

**Opinion, Religion, and “Catholic Spirit”:
John Wesley on Theological Integrity**

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*For: A. Elwood Sanner, D.D.

It is one of the ironies of Wesley scholarship that Wesley’s advocacy of a “catholic spirit”—i.e., broad acceptance among Christians of differing theological persuasions—has become a focus of controversy itself. At the heart of this controversy is the question whether Wesley’s position necessarily entails doctrinal indifference or laxity. By implication, there is also the question of whether later theologians who appeal to Wesley in defense of theological pluralism are remaining faithful to him, or fundamentally misconstruing his “catholic spirit.”¹ In other words, the issue is whether Wesley provides a model that reenforces or devalues the concern for theological integrity.

Our goal in this essay is to provide perspective on such questions concerning the intentions and implications of Wesley’s “catholic spirit” by placing it in the context of three related issues: 1) Wesley’s understanding of the status of theological convictions, 2) his views on the relationship of such convictions to Christian spirituality, and 3) his assumption that Christian doctrines possess varying grades of importance for Christian life.

heological Convictions as “Opinions”

The best indicator of Wesley’s understanding of the status of theological convictions is the typical designation of such convictions as “opinions” throughout his publications. Of course, simply noting this fact is hardly a sufficient

*This paper is dedicated to Dr. A. Elwood Sanner, who introduced me to the Wesleyan theology of grace—with its “catholic spirit”—on the occasion of his *final* retirement from Northwest Nazarene College.

analysis of our issue. The English word “opinion” has carried a variety of denotations and connotations throughout its history.² Thus, when the various instances of Wesley’s use of “opinion” are considered, it is not surprising that they manifest several important different emphases.³ A survey of these varying emphases and the contrasts they imply should provide a more adequate perspective on his understanding of the status of theological convictions.

Opinions versus Doctrines

In a 1765 letter, Wesley endorsed John Newton’s suggested criterion for distinguishing a *nonessential* opinion from an *essential* doctrine.⁴ Such a distinction was common in contemporary Anglican discussion.⁵ As such, it is understandable that many Wesley scholars have taken this reference as evidence that Wesley whole-heartedly embraced such terminology and consistently used “opinion” to designate theological convictions that were not essential for Christian life or salvation.⁶

This conclusion is inaccurate. Wesley indeed distinguished between doctrines that were important or essential for Christian life and those that were nonessential. However, the letter to Newton is virtually the only place where he characterized this distinction by the contrast between doctrine and opinion. He was using Newton’s vocabulary here, not his own.

How did Wesley express this distinction? It was usually by a contrast between different types of “opinions”—such as right versus wrong opinions, or wholesome versus dangerous opinions.⁷ He frequently used “opinions” to refer to central Christian doctrines.⁸ Indeed, he defined orthodox doctrinal belief *per se* as “holding right opinions.”⁹ Thus, Wesley hardly restricted the designation “opinions” to the sub-category of nonessential theological convictions.

Some who have recognized the broad use of “opinions” in Wesley have appealed to it as evidence for the bolder claim (or accusation!) that he considered *all* theological convictions to be nonessential for Christian life and salvation. Such a claim—taken literally—finds little support in Wesley’s actual practice. In particular, why then did he distinguish so often between “right and wrong” or “dangerous and wholesome” opinions?

Perhaps where this reading of Wesley and the more common claim that he contrasts essential “doctrines” with nonessential “opinions” both go astray is in their obvious assumption that “opinion” necessarily refers to a type of knowledge that is less than certain and, thus, could not qualify as essential knowledge. While such a use of “opinion” is common, it is not the only possible meaning. Indeed, it is not the most likely meaning when the word is used as an unqualified noun or in the plural (the large percentage of Wesley’s uses!). In such cases, “opinion” is more commonly a *generic* designation for intellectual judgments or conclusions; i.e., there is no implied contrast between degrees of certainty.¹⁰

Viewed in light of this broader meaning of “opinion,” Wesley’s typical use of “doctrines” and “opinions” suggests a different contrast than that of essential versus non-essential theological convictions. Without claiming exhaustive consistency, we would suggest that Wesley used “doctrines” primarily to denote the

authoritative teachings of the Christian religion *in their own right*. Thus, the contents of traditional authoritative sources like Scripture, the Apostolic Fathers and the Anglican Articles and Homilies were designated “doctrines.”¹¹ Likewise, when he attempted to demonstrate that the indispensability of personal holiness is clearly taught in the Bible—and thus is a normative Christian teaching—he was dealing with the “doctrine” of sanctification.¹²

By contrast, Wesley typically restricted the use of “opinions” to contexts concerning an *individual’s personal* understanding, appropriation, or rejection of authoritative Christian teachings. That is, the concern to develop or correct one’s understanding of a “doctrine” was a matter of “regulating their opinions.”¹³

In other words, for Wesley, authoritative formulations of Christian teachings like the Thirty-Nine articles of the Anglican Church were articulations of Christian “doctrine.” His understandings of these teachings were his “opinions.” Since he personally endorsed these teachings, he held “right opinions.” Those who rejected these teachings held “wrong opinions.”

Such a distinction between opinions and doctrines was essentially a theological expression of the emerging Enlightenment conviction of a disjunction between one’s knowledge or ideas (opinions) and their objects (doctrines).¹⁴ The crucial implication of this conviction was not that some ideas were less certain than others, but that *all* human ideas and judgments were *fallible*. As such, they must always remain open to further confirmation or modification. In adopting this distinction, Wesley was rejecting the equation of any contemporary human understanding of Christian doctrine (including his own!) with that doctrine *per se*.¹⁵

Opinions versus Conduct

The claim of the previous section was that, for Wesley, “opinions” were *human* understandings of Christian doctrine. He also described theological convictions as “opinions” in a set of contrasts that underlined the point that they were human *understandings*. Here the distinction is not between an idea and its object, but between the intellectual dimension of Christian life and other dimensions of that life.

For example, Wesley frequently distinguished opinions from actions or practice.¹⁶ Opinions were strictly matters of the intellect—ideas about God, ourselves, or even what we should do. By contrast, conduct was a matter of the will—putting our convictions into action. He claimed that this distinction was simply a recognition of different genres; not intended to play one off against the other.¹⁷ Indeed, his focal concern was clearly that people not confuse the total commitment involved in authentic faith with mere intellectual affirmation (opinions).¹⁸

A corollary of this distinction between opinion and practice can be found in Wesley’s construal of the theological genres of Speculative Divinity and Practical Divinity. The former dealt with matters of intellectual belief while the latter dealt with matters of practice.¹⁹

Opinions versus Tempers

Recent studies of Wesley's teachings on Christian conduct or ethics have noted that he exemplified the "character ethics" currently receiving such favorable attention.²⁰ That is, he recognized that ethical actions flow out of human tempers or affections. Accordingly, the presence of such tempers was central to his descriptions of Christian life.²¹

In this light, Wesley's frequent contrast between "opinions" and "tempers"²² can be seen as foundational to the distinction between opinions and conduct. Since Wesley generally identified the affections or tempers with the heart,²³ this contrast also took the form of a comparison of "opinions" (or the "understanding") and the "heart."²⁴ In either case, the identification of "opinions" as matters of the intellect—versus matters of the affections—is obvious. Equally obvious is the necessary question about the relationship between such opinions and the affections. We will return to that question after a few further clarifications about Wesley's use of "opinions."

Opinion versus Experience

On rare occasions Wesley contrasted "opinion" with "experience." The best example is his sermon on "The Lord Our Righteousness" where he characterized the differences between himself and the Calvinists in the debate over the imputation of Christ's righteousness to believers as being more a matter of *opinion* than real *experience*.²⁵

This contrast could appear to be another version of the Enlightenment distinction between the object of one's knowledge and ideas about that object. If so, the crucial difference between this version and the earlier example of this distinction (§I.A) would be the identification of the object of theological opinions. In the previous example this object was Christian doctrines. Here it would be experience. As such, this version could appear to suggest that Wesley considered "opinions" to be essentially intellectual articulations of one's experience. The critical function of theology would then be the determination of the adequacy of these articulations.

Such a reading of Wesley was common in the early twentieth century as Wesley scholars tried to defend his status as a theologian by comparing him to the Schleiermacherian model then dominant in theological circles. The best example is George Croft Cell, who championed a reading of Wesley as one who eventually freed himself from inadequate dogmatic opinions by submitting them to the test of Christian experience.²⁶ That is, Cell suggested that "opinions" were doctrines that failed to conform to or articulate Christian experience. Hence, they must be rejected, in favor of more authentic doctrines. So understood, experience became the *source* of theological doctrines for Wesley, rather than a *criterion* for assessing them.

Several studies have convincingly critiqued such a reading of the place of experience in Wesley's theological method. In particular, it is now clear that, *in methodological contexts*, Wesley did not appeal to experience as a form of primary revelation (be it intuition, feelings, affections, or whatever) but as the findings of

a series of investigations into the praxis-implications of theological claims.²⁷ He clearly assumed that Scripture was the authoritative source of doctrine and that the primary role of experience was to test proposed interpretations of Scripture (i.e., to test our *opinions* against the *doctrine* articulated in Scripture). Experience may supply information on matters that Scripture does not address, but such information must be tested for agreement with the “analogy of Scripture.”²⁸

The recognition of these problems with Cell’s understanding of the role of experience in Wesley’s theology calls into question the assumption that the contrast between “opinions” and “experience” is an expression of the distinction between an idea and its object. Closer examination substantiates these doubts. Wesley’s essential point in the particular sermon in question was that he and the Calvinists may differ in their *intellectual* explanations of the nature of justifying faith, and yet still share the common “experience” of their *hearts* cleaving to God through the Son.²⁹ In other words, the contrast between opinions and experience is another expression of that between opinions and tempers! It does not focus on the issue of the source or criterion of theological beliefs, but on the difference between intellectual understandings and Christian affections.³⁰

Opinions versus Expressions

Wesley restated the contrast in “The Lord Our Righteousness” in a way that further enlightens his understanding of the status of theological convictions. He suggested that the differences between him and the Calvinists were probably not even at the level of “opinions”—as contrasted with experience; but merely at the level of “expressions”—as contrasted with opinions *per se*! He considered this latter difference insignificant.³¹

It is important to note that this contrast between opinions and expressions is not simply an equivalent form of the contrast between doctrines and opinions. It’s focal issue is not the distinction between a human understanding of doctrine and the doctrine itself, but the conflict between two different human understandings which claim fidelity to the same doctrine. As such, this contrast assumes the distinction between opinions and doctrines. However, it’s unique concern is to highlight the point that one source of the fallibility of all human understandings of doctrine (i.e., opinions) is the finitude and contextuality of human language.³²

The particular implication of the finitude of human language which Wesley drew in the sermon under consideration was that advocates of apparently opposed opinions may actually differ only at the level of expression, not in their essential convictions about the doctrine in question. Of course, the question this raises is: “How would one determine such an essential agreement beneath differing expressions?”

Wesley explicitly suggested two related answers to this question. Sometimes he sought agreement between apparently opposed opinions by comparing their implications for Christian praxis. A good example is the question, raised at the 1746 Conference, whether the current dispute over salvation by faith was a mere “strife of words.” Wesley’s answer was:

In asserting salvation by faith we mean this: 1. That pardon (salvation begun) is received by *faith producing works*; 2. That holiness (salvation continued) is *faith working by love*; 3. That heaven (salvation finished) is the reward of this faith. If you who assert salvation by works, or by faith and works, mean the same thing . . . we will not strive with you at all. If you do not, this is not a “strife of words,” but the very vitals; the essence of Christianity is the thing in question.³³ (emphasis added).

At other times Wesley compared differing theological expressions in terms of the affectional disposition they inculcated. Thus, in “The Lord Our Righteousness,” he determined to cease disputing with the Calvinists over the expression *imputed righteousness*, “provided their *heart* rests only on what Christ hath done and suffered for pardon, grace, and glory.”³⁴ In light of Wesley’s assumption that the affections ground Christian praxis, the connection between this and the previous answer is clear.

Besides these explicit answers, Wesley exemplified another means of dealing with differing expressions: dialogue. Major causes of alternative linguistic expressions include differences in education, in assumptions about the meanings of particular words, and so on. Honest and sympathetic dialogue with one’s opponent should narrow these original differences and allow some commensurable “translation” of the alternative expressions. For his day, Wesley modeled notable sympathy and concern for understanding in his controversial interchanges.³⁵ As a result, greater understanding and agreement frequently resulted.³⁶

Two further points about Wesley’s recognition of the finitude of human language and its contribution to the fallibility of human understandings of Christian doctrine must be noted. First, he believed that the limitations of human understanding become most evident when theological expressions go beyond the language of Scripture and try to provide philosophical descriptions or explanations of biblical claims. A prime case in point was the doctrine of the Trinity. Wesley held that belief in the “fact” of the Trinity was essential to Christian life. However, he refused to require ascription to the traditional philosophical explication of the doctrine.³⁷

Secondly, Wesley’s recognition of the limitations of human language and the corresponding fallibility of opinions (i.e. human understandings of doctrine) must be carefully distinguished from total theological relativism.³⁸ He never suggested that *all* differences between opposing opinions were merely linguistic. Nor did he consider all theological expressions to be equally valid: some were judged confused; others, wrong; still others, thoroughly dangerous! His affirmation that all human understandings of doctrine remained *potentially open* to error and ambiguity did not mean that they were *equally guilty* of error and ambiguity.³⁹

Opinion versus Certainty

The central claim of this essay so far is that Wesley’s designation of theological convictions as “opinions” was primarily an expression of his assumption that

these convictions were *human intellectual* understandings of Christian doctrine, not that doctrine per se.⁴⁰ This claim was contrasted with the more common belief that he consistently used “opinions” to designate those theological convictions that were less certain than other such convictions. It was argued that the focal intent of his typical use of this term was not to stress such comparative certainty. This general claim must now be further clarified.

In the first place, we are not claiming that Wesley was unaware of the comparative meaning of “opinion.” Clearly he was aware of it. Indeed, his *Compendium of Logic* explicitly contrasted “opinion” (as a barely probable proposition) with more certain forms of human knowledge.⁴¹ Neither are we claiming that Wesley never used this comparative sense of “opinion” in theological contexts. There are some clear instances where “opinion” designated a tentative judgment on an uncertain theological issue.⁴² Indeed, there are a few cases where Wesley contrasted “doubtful opinions” with the undoubted fundamental teachings of Christianity.⁴³ However, we are claiming that the comparative use of “opinion” was not Wesley’s *typical* intention, especially when the word is used as an unqualified noun or in the plural. More importantly, we are claiming that he did not characteristically use the term to contrast uncertain “opinions” to certain “doctrines.”

Having said that, it should be recognized that the broader meaning of “opinions” that we are claiming for Wesley actually entails a *more radical* stance on the issue of the certainty of theological convictions than the comparative use. When using “opinion” comparatively, one usually assumes that some of their knowledge can be certain while other knowledge is “only opinion.” By contrast, Wesley’s suggested theological appropriation of the Enlightenment disjunction between human ideas and their objects would deny that *any human* theological judgment could attain absolute certainty.⁴⁴ Thus, he once explained the perennial differences over “opinion” by quoting the proverb that humans are necessarily fallible (*humanum est errare et nescire*)⁴⁵

One must recall here, however, Wesley’s assumed distinction between contemporary human judgments about Christian revelation and that revelation itself. He never surrendered the conviction that Divine revelation per se was infallible and deserving of the highest human assent.⁴⁶ What he increasingly came to doubt was our present human ability to comprehend perfectly or demonstrate unquestionably the truth of this revelation.⁴⁷ Hence, his growing stress on the constant need to regulate our fallible “opinions” by the “doctrine” in infallible Divine revelation.

Right Opinions and Genuine Religion

Having developed the point that Wesley considered theological convictions to be human (intellectual) understandings of Christian doctrine, our next issue concerns the relationship between such convictions and the development of Christian spirituality. In Wesley’s terms, this issue was focused around the question: “Are right opinions identical with or essential for genuine religion?” Interestingly, Wesley’s answers to this question over the course of his life follow

a pattern analogous to that which many theorists now claim is typical of cognitive development: 1) an early narrow dualism that affirms one's inculcated tradition unquestioningly against all "others"; 2) a contrasting dissatisfaction with such dualism as one progressively encounters cases that it cannot account for, frequently resulting in the espousal of total cognitive relativism; and 3) a mature equilibration that reaffirms commitments without claiming absolute certainty.⁴⁸

Development in Wesley's Perspective

According to Wesley's own testimony, during his early years he essentially identified the opinions and religious practices conveyed in his Anglican training with Christianity *per se*. If someone differed with him on these opinions or practices, they were likely to be adjudged as less than genuinely Christian.⁴⁹

Over time, his exposure to and appreciation for the spirituality of non-Anglican groups such as the Moravians and Roman Catholic mystics (and his corresponding disillusionment with the spirituality and openness of some of his "orthodox" Anglican fellow-ministers and overseers) inclined him to doubt the necessary connection between right opinions and genuine religion. His strongest expression of this doubt was in his *Plain Account of the People Called Methodists* (1748), where he claimed that one of the points that Methodists chiefly insisted upon was "that orthodoxy, or right opinions, is, at best, but a very slender part of religion, if it can be allowed to be any part of it at all."⁵⁰ In this claim Wesley approached a form of total cognitive relativism.

Now, cognitive relativism *per se* does not necessarily implicate one in an all-inclusive relativism. Indeed, it frequently invokes (at least implicitly) some other criterion of truth—be it conduct, affections, or whatever—in relation to which the affirmation of any particular intellectual claims is purportedly irrelevant. In Wesley's case, that other criterion was "genuine religion." Since he consistently considered genuine religion to be a matter of right tempers towards God and other persons,⁵¹ the issue here turns on his contrast between opinions and tempers noted above. By this point (1748), Wesley had clearly rejected any absolute identification of holding right opinions with possessing right tempers. Indeed, he appeared to suggest that the holding of such opinions may be irrelevant to developing or maintaining desired tempers.

Naturally, such an apparent suggestion called forth numerous criticisms and demands for clarification. Thus, Wesley repeatedly had to explain this quote in later letters and apologetic writings. Central to these explanations was the insistence that he had not been claiming that holding right opinions was *totally* unrelated to developing right tempers; rather, he had been stressing that, in and of itself, such correct theological understanding did not *guarantee* that one would personally embrace what they knew and live by it—as the example of the Devil demonstrates.

As it stands, this distinction merely clarifies the real questions: Do right opinions contribute to the development of right tempers? Conversely, does the affirmation of wrong opinions militate against right tempers? The most interesting aspect of Wesley's later clarifications of his original claim is the progression

noticeable in response to these questions.

In 1751 he was still primarily concerned to stress that, in a truly religious person, right opinions—in themselves—were a “very slender part” of religion, though he noted that admitting this did not necessarily imply that wrong opinions were not an hindrance to religion.⁵²

By 1756 he qualified the statement that holding right opinions was a slender part of right affections (i.e. genuine religion) with the claim that it was a “considerable help” to developing them.⁵³

By 1763 he was not only admitting that right opinions were a great help to developing genuine religion, he now explicitly argued that wrong opinions were a great hindrance thereto.⁵⁴

By 1766 he was agreeing with the claim that right tempers simply could not subsist without right opinions, though he still argued that right opinions might subsist without right tempers.⁵⁵

Finally, in 1790 he was quick to follow a claim that orthodoxy was not absolutely necessary to salvation with the comment that wrong opinions in religion naturally lead to wrong tempers and practices; consequently it is our “bounden duty to seek a right judgment in all things.”⁵⁶

Thus, in the mature Wesley we find a moderated position which clearly admits that there is no infallible connection between right opinions and right tempers, yet confidently claims that holding right opinions *generally* promotes the development of right tempers, while holding wrong opinions *generally* hinders that development.

Aspects of Wesley’s Mature Perspective

Some important aspects of this mature moderated claim should be highlighted. To begin with, the emphasis on the general importance of right opinions should not be construed as an assumption that clear conceptions of the central Christian doctrines are a necessary prerequisite to spiritual awakening and growth. On the contrary, Wesley assumed that it was common for Christian commitment to precede and motivate the development of Christian understanding.⁵⁷ More importantly, he refused to limit the benefits of Christian truth to those who had clear theological understanding.

This last point requires some clarification. In a 1790 sermon we find perhaps the strongest expression of Wesley’s characteristic disagreement with the assumption that a clear understanding of the central Christian doctrines was necessary for salvation; and that any lacking such clear understanding would be lost, regardless of what other changes the Spirit may have worked in their lives. As he summed it up: “I believe [God] respects the goodness of the heart rather than the clearness of the head.”⁵⁸

Such language could suggest that Wesley’s distinction between opinions and tempers noted above actually constituted a total disjunction. However, other passages support some connection between the two. For example, in an earlier sermon, after a similar stress on the priority of one’s heart being right with God, Wesley posed the question of what constituted such a “right heart.” He responded by inquiring

whether the person believed in God's being and God's perfections: God's eternity, immensity, wisdom and power; God's justice, mercy and truth?⁵⁹ Surely this response assumes some type of inherent relationship between right tempers and the central Christian conceptions of reality.

Thus, Wesley apparently believed that some form of positive *conviction* about the basic Christian understanding of reality was integral to genuine religion; and yet, he rejected the demand for clear *articulations*. The way that Wesley scholars have usually tried to explain this perplexing situation is to say that Wesley emphasized the importance of believing the "substance" of the central Christian truths, but did not require the use (or clear understanding) of traditional theological expressions of such truths.⁶⁰

A more precise way of conceiving the matter is suggested by recent claims that all truly human praxis is grounded in and inculcates basic cognitive/affective orientations toward the world, others, and the Ultimate. By implication, the crucial focus of the central Christian doctrines would be such a orientation; i.e., an affirmation of Meaning and Love at the core of Reality, and the resulting call for loving obedience and service on our part. Likewise, the development of genuine Christian spirituality would inherently involve the fostering of such a cognitive/affective orientation or "worldview."⁶¹

Viewed on such terms, the central presupposition of Wesley's mature perspective on the relationship of opinions and genuine religion would be that people could embrace the basic orientation of the Christian worldview (in at least a beginning fashion) without possessing an intricate understanding of its implicit cognitive dimensions. In such cases, the value of "right opinions" (i.e., correctly articulated understandings) would be that they *generally* helped clarify and/or cultivate the overall Christian orientation, while "wrong opinions" *generally* distorted and weakened it.

This is not to say that the mature Wesley appreciated right opinions *simply* for their instrumental value. He believed that genuine Christian life would *ideally* include both right affections and right understanding; or better, their integration. As he once put it: "I seek two things in this world, truth and love."⁶²

Yet, for all his appreciation of right opinions, the mature Wesley remained convinced that persons might possess some measure of genuine Christian affections, not only while lacking developed conceptions of Christian life's implicit cognitive dimensions, but even while entertaining or embracing many *wrong* opinions about doctrinal matters.⁶³ He did, however, suggest that there were limits to the type of errors compatible with right affections.⁶⁴ This suggestion leads us to our next topic: the relative essentiality of various Christian doctrines.

Doctrines: From Essential to Indifferent

Almost from the beginning of the sixteenth-century splits in Western Christianity there have been attempts to reestablish unity. One of the most common approaches has been the search for a set of "fundamental articles of belief" upon which the various contesting parties could agree. Overall, the results of this

approach have been minimal compared to the energies put into it—leading many recently to question its assumption that shared doctrinal beliefs preserve the unity of the life of the Church, rather than vice versa.⁶⁵ Whatever its ultimate value, this approach was influential in Wesley’s day and his scattered comments about “the essentials” can be best understood in light of it—particularly where such a comparison serves to highlight *distinctive* elements of Wesley’s approach.

Essential for What?

To understand how various theological convictions might be evaluated as more or less essential, it is first necessary to ask what they were considered fundamental or essential for. Was it for admission into the Church? The issue actually ran deeper than this, because the very problem being addressed was that competing bodies were claiming to be “the Church” and that each had an extensive set of such required beliefs—including some directly contradictory to those required by other bodies. What was hoped for was a list that was more distilled than current institutional examples, on the basis of which the competing groups could discover an underlying unity.

Accordingly, it became common to define fundamental beliefs as those that were absolutely necessary for *salvation*; as distinguished from being Anglican, or Lutheran, or Presbyterian.⁶⁶ Unfortunately, such a definition often easily took on scholastic tones, with fundamental beliefs being valued for their mere affirmation—as a prerequisite for heaven.

Wesley’s “practical” reflections on essential doctrines avoided such scholastic tendencies.⁶⁷ An important reason for this was his therapeutic model of “salvation,” which focused on God’s present work of healing human nature of the corruptions of sin, not just God’s future work of delivering us from the presence of sin.⁶⁸ Given this therapeutic emphasis, when Wesley asserted that a particular doctrinal truth was essential for salvation, he was characterizing its contribution to the present recovery of Christian affections, not demanding its intellectual affirmation as a legalistic prerequisite for entrance to heaven. No better evidence can be offered for this *distinctive* linking of a doctrine’s relative value with its present therapeutic power than his frequent designation of the important truths as “wholesome doctrine”—i.e., doctrine that restores and preserves spiritual health.⁶⁹

What is Essential?

The recognition of Wesley’s distinctive therapeutic or formative focus for the category of “essentials” sets the context for a second question: “What really is most essential for salvation?”

By Wesley’s time a significant contrast had developed in responses to this question. On the one side were Protestant and Catholic scholastics who stressed the cognitive dimension of Christian life. For them, this question self-evidently focused on differentiating *among* various doctrinal beliefs; with the possible inclusion of a few necessary sacramental rites. On the other side were a variety of Pietist movements who reacted against the Scholastic emphasis, seeking a

recovered appreciation of the affectional dimension of Christian life and of the spiritual disciplines which nurture it. They typically identified “the essentials” as certain Christian tempers, various spiritual disciplines, or even particular religious experiences.⁷⁰ Often, these were championed in direct *contrast with* doctrines.

Wesley’s various comments on “essentials” or “fundamentals” (a term he used, but hesitatingly) reveal parallels with *both* sides of this debate. On the one hand, he frequently distinguished between essential and nonessential doctrines; or between opinions which touch the foundation of Christian faith and those which do not.⁷¹ On the other hand, there are several instances where he identified orthodoxy *per se* as nonessential, by contrast with Christian tempers and disciplines.⁷² Perhaps the most dramatic is his complaint that the Reformation did not go far enough because it only reformed the opinions and modes of worship of their day, not tempers and lives. They dealt only with the circumstantial of religion, not the essentials.⁷³

What was most *distinctive* of Wesley, however, was the way in which he united these two concerns. Orthodoxy was considered nonessential *to the degree that* it remained merely intellectual affirmation—isolated from the recovery of Christian affections; while relative therapeutic contribution was an important criterion for determining which doctrines were essential and which were not.

Determining Essential Doctrines

Actually, Wesley appealed to a series of progressively narrower criteria when discussing the relative importance of various doctrines.

The first of these criteria was Scripture. Wesley accepted the general Protestant position that everything necessary for salvation was contained in the Bible.⁷⁴ However, as the history of Protestant disputes demonstrates, simply affirming the sufficiency of Scripture is not decisive. The larger question is *how* one uses Scripture as a criterion. Do you forbid everything which Scripture does not expressly approve; or allow everything which Scripture does not expressly condemn; or what?

Wesley’s actual appeals to the criterion of Scripture reflect a concern to preserve as much freedom of individual judgment as possible.⁷⁵ Occasionally he utilized this criterion in a positive role, charging that those who denied either Scripture or a clear teaching of Scripture were outside of Christian salvation.⁷⁶ More typical, however, was the negative role—to emphasize what was *not* essential. Wesley argued that, unless something was expressly (or by obvious consequence) enjoined or forbidden in Scripture, it should be considered indifferent.⁷⁷ In addition, Wesley rejected the all-too-common Protestant tendency to “level” the teachings of Scripture. He explicitly argued that, while every teaching in Scripture is important, some are more important than others.⁷⁸ As such, not even the fact that something was expressly taught in Scripture necessarily warranted it as essential; though its absence from Scripture conclusively ruled it out.

How, then, does one distinguish that in Scripture which is essential for Christian belief and practice from that which is not. Here Wesley's narrower criteria entered into play. The purpose of these criteria was not to suggest additional extra-scriptural candidates for the category of "essentials" but to guide the winnowing of scriptural teachings.

The first of these narrower criteria was reason.⁷⁹ To understand *how* Wesley used reason as a criterion in determining theological essentials, we must first note *what* he understood reason to be. Wesley rejected the conception of the mind as a realm of innate truths. He also denied that reason provided a direct means of access to Divine Truth. Instead, drawing on the eighteenth-century Aristotelian tradition, he limited reason to the activities of apprehending, understanding, and drawing inferences from the input of the senses.⁸⁰

As such, the basic contribution of reason to determining theological essentials was to help understand and draw inferences from Scripture.⁸¹ Two aspects of this process were particularly relevant. First, for any doctrine to be considered essential it must be rationally defensible as a valid interpretation of Scripture. This is surely the point of Wesley's claim that he continually employed reason to distinguish between right and wrong opinions (i.e., human interpretations of Scripture!).⁸² Second, Wesley appears to have agreed with the position of Peter Browne (which he appended to his text on Natural Philosophy) that we are not obliged to believe any doctrine in Scripture that is not plain or intelligible.⁸³ If so, only those teachings of Scripture which are reasonably plain would be candidates for being "essentials." This would fit with Wesley's insistence that Christianity, when scriptural, was also a rational religion.⁸⁴

While it could eliminate some candidates, reason alone was not a sufficient criterion for determining essential scriptural teachings. For further help, Wesley turned to Christian tradition. He considered the example and judgment of the earliest Church to be normative. In addition, he believed that the doctrinal standards of his Anglican tradition were the most faithful embodiments of this early tradition currently available.⁸⁵ Thus, he often appealed to the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Anglican Church in arguing whether particular beliefs were essential or not.⁸⁶

This is not to suggest, however, that Wesley equated the Thirty-Nine Articles with the "essentials." In the first place, he doubted the scriptural or traditional warrant for some things contained therein, as became most evident when he abridged them for the American Methodists. In the second place, like all confessional creeds, the Articles were dedicated to articulating distinctive Anglican claims, not just summarizing shared Christian beliefs. As such, they gave focused attention to some issues that Wesley generally denied were essential—such as church government—while barely touching others that he was prone to consider such—like questions of ethics.⁸⁷ Obviously, some further criterion was being invoked in making such distinctions *among* the teachings of the Articles.

This further criterion was Wesley's most *distinctive* criterion for assessing the relative importance of various doctrines; i.e., their therapeutic impact, as demon-

strated in personal and corporate Christian experience.⁸⁸ Among those clear truths which have scriptural and traditional warrant, the ones that were most conducive to developing Christian tempers were judged most essential. Likewise, if the alternative understandings (i.e., opinions) of a doctrinal issue were all compatible with or fostered rather than undercutting authentic Christian life then the choice between them was not a matter of essentials.

Wesley's List of Essential Doctrines?

Just what doctrines did Wesley consider to fulfill these criteria and merit being designated essential? He never gave a definitive list. In fact, he explicitly doubted whether there could be such a final list—another concession to human finitude and invincible prejudices.⁸⁹ At the same time, he frequently identified specific doctrines, or groups of doctrines, as essential.

There are four doctrines that Wesley identified as essential far more often than any others, usually in connection with each other: 1) original sin, 2) justification by faith, 3) the new birth and 4) holiness of heart and life.⁹⁰ All of these relate directly to the process of salvation. As such, many Wesley scholars have suggested that Wesley restricted the category of essential doctrines to those dealing with the *ordo salutis*.⁹¹ This suggestion overlooks a crucial distinction that John Deschner has recently reemphasized between the articulated theology of Wesley's writings and the presupposed theology behind those writings.⁹²

In his writings, Wesley was explicitly occupied with defining and defending his Methodist movement. He clearly considered it an interdenominational renewal movement. Its essential purpose was identified, not as the recommendation of new doctrines or different religious rites, but as the cultivation of deeper spirituality and morality within all the churches.⁹³ As the movement developed, he became convinced that an important source of the current spiritual dearth in the churches was the lack of understanding (or misunderstandings) of the four doctrines mentioned above. Thus, emphasis on these doctrines became *distinctive* of the Methodist movement.⁹⁴ Since these distinctive teachings were so directly related to nurturing Christian spirituality, Wesley naturally identified them as essential.

While these were the doctrines that Wesley explicitly identified most often as essential, it does not follow that they were the *only* ones that he considered to be so. After all, the counterpoint of his identification of what was *distinctive* of Methodism was that—beyond these matters—Methodism shared the *common* theological convictions of Christianity. Indeed, Wesley often bragged that the Methodists were *more* orthodox in regard to these common convictions than any other Christian group.⁹⁵

As such, it should be expected that Wesley considered the central claims of the Christian worldview to be essentials. If he did not explicitly mention them as often, it was because they were *not at issue*. They were part of his *assumed* theology. Fortunately, there are enough instances where he stressed the intrinsic relation of some of these central claims to the development of genuine Christian

spirituality to verify that he considered them to be essentials.

For example, as we noted before, he considered a person's beliefs about God's existence and attributes to be integral to possessing a heart right with God. Likewise, he described the affirmation of the Divinity of Christ (as contrasted with Socinians and Arians) as the "foundation of all our hope."⁹⁶ Or again, he stressed the importance of the doctrine of the atonement and, accordingly, rejected Deism as a Christian option.⁹⁷ Once more, he claimed that the question of the office and operation of the Holy Spirit is connected to the whole of real religion.⁹⁸ Finally, he asserted that the doctrine of the Trinity deals with the reality that "lies at the root of all vital religion."⁹⁹

Of course, in none of these cases, was Wesley primarily concerned with whether one had a clearly articulated intellectual understanding of these doctrines, but with whether they embraced the general dispositional orientation framed by them. Likewise, the moderation of Wesley's mature understanding of the contribution of theological convictions to Christian spirituality carried over even to such "essential" doctrines. In particular, while he believed that entertaining wrong opinions about the Trinity was inconsistent with real piety, his encounter with the biography of Thomas Firmin convinced him that there could even be exceptions to this general rule.¹⁰⁰

Wesley's Catholic Spirit

We are now in a good position to determine the focus and implications of Wesley's appeal for a "catholic spirit" among differing Christian groups. The classic expressions of this appeal were his *Letter to a Roman Catholic* (1749) and his sermon "Catholic Spirit" (1750). However, his central idea could already be found in *The Principles of a Methodist* (1740) where he wondered why we assume that a person ceases to be our neighbor just because they are of a different opinion than us.¹⁰¹

The Dangers of Denominational Zeal

The best point of entry into Wesley's understanding of a catholic spirit is to recall again the nature of the Methodist movement. It was conceived as a trans-denominational renewal movement. As such, its ideal form required Christians with differing theological opinions to accept and support each other in renewal efforts. That the goal of such broad cooperation was the basis of Wesley's various pleas for a catholic spirit is clearly evidenced by the conclusion to his *Letter to a Roman Catholic*: "Let us ...endeavour to help each other on in whatever we are agreed leads to the Kingdom."¹⁰²

Thus, a central aspect of Wesley's catholic spirit was the desire to overcome that lamentable denominational zeal which becomes so consumed in defending its distinctive claims that it overlooks the broad areas of shared beliefs with other Christian groups.¹⁰³ Characteristically, Wesley's concern in this regard was not just intellectual. He was convinced that such infighting discredited the Christian witness; for, the religion that breathes the most love is the most credible.¹⁰⁴

On further consideration, Wesley's comments about this false zeal also reveal connections with his relative valuation of tempers and opinions noted above. Two claims are particularly relevant. First, Wesley argued that we should avoid such zeal because, while it is debatable whether our opinions are right or wrong, it is certain that such tempers are wrong!¹⁰⁵ Second, even in cases of wrong opinions, hot disputes are more likely to destroy Christian tempers than these false opinions (particularly if these opinions do not deal with essential doctrine).¹⁰⁶

Invincible Ignorance and Liberty of Conscience

Another aspect of Wesley's catholic spirit grows out of his mature conviction, noted above, that humans can never attain an absolute certainty that their opinions accurately reflect Christian doctrine. Since we can never be sure that we have overcome the effects of invincible ignorance or prejudice, we should moderate our claims for the truth of our views.¹⁰⁷ More importantly, we should extend to others the liberty to pursue *their* opinions in good conscience.¹⁰⁸ Indeed, we should value the loving provision of such liberty more highly than the protection of the Church from "heresy."¹⁰⁹ Thus, Wesley's strong support for the political principle of liberty of conscience in matters of religion was another integral expression of his catholic spirit.¹¹⁰

Assumed Unity in Essentials

All this talk about liberty and avoiding hot disputes must surely look like the surrender of theological integrity that some have accused Wesley of. However, he adamantly claimed that "a catholic spirit is not *speculative latitudinarianism*. It is not an indifference to all opinions."¹¹¹ But, why is it not?

To begin with, Wesley was operating here again with his *assumption* of the basic elements of the Christian worldview. Thus, he went on to claim that those with a truly catholic spirit are "fixed as the sun in [their] judgment concerning the *main branches* of Christian doctrine" (emphasis added).¹¹² Indeed, he suggested that one cannot develop a truly catholic spirit without first learning the basic elements of the gospel of Christ.

In other words, the acceptance of differing opinions that Wesley was seeking from the various Christian traditions dealt with opinions that "do not strike at the root of Christian truth;" not with essential opinions. This is perhaps best seen in the "Letter to a Roman Catholic" where, after giving a summary of his basic beliefs (that closely follows the Nicene Creed!), he said "But you think we ought to believe *more*? We will not now enter into the dispute" (emphasis added).¹¹³

Moreover, this was not doctrinal indifference because, while Wesley was pleading for mutual acceptance of others with differing opinions in matters that are not essential, he was not advocating a suspension of one's own best judgment in these matters. As he told his Methodists: "Lay so much stress on opinions, that all your own, if it be possible, may agree with truth and reason; but have a care of anger, dislike, or contempt towards those whose opinions differ from yours."¹¹⁴

Indeed, Wesley's catholic spirit did not even entail the rejection of attempts

to dialogue with those of other opinions than one's own, with the goal of persuading them *freely* of the greater legitimacy of your views.¹¹⁵ What it did entail was a commitment to accept, love and cooperate with such others in service to God and humanity—even when they *continue* to differ from us in nonessentials.

Conclusion

While much more could be said about Wesley's catholic spirit, its basic concerns should now be clear. Perhaps its present implications can be best clarified by a critical interaction with two recent contrasting estimates.

Michael Hurley has championed Wesley's "Letter to a Roman Catholic" as a model for contemporary ecumenical relations. In particular, he has argued that Wesley epitomized the strategy, later articulated at Vatican II, of shifting emphasis from discussions of theological differences to practical cooperation among churches.¹¹⁶ While Wesley indeed desired such cooperation among churches, we have argued that it was not at the expense of all discussion of theological differences. In an age where ecumenical experience has shown that cooperation cannot go on indefinitely without concomitant theological rapprochement, perhaps Wesley's model has something more to offer than Hurley suggests.

By contrast with Hurley, Hugo Assman has claimed that too much has been made of Wesley's "Letter to a Roman Catholic" and its principle of toleration. He argues that it dealt exclusively with the situation of Methodist pastors in Ireland and had only a limited circulation; thus, it should not be generalized into a manifesto for ecumenical toleration.¹¹⁷ Hopefully, our analysis has shown that Wesley's catholic spirit was actually grounded in the broad context of his mature understanding of the nature and role of theological convictions. It also has much wider textual support than the "Letter to a Roman Catholic." As such, it surely deserves to be considered a serious proposal for deepening ecumenical cooperation without sacrificing theological integrity.

Abbreviations

<i>Christian Library</i>	<i>A Christian Library: Consisting of Extracts from, and Abridgements of, the Choicest Pieces of Practical Divinity which have been Published in the English Tongue</i> , 50 vols. (Bristol: F. Farley, 1749–55; reprinted in 30 vols., London: T. Cordeux, 1819–27).
<i>Journal</i> (Curnock)	<i>The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.</i> , edited by Nehemiah Curnock, 8 vols. (London: Epworth, 1909–16).
<i>Letters</i> (Telford)	<i>The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.</i> , edited by John Telford, 8 vols. (London: Epworth, 1931).
<i>NT Notes</i>	<i>Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament</i> , 3rd corrected edition (Bristol: Graham and Pine, 1760–62; many later reprints).
<i>Works</i>	<i>The Works of John Wesley</i> ; begun as “The Oxford Edition of The Works of John Wesley” (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975–1983); continued as “The Bicentennial Edition of The Works of John Wesley” (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984—).
<i>Works</i> (Jackson)	<i>The Works of John Wesley</i> , ed. Thomas Jackson, 14 vols. (London, 1872; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958).

Notes

1. Perhaps the most vigorous recent expression of the controversy is Jerry L. Walls, *The Problem of Pluralism: Recovering United Methodist Identity* (Wilmore, KY: Good News Books, 1986). For an earlier expression see Lawrence Meredith, “Essential Doctrine in the Theology of John Wesley, With Special Attention to the Methodist Standards of Doctrine” (Harvard University Th.D. thesis, 1962), 10.

2. Cf. the article on “opinion” in *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989) 10:858–60.

3. Cf. John Anthony Newton, “The Ecumenical Wesley,” *Ecumenical Review* 24 (1972): 160–75; and Paramanathan Ravindrathas, “Wesley og Økumenikk,” *Teologisk Forum* 1.2 (1987): 6–19. Newton has provided the most detailed analysis to-date of the category of “opinion” in Wesley’s works. He identifies five different emphases. Ravindrathas lists three major emphases. The careful reader will find both points of agreement and areas of significant difference between their analyses and that which follows.

4. Letter to John Newton (14 May 1765), *Letters* (Telford) 4:297.

5. Cf. Howe Octavius Thomas, “John Wesley’s Awareness and Application of the Method of Distinguishing Between Theological Essentials and Theological Opinions,” *Methodist History* 26 (1988): 84–97.

6. To cite just two examples: Robert E. Chiles, *Theological Transition in American Methodism: 1790–1935* (New York: Abingdon, 1965), 23; and Leonard D. Hulley, *Wesley: A Plain Man for Plain People* (Westville, S. Africa: Methodist Church of South Africa, 1987), 82.

7. For the distinction between right and wrong opinions see *A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, Pt. III, §IV.9, *Works* 11:320. For a distinction between opinions which do or do not strike at the root of Christianity see *The Character of a Methodist*, §1, *Works* 9:33. He could also distinguish “true and solid doctrines” from those doctrines (!) that were “human inventions” (*NT Notes*, 1 Cor 3:12).

8. Notice how he uses “opinion” for such subjects as the nature and use of the moral law, the sufficiency of God’s grace, etc. in Sermon 38, “A Caution Against Bigotry,” §II.3, *Works* 2:70. He also uses the term to characterize his differences with

Deists in his Letter to James Clark, (18 September 1756), *Letters* (Telford) 3:202. Indeed, he refers to Christianity per se as a “system of opinions” in his *Short Address to the Inhabitants of Ireland*, §14, *Works* 9:285.

9. His definition in *The Complete English Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (London: Hawes, 1777). This definition is found throughout the time span of his writings. Cf. Sermon 7, “The Way to the Kingdom” (1746), §I.6, *Works* 1:220; Sermon 37, “The Nature of Enthusiasm” (1750), §1, *Works* 2:46; and Sermon 62, “The End of Christ’s Coming” (1781), §III.5, *Works* 2:483.

10. Contrast definitions #1 and #2 in the OED article on “opinion.” While many assume that Wesley’s characterization of theological convictions as “opinions” employs definition #1, I am suggesting that it is best understood in terms of definition #2.

11. E.g., §1 of the preface to extracts from several Fathers in his *Christian Library*, Vol. I (*Works* [Jackson] 14:223) praises their “doctrines.” Likewise, the teachings on salvation that he extracts from the Edwardian *Homilies* are “doctrines” (cf. “The Doctrines of Salvation ...” reprinted in *John Wesley*, 123–33. Or again, the “doctrine” of the Anglican Church was assumed to be contained in the Articles and Homilies (“Ought We to Separate from the Church of England?” §II.2, *Works* 9:569). Indeed, Wesley’s identification of “doctrine” with tradition is so close that, if a doctrine was *new*, it was necessarily wrong! (Cf. Sermon 13, “On Sin in Believers,” §III.9, *Works* 1:324).

12. Cf. Letter to William Dodd (5 February 1756), *Letters* (Telford) 3:157–58.

13. Cf. Letter to William Dodd (12 March 1756), *Letters* (Telford) 3:167.

14. One of the clearest and most influential articulations of this disjunction was John Locke’s *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book 2, Chap. 8, §7. Wesley appraised this book quite favorably, including Locke’s distinctive definition of “idea”, Cf. “Remarks Upon Mr. Locke’s ‘Essay on Human Understanding’,” *Works* (Jackson) 13:455–64.

15. Wesley’s adoption of this Enlightenment claim was a partial one! He could doubt the adequacy or reliability of current understandings of doctrine, but he never expressed doubt about the adequacy or reliability of the articulations of those doctrines in Scripture and the early church, and only rarely about the Anglican doctrinal standards. He attributed the adequacy of these earlier forms to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

16. E.g. *Journal* (29 May 1745), in *Works* 20:66; *A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion, Pt. II*, §III.4, *Works* 11:253; and *Some Remarks on ‘A Defense of the Preface to The Edinburgh Edition of Aspasio Vindicated’*, §2, *Works* (Jackson) 10:348.

17. Cf. *Letter to the Bishop of Gloucester*, §I.13, *Works* 11:478.

18. Note his argument that the idea of final perseverance is not wholesome because it tends to catch people up in “strife of words” and “opinions” rather than devoting themselves to the Christian disciplines of self-denial, etc. in “Reasons Against a Separation from the Church of England,” §III.2, *Works* 9:339–40.

19. Cf. the discussion in Randy L. Maddox, “John Wesley – Practical Theologian?” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 23 (1988): 122–47.

20. See especially, Stanley M. Hauerwas, *Character and the Christian Life: A Study in Theological Ethics* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1975), chapter 5; Hauerwas, “Characterizing Perfection: Second Thoughts on Character and Sanctification,” in *Wesleyan Theology Today*, edited by T. H. Runyon (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1985), 251–63; and Lawrence D. Hulley, *To Be and To Do: Exploring Wesley’s Thought on Ethical Behaviour* (Pretoria: University of South Africa, 1988), 63ff. Note how Wesley connects the affections and the will in Sermon 62, “The End of Christ’s Coming,” §I.4, *Works* 2:474.

21. For a helpful study of this point see Gregory S. Clapper, *John Wesley on Religious Affections: His Views on Experience and Emotion and Their Role in the Christian Life and Theology* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1989).

22. E.g., *A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion, Pt. III*, §IV.14, *Works* 11:323; *Some Remarks on 'A Defense of the Preface to The Edinburgh Edition of Aspasio Vindicated'*, §2, *Works* (Jackson) 10:348; and, Sermon 61, "The Mystery of Iniquity," §29, *Works* 2:465.

23. For an analysis of Wesley's use of "heart" see Clapper, *Wesley on Religious Affections*, 46ff; and Egon W. Gerdes, "John Wesley's Lehre von der Gottesebendbildlichkeit des Menschen" (Keil University Ph.D. thesis, 1958), 67.

24. E.g., *A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion, Pt. III*, §IV.10, *Works* 11:321; and Sermon 7, "The Way to the Kingdom," §I.6, *Works* 1:220. Cf. *Letter to the Bishop of Gloucester*, §I.13, *Works* 11:479.

25. Sermon 20, "The Lord Our Righteousness," §6, *Works* 1:451.

26. Cell, *The Rediscovery of John Wesley* (New York: Henry Holt, 1935), esp. 6, 14, 80.

27. Cf. Frank Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970), 24. Where Wesley does appeal to experience as direct revelation is in regards to our assurance of God's acceptance.

28. A good recent analysis of these points is: Donald Thorsen, "Theological Method in John Wesley" (Drew University Ph.D. thesis, 1988), 284–314.

29. Sermon 20, "The Lord our Righteousness," §II.3, *Works* 1:454.

30. This is apparently the sense in which Robert Cushman argues that Wesley contrasted "opinions" with the experience of saving faith. Cf. Cushman, *John Wesley's Experimental Divinity: Studies in Methodist Doctrinal Standards* (Nashville: Kingswood, 1989), 41–42, 97, 174–75.

31. Sermon 20, "The Lord Our Righteousness," §6 (*Works* 1:451), & §II.20 (*Works* 1:464).

32. Note that Wesley attributes the difference in expression to both the natural variation in human intellectual abilities and the influence of differing educations (*Ibid.*, §II.3, *Works* 1:454).

33. Conference Minutes (13 May 1746), Q. 3, *John Wesley*, 159–60. Wesley's tight control over his pastors' conferences made their minutes accurate presentations of his own position.

34. Sermon 20, "The Lord Our Righteousness," §II.17, *Works* 1:461.

35. Cf. the judgment of Gerald Cragg in *Works* 11:160–62.

36. Perhaps the best example is Wesley's extended dialogue with "John Smith." For a helpful analysis of the increased awareness of both agreement and remaining differences through this dialogue, see: Rex D. Matthews, "Religion and Reason Joined: A Study in the Theology of John Wesley" (Harvard University Th.D. thesis, 1986), 340–57.

37. Cf. Sermon 55, "On the Trinity," esp. §§2–3 (*Works* 2:376–77) & §17 (*Works* 2:384).

38. The Wesley scholar who has most clearly recognized and stressed Wesley's awareness of the limitations of human language is Albert Outler. While technically stopping short of this point, some of his discussions verge on the suggestion of total relativism (Cf. *Works* 1:455 fn31). (For a more careful statement see *Works* 2:79).

39. An excellent example is his admission that even the Articles and Homilies are products of fallible authors, yet he insists that they are still more worthy of affirmation than most human compositions, in "Ought We to Separate from the Church of England," §II.2, *Works* 9:569.

40. Compare Newton's suggestion that Wesley's various uses of "opinion" might be subsumed under the definition: 'a religious view held on intellectual grounds'

(Newton, “Ecumenical Wesley,” 167 fn31).

41. This work was an abridgement of Henry Aldrich’s *Artis logicae compendium*, prepared for the students at Kingswood. The comments on opinion are in Book II, Chap. 1, §I, in *Works* (Jackson) 14:177. One should also note the abridgement Peter Browne’s *The Procedure, Extent and Limits of Human Knowledge* which was included as an appendix to Wesley’s *Survey of the Wisdom of God in the Creation*, 2nd edition (Bristol: William Pine, 1770) 3:203–37. This work defines “opinion” as “a medium between knowledge and ignorance” (177). Wesley had read Browne in 1729 and drew up a precis for his personal use. He read it to his preachers on 20 August 1756 (Cf. *Journal* [Curnock] 4:192). Thus, he clearly accepted its general views.

42. E.g., on the issue of when the world would end see Letter to Christopher Hopper (3 June 1788), *Letters* (Telford) 8:63. On the ethical question of the role of the parent in their child’s decision of whom to marry see Letter to Samuel Wood (October 1788), *Letters* (Telford) 8:245.

43. E.g., Sermon 4, “Scriptural Christianity,” §IV.4, *Works* 1:175.

44. Wesley sided with the British empiricist strand of the Enlightenment which denied the existence of innate ideas. While the empiricists accepted the self-evidence of self-consciousness and of immediate sensory awareness, they acknowledged that such self-evident certainty was necessarily lost the moment that human reason began to assess and make *judgments* about sensory input. Interestingly, while Wesley was ready to accept this point about the status of theological judgments in general, he tried to protect one’s personal awareness of God’s acceptance from this fallibility. Thus, he posited a “spiritual sense” by which we *intuit* God’s acceptance of us in Christ. He specifically rejected the notion that this knowledge was the product of reasoning (Cf. Sermon 62, “The End of Christ’s Coming,” §III.1, *Works* 2:481). Unfortunately, this solution posed one problem upon which he failed to reflect sufficiently: the need for a *judgment* about whether such a witness was of God or not. An insightful analysis of Wesley’s general epistemology can be found in Matthews, “Religion and Reason Joined.”

45. *A Short Address to the Inhabitants of Ireland*, §15, *Works* 9:285.

46. Thus, he could endorse (by republication) Aldrich’s schemata of the various degrees of warranted human assent, with faith in Divine Revelation placed highest—even over assent to self-evident axioms! Cf. *Compendium of Logic*, Book II, Chap. 1, §III, in *Works* (Jackson) 14:178.

47. On this point, contrast his early hope that the uneducated “heathens” in Georgia would be free from prejudices and able to discern whether he truly taught the “doctrines” of God (Letter to John Burton [10 August 1735], *Works* 25:439) with his later claim that we can never know for sure if our “opinions” are totally true because we can never be sure we have escaped invincible prejudice! (Sermon 39, “Catholic Spirit,” §I.4, *Works* 2:84). Hence the admission that he now doubted that he could prove any point of theology unquestionably (Letter to Samuel Furlly [21 May 1762], *Letters* [Telford] 4:181).

48. For a helpful summary see William G. Perry, Jr., “Cognitive and ethical growth: The Making of Meaning,” in *The Modern American College*, edited by A.W. Chickering (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1981), 76–116. For a reading of Wesley in terms of the closely related categories of faith development see James Fowler, “John Wesley’s Development in Faith,” in *The Future of the Methodist Theological Traditions*, ed. M. Douglas Meeks (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), 172–92.

49. Cf. Letter to the Printer of the *Dublin Chronicle* (2 June 1789), §3, *Letters* (Telford) 8:140; and *A Second Letter to the Author of Enthusiasm of Methodists, etc.*, §44, *Works* 11:422–23. Actually, he showed a little more flexibility in matters of doctrine than matters of religious practice.

50. *Plain Account*, §I.2, *Works* 9:254–55. For some earlier approximations to this claim see Sermon 150, “Hypocrisy in Oxford” (1741), §I.11, *Works* 4:399; and Sermon

- 7, “The Way to the Kingdom” (1746), §I.6, *Works* 1:220.
51. Cf. Sermon 120, “The Unity of the Divine Being” (1789), §16, *Works* 4:66; and Letter to Richard Morgan (15 January 1734), *Works* 25:369. Thus, this definition spanned Wesley’s life.
52. *Second Letter to the Author of Enthusiasm of Methodists, etc.*, §46, *Works* 11:425.
53. Letter to James Clark (18 September 1756), *Letters* (Telford) 3:203.
54. *Letter to the Bishop of Gloucester*, §I.12, *Works* 11:479.
55. *Some Remarks on ‘A Defense of the Preface of the Edinburgh Edition of Aspasio Vindicated’*, §2, *Works* (Jackson) 10:348.
56. Sermon 127, “On the Wedding Garment,” §15, *Works* 4:146.
57. Thus, in his *Letter to the Bishop of Gloucester*, §I.13, *Works* 11:479, he argues that people “usually feel *desires* to please God before they *know* how to please [God].” This pattern is not, however, absolute. If it were, it would be hard to explain his inclusion of so much doctrinal content in “awakening sermons.” Clearly his hope was that, in these cases, speculative knowledge would be a step toward experience of God—cf. his *Journal* entry for 5 March 1772, *Journal* (Curnock) 5:452.
58. Sermon 130, “On Living Without God,” §15, *Works* 4:175. For an earlier similar statement, see *Journal* (1 December 1767), *Journal* (Curnock) 5:244.
59. Sermon 39, “Catholic Spirit,” §I.12, *Works* 2:87.
60. A good example is Walls, *Problem of Pluralism*, 60.
61. For development of this claim that a basic cognitive/affectional orientation or “worldview” underlies the more explicit specific doctrinal claims of Christianity (and other religions), see: Arthur Holmes, *The Making of a Christian Mind* (Downer’s Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1985); and James Olthuis, “On Worldviews,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 14 (1985): 153–64.
62. Letter to Richard Tompson (28 June 1755), *Works* 26:567. Cf. *NT Notes*, Eph. 4:13, where he explains the perfecting of the saints as their attainment to “both an exact agreement in the Christian doctrine and an experimental knowledge of Christ as the Son of God.”
63. Cf. Sermon 55 (1775), “On the Trinity,” §1, *Works* 2:374.
64. *Ibid.*, §2, *Works* 2:376.
65. Besides Thomas’s “Theological Essentials,” three recent surveys of the history of this approach which provide special attention to Anglican examples are: Paul Avis, *Anglicanism and The Christian Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 79–154; Yves Congar, *Diversity and Communion* (London: SCM Press, 1984), 107–25; and Stephen W. Sykes, “The Fundamentals of Christianity,” in *The Study of Anglicanism*, edited by S. Sykes & J. Booty (London: SPCK, 1988), 231–45. For their critiques of the traditional approach, see Congar, 120; and Sykes, 242.
66. Notice how often the phrase “necessary for salvation” appears in Thomas’s survey of the discussion of “essentials” in Wesley’s Anglican context (Thomas, “Theological Essentials”).
67. For an extended analysis of Wesley’s “practical theology,” see Maddox, “John Wesley – Practical Theologian?”
68. Cf. Sermon 43, “The Scripture Way of Salvation,” §I.1, *Works* 2:156. For reflections on Wesley’s distinctive appropriation of Eastern Orthodoxy’s characteristic therapeutic model of salvation see Randy L. Maddox, “John Wesley and Eastern Orthodoxy: Influences, Convergences, and Differences,” *Asbury Theological Journal* 45.1 (1990): 29–42.
69. E.g., *NT Notes*, 1 Tim 6:3, 2 Tim. 2:2, Titus 2:1.
70. A particularly relevant example is the extract from James Garden that Wesley included in his *Christian Library* 13:7–24: Anonymous, “A Discourse Concerning Comparative Religion.” Comparative religion attempted to distinguish between essentials and non-essentials in Christian revelation. Among those things considered essentials

were: mortifying the corrupt nature, renouncing the world, etc. Among the desirable but non-essential were pastors and churches!

71. E.g., Sermon 53, “On the Death of George Whitefield,” §III.1, *Works* 2:341; and *A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion, Pt. III*, §IV.14, *Works* 11:323.

72. E.g., *A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion, Pt. III*, §I.11, *Works* 11:278; Sermon 23, “Sermon on the Mount III,” §IV, *Works* 1:533; Sermon 48, “Self Denial,” §2, *Works* 2:238; Sermon 127, “On the Wedding Garment,” §15, *Works* 4:146.

73. Sermon 61, “The Mystery of Iniquity,” §29, *Works* 2:465. “Circumstantial” is another term for “nonessentials.” Cf. Sermon 31, “Sermon on the Mount XI,” §I.4, *Works* 1:666.

74. Thus, he retained the Anglican Article on “The Sufficiency of Holy Scriptures” in the Articles of Religion he provided the American Methodists (cf. *John Wesley’s Sunday Service of the Methodists in North America* [Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1984; reprint of 1784 copy], 307). See also *A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion, Pt. III*, §I.9, *Works* 11:277.

75. Cf. the judgment of Outler in *Works* 1:303 fn14.

76. Perhaps the best example is his *Dictionary* definition of Deism as infidelity which he then equates with “denying the Bible.”

77. E.g., Sermon 12, “The Witness of Our Own Spirit,” §6, *Works* 1:303; and Letter to John Dickens (26 December 1789), *Letters* (Telford) 8:192.

78. E.g., Sermon 73, “Of Hell,” §1, *Works* 3:31.

79. We treat reason first, after Scripture, because Wesley always did.

80. The best analysis of Wesley’s conception of reason is Matthews, “Religion and Reason Joined,” Chap. 2.

81. Cf. his description of reason as “the candle of the Lord” for enlightening Scripture, in Letter to Miss March (5 July 1768), *Letters* (Telford) 5:96.

82. *Letter to the Bishop of Gloucester*, §I.11, *Works* 11:477. See also his claim that he is ready to give up every opinion which he cannot by calm, clear reason defend (Letter to John Downes [17 November 1759], §14, *Works* 9:361). He is not suggesting here that reason *alone* determines Christian truth, but that one should be able to explain how their theological convictions are grounded in Scripture.

83. *Survey of Wisdom of God* 3:227. Note, however, that Wesley was not trying to remove all mystery from Christianity. Neither did he believe that we could always explain *how* Scriptural claims were true. Rather, he was concerned to avoid “enthusiastic” claims to hidden or idiosyncratic truths. Thus, he stressed those elements in Scripture that were clear; cf. Letter to Dr. John Robertson (24 September 1753), *Works* 26:515–16.

84. Cf. Letter to Thomas Rutherford (28 March 1768), §III.4, *Letters* (Telford) 5:364. See also his desire to be a “scriptural, rational Christian” in Letter to Freeborn Garrettson (24 January 1789), *Letters* (Telford) 8:112.

85. For a good analysis of Wesley on tradition see Ted A. Campbell, “John Wesley’s Conceptions and Uses of Christian Antiquity” (Southern Methodist University Ph.D. thesis, 1984).

86. The case of Wesley appealing to the Articles to determine essentials has been argued most strongly by Allan Coppedge, *John Wesley in Theological Debate* (Wilmore, KY: Wesley Heritage Press, 1987), 171, 270. See his list of appeals to the Articles on 270fn16.

87. Cf. Wesley’s criticism of his brother Charles for treating issues of church government like they were as important as basic Christian morals; Letter to Charles Wesley (16 July 1755), *Works* 26:573.

88. For particularly clear invocations of this criterion see *A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion, Pt. III*, §I.9, *Works* 11:277; Sermon 73, “Of Hell” §1, *Works* 3:31; and the definition he agrees to in the Letter to John Newton (14 May 1765), *Letters*

(Telford) 4:297. The importance of this criterion has been stressed by Mark Horst, “Christian Understanding and the Life of Faith in John Wesley’s Thought” (Yale University Ph.D. thesis, 1985), esp. 301. See also John R. Tyson, “Essential Doctrines and Real Religion,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 23 (1988): 163–79, esp. 172–73.

89. Sermon 55, “On the Trinity,” §2, *Works* 2:376. As such Patrick Streiff would appear to go too far when he claims that Wesley was trying to reduce doctrine to a few fundamental articles. Wesley clearly wanted to put an end to needless debates over doctrines that were “nonessential,” but this did not necessarily entail a definitive list of what was essential. Cf. Streiff, “Der ökumenische Geist im frühen Methodismus,” *Pietismus und Neuzeit* 11 (1985): 59–77.

90. E.g., *An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, §12, *Works* 11:49; *Ibid.*, §84, *Works* 11:82; Sermon 45, “The New Birth,” §1, *Works* 2:187; “Preface” to his *Old Testament Notes*, §18, *Works* (Jackson) 14:253; Sermon 53, “On the Death of George Whitefield,” §III.1, *Works* 2:341; and Sermon 107, “On God’s Vineyard,” §V.5, *Works* 3:516.

91. A clear example is Meredith, “Essential Doctrine,” esp. 48, 314.

92. Deschner, “Foreword,” in reprint of *Wesley’s Christology: An Interpretation* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1985), xii.

93. Cf. *Short Address to the Inhabitants of Ireland*, §14, *Works* 9:285; “Reasons Against the Separation From the Church of England,” §III.1, *Works* 9:337; *Journal* (18 May 1788), *Journal* (Curnock) 7:389; and “Thoughts Upon a Late Phenomenon,” §9, *Works* (Jackson) 13:266.

94. Cf. the use of “distinctive” in Letter to John Smith (30 December 1745), *Works* 26:181. Indeed, Wesley tried to unite the various factions of the revival around these doctrines; cf. Letter to Various Clergymen (19 April 1764), *Letters* (Telford) 4:235–39.

95. Cf. *The Character of a Methodist*, §1, *Works* 9:33; *Advice to the People Called Methodist*, §9, *Works* 9:125; and *A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion, Pt. III*, §I.9, *Works* 11:277.

96. *Journal* (5 April 1768), *Journal* (Curnock) 5:254. Cf. *The Character of a Methodist*, §1, *Works* 9:33; *A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion, Part III*, §9, *Works* 11:277; and Sermon 123, “On Knowing Christ After the Flesh,” §§4–5, *Works* 4:99–100.

97. Letter to Mary Bishop (7 February 1778), *Letters* (Telford) 6:297–98.

98. *Letter to the Bishop of Gloucester*, intro., *Works* 11:467.

99. Sermon 55, “On the Trinity,” §17, *Works* 2:384.

100. Cf. Preface to “An Extract from the Life of Mr. Thomas Firmin,” *Works* (Jackson) 14:293.

101. *Principles of a Methodist*, Preface, 3, *Works* 9:49.

102. *Letter to a Roman Catholic*, §17, *Works* (Jackson) 10:85–86.

103. Cf. Sermon 92, “On Zeal,” *Works* 3:308–21, which recognizes the importance of zeal for good works, but focuses on the dangers of false zeal. See also his desire to avoid party zeal in *Plain Account of the People Called Methodists*, §V, *Works* 9:265–66.

104. Letter to “John Smith” (25 June 1746), §2, *Works* 26:197.

105. *Letter to a Roman Catholic*, §2, *Works* (Jackson) 10:80.

106. Cf. Letter to Rev. Plenderlieth (23 May 1768), *Letters* (Telford) 5:90.

107. Sermon 39, “Catholic Spirit,” §§I.4–5, *Works* 2:84.

108. *Ibid.*, §I.10, *Works* 2:86.

109. Note that Wesley believed that, in biblical use, “heresy” did not mean holding an erroneous opinion, but creating uncharitable divisions. He argued that the former definition was contrived to deprive the masses of the benefit of private judgement (*NT Notes*, 1 Cor. 11:18, Titus 3:10).

110. For an analysis of this concept in Wesley see Leon O. Hynson, “John Wesley’s Concept of Liberty of Conscience,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 7 (1972): 36–46.

111. Sermon 39, “Catholic Spirit,” §III.1, *Works* 2:92.

112. *Ibid.*, *Works* 2:93.

113. *Letter to a Roman Catholic*, §11, *Works* (Jackson) 10:82.

114. *Advice to the People Called Methodists*, §23, *Works* 9:130.

115. *Cf. A Second Letter to the Author of Enthusiasm of Methodists*, §44, *Works* 11:423, where he denies that his adoption of a more catholic spirit has led him to reject any attempts to convert others from different communions. Perhaps the most disconcerting aspect of Wesley’s explication of a catholic spirit is that he does not seem to admit that such dialogue with others may rightly lead to a changing of *his* mind!

116. Hurley, “Introduction,” *John Wesley’s Letter to a Roman Catholic* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968), 38.

117. Assman, “Is ‘Social Holiness’ Enough?—A Catholic Reading,” in *Faith Born in the Struggle for Life*, edited by Dow Kirkpatrick (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 26–37; here 29.