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**JOHN WESLEY ON THE BIBLE:
THE RULE OF CHRISTIAN FAITH, PRACTICE, AND HOPE¹**
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This essay surveys John Wesley’s understanding and use of the Bible, as an instructive example for those in the Wesleyan tradition. It has become traditional to introduce this topic with an excerpt from Wesley’s preface to the first volume of his *Sermons*:

I want to know one thing, the way to heaven—how to land safe on that happy shore. God himself has condescended to teach the way: for this very end he came from heaven. He hath written it down in a book. O give me that book! . . . Let me be *homo unius libri*.²

This proclaimed desire to be “a man of one book” could suggest that the best way to honor Wesley’s legacy would be to say nothing more about him, and simply study the Bible. But Wesley also responded to the claim of some of his lay preachers, “I read only the Bible,” with strong words: “This is rank enthusiasm. If you need no book but the Bible, you are got above St. Paul (who requested to be sent some books).”³ As Wesley explained his stance more carefully in *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (§10), to be *homo unius*

libri is to be one who regards no book *comparatively* but the Bible. Thus, my goal in this essay is explore how Wesley read the Bible *comparatively* with other books and sources. In the process I will also consider Wesley's approach to reading the Bible *comparatively* with other readers, and reflect *comparatively* on the reasons that Wesley read the Bible so regularly, and encouraged his followers to do the same.

The Bible that John Wesley Read

I begin with some brief comments on what Bible John Wesley read. As one would expect, Wesley owned, read, and most frequently cites the currently standard English translation of the Bible, commonly called the King James Version (KJV). But this use must be qualified in at least three ways.

The first qualification concerns the scope of the biblical canon. The KJV, as published through Wesley's lifetime, included the sixteen books commonly called the "apocrypha." Article VI of the Anglican Articles of Religion affirmed these works as worthy to read "for example of life and instruction of manners," though not as authorities for doctrine. Thus, we find occasional allusions to these books in Wesley's early years in this vein. But by the mid 1750s Wesley had consciously adopted the more narrow Protestant canon, eventually saying of the apocrypha: "We dare not receive them as part of the Holy Scriptures."⁴ This helps explain why there is no record of Wesley preaching on a text from the apocryphal books, while we can document him preaching on texts from every book in the Protestant canon except Esther, Song of Songs, Obadiah, Nahum, Zephaniah, Philemon, and 3 John.

A second qualification is that Wesley did not confine himself to the KJV. When he cites from the book of Psalms, for example, he frequently uses the translation (by Miles Coverdale) that was part of the *Book of Common Prayer*. More broadly, it is clear that he studied earlier English translations of the whole Bible, as well as

translations in German and French.

Perhaps the most important qualification is that Wesley valued the original Hebrew and Greek texts of the Bible over any translation, citing these texts throughout his life. Indeed, we can identify at least four versions of the Greek New Testament which he owned.

How John Wesley read the Bible

Wesley's practice of reading the Bible in its original languages provides a good transition to our more central question: *How* did John Wesley read and interpret the Bible *comparatively*?

Read with the Standard Scholarly Tools

The first way in which Wesley drew upon other sources *comparatively* in reading the Bible was his use of standard scholarly tools. These included Johann Buxtorf's Hebrew grammar (1609) and lexicon (1613), and Richard Busby's similar tools for Greek (1663), along with some of the most recent alternatives.

One issue receiving significant scholarly attention in Wesley's day was textual criticism, particularly of the New Testament. Wesley shared this interest and understood the general issues involved. This is why he owned multiple versions of the Greek New Testament, including John Mill's two volume version that gathered the most complete list at the time of variant readings in Greek manuscripts. Significantly, Wesley favored what is agreed to be the best critical Greek text of the day, that of Johann Albrecht Bengel (1734).

Bengel's Greek New Testament corrected the Textus Receptus (the Greek text used for the translation of the KJV) at numerous points. These and other issues had led to a growing number of calls for a new English translation of the Bible, and scattered attempts to undertake this task. Wesley owned a copy of one of the most thorough defenses of the need for a new English translation.⁵ This likely encouraged him to venture his own translation when he prepared his *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*. The English

translation that Wesley provided there varies from the KJV in over 12,000 instances.

Most of the variants between John Wesley's translation of the New Testament and the KJV were modernizations of the English and minor in nature. But many reflected text-critical decisions that remain standard in biblical scholarship. That is not to say that current scholarship would concur with all of Wesley's textual judgments. To cite one case in point, Wesley followed Bengel in vigorously defending the phrase "these three are one" as part of the original text of 1 John 5:7–9. More recent scholarship has persuasively discounted this possibility. Here as in other matters, Wesley's present heirs will want to appreciate his precedent in its historical context, then seek to be similarly engaged and discerning in our current scholarly settings.

Read as Scripture – the Book of God

While Wesley embraced the enterprise of textual criticism, his relationship was more ambiguous to early strands of *historical* criticism that surfaced in the later seventeenth century. Scattered scholars began to apply analysis used on other literary texts to the books of the Bible, which called into question traditional assumptions about authorship of some books, challenged the historical accuracy of certain biblical accounts, and highlighted human dynamics in the process of canonization. Some advocates of this agenda appeared to reduce the Bible to a mere collection of antiquated human texts.

The response of the vast majority of eighteenth-century Anglican scholars and clergy to these developments was defensive. Some marshaled book-length lists of evidence to defend the textual integrity of the Bible and its accuracy on historical and other matters. Equally prominent were manuals offering pastoral advice to laity on how to read the Bible as *Scripture*, as a book carrying divine authority. The third major means of defending the integrity of the

Bible, mixing scholarship with pastoral concern, was publication of accessible commentaries with notes to guide laity in addressing difficult passages and to point them toward unifying themes.

John Wesley generally reflected this Anglican response. While he welcomed studies of the customs of the ancient Israelites and the early Christians to enrich his reading of the Bible, Wesley retained traditional assumptions about authorship (such as Moses as author of the first five OT books) and was quick to reject suggestions of errors in the Bible. His comments on this last topic can be quite sharp, such as insisting that “If there be one falsehood in the Bible, there may be a thousand; neither can it proceed from the God of truth.”⁶

Some interpreters have taken such quotes to indicate that Wesley would align with the modern model of “biblical inerrancy,” which insists that the Bible is accurate in every detail, including historical allusions and descriptions on the natural world. But Wesley never uses the word “inerrancy” (which was not in common use at the time), and his broader comments on the authoritative role of the Bible suggest a more nuanced stance. To begin with, his affirmations almost always focus on the Bible as the “rule of Christian faith and practice.”⁷ Wesley was following here the lead of 2 Timothy 3:16–17, where the inspiration of Scripture is related to its usefulness for instructing in Christian belief and training in lives of righteousness. He frequently cites this text in teaching sermons, affirming the Bible as “infallibly true” on these matters. While he never provides a detailed account of what the *infallibility* of Scripture entails, Wesley did not think that it was undercut by mistakes on tangential matters like reproducing mistakes in the Jewish historical records the authors used, or quoting inaccurately Old Testament texts in the New Testament.⁸

More broadly, Wesley embraced at least some aspects of the principle, long held in Christian tradition, that God graciously condescended to adapt revelation to our human situation. He particularly

stressed God adapting to our inability to understand fully matters like God's timelessness. At the same time, there is little evidence that Wesley joined Augustine and others in affirming that divine condescension included allowing the human authors of the Bible to articulate the truths of revelation in the specificity (and limitations) of their language, culture, and current "science." This is another place where Wesley's descendants may want to appreciate his example in historical context, while suggesting that his conviction about how God works in salvation—by undergirding and assisting our will, but not overriding our liberty—has broader implications than he realized. Applied to God's agency in inspiring the human authors of Scripture, this conviction would allow one to take with utmost seriousness the cultural specificity of the various books in the Bible that modern scholarship makes evident, while still affirming a robust sense of the authority of Scripture as the "book of God." For example, one could appreciate how God enables the authors of Scripture to convey the truths of revelation in terms of the "science" of their day.

The last point to make is that while Wesley clearly believed that Scripture was infallible, he never took up the scholarly project of crafting an extended defense of this point. He focused his energy instead on the pastoral/practical task of enabling lay readers to engage the Bible as the trustworthy book of God. His most significant contribution in this regard was *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament* and the later parallel *Explanatory Notes Upon the Old Testament*.

Read relying on the Inspiration of the Spirit

Part of the reason for Wesley's focus on this pastoral task was his recognition of the vital role of the "inspiration of the Spirit." His typical use of this phrase is broader than considerations of the production of the Bible. In the *Complete English Dictionary* (1753) that Wesley published to help his followers read Scripture and

other writings, he defined “inspiration” as the influence of the Holy Spirit that enables persons to love and serve God. This broad use of the word trades on the meaning of the Latin original, *inspirare*: to breathe into, animate, excite, or inflame. The broader understanding is evident even when Wesley uses “inspiration” in relation to the Bible. For example, while his comments in *Explanatory Notes* on 2 Timothy 3:16 affirm God’s guidance of the original authors, Wesley’s focal emphasis is encouraging current readers to seek the Spirit’s inspiring assistance in reading Scripture!

What assistance are we to seek? To begin with, “we need the same Spirit to *understand* the Scripture which enabled the holy men of old to *write* it.”⁹ Thus, in the preface to *Sermons*, immediately after stating his resolve to be “a man of one book,” Wesley stressed that when he opens the Bible, if he finds anything unclear, his first recourse is to pray for divine assistance in understanding.

While conceptual understanding of the teaching in the Bible is vital, Wesley’s deepest concern was personal *embrace* of the saving truth in Scripture. The Spirit’s inspiring work is essential at this point. Wesley was insistent that “true, living Christian faith ... is not only an assent, an act of the understanding, but a disposition which *God hath wrought* in the heart.”¹⁰ Significantly, he included mere assent to the truthfulness of Scripture among those things that fall short of living Christian faith, reminding his readers that “the devils believe all Scripture, having been given by inspiration of God, is true as God is true,” but do not embrace that saving truth for themselves.¹¹ As a gift of God, the disposition of true faith is not the result of rational argument alone. This is why Wesley never devoted significant energy to *proving* the inspiration of the Bible by appeals to its truthfulness or other such arguments. He could publish brief resumes of arguments by other writers. But Wesley valued such apologetic efforts for helping *confirm* faith born of the work of the Spirit, not as providing the foundation for that faith.

Read in Conference with Others

Wesley makes another significant point in his preface to *Sermons*, about how he was *comparatively* a “man of one book.” We have already noted his recognition of the need for divine assistance in understanding Scripture. He goes on in this paragraph to describe how he carefully considers other relevant passages in the Bible, then adds: “If any doubt still remains, I consult those who are experienced in the things of God, and then the writings whereby, being dead, they yet speak.”¹² The crucial thing to note in this concluding line is not just that an individual might turn to other books to understand the one Book, but that we as individuals need to read the Bible *in conference with other readers!*

Several dimensions to this need deserve highlighting. Note first that Wesley identifies consulting particularly those “more experienced in the things of God.” His focal concern is not scholarly expertise (though he is not dismissing this), but the contribution of mature Christian character and discernment to interpreting the Bible. Where does one find such folk whose lives and understanding are less distorted by sin? One of Wesley’s most central convictions was that authentic Christian character and discernment are the fruit of the Spirit, nurtured within the witness, worship, support, and accountability of Christian community. This is the point of his often (mis-)quoted line that there is “no holiness but social holiness.” As he later clarified, “I mean not only that [holiness] cannot subsist so well, but that it cannot subsist at all without society, without living and conversing with [other people].”¹³ While the class and band meetings that Wesley designed to embody this principle were not devoted primarily to bible study, they helped form persons who were more inclined to read Scripture, and to read it in keeping with its central purposes. Thus, the early Methodist movement provides an instructive example for those seeking today to recover appreciation for the role of community in interpreting Scripture.

I hasten to add, secondly, that Wesley’s emphasis on the value

of reading the Bible in conference with others was not limited to considerations of relative Christian maturity. It was grounded in his recognition of the limits of all human understanding, even that of spiritually mature persons. He was convinced that, as finite creatures, our human understandings of our experience, of tradition, and of Scripture itself are “opinions” or interpretations of their subject matter. God may know these things with absolute clarity; we see them “through a glass darkly.” Wesley underlined the implication of this in his sermon on a “Catholic Spirit.”

Although every man necessarily believes that every particular opinion which he holds is true (for to believe any opinion is not true, is the same thing as not to hold it); yet can no man be assured that all his own opinions, taken together, are true. Nay, every thinking man is assured they are not, seeing *humanum est errare et nescire*: “To be ignorant of many things, and to mistake in some, is the necessary condition of humanity.”¹⁴

Wesley went on in the sermon to commend a spirit of openness to dialogue with others, where we are clear in our commitment to the main branches of Christian doctrine, while always ready to hear and weigh whatever can be offered against our current understanding of matters of belief or practice.¹⁵ His goal in this dialogue is clear—seeking the *most adequate* understanding of whatever we are considering.

The final dimension to highlight about Wesley’s call for reading the Bible in conference with others should be obvious: it is vital that we do not limit our dialogue partners to those who are most like us, or those with whom we already agree. We should remain open to, and at times seek out, those who hold differing understandings. Otherwise, we are not likely to identify places where our understanding of something in Scripture (usually shared with those

closest to us) might be wrong!

Read in Conference with Christian Tradition

Among those outside of his circle of associates and followers whom Wesley was committed to including in his conferring over the meaning of Scripture were Christians of earlier generations. As he noted, our primary means of hearing their voice is through their writings.

It is widely recognized that John Wesley valued highly the writings of the first three centuries of the church, in both its Eastern (Greek) and Western (Latin) settings. Wesley specifically defended consulting early Christian authors in a published letter to Conyers Middleton. He insisted that consultation with these writings had helped many Christian readers avoid dangerous errors in interpreting Scripture, while the neglect of these writings would surely leave one captive to misunderstanding currently reigning.

In both his formal definitions and his practice Wesley tended to jump from the early church to the seventeenth-century Anglican standards in his consideration of Christian tradition. But his reading of various commentaries and historical works passed to him an awareness of the major Medieval and Reformation debates over biblical interpretation, as well as a set of central interpretive principles. For example, he generally stressed the primacy of the literal meaning in interpreting Bible texts (a principle that the Reformers had adopted to counter the fluidity of allegorical and spiritual exegesis). In cases where two biblical texts appeared to contradict each other, he stressed that the more obscure text should be understood in light of the clearer one. Likewise, he was aware of the importance of context in interpreting Scripture—both the specific context of any particular verse or phrase and the overall context of the Bible. In fact, one of Wesley's most frequent objections to opponents' suggested interpretations was that they contradicted "the whole tenor and scope of Scripture."

Read in Conference with the “Rule of Faith”

One interpretive principle of earlier Christian generations deserves special attention. A good example can be found in St. Augustine’s *On Christian Teaching*.¹⁶ Augustine instructs his readers that when they find unclear or ambiguous passages in the Bible they should consult for guidance the “rule of faith” (*regula fidei*). He was using here the typical Latin translation of Paul’s advice in Romans 12:6 for exercising the gift of prophecy according to the “analogy (Greek, “*analogian*”) of faith.” Augustine defined this rule of faith as the teachings in “the more open places of the Scriptures and in the authority of the church.” The use of the term throughout Augustine’s works and the broad early church makes clear that the two sources identified should not be considered as either separate or additive. Early baptismal creeds and related catechetical materials sought to provide a narrative summary of God’s saving work as revealed in Scripture, with particular attention to the implicit trinitarian form of this work (the Apostles’ Creed is a key example). The “rule of faith” gathered the early church’s sense of what was most central and unifying in Scripture, to serve in part as an aid for reading the whole of Scripture in its light.

The topic of the “rule of faith” became a battle ground during the Reformation. Some teachings and practices had been advanced on the “authority of the church” through the medieval period that the Reformers judged contrary to clear biblical teaching. In response they championed “Scripture alone” as the rule of faith. But for most Protestants this did not mean rejecting the value of some communally-shared sense of the central and unifying themes in Scripture when trying to interpret particular passages. They changed the name for this shared sense to the “analogy of faith,” reflecting Paul’s Greek text, as one expression of their concern to stick close to Scripture. But they typically defended under this label the practice of consulting at least the Apostles’ Creed when seeking to interpret Scripture correctly.

Wesley inherited through his Anglican standards this Protestant commitment to Scripture as the “rule of faith,” interpreted in light of the “analogy of faith.” He also inherited the impact of Protestant debates that elevated attention to topics of the dynamics of individual salvation in communally-authoritative guides to reading of Scripture. These topics were particularly important for those Protestants concerned with piety and holy living, like Wesley. As a result, his specific articulations of the “analogy of faith” tend to focus on four themes: the corruption of sin, justification by faith, the new birth, and present inward and outward holiness.

Wesley’s focus on these topics has led some interpreters to fault him for a one-sided “personal-salvationist” reading of Scripture. If this charge is meant to imply that Wesley ignored or downplayed the redemptive work of the triune God, it must be rejected. It is true that Wesley devoted far fewer sermons to the Trinity than, say, to justification by faith. But this is because he assumed that his Trinitarian commitments were generally shared among his Anglican peers; he was focusing on areas of misunderstanding and disagreement. As Geoffrey Wainwright has shown, Wesley’s reading of Scripture was actually deeply shaped by his trinitarian convictions.¹⁷

Wesley’s commitment to reading the Bible in light of the trinitarian (and other) themes affirmed in the Apostles’ Creed is embodied in his advice: “In order to be well acquainted with the doctrines of Christianity you need but one book (besides the New Testament) — Bishop Pearson *On the Creed*.”¹⁸ John Pearson’s volume was an exposition of the Apostles’ Creed, which Wesley’s parents had commended to him and was a text used during his study at Christ Church in Oxford. This was the theological text that Wesley himself most often assigned to his assistants and recommended to his correspondents.

In other words, Wesley’s description of himself as a “man of one Book” should not mislead us from recognizing that he generally read that Book through the lens of the broadly shared Christian

“rule of faith” and his more specific high-church Anglican commitments. While some of Wesley’s current descendants will consider this a limitation, many others will find it a helpful example of an approach to reading Scripture that needs to be recovered!

Read in Conference with the “Book of Nature”

One of Wesley’s commitments nurtured by his Anglican upbringing was a higher emphasis than in some Protestant circles for studying God’s revelation in the natural world (the “book of nature”) alongside of studying Scripture. Wesley’s stated and central interest in studying the natural world was to strengthen the faith awakened by Scripture and deepen our appreciation of God’s power, wisdom, and goodness. But there is good evidence that his study of current science also helped him test and reshape inherited interpretations of Scripture.

For a fitting example, return to the preface of the first volume of *Sermons* and note Wesley’s line: “I want to know one thing, the way to heaven—how to land safe on that happy shore.” Wesley is reflecting here a long development in Christian history. Although Scripture speaks of God’s ultimate goal in salvation as the “new heavens and earth,” a variety of influences led Christians through the first millennium to assume increasingly that our final state is “heaven above.” The latter was seen as a realm where human spirits, dwelling in ethereal bodies, join eternally with all other spiritual beings (a category that did not include animals) in continuous worship of God. By contrast, they assumed that the physical universe, which we abandon at death, would eventually be annihilated. Wesley was taught this understanding of our final state in his upbringing, and through much of his ministry it was presented as obvious and unproblematic. But in the last decade of his life he began to reclaim boldly the biblical imagery of God’s renewal of the whole universe, specifically championing the notion that animals participate in final salvation. What led to this change? A

major factor was his study, in his sixties, of some current works in biology that utilized the model of the “chain of beings.” Central to this model is the assumption that the loss of any type of “being” in creation would call into question the perfection of the Creator. Prodded by this emphasis, Wesley began to take more seriously the biblical insistence that God desires to redeem the whole creation.

As this instance suggests, when the mature Wesley confronted an apparent conflict between current science and Scripture, he did not simply debate which was more authoritative. He reconsidered his interpretations of *each*, seeking an understanding that *did justice to both*. In this way he honored the authority of Scripture, while affirming the contribution of broad conferencing to our (human) understanding of Scripture. This is a balance worthy of emulation.

Read with an Emphasis on God’s Universal Pardoning and Transforming Love

While all of the points that have been made so far were characteristic of how Wesley read the Bible, none of them was unique to him. Similar points could be made for Christian leaders and theologians throughout the history of the church. But this leaves the question of what was most *distinctive* in Wesley’s general interpretation of the Bible.

As David Kelsey and others have shown, what most differentiates various theologians, or theological traditions, in their reading of Scripture is not divergence on its “authority,” but their “working canon”—the group of texts to which they appeal most often, and present as the “clear” texts in light of which to read the rest of Scripture.¹⁹ This was a reality that Wesley recognized:

We know, “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God,” and is therefore true and right concerning all things. But we know likewise that there are some Scriptures which more

immediately commend themselves to every [person's] conscience.”²⁰

So what was Wesley's “working canon”? In the quote just given he went on to cite as an example 1 Corinthians 13. He also highly prized the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5–7. But, as Robert Wall has argued, the biblical book that Wesley prized most highly was the first Epistle of John.²¹ He referred to 1 John as “the deepest part of Scripture” and a “compendium of all the Holy Scriptures.” He praised it as the best rhetorical model for preaching. And he favored the book in his own preaching, using 1 John for his sermon text much more frequently (comparative to the number of verses in the book) than any other biblical book.²²

At one level, Wesley's preference for 1 John is surprising, since there is little evidence that his contemporaries held the epistle in special regard. But note Wesley's description of 1 John 4:19 — “We love [God] because he first loved us” — as “the sum of the whole gospel.”²³ Wesley is highlighting here the deepest conviction that he gained in his own spiritual journey. He had always longed to love God fully, and had sought to do so with utmost seriousness. But it was only in the events surrounding 1738 that he finally and fully grasped the truth of 1 John 4:19, discovering that authentic and enduring love of God and others is a *response* to knowing God's pardoning love for us. Wesley also valued 1 John because it stressed so clearly the goal of the Spirit's work—to transform our lives, so that we might be made perfect in love of both God and neighbor (4:7–18), ideally leading sinless lives (2:1, 3:6–9).

Wesley was aware that many read Paul's emphasis on being justified freely by grace (Rom. 3:24) as rejecting the possibility of such sinless lives in this present world, and some read Paul in such a way as to downplay the very concern for holy living. His response was to insist that the possibility of Christian perfection, while perhaps still unclear even in the letters of Paul, was decisively settled by

John, “the *last* of the inspired writers.”²⁴ He went on to summarize his defense of Christian perfection as “in conformity therefore both to the doctrine of St. John, and to the whole tenor of the New Testament.” As the order of this claim suggests, Wesley read Paul (and the rest of the Bible) through the lens of the central convictions he found in 1 John, not to discount Paul’s message but to highlight Paul’s insistence on believers being set free from sin to be servants of righteousness (Rom. 6:18).

Another emphasis that many found in the writings of Paul was predestination—in the sense of God’s *unconditional* election of some for salvation and the others for damnation. Wesley’s response was that this particular way of reading Rom 8:29–30 and other passages was that “No Scripture can mean that God is not love, or that his mercy is not over all his works.”²⁵ In this insistence on God’s universal offer of grace we hear echoed the emphasis in 1 John that “God is love” (4:8, 16). But the specific point that this love is *universal*, or reaches over all God’s works, is not particularly highlighted in the epistle. Wesley is invoking here Psalm 145:9, “The Lord is loving to every [person], and his mercy is over all his works.” While he did not preach on this text often, it became Wesley’s favored summary of his conviction that Scripture affirms God’s saving concern for all persons. And this conviction deeply shaped his reading of specific scriptures.

To summarize, Wesley increasingly and self-consciously read the whole of the Bible in light of a deep conviction that God was present in the assuring work of the Spirit both to *pardon* and to *transform* all who respond to that inviting and empowering love (and *all* can respond!). This conviction was not something that Wesley thought he was imposing on Scripture. He was convinced that it was the most central and clear message of Scripture—as seen particularly in 1 John and related texts. At the heart of reading the Bible in “Wesleyan” ways today would be embracing Wesley’s central interpretive lens, even as one continues to test and refine

it by ongoing conference with the whole of Scripture and the range of other readers.

Why John Wesley read the Bible

We come to one final question: What were John Wesley's reasons *comparatively* for reading the Bible, and encouraging his followers to do the same?

The Rule of Christian Faith

The initial answer would seem obvious: Because it is the rule or guide for determining Christian belief! Wesley strongly affirmed this purpose, insisting that he regulated his theological convictions by Scripture, and arguing that no pastor could be a good divine (i.e., theologian) without being a good textuary.

The Rule of Christian Practice

But Wesley would be the first to insist that more is at stake in reading the Bible than just seeking better *understanding* of Christian beliefs. He consistently highlighted as well its role as the rule of *practice*. Indeed, he more frequently focused on this second role, identifying at least three dimensions of practice. Consider this fitting example:

From the very beginning, from the time that four young men united together, each of them was *homo unius libri* – a man of one book. God taught them all to make his “Word a lantern unto their feet, and a light in all their paths.” They had one, and only one rule of judgment in regard to all their *tempers, words, and actions*, namely, the oracles of God.²⁶

As the rule of our *words*, Wesley meant more than avoiding profanity. He believed that Christians should adopt the very language of Scripture, as far as possible, in their conversation.

As the rule of our *actions*, Wesley turned to Scripture not only for guidelines on moral issues, but also for testing supposed leadings of the Spirit, for deciding questions of worship practice, and so on.

Wesley's deepest concern was Scripture's role as the rule of our *tempers*. To appreciate this, one needs to recognize that Wesley used the word "tempers" to designate our fundamental character dispositions—the springboards of our words and actions. He discussed sin in this threefold division, stressing that sinful actions and words flow from corrupted tempers, so the problem of sin must ultimately be addressed at this deeper level. Correspondingly, his mature definition of Christian life placed primary emphasis on this inward dimension, the recovery of holy tempers, from which would flow holy words and actions.

What is the role of Scripture in this recovery of holy tempers? It was clearly more than just a "guide" to identifying sinful and holy tempers. Wesley considered attentive reading of Scripture to be one of the most central "means of grace"—one of the crucial ways that God has provided for receiving the assuring presence of the Holy Spirit that awakens and empowers our human response of love, and for nurturing our initial responses (by repeated practice) into enduring holy tempers. Thus, Wesley encouraged readers to come to the New Testament ready "to hear [Jesus'] word, to imbibe his Spirit, and to transcribe his life into our own."²⁷ And he worried about those who were quick to defend the authority of Scripture, while neglecting regular study of Scripture!

The Rule of Christian Hope

The last point that I would make is not one that Wesley stresses explicitly, but one that is embodied in his lifelong journey with Scripture. In addition to finding Scripture a sufficient and reliable guide to central Christian beliefs, a wise guide to Christian practice, and a vital means for nurturing Christian character, Wesley's

engagement with Scripture over the course of his life served to sustain, challenge, and deepen his sense of the Christian hope!

Consider in this regard Wesley's appeals to Psalm 145:9, "The Lord is loving to every [person], and his mercy is over all his works." We have already noted that this is not just an incidental verse for Wesley, he prized it for articulating one of the themes that he considered most central to Scripture. What I want to suggest now is that Wesley's continuing engagement with Scripture, in the various dimensions of conference laid out above, led him to recognize and emphasize an ever broader scope of the "works" over which God's mercy reigns.

As we have seen, Wesley's initial appeals to Psalm 145:9 on topics of debate focused on predestination, insisting that God offers the possibility of eternal salvation to all humans. This was a broader sense of the possibility of salvation than his opponents held. But it could easily be charged with remaining a "personal-salvationist" reading of Scripture, this time in the sense of focusing only on human souls finding their way to heaven above. This personal focus remains almost exclusive for Wesley until his later years. But then, in 1774, we find him citing this verse again in a pivotal section of his *Thoughts upon Slavery* (as one of his few scriptural citations in that work).²⁸ Here he was invoking the breadth of God's mercy as a warrant for rejecting the slave trade *in this world*, not just defending the possibility of eternal salvation for those being sold in slavery. In 1781 Wesley invoked Psalm 145:9 again, in an even broader context, insisting on God's intention to *redeem animals* as well as humans, and encouraging his readers even now to "imitate the God whose mercy is over all his works."²⁹ With these added emphases on the breadth of God's saving mercy, and our participation in God's saving work, Wesley had clearly moved beyond a merely "personal-salvationist" reading of Scripture. He had come to embrace the cosmic scope of the Christian hope.

Through this process Wesley also provided a demonstration

that a life of immersion in Scripture, read in the full range of conferencing, can reshape one's inherited interpretive assumptions and lead them into a deeper sense of the message of Scripture. May we who are heirs of his ministry take this example to heart!

1. This essay draws on and condenses Randy L. Maddox, "The Rule of Christian Faith, Practice, and Hope: John Wesley on the Bible," *Methodist Review* 3 (2011), 1–35. Readers desiring such detail should consult this online essay. www.methodistreview.org.

2. *Sermons on Several Occasions*, Vol. 1 (1746), Preface, §5, *The Bicentennial Edition of The Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984–) 1:104–5. Cited hereafter as *Works*.

3. 1766 *Minutes*, Q. 30; also as "Large Minutes," Q. 32, *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), 8:315. Cited hereafter as *Works* (Jackson).

4. *Popery Calmly Considered*, I.4, *Works* (Jackson), 10:141.

5. Charles Le Cène, *An Essay for a New Translation of the Bible* (London: John Nutt, 1702).

6. Letter to William Law (6 Jan 1756), *Letters* (Telford), 3:345–46.

7. E.g., "Thoughts Upon Methodism" §2, *Arminian Magazine* 10 (1787), *Works*, 9:527; and *Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, §5, *Works* (Jackson), 11:366.

8. See *NT Notes*, Matt 1:1; Heb. 2:7.

9. Letter to Bishop of Gloucester, II.10, *Works*, 11:509. See also *OT Notes*, Preface, §19, *Works* (Jackson), 14:253.

10. See Sermon 18, "The Marks of the New Birth," §3, *Works*, 1:418 (emphasis added).

11. *Ibid.*, §2, *Works*, 1:418.

12. *Sermons*, Vol. 1, Preface, §5, *Works*, 1:105–6.

13. See respectively, *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1739), Preface, §§4–5, *Works* (Jackson) 14:321; and Sermon 24, "Sermon on the Mount IV," §I.1, *Works* 1:533–34.

14. Sermon 39, "Catholic Spirit," §I.4, *Works*, 2:84.

15. *Ibid.*, §III.1, *Works*, 2:92–93.

16. Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, Book III, par. 2.

17. Geoffrey Wainwright, "Wesley's Trinitarian Hermeneutics," in *Reading the Bible in Wesleyan Ways: Some Constructive Proposals* (ed. B. L. Callen and R. P. Thompson; Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2004), 17–37.

18. Letter to Cradock Glascott (13 May 1764), *Letters* (Telford), 4:243. Referring to John Pearson, *An Exposition of the Creed* (London: John Williams, 1659).

19. See David H. Kelsey, *Proving Doctrine: The Uses of Scripture in Modern Theology* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1999), esp. pp. 163–67, 193–96.

20. Sermon 91, "On Charity," proem, *Works*, 3:292

21. Robert W. Wall, "Wesley as Biblical Interpreter," in R. L. Maddox & J. E. Vickers (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to John Wesley* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 113–28.

22. Although extant records are not exhaustive, a list of all known sermon occasions (over 400 pages in length), compiled by Wanda Willard Smith, longtime assistant to Albert Outler, and now available on the website of the Center for Studies in the Wesleyan Tradition (CSWT) at Duke (<http://divinity.duke.edu/initiatives-centers/cswt/research-resources/register>), supports this conclusion.

23. *Sermons*, Vol. 5, Preface, §6, *Works*, 2:357.

24. Sermon 40, *Christian Perfection*, II.20, *Works*, 2:116 (emphasis added).

25. Sermon 110, "Free Grace," §§26, *Works*, 3:556.

26. Sermon 107, "On God's Vineyard," I.1, *Works*, 3:504; see also Sermon 115, "Dives and Lazarus," III.7, *Works* 4:18.

27. *NT Notes*, Preface, §9, *Works* (Jackson), 14:238.
28. *Thoughts upon Slavery* (1774), V.7, *Works* (Jackson), 11:79.
29. Sermon 60, “General Deliverance,” §III.10, *Works* 2:449