

A mosaic artwork featuring a central dove with a golden halo, set against a background of yellow and red tiles. A branch with red and yellow leaves extends from the left side. The entire scene is framed by a dark, arched border. A small copyright symbol is visible in the upper left corner.

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# Holy Trinity: Holy People

The Theology of Christian Perfecting

T.A. NOBLE

# Holy Trinity: Holy People

# The Didsbury Lectures

## *Series Preface*

The Didsbury Lectures, delivered annually at Nazarene Theological College, Manchester, are now a well-established feature on the theological calendar in Britain. The lectures are planned primarily for the academic and church community in Manchester but through their publication have reached a global readership.

The name “Didsbury Lectures” was chosen for its double significance. Didsbury is the location of Nazarene Theological College, but it was also the location of Didsbury College (sometimes known as Didsbury Wesleyan College), established in 1842 for training Wesleyan Methodist ministers.

The Didsbury Lectures were inaugurated in 1979 by Professor F. F. Bruce. He was followed annually by highly regarded scholars who established the series’ standard. All have been notable for making high calibre scholarship accessible to interested and informed listeners.

The lectures give a platform for leading thinkers within the historic Christian faith to address topics of current relevance. While each lecturer is given freedom in choice of topic, the series is intended to address topics that traditionally would fall into the category of “Divinity.” Beyond that, the college does not set parameters. Didsbury lecturers, in turn, have relished the privilege of engaging in the dialogue between church and academy.

Most Didsbury lecturers have been well-known scholars in the United Kingdom. From the start, the college envisaged the series as a means by which it could contribute to theological discourse between the church and the academic community more widely in Britain and abroad. The publication is an important part of fulfilling that goal. It remains the hope and prayer of the College that each volume will have a lasting and positive impact on the life of the church, and in the service of the gospel of Christ.

1979	Professor F. F. Bruce†	<i>Men and Movements in the Primitive Church</i>
1980	The Revd Professor I. Howard Marshall	<i>Last Supper and Lord’s Supper</i>
1981	The Revd Professor James Atkinson†	<i>Martin Luther: Prophet to the Church Catholic</i>
1982	The Very Revd Professor T. F. Torrance†	<i>The Mediation of Christ</i>
1983	The Revd Professor C. K. Barrett†	<i>Church, Ministry and Sacraments in the New Testament</i>
1984	The Revd Dr A. R. G. Deasley	<i>The Shape of Qumran Theology</i>
1985	Dr Donald P. Guthrie†	<i>The Relevance of John’s Apocalypse</i>
1986	Professor A. F. Walls	<i>The Nineteenth-Century Missionary Movement**</i>
1987	The Revd Dr A. Skevington Wood†	<i>Reason and Revelation</i>
1988	The Revd Professor Morna D. Hooker	<i>Not Ashamed of the Gospel: New Testament Interpretations of the Death of Christ</i>

1989	The Revd Professor Ronald E. Clements	<i>Wisdom in Theology</i>
1990	The Revd Professor Colin E. Gunton†	<i>Christ and Creation</i>
1991	The Revd Professor J. D. G. Dunn	<i>Christian Liberty: A New Testament Perspective</i>
1992	The Revd Dr P. M. Bassett	<i>The Spanish Inquisition**</i>
1993	Professor David J. A. Clines	<i>The Bible in the Modern World</i>
1994	The Revd Professor James B. Torrance†	<i>Worship, Community, and the Triune God of Grace</i>
1995	The Revd Dr R. T. France†	<i>Women in the Church's Ministry</i>
1996	Professor Richard Bauckham	<i>God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament</i>
1997	Professor H. G. M. Williamson	<i>Variations on a Theme: King, Messiah and Servant in the Book of Isaiah</i>
1998	Professor David Bebbington	<i>Holiness in Nineteenth Century England</i>
1999	Professor L. W. Hurtado	<i>At the Origins of Christian Worship</i>
2000	Professor Clark Pinnock†	<i>The Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness</i>
2001	Professor Robert .P Gordon	<i>Holy Land, Holy City: Sacred Geography and the Interpretation of the Bible</i>
2002	The Revd Dr Herbert McGonigle	<i>John Wesley**</i>
2003	Professor David F. Wright†	<i>What Has Infant Baptism Done to Baptism? An Enquiry at the End of Christendom</i>
2004	The Very Revd Dr Stephen S. Smalley	<i>Hope for Ever: The Christian View of Life and Death</i>
2005	The Rt Revd Professor N. T. Wright	<i>Surprised by Hope</i>
2006	Professor Alan P. F. Sell	<i>Nonconformist Theology in the Twentieth Century</i>
2007	Dr Elaine Storkey	<i>Sin and Social Relations**</i>
2008	Dr Kent E. Brower	<i>Living as God's Holy People: Holiness and Community in Paul</i>
2009	Professor Alan Torrance	<i>Religion, Naturalism, and the Triune God: Confronting Scylla and Charybdis**</i>
2010	Professor George Brooke	<i>The Dead Sea Scrolls and Christians Today**</i>
2011	Professor Nigel Biggar	<i>Between Tribe and Cosmopolis: A Theology of the Nation**</i>
2012	Dr Thomas A. Noble	<i>Holy Trinity: Holy People: The Historic Doctrine of Christian Perfecting</i>
2013	Professor Gordon Wenham	
2014	Professor Frances Young	
2015	Professor Elaine Graham	

\*\* not yet published

† deceased

Holy Trinity: Holy People  
The Theology of Christian Perfecting

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*In Memoriam*

Hugh Rae (1921–2009)

*College Principal whose cheerful wit,  
perceptive wisdom, and warm humanity  
reflected the perfect love of God*

# Preface

To be invited to give the thirty-fourth series of Didsbury Lectures at Nazarene Theological College, Manchester in October 2012 was for me a great privilege and delight. The institution of the lecture series in 1979 was at the suggestion of my colleague, Dr Kent Brower, with the advice of his mentor, Prof. F. F. Bruce, who gave the first series. It was then my duty as dean of the college to invite and host the first ten lecturers, including my own former professor, T. F. Torrance. Later teachers of mine included in the series were Prof. J. B. Torrance and Prof. David F. Wright.

Our original intention was to call the series the Frame Lectures, to commemorate the founder of the college, Dr George Frame, but he refused to have any memorials. Had we waited a short time, he would not have been able to stop us! Instead however, since the Church of the Nazarene stands in the Wesleyan tradition, and is now a member of the World Methodist Council, we decided to call the series the “Didsbury Lectures” to commemorate the former Methodist Didsbury College, famous in its day for the Greek scholar, J. H. Moulton, and the theologian, William Burt Pope. Five of the first ten Didsbury lecturers were Methodists.

In keeping with that heritage, I have addressed in these lectures the concern of the Wesleys and their heirs with Christian holiness, and particularly that difficult doctrine of Christian “perfection” which Wesley inherited from the church Fathers. I was in fact asked to address this topic, partly to expand and update the Collins Lectures, which I first gave in 1988 at the then Canadian Nazarene College in Winnipeg (now part of the Ambrose University College in Calgary). I was urged to publish these at that time by the president, Dr Neil Hightower, and the request has come from time to time from various quarters. The same material later formed the substance of the Rothwell Lectures at Southern Nazarene University in Oklahoma in 1995. The late Dr William Greathouse, General Superintendent Emeritus of the Church of the Nazarene, was most enthusiastic and insistent that I should publish them, and even went so far as

## Preface

to reference them in their unpublished privately-circulated version in his recent commentary on Romans, completed not long before he died. I was very conscious, however, that considerable work needed to be done before publication was possible.

In the privately-circulated version, these lectures were used as class texts for students at master's level at the college and also where I now teach, at Nazarene Theological Seminary, Kansas City. They have also served as a reasonably comprehensive introduction to Christian Theology for those whose undergraduate studies were in other disciplines. I have therefore retained chapter 1 on theological method, but this covers matters that are only preliminary. Too much so-called theology gets bogged down in these epistemological issues (like Christian in the Slough of Despond!) and never gets to real theology. The original Collins Lectures form the substance of chapter 1 and chapters 6 to 8, although much has been re-written. Chapters 2 to 5—summarizing the biblical and historical background, Wesley's own doctrine, and a contemporary reformulation of that—have been added. Chapter 9 is new.

My debts are great. My grounding in the Wesleyan tradition came primarily through the preaching of Dr Sydney Martin over twenty-five years during my childhood and youth. Following studies specializing in History and Education at the University of Glasgow and some years of teaching, I undertook theological studies at New College, Edinburgh, specializing in Christian Dogmatics under Professor T. F. Torrance. I well remember his encouragement when as a new student I explained to him my interest in investigating the question of Christian "perfection." Whereas some in the Reformed tradition would have discouraged such an interest, Professor Torrance, with his deep knowledge of the Fathers, was very positive. I would love to be able to discuss this book with him now. He also strengthened the conviction, already formed from my contacts with the Reformed tradition, that theology should be about *God* and not primarily about us. He also instilled in me the vision that whatever we evangelicals say about justification and sanctification (our heritage from the Reformation and the Evangelical revival), must be grounded in the patristic "dogma" and therefore be christocentric, and thus trinitarian. It was under his influence that I pursued my own doctoral studies in the Fathers. He also illuminated the obvious truth (obvious once you have seen it!) that Christian theologians ought not to be engaged in the task of perpetuating division within the church of Christ. Certainly, no tradition should simply abandon its insights, but the task of theology, in order "that they all may be

one,” is (as he would say) to “cut behind” our disagreements to the central core of Christian belief that “Jesus Christ is Lord” to see whether we could not resolve our differences. That is the spirit in which I approached these lectures: not to perpetuate a Wesleyan “distinctive” or to glory in our being “different” from others, but to persuade all Christians that this is the heritage of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.

My more immediate thanks are due to Nazarene Theological College, Manchester, for the invitation to give the lectures; to my students over more than three decades in both Manchester and Kansas City for their thought-provoking questions; to my colleague, Dr David Rainey, for reading these chapters and for constructive and always convivial conversation; and to Chris Foster for his work in putting the book into the publisher’s required house-style. As always, my thanks are due to my wife, Elaine, without whose support and encouragement (not to mention her proof-reading) this project would never have been completed.

Thomas A. Noble  
Didsbury, Manchester  
United Kingdom  
September, 2012

# Abbreviations

ANF	<i>Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325.</i> 1867–73. Reprint. Edited by Alexander Robertson and James Donaldson. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004.
C. Ar.	Athanasius, <i>Orationes contra Arianos</i> ( <i>Orations against the Arians</i> )
CCL.	<i>Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina</i>
CD	<i>Church Dogmatics.</i> Karl Barth. Edited by G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956–75.
Civ.	Augustine, <i>De civitate Dei</i> ( <i>The City of God</i> )
Conf.	Augustine, <i>Confessionum libri XIII</i> ( <i>Confessions</i> )
Enarrat. Ps.	Augustine, <i>Enarrationes in Psalmos</i> ( <i>Enarrations on the Psalms</i> )
Ep.	Gregory of Nazianzus, <i>Epistulae</i> ( <i>Epistles</i> )
Epid.	Irenaeus, <i>Epideixis tou apostolikou kerygmatos</i> ( <i>Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching</i> )
Haer.	Irenaeus, <i>Adversus haereses</i> ( <i>Against Heresies</i> )
Herm Mand.	Shepherd of Hermas, <i>Mandate</i>
Herm Vis.	Shepherd of Hermas, <i>Vision</i>
Ign. Eph.	Ignatius, <i>To the Ephesians</i>
NPNF <sup>1</sup>	<i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series.</i> Edited by Philip Schaff. 14 vols. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1886–1900.

## Abbreviations

<i>NPNF</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers</i> , Second Series. 14 vols. Edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1886–1900.
<i>Or.</i>	Gregory of Nazianzus, <i>Orationes (Orations)</i>
<i>Paed.</i>	Clement of Alexandria, <i>Paedagogus</i>
<i>PG</i>	<i>Patrologia Graeca</i> . Edited by J.-P. Migne. 162 vols. Paris: Imprimerie Catholique, 1857–66.
<i>PL</i>	<i>Patrologia Latina</i> . Edited by J.-P. Migne. 217 vols. Paris: Imprimerie Catholique, 1844–55.
<i>Psal. Don.</i>	Augustine, <i>Psalmus contra partem Donati</i>
<i>NIDNTT</i>	<i>New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology</i> . Edited by Colin Brown. 4 vols. Exeter, UK: Paternoster, 1975–78.
<i>Strom.</i>	Clement of Alexandria, <i>Stromata</i>
<i>TDNT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> . Edited by G. Kittel and G. Friedrich. Translated by G. W. Bromiley. 10 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–74.
<i>Trin.</i>	Augustine, <i>De Trinitate (On the Trinity)</i>
<i>Vit. Ant.</i>	Athanasius, <i>Vita Antonii (Life of Anthony)</i>
<i>Vit. Moy.</i>	Gregory of Nyssa, <i>De Vita Moysis (The Life of Moses)</i>
<i>Works (BE)</i>	<i>The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley</i> . 35 vols (projected). Edited by Frank Baker and Richard Heitzenrater <i>et al.</i> Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1984–.
<i>Works (Jackson)</i>	<i>The Works of John Wesley</i> . 14 vols. Edited by Thomas Jackson. 1872. Reprint. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979.

# 1

## Preliminaries

Holiness is one of the core concepts of the Christian faith. It runs like a thread through the whole of the canonical Scriptures where we are taught to think of the God of Israel, named in the New Testament “the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,” as essentially and inherently holy. But because that is so, the people of God are to be holy. Christian theology must therefore include the concept of sanctification, an understanding of the way in which God “makes holy” (*sanctum facere*) not only a people corporately, but each one personally.

But Christians disagree in their teaching on sanctification. Clearly those who follow Christ will and should be changed by becoming his disciples, but in what ways, and how far? How like their Master can Christians become in this life? How well can they reflect the love of their heavenly Father? How far can they be filled with his Spirit? And can we possibly dare to speak of Christian “perfection”?

Several introductory books in recent decades have tried to set out the differing opinions on this, particularly among the heirs of the Reformation, evangelical Protestants. In *Justification and Sanctification* (1983) Peter Toon dealt with Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican, and Wesleyan views.<sup>1</sup> Gundry’s *Five Views on Sanctification* (1987) presented what were called the Wesleyan, Reformed, Pentecostal, Keswick, and Augustinian-Dispensational views. Donald Alexander’s *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification* (1988) included the same views, except that it replaced the last of these with the “Contemplative” view. J. I. Packer in

1. Books referred to in this paragraph are all listed in the Bibliography.

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his book *A Passion for Holiness* (1992)<sup>2</sup> carried on the Reformed (or, more specifically, Calvinist) tradition of Bishop J. C. Ryle's book, *Holiness*, written to oppose the teaching given at the Keswick convention. Archbishop Rowan Williams was one of the compilers of a book sub-titled *The Anglican Quest for Holiness* (2001)<sup>3</sup> and an ecumenical and scholarly approach was taken in another compilation edited by Stephen Barton, *Holiness, Past and Present* (2003). The list could be extended.<sup>4</sup>

### a) Wesley's Catholic and Evangelical Doctrine

The purpose of this book is to look particularly at the historic Christian teaching on Christian holiness as it was formulated by John Wesley. Stanley Hauerwas commented that in spite of the difficulties in Wesley's doctrine, particularly the troublesome word "perfection," he continued to think "that Wesley was right to hold that the peculiar contribution of Methodists to the church universal lies in our struggle to recover the centrality of holiness as integral to the Christian life."<sup>5</sup> William J. Abraham has characterized Wesley's doctrine of perfection as "an exercise in ascetic theology, which was also a form of realized eschatology that posited a distinctive phenomenology of the Christian life." He argues that the recovery and reformulation of this doctrine requires "much more serious endeavors in historical and systematic theology," and particularly calls for attention to "Methodist dogmatics."<sup>6</sup> Wesleyan theologians such as Hauerwas, Dunning, Long, and Lowery have addressed the doctrine of Christian perfection creatively in the context of Moral Theology (*alias* Christian Ethics).<sup>7</sup> The aim here is to develop our understanding of the doctrine in the context of doctrinal theology, otherwise known as Christian Dogmatics. Samuel M. Powell differentiates "academic theology," which is close to philosophy of religion (and, we might add, apologetics), from confessional "church theology."<sup>8</sup> The former seems to attract much attention today, but the latter, church dogmatics, requires much more work for the sake of the

2. American title: *Rediscovering Holiness*.

3. The other editors were Geoffrey Rowell and Kenneth Stevenson.

4. Most recently, see Tidball, *Message of Holiness*.

5. Hauerwas, *Sanctify Them*, 124.

6. Abraham, "Christian Perfection," 597f.

7. Dunning, *Divine Image*; Long, *Wesley's Moral Theology*; Lowery, *Salvaging Wesley's Agenda*.

8. Powell, *Theology of Christian Spirituality*.

church. Philosophical theology may help to keep the wolves at bay (except of course when it is the work of a wolf in sheep's clothing!), but it is church doctrinal theology or dogmatics, working closely with biblical theology, that provides food for the sheep.

In keeping with Wesley's "catholic spirit," we will not present his doctrine of Christian sanctification as merely a series of sectarian "distinctives" of interest only to Wesleyans, but as a view that stands within the mainstream tradition of the Christian church. Sadly, the Wesleyan view has too often been presented in a sectarian way. In the disputes among evangelical Christians in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it was often attacked as "sinless perfection," and some of Wesley's heirs deserved to be rebuked for that distortion of his teaching. But unlike his more unbalanced followers, John Wesley was widely read and deeply immersed in the church Fathers and was an Oxford scholar who read the Fathers and the Scriptures in the original languages. He insisted on using the easily misunderstood word "perfection" because of his commitment to Scripture as "a man of one book" (*homo unius libri*). The Bible was Wesley's source of authority for his doctrine, interpreted in the light of the early Fathers and of his own tradition in the Church of England. His doctrine of Christian "perfection" was not, therefore, a new doctrine; it was simply his formulation of the doctrine within the mainstream tradition of the church catholic. The aim here therefore is not just to carry on a conversation within the Wesleyan tradition, but across the church.<sup>9</sup>

One of the key tasks of this book will be to understand from Wesley's own writings what he actually taught. It is necessary to distinguish that from the simplified (and indeed simplistic) teaching of some later teachers who regarded themselves as "Wesleyan."<sup>10</sup> But we will approach Wesley through first undertaking a survey of the ancient Christian tradition that shaped his interpretation of Scripture, noting particularly how far he was echoing the teaching of the Fathers of the church. But of course Wesley was not only an enthusiast for the "primitive Christianity" of the early centuries: he was also an evangelical Protestant. While listening to a reading from Martin Luther, he underwent a conversion in which he trusted in "Christ alone" and received assurance of the forgiveness of his sins. He embraced a doctrine of justification by faith, which, he said, did not differ

9. For an introductory textbook for students written from within the Wesleyan tradition, see Leclerc, *Christian Holiness*.

10. We will use "Wesleyan" rather than "Methodist" since not all Wesleyans are Methodists and not all Methodists are Wesleyan.

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by a “hair’s breadth” from that of John Calvin. It is this embracing of both the Fathers and the Reformers which makes him a figure of great ecumenical significance. His most original contribution to Christian thought was in “practical divinity.”<sup>11</sup> He tried to think through how to integrate the teaching of the Fathers and the Reformers in this area of practical Christian living which Protestants have long referred to as “sanctification” and which today is often included in studies of “spirituality.”<sup>12</sup> George Croft Cell, one of the pioneers of the twentieth-century rediscovery of Wesley as a theologian, famously wrote: “The Wesleyan reconstruction of the Christian ethic of life is an original and unique synthesis of the Protestant ethic of grace with the Catholic ethic of holiness.”<sup>13</sup> That may not be exactly the best wording, but it does indicate that Wesley was what Kenneth Collins calls a “conjunctive” theologian.<sup>14</sup>

Once we have looked at the biblical roots of Wesley’s doctrine, surveyed the earlier heritage of spiritual writers through the patristic and medieval periods, and tried to straighten out the tangled web of misunderstandings and distortions that abound about Wesley’s own teaching at the popular level, we will then consider the limitations and weaknesses in Wesley’s thought. This is important, for the aim is not to champion Wesley against all comers, but to further a deeper understanding among Christians that will help us all in the practical matter of following Christ. Therefore, we must recognize that, while Wesley was a careful scholar and a clear thinker, he was a man of his time. And while he should be regarded (in David McEwan’s phrase) as truly a “pastoral theologian”<sup>15</sup> who took consistent theological positions, yet he was not a dogmatian. He did not engage in the kind of Christian dogmatics that tries to think out afresh Christian theology as an organic whole encapsulated in the creeds. He was clearly trinitarian, he clearly embraced orthodox Chalcedonian Christology, and he clearly stood in the Reformation tradition when it came to the doctrines of the atonement and justification by faith. But as a practical theologian of his time, it never occurred to him (or any of his contemporaries) to think through deeply and rigorously how his particular doctrines of “faith, repentance, and holiness” formed an organic whole with

11. See Langford, *Practical Divinity*.

12. Among recent works on Christian spirituality by Wesleyan theologians, see Collins, *Exploring Christian Spirituality*, and Powell, *Theology of Christian Spirituality*.

13. Cell, *Rediscovery*, 347.

14. See Collins, *Theology of John Wesley*, 4f.

15. McEwan, *Pastoral Theologian*.

the theology of the creeds.<sup>16</sup> In fact much theology since the Reformation has tended to regard the central doctrines of the faith as “ivory tower” matters. We have so often taken the trinitarian heart of the Christian faith for granted in order to get on with what is thought to be more practical and relevant. Specifically in Wesley’s case, he did not engage in thinking through in depth and explaining how his doctrine of Christian perfection flowed out of these central Christian beliefs in the atonement, the incarnation, and the Trinity. As a man of his time, he cannot be blamed for that.

But that is the aim of this book. We begin with the belief of the mainstream of the Christian church—from the Apostolic Fathers through Clement and Athanasius, the Cappadocians, and through the spiritual writers of the Middle Ages up to Wesley and beyond—that Christians may be truly sanctified not only in outward consistency of conduct, but inwardly in such a way as to be truly among the “pure in heart.” That is not a universal view, of course. Three of the church’s greatest theologians, Augustine, Luther, and Calvin, question whether this level of Christian holiness is possible in this life. Our intention here is not to engage directly in polemics with these major doctors of the church, but we will keep their more pessimistic doctrine in mind as a helpful and necessary corrective and balance as we concentrate on the positive theological development of the long tradition from the Greek Fathers through the medieval writers to Wesley.

But the aim is not just historical. We do not have a merely antiquarian interest in Wesley or any of his predecessors. The aim is to address for today the theological question: what basis is there for this positive view of Christian holiness in the central Christian doctrines—atonement, incarnation, and Trinity? If we truly grasp God’s action in the world in the incarnation of the Son by the power of the Holy Spirit in order to fulfill the redemptive will of the Father, does that imply that *already*, even in advance of the death of our bodies and our future resurrection, Christians may be pure in heart? Does the doctrine of the Trinity, focused in salvation from the Father in the Incarnate Son by the Spirit, and taken to be the comprehensive doctrine uniting the whole field of Christian theology, give us a basis for such a hope? Or does the trinitarian structure of Christian theology rather support the belief that the Fall is *so* deep and sin *so* entrenched that we can never love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength while we exist in these mortal bodies? Needless to say,

16. See the first two chapters of Campbell’s, *Wesleyan Beliefs*, on the “Common Christian Beliefs” and the “Distinctively Methodist Beliefs” in Wesley’s theology.

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to address such questions within the scope of one little book calls for a broad-brush approach, or, to vary the metaphor, a wide-angle lens. The kind of academic specialism encouraged by minutely careful scholarship will (no doubt) find numerous points for critique. But the church, and particularly the student and the “intelligent lay reader,” need to see the big picture. So we will take the risk.

First however, to pursue this aim we need to be clear on how to proceed and it will clarify the procedure we are going to follow to articulate in this first chapter some axioms of theological method. Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and liberal Protestant theologians will not agree fully with these, but here we are taking the Reformation view that these are essential to doing theology in a Christian way. We are not breaking new ground here, but simply attempting to state in a contemporary way the standard Reformation, evangelical position that Wesley shares.

### **b) First Axiom: Holy Scripture**

The first axiom is that the only source of Christian doctrine is the biblical revelation. That is the Reformation position that Wesley accepted as a loyal member of the Church of England and it is clearly expressed in Article IV of the Thirty-Nine Articles:

*Of the Sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures for Salvation.* Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation; so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation.

This article asserts that it is part of the faith that the articles or doctrines of the faith must either be explicit in the canonical Scriptures, or implied by them. That is the evangelical or Protestant position of the Reformation. Eastern Orthodoxy may regard the historic ecumenical councils of the church as having equal authority, and Roman Catholics may ascribe to the Pope a certain infallibility. But for Protestants, the evangelical doctrine of the Reformation is that no pope or bishop, superintendent, council, or assembly is superior to the authority of the Word of God as expressed in Holy Scripture. The implication is that no church tradition formulated in any creed or confession or article of faith or statement of doctrine, be it ever so venerable or issued by any ecclesiastical dignitary, be he ever so high, is in principle final and binding, definitive and unrevisable. Every

statement of doctrine made by Christians after the passing of the apostles is subject to the authority of the Word of God in Holy Scripture and must be evaluated as an expression of its teaching. The Bible is the one and only source and the one and the only ultimate criterion of Christian doctrine. God has spoken through the prophets and apostles, through the Old Testament and the New, and in drawing up the canon, the church, far from conferring authority on the Scriptures, recognized their authority as the voice and the Word of God.<sup>17</sup> This Reformation position, *sola scriptura*, does not, however, imply the later rationalistic understanding of “inerrancy” developed specifically within American (as distinct from European) Calvinism. Nor does it mean to say that there is no role for church tradition, and we shall come to that positive understanding of its role shortly.

But before we look at the necessary role of the church, several implications follow from this axiom about Scripture. First, it follows that it is not the task of theology merely to expound and elaborate and refine the church’s doctrine: that would be a traditional Roman Catholic view of its function. Rather, this gives dogmatic theology a critical function, namely, in every generation to judge the doctrinal statements of the church against the criterion of Holy Scripture. Biblical exegesis, that is to say, must not be held in captivity to dogmatics, as it was in the pre-Reformation Catholic church or (in effect) in the age of Protestant scholasticism. As far as within us lies, exegesis must not become *eisegesis*, reading *into* the text our own doctrinal formulations. Rather, with the reverent, godly use of the tools of biblical criticism, purged from unbelieving and secular presuppositions, the text must be allowed to speak its own message and we must strive to allow it to call in question our understanding of the truth, our doctrinal formulations, so that they may be deepened and expanded and, if need be, corrected. In this way an ongoing dialogue takes place in which the living church of God with its doctrinal formulations listens again and afresh in every generation to the Word of God, and, in the light of new questions and new insights, deepens and corrects its understanding of the truth. That is the ongoing task that has been described as the hermeneutical circle or spiral,<sup>18</sup> and it is this living conversation that gives evangelical Protestant theology its vitality.<sup>19</sup>

17. For Wesley’s view of the authority of Scripture, see Jones, *Conception and Use*, also Jones, “The Rule of Scripture,” 39–61, and Bullen, *Man of One Book*.

18. See Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*.

19. See McGrath, *Dangerous Idea*, on the revolutionary Protestant belief that each person could interpret the Bible.

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To apply this directly to the doctrine of Christian sanctification, this means, to begin with, that biblical phrases such as “wholly sanctify,” “filled with the Holy Spirit,” “perfect love,” “pure in heart,” “indwelling sin,” or “the mind of the flesh,”<sup>20</sup> have a priority and authority that cannot be accorded to such phrases as “the second blessing,”<sup>21</sup> “the sinful nature,”<sup>22</sup> or “original sin.”<sup>23</sup> These latter words and phrases are not found in Scripture. Whether they offer a legitimate interpretation of Scripture is up for discussion, but they do not carry the same authority as the biblical phrases. Christians are free to reject this later terminology, but they are bound to come to *some* understanding of the biblical phrases, such as what Paul meant when he prayed that the Thessalonians be “wholly sanctified” or (as Luther translated it) “sanctified through and through.”<sup>24</sup>

Secondly, this axiom implies that not only can Christian doctrine not be based merely on church tradition, but it certainly cannot be based on secular thinking. The doctrines of the church cannot be based on any metaphysical system, whether Platonist, Hegelian, or any other, nor can Christian theology find its source in the natural sciences, whether psychology or sociology, biology or cosmology. That does not mean to say that philosophy and science are to be excluded from the *articulation* of Christian theology. The Fathers used Platonism in this way, “spoiling the Egyptians” as they put it, and we may *use* other philosophies and the sciences in our contextualization of the Christian faith in today’s multicultural world. But we are not to draw the doctrines of the faith from any of these. These may *shape* our expression of doctrine, but they are not *sources* of Christian theology. Applying that specifically to the doctrine of the Christian life, we may for example make use of psychology in articulating our understanding of Christian sanctification, but we cannot *build* our understanding of Christian sanctification on this modern secular science. The doctrine of the Christian life, including the corporate life of the church as well as our regeneration, justification, sanctification, and the

20. 1 Thess 5:23; Acts 2:4; 4:8; etc.; 1 John 4:17f.; Matt 5:8; Rom 7:17, 20, and 8:7.

21. Wesley had an ambivalent attitude to this term. Letters: 24 March 1757, L., III, 212; 3 April 1772, L., V, 315; 8 Oct. 1774, L., VI, 116.

22. The NIV unfortunately interprets *sarx* in various NT passages as “the sinful nature.” This is a misleading interpretation, not a strict translation.

23. According to Williams, *Ideas of the Fall*, 327, the phrase *originale peccatum* first occurs in a discussion of Rom 7:7–25 in Augustine’s treatise *de diversis quaestionibus ad Simplicianum* written in AD 397.

24. *Holoteleis* is an adjective meaning “wholly perfect.” “Entirely” avoids confusing “wholly” with “holy.”

work of the Spirit, must be drawn (like every other doctrine of the faith) from the Word of God in Holy Scripture. It is a doctrine of the faith, not a scientific theory.

### **c) Second Axiom: Tradition**

If the first axiom is the authority of the Bible as the Word of God and its priority over the doctrinal statements handed on to us in the tradition of the church, the second is the legitimacy and necessity of church tradition.<sup>25</sup> It is essential that the church should formulate its doctrines in doctrinal statements, creeds, and articles of faith, and hand these on in its tradition from one generation to another. And while in principle the great creeds of the church are revisable and open to correction from further study of Scripture, yet in fact it is almost unthinkable for Christian theology that these should be abrogated or denied.

The historic creeds do not share in the final authority of the Scriptures, but all evangelical traditions follow the Reformers in believing that the ancient creeds are *in fact* a faithful summary of the teaching of the Scriptures and faithfully draw out their implications. They are indeed the church's hermeneutic for the interpretation of Holy Scripture. Even evangelical Protestants in the Anabaptist and Baptist traditions, who refuse to use the creeds in worship or to require subscription to them, generally accept them in fact in that role. But the creeds are always open to criticism. The Chalcedonian Symbol for example, not itself a creed, but a further clarifying of the second article of the Nicene Creed, is often subjected to criticism for the terminology and conceptuality of "two natures" which it employs to speak of the Person of Christ. It is only this freedom to critique the creeds in the light of Holy Scripture that guarantees that theology is a living, open dialogue between the Word of God and the church, with continuing development and increased understanding, and not a dead system of thought to be preserved like some precious antique and passed on undamaged to the next generation.

This idea of doctrinal development was advocated by John Henry Newman in his *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (1845), and he carried it from his Anglican heritage into the Roman Church, thus sowing the seeds that later bore fruit in the Second Vatican Council. But it was endorsed early in the twentieth century by the evangelical theologian, James Orr of Glasgow, in lectures later published as *The Progress of*

25. See Ted Campbell, "The Interpretive Role of Tradition," 63–75.

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*Dogma.* It has indeed become a commonplace that Christian doctrines have developed over the centuries. The doctrine of the Trinity, that God is three Persons but one God, is not stated in so many words in Scripture, but had to be inferred as the *implication* of Scripture in a process of development that reached its climax in the late fourth century. The full doctrine of the Person of Christ as one Person in two natures is similarly not stated in so many words, but had to be drawn out as the implication of Scripture in a process reaching its climax in the middle of the fifth century. The doctrine of the atonement arguably did not begin to be fully developed as a distinct area of study until rigorous thinking was initiated by Anselm's work, *Cur Deus Homo*, in the eleventh century. It is no argument therefore against Wesley's understanding of Christian holiness that he reformulated this ancient Christian doctrine of Christian perfection in the language and concepts of the eighteenth century. Wesley was simply further drawing out and formulating the *implications* of Scripture with reference to Christian sanctification, as the Fathers did with respect to the Trinity, Anselm with respect to the atonement, and Luther with respect to justification by faith.

There is therefore a positive place to be assigned to the role of Christian dogmatics.<sup>26</sup> Over the centuries of the Christian era, it has formulated the major doctrines of the Christian faith in the light of Scripture. In this development over the centuries, it has been self-critical, repeatedly criticizing and developing its formulations. Sometimes, development has gone off in the wrong direction, as in the medieval Roman doctrine of Mary.<sup>27</sup> At times, particularly at the Reformation, whole lines of development have been written off as illegitimate in the light of Scripture. But valid development must continue to take place. In the parting words of John Robinson to the Pilgrim Fathers leaving Leiden on the *Mayflower*, "The Lord has yet more light and truth to shed forth from his Word."<sup>28</sup>

From one point of view, this is the ongoing work analyzed by hermeneutics, the study of methods of interpretation. And interpretation must go on in every age. It is now frequently described as the relating of the two

26. "Dogmatic theology" is a better term than "systematic theology." It implies that theological thinking is not a philosophical or metaphysical system but is centered on the *dogma* ("decree") of the church councils, particularly the Nicene Creed, that declaration of faith which articulates the centre and core of Christian convictions.

27. See Bauckham, *Chosen by God*, on "Mariological Excesses" in the medieval period, and the comment of Karl Barth, *CD*, I, 2, 139: "Mariology is an excrescence, i.e., a diseased construct of theological thought."

28. See the hymn based on these words by George Rawson (Hymn 230 in *Congregational Praise*, 259).

horizons,<sup>29</sup> the first-century world of the New Testament and the present day. Or it may be thought of as the “hermeneutical circle,” or better still, as Grant Osborne suggested, a *spiral* moving round and upwards from interpretation to text to interpretation and so on.<sup>30</sup> But it is more than the interpretation of a text to make it speak to the present day or the relation of two widely separated horizons. If it is to be truly a spiral, penetrating ever more deeply into the truth, the history of interpretation must be taken into account. And it must lead to the distillation of the results of interpretation, the progressively more sophisticated and nuanced formulation of the truth about God in the creeds and later doctrines, while still inevitably limited to the fallible words and limited concepts of human language and culture. And just as the hermeneutical task is never finished, so the task of theology is never finished. In the light of new questions thrown up by changes in human culture, new aspects of Christian truth come to light. Neither Athanasius nor Augustine, neither Luther nor Calvin, neither Wesley nor any theologian since, has penned the last word.

As long as “this present evil age” lasts, the final definitive theology will never be written. The church must constantly live in the expectation of penetrating more deeply into the truth of God revealed once for all in Jesus Christ and expressed once for all in the Holy Scriptures. An important distinction is made here in the words of Jaroslav Pelikan, “Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.” It is not a dead traditionalism we must cultivate, but a deeper study of Christian tradition. Any exposition of Christian theology which only takes note of recent writing and ignores the Fathers and the Reformers is bound to be superficial.

With particular reference to the doctrine of sanctification, this second axiom implies that our tradition should be a living one and not a dead one. A dead orthodoxy is a rigid corpse. Or it may be compared to a family heirloom, an antique increasingly useless and irrelevant, destined eventually for the museum. A dead orthodoxy is expressed in language and categories that have petrified. It imagines that it has said the last and final word and therefore in effect claims final authority for itself. But a living orthodoxy tackles the questions of each new generation. A living tradition goes humbly to Scripture with each new set of questions. It goes

29. The simile of the fusion of horizons seems to have originated with Gadamer in *Truth and Method*: trans. of *Wahrheit und Methode*, and was taken up by Pannenberg and Moltmann. Cf. Thistleton, *Two Horizons*.

30. Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*.

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to learn, and it develops new models and is not afraid to correct and refine or even perhaps to reject old theological categories in the light of deeper study of Scripture. It is faithful to the essential truth of the tradition, but longs to express it more adequately, more scripturally, with greater insight and penetration, more persuasively and compellingly. The Wesleyan tradition then needs to be a living one in ongoing conversation with the church catholic, not a fossilized and isolated one. That is why it is important to seek to penetrate afresh into the heart of Christian faith in Christ and through Christ in the Father by the Spirit, and to see that the truth of Christian holiness is built upon this foundation and no other.

### **d) Third Axiom: Rational Spiritual Experience**

The third axiom of theological method that we will assume here is the role of what we shall call “rational spiritual experience.” This phrase is intended to bring together “reason” and “experience,” which have been misleadingly separated, and to qualify the rational experience we are talking about as “spiritual” or “relational.”<sup>31</sup>

Since the patristic and Wesleyan scholar, Albert Outler, coined the phrase, the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral,” referring to Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience, this has been thought to encapsulate Wesley’s theological method. Outler claimed that this was distinctively Wesleyan: “Thus, we can see in Wesley a distinctive theological method, with Scripture as its preeminent norm but interfaced with tradition, reason and Christian experience as dynamic and interactive aids in the interpretation of the Word of God in Scripture.”<sup>32</sup> He saw three of these factors—Scripture, tradition, and reason—in the classic Anglican methodology of Hooker and commented: “It was Wesley’s special genius that he conceived of adding ‘experience’ to the traditional Anglican triad.” But Outler’s view has now become controversial.<sup>33</sup> Wesley certainly used the four terms, although never all at once, and Anglican theology from the time of Hooker is thought to have operated with Scripture, tradition, and reason,<sup>34</sup> and the claim was that, as an eighteenth-century thinker, Wesley added the fourth,

31. See Miles, “Role of Reason,” 77–106, and Maddox, “The Enriching Role of Experience,” 107–27.

32. Outler, “Wesleyan Quadrilateral,” 9.

33. See Abraham, “Quadrilateral,” and for a recent summary of the discussion, Thompson, “Outler’s Quadrilateral.”

34. See Bauckham and Drewery, *Tradition and Reason*.