

Steve Harper

Why Pay Attention to Wesley?

Postmodern theologians do not have a single opinion about the past. Some largely dismiss tradition, especially when it came out of the “modern” era. Others recognize the fact that we have not arrived where we are today apart from the contributions of those who have preceded us. Within these variations, we cannot avoid the question, “Why pay attention to Wesley?”

This is by no means a hypothetical question. In fact, I was attending a conference several years ago at which a panel member said in effect, “We have no reason to look to Wesley for guidance. No one in the eighteenth century could possibly understand the world we live in, or have a defining word for our us today.” The rapid and complete dismissal of Wesley surprised and disappointed many in the audience, but the presenter did not give up the view. A few in the seminar even agreed with it. The moment served to illustrate that as United Methodism moves into the twenty-first century, we have no common mind regarding the connection between “tradition” and “openness.”

But it must also be said that the answer to our problem does not lie in a “back to Wesley” effort. The attention we give to him and to the early-Methodist movement is not because we ascribe a “golden age” label to the period. A responsible look at any period of history reveals there never has been such a time. Furthermore, we must acknowledge that the twenty-first century is enormously different from the eighteenth. So, our call to pay attention to Wesley must be for other reasons. In this article, I want to briefly mention four of them.

First, we pay attention to Wesley because he exemplifies a person who sought truth larger than his age. Although in many ways he was a citizen of the eighteenth century and a “Church of England man,” he laid a foundation for the Methodist movement, which he called “Scriptural Christianity.” Rather than allowing the culture to shape his message, he strove to see that the gospel influenced the culture. Both his theologi-

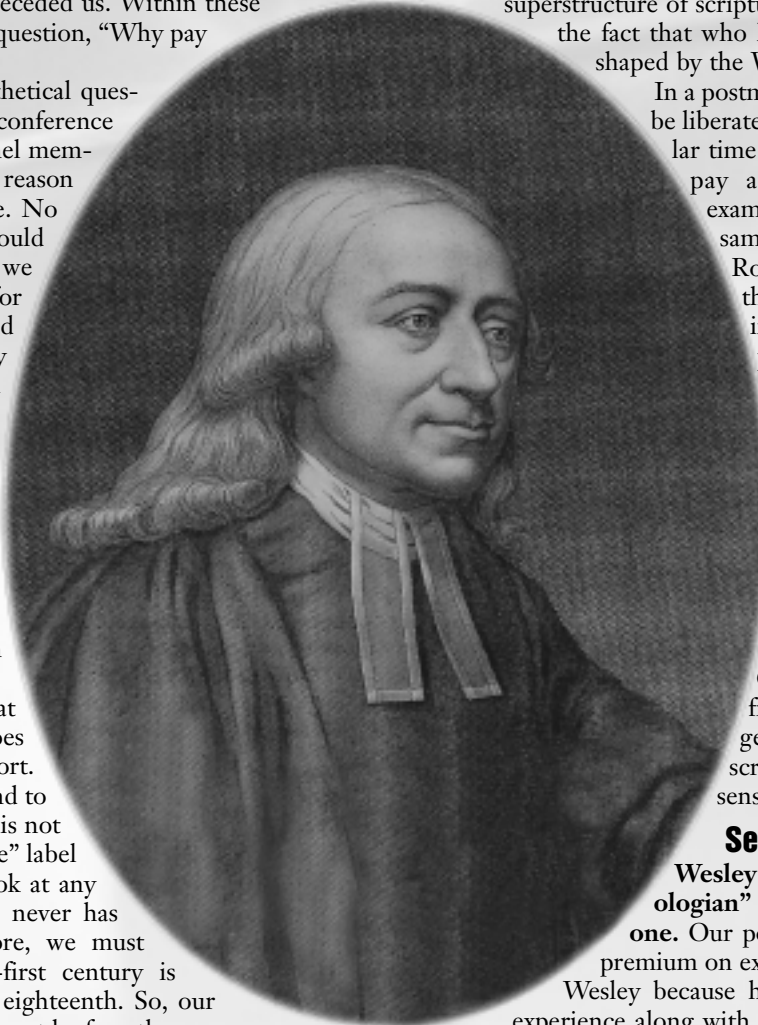
cal content and his institutional system were rooted in the Bible, with a clear theology of grace as particularly exemplified in Jesus and the emerging New Testament church.¹ Running through his sermons, letters, journal, and treatises is an explicit and implicit superstructure of scripture. He never apologized for the fact that who he was and what he did was shaped by the Word.

In a postmodern era, when we strive to be liberated from captivity to a particular time and a single culture, we can pay attention to Wesley as an example of one who sought the same during his lifetime. Dr. Robert Neville captures both the challenge and the tension in this quest by writing, “The process needs to resist the siren calls for simplicity that usually result in either losing the gospel in the excitements of culture or adopting a historic expression of the gospel that addresses some other culture than the one that is our mission field.”² Wesley would agree with these words. Consequently, we can learn from him how to engage our generation fully, doing so with scriptural authority and cultural sensitivity.

Second, we pay attention to Wesley because he was a “life theologian” more than a propositional one.

Our postmodern age places a high premium on experience. We can learn from Wesley because he ran the risk of including experience along with scripture, tradition, and reason in his theological method. He is clear in his adherence to the classic creeds of the Christian faith, but he understood that the Christian faith is more a life to be lived than a creed to be espoused. One of his favorite phrases, “faith working by love” illustrates this overlapping concern for substance and spirit in theology.

Dr. Albert Outler recognized this strength in Wesley back in 1976 when he wrote, “John Wesley was the most important Anglican theologian of the 18th century because of his distinctive



composite answer to the age-old question as to ‘the nature of the Christian life’: its origins, growth, imperatives, social impact, final end.”¹ Outler captured the core of Wesley’s person and work in this statement, recognizing that Wesley could never rest until what people believed came to saturate the way they lived. For him, this was nothing other than fulfilling the two great commandments.

As we live in a postmodern era, we can pay attention to one for whom formation superceded information. We can learn from Wesley’s concern for Christlikeness and for the holy living (e.g. fruit of the Spirit) which exemplified it. His emphasis was always, “the life of God in the human soul” (cf. Henry Scougal), and that is worth paying attention to today. Ironically, no creed or dogma has to suffer at the hands of a theology which remains life oriented. Rather, “dead orthodoxy” will become “living faith” when approached in this way.

Third, Wesley is worth paying attention to because of his eclectic approach to truth. Although he was rooted in the Anglican tradition, he did not limit his search for and communication of truth to that single source. An examination of his sources reveals a direct connection to Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Classical Protestant, Puritan, and Independent streams of thought. He did this in many cases because of the obvious overlap of ideas. But in other ways, he consciously sought to connect traditions which were often separated from one another.

He operated with the conviction that a theology made up of multiple strands is stronger than one comprised of a single thread. This eclectic spirit never violated his orthodoxy, but it did sometimes result in a message which kept things in a dynamic union rather than separating them into a competing dialectic. Dr. Paul Chilcote has rightly noted that one of the key words in Wesley’s theology is the word “and.” For example, he developed a theology of faith and works—avoiding the dichotomy between the two which he felt would result in a weakening of the gospel, and lead to the extremes of Quietism or work’s righteousness.

In paying attention to this aspect of Wesley, we are recognizing an ecumenical orthodoxy of the kind reflected in the historic creeds, councils, and confessions. In our quest for the proclamation of truth,

we can take confidence and joy in all the places and ways it is to be found. We can emerge with a larger and richer view of the Body of Christ. The result is not an unbounded pluralism, but it is surely a “catholic spirit” which respects and represents the whole people of God.

Fourth, we pay attention to Wesley because he kept the world as his parish. The gospel always propels us beyond ourselves. Even the deepest personal holiness evaporates unless it is expressed in social holiness. To be sure the world has changed dramatically since the eighteenth century, but Wesley’s heart for all people everywhere is surely akin to what we want in our day.

In “The Wesleyan Covenant Service,” we express the fact that “Christ has many services to be done.” Wesley’s life and ministry reflected that sentiment through literacy efforts, educating girls as well as boys, providing medical care to the sick, homes to orphans and widows, relief to the poor, etc. It is impossible to understand the gospel or early Methodism apart from its societal influence and global presence.

We would be hard pressed to find a more significant connection between Wesley and ourselves than this. We live globally as much as we do locally. Wesley’s example keeps the world ever before us. Furthermore, his example challenges a postmodern “choice oriented” culture by issuing a reminder that we cannot limit the gospel to any particular cause or concern. Disciples span the spectrum of service, giving place to individual gifts and graces, while simultaneously uniting us in a comprehensive expression of compassion and reform.

In my opinion, these reasons justify our paying attention to Wesley. Post-modernity must not allow itself to drift into either ethnocentrism or rootlessness. We drink from wells we have not dug, and we benefit from insights we did not invent.

Perhaps the greatest danger in not paying attention to Wesley (and others before our time) is that we confuse “originality” and “pride.” As one of my esteemed professors, Dr. Robert Cushman, often said, “the problem with too much contemporary theology is that it is freelance, operating without appreciation for or connection to the church.”

Years ago, I heard Dr. William Quick echo similar sentiments in our seminary chapel. He made the sobering comment that “a generation which forgets those who came before it deserves to be forgotten by those who come after it.” Perhaps this is the reason for paying attention to Wesley, for in doing so we create a theology which is both respectful of those who preceded us and worthy of attention by those who will carry on the gospel after we’re gone. □

Wesley’s example keeps the world ever before us. Furthermore, his example challenges a postmodern “choice oriented” culture by issuing a reminder that we cannot limit the gospel to any particular cause or concern.

1 It must be remembered that Wesley’s understanding of “Scriptural Christianity” was never divorced from his commitment to “the whole counsel of God,” thus bringing the Old Testament message to bear upon much of his theology and ecclesiology as well.

2 Neal F. Fisher, ed., *Truth and Tradition* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), p. 40.

3 Albert C. Outler, “The Place of Wesley in the Christian Tradition,” chapter 1 in *The Place of Wesley in the Christian Tradition*, edited by Kenneth E. Rowe (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1976), p.14.



Steve Harper is Vice President and Professor of Spiritual Formation at the Florida campus of Asbury Theological Seminary in Orlando, Florida.