

**WHENCEFORTH WESLEY: JOHN WESLEY'S
THEOLOGY FROM THEN TO NOW**

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During 2003 the Methodist family remembered the 300th anniversary of John Wesley's birth. Methodists reflected on his life, ministry, theology, influence, and legacy. As one reviews the position of John Wesley's theology over the 19th and 20th centuries, one observes, particularly in the Methodist Episcopal Church and one of its descendants The United Methodist Church, a rather significant altering of the assessment, understanding, and interpretation of John Wesley's theology. Consideration of this shift over the last two centuries is the subject of this paper. We conclude with observations on past and present interpretations of John Wesley.

In the autumn 2002, while my family and I were on sabbatical in England, the BBC ran a several month public contest to determine the hundred most important Britons ever. One would expect the list to include Isaac Newton, William Shakespeare, Queen Elizabeth, Lord Nelson, William Wilberforce, Florence Nightingale, Winston Churchill, and Margaret Thatcher. The inclusion of Cliff Richard, Johnny Rotten, John Lennon, and in the top ten, Princess Di, was surprising. Finding John Wesley inserted at 50th place is heartening to the Methodists. Indeed, when one surveys the list of those who have most affected western culture John Wesley must be included in the list.

A British schoolteacher once told me that when one teaches the 18th century, one can absolutely not ignore John Wesley, even if one wishes one could! John Wesley's young friend, Alexander Knox, commented after Wesley's death, "John Wesley was not a man to be forgotten." Certainly not either by more than two hundred international Methodist scholars who gathered in the summer 2002 at Christ Church [College], Oxford, England to interact on all theological things Wesleyan. How many individuals in history garner this much interest more than 200 years after their deaths? Fair to say, John Wesley has made a sizable splash in history. He was one of the most recognizable, if not controversial, figures of the 18th century. Appraisals of him, both positive and negative, are embarrassingly grand. President Woodrow Wilson acclaimed, "Unquestionably this man altered and in his day governed the spiritual history of England and the English-

speaking race on both sides of the sea"¹ English Prime Minister William Gladstone declared, John Wesley's "life and acts have taken their place in the religious history not only of England, but of Christendom."² French historian Elie Halevy even theorized England was spared a violent counterpart to the French revolution by the widespread effects of the 18th-century Evangelical Revival.³ Nineteenth-century critic Matthew Arnold attributed America's intellectual deficiency to so many Methodists following John Wesley's third-rate mind.

At the least and most tangibly, John Wesley's legacy includes the tens of millions of adherents in Methodist and Wesleyan churches worldwide, including perhaps the most respected social service institution in America, the Salvation Army. Indeed, John Wesley was a significant and blessed instrument in the 18th-century worldwide spiritual and theological awakening. Thousands were reclaimed from a life of apathy and sin, and nurtured in a holy life of faith and love.

God's aim in raising up the Methodists, John Wesley believed, was "to reform the nation, more particularly the Church" The first Methodist Conference in 1744 translated this in its exhortation given to the "Helper," "You have nothing to do, but to save souls."⁴ He professed to the Bishop of London, "Our one aim is to proselyte sinners to repentance, the servants of the devil to serve the living and true God."⁵ He declared, "We are called to propagate Bible religion through the land—that is, faith working by love, holy tempers and holy lives."⁶ A part of this mission was also the re-awakening and re-energizing of certain doctrines dormant in the church. As his spiritual descendants noted just after his death, "His great object was to revive the obsolete doctrines and extinguished spirit of the Church."⁷ On his tombstone his epitaph read in part, "This Great Light arose... to *revive, enforce, and defend* The Pure, Apostolical Doctrines and Practices of the Primitive Church."⁸ In his memorial sermon for John Wesley at the

¹Woodrow Wilson: President of the United States, *John Wesley's Place in History* (New York: The Abingdon Press, An Address Delivered at Wesleyan University on the Occasion of the Wesley Bicentennial), 36.

²A. Skevington Wood, *The Burning Heart: John Wesley, Evangelist* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1967), 281.

³Elie Halevy, *The Birth of Methodism in England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 1-29; Bernard Semmel, *The Methodist Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1973), 3.

⁴The Late Rev. John Wesley, A. M., *Minutes of the Methodist Conferences, from The First, Held in London* (London: Thomas Cordeux, 1812), 1,9,15.

⁵John Wesley, *The Letters of the Reverend John Wesley, A.M.*, ed. John Telford, 9 vols. (London: The Epworth Press, 1960), 2, 289.

⁶Wesley, *Letters*, 6, 291.

⁷Henry Moore, *The Life of the Rev. John Wesley, A. M.*, 2 vols. (London: Kershaw 1824-1825), 2,453.

⁸Robert Southey, *The Life of Wesley; and The Rise and Progress of Methodism* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1876), 586.

Methodist conference in 1791, Joseph Benson reiterated Wesley's "grand doctrines": depravity of human nature, the atonement of Christ, the influences of the Spirit of God, justification, sanctification, and eternal life.⁹ As decades passed, these doctrines became subject to controversy, reinterpretation, and revision. As we turn to the following discussion, one acknowledges beforehand that the theological landscape is often more nuanced than the broad scope aim of this paper of identifying emerging shifts.

I

One hundred fifty years from the inception of the Evangelical Revival in the late 1730s, the theology of Methodism's parent generally held sway in American Methodism. John Wesley's *Works*, John Fletcher's *Checks against Antinomianism*, and Richard Watson's *Theological Institutes* were the primary sources for first generation American Methodists.¹⁰ As the 19th century developed, their sons and daughters began to consider other theological sources. By the last quarter of the 19th century, eminent Methodist scholars were neither besotted by, nor felt beholden to, John Wesley. Shifts away from doctrinal understandings critical to John Wesley's theological package picked up pace by the last quarter of the 19th century. Though Professor Henry Sheldon of Boston University School of Theology noted by 1906 no serious discussions had been held on changing the creed; by that time there was growing critique of and divergence from John Wesley's theology. In 1903 Professor William North Rice of Wesleyan University wrote of the affects of the age of science on Christian doctrine. L. W. Munhall, a lettered clergyperson of the Methodist Episcopal Church, perceived a "drift" away from the "traditional beliefs" of historic Methodism among leading Methodist educational schools.¹¹ Robert Chiles noted as one turned the corner to the 20th century, there was a movement away from John Wesley's "classical Protestant orthodoxy."¹²

A confluence of factors allowed opportunity for revisions in John Wesley's theology and an alteration of his standing and status in American Methodism. With America's westward expansion and encounter with the bitterly harsh realities of brute nature, Methodism began to confront contextu-

⁹Joseph Benson, *A Sermon Preached on the Sunday Evening Preceding the Opening of the Conference of the Preachers Lately in Connexion With The Rev. John Wesley at Manchester July 26, 1791*, (Birmingham: J. Thompson 1791), 18.

¹⁰Leland H. Scott, "Methodist Theology in America in the Nineteenth Century," *Religion in Life* 25 (1955), 89.

¹¹Henry C. Sheldon, 'Changes in Theology Among American Methodists,' *American Journal of Theology* 10 (1906), 31; William North Rice, *Christian Faith in an Age of Science* (New York: A. C. Armstrong and Son, 1903); Milton S. Terry, *Methodism and Biblical Criticism* reviewed by L. W. Munhall (Germantown, Philadelphia, Pa), 1, 52, 58.

¹²Robert E. Chiles, "Methodist Apostasy: From Free Grace to Free Will," *Religion in Life* 28, (1958), 438.

al, philosophical, and theological issues peculiar to the American context.¹³ How did one square rugged, naturalistic individualism, and the need of self-reliance for wilderness survival with the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith? If one is not saved by works, but by grace, how does one view ingenuity and human effort when it comes to getting over the Rockies? Methodist scholars who were studying in Germany sought philosophical methodologies that could help them articulate a natural theology in response to the frontier experience.

Though Methodists in the 19th century were aware of the increasing challenge of biblical criticism, science, and evolution, the most determinative factor at the time impacting Methodism early on was its continuing debate with Calvinism. The central controversy concerned the relationship between redemptive grace and human, moral freedom.¹⁴

After encountering these challenges, by the last quarter of the 19th century revision of Wesley's theological essentials was underway. Methodist seminary theologians criticized his conception of Scripture, original sin, the person and work of Jesus Christ, the grace/free will dialectic, and personal salvation. Little was left untouched. Moreover, the fire of these originally held doctrines was dying down. There was also a growing confidence in American Methodist thinking that it knew better about the contemporary American context than John Wesley.

More specifically, we can consider how American Methodists began to diverge from Wesley relative to his essential theological doctrines. Take the issue of the conception of Scripture. In 1906 Boston professor Henry Sheldon pointed out that Methodists knew of a conflict between two views of Scripture. The traditional view of John Wesley accepted Scripture as inerrant and infallible. The critical view, the "broader view" as Henry Sheldon put it, understood that Scripture contained materials for a complete religious and ethical system. This "broader view" also renounced scriptural inerrancy and infallibility. That Methodists at the turn of the 20th century were debating the infallible authority of Scripture is indicative of the theological shift occurring. L. W. Munhall pointed out that scholars at Methodist schools, particularly professor Milton Terry, asserted a fallible and errant Scripture as a "*sufficient guide to the knowledge of salvation.*"¹⁵

Until the end of the 19th century, Methodists had adhered to John Wesley's view of inerrancy. He declared in his *Farther Appeal*, "Sir, if the Bible is a lie, I am a very madman as you can conceive."¹⁶ In arguing against Mr. Jenyns's assertion that the biblical writers made mistakes, John Wesley

¹³Scott, 87.

¹⁴Scott, 89; Chiles, 439.

¹⁵Sheldon, 32; Munhall, 21, 46.

¹⁶John Wesley, *The Oxford Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, Editor-in-chief Frank Baker, Vol.11: *The Appeals to Men of Reason and Religion and Certain Related Open Letters* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 175.

avowed, "If there be one falsehood in that book, it did not come from the God of truth."¹⁷ Scott Jones describes John Wesley's logic on this point. Wesley argued that since the Bible is authored by God, and God cannot lie or make mistakes, there are no mistakes in the Bible.¹⁸

Lest one think that Wesley's position was inevitable for one of his age, affirming biblical inviolability was not the only intellectual posture known and available to John Wesley in the 18th century. A "tidal" shift to the critical approach to Scripture was already underway in the Age of Enlightenment.¹⁹ He was certainly not unaware of the critical views espoused by the likes of Rousseau, Voltaire, and Hume who rejected Scripture as authoritative and God-authored.

In any case, by the twilight of the 19th century, Methodist scholars were questioning the necessity of maintaining Wesley's position. Moreover, this "broader" view of Scripture reached beyond scholars. It was widely distributed through the pastorate and through the Methodist Book Concern. With its hold on Protestant scholarship, Sheldon predicted, it had a future with promise.²⁰

Wesley's position regarding Holy Scripture was not the only doctrine to receive renewed evaluation. His decisive doctrine of "original sin" received telling criticism as being confusing and contradictory. He had affirmed original sin was both "imputed" and "inherent." By using the term "original sin imputed," current among moderate Calvinist theologians like Dr. Jennings and Dr. Watts, Wesley referred to the guilt and penalty of Adam's sin (but not his act) being reckoned to every descendant as sin. Namely, he said, every person is guilty not *for* the act but, in some sense, *by* the act. He declared, "God does not look upon infants, as innocent, but as involved in the guilt of Adam's sin."²¹

On the other hand, Wesley referred to "original sin inherited" as the corruption of human nature which occurs after the Fall. Following Adam and Eve's sin, humankind suffered the privation of original righteousness as well as the acquisition of a corrupting essence, a bent and inclination to sin. No faculty of the soul was left unaffected by the depravation.

¹⁷John Wesley, *The Journal of The Rev. John Wesley, A. M.*, ed. Nehemiah Curnock, stand. ed., 8 vols. (London: Epworth Press, 1938), 6, 117.

¹⁸Scott J. Jones, *John Wesley's Conception and Use of Scripture* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1995), 23, 216; Howe Octavius Thomas, "John Wesley's Understanding of the Distinction Between Theological Essentials and Opinions" (unpublished M. A. Thesis, University of Bristol, 1984), 106f.

¹⁹Jones, 26.

²⁰Sheldon, 35-37; Munhall, 52.

²¹John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson, 3rd ed., 14 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 9, 316.

Indeed, by intention “original sin imputed” was not stressed in preaching; nevertheless, it remained, contrary to Randy Maddox’s recent assessment, a fixture of his theology.²² Historically, Methodist scholars have understood this to be the case. Witness the fact the doctrine was cited as causing problems to Methodists in their arguments with Calvinists. Some 19th century Methodist scholars argued one could not maintain free personal agency with the doctrine of “original sin imputed.” If one did, persons would be guilty for what they had not done.²³

Ironically, John Wesley had countered this very argument proffered by Pelagian Dr. John Taylor of Norwich. In his treatise on original sin in 1757, Wesley asserted that God “imputes Adam’s first sin (not meaning Adam’s actual commission of the sin) to all mankind.”²⁴ Accordingly, 19th century Methodist scholars conceived Wesley as being inconsistent.²⁵ To illustrate, Professor John Miley of Drew averred it was contrary to Wesley’s system which repudiated arbitrary sovereignty. He urged it be dropped from the Methodist church’s *Second Article of Religion*.²⁶ Professor Sheldon reported the doctrine of hereditary guilt was all but dead in the last half of the 19th century, having no standing in principal theological schools. He believed it would not be resuscitated!²⁷

The last two decades of the 19th century also showed some cracks developing in the traditional Wesleyan christology. First, contrary to Wesley, Methodist scholars asserted Jesus Christ was not free of limitations, particularly in his knowledge.²⁸ Second, Wesley viewed the atonement through the satisfaction theory with a judicial, penal perspective. A sacrifice was rendered to God and his ethical nature compensating for humankind’s sins and allaying God’s wrath.²⁹ In the late 19th and early 20th century, some Methodist theologians showed timidity toward the penal character of the satisfaction theory which Wesley espoused. Eschewing the cross’s objective reality, some argued there was no atoning virtue in the physical transaction between the Father and Son.³⁰

²²Professor Sheldon reports the doctrine of hereditary guilt was all but dead in the last half of the nineteenth century. Implicit in this acknowledgement was the acceptance among scholars at the time that the doctrine of hereditary guilt was an integral element of John Wesley’s theology. See, Sheldon, 38f; compare Harold Lindstrom’s analysis, Harold Lindstrom, *Wesley and Sanctification: A Study in the Doctrine of Salvation* (London: The Epworth Press, 1956), 40-44; Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood Press, 1994), 74f.

²³John Miley, *Systematic Theology*, 2 vols. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1989), 1, 520.

²⁴John Wesley, *Works*, 9, 409f.

²⁵Scott, 93.

²⁶Miley, 1:522-27; Sheldon, 39.

²⁷Sheldon, 39.

²⁸Sheldon, 39.

²⁹Thomas, 152.

³⁰Sheldon, 42

In place of John Wesley's satisfaction theory, Miley argued for Grotius's view that Jesus' death was necessary to secure the restoration of God's governmental order.³¹ Miley's position was integrated into the Methodist Course of Study materials so that not a few people began to consider this the Methodist view.³² Moreover, a greater appreciation of the moral influence theory was developing which affirmed Christ's death as an example of love.

This Methodist theologizing about the cross demonstrates an interesting counterpoint occurring at the borders of the 20th century. Accompanying the lessening of the necessity of the objective value of the cross for forgiveness was increased attention to the necessity of the role of human freedom in salvation. Robert Chiles observed that late 19th-century anthropological interests replaced Wesley's soteriological interest. While for Wesley human freedom was considered within the context of Jesus Christ's atonement and saving grace, Alfred Knudson, for example, assigned freedom to the order of creation.³³

How did John Wesley's dialectic of grace and free will fare in the 19th century? Throughout most of the century under the influence of Watson's *Institutes*, Wesley's dialectic was generally maintained. Wesley seemed to maintain two contrary doctrines at once. Grace is sovereign and God's gift is given in Jesus Christ. Humans cannot work, will, do, merit, or project themselves forward. All effort and merit is Jesus Christ's alone and his grace is offered to all. Whatever else is true, humans have no power to choose the things of God; yet, at the same time, persons are responsible to accept God's grace given. Indeed, most rebuff the grace offered, but some with God's empowering grace receive.³⁴

So, Wesley maintained this holy antinomy that God does everything though humans are still responsible.³⁵ Contrarily, in dialectic confrontation with the American frontier philosophy, and Calvinism and God's sovereignty, 19th-century Methodists thought they needed to resolve this tension in a neat and tidy systematic way.³⁶ As the century wore on, Methodist scholars weighted the balance of the tension away from grace and toward responsible human freedom. For example, Borden Parker Bowne, Boston University philosopher, and theologian Albert Knudson affirmed that the mark of humanness is the human endowment of metaphysical freedom. Without this natural intrinsic freedom, one could not be considered human.³⁷ Inherent in this human freedom must be the power to choose if true responsibility is to exist. Until this choice, there is neither guilt nor merit.³⁸

³¹Miley, 2: 155-94; see, L. W. Grensted, *A Short History of the Doctrine of the Atonement* (London: University of Manchester, 1920), 293.

³²Sheldon, 41.

³³Chiles, 448

³⁴Thomas, 132.

³⁵Chiles, 440.

³⁶Chiles, 443.

³⁷Chiles, 446.

³⁸Chiles, 443f.

Notice the contrast between Wesley and Knudson. Whereas, Wesley held that human nature is intrinsically totally depraved and original freedom is lost and the will bound, Knudson avowed human freedom is part and parcel of human nature. To choose is to be human. While Wesley stressed human insufficiency and Christ's gracious ability, Knudson accented human capacity. Moreover, Knudson refocused Wesley's strong soteriological interest on anthropology.³⁹

In the late 19th century scholars took issue with a cluster of doctrines associated with Wesley's understanding of personal salvation. First, there was stress on "conversion" as a distinct crisis in conscious experience. In his own day, Wesley was repeatedly attacked for (a) maintaining justification and regeneration were instantaneously given, and (b) generally accompanied by an inner, experiential testimony of the Holy Spirit that Jesus loved *me* and died for *me*. Alias "John Smith" disputed that faith was given in an instant ("momentary illapse") and was a "perceptible inspiration" — the sudden inspiration of the Holy Spirit's inner testimony. Wesley argued strongly that it was. Smith countered that faith and growth in grace were progressive.⁴⁰

A century after Wesley, Methodists still taught that one entered the kingdom of heaven by a distinct crisis experience. Nevertheless, Professor Sheldon expectantly judged that the church was beginning to recognize the value of gradual nurture as opposed to sudden conversion. Children from an early age must be taught the error of practical unbelief and alienation from the heavenly Father. One detects in Sheldon, like Wesley's sparing partner "John Smith," coolness to "instant decisions" and "radical transformations." Sheldon was more comfortable with what he called "the gentler means of Christian nurture" which were "receiving enlarged appreciation" among Methodists.⁴¹

In tandem with the lessening of instantaneous saving faith was the drift away from assurance as an inner impression of the Holy Spirit that confirmed one's salvation. The rising trend considered assurance more as an ongoing, continuous fact in a vital Christian life.⁴²

When Christian perfection was considered, there was a very marked change in Methodists' appraisal of Wesley's unique teaching. Though the doctrine had been maintained through most of the 19th century by persons such as Nathan Bangs, Minor Raymond, and Daniel Steele, by the last quarter of the century it was a spent movement in the Methodist Episcopal churches. Wesley had urged that following the moment of justification and regeneration, a second gracious work of the Spirit took away our bent to sin-

³⁹Chiles, 448.

⁴⁰Wesley, *Letters*, 2, 61ff.

⁴¹Sheldon, 50.

⁴²Sheldon, 50.

ning. The Holy Spirit bestowed a desire to love God and others singularly with all one's heart, soul, mind, and strength. Though the regenerate believers are holy, yet they are not holy altogether until brought to entire sanctification.⁴³

By the end of the 19th century entire sanctification was only the specialty of a school within the church and not property of the whole church. The majority of pastors did not preach it. Evidence of its failing hold on the Methodist Episcopal Church came not only from within the church, but from those such as the Wesleyans, Free Methodists, Nazarenes, and the Salvation Army, who felt compelled to exit because of this doctrinal failure. Distinguished theologians freely dissented from Wesley's view and offered their own revisions of the doctrine. Professor Sheldon commented that though eminent persons in the church may not have voiced their opinion, they had the "chilling suspicion, not to say a downright conviction, that Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfection is 'not in its proper terms a workable doctrine.'"⁴⁴

II

The 19th century's critical posture toward Wesley's theology laid down the tracks for the direction of the 20th and 21st centuries. Leading Methodist scholars and church leaders have neither felt compelled to be in Wesley's strait-jacket nor have they been bound by his theology based upon his past stature and authority. In 1881 Vanderbilt theologian, T. O. Summers, was sensitive to the *New York Times* criticism that the British and American Ecumenical Conference in 1881 avoided doctrinal discussion. He replied, "We are not confined in John Wesley's straight jacket....we believe no dogma merely because Wesley affirmed it. ...we reject many of his views."⁴⁵

Modern American Methodist scholars were certain they knew better than Wesley about American needs in a changing theological context and relative to modern intellectual challenges (after all, they had been studying in Germany!). Hence, the liberalizing trend begun in the later 19th century proceeded apace in the 20th. Drew University church historian Kenneth Rowe notes, "liberal Protestantism" caught up with the Methodists in the 1890s.⁴⁶

With the rise of critical historiography, scholars have increasingly purposed to submit Wesley's writings and theology to historical critique. Positively, this has increasingly brought an intentional desire among

⁴³Sheldon, 43.

⁴⁴Sheldon, 47ff.

⁴⁵David C. Shipley, "The Development of Theology in American Methodism in the Nineteenth Century," *The London Quarterly and Holborn Review* 184 Sixth Series 28 (1959), 260.

⁴⁶Kenneth E. Rowe, ed., *The Place of Wesley in the Christian Tradition* (Metuchen, N.J.: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1976), 2.

Methodists to study Wesley with accepted standards of historiography and with a critical eye.⁴⁷ In the 20th century, scholars sought to investigate more analytically such things as sources important to him; his own historical, philosophical, theological and cultural context; commentators both favorable and unfavorable to him and their contexts; and the various periods of his life (early, middle and late years), not always on the surface easy to harmonize.

As revisionist interpretations picked up momentum in the late 19th century and challenged classical, theological understandings of Wesley, they sparked new studies about him in the 20th century. George Cell, professor of historical theology at Boston University, marked the beginning of a movement to “relocate” Wesley which has ensued to date. Cell noted the reason for his studies, “The radical revision of the tradition about Wesley outlined in these essays has been therefore in the first place an event in my own experience.”⁴⁸ Cell noted the tendency to reject the Evangelical Revival as contributing any influential idea to modern Christian thought. In order to find out what Christianity is, one must take a detour through German speculative philosophy and liberal theology.⁴⁹

In 1935 Cell assessed his own time as having the “grace sickness” against which Wesley had reacted in his own day. Cell embarked on a fresh study of Wesley thinking Wesley could be serviceable to a renaissance of Christian faith.⁵⁰ He saw in the Wesleyan movement an evangelical reaction against the dominant semi-humanist, semi-Pelagian Anglicanism and a return to the faith of the early Reformers.⁵¹

Studies of Wesley commenced by scholars with other theological commitments, each trying to locate him in the scholar’s own theological paradigm. The Neo-orthodox traced Wesley to the Continental Reformers; Schmidt and Towlson to Continental Pietism; Jean Orcibal to the western mystical tradition; Robert Monk and John Newton to English Puritanism; Leo Cox, George Turner, and Mildred Winkopp to the holiness tradition; Ole Borgen, Rattenbury, Rupp, and Outler to the “Anglican in earnest.” Bob Tuttle and David DuPlessis have seen him as a model for charismatics and Bernard Semmel, E. P. Thompson, and Reginald Ward as a social revolutionary. Maximin Piette and John Todd viewed him through Roman Catholic eyes and, more recently, Ted Jennings sees socialist affinities in Wesley resembling a liberationist. Allchin, Ward, and of late, Randy Maddox, have tried to demonstrate a resemblance in Wesley to Eastern Orthodoxy.⁵² And everybody wants to say, “Will the real John Wesley please stand up.”

⁴⁷Cell, ix.

⁴⁸Cell, v.

⁴⁹Cell, 17-22.

⁵⁰Cell, 37.

⁵¹Cell, 17-22.

⁵²Rowe, 3.

Indeed, people have been seeing all kind of things in John Wesley. Let me select a cluster of particular instances from the middle to the late 20th century which have continued and advanced in their own way the 19th-century divergence from the theological understanding native to John Wesley.

Relative to subjective soteriology, Maximin Piette, the French Roman Catholic historian, is best known for arguing in 1937 against seeing Wesley's spiritual experience in the spring 1738 as a "conversion." He contended college-aged John did not have grievous sins warranting a "conversion." Wesley had remained faithful in his religious duties. Moreover, he maintained that Wesley was not passing from a state of sin to a state of justifying grace, but moving from lesser perfection to higher perfection.⁵³

This view has had "legs." In keeping with Piette's argument, Albert Outler, the late venerable Wesley theologian, concluded that Wesley was converted in 1725, thirteen years prior to Aldersgate. This is evidenced, he maintained, in Wesley's journal when he said, "I resolved to dedicate *all* my life to God, *all* my thought and words and actions...." Outler's verdict: "A conversion if ever there was one."⁵⁴

Recent Wesley authorities, Richard Heitzenrater and Randy Maddox, among others, are sympathetic to this position asserting that Wesley already had "inward religion" (not works-righteousness) prior to 1738 such that his life was not in stark contrast to his life after 1738.⁵⁵ Scholarly fashion for sometime has seen John Wesley as already a genuine, "Christian altogether" long before Aldersgate. Consequently, Aldersgate is perceived as one more spiritual experience along the way of salvation.⁵⁶

Seeming legitimization of the late 19th-century Methodist theologians' rejection of Wesley's avowal of an instantaneous, critical moment of justification/regeneration is given support by contemporary critical Wesley scholars, supposedly right out of his own experience. This re-interpretation of his experience is arrived at by presupposing a model of soteriology which is neither Protestant nor Reformation nor, one might add, historically Wesleyan. It assumes either (a) a generic view of conversion as a change from one thing or condition to another, or (b) a Roman Catholic view of conversion which is seen as occurring at baptism, or (c) the view espoused by William James of a spiritual development of the "once born" which is gradual.⁵⁷ As was exemplified in the 19th century, this view is accompanied by the softening of the whole traditional Wesleyan nexus of total depravity answered by instantaneous justification/regeneration by the atoning merits of Christ through saving faith.

⁵³Maximin Piette, *John Wesley in the Evolution of Protestantism* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1937), 244.

⁵⁴Albert Outler, ed., *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 7.

⁵⁵Randy L. Maddox, ed., *Aldersgate Reconsidered* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1990), 58.

⁵⁶Maddox, *Aldersgate*, 145.

⁵⁷Maddox, *Aldersgate*, 143.

Another example in the late 20th century of the re-appraisal of John Wesley's soteriology is demonstrated in Randy Maddox's erudite and nuanced book, *Responsible Grace*. Following up Albert Outler's work and his sensitivities to ecumenism, Maddox argues that John Wesley agrees more with Eastern soteriology than with Western, Latin soteriology. That is, the western church of the Roman Catholic Empire emphasized sin as guilt and its consequent absolution. The eastern church stressed sin not as guilt but as disease from which one needed therapeutic healing. Maddox states that Wesley, "is indeed best understood as one fundamentally committed to the therapeutic view of Christian life."⁵⁸ Interestingly, the result and ramifications of this interpretation amounts to a regurgitation of the late 19th century's gradual sloughing off of the whole traditional nexus of personal salvation which had up to that point been affirmed of Wesley. That is, the awareness of original sin with both concomitant corruption *and* guilt remedied by the punctiliar event of juridical justification *and* regeneration, confirmed by the immediate testimony of the Holy Spirit in one's heart, is given short-shrift. In heightening the eastern church paradigm, he has diminished, if not eradicated, the Protestant, Reformation paradigm. Maddox, and others like him, has not overcome the Catholic/Protestant dialectic that has bedeviled the modern theological location of John Wesley.⁵⁹

Through critical, historical analysis, the dominant scholarly activity in Wesley's theology in the 20th century has continued the 19th century movement away from Wesley's native theological understanding. In regards to holiness, excepting the holiness parties within and outside the Methodism, north and south, there was by the early 20th century little appetite in the church for Wesley's doctrine of sinful perfection. Since the 1970s Wesley scholars have revisited the doctrine of sanctification and found it could be historicized. Taken out of the context of the total depravity/repentance/justification/regeneration matrix, it can, with historicist squinting, be used in the service of socio-politico-ethical transformation and, more of the moment, liberation theology.

⁵⁸Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 23.

⁵⁹One of the overriding visions Randy Maddox has for his interpretation of John Wesley in the late twentieth century is to see in him the promise for healing the divide between Eastern and Western Christianity. An exalted vision, this. One wonders John Wesley's own assessment of this as the culminating mission & vision of himself? He, a vehicle to reconcile Eastern & Western Christianity? He would be pleased if it occurred; yet would not his ardent interest be in knowing also how many bishops, archbishops, metropolitans, and patriarchs were justified and regenerated in the process? How many were expecting to be made perfect in love in this life? Rhetorically asking what is the 'end of all ecclesiastical order,' John Wesley asserted, 'Is it not to bring souls from the power of Satan to God and to build them up in His fear and love? Order, then, is so far valuable as it answers these ends; and if it answers them not, it is nothing worth'; Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 256; Wesley, *Letters*, 2, 77f.

For example, leading Wesley scholar Randy Maddox approvingly quotes Latin American liberation theologian Miguez Bonino. Bonino interprets John Wesley as having taken the Reformation doctrine of justification by grace through faith and transposed it into “sanctification by grace through faith.”⁶⁰

Emory professor emeritus Theodore Runyon in his recent book on Wesley’s theology, *The New Creation: John Wesley’s Theology for Today*, states that one of his book’s major goals is to reinterpret Wesley’s doctrine of Christian perfection in a way that makes it viable for today.⁶¹ Namely, he says, what we can learn from Wesley is that the future has possibilities for constructive social change. Runyon’s primary interest is to apply Wesley’s theology to today’s world issues such as human rights, poverty and economic rights, the rights of women, the environment, ecumenism, and religious pluralism.⁶² His treatment is certainly an interesting and essential exercise in trying to apply Wesley’s theology to modern world issues. Nevertheless, as crucial as Runyon’s project may seem, one may question if this was the main end and significance of John Wesley’s theology, even sanctification, as Wesley conceived it.

Similar to late 19th-century theologians, Runyon by his own admission cannot take Wesley’s exposition of sanctification literally. He says it must be *re-interpreted*. In Runyon’s mind, Wesley’s original interpretation is vulnerable to being construed too easily as “individualistic.”⁶³

Permit me to make some observations and share some reflections regarding the way in which Wesley’s descendants have taken him for their own, whether as parent, theological guide, or authority. First, that scholars, among many others, with the stature of Henry Sheldon, Alfred Knudson, Maximin Piette, Albert Outler, John Cobb and Ted Runyon consider Wesley’s theological contribution important enough with which to grapple centuries later is a testimony to the staying power and lasting significance of John Wesley.

Second, the theological understanding passed on to Wesley’s immediate successors and maintained generally as a consolidated block and unity has over time faded, being variously challenged, revised, amended, discarded, and reinterpreted. A consensus of understanding of his theological essentials does not exist in the present. Trying to regain an understanding about how he is relevant and authoritative for us is up for grabs. Painting with a broad brushstroke, one could say the first century following Wesley was one of adherence to the unamended Wesley. The 20th century has been one of challenge and revision. This whole two-century experience may help us in the

⁶⁰Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 172.

⁶¹Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley’s Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 223.

⁶²Runyon, 168.

⁶³Runyon, 223f.

process of retrospective evaluation. In what ways has the challenge strengthened our understanding of John Wesley? In what ways has it been extravagant and /or disingenuous? The 19th century theologians knew Wesley's theology. They were forthright in discarding a Wesleyan point when they disagreed with it. Contemporary theologians have been more sophisticated.

In considering how Wesley is and will be relevant and authoritative for us will be answered differently. Many want him to "rest in peace." They believe his day is done. His theology is no longer a serious option. In United Methodism, and to some extent in other Methodist churches, few have an inclination to return to John Wesley's theology as presented in his *Sermons, Notes, and Works*. Moreover, his theology has had little credibility in our seminaries for several generations. There is some modulation of this as there are now in place Wesley scholars with an appreciation of Wesley in some of the Methodist seminaries. This may be encouraging as one looks to the future. Others will say, "John Wesley is an important fixture of our heritage; however, we cannot take Wesley as he was. This would set intellectual Christian thought back 200 years." Randy Maddox wonders what taking John Wesley as a mentor would mean. It would certainly not mean, he says, a "simple collation and repetition of Wesley's theological pronouncements as a scholastic authority."⁶⁴ John Cobb argues that we only take positively from John Wesley that which makes sense in terms of our "current understanding of the Bible and our own living experience" (Whose and which current understandings of the Bible and living experiences seems more like it. Presumably, as has been the case, different constituencies will take different things).⁶⁵

The manner in which interpreters in the future take Wesley as their own will depend to a great extent on hermeneutical assumptions. Hermeneutics traditionally refers to the interpretation and understanding of a text, whether the Bible or one of Wesley's sermons. The traditional understanding of an interpreter's task is to recapture, reconstitute, or reconstruct the expressed thought and the verbal meaning of an author. During the 20th century a shift occurred in phenomenological hermeneutics. The shift has moved away from viewing the interpreter's job as understanding the text and the author's meaning to an analysis of the interpreter. Understanding the interpreter and the interpreter's existence and context, our being-in-the-world, has become the more critical goal of interpretation in the postmodern day. For postmodern interpreters the question is not, how can an interpreter understand or recapture the author's meaning, but what kind of being consists in the understanding of the interpreter?⁶⁶

⁶⁴Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 256.

⁶⁵John B. Cobb, *Grace and Responsibility: A Wesleyan Theology For Today* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 159.

⁶⁶Paul Ricoeur, *Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, ed. Don Ihde (Continuum International Publisher, 1974), 6.

All of this is to say that pre-understandings, both hermeneutical and theological, brought to the interpretation of Wesley texts has, and will, play a major role in the future interpretation of his theology. Interestingly, phenomenological hermeneutics has essentially reinforced the late 19th-century divergence away from and revision of John Wesley's theological essentials. Such contemporary interpreters as Maddox, Runyon and Cobb, who assume that Wesley's theology, as he formulated it, is alien to our culture and situation today, have enjoyed interpretative domination today. Their vision of John Wesley as a mentor for us is one in which his texts must be made, or remade, to fit the contemporary situation.⁶⁷ They do not envisage the possibility of submitting our contemporary life to Wesley's texts. One basic issue for the future may be this: which presupposition will one accept: the radical historicity of phenomenological hermeneutics, or the possibility of recapturing John Wesley's meaning for today?⁶⁸

In conclusion, shifts away from the classical Protestant understanding of John Wesley's theology picked up pace in the late 19th century. Twentieth-century critical historiography and phenomenological hermeneutical interpretation have not diminished but re-affirmed the late 19th century's move away from Wesley's high view of scriptural infallibility; hereditary guilt of total depravity; the deity of Jesus Christ and the objectivity of his atonement; the antinomy of grace and free will; the stress on soteriology with an instantaneous, crisis experience of justification by faith and regeneration; and the literal proposal of Christian perfection.

John Wesley's immediate theological successors apprehended his theology differently from those of the late 19th and 20th centuries. Whereas they celebrated John Wesley as one who revived and defended "the Pure, Apostolical doctrines" of the Primitive Church, Wesley's later interpreters focused their interest in him elsewhere. His early theological descendants took his "grand doctrines": depravity of human nature, the atonement of Christ, the influences of the Spirit of God, justification, sanctification, and eternal life" literally as he preached them. Later dominant 19th-and 20th-century interpreters took issue with them as they were and felt obliged to disagree, revise, and reinterpret them to suit new contexts and perceived, emerging life experiences.

⁶⁷See, Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 256; Cobb, 159.

⁶⁸See, E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 257.