JOHN WESLEY'S UNDERSTANDING OF THE THEOLOGICAL DISTINCTION BETWEEN "ESSENTIALS" AND "OPINIONS"

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John Wesley appealed often to the "uncontroverted truths of Christianity" while at the same time he warned against thinking "that orthodoxy, right opinion, (vulgarily called faith) is religion."¹ His method of distinguishing between truths that are fundamental to true Christian religion and those beliefs that are indifferent to the essence of saving faith in which persons 'think and let think' has been readily observed.

Finding its way into the everyday language of United Methodism in the last twenty years, some understanding of this method served as a theological model for the 1972 Doctrinal Statement (which forms the context of the 1988 Doctrinal Statement) in the United Methodist Book of Discipline. Every United Methodist pastor who has come into connection in the last twenty years has been examined by Boards of Ordained Ministry presupposing such an understanding. Because "ideas have consequences" and our Doctrinal Statement bears upon pastors who influence parishioners, the re-examination of John Wesley's theological approach upon which our recent doctrinal statements are based may have important ramifications today for our doctrinal understanding.

Strangely, for a matter so foundational, little direct scholarly attention has been focused upon tracing the method's roots and historical antecedents to John Wesley, the rise of the method's awareness in him, or upon understanding and analyzing John Wesley's conception of it.² There is some reason to suggest that building a complete and comprehensive profile of John Wesley's understanding of this method by collating and considering the literally manifold relevant references throughout the entire Wesleyan corpus had not been in the purview of the Doctrinal

Statement's chief architect, the late Albert C. Outler, the Chairperson of the 1968–1972 Doctrinal Study Commission. Rather, Outler seized upon exemplary, irenic Wesleyan passages which his ecumenical eye envisaged being suitable to adaptation to the current, United Methodist ecclesial situation.

In the 1950’s, Franz Hildebrandt noted in passing John Wesley’s theological method. He commented referring to John Wesley, “He draws a clear distinction between doctrine and opinion which is fundamental to his thought.” Gerald Cragg also remarked, “In his own mind he drew a sharp distinction between essential doctrines and non-essential opinions.” Robert Monk concurred that John Wesley attempted to allow freedom of opinion in all matters but those that related to the very core of the Christian faith.

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3 In a correspondence with me on August 8, 1983 in which the matter of John Wesley's method was discussed, Albert Outler said that if in my study of the subject I compiled a concordance “of Wesley’s use of the term ‘opinions’—and ‘essentials’, if indeed this word occurs,” that this “in itself, would be a useful service and I would be glad to have such an inventory for my files.” Therefore, I concluded he had not indexed these terms or, for that matter, other such relevant synonyms according to the whole Wesleyan corpus. In order to have a critical and adequate apprehension of John Wesley's method one must work with such a basic index.

Had he done so, might he have been more careful in the impression he gave of his appraisal of John Wesley on the “indifferentist”–“dogmatist” dialectic? See, Doctrine and Theology in The United Methodist Church, ed. Thomas A. Langford (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1991), 77ff. Was John Wesley in real danger of sliding into “indifferentism”? The more interesting and real issue is whether and in what way he was a “dogmatist.” The issue demands more careful unpacking.

John Wesley was not a “dogmatist” in the sense of believing that assent to a formal, credal statement of doctrinal propositions was “saving faith” as Roman Catholic and Protestant scholasticism tended to hold. On the other hand, he did accept the traditional role of “assent” (assensus) in saving faith and he unequivocally affirmed that the acceptance of certain realities was necessarily required of a guilty sinner in order to be justified. In what way these particular realities were necessary will be begun to be set forth in this paper. However, that he did accept that certain realities were absolutely necessary opens him to the charge of “dogmatism” by some modern theologians, e.g., Rudolf Bultmann. Rudolf Bultmann saw even qualified demands for “assent” as “works-righteousness.”

Albert Outler’s litmus test for determining dogmatism in John Wesley is manifestly the degree of narrowness and degree of juridical form. He says John Wesley had an aversion to having norms “defined too narrowly or in too juridical a form”; Langford, Doctrine and Theology, 76. Indeed, this is part of the issue. However, just as important for John Wesley was the nature of the reality that was expected to be believed by a guilty sinner for salvation. Elucidating this is part of the task of this paper.


Roman Catholic Maximin Piette noted of John Wesley, "There are, first of all, points of view of first-rank importance; then, others of lesser consideration." In the 1960's, Colin Williams concurred with Franz Hildebrandt's observation seeing in such a distinction a way to approach John Wesley's theology today, particularly as it related to ecumenism. Albert Outler more than anybody else raised contemporary Methodism's awareness of John Wesley's method. He viewed it as a theological approach which American Methodism might appropriate to promote unity amidst theological diversity.

Presupposing such recognition, the purpose of this article is to attempt to establish within the brief confines of an article John Wesley's definition and conception of the nature of that which was theologically essential and that which was opinion. John Wesley's bifurcation of theological truth into that which was absolutely fundamental and that which was non-essential to true, living faith was a method which was assumed in his theology from the 1740's to his death. Specific instances in his writings are so ubiquitous only the following exemplary passages can be given. In his 1745 Farther Appeal, John Wesley asserted that in former times persons had "a zeal for things which were no part of religion, as though they had been essential branches of it. And many have laid as great (if not greater) stress on trifles, as on the weightier matters of the law. But it has not been so in the present case. No stress has been laid on anything as though it were necessary to salvation but what is undeniably contained in the Word of God."  

In his letter to his nephew, Samuel Wesley, in 1784, John Wesley expressed his concern for what he believed was Samuel's turn in the wrong direction. He wrote, "I do not mean with regard to this or that set of opinions, Protestant or Romish (all these I trample under-foot; but with regard to those weightier matters, wherein, if they go wrong, either Protestants or Papists will perish everlastingly."

On another occasion he affirmed, "Of consequence, the new birth is absolutely necessary in order to eternal salvation"; yet, he accorded, "The Methodists alone do not insist on your holding this or that opinion; but they think and let think."

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John Wesley used manifold words, phrases, and expressions synonymously throughout his writings from the 1740's to his life's end to signify those final, unequivocal realities which were of the essence of genuine Christianity and which could not be compromised without dissolving Christianity into heathenism. Some of the terms he used are the following: the "uncontroverted truths of Christianity"; that which is at the "very centre and marrow of the gospel"; that which is "absolutely necessary to the salvation"; "those two points"; the "grand scriptural doctrines"; and "our main doctrines." Most commonly he used derivatives of the words "essence" and "fundamental." Specifically, he spoke of "the most essential parts of real, experimental religion"; that which was "essential to religion"; "the very essence of Christianity"; "things essential"; or simply "the essentials." Likewise, he referred to the "two fundamental points"; "the fundamental doctrines"; "fundamental truths"; that which is "fundamental"; and "the fundamental point." How did John Wesley define "essential" and "fundamental"? What were the criteria of that which was "essential to religion" and a "fundamental point"? The recognition of his differentiation between essential Christianity as a rational, doctrinal "system" and a personal, inner experience of the soul is critical. Consider first essential Christianity as a rational, theological "system." This aspect comprehends doctrinal truths which appeal to the intellect and are apprehended and assented to by the mind. That which was "essential to religion" were those fundamental, rational truths which distinguished Christianity as a body of truth from that which was not Christianity. (When he seemed to belittle "orthodoxy," he was referring to the tendency of his day to equate saving faith with the acceptance of orthodox doctrine.) In his rebuttal to Dr. John Taylor's 1759 exposition of the doctrine of original sin, John Wesley remarked that his subject concerned "a thing of the highest importance —nay, all the things that concern our eternal peace. It is Christianity or heathenism." In his sermon on the Trinity in 1775, John Wesley insisted that the "fact" of the Trinity was "a truth of the last importance. It enters into the very heart of Christianity: It lies

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at the root of all vital religion." In his address given at George Whitefield's memorial service, he acknowledged that "there are many doctrines of a less essential nature. . . . In these we may think and let think. . . . But, meantime, let us hold fast the essentials of "the faith which was once delivered to the saints."

In these statements John Wesley demonstrated that he accepted the premise that there are certain cognitive theological truths that are absolutely integral to the identity of Christianity as "Christianity." Without these discursive, sine qua non realities, "Christianity" as defined on the cognitive level by unique rational, interrelated truths would go out of existence.

Though mental "assent" to these divine truths was not saving faith, nonetheless, John Wesley in the tradition of the authors of the Church of England Homilies consciously presupposed and included the apprehension of and "assent" to cognitive theological truth as a prior aspect of "true, living, Christian faith." He specifically stated more than once that faith was "not only an assent, an act of the understanding . . . ," "not only a belief of all the articles of our faith . . . but . . . ."

Notwithstanding this, let one hasten to say he did not go so far as to argue as some that clear views of "capital doctrines" were categorically necessary for salvation. He argued that the goodness of the heart was preeminent over the clearness of the head. There were "serious" persons who sought salvation who had little or no religious background.

Nevertheless, wrong theological opinions could be a peril to true Christianity. One's intellectual objections to essential, rational theological propositions could inhibit one from experiencing the essential, saving Christian realities. If intellectual objections became faith inhibitors, then the person was leaning too heavily upon his/her "notions." John Wesley confronted many of his antagonists who had intellectual qualms with his description of pure, genuine religion with an invitation to experience this religion. Though in modern Methodism we have rightly emphasized John Wesley's theological inclusiveness, we have often failed to take seriously or implement his theological exclusiveness. To have a situation in which a "child of the devil" (one with "no true religion at all") negatively doubts

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17Wesley, Works, ed. T. Jackson, Vol. 6, 205.
18Wesley, Works, ed. T. Jackson, Vol. 6, 177f.
or denies the essentials while simultaneously claims to have justifying faith
would be inconceivable to John Wesley.23

Previously, we mentioned that Wesley differentiated between “essen-
tials” which were rational affirmations and essentials which were personal,
inner experiences of the soul. Leaving the perspective of essentiality on
the cognitive level, let us now consider the perspective of essentiality on
the experiential level of the soul. First, John Wesley identified an “essen-
tial” or “fundamental” that pertains to true, Christian experience as that
which was necessary to personal present and final salvation. That which
answered the jailer’s question in the book of Acts, “What must I do to
be saved?” was that which was necessary for present salvation. Colin
Williams was getting at John Wesley’s understanding when he stated that
the distinction between essential doctrines and opinions was “based on
the relevance of the doctrines to the work of salvation”.24

For John Wesley, that which was essential had a direct and necessary
relation to personal salvation. In his sermon on “The New Birth” he said,
“Of consequence, the new birth is absolutely necessary in order to eternal
salvation.”25 In 1745 he replied to “John Smith” as follows:

“Our singularities (if you will style them so) are fundamental and of the essence
of Christianity”; therefore we must ‘preach them with such diligence and zeal
as if the whole of Christianity depended upon them.’ It would doubtless be wrong
to insist thus on these things if they were ‘not necessary to final salvation’; but
we believe they are, unless in the case of invincible ignorance.26

In his reply to William Romaine who criticized him for not including
“absolute predestination” as an essential along with justification and re-
generation, John Wesley argued that if “absolute predestination” was fun-
damental, then everyone who did not hold it, “must perish everlastingly.”27
That is, one who did not hold “absolute predestination” could not be justified
and saved. Therefore, for John Wesley what was necessary to justification
and salvation was that which was “fundamental” and “essential.”

Further, as that which was directly necessary to personal salvation,
a “fundamental” was a saving reality of God apprehended and experienced
in the inner heart. Indeed, an invincible, cognitive ignorance of “essen-
tial” rational doctrine did not necessarily preclude personal salvation.
However, the absence of true, inward, saving Christian experience did ex-
clude it. If one did not experience living faith in the heart, one could not
be justified and accepted of God. Similarly, without an inner, experiential

24Williams, Wesley’s Theology, 93. Gerald Cragg rightly concluded that an essential doc-
trine to Wesley was “one vital to salvation”, Wesley, Works, ed.-in-chief Frank Baker, Vol.
11, 23.
26Wesley, Letters, Vol. 2, 64.
conviction of original sin in the heart, one's heart was not ready to receive
the gift of justifying faith.

One might have an invincible, cognitive ignorance of fundamental, rational doctrines but still be saved through experiential, living faith. The inversion of this was not true. One could not be devoid of the Christian experiential essentials and have a knowledge of fundamental, rational truth and still be saved. Without the essential experiences on the continuum of Christian salvation, salvation was not possible. Even though in 1747 he altered his view of saving faith saying saving faith was not an assurance of pardon, he still maintained that there could be "no good hopes of salvation" without "a divine evidence or conviction [a divinely given, personal experience] that Christ loved me and gave Himself for me."28 The crucial point was that whatever else may be true, the experiential essentials known in the heart were intrinsic to true, saving religion.

What was the nature of these experiential essentials? First, these experiential essentials were those realities which existed objectively in God's supra-empirical heavenly dimension. Moreover, they were experiential realities which must be apprehended in the inner person by the suprasensory faculty, the "eye" of the soul.29 These essential, supra-empirical truths were not only as real as objective fact but were indivisible. Making a distinction between divine, bedrock reality and the explanation of this reality, John Wesley viewed the supra-empirical, elementary realities as distinct from their theological counterparts, the rational doctrines and "opinions" which sought to explain them.30 In the sermon "The Lord Our Righteousness" he stated that those who professed Christ and had differed over the doctrine of the Lord's righteousness had differed more in words, language and opinion than real experience.31

Second, pressing into service the argument of the seventeenth century "men of latitude," he characterized a "fundamental" as a truth which was self-evident and clearly revealed in Scripture.32 In his sermon on "Christian

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29In his sermon "The Scripture Way of Salvation," John Wesley drew an analogy between the eyes of the soul which perceived the invisible world and the natural faculties that perceived the world around us; Wesley, Works, ed. T. Jackson, Vol. 6, 47.
30Colin Williams observed that John Wesley drew a distinction between the "substance" of a doctrine and its philosophical illustrations. John Wesley distinguished between the "fact" and the opinion, the reality and the "manner how", the explanation of it; Williams, Wesley's Theology, 94f. John Wesley allowed that one might make serious errors in the explication of the given, essential truths without making mistakes regarding the essential truths themselves.
32John Tillotson had argued in his sermon, "One Thing Needful," that because God would have all persons saved and had provided for the salvation of all persons, whatever was necessary for salvation could be known by all and must be at their disposal; John Tillotson, The Works of the Most Reverend Dr. John Tillotson, with "The Life of the Author" by Thomas Birch, comp. Thomas Birch, 3 vols. (London: printed for J. & R. Tonson et al., 1754), Vol. 1, 314.
Perfection” he said, “It is true, the children of God do not mistake as to the things essential to salvation.” They are “taught of God” and the way He teaches them is so plain that not even a fool need err. If the things essential were ambiguous, then persons would have legitimate complaints against God for missing salvation.

Moreover, a “fundamental” reality by implication was one which God could be counted on to reveal “not obscurely, not incidentally, but frequently, and that in express terms” because it was “one of the peculiar privileges of the children of God.” The experience of God’s children—experience given to the Methodists—confirmed it. The fact of an experiential revelation in the soul was so certain that one who never experienced it was never justified or had forgotten it.

The nature of that which was essential was further clarified and distinguished in the contrasting light of Wesley’s definition and understanding of “opinion.” He used the word “opinion” in three general senses. First, an “opinion” was any rational, theological proposition, a system of doctrines, or “orthodoxy” to which one could assent. In his sermon “On The Trinity”, he wrote, “Whatsoever the generality of people may think, it is certain that opinion is not religion: No, not right opinion; assent to one, or to ten thousand truths.” He told Dr. Conyers Middleton in 1749 that one “may assent to three or three-and-twenty creeds... and yet have no Christian faith at all.”

Second, the meaning of “opinion’’ was revealed in the way it was deliberately set in contrast to what was “fundamental.” An “opinion” could be a belief or doctrine which was not of the essence of the Christian faith, which was not rationally or experientially necessary to salvation, and which did not obstruct the full love to God and man. It was a belief which any Christian, i.e., any one born again, could hold in disagreement with other Christians and still be a Christian, both in his or her own eyes and in the eyes of other children of God.

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33 Wesley, Works, ed. T. Jackson, Vol. 6, 3.
36 Wesley, Works, ed. T. Jackson, 6, 199. John Wesley rejected the understanding which has its roots in Roman Catholicism and was evident in scholastic Lutheranism that assent to “right opinion” and “orthodoxy” was saving faith. The assumption of a rational, saving faith not directly connected with a saving experience of the soul characterized the current understanding of faith among Church of England divines.

When John Wesley diminished “orthodoxy” and “right opinion,” he was reacting against the prevailing conception of faith which seemed to go little further than cerebral, credal concurrence and missed the heart and soul. None the less, “living faith” was not exclusive of “assent” to “right opinion” but typically inclusive of it.

John Wesley’s view is in contrast to a more radical antithesis to a rational faith as seen in someone life Rudolf Bultmann. For him, saving faith could be saving faith only in the abandonment of all prior propositional affirmations.
John Wesley expressed this understanding in his correspondence with John Newton. "You have admirably well expressed what I mean by an opinion contradistinguished from an essential doctrine" he wrote John Newton.\(^{38}\) Then John Wesley proceeded to quote with acceptance John Newton's definition which has been mentioned by Wesleyan authorities, i.e., Hildebrandt and Williams, as the definition of "opinion" in John Wesley. He said, "Whatever is 'compatible with a love to Christ and a work of grace' I term opinion."\(^{39}\) John Wesley offered another slant on this description by positing that if something was an opinion, "it is not subversive (here is clear proof to the contrary) 'of the very foundations of Christian experience.'" Wesley further qualified himself in a revealing statement in which he deduced that anyone who held something subversive and retained it, "cannot possibly have any Christian experience at all!" That which was subversive contradicted and undermined the thing itself.\(^{40}\)

Therefore, opinions over which genuine Christians may rightfully differ were those which were "compatible with a love to Christ and a work of grace" and which were "not subversive of the very foundations of Christian experience." Stated another way, an opinion was belief which one could hold without inhibiting one's saving experience of Jesus Christ or undermining one's present or final salvation.

Third, Wesley used the term "opinion" to cover subjects and concerns which were not described explicitly and definitively in Scripture. These were theological points on which Scripture remained silent. For example, in speaking of how the universal change was wrought in the soul of the entirely sanctified, he acknowledged that the Scriptures were silent upon the subject. He concluded that "because the point is not determined, at least not in express terms . . . Every man therefore may abound in his own sense . . . provided he will not be angry at those who differ from his opinion . . . ."\(^{41}\)

In concluding our profile of "opinions," I note several other features about them which round out our understanding. Contrary to John Wesley's conception of "essentials," one notices that in "opinions" Christians may, and will, err. He recognized, "But in things unessential to salvation they do err, and that frequently."\(^{42}\) Although one necessarily believed one's opinion to be true, no one could be assured that all one's opinions taken together were true. Therefore, opinions were those areas in which wise men allowed liberty of thinking and did not insist upon agreement as long


as it was not at the expense of truth. In addition, "opinions" were "externals" associated with "outward actions" and "modes of worship," and were not in the same "room" with the true Christian experience of faith and repentance.

United Methodists do well to re-examine John Wesley's understanding and use of this confident but conciliating theological model and our own modern understanding and application of it.

Modern United Methodism has genuinely been concerned about how to tumble barriers between people of faith. We want a theology that is inclusive and irenic; yet, this very blessed spirit has led to paralysis in regard to "essentials." Perhaps we have felt that the assertion of "essentials" would cancel the very pacific spirit we are trying to engender. We may consider how John Wesley managed the tension.

Moreover, the argument one hears is that a setting forth of theological "essentials"—if one grants it could even be done—would formalize and stultify living, Christian faith. We fear what was said of Melanchthon: that in giving doctrinal form to Martin Luther, Melanchthon rationalized the spirituality out of him. However, at our juncture in history a legitimate question arises in light of statistics, indices, and the spate of critiques of "old line" denominations: have we a vital, living faith in danger of being formalized? Has not United Methodism been put into a swoon for several decades unassisted by an emphasis on theological "essentials"? Is our critical doctrinal concern today really that of keeping United Methodism from being formalized? Perhaps by re-examining John Wesley's theological method we may reflect on how John Wesley fanned a vibrant movement while nurturing both a "catholic spirit" and an unwavering, daily proclamation of God's unfailing, incontrovertible, fundamental saving realities.

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