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THE WESLEYAN QUADRILATERAL — IN JOHN WESLEY

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For five full decades, John Wesley served as theological mentor to "the people called Methodists," with no peer and no successful challengers. Throughout that half century, he was embroiled in one doctrinal controversy after another—with Anglican priests and bishops, with Calvinist partisans (clerical and lay) and with occasional dissidents within his own "connexion." Doctrinal consensus was a prime concern with him and a prerequisite for stability in the Methodist Societies. Thus, at the outset of his first "conference" with his "assistants" (1744), the first questions posed for discussion were:

(1) What to teach?
(2) How to teach?
(3) What to do (i.e., how to regulate our doctrine, discipline and practice)?

There was, of course, no question in anyone's mind as to who would have the final word in these conversations but everyone agreed that these were the right questions for a religious society within an established church.

As the Methodist movement spread and matured, Wesley supplied it with reams of theological and ethical instruction, in different genres: sermons, letters, tracts, exegetical notes, a huge Journal, even a full-length monograph (on *Original Sin*). But—and this, of course, is my point—there is only one instance in all of this of anything resembling a doctrinal credo (in his open "Letter to a Roman Catholic," 1749) and even this was an obvious borrowing from Bishop John Pearson's classic *Exposition of the Doctrine of the Creed*—the bishop's counterpart to the *Westminster Confession* and *Shorter Catechism*. Wesley seems never to have toyed with the notion of a *summa theologiae*—not even a catechism. What then did he expect his people to identify as their "standards of doctrine"?

His first move had been to abridge the first four Edwardian *Homilies* (of 1547) into a brief theological charter: *The Doctrine of Justification according to the Church of England* (cf. *Journal* Nov. 11, 1738). Then as the Revival gained momentum, he turned to the method of conciliar dialogue, gathering his assistants together by invitation. He himself recorded the upshot of their discussions and published this in a cumulative set of *Minutes of Conversations Between the Rev. Mr. Wesley and Others* (1744 et seq.). The theological substance of these "minutes" reflects the mind and spirit of early Methodism very well indeed. A version of them ("The Large Minutes") was accepted by the fledgling Methodist Episcopal Church in America and so may be considered as included within the scope of that notoriously ambiguous phrase in "The First Restrictive Rule" (1808) in the *Methodist Book of Discipline* concerning "our present existing, and established, standards of doctrine."

In 1763, in what came to be known as "The Model Deed" Wesley proceeded to stipulate the negative limits of Methodist doctrine—viz. that preachers in Methodist chapels were to preach 'no other doctrine than is contained in Mr. Wesley's *Notes Upon the New Testament* and four volumes of Sermons.' This provided his people with a doctrinal canon that was stable enough and yet also flexible. In it, the Holy Scriptures stand first and foremost, and yet subject to interpretations that are informed by 'Christian Antiquity', critical reason and an existential appeal to the "Christian experience" of grace, so firmly stressed in the *Explanatory Notes*. The "four volumes" mentioned in the "Model Deed" contained either forty-three or forty-four sermons, depending on whether or not one counts "Wandering Thoughts" (it was not in the first edition of the "four volumes" [1760] but appeared in subsequent editions [before '63]). All this suggests that Wesley was clearly interested in coherent doctrinal norms but was equally clear in his aversion to having such norms defined too narrowly or in too juridical a form. Thus, he was content with exegetical "notes" (eager to borrow heavily from others), plus a sampling of sermons (he would have dismissed all haggling over the number of "standard sermons!") and, of course, the Wesley hymns (Charles' and his own). These non confessional norms served his people well for the better part of two full centuries.

Wesley's refusal to define "doctrinal standards" too narrowly was a matter of principle: it was in no way the sign of an indecisive mind. Such a notion makes no sense when one considers how confident his own theological self understanding was (as reflected in his controversial writings), and in his arbitrary decisions as an editor. Take a single example from several hundred: in *A Christian Library* (vol. 31), he felt free to make some fairly drastic revisions of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* and thus on his own authority to "correct" what was a semi sacrosanct text! Then, too, there were his equally drastic revisions of the Book of Common Prayer, with his brusque self justification for simply having omitted a large fraction of the Psalter, characterizing the excluded Psalms as "not fit for the mouths of a Christian congregation." No, Wesley's refusal to provide the Methodist people with a confession for subscription was the conviction of a man who knew his own mind on every vexed question of Christian doctrine, but who had decided that the reduction of doctrine to any particular form of words was to misunderstand the very nature of doctrinal statements.

But does this mean, then, that Wesley was an indifferentist? *Me genoito!* His working concepts of doctrinal authority were carefully worked out; they were complex and dynamically balanced. When challenged for his authority, on any question, his first appeal was to the Holy Bible, always in

the sense of Article VI in the XXXIX Articles—to which he had subscribed but which he was prepared to quote inexactly. Even so, he was well aware that Scripture alone had rarely settled any controverted point of doctrine. He and his critics had repeatedly come to impasses in their games of prooftexting—often with the same texts! Thus, though never as a substitute or corrective, he would also appeal to "the primitive church" and to the Christian tradition at large as competent, complementary witnesses to "the meaning" of this Scripture or that. Even in such appeals, he was carefully selective. For example, he claimed the right to reject the damnatory clauses in the so-called "Athanasian Creed"; he was prepared to defend Montanus and Pelagius against their detractors. He insisted that "private judgment was the keystone of the Protestant Reformation."

But Scripture and tradition would not suffice without the good offices (positive and negative) of critical reason. Thus, he insisted on logical coherence and as an authorized referee in any contest between contrary propositions or arguments. And yet, this was never enough. It was, as he knew for himself, the vital Christian experience of the assurance of one's sins forgiven, that clinched the matter.

Thus, we can see in Wesley a distinctive theological method, with Scripture as its pre-eminent norm but interfaced with tradition, reason and Christian experience as dynamic and interactive aids in the interpretation of the Word of God in Scripture. Such a method takes it for granted that faith is human re-action to an antecedent action of the Holy Spirit's prevenience, aimed at convicting our consciences and opening our eyes and ears to God's address to us in Scripture. This means that our "knowledge of God and of the things of God" is more nearly a response of trusting faith in God in Christ as Grace Incarnate than it is a mental assent to dogmatic formulations however true. This helps explain Wesley's studied deprecations of "orthodoxy," "theological opinions," "speculative divinity" and the like. It illumines his preoccupation with soteriology and his distinctive notion of grace, in all its modes, as the divine constant in every stage of the "order of salvation" (from repentance and justification, to regeneration, sanctificationion to glory). And it justified Wesley's willingness, given honest consensus on essential Christian doctrine, to allow for wide variations in theological formulation and thus for Christians "to think and let think." This was less a mood of doctrinal compromise than it was a constructive alternative to the barren extremes of "dogmatism," on the one side, and "indifferentism," on the other.

Wesley's theological pluralism was evangelical in substance (firm and clear in its Christocentric focus) and irenic in its temper ("catholic spirit"). It measured all doctrinal statements by their Biblical base and warrants. He loved to summon his readers "to the letter and the testimony," understood as "the oracles of God." But this reliance on Scripture as the fount of revelation was never meant to preclude a concomitant appeal to the insights of wise and saintly Christians in other ages. And it never gave license to "enthusiasm" or to irrational arguments. Finally, since the devils are at least as clear in their theological assents as believers are, real Christians are called beyond "orthodoxy" to authentic experience—viz., the inner witness of the Holy Spirit that we are God's beloved children, and joint heirs with Christ. It is this settled sense of personal assurance that is

"heart religion": the turning of our hearts from the form to the power of religion. Christian experience adds nothing to the substance of Christian truth; its distinctive role is to energize the heart so as to enable the believer to speak and do the truth in love.

This complex method, with its fourfold reference, is a good deal more sophisticated than it appears, and could be more fruitful for contemporary theologizing than has yet been realized. It preserves the primacy of Scripture, it profits from the wisdom of tradition, it accepts the disciplines of critical reason, and its stress on the Christian experience of grace gives it existential force.

The Edwardian reformers (Cranmer and Harpsfield in particular) had placed the Church of England under the authority of Scripture, but they had then refocused its use more largely in the liturgy (so that "the Christian folk could be immersed in Scripture as they prayed!"). The Scripture is equally the baseline of Anglican doctrinal essays, especially those born of controversy. One has only to notice the differences in method and intention in, say, Richard Hooker's *Laws of Ecclesiastical Policy* (1594 et. seq.) to see how far Anglicanism stood apart from continental Protestantism. In Hooker, Scripture, tradition and reason are carefully balanced off in a vision of natural law, "whose seat is the bosom of God, whose voice is the harmony of the world" (*E.P.*,I, xvi, 8). There is no contradiction between reason's discoveries of natural law and faith's discoveries of revelation (cf. *E.P.* III, ix, 2). Bishops John Bramhall and Simon Patrick had mastered "Christian Antiquity" and had put it to good use. Thomas Tenison (Archbishop of Canterbury when the brothers Wesley were born) had defined "the Protestant theological method" as the conjoint "use of Scripture, tradition and reason" and had defended this against the Socinians (who had, as Tenison believed, down scaled tradition and ended up with nothing better than a tepid Biblical rationalism). Even after Wesley, Francis Paget (Hooker's best editor) could claim, quite plausibly, that "the distinctive strength of Anglicanism rests on its equal loyalty to the unconflicting rights of reason, Scripture and tradition." This, then, was the tradition within which Wesley took his stand; before "the judgment bar of Scripture, right reason and Christian Antiquity" (*Works*, Preface, vol. 1, 1771).

It was Wesley's special genius that he conceived of adding "experience" to the traditional Anglican triad, and thereby adding vitality without altering the substance. What he did was to apply the familiar distinction *between fides quae creditur* and *fides qua creditur* (from a theoretical faith to an existential one) so as to insist on "heart religion" in place of all nominal Christian orthodoxy (cf. "The Almost Christian"). He had found support for this in Cranmer's wry comment (in Homilies, IV) about the devils who assent to every tenet of orthodoxy, "and yet they be but devils still." It was this added emphasis on "experience" that led Gerald Cragg (in his *Reason and Authority in the 18th Century*) to entitle his chapter on Wesley, "The Authority of Revitalized Faith." Wesley would have amended that to read "The Authority of Vital Faith."

With this "fourth dimension," one might say, Wesley was trying to incorporate the notion of conversion into the Anglican tradition—to make room in it for his own conversions and those of others. It is not irrelevant that in his report of the so-called "Aldersgate experience" of May 24th,

1738, he takes us back to his very first conversion (to "seriousness" and self dedication in 1725); thence on to his grand mystical illumination in 1727. After "Aldersgate" and after his ambivalent encounters with the Moravians in Herrnhut, the Journal recounts his rediscovery of a vital doctrine of justification by faith in his own tradition, in November of 38. But this had then been followed by a lapse into the depths of religious anxiety (in January 1739). The process then reached its climax in the spring of '39, with the "discovery" of his true and life-long vocation as an evangelist and spiritual director.

The success of Methodism as a religious society within the Church of England bolstered his sense of freedom to amend Anglican customs without rejecting the Anglican heritage. He quietly ignored the possibility that, in the process of reforming the national church, he was opening a way for his "societies" eventually to "separate" and go it alone as "sects" trying to become "churches" on their own. Over against the Anglican tradition of the church as *corpus mixtum*, Wesley demanded more of his societies, as disciplined communities of true believers. Against the Anglican reliance on church as ministrant of the means of grace, Wesley opposed the doctrine of justification by faith alone (and argued, mistakenly, that this doctrine was novelty in Anglicanism!). To the Anglican tradition of baptismal regeneration he added conversion and "new birth" as a Gospel requisite. To the Anglican contentment with the *Prayer book* as a complete blueprint, Wesley added a medley of "irregularities": field preaching, extempore prayer, itinerancy, class meetings and the like. To the Anglican tradition of the "natural" alliance between church and state, he opposed the concept of church as a voluntary association. The effect of such changes was to put the question of authority into a new context: to relate it more nearly to the individual's conscience, to small group consensus, and also to link it practically with the ideal of "accountable discipleship," (to use an apt phrase of David Watson's). The practical effect of this was to make every Methodist man and woman his / her own theologian. He nowhere gave his people an actual paradigm for their theologizing; somehow, he hoped that they would adopt his ways of reflection as their own. The truth is, however, that his bare texts, unannotated, did not suffice to make true "Wesleyans" out of those who have continued to bear his name and who honor him as patriarch. This is why the editors of the new edition of his Works hope that more ample annotations will help both "Wesleyans" and non-Wesleyans in the "discovery" of the richness and sophistication of his special sort of "folk theology."

Even that cheerful thought may be thwarted, however, so long as the phrase "the Wesleyan quadrilateral" is taken too literally. It was intended as a metaphor for a four element syndrome, including the four-fold guidelines of authority in Wesley's theological method. In such a quaternity, Holy Scripture is clearly unique. But this in turn is illuminated by the collective Christian wisdom of other ages and cultures between the Apostolic Age and our own. It also allows for the rescue of the Gospel from obscurantism by means of the disciplines of critical reason. But always, Biblical revelation must be received in the heart by faith: this is the requirement of "experience." Wesley's theology was eclectic and pluralistic (and I confess my bafflement at the hostility aroused in some minds by such inno-

cent adjectives). Even so, it was a coherent, stable, whole, deriving its fruitfulness from its single, soteriological focus in the Christian evangel of Jesus Christ—"who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven and was made man!"

When I first began reading Wesley's entire corpus with some care (after many years as a credentialled professor of the "history of Christian thought"), I was puzzled by the score or more brief summations of "the Gospel" that Wesley sprinkles almost casually along the way—never twice in the same form of words (which suggests that, before Coleridge or Wittgenstein, Wesley had come upon the secret that language [and the language of religion in particular] is, by its nature, "incomplete"). Little by little, it dawned on me that Wesley's purpose in these summaries was to refocus the entire range of his theological reflection upon the crux of the matter: which is to say, salvation. For example:

> "Let us prophesy according to the analogy of faith"—as St. Peter expresses it, "as the oracles of God"—according to the general temper of them, according to that grand scheme of doctrine which is delivered therein touching original sin, justification by faith and present, inward salvation. There is a wonderful analogy between all these, and a close and intimate connexion between the chief heads of that faith "which was once for all delivered to the saints." [*Explanatory Notes*, on Romans 12:6, on "the analogy of faith"].

He is eager for theological dialogue, but his real concern is with:

> the most essential parts of real experimental religion: its initial rise in the soul, that goes on to faith in our Lord Jesus Christ which issues in regeneration, is attended with peace and joy in the Holy Ghost, thence to our wrestlings with flesh and blood, and finally to perfect love. [*Second Letter to Bishop Lavington*, X, 17].

All Wesleyans are familiar with his metaphors of "porch," "door" and room" of "true religion" [*The Principles of a Methodist*, in Jackson, VIII 472-74]. Similar encapsulations of the ordo salutis abound, some in obvious places but some in unexpected places—as, for example, in the "Preface" to the Explanatory Notes on the Old Testament (the vast bulk of which was simply lifted from others):

> [In your reading of the Scriptures] have a constant eye to the analogy of the faith, which is to say, the connexion there is between those grand fundamental doctrines of original sin, justification by faith, the new birth, inward and outward holiness.

As an Anglican priest, he will assume a shared faith with "A Gentleman of Bristol" (Jan. 6, 1758) in

> the principles of the Church of England as being confirmed by our Liturgy, Articles and Homilies—and so also by the whole tenor of Scripture [notice this catch phrase: it is a favorite, repeated in many different contexts].

In another place, he summarized the essential Gospel in yet another set of theses:

> 1. That without holiness no man shall see the Lord:
> 2. That this holiness is the work of God, who worketh in us both to will and to do;
> 3. That he doeth it of his own good pleasure, merely for the merits of Christ;
> 4. That holiness is having the mind that was in Christ, enabling us to walk as He walked;
> 5. That no man can be sanctified till he be justified;
> 6. That we are justified by faith alone
> ["The General Spread of the Gospel," para. 13]

This comes in a sermon; this particular form of words is never used again.

The obvious methodological question posed by summaries like this is whether such variant expressions oversimplify or distort "the essence of the Christian Gospel." For Wesley, it was enough to point to its soteriological core in evangelical terms. As far as the full range of theological opinions is concerned, he is more relaxed—even to the point of tolerating the "over beliefs" of the Roman Catholics and also the Reformed doctrines of election and predestination. It is this skillful balancing of the essentials off from the adiaphora that allows Wesley to escape both the rigidities of dogmatism and the flabbiness of indifferentism.

In the new edition of Wesley's Works, we have tried to alert even the casual reader to the extent to which Wesley was, as he claimed he was, *homo totius libri*. To an extent that I had not realized before I wore out the first of two concordances we used in tracing down Wesley's Scripture citations (quotations, paraphrases, allusions, echoes) the Bible was truly his second language. His rhetoric throughout is a tissue woven from the Biblical texts and paraphrases and his own crisp Augustan prose ("plain truth for plain people"). His appeal to Scripture goes far deeper than the use of texts in support of his own views. His larger concern was to let each part of Scripture be pondered in the light of the whole, obscure texts in the light of the more lucid ones—and all of them, always, in the spirit of prayer, *coram Deo*. Scripture is not merely God's address to the believer—it is inspired by the Holy Spirit who in turn inspires the believer's understanding. The Bible is to be read literally, save where such a reading leads to an absurdity or to an impugnation of God's goodness. Scriptural commands are not to be construed legalistically; they are to be seen also as "covered promises." Even allegory is occasionally resorted to (as with the image of "The Wilderness State"). The Apocrypha may be used for edification, though not for sermon texts. Wesley was capable of partisan prooftexting; and yet also felt free to alter the *Textus Receptus* by appeal to older MSS; and he had no qualms in nuancing some Greek words arbitrarily (as with paroxysmos in Acts 15:39), where he insists that only Barnabas lost his temper, but never St. Paul. The clearest impression that remains after all the tedium of tracing Wesley's Biblical sources is of a man very much "at home" in the Bible and quietly confident of his understanding of its "general tenor."

There is another sense, however, in which the notion of Wesley as the man of "one book only" is patently absurd. He read voraciously and in all

genres. He had a special fondness for "the Fathers" of the early centuries. He thought that the Greek theologians had understood the Gospel more profoundly and therapeutically than their Latin counterparts. He came at the Fathers with an Anglican bias (he had been at Oxford in the twilight of a great age of patristic scholarship), in the tradition of Richard Field, Henry Hammond and Simon Patrick. He was not in the least intimidated by learned detractors of patristic wisdom (like Jean Daille and Conyers Middleton).

What Wesley learned most from the Eastern fathers was the rich notion of the Christian life as a participation in the divine (i.e., salvation as the restoration of the ruined image of God in the human soul). The stage for his "Aldersgate experience" had been set by the Scripture with which he began that day: II Peter 1:4 (cf. Wesley's paraphrase: *ta megista hemin timia epangelmata dedoretai, hina genesthe theias koinonoi physeos*, and the crucial phrase, "partakers of the divine *physis*." It was in this sense of "participation" in the divine life that Wesley had already understood the mysteries of grace and free will, of prevenient grace as the Holy Spirit's constant initiative, of "perfection" as a process rather than a completed act. There is much Anselmian language in Wesley ("acquittal," "imputation"), but there is even more that stresses the notion of healing (*therapeia psyches*). He was neither "Augustinian" (indeed, he has some tart comments about the great bishop), nor "Pelagian" (he actually doubted that Pelagius had been a "Pelagian")—and he could interpret *dikaiosyne* not only as the "imputation" of Christ's righteousness to the repentant believer but also its "impartation" as well.

From the Latin traditions, he seems to have learned most from men like William of St. Thierry—who had taught that love is the highest form of knowledge—and from the Victorines (Rupriecht of Deutz, Hugh et al.) with their bold notion that God had used the Adamic Fall to bring about a greater total good than if Adam had not sinned (*O felix culpa!*).

All of this is a way of saying that, for Wesley, the Christian tradition was more than a curiosity or a source for illustrative material. It was a living spring of Christian insight. Reading Wesley against his sources amounts to an eccentric excursion through the length and breadth of the history of Christ thought. And because a lively sense of "tradition" has now come to be a prerequisite in ecumenical dialogue (cf. J. J. Pelikan's recent essay, *The Vindication of Tradition*), it is all the more important for "Wesleyans" (and others), to discover how much he had learned from the Christian past and thus also to learn for ourselves the importance of being truly "at home" in that past.

But Wesley was no antiquarian. We know of his inborn tendency to require a reason for everything from his father's well-known complaint to Susanna about his personal habits. He never discounted his university training in logic nor his life-long interest in contemporary science and culture. He lived in the perilous transition from an earlier theocentric rationalism that sought to reconcile religion and science (as in John Ray's *Wisdom of God in Creation*—the prototype for Wesley's *Survey of the Wisdom of God in Creation*) to the 'Enlightenment's' outright rejection of supernaturalism (as in the deists and David Hume). To be a theologian in 18th century Britain was to struggle with deism and secularism (cf. Joseph

Butler, William Paley *et al.*). Wesley's acknowledgment of rationality as normative was both principled and pragmatic. He took logical order as a paradigm for the order of being itself (as any good Ramist would, or later, the Kantians). He remained a disciple of Locke and Aldrich all his days. But his vivid sense of mystery kept him aware of reason's limitations (as in "The Case of Reason Impartially Considered"). Richard Brantley (in Locke, *Wesley and the Method of English Romanticism* (1984) has analyzed Locke's influence on Wesley. But no one, to my knowledge, has provided a comparable study of Wesley and Malebranche, or the Cambridge Platonists, or John Norris, or Bishop Berkeley, *et al.*

Wesley's understanding of reason led him to a religious epistemology that hinges, crucially, on his view of intuition as a "spiritual *sensorium*" in the human mind that constitutes what is most distinctively human: viz., our capacity for God. This is part of God's creative design and it points to the chief inlet of the Holy Spirit into the human soul and spirit. Just last year, a dissertation was accepted by Rome's Angelicum University on The Perceptibility of Grace in John Wesley (by Daniel Joseph Luby—a layman!). It is a superb probing of the importance, for Wesley, of "immediate perception" [of spirituality reality]. Such unexpected developments remind us of how much we also need a full-fledged monograph on "rationality in the Wesleyan spirit." Even so, "our knowledge of God and of the things of God" does not come from intuition, inference or deduction alone. Always it is a prevenient and unmerited gift and must, therefore, be experienced as an inward change of heart and head in which the mind's intuitions of the truth are realized in the heart (as when *Christus pro nobis* becomes *Christus pro me*).

Here a careful distinction is needed. The "experience of grace" is indeed deeply inward, but it is not a merely subjective "religious affection." It is an objective encounter (within "the heart," to be sure) of something not ourselves and not our own (something truly transcendent). It is an inward assurance of an objective reality: viz., God's unmerited favor, his pardoning mercy, an awareness of the Spirit's prevenient action in mediating the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ to the believer. It is, therefore, the experience of a given—a divine action that can only be re-acted to, in trusting faith or in prideful resistance. It is this stress upon the sheer givenness of spiritual insight and of divine grace that distinguishes Wesley from Pelagius—and for that matter, from Arminius and Episcopius. Had he known of Kant (his younger contemporary!) Wesley would have agreed with at least the first two paragraphs of his first *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788):

> There can be no doubt that all our knowledge begins with experience. . . . In the order of time, therefore, we have no knowledge antecedent to experience and with experience all our knowledge begins.
>
> But though all our knowledge begins with experience, it does not follow that it arises out of experience . . .

When, therefore, zealous and pious souls conclude that the intensity or inwardness of their own feelings is the measure of truth (and when they invoke Wesley's "strangely warmed heart" as a witness to such a

correlation) nothing but pious sentimentality can ensue and, with it, a sort of narcissism that readily turns into an anti-intellectualism. The verb forms in the familiar phrase, "I felt my heart strangely warmed" give us an underdeveloped clue. "I felt" is in the active voice; "strangely warmed" is passive.

In this light, one may read with profit another of Wesley's "summaries," this one of the gist of Christian experience at its best:

> Words cannot express [and he was serious in his conviction that religious language is apophatic and, therefore, also polysemous] what the children of God experience. But perhaps one might say (desiring any who are taught of God to soften or strengthen the expression) that "the testimony of the Spirit" is an inward impression on the soul, whereby the Spirit of God directly witnesses to my spirit that I am a child of God, that Jesus Christ hath loved me and given Himself for me—and that all my sins are blotted out and that I, even I, am reconciled to God ["The Witness of the Spirit," I, i, 7].

Dr. Sugden's comment on this passage, invoking the authority of W. B. Pope, takes Wesley to task for this emphasis on the objectivity of the Spirit's activity and of the human role as wholly reactive. This reminds us of how, in the history of Methodist theologizing, Wesley's heroic efforts to save us from subjectivity and sentimentality have so often gone so largely for naught. Wesley's theological method was distinctive, and maybe unique (for one cannot identify any of his disciples who adopted it as a whole or in his theological spirit). Adam Clarke, Richard Watson, W. B. Pope, and others grasped much of the substance of the patriarch's teaching, but they were bent on remaking him into a biblicist (Clarke) or a systematic theologian (Watson and Pope). Indeed, Watson went so far as to entitle his own exposition of Wesleyan theology in the Calvinist fashion, *Theological Institutes*.

All Wesleyans have agreed on the primacy of Scripture and then differed (not always helpfully) in their hermeneutical perspectives. This seems to me to have come from a neglect of Wesley's own hermeneutical focus on "the analogy of faith"; I cannot cite a single essay by a Wesleyan exegete or theologian in which the *analogia fidei* is a governing notion. In the 19th century, Wesley's reliance on the Christian tradition as a whole (and especially "the Fathers") was quietly jettisoned (even by Methodist historians, like Sheldon and Cell). His confidence in reason, within its proper limits, has given way to an emotive anti intellectualism or else its opposite: e.g. an overconfidence in reason (as in Bowne and Brightman). His focus on "experience"—as a soteriological category—has been turned into a variety of empiricisms, bolstered by a pragmatic appeal to "practical results."

The term "quadrilateral" does not occur in the Wesley corpus—and more than once, I have regretted having coined it for contemporary use, since it has been so widely misconstrued. But if we are to accept our responsibility for seeking *intellectus* for our faith, in any other fashion than a "theological system" or, alternatively, a juridical statement of "doctrinal standards," then this method of a conjoint recourse to the fourfold guide-

lines of Scripture, tradition, reason and experience, may hold more promise for an evangelical and ecumenical future than we have realized as yet—by comparison, for example, with biblicism, or traditionalism, or, rationalism, or empiricism. It is far more valid than the reduction of Christian authority to the dyad of "Scripture" and "experience" (so common in Methodist ranks today). The "quadrilateral" requires of a theologian no more than what he or she might reasonably be held accountable for: which is to say, a familiarity with Scripture that is both critical and faithful; plus, an acquaintance with the wisdom of the Christian past; plus, a taste for logical analysis as something more than a debater's weapon; plus, a vital, inward faith that is upheld by the assurance of grace and its prospective triumphs, in this life.

The epoch that looms before us, whether we like it or no, is a postliberal age, in which the dogmatisms of the pre—Enlightenment orthodoxies and the confident dogmas of "liberalism" (e.g., "progress" and "human perfectibility") will come to seem increasingly outmoded. It is, predictably, a time of troubles for the whole world, with no assured future for our plundered planet or for a humanity addicted to self—defeating strategies masked with the illusions of good intentions. The still—divided fragments of the Christian community are more interested in honest doctrinal consensus than ever before. But this is also to say that it is a time when the study of Wesley has a distinctive contribution to make.

Neither the Wesley theology, nor his methods are simple panaceas. They are not like the TV dinners that can be reheated and served up quickly for immediate use. They call for imaginative updating in the new world cultural contexts (the sort of thing that John XXIII spoke of as *aggiornamento*—care in preserving the kernel, imagination in renovating the medium). Wesley's vision of Christian existence has to be reconceived and transvalued so that it can be as relevant in the experience of the late 20th century as it was to alienated English men and women in 1740! This requires that it must be refocused in ways neither doctrinaire on the one hand, nor trendy on the other. Wesley avoided such barren polarizations and so, one thinks, we may also—if our theologians, like his, are as deeply immersed in Scripture ("at home" in its imagery and mystery), as truly respectful of the Christian wisdom of past ages, as honestly open to the disciplines of critical reason, as eagerly alert to the fire and flame of grace.

Wesley's complex way of theologizing has the ecumenical advantage of making fruitful linkages with other doctrinal traditions without threatening to supplant any of them and without fear of forfeiting its own identity. There are, however, at least two prior conditions for such linkages: that Wesley be rescued from the stereotypes in which his professed disciples have cocooned him and that we recover for ourselves the rich manifold of tradition from which he drew so freely and creatively. These conditions can be best met by learning more and more from Wesley himself (the whole Wesley, including "the later Mr. Wesley" as reflected in *A Christian Library* and *The Arminian Magazine*) and yet also learning more and more, and on our own, from the rich manifold of Christian traditions from which Wesley learned so much.

This is a daunting challenge and I freely confess that it is more of a task than I have myself been able to bring off to my own satisfaction. But I can

testify, with great gratitude, that my communing with Wesley and his sources has been immensely enriching, in my theological concerns and in my own growth in grace. It is, therefore, with full assurance that I commend such explorations, not only to those who bear the Wesleyan insignia, but to all others who may care to extend their acquaintance with a rare man of God.