

WESLEY'S SERMONS AS SPIRITUAL FORMATION DOCUMENTS

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The sermons of John Wesley represent the heart of his theology and ministry. They are the primary means of validating Dr. Albert Outler's assertion that, "John Wesley was the most important Anglican theologian of the eighteenth century because of his distinctive, composite answer to the age-old question as to the nature of the Christian life."¹ And clearly, it is his sermons which establish him as a "folk theologian" par excellence. To read his sermons is to put one's fingers squarely on the pulse of early Methodism. To study them is to receive inspiration and insight for proclaiming the gospel today.

I want to examine Wesley's sermons as spiritual formation documents. My previous study of Wesley has convinced me that he was familiar with the normative principles of historic spiritual formation (e.g., spiritual direction, the practice of Christian disciplines, and a sacramental emphasis).² Recently, I have given special attention to Wesley's standard sermons, examining them for evidence regarding their role as spiritual formation documents. This is important for several reasons: (1) because of the renewed interest in spiritual formation and its obvious connections with early Methodism, (2) because of a belief that contemporary preaching must be seen as a primary means of nurturing people in their spiritual life, and (3) because of a growing conviction that Wesley viewed his sermons in this way.

Obviously, it is not possible in an article to do an extensive analysis of individual sermons. Therefore, I will focus on relevant background information and then do a more detailed analysis of the Preface to the *Sermons on Several Occasions*, which Wesley wrote in 1746.³ My goal is to link the past and present in a way that enriches the act of proclaiming the gospel.

¹Kenneth Rowe, ed., *The Place of Wesley in the Christian Tradition* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1976), 15.

²My findings in this regard are published in my Ph.D. dissertation, "The Devotional Life of John Wesley: 1703-38" (Duke University, 1981), and in my two books, *John Wesley's Message for Today* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983) and *Devotional Life in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville: The Upper Room, 1983). I've also explored the subject in an article, "John Wesley as Spiritual Director" in the *Wesleyan Theological Journal* (Fall 1985).

³For this study I have used the Bicentennial Edition of Wesley's Works as my primary text. The standard sermons are published in Volumes 1 and 2 of this edition, and they have been edited by Dr. Albert Outler. References will be cited as Outler, Vol. 1, with appropriate page number. In footnote six, I have also used the Bicentennial Edition with a reference to a volume of letters edited by Dr. Frank Baker.

Regarding background, we note first of all that Wesley was one with many of his contemporaries in viewing preaching as an act through which people are shaped and influenced. This was especially true with respect to preaching in the Puritan and Sectarian traditions, and also true for the great Edwardian preachers of Anglicanism.⁴ An examination of their sermons in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries reveals them to be exercises in the setting forth of a particular issue or topic, followed by an appeal (usually grounded in logic and reason) to embrace or reject it. To be sure, Wesley's content went beyond the moralistic tone which characterized much of the preaching, but his overall style reflected his conviction that preaching should result in some kind of change in the hearer.

Second, it is important to remember that Wesley chose to publish many of his sermons. This fact increases the probability that he saw them as spiritual formation documents. Dr. Albert Outler is correct in maintaining that the purpose of a *written* sermon was "chiefly for nurture and reflection."⁵ That Wesley knew this makes it all the more likely that he selected, revised, and ordered his sermons for this end.

An example from his letters illustrates the point. On November 24, 1738, while making a visit to Oxford, he wrote back to James Hutton and Mr. Fox in London. As he concluded the letter he wrote, "Many here would buy hymnbooks and the Sermon on Faith. Send them therefore with the rest."⁶ Here is an early reference to a custom which Wesley repeated countless times in the course of his ministry. Here is the embryonic ministry of literature publication and distribution which came to be a hallmark of the Methodist movement. And it appears that Wesley had no other purpose in doing this than to enrich and nurture the spiritual life of his readers.

Third, by 1746 the Methodist movement was underway in earnest. The United Societies, with their smaller classes and bands, were organized and multiplying. The annual conference system was into its third year. This proliferation of Methodism increased the need for some kind of doctrinal guidance. It is significant that Wesley chose to provide that guidance through published sermons. Dr. Outler again provides insightful comment, "This decision that a cluster of sermons might serve as doctrinal standards of a popular religious movement is a significant revelation of Wesley's self-understanding of his role as a spiritual director of 'the people called Methodists'."⁷

Here it is possible to see a direct link with preachers like Johann Tauler, Lancelot Andrewes, and even Samuel Annesley, who had vie-

⁴Outler, Vol. 1, 20-29.

⁵*Ibid.*, 14.

⁶Baker, Vol. 25, 588.

⁷Outler, Vol. 1, 40.

wed themselves in a similar fashion. Furthermore, he may well have been following the example of Anglicanism wherein the Homilies were viewed as theological standards in homiletical form. And surely he knew that sermons would more effectively communicate doctrine to common people than scholarly treatises could ever do. In all these ways Wesley was evidencing the use of his sermons as spiritual formation documents.

A fourth and final piece of background information has to do with Wesley's selection and ordering of the standard sermons. He did this in a way which highlighted soteriology. The standard sermons are Wesley's most normative statement regarding the nature of salvation. A rough outline of the sermons seems to confirm this:

Sermons 1–16: the essence of salvation

Sermons 17–40: the order of salvation

Sermons 41–53: the application of salvation

As readers become familiar with the sermons, they could read them profitably by either following Wesley's own soteriological scheme, or by exploring a particular topic in detail as it was developed throughout the sermon corpus.

While Wesley's standard sermons are the focus of this study, it is worth noting that much the same can be said for the formative nature of sermons 54–108, which Wesley published in 1788. Although this group of sermons never became doctrinal standards, they do represent Wesley's attempt to guide and nurture second and third generation Methodists. They have a corporate tone which helps us see Wesley's developing sense of community, and they are especially directed toward the application of faith to the practical issues of life.⁸

These background statements help us to view Wesley's sermons as spiritual formation documents. An examination of his Preface to the *Sermons on Several Occasions* (1746) yields further insight. Here in his own words Wesley sets forth his purposes in publishing the sermons. As we examine the paragraphs sequentially, we discover other features which relate the sermons to spiritual formation.⁹

Paragraph 1: Wesley makes the connection between adequate nurture and offering "the essentials of true religion." People must have access to the total gospel if they are to grow properly in their faith. This is so important that he returns to it in paragraph six. His desire

⁸*Ibid.*, Vol. 2, 349–357. Dr. Outler notes that this series of sermons reveals a developing and maturing of Wesley's preaching, especially as it pertains to the outworkings of Christianity in culture.

⁹This study of the Preface can be enhanced if you will follow along with a copy of the text before you. It is found in a variety of places: Volume 1 of the Bicentennial Edition (Abingdon), Volume 1 of the Sugden Edition (Zondervan), Volume 1 of the Jackson Edition (Baker), or Wesley's Forty Four Sermons (Epworth Press).

is “to describe the true, the scriptural, experimental religion, so as to omit nothing which is a real part thereof, and to add nothing thereto which is not.”¹⁰ In these words he reveals his conviction that nurture must take place in the context of an awareness of the full gospel. Here is an important insight when contrasted with a piecemeal approach, or worse, a temptation in preaching to emphasize a “pet” theme at the expense of the whole counsel of God. It is another indication that Wesley consciously selected and ordered the sermons to be spiritual formation documents.

Paragraphs 2–4: In this section Wesley emphasizes his conviction that preaching must be done in understandable language. Interestingly, he spends more time on this seemingly obvious point than on any other in the Preface. His reason for doing so becomes clear when his sermons are contrasted with some in the same period. Within Anglicanism in particular there was a preaching tradition which viewed the sermon more as a work of art than an act of worship. The sermon was seen as an occasion to demonstrate the eloquence and learning of the preacher. Sermons had an ornate style strikingly akin to that of baroque art and music.¹¹

This problem was recognized by many in the eighteenth century. A most interesting statement appeared in the August 1, 1754, edition of *The Connoisseur* which speaks directly to the issue Wesley was raising,

This affectation is never more offensive than when it gets into the pulpit. The greater part of almost every audience that sits under our preachers are ignorant and illiterate, and should therefore have everything delivered to them in as plain, simple, and intelligible a manner as possible. Hard words, if they have any meaning, can only serve to make them stare; and they can never be edified by what they do not understand. Young clergymen just come from the University, are proud of showing the world that they have been reading the Fathers, and are fond of entering on the most abstruse points of divinity. But they would employ their time more to their own credit, as well as the improvement of their hearers, if they would rather endeavour to explain and enforce the precepts of the Apostles and Evangelists, than retail the confused hypotheses of crabbed metaphysicians.¹²

Wesley confronts this misuse of preaching, making it clear that his sermons will not fall into such gross error. His approach is clearly stated in the opening sentence of paragraph three: “I design plain truth for plain people.” Homiletically, this is in keeping with what many

¹⁰It is necessary to note that Wesley’s phrase, “experimental religion” is not the same as we think of the term “experimental” today. He does not intend the idea of speculation or possibility, but rather the idea of experience. Wesley stood firmly against speculative religion, as his own words show in the sermon “Catholic Spirit”, Outler, Vol. 2, 92–95.

¹¹Outler, Vol. 1, 21.

¹²Edward H. Sugden, ed., *Wesley’s Standard Sermons* Volume I (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury Press, 1986), 29.

believe to be the first rule of preaching: "know your audience." In terms of communication theory, it validates the assertion that there is no communication without understanding. And from the standpoint of spiritual formation, it is consistent with the conviction that authentic nurture occurs when there is a connection between the grasp of truth and its application. Or to put it another way, spiritual formation occurs when there is an interplay between head and heart. Wesley's commitment to "plain truth for plain people" is one way he expressed his concern for the joining of knowledge and vital piety.

Such a commitment and resulting preaching style does not mean the abandonment of education and intelligence in a sermon. Rather, it means the use of one's knowledge in ways that the audience can understand and appropriate. Every preacher knows how difficult it is to communicate truth without using technical theological jargon which only professionally-trained theologians can understand. Here is one of the geniuses of Wesley's sermons: they are salted with reference to many sources. They draw on various depths of knowledge, but this information is woven quietly into the text and sometimes modified so that the truth is proclaimed in ways the people could receive and apply.

We have all heard preachers and teachers who obviously knew what they were saying, but who could not put it into words we could understand. Wesley's choice of "plain-style preaching" was deliberate, and it was an intermediate point between unintelligible verbosity on the one hand and shallow piety on the other. It is an approach which *both* informs and forms. It does not insult the intelligence of the hearer, it enriches and develops it. And in this way it is in harmony with spiritual formation principles.

Paragraph 5: From a spiritual formation standpoint this is the most important section of the Preface. Three significant insights are contained here. First, we see Wesley's commitment to what we call incarnational or relational preaching. He writes, "I am not afraid to lay open what have been the inmost thoughts of my heart." We know that in his oral presentations, Wesley's preaching contained more illustrations and personal references. But here he is telling us that even in the published sermons he is putting *himself* on the line.

This does not mean that Wesley casts propriety or scholarship to the wind. Even less does it mean that his sermons are an exercise in attention getting. On the contrary his sermons reveal evidence of a facility with Hebrew and Greek. They show a person amazingly familiar with hundreds of other sources. But Wesley is no "footnote preacher." That is to say, his authority does not issue from the sources he cites, but rather from his own life—from what he himself believes. Like the first apostles, Wesley cannot keep from telling what he has seen and heard. He is more than a distanced reporter; he is a living witness.

The importance of this as a spiritual formation principle can hardly be overemphasized. There is an indispensable link between the message and the medium. Preaching is an autobiographical exercise. In fact, preaching makes little sense if the preacher does not place himself/herself within the scope of the message. Wesley is revealing his role as a spiritual director when he says that his sermons are expressions of his own life and faith. In effect, he is saying, "if your heart is warmed by what you read, you can be sure my own heart was warmed first." At the same time, he is fulfilling the role of a spiritual director by bearing witness to the faith without requiring his hearers to embrace every facet of the message. The sermons are not written in a coercive or legalistic tone. The reader is free to interact with, expand, and even disagree. He makes this crystal clear near the end of the Preface.

Secondly, paragraph five reveals Wesley's ultimate purpose in publishing the sermons. He says, "I want to know one thing, the way to heaven." The key word is "way." It can be so easily overlooked. But it is absolutely necessary for interpreting the formative dimension of Wesley's preaching. For him, the "way" is dynamic and progressive. It is the movement of a person in response to God's grace. This way has often been described by Wesley scholars as the "order of salvation."¹³ It means that if a person responds positively to the grace of God, that person will move in ever-increasing degrees of maturity and wholeness.

This "way" can be seen in the sermons internally and externally. Internally, some of Wesley's key sermons give attention to this *ordo salutis*. By reading them, one can see the grand sweep of the grace of God in life. In such sermons one is able to "locate" himself/herself chronologically and theologically. And having done so, the sermon then becomes a spiritual guide to direct the person from where he/she is to where he/she needs to go.¹⁴

Externally, Wesley's concern for the order of salvation can also be seen in his ordering and selection of sermons which we described earlier. In these ways, the reader has placed himself/herself in something of a "soteriological atmosphere." One is breathing spiritual air which will produce the kind of vitality it describes. By using sermons

¹³Outler, Vol. 1, 105–106. The "ordo salutis" is the primary interpretive tool for grasping Wesley's "system" in theology. Although trained in a classical theological methodology which approached theology topically, Wesley preferred the "order of salvation" as the means for describing theological truth. It was a system which enabled theology to parallel human experience more closely than the topical approach. It is a more formative system. It is unfortunate that some have missed this "system" in Wesley's theology, otherwise his status as a bonified theologian might not have been questioned as it has been in the past.

¹⁴Some of the best examples of this internal development are, "Scriptural Christianity," "The Way to the Kingdom," and "The Scripture Way of Salvation."

to describe "the way to heaven," Wesley is testifying to his conviction that the gospel is preached best in a way that corresponds to human experience. The gospel journey can be most easily recognized and received when it parallels our general human journey. The published sermons do that in an observable way.

The third insight from paragraph five is less direct, but no less important. Wesley goes into some detail describing a process of using the Bible formatively. He reveals his own method of approaching the Bible in a devotional spirit by relating the following six steps:

1. He reads the selected text
2. He refers the text to God in prayer
3. He consults parallel texts
4. He continually reflects and meditates
5. He converses with knowledgeable people
6. He examines other helpful writings

In paragraph six, Wesley makes it plain that he wants his sermons to be consistent with the Bible's portrayal of the "way to heaven." Therefore, it is likely that he saw the published sermons as one set of "helpful writings" which people could turn to for additional spiritual insight in connection with their primary use of Scripture. Here is Wesley's conscious act of setting his sermons within a process which he has already recognized as being spiritually beneficial.

Paragraphs 8-10: In classical spiritual formation authentic spirituality is related to the virtue of humility. The true spiritual guide shuns the evil of pride and shares spiritual insight in a spirit of openness. Knowing this, the final paragraphs of Wesley's Preface are a virtual case study in spiritual formation literature.

First, Wesley declares his openness to conviction, both from God and other people. He writes, "What I know not, teach thou me." Second, he does not offer the sermons in the attitude of a spiritual superior giving to unspiritual inferiors. In fact, he assumes that some of his readers may see into things better than he. When this is the case, he asks the reader to be patient with him and to help him move farther along in wisdom and maturity.

In paragraph nine we can detect a hint of lighthearted humor mixed with the overall tone of humility. The playful irony of this paragraph reads like a similarly humorous example in the preface to his Complete English Dictionary.¹⁵ Such a statement reminiscent of Thomas Merton's more-recent statement that "the mark of a saint is the ability to laugh." This paragraph further illustrates Wesley's healthy attitude which accompanied a serious attempt to provide spiritual formation for his readers.

¹⁵Sugden, Vol. 1, 33.

Most of all, in paragraph ten he says that he wants to avoid provoking anyone to anger. Anger only serves as smoke to dim the eyes of the soul and destroy dialogue and fellowship. Wesley was wise enough to know that his sermons would be controversial to some readers. So at the very outset he wanted to make it clear that his purpose was not to provoke but to inspire. His aim is to move people toward greater maturity. His final sentence in the Preface captures the essence of his purpose, "May he prepare us for the knowledge of all truth, by filling our hearts with all his love, and with all joy and peace in believing."

In bringing all this to a close, we may ask if this is not something of an exercise in describing the obvious. To those who already view and practice preaching as a spiritually formative exercise, it may appear so. But for others, it is a word which needs new emphasis. Preaching has fallen on hard times in some places. One of my professors in college looked upon it as an outmoded medium altogether. And twenty years later, I still pick up an article or hear a comment downplaying the importance of preaching. Furthermore, some of the so-called "preaching aids" are resources which encourage shallow, uncreative thinking, and homiletical short cuts. A recent advertisement based its appeal for a sermon handbook precisely on the basis that, "we know you don't have time to prepare your sermons." John Wesley would roll over in his grave! He would say that if we don't have time to devote ourselves to the ministry of preaching, we're too busy. He would say that if we have not caught a vision for the formative power in proclaiming the gospel, we need to look again. So from that perspective, this examination of his sermons is challenging and relevant indeed.