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John Wesley's Concept of Biblical Authority

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JOHN WESLEY'S CONCEPT
OF BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

A Research Paper
Presented to
the Faculty of the Department of Theology
Western Evangelical Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Divinity

by
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

I. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The problem of this investigation was to determine the role of the Bible in the teaching of John Wesley in relation to his concept of religious authority; and to ascertain whether the Bible, according to his teaching, was considered as true in whole.

II. JUSTIFICATION OF THE PROBLEM

The justification for this research was based on the following reasons: (1) The importance of the thought of John Wesley to the theological and experiential aspects of modern church history; (2) The relevance of the topic of Biblical authority in view of recent past trends in modern theology; (3) The problems posed concerning the authority and relevance of the Scriptures by the ecumenical movement; and (4) The apparent lack of recent literature concerning the specific subject of Wesley's views on the authority of Scripture.

Wesley's importance. On this subject, Luke Tyerman in his biography of John Wesley, The Life and Times of the Rev. John Wesley, said:

. . . he is now, among all parties,— Churchmen, Methodists and Dissenters, papists, protestants and infidels, statesmen, philosophers and men of letters,— one of the greatest and most interesting studies of the age. The world wishes to know something more

respecting the man, who, under God, was the means of bringing about the greatest reformation of modern times.¹

Francis J. McConnell, in John Wesley, expressed his belief that more has been written about Wesley than any other man of the eighteenth century, excepting only the possibility of some statesmen, scientific thinkers, and military leaders.² From the recognition of men of the stature of McConnell and Tyerman, there seemed to be strong evidence of the importance of John Wesley to understanding theology, even in a modern context. More comments from scholars of repute in various fields could have been quoted to support the importance of the life and work of John Wesley; indeed, W. H. Fitchett took two pages of the "Proem" to his book, Wesley and His Century, in listing the approbations of prominent scholars and thinkers for the influence of John Wesley, not only in religion, but as a primary mover for social and historical progress in England.³ Wesley himself, however, was not the complete end of the study. The teaching of Wesley on the authority of the Bible when any number of other subjects could have been selected came about because of the recent arguments by many within the Christian Church that perhaps not all the teaching of the Bible remains relevant to modern man.⁴

¹L. Tyerman, The Life and Times of the Rev. John Wesley (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1872), I, p. iv.

²Francis J. McConnell, John Wesley (New York: The Abingdon Press, 1939), p. 9.

³W. H. Fitchett, Wesley and His Century (Cincinnati: Jennings and Graham, 1912), pp. 1-2.

⁴Don Neiswender, "Theology at the Vulture Peak," Christianity Today, 12:21 (July 19, 1968), p. 13.

Recent Trends in Theology. Dr. Elton Trueblood recently wrote concerning the "moral predicament" of modern society in the twentieth century that "The trouble . . . seems to come not from the breaking of moral laws but from something far more serious: the rejection of the conception that there is any moral law at all."⁵ The editor of Christianity Today expressed something of the same thought this way:

Rebellion against authority. This phenomenon is not confined to the Church, of course, but it has been strikingly evident there. Rebellion against church authority has been most apparent in the Catholic Church; however, the even more significant denial of the authority of Scripture is affecting Protestants as well as Catholics. In the past, most religious books at least made some claim to be based on Scripture, but this is no longer so. Many people, it seems--even those who call themselves Christians--are not greatly concerned about what the Bible (or the Church) has to say, especially if it conflicts with their own ideas.⁵

These statements and others similar to them seemed to justify the concentration of the study of Wesley to his concept of Biblical authority.

Authority in the Ecumenical Movement. J. Marcellus Kik has expressed the major concern of the evangelical for what he called, "Ecumenical Inclusiveness."

No one will argue that the general tenor of the ecumenical movement is to include a wide variety of beliefs. C. C. Morrison writes, "What, in a united church, shall we do with our differences? There can be only one answer. They must be welcomed and embraced as essential to the fulfillment of the Christian life. Our diversities are not a spiritual liability, but a spiritual asset, of the Christian life."⁷

⁵Elton Trueblood, A Place to Stand (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), p. 16.

⁶"Shaky Seventies for Religious Books," Christianity Today, (editorial unsigned) 14:10 (February 13, 1970), p. 24.

⁷J. Marcellus Kik, Ecumenism and The Evangelical (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1958), pp. 14 and 15.

After stating the general attitude of "ecumenical inclusiveness," Kik continued, summing up the evangelical position on inclusiveness:

While minor differences of beliefs may be included in a Christian movement, surely not major. The evangelical movement has been guilty of separation on apparently minor differences. Of course, real argument issues as to what may be considered a minor or major difference of belief. According to the creeds of historic denominations the norm for judgment is Scripture. The question of authority itself must be considered of prime importance and vital to the very existence of Christianity. . . . The suggestion to find union by "agreeing to disagree" on vital doctrines is unworthy of the Christian church. These concern her confession, her testimony, her witness to the world. An uncertain sound emanating from the church concerning matters that are at the heart and life of her existence will fail to arouse the world to the need of embracing Christianity.⁸

It has been the judgment of men such as Kik that led the present writer to conclude that the study of the topic of authority, and especially Biblical authority would be justified.

Lack of recent study on the topic. The evidence to support this general reason for the study of Wesley's view of Biblical authority was the writer's own impression gained by a survey of the literature available in the area.

III. LIMITATIONS

The problem and research was limited to the view of John Wesley concerning Biblical authority. Particular care was taken to discover what role Scripture took as a basis for veracious authority. Not included in the study were the areas of governmental, or imperial

⁸Ibid., p. 15.

authority; ecclesiastical authority; or the authority of custom. Some discussion about the nature of reason, experience, and tradition as bases of religious authority was included, but only to further understand Wesley's concept of Biblical authority in relation to religious knowledge.

IV. DEFINITION OF TERMS USED

Authority. Authority itself has been defined in a normative definition by Bernard Ramm in his book, The Pattern of Authority, as following:

Authority itself means that right or power to command action or compliance, or to determine belief or custom, expecting obedience from those under authority, and in turn giving responsible account for the claim to right or power.⁹

The more directly applicable division of authority itself to the study was the division Ramm called "veracious authority." The following definition has been included for clarity of the idea of the nature of authority:

Veracious authority (the authority of veracity or truth) is that authority possessed by men, books, or principles which either possess truth or aid in the determination of truth. A man is an authority on a given subject in that he would be more likely to possess the truth about the subject than most other men. A book is authoritative because it is recognized as containing reliable or veracious information. A principle is an authority in the sense that if one would seek the truth he

⁹Bernard Ramm, The Pattern of Authority (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1957), p. 10.

must abide by the principle.¹⁰

That subdivision of authority itself called veracious authority was found to closely correlate to the nature of Biblical authority.

Biblical authority. The question of authority in the Christian religion was closely tied to the revelation of truth as found in the Holy Scriptures. Most serious thinkers have agreed that God is the final authority in religion.¹¹ The problem then logically followed: ". . . in what way does God make known Himself, His mind, and His authority to men generally?"¹² This was done as God revealed Himself through ". . . the Holy Spirit who speaks the divine word of revelation in the prophet or apostle, and who creates the written record of revelation for other generations."¹³ Thus, the principle of authority which was the proper authority for the Christian Church, and which could be properly called "Biblical authority" was held by the writer to be:

. . . the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scriptures, which are the product of the Spirit's revelatory and inspiring action, is the principle of authority for the Christian Church.¹⁴

¹⁰Ibid., p. 12.

¹¹T. Rees, "Authority," The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1960), I, p. 334.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ramm, op. cit., p. 27.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 28.

Experience. The term "experience" was found to be used in a variety of ways. The sense adopted for the investigation was that, not merely of the human experience of the unregenerate natural man, but in the sense of an impartation of spiritual personal life through the truth as vitalized and quickened by the Holy Spirit of God.¹⁵

H. Orton Wiley's comment was especially helpful in relating the experiential aspect of man's relationship to God as a subsidiary source of authority:

Our Lord further emphasized this great truth when He said, If any man willeth to do his will, he shall know of the teaching, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself (John 7:17). Here Christ asserts that the knowledge of God does not come through right ethical and spiritual relationships. Personal knowledge comes not by logical processes but through spiritual contacts. Our Lord further indicates that the pivot of personal knowledge is an obedient will, and that the deepening bond of sympathy makes possible a more intimate communion and an enrichment of personal knowledge. This ethical knowledge growing out of the obedience of faith is, we maintain, a rudimentary but true knowledge of God, and therefore a subsidiary source of Christian theology. We believe with Gerhert, that from it valid conceptions of God may be intellectually constructed, and systematic knowledge may be developed. Then the whole man, personality in all its functions, attains to the possession of divine truth. . . .¹⁶

Reason. Reason is the faculty of the person that performs three important functions, as expressed by John Wesley in Sermon LXX. Those functions were held to be apprehension, judgment, and discourse.¹⁷

¹⁵H. Orton Wiley, Christian Theology (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1967), I, p. 38.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 38-39.

¹⁷William R. Cannon, The Theology of John Wesley (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1945), p. 158.

"By 'apprehension' Wesley means the act of conceiving a thing in the mind. By 'judgment' he means 'the determining that the things before conceived either agree with or differ from each other;' while by 'discourse' he means 'the motion or progress of the mind from one judgment to another.'"¹⁸

The definitions were structured as above with the intent of approximating the definition which Wesley himself would have been most in agreement.

V. SOURCE MATERIALS

The investigation has relied primarily upon the writings of John Wesley, with some reference made to the wide field of literature and scholarly studies which have dealt with the thought of Wesley. Because of the vast amount of material which Wesley either wrote himself, revised, or edited, it was necessary to limit the field of research to some of the more crucial material which Wesley produced.

Primary sources have included The Works of John Wesley in fourteen volumes, edited by Thomas Jackson, published in 1831 and republished by the Zondervan Publishing House;¹⁹ the 1958 edition of the Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament,²⁰ published by Alec R.

¹⁸John Wesley, Sermon LXX, intro. sec. 1. Quoted in W. R. Cannon, Ibid.

¹⁹John Wesley, The Works of John Wesley, Thomas Jackson, ed., (third edition; Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, 1958).

²⁰John Wesley, Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament (Naperville: Alec R. Allenson Incorporated, 1958).

Allenson Inc.; Wesley's Standard Sermons, edited and annotated by Edward H. Sugden and published by The Epworth Press.²¹ The bulk of supportive material has been derived from the Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament and The Standard Sermons of John Wesley. The Twenty-five Articles were also important to the study.

The justification for using the standards over other literature written by Wesley was best expressed by John Deschner in his work, Wesley's Christology:

But why concentrate on the standards? For one thing, they contain the doctrine for which Wesley, himself, was prepared to take the most serious kind of responsibility. In the Model Deed of 1763, Wesley prepared a legal instrument which limited the pulpit in his preaching-houses to persons who "preach no other doctrine than is contained in Mr. Wesley's Notes on the New Testament, and four volumes of sermons."²²

Edward Sugden also wrote of the importance of the "Standard Works" in the introduction to his edition of The Standard Sermons of Wesley:

. . . there is scarce any subject of importance, either in practical or controversial divinity, which is not treated of more or less, either professedly or occasionally. His aims were thus elucidation and completeness of presentation.²³

Of secondary importance to the study were the letters and the journal as printed in the Jackson edition of Wesley's Works. They were included at some points, but primarily as supportive material.

²¹Edward H. Sugden (ed.), Wesley's Standard Sermons (London: The Epworth Press, 1951).

²²John Deschner, Wesley's Christology. An Interpretation (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1960).

²³Sermons. Vol. I, p. 13.

VI. PROCEDURE OF THE STUDY

The initial step in the research was the study of contemporary scholars on the subject of authority. Then further study was made of concepts of Biblical authority so that the study could be done within the proper categories of logical thought. The next step in research was the survey of the writings of John Wesley with particular emphasis on searching for clues as to his concepts of Biblical authority. Following that, with some overlapping with the original study of Wesley's writings, was the study of materials dealing with the life and ideas of John Wesley made from primary source materials.

The writing of the paper began with the life of Wesley in its historical aspects. This research was written as chapter two, The Historical Background of John Wesley. Then the third chapter was the written result of the study of Wesley's use of the Bible. This brought a practical perspective to the concept of authority in Wesley's thought, and was profitable in its aid in making final conclusions concerning Wesley's view of Biblical authority. The fourth chapter attempted to present Wesley's view of the Bible. Some contemporary questions were asked in reference to his views and conclusions drawn. The fifth chapter was a survey of the authority of the Bible as conceived by Wesley. The relation of Biblical authority to other sources of religious authority in the teaching of Wesley was also considered. Finally, in the sixth chapter, a brief summary was made and conclusions drawn relating to the general topic of Wesley's concept of Biblical authority.

CHAPTER II

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF JOHN WESLEY

I. FAMILY BACKGROUND

John Wesley has been called "The most famous leader and creator of the Evangelical movement."¹ Many have ascribed to him the highest position among men of his contemporaries in all of England. John Telford, his biographer, said: "Wesley's life will never cease to fascinate all readers. . . . He belongs to the universal Church. One community bears his name; all churches have caught his spirit."² Prominent with him were his brother Charles and their friend George Whitefield. John and Charles had for their father Samuel Wesley, who had become a priest of the Church of England and was long in charge of the rural parish at Epworth.³ John Wesley was born on June 17, 1703.⁴ The wife of Samuel Wesley was Susanna, whose father, Samuel Annesley, was a nephew of the first Earl of Anglesea and a clergyman. She was "a woman of great force of character, exercised a methodical discipline

¹Kenneth Scott Latourette, A History of Christianity (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers), 1953, p. 1023.

²John Telford, The Life of John Wesley (London: The Epworth Press, 1953), p. xv introd.

³Latourette, op. cit., p. 1023.

⁴Martin Schmidt, John Wesley, A Theological Biography (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), p. 63.

over her large family, arranging for the older to care for the younger children with exacting obedience."⁵

II. WESLEY'S EDUCATION

John Wesley's education, in his youth was administered mostly by his mother. Mrs. Wesley was the schoolmistress of the Parsonage. Her grandson, Samuel Wesley, said that she had a talent for imparting knowledge upon memory so that it was not forgotten.⁶ It must surely have been during this time of influence by his mother and father, that John Wesley's foundation was laid, which allowed him to accomplish the great tasks that lay ahead of him.

At the age of eleven, in 1714, he started his formal education at the Charterhouse School in London.⁷ His financial arrangements were handled by the Duke of Buckingham, who was a good friend of his father. On June 24, 1720, John Wesley went to Christ Church as he entered Christ College and Oxford University.⁸

The beginning of 1725 was marked by an increased desire for his spiritual condition.⁹ He began to study the "Imitation of Christ" by Thomas A' Kempis, which taught him that true religion was seated in the heart, that true motive and pure affection must extend to all of

⁵Latourette, op. cit., p. 1023.

⁶Telford, op. cit., p. 739.

⁷Ibid., p. 16.

⁸Ibid., p. 33.

⁹Ibid., p. 37.

thought as well as word and action.¹⁰ He also read another book, Jeremy Taylor's Holy Living and Dying, from which he became certain that one must sacrifice all to God or live all to oneself.¹¹ In March, 1726, through the efforts of his father, and others, he was elected Fellow of Lincoln College.¹² He preached at nearby colleges and began lecturing in various areas at the college.¹³ "His reputation as a scholar and a man of literary taste was now established in the university."¹⁴

III. WESLEY'S MISSIONARY VENTURE

In 1735 there began another important stage in the career of John Wesley. He sailed for Georgia with his brother as missionaries of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts.¹⁵ On the voyage to Georgia, the Wesleys made the acquaintance of Moravians who were on the same ship and John was greatly impressed to find that in the midst of the storm and the imminence of death they had a fearlessness which his faith had not given to him.¹⁶ The Wesleys laboured earnestly in the young colony, but had to confine their efforts chiefly to the whites, though they had originally intended to minister to the Indians.¹⁷

¹⁰J. Brazier Green, John Wesley and William Law (London: The Epworth Press, 1945), p. 25.

¹¹Luke Tyerman, The Life and Times of the Rev. John Wesley, M. A. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1872), I, p. 35.

¹²Ibid., p. 45. ¹³Ibid. ¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Latourette, op. cit., p. 1024. ¹⁶Ibid. ¹⁷Ibid.

Wesley's work in Savannah, Georgia, where he taught, preached and worked with untiring effort, was a success.¹⁸ His work in Savannah won him respect, ease, honour, and abundance--which he had not expected when he came to America.¹⁹ But then the problems began to erupt from various sources, the chief problem being his romance with Miss Sophia Hopkey. Wesley seriously considered marrying her, but upon the counsel of his close friend, Mr. Delamotte and several Moravian friends he changed his decision.²⁰ After that the lady married a Mr. Williamson. In the following course of events, Wesley repelled Mrs. Williamson from the Communion for behaviour which ". . . he thought reprehensible."²¹ From this point on the work was beset with difficulty and Wesley finally found it necessary to leave America for England.²²

IV. WESLEY'S CONVERSION

Soon after he arrived in London, Wesley had the profound experience which was to change the direction of his life and ultimately bring forth the Methodist movement. On May 21, 1738, Charles, who had also returned to England because of difficulties in his work in America, professed a new inner peace.²³ Luke Tyerman recorded the account as

¹⁸Telford, op. cit., p. 83.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid., p. 86.

²¹Ibid., p. 87.

²²John Wesley, The Works of John Wesley, ed. Thomas Jackson (third edition; Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, 1958), I, p. 57.

²³Luke Tyerman, The Life and Times of the Rev. John Wesley, M. A. (New York: Harper and Brothers, Publishers, 1872), I, p. 179.

several found this new experience of conversion:

Wesley thought that being without faith, he ought to leave off preaching. But Bohler replied: "By no means. Preach faith till you have it; and then, because you have it you will preach it;" and, on the 6th of March, he began to preach accordingly. Meanwhile several of his friends, as his brother Charles, Mr. Gambold, and Mr. Stonehouse, vicar of Islington, had embraced the doctrine of salvation by faith only; and two, Whitefield, and Mr. Hutchins of Pembroke College, had experienced it. Charles Wesley also, on Whit-Sunday, May 21, was made a partaker of the same great blessing. At the time, he was ill of pleurisy, and his brother and some other friends came to him, and sang a hymn of praise to the Holy Ghost; and after they were gone, he was enabled to exercise that faith in Christ of the want of which he had been recently convinced, and was filled with love and peace. Wesley himself was still a mourner.²⁴

Three days later, on May 24, 1738, John went to a meeting of an informal Anglican society on Aldersgate, not far from where he had attended evening prayer meeting.²⁵ Wesley recorded this experience in his Journal:

I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me, that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death; and I then testified openly to all there, what I now first felt in my heart.²⁵

Scholars have debated as to the significance of this event. Leslie R. Marston, in the book, From Age to Age a Living Witness, stated his theory that Wesley had enjoyed no constant or consistent spiritual victory for more than ten years preceding Aldersgate that would indicate that he was a child of God. Marston said:

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Tyerman, op. cit., I, p. 80.

²⁶Works, op. cit., I, p. 95.

His state represents the not unfamiliar picture of the seeker who, in his quest for God, follows now one route and then another through weary months and long years of faithfulness without faith, of duty without victory; catching now and again a glimpse of what victory could mean, only to lapse at once into failure and despair.²⁷

According to Marston's view, there was spiritual victory at Aldersgate, but the Aldersgate experience had not brought freedom from the strivings of sin within him.²⁸ He had a clear consciousness of the forgiveness of his sins, but he evidently was not yet clear in terms of experience, in the distinction between justification and entire sanctification as successive operations of the Holy Spirit of God in the heart of man.²⁹

Marston recognized the spiritual victory gained, but followed with another observation later in his book:

The Aldersgate experience had brought Wesley the clear consciousness of the forgiveness of sins, but it had not brought freedom from sin's strivings within. Evidently he was not as yet clear, in terms of experience, in the distinction between justification and entire sanctification as successive operations of the Holy Spirit in the soul. But while at Herrnhut that amazing example of saintly spiritual insight among the Moravians, Christian David, told him, "the being justified is widely different from have the full assurance of the faith, . . ."³⁰

Though there has been difference of opinion as to the spiritual significance of the Aldersgate experience, a likely theory was expressed by Dr. Marston. Concerning Wesley's sanctification Marston said:

²⁷Leslie R. Marston, From Age to Age a Living Witness (Winona Lake: Light and Life Press, 1950), p. 45.

²⁸Ibid., p. 49.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid.

We are not able to point to a specific time or to circumstantial details marking this second deliverance, but there is evidence that the event occurred not long after Aldersgate---probably a matter of months, not years.

The evidence is two-fold. In the first place, there seems suddenly to have occurred, about ten months after Aldersgate, a marked change in the direction of Wesley's energies from inner conflict and strained service to tireless, irresistible and successful achievement in evangelism and in organizational generalship. Contrary to the usual claim of writers on John Wesley, Aldersgate did not mark the end of the too intense self-concern of his religion. The outward direction of his religious concern came a few months later, as study of his Journal makes clear. According to the evidence, this change took place somewhere between his sense of complete failure on January 4, 1739, and his self-committing response to Whitefield's call to the Bristol area late in March of the same year. Probably the change occurred in connection with his response to the call or his actual entry upon the task.³¹

The end of the debate has not been reached. Wesley did not give a clear, direct testimony to the experience of sanctification, nor indicate what role the Aldersgate experience took. Marston cited circumstantial evidence in support of the conclusion that Wesley experienced his personal Pentecost when he began field preaching at Bristol, but there still was no explicit personal testimony by Wesley to entire sanctification.³²

It was not until years later in 1762 that Wesley was "very explicit and emphatic about testifying to entire sanctification as a second work of grace, received instantaneously by faith subsequent to regeneration."³³ Wesley did strongly imply his personal possession of

³¹Ibid., p. 54.

³²George Turner, The Vision Which Transforms (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1964), p. 215.

³³Tyerman, II, pp. 417-418, quoted in Turner, Ibid.

the experience which he urged others to have:

Many years ago my brother frequently said, "Your day of Pentecost is not fully come; but I doubt not it will; and you will then hear of persons sanctified, as frequently as you do now of persons justified; Any unprejudiced reader may observe, that it was now fully come."³⁴

Such a statement provided strong inferential evidence that Wesley had the experience which he so diligently preached.

Wesley himself gave a summary of the direction and effect of his preaching which was significant in showing the over-all effect of the transformation which occurred at Aldersgate:

- (1) From the year 1725 to 1729 I preached much, but saw no fruit of my labour. Indeed it could not be that I should; for I neither laid the foundation of repentance, nor of believing the gospel; taking it for granted, that all to whom I preached were believers, and that many of them "needed no repentance."
- (2) From the year 1729-1734, laying a deeper foundation of repentance, I saw a little fruit. But it was only a little; and no wonder: For I did not preach faith in the blood of the covenant.
- (3) From 1734 to 1738, speaking more of faith in Christ, I saw more fruit of my preaching, and visiting from house to house, than ever I had done before; though I know not if any of those who were outwardly reformed were inwardly and thoroughly converted to God.
- (4) From 1738 to this time, speaking continually of Jesus Christ, laying Him only for the foundation of the whole building, making him all in all, the first and the last; preaching only on the plan, "The kingdom of God is at hand; repent ye, and believe the gospel;" the "word of God ran" as fire among the stubble; it "was glorified" more and more; multitudes crying out, "What must we do to be saved?" and afterwards witnessing, "By grace we are saved through faith."³⁵

³⁴Wesley, Journal, quoted in Turner, Ibid.

³⁵William M. Arnett, "John Wesley--Man of One Book" (unpublished Doctor of Philosophy thesis, Drew Theological Seminary of Drew University, 1954), pp. 33-34.

Aldersgate was the dividing point of Wesley's life. Before 1738, there was legality and barrenness; after 1738, there was implicit trust in Christ for salvation, a Christ-centered message, and fruitfulness.³⁶

³⁶Ibid.

CHAPTER III

WESLEY'S USE OF SCRIPTURE

I want to know one thing--the way to heaven; how to land on that happy shore. God Himself was condescended to teach the way; for this very end He came from heaven. He hath written it down in a book. O give me that book! At any price, give me the book of God! I have it: here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be homo uniu libri.¹

The above quote from the "Preface" to the Sermons of John Wesley showed his general attitude toward the Bible and his method of interpretation. To Wesley, the Bible was a book of God.² As the book of God, it was his concern that the Scriptures receive the careful attention it deserved by those who professed to believe in it. In commenting on Deuteronomy 17:19 in his Explanatory Notes Upon the Old Testament he wrote that "'Tis not enough to have Bible, but we must use them, yea, use them daily. Our souls must have constant meals of that manna, which if well digested, will afford them true nourishment and strength."³ The investigation for this chapter was in the area of his use of the "oracles of God," as he frequently called the Scriptures.⁴ Luke Tyerman

¹John Wesley, "Preface," Wesley's Standard Sermons (London: The Epworth Press, 1961), I, p. 31-32.

²George Turner, "John Wesley As Interpreter of Scripture," Inspiration and Interpretation, ed. John F. Walvoord (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1957), p. 160.

³John Wesley, Explanatory Notes Upon the Old Testament, quoted in William Arnett, "John Wesley--Man of One Book," (unpublished Doctor of Philosophy thesis, Drew Theological Seminary of Drew University, Madison, 1954), p. 86.

⁴John Wesley, The Works of John Wesley, Sermon XL, ed. Thomas Jackson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, n.d.), VI, p. 1.

expressed the significance of such a statement in the way Wesley would have meant it:

Wesley was not a designing man; cunning he had none: he was a man of one idea: his sole aim was to save souls. This was the philosophy of life. All his actions had reference to this. He had no preconceived plans; and, hence, it is needless to speculate about his motives. The man is best known by what he did; not by what philosophers might suspect he thought. Holding these opinions, my one object has been to collect, collate, and register unvarnished facts; and I hope I have not altogether failed.⁵

It certainly was true of Wesley that his actions spoke as well as his words. The emphasis which Wesley placed on the Bible was demonstrated by his life-long interest in it and in the study of Scripture.

I. WESLEY'S PERSONAL INTEREST

Wesley's early preparation included training in the home by his mother with a strong, concentrated program of Bible reading.⁶ In his school work, the study of the languages of Scripture were an important part of the curriculum which he studied. He was exposed to the principles of Hebrew, Greek, and Latin.⁷ At Charterhouse, which he attended at the age of fourteen, he was known for his proficiency in Hebrew.⁸ At Oxford, he was so skilled in Greek that he and his brother Charles conducted devotions every day in Greek, while using the Greek

⁵Luke Tyerman, The Life and Times of the Rev. John Wesley, M. A. (New York: Harper and Brothers, Publishers, 1872), I, Preface, p. v.

⁶Turner, op. cit., p. 164.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.

New Testament, as well as reading from the early church fathers.⁹

George Croft Cell, writing in the Introduction to John Wesley's New Testament, agreed that the Greek New Testament was important to Wesley in his devotions and studies. This was of such effect that ". . . often when a friend halted in quoting a verse of the English text, Wesley would come to the rescue by quoting the original Greek."¹⁰ Such familiarity certainly indicated that Wesley was serious when he said he was a "man of one book." While he was a student at Oxford he adopted a schedule of study which he kept for years. He read the classics on Monday and Tuesday, logic and ethics on Wednesday, Hebrew and Arabic on Thursday, metaphysics and philosophy on Friday, oratory and poetry on Saturday, and Divinity on Sunday.¹¹ With such a background, it was somewhat paradoxical that he called himself "a man of one book," yet the real meaning of that phrase involved his devotion to the Bible as the center of his study as he expressed in A Plain Account of Christian Perfection:

In the year 1729, I began not only to read, but to study the Bible, as the one, the only standard of truth, and the only model of pure religion. Hence I saw, in a clearer and clearer light, the indispensable necessity of having "the mind which was in Christ" and of "walking as Christ also walked;" . . . in all things.¹²

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰George Croft Cell, "Introduction," John Wesley's New Testament Philadelphia: The John C. Winston Company, 1938), p. x.

¹¹Turner, op. cit., p. 164.

¹²John Wesley, "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection," Works, op. cit., XI, p. 367

II. PRINCIPLES OF INTERPRETATION

Understanding the principles of interpretation which are used by a man are important if a proper theological understanding would be reached. This was especially true in the case of Wesley because of his emphasis on the value of Scripture for his own understanding of "the mind which was in Christ."¹³

Priority of Original Languages. Wesley's own skill in the original languages of the Bible was the best testimony to the priority he placed on this aspect of Scriptural understanding. The translation of the New Testament was no small task. The very fact that it was attempted illustrated Wesley's concern for the proper translation from the best text of the original tongue.

His statement concerning the academic training for a minister showed clearly that he had high regard for the value of the original tongues:

Secondly. No less necessary is a knowledge of the Scriptures, which teach us how to teach others; yea, a knowledge of all the Scriptures; seeing scripture interprets scripture; one part fixing the sense of another. So that, whether it be true or not, that every good textuary is a good Divine, it is certain none can be a good Divine who is not a good textuary. None else can be mighty in the Scriptures; able to instruct and to stop the mouths of gainsayers.

In order to do this accurately, ought he not to know the literal meaning of every word, verse, and chapter; without which there can be no firm foundation on which the spiritual meaning can be built? Should he not likewise be able to deduce the proper corollaries, speculative and practical, from each text;

¹³Ibid.

to solve the difficulties which may arise, and answer the objections which are or may be raised against it; and to make a suitable application of all to the consciences of his hearers?

Thirdly. But can he do this, in the most effectual manner, without a knowledge of the original tongue? Without this, will he not frequently be at a stand, even as to texts which regard practice only? But he will be under still greater difficulties, with respect to controverted scriptures. He will be ill able to rescue these out of the hands of any man of learning that would pervert them: For whenever an appeal is made to the original, his mouth is stopped at once.¹⁴

Wesley's own training included the reading of the Scriptures several hours every day in the original tongues.¹⁵ Such a strong demand for the inclusion of the original languages of Scripture as a requirement for serious Bible study, coupled with his own diligent practice of the recommended principle, left little doubt of the primacy of the original languages in his principles of interpretation.

The principle of accomodation of revelation. Bernard Ramm said, "The Bible is the truth of God accommodated to the human mind for its proper assimilation. . . . To be a meaningful and assimilable revelation, the revelation had to come in human languages, in human thought-forms, and referring to objects of human experience."¹⁶ To this, Wesley would have agreed whole-heartedly as illustrated by his translation and comment on Romans 6:19, "I speak after the manner of men because of the

¹⁴Works, op. cit., X, pp. 482-3.

¹⁵Tyerman, op. cit., I, p. 52.

¹⁶Bernard Ramm, Protestant Biblical Interpretation (Boston: J. A. Wilde Company, 1955), p. 109. The principles of interpretation Wesley used were, in general, categorized according to the principles in this book by Ramm.

weakness of your flesh: . . ."¹⁷ In commenting he said, "19. I speak after the manner of men--Thus it is necessary that the Scripture should let itself down to the language of men. Because of the weakness of your flesh--Slowness of understanding flows from the weakness of the flesh; that is, of human nature."¹⁸ The statement Wesley made (" . . . it is necessary that the Scripture should let itself down to the language of men.") indicated that there was in Wesley's mind an accomodation on the part of God as he communicated divine truth through language to human understanding.

The principle of progressive revelation. The principle of progressive revelation is that which has been held to account for the relation of the Old Testament to the New Testament. Ramm held that ". . . the Bible sets forth a movement of God, with the initiative coming from God and not man, in which God brings man up through the theological infancy of the Old Testament to the maturity of the New Testament."¹⁹ Wesley held a similar view of which expression was found in his commentary on Hebrews 1:1 and 2, where he said:

I. God, who at sundry times--The Creation was revealed in the time of Adam; the Last Judgment, in the time of Enoch: and so at various times, and in various degrees, more explicit knowledge was given. In divers manners--In visions, in dreams, and by revelations of various kinds. Both these are opposed to the one entire and perfect revelation which He has made to

¹⁷John Wesley, Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament (Naperville: Alec R. Allenson Inc., 1958), p. 558. Cf. Notes, p. 352.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Ramm, op. cit., p. 111.

us by Jesus Christ. The very number of the prophets showed that they prophesied only 'in part.'²⁰

Here Wesley implied that the "perfect revelation" was the culmination of a series of "revelations of various kinds," and that gradually, "more explicit knowledge was given."²¹ This was the heart of the principle of progressive revelation.

The principle of historical propriety. That Wesley referred to the historical context of the writers of the Scriptures was evident from the introductory remarks which he made before each book in his Notes.²² He took some care to learn about the cultural peculiarities of the Biblical people as well as the political history of the nations. In his comment on John 11:9 he said:

9. Are there not twelve hours in the day?--The Jews always divided the space from sunrise to sunset, were the days longer or shorter, into twelve parts: so that the hours of their day were all the year the same in number though much shorter in winter than in summer.²³

Such a comment indicated the care that he took to give to the reader the historical context so that the import of the text would be more readily understandable.

The principle of humility. Wesley admitted that there were some passages of scripture which were "doubtful." It was his position that

²⁰Notes, p. 810.

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid., p. 515, 392.

²³Ibid., John 11:9, p. 351.

such scriptures should be subjected to the test of the analogy of faith,²⁴ which will be discussed later in the study. The important fact noted here was that Wesley did not assume that he knew what every text meant.

The checking principle. The principle of checking with the previous work of Christian thinkers was one of the important elements of Wesley's Bible study method. He said:

'I am willing to do, let me know, Thy will.' I then search after and consider parallel passages of Scripture, 'comparing spiritual things with spiritual.' I meditate thereon with all the attention and earnestness of which my mind is capable. If any doubt still remains, I consult those who are experienced in the things of God; and then the writings whereby, being dead, they yet speak. And what I thus learn, that I teach.²⁵

Wesley's reference to "those who are experienced in the things of God" was of such extent that he even, in the case of his commentary on the book of The Revelation, went so far as to ". . . partly translate, partly abridge, the most necessary of his (Bengelius) observations; . . ."²⁶ It was apparent that Wesley did not study without reference to the competent scholars of his day as well as those who had gone before him.

The principle of induction. The comment of Ramm was of help to understand a proper definition of the principle of induction. He

²⁴Ibid. Romans 12:6, p. 569-570.

²⁵Sermons, "Preface," p. 32.

²⁶Notes, p. 932.

explained that "In our interpretation of Scripture we must discover the meaning of a passage, not attribute one to it."²⁷ This is the principle of exegesis rather than eisegesis.²⁸ In this vein of thought Wesley wrote:

Every thinking man will easily discern my design in the following sheets. It is not to write sermons, essays or set discourses upon any part of Scripture. It is not to draw inferences from the text, or to shew what doctrines may be proved thereby. It is this: To give the direct, literal meaning of every verse, of every sentence, and, as far as I am able, of every word in the oracles of God. I desiring only, like the hand of a dial, to point every man to this: not to take up his mind with something else, how excellent soever; but to keep this eye fixt upon the naked Bible, that he may read and hear it with understanding. I say again (and desire it may be well observed, that none may expect what they will not find), It is not my design to write a book which a man may read separate from the Bible: but barely to assist those who fear God, in hearing and reading the Bible itself, by shewing the natural sense of every part, in as few and plain words as I can.²⁹

The temptation to shew what doctrines may be proved by the Scripture was one which Wesley avoided being independent of thought.³⁰ In his Notes, he attempted to let the text speak for itself. His own statement was: "My own conscience acquits me of having designedly misrepresented any single passage of Scripture. . . ."³¹ Wesley did, however, say that ". . . I cannot flatter myself so far (to use the words of one

²⁷Ramm, op. cit., p. 119.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Explanatory Notes upon the Old Testament, "Preface," (1765), Turner, op. cit., p. 172.

³⁰Ibid., p. 173.

³¹Notes, "Preface," p. 8.

of the above-named writers) as to imagine that I have fallen into no mistakes in a work of so great difficulty."³² Such a spirit of honesty and singleness of purpose indicated the undesigning attitude which was necessary for the proper exegesis of the text.

The principle of preference for the clearest interpretation.

Some passages of Scripture apparently conflict with others, said Ramm,³³ in such cases where two passages conflict the rule has been to choose . . . the clear over the obscure, and the more rational over the credulous."³⁴ Wesley would have agreed to this principle as his statement on Romans 12:6 indicated: "Every article, therefore, concerning which there is any question should be determined by this rule; every doubtful scripture interpreted according to the grand truths which run through the whole."³⁵ Similarly, and perhaps closer to the principle of preference for the clearest interpretation, Wesley spoke of searching "parallel passages" to find the meaning of doubtful passages.³⁶

The principle of the unity of the sense of Scripture. Again, the statement which would indicate that Wesley held the principle of

³²Ibid.

³³Ramm, op. cit., p. 120.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Notes, loc. cit.

³⁶Sermons, "Preface," I, pp. 31-32.

the unity of the sense of Scriptures was made in the Notes. He said concerning the Bible:

10. Concerning the Scriptures in general, it may be observed, the word of the living God, which directed the first patriarchs also, was, in the time of Moses, committed to writing. To this were added, in several succeeding generations, the inspired writings of the other prophets. Afterwards, what the Son of God preached, and the Holy Ghost spake by the apostles, the apostles and evangelists wrote. This is what we now style the Holy Scripture: this is that 'word of God which remaineth for ever'; of which, though 'heaven and earth pass away, one jot or tittle shall not pass away.' The Scripture, therefore, of the Old and New Testament is a most solid and precious system of divine truth. Every part thereof is worthy of God; and all together are one entire body, wherein is no defect, no excess. It is the fountain of heavenly wisdom, which they who are able to taste prefer to all writings of men, however wise or learned or holy.³⁷

Wesley called attention to the unity of Scripture in the phrase, ". . . is a most solid and precious system of divine truth."³⁸ This indicated his view of Scripture as a whole fabric.

The principle of the analogy of faith. The principle that Scripture interprets itself was aimed at refuting the special place the Roman Catholic Church had assumed in the interpretation of Scripture.³⁹ In "A Roman Catechism, Faithfully Drawn out of the Allowed Writings of the Church of Rome," Wesley opposed the Roman Catholic Faith on the ground that ". . . Scripture, therefore, is a rule sufficient in itself, and was by men divinely inspired at once

³⁷Notes, "Preface," p. 9. Cf. Notes, "Preface," p. 10.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Ramm, op. cit., p. 126.

delivered to the world; and so neither needs, nor is capable of, any further addition."⁴⁰ He went on to criticize the Roman Catholic Church for adding doctrines which could not be found in the Scripture: the doctrine of transubstantiation, of the seven sacraments, of purgatory, the practice of half-communion, and others.⁴¹ Again, in a more direct comment supporting the "analogy of faith" Wesley commented on Romans 12:6:

Let us prophesy according to the analogy of faith--St. Peter expresses it, 'as the oracles of God'; according to the general tenor of them; according to that grand scheme of doctrine which is delivered therein, touching original sin, justification by faith, and present, inward salvation. There is a wonderful analogy between all these; and a close and intimate connexion between the chief heads of that faith which was 'once delivered to the saint.' Every article, therefore, concerning which there is any question should be determined by this rule; every doubtful scripture interpreted according to the grand truths which run through the whole.⁴²

Thus, Wesley practiced and taught that Scripture was to determine the interpretation of the subset of the whole body.

The principle of contextual interpretation. This principle was seen in his statement in the "Plain Account of Christian Perfection," where he observed that:

you are in danger of enthusiasm every hour, if you depart ever so little from Scripture; yea, or from the plain, literal meaning of any text, taken in connexion with the context. And so you are, if you despise or lightly esteem reason, knowledge, or human

⁴⁰Works, X, p. 90.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Notes, loc cit., "Preface."

learning; every one of which is an excellent gift of God, and may serve the noblest purposes.⁴³

In another source, Sermon CXXXVI "On Corrupting the Word of God,"
Wesley warned that:

any passage is easily perverted, by being recited singly, without any of the preceding or following verses. By this means it may often seem to have one sense, when it will be plain, by observing what goes before and what follows after, that it really has the direct contrary.⁴⁴

At the same time, it was found that Wesley did not always adhere to this principle as strictly as he might have, or as he should have. The point was made by Edward Sugden in his comment on Sermon XII, "The Means of Grace," that "The outstanding weakness of Wesley as an interpreter of the Scriptures is his disregard of the context; he takes just the words of the particular passage he is considering without reference to what precedes or follows; . . ."⁴⁵

"On the other hand, . . ." stated George Turner, ". . . it is hard to find instances of texts being distorted in support of a position. Good judgment is apparent throughout Wesley's use of Bible evidence."⁴⁶

The principle of emphasizing the literal meaning. Though this principle has been placed toward the end of the order, it

⁴³Works, "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection," XI, p. 429.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Sermons, I, p. 249.

⁴⁶Turner, op. cit., p. 169.

certainly was not because of the emphasis which Wesley placed upon it. He said that "The general rule of interpreting Scripture is this: the literal sense of every text is to be taken, if it be not contrary to some other texts; but in that case the obscure text is to be interpreted by those which speak more plainly."⁴⁷ In "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection," Wesley advised that ". . . you are in danger of enthusiasm every hour, if you depart ever so little from Scripture; yea, or from the plain, literal meaning of any text, . . ."⁴⁸ Again, in his sermon "Of the Church," Wesley said: "It is a stated rule in interpreting Scripture, never to depart from the plain, literal sense, unless it implies an absurdity."⁴⁹

The principle of experience as confirmer. Wesley made the statement that ". . . experience is sufficient to confirm a doctrine which is grounded on Scripture."⁵⁰ The matter of the relation of experience as a source of authority has been discussed later in the research, but the idea of experience as confirming Scripture was essential to the understanding of Wesley's principles of interpretation.

The principle of reason used to understand Scripture. Along with the idea that experience has value to confirm Scripture, Wesley

⁴⁷Arnett, op. cit., "Letter to Samuel Furley," p. 94.

⁴⁸Works, loc. cit.

⁴⁹Works, VI, p. 395.

⁵⁰William R. Cannon, The Theology of John Wesley (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1946), p. 159.

held that by reason ". . . God enables us in some measure to comprehend his method of dealing with the children of men."⁵¹ Wesley believed that reason was necessary to interpret what was revealed in Scripture and that Christians were in danger if they ". . . despise or lightly esteem reason, knowledge, or human learning. . ."⁵² in studying Scripture.

The principle of simplicity in truth. In the "Preface" to the Sermons Wesley strongly presented his position that the presenting of the truth of God's Word was to be simple and practical:

I design plain truth for plain people: therefore, of set purpose, I abstain from all nice and philosophical speculations; from all perplexed and intricate reasonings; and, as far as possible, from even the show of learning, unless in sometimes citing the original Scripture. I labour to avoid all words which are not easy to be understood, all which are not used in common life; and, in particular, those kinds of technical terms that so frequently occur in Bodies of Divinity; those modes of speaking which men of reading are intimately acquainted with, but which to common people are an unknown tongue.⁵³

This certainly was of benefit to Wesley as he related the truth of the Scripture to the people. Indeed, it was necessary because of the contact which he had with the people of England through his preaching. It was estimated that ". . . he must have preached at least three or four times a day during the latter fifty years of his life, and that, from the time of his return from America in 1738 he had preached no less than 52,400 sermons."⁵⁴

⁵¹Works, VI, p. 354. ⁵²Ibid., p. 360. ⁵³Sermons, I, p. 30.

⁵⁴Maximin Piette, quoted in Arnett, op. cit., p. 97.

That Wesley was an interpreter of Scripture was evident. The study of Wesley's principles of interpretation was productive of the concepts and attitudes necessary to understand the position of the Bible as a source of doctrine and avenue to truth.

III. WESLEY'S SUGGESTIONS FOR BIBLE STUDY

Suggestions for Bible study. William Arnett, in "John Wesley--Man of One Book," listed the suggestions for Bible study as found in Wesley's Explanatory Notes Upon the Old Testament:

First, set apart some time, if possible, every morning and evening to read the Scripture.

Second, read a chapter out of the Old and one out of the New Testament, if possible. If that cannot be done, read one chapter, or part of one.

Third, read the Scripture with the single purpose of knowing the whole will of God, and with a fixed determination to do that will.

Fourth, in order to know the Will of God, there should be a constant eye to the analogy of faith: the connection and harmony there is between those grand, fundamental doctrines--Original Sin, Justification by Faith, the New Birth, Inward and Outward Holiness.

Fifth, serious and earnest prayer should be made before approaching the oracles of God, seeing that "scripture can only be understood through the same Spirit whereby it was given." Prayer should be offered at the close in order that what is read might be written upon the heart.

Sixth, there should be periods of self-examination during the reading of the Scripture, with both heart and life being scrutinized. And whatever light is given "should be used to the uttermost, and that immediately. Let there be no delay. Whatever you resolve, begin to execute the first moment you can. So shall you find this word to be indeed the power of God unto present and eternal salvation.⁵⁵

⁵⁵Wesley, Explanatory Notes Upon the Old Testament, I, p. ix, 'Preface,' quoted in Arnett, op. cit., p. 115.

This was undoubtedly a method which Wesley used in his own Bible study, and the teaching and preaching ministry which was so strongly founded in an intimate knowledge of the Scripture was an indication that this was the case.

Avoidance of enthusiasm. Although Wesley believed in the study of the Bible as outlined above it was not conclusive that Wesley was a "bibliomaniac," although he did engage in the practice of random selection of Bible texts to ascertain the Will of God.⁵⁶ It was the opinion of Sugden, writing in a footnote to the Standard Sermons that ". . . we may safely conjecture that he had come by this time (1750) to see the superstitious and 'enthusiastic' character of such methods of ascertaining the will of God."⁵⁷ The suggestions for study, and the avoidance of enthusiasm (having taken Sugden's opinion as probably correct) in relation to Bible study, indicated the strong, positive and honest approach Wesley made in the Study of Scripture.

IV. WESLEY'S PRACTICAL USE OF SCRIPTURE

Wesley as a preacher. The frequency of Wesley's preaching has already been mentioned above, however, it was helpful to study the use of Scripture in the sermons themselves. Wesley preached his first sermon in 1725 on Sunday, September 26.⁵⁸ That was the first of an

⁵⁶Arnett, op. cit., p. 118.

⁵⁷Sermons, II, p. 97.

⁵⁸Arnett, op. cit., p. 97.

estimated 52,400 sermons and 225,000 miles of travel which was primarily devoted to the preaching ministry.⁵⁹

The method Wesley used in most of his sermons was that of taking a text to support a chosen subject and then bring whatever general supportive and illustrative material from the total scope of the Bible.⁶⁰ Dr. Turner said, "As an interpreter of the Bible, Wesley's most characteristic role was that of preacher - not exegete like Bengel, nor teacher like Calvin, but evangelist."⁶¹ Wesley was predominantly a textual preacher rather than an expositor.⁶² In addressing the people, Wesley seemed to be more concerned with the people to whom he was preaching than the people to whom the Bible writers were addressing.⁶³ There was one exception that was of importance: that was the expositional series Wesley preached on Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. There were thirteen of them, or almost one fourth of Wesley's "standard" sermons.⁶⁴ These sermons were fully presented with the purpose of the original writers in view.⁶⁵ Thus, Wesley was versatile in his ability and execution of exposition of Scripture, but whether he stayed to the closely expositional approach

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰Arnett, op. cit., p. 101.

⁶¹Turner, op. cit., p. 165.

⁶²Ibid.

⁶³Ibid., p. 166.

⁶⁴Sermons, I, p. 315-542; II, p. 9-23.

⁶⁵Turner, loc. cit.

or the more diffused topical approach, the basis of the message was consistent with Scripture. Hence, Wesley was a Biblical preacher.

Wesley as a writer. The sheer bulk of the writings of Wesley precluded a detailed analysis of the Scripture as used in his literature. Some general observations have been made, however, on the basis of the more detailed studies of certain selected portions of his writings.

The Plain Account of Christian Perfection was studied by W. E. Sangster, who found that Wesley quoted the Bible ". . . one hundred and ninety-five times: twenty-three times from the Old Testament and one hundred and seventy-two from the New."⁶⁶ Some of his pages were so full of quotations that the phrasing was almost entirely that of the Bible, only placed in a judicious and striking manner in the flow of Wesley's thought.⁶⁷ "Ignoring the repetitive use he makes of certain texts, he quotes the Synoptic Gospels twenty-nine times, Paul seventy-four times and the Johannine writings thirty-four times."⁶⁸ The most often quoted book, said Sangster, was the First Epistle of John, which he used to obtain some twenty texts.⁶⁹ Turner commented on the familiarity that Wesley had with the Bible:

⁶⁶W. E. Sangster, The Path to Perfection (New York: Abingdon-Lokesbury Press, 1943), p. 35.

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸Ibid.

⁶⁹Ibid.

Another characteristic of Wesley's sermons is the amazing ease with which Biblical quotations and allusions come from his lips. His years of reading the Bible had woven its phrases into the very texture of his thought. His mind was thoroughly impregnated with the Scripture.⁷⁰

The "impregnated scriptures" inevitably found their way into the letters which he wrote. Arnett has accomplished a detailed analysis of the Scripture references or allusions in the eight volumes of Wesley's Letters.⁷¹ Dr. Arnett described that study as follows:

The Bible references (book, chapter, and verse) were . . . written in the margin of the book where the references were used. From this data, the following information has been compiled, indicating the approximate number of times that Bible quotations or allusions are made:

Volume I	1721-1741	44	Scripture references		
"	1742-1749	251	"	"	
"	1749-1758	309	"	"	
"	1758-1766	335	"	"	
"	1766-1772	445	"	"	
"	1772-1780	425	"	"	
"	1780-1787	453	"	"	
"	1787-1791	271	"	"	

Keeping in mind that these figures are an approximation, the grand total, including duplications in use of Bible quotations, is 2,543.⁷²

There was ample evidence resulting from Dr. Arnett's study which showed the abundant use that Wesley made of the Scriptures. This abundance

⁷⁰Turner, op. cit., p. 157.

⁷¹Arnett, op. cit., p. 112.

⁷²Ibid., p. 113.

formed another block of evidence toward understanding John Wesley's concept of the role of the Bible in authority. The thorough and abundant use of Scripture in the practical, everyday "business" of this clergyman was significant.

CHAPTER IV

WESLEY'S VIEW OF SCRIPTURE

In a study of theological transition in the Methodist doctrine, Robert E. Chiles found that in studying the "fundamental doctrines,"¹ there were three which stood out as most important. The ones he selected for study were, "revelation, sin, and grace. . . ."² The selection served to illustrate the importance of the concept of revelation to the structure and content of Wesley's thought. Chiles said:

In the doctrine of revelation, broadly conceived, the foundation is laid and direction set for the elaboration of systematic theology. Theology's point of departure, the sources it uses, and the ultimate authority it respects are critical for the development of various doctrines and for the statement of a system as a whole. Thus to ignore this area would be to pass up one of the most sensitive guides to shifting theological currents.³

Certainly the study of Wesley's view of Scripture was necessary to determine the concept that Wesley held on the authority of the Scripture.

I. WESLEY'S VIEW OF REVELATION

Necessity of revelation. Wesley strongly affirmed the value of revelation; both general revelation and special revelation. In

¹Robert E. Chiles, Theological Transition In American Methodism: 1790-1935 (New York: Abingdon Press, 1955), p. 28.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

writing on the validity of reason in relation to religion, however, he expressed his evaluation of general revelation for knowing God when he wrote:

21. What a miserable drudgery is the service of God, unless I love the God whom I serve! But I cannot love one whom I know not. How then can I love God till I know him? And how is it possible I should know God, unless he make himself known to me? By analogy or proportion? Very good. But where is that proportion to be found? What proportion does a creature bear to its Creator? What is the proportion between finite and infinite?⁴

The value of general revelation. Wesley did not leave the matter there, however, for he did believe in the value of general revelation as indicated by his statement: "I grant, the existence of the creatures demonstratively shows the existence of their Creator. The whole creation speaks that there is a God."⁵ Wesley also made a statement reaffirming the reality of general revelation in his Sermon "On Working Out Our Own Salvation." He said: "Some great truths, as the being and attributes of God, and the difference between moral good and evil, were known, in some measure, to the heathen world. The traces of them are to be found in all nations."⁶ General revelation, according to Wesley was evidenced in the presence of conscience among men. To Wesley, this moral sense of duty was a strong appeal to the reality of general revelation. He described it as ". . . a faculty or power,

⁴John Wesley, The Works of John Wesley, ed. Thomas Jackson (third edition; Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, 1958), VIII, p. 197.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid., VI, p. 506.

implanted by God in every soul that comes into the world, of perceiving what is right or wrong in his heart or life, in his tempers, thoughts, words, and actions."⁷ Also he wrote describing this conscience as:

"The true Light, who lighteth every man that cometh into the world . . . " which is " . . . vulgarly termed natural conscience, pointing out at least the general lines of good and evil."⁸ Thus, Wesley affirmed the reality and value of general revelation, but only for the broadest concepts of the knowledge of God and His purpose for the created.

The necessity of special revelation. The knowledge of God obtained by the vague revelation through nature was not enough for Wesley in his quest to know the way to heaven. "God himself has condescended to teach the way; for this very end He came from heaven. He hath written it down in a book. O give me that book!"⁹ The higher knowledge of God in the form of acquaintance with him was reserved for the revelation in "that book," which disclosed the life and Person of His Son.

We had, by nature, no knowledge of God, no acquaintance with Him. It is true, as soon as we came to the use of reason, we learned 'the invisible things of God, even His eternal power and Godhead, from the things that are made.' From the things that are seen we inferred the existence of an eternal, powerful Being, that is not seen. But still, although we acknowledge His being, we had no acquaintance with Him. As we know there is an Emperor of

⁷John Wesley, Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament (Naperville: Alec R. Allenson Inc., 1958), p. 303.

⁸Edward H. Sugden (ed.), Wesley's Standard Sermons (London: The Epworth Press, 1961), II, p. 215.

⁹Ibid., I, pp. 31-32.

China, whom yet we do not know; so we knew there was a King of all the earth, yet we knew Him not. Indeed we could not by any of our natural faculties. By none of these could we attain the knowledge of God. We could no more perceive Him by our natural understanding, than we could see Him with our eyes. For 'no one knoweth the Father but the Son, and he to whom the Son willeth to reveal Him. And no one knoweth the Son but the Father, and he to whom the Father revealeth Him.'¹⁰

The only source of a personal knowledge of God, according to Wesley, must be the Son of God, Jesus Christ for in him the limited revelation through nature was completed by ". . . the one entire and perfect revelation which He has made to us by Jesus Christ."¹¹ From those statements, it followed that Wesley did believe in the necessity of a special revelation of God by God Himself so that man might have the "acquaintance" which Wesley felt was of such importance.

The nature of special revelation. H. Orton Wiley believed special revelation to be ". . . the redemptive purpose of God manifested in Christ Jesus, as over against the more general revelation of His power as manifested in His creative works."¹² In defining the "Gospel" Wesley was in essential agreement with the definition presented by Wiley: "The gospel (that is good tidings, good news for guilty helpless sinners), in the largest sense of the word, means, the whole revelation made to men by Jesus Christ; . . ."¹³ Here was Wesley's

¹⁰Sugden, loc. cit.

¹¹Notes, p. 810.

¹²H. Orton Wiley, Christian Theology (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1967), I, p. 135.

¹³Sermons, I, p. 159.

emphasis on the nature of revelation, it was the revelation of God through Christ to "helpless sinners" who need to accept ". . . what our Lord did and suffered while He tabernacled among men."¹⁴ The primary purpose of revelation for Wesley was the redemptive purpose. "God Himself has condescended to teach the way; for this very end He came from heaven. He hath written it down in a book."¹⁵ Wesley's purpose was to know "the way to heaven," God provided the source of knowledge for man's redemption in Christ, and that knowledge was preserved and recorded so that all could know the "way to heaven."

The Bible as revelation. For Wesley, the Bible was, as expressed above, the prophetic work of Christ through the Holy Spirit.¹⁶ This revelation was expressed inwardly by the Spirit. Wesley commented on Ephesians 4:21: "Seeing ye have heard him--Teaching you inwardly by His Spirit."¹⁷ But the inward expression was also formed in the objective Scripture which also revealed the Person and work of Christ. That this was Wesley's view was seen in his comment:

Concerning the Scriptures in general, it may be observed, the word of the living God, which directed the first patriarchs also, was, in the time of Moses, committed to writing. To this were added, in several succeeding generations, the inspired writings of the other prophets. Afterward, what the Son of God preached, and the Holy Ghost spake by the apostles, the apostles and evangelists wrote.--This is what we now style the Holy Scripture: this is that word of God which remaineth for ever: of which, though heaven and earth pass away, one jot or tittle shall not pass away. The Scripture therefore of the Old and New Testament,

¹⁴Ibid. ¹⁵Ibid., pp. 31-32.

¹⁶John Deschner, Wesley's Christology (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1960), p. 90.

¹⁷Notes, p. 715.

is a most solid and precious system of divine truth.¹⁸

Therefore, ". . . 'God is made unto us wisdom;' who, by His word and His Spirit, is with us always, 'guiding us into all truth;'.¹⁹
 Revelation's content, according to Wesley, was Jesus Christ and the gospel of which man has knowledge ". . . by His word and His Spirit, . . ."²⁰

II. WESLEY'S VIEW OF INSPIRATION

Wesley's belief in inspiration. The logic of Wesley's thinking on the Inspiration of the Scriptures was clearly defined in his passage from "A Clear and Concise Demonstration of the Divine Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures."²¹ In it he affirmed the evidences for the belief that the Bible was from God,²² the source of the prophetic writings of Scripture,²³ and the moral character of the writers:²⁴

There are four grand and powerful arguments which strongly induce us to believe that the Bible must be from God, viz., miracles, prophecies, the goodness of the doctrine, and the moral character of the penmen. All the miracles flow from divine power; all the prophecies, from divine understanding; the goodness of the doctrine, from divine goodness; and the moral character of the penmen, from divine holiness.

¹⁸Notes, "Preface," pp. 8-9.

¹⁹Sermons, II, p. 76.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Works, XI, pp. 478-79: 424.

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid. ²⁴Ibid.

Thus Christianity is built upon four grand pillars, viz., the power, understanding, goodness, and holiness of God. Divine power is the source of all the miracles; divine understanding, of all the prophecies; divine goodness, of the goodness of the doctrine; and divine holiness, of the moral character of the penmen.²⁵

In his view of the Bible as inspired revelation, Wesley was in line with the classic view of Augustine and the Reformers, but opposed to the rationalists of his day.²⁶ The doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture was not the doctrine of the Deists who did not believe the Scriptures as having been inspired in any way.²⁷

Further developing the argument, Wesley wrote:

I beg leave to propose a short, clear, and strong argument to prove the divine inspiration of the holy Scriptures.

The Bible must be the invention either of good men or angels, bad men or devils, or of God.

1. It could not be the invention of good men or angels; for they neither would nor could make a book, and tell lies all the time they were writing it, saying 'Thus saith the Lord,' when it was their own invention.

2. It could not be the invention of bad men or devils; for they would not make a book which commands all duty, forbids all sin, and condemns their souls to hell to all eternity.

3. Therefore, I draw this conclusion, that the Bible must be given by divine inspiration.²⁸

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶George Turner, "John Wesley As Interpreter of Scripture," Inspiration and Interpretation, ed. John F. Walvoord (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1957), p. 160.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Works, loc. cit.

Without being concerned for the logic of the statement, the observation was made that Wesley's final conclusion affirmed the Bible was divinely inspired.

Wesley's theory of inspiration. The concept of the relation of the divine and human elements in the inspiration of Scripture was of importance to the study, although the theory of the authority of the Scripture has rested heavily on this area of thought. Wiley wrote that Christianity ". . . is based upon the fact of inspiration, and is not dependent upon any particular theory as to the origin of its sacred writings."²⁹ It seemed, however, that there was a weakness exhibited in the "Intuition and Illumination Theories,"³⁰ which could have extended its influence to affect the doctrine of Biblical authority.

Wiley classified the theories of inspiration as: (1) The mechanical or dictation theory which emphasized the supranaturalistic element; (2) the intuition and illumination theories which emphasized human element; and (3) the dynamical or mediating theory.³¹

In A Compendium of Natural Philosophy, Wesley stated that God made men the "immediate instruments of all those revelations, so evangelical faith must be partly founded on human testimony."³² This

²⁹Wiley, op. cit., I, p. 173.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Ibid.

³²John Wesley, A Compendium of Natural Philosophy, quoted in Compend of Wesley's Theology, ed. Robert W. Burtner and Robert E. Miles (New York: Abingdon Press, 1954), p. 23.

was an admission of the human element and a constructive statement on the direct activity of God in the recording of the Scriptural writings. The character of the writers was not reflected upon in Wesley's writings. He made the general comment that ". . . if we consider them abstracted from their Divine authority, they must be allowed to be of equal credibility, at least, with all other ancient writings."³³ Then he went on to say that even if they were writing on the basis of mere human account placed upon some reasonable assumptions, their credibility would be at least as certain as that of any other writer of the time.³⁴ Beyond this, however, Wesley proposed that God made those men the "immediate instruments" of all of his revelation.³⁵ As immediate instruments then, the writings in Scripture would be closely related to the exact concepts of the Holy Spirit as He intended them.

The degree to which the writers reflected the guidance of the Holy Spirit into the truths of Scripture was to Wesley very significant. He stated that:

We know that 'all Scripture, given by inspiration of God, is profitable,' either 'for doctrine,' or 'for reproof'; either 'for correction or for instruction in righteousness'; and that 'the man of God,' in the process of the work of God in his soul, has need of every part thereof, that he may at length 'be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.'³⁶

Wesley felt that the Scripture was experientially very beneficial in

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Ibid., p. 24.

³⁶Sermons, loc. cit.

"every part." He did not, however, hold to a mechanical view of inspiration though the following statement would seem to have approached that view:

The language of His messengers, also, is exact in the highest degree: for the words which were given them accurately answered the impression made upon their minds; and hence Luther says, 'Divinity is nothing but a grammar of the language of the Holy Ghost.'³⁷

On first glance, the above statement seemed to approach the dictation concept, but the word "exact" was counterbalanced by the idea that an "impression" was given to them and made "on their minds" to a great degree of accuracy, but still within the scope of the finite mind of the inspired writer.

In speaking about the debate among the apostles in Acts 15:7 the comment Wesley made in the Notes indicated that the active inspiration of the Holy Spirit took different forms rather than being statically determined. He said, "For how really soever they were inspired, we need not suppose their inspiration was always so instantaneous and express as to supersede any deliberation in their own minds, or any consultation with each other."³⁸

The reliability of Scripture. The logic of the ideas Wesley expressed concerning the inspiration of Scripture, as developed above, brought still another unanswered problem: did Wesley consider the entire body of Scripture to be factual, or did he admit to error and unreliability in some part of the sacred writings?

³⁷Notes, p. 9.

³⁸Ibid.

It followed from the former evidence that the Bible, according to Wesley's view, was in some way Divine. There was an element in the letters and accounts of those writings that included God inspired testimony to the men chosen to record the intended impressions. Wesley was strong in his statement on the reliability of the Scripture. The "man of one book" said, "O give me that book! At any price, give me the book of God! I have it: here is knowledge enough for me."³⁹ That statement showed his confidence in the reliability of the Scriptures but the following was of greatest importance in understanding Wesley's belief in the extent of that reliability. "Every part thereof is worthy of God; and all together are one entire body, wherein is no defect, no excess."⁴⁰ There could be no mistake as to the intent of those words. Wesley was affirming the utter dependence and faith which he placed upon the entire Scripture. In his Journal he said, "Nay, if there be any mistakes in the Bible there may as well be a thousand. If there be one falsehood in that book it did not come from the God of truth."⁴¹

In another instance, Wesley took exception to those who would take upon themselves the task of "mending" the Scriptures where they are supposed to be errant or fallible:

It would be excusable if these menders of the Bible would offer their hypotheses modestly. But one cannot excuse them when they

³⁹Sermons, "Preface," I, p. 6.

⁴⁰Notes, p. 9

⁴¹Works, VI, p. 117.

not only obtrude their novel scheme with the utmost confidence, but even ridicule that scriptural one which always was, and is now, held by men of the greatest learning and piety in the world. Hereby they promote the cause of infidelity more effectually than either Hume or Voltaire.⁴²

Such was his statement intended to support his belief that: "The Scripture, therefore, of the Old and New Testament is a most solid and precious system of divine truth. Every part thereof is worthy of God; and all together are one entire body, wherein is no defect, no excess."⁴³

Together with the evidence cited on Wesley's idea of revelation, and the evidence of Wesley's use of the Scripture, it was apparent that Wesley held a high view of Scripture, both as to the reliability of its inspired truths and the extent which Wesley considered the Bible to be utterly reliable.

⁴²John Wesley, Journal, V, p. 523, quoted in William M. Arnett, "John Wesley--Man of One Book" (unpublished Doctor of Philosophy thesis, Drew Theological Seminary of Drew University, 1954), p. 67.

⁴³Notes, loc. cit.

CHAPTER V

WESLEY'S CONCEPT OF BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

I. INTRODUCTION

The problem of the chapter. The task of this chapter was to present the view which Wesley held concerning the role of the Bible as authority in relation to the role which reason, tradition and experience assumed in Wesley's thought. To Wesley, ". . . the Scriptures are the touchstone whereby Christians examine all, real or supposed, revelations. In all cases they appeal 'to the law and to the testimony,' and try every spirit thereby."¹ The evidence for Wesley's view of the Scripture as the inspired Word of God has been presented. A profitable summary of that evidence was seen in Wesley's comment on I Corinthians 7:25:

I have no commandment from the Lord--By a particular revelation. Nor was it necessary he should; for the apostles wrote nothing which was not divinely inspired: but with this difference--sometimes they had a particular revelation, and a special commandment; at other times they wrote from the divine light which abode with them, the standing treasure of the Spirit of God. And this, also, was not their private opinion, but a divine rule of faith and practice.²

Thus, it was indicated that there was more to the Biblical idea than that the Bible was truth from God. As truth, Wesley believed that this body of revelation was ". . . divine rule of faith and practice."³

¹William M. Arnett, "John Wesley--Man of One Book" (unpublished Doctor of Philosophy thesis, Drew Theological Seminary of Drew University, 1954), p. 64.

²John Wesley, Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament (Naperville: Alec R. Allenson Incorporated, 1957), p. 505.

³Ibid.

The particular question, as stated above, was whether Wesley believed that the Scriptures were merely a divine rule of faith and practice, or in some sense, the divine rule of faith and practice. The emphasis on Scripture, reason and experience as determinative in religion was evident throughout the writings of Wesley. To decide what the ultimate authority among those three categories was for Wesley was not a matter of course. The comments Wesley made on the subject were scattered throughout his writings in no organized manner. When taken separately, some of the statements that applied seemed contradictory. It was the purpose of this chapter to organize and relate that material in light of the general question.

Contemporary thought. The times in which Wesley lived were important to understand his view of the authority of the Bible. This has not been a historical survey, nor has that been the intention of the present chapter, but a few brief remarks have been made because of their direct relationship to the subject. Heavy reliance has been placed upon certain scholars who, it was judged, were qualified to carry the generalizations assumed here.

A characteristic of the eighteenth century was its lack of Bible critics.⁴ Sangster noted that the publication in 1753 by Jean Astruc of Conjectures on the Original Documents which Moses Appears to have Employed for the Composition of the Book of Genesis was a

⁴W. E. Sangster, The Path to Perfection (New York: Abingdon-Lockesbury Press, 1943), p. 35.

starting point for the modern critical study of the Bible.⁵ Also, Sangster pointed out that there has been no evidence that Wesley knew of the publication of Astruc's work.⁶

Rationalism versus Pietism. Another phase of the eighteenth century situation was the polarization of the rationalists and the pietists.⁷ McGiffert said:

The authority of the Bible was made more of by them than for a long time before. In opposition to the current recognition of the sufficiency of human reason, they delighted to belittle it, and to denounce its claims as presumptuous and irreligious. But they appealed in opposition to it, not to the spirit in the hearts of all believers, as the Quakers did, but to the written and infallible word.⁸

And yet the authority of the Bible was not the chief concern of the Methodist movement. George Turner said, "The problem in Wesley's day was not authority but indifference in the Church. Thus Wesley was less bold than Luther in determining the relative value of different books of the Bible. . . ."⁹ To Wesley the books of the Bible were all equally inspired and reliable.¹⁰ Thus, Wesley's view of

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

⁷A. C. McGiffert, Protestant Thought Before Kant (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1915), p. 172.

⁸Ibid.

⁹George Turner, "John Wesley As Interpreter of Scripture," Inspiration and Interpretation, ed. John F. Walvoord (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1957), p. 161.

¹⁰Ibid.

the authority of the Scripture lay somewhere between the cool, reasonable "faith" of the rationalists and the subjectivistic Quakers.

More generally, there was a trend from the overthrow of Aristotelianism by Francis Bacon, to the abandonment of faith as a guide to the truth by Herbert of Cherbury, to the advocacy of materialism by Hobbes, on to the modified supernaturalism of Tillotson and Locke, the deism promoted by Tindal, and finally, the skepticism of Hume.¹¹ The understanding of Wesley necessitated the study of at least the two aspects of his contemporaries, its precritical atmosphere and its logical shift from rationalism to skepticism. The natural consequence for the newly "converted" Wesley's was that they chose to battle the opposing forces of their age on different grounds than some, more traditional apologists, such as Clarke, Butler, and Warburton.¹² Instead of using rational defense of the Gospel, the Wesleyans conquered by the emphasis on receiving Christian grace.¹³ Reason, however, played an important role in the formation of the theology of John Wesley. The following section was devoted to understanding its role in the process of that formation.

II. THE ROLE OF REASON

Necessity of reason. From the outset, it was apparent that Wesley did not depreciate the logical power of the human mind as an

¹¹Eldon R. Fuhrman, "The Concept of Grace in the Theology of John Wesley" (unpublished Doctor of Philosophy thesis, The State University of Iowa Department of Religion, 1963), p. 8.

¹²Ibid., p. 9.

¹³Ibid.

apprehender of truth. To him, reason was neither overvalued nor undervalued.¹⁴ Wesley himself said:

Let reason do all that reason can: Employ it as far as it will go. But, at the same time, acknowledge it is utterly incapable of giving either faith, or hope, or love; and, consequently, of producing either real virtue, or substantial happiness. Expect these from a higher source, even from the Father of the spirits of all flesh. Seek and receive them, not as your own acquisition; but as the gift of God. . . . He alone can 'shed his love abroad in your heart by the Holy Ghost given unto you.'¹⁵

Wesley was concerned that Scripture and reason should go together. He was of those ". . . desiring a religion founded on reason, and every way agreeable thereto."¹⁶ He also said, "Surely, it is high time now that we should be guided, not by custom, but by Scripture and reason."¹⁷ In his sermon on "The Nature of Enthusiasm," he related "the plain scriptural rational way"¹⁸ of finding out the will of God in specific instances. One of the criticism Wesley made of Luther's Commentary on Galatians is the fact that the Reformer wrote in a manner which Wesley felt detracted from reason.

How does he (almost in the words of Tauler) decry reason, right or wrong, as an irreconcilable enemy to the gospel of Christ! Whereas, what is reason (the faculty so called) but the power of apprehending, judging, and discoursing? Which power is no more to be condemned in the gross than seeing, hearing, or feeling.¹⁹

¹⁴Arnett, op. cit., p. 68.

¹⁵John Wesley, The Works of John Wesley, ed. Thomas Jackson (third edition; Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, 1958), VI, p. 360.

¹⁶Ibid., VIII, p. 11-12. ¹⁷Ibid., X, p. 511.

¹⁸Edward Sugden (ed.), Wesley's Standard Sermons (London: The Epworth Press, 1961), II, p. 98.

¹⁹Journal, II, p. 467, quoted in Arnett, op. cit., p. 59.

Wesley closely identified reason with the Methodist movement when he said: "It is a fundamental principle with us (the Methodists) that to renounce reason is to renounce religion, that religion and reason go hand in hand, and that all irrational religion is false religion."²⁰

Limitations of reason. It could appear that Wesley would have agreed to the validity of a "natural theology" judging by some of the statements made above, but Wesley made a distinction between Scripture and reason as sources of knowledge. Colin W. Williams stated that Wesley made no use of arguments for the existence of God and drew his ethics entirely from revelation. Williams explained that Wesley believed that in the matter of man's relation to God, reason has no pre-established principles which would enable it to develop a "natural theology."²¹ The extreme nature of Wesley's concept of the gap between reason and the "deep things of God," was exhibited here:

Your reasoning justly, not only on this, but on any subject whatsoever, pre-supposes true judgments already formed, whereon to ground your argumentation. . . . And seeing our ideas are not innate, but must all originally come from our senses, it is certainly necessary that you have senses capable of discerning objects of this kind: Not those only which are called natural senses, which in this respect profit nothing, as being altogether incapable . . . but spiritual senses, exercised to discern spiritual good and evil. It is necessary that you have a new class of senses opened in your soul, not depending on organs of flesh and blood. . . .

²⁰Letters, V, p. 364, quoted in Colin W. Williams, John Wesley's Theology Today (New York: Abingdon Press, 1960), p. 30.

²¹Williams, op. cit., p. 30.

The ideas of faith differ toto genere from those of external sensation. . . . What a gulf is here! By what art will reason get over the immense chasm? This cannot be, till the Almighty come in to your succor, and give you that faith you have hitherto despised. Then upborne, as it were, on eagles' wings, you shall soar away into the regions of eternity; and your enlightened reason shall explore even 'the deep things of God'; God himself 'revealing them to you by his Spirit.'²²

Wesley further illustrated his point with a hypothetical example.

Were two infants . . . to be brought up from the womb without being instructed in any religion, there is little room to doubt but (unless the grace of God interposed) . . . they would have no religion at all: they would have no more knowledge of God than the beasts of the field, than the wild ass's colt. Such is natural religion, abstracted from traditional, and from the influences of God's Spirit.²³

The substance of Wesley's view of the role of reason was that reason should be allowed to function to its natural limits. But, while using it, it must be recognized that ". . . it is utterly incapable of giving either faith, or hope, or love; and, consequently, of producing either real virtue, or substantial happiness. Expect these from a higher source, even from the Father of the spirits of all flesh."²⁴

III. THE ROLE OF TRADITION

A closely related category of authority was tradition, it being the reasonable thought of the ancient Christian thinkers. The contribution of tradition to the principles of interpretation as

²²Works, VIII, p. 13.

²³Ibid., II, pp. 216-17.

²⁴Ibid., VI, p. 360.

followed by Wesley were discussed in Chapter III. Wesley added other ideas to that of the "checking principle." In answering a charge written against him, Wesley wrote in a letter:

In your last paragraph you say, 'You set aside all authority, ancient and modern.' Sir, who told you so? I never did; it never entered my thoughts. Who it was gave you that rule I know not; but my father gave it me thirty years ago (I mean concerning reverence to the ancient church and our own), and I have endeavored to walk by it to this day. But I try every doctrine by the Bible. This is the word by which we are judged in that day.²⁵

It was evident that Wesley had for some time regarded the tradition of the early church writers as authoritative to some degree. He even extended himself to say "I regard no authority but those of the Ante-Nicene Fathers; nor any of them in opposition to the Scripture."²⁶

The limitations of tradition. Christian tradition, said John Wesley, though it ". . . stands, as it were, a great way off; and therefore, although it speaks loud and clear, yet makes a less lively impression."²⁷ Traditional evidence was too far removed from the present to give the same impression that its actual ideas might warrant.²⁸ "Whereas the inward evidence is intimately present to all persons at all times and in all places. It is nigh thee, in thy mouth, and in thy heart, if thou believest in the Lord Jesus Christ."²⁹ Wesley

²⁵Letters, III, p. 172, quoted in Williams, op. cit., p. 29.

²⁶Williams, loc. cit.

²⁷Compend of Wesley's Theology, p. 33.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Ibid.

promoted the position that the evidence of Christian tradition was valid, though not as meaningful or as immovable in the face of criticism as the "internal evidence."³⁰

Indeed, Wesley felt that the attack made upon Christian tradition by the writers of his time might have a beneficial effect upon the defenders of this evidence: ". . . particularly in this age, God suffers all kind of objections to be raised against the traditional evidence of Christianity, that men . . . may not rest the whole strength of their cause thereon, but seek a deeper and firmer support for it."³¹ The role of tradition in comparison to the role of experience as evidence was not as great as the role of experience, which he said was "a deeper and firmer support."³²

Another limitation of the tradition of Christian thought, wrote Wesley, was their lack of "so large a portion of the blessed Spirit."³³ However, in the paragraph in which that qualification was made, Wesley also affirms the value of tradition. He held that, "Not only that [the fathers] were not mistaken in their interpretations of the gospel of Christ; but that, in all the necessary parts of it, they were so assisted by the Holy Ghost, as to be scarce capable of mistaking."³⁴

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Ibid., p. 34.

³²Ibid.

³³Works, XIV, pp. 240-41.

³⁴Ibid., p. 240.

Therefore, Wesley took a high view of the Christian tradition as evidence, but ranked it below experience because of its distance from the contemporary individual and below the Scriptures because the Church fathers were not inspired to the same degree as the writers of Scripture. Even with those limitations, however, Wesley made a strong position for the force and witness of those writings:

Indeed the manner in which they were written, the true primitive simplicity which appears in all the parts of them, is no just objection to them, but rather a strong recommendation to all considering men. They knew the excellency of their doctrine, and the importance of the revelations which it made of the future state; and therefore they contented themselves to declare these things in a plain and simple manner; and yet with such efficacy and power as surpassed all the rhetoric in the world.³⁵

Since Wesley placed such strong confidence in the tradition of Christianity, the following sections dealing with the Christian experience and the Christian revelation, were of utmost importance for Wesley ranked them above Christian tradition.

IV. THE ROLE OF EXPERIENCE

"It is a theology of experience. It rests, to be sure, on two pillars: Scripture and experience."³⁶ Those words of George Croft Cell, in The Rediscovery of John Wesley, reflect the thinking of a scholar whose work has shown considerable solid research and thinking. Cell claimed:

³⁵Ibid., p. 240-41.

³⁶George Croft Cell, The Rediscovery of John Wesley (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1935), p. 72.

It is safe to say that no other teacher of the Christian Church and preacher of the Gospel ever laid upon experience so heavy a burden of responsibility for discerning and confirming the truth-values of the Christian faith. In respect to the primacy accorded to religious experience, the extent to which he made experiential thinking his principle of method and results of his researches into the meaning of God in Christian experience, it can truly be said that Wesley started theology on the paths in which today religious thought moves increasingly.³⁷

Arnett added the thought that "Though we cannot regard Wesley as pioneering exclusively in this area of the Christian faith, yet it can be admitted that no one more daringly brought the subjective factor to bear upon his interpretation of the Word of God."³⁸

As Cell judged Wesley and his view of experience he said, "Wesley brought the whole Christian world back to religion as experience; in religion, experience and reality come to the same thing."³⁹

The study was concerned with understanding the role of experience in relation to Scripture, reason and tradition. The findings of others like Cell and Arnett were considered, but the emphasis of the study was placed on finding Wesley's pattern of thought relating the four elements of his system of authority.

Factors in Wesley's view of experience. Cell posed the question "What led him to transfer his final trust from the way of reason and that of traditional authority to experiential thinking" ⁴⁰ He

³⁷Ibid., pp. 72-73.

³⁸Arnett, op. cit., p. 70.

³⁹Cell, op. cit., p. 73.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 82.

discussed the question in his chapter, "Religion As Experience," and concluded that he believed in the ". . . conversion-experience as the master-key to his mature doctrine of Christian experience."⁴¹ Arnett agreed on this point,⁴² saying that the two important factors in the development of Wesley's interpretation of the Word of God were ". . . primarily, Wesley's own religious experience, and secondly, his doctrine of assurance."⁴³ Cell continued in the same vein:

. . . it must suffice here to refer simply to the conversion-experience as the master-key to his mature doctrine of Christian experience. The experiential confirmation in 1738 of the highest truth-value of the Gospel, formed and informed henceforth his theological method. His understanding and exposition of 'the Essentials of True Religion' moved increasingly in experiential paths. Every sermon he preached hangs on the appeal to experience. And several of his ablest discourses are devoted to a direct exposition of the basic truth that in religion experience and reality come to the same thing.⁴⁴

The second factor in the emphasis of Wesley was the concept of assurance. It was the conversion experience at Aldersgate that prompted the importance of experience for him, but the positive assurance he believed in⁴⁵ also directed his thinking. In reference to this Arnett said:

It is here that the doctrine of assurance, which is emphasized in the Wesleyan Message becomes conspicuous. It was Wesley's contention that the Spirit of God was vitally concerned in the

⁴¹Ibid., p. 92.

⁴²Arnett, loc. cit.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Cell, op. cit., pp. 92-93.

⁴⁵Sermons, I, pp. 199-218.

religious life of every man, and that the Christian could be aware of the Holy Spirit's activities in his life. This was rather revolutionary in the eighteenth century when we remember that Deism was the prevailing tone of the times, even to the point of invading Christian circles. It is no wonder then that the cry went up: 'This is enthusiasm!' when claims were made concerning the consciousness of the Holy Spirit's presence and manifestation.⁴⁶

Wesley's own definition was that the assurance of the Spirit is ". . . an inward impression on the soul, whereby the Spirit of God directly witnesses to my spirit, that I am a child of God; that Jesus Christ hath loved me, and given himself for me" ⁴⁷ The work in Wesley's view was of the Holy Spirit working in such a manner that there could be no doubt when it was completed.⁴⁸ Wesley also believed and taught the witness of our own spirit:

But I thus love, delight, and rejoice in God;
Therefore, I am a child of God:--
Then a Christian can in no wise doubt of his being a child of God. Of the former proposition he has as full an assurance as he has that the Scriptures are of God; and of his thus loving God, he has an evidence. Thus, the testimony of our own spirit is with the most intimate conviction manifested to our hearts, in such a manner, as beyond all reasonable doubt to evince the reality of our sonship.⁴⁹

Colin Williams was correct in his evaluation of the role of the witness of the Holy Spirit in the Wesleyan concept of authority; he said, "He is also at one with Luther and Calvin in relating the authority of Scripture to experience by the living witness of the Holy Spirit."⁵⁰

⁴⁶Arnett, op. cit., p. 74.

⁴⁷Sermons, I, p. 208.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 216.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 210.

⁵⁰Williams, op. cit., p. 37.

This view was supported by George Turner, who said that Wesley agreed with the Quakers that the Spirit of God is the real source of all divine truth, being prior to its recording in the Bible manuscripts.⁵¹ But Wesley took exception to Barclay's statement that these divine revelations are not to be subjected "to the outward testimony of the Scriptures or of the natural reason of man, as to a more noble or certain rule of touchstone."⁵² Wesley held that the Scriptures are "the touchstone whereby Christians examine all, real or supposed, revelations."⁵³ The facts supported both these men in their proper conclusion that Wesley did not rely completely on the inward witness to learn or to judge Divine truth.

The value of experience in authority. What then, did Wesley say concerning the role of experience? Wiley, believed that Wesley's faith in a theology of experience made it possible for him to ". . . inject a vitality into the field of religion comparable to that which Schliermacher introduced into modern theological thought."⁵⁴

Some have thought that Wesley's theology looked to experience as its ultimate authority. Henry Bett maintains that experience was the final appeal for Wesley.⁵⁵ He claimed that in this fact was expressed the logical conclusion of the Protestant Reformation.⁵⁶

⁵¹Turner, op. cit., p. 158.

⁵²Robert Barclay, quoted in Turner, loc. cit. ⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Fuhrman, op. cit., p. 11.

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 12.

⁵⁶Ibid.

Wesley did place great stress on personal experience in the structure of authority. He was concerned for the Methodists over the tendency to formalism which he felt could result from having the form of religion without the power. His own words were:

I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist, either in Europe or America. But I am afraid, lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power. And this undoubtedly will be the case, unless they hold fast both the doctrine, spirit and discipline with which they first set out.⁵⁷

Perhaps the fear of formalism in the Church, as certainly was the case in the general group of Churches in England at that time, as J. A.

Froude revealed:

The French Revolution had frightened all classes out of advanced ways of thinking, and society in town and country was Tory in politics, and determined to allow no innovations upon the inherited faith. It was orthodox without being theological. Doctrinal problems were little thought of. . . . People went to church on Sunday to learn to be good, to hear the commandments repeated to them for the thousandth time, and to see them written in gilt letters over the communion-table.⁵⁸

Such was "formalism" in the eighteenth century; the problem which worried Wesley concerning the Methodists.

As reviewed previously, the conversion experience of Wesley was, in all probability, determinative of his emphasis on experience. Indeed, in reference to that event, he made a significant statement

⁵⁷Luke Tyerman, The Life and Times of the Rev. John Wesley, M. A. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1872), III, p. 519, quoted in Williams, op. cit., p. 33.

⁵⁸J. A. Froude, Short Studies on Great Subjects, 1886, IV, pp. 239 f., quoted in Alec R. Vidler, The Church in an Age of Revolution (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1962), p. 35.

concerning the argument he used for rejecting Peter Bohler's views on the fruits of true faith.

When I met Peter Bohler again, he consented to put the dispute upon the issue which I desired, namely, Scripture and experience. I first consulted the Scripture. But when I set aside the glosses of men, and simply considered the words of God, comparing them together, endeavouring to illustrate the obscure by the plainer passages, I found they all made against me, and was forced to retreat to my last hold, 'that experience would never agree with the literal interpretation of those scriptures.⁵⁹

And so it was that Wesley was prepared to throw over the doctrines he discovered by the lack of experiential examples. It was noted, however, that the above event took place in 1738 and thus was a product of his less mature years. Later, in 1772, he was able to write:

In my way to Luton I read Mr. Hutcheson's Essay on the Passions. He is a beautiful writer, but his scheme cannot stand unless the Bible falls. I know both from Scripture, reason, and experience that his picture of man is not drawn from life. It is not true that no man is capable of malice, or delight in giving pain; much less that every man is virtuous, and remains so as long as he lives; nor does the Scripture allow that any action is good which is done without any design to please God.⁶⁰

Here there was a more balanced approach to a doctrinal problem, which better represented Wesley's mature thought and lifetime position. Here Wesley indicated that he relied more heavily on Scripture as a corroborating authority along with experience and reason.

The limitations of experience as a source of authority. Wesley did emphasize the value of experience and the importance of its role

⁵⁹Works, I, p. 102.

⁶⁰Ibid., III, pp. 485-86.

in establishing truth, but he also recognized the limitations of experience in relation to Scripture. In writing of the witness of the Spirit Wesley said, "Every one, therefore, who denies the existence of such a testimony, does in effect deny justification by faith."⁶¹ The position Wesley held on this point was firm. It was not the purpose of the research to establish Wesley's doctrine of the witness of the Spirit, but the confidence which Wesley had, as seen in the above quote, was a reflection of his confidence in the authority upon which that doctrine was based. In answering objections to the doctrine of the witness of the Spirit he said:

IV. But abundance of objections have been made to this; the chief of which it may be well to consider.

I. It is objected, first, 'Experience is not sufficient to prove a doctrine which is not founded on Scripture.' This is undoubtedly true; and it is an important truth: but it does not affect the present question; for it has been shown, that this doctrine is founded on Scripture; therefore experience is properly alleged to confirm it.⁶²

Here Wesley has demonstrated his confidence in both the authority of experience and the authority of the Scripture. He defined the relationship between the two in the sentence, "'Experience is not sufficient to prove a doctrine which is not founded on Scripture.' This is undoubtedly true; and it is an important truth: . . ."⁶³

Experience then, clearly must have been second to the authority of Scripture. Another conclusion taken from the passage above would

⁶¹Sermons, II, p. 351.

⁶²Ibid.

⁶³Ibid.

have been erroneous. He said that experience was of importance in its role of confirming the stated Scriptural doctrine of assurance, but at the same time presented the major qualification for experience, that it must conform to Scripture. There was, in his view, a very positive and valuable confirmatory function of experience involved in the discussion, but Scripture was the higher authority for Wesley.

In the above vein of thought, Wesley rejected Baron Swedenborg's "dreams" and "reveries" since experience was not, for Wesley, an independent source of doctrine. After reviewing some of Swendenborg's "dreams" Wesley wrote: "Having now taken a sufficient view of the Baron's reveries, let us turn to the oracles of God. What saith the Scripture?"⁶⁴ Then Wesley said:

All his folly and nonsense we may excuse; but not his making God a liar; not his contradicting, in so open and flagrant a manner, the whole oracles of God! True, his tales are often exceeding lively, and as entertaining as the tales of the fairies; But I dare not give up my Bible for them; and I must give up one or the other. If the preceding extracts are from God, then the Bible is only a fable: But if "all Scriptures are give by inspiration of God," then let these dreams sink into the pit from whence they came.⁶⁵

Wesley was not willing to compromise the Scripture and its authority for the "experience" of anyone, even though they claimed inspiration.

Similarly, Wesley criticized Madam Guyon for her mystical inspirations of God:

The grand source of all her mistakes was this, the not being guided by the written word. She did not take the Scripture for

⁶⁴Works, XIII, p. 408, quoted in Arnett, op. cit., p. 79.

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 409.

the rule of her action; at most, it was but the secondary rule. Inward impressions, which she called inspirations, were her primary rule. The written word was not a lantern to her feet, a light in all her paths. No; she followed another light, the outward light of her confessors, and the inward light of her own spirit.⁶⁶

In another instance he affirmed the relevance and value of the authoritative Scriptures in relation to the Holy Spirit:

For though the Spirit is our principle leader, yet He is not our rule at all; the Scriptures are the rule whereby He leads us into all truth. Therefore, only talk good English; call the Spirit our 'guide,' which signifies an intelligent being, and the Scriptures our 'rule,' which signifies something used by an intelligent being, and all is plain and clear.⁶⁷

It was conclusive that Wesley did have a high view of the role of experience as authority. It was also conclusive that the nature of that authority caused it to be subject to the rule of faith and practice, the Holy Scripture.

V. THE ROLE OF SCRIPTURE

Since "Experience is sufficient to confirm a doctrine which is grounded on Scripture,"⁶⁸ the Scriptures were demonstrated as Wesley's source. That finding was the essential conclusion to the research. The purpose of the remainder of the chapter was to collect the evidence and argument from the total perspective of the research, with the inclusion of some illustrations and factors not previously covered. Following

⁶⁶Works, XIV, p. 291.

⁶⁷Letters, II, p. 117, quoted in Arnett, op. cit., p. 81.

⁶⁸Sermons, loc. cit.

that, the final chapter has recorded the summary of findings and conclusions on the basis of the study.

Wesley: a diligent Bible student. Wesley was proficient in his knowledge and use of the Bible, to the point where he could correct a friend who had difficulty with an English text by quoting the original Greek text.⁶⁹

Heavy use of Scripture. Wesley said, "Tis not enough to have Bibles, but we must use them, yea, use them daily."⁷⁰ In 1727, at the age of 24, Wesley was spending several hours every day in examining the Scriptures in the original languages.⁷¹

Principles of interpretation. Thirteen principles of interpretation were evident and have been presented in Chapter III. Of special significance for Wesley's view of the authority of the Bible were the principles of induction, analogy of faith, emphasis on the literal meaning, and the principle of contextual interpretation. These evidenced a strong reliance on the existing manuscripts and confidence in the general trustworthiness of the Bible.

⁶⁹George Croft Cell, "Introduction," John Wesley's New Testament Philadelphia: The John C. Winston Company, 1938), p. x.

⁷⁰John Wesley, Explanatory Notes Upon the Old Testament, quoted in Arnett, op. cit., p. 86.

⁷¹Luke Tyerman, The Life and Times of the Rev. John Wesley, M. A. (New York: Harper and Brothers, Publishers, 1872), I, p. 52.

High view of Scripture. Wesley viewed special revelation as a necessity, since men cannot know the Creator unless he made himself known to man.⁷² Wesley also viewed the Scriptures as completely inspired by God.⁷³ Along with this, was Wesley's emphasis on the reliability of Scripture, which he considered to be inerrant and infallible.⁷⁴

Reason limited in authority. Wesley understood the value of reason and strongly urged that it be a primary consideration in religion.⁷⁵ Yet Wesley limited the role of reason because of the necessity of prior suppositions which would determine the line of reasoning and because of the limitations of the "human flesh."⁷⁶

Tradition limited in authority. Wesley placed confidence in the judgment of the early Church fathers, but limited their authority in his own thinking because they lacked the same inspiration that he ascribed to the writers of Scripture.⁷⁷

Confidence in Scripture for Doctrine. At times in Wesley's life, he was confronted with various attacks or diversions of his

⁷²Works, VIII, p. 197.

⁷³Ibid., II, p. 76.

⁷⁴Ibid., VI, p. 117.

⁷⁵Letters, V, p. 364, quoted in Williams, loc. cit.

⁷⁶Works, VIII, p. 13.

⁷⁷Ibid., XIV, loc. cit.

own people from the teaching of Scripture as he saw it. . . One of those differences was that of the Calvinistic interpretation of the doctrine of predestination. Wesley's reliance on Scripture was seen in his reply to that doctrine:

this is the blasphemy clearly contained in the horrible decree of predestination! . . . 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. Whatever that Scripture proves, it never can prove this; whatever its true meaning be, this cannot be its true meaning. . . . No scripture can mean that God is not love, or that his mercy is not over all his works; that is, whatever it proves beside, no scripture can prove predestination.⁷⁸

By this Wesley meant to say that the doctrine did not correspond to the general tenor of the major teachings of the Scripture. This was an illustration of the principle of the "Analogy of Faith" in practice.

The judgment of scholars. Although the study was made from the original sources of Wesley, the evaluation of other scholars was of value. Though there were various opinions as to the place of the Scriptures in Wesley's pattern of authority there were some who, in general, concurred with the findings of the study.

George Turner emphasized the interaction of Scripture, reason and experience, in Wesley's thought.

This viewpoint merges with the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. If the Bible is inspired, as Wesley believed, then he was consistent in supposing that the Spirit could supplement that revelation by present-day activity in the lives of men. If the Bible is not

⁷⁸Ibid., VII, p. 383.

inspired, in the traditional sense, it still is the record of religious experience and has authority as such.⁷⁹

Speaking of the Evangelical belief in the eighteenth century,

A. C. McGiffert said:

It would seem as if their emphasis upon the Spirit, revealing divine truth as well as imparting moral power, would have led the Evangelicals to give up all notion of an external authority in religion, but their distrust of man was so great, and their hostility to the rationalism of the age so controlling that they took exactly the opposite course. The authority of the Bible was made more of by them than for a long time before.⁸⁰

Colin Williams also expressed his view of Wesley's authority:

In summary, we may say that Wesley takes his stand with the Classical Protestant view of authority in exalting the Scriptures as the final authority in matters of faith and practice. He is also at one with Luther and Calvin in relating the authority of Scripture to experience by the living witness of the Holy Spirit, who brings the truth of the gospel to the heart of the believer through the record of Scripture.⁸¹

William Arnett summarized his chapter dealing with Wesley's

view of the Scripture:

We may conclude that Wesley is not confronted with an "either - or" respecting Scripture and experience. Rather it is a case of "both - and." It is not a matter of subjecting experience to the Bible entirely. Theoretically the written Word is primary, but in practice the two are not mutually exclusive. And, "what God hath joined together, let not man put asunder."⁸²

Summary. The material of the chapter has expressed the various

facets of Wesley's thought on the authority problem in relation to

⁷⁹George Allen Turner, The Vision Which Transforms (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1964), p. 311.

⁸⁰A. C. McGiffert, Protestant Thought Before Kant (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1915), p. 172.

⁸¹Williams, op. cit., p. 37.

⁸²Arnett, op. cit., p. 85.

reason, tradition, experience and Scripture. All of these elements were combined as Wesley made the decisions of doctrine for faith and practice that became such an important part of the development of the Methodist Church and the Wesleyan tradition. It was concluded that there was a vital interaction of the elements of reason, tradition, experience and Scripture in Wesley's concept of authority.

CHAPTER VI

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

A summary of the major findings of this study, the conclusions derived from those findings, and suggestions for further study were recorded in this chapter.

I. SUMMARY

Wesley's life was one marked by the conversion experience which changed his direction of thinking and increased his effectiveness as a fruitful Christian.

Wesley was well-versed in the knowledge of Scripture as was discovered in chapter three. Corollary to this was his skill as a student of the Bible, as found by his technical ability, his beneficial principles of interpretation and the abundant use made of Scripture in his preaching and writing.

It was found that Wesley had a high view of Scripture as evidenced in his belief in the revelation, inspiration, and reliability which he ascribed to all Scripture.

In relation to his thought on the Bible, Wesley was not an obscurantist. It was his practice to use the sources of religious authority: reason, tradition, and experience as well as Scripture in his attempt at understanding matters of faith and practice.

There were important limitations placed on these sources of knowledge, however. Reason, according to Wesley, was limited by the

capabilities of finite and sinful man. Tradition was limited by the lack of the same inspiration ascribed to Scripture. Experience was limited to a confirmatory role in relation to Scripture.

Wesley, it was found, believed in the inerrancy of Scripture.

Wesley derived his doctrines from the Scripture, and defended his doctrines from Scripture.

It was found that Wesley believed in the authority of Scripture.

II. CONCLUSIONS

The following conclusions were derived in regard to the problem of this study.

1. In the theory of John Wesley's teaching, the Scripture was the highest and final authority.
2. Wesley taught that the Bible was true in whole.

III. SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

The study revealed that certain areas of research would add to the understanding of the thought of John Wesley.

1. A close study of Wesley's concept of the chain of delegated authority starting with his concept of God's sovereignty and reaching along the lines of authority to the social structure of man's culture, would be helpful in understanding the role of the Church in society and other human relationships as viewed by Wesley.

2. A study of the ideological context in which Wesley lived, with particular emphasis on how it affected his thought would be very beneficial to understand the doctrinal emphases of Wesley.

3. A detailed analysis of Wesley's works, including an adequate index and statistical studies of the use he made of Scripture would be of help to those doing research in the area.

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