JOHN WESLEY'S AWARENESS AND APPLICATION OF
THE METHOD OF DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN
THEOLOGICAL ESSENTIALS AND THEOLOGICAL OPINIONS

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Discussions have once again surfaced in United Methodist circles which center around John Wesley's self-confident yet eirenic aphorism, now a well-worn American United Methodist cliche, "But as to all opinions which do not strike at the root of Christianity, we think and let think." The method implicit in this cliche and these discussions is the theological method of distinguishing between theological truths fundamental to genuine Christian faith and those indifferent "opinions" in which Christians may agree to disagree.

Speaking to a World Methodist bicentennial gathering in 1984 from Wesley's pulpit in City Road Chapel, London, Bishop Jack M. Tuell of the California-Pacific Conference alluded to John Wesley's dichotomy and explained that Methodists do not define themselves by their opinions but by their love for God and neighbor. Further, the World Methodist Council recently published its "Jerusalem" reaffirmation which laments the confused misunderstanding of many Methodists who view Methodism as "a collection of various opinions where a person is free to believe almost anything that person chooses." The document calls on Methodists to "reaffirm the essentials of the Christian Faith." Moreover, the related topic of "doctrinal pluralism" has re-emerged in the deliberations of United Methodism's doctrinal commission under its mandate to revise the doctrinal statements in the 1972 Book of Discipline. According to reports in June 1986, the commission is delving deeply into Wesleyan tradition and is, in the reported words of its chairman Bishop Earl G. Hunt, Jr., "searching for the great principles."

3"An Invitation to Discover ... Reaffirm" (The World Methodist Council: Lake Junaluska).
4Ibid.
Understanding what John Wesley meant by theological fundamentals and theological opinions is important for Methodist theology. Given the confines of one article, perhaps this paper can contribute to this understanding by assuming the modest task of attempting to set the theological method and John Wesley’s awareness and application of it into some historical perspective. A suitable beginning may be made by investigating the following three areas: first, the historical lineage from which this theological distinction was born and developed; second, those immediate predecessors of John Wesley who were most probably responsible for impressing the distinction upon him; third, the motivation and circumstances which prompted John Wesley to adopt this distinction into his theological vocabulary and to use it in the cause of the Evangelical Revival.

What was the origin of this method in which essential scriptural truths absolutely necessary to true Christian faith were distinguished from ambiguous scriptural points which were “indifferent” to the vital essence of the Christian faith. Was it a Wesleyan innovation? If not, from where did the method come before arriving at John Wesley?

First, in the third century Origen, who is credited with the first attempt at systematizing Christian theology, notes in the preface to his book *De Principiis* that some scriptural affirmations (e.g., the Trinity) may be set forth in clear, dogmatic propositions while other points (such as the consummation) lend themselves only to discussion and “intelligent inference.”

In 1536, amidst the controversy of the German Reformation, the Elector of Saxony instructed Martin Luther to prepare a statement with the Roman Catholics in mind which would propose those articles of faith in which no concessions could be made and those in which concessions might be made for the sake of peace. In what became known as the Smalcald Articles, Luther’s first and “chief article” revolved around the death of Christ for our trespasses and the resultant justification by faith alone. Luther thundered, “Nothing in this article can be given up or compromised, even if heaven and earth and things temporal should be destroyed.” However, because so many of the subordinate questions in dispute (the Mass, purgatory, indulgences, etc.) were bound to this article and therefore had to be considered as

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fundamental, the Elector rather than getting a paper of concessions, received mainly a confession of all those things on which Luther could allow no compromise.

Philip Melanchthon, Luther's ardent junior supporter who was drawn into the controversy, published a work *Locii communes rerum theologicarum* whose purpose was to set forth only the essence of scriptural, theological topics distilled from any philosophical speculations. According to Melanchthon, there were specific, fundamental topics ("the Power of Sin," "the Law," and "Grace") which God had willed Christians to know and without which they could not be Christians. In contrast, there were reflections upon the nature of these topics and certain exalted theological topics whose incomprehensibility led to vain disputation.

From the Roman Catholic side, George Cassander (died 1566), a Flemish teacher at Cologne, sought to span the chasm between Roman Catholic and Protestant with a similar formulation about what is fundamental and what is non-essential. Later in the sixteenth century and across the sea, Richard Hooker sought to be a moderating theological force between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism by forging the *via media* (the middle way) which helped set the mold for distinctive Anglican thought. In his *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, he distinguished between "necessary" doctrines and "accessory" doctrines. He argued that those matters of faith deemed "necessary" for salvation were those things which all persons were to know or do to be saved. These were the things of which it was said, "This not to believe is eternal death and damnation." On the other hand, "accessory" doctrines (e.g., ceremonies, order, and church government) were those things which, being alterable, did not change the way of salvation.

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11Ibid, 21.
12Ibid, 21f.
This method of distinguishing between fundamental truths and non-fundamental topics came to be articulated in an effort to mediate between Roman Catholics and Protestants. However, as the corner was turned into the seventeenth century, the formulation was further clarified and became more prominent as it was used to mediate not only between Roman Catholics and Protestants, but also in intra-Protestant conflict. As a result of the raging controversy between the Calvinistic Puritans and Arminian High-Church Anglicans, it developed into an accepted, literally commonplace, theological method, particularly within the “latitude” movement which pleaded for peace and toleration. As we shall see, writers from the “latitude” movement were the most probable sources of John Wesley’s awareness of the theological distinction.

The method of winnowing fundamental scriptural propositions from non-fundamental categories seems to have been brought to the seventeenth century English theological consciousness through the proceedings of the Synod of Dort in Holland in 1618. John Hales, an English observer with influential connections, returned to England with an inspiring account of Episcopius’ defense of Arminian theology against the articles of Calvinism. Episcopius’ disputation so impressed John Hales that he exclaimed with changed mind, “I bade John Calvin good-night.” Among other things in his speech, Episcopius differentiated between fundamentals and opinions. He argued that there were “certain important doctrines ... on which the whole superstructure of piety is founded” and which “must be held inviolably sacred.” On the issues in which the learned had never enjoyed uniformity of opinion, where essentials were not involved, greater latitude of sentiment and expression ought to be allowed.

While it is highly probable that John Wesley was familiar with this passage of Episcopius, we shall find that there is good reason to believe that by the time he became aware of Episcopius’ views he was already aware of the theological distinction. As we now turn our attention to the second area of our investigation, we consider other

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18 Ibid.
important seventeenth century English divines who began to harness Episcopius' distinction as reported by John Hales and who are more probably responsible for conveying Episcopius' sentiments to Wesley.

Through John Hales, Episcopius' approach found fertile soil in England in the circle at Great Tew, a small group of select Anglican divines who were cool to high-strung Calvinism and yet desirous of toleration toward them. Perhaps the most important outcome of this group was the work of one of its members, Archbishop Laud's godson, William Chillingworth. The influence of Episcopius' distinction upon him was reflected in his major work, The Religion of Protestants, a Safe Way to Salvation. This book is regarded as not only that which put Episcopius' method into the permanent possession of English religious thought, but also that which laid the foundation for toleration in the latitudinarian school which was now arising in the English church.

While there is no reference to John Wesley having read Chillingworth, he was abundantly familiar with writers from the latitude-school represented by the Cambridge Platonists and their pupils, the Latitudinarians, who were greatly influenced by Chillingworth and carried forward the best of his tradition.

John Wesley would have found Episcopius' sentiments and method amply reflected in the Cambridge Platonists. We look to this mid-seventeenth century theological school as well as to their later pupils for providing the primary sources for Wesley's understanding and appreciation of the distinction between essentials and opinions. Selections from some of the major Cambridge Platonists, including John Smith, Henry More, and Ralph Cudworth were inserted into the selections in Wesley's A Christian Library.

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22 Moreover, the seventeenth century historian Gilbert Burnet stated of the Cambridge Platonists in his History of My Own Time that “they read Episcopius much.” Gilbert Burnet, History of My Own Time, 6 vols. (Oxford: n.p., 1823), vol. 1, 324; Seaton, Theory of Toleration, 68.
23 Minor members, such as Nathaniel Culverwel and John Worthington, were also accorded a place. Robert C. Monk, A Study of the Christian Life: John Wesley, His Puritan Heritage (London: Epworth Press, 1966), 257f.
As one reviews the selections from the works which Wesley read and some of which he included in his *A Christian Library*, one hears the refrains which Wesley later often repeated. Two examples will have to suffice. John Smith, in his *Select Discourses*, decried the casting of religion into a "set of duties and system of opinions." 24

Similarly, Henry More in his *Mystery of Godliness* wrote that his purpose was to present faith which is "sufficient to salvation" "in the most necessary points" rather than discuss opinions that were indifferent and innocent.

One can see the outlook of these Cambridge Platonists, even their words, mirrored in John Wesley’s own words in so far as he insisted that religion was not a “round of duties” 26 or “a system of right opinions.” 27 In his sermon “The Wedding Garment,” John Wesley remarked, “Indeed, it is not a little sin to represent trifles as necessary to salvation; such as going of (sic) pilgrimages or anything that is not expressly enjoined in the Holy Scripture. Among these we may undoubtedly rank orthodoxy, or right opinions.” 28

The theological descendants of the Cambridge Platonists, the Latitudinarians, exercised a dynamic influence on Wesley’s awareness and application of the distinction between fundamentals and indifferent opinions. The Latitudinarians, who received the tradition of Hooker, Episcopius, and Chillingworth, eschewed the religious intensity of doctrinal polemics by appealing to charity and tolerance on all matters not essential to salvation. They more than anyone else set the theological temper for Wesley’s eighteenth century England. 29 Accordingly, they occupied a significant place among Wesley’s theological resources. While at Oxford, Wesley read Simon Patrick and John Tillot-

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26 John Wesley, *The Works*, vol. 6, 432.
28 Wesley, *Works*, vol. 7, 315f. One must be careful to understand what Wesley meant by "orthodoxy" before drawing conclusions as to what he is condemning here.
son's *Sermons* (who were both represented in Wesley's *A Christian Library*) and assorted selections from John Norris, whom he read and re-read throughout his life.\(^{30}\) Moreover, he read Francis Blackhouse, Joseph Glanvill and especially Edward Stillingfleet.\(^{31}\)

John Norris, in his *Practical Discourses* (which John Wesley read), bemoaned that there were more examples of "ill-living than ill-thinking" so that more emphasis ought to be laid on "Practice" and "Actions" and less on "Opinions." A similar strain was heard in John Wesley's claim in his *Journal* that the differences between himself and the Antinomians were "not points of opinion, but practice."\(^{32}\)

Herbert Workman noted that Archbishop Tillotson was one of the representative links between the Latitudinarians and Wesley.\(^{33}\) In his renowned sermon, "One Thing Needful," Tillotson charged that men did not pay attention to the necessary things of religion but were zealous for small things.\(^{34}\) In John Wesley's defense of the Methodist movement, he submitted that the Methodists did not have "a zeal for things which were no part of religion, as though they had been essential branches of it."\(^{35}\)

One Latitudinarian theologian who riveted John Wesley's attention at a crucial juncture in the Revival was Bishop Edward Stillingfleet. A follower of Chillingworth's school who carried forward the liberal, Anglican tradition, Stillingfleet wrote the book *Irenicum* which was one of the weightiest contributions of the seventeenth century to the issue of church government.\(^{36}\) This was perhaps the most potent and cogent argument incorporating the distinction between necessities and opinions with which Wesley was apparently familiar. Stillingfleet used the eirenic distinction to argue that no one could claim that any one form of church government was more scriptural than another. There-

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fore, he suggested that the Church of England and the Presbyterians ought to compromise. In reaching his conclusion, Stillingfleet urged that Christ required no other "Duties" than those that were necessary and sufficient for eternal salvation. He averred that, "The articles of faith called fundamental are not only such as are necessary to be believed, but if they be, are sufficient for salvation to all that do believe them." On the other hand, Stillingfleet, again appealing to the New Testament, advanced that the apostles tolerated great diversities of practice and observations. While they agreed on the weighty matters of religion, they did not value "Indifferences" or those things which did not concern "Salvation." Clinching his argument, he reasoned that in order for one to assert that one form of church government was founded upon divine right, one must be able to show that it was necessary to salvation by divine command. Of course, he concluded, scripture proclaimed no such command.

John Wesley read Stillingfleet's *Irenicum* (probably sometime in the mid-1740's) when he himself was enmeshed in issues which related to church form. The logician Wesley found Stillingfleet's argument so compelling that he accepted it as "unanswerably proved." The disputation not only convinced Wesley's mind of several crucial, controversial matters but it also satisfied him regarding "the whole question of church government." *Irenicum* opened up Wesley's once bigoted, High Church ecclesiology and laid a formidable theological foundation

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38Ibid, 152.


40Stillingfleet's book convinced Wesley's mind regarding several key issues: (1) episcopal ordination was not essential to valid administration of the sacraments; (2) the definition and perspective of schism; (3) possibly, that laymen were justified in preaching. Lawson, John Wesley, p. 74; and Frank Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England* (London: Epworth Press, 1970), 146f, 150. See also: "John Bennet's Copy of the Minutes of the Conferences of 1744, 1745, 1747, and 1748; With Wesley's Copy of Those for 1746," *Publications of The Wesley Historical Society*, no. 1 (London: Charles H. Kelly for Wesley Historical Society, 1896), in *Minutes of the Methodist Conferences, Vols. 1–3, 1744–1813*, for 1744 regarding the separation of the Methodists, 12–13; 1745 under "points of discipline," regarding church government, 24–25; and 1747 under "points of discipline," regarding "schism," 46–48. The "Minutes" of 1745 and 1746 seem to reflect an ignorance of Stillingfleet, while 1747 in comparison might seem to connote an apprehension of *Irenicum*.

41This student agrees with Lawson in that while King influenced Wesley regarding the order of "presbyters" and "bishops," Stillingfleet was the more influential of the two in the whole matter of church government. Lawson, John Wesley, 70. See also: Robert C. Monk, *John Wesley: His Puritan Heritage*, 196; and John Wesley, *Wesley's Standard Sermons*, ed. Edward H. Sugden, 2 vols. (London: Epworth Press, 1921), vol. 2, 135. Sugden, among others, highlights King's influence.
so that he now “extended his hand” to other church forms and governments. Stillingfleet, like Episcopius and Chillingworth to their generation, demonstrated to Wesley the principles upon which communion should be formed. Stillingfleet’s argument, reasoned according to the method of differentiating between that which was theologically fundamental and that which was indifferent, certainly armed Wesley with a considerable, exemplary method for apologetically dealing with both his critics of the Revival and those of his brothers and sisters in it who were Calvinists. He could acknowledge that there were other true Christians in other true churches with differing “opinions” (touching indifferent matters) from those of the Church of England. Part and parcel with this enlightened view of church government came also either a heightened perception, a renewed conviction, or a fresh perspective of the role of the distinction between essentials and opinions. This distinction now became intrinsic to his appeal for union and cooperation among true Christians who agreed on the essentials but differed according to opinions.

Turning away from the Latitudinarians, we observe that John Wesley also encountered seventeenth century evangelicals in non-conformity who refused to accept the Act of Uniformity of 1662 but who also sought reconciliation by bifurcating theological matters. John Flavel professed that Christians were to live and die by their commitment on matters of faith while being prepared to yield on matters of mere opinion. In Richard Baxter’s pastoral exhortation to his congregation in the preface of Saints’ Everlasting Rest (one of John Wesley’s favorite books), the author utilized nearly half of his preface to appeal to them according to Rup. Meldenius’ aphorism, “We may have unity in things necessary, liberty in things unnecessary, and charity in all.”

In the last section of our investigation, we direct our attention to the question—what motivated John Wesley to adopt and employ the theological method of differentiating between fundamentals and non-fundamentals? What religious and theological situations evoked this particular response from him?

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42 Herbert Workman remarked that Stillingfleet’s Irenicum, which was published with an eye to a compromise with the Presbyterians, led Wesley to consider that the Church was constituted upon a broad and comprehensive basis, tolerant of different parties within its communion. Workman, The Place of Methodism, 29.

43 Wesley, ed., A Christian Library, Vol. 27: John Flavel, “A Discourse of the Causes and Cures of Mental Errors,” 295. Gerald Cragg mentions in his Introduction to Wesley’s Appeals that Flavel anticipated Wesley’s distinction between essential doctrines and non-essentials. While this is certainly true, we may not infer from this that Flavel was more than one influence among others.

As in the theological controversy between Episcopius and the Synod of Dort, and in the conflict between the Royalists and the Presbyterians in the seventeenth century, so in Wesley the ferment of controversy in which he was chronically embroiled gave impetus to such a method.

Of course, controversy alone did not necessitate recourse to the distinction between essentials and opinions. We want to explore more specifically why John Wesley seized upon this particular method as the way of resolving discord.

One prominent reason for considering why Wesley used this theological distinction was that it was an available and acceptable apologetic device. It was an expedient aid in the Methodist defense against the Anglican criticism that Methodists were not true Anglicans but odd “enthusiasts.” Since this criticism was as good as saying that Methodists were not, properly speaking, Christians, Wesley penned his *An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion* of 1743 and his *Farther Appeal* of 1745 to argue that in the main essential points Methodists were mainstream Anglicans and proper Christians. He deflected accusations, like Bishop Warburton’s, that the Methodists were just another erroneously fanatical and schismatic strain of Puritans. Wesley pointed out that the Methodists were different from the former Dissenters in that the Methodists did not have a “zeal” for “erroneous” opinions on things which were really no part of religion (surplices, etc.). On the contrary, he protested that Methodists stressed only what was necessary to salvation as undeniably contained in the Word of God. So, by making the distinction between what was necessary to salvation and what was opinion, Wesley could emphasize that Methodists were in true harmony with the essential theology and spirit of Anglicanism. By the same token, he attempted to divert attention from those “singularities” and opinions in which the Methodists were deviating from the typical Anglicanism of the day and in which they appeared to be dividing the church as the dissenters were accused of doing in the previous age.

What other reason may be suggested for Wesley’s response to the theological contentions by theological dichotomy? The Latitudinarian temper of Wesley’s age emphasized the very broad, general theological necessities while soft-pedaling the potentially volatile so-called “opinions.” In calling Wesley’s peculiar “enthusiasm” to account, some of

45Gerald Cragg mentions that Wesley cited his *Appeals* as valuable instruments in “promoting the intelligent goodwill.” Wesley, *Appeals*, 38. Also, Frank Baker affirms that John Wesley wanted to persuade those of the Established Church that the Methodists were an integral part of the Established Church, perhaps its most loyal members. Baker, *John Wesley and The Church of England*, 88.


his traditional Anglican critics appealed to him to forsake his opinions and return to the "uncontroverted truths of Christianity." As was consistent with his style of rebuttal, Wesley adopted his opponents' distinction in order to counter the argument and support his own case. Perhaps through such debate he became acquainted first-hand not only with its use but also with what a useful theological method it was in the minds of his Anglican critics. Therefore, he too employed the distinction as an Anglican of his age as a way to meet their minds and span the chasm that separated them.

For instance, in 1745 "John Smith" censured John Wesley for making instantaneous conversion his "most beloved opinion." Moreover, "John Smith" impugned him for the "uncontroverted truths of Christianity" which were "necessary to final salvation." Wesley responded by using "John Smith’s" dichotomy to return the volley. He assured "John Smith," “that no singularities are more, or near so much, insisted on by me as the general, uncontroverted truths of Christianity.” The Methodists preached what was fundamental, essential, and necessary to final salvation. By adopting the categories of the arguments of his Anglican adversaries, Wesley could demand to be judged on the very basis of their principles. The Methodists might have some peculiarities, Wesley gradually admitted, but these smaller matters of opinion ought not to be used to judge those who totally agreed in essentials with scripture and the church.

Perhaps another contributing reason for the attractiveness of this distinction to John Wesley had something to do with his temperament and vocation. He perceived himself as one who was quick to come to the point and who did not like "fluff"—the extraneous. This, coupled with the fact that he was an evangelist who had one solitary concern, to save souls and help them to grow in grace, perhaps predisposed him to theology distilled to its essence and immediately relevant to his main fundamental concern of present and final salvation.

Another major factor which encouraged John Wesley’s use of the theological distinction was the divisiveness of the evangelical leaders which threatened the Revival. Fortunately this met in John Wesley one who had a heightened sensitivity to the desires and will of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ demanded utter faithfulness from him: he must not shrink

50 Wesley, Letters, vol. 2, 64.
from seeking reconciliation with those who were his brothers and sisters. In his circular letter addressed to “Various Clergymen” (all the evangelical ministers of the Revival) in April 1764, Wesley stated that the falling out of the Revival’s clergymen had “prevented much good and occasioned much evil.” He then proceeded to enumerate a list of concerns regarding the infighting which gives us insight into the burdens which spurred him on to seek the way of conciliation. In the list, he related that the dissention of the evangelicals “grieved our spirits.” John Wesley was a man caught in a cross-fire. On the one hand, he was attacked and ostracized by many of the traditional Anglican clergy. On the other hand, he was suspected, even considered a non-Christian, by some of those he considered his brothers and sisters in the Revival. His letter implies his sense of isolation. He was acutely aware of the need to establish common ground, not only to “bless his soul,” but for the good of the work. He was keenly desirous that the evangelicals center themselves on the essentials in order that they might at least acknowledge and affirm one another’s status as children of God. As he wrote to James Rouquet in 1761, “How many and how great are the advantages which would flow from a general union, of those at least who acknowledge each other to be messengers of God.”

Moreover, Wesley had been finding that many in the Revival who were coming to salvation in Christ were of various denominational backgrounds. Seeing Anglicans, Presbyterians, Independents, Quakers, and even Roman Catholics respond in faith to Jesus Christ no doubt made him sensitive to the need to emphasize the common denominator. Therefore, he distinguished between those non-negotiable truths that were absolutely vital to a dynamic relationship with Jesus Christ and those non-essential things in which differences might be tolerated. Wesley was forced to acknowledge that persons from different religious backgrounds were kin, having been reborn of the same Father, Lord, and Spirit.

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54Ibid, vol. 4, 236; Wesley, Journal, vol. 5, 60. If there is any one letter which might epitomize John Wesley’s consistent desire regarding the use of the distinction in reconciling the theological differences of genuine Christians this letter is the most probable candidate. Indeed, his “A Letter to a Roman Catholic” is generally referred to as an example of his desire (Cf. Albert Outler, ed., John Wesley (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964, 492f). This is a commendable example of his desire to obtain reconciliation between genuine Christians, but it tends to go unnoticed that John Wesley’s Letters and Journals clearly record that the main purpose for which he employed the theological distinction was to achieve a reconciliation between the evangelicals of the Revival of which his letter to “Various Clergymen” is representative.
56Sudgen aserts that it was Wesley’s finding many devout Christians from other denominations on his journeys that opened his eyes to the existence of real Christians outside the Anglican Church. Wesley, Wesley’s Standard Sermons, vol. 2, 135.
Distinguishing between essentials and opinions was possibly also a defense mechanism to protect the Methodists under Wesley's care from Calvinism while nevertheless, still attempting to maintain brotherly and co-operative relations with the Calvinistic Methodists. Because Wesley asserted that he stressed the fundamentals and not disputable opinions (among which he classed predestination and the Calvinistic conception of imputed righteousness), he could exclude the preaching of predestination and similar doctrines from his societies on the ground that these were controversial opinions. This not only protected his societies from dangerous opinions, but also attempted to sidetrack issues that hampered evangelical union.

In his letter to "Various Clergymen," Wesley expressed concern over the fact that evangelical dissension over less significant doctrines had "weakened our hands." Their jealousies, pride, and misunderstandings were a hindrance to the great work in which they were all enraged. "What advange must this give to the common enemy!" exclaimed Wesley. He summarized his concern when he stated that he tolerated all persons in all things indifferent in order that he might gain the more converts to genuine, scriptural Christianity. If the evangelicals could unite in the essentials, then they could amass a "league offensive" to carry the war into the devil's own quarters.

John Wesley had pragmatic hopes that a loving attitude toward one another founded upon the essentials might encourage other ordained, evangelical ministers of the Church of England to enlist into the faltering, ordained section of the Wesleyan Methodist itinerancy. He increasingly felt that the key to reviving the Church of England was a united evangelical clergy.

Furthermore, the theological method of separating the essentials from the non-essentials offered the way for the evangelicals of the Revival to find agreement in combating the embarrassing and discrediting charge that the evangelicals were divided. As Wesley put it, a disunion "gave our common enemies huge occasion to blaspheme." In his Earnest Appeal, Wesley reprinted the common charge, "You cannot agree in your doctrines among yourselves. One holds one thing, and one another. Mr. Whitefield anathematizes Mr. Wesley; and Mr. Wesley anathematizes Mr. Whitefield."57

57Wesley, Letters, vol. 4, 236.
58Ibid, 146.
63Wesley, Letters, vol. 4, 236.
Lastly, John Wesley deplored the division among the leaders of the Revival and any who called themselves Christians out of his own deep faith in and love for Jesus Christ and His gospel. The evil tempers of jealousy, judgmental attitudes, slander, and so forth that were stirring among the Revival leaders and other Christians were a denial of the very message of salvation in Christ which he and the others claimed and preached. Punctiliously scrutinizing himself, others, and the Revival in the light of scripture, John Wesley thought it highly imprudent and wrong for any “who preach the essential gospel truths to stand aloof from each other.” He was ashamed that “those who were not only brethren in Christ but fellow labourers in His gospel had no more connexion or fellowship with each other than Protestants have with Papists.”65 To the evangelicals who excused their disunity because they could not trust one another he replied, “No matter whether we can or no. Thus far we must unite, trust or not; otherwise we sin against God.”66 On another front, rather than attack the Roman Catholic violence against the Methodists in Cork with an angry polemic, Wesley appealed to them in his “Letter to a Roman Catholic” to remember that they were all brothers and sisters who believed in the essence of the gospel.67

In conclusion, through the seventeenth century theological literature John Wesley had read, the distinction between theological essentials and theological opinions and its use in similar controversies in the previous age made its impression on him. Moreover, it was a typical device in the theological “atmosphere” and discussions of his own age. Therefore, to this eclectic, practical, no-nonsense evangelist,68 who had a scrupulous conscience and a single-eye to saving his own soul and those around him, this distinction offered a way to respond to the erupting criticisms and controversies of the Revival which would bless his own soul, bridge the chasm between Methodists and traditional Anglicans, ensure the well-being of his denominationally mixed societies, promote the gospel and guard its integrity, unify a fractured evangelical leadership, and, in general, hasten “the great work of God.”

65Wesley, Letters, vol. 4, 236.
66Ibid, 259.
68Outler, John Wesley, 119.