

## THE PRESENT STATE OF WESLEY STUDIES

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John Wesley starts his *Short History of the People Called Methodists* (1781) with the comment, "As no other person can be so well acquainted with Methodism, so called, as I am, I judge it my duty to leave behind me, for the information of all candid men, as clear an account of it as I can." This comment echoes an attitude that Wesley had already expressed several times in works that survey or analyze the Wesleyan movement—that he was the most appropriate person (perhaps the only one fully qualified) to give a full and accurate account of his life and his movement.<sup>1</sup> Such an attitude provides a curious backdrop to Wesley's accounts, particularly since his various narratives exhibit, in the details of the story, some inaccuracies and incongruities that one would not expect, given the source.

Since Wesley's day, over three hundred books have been written about the man. At first glance, one would think that certainly Wesley had been "done"—what else could possibly be left to say that hadn't already been said? The writers who have analyzed Wesley exhibit a curious mixture of approaches in their use of his writings as a source for their studies. There are those who assume that Wesley did provide the first and the last word of any consequence; therefore, his words only bear repeating—inaccuracies and contradictions notwithstanding.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, others presume that Wesley cannot be understood without a complete knowledge not only of his writings but also of his historical context and his sources. The former tend to put Wesley on a pedestal; the latter tend to put Wesley under a microscope.

The trend in Wesley studies in recent years has been to move away from the "pedestal" and toward the "microscope" approach. Nevertheless, both approaches are still evident today, often waging a quiet

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<sup>1</sup>E.g., in *The Character of a Methodist* (1742)—". . . it being generally believed that I was able to give the clearest account of these things," *Works*, VIII. 339; in the preface to his *Journal* (1740)—". . . it being my only concern herein nakedly to 'declare the thing as it is,'" *Works*, I. 4; in his sermon "On Laying the Foundation of the New Chapel" (1777)—"There is no other person, if I decline the task, who can supply my place—who has a perfect knowledge of the work in question [Methodism], from the beginning of it to this day," *Works*, VII. 420.

<sup>2</sup>E.g. "Yet, after all, his own *Journal* and *Letters* will always remain the best, almost the only needful, authority for the life of Wesley." C. T. Winchester, *The Life of John Wesley* (New York: Macmillan, 1919), p. viii.

“battle of the books” on the shelves of many unsuspecting owners. The incongruity in these two quite different types of magnification often results in some confusion to the person who is simply looking for a “good book” on Wesley. The problem becomes somewhat more understandable, however, in the light of some basic distinctions that can be made between various levels of research and writing.

### Levels of Study

The material that is currently available on Wesley can be placed into four general categories or levels of study. These represent four of the basic levels of research and writing that comprise the process of discovering and disseminating knowledge based on historical investigation.

The first level of research might be called *primary studies*. The basic task of this level is to provide reliable texts of primary resources, the essential foundation for the historian’s task. This process requires the collection, collation, and critical investigation of documents (published and unpublished) that are contemporary with the subject under study. This level of research also attempts to present the documents in the light of the events and thought patterns of their own time, the historical matrix within which the documents must be understood.

The second level is comprised of *specialist studies* that analyze and interpret specific discrete topics. These works investigate the specific political, scientific, literary, theological, social, economic, or cultural aspects of the topic under examination. This process may operate with different degrees of specificity, focusing upon a single idea, event, or structure, or perhaps studying a whole group or class of things. The main characteristic of this level of work is that of scholarly analysis and interpretation of a selected topic—looking carefully and critically at the background, the historiography, the documents, the context, and the implications of the specialized topic under consideration. Such studies depend very heavily for their grounding upon the results of adequate primary research.

The third level of work consists of *comprehensive studies* that summarize and synthesize the studies done at the second level. These comprehensive works attempt to survey eras, movements, or individuals in such a fashion as to provide a thorough analysis of the subject. An extensive work of this sort often presents an interpretation of the subject that vies for recognition as the “standard” view. When such a recognized view is challenged, the competing interpretation is usually the result of an author either (1) adopting a different interpretive stance through which to filter the primary and/or specialist studies; or (2) relying upon a different selection of primary research and/or specialist studies. New research and writing at the first and second levels often results in new interpretations at the third level of work.

The fourth level in this process is made up of the *popular studies*, works written for the general public. These works usually rely solely upon the comprehensive studies of level three, some points of which are distilled, simplified, edited, and produced in such a fashion as to reach a wide audience. These works play an important part in the broad dissemination of ideas. Quite often, the main considerations of the writers at this level are didactic, hagiographic, or aesthetic. Scholarly adequacy, essential to the work of level one and two, and important in level three, is (unfortunately) often overlooked or set aside in the production of work in level four.

These four levels of study are all going on at the same time. Ideally, they should all build upon the foundation of primary studies, each level then building upon the best work of the others in the order that we have listed them. From a scholarly point of view, the problem for the last two centuries in Wesley studies has been that no adequate base of primary research has been present to undergird the work of the other levels. One explanation for this situation can be found in the history of historical scholarship in general. It was not until well into the nineteenth century that modern critical historical studies became prevalent with the work of Leopold von Ranke and other critical historians. Their idea that it was necessary not only to go back to the primary sources but also to analyze them critically was not easily or readily accepted by some writers, especially when religious ideas or traditions were a part of the scene to be examined. This reticence to accept critical scholarship in the realm of religious ideas is evident also in the field of biblical studies, where the acceptance of such work has only gradually made inroads (and not without a great deal of controversy) into the various levels of biblical study over the last century.

The lack of a critical base upon which to build an adequate program of Wesley studies, thus explained but not excused, has had predictable results. Many comprehensive and popular studies of Wesley's life and thought have been produced that are not founded upon adequate historical research at the primary and specialist levels of study.

It would be easy to disparage the works of many nineteenth century Wesleyan writers in this regard, perhaps too easy from our modern critical perspective. We must recognize that only recently have two important developments taken place. First, more and more persons who are interested in Wesley studies have begun to see the value of (rather than fear the "danger" of) critical historical methodology in helping to discern the significance of Wesley's life and thought. Second, the academy at large has begun to recognize the value of Wesley studies as a respectable sub-field of the academic study of religion, politics, literature, and several other fields. As a result, a noticeable renaissance of Wesley studies has occurred in the last decade, fostered in part by the rising historical consciousness associated with the bicentennial celebrations in American Methodism from 1966 to 1984. The question that presents itself at this point is whether

or not the solid work that has begun in this field can maintain its momentum and whether its results can be felt in all four levels of study mentioned above.

It is not our purpose here to list or review the recent works that have been published in Wesley studies.<sup>3</sup> Rather, we will look at the present state of affairs in the four levels of study outlined above, noting in particular the agenda that lies in front of us in order to best satisfy the needs of the church and academy in the area of Wesley studies.

### Primary Studies

Of first importance in the study of the Wesleys is a complete and reliable text of their writings. It is a telling comment on the state of Wesley studies to note that the standards of modern critical scholarship are only beginning to be applied to the publication of the Wesleys' works. For the better part of two centuries, writers have had to rely on less than adequate editions of the Wesleys' writings as a basis for Wesleyan studies.

The early commentators on John Wesley's life and thought relied heavily upon the edition of the *Works* published by William Pine in the 1770s. The typographical errors of Pine, the printer, though they worried Wesley at the time, were only a small part of the problem. Many editorial insertions and deletions over the years had altered the text of some of the works. These changes were at times effected by Wesley or his assistants, but were at other times made simply at the discretion (or indiscretion) of the printer or publisher. In 1745, for example, a whole line was inadvertently omitted in the *Farther Appeal*. This mistake deleted permanently from the text one of the three factors Wesley felt was necessary for justification; it was never reinserted in any subsequent edition.<sup>4</sup> In preparing his works for the collected set in the 1770s, Wesley himself does not seem to have checked to see if the editions he was using, most often the most recent available to him, were any different from the earlier editions. In some cases, Wesley's own attempts to make corrections of obvious errors for the errata sheets, since he did not often check his original text, resulted in textual confusion that only compounded the problem.<sup>5</sup>

A new edition of Wesley's writings was produced about twenty years after Wesley's death by Joseph Benson, editor for the British Methodist conference. That edition in sixteen volumes (1809-13) relied heavily on the

<sup>3</sup>For recent surveys of the literature and a list of bibliographies, see Frank Baker, "Unfolding John Wesley: A Survey of Twenty Years' Studies in Wesley's Thought," in *Quarterly Review*, 1 (1980), 44-58; and Richard Heitzenrater, "Wesley in Retrospect," in *The Elusive Mr. Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), II, 163-214.

<sup>4</sup>*The Appeals to Men of Reason and Religion*, ed. by Gerald R. Cragg, in *The Works of John Wesley* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), XI, 117.

<sup>5</sup>For details of these problems, see Frank Baker, "The Oxford Edition of Wesley's Works and Its Text," in *The Place of Wesley in the Christian Tradition*, ed. by Kenneth E. Rowe (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow, 1980), pp. 124-26.

inadequate "Pine" edition. It did, however, include the last installments of the *Journal* and a few other writings not in the earlier edition. Thomas Jackson, Benson's successor as connectional editor, produced another edition of the *Works* (the "third," 1827-31), which purported to present a "pure text" and a "complete collection" of Wesley's original writings. Although Jackson did improve somewhat on Benson's edition, he included no manuscript sources and provided no annotations or critical apparatus. Besides, he mistook some works to be original with Wesley that were not and continued the practice of using later editions of Wesley's writings without comparing them with earlier or first editions. He thus perpetuated many typographical and editorial corruptions that had crept into the text. Jackson's edition, which reached its final form in the "fourth" edition of 1872, was the last "complete" collection of Wesley's works to be published, and has been the basis for all the recent photo reproductions of Wesley's *Works* in fourteen volumes. The so-called "standard" editions of the *Journal* (eight volumes, ed. Curnock), *Letters* (eight volumes, 1935-37, ed. Telford), and *Sermons* (two volumes, 1921-22, ed. Sugden) do contain some additional material and notes. They do not, however, reflect the standards of critical textual or historical work expected by the present generation.

At the present time, the new critical edition of Wesley's works now in production will overcome the lack of a reliable text of Wesley writings.<sup>6</sup> Some have asked why a new edition of Wesley's works is needed. The simple answer is, as has been noted above, that there is not, and never has been, an edition of Wesley's works that presents the reader with a full and reliable text of his writings. Nor has there been an adequately annotated edition that utilizes the best scholarship available in a number of disciplines to help the reader understand the sources and context of the material. The new edition includes introductory material to provide the background of the work and citations that locate the sources of Wesley's quotations (or more often, misquotations). Annotations also shed further light upon many of the ideas, events, or individuals mentioned in the text. Manuscript material is included when appropriate to illuminate the published texts, and lists of variant readings reflect each particular item's publishing history. The new edition will also include the previously unpublished Wesley diaries, a storehouse of information about the private

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<sup>6</sup>This project was begun in 1960, the first five volumes published as THE OXFORD EDITION OF THE WORKS OF JOHN WESLEY. The last volume to be published by Oxford University Press appeared in February 1984, *A Collection of Hymns for the People Called Methodists*, ed. by Franz Hildebrandt and Oliver A. Beckerlegge. Subsequent volumes are being published by Abingdon Press under the title, THE BICENTENNIAL EDITION OF THE WORKS OF JOHN WESLEY. The first work to appear (May 1984) will be volume one of the *Sermons on Several Occasions*, ed. by Albert C. Outler. Frank Baker, Duke University, is Editor-in-Chief of the project and James E. Kirby, Southern Methodist University, is president of the Board of Directors.

Mr. Wesley. One of the most important scholarly tools in the whole project will be the two-volume bibliography of the writings of Wesley. It will provide a definitive listing of descriptive information relative to the various Wesley publications.

Over the next several years, this project, called the "Wesley Works Editorial Project," will produce a thirty-five volume critical edition of Wesley's writings that will provide a core of foundational studies necessary for a first-rate succession of specialist studies on Wesley's life and thought.

In the meantime, the writings of the rest of the Wesley family remain in a relative state of obscurity and chaos. Of particular concern are Charles Wesley's works, both his prose and poetry. The only major attempt to collect the poetical works of the Wesleys is a thirteen-volume work by George Osborn (1868-72). This set is not only difficult to find but also has serious limitations as a source for critical scholarship. Several other smaller anthologies of Charles' poetry have been published over the years, but most of them simply present a selection of favorite Wesleyan hymns. One exceptionally valuable work that provides a model for work to be done in this area is Frank Baker's *Representative Verse of Charles Wesley* (London: Epworth Press, 1958). Baker not only compares manuscript and printed editions of the texts, but also provides useful critical notes on the meters and sources of Charles' verse, as well as the vocabulary, rhymes, rhetoric, and literary allusions. This book includes 335 poems, only a small sampling selected from Charles' published and unpublished works. The rest remains largely untouched at this basic level of primary textual studies.

Similar textual work remains to be done on the prose works of Charles Wesley. His *Journal and Letters* was edited by Thomas Jackson and published in two volumes in 1849. The journal selections, however, spanning the period 1735 to 1754, omitted those portions that Charles has written in shorthand. A new edition of the journal that incorporated those sections was begun by John Telford, but only one of the proposed three volumes was ever completed.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, neither of the editions provides any annotations concerning the persons, names, and events mentioned in the text.

A new collected edition of Charles Wesley's letters is also a desideratum, the rather meager Jackson collection of 1849 being the only one ever published. The sermons of Charles Wesley are also in a state of chaos. The only edition ever published, in 1816, was based on sermons in Charles' handwriting, but they turn out to be largely (if not entirely) sermons written by John Wesley and subsequently copied by Charles.<sup>8</sup> A group of sermons that were apparently actually written by Charles are in

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<sup>7</sup>London: Cully [1910]; reprinted by the Methodist Reprint Society, Taylors, S.C., 1977.

<sup>8</sup>Richard P. Heitzenrater, "John Wesley's Early Sermons," *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society*, XXXVII (February 1970), 112-13.

shorthand and have only recently been transliterated by Tom Albin and Oliver Beckerlegge. If published, these sermons, along with a new edition of Charles' letters and journal, could provide the public the valuable core of his prose works.

Much work therefore remains to be done at the level of primary studies in order to provide full, reliable, and annotated texts, not only of John Wesley's works, but also of Charles Wesley's works, edited in such a fashion as to reveal both the sources of their thought and the context of their activities. Perhaps we can even hope for a concordance of the works of the Wesleys, another tool that would open up new opportunities for serious inquiry. Such foundational primary studies as these are necessary in order to provide an adequate base for the next level of study.

### Specialist Studies

For many decades after Wesley's death, "Wesley studies" consisted solely of biographies. These were generally by Methodists and for Methodists; the triumphalist tone was inevitable. The first appearance of more circumscribed topical studies was in the latter part of the nineteenth century, when several writers (primarily Anglican and Methodist) began to examine Wesley's relations with the Church of England. Studies of Wesley's theology, in some instances comparing Wesley with Calvin, Swedenborg, and Whitefield, began to appear before the century was out. The early twentieth century brought more studies of special aspects of Wesley's life and thought—evangelism, romance, philanthropy, socialism, science, patriotism, ethics, and the like. The tendency of these studies, however, was simply to describe a special facet of Wesley's biography, selected from his own writings and isolated from the larger background and context of his times. These works exhibit a partisan preoccupation on the part of Methodists with their founder and show little interest in the sources of Wesley's own thought and action, much less the broader historical context in which Wesley was writing and acting.

A few theological studies in the second quarter of the twentieth century began to call for and exhibit a wider approach. Maximin Piette's study, *Réaction de John Wesley dans l'Evolution du Protestantisme* (1925), and George Croft Cell's book, *The Rediscovery of John Wesley* (1935), opened up new vistas of investigation, not only of specific doctrines within Wesley's thought, but also of the relationship of these ideas to classical Reformation theology. In the last half century, many works have helped illuminate major themes in Wesley's life and thought. In keeping with the growing ecumenical tendencies in religious thought, the theological studies have by and large begun to free Wesley from his Methodist closet. In addition, Wesley has been discovered by writers from a variety of disciplines, such as political science, literature, music, science, psychology, medicine, and philosophy.

The result has been a growing body of books and articles that demonstrate the wide variety of Wesley's own interests and involvements. Many of these works are done by scholars with competence in a special field of inquiry but with only a limited acquaintance with Wesley. The major problem at this point is that the available Wesley resources at the textual and contextual level often do not provide adequate support for their task. Here is where the incomplete nature of the work at the primary level begins to effect subsequent endeavors at every other level.

Take, for example, the study of Wesley and medicine. Basic to that endeavor would be an understanding of the background and development of Wesley's popular little publication, *Primitive Physick*. It is one thing to say that it is a quaint collection of home remedies and folk medicine. It is quite another thing to say where these prescriptions came from and how Wesley came to include them in his collection. That information is still largely elusive at this point, awaiting the quickening eye of some patient researcher. A further requisite for such a study would be a good understanding of the status of medical theory and practice in the eighteenth century, a field of enquiry that is itself just beginning to emerge.

Another good example of the work that remains to be done at this level can be seen in the prerequisites necessary to write an adequate study of Wesley's theology. Picture a huge chart taking up a rather good-sized wall. Down the lefthand margin would be a column listing the various topics that would be essential to an understanding of Wesley's theology, such as original sin, grace (prevenient, convincing, justifying, sanctifying), faith (again with subdivisions), repentance, justification, assurance, regeneration, sanctification, Christian perfection, eschatology, the Trinity (God, Christology, pneumatology), atonement, eternal life, hell, the church, the sacraments, scripture, tradition, reason, experience . . . the ceiling would need to be quite high to contain the list. The length of the wall would contain columns for each year of Wesley's career, columns large enough to contain quotations for that year on each topic listed to the left. That central part of the chart would then graphically display the chronological development of each of these topics as expressed in Wesley's own writings.

But that would only be the beginning. At the bottom of the chart, under each yearly column would be listed his readings for that year, giving some idea of the sources for many of the ideas that he was expressing during that time. At the top of the chart would be listed the various controversies which engulfed Wesley, thus providing some idea of the polemical stance which he might be forced to take in given instances. If this could all be done on a clear plastic sheet, then behind it on the wall could be sketched the larger historical context within which Wesley was acting and thinking—the developments in politics, science, music, theology, economics, philosophy, technology, biblical studies, transportation, and other areas that would contribute to a better understanding of the living

matrix of Wesley's life. With such a chart filled in (including perhaps more plastic overlays, if necessary), one could then begin to bring scriptural, theological, and historical tools to bear on an analysis of Wesley's thought. By such means, one could examine Wesley's theology in a way that could begin to comprehend the richness of its background, the complexities of its development, and the urgencies of its rhetoric.

Many valuable specialist studies have already been completed that could contribute to a further sharpening of work at this level. Nearly every topic listed in our imaginary chart could benefit from a careful monographic study. Up to the present time, however, many of those studies have had neither the textual base nor the methodological approach that is necessary for a fully adequate study. We have already mentioned the necessity of sufficient primary studies that would identify the sources and provide the accurate content of Wesley's writings as well as elucidate the background and context of Wesley's activities. In addition, specialist studies should also approach a particular topic with several basic principles in mind: (1) *parts* of the whole are best understood within the larger scope of the whole, (2) the process of development involves both change *and* continuity, (3) neither side of a controversy generally has a monopoly on truth, (4) a mediating position often incorporates incongruous aspects of competing opposites, (5) nothing is really new under the sun.

With regard to specialist studies on Wesley, then, an adequate study, in the light of the principles just listed, would consider the early and late (as well as the middle) Wesley, would consider the change as well as the continuity in his development, would take seriously the criticisms of anti-Wesleyan views as part of the whole picture, would recognize the incongruities and analyze the resulting tensions, and would look for the precursors and precedents of his thoughts and actions. To be most useful, these specialist studies would also be firmly grounded in first-rate historical work on the particular topic under investigation, whether it is within the field of theology, medicine, literature, or some other discipline. Much work remains to be done in many areas of contextual studies that provide necessary support for Wesley studies. Such a predicament should not, however, discourage the student of Wesley from making effective use of the supporting material that is presently available.

### Comprehensive Studies

The last two sections have repeatedly illustrated the point that there is much yet to be done at the first two levels of Wesley studies. We have just barely begun to approach Wesley with the appropriate critical tools and the breadth of outlook that are necessary to build a solid foundation and sturdy framework to house our endeavor; adequate work at these two levels is a necessary prerequisite to the production of biographies and historical surveys that measure up to modern critical standards. The same

criteria that are indispensable at the first two levels of study are also essential to the production of adequate comprehensive studies.

The biography has been the most common form of surveying the Wesleyan phenomenon in the eighteenth century. In spite of the prolific production of such works, a definitive biography of Wesley has never been written and perhaps could not yet be written at the present time. However, some good biographies have been produced; several well-written, credible works have presented enlightening portraits of Wesley. Even a quick survey of the literature, however, will reveal that none of the biographies presently available provides a full narrative of Wesley's life in its many-faceted complexity—taking into account, for instance, the full range of his theological development that provided not only the ideological context for his own spiritual pilgrimage but also the doctrinal agenda for his revival movement (a typical aversion of most current biographical writers) as well as the many energetic activities that made up the curriculum of a long and productive life (including the quirks of his personal relationships with women which seem to be a particular fascination of many present authors). In addition, Wesley's involvement in politics, medicine, prisons, poetry, economics, and a host of other areas also requires treatment in a fully comprehensive look at the man.

Historical surveys of the Wesleyan movement in the eighteenth century generally display many of the same shortcomings as the biographies. There are not as many histories as there are biographies, to be sure—one would be hard-pressed to find in a bookstore these days *any* narrative history of Wesley and his movement, much less an adequate one. Such a situation may simply represent the current state of Wesley studies in general. The older works seem insufficient and yet the basic material is not quite in hand yet for definitive new works. However, the revisionist work of the specialist studies is beginning to provide a growing body of new material, and as that information builds up, it calls for a new synthesis to be reflected in subsequent surveys of the Wesleyan movement. There are still many areas that need further careful investigation, such as the place of women in the Wesleyan scheme, the nature of Wesley's work among the poor, the character of the political and economic philosophy that guided his thought and actions. The demands of critical scholarship obviously apply at least as much to these historical endeavors as to the biographies. The tendency of generations of writers in this century to rely on the twice-told tales passed on in the tomes of the nineteenth-century surveys simply demonstrates how much work remains to be done at this level, especially if we again mention that Charles Wesley's full significance has hardly yet been examined.

### Popular Studies

The work of the first three levels is essentially scholarly. But much of what is written about Wesley is intentionally non-scholarly designed to

reach a non-academic audience. While popular studies is only one of four points for our consideration here, the material in this category probably makes up at least half the total bulk of current publications about Wesley. This category would include Sunday school literature, devotional publications, novels, and works about Wesley that attempt to reach a wide popular audience.

The self-consciously non-academic approach of some of this literature suggests the speaker who starts a speech by saying, "Now I'm not really a scholar, but . . ." and then launches out upon a discourse that represents a very firmly held personal interpretation that speaks to some controversial issue of scholarly concern. Disclaiming academic credentials does not, however, exempt a person from being responsible in making truth-claims. In the field of Wesley studies, the production of popular works does not necessitate compromising the academic integrity of the topic in order to make it palatable to a particular audience. A striking example of this is a children's book in the "Ladybird" series, a biography of Wesley that is simple, well-written, illustrated, and uses the latest research on the life and thought of Wesley and his times.<sup>9</sup> The fact that a book is written with a literary flair, or that it has illustrations, or that it is designed for a specific group should not exempt it from the normal expectations of accuracy and integrity.

We are still in the infancy of our knowledge about pictorial illustrations relative to Wesley and Methodism. Graphic (and iconographic) materials have been used so indiscriminately for so long that one almost presumes that "pictures" lower the academic integrity of a work. There is no reason why that should necessarily be the case. Appropriate illustrations, if selected carefully and produced well, can provide very helpful insights that complement the written or spoken word. At this point, the tendency seems to be for the books with good pictures and fluid writing to be lacking in historical scholarship, and the works that represent the best in scholarship to be more difficult to read and without good illustrations. With new technologies and new information, however, and a willingness to use all available resources, the best of scholarship, writing, and the graphic arts might be brought together more frequently.

### **Wesley Studies in the Academy and the Church**

The seeming divergence between scholarly and popular approaches to Wesley studies might be seen by some as a reflection of the different character and methods of the academy and the church. Such an explanation, while plausible, need not be understood as defining an essentially divergent goal of the church and the academy with regard to the Wesleyan heritage. Both the church and the academy are grounded in a concern for

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<sup>9</sup>John Vickers, *John Wesley, Founder of Methodism* (Loughborough, 1977).

truth. In the academy, the search for truth through a critical investigation of the past defines the character of historical inquiry. The historian's task is to understand the past on its own terms before interpreting or appropriating its meaning for the present. In the church, the critical temper is also essential to the continuing practice of "an historically authentic Christian tradition."<sup>10</sup> The ongoing practice of a viable tradition depends upon critical reflection to maintain its vitality and integrity. Historical inquiry in the academy and in the church can provide both an anchoring and renewing element to the future of the Wesleyan heritage.

Within the last two years, as American Methodism approached its 1984 bicentennial, the United Methodist Church helped sponsor three major conferences. These provided special opportunities for investigating and reflecting upon the Wesleyan tradition as an important element of the denomination's heritage. The first was the Seventh Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies at Keble College, Oxford, in July 1982, with the theme, "The Future of Wesleyan Theology"; the second, the consultation on "Methodism and Ministry" at Drew University in April 1983; and the third, the consultation on "Wesleyan Theology and the Next Century" at Emory University in August 1983. Each of those occasions had in common one of the expressed purposes of the Emory consultation: "To examine critically those elements within the Wesleyan tradition which may, if recovered and reinterpreted, lend identity and direction to the Methodist movement today."

Participants at the three events included members of the church and the academy, preachers and teachers, clergy and laity, men and women, black and white, from around the globe. Several academic disciplines and several denominations were represented by the participants. On such an interdisciplinary and ecumenical base, the level of interest in Wesley that was quickened on those occasions has encouraged many to think that a new day has dawned in Wesley studies. The working groups at these conferences approached the Wesleyan tradition from a variety of angles.<sup>11</sup> They seriously examined the possible Wesleyan resources that might inform Methodism's mission as it moves toward and into the twenty-first century.

With the recognition that much basic work presently remains incomplete at every level of Wesley studies, the participants of the conferences were anxious to move forward using the highest standards of critical scholarship presently available, aware at the same time of the need

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<sup>10</sup>Ray C. Petry, "The Critical Temper and the Practice of Tradition," in *The Duke Divinity School Review*, XXX (Spring 1965), 96.

<sup>11</sup>Papers and discussions focused on such areas as biblical authority, feminist theology, salvation and justice, evangelism, liberation theology, spirituality, faith development, black and ethnic religion, ecumenism, social ethics, worship, religious affections, process theology, and the sacraments.

to be more openly cautious in making broad generalizations and to be more modest in stating final conclusions. Many participants expressed the strong feeling that Wesley is an important authoritative resource for Methodism today and repeated the conviction that Wesley, rightly understood and creatively appropriated, could provide for Methodism and the wider church a vision of the Christian life that could continue to reform and renew individuals and institutions in our world.

These conferences were an important step in the process of implementing a new approach to Wesley studies. They were especially significant, in each case both as a symbol and as an opportunity, for the manner in which they allowed the church and the academy to work together as partners in the process of rediscovering Wesley. The goal of Wesley studies properly conceived, and as reflected in these conferences, is not to recapture or perpetuate a sectarian "Wesleyan" self-consciousness, but rather to understand and appropriate the Wesleyan heritage in ways that will guide and invigorate conscientious attempts to think and live as vital and authentic Christians in our day.