BOOK REVIEWS


Analyses of John Wesley’s doctrine of Christian Perfection typically follow the format of his apologetic work *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*. The *Plain Account* opens in 1725 when Wesley was a college student, and that is the period of Wesley’s life where secondary treatments characteristically begin. The *Plain Account* reports, in chronological order, every significant statement Wesley made on Christian Perfection from 1725 to 1767, and secondary works usually follow this chronological arrangement. The *Plain Account* then argues that Wesley’s definition of Christian Perfection remained consistent throughout his ministry, and this question of consistency normally constitutes the main thesis of secondary writings. Finally, the *Plain Account* concludes with one last apologetic defense of the doctrine, and the Wesleyans who write about Christian Perfection by and large offer their own defense of the continuing relevance of this teaching.

*John Wesley’s Theology of Christian Perfection* fits this conventional framework. Olson chronologically traces the development of John Wesley’s *ordo salutis* from 1725 until his death in 1791. He argues that Wesley did revise his teachings on the stages in the salvation process and that these shifts in his definitions of sin, preventing grace, justification and sanctification did influence his conception of Christian Perfection, but that these changes should be understood as the maturation of earlier insights, the addition of “nuance and contour,” and not as a radical departure from his core message, which Olson labels “perfection theology.” Predictably, the book argues that this theological tradition is still relevant and spiritually beneficial for both individuals and denominations.

Olson uses the motif of “spiritual DNA” to describe Wesley’s perfection theology. Instead of a double helix, he maps three axioms in the DNA of Wesley’s faith: the necessity of inward holiness, justification by faith-alone, and the faithfulness of God towards all of creation (41, 119, 294). No insinuation is made that this DNA can be replicated in the true follower of Wesley, but when the book is considered as volume two of a proposed five-volume “John Wesley Christian Perfection Library” an agenda to conform Wesleyans to Olson’s interpretation of perfection theology does emerge.

For those who have never read the scholarly treatments of Christian Perfection by Outler, Lindstom, Maddox or Collins, this book might serve as a helpful introduction. It thoroughly recounts John Wesley’s Christian
Perfection writings and provides a chronologically-arranged bibliography of these publications that researchers should find a useful reference tool.

A doctrinal study of John Wesley’s theology requires more than a synthesis of everything he ever wrote on the subject, however. Future works on Wesley’s Christian Perfection must go beyond the apologetics of the *Plain Account* and discover how such things as the philosophical debates, scientific theories, political events, and cultural trends of his time impacted his religious convictions. If we are to understand why he wrote what he wrote, including what he took for granted in his audience and what he omitted, then we must work to fill in the details of the context that give words their meanings.

A summary of Wesley’s writings is an important first step, but it must be partnered with a historical analysis of the unnamed influences that shaped his theological position. The *Plain Account* does provide a partial list of the sources that influenced the Wesleyan doctrine of Christian Perfection, but Wesley was never one to provide detailed citations in his writings. Providing those footnotes to Wesley, publishing a critical interpretation of his work, should be the standard by which the next generation of John Wesley scholars is evaluated.

Laura Bartels Felleman
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This is not a book for the fainthearted—not because it is in any way a tedious or complex read, on the contrary, it is both informative and accessible. In the relentless pursuit of its goal, however, the book inadvertently hammers home the inescapably depressing fact that there has not been a time in the last century when the world was not embroiled in matters of war. Chapter by chronological chapter the formula is the same, the events provoking the questions of war and/or peace are outlined along with the general position(s) adopted by the Church. This is then followed by a more detailed and particular exploration of the various British Methodist responses to the situation.

To be fair to Hughes, the book was never intended to be a work of theology, but it is difficult to know how to evaluate it as a work of factual history given the lack of critical analysis and the frequent ambiguity of the text. The references to strange bodies such as “leading Methodists” who are nowhere defined or named, was for this reviewer, extremely irritating. I have much sympathy with the author’s lament that “the views of many Methodist ministers on questions of war and peace were out of line with those of their congregations.” The overriding question however is the extent to which this was really taken into account in framing a “British Methodist
perspective.” This divergence, combined with the author’s evident lack of in
depth knowledge concerning Conference procedures cast significant doubt
on the accuracy of some of the conclusions drawn.

Notwithstanding the above, the book will undoubtedly prove to be a
valuable resource to the Church and the wider community. The range and
scope of the research undertaken to produce the book is evident, and the style
of writing renders the fruit of it very accessible to the reader. It is a shame
that the book is understandably limited to exploring British Methodism. As
Hughes points out, the responses of the British Methodist people tended
to echo those of wider society, which means that the book has intrinsic
value for students of socio-political history as well as of religion. Above
all, however, Hughes is to be commended for cataloguing the difficulties,
if not impossibilities, inherent in persuading Christians to reach a single
mind on the question of war and peace regardless of the size or nature of the
conflict.

ANGELA SHIER-JONES

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S T Kimbrough, Jr. and Kenneth G. C. Newport, eds. The Manuscript

The publication of this critical edition of the manuscript journal of
Charles Wesley provides the Wesley scholar with another reliable source in
the study of early Methodism. This edition includes not only the text of the
manuscript journal, but also many helpful footnotes and in-text citations. The
introduction gives a helpful description of the nature journal. Basically, there
are two major deficiencies in Charles’s journal. First, Charles’s writing was
uneven. The earliest entries, specifically those before 1738, are relatively
full of details, revealing the inner struggle and reflections of Charles Wesley,
but the entries after 1738 are much more terse and are primarily concerned
with his ministry and travel. The second limitation is that the journal covers
a relatively brief period of his life, basically from 1736 to 1751. One might
say it extends to 1756 but this is only because it includes twenty-seven pages
of entries from September 17 to November 5, 1756. There are eight other
gaps in the journal form 1736 to 1751, but none as significant as the gap from
1751 to 1756. The final gap was partially filled in by Jackson with journal
letters. The journal does not include any material from the journal letters,
but the introduction does compare the difference between the manuscript
journal and the journal letters. This comparison highlights the value of
the journal letters and the fact that this manuscript is actually an extract of
Charles’s journal. The introduction also gives a history of the publication of
the manuscript journal noting the limitations of previous publications.
This publication includes many valuable features. Footnotes give information that clarifies the context, identifies books referred to by Charles, gives the sources of allusions—both scriptural and literary—and identifies text which is not included in previous editions. The names of people are expanded (normally adding the first name in square brackets) and the locations of places mentioned are identified and a modern spelling is given. Five indexes add value to this publication. There is an index of persons, places, topics, sermon texts, and scripture references and allusions.

The most important contribution of this journal is the publication of the passages written in shorthand. Many of these passages are published for the first time. Charles normally used shorthand to conceal material of a sensitive nature. Because of the publication of this text, the incidents surrounding Charles’s struggles in Georgia and his later struggle with his brother are given greater clarity.

This journal is a part of a growing collection of critical works on the primary texts related to Charles Wesley. It is recommended for anyone who wants to look at the middle years of Charles Wesley’s life, from his perspective.

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OTHER BOOKS RECEIVED


William Lawrence, who has been a pastor, district superintendent, professor, and seminary dean writes out of his love for the church and his broad knowledge of the history and practices of The United Methodist in order to provide analysis and suggestions for the recovery of the church. Declining statistics for United Methodism in the United States are merely symptoms and improving statistics may no be an indicator of recover. He offers suggestions for alternatives to church-dividing questions and counters some conventional wisdom, for example, that bishops should not be elected officers of general agencies but that they can provide better oversight as members of an agency. This is a fresh approach in the crowded field of “how to fix the denomination” genre of books.


It is easy to be in agreement with the main teaching of the book which is the need to “rediscover the core of the Wesleyan witness–faith working by love.” (p. viii) The balance that is called for includes the transformation of the individual and the transformation of society. The book is marred by at least two glaring errors of historical fact. On page 62 it claims that “in 1968, the Methodist Episcopal Church merged with the Evangelical United Brethren . . . .” The Methodist Episcopal Church had not existed since 1939. On page 76 there was reference to the 2006 celebration of full clergy rights for women. But the text claimed it was commemorating “fifty years of women’s ordination.” Women had been ordained in the Methodist Episcopal Church since 1924 and the United Brethren Church since the late 19th century. Clergy rights and conference membership should be kept distinct from ordination. The desire to have both personal and social holiness is without question, but that is not a new or unheard message.

This meticulously researched collection of original documents trace the journey of several Methodist missionary families from the East Coast to the Oregon territory in 1853. The Hines, Cathard and Bryant families become known through their own writings. Methodism moves in and out of the text but the greater interest would be for those who want an intimate glimpse of the travails of travel across the North American continent.


Thirty-three essays of varying length written persons who lived through the civil rights struggle in Arkansas during the 1950’s and 1960’s makes this compelling reading. Some white Methodists spoke out against racial discrimination and faced severe condemnation by church members. African American Methodists endured harsh indignities and abuse. Efforts to integrate Hendrix College were slow in bearing fruit. These eyewitness and first person accounts will provide the primary sources for the writing of this history by future historians. They offer powerful testimony to the pain of those years. A few historical inaccuracies mar the introductory statement on Methodism in general. But this a story that must be told and must be known. This book of essays provide that good service.