

JOHN WESLEY AS A THEOLOGIAN OF GRACE

Robert V. Rakestraw*

In the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* John Calvin writes:

We shall never be clearly persuaded, as we ought to be, that our salvation flows from the wellspring of God's free mercy until we come to know his eternal election, which illumines God's grace by this contrast: that he does not indiscriminately adopt all into the hope of salvation but gives to some what he denies to others.¹

Calvin goes on to amplify this seminal statement by contrasting God's free grace with human effort in the sharpest possible manner, declaring that "the very inequality of his grace proves that it is free."²

Since the time of Calvin the impression has been created among many Protestant Christians that only those in tune with the outlook of this master theoretician are entitled to speak seriously of God's free grace to humankind. The fact that the Calvinistic and Reformed denominations have traditionally held so adamantly to the doctrines of human depravity, justification by faith, and the supreme authority of Holy Scripture has deepened the impression among many that only within this stream of Protestant thought is God really presented as sovereign and human beings really seen in their utter helplessness as the Scriptures appear to present them. In many evangelical colleges and seminaries students are exposed to Hodge, Shedd, Warfield and other Calvinistic thinkers, yet seldom are they introduced seriously to those such as Clarke, Miley, Pope and others who seek to exalt the matchless grace of God by heralding its universality rather than its particularity.

The major influence on this latter group of theologians is, of course, John Wesley, just as John Calvin is for the former group. But in the eyes of most non-Wesleyan Christians Wesley is not taken seriously as a theologian of grace; in fact, he is not taken seriously as a theologian at all. Albert Outler notes that Wesley the evangelist, Wesley the organizer, and Wesley the social reformer are all familiar figures, but what has gone largely obscured is Wesley the theologian.³ In Outler's view, "that Wesley should have become the patron saint of theological indifferentism is mildly outrageous."⁴ Because Calvin wrote his theol-

*Robert Rakestraw is teaching fellow and doctoral candidate in theology and ethics at Drew University in Madison, New Jersey.

¹Calvin: *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (ed. J. T. McNeill; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 2. 921.

²Ibid., p. 929.

³A. C. Outler, *Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1975) 3.

⁴*John Wesley* (ed. A. C. Outler; New York: Oxford University, 1964) 28.

ogy systematically, whereas Wesley expressed his views primarily in sermons, letters, journals, essays, and tracts based on the exigencies of the moment, Calvin's theology is often considered to be more scintillating and intellectually satisfying than the theology of Wesley. It is because of this that Clark Pinnock, a defender of the Wesleyan viewpoint on grace, writes that "the Reformed position on grace and salvation is better known and defended in evangelical Christian circles than our own."⁵

Fortunately Wesley's theology has been sustained and refined over the past two centuries by a very dedicated and active body of Christian thinkers within the Wesleyan tradition. And recognition of Wesley's thought is increasing. Arthur Skevington Wood observes that there has been a renaissance of interest in Wesley's contribution to Christian thinking since the period following the Second World War.⁶ Wilbur Dayton likewise points out the quickened interest in Wesleyan thought since Watergate and other recent disheartening events. He adds that "a few have gone so far as to predict that the next great revival will stress holiness much as the earlier Wesleyan revival."⁷

The primary purpose of this study is to present John Wesley as the eminent theologian of grace he is. It will be argued that Wesley exalts the grace of God just as strongly as, if not more strongly than, those who insist on the absolute sovereignty of God's grace as presented in the Calvinistic tradition. Wesley makes a major contribution to Christian theology with his emphasis on the grace of God in every phase of a person's life, and the recognition of Wesley's contribution is long overdue.⁸ Even those who cannot subscribe to Wesleyan theology as a whole will gain valuable insights into the way in which God's grace operates in human beings, both before and after the new birth.

In 1746 Wesley wrote that "our main doctrines, which include all the rest, are three,—that of repentance, of faith and of holiness."⁹ Eighteen years later he insists in more formal fashion that the three strands of Scriptural doctrine essential for Christian unity are original sin, justification by faith, and holiness of heart and life.¹⁰ In each of these core doctrines the grace of God is a major emphasis. Therefore after considering the nature and activity of grace in general we will consider the three major movements of prevenient, justifying and sanctifying grace.

⁵*Grace Unlimited* (ed. C. H. Pinnock; Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1975) 18.

⁶A. S. Wood, "The Contribution of John Wesley to the Theology of Grace," in *Grace Unlimited* (ed. Pinnock) 209.

⁷W. T. Dayton, "A Wesleyan Note on Election," in *Perspectives on Evangelical Theology* (eds. K. S. Kantzer and S. N. Gundry; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979) 101.

⁸A major work giving such recognition is E. R. Fuhrman, *The Concept of Grace in the Theology of John Wesley* (doctoral dissertation, University of Iowa, 1963; Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1963).

⁹*The Works of John Wesley* (ed. T. Jackson; 14 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979 reprint of 1831 edition), 8. 472. Hereafter this set will be designated as *Works*.

¹⁰*Works*, 3. 170.

I. THE NATURE OF GRACE

Wesley uses grace in a twofold sense. At times he means the undeserved favor, mercy and free love of God.¹¹ In other instances, however, grace is the actual power, help or energy of God.¹² In fact, Harald Lindström claims that "it is not the idea of solace, but the idea of power that moulds Wesley's conception of grace."¹³ And Lycurgus Starkey emphasizes that when Wesley speaks of grace as formative and creative "the term is used as an equivalent for the Holy Spirit who is continually breathing his presence into the soul of man." This emphasis on the empowering office of the Spirit is considered by Starkey to be Wesley's major contribution to the Protestant doctrine of grace.¹⁴ Concerning the relationship of the two kinds of grace, Wesley writes:

As soon as ever the grace of God in the former sense, his pardoning love, is manifested to our souls, the grace of God in the latter sense, the power of his Spirit, takes place therein. And now we can perform, through God, what to man was impossible.¹⁵

The most helpful framework for understanding the concept of grace in the Wesleyan writings is suggested by Wesley himself. He repeatedly speaks of grace as prevenient (he used the now archaic "preventing"), justifying and sanctifying.¹⁶ These three categories correspond to the three essential Wesleyan doctrines of original sin, justification by faith, and holiness of heart and life. In Outler's view, Wesley's presentation of grace in this threefold manner is the most original element in his theology. Such a doctrine "is hardly to be found, in the form he developed it, anywhere else in the body of Anglican divinity."¹⁷

Wesley also stressed the means of grace, seeing them as avenues through which God's grace may be mediated. In "The Means of Grace" he appears to use the terms "means of grace," "sacraments" and "ordinances" interchangeably. In one sense, then, all of the means have a sacramental quality to them. In a stricter sense, however, the sacraments proper (which for Wesley were baptism and holy communion) may be seen as one category of the many means of grace.

The means of grace are defined as "outward signs, words, or actions, ordained of God, and appointed for this end, to be the ordinary channels whereby he might convey to men, preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace." the chief means of grace are prayer, searching the Scriptures, and receiving the Lord's supper. Wesley urges all, even the unconverted, to make frequent use of these

¹¹Works, 5. 7, 141; 7. 373-374.

¹²Works, 5. 141; 6. 508-509; 9. 103; 12. 157; 14. 356.

¹³H. Lindström, *Wesley and Sanctification* (Stockholm: Nya Bokförlags Aktiebolaget, 1946) 123.

¹⁴L. M. Starkey, Jr., *The Work of the Holy Spirit* (New York: Abingdon, 1962) 36-37.

¹⁵Works, 5. 141.

¹⁶Works, 1. 280; 8. 404, 486-487.

¹⁷Outler, *John Wesley* 33.

means of grace. "All who desire the grace of God are to wait for it in the means which he hath ordained; in using, not in laying them aside." He considers that by use of the means one attains what otherwise one normally would not, and in this sense Wesley "trusted" in them until his death. He is careful, however, to emphasize that when separate from the Spirit of God these outward means cannot profit at all. Rather, they are an abomination before God. "Even what God ordains conveys no grace to the soul, if you trust not in Him alone."¹⁸

II. PREVENIENT GRACE

Wesley abhorred the Calvinistic doctrine of predestination, and it constituted one of the two major battlefronts of his long ministry (the other being his battle with antinomianism). He would agree with the sentiment of his brother's hymn, which Umphrey Lee says "comes close to blasphemy":

My dear Redeemer, and my God,
I stake my soul on Thy free grace;
Take back my interest in Thy blood,
Unless it stream'd for *all* the race.¹⁹

Yet if men and women are born in sin and unable in themselves to make the least move toward God, as Wesley believed, while at the same time God's offer of salvation to all is sincere and to be accepted in order to obtain eternal life, how are these two cardinal truths to be reconciled?

Wesley's answer is the doctrine of prevenient grace. While this is not an original notion with Wesley, it is a distinctive of Wesleyan thought because of the emphasis it receives in his order of salvation. Probably the most important of Wesley's writings for an understanding of prevenient grace is his sermon "On Working Out Your Own Salvation." Here Wesley explains:

Salvation begins with what is usually termed (and very properly) *preventing grace*; including the first wish to please God, the first dawn of light concerning his will, and the first slight transient conviction of having sinned against him. All these imply some tendency toward life; some degree of salvation; the beginning of a deliverance from a blind, unfeeling heart, quite insensible of God and the things of God.²⁰

When Wesley speaks of "some tendency toward life" he is not stating that because a person has such a tendency he or she is able to receive God's prevenient grace in the first place, but rather that such free grace creates within us the power to accept faith or to refuse it. Wesley insists that "all men are by nature not only sick, but 'dead in trespasses and in sins.'" It is "impossible for us to *come* out of our sins, yea, or to make the least motion toward it, till He who hath all power in heaven and earth calls our dead souls into life." Yet the fact that all are dead in sin by nature excuses none, seeing that

¹⁸*Works*, 5. 187-190, 196, 201.

¹⁹U. Lee, *Our Fathers and Us* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University, 1958) 68.

²⁰*Works*, 6. 509.

there is no man that is in a state of mere nature; there is no man, unless he has quenched the Spirit, that is wholly void of the grace of God. No man living is entirely destitute of what is vulgarly called *natural conscience*. But this is not natural: It is more properly termed, *preventing grace*. Every man has a greater or less measure of this, which waiteth not for the call of man . . . And every one, unless he be one of the small number whose conscience is seared with a hot iron, feels more or less uneasy when he acts contrary to the light of his own conscience.²¹

It is noteworthy that for Wesley conscience is not something natural in the constitution of every person. It is a gift of God's prevenient grace. When it is heeded and welcomed in the soul, it both "prevents" a person from sinning and it "prevenes" or goes before the reception of more grace.

Colin Williams observes that for Wesley prevenient grace is not sufficient to enable a person to turn to God in faith. "Further gifts of grace are necessary to enable man to come to repentance and then to justification. What it means is that God directly intervenes in the lives of men seeking to start them on the road to salvation."²² Because of this divine intervention in the lives of all people, prevenient grace is most appropriately discussed under the heading of anthropology rather than soteriology.²³ By this doctrine, then, Wesley is able to hold to both the depravity of every person in his or her natural condition and the free, impartial grace of God offered to all. Williams is correct in maintaining that by this doctrine Wesley broke the chain of logical necessity by which the Calvinist doctrine of predestination appears to flow from the doctrine of original sin.²⁴

It is most fortunate that Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace has not been allowed to fade into oblivion. Both Colin Williams and Jesuit Michael Hurley emphasize the significance of the Wesleyan view for present ecumenical discussion.²⁵ In fact, Methodist bibliographer Kenneth Rowe states that Hurley breaks new ground by showing the theological significance of Wesley's concept of universal prevenient grace for current discussion of mission and evangelism and especially for the contemporary interreligious dialogue.²⁶

III. JUSTIFYING GRACE

To Wesley, salvation consists of "two grand branches": justification and sanctification. "By justification we are saved from the guilt of sin, and restored to the favor of God; by sanctification we are saved from the power and root of

²¹Works, 6. 511-512.

²²C. W. Williams, *John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1960) 42.

²³As, e.g., in P. A. Mickey, *Essentials of Wesleyan Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980) 85-86.

²⁴Williams, *Wesley's Theology* 44.

²⁵Ibid., p. 46; M. Hurley, "Salvation Today and Wesley Today," in *The Place of Wesley in the Christian Tradition* (ed. K. E. Rowe; Metuchen: Scarecrow, 1976) 94-116.

²⁶K. E. Rowe, "The Search for the Historical Wesley," in *The Place of Wesley* (ed. Rowe) 6-7.

sin, and restored to the image of God."²⁷ God's saving grace, therefore, is both justifying and sanctifying.

In his sermon on "Free Grace" Wesley uses grace especially in the sense of God's love. This sermon, which has been called the most powerful and impassioned of all Wesley's sermons, contributed to the division between Whitefield and Wesley and to the defection of Howell Harris and others from Wesley.²⁸ Basing his thoughts on Rom 8:32, Wesley stresses that God's grace is both free "in all" and free "for all." By free "in all" Wesley means that "it does not depend on any power or merit in man; no, not in any degree, neither in whole, nor in part." All good tempers, good desires and good intentions of a person "flow from the free grace of God; they are the streams only, not the fountain." God's grace is also free "for all." There is not one person who has lived for whom God's grace has not been offered. Jesus Christ is "full of grace and truth," and while on earth he spoke everywhere as if he were willing that all should be saved. "To say, then, he did not intend to save all sinners, is to represent him as a gross deceiver of the people."²⁹

In general, God's grace does not act irresistibly. "We may comply therewith, or may not." For his own sovereign purposes God does work irresistibly in some persons, but even in them he does not always so work. Wesley's main arguments against the Calvinistic doctrine of irresistible grace are that there is not one clear Scripture passage that teaches such a doctrine and that the doctrine flatly contradicts numerous passages that speak of people stubbornly resisting the most gracious offers of God.³⁰

As stated above, Wesley insists on both the free and the universal dimensions of grace. Cannon raises the issue, however, that if grace is for all and to a certain extent already present in all, how is it that some are justified while others are not? It is not due to human merit, for faith alone is the condition of justification, and faith springs from the same divine source as grace does. Wesley's solution to this dilemma is in his insistence on free human responsibility. To those who in "mock humility" claim that they can do nothing toward their salvation Wesley writes, "You can do something, through Christ strengthening you. Stir up the spark of grace which is now in you, and he will give you more grace . . . You must be 'workers together with him' . . . otherwise he will cease working."³¹ Wesley, because of his insistence on the universality of prevenient grace, is forced to ascribe to the sinner, operating under the influence of that grace, some element of active responsiveness. Before even faith can be bestowed there must be the

²⁷*Works*, 6. 509.

²⁸*The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley* (ed. N. Curnock; 9 vols.; London: Epworth, 1938 reprint of 1911 edition), 2. 421 n. 1. See also I. Reist, "John Wesley and George Whitefield: A Study in the Integrity of Two Theologies of Grace," *EvQ* 47 (1975) 26-40.

²⁹*Works*, 7. 373-374, 382.

³⁰*Works*, 1. 427; 6. 280-281; 10. 254-255.

³¹*Works*, 6. 513.

“first wish to please God,” which is possible because of prevenient grace. By actively responding to grace in this way (which response includes repentance and works meet for repentance when there is opportunity) one is brought to desire faith and to seek fervently to be justified.³²

Is Wesley by this doctrine compromising the great Protestant teaching of justification by grace through faith? The answer to this question must be a clear “No.” Christian salvation, including the grace and faith that lead to it, are free gifts of God. Does Wesley, then, hold to synergism? Does he ascribe to the sinner an actual cooperation with the grace of God in making possible the conditions necessary for one’s own justification? Cannon is correct in answering “Yes” to this question. “For in the very act of not killing grace and of listening to the voice of natural conscience . . . man is actually co-operating with God in God’s efforts in behalf of his salvation. This must be the case; it cannot be otherwise.” Cannon is right in rejecting the statement of G. C. Cell that “the Wesleyan doctrine of saving faith . . . is a complete renewal of the Luther-Calvin thesis that in the thought of salvation God is everything, man is nothing.” For Wesley, even though one cannot in any sense save oneself by good works or by any inherent goodness, that one is ultimately the determining factor in the decision of his or her justification. Faith is offered as God’s free gift, but the sinner must then actively respond to that offer and reach out with the arms of true repentance to receive the gift.³³

To those who are horrified at the thought of a human being having the final say in his or her justification, Wesley maintains that this is the only intelligible way to read the Scriptures. If one is not in some sense accountable for one’s eternal destiny, then the Scriptures are to be read in some manner foreign to all other literature. Furthermore, Wesley argues convincingly in “Predestination Calmly Considered” that God receives greater glory by his free and universal offer of salvation than by the Calvinistic notion of particular redemption and reprobation. “We give God the full glory of his sovereign grace, without impeaching his inviolable justice.” To those who object that Wesley makes salvation “conditional,” he answers:

I declare just what I find in the Bible, neither more nor less; namely, that it is bought for every child of man, and actually given to every one that believeth. If you call this conditional salvation, God made it so from the beginning of the world.³⁴

IV. SANCTIFYING GRACE

As seen above, a person’s “proper Christian salvation” consists of justification and sanctification. For Wesley, experience as well as Scripture shows this salvation to be both instantaneous and gradual. At justification a sinner is sanctified instantaneously, and at this time the gradual work of sanctification begins. “We go on from grace to grace; while we are careful to ‘abstain from all appear-

³²W. R. Cannon, *The Theology of John Wesley* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1946) 108-109.

³³*Ibid.*, pp. 105, 115, 117.

³⁴*Works*, 10. 254; see also 10. 229-232, 363.

ance of evil,' and are 'zealous of good works.' . . . It is thus that we wait for entire sanctification; for a full salvation from all our sins."³⁵

Even though Wesley taught that there would always be some sin in believers, in the sense of the residual, evil nature common to humanity, he held Christians to the highest standard of holiness. However, one's sanctification is accomplished by faith alone. "Exactly as we are justified by faith, so are we sanctified by faith. Faith is the condition, and the only condition, of sanctification, exactly as it is of justification." When asked whether there is a repentance consequent upon, as well as previous to, justification, Wesley answers that there is such a repentance and zeal for good works that must follow justification. In fact, good works

are so necessary, that if a man willingly neglect them, he cannot reasonably expect that he shall ever be sanctified; he cannot grow in grace, in the image of God . . . nay, he cannot retain the grace he has received; he cannot continue in faith, or in the favour of God.³⁶

At this point Wesley seems to contradict himself. On the one hand he maintains that faith is the only condition of sanctification, while on the other hand he teaches that repentance and good works are in some sense necessary for sanctification, and even for continuance in justification. In spite of this dual conviction, there is no genuine contradiction in Wesley. Rather, there is remarkable consistency in his synergistic view of both justification and sanctification. The key to the apparent contradiction is in Wesley's statement "if a man *willingly neglect*" repentance and good works. The point is that works in themselves contribute absolutely nothing positively toward our salvation or holiness. Whatever good works one may do before or after justification are wrought by God's grace in the one who simply looks to God in faith and acts according to the light one has. They constitute a faith-response to God's grace-initiative. If a believer, sensing God's gracious promptings to do good works, willingly neglects them, then that person is in danger of forfeiting the favor of God. The act of disobedience to God's prior leading constitutes a deliberate rejection of God's grace, which can be resisted both before and after justification. Wesley is always concerned not to deprive a person of "that liberty which is essential to a moral agent."³⁷

The heart of Wesley's theology of sanctifying grace is his doctrine of Christian perfection, which he describes as "the grand depositum which God has lodged with the people called Methodists; . . . for the sake of propagating this chiefly He appeared to have raised us up."³⁸ Wesley defines Christian perfection as "the loving God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. This implies, that no wrong temper, none contrary to love, remains in the soul; and that all the thoughts, words, and actions, are governed by pure love." Such perfection does

³⁵*Works*, 6. 46.

³⁶*Works*, 6. 49.

³⁷*Works*, 6. 280.

³⁸*The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley* (ed. J. Telford; 8 vols.; London: Epworth, 1931), 8. 238.

not exclude human infirmities, ignorance and mistakes. "A man may be filled with pure love, and still be liable to mistake . . . I believe this to be a natural consequence of the soul's dwelling in flesh and blood."³⁹

Wesley uses several terms more or less synonymously. "Christian perfection" is the most common term for the concept, but he also uses "perfect love," "second blessing," "second change," "full salvation" and "entire sanctification."⁴⁰ While there is a definite lack of clarity and consistency in Wesley's treatment of perfection as it relates to the ongoing life of the perfected Christian, the important point for our present purpose is that Wesley insisted on the possibility and desirability of becoming "perfected in love" in this life. If God's command is to "love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind," such a command must be possible of fulfillment by the believer who responds in faith to God's grace. Otherwise God is commanding and promising that which he is not able to perform, which would indicate a weaker view of his grace than the view of those who (claiming to be the only true champions of sovereign grace) insist that such perfection is not possible in this life.⁴¹ Outler writes:

Perfection is the fulfillment of faith's desire to love God above all else and all else in God, *so far as conscious will and deliberate action* are concerned. To deny this as at least a possibility seemed to Wesley to imply that deliberate sin is inevitable and unavoidable—which would be to say that man was made to sin and that his sinful disposition is invincible.⁴²

When a believer has been granted the gift of perfect love, "then the soul is pure from every spot of sin." "Sin ceases to be" in the sense that the believer fully walks in the light as Jesus is in the light, with the blood of Jesus cleansing from all sin. In a powerful appeal at the end of "The Scripture Way of Salvation," Wesley urges every Christian to come to God at once and expect this blessed gift. No preparation or self-improvement is required. Rather, "expect it *by faith*, expect it *as you are*, and expect it *now!*"⁴³

One major misconception of Wesley's view of holiness is that perfection is a state in which one remains until death and from which one cannot fall. Wesley never taught any such doctrine. Rather, "perfect love" is the conscious certainty, in a present moment, of the fullness of one's love for God and neighbor. One may lapse from perfection as tragically as one falls from grace at any other stage of life.⁴⁴ For Wesley "perfection" means "perfecting," with "further horizons of love and of participation in God always opening up beyond any given level

³⁹Works, 11. 394.

⁴⁰Lindström, *Sanctification* 126-127.

⁴¹Works, 6. 52.

⁴²Outler, *John Wesley* 32.

⁴³Works, 6. 53; see also 11. 383, 393.

⁴⁴Outler, *John Wesley* 31-32; see also Works, 8. 202.

of spiritual progress."⁴⁶ This perfecting continues even beyond death, throughout eternity. One who falls from the state of perfect love may be restored to it in the same way he or she received it previously: by repentance and its fruits (if there is opportunity) and by faith.

V. CONCLUSION

The concern of this study has been to present John Wesley as a theologian of grace by considering his views on the nature of grace and its main movements in the lives of human beings. It has been demonstrated that one of the most central concepts in all of Wesley's theology is grace—the loving, unmerited favor and active power of God toward all and in all. God's grace has been seen flowing from him in such a way that it always takes the initiative in a person's life, from prevenient grace to grace throughout eternity. When asked, "Wherein may we come to the very edge of Calvinism?", Wesley replied, "(1) In ascribing all good to the free grace of God. (2) In denying all natural free-will, and all power antecedent to grace. And (3) In excluding all merit from man; even for what he has or does by the grace of God."⁴⁶ Whatever good desires and deeds there are in a person are the result of that person's response by faith to the prior gift of grace. In Wesley's words, "to use the grace given is the certain way to obtain more grace."⁴⁷ Starkey summarizes nicely the balance between divine initiative and human response:

In this Wesleyan formulation—God works, therefore you *can* work and *must* work—the initiative of God's grace is completely retained. Man has no cause to claim merit or pride for his righteousness. This formula also makes a very positive evaluation of the Christian life in terms of man's moral endeavor. In establishing this middle position Wesley escapes the tendencies toward antinomianism in some phases of the Reformation and the antithetic possibility of justification by works implicit in Roman Catholic dogma established by the Council of Trent. Can we not say the Wesleyan position supersedes the synergistic controversies of the past in the recognition that *both* God *and* man work under the ultimate aegis of God's redemptive purpose and will?⁴⁸

How then should we assess Wesley? Outler is correct in noting that the chief interest and significance of Wesley as a theologian lies in the integrity and vitality of his doctrine as a whole. Unfortunately, "no summary review of Wesley's life and work can convey an adequate sense of the constant vitality and cumulative force that comes with a sufficiently broad and sustained reading of Wesley himself."⁴⁹ Yet students of theology and professors of theology alike who have

⁴⁶Outler, *Wesleyan Spirit* 73.

⁴⁶*Works*, 8. 285.

⁴⁷*Works*, 12. 288.

⁴⁸Starkey, *Holy Spirit* 122-123.

⁴⁹Outler, *John Wesley* 30, 33.

been largely unfamiliar with or disdainful of this giant of grace need to realize their intellectual and spiritual impoverishment.

It would be erroneous to argue that Wesley's theology is without ambiguity and internal tensions that affect considerably its applicability in the life of the individual and the Church.⁵⁰ However, Bernard Semmel rightly argues that if Wesley's theology was as regressive and repressive as some have assumed, it is inconceivable that it could have produced such remarkable and even revolutionary effects.⁵¹ Those who begin to study seriously the amazingly nuanced and startlingly Scriptural theology of John Wesley are not long in discerning why Stanley Ayling speaks of Wesley as "the single most influential Protestant leader of the English-speaking world since the Reformation."⁵²

⁵⁰See, e.g., W. G. McCown, "Believing in the (Contemporary) Wesleyan Mode: The Faith of Our Children," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 17 (1982) 7-14.

⁵¹B. Semmel, *The Methodist Revolution* (New York: Basic, 1974) 5.

⁵²S. Ayling, *John Wesley* (Cleveland: W. Collins, 1979) 318.