion and to inculcate a capacity for theological judgment.⁷⁸

10. *Journal*. Wesley's publication of his *Journal* also deserves some consideration in discussion of his theological activity. The importance of this act is not just that it stands in a tradition of such classic examples as Augustine's *Confessions*. It is the fact that the journal—no doubt first published primarily to defend his revival in the public arena—became yet another

avenue by which Wesley fashioned and strengthened the faith of his followers.⁷⁹ Unfortunately, the genre tended to invite misrepresentation by its one-sided account of his theology.⁸⁰

11. *Letters*. The last major form of Wesley's theological activity was his numerous private letters. Since most of these were written in response to letters asking his counsel or advice, they provide important insights into his pastoral concern and practice. They also provide numerous examples of situational doctrinal reflection.⁸¹

VI. THE NATURE OF WESLEY'S PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

The preceding section should have made it clear that Wesley pursued serious theological activity in the forms common to his Anglican setting and appropriate to the early Christian model of practical theology. To clarify further the nature of his practical theology, we will now explore parallels between it and the model being proposed in the recent discussions of theological method.

1. *Concerns of Wesley's Practical Theology*. To begin with, Wesley shared many of the concerns of the movements that have joined forces in calling for a more practical theology. For example, he also refused to separate ethical convictions from doctrinal considerations. He disdained merely philosophical approaches to ethics, grounding his own ethical reflection solidly in his theology of grace.⁸² On the other side, he had little patience for a theology that neglected or undercut the dimension of responsible Christian living.⁸³

While his social analysis shared his age's blindness to structural causes, Wesley's advocacy of the cause of the poor, his confidence in the transforming power of God, and his emphasis on *orthopraxis* have suggested parallels with contemporary liberation theologies.⁸⁴ Likewise, his understanding of Christian holiness as involving holy tempers, not just correct actions, has resonated with those articulating a "character ethics."⁸⁵

The preceding survey of Wesley's various theological activities should make clear his shared conviction with those who consider such undertakings as constructing liturgies to be serious—indeed, primary—forms of theology. Likewise, our comparison of Wesley to Popular Theology noted his concern that theology be done for the good of (and in terms understandable to) laypersons, rather than primarily for the academy. In this regard, there is a similarity between Wesley and the recent calls for a "peoples' theology." However, Wesley did not particularly share the current concern to give the "people" a voice in theological decisions. His agenda was to provide them with an appropriate theological formation.⁸⁶

There are also strong affinities between Wesley and the contemporary emphasis on the role of theological doctrines as the "rules" or "grammar" of Christian confession and life.⁸⁷ For example, in his note on I Cor. 14:6, he defines the purpose of doctrine as "to regulate your tempers and life." However, words of caution are again in order. First, some advocates of the regulatory view of doctrine construe it simply in terms of norming Christian *language*. By contrast, Christian *tempers* and *actions* are clearly Wesley's concern. Secondly, their strong anti-foundationalist mood inclines many advocates of this view toward denying that doctrines make any claims about "how things are," while still affirming their norming implications for Christian life. Wesley would not have understood (or agreed with!) this contrast. For him, it was *because* God is Creator that we owe our love to God;

and *because* Christ is not only Priest but Prophet that Christians must uphold the law.⁸⁸

Finally, Wesley would have been quite sympathetic with the description of the basic Christian convictions as a patterned worldview through which we interpret the world and by which we are moved to Christian praxis. He was convinced that true religion *begins* in the true knowledge of God.⁸⁹ Thus, he could argue that the chief cause of the inefficacy of Christianity in England was that the people did not know the “first principles” of Christianity; i.e., the nature and moral attributes of God, God’s providence, the offices of Christ, etc.⁹⁰ Likewise, his proposed cure for the natural atheism with which children are born was to educate them in the basic Christian worldview.⁹¹ While Wesley did not believe that assent to the Christian worldview was the *sufficient* cause of Christian discipleship—for one must *practice* what they ^{believe}⁹²—he clearly held that a conviction⁹³ of the truth of this basic worldview was a *sine qua non* of such discipleship, because this worldview grounded and structured Christian life.⁹⁴

2. *Characteristics of Wesley’s Practical Theology.* In light of the concerns that Wesley shared with contemporary movements that have fostered the call for recovering a practical theology, one would also expect some similarity with the characteristics of the model they propose.

The first characteristic of the proposed model is that it should be inherently transformative. Obviously, this assumes that humans are *not* right, and that theology’s goal is not to make them comfortable with their faults but to reform them. This same conviction is apparent in Wesley’s claim that, while Calvinists merely aim to make Calvinists, he is trying to make Christians!⁹⁵ Given this assumption, one important criterion for assessing any doctrine would be consideration of its positive or negative results on Christian life in the world. This criterion played a dominant role in Wesley’s doctrinal assessment.⁹⁶

The second characteristic of the desired practical theology is that it should be holistic. It should consider and seek to norm not only the mind, but also the will and the affections. Underlying this characteristic is the growing conviction that what ultimately unites *orthodoxy* and *orthopraxis* are right affections (*orthopathos*). Thus, a truly practical theology must be concerned to understand and form (*reform*) human affections. Wesley’s deep sensitivity to this concern is easy to demonstrate. Indeed he has been used as a model by recent proponents of this general theme.⁹⁷

The third major characteristic of the proposed model is that a truly practical theology should recognize the primacy of praxis. Such primacy assumes that it is existing praxis that presents the legitimate challenges that spark theological activity. Even a cursory examination makes it clear that the stimulus of most of Wesley’s theological insights and endeavors was the struggle to meet the needs of and address the controversies within his fledgling revival movement.

The affirmation of the primacy of praxis also assumes that theological reflection must always be related back to praxis through such *primary* theological activities as constructing liturgies, shepherding congregations, etc. Our review of the various forms of Wesley’s theological activity shows clearly that he engaged in such *primary* theology.

What the primacy of praxis does *not* imply is a reduction of theological decisions to the criterion of “whatever will work.” It does not reject careful doctrinal reflection. Rather, it requires that such doctrinal reflection be pursued to the point of determining the anthropological and soteriological dimensions of *all* Christian doctrines. Our major claim in this paper is that such serious doctrinal reflection, responding to the stimulus of praxis and in service to the efforts of primary theological activities—is precisely what we find in Wesley.⁹⁸

Wesley clearly did not avoid doctrinal reflection. Indeed, at one time or another, he touched on every major area of doctrinal reflection.⁹⁹ Moreover, he did not limit himself to those doctrines whose implications for Christian life were immediately evident. He found it necessary to take up some quite technical debates—such as the question of whether Christ’s death was the *formal* or *meritorious* cause of justifying faith.¹⁰⁰ He also dealt with such speculative issues as the nature of animals in Heaven,¹⁰¹ the nature of the torments in Hell,¹⁰² and how God will deal with those who have never heard of Christ.¹⁰³ But, what most characterized Wesley’s doctrinal reflection was that it always drew the anthropological and soteriological implications of the doctrine under consideration—however, technical or speculative it might be.¹⁰⁴

The fourth major characteristic of the desired practical theology is that it should be contextual. It is not concerned to formulate timeless definitions of truth but to determine context-sensitive embodiments of the Christian gospel. Now, Wesley was no more sensitive to his bias toward his general Anglo-Saxon Christian context than the rest of his age.¹⁰⁵ However, consideration of the variations in his doctrinal reflection does demonstrate a sensitivity to the changing contexts of the struggles in his movement.¹⁰⁶

The final characteristic desired in a contemporary practical theology is that it be occasional. Our analysis of the forms of Wesley’s theological activity—especially the occasional essays—clearly demonstrates that this was characteristic of his general approach.

VII. WESLEY’S CONTRIBUTION TO THE MODEL OF “THEOLOGY AS PRACTICAL”

We have argued that Wesley’s practice modeled a style of theological activity very similar to that being proposed in the call for a recovery of practical theology. As such, Wesley should be of interest, as an exemplar, to those involved in this discussion.

We believe that there is another—less obvious, but equally important—contribution that Wesley can make to the present discussion. Perhaps the greatest concern expressed about the proposed model of praxis-related theology relates to its occasional and situational nature.¹⁰⁷ It is sparked by issues in particular situations and tends to adopt unique emphases or strategies appropriate to each situation. This suggests two potential problems. First, such an occasional approach to theology would not be conducive to comprehensive theological awareness. Second, it is possible that the demands of the situation would so dominate theological judgments that there would be no consistency between the various situation-related theological reflections.

Clearly the second of these potential problems is the most troubling. A fragmentary theological understanding could still be authentic in the issues it treats. Likewise, while comprehensiveness is laudable, it does not appear to be essential to human praxis. By contrast, a lack of reasonable consistency in theological reflections would surely weaken confidence in any claim to truth. Thereby, it would also limit the effectiveness of that reflection in norming praxis. This explains why a concern for consistency in its major doctrines is characteristic of all religions.¹⁰⁸

In the modern Western model of Systematic Theology this concern for consistency came to be construed—under the influence of the Hegelian *Encyclopedia*—as the need for all theological claims to be derived from or subsumed under a single idea.¹⁰⁹ Such a tight system was often attained only at the expense of exegetical and praxis-related considerations. Obviously, such an approach is not going to be attractive to a proponent of praxis-related theological reflection. Thus, it is ironic that so many Wesley interpreters continue to apologize for the fact he was not a “systematic” theologian in this Hegelian sense.¹¹⁰ Wesley’s model now appears to be more viable than that against which they critique him!

But, if consistency should not to be imposed by the Hegelian Idea, what other options are there? Two major suggestions have been made. The softest claim is that it is the intrinsic consistency of the basic Christian mythos that grants consistency to situation-related reflection.¹¹¹ While helpful, this suggestion fails to explain how there can be—as there surely are—alternative consistent readings of this one mythos.

In answer to this question, some have argued that what gives consistency (*if there is any*) to particular theological traditions are not unchanging doctrinal summaries, *or* a theoretical idea from which all truth is deduced or given order in a “system.” Rather, it is a basic orienting *perspective* or concern that guides their various theological activities.¹¹² Particular responses could vary as appropriate to their situation and yet retain a consistency because each situation is addressed from the standpoint of the same orienting perspective. Moreover, one need not have a comprehensive summary of the claims consistent with such a perspective prior to engaging in theological reflection. In fact, it is precisely the search for consistent expressions in relation to new issues that enlivens a theological tradition.

As we have argued elsewhere, we believe this understanding of an orienting perspective is quite helpful for explaining the consistency that so many interpreters find in Wesley’s various situation-related theological reflections.¹¹³ As Albert Outler notes, this consistency is not one of literal identity in every formulation but of a constancy of intention and perspective in various circumstances.¹¹⁴ This is exactly what we would *expect* to find in a praxis-related theological reflection.

If, indeed, Wesley maintained a reasonable consistency among his various situation-related theological activities by addressing each of these situations under the guidance of an (admittedly, implicit) orienting perspective, then his example strengthens the case of those arguing that this is how consistency should be insured. More importantly, it helps remove the most serious objection to the contemporary calls for theological reflection to reestablish its connection to Christian life and praxis.

NOTES

Abbreviations

<i>John Wesley</i>	<i>John Wesley</i> . Ed. Albert C. Outler. A Library of Protestant Thought Series. New York: Oxford University Press, 1964.
<i>Journal</i> (Curnock)	<i>The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.</i> 8 vols. Ed. Nehemiah Curnock. London: Epworth, 1909–16.
<i>Letters</i> (Telford)	<i>The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.</i> 8 vols. Ed. John Telford. London: Epworth, 1931.
<i>NT Notes</i>	<i>Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament</i> . 2 vols. London: Bowyer, 1755.
<i>Works</i>	<i>The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley</i> . Editor in Chief, Frank Baker. Nashville: Abingdon, 1984ff. (Volumes 7, 11, 25, and 26 appeared as the <i>Oxford Edition of The Works of John Wesley</i> . Oxford: Clarendon, 1975–83).
<i>Works</i> (Jackson)	<i>The Works of John Wesley</i> . 14 vols. 3rd ed. Ed. Thomas Jackson. London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1872.

1. This paper is dedicated to Dr. J. Kenneth Grider in honor of completing 37 years of teaching theology at Nazarene Theological Seminary. Both his life and teaching have modeled a Wesleyan practical theology.

2. For a more detailed and documented study of the history of practical theology and the current debates about recovering an understanding of theology as practical see Randy L. Maddox, “Recovering Theology as a Practical Discipline: A Contemporary Agenda,” *Theological Studies* 51 (1990): 650–72; and Maddox, “Practical Theology: A Discipline in Search of a Definition,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 18 (1991): 159–69.

3. Note Augustine’s conviction about theology: “The only merit of this science is that from it a saving faith is born, nourished, defended, and strengthened” (*De Trinitate*, Bk. 14, Chap. 1.).

4. A good example is St. Basil’s *On the Holy Spirit*. This complex and influential analysis of the interrelations of the Godhead was occasioned by the issue of whether Christians should pray to the Holy Spirit.

5. An example would be Thomas á Kempis’ *The Imitation of Christ*.

6. Cf. Johann Theiner, *Die Entwicklung der Moraltheologie zur Eigenständigen Disziplin* (Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet, 1970), 57–97.

7. These developments are chronicled in Theiner, *Moraltheologie*.

8. For an analysis of the problems involved in this bifurcation of the theological sciences, see Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983).

9. Cf. Volker Drehsen, “Theologia Popularis: Notizen zur Geschichte und Bedeutung einer praktisch-theologischen Gattung,” *Pastoraltheologie* 77 (1988): 2–20.

10. Cf. Dreshen, "Theologia Popularis," 16ff.
11. For an analysis of this development see Edward Farley, "Theology and Practice Outside the Clerical Paradigm," in *Practical Theology: The Emerging Field in Theology, Church and World*, 21–41, edited by Don Browning (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983).
12. While there were earlier approximations to such a position, the clearest example is Ernst Troeltsch.
13. We have purposefully avoided this term until now. The term "praxis" has been reappropriated in recent philosophical and theological discussions to emphasize the unescapable dialectical relationship between theory and practice. As such, one cannot simply derive practice from theory or derive theory from practice. Rather, truth emerges in creative action, inspired by critical reflection, that gives rise to both change and insight. In this light, Christian praxis can once more become a *stimulus* and *guide* of theological reflection, and not just the *goal*. For an analysis of the current theological discussion of praxis see: Matthew Lamb, *Solidarity with Victims: Toward a Theology of Social Transformation* (New York: Crossroad, 1982).
14. A good example is Thomas Ogletree, "Dimensions of Practical Theology: Meaning, Action, Self," in *Practical Theology*, 83–101.
15. On this crucial point see Clodovis Boff, *Theology and Praxis: Epistemological Foundations* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987), esp. 190, 200.
16. Cf. Isabel Rivers, "Dissenting and Methodist Books of Practical Divinity," in *Books and their Readers in Eighteenth Century England*, edited by I. Rivers (New York: St. Martins, 1982), 127–64; see p. 127.
17. In the eighteenth-century "divinity" was the common English term for teaching about God, and one who teaches (either as theologian or pastor) was a "divine." Cf. "An Address to the Clergy," §I.2, *Works* (Jackson) 10:482.
18. Cf. Letter to Mary Bishop (17 April 1776), *Letters* (Telford) 6:213.
19. Note the conjunction of speculative and practical in: Sermon 122, "Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity," §6, *Works* 4:89; Preface to the 1780 Hymnbook, §4, *Works* 7:73–4; Preface to the Pocket Hymn Book, §7, *Works* (Jackson) 14:345; and Letter to John Hosmer (7 June 1761), *Letters* (Telford) 4:155.
20. Note how he uses the term to refer to devotional works like Kempis and Law, but not Pearson's *On the Creed* in the Conference Minutes for Wednesday, 14 May 1746, Quest. 15, *John Wesley*, 162.
21. Subtitled: "Consisting of Extracts from, and Abridgements of, the choicest pieces of Practical Divinity which have been published in the English Tongue." The Preface is reprinted in *Works* (Jackson) 14:220–22.
22. Note the Preface §4 designates the work a "little body of experimental and practical divinity" (*Works* 7:74).
23. Cf. *NT Notes*, Romans 14:19; and the Preface to *A Christian Library*, §5, *Works* (Jackson) 14:221.

24. Note his reference to an early Christian aphorism: “God has made practical divinity necessary, and the devil controversial,” to which he adds that sometimes we must write and preach controversially, but the less the better, in Letter to Joseph Benson (31 July 1773), *Letters* (Telford) 6:35. Cf. Letter to ‘John Smith’ (30 December 1745), *Works* 26:176; and Journal (19 November 1751), *Journal* (Curnock) 4:4. Note also Gerald Cragg’s judgment that, compared to the typical models of controversial writing in his day, Wesley was quite reasonable and self-possessed (*Works* 11:460–62).

25. Some of the Letters (Telford) and the Appeals to Men of Reason are collected in *Works* 11. Note Wesley’s defense of the controversial materials in the *Arminian Magazine* in the Preface to the Second Volume, §9, *Works* (Jackson) 14:283.

26. Preface to *A Christian Library*, §7, *Works* (Jackson) 14:221–22. Cf. the Letter to Dorothy Furley (18 June 1757), *Letters* (Telford) 3:218.

27. See *NT Notes*, Acts 17:22. Cf. reference to Natural Philosophy in “An Address to the Clergy,” §II.1, *Works* (Jackson) 10:492. He also makes one reference to a distinction between “positive divinity” and “comparative divinity” (apparently his closest genre to “systematic” theology) in Sermon 92, “On Zeal,” §II.5, *Works* 3:313.

28. Cf. Frank Baker, “John Wesley and Practical Divinity,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 22.1 (1987): 7–15.

29. Cf. Robert Cushman, *Faith Seeking Understanding* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1981), 65; Erich von Eichen, *Rechtfertigung und Heiligung bei Wesley dargestellt unter Vergleichung mit den Anschauungen Luthers und des Luthertums* (Heidelberg: Eichen, 1934), 68; Luke Keefer, “John Wesley and English Arminianism.” *Evangelical Journal* 4 (1986): 15–28; Martin Schmidt, *John Wesley: A Theological Biography*, II.1 (New York: Abingdon, 1972), 59; and Roy Sturm, *Sociological Reflections on John Wesley and Methodism* (Indianapolis: Central Publishing, 1982), 99.

30. Actually, this may not be obvious in reading Wesley’s few explicit *descriptions* of his use of experience. He tends to describe it with the typical naive inductivism of his day. In *practice*, however, his appeals to experience were not to develop doctrine inductively, but to test proposed understandings of doctrine—as modern hermeneutic awareness would suggest is *always* the case. For a good summary of Wesley’s *understood* inductive methodology see Donald Thorsen, “Theological Method in John Wesley” (Drew University Ph.D. thesis, 1988), 158ff.

31. Cf. Thorsen, “Theological Method,” esp. 343, 157, 200.

32. Cf. Thorsen, “Theological Method,” 70, 304.

33. On the role of experience in confirming or denying proposed doctrines see: Sermon 11, “The Witness of the Spirit II,” §III.6 & §V.2, *Works* 1:290, 297; Sermon 13, “On Sin in Believers,” §III.7, *Works* 1:323; and Sermon 44, “Original Sin,” §II.2, *Works* 2:176. On its role in deciding matters not defined in Scripture see Sermon 83, “On Patience,” §§11–12, *Works* 3:177–78.

34. We noted Wesley's conjunction of "experimental" and "practical" divinity, referring to the 1780 *Hymnbook* (*Works* 7:74). Some take this to be an identification of the two. We would suggest that they correlate but are not identical. "Experimental divinity" appears to be used at times Wesley is talking about how he *confirms*, or *develops* his theological affirmations, while "practical divinity" is used to emphasize their *effects* on life.

35. Some have described Wesley's theology as a "pastoral" theology. By this however they are not referring to the technical discipline of training pastors. Rather, they are suggesting that Wesley's theological concern was not primarily academic; it was to meet the pastoral needs of his people. Cf. Fadiey Lovsky, *Wesley: Apôtre des Foules, Pasteur des Pauvres* (Lausanne: Foi et Victoire, 1977), 147; John M. Turner, *Conflict and Reconciliation: Studies in Methodism and Ecumenism in England, 1740–1982* (London: Epworth, 1985), 44; and Philippo Verhalen, *The Proclamation of the Word in the Writings of John Wesley* (Rome: Pontificia Universitas Gregoriana, 1969), 9, 56.

36. Cf. in this regard Frederic Greeves, *Theology and the Cure of Souls: An Introduction to Pastoral Theology* (Manhasset, NY: Channel Press, 1962). He is a Methodist struggling to overcome the limitations of Pastoral Theology to mainly technical application—through appeal to Wesley (70–83).

37. Note that he recommends the same course of study to lay women as to his preachers! Cf. Letter to Margaret Lewen (June 1764), *Letters* (Telford) 4:247–49; and Letter to Sarah Wesley (8 September 1781), *Letters* (Telford) 7:81–83.

38. Cf. Albert Outler, *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), vii; Outler, "John Wesley as Theologian—Then and Now," *Methodist History* 12.4 (1974): 65; Outler, "John Wesley: Folk Theologian," *Theology Today* 34 (1977): 150–60; Outler, "John Wesley's Interests in the Early Fathers of the Church," *Bulletin of the United Church of Canada Committee on Archives and History* 29 (1980–2): 6–7; and *Works* 1:67.

39. Cf. *NT Notes*, Preface, §3, *Works* (Jackson) 14:235; and *Sermons*, Volume 1, Preface, §3, *Works* 1:104.

40. Note the comment of Wilson & Harper that Wesley's decision to be a folk theologian was influenced by the emerging gap between upper and lower classes in the eighteenth century. Robert Wilson and Steve Harper, *Faith and Form: A Unity of Theology and Polity in the United Methodist Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 19. Cf. Thomas W. Herbert's comment about Wesley's need to pierce the wall between literary culture and his unlearned flock: *John Wesley as Editor and Author* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1940), v.

41. In 1964 Outler assumed that folk theologians did not belong in the front rank with speculative theologians who (alone?) effected changes in Christian doctrine (*John Wesley*, 119). More recently he has suggested that Wesley's theological model is an authentic and creative form in its own right; cf. "A New Future for 'Wesley Studies': An Agenda for 'Phase III'," in

The Future of the Methodist Theological Traditions, edited by M. Douglas Meeks (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), 48.

42. See especially Leon Hynson, “Wesley: Theology of the Moral Life,” *Asbury Seminarian* 38.5 (1983): 18–19.

43. Cf. Outler’s comment in *Works* 2:236.

44. For a striking example, note: *Das Zeitalter des Pietismus*, edited by Martin Schmidt & Wilhelm Jannasch (Bremen: Carl Schünemann Verlag, 1965). The *only* non-German example of Pietism they mention is John Wesley (247ff).

45. The strongest such claim is Lionel Greve, “Freedom and Discipline in the Theology of John Calvin, William Perkins and John Wesley: An Examination of the Origin and Nature of Pietism” (Hartford Seminary Ph.D. thesis, 1976), 218. Cf. Richard Heitzenrater, *The Elusive Mr. Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), 1:145; Jean Orcibal, “Les spirituels français et espagnols chez John Wesley et ses contemporains,” *Revue de L’Histoire des Religions* 139 (1951): 55, 76 (he translates “practical divinity” as “spirituality”); and Martin Schmidt, *John Wesley*, II.2 (New York: Abingdon, 1973), 189.

46. Cf. Albert Outler’s judgment that few have surpassed Wesley’s grasp of theology as a practical science: “The Place of Wesley in the Christian Tradition,” in *The Place of Wesley in the Christian Tradition*, edited by K. A. Rowe (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1976), 29.

47. Note the somewhat similar comparison in Thomas Oden, *Doctrinal Standards in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 22–24. He omits the liturgy which was a crucial form of theological expression—particularly in the Greek Church.

48. See Thorsen’s helpful discussion of this point (drawing on Henry McAdoo) in Thorsen, “Theological Method,” 31, 35–38. Cf. Outler in *Works* 1:99.

49. This is the thesis of Thorsen, “Theological Method.”

50. Most studies of Pietism deal only with Continental examples. If England is mentioned, it is with reference to Puritanism. However, only a portion of Puritans would really qualify for such a designation—many others were more likely Scholastics! On the issue of English Pietism see F. Ernest Stoeffler, *The Rise of Evangelical Pietism* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1965), esp. 27–29.

51. We are not claiming there were no such approaches present in English schools. During the early shifting affiliations of the Church of England there were frequent importations of Continental theologies and theologians. This influence remained scattered through the schools. However, it did not define *the* model of University theology. On the more pastoral nature of such Anglican Divines as Richard Hooker and Jeremy Taylor, see Christopher F. Allison, *The Rise of Moralism* (London: SPCK, 1966), 5, 63–64.

52. Note, for example, the reputation of William Perkins—a prominent English pietist—at Cambridge (Stoeffler, *Evangelical Pietism*, 51). In Germany Pietists typically started their *own* schools: like Hälle.

53. There were minority voices like John Downname who argued that the most profitable part of theology is “that which consisteth more in experience and practice, than in theory and speculation; and more principally tendeth to the sanctification of the heart, than the informing of the judgement and the increasing of knowledge.” Quoted in Stoeffler, *Evangelical Pietism*, 70.

54. Parallels between Wesley’s forms of theological expression and those of Anglicanism have been noted in Oden, *Doctrinal Standards*, 35. If anything, Wesley idealized Early Church practice and theology even more than was typical in Anglicanism. Thus, we will stress Early Church parallels.

55. E.g., Letter to Cradock Glascott (13 May 1764), *Letters* (Telford) 4:243; and Letter to Alexander Knox (5 June 1778), *Letters* (Telford) 3:314.

56. For a helpful comparison of the Thirty-Nine Articles and Wesley’s edited version, highlighting the theological considerations involved in Wesley’s editing, see Oden, *Doctrinal Standards*, 99–126.

57. Cf. Sermon 121, “Prophets and Priests,” §15, *Works* 4:80—“I hold all the doctrines of the Church of England. I love her Liturgy. I approve her plan of discipline.” For Wesley’s appreciation of the value of liturgical worship for his followers, see “Reasons Against a Separation from the Church of England,” §3.3, *Works* (Jackson) 13:230; and “Large Minutes,” Q. 45, *Works* (Jackson) 8:321–22. Cf. the discussion in Henry Knight “The Presence of Christ in the Christian Life: A Contemporary Understanding of Wesley’s Means of Grace” (Emory University Ph.D. thesis, 1987), 133–39; and Jerald Brian Selleck, “The Book of Common Prayer in the Theology of John Wesley” (Drew University Ph.D. thesis, 1983).

58. Cf. *John Wesley’s Sunday Service of the Methodists in North America* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1984; reprint of 1784 copy). In the Introduction to this edition James White argues that the distinctive elements of Wesley’s theology can all be found in the way he edited and ordered this service (16). Wesley had been thinking about most of the issues involved in his revision for some time. Cf. “Ought We to Separate From the Church of England” (1755), full version given in Frank Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970), 326–40 (note p. 331). Baker gives a good summary of the revisions on 234ff.

59. The three collections of prayers are reprinted in *Works* (Jackson) 11:203–72. The Devotions can be found in *John Wesley’s Prayers*, edited by Frederick C. Gill (London: Epworth, 1951), 71–100.

60. On the theological nature of the prayers, see Selleck, “Book of Common Prayer,” 179ff.

61. Cf. Albert Outler, *Evangelism in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville: Tidings, 1971), 21–22; Outler’s discussion in *Works* 1:14; and Outler’s note in

Works 4:422 that Wesley did publish some awakening sermons for the general public but did not include them in the collections of *Sermons on Several Occasions* which were meant to provide for the theological sustenance and growth of his lay preachers and members, as well as to define and defend his doctrinal tenets for skeptical scholars.

62. *Sermons on Several Occasions*, Vol. I, "Preface," *Works* 1:103.

63. Note Sermon 87, "The Danger of Riches," §II.1, *Works* 3:236: "I am [now] to apply what has been said. And this is the principal point. For what avails the clearest knowledge, even of the most excellent things, even of the things of God, if it go no farther than speculation, if it be not reduced to practice?"

64. John Lawson, *Selections from John Wesley's Notes on the New Testament: Systematically Arranged with Explanatory Comments* (London: Epworth, 1955), 10. There was a lesser-known parallel *Expository Notes on the Old Testament*. While it has very little original Wesley material in it, his theological concerns are clearly evident in his process of editing and his few additions; cf. Robert M. 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).

65. Cf. Rattenbury's claim that the hymnbooks were the most comprehensive of all the statements of Methodist doctrine; J. Ernest Rattenbury, *The Evangelical Doctrines of Charles Wesley's Hymns* (London: Epworth, 1941), 61.

66. See especially the references in the "Plain Account of Christian Perfection," §§9ff, *Works* (Jackson) 11:370ff. Cf. Oliver Beckerlegge's discussion in *Works* 7:55–56.

67. Cf. the conclusions about Charles' hymns in James Dale, "The Theological and Literary Qualities of the Poetry of Charles Wesley in Relation to the Standards of His Age" (Cambridge University Ph.D. thesis, 1960), esp. 132–34, 180; and Erik Routley, *The Musical Wesleys* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 30.

68. Cf. Robert Cushman, "Orthodoxy and Wesley's Experimental Divinity," *Quarterly Review* 8.2 (1988): 74; and Franz Hildebrandt's comment (*Works* 7:1) that the *Hymns* belong with the *Sermons* and *Notes* as the three standard books of Wesleyan doctrine. The Wesleys had ancient precedent for this form of theological activity as well. While congregational hymns per se were not present in the early church, much of the liturgy was chanted and it appears that these repetitive chants were also as influential on the laity as the expressly didactic elements.

69. Until the drawing up of the "Model Deed" which established the *Sermons* and the *NT Notes* as the standards of Methodist doctrine, Wesley considered the Minutes of his conferences as such a standard; cf. the Letter to the Traveling Preachers (4 August 1769), *Letters* (Telford) 5:145.

70. In the first place, they were not gatherings of the whole Christian community. Secondly, they dealt mainly with Methodist distinctives, not the

central doctrines authoritatively defined by the early Church Councils. Cf. William Doughty, *John Wesley: His Conferences and His Preachers* (London: Epworth, 1944), 32.

71. On Wesley's control of the conferences see his Letter to Thomas Taylor (?), (18 January 1780) *Letters* (Telford) 6:376. Cf. Doughty, *Conferences*, 17–18.

72. Note Cragg's discussion in *Works* 11:38ff.

73. "The Doctrine of Original Sin," *Works* (Jackson) 9:191–464.

74. Cf. Casto, "Exegetical Method," 2.

75. See the discussion in Frederick R. Edgar, "A Study of John Wesley from the Point of View of the Educational Methodology Used by Him in Fostering the Wesleyan Revival in England" (Columbia University Ph.D. thesis, 1952), 64, 80ff.

76. *Instructions for Children*, 8th edition (Bristol: William Pine, 1767). The work is summarized and discussed in John W. Prince, *Wesley on Religious Education* (New York: Methodist Book Concern, 1926), 127.

77. Cf. Rogal's observation that Wesley never lost sight of the need to educate and mold his readers into "thinking" Christians, and his concern that Wesley at times tried to be the guardian of his followers' intellects, filtering out all opposing views; Samuel Rogal, *John and Charles Wesley* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1983), 96–97.

78. Note the conclusion to John Wesley, *A Survey of the Wisdom of God in Creation* (London: J. Paramore, 1784 [4th ed.]) 4:332–33: "I have presented my readers with a variety of facts of an interesting nature . . . but this contemplation would prove fruitless, did it not lead us to aspire incessantly after this adorable Being, by endeavouring to acquire a knowledge of [God], from that immense chain of various productions wherein [God's] power and wisdom are displayed." See also comments on his history of England in Rogal, *John and Charles Wesley*, 131.

79. Cf. W.R. Ward's comments in *Works* 18:37–38; and Samuel Rogal, "John Wesley's *Journal*: Prescriptions for the Social, Spiritual, and Intellectual Ills of Britain's Middle Class," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 26 (1988): 33–42. See also River's claim that Wesley's *Journal* may be the most important work of practical divinity of the century ("Practical Divinity," 152).

80. Cf. Cragg's comment in *Works* 11:7.

81. Cf. Frank Baker's comments in *Works* 25:97ff.

82. Cf. Robert Rakestraw, "The Concept of Grace in the Ethics of John Wesley" (Drew University Ph.D. thesis, 1985), 4, 162, 143ff.

83. Witness his rejection of the Moravians because their quietism allowed "inward religion to swallow up outward," in Letter to Charles Wesley (21 April 1741), *Works* 26:56.

84. Cf. the various articles in Theodore Runyon, ed., *Sanctification and Liberation: Liberation Theologies in the Light of the Wesleyan Tradition*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981).
85. Note especially, Stanley Hauerwas, *Character and the Christian Life: A Study in Theological Ethics* (San Antonio, TX: Trinity University Press, 1975), chapter 5.
86. Cf. Robert Cushman, "Church Doctrinal Standards Today," *Religion in Life* 44 (1975): 403, 410fn6
87. Note the positive discussion in Mark Horst, "Christian Understanding and the Life of Faith in John Wesley's Thought" (Yale University Ph.D. thesis, 1985), esp. 92, 131.
88. Cf. Sermon 128, "The Deceitfulness of the Human Heart," §I.2, *Works* 4:153; and Sermon 36, "The Law Established by Faith II," §I.6, *Works* 2:37–38.
89. "An Ernest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion," §28, *Works* 11:55.
90. Sermon 122, "Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity," §6, *Works* 4:89.
91. Sermon 95, "On the Education of Children," §14, *Works* 3:353. The passage should be read in full to capture Wesley's graphic description of the basic Christian view of God and God's relation to humanity.
92. On this point one must read carefully Wesley's programmatic remark that "orthodoxy, or right opinions, is, at best, but a very slender part of religion, if it can be allowed to be any part of it at all" (*Plain Account of the People Called Methodists*, §I.2, *Works* [Jackson] 8:249). It was often misunderstood as implying one could be religious without being orthodox. His point was that one could be orthodox without being religious! Cf. Letter to James Clark (18 September 1756), §7, *Letters* (Telford) 3:203.
93. On the choice of "conviction" over "assent," see Rex Matthews, "'With the Eyes of Faith': Spiritual Experience and the Knowledge of God in the Theology of John Wesley," in *Wesleyan Theology Today*, edited by Theodore Runyon (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1985), 406–15.
94. Cf. his description of Christianity as "that system of doctrine which describes the character [of one who is a Christian indeed], which promises that it shall be mine . . . and which tells me how I may attain it" (*A Plain Account of Genuine Christianity*, §II.1, *John Wesley*, 188). To be sure, Wesley assumed one could embrace and be shaped by this basic Christian worldview without needing to (or being able to) express it in clear theological terms (Cf. Sermon 130, "On Living Without God," §15, *Works* 4:175). Yet, he does assume a conviction of the *truth* that God is Benevolent Creator, etc.
95. Letter to Mrs. Woodhouse (30 July 1773), *Letters* (Telford) 6:34.
96. Note his citing of the negative consequences of the doctrine of Predestination (*along with the lack of Scriptural support, etc.*) as reason for rejecting it in *Predestination Calmly Considered*, §86, *Works* (Jackson) 10:256. For another example see Sermon 110, "Free Grace," *Works* 3:544–59.

97. See Gregory Clapper, *John Wesley on Religious Affections: His Views on Experience and Emotion and Their Role in the Christian Life and Theology* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1989), 154; Knight, “The Presence of Christ,” esp. 281ff; and Horst, “Christian Understanding,” esp. 131.

98. Thus, we strongly deny that Wesley’s was a “theology of pragmatism,” as has been argued by Johannes Schempp, *Seelsorge und Seelenführung bei John Wesley* (Stuttgart: Christliches Verlagshaus, 1949), esp. 132f, 164; William Sweetland, “A Critical Study of John Wesley as Practical Thinker and Reformer” (Michigan State University Ph.D. thesis, 1955); and John Vincent, *OK, Let’s Be Methodists* (London: Epworth, 1984), 9, 65ff.

99. While it is somewhat of an overstatement to say that his sermons, taken together, add up to a *Summa Theologica* (Outler, *Evangelism*, 41), it is also a mistake to assume Wesley treated only the *ordo salutis*.

100. See the summary of the issues involved in Outler, “Place of Wesley,” 25.

101. Sermon 60, “The General Deliverance,” §III.3–4, *Works* 2:446–47.

102. Sermon 73, “Of Hell,” *Works* 3:31–44.

103. Sermon 91, “On Charity,” §II.3, *Works* 3:295–96; Sermon 106, “On Faith,” §I.4, *Works* 3:494; Sermon 130, “On Living Without God,” §14, *Works* 4:174; and his note on Romans 1:19 in *NT Notes*.

104. Note the consistent style in his “doctrinal” sermons of first defining and (if necessary) defending the doctrine, and then drawing the implications of the doctrine for Christian praxis; e.g., Sermon 67, “On Divine Providence,” §27, *Works* 2:548; Sermon 72, “On Evil Angels,” §III, *Works* 3:27; and the whole of Sermon 120, “The Unity of the Divine Being” (*Works* 4:61ff), where his description of God’s attributes leads to a description of true religion as “gratitude and benevolence” (§16 [p. 66]).

105. Cf. his derogatory description of contemporary Eastern Orthodoxy in Sermon 63, “The General Spread of the Gospel,” §§5–6, *Works* 2:487.

106. Cf. Knight, “Presence of Christ,” 8–9; and David L. Watson, “Christ Our Righteousness: The Center of Wesley’s Evangelistic Message,” *Perkins Journal* 37 (1984): 38–39. For a good analysis of the contextuality of Wesley’s responses to the particular issue of the Calvinist Methodists and their affirmation of predestination see Alan Coppedge, *John Wesley in Theological Debate* (Wilmore, KY: Wesley Heritage Press, 1987).

107. Note, in particular the worries expressed by Edward Farley—one of the advocates of recovering theology/discipline: Farley, “Systematische Theologie in einer systemfeindlichen Zeit,” in *Entwürfe der Theologie*, edited by J.B. Bauer (Graz: Styria, 1985), 95–125 (esp. 103).

108. Cf. William Christian, *Doctrines of Religious Communities* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1987), 43–44.

109. Cf. Charles Wood, *Vision and Discernment* (Atlanta, GA: Scholar’s Press, 1985), 16fn23.

110. For particularly sharp examples see Robert Burtner & Robert Chiles, *John Wesley's Theology: A Collection from His Works* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1954), 7; and Paul Sanders, "John Wesley and Baptismal Regeneration," *Religion in Life* 23 (1954): 591.

111. This is Farley's solution ("Systematische Theologie," 103–4).

112. Gerhard Sauter has described this orienting perspective as a "orienting concept" (*Wissenschaftstheoretische Kritik der Theologie* [Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1973], 281) or a "concept with an orienting function" (*Arbeitsweisen Systematischer Theologie: Eine Anleitung*, [Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1976], 156). David Kelsey describes a similar phenomenon by distinguishing between a "discrimen" and norms or criteria (*The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975], 160). He makes the crucial point that such a discrimen is not a norm or criterion arbitrarily imposed upon the Christian tradition, but the attempt of a theologian (or theological tradition) to grasp imaginatively what distinguishes and unites the Christian worldview.

113. Randy L. Maddox, "Responsible Grace: The Systematic Perspective of Wesleyan Theology," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 19.2 (1984): 7–22. Note also Mitsuru Fujimoto, "John Wesley's Doctrine of Good Works" (Drew University Ph.D. thesis, 1986), 1—where he argues that, while Wesley's theology betrays any signs of systematization, it gives unequivocal proof of a "guiding principle." For affirmations of consistency in Wesley's theology see Heitzenreiter, *Elusive Mr. Wesley*, 1:28; Outler, *John Wesley*, 27; and Robert Tuttle, *John Wesley: His Life and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 10.

114. *Works* 1:62.

John Wesley was born on June 17, 1703, the fifteenth of 19 children (eight of whom died in infancy) born to Samuel and Susanna Wesley. Both of his grandfathers were among the nonconformist (Puritan) clergy ejected by the Church of England in 1662. However, Wesley's parents rejected the dissenting tradition and returned to the established church. Furthermore, believing, as he did, that faith is more than merely an acknowledgment of ideas, Wesley as a practical theologian, contended that a part of the theological method would involve "experiential" faith. In other words, truth would be vivified in personal experience of Christians (overall, not individually), if it were really truth. Recent papers in John Wesley, Wesleyan Theology, Sacramental Theology. Papers. People. The Sunday Service of the People Called Methodists. John Wesley revised the Book of Common Prayer for the use of Methodists in America in four editions beginning in 1784. One frontier preacher's response may stand as typical of the neglect the book experienced-'Our preachers prefer to pray more. John Wesley revised the Book of Common Prayer for the use of Methodists in America in four editions beginning in 1784. Several practical strategies toward appropriation are offered as well as specific thoughts about the teaching of preaching as appropriation. Save to Library. Download.