WESLEY AS CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGIAN: A NEW PARADIGM FOR OVERCOMING TENSIONS IN THE WESLEYAN/HOLINESS HERITAGE

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The presence of many different, sometimes competing versions of Wesley has been a fact of Methodist life and ecumenical scholarship since the 19th century. The diverse traditions of interpretation of Wesley’s heritage have created tensions in the Methodist heritage, beginning with the controversy with Whitefield and the evolution of the Holiness Movement. More recently, struggles over the Wesleyan heritage have developed among interpreters who want to identify him with Modern Revivalism, others who stress his Roman Catholic or Reformed roots, and still others who try to align him with modern Liberation Theology of Social Gospel impulses. Of course the indebtedness of the Methodist movement’s founder to the Anglican heritage cannot be neglected. The paradigm for Wesley research that I propose can contribute to healing these intramural squabbles.

Essentially my conclusion is that almost all the venerable traditions of Wesleyan interpretation are correct. In different contexts, Wesley said almost everything that these various interpretative traditions attribute to him. Of course, this in itself is no new insight. Previous scholars have noted the conceptual richness or eclecticism of Wesley’s thought. What is unique about my proposal is that I can discern a pattern to the conceptual diversity in his thought. Throughout his career he stressed similar themes when addressing similar pastoral concerns. Such insights can provide us with a new appreciation of the various traditions of Wesleyan/Holiness theology. Identifying the pastoral purposes for which Wesley deployed various doctrinal construals can be an important step in the development of new paradigms for Wesleyan/Holiness and even for an ecumenical theology. The paradigm for reading Wesley that I propose takes lessons from him not just concerning what his contemporary heirs should proclaim, but also gains insights from him about when to proclaim his various insights.

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Of course the case for this pattern cannot be made with regard to all of Wesley's teachings and practices. That would take a book, which may need to be written someday. For this paper, I shall try to make the case for this contextual paradigm of reinterpreting Wesley by examining the diversity in his thought regarding the role and nature of justification by faith, its relation to sanctification and perfection, the relationship between divine providence (including predestination) and free will, his views on the Sacraments and worship, and his approach to social justice.

**Justification**

There has been and continues to be an interpretive debate over the role that justification by faith plays in Wesley's thought. Certainly the doctrine played a central role in his thought earlier in his career, particularly in view of its role in the Aldersgate Experience. In contexts where he was preaching or responding to criticisms of the doctrine, he identified it as the central teaching of the faith. However, when he turned to explicate the heart of Methodism he spoke of its fundamental doctrine as "that the Bible is the whole and sole rule both of Christian faith and of practice." When he did get around to referring to salvation by faith as a "constant doctrine" he began to include with it other affirmations more related to living the Christian life—repentance and holiness.

In this connection, when reflecting on the overall sweep of his theology on several occasions, both in his A Farther Appeal To Men of Reason and Religion and in his Articles of Religion, he endorsed the wording of the Anglican Thirty-Nine Articles and spoke only of justification as "most wholesome doctrine," which relegates it to something less than a central role in his thought.

When trying to justify the success of his ministry from critics, and so explaining in that context the need for his revival in England (responding to sloth), Wesley clearly subordinated justification to holiness, with a most fertile image. He wrote: Our main doctrines, which include all the rest, are three,—that of repentance, of faith, and of holiness. The first of these we account, as it were, the porch of religion: the next, the door; the third, religion itself. By relegateing salvation by faith to the "door" of religion, while holiness (sanctification) is really religion itself, Wesley implicitly asserts that the real heart of faith is sanctification, that justification is just prologomena to the real thing. He nearly says this explicitly later in the document just cited, as he claims that religion itself is love, not just God's love for us, but our loving God and humanity. In a sermon addressing a related concern about the ongoing need for the Law of God over-against Lutheran hesitations, he claimed that faith is only the handmaid of this love.

That Wesley affirms this prioritizing of holy love (sanctification) over the doctrine of justification, but sees it as related to his context (esp. a concern to respond to sloth) is evident in his Journal entry for April 23, 1777. He wrote about Justification by Faith, claiming "I do not find this to be a profitable subject to an unawakened congregation." In the August 2, 1745 "Minutes of Some Late Conversations" after explaining the reasons for his earlier stress on justification, Wesley proceeds to contend that once the foundation is laid we can go on to exhort perfection.

In this and in the quotation above, the Methodist movement's founder essentially affirms that for him not justification, but perfection is the central teaching of Methodism.
He makes that point almost explicitly on at least two occasions, as he concerned himself to assert the importance of the doctrine in face of either criticisms of it or in response to a lack of church growth. In *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* he says about it that 'all our preachers should make a point of preaching perfection constantly, strong, and explicitly; and all believers should mind this one thing...' And in a 1776 *Journal* entry, he laments that the church in the region in which he was "had gained no ground in Circuit all the year," because preachers had not taught perfection, which he says is "the peculiar doctrine committed to our trust."

Given these commitments, it is interesting the Wesley did not reject his concern about justification, advising that we not deprecate justification to exult full sanctification. We need to do that. The context for these comments was a mixture of the sort of general attempt to articulate the essence of the faith of the Methodist movement, in which we have observed that sanctification or perfection was stressed, but in this case spiced by a concern to assert the *sola fides* from critiques (a concern not unlike one of the contexts in which Wesley stressed the centrality of justification). What the Methodist movement's founder designated as the center of Christian faith was very much a matter of context.

Perhaps it could be argued that the different positions taken by Wesley regarding the center of Christian faith was as much a function of development in his thought as it was related to his addressing different contexts. However, the case that diversity in his thought is merely a matter of maturity cannot be made with regard to other doctrinal loci.

With regard to his treatment of justification, generally speaking Wesley employed the forensic understanding of the doctrine (construing justification as the unmerited declaration of pardon and forgiveness which truly makes them righteous in God's sight). This construal of the doctrine helped him assert that God alone justifies with no contribution on our part. The very fact that this view is asserted in the *Articles of Religion* bespeaks its prevalence in his thought. Of course he makes this very clear in one sermon on justification where he affirms the concept that he does not deem God's declaration of imputed righteousness to be a mere legal fiction.

Wesley's remarks in the previously mentioned sermon have led some of his interpreters to claim that he rejected the forensic understanding. And in fact, in other contexts, when dealing with the question of how perfection can be affirmed in view of our sin, and describing (not so much exhorting) perfection, he relied on a kind of Mystical notion of justification, the idea that in justification we are brought into union with Christ.

The similarities between this view of the Eastern concept of *theosis* are quite apparent, as has been noted by a number of Finnish theologians. Wesley himself easily moved from the Mystics' insights to the notion of *theosis* (deification), which he expressly embraced in a 1736 sermon when dealing with how to live happily despite our sin (concerned with sanctification), but from a cosmic, eschatological point of view.

The concept of *theosis* introduces the element of cooperation with grace very strongly (not surprising, given the preoccupation Wesley had with Christian living when he drew upon these images). In fact, when one considers his view of free will as articulated in the *Articles of Religion* (his insistence that we have free will which cooperates with grace as a result of the gift of the Holy Spirit), his overall commitment to affirming the believer's cooperation with grace is readily apparent. This commitment is quite consistently affirmed
by Wesley throughout the corpus, hardly surprising given his typical concern about perfection and sanctification (though this construal does not appear in texts where he was addressing the doctrine of justification by asserting its centrality to his thought). To the extent that most of the time in these instances he prioritized grace over human response, the Methodist founder’s construal bears genuine family resemblances to the views of Thomas Aquinas and the Roman Catholic heritage.

Wesley’s commitment to affirming the human participation in salvation even led him at several points to blur the distinction between God’s Work and human work to the point of making it seem that repentance must precede faith. This happens particularly when he more directly addressed concerns about living the Christian life.

These affirmations are in line with Eastern Orthodox ways of construing the grace-works relationship. Wesley’s thought converges with the Eastern and the Roman Catholic heritage in another way on this range of issues. With them, he referred to salvation as a process in these contexts.

This stress on cooperation is even applied by Wesley in a sermon on love (connoting that he was attending to a concern that his hearers practice love) which deals with the questions of whether non-Christians might be saved. He concluded with a word of hope, contending that they may be saved because their spirituality is counted as faith.

**Sanctification and Perfection**

Historically the Wesleyan/Holiness heritage has been divided by the question of when sanctification begins and its relation to justification. Generally speaking, Methodists are correct. Most of the time when Wesley addresses the question, and particularly when merely explaining the faith or exhorting believers to go on to perfection, he insisted that sanctification begins in justification. In other contexts, though, when especially concerned to affirm justification by faith in face of distortions of it, the Holiness Movement presents the true Wesley. In these contexts he spoke of sanctification as a “second work of grace,” presumably what follows justification.

The nature of perfection was also treated in a conceptually diverse way by the Methodist founder. He contended that it may be both a process and an event. Yet in a 1766 letter he claimed that he construed it as a gradual work.

This distinction was relevant for Wesley’s position on the issue of whether perfection can be realized by the believer in this life or whether it can only transpire in death. On this topic too, a contextually conditioned diversity emerges.

Wesley’s characteristic position on this topic is best articulated by him and his colleagues in “The Large Minutes.” They concluded that perfection may be attained before we die. The general background of this assertion helps us understand the rationale or pastoral context for this assertion. It emerges in the context of the early Methodist leaders grappling with the problem of how to revive the work of God where it was in decay. And in other contexts Wesley asserts the possibility of perfection in this life in order to give his readers and hearers hope from a lack of confidence in making progress or in response to critics of the doctrine of perfection. His Journal also reveals that he preached on this theme quite frequently in his final years.

By contrast, earlier in his career Wesley had been restrained in contending that perfec-
tion could be realized in this life, claiming it comes only in death. Insofar as one can identify this difference by contrasting Wesley’s earlier and later writings, it is tempting to portray it as a function of development in his thought. But this overlooks the context for these earlier rejections of the possibility of achieving perfection in this life. His comments in the earlier period emerged when trying to comfort those in trial. Wesley himself seems to recognize the contextual character of this shift in emphasis, not that the shift in the Methodist movement’s emphases on these points are functions of the different audiences and concerns addressed.

Wesley’s definition of perfection was also conditioned by the different contexts he addressed. The distinct positions he took on this topic had implications for the various positions he took concerning when perfection can transpire. When dealing with sanctification and specifically with those who believed they have attained perfection, he and his colleagues insisted that perfection entails being without sin.

In other contexts, though, sometime after 1759, when providing an overall exposition of perfection, taking a position which seems to make his assertion of the possibility of realizing perfection in this life more viable, he claims that it does not entail sinlessness (or avoidance of inward temptation). This later position was defended lest the other more strict version discourage striving for perfection. It is evident how different pastoral concerns led Wesley to articulate his views on perfection differently, and in all cases a given construal of the doctrine gets used for similar purposes. Never are two different versions of perfection deployed when addressing parallel pastoral concerns.

Another interesting issue related to the doctrine of sanctification pertains to Wesley’s attitudes towards extraordinary manifestations and emotional outpourings of the Spirit. When addressing questions about attendance at worship or seeking to encourage believers he expressed a willingness not to hinder these apparent outbreaks of tongues. But because he and the Methodists were accused of enthusiasm by their critics, one finds times when Wesley was critical of extraordinary expressions of the Spirit, particularly when defending himself and the Methodist movement from such charges. But even in these cases Wesley generally remained open to extraordinary manifestations of the Spirit, as long as those who have these experiences do not despise the means of grace.

**Arminianism and Divine Providence**

Wesley’s rejection of unconditional (double) predestination is well known. Though Biblical grounds are provided in support of this rejection, the main reason he offers for his conclusion in these cases is because such a view of predestination discourages the practice of the Christian life and the viability of preaching by its affirmation of inevitability.

The affirmation of this set of commitments has led many to deem Wesley an Arminian. There is much controversy about this point. Clearly the Articles of Religion, in bypassing predestination, do not represent an Arminian position in the fullest sense. Yet on at least several occasions, when expositing the nature of the faith though with a concern for Christian responsibility still in view, Wesley did speak of predestination as based on divine foreknowledge, as Arminius did.

Wesley’s Arminian orientation is not the whole story regarding his theology. In a context in which he and his colleagues were concerned to emphasize their commitments to
justification by faith, he actually conceded how close his version of the Gospel is to Calvinism, in ascribing all good to the free grace of God and in denying natural free will.\footnote{41} Elsewhere in his Manners of the Present Time, when attempting to criticize the atheism and sloth of his day, Wesley continued to affirm a strong doctrine of providence.\footnote{42} Elsewhere, in treatises in which he denied unconditional election, but was responding to critiques of such a position, Wesley again affirmed a strong doctrine of providence, contending that God orders all temporal things short of eternity. In one such treatise, he makes this point by distinguishing between God's role as Governor and as Judge.\footnote{43}

In many contexts, Wesley asserted his Calvinism in other ways. When describing the logic of faith or defending his views of free will he claimed that faith is a work of the Spirit or that freedom is restored by grace.\footnote{44} These commitments seem logically to entail an affirmation of predestination. Of course, Wesley did not systematically draw this conclusion. But at least on one occasion, while seeking to create a context for overcoming controversies, he went so far as to concede that predestination, though not a doctrine, is a valid “opinion” if it does not interfere with the practice of the Christian life.\footnote{45} Elsewhere, for purposes of working out problems with Whitefield, he even maintained an openness to not denying that God elects unconditionally and that on some occasions God works irresistibly.\footnote{46} Again the conceptually rich, contextually conditioned character of Wesley's thought is strikingly apparent.

**Sacraments**

One of the more controversial issues in the dispute among interpreters of Wesley's heritage has been over the Lord's Supper, whether Christ is really Present in the Sacrament. As usual, I find some grounds for both conclusions.

In a number of treatises devoted to this Sacrament there is no reference to the Real Presence. In these cases he is dealing with his own position in relation to a polemic with Catholic teaching, or when he is urging use of the Sacrament. In the latter case, he speaks of it in a Zwinglian-like mode, referring to it only as a “remembrance”.\footnote{47} Those Methodists who have insisted on the commitment of the Wesleyan/Holiness heritage to a symbolic view of the Sacrament seem to have some authorization for that conclusion.

On the other hand, Wesley affirmed the Presence of Christ in the Sacrament in a 1732 letter to his mother, but claimed “the manner of that union is a mystery to me.”\footnote{48} This view is affirmed in a more Calvinist/Anglican fashion in the Articles of Religion, as he claims that:

> "The body of Christ is given, taken, and eaten in the Supper only after a heavenly and spiritual manner."\footnote{49}

But on the other hand, in his letter Wesley contends that only Christ’s divine nature, not His human nature is present, a point that is much more suggestive of Zwingli than of Calvin’s version of Christ’s Presence.\footnote{50}

The pattern seems to be that a concern to affirm the Real Presence of Christ in the Sacrament is Wesley's general supposition (though he does not do it very clearly). And such an affirmation is not made when engaging in polemics with the doctrine of transubstantiation or when especially concerned with exhorting the Sacrament's reception.
Social Justice

Modern interpreters of Wesley have largely lauded his social ethics. A question in dispute is his rationale for intervention on behalf of justice. Generally speaking, as when he offered a rationale for his condemnation of slavery, Wesley relied on a Reformed/Puritan vision of social justice, appealing to the Gospel and the nature of the Christian faith (esp. the quest for holiness and perfection), as the grounds for his social positions. Even some of his more conservative positions were authorized by appeals to the Gospel or the nature of Christian faith, as he identifies loyalty to the Church with loyalty to the King.

This Gospel-centered stress on sanctification as authorization

For social justice is not the whole story of Wesley's views. We find him opt for a different model for authorizing social justice in other contexts when not so much addressing concrete injustices, but when concerned to describe how government or society ordinarily functions, such as when he criticized Locke and democracy, in the traditions of an Augustinian, Lutheran Two-Kingdom Ethic, he appealed to common sense. Likewise a similar theological profile is evident when he praised the morality of non-Christians.

This Augustinian way of doing social ethics also seems implied by his claim that on account of our iniquity there is no such thing as a Christian commonwealth. In that case, Christian values do not seem to have a legitimate place in government, since if these values were imposed on the society not everyone would be able to participate equally (a core commitment of Wesley's political ethic). Non-Christians would be at a disadvantage, since they would not affirm what is basic to that society and its values.

Granted Wesley took some very liberation-oriented positions (like the condemnation of slavery, the empowerment of women, empowerment of the poor by organizing them in order to create jobs, as well as advocacy on their behalf in order that they might receive health care and government aid). Typically, he condemned injustices when addressing sloth. Yet elsewhere he urged restraint on political preaching, focusing on preaching Christ in contexts where he was preoccupied with loyalty to monarchy. In that sense, perhaps James Cone and other Liberation Theologians may have a point in critiquing Wesley for being so overly concerned with sanctification and holiness as to be distracted from attention to social and political needs. Wesley's approach to social ethics was indeed contextually-conditioned. But that is true of all good (but inevitably defective) politics.

Summary

The rich diversity of Wesley's thought has been demonstrated. It is evident that the most venerable traditions of Wesleyan interpretation have some validity, correctly interpreting certain strands of his corpus. We have also demonstrated a pattern to the diversity in his thought. Essentially we have seen that when exhorting faith, comforting despair, or responding to Pelagian abuses he stressed the primacy of grace and the doctrine of justification. However, when dealing with questions of Christian responsibility and responding
to sloth in the Christian life (issues which he more typically addressed), then his synergism and insistence on the cooperation of the faithful with grace and attention to issues related to the doctrine of sanctification and perfection tended to receive more emphasis.

Wesley's stress on Christ's Presence more characteristically appeared in contexts which also led him to stress the primacy of grace, while in contexts addressing Christian responsibility (or criticizing Roman Catholic Sacramentology) this affirmation of a Sacramental Presence was minimized so as to suggest symbolic views. It is my belief that such patterns in the use of Christian concepts are not just characteristic of Wesley's thought, but that his theology may embody a truly catholic pattern.  

These insights may offer a new model for doing theology (not just in the Wesleyan mode, but for ecumenical theology). The problem with much theology today is that it is perceived as irrelevant to the demands of everyday ministry. Pastors must address such a variety of pastoral issues, and the Systematic model of theology offers proposals geared to just one or two issues preoccupying the Systematician. As a result, much contemporary theology, due to its dependence on systematic models, is not flexible enough to address the full range of pastoral concerns that emerge from everyday life. Also the systematic model does not offer guidance regarding when given doctrinal formulations are most helpful. It is with the model I am proposing. Not only does my way of reading Wesley provide today's church leaders with the wide range of diversity necessary to have options for every sort of pastoral concern that might emerge on their watch. In addition, this new paradigm for reading Wesley and other prominent leaders of the Church who like him employed an occasional, contextual theological approach provides today's pastors with guidance regarding when (for what pastoral purposes) each of the various theological formulations made available by the Wesleyan and catholic heritage is best employed.

Notes
2. For such an interpretation of the Wesleyan heritage, see A. B. Lawson, John Wesley and the Christian Ministry (London: SPCK, 1963).
4. "Salvation By Faith" (1779), Sermons, I, III.7-8, in The Works of John Wesley, Vol. 5 (14


6. A Farther Appeal To Men of Reason and Religion (1745), Pt. II, II. 3, in Works Vol. 8, p. 53; Articles of Religion (1783-1784), 9; cf. The Thirty-Nine Articles (1549), XI.


8. Ibid, VI. 6, p. 474.


16. The Finns have tried to make this point in order to establish how Luther's reliance on this way of describing justification converges with Eastern Orthodox commitments; see Tuomo Mannermaa, Der im Glauben gegenwartige Christus. Rechtfertigung und Vergottung. Zum okumenischen Dialog (Hannover, 1989); Simo Peura, Mehr als Mensch? Der Vergoellnischung als Thema der theologie Martin Luthers von 1513-1519 (Stuttgart, 1994).


25. “Justification By Faith” (1746), Sermons, V, II.1, in Works, Vol. 5, p. 56. Note how the Holiness Movement’s endorsement of this view of sanctification as a second work of grace (see The Weselyan Church, Articles of Religion, Arts. XI, XIV; Church of the Nazarene, Articles of Faith, Art. X) led it to stress sanctification more than even predecessors like Wesley and the earlier Pietists.


31. Minutes of Some Late Conversations Between the Rev. Mr. Wesleys and Others (August 2, 1745), II, Q. 15, in Works, Vol. 8, pp. 283-284;

32. Ibid. (June 26, 1744), I, Q.4, in Works, Vol. 8, p. 279.


39. The Five Arminian Articles.


42. An Estimate of the Manners of the Present Time (1782), 13, in Works, Vol. 11, pp. 159-160.

Also see An Act of Devotion (n.d.), in Works, Vol.8, p. 135.


Considered (1773), 45, in Works, Vol.10, pp. 229-230; Articles of Religion (1783-1784), 8.


49. Articles of Religion (1783-1784), 17; cf. John Calvin, Confession of Faith concerning the Eucharist (1537); The Thirty-Nine Articles (1549), XXVIII.


51. A good summary of these various positions has been provided by Maddox, pp. 244,267-368. Also see Jennings.


For a concern about other social issues like care for the poor by appeal to the Gospel, see “On God’s Vineyard” (n.d.), Sermons, CVI, V.4.5.7, in Works, 7, pp. 212.213.


54. “On Faith” (n.d.), Sermons, CVI, II.3, in Works, Vol. 7, p. 201; Observations On Liberty (1776), 31-32, in Works, Vol. 11, p. 104. For Augustine’s claim that reason, not the Gospel, is the ground for social ethics, see his The City of God (413-426), XIX.12,6.1.


61. An Augustinian knows the inevitably defective character of all social policies. Augustinians conclude that for this reason these policies must be contextual, because in new contexts our concupiscence will try to take advantage of previously just legislation.

62. For a detailed analysis of this pattern in the theology of a number of theologians, see my A Common Sense Theology: The Bible, Faith, and American Society (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1995), pp. 216-220.

63. Other examples of the presence in the thought of other prominent theologians of the broader pattern to the use of Christian concepts identified in this paper in Wesley may be found in