BOOK REVIEWS


Prayers based on systematic theology are a recognizable, if somewhat arcane genre, as witness the Prayers and Meditations of St. Anselm and the Prayers from Theology by Romano Guardini. In this context, this book of prayers must be considered not only as a devotional work, but in historical terms, as an interpretation of John Wesley's "Standard Sermons." Chilcote's project is in itself entirely apt, since sermons, by their own nature, must be assumed to intend to lead the hearer or reader into prayer as well as into other acts of discipleship. Wesley's "Standard Sermons," even when their homiletic dress clothes what are really theological essays, have a practical end of this kind. The author is eminently equipped for his undertaking, his doctoral and other published research having been into various aspects of Wesley history, and his teaching experience in Africa and the United States having been extensive and varied.

Each sermon is introduced with its text in NRSV form, and followed by Charles Wesley verses, retrieved for the purpose from the 1780 Collection or elsewhere. The "Standard Sermons" present any expositor with several decisions. The most obvious being the choice of which "canon" to go by—the 44 of Mr. Wesley's initial and final choice, or the 53 of the 19th-century British editor's choice, which has dominated American editions. Chilcote goes with the latter, but omits No. 53, on the death of Mr. Whitefield. That would have presented some unique problems, but also an opportunity: one thinks of the oral tradition in which Mr. Wesley, when asked if we should see Mr. Whitefield in heaven, said that we should not—because Mr. Whitefield will be so near the throne that we shall not see him for the glory. The choice of modern imagery to translate older styles is never simple: the only point where Chilcote's choice makes one uneasy is where he speaks of God dreaming (pp. 15, 132).

The prayers match the content and logic of the sermons well. Sometimes the author does not quite escape the risk of seeming to tell God what God already knows, but in every case the hymn verses assert the prayer character of the chapter. At some points, especially in "The Nature of Enthusiasm" and "Caution against Bigotry," the prayers match the sermons in eloquence and passion. This book is recommended as an introduction to John Wesley as interpreter of Christianity.

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Longenecker has carved out a specialty on the topic of his new book—outsider religion, movements typifying H. Richard Niebuhr's "Christ against culture," the religious left-wing, the radical reformation and its progeny. With such a focus he has shaped his major publications: *Piety and Tolerance: Pennsylvania German Religion, 1700-1850*; *Selma's Peacemaker: Ralph E. Smeltzer and Civil Rights Mediation; The Dilemma of Anabaptist Piety: Strengthening or Straining the Bonds of Community?*; and *Anabaptist Currents: History in Conversation with the Present.* He is currently at work on *The Brethren and the World Wars: A Source Book on the Church of the Brethren, 1914-1950.*

The volume under review enlarges the focus from outsider to mainstream religion and, in particular, to the mainstreaming of several movements that at one point claimed outsider status. Presbyterians, Methodists, and Baptists fall from grace into some kind of worldliness, roughly in that chronological order. Dunkers, Mennonites, and Quakers sustain and reframe their standards of purity. Longenecker traces out this story line with considerable subtlety but the presumptions implicit in my crude statement do operate. Outsider status functions as a norm and loss thereof as a kind of fall. Readers of Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* will recognize that Wesley and Methodism "belong" to the "Christ the Transformer of Culture" type and that Longenecker holds Methodism to sectarian standards and expectations that by no means exhaust its ethic and piety, indeed, do not express it adequately.

Still his focus does afford an interesting, informative, and important perspective. It illuminates early Methodism. And it helps explain Methodist change, why sectors of the movement experienced that change as violation, and why revolts and schisms occurred.

Longenecker fits the Methodist saga within an overview of Shenandoah, where religious pluralism akin to that of Pennsylvania prevailed, albeit compromised by slavery, within a colony/state with a clear power center east of the mountains and, after the Revolution, with the residue of an Anglican establishment and a putative Tidewater center. He credits all six religious movements with an outsider orientation during the colonial period. Methodism's outsidersness derived both from Wesley and from the way it negotiated its way into the American environment. So it appealed to the poor, slaves, women, those on the margin. Its practices disdained the patterns of gentility (as worldliness), pitting it against colonial structures of power and privilege. Its class and society structure provided an alternative to the social order of American society. Its
revivalistic preaching, love feasts, quarterly conferences, and later camp meetings elicited and sanctioned emotional displays that challenged existing norms of religiosity. And, of course, it functioned as a critique of Anglicanism, the established regime in colonial Virginia and something of an empty center after the Revolution.

Longenecker narrates the changes in Shenandoah religion in terms of successive revolutions that convulsed American society as a whole—the American, Methodist, Market, and Southern. Each of these revolutions threatened religious integrity and outsider status, obliging groups to capitulate to revolutionary expectations or redefine their practices. Methodists play complex, important, but not heroic role here. Emerging as outsiders during the American Revolution, they led the revivalistic or evangelical transformation of America. Thereby they “fall” into the mainstream, a banishment symbolized in easy appropriation of the popular forms of respectability (architecture and apparel especially) and in embrace of slavery and the Southern military cause.

This “outsider” narration of Methodism’s growth, mainstreaming, and bourgeoisification closely approximates that held by Methodist reformers, particularly those who founded the Wesleyan and Free Methodist churches. Longenecker renders it splendidly.

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Understanding John Wesley’s theology requires grasping the whole of his sermonic writings. Several editors, such as Thomas Oden and Clare Weakley, have tried with good intentions to translate selected Wesley sermons into a modern idiom in the last generation or so, with limited success. Prof. Kinghorn also tries in this book to make the “standard” sermons of Wesley “understandable to modern ears” by updating the vocabulary, use of scripture, grammar, syntax, spelling, punctuation, and style. At the same time, the editor seeks “to communicate the precise meaning” of what Wesley wrote. The editor provides a short introduction to each sermon, giving some helpful comments upon the context and design of the piece. For these, he relies in part upon the work of Albert C. Outler and others in the Bicentennial Edition of Wesley’s Works.
This first volume (of three?) contains twenty of the sermons that the British Methodists have deemed "standard" in one way or another—the rationale in the Introduction is wonderfully ambiguous and woefully incomplete (11). By selecting this pre-determined body of fifty-two sermons for the project, the editor has proposed a manageable project but also has ignored nearly two-thirds of Wesley's sermonic writing, including all of his work during the last twenty years of his life.

Wesley himself recognized the constant fluidity of language and the need for updating our comprehension of older texts. His *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* (1755) did not simply rely upon the King James Version of the previous century but provided a text that he modified in the light of both the original Greek Testament and the contemporary language of his day. One must recognize, however, that every translation, whether it be from one language to another or from one period to another, will entail interpretation by the translator. To translate the "precise meaning" of Wesley's text into modern English in a manner that would be universally accepted is as impossible as to provide a modern translation of the Bible that everyone would agree contained the "literal" meaning of the scriptural text. These translations of Wesley's sermons, therefore, provide us with the yet another translator's interpretation of Wesley's meaning.

Rather than use Wesley's quotations of the biblical text, which he often adjusted slightly to fit his own understanding and emphasis, the editor has designed to substitute the NRSV. This obliteration of Wesley's adaptations is not consistent or complete, however, since the text in this volume simply ignores some biblical quotations and transforms them within the modern transliteration of the text. At times, the editor combines multiple biblical quotations into one quotation without differentiation or comment. The limited proposal outlined in the Introduction, to change 18th-century terms that have lost their meaning, is perhaps the major reason for this edition, but it does not prepare the reader for the wholesale paraphrasing of the Wesley text that occurs throughout the volume. The list of sixteen such terms at the beginning of the work include some that persons unfamiliar with 18th-century literature might misconstrue. But the list also contains some words or phrases that need no change ("an increase of" to "more") and some that have questionable translations ("analogy of faith" to "evangelical system of belief"). Proceeding through the book, one wonders if many of the new phrases (e.g., "is not the same faith as a heathen") in fact mean the same thing as Wesley's ("is not barely the faith of a heathen").

Indeed, the editor himself ignores the "need" for the updating process itself in the prefatory comments to the first sermon, where to make a
point he quotes eight lines from another of the sermons, using Wesley's original language (34; the "updated" text is on 286). A closer look at the "revised" selection reveals that three dozen of the eight dozen words have been changed. In some cases, the apparent meaning or nuance of Wesley's language has been altered ("melancholy remark" to "thoughtful assertion"; "a setter forth" to "an innovator," "they cry out" to "is only teaching them about"), and in other cases, a new word has been provided unnecessarily ("hazard" to "danger," "esteemed" to "judged," "these things" to "it").

The page of revised text that follows this section of the sermon contains a dozen or so additional changes that are at best unnecessary and at worst questionable, including "faithful" to "trustworthy"; "plain meaning" to "clear meaning"; "perceivable" to "discernible"; "to mention" to "to offer"; "natural man" to "unconverted people"; "the praise of God" to "God's approval"; "directly implies" to "involves." There are, in many other places also, differences in meaning between what Wesley says (e.g., defining "circumcision of the heart" as a "disposition of soul" called "holiness") and what the new text says (calling it an "inclination of the soul toward... holiness").

The most telling, and perhaps agreeable, comments of the editor in this edition come in the Introduction, which states unequivocally that Wesley's ideas in the sermons "are straightforward and easy to grasp... . The reader is never left in doubt as to the point that Wesley makes... . Ease of comprehension is a mark of Wesley's sermons" (23). The presumption is important: Methodists need to read Wesley's sermons. The implicit question thus raised by the editor is, why do we need this modern paraphrase?

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