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# John Wesley and Creative Synthesis

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*by Melvin E. Dieter*

The more we learn about John Wesley, the more we see the complexity of a person who himself wished to be looked upon as a very simple man. This is particularly true as we try to understand the theology that motivated and directed his life and ministry. Until recently, it was more or less taken for granted that Wesley had no unique contribution to make to contemporary theological discussions, because in no sense did he develop a theology essentially different from the prevailing systems of thought. Historically, Wesley has been known for his practices more than his theoretical speculation. His emphasis on evangelism and Christian experience has strongly shaped our conceptions of him as a theologian.

Calvinism is alive with complexities that have produced many divergent expressions of its author's teachings among his followers; nevertheless the "Five Points" of a very systematic John Calvin are always there. Their arguments flow from premise to conclusion, point to point, in rather simple, logical consistency. Understanding and defense of the basic Calvinist position, in some measure at least, is readily available in a logical, coherent outline to both proponents and opponents.

To put together any similar brief and easily attainable explanation of basic Wesleyan theology is quite another problem. This is not to deny that Wesley was a logical thinker or was averse to the use of rational argument in explaining his positions or practices! Quite to the contrary, he was a very rational man addressing a very rationalistic age. But to understand his theological underpinnings we cannot turn to a model with outlines of one, two, three points or more in logical sequence. To better comprehend Wesley's theological self-understanding it is more helpful to think in terms of finding a

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*Dr. Dieter is vice provost and professor of Church History at Asbury Theological Seminary where he has served since 1975. He holds the Ph.D. degree from Temple University.*

“formula” or putting together a theological “molecular” model in which the dynamic of the whole is intimately related to each individual element. It springs to life and growth in an integrated action, reaction, and interaction of each element with every other element. It is a creative synthesis in which elements of divine revelation and human experience, which are polarized in other theological systems, exist together in viable tension.

From the Scriptures, from the tradition of the historic church, from his own experience and that of other Christians, and by his God-given rational powers, he brought together a dynamic mix of vital Christianity. Its effects are still being felt everywhere in Christianity and the world today. To put it very simply, Wesley’s theological mix is more like Grandma’s cooking than it is like a classical theologian’s dissertation; a handful of this, a smidgen of that, a sprinkle of something else, and a good helping of another. In Wesley’s hands, as in Grandma’s kitchen, it may have produced as good a mix as we’ve ever tasted; but to recover the recipe and duplicate the product becomes a formidable challenge. We can readily identify the ingredients, but the balance and the blend are often the unknown quantities.

The importance of understanding Wesley’s doctrines in this pattern has come to the fore with great force in current Wesley studies. The contemporary Wesleyan scholar, Dr. Albert Outler, has made a major contribution in establishing Wesley as a serious theologian by pointing out the rich sources upon which Wesley drew in constructing his theology.<sup>1</sup> But even non-Wesleyan writers such as John Todd, a Catholic, have sensed the value of Wesley’s creative theological synthesis. In his book *John Wesley and the Catholic Church*, Todd recognizes the viable tension Wesley maintained between institution and individual. Wesley, he says, finds “a special and unwavering respect for the Anglican Church as an institution . . . [and] at the same time has a scrupulous and delicate regard for the inspirations of the Spirit amongst individual Christian men and women.” This combination of “individual” and “institution,” Todd continues, offers something like the “happy mean to the different streams of Christian life today.” But in trying to define that Wesleyan synthesis or “happy mean,” Todd questions whether any “formula could hold his [Wesley’s] dynamic and practical understanding . . . of the many polarities which he holds in tension in his theology.”<sup>2</sup>

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Wesley's dialectic was so evident to his critics in his own time that charges of theological compromise and eclecticism constantly flowed about him. The author of *Methodism and Popery Dissected and Compared*, an anti-Wesleyan tract published in 1779, saw Wesley as a constant turncoat and his theology as pure eclecticism. The satirist thundered:

Read his writings as a Divine, and I am positive any Gentleman acquainted with Religious Controversy would, with the *Sorbonne*, declare him a *Jesuit*, a *rank Catholic*. Peruse his answer to Doctor Warburton, you would pronounce him a Serjeant at Law. Hear him preach one day at the Foundery, and you would swear he was a good Actor. Take a turn to the Seven-Dials the next morning, and ten to one (if the weather changed) but Implicit Faith, the doctrine of the Mother-Church [perhaps Roman Catholic] is his Theme; and in the evening an Anabaptist. Every Sunday he is a Lutheran; the following day he sides with mad Jack Calvin; and if the weather proves mild (by his mental Barometer) on Tuesday, he cannot tell what Religion he is of himself, unless he is destined to hold forth: and then, as he has all Religions by him, he takes no care, but gives his Congregation what first comes uppermost . . .<sup>3</sup>

Toplady, in the heat of controversy, called him “a low and puny tadpole in divinity” and a “Methodist weathercock, turning with every wind of doctrine.”<sup>4</sup> But Wesley was no mere eclectic, and certainly no compromiser who clipped the edges of truths to make them suit his own purposes. He was rather the synthesizer who was able to redeem elements of truth from within the Christian tradition that ordinarily were locked into the rather rigid theologies of others and put them together in such a way that the whole mix created a new way of looking at Christian doctrine and the Christian life. We know it as Wesleyanism.

The quote given above from *Methodism and Popery* illustrates in its biting satire some of the areas into which Wesley reached to create the elements that are so essential to his theology. He was a “rank Catholic” in his willingness to make a new emphasis on the love of God as the predominant theme of redemption over against the

predestinarian doctrines of the hyper-Calvinism of his day. In doing this he reshaped the church's understanding of God's relationship to a fallen world. He did this in great measure by reaching behind the Reformation theology into the Catholic tradition and redeeming the theme of God's love for every person for the church of his time. And he accomplished this without forsaking in any degree the Reformers' unremitting commitment to the biblical principle of justification by faith. In emphasizing the need for "justification by faith" he remained "a Lutheran" and sided with "mad Jack Calvin." His emphasis upon conversion, the structure of his class meetings, and his freedom to use laypeople to teach and even preach, he learned in part from Moravian pietism and the Anabaptist tradition. If "he cannot *tell what religion* he is of himself," as the critic charged, it was because he hesitated to build the barriers of doctrine that would exclude people who were experiencing God in Christ from the pale of Christian faith. In that sense, few other leaders of movements in church history had "all religions by him" as he did.

If it is granted that "creative synthesis" is a critical element in understanding Wesley, there are then a number of important questions that arise for those who would be Wesleyans; among them the following:

1. *How can we find that mix of ingredients that give a Wesleyan theology balance, dynamic, and enduring validity?* It has already been suggested that to do this we will have to allow Wesley to lead us out into the broader horizons of Christian truth within which he himself felt at home. An abiding error in attempting to understand and learn from Wesley or any other great Christian is to narrow the horizons that inspired their hope and enlarged their perspectives. To do this is to end up often in static positions where the spiritual dynamic is lost and elements of Christian truth that once seemed to be the strength of a movement now contribute to its weakness. The essential smidgen or handful of some ingredient has been left out of the recipe somewhere along the line and the product is not the same. Inasmuch as we can we must widen our view to a much larger Wesley than the one we have locked into that we sometimes define as Wesleyanism.

2. *How did Wesley save himself from pure eclecticism and compromise as he ranged so freely across the theological and historical barriers of his age to find the truths that shaped his theology?*

Wesley was saved from these by what is popularly known as the Wesleyan quadrilateral of authority (which in itself demonstrates a

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creative synthesis). Scripture, experience, tradition, reason were the persistent test points for his judgments on what was or was not God's truth for men and women. Wesley, however, did not regard each of these elements as equally authoritative, using whichever part of the quadrilateral that seemed to best suit his immediate purpose. The results of that kind of pluralism have been nothing but compromise and rank eclecticism among Wesleyans who have used the quadrilateral in that way. The Wesleyan sense of balance and priority must remain intact here. Scripture for him was the beginning and the end of the process. The other three were in the mix and had to be there, but Scripture with its revelation of God's saving love in Jesus Christ was his only hope of final assurance. The broad horizons of reason, tradition, and valid experience ended wherever God's Word failed to show the way.

3. *How can a Wesleyan perspective of truth born of such a creative synthesis help the church today?* If Wesley's model is understood in some authentic way and allowed to become a part of our own efforts at "creative synthesis," it offers exciting possibilities. It will encourage us to largeness of horizon, to look beyond our borders for elements in the traditions, experience, and understanding of the whole church, which may become part of our own experience of Christianity so, hopefully, we too may give fresh perspective to what constitutes vital Christianity. If we are willing to accept Wesley's hierarchy of authority based on Scripture as the final arbiter, but not the sole ingredient in the theological process; if we are willing, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, to transcend any system that threatens to lock in truths, and free those truths from their isolation to become a part of a more creative Christianity, we too can contribute to revitalizing the church and society in our day — just as Wesley did in his.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>See Albert Outler, "Methodism's Theological Heritage: A Study in Perspective," in Paul Minus, Jr., ed., *Methodism's Destiny in an Ecumenical Age* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1969), pp. 44-70.

<sup>2</sup>John Todd, *John Wesley and the Catholic Church* (London: The Catholic Book Club, 1958), p. 14.

<sup>3</sup>As quoted by Albert M. Lyles, *Methodism Mocked: The Satire Reaction to Methodism in the Eighteenth Century* (London: The Epworth Press, 1960), p. 117.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 122.

