

The Rule of Christian Faith, Practice, and Hope: John Wesley on the Bible

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Abstract

JOHN WESLEY insisted that a good theologian must be a good textuary (student of biblical texts). This essay surveys his model as a textuary, highlighting insights from recent secondary studies and providing some new evidence from just-released sources. The first section focuses on *what* Bible Wesley read, probing his assumptions about canon and his emphasis on studying Scripture in the original languages. The second section details several dimensions of *how* Wesley read the Bible, with particular attention to his “theological” reading of Scripture and the identification of his distinctive “working canon.” The final section turns to *why* Wesley read the Bible, stressing that he valued Scripture for more than just a guide to Christian faith. His strongest emphasis was on Scripture as a “means of grace” for nurturing Christian life, and his life-long practice of immersion in Scripture served to sustain and broaden his sense of the Christian hope.



IT HAS BECOME TRADITIONAL—indeed, almost obligatory—to begin presentations on John Wesley’s appreciation for and approach to interpreting the Bible with the following excerpt from his preface to the first volume of his *Sermons on Several Occasions*:

I am a spirit come from God and returning to God; just hovering over the great gulf, till a few moments hence I am no more seen—I drop into an unchangeable eternity! 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! At any price, give me the Book of God! I have it. Here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be *homo unius libri*.¹

This proclaimed desire to be “a man of one book” could suggest that the best way to honor Wesley’s legacy would be to devote this essay to bible study. As further warrant for such a move, one might cite the response that John received in a letter from his father: “You ask me which is the best commentary on the Bible. I answer, the Bible.”²

But Samuel Wesley went on in the letter to commend a couple of commentaries, and insisted on use of a broad assortment of scholarly tools for studying the Bible in the manual he prepared for a curate he was mentoring, a manual that John Wesley published on his father’s behalf in 1735.³ Likewise, John Wesley responded to the suggestion from some of his lay preachers, “But 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.”⁴ As Wesley explained his stance more carefully in *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, to be *homo unius libri* is to be one who regards no book *comparatively* but the Bible.⁵

The balance that Wesley is suggesting here cautions against two polar tendencies that have appeared among his ecclesial descendants in North America. At one pole is the tendency of many early English immigrants to cast off all “chains” of inherited structures and creeds. This tendency can be discerned in Asa Shinn’s *Essay on the Plan of Salvation* (1813), one of the first books on a theological topic published by a Methodist in North America, when he insists:

¹ *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*.

² Letter from Samuel Wesley Sr. (24 Jan 1725), *Works*, 25:158.

³ Samuel Wesley (1662–1735), *Advice to a Young Clergyman* (London: C. Rivington & J. Roberts, [1735]). John Wesley published the volume and added the preface.

⁴ 1766 *Minutes*, Q. 30; also the “Large Minutes,” Q. 32, *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), 8:315. Cited hereafter as *Works* (Jackson).

⁵ *Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, §10, *Works* (Jackson), 11:373.

Each one is bound under a sacred obligation, to go to the Bible for [one's] system of divinity, and so far as any is governed by a regard to any human creed, in the formation of [one's] religious opinions, so far [one] is deficient in the very principle of Christian faith; and pays that homage to human authority that is due only to the Divine.⁶

It is little surprise that one finds no explicit interaction with Wesley in Shinn's volume.

At the other pole is the tendency occasionally surfacing in Methodist/Wesleyan debates to treat John Wesley's specific stance on certain exegetical issues as an inviolable precedent for his descendants. In effect, this renders Wesley's stance *comparatively* more authoritative than the Bible (as clarified by further exegetical and theological reflection, and read in specific contexts). As such, it violates his most central conviction about the role of the Bible in Christian life.

Mindful of Wesley's balanced precedent, I have no interest in offering here a canonical model for Wesleyan exegesis and hermeneutics. At the same time, I am convinced of the deep formative power of tradition upon all human understanding. I also believe that the appropriate relationship to one's mentors is openness both to embracing the wisdom that they offer and to discerning the contextuality and limitations of their example. Thus I devote this essay to a survey of how John Wesley engaged the Bible, seeking to shed light on his formative impact and to identify some elements of wisdom from his example for present Wesleyan life and vocation. I organize my sketch around three basic questions:

1. *What* Bible did Wesley read?
2. *How* did he read and interpret the Bible?
3. *Why* did he read the Bible, and encourage others to do so?

The Bible that John Wesley Read

The answer to my first question might seem self-evident: as an eighteenth-century Anglican, Wesley would have read the currently standard English translation of the Bible, commonly called the King James Version (KJV). While this is true, there are some specific points worth highlighting.

⁶ Asa Shinn, *An Essay on the Plan of Salvation* (Baltimore: Neal, Wills & Cole, 1813), 230.

Focused on the Protestant Canon

The first point has to do with the scope of the biblical canon for Wesley. The KJV, as published through his lifetime, included the sixteen books commonly called the “apocrypha,” placed in a separate section. 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. Wesley’s father specifically encouraged reading the apocryphal books as aids for understanding the more authoritative books in the canon.⁷ Thus, it is not surprising to find scattered citations from or allusions to the apocrypha in Wesley’s writings.⁸ In keeping with the Articles, these are never presented as warrant in doctrinal debate; they typically support appropriate Christian “manners,” such as the exhortation in his *Journal* for Christians to “honor the physician, for God hath appointed him” (Ecclesiasticus 38:1-2).⁹ Significantly, we have no record of John Wesley preaching on a text from the apocryphal books.

In reality, Wesley came to adopt a more stridently Protestant stance on the apocrypha than that of his father or his Anglican standards. This may have been encouraged by the need to counter the false, but broadly spread, suspicions during threatened invasions from France in 1744–45 and again in 1756 that the Wesley brothers were supporters of the (Roman Catholic) Stuart line to the British throne that was in exile in France. Whatever the reason, in 1756 John Wesley published a digest of an anti-Catholic *Catechism* by John Williams which included an insistence that the apocryphal books were not part of “canonical scriptures.” When he published a further redaction of this work in 1779, Wesley sharpened the point in his own words: “We cannot but reject them. We dare not receive them as part of the Holy Scriptures.”¹⁰ Five years later, when he abridged the Anglican Articles of Religion, to provide doctrinal

⁷ Cf. Samuel Wesley, *Advice*, 29–30. Samuel also encourages reading some extra-canonical works from the period of the early church.

⁸ The most ambitious attempt to identify instances is James H. Charlesworth, “The Wesleys and the Canon: an Unperceived Openness,” *Proceedings of the Charles Wesley Society* 3 (1996): 63–88.

⁹ *Journal* (30 Sept. 1786), *Works*, 23:420.

¹⁰ The original work is John Williams (1636?–1709), *A Catechism Truly Representing the Doctrines and Practices of the Church of Rome with an Answer Thereto* (London: Richard Chiswell, 1686). Wesley’s 1756 digest (without attribution), was *A Roman Catechism, with a Reply Thereto*; see Q. 10, *Works* (Jackson), 10:92. In 1779 Wesley published a condensed and rewritten version of the work under his name as *Poperly Calmly Considered*; see section I.4, *Works* (Jackson), 10:141.

standards for The Methodist Episcopal Church that was organizing in the newly formed United States of America, Wesley deleted all reference to the apocrypha from the Article on Scripture.

Valuing a Range of Translations

The second point that deserves highlighting is that Wesley did not confine himself to the King James Version of the Bible. To begin with, when he cites from the book of Psalms he frequently uses the translation of the psalter (by Miles Coverdale) that was part of the *Book of Common Prayer*. More broadly, it is clear that John and his brother Charles studied other English translations as well as translations into German and French. This can be demonstrated most fully in the case of Charles Wesley, because we have surviving catalogue lists of his personal library around 1765.¹¹ In addition to the KJV (1611), these lists include the New Testament in the English translation of Miles Coverdale, which was the first English version of the Bible authorized for the Church of England by Henry VIII in 1539 (often called the "Great Bible"). Charles also owned an English rendering of Theodore Beza's translation of the New Testament into German (in 1556), along with a German New Testament and the "Geneva Bible" (1560) in French. While we have no similar catalogue by John of his library, and much of the library has been lost, John's personal copy of Luther's German translation of the Bible survives at Wesley's house in London.¹²

Assigning Primacy to the Original Languages

A final point to make in this section is that both Charles and John Wesley clearly valued the original Hebrew and Greek texts of the Bible over any translation. To begin with Charles, the lists of his personal library include a Hebrew Testament, two Hebrew psalters, a copy of the Septuagint (Old Testament in Greek), and four different Greek versions of the New Testament. In John's

¹¹ There are four overlapping lists, in manuscript notebooks at the Methodist Archive and Research Centre, The John Rylands University Library. For a combined catalogue of these lists, see Randy L. Maddox, "Charles Wesley's Personal Library, ca. 1765," *Proceedings of the Charles Wesley Society* 14 (2010): forthcoming.

¹² See Randy L. Maddox, "John Wesley's Reading: Evidence in the Book Collection at Wesley's House, London," *Methodist History* 41.3 (2003): 118–33. Cf. Maddox, "John Wesley's Reading: Evidence in the Kingswood School Archives," *Methodist History* 41.2 (2003): 49–67; and Maddox, "Remnants of John Wesley's Personal Library," *Methodist History* 42.2 (2004): 122–28.

case our records are again more sketchy, but we can confidently identify at least four versions of the Greek New Testament which he owned as well.¹³ This is hardly surprising, since John's role as a Fellow of Lincoln College at Oxford included tutoring in Greek. What might be surprising is that when John created the school at Kingswood to provide education for the coal miners' children and others, he included study of both Greek and Hebrew.¹⁴ He hoped for them to be able to read the same Bible that he read—in its most original, and authoritative, languages!¹⁵

How John Wesley Read the Bible

This practice of reading the Bible in its original languages provides a fitting transition to our second question: *How* did John Wesley read and interpret the Bible?

Read with the Standard Scholarly Tools

The first thing that must be said is that, in keeping with his father's advice, John Wesley read the Bible drawing on the standard scholarly tools of his time.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷

One issue receiving significant scholarly attention in Wesley's day was textual criticism, particularly of the New Testament. Wesley shared this interest

¹³ See the two editions of Bengel and the editions published by Stephan and Redmayne in Maddox, "Wesley's Reading, London"; as well as the edition by John Mill mentioned below.

¹⁴ Cf. *A Plain Account of Kingswood School*, §16, *Works* (Jackson), 13:296. For copies of the Greek and Hebrew grammars he abridged for these classes, see *Works* (Jackson), 14:78–160.

¹⁵ Wesley apparently believed that God created the first written language when providing the Ten Commandments (*Explanatory Notes upon the Old Testament*, Exodus 24:4). But he defended Greek as more perfect than Hebrew, because God used it for the New Testament, in his Letter to Dean D. (1785), *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, edited by John Telford (London: Epworth, 1931), 7:252. Hereafter cited as *OT Notes and Letters* (Telford).

¹⁶ This point is developed particularly in Robert Michael Casto, "Exegetical Method in John Wesley's *Explanatory Notes upon the Old Testament: A Description of His Approach, Uses of Sources, and Practice*" (Duke University Ph.D. thesis, 1977).

¹⁷ See, for example, the Hebrew grammars by Bayley (1782) and Robertson (1783) in Maddox, "John Wesley's Reading."

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.¹⁸ 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. John Wesley owned a copy of one of the most thorough defenses of the need for a new English translation, which may have encouraged him to venture his own when he prepared his *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*.¹⁹ The English translation that Wesley provides in this work varies from the KJV in over 12,000 instances.²⁰

Most of the variants between John Wesley's translation of the New Testament and that in the KJV were modernizations of the English and minor in nature. But many reflected text-critical decisions that remain standard in biblical scholarship.²¹ This 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 5:7-9.²² 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.²³

¹⁸ John Mill, *Novum Testamentum. Cum lectionibus variantibus mss. exemplarium, versionum, editionum, ss. patrum & scriptorum ecclesiasticorum; & in easdem notis*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Sheldonian Theatre, 1707). Wesley records owning this work on the inside cover of his first Oxford diary.

¹⁹ Charles Le Cène, *An Essay for a New Translation of the Bible* (London: John Nutt, 1702); see Maddox, "John Wesley's Reading."

²⁰ Wesley also issued this English translation separately (without his notes) as one of his last publications: *The New Testament* (London: New Chapel, 1790). Cf. George Croft Cell, *John Wesley's New Testament Compared with the Authorized Version* (London: Lutterworth, 1938); and Francis Glasson, "Wesley's New Testament Reconsidered," *Epworth Review* 10.2 (1983): 28-34.

²¹ See the analysis in Robin Jerome Scroggs, "John Wesley as a Biblical Scholar." *Journal of Bible and Religion* 28 (1960): 415-22.

²² See Wesley's extended defense in Sermon 55, "On the Trinity," §5, *Works*, 2:378-79.

²³ Cf. Stephen B. Dawes, "John Wesley and the Bible," *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society* 54 (2003): 1-10.

*Read as Scripture—the Book of God*²⁴

If Wesley embraced the enterprise of textual criticism, his relationship was more ambiguous to early strands of *historical* criticism that surfaced in the second half of seventeenth century.²⁵ Writers like Thomas Hobbes, Jean Le Clerc, Richard Simon, and Benedict Spinoza began to apply forms of critical analysis used on other literary texts to the various books of the Bible, calling into question traditional assumptions about the authorship of some books, challenging the historical accuracy of certain biblical accounts, and highlighting human dynamics in the long 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. The precedent was set on the scholarly front in the 1690s by William Lowth and John Williams, who marshaled book-length lists of evidence to defend the textual integrity of the Bible and its accuracy on historical and other matters.²⁶ But equally prominent through Wesley's lifetime were manuals offering practical and pastoral advice to laity on how to read the Bible as *Scripture*, as a book carrying divine authority for the church. One of the earliest and most popular of these was again by William Lowth, titled *Directions for the Profitable Reading of the Holy Scriptures* (1708). While this work touches occasionally on critical issues, Lowth's main focus is on providing laity with principles for interpreting the Bible that highlight its clearest teachings (as received through the history of the church) and underline its unity of message. The other major means of defending the integrity of the Bible in eighteenth century England, mixing scholarship with pastoral concern, was the publication of accessible commentaries with notes to guide laity in addressing difficult passages and to point them toward unifying

²⁴This emphasis is the primary focus of Scott Jameson Jones, *John Wesley's Conception and Use of Scripture* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1995); and Mark L. Weeter, *John Wesley's View and Use of Scripture* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007).

²⁵For recent surveys of this emerging strand, see David S. Katz, *God's Last Words: Reading the English Bible from the Reformation to Fundamentalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004); and Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

²⁶William Lowth, *A Vindication of the Divine Authority of the Writings of the Old and New Testament* (Oxford: Sheldonian Theatre, 1692); and John Williams, *Twelve Sermons preached [1695–96] at the lecture founded by Robert Boyle, concerning the Possibility, Necessity, and Certainty of Divine Revelation* (London: R. Chiswell, et al., 1708).

themes. Such works were among the best sellers of the day and topped borrowing lists in libraries.²⁷

John Wesley generally reflected this majority Anglican response. To be sure, he was happy to draw upon emerging historical studies of the customs of the ancient Israelites and the early Christians to enrich his reading of the Bible. The two most prominent works in this vein were by Claude Fleury. Wesley read them both in their original French, preparing a manuscript abridged translation of the volume on early Christians. He later published this abridgment for use by his lay preachers and the students at Kingswood.²⁸ At the same time, Wesley clearly retained traditional assumptions about authorship (such as Moses as author of the first books in the Old Testament) and was quick to reject any suggestion of "errors" in the Bible.

An Excursus on Inerrancy

Wesley's comments about the accuracy of the biblical text can be quite sharp. He insisted to William Law that "if there be one falsehood in the Bible, there may be a thousand; neither can it proceed from the God of truth."²⁹ To the qualified assertion of William Warburton that there is "no considerable error" in the Bible Wesley posed the rhetorical question, "Will not the allowing there is *any error* in Scripture shake the authority of the whole?"³⁰ And to the claim of Soame Jenyns that the writers of the Bible were sometimes left to

²⁷ On these various points, see Justin Champion, "Directions for the Profitable Reading of the Holy Scriptures': Biblical Criticism, Clerical Learning and Lay Readers, c. 1650–1720," in *Scripture and Scholarship in Early Modern England*, eds. A. Hessayon & N. Keene (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), 208–30; and Thomas R. Preston, "Biblical Criticism, Literature, and the Eighteenth-Century Reader," in *Books and their Readers in Eighteenth-Century England*, ed. Isabel Rivers (New York: St Martin's Press, 1982), 97–126.

²⁸ The works in question are Claude Fleury (1640–1723), *Les mœurs des Israelites* (Paris: Clouzier, 1681); and Fleury, *Les mœurs des Chrétiens* (Paris: Clouzier, 1682). Wesley records reading them in his diary in 1736 (see April 24–25, *Works*, 18:379–80; and Sept. 13, *Works*, 18:422). English versions were published almost immediately after the French, but Wesley may not have had them available. His manuscript translation (done in 1737) is present in the Colman collection at the Methodist Archive and Research Centre, Manchester. Wesley published this translation as *The Manners of the Antient Christians* (Bristol: Farley, 1749).

²⁹ Letter to William Law (6 Jan 1756), *Letters* (Telford), 3:345–46.

³⁰ Letter to Bishop of Gloucester (1763), II.5, *Works*, 11:504.

themselves, consequently making some mistakes, he protested, “Nay, if there be one falsehood in that book, it did not come from the God of truth.”³¹

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.³² This claim is questionable, not so much because the words “inerrant” and “inerrancy” do not appear in his writings (they were not in common use until the next century), but because his broader comments on the Bible suggest a more nuanced stance. Take for example his reflections in “Thoughts upon Methodism”:

What is their fundamental doctrine? That the Bible is the whole and sole rule both of Christian faith and practice. Hence they learned: 1) That religion is an inward principle; that it is no other than the mind that was in Christ; or in other words, the renewal of the soul after the image of God, in righteousness and true holiness. 2) That this can never be wrought in us but by the power of the Holy Ghost. 3) That we receive this and every other blessing merely for the sake of Christ; and, 4) that whosoever hath the mind that was in Christ, the same is our brother, and sister, and mother.³³

Note the focus on central truths of “Christian faith and practice.” Wesley is 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.³⁴

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

³¹ See *Journal* (24 July 1776), *Works*, 23:25; commenting on Soame Jenyns, *A View of the Internal Evidence of the Christian Religion* (London: J. Dodsley, 1776). Wesley published these comments in a letter to the *Bristol Gazette* (12 Sept. 1776), p. 2, where he added “But I flatly deny that there is one falsehood in the Bible.”

³² E.g., Wilber T. Dayton, “Infallibility, Wesley, and British Methodism,” in *Inerrancy and the Church* (Chicago: Moody, 1984), 223–54; and Daryl McCarthy, “Early Wesleyan Views of Scripture,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 16.2 (1981): 95–105.

³³ “Thoughts Upon Methodism” §2, *Arminian Magazine* 10 (1787), *Works*, 9:527. See also *Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, §5, *Works* (Jackson), 11:366.

³⁴ See particularly Sermon 16, “The Means of Grace,” II.8, *Works*, 1:388; Sermon 12, “The Witness of Our Own Spirit,” §6, *Works*, 1:302–303; and Sermon 36, “The Law Established by Faith, II,” I.5, *Works*, 2:37.

tangential matters. His very first comment in *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament* (on Matthew 1:1) sets the tone:

If there were any difficulties in the genealogy, or that given by St. Luke, which could not easily be removed, they would rather affect the Jewish tables than the credit of the evangelists, for they act only as historians, setting down those genealogies as they stood in those public and allowed records. . . . Nor was it needful they should correct the mistakes, if there were any. For these accounts sufficiently answer the end for which they are recited. They unquestionably prove the grand point of view, that Jesus was of the family from which the promised Seed was to come.

Wesley similarly had no problem acknowledging that New Testament writers do not always transcribe with exactness the Old Testament passages that they cite. He recognized that many of the differences demonstrate that the New Testament writers were citing from the Greek text in the Septuagint. While he considered the Septuagint less reliable than the Hebrew text, Wesley justified this use on the grounds that "It was not their business, in writing to the Jews, who at that time had it in high esteem, to amend or alter this, which would of consequence have occasioned disputes without end."³⁵

This justification may call to mind a broader principle, long held in Christian tradition, that God graciously condescended to adapt revelation not only to general human limitations but to specific cultural settings. Augustine, for example, invoked this principle to explain the account of creation in Genesis—as appropriate for "unlearned" peoples.³⁶ Wesley does speak of "divine condescension" in revelation on occasion, noting that God adapts to the "low capacities" of human nature, such as our inability to understand fully God's timelessness.³⁷ But his comment on the use of the Septuagint is one of the few that suggests divine condescension might include 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."³⁸ Wesley's more typical tendency was to extol how accurately the authors' words answered the impression made by

³⁵ *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*, Heb. 2:7; see also (more broadly) Matt 2:6. Cited hereafter as *NT Notes*.

³⁶ See Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, ch. 15; and *Confessions*, Book XII, ch. xvii (§ 24).

³⁷ See particularly *NT Notes*, Rom. 6:19; and *NT Notes*, 1 Peter 1:2.

³⁸ Some have cited Wesley as embracing this principle by citing the text: "The scriptures were never intended to instruct us in philosophy, or astronomy; and therefore, on [cont.]

God upon their mind, and to insist that interpersonal dynamics were always guided by God in an unerring direction.³⁹

This is another place where Wesley's present descendants may want to appreciate his example in historical context, while suggesting that his deepest conviction about how God works in human life has broader implications than he realized. Recall how Wesley describes this conviction in relation to conversion:

You know how God wrought in *your own* soul when he first enabled you to say, "The life I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me." He did not take away your understanding, but enlightened and strengthened it. He did not destroy any of your affections; rather they were more vigorous than before. Least of all did he take away your liberty, your power of choosing good or evil; he did not *force* you; but being *assisted* by his grace you . . . *chose* the better part.⁴⁰

If you carry this conviction over to God's agency in graciously assisting the human authors of Scripture, I would suggest that one could take with utmost seriousness the cultural specificity of the various books in the Bible that modern scholarship makes evident, as well as the literary craft of the various authors, while still affirming a robust sense of the authority of Scripture as the "book of God."

The length of the preceding discussion of inerrancy could be misleading. It reflects our modern debates more than Wesley's focal concern. He certainly believed that "the Scripture of the Old and New Testaments is a most solid and precious system of divine truth. Every part thereof is worthy of God; and

those subjects, expressions are not always to be taken in the literal sense, but for the most part, as accommodated to the common apprehension of mankind." This is found in Wesley, *A Survey of the Wisdom of God in Creation; or, A Compendium of Natural Philosophy* (2nd American ed.; Philadelphia: Jonathan Ponder, 1816), 2:139–40. But these words are not part of Wesley's original text. They are part of the revision introduced into this and later editions in North America, where the editors chose to replace much of Wesley's discussion of astronomy with text drawn from James Ferguson, *Astronomy Explained Upon Sir Isaac Newton's Principles* (London: for the author, 1756); see p. 48 for this quote. It is unclear if Wesley would have agreed with Ferguson; see his hesitation in *Journal* (8 Jan. 1775), *Works* 22:442.

³⁹ See *NT Notes* (1754), Preface, §12, *Works* (Jackson), 14:238; and *NT Notes*, Acts 15:7.

⁴⁰ See Sermon 63, "The General Spread of the Gospel," §11, *Works*, 2:489.

all together are one entire body, wherein is no defect, no excess."⁴¹ But he never took up the scholarly project of crafting an extended defense of this point.⁴² 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* (1755), where he distilled the insights of several commentators (particularly, again, Johann Bengel), interweaving his own exhortations and advice.⁴³ Wesley later published the parallel *Explanatory Notes Upon the Old Testament* (1765), a work that relies heavily on other commentators, with only scattered inserts of Wesley's voice.⁴⁴

Read Relying on the Inspiration of the Spirit

While the word "inerrancy" does not appear in Wesley's writings, the phrase "inspiration of the Spirit" and its various derivations are found everywhere. It is important to note that his typical use of the phrase is broader than just considerations of the production of the Bible. In the *Complete English Dictionary* (1753) that he published to explain hard words in Scripture and other writings, Wesley defined "inspiration" broadly—as the influence of the Holy Spirit that enables persons to love and serve God. This definition is reflected in comments to his followers like the following: "You believe that ... there cannot be in any [person] one good temper or desire, or so much as one good thought, unless it be produced by the almighty power of God, by the inspiration or influence of the Holy Ghost."⁴⁵ This broad use of "inspiration" trades on the meaning of the Latin original, *inspirare*: to breathe into, animate, excite, or inflame. But the most important precedent for the broad use was surely the Collect for Purity, which Wesley prayed regularly at celebration of the Eucharist: "Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts, by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we might perfectly love thee and worthily magnify thy holy name."

⁴¹ *NT Notes* Preface (1754), §10, *Works* (Jackson), 14:238.

⁴² Wesley was not entirely against such scholarly endeavors. But the most extended example, his *Letter to Conyers Middleton* (1749), was devoted to defending claims about miracles in post-biblical church history.

⁴³ The best available analysis of Wesley's sources and editorial contribution to *NT Notes* is Frank Baker, "John Wesley, Biblical Commentator," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 71.1 (1989): 110–20.

⁴⁴ See Casto, "Exegetical Method."

⁴⁵ *Advice to the People Called 'Methodists'*, §6, *Works*, 9:124.

The broader sense is evident even when Wesley uses “inspiration” in relation to the Bible. Consider his comments on 2 Timothy 3:16 in *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*:

The Spirit of God not only once inspired those who wrote it, but continually inspires, supernaturally assists those that read it with earnest prayer. Hence it is so profitable for doctrine, for instruction of the ignorant, for the reproof or conviction of them that are in error or sin; for the correction or amendment of whatever is amiss, and for instructing or training up the children of God in all righteousness.

While he affirms God’s guidance of the original authors, Wesley’s focal emphasis is encouraging present readers to seek the Spirit’s gracious assistance in reading Scripture!

What assistance are we to seek? To begin with, as Wesley clarified his point to Bishop William Warburton (quoting Thomas à Kempis), “we need the same Spirit to *understand* the Scripture which enabled the holy men of old to *write* it.”⁴⁶ Thus, in the preface to his first volume of *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.⁴⁷ Note that he does not pray for spiritual guidance apart from Scripture, but for the Spirit’s aid in our reflections upon Scripture. As Wesley once put it, “the children of light walk by the joint light of reason, Scripture, and the Holy Ghost.”⁴⁸

Although 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.”⁴⁹ 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

⁴⁶ *Letter to Bishop of Gloucester*, II.10, *Works*, 11:509. See also *OT Notes*, Preface, §18, *Works* (Jackson), 14:253.

⁴⁷ *Sermons*, Vol. 1, Preface, §5, *Works*, 1:105–106.

⁴⁸ Letter to “John Smith” (28 Sept. 1745), §14, *Works*, 26:158.

⁴⁹ See Sermon 18, “The Marks of the New Birth,” §3, *Works*, 1:418 (emphasis added).

God is true," but do not embrace the saving truth of Scripture.⁵⁰ As Wesley emphasized to a correspondent, personal embrace of the Bible as saving truth is a *gift* of God, not the natural result of rational argument alone; moreover, it is a gift which must be nurtured by continuing reliance on the inspiring work of the Spirit.⁵¹

This is why John 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 advanced by other writers.⁵² But here, as in his consideration of God's revelation in nature, Wesley valued such apologetic efforts for helping *confirm* faith born of the witness of the Spirit, not as providing the foundation for that faith.⁵³

A final point to make about the relationship of the inspiration of the Spirit to the Bible in Wesley is that he shared a common blind spot of his day. He clearly affirmed God's inspiration of the original authors, and he could speak of how the church has carefully handed down the book, but he shows little awareness of the long and convoluted process of canonization.⁵⁴ An adequate doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture today would need to make the Spirit's activity in this process a central theme!

⁵⁰ Ibid., §2, *Works*, 1:418.

⁵¹ See John Wesley's Letter to "John Smith" (10 July 1747), §9, *Works*, 26:249–50.

⁵² A good example is "Clear and Concise Demonstration of the Divine Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures," *Arminian Magazine* 12 (1789): 211. While Thomas Jackson thought that this was written by Wesley (including it in his edition of Wesley's *Works*, 11:484), it is one of the numerous pieces in the *Arminian Magazine* that Wesley borrowed. In this case the author is John Ryland (1723–92). The brief piece appears (with an additional paragraph) in Ryland, *Body of Divinity in Miniature* (London: T. Chapman, 1790), 127–29. While this postdates the publication by Wesley, Ryland was distilling a longer argument already published in his three-volume *Contemplations of the Beauty of Creation* (see the 3rd edn. [Northampton: Thomas Dicey, 1780], 1:160–330, esp. 268 and 307). Wesley got it either from Ryland directly or some recent magazine.

⁵³ See Randy L. Maddox, "John Wesley's Precedent for Theological Engagement with the Natural Sciences" *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 44.1 (Spring 2009): 23–54; esp. 41–43. I think there is a bit more resonance in Wesley here than William Abraham senses for the critique that Abraham rightly offers of attempts to prove the inspiration of Scripture; cf. Abraham, *Aldersgate and Athens: John Wesley and the Foundations of Christian Belief* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), 61–80.

⁵⁴ There were some initial works attending to this issue in Wesley's day, particularly Jeremiah Jones, *A New and Full Method of Settling the Canonical Authority of the New Testament*, 3 vols. (London: J. Clark & R. Hett, 1726–27). But there is no evidence that Wesley read Jones, and Jones's work mainly defends decisions about which works were included in and excluded from the New Testament on grounds of their content, not their process of adoption.

Read the Entire Canon

While Wesley may have paid little attention to the process of canonization, he read and drew upon the *whole* of the Protestant canon, and encouraged his followers to do the same. This practice traces back to his Anglican nurture—reinforced by his mother Susanna!—since the *Book of Common Prayer* suggested a pattern of daily readings that covered the Old Testament once and the New Testament (except Revelation) three times a year. Wesley passed this expectation on to his Methodist followers, encouraging them to read a portion of *both* testaments each morning and evening.⁵⁵ Lest children avoid the Old Testament, due to its size, Wesley prepared a special abridgment for them.⁵⁶

Wesley's pastoral practice reflects his commitment to the theological and spiritual value of the whole Bible. For example, Wesley left behind records in his diaries, letters, published *Journal*, and two manuscript sermon registers that have allowed constructing a list of his biblical texts for sermons through much of his ministry.⁵⁷ This list demonstrates extensive preaching in both testaments. Indeed, we have records of John Wesley preaching on texts from every book in the Protestant canon except Esther, Song of Songs, Obadiah, Nahum, Zephaniah, Philemon, and 3 John. Part of the reason for this extensive range is that he typically used one of the assigned lessons in the *Book of Common Prayer* when he preached on Sundays, right up to his death.⁵⁸ But his preaching throughout the week in various settings also shows remarkable breadth.

Embedded in Wesley's pastoral practice is rejection of the tendency (tracing back at least to Marcion in the early church) of many Christians to dismiss

⁵⁵ See, for example, his Letter to Margaret Lewen (June 1764), *Letters* (Telford), 4:247; and *OT Notes*, Preface, §18, *Works* (Jackson), 14:253.

⁵⁶ His four-part *Lessons for Children* (1746–54) is simply an abridgment of the KJV Old Testament. It is “lessons” in the sense of assigned readings, not lectures about the readings. At this point (pre-1756), Wesley included in Part IV selections from two books in the apocrypha: Ecclesiasticus and Wisdom.

⁵⁷ The records are not exhaustive, because portions of Wesley's diary have been lost. Even so, a list of all known sermon occasions, where we have the text, runs over 400 pages in length! This list was compiled by Wanda Willard Smith, longtime assistant to Albert Outler. It can be found 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>.

⁵⁸ For a late example, see *Journal* (16 Aug. 1789), *Works*, 24:150.

the Old Testament, either explicitly or by simple neglect.⁵⁹ Most centrally, Wesley avoided any suggestion that the emphasis on grace and forgiveness in the New Testament should be posed against the emphasis on living by God's law in the Old Testament.⁶⁰ Rather, as Wesley liked to put it, every moral command in *both* Testaments should be read as a "covered promise" —a promise both that the basic intent of the law is our well-being and that God will graciously enable our obedience.⁶¹ This conviction allowed Wesley to read the Old Testament as an authoritative unfolding of *Christian* truth, while affirming the New Testament as the *final standard* of Christian faith and practice.⁶² Admittedly, it also inclined him to read Christian convictions a bit too directly into Old Testament texts at times.⁶³ But it also undergirded his tendency to interweave allusions to texts from both of the Testaments throughout his sermons, emulating the intertextuality of Scripture itself.⁶⁴

Read in Conference with Others

My next major point is signaled again in Wesley's preface to his first volume of *Sermons*, where he stresses being 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 Scripture, then adds: "If any doubt still remains, I consult those who are experienced in the things of God, and then the writings whereby,

⁵⁹Cf. Matthew R. Schlimm, "Defending the Old Testament's Worth: John Wesley's Reaction to the Rebirth of Marcionism," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 42.2 (2007): 28–51. Schlimm details Wesley's rejection of a scholarly form of Marcionism in his day.

⁶⁰See Sermon 34, "The Original, Nature, Properties, and Use of the Law," *Works*, 2:4–19.

⁶¹Sermon 25, "Sermon on the Mount V," II.3, *Works*, 1:554–55; and Sermon 76, "On Perfection," II.1–8, *Works*, 3:77–80. For an analysis of how this led Wesley to read the Sermon on the Mount differently than Luther, see Tore Meistad, *Martin Luther and John Wesley on the Sermon on the Mount* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1999).

⁶²Sermon 67, "On Divine Providence," §4, *Works*, 2:536; and Letter to Elizabeth Hardy (5Apr 1758), *Letters* (Telford), 4:11.

⁶³See the critique of John in A.W. Martin Jr., "'Then As Now': Wesley's Notes as a Model for United Methodists Today," *Quarterly Review* 10.2 (1990): 25–47; and (more nuanced) in Schlimm, "Defending the Old Testament's Worth."

⁶⁴Cf. Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

being dead, they yet speak.”⁶⁵ 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.⁶⁶ 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 [others].”⁶⁷ 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.⁶⁸ Thus, the early Methodist movement provides an instructive example for those seeking today to recover appreciation for the role of community in interpreting Scripture.⁶⁹

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

⁶⁵ *Sermons*, Vol. 1, Preface, §5, *Works*, 1:105–106.

⁶⁶ This point is helpfully developed by Andrew C. Thompson in “Outler’s Quadrilateral, Moral Psychology, and Theological Reflection in the Wesleyan Tradition,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 46.1 (2011): 49–72.

⁶⁷ See respectively, *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1739), Preface, §§4–5, *Works* (Jackson), 14:321; and Sermon 24, “Sermon on the Mount IV,” §1.1, *Works*, 1:533–34.

⁶⁸ A closely related point is developed in Steven Joe Koskie Jr., “Reading the Way to Heaven: A Wesleyan Theological Hermeneutic of Scripture” (Brunel University, London School of Theology, Ph.D. thesis, 2010), esp. chs. 4 & 6.

⁶⁹ See, for example, Stephen E. Fowl & L. Gregory Jones, *Reading in Communion: Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991).

matter.⁷⁰ 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."⁷¹

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.⁷² His goal in this dialogue is clear—seeking the *most adequate* understandings.

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 the places where our present understanding of something in Scripture (usually shared with those closest to us) might be wrong! That is why Wesley specifically invited any who believed that he presented mistaken readings of the Bible in his *Sermons* to be in touch, so that they could confer together over Scripture.⁷³

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.

⁷⁰For more on this see Randy L. Maddox, "Opinion, Religion, and 'Catholic Spirit': John Wesley on Theological Integrity," *Asbury Theological Journal* 47.1 (1992): 63–87; and Maddox, "The Enriching Role of Experience," in Stephen Gunter (ed.), *Wesley and the Quadrilateral* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 107–27.

⁷¹Sermon 39, "Catholic Spirit," §I.4, *Works*, 2:84.

⁷²*Ibid.*, §III.1, *Works*, 2:92–93.

⁷³*Sermons*, Vol. 1, Preface, §§8–9, *Works*, 1:107.

It is widely recognized that Wesley valued highly the writings of the first three centuries of the church, in both its Eastern (Greek) and Western (Latin) settings. Ted Campbell has demonstrated that his strongest interest was in the model of Christian practice in the ancient church, though he also valued early precedent in doctrine.⁷⁴ Wesley specifically defended consulting early Christian authors when interpreting Scripture in his published letter to Conyers Middleton. Middleton had argued that such consultation was not necessary because Scripture is both complete and clear in its teachings. To this Wesley responded, “The Scriptures are a complete rule of faith and practice; and they are clear in all necessary points. And yet their clearness does not prove that they need not be explained, nor their completeness that they need not be enforced.”⁷⁵ He went on to insist that consultation with early Christian writings had helped many avoid dangerous errors in their interpretation of Scripture, while the neglect of these writings would surely leave one captive to current reigning misunderstandings.

In both his formal definitions and his practice Wesley tended to jump from the early church to the Anglican standards in his consideration of Christian tradition.⁷⁶ 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 stressed the primacy of the communally accepted verbal or “literal” meaning in interpreting biblical texts (a principle that the Reformers had adopted to balance the fluidity of allegorical and spiritual exegesis).⁷⁷ 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 the exegetical claims

⁷⁴Ted A. Campbell, *John Wesley and Christian Antiquity* (Nashville: Kingswood, 1991).

⁷⁵A Letter to the Reverend Dr. Conyers Middleton (4–24 Jan. 1749), *Letters* (Telford), 2:325.

⁷⁶See Ted Campbell, “The Interpretive Role of Tradition,” in Gunter (ed.), *Wesley and the Quadrilateral*, 63–75.

⁷⁷It is important to distinguish this Reformation focus on the communally accepted reading of the actual biblical text from the later tendency to equate the “literal” meaning with the author’s intent. See the helpful discussion of this point in Koskie, “Reading the Way to Heaven,” 88–119. See also James Thomas Clemons, “John Wesley—Biblical Literalist?” *Religion in Life* 46 (1977): 332–42.

of opponents was that they contradicted “the whole tenor and scope of Scripture.”⁷⁸

Like most Anglicans of his day, Wesley took Luther’s side in one major interpretive debate. While Protestants agreed that Scripture was the final authority of Christian belief and life, they divided in practice on the question of how to use Scripture in addressing cases not explicitly covered therein. Luther generally took the more flexible stance that we can accept from tradition or experience things of proven value not explicitly *condemned* in Scripture, while Zwingli urged the tighter principle of rejecting everything not explicitly *condoned* in Scripture. Wesley frequently argued that whatever Scripture neither explicitly forbids nor enjoins was of an indifferent nature; i.e., open to Christians to decide either way.⁷⁹ Of course, he was quick to add that Scripture might teach *principles* relevant to specific matters of faith and practice, even if it did not address the matters explicitly.⁸⁰

Read in Conference with the “Rule of Faith”

One interpretive principle that Wesley inherited from earlier Christian generations deserves special attention. A good example of the principle can be found in St. Augustine’s *On Christian Teaching*, one of the first Christian treatises devoted to guidelines for interpreting Scripture. 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 of faith” (Greek: κατὰ τὴν ἀναλογίαν τῆς πίστεως). Augustine went on to define this rule of faith as the teachings found in “the more open places of the Scriptures and in the authority of the church.”⁸¹ The use of the term throughout Augustine’s works and the broad early church makes clear that the two sources he identified should not be considered as either separate or additive. Rather, early baptismal creeds and related catechetical materials sought to provide a narrative summary of God’s

⁷⁸ These principles are well documented and discussed in Jones, *John Wesley’s Conception and Use of Scripture*, 114–26; and Weeter, *Wesley’s View of Scripture*, 194–204.

⁷⁹ E.g., Sermon 12, “The Witness of Our Own Spirit,” §6, *Works*, 1:303; Sermon 97, “On Obedience to Pastors,” §III.6, *Works*, 3:380; Letter to John Dickens (26 Dec. 1789), *Letters* (Telford), 8:192; and *Serious Thoughts Concerning Godfathers and Godmothers*, §4, *Works* (Jackson), 10:507.

⁸⁰ Cf. *Plain Account of the People Called Methodists*, II.10, *Works*, 9:263.

⁸¹ Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, Book III, par. 2.

saving work as revealed in Scripture, with particular attention to the implicit trinitarian form of this work (the Apostles' Creed is a key example).⁸² The "rule of faith" gathered the early church's communal 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 battleground during the Reformation. Some teachings and practices had been advanced on the "authority of the church" through the medieval period that the Reformers judged lacking in biblical support or 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 consulting 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.⁸³

Wesley inherited through his Anglican standards this Protestant commitment to Scripture as the "rule of faith," interpreted in light of the "analogy of faith."⁸⁴ He also inherited the impact of ongoing Protestant debates over the dynamics of individual salvation, which elevated attention to topics of soteriology in communally-authoritative guides to reading of Scripture.⁸⁵ Attention to these topics was particularly high among those Protestants concerned with piety and holy living, like Wesley. Thus, his specific articulations of the "analogy of faith" tend to focus on four soteriological themes: the corruption of sin, justification by faith, the new birth, and present inward and outward holiness.⁸⁶

⁸² See Paul M. Blowers, "The *Regula Fidei* and the Narrative Character of Early Christian Faith," *Pro Ecclesia* 6.2 (1997): 199–228; and Jason E. Vickers, *Invocation and Assent: The Making and Remaking of Trinitarian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 1–28.

⁸³ See the examples collected in Jones, *John Wesley's Conception and Use of Scripture*, 45–53.

⁸⁴ See *The Character of a Methodist*, §1, *Works*, 9:34; and (for a few examples of "analogy of faith") Sermon 5, "Justification by Faith," §2, *Works*, 1:183; *An Address to the Clergy*, §II.1, *Works* (Jackson), 10:490; Sermon 62, "The End of Christ's Coming," §III.5, *Works*, 2:483; and Sermon 64, "The New Creation," §2, *Works*, 2:501.

⁸⁵ Cf. Vickers, *Invocation and Assent*, 29–67.

⁸⁶ E.g., *NT Notes*, Rom. 12:6; *OT Notes*, Preface, §18, I:ix, *Works* (Jackson), 14:253; and Sermon 122, "Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity," §6, *Works*, 4:89.

Wesley's focus on these topics has led some interpreters to fault him for a one-sided "personal-salvationist" reading of Scripture.⁸⁷ 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. In the published sermon that Wesley does devote to the Trinity he traces the saving work of each person of the Godhead, insisting that recognition of their conjoined work has a "close connection to vital religion."⁸⁸ As Geoffrey Wainwright has shown, Wesley's reading of Scripture was actually deeply shaped by his trinitarian convictions.⁸⁹

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*."⁹⁰ John Pearson's volume was an exposition of the Apostles' Creed, which had been commended to Wesley by both of his parents and was used as a text during his study at Christ Church in Oxford.⁹¹ It was the theological text that Wesley himself most often assigned to his assistants and recommended to his correspondents.⁹²

There were British voices in Wesley's century, like John Locke, who criticized allowing the Apostles' Creed or any authoritative "analogy of faith" to shape one's interpretation of Scripture. They argued that this contradicted the role of Scripture as itself the "rule of faith." But what their arguments make most clear is their confidence in their ability as "enlightened" readers to get

⁸⁷ E.g., Stephen B. Dawes, "John Wesley and the Bible," *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society* 54 (2003): 1–10; p. 7.

⁸⁸ Sermon 55, "On the Trinity," *Works*, 2:374–86; esp. §2 (376).

⁸⁹ Geoffrey Wainwright, "Wesley's Trinitarian Hermeneutics," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 36.1 (2001): 7–30. For similar on Charles Wesley, see Vickers, *Invocation and Assent*, 169–89.

⁹⁰ Letter to Cradock Glascott (13 May 1764), *Letters* (Telford), 4:243.

⁹¹ John Pearson (1613–86), *An Exposition of the Creed* (London: John Williams, 1659). For the commendation of his parents, see Samuel Wesley, *Advice*, 46; and Letter from Susanna Wesley (10 Nov. 1725), *Works*, 25:183. On its assignment at Christ Church, see *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society* 47 (1989): 33–35.

⁹² See *Journal* (23 Feb. 1749), *Works*, 20:263; Letter to Margaret Lewen (June 1764), *Letters* (Telford) 4:249; and Letter to Sarah Wesley (8 Sept. 1781), *Letters* (Telford) 7:83.

back to what the authors of Scripture *really* meant, correcting the misunderstandings of all previous generations of interpreters.⁹³ As we have seen, Wesley was skeptical about any such human hopes for absolute certainty. Neither did he share the comparative disdain for earlier interpreters. Thus, while he encouraged Methodists to “think and let think” on a range of theological “opinions which do not strike at the root of Christianity,” he stressed that he and the movement embraced the central doctrines of historic Christian teaching.⁹⁴

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.⁹⁵ 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!⁹⁶

Read in Conference with the “Book of Nature”

One of the commitments that Wesley imbibed from 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.⁹⁷ 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.⁹⁸ But there is good evidence that study of current science also helped Wesley test and reshape his current understanding 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

⁹³ See particularly John Locke, *An Essay for the Understanding of St Paul’s Epistles, by Consulting St Paul Himself* (London: Awnsham & Churchill, 1707), xxi [note the subtitle!].

⁹⁴ *The Character of a Methodist*, §1, *Works*, 9:33–34 (which highlights claims about Christ as truly divine).

⁹⁵ Donald A. Bullen, *A Man of One Book? John Wesley’s Interpretation and Use of the Bible* (Milton Keynes, England: Paternoster, 2007) emphasizes this point, casting it in an overly one-sided manner, while caricaturing many earlier interpreters of Wesley.

⁹⁶ See in this connection Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), esp. 57–77.

⁹⁷ For more on this, see Maddox, “Wesley’s Precedent,” esp. 38–39.

⁹⁸ See *Survey of the Wisdom of God*, Preface, §1, *Works* (Jackson), 14:300.

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 imbibed 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.⁹⁹ What led to this change? A major factor was the study he undertook, 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.¹⁰⁰

This instance of conference with current science helping Wesley to reclaim a theme of Scripture and early Christian tradition suggests a broader point. Some voices in the emerging Enlightenment (with its emphasis on science) posed the authority of *present* experience and reason over against *past* authorities in a way that emptied Scripture and tradition of normative contribution to deciding theological issues. In reaction, others called for theology to be based on Scripture *alone*. Wesley refused to join either side of this polarization. Confronting an apparent conflict between science and Scripture, he did not simply debate which was more authoritative but 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.

⁹⁹ See Sermon 60, "The General Deliverance," *Works*, 2:437–50; and Sermon 64, "The New Creation," *Works*, 2:500–10.

¹⁰⁰ See the discussion in Randy L. Maddox, "Anticipating the New Creation: Wesleyan Foundations for Holistic Mission," *Asbury Journal* 62 (2007): 49–66.

Read with a “Discrimen” of 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 were unique to him. Similar points could be made for many of his fellow Anglicans and (with appropriate adjustments) 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—what accounted, for example, for the rejection of his interpretation on key issues by his fellow evangelicals?

In a perceptive study of how several twentieth-century theologians used Scripture, David Kelsey demonstrates that their deepest differences lay not in whether they affirmed the authority of the Bible (all of them did), or drew on historical methods (again, all did), but in the particular *discrimen*, or interpretive lens, which they brought to reading Scripture. Central to this *discrimen* was the interpreter’s convictions about *how* God is currently present among the faithful in saving ways and the *ultimate goal* of that saving work.¹⁰¹ Kelsey notes that the interpreters viewed their *discrimen* as a perceptive insight into the deepest themes of Scripture, not a foreign imposition upon it. He also suggests that *discrimens* are communally-shared (though differing between Christian communities), with readers imbibing their initial interpretive lens from their formative community.

I believe that Kelsey’s insight applies more broadly than the twentieth century. Thus, my consideration of what was most distinctive about Wesley’s interpretation of Scripture will focus on sensing his *discrimen*. What were his deepest convictions, drawn from Scripture, about how God is currently present in saving ways, and the goal of that saving work? Kelsey notes that a helpful way to approach this question is to watch for an interpreter’s “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.¹⁰²

We should have no qualms in applying this criterion on Wesley, for it was one that he recognized himself. Consider two brief examples:

Every truth which is revealed in the oracles of God is undoubtedly of great importance. Yet it may be allowed that some of those which are

¹⁰¹ David H. Kelsey, *Proving Doctrine: The Uses of Scripture in Modern Theology* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1999), esp. pp.163–67, 193–96.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 103–4.

revealed therein are of greater importance than others as being more immediately conducive to the grand end of all, the eternal salvation of [humanity]. And we may judge of their importance even from this circumstance, that they are not mentioned only once in the sacred writings, but are repeated over and over.¹⁰³

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.¹⁰⁴

So what was Wesley's "working canon"? In the last quote just given he went on to say "In this rank we may place the passage before us," namely, 1 Corinthians 13. Elsewhere he describes this chapter as "a compendium of true religion."¹⁰⁵ Wesley also highly prized the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, chaps. 5–7, describing it as "the noblest compendium of religion found in the oracles of God," and devoting to it nearly a third of the entries in his first four volumes of published *Sermons*.¹⁰⁶ But, as Robert Wall has argued, the biblical book that Wesley prized most highly was surely the first Epistle of John.¹⁰⁷ He referred to 1 John as "the deepest part of Scripture" and a "compendium of all the Holy Scriptures."¹⁰⁸ He praised it as the best rhetorical model for preaching.¹⁰⁹ And he favored the book in his own preaching, using 1 John for his sermon text and alluding to it within sermons much more frequently (relative to the number of verses in the book) than any other biblical book.¹¹⁰

¹⁰³ Sermon 73, "Of Hell," §1, *Works*, 3:31.

¹⁰⁴ Sermon 91, "On Charity," proem, *Works*, 3:292

¹⁰⁵ *Journal* (30 Mar. 1789), *Works*, 24:126.

¹⁰⁶ See *Journal* (17 Oct. 1771), *Works*, 22:293. There were 44 sermons in the original first four volumes of *Sermons*, 13 on the Sermon on the Mount.

¹⁰⁷ 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.

¹⁰⁸ *Journal* (18 July 1765), *Works*, 22:13; and *Journal* (9 Nov. 1772), *Works*, 22:352.

¹⁰⁹ *Sermons*, Vol. 5, Preface, §6, *Works*, 2:357.

¹¹⁰ In the sermon register described earlier (see note 57), we have records of Wesley preaching on a text from 1 John at least 503 times; since there are 105 verses in 1 John, this reflects use of the book at the rate of 4.8 times per verse. The comparative numbers for some other examples would be: Galatians (479 uses, 149 verses; 3.2 rate), Romans (924 uses, 433 verses; 2.15 rate), 1 Corinthians (835 uses, 437 verses; 1.9 rate), James (154 uses, 108 verses; 1.4 rate), Matthew (1460 uses, 1071 verses; 1.36 rate), Gospel of John (1044 uses, 879 verses; 1.18 rate), Mark (757 uses, 678 verses; 1.1 rate), and Luke (933 uses, [cont.]

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.¹¹¹ But consider this in light of Kelsey's analysis of an interpreter's *discrimen*, where a central aspect is one's conviction about how God is vitally present among the faithful today in saving work. Then note Wesley's description of 1 John 4:19 — "We love [God] because he first loved us" — as "the sum of the whole gospel."¹¹² 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.¹¹³ From that point on, Wesley's writings particularly emphasized how God was presently active among the faithful in the Holy Spirit, whose witness assures us of God's love (another theme prominent in 1 John¹¹⁴).

Wesley drew on a range of texts to stress this assuring work of the Spirit, including Romans 5:5, which speaks of "the love of God shed abroad in our heart, through the Holy Ghost which is given unto us."¹¹⁵ But he kept going back to 1 John because it connected the *mode* of God's presence (in the Spirit's assuring work) so clearly with the *ultimate goal* of God's saving work—not only to pardon our sin but to heal and transform our lives, so that we might be made

1151 verses; .8 rate). Note that 25% of the citations of 1 Corinthians are chapter 13; and a similar proportion for Matthew are from the Sermon on the Mount.

This preference can also be seen, though less clearly, in the texts for Wesley's *published* sermons. Five of these sermons are on texts from 1 John (a rate of .05 sermons per number of verses in 1 John). Romans, by comparison, is the source of the text for seventeen sermons (which is a rate of .04 sermons per verses). Galatians is used as a text for only one sermon (rate of .007).

¹¹¹ Cf. James H. Williams, "Why Should I strive to Set the Crooked Straight?: Wesley, His Luminaries, Modern Critics, and the 'Sinlessness Contradiction' in 1 John 1:8,10 and 3:6,9" (University of Sheffield Ph.D. thesis, 2001), 141–75.

¹¹² Sermons, Vol. 5, Preface, §6, *Works*, 2:357.

¹¹³ See Randy L. Maddox, "A Change of Affections: The Development, Dynamics, and Dethronement of John Wesley's 'Heart Religion,'" in Richard Steele (ed.), *Heart Religion in the Methodist Tradition and Related Movements* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 2001), 3–31.

¹¹⁴ See Wesley's extended reliance on 1 John in Sermon 10, "Witness of the Spirit I," I.3–4, *Works*, 1:272.

¹¹⁵ For an early example, see *Journal* (29 January 1738), *Works*, 18:215–16. This passage accounts for 50 of Wesley's 890 references to Romans in his sermons.

perfect in love of both God and neighbor (4:7-18), ideally leading sinless lives (2:1, 3:6-9).¹¹⁶

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 that 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."¹¹⁷ 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 central convictions he found most clearly expressed 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).¹¹⁸

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,

. . . destroys all [God's] attributes at once. It overturns both his justice, mercy and truth. Yea, it represents the most Holy God as worse than the devil. . . . You say you will "prove it by Scripture." Hold! What will you prove by Scripture? That God is worse than the devil? It cannot be. Whatever that Scripture proves, it never can prove this. . . . There are many Scriptures the true sense whereof neither you or I shall know till death is swallowed up in victory. But this I know, better it were to say it had no sense at all than to say it had such a sense as this. . . . No Scripture can mean that God is not love, or that his mercy is not over all his works.¹¹⁹

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

¹¹⁶ This connection is emphasized in Wall, "Wesley as Biblical Interpreter," 118–22.

¹¹⁷ Sermon 40, *Christian Perfection*, II.20, *Works*, 2:116 (emphasis added).

¹¹⁸ See Victor Shepherd, "John Wesley," in J.P. Greenman & T. Larsen (eds.), *Reading Romans Through the Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005), 149–68. Shepherd's study is more perceptive than Stephen Westerholm's chapter on Wesley in *Perspectives Old and New of Paul: The "Lutheran" Paul and His Critics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 64–87.

¹¹⁹ Sermon 110, "Free Grace," §§25–26, *Works*, 3:555–56.

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 biblical texts. Consider one more example:

I was just revising my *Notes* on the 5th chapter to the Romans; one of which I found, upon a closer inspection, seemed to assert such an imputation of Adam’s sin to his posterity as might make way for the “horrible decree” [unconditional election]. I therefore struck it out immediately; as I would willingly do whatsoever should appear to be any way inconsistent with that grand principle “The Lord is loving to every [person]; and his mercy is over all his works.”¹²⁰

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 debates that Wesley had with evangelical colleagues like George Whitefield was the fact that they did not share this *discrimen* of God’s universal pardoning and transforming love.¹²¹ A key dimension of reading the Bible in “Wesleyan” ways today would be embracing Wesley’s central *discrimen*, 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

The most central dimension of reading the Bible in “Wesleyan” ways today would be to read it for the same purposes as did Wesley. This turns attention to my third basic question: Why did John Wesley read the Bible, and so strongly encourage his followers to do the same?

¹²⁰ Letter to Richard Tompson (28 June 1755), *Works*, 26:566–67.

¹²¹ Note how George Whitefield defends God’s “distinguishing love” rather than God’s universal love (p. 26) and rejects any possibility of sinless perfection (pp. 19–20) in *A Letter to the Rev. Mr. Wesley, in answer to his sermon entitled “Free Grace”* (London: T. Cooper & R. Hett, 1741).

The Rule of Christian Faith

Once again, 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 ("opinions") by Scripture, and arguing that no pastor could be a good divine (i.e., theologian) without being a good textuary.¹²² One can thus appreciate why Wesley inscribed on the inside cover of his copy of Johann Bengel's Greek New Testament the conclusion to a quote from Augustine's *Confessions*, where Augustine prays, "Let thy Scriptures be my chaste delight. Let me not be deceived in them, nor deceive others by them."¹²³

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. When he affirmed the importance of Scripture, he consistently highlighted not only its role as the rule of faith but also its role as the rule of practice.¹²⁴ Indeed, he more frequently focused on this second role, highlighting at least three dimensions in which Scripture should serve as the rule of Christian 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" [Ps. 119:105]. They had one, and only one rule of judgment in regard to all their *tempers, words, and actions*, namely, the oracles of God. They were one and all determined to be "Bible-Christians." They were continually reproached for this very

¹²² For statements on his own practice, see Letter to William Dodd (5 Feb. 1756), *Letters* (Telford), 3:157–58; and Letter to William Dodd (12 Mar. 1756), *Letters* (Telford), 3:167. On the requirement for clergy to be good textuaries in order to be good divines, see *An Address to the Clergy*, §1.2, *Works* (Jackson), 10:482.

¹²³ *Confessions*, Bk XI, ch. 2, sec. 3. Wesley's inscription is in Latin: "Nec fallar in iis, nec fallam ex iis." See Maddox, "Wesley's Reading . . . London."

¹²⁴ See, for example, "Thoughts Upon Methodism," §2, *Arminian Magazine* 10 (1787), *Works*, 9:527; Sermon 106, "On Faith," I.8, *Works*, 3:496; and *Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, §5, *Works* (Jackson), 11:366. The role of Scripture as a guide to piety is particularly stressed in Duncan Ferguson, "John Wesley on the Scripture: The Hermeneutics of Pietism," *Methodist History* 22 (1984): 234–45.

thing, some terming them in derision “Bible bigots”; others “Bible moths”—feeding they said upon the Bible as moths do upon cloth. And indeed unto this day it is their constant endeavour to think and speak as the oracles of God.¹²⁵

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 all of their conversation.¹²⁶

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.¹²⁷ In his early years he even used the Bible as a divining tool (i.e., expecting God to guide through passages he confronted on spontaneously opening the Bible), though he insisted that he turned to this expedient only when biblical and rational principles did not settle the question.¹²⁸

But Wesley’s deepest concern was surely 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.¹²⁹

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

¹²⁵ Sermon 107, “On God’s Vineyard,” I.1, *Works*, 3:504; see also Sermon 115, “Dives and Lazarus,” III.7, *Works*, 4:18.

¹²⁶ E.g., Letter to John Newton (1 Apr. 1766), *Letters* (Telford), 5:8; and Letter to Joseph Benton (28 Dec. 1770), *Letters* (Telford), 5:215.

¹²⁷ Cf. Sermon 10, “The Witness of the Spirit, I,” II, *Works*, 1:277–814; *Letter to a Person lately joined with the . . . Quakers* (10 Feb. 1748), *Letters* (Telford), 2:117; and Letter to Mary Bishop (26 Dec. 1776), *Letters* (Telford), 6:245.

¹²⁸ For some examples of such “bibliomancy,” see *Journal* (15–28 March 1739), *Works*, 19:37–38; *Journal* (14 Oct. 1738), *Works*, 19:16; and *Journal* (20 April 1741), *Works*, 19:191. Then note Wesley’s response to Thomas Church who criticized this practice, in *Principles of a Methodist Farther Explained* (1746), IV.3–4, *Works*, 9:201–204.

¹²⁹ For more on these points, see Maddox, “Change of Affections,” 13–17.

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.¹³⁰ 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."¹³¹

When Wesley issued his translation of the New Testament separately in 1790, he urged readers in the preface to pray this collect from the *Book of Common Prayer* each time that they turned to studying Scripture:

Blessed Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning, grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience, and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace, and ever hold fast, the blessed hope of everlasting life which thou has given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ.¹³²

The collect calls to mind Wesley's description of the early Methodists "feeding upon the Bible as moths do upon cloth." It may also suggest why Wesley encouraged all Methodists, not just his lay preachers, to immerse themselves in the Bible at least two hours every day.¹³³ He was not just concerned to increase their knowledge of God, he longed for them to go deeper in relationship with God, and experience more broadly the transforming impact of this relationship.

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 (or the Christian sense of the focus and scope of salvation)!

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 was not just an incidental verse for Wesley, he prized it for articulating one of the themes that he considered most central to Scripture, and

¹³⁰ See Sermon 16, "The Means of Grace," II.1 & III.7–10, *Works*, 1:381, 386–89.

¹³¹ *NT Notes*, Preface, §9, *Works* (Jackson), 14:238.

¹³² The New Testament (1790), Preface, §4, *Works* (Jackson), 14:307.

¹³³ Cf. Letter to Margaret Lewen (June 1764), *Letters* (Telford), 4:247.

used as a *discrimen* in reading the whole of 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 over time to recognize and emphasize an ever broader scope of the "works" over which God's saving mercy reigns.

As we have seen, Wesley's initial appeals to Psalm 145:9 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 individual human souls finding their way to heaven above.¹³⁴ This individual salvation focus remains almost exclusive for Wesley until his later years. Then, in 1774, he highlights Psalm 145:9 again in a pivotal section of his *Thoughts upon Slavery* (as one of his few scriptural citations in that work).¹³⁵ Here he was invoking the breadth of God's mercy as a warrant for rejecting participation in the slave trade *in this world*, not just defending the possibility of eternal salvation for those being sold in slavery. Wesley invoked Psalm 145:9 yet again in 1781, 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."¹³⁶ 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 communal and 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 our inherited *discrimen* and lead us into a deeper sense of the message of Scripture. May we who are heirs of his ministry take this example to heart!



¹³⁴ Koskie, focusing on sermons in Wesley's "middle" years, raises this general charge in "Reading the Way to Heaven," 133–36, 177–80. I agree with Koskie on the need to embrace a communal and covenantal understanding of God's saving work, and am arguing here that there is some movement in Wesley himself in this direction.

¹³⁵ *Thoughts upon Slavery* (1774), V.7, *Works* (Jackson), 11:79.

¹³⁶ Sermon 60, "General Deliverance," §III.10, *Works*, 2:449

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