

**Responsible Grace:  
The Systematic Perspective of Wesleyan Theology**  
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An essay investigating the systematic nature of John Wesley's theology must strike many readers as misconceived. The conventional wisdom is that Wesley was primarily an evangelist and the organizer of a renewal movement within Anglicanism, not a systematic theologian. This opinion has been voiced as loudly by Wesleyan theologians as by outside observers. Consider, for example, Carl Michalsen's assessment that "preaching and not theology was the main concern of John Wesley."<sup>1</sup> As Rupert Davies notes, even Wesley's strongest defenders are often willing to concede that, far from being a creative and systematic thinker, he was a third-rank theologian.<sup>2</sup>

A pointed example of the hesitancy concerning Wesley's stature as a systematic theologian was provided at the Bicentennial Consultation on Wesleyan Theology held at Emory University in August 1983. In the section dealing with systematic theology, major papers were presented on the theme of the contribution of Wesleyan theology for the future. The theses of several of these papers are revealing. Durwood Foster listed several assets of the Wesleyan tradition, focusing on its ability to preserve a tension between such themes as grace and freedom. However, his central judgment was that Wesley's own theology ultimately lacked a unifying perspective.<sup>3</sup> Thomas Langford located the major significance of Wesley in the fact that he inaugurated the first major religious movement after the inception of the Enlightenment. As such, Wesley presented one of the first models for mediating biblical theology to a "secular" world. However, given the drastic changes between our setting and Wesley's, Langford concluded that Wesley offers contemporary theologians more bases than conclusions.<sup>4</sup> M. Douglas Meeks located the central contribution of Wesley's approach to theology in his emphasis on relating theology to the praxis of the church and the situation of the poor. Meeks then suggested a similarity between Wesley's approach and that of contemporary liberation theology. In that light, he argued that Wesleyan theologians should no longer be chagrined at the charge that Wesley was a "peoples' theologian."<sup>5</sup>

Meeks' assessment of Wesley's contribution to theology is clearly the most positive. However, even it concurs implicitly with the conventional perspective that Wesley's main contribution is not to be found in the area of systematic theological reflection.

There are two basic reasons behind the conventional evaluation of Wesley. Albert Outler notes the first when he suggests Wesley was not a "theologian's theologian." That is, Wesley did not pursue theology primarily in dialogue with and in the scholarly language of professional theologians. Rather, he developed what Outler calls a "folk theology," expressing the Christian message in its fullness and integrity in "plain words for plain people."<sup>6</sup> Rupert Davies expresses the second reason when he notes that Wesley never composed a *Summa*: i.e., a system that embraced the whole range of Christian revelation and related it to the other departments of human knowledge.<sup>7</sup> As Wood summarizes both of these points, "Wesley's theology was practical and occasional rather than theoretical and systematic."<sup>8</sup>

No doubt, the preceding observations are basically correct. However, the condescending value judgments implied in them are subject to question. Such questioning may help to uncover the organic unity in Wesley's own theology, which Outler notes is missed by so many.<sup>9</sup> It may also provide a theological norm for contemporary Wesleyan theology.

### **New Perspectives on the Nature of Systematic Theology**

Perspective for evaluating the conventional assessment of Wesley as a theologian can be gained from the contemporary debates about the scholarly and systematic nature of theology. This subject has been most seriously debated by European theologians. However, it has also received significant consideration in the Americas. The most common format for the discussion has been the use of a particular philosophical conception of the nature of scholarly inquiry (*Wissenschaftstheorie*) to either critically evaluate the nature of theological reflection or to construct an ideal model of theological reflection.<sup>10</sup>

One of the most helpful contributions of this recent discussion has been the overcoming of the dominance of a model of scholarly theological activity which has reigned through much of medieval and modern Christian thought. Whether in the form of an Aristotelian *Summa* or an Hegelian *Encyklopadie*, this dominant model has functioned under the premise that the ideal approach to theology is one concerned with: (a) the systematic investigation of the entire range of Christian revelation and (b) the rational demonstration of the truth claims of Christian faith in view of the breadth of human knowledge. Within such a model, the theological reflections of Wesley (or Luther!) would obviously be second-rank at best. The claim to a truly scholarly and systematic theology would be limited to the likes of Aquinas and Calvin.

What has characterized the recent discussion is the development of alternative conceptions of the nature and goal of theology based on some recent philosophical reconceptions of the nature of scholarly activity.<sup>11</sup> In particular, there is a significant and growing group of theologians who have drawn on such perspectives as analytic philosophy and the critical theorists

of the Frankfurt School to develop an understanding of scholarly theology that is “practical” or integrally related to the life and practice of the Christian community. An understanding of the basic conception and implications of one of the most helpful such approaches can be gained by considering its main proponent-Gerhard Sauter.<sup>12</sup>

Sauter argues explicitly against the Hegelian tendency to judge the scholarly nature of an activity such as theology by its ability to construct a comprehensive system that can be clearly integrated with the large: system of all human knowledge. Instead, Sauter follows Karl Popper in claiming that the true test of scholarship should be that any particular discipline proceed about its activity in light of critically-assessed methods.<sup>13</sup> Thus, a theologian would be considered scholarly if she or he proceeded according to critically-assessed methods, even though they never constructed an embracive theoretical system of thought.

Building on this point, Sauter asserts that the primary task of theology is a practical one; namely, critical reflection on the life and practice of the church. The ultimate value of theological reflection is not found in its abstract theoretical moments, but rather in the use of the results of such moments for critiquing and norming contemporary church discourse and life.<sup>14</sup> The overarching goal of theology is to bring the tradition of Christian doctrine and the skills of disciplined thought to bear in solving the practical problems of the contemporary Christian community.<sup>15</sup> As a corollary, the goal of theological education is not primarily the memorization of a system of theology, but rather the formation of an ability to make theologically responsible judgments.<sup>16</sup>

The question, of course, is “What constitutes a theologically responsible judgment?” Two basic sets of considerations become evident in Sauter’s discussion. The first set deals with methods of theological investigation. Included here would be consideration of the sources consulted for relevant insights (Scripture, tradition, psychology, etc.) and the manner in which these sources were consulted (e.g., historical critical method).<sup>17</sup> The second set of considerations deals with the methods and structure of theological judgment. Included here would be consideration of how the various relevant insights are related to each other and to the problem being addressed.<sup>18</sup> Accordingly, a responsible theological judgment is one which uses critically appraised methods of theological investigation and judgment to address the practical problems of the life and thought of the Christian community.

So far, our discussion of Sauter has focused on his understanding of how theologians should make particular theological judgments. While this is the heart of Sauter’s approach, it must not lead to a misperception of Sauter as unconcerned with the systematic nature of theology. While he does reject the idea that the primary goal of theology is to construct intricate theological systems, he is very concerned with systematic theological reflection.<sup>19</sup> One of his most basic requirements for responsible theological judgments is that one investigate the relationship of other problems and the various themes and concepts of Christian doctrine to the situation under consideration. For example, an adequate theological evaluation of glossolalia would include not only considerations of biblical and historical precedents, but also, consideration of the implications of

such a practice for one's understanding of the nature of the Imago Dei, the finality of the revelation of Jesus Christ, etc.

It is in the context of this last point that one of Sauter's most important contributions, for our purposes, is found. A perennial frustration of Christian theologians is the fact that representatives of different theological traditions can often consider the same issue or problem, drawing on the same theological sources and using the same critical methods of investigation, and arrive at significantly different conclusions. Sauter's analysis of the nature of theological argumentation and systematization provides a convincing explanation of this phenomenon. He notes that the various concepts of theology (revelation, justification, law/gospel dialectic, etc.) should be distinguished into at least three categories.<sup>20</sup> The crucial category, for our purposes, is what he calls "orienting concepts." Orienting concepts play a unique role in theological argumentation. They are not utilized as one topic among others to be organized. Rather, they provide the integrative thematic perspective in light of which all other theological concepts are understood and given their relative meaning or value.<sup>21</sup> Sauter's point is that the difference between rival theological traditions lies not so much in their differences over particular doctrines as in their choice of orienting concepts.

This point can be illustrated by a comparison of Luther and Calvin. By Sauter's standards, Luther would be a systematic theologian if it could be shown that his attempts to address the practical problems of the church of his day were guided by a consistent orienting concept (or set of related orienting concepts). In recent Luther investigation, it has become quite clear that the concept of justification by faith (and the related concepts of a theology of the cross and the law/gospel dialectic) function as such an orienting concept in his theological reflection.<sup>22</sup> In the case of Calvin, the mere fact that he developed a comprehensive handbook of Christian doctrine would not in itself qualify him as a systematic theologian. To be considered as such, it would be necessary to show that his system of theology evidenced the influence of a consistent orienting concept. (We are all painfully aware that summaries of Christian doctrine abound which have no such consistency). Again, it is widely agreed that the concept of the sovereignty or majesty of God functions as the chief orienting concept in Calvin's theology.<sup>23</sup>

The point of Sauter's analysis is that the crucial difference between Luther's theology and that of Calvin lies not in individual doctrines but in the perspective and selectivity exercised on all doctrines by their respective orienting concepts. To take just one example, both Luther and Calvin endorsed a doctrine of personal predestination. However, this seeming point of agreement between the two theologians is also a key example of their differences because they each opt for and understand predestination from the perspective of their chief orienting concepts. For Luther, the doctrine of predestination is primarily a safeguard against any form of works-righteousness. By contrast, for Calvin, it is an expression of the final sovereignty of God and hence, the certainty of salvation.<sup>24</sup>

This example has important implications for any contemporary claim to express, for example, an authentic Calvinist theology. The crucial criterion for deciding such a claim would not be the number of direct

quotations from Calvin. Neither would it be the mere fact that one endorsed the doctrine of predestination. Rather, it would focus on whether one's theological perspective was guided throughout by Calvin's distinctive chief orienting concept.

### **Wesley as a Scholarly and Systematic Theologian**

What would be the effect on the conventional evaluation of Wesley as a scholarly and systematic theologian if Sauter's reflections on the nature of systematic theology were accepted as valid?

In the first place, the fact that, far from being a *summa*, Wesley's theological writings and reflections were nearly all occasional and directed to specific problems in the church of his day would no longer be viewed with disdain. It would merely indicate that Wesley departed from the then dominant theoretical model of theological activity because of his concern for the vital task of rendering theological judgments on the life and practice of the church.<sup>25</sup>

In that case, the pertinent question would become: "Did Wesley pursue these judgments in a theologically responsible and systematic manner?" As we have seen, an adequate answer to this question involves both consideration of Wesley's methods of theological investigation and consideration of his approach to theological argumentation. Regarding the former, it has been repeatedly demonstrated that Wesley pursued his theological reflection with a self-critical awareness of the various sources of theology—the famous "Wesleyan quadrilateral"—and in light of the most responsible methods of research of his day.<sup>26</sup> This particular aspect need detain us no longer.

The more pressing considerations pertain to Wesley's approach to theological argumentation. On one level, this would involve an analysis of the relative role and authority Wesley gave to the various sources of theology in formulating a theological judgment. Paul Hoon has provided a summary of this aspect of Wesley, emphasizing its practical or experience-related character.

The procedure by which Wesley arrives at a doctrine consists, first, in deriving it from and formulating it on the basis of Scripture; second, in testing and modifying it in accord with experience; third, in testing it by reason; fourth, in testing it by tradition. ... The distinctive feature of this method lies in the high place given to experience and in the manner in which Wesley systematically appeals to experience.<sup>27</sup>

This summary is helpful both in regards to stressing the primary role of Scripture and the important role of individual and corporate<sup>28</sup> experience in Wesley's theological reflection. However, in light of Sauter's analysis of the systematic nature of theology, it is obvious that a further question must be raised about Wesley's theological argumentation.

This further, and in our opinion most crucial, question is whether one can discern an orienting concept (or set of related concepts) that provided a consistency to Wesley's various theological judgments. This question has rarely been addressed, even by those involved in the recent renewed consideration of Wesley's theology. The major reason is that this recent work has largely limited itself to exposing and defending Wesley's

understanding of “the way to heaven.”<sup>29</sup> Most of the research has dealt with individual aspects of salvation such as justification<sup>30</sup> and sanctification.<sup>31</sup> The few more comprehensive introductions to Wesley have been presented as summaries of his order of salvation.<sup>32</sup> Even the two seeming exceptions to this characterization, a treatment of Wesley’s Christology<sup>33</sup> and one of his doctrine of the Holy Spirit,<sup>34</sup> deal with their subjects primarily in terms of their relation to the order to salvation.

Without denying the immense contributions to this recent work, it can be argued that Wesley’s contribution to theology goes beyond his reflections on the order of salvation. It is true that Wesley himself understood the core of his theology to lie in the order of salvation (cf. 8:46; 10:72).<sup>35</sup> However, he did not restrict himself to this narrow group of topics. Within his works, one can find treatments of almost every major issue of theology—sovereignty of God, omniscience, atonement, etc.—and many of the secondary topics—angels, devils, nature of hell, etc. Moreover, the topics and arrangements of his second series of sermons resemble the classical Protestant “salvation history” model of a dogmatic.<sup>36</sup> With some license, it could be considered a lay-level theology handbook.

In this light, a re-evaluation of the conventional low regard of Wesley as a systematic theologian seems appropriate. As suggested above, the outcome of any such re-evaluation would hinge on whether it can be demonstrated that Wesley utilized, at least implicitly, a central orienting concept in rendering his various theological judgments.

### **Responsible Grace – Wesley’s Orienting Concept**

The major thesis of this essay is that there is such an orienting concept in Wesley’s theology; namely, the concept of responsible grace. To substantiate this thesis, it will be necessary to first define this orienting concept and then illustrate its influence on Wesley’s theological reflection.

The orienting concept of responsible grace is not simply a doctrine discussed by Wesley. It is a fundamental conviction about the nature of divine-human interaction which provided the distinctive slant to all of Wesley’s theology. The most succinct expression Wesley gives of this concept is actually a quote from St. Augustine: “He that made us without ourselves, will not save us without ourselves” (6:513). That Wesley quotes Augustine in this regard is ironic for, as Outler notes, “(Wesley’s) driving passion was to find a third alternative to Pelagian optimism and Augustinian pessimism with respect to the human flaw and the human potential.”<sup>37</sup> Wesley found this third alternative in a concept of responsible grace, whereby salvation is clearly a gift of God (we cannot save ourselves), but a gift that calls us to respond and to take responsibility (God will not save us without ourselves).

In the first place, Wesley is utterly convinced that human beings have neither the existing moral purity to merit salvation nor the power to achieve such purity on their own (8:49). If we have even one good thought or one good desire, we should be careful to give the honor to God because it is a gift of grace (6:398). Salvation, indeed even the desire for salvation, is fundamentally a free gift of God offered to undeserving human persons (5:7–8). Far from meriting this gift, we can only accept it in faith. Moreover, even the faith by which we accept salvation is a gift of God (5:

62). Clearly, the theme of grace was central to Wesley's preaching and theological reflection.<sup>38</sup>

The theme of responsibility was just as central and provided a type of dialectical balance to the theme of grace. It was Wesley's conviction that, while God may on occasion irresistibly constrain a person to perform a specific task in fulfilling divine providence, such was never the case in relation to personal salvation (10:210). The gift of grace upon which salvation depends operates such as to empower us to respond without compelling us to obey.<sup>39</sup> By means of prevenient grace, God acts upon every human person to enable them to enter into a saving relationship with God. However, "God does not continue to act upon the soul, unless the soul reacts upon God" (5:233; cf. 6: 49). We must respond to God's grace and ultimately, we bear the responsibility if we do not do so.

This theme of responsibility is not limited to the initial acceptance of salvation. Indeed, Wesley's most characteristic stress is on the continuing responsibility to put the grace of God to work transforming our lives, lest it be received in vain (V, 144). Concerning this transformation, Wesley is quite clear that even the most saintly Christian still stands in the tension found between two confessions of Scripture: "Without me you can do nothing" and "I can do all things through Christ strengthening me" (10: 478). Wesley gives a detailed description of this tension in his sermon "On Working Out Our Own Salvation":

(Firstly), inasmuch as God works in you, you are now able to work out your own salvation. ... You can do something, through Christ strengthening you. Stir up the spark of grace which is now in you and [God] will give you more grace. Secondly, God worketh in you; therefore you must work ... otherwise [God] will cease working (6: 512-13).

In brief, Wesley understood the essential Christian message to be one of grace, but grace which both called for and empowered human response thereby preserving human responsibility. This, in his opinion, inescapable dialectic between grace and responsibility became the criterion by which Wesley judged the adequacy of the various theological positions of his day. For example, while Luther's writings had played a key role in helping Wesley clarify the primacy of grace in Christian life,<sup>40</sup> he sensed in Luther's formulation of "justification by faith alone"<sup>41</sup> an overemphasis on the imputed nature of holiness (solifidianism) which severed the taproot of human responsibility (1:186,315-16). He was convinced that this imbalance leads ultimately either to an ethical and spiritual quietism like that of the Moravians (1:315, 257) or to an enthusiastic antinomianism (11:430-32).

Calvin's theology was also found wanting by Wesley. It is true that Calvin is often mentioned with appreciation regarding subjects such as the imputation of Christ's righteousness to Christians (5:240) and the lack of all natural free-will (8:285). However, Wesley's final judgment is that Calvin emphasizes the sovereignty of God to the point of the logical and practical denigration of human responsibility (7:373-86; 8:337; 10:211-59; 11:493-94).

On the other side, Wesley was just as critical of those theological positions which defended human responsibility in any way which obscured the fact that salvation is always of grace, apart from any human merit. In

particular, he was critical of the traditional Roman Catholic understanding of salvation which made justification contingent upon infused holiness (5:58). He also found it necessary to part ways with his early mentor, William Law, when the latter denied justification by faith and imputed righteousness as doctrines that undermined Christian piety (3:308; 5:245). For Wesley, it is precisely our awareness of the unmerited nature of God's grace that calls forth responsible Christian living.

It is this dialectic between grace and responsibility that we are terming "responsible grace." It should be evident by now that the theme is present in Wesley's theology. The claim that it functioned as an orienting concept guiding Wesley's various theological judgments remains to be shown.

### **The Orienting Concept at Work**

A brief review of the method of systematic theology suggested above will help clarify the next step in our argument. In making theological judgments, a responsible or scholarly theologian is obliged to consult the appropriate sources and develop a critical awareness of the various alternatives. They must then either choose between the alternatives or find a way of reconciling the apparent differences.<sup>42</sup> The mark of a "systematic" theologian is that a basic continuity can be discerned in these various theological decisions and formulations. The remaining task of this essay is to demonstrate that there is such a basic consistency in Wesley and that it is an expression of his fundamental conviction about "responsible grace." This demonstration will begin with an analysis of Wesley's doctrine of God. Then programmatic remarks on the other major areas of Wesley's thought will be given. In each case, it will be argued that the concerns embodied in the concept of responsible grace guide Wesley's formulations and decisions regarding theological options.

#### *1. Doctrine of God*

Wesley's position regarding the various aspects of the doctrine of God has been chosen for primary consideration because it provides the theological basis for his more extended discussion of the order of salvation. Also, it has been cogently argued that the most basic differences between Wesley's theology and that of Calvin (as one example) lie at the level of their respective doctrines of God.<sup>43</sup>

The major focus of Wesley's reflection on the doctrine of God was the nature of God's sovereignty. His main point, directed at Calvin (as he understood Calvin) was that God's sovereignty should always be related to the other divine attributes (10:220). Failure to make this relation would ultimately lead to an abstract and deterministic view of sovereignty which undermined both God's justice (10:216,363) and God's love (10:229). It would also destroy human responsibility (6:318; 10:362).

Moving beyond critique, Wesley provided several constructive proposals for understanding the nature of God in a way that held divine sovereignty, mercy and justice together. In the first place, he refused to follow the Nominalists in making a distinction between God's will and God's nature (5:440-41). This removed the possibility of vindicating God's sovereign decisions by placing God above the divinely-established moral law. In the second place, Wesley located the primary expression of God's

sovereignty in the bestowal of mercy rather than in the abstract concept of self-sufficiency and freedom.<sup>44</sup> This move purged the notion of sovereignty of its frequent overtones of arbitrariness and domination. Finally, Wesley argued at length that a conception of God wherein God could interact effectively and providentially with human beings while still allowing a measure of human free-agency does not detract from God's glory. On the contrary, it immeasurably deepens our sense of God's glorious wisdom, justice and mercy (10:230–34; 6:317–18), without, at the same time, undercutting human responsibility.

This basic stance regarding God's nature as loving and just finds expression in Wesley's judgments regarding several related issues. To cite just one example, it led him to opt for a conception of divine foreknowledge that did not imply determinism. Wesley found such a conception in the notion of eternity as above time. From this perspective, matters related to personal salvation do not take place because God knows them. Rather, God knows them because they take place (6:227).

Clearly, Wesley's judgments concerning the nature of God are congruent with the notion of responsible grace outlined above. The more crucial point, which must now be argued, is that Wesley's strong convictions about responsible grace played a decisive role, albeit often implicitly, in arriving at these judgments. As evidence for this assertion, consider the following passage concerning the Calvinist conception of God's sovereign predestining will:

It destroys all (God's) attributes at once: It overturns both His justice, mercy and truth. ... You represent God as worse than the devil; more false, more cruel, more unjust. But you say you will prove it by Scripture. Hold! What will you prove by Scripture? that God is worse than the devil? It cannot be ... better to say (Scripture) has no sense at all, than to say it had such a sense as this. ... No Scripture can mean that God is not love, or that His mercy is not over all His works (7:382–83).

Note how Wesley's convictions about the mercy and justice of God become criteria for determining the meaning of Scripture. In all fairness, this quote must be balanced by Wesley's claim that his convictions about God's justice and love are thoroughly grounded in Scripture (10:211). Nonetheless, it is a clear illustration of at least one area where Wesley's basic convictions about responsible grace were a decisive influence in his determination of issues of Christian doctrine and practice.

The consistency with which this influence was expressed throughout Wesley's thought can be suggested by some programmatic reflections on the other major areas of his thought.

## *2. Doctrine of Christ*

Wesley did not engage in detailed reflections on Christology. However, his concern for responsible grace can be found in his scattered remarks. It is evident in his defense of Christ's active righteousness as a supplement to his passive righteousness, thereby qualifying Christ as a model for Christian behavior (5:236). It is also evident in his concern to retain the rejection of human merit evident in the classical satisfaction model of the

atonement while, at the same time, repudiating any human tendency to rely on Christ's righteousness imputed to us and neglect the demand for inherent righteousness (5:244).<sup>45</sup>

### 3. *Doctrine of Humanity*

Wesley's convictions about responsible grace are at the heart of his doctrine of humanity. There is no clearer expression of the dialectic between God's gift and human responsibility in Wesley's thought than his well-known conjunction of a strong doctrine of original sin with an equally strong doctrine of God's universal prevenient grace.<sup>46</sup> This conjunction allows Wesley to deny all natural human merit and power while at the same time calling on sinners to respond to God's offer of grace and take responsibility for their lives in Christ. It must be admitted that Wesley was not always careful, particularly in his later writings, to give equal emphasis on both sides of this dialectic.<sup>47</sup> However, this can be attributed to the one-sided (anti-Calvinist) controversies in which he was embroiled at the time. As a theologian seeking to address the present needs of his church, he did not have the luxury of detached contemplation which makes possible ideally balanced formulations.

### 4. *Doctrine of Salvation*

The influence of Wesley's perspective of responsible grace is also evident in every major area of his doctrine of salvation. At the most basic level, its influence can be seen in his definition of major terms. For example, he defines salvation as not merely deliverance from hell or going to heaven, but a present deliverance from sin (8:47; cf. 12:71). "Grace" is taken to include not merely our free acceptance by God, but the power of God at work in us both to will and to do according to God's good pleasure (9:103). And, faith is understood to be more than mere assent. It is a disposition wrought in our heart that is productive of good works (5:12, 168, 205). Accordingly, in Wesley's terms, salvation by grace through faith can never be understood in an antinomian sense. But neither can it be understood as self-salvation, for Wesley is quite clear that the love which transforms our lives is a gift of God (5:39–40).

The tension between grace and responsibility is expressed structurally when the possibility of growth in Christ-likeness (sanctification) is made contingent on God's gracious acceptance (justification), while the continuance in God's acceptance (justification) is made contingent on growth in Christ-likeness (sanctification).<sup>48</sup> It is this dual tension that allows Wesley to integrate "faith alone" with "holy living" in an authentic dialectic.<sup>49</sup> A logical corollary of this tension is Wesley's affirmation of the third use of, the law-to guide Christian life (5:443).

The most distinctive element in Wesley's doctrine of salvation is his affirmation of the possibility of entire sanctification.<sup>50</sup> This affirmation has been the focus of numerous critical evaluations. These evaluations typically charge Wesley with overlooking the presence of sin in all believers and with over-evaluating the natural human ability to conquer sin.<sup>51</sup> Obviously, such charges, if true, would be in radical conflict with the principle of responsible grace articulated above. However, a careful reading of Wesley proves the charges to be ungrounded.<sup>52</sup>

Wesley states quite clearly that the experience of entire sanctification, if ever obtained, is a gift of God, not a product of human effort (5:164). At the same time, he stresses human responsibility in relation to entire sanctification. In the first place, Wesley considers the possibility of entire sanctification to hinge on a prior (typically long) period of responsible growth in grace which includes progressive victory over the sinful inclinations that remain in the life of a believer (sanctification in the larger sense of the word) (6:454; 11:402-3).<sup>53</sup> His major emphasis clearly lies on this ongoing process of Christian growth because he is (theoretically) willing to concede the possibility that entire sanctification may be a reality only at or shortly preceding death (5:165; 11:372).<sup>54</sup> In the second place, Wesley stresses the element of human responsibility within the state of entire sanctification itself by emphasizing the continuing need for growth in Christ-likeness even here (6:5; 7:202), the absence of which would ultimately lead to the loss of the experience (6:419).<sup>55</sup> Indeed, it is characteristic of Wesley that his first advice to those who claimed entire sanctification was to avoid pride, enthusiasm and antinomianism.<sup>56</sup> In brief, while the affirmation of the possibility of entire sanctification may be distinctive of Wesley, the conception of sanctification (as a whole) as the progressive responsible application of the free grace of God is characteristic of Wesley. It was, thus, no accident that Wesley chose as a motto for the Methodists the phrase “not as though I had already attained.”<sup>57</sup>

#### *5. Doctrine of the Church*

Wesley’s comments on the doctrine of the church are sparse and reflect significantly his Anglican training.<sup>58</sup> However, the influence of his conception of responsible grace can be detected here as well. In particular, it is evident in his argument that the “holiness” of the church must be more than its holiness “in Christ.” It must be a holiness that is expressed, in varying degrees, in the lives of its members (6:400).

#### *6. Doctrine of Sacraments*

Concerning Wesley’s doctrine of the sacraments, one can do no better than to quote the conclusion of the definitive study on this subject: “We find in him a combination of emphasis upon God’s work as basic and essential, although without destroying man as man. There is a necessity for objective means of grace, but these are never seen as static or ends in themselves.”<sup>59</sup> Such an emphasis is clearly in line with the principle of responsible grace. At the same time, it seems fair to say that Wesley never consistently developed the implications of his radical reaffirmation of grace in 1738 for the doctrine of the sacraments.<sup>60</sup> This is particularly true in regard to the issue of infant baptism.<sup>61</sup>

#### *7. Doctrine of Eschatology*

Finally, the influence of Wesley’s conviction about responsible grace can be detected in his scattered comments regarding eschatology. In general, he preserves the tension between the “already” and the “not yet” of the presence of the Kingdom in the world.<sup>62</sup> Thereby, he can reject quietism without endorsing enthusiasm.

## Conclusion – Implications

The basic argument of this essay is that there is an underlying unity in Wesley's various situation-related theological reflections which is due to the influence, implicit or explicit, of a key orienting concept-responsible grace. If this argument is cogent, then it has several implications for Wesley studies and Wesleyan theology.

In the first place, an awareness of the unifying perspective of Wesley's work provides a significant help in understanding and relating the various parts of Wesley's thought. It also provides a criterion by which to assess claims about unresolved tensions or significant changes in Wesley's perspective.<sup>63</sup>

Perhaps more importantly, an awareness of the defining perspective of Wesley's theological reflection provides a criterion for guiding and/or assessing contemporary expressions of Wesleyan theology.<sup>64</sup> Albert Outler has issued a timely call for a new phase in Wesley studies which moves beyond presentations of Wesley as either an idealized figure or a mere endorser of particular popular causes. Replacing these earlier phases, Outler envisions an approach to theology wherein Wesley plays the role of magister or guide—"another of those voices behind us saying 'This is the way, walk in it.'"<sup>65</sup> In light of the preceding analysis, it can be suggested that the way Wesley would lead us is in seeking an evermore consistent and relevant expression of "responsible grace." At times, this may mean correcting or moving beyond Wesley himself.<sup>66</sup> Often, it will mean liberating Wesley from the tradition of later Wesleyan theologians who have lost the dynamic balance embodied in the concept of responsible grace.<sup>67</sup> Always, it will mean carrying out our theological reflections in a way that addresses the burning needs of the present church and world.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Carl Michalsen, *Worldly Theology* (New York: Scribner's, 1967), 127.

<sup>2</sup>Rupert Davies, "The People Called Methodists: 1. Our Doctrines" in *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain*, Vol. I, edited by R. Davies, et al. (London: Epworth Press, 1965), 147.

<sup>3</sup>Durwood Foster, "Wesleyan Theology: Heritage and Task," 2, 6–7. This and the next two papers are scheduled for future publication in a volume of essays from the consultation.

<sup>4</sup>Thomas Langford, "Constructive Theology in the Wesleyan Tradition," 7, 14.

<sup>5</sup>M. Douglas Meeks, "John Wesley's Heritage and the Future of Systematic Theology," 3, 9, 11.

<sup>6</sup>Albert Outler, ed., *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), vii.

<sup>7</sup>Davies, “People Called Methodists,” 147. See also Outler, *John Wesley*, 27.

<sup>8</sup>Arthur Skevington Wood, “The Contribution of John Wesley to the Theology of Grace,” in *Grace Unlimited*, ed. Clark Pinnock (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1975), 210.

<sup>9</sup>Outler, *John Wesley*, 27.

<sup>10</sup>Two convenient overviews of various positions in this debate are: George Lindbeck, “Theologische Methode and Wissenschaftstheorie,” *Theologische Revue* 74 (1978): 259–80; and J. W. V. Van Huyssteen, “Systematic Theology and the Philosophy of Science,” *Journal of Theology for South Africa* 34 (March 1981): 4–16. N. B. The German word *wissenschaft* is often translated “science.” However, it is conceived to include all self-critical approaches to knowledge and thus has a broader scope of meaning than is typically assigned to “science” in the Anglo-American realm.

<sup>11</sup>Cf. Lindbeck, “Theologische Methode,” 270. Brief summaries of several alternative conceptions can be found in Randy L. Maddox, *Toward an Ecumenical Fundamental Theology* (Chico, CA: Scholar’s Press, 1984), chapters 5 and 6.

<sup>12</sup>The most relevant works are: *Wissenschaftstheoretische Kritik der Theologie* (Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1973) and *Arbeitsweisen Systematischer Theologie* (Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1976). For similar perspective reached by significantly different routes see George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984); and James D. and Evelyn E. Whitehead, *Method in Ministry* (New York: Seabury, 1980).

<sup>13</sup>Sauter, *Kritik der Theologie*, 219–20, 222.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, S30

<sup>15</sup>Cf. *Ibid.*, 260.

<sup>16</sup>Sauter, *Arbeitsweisen*, 31–33.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 43–85.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 10–41, 86–128.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>20</sup>Sauter, *Kritik der Theologie*, 281.

<sup>21</sup>Sauter, *Arbeitsweisen*, 19.

<sup>22</sup>Cf. Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson, *Christian Dogmatics* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 2:130; Frederick Bruner and William Hordern, *The Holy Spirit—Shy Member of the Trinity* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 65; and Gerhard Ebeling, *Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), 25.

<sup>23</sup>Cf. John T. McNeill, *The History and Character of Calvinism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954), 201–12; and Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967), 262–68.

<sup>24</sup>See Wilhelm Niesel, *Reformed Symbolics* (London: Oliver & Boyd, 1962), 240–41.

<sup>25</sup>Cf. Meeks' evaluation mentioned above, fn. 5.

<sup>26</sup>To give just one example, Colin Williams, *John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1960), 23–38.

<sup>27</sup>Paul Hoon, "The Soteriology of John Wesley" (Edinburgh University Ph.D. thesis, 1936), 343; Quoted by Paul Merritt Bassett, "The Holiness Movement and the Protestant Principle," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 18.1 (1983): 13.

<sup>28</sup>Cf. Williams, *Wesley's Theology*, 34.

<sup>29</sup>Cf. Davies, "People Called Methodists," 147.

<sup>30</sup>Cf. William Cannon, *The Theology of John Wesley* (New York: Abingdon, 1946); and Franz Hildebrandt, *From Luther to Wesley* (London: Lutterworth, 1951).

<sup>31</sup>See especially Harold Lindstrom, *Wesley and Sanctification* (Wilmore, KY: Francis Asbury Publishing Company, 1980; reprint of 1946 edition).

<sup>32</sup>The most thorough is Williams, *Wesley's Theology*. A more "popular" presentation is Steve Harper, *John Wesley's Message for Today* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983). The order of salvation focus is evident as well in the selections presented by Outler in *John Wesley*.

<sup>33</sup>John Deschner, *Wesley's Christology* (Dallas, TX: Southern Methodist University Press, 1960).

<sup>34</sup>Lycurgus M. Starkey, *The Work of the Holy Spirit: A Study in Wesleyan Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1964).

<sup>35</sup>This and all following location references in the text of the essay refer to *The Works of John Wesley*, edited by Thomas Jackson, 14 volumes (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979 [reprint of 1835 original]). The volume number is given first and then the page number.

<sup>36</sup>Compare *Works of Wesley*, Vols. 6 & 7 to Sauter, *Arbeitsweisen*, 91–94.

<sup>37</sup>Albert Outler, *Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville: Tidings, 1975), 35.

<sup>38</sup>Outler notes that Wesley's first six favorite sermon texts all centered on the theme of grace (*Ibid.*, 13).

<sup>39</sup>Cf. Umphrey Lee, *John Wesley and Modern Religion* (Nashville: Cokesbury, 1936), 127. It should be noted that this interpretation of Wesley is not without its competitors. On the three major types of interpretation in this regard see Thomas Langford, *Practical Divinity* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983), 33. We believe that the second interpretation Langford mentions is clearly the most adequate and consider the current essay a validation of that judgment.

<sup>40</sup>Outler notes that the Aldersgate experience, sparked by the reading

of Luther's commentary on Galatians, provided the decisive impulse for Wesley's realization that sanctification follows justification rather than preceding it (Outler, *Wesleyan Spirit*, 70–71).

<sup>41</sup>Note the vigorous protests of contemporary Lutheran theologian Gerhard Forde against the formulation "Justification by grace through faith!" in Braaten & Jenson, *Christian Dogmatics*, 2:243.

<sup>42</sup>Cf. Whitehead, *Method in Ministry*, 21–25.

<sup>43</sup>Cf. Jerry Walls, "The Free Will Defense: Calvinism, Wesley and the Goodness of God," *Christian Scholar's Review* 13 (1983): 19–33.

<sup>44</sup>Cf. Meeks, "John Wesley's Heritage," 19–20.

<sup>45</sup>On Wesley's view of the atonement see Lindstrom, *Wesley and Sanctification*, 55–75.

<sup>46</sup>Excellent treatments of these twin doctrines are available in *ibid.*, 19–50; and Williams, *Wesley's Theology*, 41–55.

<sup>47</sup>Cf. John Allen Knight "Aspects of Wesley's Theology after 1770," *Methodist History* 6.3 (April 1968): 33–42.

<sup>48</sup>The best exposition of this dual tension is Lindstrom, *Wesley and Sanctification*, 83–104, 213.

<sup>49</sup>Albert Outler, "The Place of Wesley in the Christian Tradition" in *The Place of Wesley in the Christian Tradition*, ed., Kenneth Rowe (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1976), 15.

<sup>50</sup>Cf. Outler, *John Wesley*, 30.

<sup>51</sup>Cf. Kenneth Prior, *The Way of Holiness* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1982), 71ff.

<sup>52</sup>Cf. the exposition of the doctrine of Christian Perfection in Lindstrom, *Wesley and Sanctification*, 117–19.

<sup>53</sup>Cf. *ibid.*, 134. Wesley's various uses of "sanctification" are summarized in *ibid.*, 123.

<sup>54</sup>In reality, Wesley believed the experience was possible prior to death and attributed the alternative opinion, held by his brother, to an absolutistic view of perfection. Cf. Williams, *Wesley's Theology*, 169.

<sup>55</sup>To understand how one could be "perfect" or "sinless" and still need to grow in Christ-likeness, it is necessary to recall Wesley's distinction between a "moral" definition of sin and a "strict" definition of sin (6:417; 5:163). See John L. Peters. *Christian Perfectionism and American Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1956), 39–46.

<sup>56</sup>See John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1966), 95–100.

<sup>57</sup>Cf. the subtitle to his essay "The Character of a Methodist" (8:339).

<sup>58</sup>The best treatments of Wesley's view of the church are Williams, *Wesley's Theology*, 141–58; and Albert Outler, "Do Methodists Have A

Doctrine of the Church?” in *The Doctrine of the Church*, ed., Dow Kirkpatrick (Nashville: Abingdon, 1964), 11–28,

<sup>59</sup>Ole Borgen, *John Wesley on the Sacraments* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), 281.

<sup>60</sup>Cf. F. Ernest Stoeffler, “Tradition and Renewal in the Ecclesiology of John Wesley” in *Traditio–Krisis–Renovatlo aus theologischer Sicht*, ed., B. Japert & R. Mohr (Marburg: N. G. Elwert, 1976), 312.

<sup>61</sup>Cf. Lindstrom, *Wesley and Sanctification*, 107fn9.

<sup>62</sup>Cf. Williams, *Wesley’s Theology*, 192.

<sup>63</sup>Cf. above, footnotes 47 and 60.

<sup>64</sup>Note the call for such a hermeneutic principle by the working group on “Salvation, Justice and the Theological Task” of the Oxford Institute of Theological Studies. *OXFORD notes* 1.2 (1984): 6.

<sup>65</sup>Albert Outler, “A New Future for ‘Wesley Studies’: An Agenda for Phase III,” presented at the 7th Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies (1982). Essays from this conference will be published in 1985 by Abingdon under the title *The Future of the Methodist Theological Tradition*.

<sup>66</sup>See, for example, the application of Wesley’s insights to the realm of social and political liberation—a theme Wesley rarely addressed—in *Sanctification and Liberation*, ed. Theodore Runyon (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981).

<sup>67</sup>Wesley’s theological heirs have often lost this balance, particularly in America. On the one hand, American Methodism moved in a direction that emphasized natural human capacities at the expense of a clear doctrine of grace. (Cf. Robert E. Chiles, *Theological Transitions in American Methodism* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1965]; and Langford, *Practical Divinity*, chapters 5 & 8). On the other hand, the American holiness movement, as it took its unique shape through the influence of the Oberlin School which introduced a more Calvinist anthropology and an emphasis on the crisis nature of sanctification as the “baptism of the Holy Spirit” into the understanding of sanctification, moved in a direction that highlighted the divine side of sanctification as an event to a degree that often denigrated the responsible growth in grace that was so central to Wesley. (Cf. two articles by Donald Dayton: “Asa Mahan and the Development of American Holiness Theology,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 9 (1974); and “The Doctrine of the Baptism of the Holy Spirit: Its Emergence and Significance,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 13 (1978).

Responsible Grace book. Read 2 reviews from the world's largest community for readers. Of special focus in this reflective overview of Wesley's theologic...Â Goodreads helps you keep track of books you want to read. Start by marking "Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology (Kingswood Series)" as Want to Read: Want to Read savingâ€¦| Want to Read. Prevenient grace (or enabling grace) is a Christian theological concept rooted in Arminian theology, though it appeared earlier in Catholic theology. It is divine grace that precedes human decision. In other words, God will start showing love to that individual at a certain point in his lifetime. Prevenient grace is embraced primarily by Arminian Christians who are influenced by the theology of Jacob Arminius or John Wesley. Wesleyan Arminians believe that grace enables, but does not ensure, personal