

Methodist Church
Discipleship & Ministries Learning Network
Worship Leader & Local Preacher Training Pathway

Reading excerpt: Barrie W. Tabraham, *The Making of Methodism* (London: Epworth Press, 2010, 2nd Edition) chapter on 'Wesley's Theology 1: His Sources of Authority' 26 - 37

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Course of Study: 'Worship: Leading & Preaching' Module 1
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Wesley's Theology 1 His Sources of Authority

*Far off we need not rove
To find the God of love;
In his providential care,
Ever intimately near,
All his various works declare,
God, the bounteous God is here.*

We now move from pure history to the study of ideas, and begin to examine Wesley's basic beliefs. In Chapter 5 we shall see how John Wesley developed a coherent picture of the relationship between God and his people, and Chapter 7 explores the contribution he and his brother made to the development of worship, not least by their sacramental theory and practice. These sections will enable us to have a clearer understanding of the distinctive features of Methodism itself. For the moment, however, we turn to the sources from which Wesley drew his religious ideas.

If your faith has ever been challenged by a theological or ethical problem, you may have asked yourself, 'How can I know that what I believe is actually true?' Responses such as 'The Bible says . . .', or 'It stands to reason', simply will not do, because we must be wary of the danger of over-simplifying situations and coming to hasty judgements. As we know, making sense of our faith in a complex world is a demanding task.

Although John Wesley lived over 200 years ago, he had a method of working out his theology in

a very practical way that can still be applied today. Our times may be very different from his, but human nature remains much the same. We shall find that many of the fundamental questions of belief that exercise our minds were just as common in the eighteenth century.

There are three preliminary matters that should be noted:

First, the context in which John Wesley was writing. Sometimes he was addressing a national scene in which Roman Catholic, Anglican and Calvinist traditions were firmly established and well defined. At others, he was writing to individuals about specific issues, often arising out of pastoral problems. In either case, it is important not to take his words out of context, especially in those areas where he modified his views over the passage of time. As we shall see in the next chapter, John Wesley was not afraid to add footnotes to his journal at a later date, when he felt that his earlier judgements needed qualifying in some way.

Second, the absence of a single, all-embracing theological statement from Wesley. Although he

remained an active and serious theologian throughout his life, he produced no systematic theology in the way that Karl Barth or Paul Tillich were to do in the twentieth century. He was, as we saw in the last chapter, an exceedingly busy and much-travelled man. Thousands of words poured from his pen on countless issues. Wesley was primarily interested in meeting people's practical needs, and therefore his theology had a dynamic quality which evolved over the years.

Third, Wesley's concentration on particular doctrines. He was not concerned to cover every single aspect of belief. There is little in his works, for example, about the Trinity,¹ or specific teaching concerning the Holy Spirit – though his writings contained much teaching about the Spirit's work. Being a supremely practical man, he did not spend time in going over ground that had been well trodden by others. Rather, he brought new and vivid insights into the way in which the individual could experience God's salvation.

There were four sources of authority which Wesley believed underpinned his whole theology. They were **scripture, experience, reason and tradition**.

To illustrate how these four sources operated in Wesley's thinking, imagine a mobile, hanging from a ceiling in a hallway² and rotating slowly in the moving air. In the centre is Scripture, and around it are Tradition, Reason and Experience. Like the mobile, Wesley's theology was a dynamic thing which was always moving and developing. Each element could be defended, but only in relation to the other three. Most scholars would agree that for Wesley, Scripture and Experience were the most important, with Reason and Tradition having slightly lesser importance. There was nothing really new in this, simply that Wesley combined and expounded the elements in a distinctive way.

This, as we shall see, was a method of doing theology in a way that had a useful, practical application. Many Methodists have found that, suitably updated,

the four 'pillars' make a good foundation for theology today. In answering the question 'How can I be sure of what I believe?', Wesley's four foundation pillars certainly make a very good starting-point.

Scripture

*Still we believe, almighty Lord,
Whose presence fills both earth and heaven,
The meaning of the written word
Is by thy inspiration given;
Thou only dost thyself explain
The secret mind of God to man.*

We know that Scripture can, if studied in isolation, be made to prove almost anything. You may have come across the story of the Sunday School teacher who asked her class what they had learned from the story of Goliath. 'To duck', came one boy's reply. Enough said. Wesley's theology centred on the Bible. He was, as he himself put it, '*homo unius libri*' – 'a man of one book' – and he accepted its verbal inspiration. In the preface to the *Forty-four Sermons*, Wesley set out in clear terms his own method for understanding and studying Scripture. [19]

However, when he said that he believed all that was in the Bible 'as far as I understand it', he was expressing the view of a man who had not been exposed to what we know as modern biblical criticism. Had he read the later theories – of the multiple authorship of Genesis and Isaiah, for instance – he would no doubt have subjected them to the same sharp scrutiny as the scholarship of his own day.

In the next document [20], Wesley explains how the Holy Spirit helps Christians to use and understand the Bible. In February 1748 he wrote a letter to a Quaker, probably Thomas Whitehead³ whom he had met in Bristol nine years earlier. He answers

19. *Wesley's use of Scripture*

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! At any price, give me the book of God! I have it: here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be *homo unius libri*.

Here then I am, far from the busy ways of me. I sit down alone: only God is here. In His presence I open, I read His book; for this end, to find the way to heaven. Is there a doubt concerning the meaning of what I read? Does anything appear dark or intricate? I lift up my heart to the Father of Lights: 'Lord, is it not Thy word, "If any man lack wisdom, let him ask of God"? Thou "givest liberally, and unbraidest not." Thou hast said, "If any be willing to do Thy will, he shall know." 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.

Source: J. Wesley, Sermons on Several Occasions, Epworth Press 1944, p. vi.

the question, 'Is there any difference between Quakerism and Christianity?' and in the following extract points to the need for a balanced approach to Scripture. Note how Wesley is careful to draw a distinction between the words 'rule' and 'guide',

in order to avoid extremes. He feels that it is just as wrong to be slavishly literal as it is to be purely subjective.

20. *How to read the Bible*

'Yet the Scriptures are not the principal ground of all truth and knowledge, nor the adequate, primary rule of faith and manners. Nevertheless they are a secondary rule, subordinate to the Spirit. By Him the saints are led into all truth. Therefore the Spirit is the first and principal leader.'

If by these words . . . be only meant that '*the Spirit is our first and principal leader*', here is no difference between Quakerism and Christianity.

But there is great impropriety of expression. For though the Spirit is our principal 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.

Source: J. Wesley, Letters, Vol. II, p. 117.

Of course, Wesley accepted that there were bound to be slight inaccuracies in Scripture, or 'corruptions in the received text', as he put it. However, proper study of the Bible, in Wesley's eyes, involved more than just understanding the bare text. It was important to know both the context in which a particular passage had been written, and the levels at which the text was meant to be understood, given that some verses could have more than one meaning. Wesley was not, therefore, a literalist!

The method of biblical interpretation which Wesley advocated was twofold. First, mastery of the *literal* meaning of the text – in other words the plain meaning or sense of the words and phrases within the context in which they were written. Second, an understanding of the *spiritual* meaning of the passage, and its significance for the life of faith.

In the following document, Wesley states clearly how he believes Scripture is an all-important authority as 'a complete rule of faith'. It is a short extract from a lengthy letter which he wrote to Dr Conyers Middleton in January 1749. Middleton, who was a Fellow of Trinity College Cambridge, had written a book in which he attacked aspects of the Church's teachings, particularly in their reliance upon the authority of the Bible. Wesley is quick to defend his position resolutely. [21]

Incidentally, both John and Charles employed the use of 'lot' – a custom which they borrowed from the Moravians. This involved reaching a decision by introducing a chance factor, such as opening the Bible at random. However, we must not suppose that this practice implied that the Wesleys were either blasé or uncritical in their approach to Scripture. There was no sense in which either John or Charles opened the Bible at random, and blindly followed whatever verse their fingers pointed to. The use of lot (sometimes expressed as 'casting lots') had its origins in the Early Church (Acts 1.26) and the Wesleys used it from time to time when faced with difficult decisions, in the belief that God would influence the result.⁴

Experience

*O that with all thy saints I might
By sweet experience prove
What is the length, and breadth, and height,
And depth of perfect love!*

21. *The authority of Scripture*

You proceed: '*If the Scriptures are a complete rule* (I reject the word 'sufficient', because it is ambiguous), *we do not want the Fathers as guides, or, if clear, as interpreters. An esteem for them has carried many into dangerous errors: the neglect of them can have no ill consequences.*' (Page 97.) I answer: (1) The Scriptures are a complete rule of faith and practice; and they are clear in all necessary points. And yet their clearness does not prove that they need not be explained, nor their completeness that they need not be enforced. (2) The esteeming the writings of the first three centuries not equally with but next to the Scriptures never carried any man yet into dangerous errors, nor probably ever will. But it has brought many out of dangerous errors, and particularly out of the errors of Popery. (3) The neglect in your sense of the primitive Fathers – that is, the thinking they were all fools and knaves – has this natural consequence (which I grant is no ill one, according to your principles), to make all who are not real Christians think Jesus of Nazareth and His Apostles just as honest and wise as them.

Source: J. Wesley, Letters, Vol. II, p. 325.

Wesley tested all truth, including Christian truth, by experience. This did not mean that he over-emphasized mere feelings. There had been too many tragic examples in the seventeenth century of misguided religious zeal for Wesley to be unaware of the dangers of relying on experience alone. He knew only too well that it was possible to convince oneself of almost anything if one tried hard enough.

Rather, what he understood by 'experience' was an awareness of the will and purpose of God which addressed an individual's whole personality, and not just the emotions. There was a subtle difference in Wesley's view, therefore, between on the one hand simply having a *feeling* that a particular course of action was right and, on the other, allowing religious intuition in its broadest sense to guide one's perceptions.

He also accepted that individuals would be bound to differ in their relationship with God and their experience of his grace, truth and love. This was inevitable. George Whitefield had an evangelical experience similar to John and Charles Wesley's, yet it led him in a different theological direction. John Wesley understood this, but the alternative – a dry, formal religion which was not underpinned by a personal experience of the love of God – was one he feared. In October 1785, in a letter to a friend when he was aged 82, Wesley could still write with great feeling about the way the grace of God works in the heart of the individual. In this passage, he shows a clear appreciation of the way people's experience could vary. [22] The word 'justification' in the first sentence simply refers to the pardon for sin and the acceptance that a sinner receives from God – we shall be examining this in Chapter 5.

Of course, Wesley himself was careful not to equate 'experience' in this sense with merely 'the wisdom of years'. This can be seen in the following extract from one of his letters, written when he himself was well past 70. It was addressed to a Miss March, with whom he corresponded on a number of occasions. She has been described as 'a lady of good education' who, 'having a small independent fortune, devoted her life and all she had in doing good'. In a letter to her dated 27 December 1774 [23], Wesley sets down some of his thoughts regarding the nature of experience in the Christian faith. His advice concerning the pastoral problem he refers to in the first paragraph makes it quite clear that

22. *The variety of religious experience*

There is an irreconcilable variability in the operations of the Holy Spirit on the souls of men, more especially as to the manner of justification. Many find Him rushing upon them like a torrent, while they experience the o'erwhelming power of saving grace.

This has been the experience of many; perhaps of more in this late visitation than in any other age since the times of the Apostles. But in others He works in a very different way:

*He deigns His influence to infuse,
Sweet, refreshing, as the silent dews.*

It has pleased Him to work the latter way in you from the beginning; and it is not improbable He will continue (as He has begun) to work in a gentle and almost insensible manner. Let Him take His own way: he is wiser than you; He will do all things well. Do not reason against Him; but let the prayer of your heart be,

Mould as Thou wilt Thy passive clay!

I commit you and your dear sisters to his Tender care . . .

Source: J. Wesley, Letters, Vol. VII, p. 298.

important decisions cannot be made without careful reflection.

It was experience, therefore, which confirmed the truth of doctrine, but Wesley never said that experience by itself proved anything. This would lead to the dangers of what he called 'speculative religion' in which people could believe almost what they liked.

23. *The place of experience in the Christian faith*

A few minutes I spent with Miss M_____ when she was in town two or three years ago . . . From her letters I should judge that she had still many convictions and strong desires to be a real Christian. At the same time it is plain she is surrounded with hindrances and is sometimes persuaded to act contrary to her conscience. It is extremely difficult to advise a person in such circumstances what to do. Methinks the first thing I would advise her to, at all events, is, 'Do nothing against your conscience. 2. At a proper opportunity, after praying for courage, tell your lady you scruple such and such things. And I doubt not but she will take effectual care that no one shall press you . . .' Leaving her place is the last step to be taken if she finds she cannot save her soul therein.

You know it is very natural for me to estimate wisdom and goodness by years, and to suppose the longest experience must be the best. But, although there is much advantage in long experience and we may trust an old soldier more than a novice, yet God is tied down to no rules; He frequently works a great work in a little time. He makes young men and women wiser than the aged; and gives to many in a very short time a closer and deeper communion with Himself than others attain in a long course of years . . .

Source: J. Wesley, Letters, Vol. VI, p. 132.

guarded against the very thing of which eighteenth-century Methodists were so often wrongly accused – 'enthusiasm', or purely emotional religion. It is worth noting in this context that what Wesley often referred to as 'experimental' religion, we would now term 'experiential'. This is a pity, since the modern expression has lost the original sense of 'testing', clearly illustrated by the course of action which Wesley advised in the letter to Miss Marsh.

We can summarize Wesley's teaching, then, by saying that experience confirms a doctrine that is already grounded in Scripture, its truth being seen in the practical outworking of faith in our lives.

Reason

*To thee, inseparably joined,
Let all our spirits cleave;
O may we all the loving mind
That was in thee receive.*

This next source of Wesley's religious authority should be seen against the background of two extremes that were particularly evident in the eighteenth century. It comes as no surprise to find that he was concerned to steer a middle course.

One extreme has been referred to already: 'Enthusiasm' – a term of reproach which in the eighteenth century meant religious fanaticism.⁶ We can readily understand why 'enthusiasm' was widely feared in Church circles in Wesley's day. The previous two centuries had seen the deaths of countless thousands of Protestants and Catholics throughout Europe as the result of an excess of religious zeal. When, after Queen Anne's reign, the move towards religious toleration increased, many of John Wesley's contemporaries – including, no doubt, his mother – breathed a deep sigh of relief!

At the other end of the spectrum was Rationalism – which developed from the Enlightenment. We

'In Wesley', writes Dr Colin Williams, 'experience is not the test of truth, but the truth the test of experience.'⁵ In this way, by linking experience to the other three main sources of religious authority, he

should not think of it as identical with twentieth-century humanism or atheism; rather, it was an appeal to the unaided use of the mind. Eighteenth-century rationalists inevitably questioned the nature of revelation and their ideas were therefore seen as a threat to spiritual inspiration.

For Wesley, the use of 'reason' had to avoid both these extremes. He defined the term carefully, using it in three slightly different senses:

First, 'reasonable' in the sense of being 'logical'. For example, Wesley saw that reason, being a God-given faculty, was an essential part of every Christian's equipment – in order to search the Scriptures, make moral decisions, and to 'seek after true religion'. He explains this in the following extract [24], taken from *An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, written in 1744. This was the first of a series of four Appeals, and in it Wesley presents one of his clearest statements of the reasonableness of the Christian faith.

There are dozens of practical questions which every Christian has to face each week, the answers to which are not immediately apparent from reading the Bible. The Church has been divided over many issues – in recent years, for example, over the ordination of women to the priesthood, gambling and the responsible use of alcohol. Wesley was right, therefore, to be concerned that we should think through the problems and issues that face us.

Second, Wesley used the word 'reason' to describe a human faculty in contrast to faith. He acknowledged that human reason had its limitations, and needed to be complemented by what he called the 'seeing eye' and the 'hearing ear' – spiritual senses developed by a life of faith through an intimate relationship with God.

Third, by 'reason' he also meant an approach to belief that was in accord with orthodox faith and practice. In his *Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, Wesley examined the doctrines he taught, enquiring whether they were reasonable,

24. *The reasonableness of the Christian faith*

28. But one question still remains to be asked, 'What do you mean by reason?' I suppose you mean the eternal reason, or the nature of things: the nature of God and the nature of man, with the relations necessarily subsisting between them. Why, this is the very religion we preach: a religion evidently founded on, and every way agreeable to, eternal reason, to the essential nature of things . . .

29. It is in every way suited to the nature of man, for it begins in man's knowing himself, knowing himself to be what he really is – foolish, vicious, miserable. It goes on to point out the remedy for this, to make him truly wise, virtuous, and happy, as every thinking mind (perhaps from some implicit remembrance of what it originally was) longs to be. It finishes all by restoring the due relations between God and man . . .

30. But perhaps by reason you mean the faculty of reasoning, of inferring one thing from another . . .

. . . the strongest reasoner whom we have ever observed (excepting only Jesus of Nazareth) was that of Paul of Tarsus – the same who has left that plain direction for all Christians: '*In malice (or wickedness) be ye children, but in understanding (or reason) be ye men*' [cf. I Cor. 14:20].

31. We therefore not only allow but earnestly exhort all who seek after true religion to use all the reason which God hath given them in searching out the things of God.

Source: J. Wesley, An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion, Wesleyan Methodist Book Room 1844, pp. 11–12.

and concluding in each case that they were and that together they constituted a reasonable and coherent system of belief.

In many of his letters over the years, Wesley emphasized the importance of using reason – provided it was attended by the other ‘pillars’ of Scripture, experience and tradition – as a way of maintaining a healthy, balanced faith. Reason, Wesley asserted, was essential ‘both in laying the foundation of true religion, under the guidance of the Spirit of God, and in raising the superstructure’.⁷ But Christians could not base their faith solely upon it. So, for example, when writing to Joseph Benson⁸ in October 1770, Wesley affirmed the place of reason, but was careful to acknowledge its limits. [25]

Wesley always insisted that the faith he was teaching was ‘agreeable to eternal reason, to the essential nature of things’, and he was therefore anxious to avoid difficulties of two kinds. On the one hand, there were those created by ‘Stillness’ or, as it was sometimes called, ‘Quietism’. This was in many ways a reaction against the notion of ‘salvation by works’ and, as such, played down the part of human activity and responsibility. Those who followed this line played down any emphasis upon reason and waited quietly to ‘feel’ the touch of God upon the soul. On the other hand, there were difficulties produced by ‘Deism’ – which resulted from overvaluing reason and thus excluding the possibility of inspiration and revelation. When commenting on 1 Corinthians 14.20 in his *Notes on the New Testament*, Wesley stressed that ‘knowing religion was not designed to destroy any of our natural faculties, but to exalt and improve them – our reason in particular’.⁹

Furthermore, in a letter to Dr Rutherford in March 1768, Wesley summarized his position succinctly: ‘It is a fundamental principle with us that to renounce reason is to renounce religion, that religion and reason go hand in hand, and that all irrational religion is false religion.’¹⁰ Passionate he might be, but never a woolly emotionalist!

25. *The limits of reason*

‘Child,’ said my father to me when I was young,
‘you think to carry everything by dint of argu-
ment. But you will find by-and-by how very
little is ever done in the world by clear reason.’
Very little indeed! It is true of almost all men,
except so far as we are taught of God, –

*Against experience we believe,
We argue against demonstration;
Pleased while our reason we deceive,
And set our judgement by our passion.*

Passion and prejudice govern the world, only
under the name of reason. It is our part, by
religion and reason joined, to counteract them
all we can. It is yours in particular to do all
that in you lies to soften the prejudices of those
that are round about you and to calm the pas-
sions from which they spring. Blessed are the
peace-makers!

Source: J. Wesley, Letters, Vol. V, p. 203.

Tradition

*Head of thy Church, whose Spirit fills
And flows through every faithful soul,
Unites in mystic love, and seals
Them one, and sanctifies the whole.*

This fourth pillar of John Wesley’s theology was also very important, and one which reflected his upbringing and family background. Writing in June 1775 to the Earl of Dartmouth, who was the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Wesley asserted ‘I am an high churchman, the son of an high churchman’, and in all his writings he stressed the importance of

the traditions of the Church. This did not mean, of course, that all Methodists had to embrace Anglican *churchmanship* (that is, ceremonial and liturgical style). Rather, Wesley urged they should respect and value its doctrines and laws.

The following two extracts show how much importance Wesley gave to tradition or, as we might put it today, ‘the collective wisdom of the centuries’. Notice how in the first passage [26], Wesley takes care to define exactly what he means by ‘the church’.

In that excerpt Wesley sees the church operating at different levels: the universal Catholic Church consisting of believers throughout the world; ‘National Churches’ represented in Britain by the Church of England; and, at the local level, companies of believers, no matter how few in number, meeting together in Christ’s name. It was this common love for Jesus Christ that made the Church holy in Wesley’s view – not the Church’s laws and regulations, nor the relative virtue of its individual members. Rupert Davies has observed that because he thought in these terms, Wesley was actually calling into question Article 19 of the Church of England.¹¹ This article presupposed that the preaching of the pure Word of God and the proper administration of the sacraments had to take place for a church to exist in a particular place. Wesley did not consider that these conditions were always observed in the Roman Catholic Church, yet he was quite prepared to accept faithful Catholics as brothers and sisters in Christ.

The second of the two documents is part of a letter John Wesley wrote to a Revd William Dodd, who had questioned him on certain doctrinal points. Dodd, who at various times was a lecturer and a hospital chaplain, eventually became convicted of forgery, and was visited in prison just before his execution in 1777. This excerpt [27], dated 12th March 1756, gives a brief insight into Wesley’s views on the value of church tradition, particularly in its relationship to Scripture.

26. *Wesley describes the essence of the Church*

You still think we are secretly undermining, if not openly destroying, the Church.

What do you mean by the Church? A visible church (as our Article defines it) is ‘a company of faithful (or believing) people: *coetus credentium*’. This is the essence of a church, and the properties thereof are (as they are described in the words that follow) ‘among whom the pure Word of God is preached, and the sacraments duly administered.’ Now, then (according to this authentic account), what is the Church of England? What is it, indeed, but the ‘faithful people, the true believers, of England’? It is true, if these are scattered abroad, they come under another consideration. But when they are visibly joined by assembling together to hear ‘the pure Word of God preached’ and to eat of one bread and drink of one cup, they are then properly the visible Church of England . . .

Others object that we do not observe the *laws* of the Church, and thereby undermine it. What laws? The rubrics or canons? In every parish where I have been curate yet, I have observed the rubrics with a scrupulous exactness, not for wrath, but for conscience’s sake.

Source: J. Wesley, An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion, pp. 30–2.

The reasons why Wesley laid such stress on tradition are not difficult to see: his own family upbringing, his experience at Oxford, and his strong belief in the church as the inheritor of the traditions of the Early Christian Fathers. In his great study *John Wesley and the Church of England*, Dr Frank Baker

27. *The value of church tradition*

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 that 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 endeavoured to walk by it to this day. But I try every Church and every doctrine by the Bible. This is the word by which we are to be judged in that day. Oh that we may then give up our account with joy! Whatever farther thoughts you are pleased to communicate will be seriously considered by, reverend dear sir,
Your affectionate brother and fellow labourer.

Source: J. Wesley, *Letters*, Vol. III, pp. 172–3.

has asserted that Wesley's views underwent a subtle but significant change over the years. Having started from a position in which he saw the church as an institution to be preserved with a traditional rule, Wesley came to see it as the company of the faithful with a mission to the world. In other words, while retaining his respect for and support of the church, Wesley recognized the need to transform a tradition which, in the case of the Church of England, had become over-preoccupied with the church as an institution. He was not blind to its faults! That part of the story will be told in a later chapter.

We should note that Wesley accepted that Christians from various denominations might hold different 'opinions'. This term has a far more general meaning today than it did in the eighteenth century. Wesley used it to mean views which different Christians might sincerely hold about religious matters over and above the 'core' of their faith. He acknowl-

edged that Christians were bound to think, worship and act differently.

In fact, he was remarkably tolerant of those who became Methodists, in that he did not prescribe a set of doctrines which new members were expected to understand – though of course they were expected to be nurtured and grow in the faith! The following extract from his *Journal*, written in May 1788 when he was preaching in Scotland, shows how 'broad' Wesley felt Methodism should be. [28]

28. *Methodism – a 'broad Church'*

There is no other religious society under heaven which requires nothing of men in order to secure their admission into it but a desire to save their souls. Look all around you: you cannot be admitted into the Church, or society, of the Presbyterians, Anabaptists,¹² Quakers, or any others, unless you hold the same opinions with them, and adhere to the same mode of worship.

The Methodists alone do not insist on your holding this or that opinion; but they think and let think. Neither do they impose any particular mode of worship; but you may continue to worship in your former manner, be what it may. Now, I do not know any religious society, either ancient or modern, wherein such liberty of conscience is now allowed, or has been allowed, since the age of the Apostles.

Source: J. Wesley, *Journal*, Sunday 18 May 1788.

No wonder Methodists appeared to be 'friends to all and enemies of none'!

If we want a brief insight into the 'irreducible minimum' which Wesley held to be necessary for genuinely belonging to the company of believers, we

can do no better than to turn to his sermon on 'The Catholic Spirit', in which he preached on the text:

Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thy heart?
And Jehonadab answered, It is. If it be, give me
thine hand. (2 Kings 10.15)

an extract of which is reproduced here [29].¹³ Wesley examines what it is that Christians must believe and do to be 'of one heart'. He accepts the inevitable variety of opinion and practice amongst Christians, and then goes on to explore the implications of the text. Purists will no doubt want to question the way in which Wesley lifts the verse out of its context, but his ideas are both thought-provoking and surprisingly up to date.

The important thing, which Wesley never neglected, was to link these four pillars together. He was only too aware of the problems that can be created by basing belief and practice on any one by itself. As we know, a reliance upon Scripture to the exclusion of the other elements can lead to a dogmatic and sterile fundamentalism. Letting experience be the only guide to our actions can result in a spiritual outlook which becomes simply a matter of what we happen to feel is right at the time – a pragmatic, whimsical approach which will not do. A faith based solely on reason, by contrast, can end up by being a cold, formal, intellectual system of belief, without the warmth of a genuine experience of the love and presence of God. Too much emphasis upon tradition can lead to a fossilizing of attitudes in the Church.

By allowing these four pillars to complement each other, Wesley was showing a way forward to a lively, balanced approach to faith that would help his contemporaries and provide his heirs with useful tools in their search for truth and meaning.

29. Wesley's 'Catholic Spirit'

The first thing implied is this: Is thy heart right with God? Dost thou believe His being and His perfections? His eternity, immensity, wisdom, power? His justice, mercy, and truth? . . . Dost thou believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, 'God over all, blessed for ever'? Is He revealed in thy soul? Dost thou know Jesus Christ and Him crucified? . . . Is thy faith . . . *filled with the energy, of love*? Dost thou love God 'with all thy heart, and with all thy mind, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength'? . . . Art thou employed in doing, 'not only thy own will, but the will of Him that sent thee'? . . .

Is thy heart right toward thy neighbour? . . . Do you show your love by your works? . . .

'If it be, give me thy hand.' I do not mean, 'Be of my opinion'. . . You need not even endeavour to come over to me, or bring me over to you . . . I do not mean, 'Embrace my modes of worship'. . . We must both act as each is fully persuaded . . . I mean, first, love me . . . as a brother in Christ . . . I mean, secondly, commend me to God in all thy prayers . . . I mean, thirdly, provoke me to love and good works . . . I mean, lastly, love me not in word only, but in deed and in truth . . .

If, then, we take this word in the strictest sense, a man of a catholic spirit is one who, in the manner above mentioned, gives his hand to all whose hearts are right with his heart.

Source: J. Wesley, *Sermons*, Vol. 2, pp. 346–59.

For Discussion

- 1 Why is religious fanaticism so dangerous? What are some of the ways in which it can be avoided?
- 2 How would you justify your belief in the existence of God to an unbeliever?
- 3 In what sense can Scripture be 'a complete rule of faith', when so many of the problems we are faced with today are not referred to specifically in the Bible?
- 4 A friend tells you that he is proposing a course of action (which you feel is unwise) because he has had 'a word from the Lord'. What would be your reply?
- 5 In a debate concerning some aspect of Christian belief, a person says 'It doesn't make sense!' How can you respond as one rational person to another, knowing that much of what you believe cannot be proved?
- 6 In what way has your own church's tradition been special to you?