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**RESPONSIBLE GRACE:  
THE SYSTEMATIC NATURE OF  
WESLEY’S THEOLOGY RECONSIDERED**

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An essay investigating the systematic nature of John Wesley’s theology must strike many readers as misconceived. Wesley is widely respected as an evangelist and the organizer of a renewal movement within Anglicanism; however, even his strongest defenders are often willing to concede that, far from being a creative and systematic thinker, he was a third-rank theologian. There are two reasons for such an evaluation. In the first place, rather than pursuing theology primarily in dialogue with and in the scholarly language of professional theologians, Wesley opted for what Albert Outler has called a “folk theology,” expressing the Christian message in its fullness and integrity in “plain words for plain people.” Secondly, Wesley never composed a *summa*, i.e., a systematic work embracing the whole range of Christian revelation and relating it to the other areas of human knowledge.

**NEW PERSPECTIVES ON  
THE NATURE OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY**

In reopening the question of the systematic nature of Wesley’s theology, we are not challenging the two characteristics of his

theology just noted. Such a challenge is neither possible nor desirable. Rather, we want to challenge the model against which Wesley's theology was measured and found wanting. This model, whether in the form of a Thomist *Summa* or a Hegelian *Enzyklopädie*, has reigned throughout most of the history of medieval and modern Christian thought. The central premise of this model is that the ideal approach to theology is one concerned with: (a) the systematic summary 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.

One of the most exciting and significant developments in recent discussion of the nature of theology is a growing rejection of this once-dominant model of theological reflection. In its place is emerging an understanding of the task of scholarly theology that is "practical."<sup>1</sup> For this approach, the ultimate value of theological reflection is not to be found in its abstract theoretical moments, but rather in the use of the results of such moments for making critiques of and establishing norms for contemporary church discourse and life. The overarching goal of theology is to bring the tradition of Christian doctrine and the skills of disciplined thought to bear on the practical problems of the contemporary Christian community. Likewise, the goal of theological education is not primarily the memorization of a system of theology, but rather the cultivation of an ability to make theologically responsible judgments about contemporary Christian life and practice.

From the perspective of this new model, the criteria for being a scholarly and systematic theologian would undergo a corresponding change. The key questions would become: (1) whether the person used critically assessed methods in drawing on the Christian tradition, (2) whether he or she followed theologically responsible methods for weighing evidence in making occasional (i.e., situation-related) judgments, and (3) whether there was a consistency of perspective among the various occasional judgments.

The third question, dealing with consistency of perspective, has been most helpfully framed in terms of the “orienting concept” to be discerned in one’s theological reflection.<sup>2</sup> An orienting concept is not simply one topic among others to be discussed in a systematic theology. Rather, it is an expression of often primarily implicit convictions and provides the integrative thematic perspective in light of which all other theological concepts and judgments are given their relative meaning or value. Examples of such orienting concepts would include the concept of justification by faith, which provides the coherence to all Luther’s theological reflection, and the concept of the sovereignty of God, which provides Calvin with his unique perspective on all of Christian doctrine.<sup>3</sup> Discerning such an orienting concept would thus be a crucial step in determining whether a theologian merited consideration as a scholarly and systematic theologian under the new model being developed.

### **WESLEY AS A SCHOLARLY AND SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGIAN**

What would be the effect on the conventional negative evaluation of Wesley as a scholarly and systematic theologian if this new model of theological reflection were accepted as valid?

In the first place, the fact that, far from forming 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 dominant model of theological reflection because of his concern for the vital task of rendering theological judgments on the life and practice of the church. Under the new model such an approach would be applauded *provided* it were carried out in a scholarly and systematic manner (as defined by this approach).

Can Wesley’s theology meet this provision? we noted earlier that there are three basic questions to be addressed in this regard. Concerning the first question on methods of researching tradition, it has been repeatedly demonstrated that Wesley pursued his theological reflection in light of the most responsible methods of research of his day. If anything, the answer to the second question on methods of theological argumentation is even clearer. The one

aspect of Wesley's theological method that has been most widely acclaimed is his self-critical awareness of the relative roles of the various sources of theology in formulating a theological judgment—i.e., the Wesleyan Quadrilateral.<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, the third question—whether one can discern an orienting concept that provides a consistency to Wesley's occasional theological judgments—has rarely been addressed, even by those involved in the recent renewed considerations of Wesley's theology. The major reason is that this recent work has largely limited itself to exposing and defending Wesley's justification and sanctification. While it is true that Wesley himself understood the core of his theology to lie in the order of salvation, it can be argued that his contribution to theology goes far beyond this locus.<sup>5</sup> Within his works one can find treatments of almost every major theological issue. Moreover, the topics and arrangement of his second series of sermons resemble the classical Protestant “salvation history” model of a dogmatic theology text. As such, it is entirely legitimate to pursue our re-evaluation of Wesley as a systematic theologian. As suggested above, the outcome of any such re-evaluation will hinge on whether it can be demonstrated that Wesley utilized, at least implicitly, a central orienting concept in rendering his occasional theological judgments.

### **RESPONSIBLE GRACE—WESLEY'S ORIENTING CONCEPT**

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

The orienting concept we are calling “responsible grace: is not simply a doctrine discussed by Wesley. It is a fundamental conviction about 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 Saint Augustine: “He that made us without ourselves, will not save us without ourselves.” 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>6</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 nevertheless a gift that calls us to respond and to take responsibility (God will not save us without ourselves).

In the first place, Wesley was utterly convinced that human beings have neither the existing moral purity to merit salvation nor the power to achieve such purity on their own. 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. Salvation, indeed even the desire for salvation, is fundamentally a free gift of God offered to undeserving human persons. 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. Clearly, the theme of grace was central to Wesley’s preaching and theological reflection.

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, although 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. The gift of grace upon which salvation depends operates so as to *empower* us to respond without *compelling* us to obey.<sup>7</sup> By means of prevenient grace, God acts upon every human person to enable her or him to enter into a saving relationship. However, “God does not continue to act upon the soul, unless the soul re-acts upon God” (“The Great Privilege of Those That Are Born of God”). 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. 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.” Wesley gives a detailed description of this tension in his sermon, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation”:

[First,] in as much 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.

In Brief, Wesley understood the essential Christian message to be one of God-given grace, but grace which both called for and empowered human response, thereby preserving human responsibility. We believe the title “Responsible Grace” captures well this perspective. It places primary emphasis on God’s indispensable gift of gracious empowerment while carefully qualifying this empowerment as one that enables rather than overrides human responsibility. Moreover, this title invites ready and insightful comparison with parallel formulations for Lutheranism (unmerited or free grace), Calvinism and universalism (sovereign grace), traditional Roman Catholicism (infused grace), etc.

### **THE ORIENTING CONCEPT AT WORK**

It should be evident by now that the dialectic between grace and responsibility that we are terming “responsible grace” is present in Wesley’s theology. What remains to be shown is that this conviction functioned as an orienting concept, providing the basic consistency between Wesley’s various theological decisions and formulations. Obviously, there is not space for an exhaustive survey of Wesley’s theological reflections in this regard. Accordingly, we will focus on his doctrine of God and his doctrine of salvation.

*Doctrine of God.* Wesley’s position regarding the various aspects of the doctrine of God has been chosen for first consideration because it provides the theological basis for his more extended discussion of the order of salvation. 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. Failure to make this relation would ultimately lead to an abstract and deterministic view of sovereignty which would undermine both God's justice and God's love. It would also destroy human responsibility.

Moving beyond critique, Wesley provided several constructive proposals for understanding the nature of God in a way that holds 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. This view of the unity of will and nature 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>8</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, 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.

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 from "Free Will," 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 it were to say [Scripture] had 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.

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. 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.

*Doctrine of Salvation.* The influence of Wesley's convictions about 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 not merely as deliverance from hell or going to heaven but as present deliverance from sin. "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. In addition, faith is understood as more than mere assent. It is a disposition wrought in our heart that is productive of good works. 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 that transforms our lives is a gift of God.

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>9</sup> It is a dual tension that allows Wesley to integrate "faith alone" with "holy living" in an authentic dialectic. A logical



corollary of this tension is Wesley's affirmation of the third use of the law—to guide Christian life.

The most distinctive element in Wesley's doctrine of salvation is his affirmation of the possibility of entire sanctification. 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 overevaluating the natural human ability to conquer sin. 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.

Wesley states quite clearly that the experience of entire sanctification, if ever obtained, is a gift of God, not a product of human effort. 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). It is clear that his major emphasis 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.<sup>10</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, the absence of which would ultimately lead to the loss of the experience.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, it is characteristic of Wesley that his advice in *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* to those who claimed entire sanctification was to avoid pride, enthusiasm, and antinomianism. 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 obtained."

We believe the preceding analysis of Wesley's doctrines of God and salvation provides sufficient initial warrant for the claim that

Wesley was guided in his occasional theological reflections by a chief orienting concept—responsible grace. To provide further warrant it would be necessary to demonstrate the influence of this concept in other doctrinal areas. It is our conviction that such a demonstration is possible, and we would encourage investigations of such issues as Wesley’s view of sacraments of eschatology from this perspective.

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

If our basic argument to the claim that Wesley’s various situation-related theological reflections were guided by the concept of responsible grace is accepted, 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.

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. Albert Outler has issued a timely call for a new phase in Wesley studies which moves beyond presentations of Wesley as either an idealized cult figure or a mere endorser of particular popular causes. Outler envisions an approach to theology, replacing these earlier phases, wherein Wesley plays the role of mentor or guide—a voice *behind* us saying, “This is the way, walk in it.”<sup>12</sup> In light of the preceding analysis, it can be suggested that the way Wesley would lead us in seeking an ever more consistent and relevant expression of “responsible grace.” At times this may mean correcting or moving beyond Wesley himself. Often it will mean liberating Wesley from the tradition of later Wesleyan theologians, both liberal and conservative, who have lost the dynamic balance embodied in the concept of responsible grace. Always it will mean carrying out our theological reflections in a way that addresses the burning needs of the present church and the world.

## NOTES

1. Examples of this new approach in a variety of contexts include: Don S. Browning, *Religious Ethics and Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983); George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Doctrine in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984); and James D. and Evelyn E. Whitehead, *Method in Ministry: Theological Reflection and Christian Ministry* (New York: Seabury, 1980). The most detailed defense and elaboration of this type of approach is found in two works by Gerhard Sauter: *Wissenschaftstheoretische Kritik der Theologie: Die Theologie und die Neuere Wissenschaftstheoretische Diskussion* (Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1973); and *Arbeitsweisen Systematischer Theologie: Eine Anleitung* (Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1976).
2. See especially Sauter, *Arbeitsweisen*, 19.
3. On Luther see *Christian Dogmatics*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 2:130. On Calvin see Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought: From Its Judaic and Hellenistic Origins to Existentialism* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), 262–63.
4. On both of these points see Colin W. Williams, *John Wesley's Theology Today* (New York: Abingdon, 1960), 23–38.
5. This and other interpretations of Wesley are derived from his *Works*, available in various editions, which are not cited here but are available on request.
6. Albert C. Outler, *Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville: Tidings, 1975), 35.
7. 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: Theology in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983), 33. We believe the second interpretation Langford mentions is clearly the most adequate and consider the current essay a validation of that judgment.
8. Cf. M. Douglas Meeks, *The Future of the Methodist Theological Traditions* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), 29–30.
9. The best exposition of this dual tension is Harald Lindström, *Wesley and Sanctification: A Study in the Doctrine of Salvation* (Wilmore, Ky.: Francis Asbury Publ. Co., 1981), 83–104, 213.
10. However, Wesley himself believed the experience was possible prior to death and attributed the alternative opinion, held by his brother, to an absolutist view of perfection. See Williams, *Wesley's Theology*, 169.
11. 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 (“On Perfection” and “The Repentance of Believers”). See John L. Peters, *Christian Perfection and American Methodism* (New York: Abingdon, 1956), 39–46.
12. Albert C. Outler. “A new Future for Wesley Studies: An Agenda for ‘Phase III,’” in Meeks, *Methodist Theological Traditions*, 34–52.