



# What have the sermons of John Wesley ever done for us?

## John Wesley's sermons and Methodist doctrine

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*This article considers John Wesley's sermons as a source for Methodist theological reflection. There is a great deal of historical evidence that John Wesley intended his published sermons to provide a standard for Methodist doctrine and to function as an apologetic for the Methodist movement to the public at large. The article considers why he chose a published sermon collection as the vehicle for conveying his theology alongside exploring what the sermons tell us about Wesley as a theologian. It further considers how Wesley's sermons might prompt Methodists to think about contemporary issues.*

JOHN WESLEY • SERMONS • BOOK OF HOMILIES • FORTY-FOUR SERMONS • DOCTRINAL STANDARDS

What *have* John Wesley's sermons ever done for us? Underlying the catchy title, with its nod to the comedy of Monty Python, are rather serious questions for consideration by the people called Methodist and those whose worshipping communities trace their theological roots to Wesleyan Arminianism. What place do these eighteenth-century writings of a Church of England cleric have in forming what we believe? How do Wesley's sermons inform the way we live as Christians in the twenty-first century?

It was my colleague at Wesley House, the Revd Dr Jonathan Hustler, who proposed the question as a title for the college's Thursday evening series exploring Methodist theology and spirituality. What if, over the span of the academic year, we read a different Wesley sermon each week and had someone lead us in reflecting on what that sermon might mean for us as we engage in the theological and practical tasks of ministry? It proved to be a meaningful way of creating a dialogue between these historic writings and contemporary Methodist theology. University professors, connexional officers, circuit superintendents, a Cambridge dean, college tutors, deacons, presbyters and local preachers all rose to the task of reflecting on John Wesley's words in light of how they inform, disturb, frustrate, inspire and challenge us in our time. In order to encourage our readers to grapple with the relationship between John Wesley's writings and our contemporary understandings of being Methodists, *HOLINESS* is including a series called 'What have Wesley's sermons ever done for us?'

As the first in the series, this article considers John Wesley's sermons as a source for Methodist theological reflection. There is a great deal of historical evidence that John Wesley intended his published sermons to provide a standard for Methodist doctrine and to function as an apologetic for the Methodist movement to the public at large. It is important to consider why he chose a published sermon collection as the vehicle for conveying his theology alongside exploring what the sermons tell us about Wesley as a theologian.

## The 'dead horse' question: was John Wesley a theologian?

Methodism's history includes long periods of ambivalence toward John Wesley as a theologian. Since his death in 1791, he has been variously portrayed as saint, dissenter, heart-warmed evangelical, liberal social reformer and 'partisan theological hero' whose words could be used to justify contradictory doctrinal

positions.<sup>1</sup> Prior to the 1960s, few in academic circles referred to John Wesley as a theologian, and even fewer as a theologian shaped by his Anglican background. Albert Outler, Frank Baker, Franz Hildebrandt, Rupert Davies and Gordon Rupp, to mention just a few esteemed figures in the emergence of Wesleyan studies, reassessed the significance of John Wesley as a theological influence on the development of Methodism. A generation of academics and ministers emerged in the succeeding decades to develop groundbreaking work on the published and unpublished works of the Wesley brothers and craft significant new theological writing in the Wesleyan frame. As a result, the specialist field of Wesleyan theological studies has flourished over the last 50 years, creating scholarly networks that draw together the different varieties of Methodists across the world, as well as Wesleyans, Nazarenes, Pentecostals, and others who trace their denominational origins to some aspect of Wesley's Arminianism. John Wesley holds a significant place as the subject of historical study and as a 'theological mentor'.<sup>2</sup>

Still, it is not unusual to hear Wesleyan scholars assert that John Wesley was not a systematic theologian. Indeed, he was not, and attempting to make him one would be both foolish and somewhat anachronistic. Systematic theology was a continental tradition evident in Catholic and Protestant Scholasticism. It was not the methodology of eighteenth-century Church of England 'divines'. Their sources were rooted in the pastoral and communal traditions of Christianity, and particularly the Church of England as it emerged after the Elizabethan settlement and re-emerged after the Restoration. For an Oxford-educated, High Church cleric like Wesley, Scripture, Patristic writings, the Thirty-Nine Articles, the *Book of Homilies*, the liturgies of the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*, and the Church's hymnody were taken as authoritative sources for theological reflection. Added to these was the substantial list of works that he would eventually publish as part of his Christian library, including the spiritual writings of Thomas à Kempis, Richard Baxter, William Law, and Jeremy Taylor. John Wesley's particular way of engaging with and synthesising these sources in order to communicate the message of salvation to the average person made him, in the view of Albert Outler, a 'folk theologian'. Sermons, whether oral or written, were his primary means of communicating his reflections on this living Christian tradition.

John Wesley's published sermons, therefore, have been particularly important for those exploring his understanding of Christian doctrine and praxis. It should not be surprising that his sermons comprise the first volumes in the authoritative bicentennial edition of *The Works of John Wesley* (first volume

published in 1984), widely considered the authoritative version of all of his writings. The series expands beyond Wesley's 4-volume *Sermons of Several Occasions* (noted in the editor's Preface by the rather unfortunate acronym SOSO) to include some 19 that were transcribed from manuscripts and 18 that appeared in *Arminian Magazine* either late in his life or posthumously. These 151 sermons, spanning from his diaconate to his last days, provide insight into themes that most concerned him in the areas of Christian doctrine and holy living. They allow readers to see both the gaps and the leaps in Wesley's thought, and to engage with some of his more speculative writing.

## The significance of the forty-four sermons

For generations of Methodists, however, the 44 sermons contained in the *Sermons on Several Occasions* hold a special place. These are the sermons that Wesley published in four volumes between 1746 and 1760, noting in the first words of his oft-quoted Preface to the first volume and every subsequent edition:

The following sermons contain the substance of what I have been preaching for between eight and nine years last past. During that time I have frequently spoken in public on every subject in the ensuing collection: and I am not conscious that there is any one point of doctrine on which I am accustomed to speak in public which is not here – incidentally, if not professedly – laid before every Christian reader.<sup>3</sup>

Wesley asserted his intention to put his views of true religion before a general readership in simple language. His emphasis on 'plain' language belied his considerable learning. While he may have designed 'in some sense to forget all that I ever have read in my life' and 'to speak, in the general, as if I had never read one author, ancient or modern (always excepting the inspired);' his sermons reveal through their themes that he was well read in theology and familiar with both Latin and Greek.<sup>4</sup> Outler affirms:

It is obvious that he retained the substance of his reading; his voracious appetite for books of all sorts was never satiated ... Moreover, he retained a rich concealed deposit of all this for use throughout his life. Thus, as a mentor to the Methodists, he digested

this material and simplified it to the end that his 'plain people' could hear its 'plain truth' in a rhetoric suited to their needs.<sup>5</sup>

He intended the sermons to be accessible, so that readers might understand the need for and way to salvation, and so that his critics might see that he preached nothing that was contrary to the doctrines of the Church of England. While the latter point might be contested if one stridently adhered to the doctrine of predestination mentioned in the Thirty-Nine Articles, Wesley was certainly well within the boundaries on other doctrinal points such as total depravity and justification by faith.

## John Wesley and the *Book of Homilies*

Turning to the sermon as a genre for general communication of doctrine was part of his Church of England background. What is often missed by the contemporary reader, but might not have been lost on his Church of England colleagues, was Wesley's use of language from volumes of published homilies. There was irony within the title, *Sermons on Several Occasions*. Publications of sermons preached on 'occasions' usually indicated something formal, such as a public sermon at a cathedral or national event. Wesley's use of such irony was likely intentional. After all, Wesley had earned the cool censure of the university officials and clergymen in Oxford for the content of his sermon 'The Almost Christian'. It was the last sermon he was invited to preach anywhere in Oxford. He included it at the behest of several friends in the *Sermons on Several Occasions* with a brief introduction. From 1739 onward, as invitations to preach in parish churches dwindled and hostility from his colleagues grew, he adopted the extraordinary means of preaching outdoors – in fields and market places – to the common folk. These public places formed his occasions for preaching, and the less-than-noble his audiences. Further adding to this irony is the likelihood that most of these 44 sermons were not preached by Wesley on any occasion. His preaching notes may have formed the kernel of what he later developed into manuscripts for publication, but his manuscripts were not transcriptions of his (largely extemporaneous) preaching. These sermons are his careful, thoughtful reflection and distillation of the doctrines he wished to communicate.

Wesley had a personal attachment to one particular collection of published homilies, as his language, organisation and content in the *Sermons on Several*

*Occasions* demonstrates. Wesley's use of phrases such as 'plain truth for plain people' echoed the language in the Introduction to the *Book of Homilies*, published by Thomas Cranmer in 1547 and reissued in 1562 after Elizabeth I's accession to the throne and headship of the Church of England. The *Homilies* were to be read (by royal command) 'plainly and distinctly' by all clergy to their congregations on Sundays and holy days.<sup>6</sup> The publication of a standard set of sermons for the Church of England was significant in that it marked the Church's emphasis, under Cranmer's leadership, on exposition of the Bible through preaching. The different homilies explained points of Protestant doctrine in simple language and instructed people in the practicalities of Christian living. In their original published form, each was long – perhaps longer than people could generally tolerate in one sitting. Later editions broke each homily into parts for even simpler, and shorter, reading in services.

The *Book of Homilies* was proscriptive for less-educated Church of England clergy, who were largely unaccustomed to preaching. They were to read from these authorised sermons without fail. As Heitzenrater points out, however, the canons of the Church of England allowed clergy holding the MA qualification to preach their own sermons. In such cases, the *Book of Homilies* was prescriptive, providing both doctrinal boundaries and practical patterns for what to preach during the contentious Reformations under Edward VI and Elizabeth I.<sup>7</sup> Their content, much like the 1546 *Book of Common Prayer*, was theologically moderate and did not have a strong emphasis on the Reformed doctrine of predestination. Therefore, Wesley could demonstrate, through publication of his own sermons, that his doctrine did not vary from what was in the *Homilies*.

The *Book of Homilies* was quite an important work in John Wesley's theological development. After his heart-warming at Aldersgate in May 1738 and his summer sojourn with the Moravians in Herrnhut and Marienborn, he turned to resources within his Church of England tradition, particularly to the *Book of Homilies*, to help him frame his understanding of justification by faith. Outler writes:

There he had found a resolution to his doctrinal perplexities to match his new-found sense of assurance. This had prompted him to extract from Homilies I–IV an abridgement, which he then published and used as a theological charter throughout his whole career.<sup>8</sup>

Wesley then published an abridged version of the *Homilies*. It proved to be one of his popular works, going through 13 editions in his lifetime. His own choice of sermons as the means for explaining his doctrine was a practice influenced by his encounter with the *Homilies*.

## **A Methodist *Book of Homilies***

Wesley's publication of a set of standard sermons served similar purposes for the Methodist people as had both the Edwardian and Elizabethan editions of the *Book of Homilies*. Wesley did not decree that Methodist preachers must read his sermons aloud in Methodist meetings or in their outdoor preaching. He was not necessarily proscriptive in that sense, though he did not hesitate to suggest that they read some part of his sermons to their listeners. The sermons provided a pattern for what doctrine Methodists should preach, especially with regard to salvation. The publication of the first volume of sermons dovetailed with the growing use of untrained lay assistants in the Methodist movement. As questions over doctrine and the need for guidance emerged,

Wesley responded, not with a creed or a confession, or even a doctrine treatise, but with something analogous to a set of Methodist 'Homilies' – not in this case 'appointed to be read in the churches' (as Cranmer's had been) but rather to be studied and discussed by the Methodists and their critics.<sup>9</sup>

It is rather generous of Outler to assert that the sermons were to be studied and discussed by the Methodists. Although Wesley's sermons were the product of a discursive theological process of preaching, considering criticism, and finally setting his views down on paper, it is hard to imagine that he would tolerate much opposition to his views on substantial matters like justification, grace, sacraments or holy living from his colleagues or lay assistants. The theological dispute with George Whitefield over predestination was one case in point. Later sermons like 'On Predestination' and 'Free Grace', neither among the 44, left little room for discussion regarding his Arminian views. Later works built on the doctrinal positions he commended to the Methodist people in the four volumes of sermons of *SOSO*. In the 1789 version of his will, he promised a printed copy of these 44 sermons 'to each travelling preacher who should remain in the Connexion six months after [his] decease'.<sup>10</sup> He wanted his assistants to preach the doctrine of salvation and the means of holy living that

he believed and put down in these sermons.

The bequest to the Connexion's preachers likely referred to the newer 1787 edition of *Sermons on Several Occasions*, printed by Albert Smith under the auspices of the Wesleyan Conference Office. The front matter of that edition included a note under the title, 'Consisting of forty-four sermons, published in four volumes 1746, 1748, 1750, and 1760 (fourth edition, 1787); to which reference is made in the Trust-Deeds of the Methodist Chapels as constituting, with Mr. Wesley's Notes on the New Testament, the standard doctrines of the Methodist Connexion.'<sup>11</sup> The reference was to the standards that were put in place as societies were constructing buildings for their meetings. The Model Deed of 1763, on which the Trust-Deeds were based, required that Methodist societies only allow preaching in the chapels that did not contradict the doctrines expressed in the 44 sermons and the *Notes on the New Testament*. The sermons provided the boundary for what was acceptable doctrinal content. There was no demand for adherence to a confession or set of Articles, since these were already present in the established Church within which the Methodist sat as a Connexion of voluntary societies. American Methodists would receive a slightly longer prescription for their doctrine. In addition to the *Sermons* and the *Notes*, the American Conference accepted the Articles of Religion, Wesley's edited version of the Thirty-Nine Articles devoid of references to predestination and loyalty to the Crown. The twenty-six Articles of Religion summarised the major points of the doctrines expounded in Wesley's sermons.

The place of Wesley's 44 sermons as a source of doctrinal reflection in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Methodism is hardly contestable. His choice of the published sermon as a means of communicating his theology was rooted in his Church of England tradition and reflected his appreciation for the *Book of Homilies*. So, we are left with the question: what role do these sermons serve for the Methodist people today?

## The role of Wesley's sermons today

The sermons invite us to engage the 'salvation optimism' of an eighteenth-century spiritual and theological mentor who believed that all can be saved. When one reads Wesley's sermons, it is apparent that his rhetoric and language do not suit the twenty-first century. His use of Scripture defies any modern categorisation as exegesis. What is not necessarily hostage to his context are his doctrinal concepts and his emphasis on how one progresses toward



holiness. Many of his sermons, both in the traditional 44 and in the larger corpus, offer a wealth of material for consideration as we reflect on what it means to live as Methodists in our present context. For example:

- What might Wesley's writings on the universality of prevenient grace mean for United Methodists living amid a strong and popular revival of predestinarian Calvinism in the United States? ('On Predestination' and 'Free Grace')
- In what way do his thoughts on grace and the human condition affect contemporary understandings of mission? ('God's Love to Fallen Man', 'The General Spread of the Gospel' and 'Justification by Faith')
- How might his affirmation of Holy Communion as the primary means of grace guide discussions about worship, sacramental authority, or lay presidency? ('The Duty of Constant Communion' and 'The Means of Grace')
- What does his emphasis on holy conferencing and accountability say to those who suggest denominational schism? ('On Schism')
- How might his musings on the catholic spirit impact our discussions of ecumenism and inter-faith dialogues? ('The Catholic Spirit')
- To what extent could his concerns about both enthusiasm and Christian perfection affect Methodist attitudes toward charismatic practices and their relationships with their Pentecostal neighbours? ('The Nature of Enthusiasm', 'The More Excellent Way' and 'The Witness of the Spirit')
- In what ways might Wesley's sermons challenge us to think about poverty, immigration, economy, environmental stewardship, or care of the infirm? ('The Danger of Riches', 'On Charity', 'Caution Against Bigotry', 'The Good Steward', 'The New Creation' and 'On Visiting the Sick')

As we work through such questions, we need not justify our every position with reference to something John Wesley wrote. We need to know what Wesley thought, but we also need to recognise a model in how he worked out his theology. Theology in the Wesleyan spirit looks beyond Wesley to the treasure trove of sources in the living Christian tradition. It examines all things in light of belief in a loving God and a related commitment to loving neighbour, and guides us 'plain people' as we strive to work out our salvation amid the challenges of contemporary contexts.

## Notes

1. Randy Maddox, 'Reclaiming an Inheritance: Wesley as Theologian in the History of Methodism' in *Rethinking Wesley's Theology for Contemporary Methodism*, ed. Randy L. Maddox (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 1998), pp. 213–225.
2. *ibid.*, p. 223.
3. John Wesley, *Sermons on Several Occasions in Three Volumes*, vol. 1 of *The Works of John Wesley, Sermons I: 1–33*, ed. Albert Outler (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1984), p. 103.
4. *ibid.*
5. Albert Outler, 'Introduction', in vol. 1 of *The Works of John Wesley, Sermons I: 1–33*, ed. Outler, p. 26.
6. *Certain Sermons or Homilies Appoynted to Be Read in Churches.: In the Time of the Late Queene Elizabeth of Famous Memory. and Now Thought Fit to Be Reprinted by Authority from the Kings Most Excellent Maiesty* (London: John Norton, Joyce Norton and Richard Whitaker, 1635), Preface.
7. Richard P. Heitzenrater discusses the similar purposes of the *Book of Homilies* and *Sermons on Several Occasions* as vehicles for doctrine in chapter 9 of *Mirror and Memory: Reflections on Early Methodism* (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 1989), pp. 174–188.
8. Outler 1984, p. 4.
9. Outler 1984, p. 40.
10. Outler 1984, p. 54, quoting from Luke Tyerman, *The Life and Times of the Rev. John Wesley*, vol. III (London: Hodder & Stoughton), pp. 15, 616–617.
11. John Wesley, *Sermons on Several Occasions*, 4th edn (London: Alfred Sharp, 1787), front matter.