

The Methodist Chimera

The Quadrilateral and “Execrable Villainies”

Barry E. Bryant

As The United Methodist Church attempts to find a “way forward” around the fissures and through the rancor regarding the compatibility or incompatibility of homosexuality with Christianity, each side of the issue tries to evoke John Wesley as an authority. Whether one adores or abhors him, whether one thinks Wesley relevant or irrelevant, this might be an opportunity to understand his contribution to how we got here and how he might help us toward the way forward. The best place to start is with the *Quadrilateral* and *Connectionalism*.

The Quadrilateral and Connectionalism

In his work, *The Spirit of Anglicanism*, noted Anglican scholar, Henry McAdoo argued, that Anglicanism does not have a theology as much as it has a theological method, consisting of Scripture, reason, and tradition.¹ It has Richard Hooker (d. 1600) and the *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (1594) to thank for that.² In some respects, the Methodist nut has not fallen far from the Anglican tree. Since 1972, and the entry of the “Quadrilateral” into the United Methodist vernacular and the *Book of Discipline*, neither does United Methodism have a theology as much as it has a theological method. United Methodism has Albert Outler to thank for that. There is one difference between Outler and Hooker, however. The Quadrilateral adds “experience.” Because of the insertion of experience, United Methodist sources are not entirely consistent with Hooker’s Anglican sources. Many do not even consider the Quadrilateral to be “Wesleyan” at all and consider it more accurately described as “Methodist.” Of course, Outler did not invent the Quadrilateral. Its theological sources have been used since the early church. United Methodists just trademarked it and capitalized the “Q.” All of this is certainly nothing new in terms of the scholarship. The “Q” has its proponents and its opponents who have argued *ad nauseam* over the issue, and just a review of this literature would take a considerable amount of time.³ While United Methodism does not have an official theology, it does have United Methodists who do theology. United Methodist theology also consists of theological characteristics that are practical and contextual in nature, which the Quadrilateral is intended to facilitate. These characteristics are considered constitutive to the character of United Methodist theology and to “our theological task.”⁴

Neither Did United Methodists Invent Connectionalism

It has also been argued that neither does United Methodism have an ecclesiology as much as it has an ecclesiological concept known as “Connectionalism.” As Russ Richey notes, the term *connectional* is generally used as an organizational classification, and when “employed it distinguishes denominations with centralized authority, governance, and structure from those that lodge such prerogatives in the congregation.”⁵ But, just as United Methodists did not invent the Quadrilateral, neither did we invent Connectionalism. By this definition there are many denominations that are interrelated institutionally and function connectionally. For United

Methodists, Connectionalism is more than just a concept. Just as contextual theology is a characteristic of Methodist theology, Connectionalism has become a constitutive understanding of our ecclesial and theological identity, at least for now. Economists have pronounced that we have about fifteen years of an economically sustainable institutional Connectionalism left unless things are turned around.⁶ The movement that became a denomination may one day need to reinvent itself as a movement again, and schism will hasten this process.

Contextual Theology and Connectional Polity

Since the 1968 merger, the problem that has quadrennially plagued United Methodism has been when General Conference attempts to insert square Quadrilateral pegs into round Connectional holes. Put another way, one of our biggest problems is when contextual theology encounters connectional polity. To shift the metaphor from one of Euclidian geometry to one of theoretical physics, General Conference is like the Large Hadron Supercollider buried 574 feet in the ground near Geneva, Switzerland. Physicists use the facility to collide quantum particles against one another in search of hints about the origins of the universe. In 2013, it was announced that the existence of the Higgs boson had been confirmed. Otherwise known as the “God particle,” it is believed to hold things together, creating mass. The United Methodist problem is when contextual theology and connectional polity collide like subatomic particles in the Hadron supercollider we call “General Conference.” After watching the impact of such theological collisions, we are left looking for the Higgs boson “God particle,” or that which holds us together.⁷ What will prove to be United Methodism’s “Higgs boson” or the God particle that unites? The short answer to that is the Holy Spirit. The larger issue facing The United Methodist Church at this point could well be “Pneumataphobia,” or “fear of the Holy Spirit.” Are we able to trust the Holy Spirit to guide us through our doctrinal collisions to discover what holds us together? Even as we affirm the Spirit’s work, contextual theology stresses and stretches Connectionalism to the point of breaking, causing it to lean more toward a congregational polity. The tension between the characteristics of United Methodist contextual theology and United Methodist connectional polity is one reason why we fret of schism today.

Neither Did Methodism Invent Schism, but in the Nineteenth Century We Nearly Perfected It

In fairness, just as United Methodists did not invent the Quadrilateral or Connectionalism, neither did Methodists invent schism, but in the nineteenth century, we worked to perfect it. Between 1784 and 1895, the Methodist Episcopal Church split no fewer than ten times. We have been schooled on schism. Even before the Quadrilateral was named, by taking a closer look into each of these stories, one may see how the sources of theology contributed to each schism. Methodists have split over race and the episcopacy more than anything else. The schism of 1844, resulted in a rather protracted and litigious ecclesial divorce, complete with the division of property and assets. United Methodists have come by schism honestly as the schismatic child of a schismatic parent. Methodists split from the Church of England, and the Church of England split from the Roman Catholic Church as the result of Henry VIII and his very nasty, bloody, and violent royal divorce.

The Quadrilateral as a Theological Chimera

The Quadrilateral formalized Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience as theological sources and was originally constructed as a theological chimera, a hybrid of Anglican and Wesleyan

theological sources constructed in the hope that it would result in unifying the newly created The United Methodist Church. Now it looks as though it has contributed more to United Methodism becoming the “Untied” Methodist Church.⁸ At this point, unity itself has become a chimera as something hoped or wished for, but often illusory or impossible to achieve. As United Methodists engage in “holy conversation” around the issue of human sexuality, there will be implicit and explicit appeals made to the Quadrilateral, and the resulting factions are the results of fissures around tradition and experience and their relationships to Scripture testing once again our commitment to contextual theology and connectional polity. One reason for the tension was created by Wesley himself and his premodern epistemology in a postmodern world. Here is where it gets complicated.

“According to Scripture, Reason, and Experience,” Wesley’s Premodern Epistemology

In 1757, Wesley published his largest work, *The Doctrine of Original Sin, According to Scripture, Reason, and Experience*. The title is provocative. Wesley proposed to use “scripture, reason, and *experience*” and not the Anglican sources of “Scripture, reason, and *tradition*.” Why would a devoted Anglican such as Wesley not use Richard Hooker’s Anglican sources for a defense of a doctrine as significant as original sin?⁹ This raises several questions. Is this more than just the book’s subtitle or is it Wesley’s rejection of Hooker’s theological method? For a man who considered himself a “man of one book” was Scripture alone not enough to defend the doctrine of original sin? Does Wesley utilize reason as the product of the Enlightenment? Why the exclusion of tradition? Would the use of tradition in this instance have been deemed inadequate, problematic, or both? Why the substitution of “tradition” for “experience”? This title page is not the only place where “Scripture, reason, and experience” make an appearance. They are copiously scattered throughout his work.¹⁰ However, nowhere else do these words appear in closer proximity to one another than they do here. So, where does Wesley get this? To find the answer to that we need to turn to one of Wesley’s lesser known books: his *Compendium of Logick*.¹¹

What Do Henry Aldrich, Pope John XXI, and John Wesley Have in Common?

Wesley’s *Compendium* was based on a text crucial to his intellectual formation: Henry Aldrich, *Artis Logicae Compendium* (1691). This was the text Wesley studied while a student at Oxford.¹² He also used it while a tutor at Lincoln College and moderator of disputations at the college.¹³ In 1750, Wesley translated Aldrich’s Latin text so it could be used at Kingswood School, and later that year published it as *A Compendium of Logic*.¹⁴

The work of Aldrich was dependent on the work of Peter of Spain, a Thomist, Dominican, logician, and Pope John XXI (d. 1277). This work became a standard textbook of logic and went through 166 reprinted editions.¹⁵ Wesley’s publication of the *Compendium* revived the text of Aldrich, and because of Peter of Spain’s influence on Aldrich, Wesley revived a Thomistic epistemology too. Epistemologically, Wesley stood in the Thomistic tradition, and that is evident nowhere more than in the section on the “scale of assent.” It is premodern and the linchpin of Wesley’s epistemology, immediately putting him at odds with John Locke and the Enlightenment.¹⁶

The degrees of assent were regulated by the grounds of probability, which become a subtle form of epistemological gambling. What are the odds that what one knows is correct and true?

For Peter of Spain, Aldrich, and Wesley it came down to “degrees of probability.” The veracity of one’s experience depends on whether the senses had been deceived. Wesley said rather skeptically, “Men are often deceived, and often deceive.”¹⁷ The reliability of one’s experience is often limited by deception and misperception.

The Epistemic Claims in Experience and Testimony

Notwithstanding this, an “epistemology of testimony” may be developed by which the truth of certain statements regarding the experiences of others may be verified. To do this raises several questions. What constitutes the epistemic link between the subject, the hearer, and the state of affairs being communicated between the two?¹⁸ Can the testimony of one’s personal experience be a reliable form of knowledge? What justifies accepting the testimony of the speaker? Is testimony to be taken only phenomenologically, as something to be studied without imposition upon another?¹⁹ Is testimony even a reliable basis of belief? Is testimony as essential to epistemology as are sense perception, memory, and reason?²⁰ What is being transmitted through narrative is not just a story; narratives also include epistemic properties. There is not enough time to fully explore the recent literature around this emerging issue, but in our way forward, it could be helpful in the analysis of Wesley’s use of testimony and experience in the current debate regarding human sexuality.

Wesley’s own extensive use of testimony, especially the individual testimonies of religious experience chronicled in the *Arminian Magazine*, is a good example. But the intent of Wesley’s epistemology of testimony was not just to verify the truth of an individual’s experience. His understanding of experience was one of privatized piety. Yet Wesley rejected the notion of a solitary Christian and instead insisted in one of his most misunderstood phrases, that there is “no holiness but social holiness.” By that he did not mean “social justice,” but that sociality and communion are essential to Christianity. To turn Christianity into a solitary religion is to destroy it. This is as close as he would come to saying communion is an ontological category. If communion is an ontological category, how do testimony, narrative, and the epistemology of testimony contribute to communion and remedy privatized piety?

With the epistemology of testimony, Wesley sought to verify the truth of biblical doctrine. He fully expected experience to verify Scripture and the truth of certain Christian doctrines, such as justification, entire sanctification, and assurance. This meant testimony, indeed much of religious experience, was “narrative dependent.”²¹ The challenge of the communion of Connectionalism has been the weaving of narratives and the validity of testimonies. How essential is narrative, with its implied epistemology of testimony, to the construct of United Methodist ecclesiology? Much of what collides at General Conference are narratives that have been constructed from experience derived from local, regional, and even global settings.

What about Reason?

What of reason? While, on the one hand, individuals deceive and are deceived, “reason and nature”; on the other hand, they “are not often deceived, and seldom do they deceive their followers.”²² Faulty reasoning could well argue that God is love; love is blind; Ray Charles is blind; therefore, Ray Charles is god. Even reason is not perfect. As the scale of assent proceeded from experience to reason, Wesley’s understanding of the relationship between faith and reason started to unfold. It began by implying that reason and nature were in some ways less effected by sin than sensory perception, and consequently more reliable.

Reason may also be used in an analytic sense, in arts, sciences, grammar, rhetoric, logic, mathematics, and even metaphysics.²³ Furthermore, analytical reason could help provide religion with an understanding of its scriptural foundation and help in constructing a “superstructure” for the Christian system.²⁴ In other words, reason helps to provide theological coherence.

Ultimately, however, while reason is less susceptible to deception, and, consequently, more reliable than experience, the most reliable of all was “Divine Revelation.” This is so because, as Wesley confidently asserted, “God can neither deceive, nor be deceived.”²⁵ What the scale of assent does not provide is a doctrine of inspiration or the means of working out the relationship among reason, revelation, and the doctrine of God into the idea of Scripture. What it does provide is the confident assertion that the doctrine of revelation is linked to the character and nature of God. God does not lie. Upon this truth from the doctrine of God, revelation rests as the surest form of knowledge available. But how does one discern what God says in revelation and what humans contribute to the stories that convey God’s truth? And, by the way, what happened to tradition?

What Happened to Tradition in Wesley’s Scale of Assent?

Tradition was omitted from the scale of assent and the *Compendium of Logic*. In fairness, this was not Wesley’s doing. Having said that, for Wesley, all traditions, even early Christian ones, must ultimately be subjected to the authority of Scripture; and the interpretation of Scripture is not immune from methods of its interpretation, or hermeneutics. The interpretation of Scripture engaged an implicit and unstated hermeneutical method that was used to render judgment on any tradition.

Wesley and the Rehabbed Heretics

Based on Scripture, reason, and experience, Wesley rehabilitated heretics. For example, after reading John Lacey, *The General Delusion of Christians with Regard to Prophecy*,²⁶ Wesley developed sympathy for the heretical Montanists, saying they were “real scriptural Christians,”²⁷ and that he, “doubted whether that arch-heretic, Montanus, was not one of the holiest men in the second century.”²⁸ In virtually the same breath, Wesley showed a significantly qualified sympathy for another “archheretic,” Pelagius, whose real heresy “was neither more nor less than this: The holding that Christians may, by the grace of God, (not without it; that I take to be a mere slander,) ‘go on to perfection;’ or, in other words, ‘fulfil the law of Christ.’”²⁹ And then, by attaching to himself the label “Arminian,” he identified himself with one who had been condemned as heterodox by the Synod of Dort in 1619.

Wesley and the Anglican Canons

While Wesley aligned himself with heretics, he also distanced himself from several traditions of the Church of England and its canons. The failures of Wesley as a missionary in Georgia are well known. The great irony of this is that adherence to Anglican canon law in the colony of Savannah contributed much to his undoing. There are at least two examples of this, and these examples are drawn from Wesley’s sacramental practice. First, Wesley refused to baptize an infant when the child’s mother would not allow Wesley to perform the baptism by immersion,³⁰ and, then he refused to admit Sophey (Hopkey) Williams to the Eucharist, causing a series of events that led to his leaving Georgia.³¹ But things changed after Aldersgate. After Wesley’s return to London and his “heartwarming” experience, he starting playing fast and loose with canon law wherever he thought it impeded the mission of Methodism.

Episcopal Obedience, Canons, and Conscience

While not strictly forbidden, field preaching was unseemly and something Wesley had considered “vile.” When he finally relented and resorted to field preaching, he remarked,

“I could scarce reconcile myself at first to this strange way of preaching in the fields, of which he set me an example on Sunday; having been all my life (till very lately) so tenacious of every point relating to decency and order, that I should have thought the saving of souls almost a sin, if it had not been done in a church.”³²

Then he started using lay preachers, based on a distinction he made between prophets as those who preach the word and priests as those who administered the sacraments, bifurcating Word and Table in a way Methodism has not since recovered from. We might also talk about his use of women as exhorters. While adhering to the *Book of Common Prayer*, he also advocated the use of extempore prayer and questioned the administration of baptism only by an ordained priest.³³ Wesley even dismissed the Anglican guidelines for ordination, when he took it upon himself to set aside Thomas Coke for the work in America and to ordain the first in a long list of Wesley-ordained preachers.³⁴

In addition, Wesley did not always hold every Anglican bishop in the same regard, referring to some as “mitred infidels”; and to the other extreme, he referred to others as “orthodox devils.”³⁵ Notwithstanding his opinions, he never took moves to leave the Anglican Church over either infidels or devils. The mission was not one of schism but of reform. To maintain its relationship, or “connection” if you will, to Anglicanism it would require a relationship of conscience that would have to also tolerate the ecclesial connection with Anglicanism.

The question of conscience and canons came up in the first Annual Conference of 1744, when it was asked,

Q. 8: How far is it our duty to obey the bishops?

A. In all things indifferent. And on this ground of obeying ’em, we should observe the canons, so far as we can with a safe conscience.³⁶

Wesley frequently stretched episcopal authority and Anglican canons to the point of snapping, and conscience helped to avoid a breaking point. Finally, to find out the true regard Wesley had for the Anglican Articles of Religion, it is necessary to compare them with the Articles of Religion Wesley sent to American Methodism with all his corrections, additions, and deletions. These severely edited articles were adopted at the Christmas Conference in 1784.

Holding Tradition Accountable

Wesley’s appropriation of tradition illustrates how Scripture and even experience were employed as ways of holding tradition accountable to the needs of his day, and not even the early church tradition was immune from that. In the instance of Montanists, tradition was held accountable to the work of the Holy Spirit; in the instance of Pelagius, tradition was held accountable to grace; and, in the instances of canon law, tradition was held accountable by mission. What these have in common is the relationship between tradition and the prophetic. To what extent are tradition and even canon law the products of human culture and decisions, and what part the result of the work of the Holy Spirit?

Wesley and “Execrable Villainy”

Scripture, reason, and experience were important theological sources for Wesley, with the most significant being Scripture. We have just seen how they were arguably utilized to critique and modify tradition and the contents contained in Anglican canon law when Wesley thought the mission of Methodism was impeded. His “premodern” use of these sources was then used to construct a social ethic around the issues of poverty and slavery to challenge prevalent Christian attitudes of his day.

Wesley first used the phrase “execrable villainy” in regard to the wealthy’s treatment of the poor. His journals and letters are replete with scathing comments about English society’s treatment of the poor. It was Scripture that gave him clarity and perspicuity regarding Methodism’s mission toward the poor. For example, his first foray into field preaching was based on the well-known passage of Luke 4:19, which claimed every preacher of the gospel has a claim to the empowerment and anointing by the Holy Spirit to preach the good news of the gospel to the poor as a gospel of healing, deliverance, envisioning, liberation, and the *kairos* of jubilee.³⁷ To deny the poor their God-granted deliverance and liberty was an “execrable villainy,” an evil of the highest order.

O England, England! will this reproach never be rolled away from thee? Is there anything like this to be found, either among Papists, Turks, or Heathens? In the name of truth, justice, mercy, and common sense, I ask, . . . [w]here is the mercy of thus grinding the face of the poor? thus sucking the blood of a poor, beggared prisoner? Would not this be execrable villainy [*sic*] . . . ?³⁸

If the mission of Methodism was indeed to reform the nation of England, the reform could start here. This goes beyond any “preferential option for the poor.” Care for the poor was not optional to Wesley but a constitutive feature of Wesley’s understanding of the gospel that is obligatory.

Wesley and the “Execrable Villainy” of Slavery

While many consider his Georgia mission a miserable failure, he did travel to South Carolina, where he encountered slavery, slaves, and their inhuman conditions, concluding that Africans were human beings with souls, and if they had souls they were created in the image of God and their enslavement was evil. Then on August 12, 1772, Wesley read a “book published by an honest Quaker on that execrable sum of all villainies commonly called the Slave-trade.”³⁹ Benezet was a French born Quaker living in Philadelphia when he published his book.⁴⁰ Wesley extracted Benezet’s work, added some of his own thoughts, and published it as, *Thoughts on Slavery* (1774). Among other things, Wesley argued that the slave trade was created out of economic necessity to provide a source of cheap labor in the New World. He then argued that Africans were procured through fraud and violence only to be subjected to the inhumane conditions of the Middle Passage. He rejects any notion that the Africans were extracted from backward, oppressive, and violent cultures of their own, citing agricultural competence and highly organized communities that flourished despite European interference.⁴¹ Leon Hynson has argued that in *Thoughts on Slavery* is an emerging theological foundation for human rights derived from a relational understanding of the image of God and natural law.⁴² Then just days before he died, Wesley penned a well-known letter to William Wilberforce exhorting him to “go through your glorious enterprise in opposing that execrable villainy [*sic*], which is the scandal of religion, of England, and of human nature.”⁴³

Wesley’s experiences with poverty and slavery helped to influence an understanding of Scripture that led to his explication of “execrable villainies” and to formulate a prophetic pronouncement against them. To challenge Anglican tradition was to challenge and reform the

church and its ecclesial power. To challenge the “execrable villainies” of poverty and slavery was to challenge and reform the nation and the entrenched power structures of English society to side with the poor and the enslaved. The eighteenth-century rhetoric of “execrable villainy” meant not just villainy. They were egregious evils and those things that ultimately denied or obstruct human flourishing and inhibited the renewal of the image of God in human beings.

“Execrable Villainy” of Slavery in America

So, what happened to Wesley’s “execrable villainies” when Methodism came to America? In short, they were all but abandoned through a series of General Conferences because of American politics, economics, and geography. Instead, Methodists learned how to create a hermeneutic of discrimination informed by power and economics.

For discrimination to succeed, several things happened. As Methodism expanded south it started to rapidly grow, and as it started to grow it became dependent on plantation owners and cotton money. Indeed, through a twist of geographical fate, if cotton had grown better in Michigan instead of Mississippi, the need for slavery would have been cultivated in the North instead. The model of agriculture as a commodity created an economic force around cotton that revived the institution of slavery, and Christians found themselves creating and defending a hermeneutic used to defend the economics of white privilege.⁴⁴

With Wesley’s influence, Methodism started out as a slavery-condemning church, but by 1820, it had become a slavery-defending church. Both Asbury and Coke knew that to take a stand against slavery meant that Methodism might not survive, and even if it survived it might not thrive and would certainly lose the South. The Quakers, with their pacifist and abolitionist tendencies, were an example of what they did not want to happen to Methodism. Despite John Wigger’s sympathetic treatment of Asbury in his book, *American Saint: Francis Asbury and the Methodists*, let us be clear. Methodism’s first bishop sacrificed slavery (and with it black bodies and lives) on the altar of church growth. Francis Asbury was more willing to kick lay preachers out of the connection for administering the Eucharist than for owning slaves. Eventually, Holland McTyeire and William Smith began a theological and biblical defense of slavery and a catechism was written by William Capers, teaching slave children that to disobey masters was at the peril of hellfire.⁴⁵ All of this was an attempt to defend southern piety and depict it as being consistent with owning human beings. Slavery had by this time created a regionalism in the church that succeeded in fracturing connectional fraternity around slavery. To southern Methodists, it was outrageous and offensive to impugn their piety by saying slavery was a sin. Who had the right to say slavery was sin when the Bible clearly supported it? Abolitionists considered it equally outrageous to think that slavery was not sinful. By 1844, Methodism split not over the ethics of slavery but over a matter of discipline and whether a slave-holding bishop could serve the entire connection.⁴⁶

“The Execrable Villainy” of Poverty

The second thing that happened to the “execrable villainy” of poverty was the shift toward Methodist “respectability.” While Asbury tolerated slavery, to his credit he was less amenable to the wealthy. The regard for respectability was due largely to the efforts of Nathan Bangs and the upward mobility of Methodists.⁴⁷ B. T. Roberts lamented it.⁴⁸ The problem was not so much that Methodism desired respectability but that it came at the expense of abandoning the poor. The poor were not considered respectable. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Methodist architecture and the shift from modest buildings to Gothic architecture, which communicated

power, prestige, and permanence.⁴⁹ Exegeting architecture and reading skylines are indeed ways of interpreting a society's values. The desire for respectability and the justification of wealth and slavery eventually taught Methodists how to discriminate against poor white folks.⁵⁰ This was certainly not confined to the South, as Chicago became a case study for how "main Methodists" abandoned the city and the city's poor after the great fire for the more affluent suburbs of the Northshore, such as Evanston (where Garrett-Evangelical is located) and Wilmette. Holiness organizations were left to fill that vacuum, and offered their scathing critiques of the Methodists who absconded for posher climes.⁵¹ Instead of cultivating a hermeneutic of "execrable villainies" and the evils of race and poverty, much of Methodism had a hermeneutic of "white privilege and respectability."

A "Way Forward"?

There are several lessons to be learned here. We are not likely to have an official United Methodist theology anytime soon. Neither should we. The contextual nature of United Methodist theology and the connectional nature of United Methodist polity should also continue. As they do continue, we need get better at listening to the testimonies and narratives of others, particularly in cross-cultural settings. The tension between contextual theology and connectional polity may be resolved through greater cross-culture competency. While Wesley was more conservative in his epistemology and theology, he was decidedly more progressive in his attitudes toward social justice issues, such as wealth and slavery, race and respectability. Here is a warning, lest we make an idol of respectability again. Additionally, his attitudes toward Anglican bishops and canon law were indeed critical to the point that he allowed leniency where conscience and obedience were concerned. At the same time, he stretched his relationship with the Church of England to the point of breaking because of his determination and dedication to the Methodist mission. He did not hesitate to hold traditions or canons accountable to Scripture and frequently attempted to discern where the Holy Spirit encounters the human spirit in them. His language of "execrable villainy" was an attempt to identify what he thought was evil in English culture and defined sin in such a way that some Americans found objectionable. Finally, the "execrable villainies" of poverty and slavery were ultimately compromised by American geography, economics, and politics. In its place emerged a hermeneutic of discrimination that has afflicted Methodism since slavery.

Wesley's Last Request to American Methodists

Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary has a letter from John Wesley to Ezekiel Cooper, the last letter Wesley sent to the work in America. In the closing section he wrote,

We want some of you to give us a connected relation of what our Lord has been doing in America from the time that Richard Boardman accepted the invitation and left his country to serve you. See that you never give place to one thought of separating from your brethren in Europe. Lose no opportunity of declaring to all men that the Methodists are one people in all the world; and that it is their full determination so to continue,
Though mountains rise, and oceans roll,
To sever us in vain.⁵²

Wesley would have been eighty-seven when he wrote it, and Cooper twenty-eight when he received it, by which time Wesley was probably dead.

Several things are significant about this letter. First, by September of 1784, Wesley, the strident royalist and consummate supporter of colonialism, knew that the Anglican and colonial ties with American Methodism would have to be severed in order to create a fledgling church that would then strike out on its own. So, he severed the ties that bound English and American Methodism and acknowledged that there was no longer any real “connection” between Methodism in England and Methodism in America. He wrote, “[O]ur American brethren are now totally disentangled both from the State and from the English hierarchy, we dare not entangle them again either with the one or the other.”⁵³

By December of that year, American Methodism indeed made plans to disentangle itself and did so at the “Christmas Conference” of 1784. It could be called a geopolitical schism, but it functioned more like a “church plant.” The Christmas Conference affirmed other important items. First, it affirmed Wesley’s authority, so long as he was alive. I think we have seen just how long that lasted and why it was short-lived. Second, it drafted a strong statement condemning slavery, aligning with Wesley’s own anti-slavery sentiments. Third, the office of bishop was created, despite Wesley’s protests and outrage. For this reason it is difficult for some Wesleyans to embrace both Wesley *and* the episcopacy. Since then, not all Wesleyans are Methodist and, for altogether different reasons, all Methodists are not Wesleyans. Yet strangely enough, Wesley is seen here pleading with Cooper for British Methodists to be given a “connected relation” to the work that had started in 1769. After a bloody revolutionary war, all the political rancor, and social malice, what could possibly show that “the Methodists are one people in all the world”? Was Wesley delusional?⁵⁴ How might Methodists find unity, not amid the diversity, but despite their geographic, political, and even theological separation? Obviously, Wesley did not provide any answers to these questions, and neither did he lay out a plan for how “all Methodists are one people in all the world.” But he does seem to be referring to something deeper here than an institutional connection.

Wesley believed that Methodists had a mission to reform the nation and the church. However, it has often been said that we are now the church that Wesley sought to reform. Sometimes we look like a fellowship of rehabbed heretics in a connectional polity. It will not be the Quadrilateral or a hermeneutic of discrimination that will reform us. Reform is ultimately the work of the Holy Spirit who makes disciples of us as well as empowers and anoints us to preach the good news of the gospel to the poor, as a gospel of healing, deliverance, envisioning, liberation, and jubilee.⁵⁵ Reforming the nation and the church is to fight against discriminatory practices and the “execrable villainies” of racism and poverty in our society. This is not because of Wesley’s influence alone. But it is because in the United Methodist baptismal vows we have pledged, “to resist, evil, injustice, and oppression / in whatever form they present themselves,” in other words, “execrable villainy.”⁵⁶ One way forward might just be our renewal in those very vows.

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¹ Henry R. McAdoo, *The Spirit of Anglicanism: A Survey of Anglican Theological Method in the Seventeenth Century*, The Hale Lectures of Seabury-Western Theological Seminary (London: A. & C. Black, 1965), 1–4. Properly speaking, the Lambeth Conference of the Anglican Communion created the Lambeth Quadrilateral in 1988, which consists of Scriptures, creeds, Sacraments, and the historic Episcopate. See, J. R. Wright, *Quadrilateral at One Hundred: Essays on the Centenary of the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral, 1886/88–1986/88*. (Cincinnati, OH; London: Forward Movement Mowbray, 1988).

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- ² See, J. R. Wright, *Quadrilateral at One Hundred*.
- ³ Of particular note is Ted Campbell, Stephen Gunter, et al., *Wesley and the Quadrilateral: Renewing the Conversation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997).
- ⁴ “Our Theological Task,” *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 2016* (Nashville, Tennessee: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016), ¶ 105.
- ⁵ Russell E. Richey, *Methodist Connectionalism: Historical Perspectives* (Nashville: General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, The United Methodist Church, 2009), 6.
- ⁶ Heather Hahn, “Economist: Church in crisis but hope remains” UMC.org (<http://www.umc.org/news-and-media/economist-united-methodist-church-in-crisis>, accessed October 30, 2016).
- ⁷ I can’t resist inserting something to break up the monotony of documentation. Higgs Boson walks into a church. The priest says, “We don’t allow your kind in here.” Higgs Boson replies, “What? Without me you can’t have mass.”
- ⁸ See Russell Richey’s essay in this book.
- ⁹ See, Nigel Atkinson, *Richard Hooker and the Authority of Scripture, Tradition and Reason: Reformed Theologian of the Church of England?* (London: Paternoster Press, 1997). Atkinson argues that what distinguished Hooker from the Reformers on the issue of tradition was largely his appeal to an episcopal form of ecclesiology.
- ¹⁰ Isabel Rivers, “John Wesley and the Language of Scripture, Reason, and Experience,” *Prose Studies* 4, no. 3 (1981): 252–84.
- ¹¹ John Wesley, *A Compendium of Logick*, (Bristol: Felix Farley, 1750).
- ¹² For a literal English translation of Aldrich see, Henry Aldrich, *Rudiments of Logic* (Oxford: Vincent, 1827). The British Library copy was bound together with Samuel Hinds, *Introduction to Logic* (Oxford: 1827).
- ¹³ Vivian H.H. Green, *The Young Mr. Wesley: A Study of John Wesley and Oxford* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1961), 130.
- ¹⁴ John Wesley, *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.* [hereafter, *Journal*], 8 vols., ed. Nehemiah Curnock (London: Epworth Press, 1960), 3:459. The translation took him “three or four hours” while waiting for the tide to go out so he could complete his journey from Tan-y-bwlch to Moel-y-don. See John Wesley, *A Short Account of Kingswood School* (Felix Farley: Bristol, 1749); cf. *Journal*, 3:530–52 (1751). Luke Tyerman, *The Life and Times of the Rev. John Wesley, M.A., Founder of the Methodists*, 2 vols. (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1870–71), 2:90; also, Richard Green, *The Works of John and Charles Wesley: A Bibliography* (London: Methodist Publishing House, 1896), 68.
- ¹⁵ Joseph P. M. Mullally, *The Summulae Logicales of Peter of Spain*, vol. 8, *Publications in Mediaeval Studies* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1945). Before becoming Pope, Peter of Spain was an ophthalmologist and a prominent figure in the history of that science. See, M. Davidson, “Petrus Lusitanus: An Ophthalmologist Who Became a Pope,” *Archives of Ophthalmology* 68, no. 2 (1962): 290–291.
- ¹⁶ To see how Wesley differed from Locke, see his commentary on Locke in *The Arminian Magazine*, between 1782–1784.
- ¹⁷ John Wesley, “Logic,” in *The Works of John Wesley* [hereafter, *Works*[Jackson]], 14 vols., 3rd ed., Thomas Jackson, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979), 14:178.
- ¹⁸ See, Elizabeth Fricker and David E. Cooper, “The Epistemology of Testimony,” *The Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 61 (1987): 57–83, 85–106.
- ¹⁹ This is the position taken by William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985).
- ²⁰ Jennifer Lackey, “Knowing from Testimony,” *Philosophy Compass* 1 (2006) 5: 43–448, also, Lackey, “The Nature of Testimony,” *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 87 (2006): 177–97.
- ²¹ Hollibert E. Phillips, “On Appealing to the Evidence,” *The Philosophical Forum* 22 (1991) 3, 228–42. He observes that William James concluded that true ideas are made by true events.
- ²² “Logic,” in *Works*[Jackson], 14:178.
- ²³ Wesley, “The Case of Reason Impartially Considered” (1781), in *Sermons II*, ed. Albert C. Outler, vol. 2, *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* [hereafter *Works*] (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976–), 591.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 2:592.
- ²⁵ Wesley, “Logic,” in *Works*[Jackson], 14:178; cf. “Seek First the Kingdom” (1725), *Works*, 4:220, “God . . . can neither deceive others nor be himself deceived, since he is a true as well as an all-knowing Being.”
- ²⁶ Lacey was a patron of the French prophets, a group of French Huguenots prone to ecstatic and apocalyptic extremes. Some of their group operated within and on the fringe of Methodism, causing Wesley untold problems, as can be seen in Bishop Lavington’s attack on Methodism in, *Enthusiasm of Methodists and Papists Compared*.

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- See *Works*, 26:32–33, note. Also, Hillel Schwartz, *The French Prophets: The History of a Millenarian Group in Eighteenth Century England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 207.
- ²⁷ *Journal*, 3:490 (750). Cf. “The Real Character of Montanus,” *Works*[*Jackson*], 11:485–6.
- ²⁸ “The Wisdom of God’s Counsels” (1784), *Works*, 2:555. Also note, James Clark, “Montanus redivivus: or, Montanism revived in the principles and discipline of the Methodists (commonly called swadlers)” (Dublin: 1760).
- ²⁹ “The Wisdom of God’s Counsels” (1784), *Works*, 2:556. Also, B.R. Reese, *Pelagius: A Reluctant Heretic* (Woodbridge, England: Boydell Press, 1988).
- ³⁰ Thomas Sharp, *The rubric in the Book of common prayer, and the Canons of the Church of England . . .*, (London: B. White, Fleet-Street, and C. Dilly, in the Poultry, 1753), 32, 45.
- ³¹ See Canon XXII, “Anglican.” 1604 Canon Law. Accessed November 12, 2015. <http://www.anglican.net/doctrines/1604-canon-law/#p1-2>.
- ³² *Journal*, 2:166. Cf. Edmund Gibson, “The Case of the Methodists Briefly Stated, More Particularly in the Point of Field Preaching,” referred to in “A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion, I” (1745), *Works*, 11:178–83.
- ³³ See, Thomas Church, “Some Farther Remarks on the Rev. Mr. John Wesley’s Last Journal” (London: M. Cooper, 1746). To which Wesley replied with, “The Principles of a Methodist Farther Explained” (London: W. Strahan, 1746). For his remarks on extempore prayer see *Works*, 9:187–88, 195, 538; and “Catholic Spirit” (1750), *Works*, 2:90. Also, John Wesley, *The Letters of John Wesley* [hereafter *Letters*], 8 vols., ed., John Telford (London: Epworth Press, 1931), 7:23 (1787).
- ³⁴ See *Journal*, 7:15–6 (1784); *Letters*, 7:21 (1780), cf. Edgar Thompson, *Wesley: Apostolic Man* (London: Epworth Press, 1957) Albert Brown-Lawson, *Wesley and the Christian Ministry: The Sources and Development of his Opinions and Practices* (London: S.P.C.K., 1963).
- ³⁵ *Letters*, 7:285, where he admitted he did indeed vary from “‘the mitred infidels’ of the Church of England.” For a less caustic remark, see, “Prophets and Priests” (1789), *Works*, 4:81.
- ³⁶ John Wesley, *The Methodist Societies, The Minutes of Conference*, ed. Henry Rack, vol. 10, *Works* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 135. For an interesting take on Wesley and conscience see, Leon O. Hynson, “John Wesley’s Concept of Liberty of Conscience,” *Wesley Theological Journal* 7 (1972), 36–46. The core of his argument is that conscience is informed by the Holy Spirit.
- ³⁷ *Journal*, vol. 1, April 2, 1739. For an excellent and concise summary of Wesley’s development on slavery see, “John Wesley’s Thoughts Upon Slavery and the Language of the Heart,” *The Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 85 (2003): 269–84.
- ³⁸ *Journal*, 4:467.
- ³⁹ *Journal*, 5:446.
- ⁴⁰ Anthony Benezet, *Some historical account of Guinea, its situation, produce, and the general disposition of its inhabitants. With an inquiry into the rise and progress of the slave trade, its nature and lamentable effects. Also a republication of the sentiments of several authors of note on this interesting subject: particularly an extract of a treatise written by Granville Sharp* (London: W. Owen and E. and C. Dilly, 1772).
- ⁴¹ Summary “Thoughts upon Slavery” in “A Collection of Religious Tracts,” The University Library (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina), <http://www.docsouth.unc.edu/church/wesley/summary.html>, accessed Feb. 19, 2017.
- ⁴² Leon O. Hynson, “Wesley’s ‘Thoughts upon Slavery’: A Declaration of Human Rights,” *Methodist History* 33 (October 1994): 46–57.
- ⁴³ *Letters*, 8:265.
- ⁴⁴ Jack P. Greene, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Social Development of Early Modern British Colonies and the Formation of American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988). Greene associates the agriculture as commodity model with Thomas Jefferson and argues this is the model that took root in the South, connecting cotton with slavery.
- ⁴⁵ Holland N. McTyeire, “Master and Servant,” *Duties of Masters to Servants* (Charleston, SC: Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1851), 7–46; William A. Smith, *Lectures on the Philosophy and Practice of Slavery . . .*, Thomas O. Summers, ed. (Nashville: Stevenson and Evans, 1856); William Capers, “Catechism for Little Children and for Use on the Missions to the Salves in South-Carolina,” in, *Methodist Experience in America: A Sourcebook, Vol. II*, Russell E. Richey, et al., eds. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 231–35.
- ⁴⁶ See Mark Auslander, *The Accidental Slaveowner: Revisiting a Myth of Race and Finding an American Family* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2011). Auslander’s work is remarkable in its reframing the Andrew relationship to “Kitty” around the issues of race and family.

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- ⁴⁷ For an account of this, see Daniel F. Flores, “Respectable Methodists: Nathan Bangs and the Rise of Respectability in the Methodist Episcopal Church in the Early National Period,” PhD dissertation (Drew University, 2004).
- ⁴⁸ Benjamin T. Roberts, “Free Churches,” *The Earnest Christian: Devoted to the Promotion of Experimental and Practical Piety* 1 (1860)1: 6–10.
- ⁴⁹ See Abel Stevens, *The Centenary of American Methodism: A Sketch of Its History, Theology, Practical System, and Success* (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1866), 233–36.
- ⁵⁰ This is not just a part of the Methodist narrative. For a brilliant historical analysis of “poor white folk,” see Nancy Isenberg, *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America* (New York: Viking, 2016).
- ⁵¹ For a careful and critical analysis of this see Jonathan D. Dodrill, “Sanctifying the Second City: Portraits of Lived Religion in Chicago’s Holiness Rescue Missions from the Great Fire to the Great War” (Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, 2016). In the third chapter, his analysis suggests that the failure of “main Methodism” in Chicago came about as the result of Methodism’s “embourgeoisment.”
- ⁵² The entire text of the letter is found in, *Letters*, 8:289.
- ⁵³ John Wesley, *Letters*, 7:238–39.
- ⁵⁴ I’ve often said that if there had been psychotropic drugs in the eighteenth century, there might not have been a Methodism.
- ⁵⁵ *Journal*, vol. 1, April 2, 1739. For an excellent and concise summary of Wesley’s development on slavery see, “John Wesley’s Thoughts Upon Slavery and the Language of the Heart,” *The Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 85 (2003): 269–84.
- ⁵⁶ *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 40.