

EDITORIAL

A LOOK AT CHRISTIAN PERFECTION AFTER TWO CENTURIES

Harold Barnes Kuhn*

When an eighteenth century Christian movement develops through two-plus centuries, it is inevitable that needs for careful re-evaluation and for possible supplementation of original insights should arise. Wesleyanism, with its strong soteriological and experimental emphasis, has not escaped this interpretative process, the more so since it was really, in its context, ahead of its time.

Had Wesley's work been merely the results of the dynamics of the human spirit, it should have remained stillborn in the 1730's. That it to say, it challenged the mood and spirit of the eighteenth century, and was radically disharmonious with the rationalism of the period. This accounts, of course, for the mounting opposition against it by the major religious leadership of the period. As a movement giving emphasis to the inner life of man, it was a scandal to deistic leaders to whom the religious expression of the early Wesleyan societies appeared to be a horrendous manifestation of "enthusiasm."

The student of historical movements finds the survival of Wesleyanism to be little short of a miracle. It actually belonged, in spirit and mood, to the nineteenth century. While it was not in itself typically 'romantic', it would have been in agreement with much of Romanticism, in its powerful reaction in the 1800's against the Century of Reason. Only a movement of gigantic internal resources could have survived, let alone have grown to spectacular dimensions, in the eighteenth century, with its robust advocacy of the ability of reason to speak for the whole man.

*Professor of Philosophy of Religion, Asbury Theological Seminary

The development of Wesleyanism in the nineteenth century have offended some of those claiming the Wesleyan label in our century. These have objected that Wesley's theological emphasis was basically christological, while the later developments are said to have brought the work of the Holy Spirit, particularly in relation to the doctrine of entire sanctification, into a prominence which Wesley never intended. Now, it is true that Wesley had relatively little time to articulate a full *Summa theologica*. The intensity of his preaching labors, and the extent of his organizational work, militated against this. This being the case, we must rely rather heavily upon his *Sermons* and *Notes* for the elaboration of many of his doctrinal positions.

It seems clear that when Wesley's writings as a whole are considered, the role of the Third Person is seen by him to be far more prominent and meaningful than might be suggested by a reading confined exclusively to *The Plain Account*. Dr. William M. Arnett, The Frank Paul Morris Professor of Christian Doctrine in Asbury Theological Seminary, has done an exceedingly careful in-depth study at this point. We are grateful to Dr. Arnett for the written results of this survey and are delighted to present it to our readership.

The careful reading of this monograph should serve to allay any fears that the nineteenth century developments of Wesleyan theology, particularly that which was stimulated by the work of the National Association for the Promotion of Holiness (now the Christian Holiness Association), represented an "outWesleyanizing of Wesley". No doubt some of the fears at this point represent a reaction against the emphasis of the 20th century charismatic movement. One wonders whether such fears are really warranted. At any rate, it is difficult to feel that professed Wesleyans are consistent in accepting with eagerness whatever light contemporary movements, such as the depth psychology, might shed upon their theology, and at the same time rejecting out of hand that which was developed in the nineteenth century, particularly when this latter made explicit that which was more than implicit in the works of John Wesley himself.