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His Spirit in These Mysterious Leaves

A Wesleyan Way of Reading

Maxine E. Walker

His Spirit in these mysterious leaves
Unerring testimony gives
To Christ the Lord most high:
O would He take of Jesus' blood,
Blood of the true, eternal God,
And to my heart apply![1]

For many of us claiming the Wesleyan/Holiness heritage in America, Wesleyan hymns are infrequently sung in contemporary worship services, and if sung, a few verses are indiscriminately chosen from the entire hymn. Moreover, the reading of Scripture is a relatively short exercise; brief Scripture passages are chosen to undergird the morning message; frequently there is minimal biblical exegesis in the sermon. Sunday school classes tackle complex social issues—family, marriage, parenting, personal relationships—and the Bible may or may not be an integral part of the study. Frequently a recent Christian best-seller is the centerpiece for small study groups or retreats. Bible studies are not attended by laity in a consistent way.[2] At the United Methodist Church I attended for All Saints' Day, an Old Testament passage and a Psalm were read; the Ephesians' reading was eliminated due to a time problem but was referred to throughout the sermon. Illustrations in the sermon were far-ranging: Rollo May, the Eastern church, music and art, Celtic celebrations, Blaise Pascal, Wittenberg and the Reformation, Cathedral of Salisbury and other great European Gothic cathedrals, Barbara Tuchman, the darkness of understanding in Karl Marx.

In the Academy, theories about language, culture, and interpretation, from both Christians and non-Christians, command the disciplines, ideas that influence or question how we read the Bible as Scripture. Some examples follow:

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[1]S T Kimbrough, Jr., and Oliver A. Beckerlegge, eds. *Unpublished Poetry of Charles Wesley: Hymns and Poems for Church and World,* vol. 3 (Nashville, TN: Kingswood/Abingdon, 1992), 175; henceforth cited as *Unpublished Poetry* followed by volume and page number(s). The three poems entitled "Before Reading the Scriptures" (MS Richmond, p. 106), "Before Reading The Scripture" III (MS CW I [p] 3–4), IV (MS CW I [p] 5–6), V (MS CW I [p] 6–8), VI (MS CW I [p] 8), and "Before Reading Scripture" (MS Misc. Hymns, p. 228) are from *Unpublished Poetry,* 3:172–76.

[2]This is not to suggest that the following study is a "complaint" about the current trends in worship styles and patterns or the vast array of "authorities" used in preaching and devotions. What I do want to suggest is that the loss of hymns in tandem with the other ecclesial practices not only discovers the little amount of time devoted to reading the Bible but also tell us that we may no longer be reading the Bible as Scripture. In the early Methodist preaching-house, the service came to include two Scripture lessons, a pastoral prayer, three to five hymns, and the sermon; the Scriptures by the very words of the hymns and sermon were additional "readings" of Scripture. (Franz Hildebrandt and Oliver Beckerlegge, eds. *The Works of John Wesley. A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists,* vol. 7 [Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1983; reprint, Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989], 63.)

In defense of a cultural-linguistic understanding of religion, George Lindbeck in *The Nature of Doctrine* explains that to become religious involves becoming skilled in the language, *i.e.,* the naming and descriptions of behavior or the symbol system of that religion. The grammar of religion, like any language cannot be explicated or learned except by practice.

Kevin Vanhoozer argues that the witness of the Spirit is connected with the normative use of the author's "God the Father," not the variable use by the community of readers.[3]

Merold Westphal posits an open space between a musical score and the interpretation.[4] The hermeneutical circle is between the part and the whole. Various interpretations of a text are various "workings" in the world. Interpretations are an important sense internal to the text; they belong to its being, as giving determinacy to something not fully determinate. Thus the meaning of a text is conceptually inseparable from the history of its interpretation, a history that will be composed of a variety of readings.[5]

Donald Marshall notes, the wise interpreter grasps "a question—not a question we put critically to a text, but the question the text puts to us."[6]

Joel Weinsheimer ". . . all sound interpretive practice involves movement between two poles, that of correctness and that of creativity . . . ."[7]

George Poulet states "reading, then, is the act in which the subjective principle which I call I, modified in such a way that I no longer have the right, strictly speaking to consider it as my *I.*"[8] By this is meant, that the reader's method of dealing with texts is "built upon a linguistic and perhaps an institutional base, not a psychological, social, or historical one. In effect this means that language is considered as a constituted community of language users, not merely as a vertical means of communication. . . ."[9]

Umberto Eco, the Italian semiotic theorist, queries, "Can we take into account cases of interpretation of written texts to which the empirical author, still alive, reacts by saying 'No, I did not mean that'?"[10]

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[3]Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Special Revelation and General Revelation" in *Disciplining Hermeneutics: Interpretation in Christian Perspective.* Roger Lundin, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997), 156.

[4]Merold Westphal, "Post-Kantian Reflections on the Importance of Hermeneutics" in *Disciplining Hermeneutics: Interpretation in Christian Perspective.* Roger Lundin, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997), 60.

[5]Westphal, 65.

[6]Donald Marshall, "Truth, Universality, and Interpretation" in *Disciplining Hermeneutics: Interpretation in Christian Perspective.* Roger Lundin, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997), 82.

[7]Joel Weinheimer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics and Literary Theory* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1991), 87 quoted in Roger Lundin, ed. Introduction. *Disciplining Hermeneutics: Interpretation in Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997), 13.

[8]Quoted in Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1983), 302.

[9]Said, 147.

[10]Umberto Eco, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation.* Stefan Collini, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1992), 66.

In each case, you who are much stronger Wesley scholars than I, hear something to which you might agree or disagree as one thinks about the Wesleys' reading of Scripture.

Simply put, given the diversity of reflections on hermeneutics and the practices in many American churches, what does it mean to read the Bible as Scripture? By reading the "Bible as Scripture" I am suggesting, in broad strokes, that the Bible is read as Scripture, when, as a text among many texts in our culture, it is read to evoke memory and expectation, affirmation and critique of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.[11] In such a discussion, Richard Heitzenrater has outlined the inadequacies inherent in trying to bridge the eighteenth and twentieth century; it is tempting to assume that if one could just transport the ideas and/or institutions of the past into the present, the problems of the contemporary age would disappear.[12] The challenge is to appropriate creatively the content and practices of the Wesleyan heritage. Professor Rob Wall, Seattle Pacific University, suggests that a Wesleyan hermeneutic may be articulated by a text-centered, canon-oriented, interdisciplinary engagement with the Bible, a hermeneutic that draws deeply from Wesley's own use of Scripture.[13] As a professor of literature, the interdisciplinary "engagement" promises an opportunity for me and my academic colleagues to enter the discussion with Wesleyan theologians on these important tasks of reading Scripture.

As a way to get into the discussion, Professor Wesley Kort in *"Take, Read": Scripture, Textuality, and Cultural Practice* takes an impressive look at John Calvin's theory and practice of reading Scripture. Kort is interested not only in "recovery but also reconstruction" of Calvin's theory in such a way that allows us to read the Bible as scripture.[14]

What challenged me about Kort's work was how one might retrieve and reconstruct John and Charles Wesley's reading of Scripture—in particular, Charles Wesley, for the Charles Wesley Society—a Wesleyan way to read the Bible as Scripture in a postmodern world of texts.

Kort's steps are to delineate the features of Calvin's doctrine of Scripture, to trace in modernity how nature, history, and finally literature have come to be read

[11]"In the genealogy of texts there is a first text, a sacred prototype, a scripture, which readers always approach through the text before them, either as petitioning suppliants or as initiates amongst many in sacred chorus supporting the central patriarchal text. Northrop Frye's theory of literature makes it apparent that the displacing power in all texts finally derives from the displacing power of the Bible, whose centrality, potency, and dominating anteriority inform all Western literature. The same is no less true, in the different modes . . . of the Koran. Both in the Judeo-Christian and in the Islamic traditions these hierarchies repose upon a solidly divine, or quasi-divine, language, a language whose uniqueness, however, is that it is theologically and humanly circumstantial." (Said, 46.)

[12]Richard Heitzenrater, *Mirror and Memory: Reflections on Early Methodism* (Nashville, TN: Kingswood/Abingdon Press, 1989), 10.

[13]Rob Wall, "The Future of Wesleyan Biblical Studies" in *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 33:2 (Fall 1998):101–15.

[14]Wesley A. Kort, *"Take, Read": Scripture, Textuality, and Cultural Practice* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1996).

as scripture, first supplementing, then supplanting the Bible. Kort uses two terms to describe analogically what has happened (does happen) reading a text as scripture—centrifugal and centripetal movement. Simply put, "centripetal reading" is solitary reading, reading that through the Holy Spirit imparts saving knowledge to the heart. Centripetal reading is that which unifies.[15]

"Centrifugal reading," on the other hand, allows for diversity and is that movement that takes the reader into the world and "constructs it in terms of the saving knowledge of God." Centrifugality is balanced by centripetality; one "must be prepared to release the investments [in knowledge of the world] when centripetal reading is again taken up."[16] Kort concludes or "opens" (if you will) his book at the end by using the work of European critics Maurice Blanchot and Julia Kristeva.[17] These critics advocate alternatives to the "putative adequacy" of deconstructive and political readings of texts and posit the "possibility of reading as an occasion or process of self-abjection and reconstitution."[18] These critics establish theories of the practice of reading that counters "culture and the self"—readings that are reconstructive of what Calvin was doing in his time—reading centripetally, divesting oneself of illusions.

First, Kort points out that Calvin uses visual metaphors for reading, such as his famous figure that compares reading Scripture to donning spectacles that clear up blurry eyesight (Institutes 1.6.1 and 1.14.1). In addition to visual metaphors, Calvin directs a person to read with an attitude appropriate to hearing, "to read with receptivity or passivity."[19] A sense of reading is also an act of eating, of allowing the text to become a part of oneself and of taking the words as nourishment; this accounts for the close relation that exists for Calvin between reading Scripture and receiving the Sacrament." The reading of Scripture—the text taken through the mouth—is to read "as if." These metaphors point to how Calvin reads the Bible centripetally.[20]

What might be said about the Wesleys in their reading of Scripture centripetally in relation to figurative language that describes the divine work in the created world? The eye metaphor is prevalent; Scripture gives power of discerning light: "Christians are more enlightened;" "their eye is more clear and single;" "they look beyond the veil of the material world;" "the eyes of their understanding being enlightened."[21] John Wesley also refers to having "new eyes to see and

[15]Kort, 32–33.

[16]Kort, 35.

[17]See for example, Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), and Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1984).

[18]Kort, 110.

[19]Kort, 21.

[20]Kort, 21.

[21]Sermon 17 (1733), "Circumcision of the Heart," Sermon 147 (1734), "Wiser than Children of Light," *Works*, 1:405; 4:364.

new ears to hear."[22] In 1744, Wesley refers to faith as "the eye of the newborn soul" as well as the ear, the palate, and the feeling of the soul, each image supported by a passage of Scripture.[23]

This light, as the Wesleys read in Scripture, is not just corrected vision but a restored vision. As Charles Wesley writes, "Faith lends its realizing light,/The clouds disperse, the shadows fly;/Th'Invisible appears in sight,/And God is seen by mortal eye."[24] As the eyes of the soul are both opened and enlightened by the work of the Holy Spirit, one not only affirms light (in its varying degrees) wherever it is found, but also exposing darkness (in its varying degrees). "[I]t is about awakening people to the light they possess and the responsibility that it brings, enabling them to respond to godly patterns of life."[25] In the language of poetry, the eye metaphor, with its assurance of God's quickening ray, holds together four motifs—human depravity, salvation by grace, human responsibility, and the offer of salvation to all.[26] As a sideline note, it might be interesting to ask what metaphors have replaced the "eye metaphor" and light imagery in contemporary hymns and are these metaphors and images able to connect these four Wesleyan motifs?

Professor Kort says, for Calvin, centripetal reading is a focusing and minimalizing process by which the reader attends to two pieces of crucial knowledge: "the name of the one who has created everything and knowledge that the one who has created everything also redeems."[27] This crucial knowledge is not otherwise available except in the reading of Scripture.

In three devotional poems titled, "Before Reading the Scripture/s," poems that I am taking as basically representational of Charles Wesley's devotional thoughts before reading Scripture and whose themes are extended in additional writings, the figurative language is sparse, an equivalent *lectio divina* as the feeding on Scripture is missing.[28] There are no references to reading the Scripture as if one were partaking of the Lord's Supper, although in the *Collection of Hymns,* a Eucharistic interpretation is evident in "Come Sinners, to the Gospel Feast."

Listen to the shortest of the poems on reading Scripture:

> Son of God, to Thee I look
> Teach me the mysterious Book;
> Take my weakness by the hand,
> Make my dulness understand.

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[22]Sermon 148 (1736), *Works,* 4:373.

[23]*Appeals,* 6–7, *Works,* 11:46–47.

[24]*Works,* 7:195.

[25]Philip R. Meadows, "Wesleyan Theology for a World Context" *Windows on Wesley: Wesleyan Theology in Today's World,* Philip R. Meadows, ed. (Oxford: Applied Theology Press, 1997), 43.

[26]Kenneth J. Collins, *The Scripture Way of Salvation: The Heart of John Wesley's Theology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1997), 45.

[27]Kort, 28.

[28]*Unpublished Poetry,* 3:172–77.

With thy grace anoint my eyes,
Make me to salvation wise,
Wisdom from above impart,
Give me the believing heart.[29]

However, Wesley is also reading Scripture in a similar centripetal way, as Calvin does. "Teach me God in Christ to know. . . :"

Thine Oracles the answer give,
They teach me to repent, believe,
And Christ my Lord confess,
My faith by my obedience prove,
Worship Thee in the Spirit of love
And truth of holiness.[30]

Again, in the third hymn, he writes:

Come, divine Interpreter
Of thy own most sacred word,
The deep things of God declare,
Testify of Christ the Lord,
Life, eternal life impart,
Speak the truth into my heart.[31]

What remains open in Wesley hymns and devotional poems is whether reading Scripture centripetally involves and requires above all, as it does for Calvin, divestment and dislocation because there is a negative relation between the reader's world and the self and the saving knowledge of God available only in and by reading Scripture. Centripetal reading, such as Kort identifies with Calvin, undermines any goodness or reliability of all things human. In Charles Wesley's *Short Hymns on Select Passages of the Holy Scriptures* the centripetal movement does not appear to be divestment and dislocation of the self because the self is not completely without grace. Prevenient grace is continually moving us toward the center. From Hymn I on Genesis 1:2–3 ("Darkness was upon the face of the deep. The Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters."), Charles Wesley poetically makes it very clear that as the Dove broods over my nature's night, "raise again the spark of love" and "call forth the ray of heavenly light." Again, in *Short Hymns* in response to Job 19:28 that states "The root of the matter is found in me," Charles Wesley poetically sings:

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[29]"Before Reading the Scriptures" (*Unpublished Poetry* 3:172).
[30]*Unpublished Poetry,* 3:175.
[31]*Unpublished Poetry,* 3:177.

Come then, the true celestial Vine,
The Tree of Life, the Root of Grace,
Claim the wild olive-trees for thine,
Spring up in all our ransom'd race,
And if conceal'd in all thou art,
Be found this moment in my heart.[32]

As John Cobb puts it in *Grace & Responsibility,* "God does not enter a person from without and take possession because God is already, always a constitutive part of the person."[33] We go on from grace to grace. The spirit is a constitutive presence. As Cobb continues, "for Wesley, the Spirit was the principle of life itself, of all understanding, of what is called conscience, and of every impulse to good."[34] Theodore Runyon in *The New Creation* notes that there is a measure of salvation without reading Scripture: prevenient grace brings with it "some degree of salvation."[35]

Centripetal reading of Scripture in Wesley then does not seem primarily to be divestment nor dislocation of self but is reading that affirms the movement from prevenient grace to saving grace to sanctifying grace—God's "free, almighty grace, first preventing us, and then accompanying us every moment."[36] The emphasis is on the presence of grace from the beginning to the end of life, and we can know this grace by the witness of the Spirit to our hearts. "Emptying" one-self of all but love—yes; "dislocation"—no.

However, if we read carefully the *Short Hymns,* Charles Wesley also reads the Scripture as divestment of self:

Jesus, to my heart explain
What it is to cease from man,
Born in sin and misery,
Born a sad reverse of thee!

Nothing great may I admire,
Nothing good in man require,
Never worship or esteem,
Never trust myself, or him.[37]

And again in hymns on the book of Nehemiah, the poet declares the Savior's love "brings the power that sets me free,/Power to renounce whate'er is

[32]Charles Wesley, *Short Hymns on Select Passages of the Holy Scriptures,* 2 vols. (Bristol: E. Farley, 1762), 1:240, stanza 3; henceforth cited as *Short Hymns* followed by volume and page number(s).

[33]John B. Cobb, Jr., *Grace & Responsibility: A Wesleyan Theology for Today* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), 47.

[34]Cobb, 46.

[35]Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), 219. See also Sermon 85 "On Working Out Our Own Salvation."

[36]Collins, *The Scripture Way of Salvation,* 378.

[37]On Isaiah 2:19, *Short Hymns* 1:306, Hymn 966.

me; / Power to sell all, and purchase thee."[38] Reading in this mode counters all readings that are self-serving and self-aggrandizing. Centripetal reading in these Wesley hymns seems to balance the sovereignty of God and human responsibility to act on the grace God has.

What I find striking in these devotional hymns and poems before reading the Scripture, however, are notable similarities to the hermeneutical issues facing Wesleyans today—how will we come to truth and how wide is the gate to arrive at truth. This is not to say that either John or Charles Wesley were in the same critical dilemmas as we are in the late twentieth century. However, it is to suggest that the Wesleyan position on reading Scripture not only identifies its own critical stance but also undermines it in a way that "opens" the door to the reading of Scripture as Scripture.

In the spirit of the budding Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, the reader in the devotional poems asks that all prejudice be removed in order to "weigh, and read, and hear." God is sovereign, but to the reader all religions may be tested to see which may safely conduct the soul to heaven. The reader asks to be "indifferent to the Way."[39] Cobb says that Wesley is the "last major Christian theologian who did not experience a significant tension between the world of Scripture and traditional Christian thinking, on the one side, and the new scientific worldview, on the other."[40] It may not be a "significant tension," but the seeds of scientific objectivity are present, an objectivity that results in distance between the author's intention, the autonomy of the text, and the rights of the reader:

> That truth I in the means may find,
> A candid, free, impartial mind
> To me vouchsafe to give,
> With judgment sound, and reason clear,
> So shall I weigh, and read, and hear
> And all thy mind receive."[41]

Reinforcement of the individual believer's ability to read to find the truth and to find it objectively comes early on in "Before Reading the Scripture," poem 3, by emphasizing the reader's own role in finding the truth apart from the Church tradition. Although the universal church has "handed down the sacred page" and churches from "East to West" have unanimously attested to the Word, the reader is still "not satisfied, / I want a more substantial ground, / A Rock on which my faith to found . . . ."[42] That "Rock" is Christ alone and is found in the Spirit's testimony to Christ in "these mysterious leaves." The Spirit testifies directly to the reader's heart.

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[38]*Short Hymns,* 1:216.
[39]*Unpublished Poetry,* 3: IV, stanza 3, 174.
[40]Cobb, 21.
[41]*Unpublished Poetry,* 3: IV, stanza 2, 174.
[42]*Unpublished Poetry,* 3: Hymn III, stanza 4, 173.

The reader's heart becomes the locus for interpretation, a place where a spiritual sense is awakened by the Spirit. The reader must be in the spirit of being "taught" for he is weak and dull. Once the Spirit testifies of Christ, all other knowledge goes "as trivial, void, and vain . . . ."[43] What is "the knowledge fit to know?"—another line in the hymn "for believers interceding for the world."[44] At this point, interdisciplinary engagement or reflection on hermeneutical practices and theories of reading seem to be unnecessary. Is this the spiritualism that Kort and others identify as supposing a relation of immediacy between the reader and the divine? Is this the elevation of religious experience apart from the reading of Scripture? Is this a kind of centripetal reading that weakens or distorts the reading of Scripture? Is this the kind of centripetal reading that, although it may claim to unify Christians in saving knowledge of God, in practice permits room for other "warrants for justification"—the primacy of Scripture as William Abraham suggests?[45]

Franz Hildebrandt in his introduction to *The Works of John Wesley, A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists* notes that "by their texts ye will know them."[46] What appears ironic is that the entire corpus of the hymns is as Hildebrandt notes "a short hymn on select passages of the Holy Scriptures" and yet the hymn-writers' admonition to read the Scripture is quite minimal. In each section of hymns, that, in themselves and via the scriptural references, describe the life experiences of a real Christian and of the corporate Methodist life, the lines devoted to reading Scripture are few. Typical phrases that occur in the hymns are: "You, who read his written Word" (hymn 7); "Sinners, obey the gospel word!" (hymn 90); "thy quickning word;" "O God! Thy record I believe . . ." (hymn 350).

In the majestic collection of *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists,* a collection that has come to be almost equivalent to a doctrinal standard, there are hymns for believers rejoicing, believers fighting, believers watching, believers suffering, believers interceding for the World but no section on believers reading Scripture. Few of the 2,349 texts in *Short Hymns* that poetically treated scriptural passages were recast for the 1780 *Collection* and few were sung. In part V of *A Collection Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists,* there are hymns for the Society meeting, the Society giving thanks, for the Society praying, but there is no section on the Society reading Scripture. This classification of hymns for the societies undoubtedly reflected the "experiential language of real Christians"; however, when a class-meeting leader responded to statements made by the class members, the leader's responses were

[43]*Unpublished Poetry,* 3: V, stanza 5, 176.

[44]*Unpublished Poetry,* 3: V, stanza 5, 176.

[45]William Abraham, "John Wesley's Conception and Use of Scripture," in *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 33:1 (Spring 1998), 9.

[46]Hildebrandt, 5.

heavily punctuated with scriptural advice or admonition. That the hearing and singing of Scripture were essential in discipleship and Christian formation is clear, but the notion that these non-ecclesial groups exist primarily as a community of readers of Scripture is unclear. John Tyson says, "for Charles [Wesley], the Bible was the enlivened Word because of the work of the Holy Spirit, hence the Spirit—more often than the Bible—was said to be infallible in the revelatory event."[47]

Thus, from a professor of literature's perspective, in a study to determine a Wesleyan way of reading, there appears an ironic tension between the pervasive scriptural language of the hymns and what the hymns do not say directly. Reading Scripture is important because the heart of the hymns' language is scriptural, and yet reading Scripture is not admonished as a central part of the Christian's life in the hymns. Teresa Berger, in her fine study on the relationship of doxology to theology, is helpful here. She writes, "The actual singing of a hymn cannot be taken into account by a study of the text alone."[48] "Doing" is fundamental to the understanding of doxological speech rather than an imposition of dogmatic categories and dogmatic assertions, let's say, a doctrine of Scripture. Doxological speech is an appropriate faithful response to the saving acts and presence of God.[49] Thus the necessity for teaching/instruction in reading the Bible as Scripture—activities strongly emphasized in Wesley's hymns themselves—is the task of others in the church. We need to ask, Is the performative speech of hymns assumed to be equivalent to the reading of Scripture—both then and now?

John Tyson clearly states, "The hymns *are* patchworks of biblical materials; words, phrases, and allusions cut from the fabric of the Authorized Version and sewn into a new pattern that was tailored by the poet-theologian of the Methodist revival."[50] Tyson continues, "Charles Wesley 'paraphrases' . . . the Bible by weaving Biblical words, phrases, and images together to form a new interpretative fabric."[51] This interpretative fabric, I suggest, may very well be what Berger calls doxology authenticating itself and doing so by "establishing a space for the encounter of praise with God and protecting it against threats from the outside such as magic, idolatry, and self-glorification."[52] This interpretative space was maintained for believers, individually and corporately, through the rules of the Bands/Societies that directed Methodists to "read the Scriptures, and meditate therein, at every vacant hour."[53] Letters and memoirs of early Methodists punc-

[47]John R. Tyson, ed., *Charles Wesley: A Reader* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1989), 445.

[48]*Theology in Hymns? A Study of the Relationship of Doxology and Theology According to A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists (1780)*, trans. Timothy E. Kimbrough (Nashville, TN: Kingswood/Abingdon Press, 1995), 163.

[49]Berger, 164.

[50]Tyson, 34.

[51]Tyson, 35.

[52]Berger, 168.

[53]David Lowes Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting: Its Origins and Significance* (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 1985; rev. 1987), 202.

tuate the point that Methodists could as readily quote Wesley's hymns as they could quote Scriptures. They read and repeated the texts amid temptation, during fear of physical harm and impending death, as statements of personal victories and praise. As Hildebrandt notes about the generations of Methodists following Wesley's death, the hymns and the Scriptures in the lives of nineteenth-century Methodists "fed their souls ever since their conversion."[54] The evidence sometimes appears otherwise.

In a Whitby 1817 description of a class meeting, it is clear that "a pious Wesley hymn book" is used in praise, and there is a very brief mention of reading Scripture. The emphasis is on the "simple tale" told by the leader of his own mental troubles, conflicts, and debates and the questions posed to the believers views about their hopes, fears, and repentant tears. To be sure, this female writer observes of the class meeting leader: "The blessed Gospel as his guide he views . . . [he] adores its saving plan/And shows its influence on the heart of man,"[55] but she does not testify on the basis of Scripture but on experience. She says to her friend, "when you puruse [*sic*] these harsh unpolish'd lines/. . . O may [Christ] work upon your yielding heart,/And all *my* [italics mine] meaning to your soul impart!"[56]

To be sure, these non-ecclesial groups—the class meetings—kept believers accountable in their discipleship, while the Anglican traditional structure served as the visible reality of the church in the world: "the 'little' churches were formed with the avowed purpose of remaining within the larger church in order to call it back to its own essentials; and their members were given guidance in religious experience and spiritual nurture only to the extent that the doctrines and ordinances of the Church of England were pre-supposed"[57]—*i.e.,* the authority and reading of Scripture. But what happens when the "little" church with the seeds of the primacy of experience not rigorously tested by the reading of Scripture turns into the "big" church, or the "little" church turns into other denominations with Wesleyan roots?[58]

Another dimension in the pull between the primacy of Scripture and the primacy of experience may be a consequence of the hymns cast as biblical narratives

[54]Hildebrandt, 45.

[55]Watson, 234.

[56]Watson, 239.

[57]Watson, 127.

[58]According to Stephen Lennox, "Christian experience, for holiness interpreters, meant entire sanctification, narrowly defined in terms of what it was, how it was received, and what it would produce. Having embraced the creed of second-blessing holiness, they were convinced that the only entirely sanctified could properly interpret the Bible." ("Biblical Interpretation in the American Holiness Movement" in *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 33:2 [Fall 1998]:29) Lennox quotes early writers on holiness: "by experiencing God's love one apparently can know God 'with a swiftness, a certainty and a personal communion, that surpasses all the boasted knowledge of science, and furnishes the only true interpretation of creation and providence . . . . Without a critical audience, there was no one to challenge its [Holiness Movement] novel interpretations." (31)

in the experience of present tense believers. The biblical past and the eighteenth-century present are blended in a eucharistic timelessness that sets Christ before the reader and makes the gospel past into a contemporary experience[59]—the reader enters into an experiential dialogue with the divine. For example, instead of *reading* passages on the crucifixion or *reading* Phil. 3:8 or 1 Cor. 2:2 as if the narrative is far away and long ago, the hymn writer puts the believer at the crucifixion:

> Then let us sit beneath his cross
> And gladly catch the healing stream,
> All things for him account but loss,
> And give up all our hearts to him;
> Of nothing think or speak beside,
> "My Lord, my Love is crucified."[60]

At the outset, *Short Hymns* sets the soul in the drama of the Old Testament; *e.g.,* hymn on Genesis 1:2. "The earth was without form, and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep":

> Such is my soul, confus'd and void,
> With darkness palpable o'er-spread
> Stript of the living form of God,
> Fallen, emphatically dead,
> 'Till the eternal Spirit move,
> And raise again the spark of love.
>
> (Hymn 1:2)

Upon Hannah's rejoicing over Samuel, "I prayed for this child, and the Lord has granted me what I asked of him" (1 Samuel 1:27), Charles Wesley responds, "Whate'er I ask, I surely know,/And stedfastly believe/Thou wilt the thing desir'd bestow,/Or else a better give."[61] In a variant of Hans Frei's *Eclipse of Narrative,* Charles Wesley read Scripture not as an object to be investigated but as a narrative that one appropriates as one's own story; on the other hand, Frei's point is that there is no way that we can provide an independent description of Jesus' divine–human reconciliation without the literal sense of the biblical narratives.

This is where it becomes important to pick up Kort again. In current hermeneutical language, how then will Wesleyans "read" Scripture over the "rights of the reader"—the experiential rights of the reader?[62] Is there anything

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[59]Tyson, 443.

[60]*Works,* 7:27, stanza 4, 115.

[61]As Charles Wesley writes in his Preface to *Short Hymns on Select Passages of the Holy Scriptures,* "My desire is, rightly to divide the word of Truth: but who is sufficient for these things? Who can check the self-confident, without discouraging the self-diffident?"

[62]Kort, 38, 44.

in Kort's understanding of Calvin's centrifugal reading of Scripture that may help us here? Once divestment and dislocation of self occur in centripetal reading, then centrifugal reading begins. The outward movement, in particular, Calvin's theory of accommodation, reveals the need and opportunity to "reassess God's relation to the world in light of more recent learning" and to transform life, society, and to some extent the natural world.[63] To make a long story short, Kort argues that in modernity the reading of nature, history, and literature as Scripture began as biblically warranted. Each centrifugal reading practice begins as a supplement to reading the Bible—as a way to reassess God's relation to the world—but each practice finally takes dominance.

In Calvin's reading of Scripture, however, centrifugal reading combats the temptations to solidify the results of reading into something permanent, "to use reading to certify what always must be brought into question."[64] Centrifugal reading opposes, as well, the error of forms of spiritualism that makes those cultural identities and coherences idolatrous and lethal.[65] In the world, we can "rush into the snare/of blind idolatry," as Charles Wesley notes.[66] To explain centrifugal reading, Kort uses Jacob as an example of what it means to emerge from an encounter with the night visitor; ". . . the reader emerges from the exit not only with a limp, a chronic instability, but also with a new name, a changed identity, and world."[67] The reader emerges from the "wilderness" encounter with a sharper set of distinctions; we read to be led away from "the securities and comforts provided by political and social structures and toward a way of life marked by uncertainty."[68] Centrifugal reading constructs the world in terms of the saving knowledge of God, "to translate knowledge of God into concrete structures and actions" and also directs us back to the Scripture to correct what we have seen and heard.[69]

The poet in Charles Wesley's hymn "Wrestling Jacob" clearly moves along that same horizon of uncertainty and questioning until grace reveals the Savior whose "nature and . . . name is Love." The poet better understands how he must live—"all helplessness, all weakness, I/On thee alone for strength depend."[70] He must live in the world in a different way, for the "Sun of Righteousness" has "withered [his] nature's strength." To be sure, the limp is there, but Jacob can overcome the world and "leap for joy." Is this the leap of joy that sees God at work, the work of the Spirit, in culture and the world? As Ted Runyon points out, ". . . every degree of grace is a degree of life. . . . Therefore, God's own work of prevenient grace is the basis for detecting the work of the Spirit in other cultures

[63]Kort, 125.
[64]Kort, 131.
[65]Hildebrandt, 637.
[66]Kort, 130.
[67]Kort, 129.
[68]Kort, 35.
[69]Kort, 132.
[70]*Works*, 7:136, stanza 11, 252.

and other religions."[71] Moreover, is it also the "leap of joy" that calls us to read the work of the Spirit in the world as well as to read the work of the Son who gives incarnate expression to the grace which is eternally operative in the Godhead? In the *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament,* John Wesley says of Jacob's new name, "They that by faith have power in heaven have thereby as much power on earth as they have occasion for."[72]

In the conclusion of this paper, I want to look again at the analogy of centripetal/centrifugal movement. Physicists tell me that centripetal force is the resultant force toward the center. The sum of the tension force and gravitational force is the centripetal force itself. Centripetal is the effect of forces. For the physicist there is not a centrifugal force as such. The only force on an object going around in a circle is centripetal. The reformer's disjunction of nature and grace is subtly recognized in Kort's analogy as two distinct forces with specific points of exit and return. The Wesleyan distinction of prevenient grace draws nature and grace into a dialectic rather than a dichotomy (nature and grace are distinct, if inseparable, realities) and makes persons accountable and responsible throughout and in all of life. Both Phillip Meadows and John Cobb are helpful here: it is quite proper to say . . . that human *personality,* or human *subjectivity* is co-constituted by nature and grace.[73]

Thus, it seems essential given the Wesleyan emphasis in the hymns on the various circumstances in the spiritual lives of the believers, on the concentration on the inner experience of the individual, and on the fundamental experience of individual and corporate experience of conversion that this *experienced grace* is grace tested by Scripture and confirmed within the context of believers held accountable and responsible in Christian community. Scripture's intended role is the community's rule of faith. The reading and interpretation of Scripture is an activity of communal discernment—a community anchored in apostolic testimony.[74]

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[71]Runyon, 219.

[72]G. Roger Schoenhals, *John Wesley's Commentary on the Bible: A One-Volume Condensation of His Explanatory Notes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Francis Asbury Press, 1990), 52–53.

[73]Meadows, 34; Cobb, chapter 2.

[74]The Wesley hymns and the class meeting provided those open spaces for testing practices/performances in light of reading of Scripture. However, as Teresa Berger suggests the question, Can we assume that picking up a Methodist hymnal and singing all stanzas will again authorize the reading of Scripture, especially given that the Authorized Version of the Bible is no longer recognized and understood? Or can we (do we want to) re-institute the exact format of the class meeting which so particularly fit the eighteenth-century context? I doubt it. Nonetheless, we can note the hazards of experience untested by Scripture. We can remember that God has acted in and through persons and institutional policies and processes formulated by persons directly through the hearing of the gospel and without the hearing of the gospel. See Berger, *Theology in Hymns?*

In 1888, one writer on the class meetings asked whether or not every Methodist school in the land should have its class meeting, and especially those with theological departments proper. "It would be a strong defense against rationalistic error and nebulous theology in general." (O. P. Fitzgerald, *The Class-Meeting in Twenty Short Chapters* [Nashville, TN: Southern Methodist Publishing, 1888], 43.)

The work of Stephen Fowl and L. Gregory Jones is very helpful here, especially their collaborative work, *Reading in Communion: Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life.* Fowl and Jones' call is to a wise reading of Scripture through the friendships and practices of a Christian community, to both reading of the Scripture and readings of the world, to work analogically and dialectically between the past and the present, to the importance of character in wise readings, and to the "[cultivation of] active dialogues with outsiders so as to avoid interpretive self-deception."[75] The "outsiders" are those who bear a family resemblance and those who are complete strangers.[76] For many members of the Church of the Nazarene today, for example, the outsider is the Bible itself. For many in the academy, the outsider is the Bible itself. For many in assorted Wesleyan churches etc., the Bible bears a family resemblance to a variety of secular texts.

Whereas Kort suggests that reading the Bible as Scripture is deliverance from the domination of cognitive and institutional conclusions,[77] Wesleyans read the Bible as Scripture in community, in dialogue with cognitive and institutional conclusions both past and present, in dialogue carried on by disciples whose lives are transformed and guided by the Spirit. Grace is meant to be "for all and in all." Nonetheless, we have much to learn from Reformed ways of reading that challenge distortion and self-serving political agendas, postures which for pietists can be the idolatry of experience and for persons in my own discipline can be the idolatry of novel hermeneutical theories and "overinterpretation." Those claiming the Wesleyan heritage must be taught to read in such a way that the way of salvation, beginning in prevenient grace, is not accommodating all readings but is "seeing" grace in diverse readings, readings of texts that affirm we cannot depend on ourselves and human insight.

The Bible is read as Scripture because "it provides the context for understanding what it means to live faithfully before God,"[78] and we read eschatologically—we read with the end in view. From our past, we can recall that hymn singing, however close in paraphrase and anchored in Scripture, is not Scripture, that responding or preaching in scriptural paraphrases is not Scripture, that expe-

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[75]Stephen E. Fowl and L. Gregory Jones, *Reading in Communion: Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life* (London: SPCK, 1991 and Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1991), 104.

[76]To understand how to treat strangers or strange ideas, Fowl and Jones do not cite contemporary social science studies *as primary authority* to make their point; they rely on interpretations of Mark and Matthew.

Using Scripture as their authority, Fowl and Jones cite Mark 7 in which Jesus initially refuses to heal a Syro-Phoenician woman, a woman imagistically linked with "dogs" but whose persistence leads to her healing. Fowl and Jones also compare the subtle differences between the Markan account and Matthew 15. Although Jesus is characterized by his willingness to reach out to outsiders, when he is in Tyre and Sidon, "Jesus is in a new context . . . . It is not clear how he should carry on his mission to the outsider." (Fowl and Jones, 122.)

[77]Kort, 123.

[78]Fowl and Jones, 36.

rience is not Scripture.[79] As *The United Methodist Hymnal* states, Scripture—The Book of the church—these "mysterious leaves" claim unique force and significance in our lives as God's grace in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit enlightens our understanding: "Come, Divine Interpreter," teach us the way.

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[79]Richard Heitzenrater points out that the 1563 Elizabethan Admonition dictated that "no parson, vicar, or curate do preach, treat, or expound of his own voluntary invention, any matter of controversy in the scriptures, if he be *under* the degree of a master of arts, . . . but only for instruction of the people read the Homilies already set forth . . . ." The Homilies became a boundary for the less educated parson or curate. (Heitzenrater, 177.) Heitzenrater continues by noting that the Model Deed printed in the "Large Minutes" of 1763 saw to it that "such persons [preachers appointed by Mr. Wesley] preach no other Doctrine than is contained in *Mr. Wesley's Notes upon the New Testament,* and the four volumes of Sermons." Thus, Heitzenrater concludes the two documents acted as *boundaries,* not patterns. (179) Wesley was more interested in *edification* that would promote *holiness* of life than in *enforcement* that would simply guarantee *uniformity* of doctrine. (180) The Homilies retain a "measure of authority." (187)

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