



# Making the invisible Christ visible: problems and opportunities for Wesleyan Christology

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*Wesley's Christology has been critiqued as inadequate and potentially unorthodox in a variety of ways, some of them contradictory. The most telling critical analysis has been by John Deschner (1960, 1985, 1988) using Reformed christological categories in his research supervised by Karl Barth. While affirming the Methodist emphases on 'the whole Christ' and 'the present Christ' in soteriological perspective, he also asks pressing questions about how Wesleyan theology can resolve apparent tensions between Christ and the law, and how it can better express the wholeness of Christ, moving beyond individual soteriology towards a more comprehensive vision of ecclesial wholeness and the wholeness of the human community. Wesleyan theologians have in turn responded to these questions in a range of ways, with varying success. What are the parameters and prospects for Wesleyan Christology in the light of this debate, and how does this relate to the contemporary missiological context?*

JOHN WESLEY • CHRISTOLOGY • JOHN DESCHNER • KARL BARTH •  
REFORMED THEOLOGY

## Introduction

*But Jesus concealed himself – Probably by becoming invisible!*  
(John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament: John 8:59*)

John Wesley's Christology has been critiqued as inadequate and potentially unorthodox in a variety of ways. The most fully developed critical analysis has been by John Deschner in his book *Wesley's Christology: An Interpretation* (first published in 1960, then reissued with a new introduction in 1985),<sup>1</sup> using Reformed christological categories in his research supervised by Karl Barth. He asks pressing questions about how Wesleyan theology can resolve apparent tensions between Christ and the law, and how it can better express the wholeness of Christ to move beyond individual soteriology towards a more comprehensive vision of ecclesial wholeness and the wholeness of the human community. Despite its age, this remains the fullest and most penetrating discussion of Wesley's Christology, and demands attention from all who approach the topic. Wesleyan theologians have responded to the questions Deschner raises in a range of ways, some of which will be considered below.<sup>2</sup> What are the parameters and prospects for Wesleyan Christology in the light of this debate, and how can constructive theological work proceed? The aim of this essay is to discuss Wesley's Christology primarily by engaging with Deschner's work, and from this discussion to open up new Wesleyan ways of understanding Christology from the particular perspective of the current experience of sanctification. While acknowledging the same problems as identified by Deschner, this is a more optimistic reading of their causes and correspondingly of the way that they represent opportunities for christological developments.

Deschner's book is the result of research carried out under the supervision of Karl Barth (1953–56). One of the significant contributions it made to Wesleyan scholarship and contemporary Wesleyan theology was to frame a systematic discussion of Wesleyan Christology by using categories from what he terms 'Protestant Orthodoxy'.<sup>3</sup> Deschner does not directly engage Barth's own theology, but draws on Heinrich Heppe's 1861 *Reformed Dogmatics* and Heinrich Schmid's 1889 *Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. The Barthian influence is in the background, but the explicit dialogue is with Reformed and Lutheran orthodoxy. He follows the schema of the two natures of Christ, human and divine, the two states of Christ, humiliation and exaltation, and, most significantly, the three offices of Christ, prophet, priest and king.

Encouraged by Karl Barth he poses the question of which of these three offices is primary for Wesley, and hence the key to his understanding of the nature and work of Christ. In the absence of any full development of this schema by Wesley, this is an *interpretative* decision. Some reviews of the book saw in this interpretation an imposition on Wesley from a Barthian perspective; hence Franz Hildebrandt's comment that at some points Deschner is 'reading Wesley through Barthian spectacles'.<sup>4</sup> Though mindful of this, it is also apparent that the dialogue between Wesley's texts and a Reformed position is part of the welcome insight that Deschner brings.

On the particular suggestion from Barth to use the threefold office as an analytic tool, Deschner comments:

Wesley can be read as a legalist or enthusiast if the prophetic or kingly offices are made fundamental to the work of Christ. He can be read in a decidedly more evangelical light if the priestly office becomes the starting point for understanding the others.<sup>5</sup>

This discussion of the relations between the three offices is one which continues in Wesleyan theology and is echoed in contemporary ecumenical discussions. Just one example is the case Geoffrey Wainwright makes in his 1997 work on Christology for the threefold office coming out from its predominantly Reformed roots, and now being used more widely in ecumenical theological explorations.<sup>6</sup> He sees the threefold office as a good vehicle to now press ahead with the 'active appreciation and further transmission of Classic Christianity',<sup>7</sup> and he also acknowledges that Deschner's work marks a significant Wesleyan contribution to this movement.<sup>8</sup>

In brief, Deschner's conclusions from his analysis of the two natures, two states and three offices are that Wesley's Christology overemphasises the divine nature of Christ in opposition to the human nature, is primarily based from the perspective of Christ in exaltation rather than in humiliation, and makes the priestly work of Christ primary, 'and indeed a priestly work which includes the prophetic and kingly work as one'.<sup>9</sup> From an historical perspective, these christological emphases are the result of polemical debates with various theological strands, most importantly eighteenth-century Calvinism. With regards to the primacy of the priestly office, Deschner goes on to conclude, 'Wesley is not Calvin here: Wesley is much more interesting simply as Wesley, even in his doctrine of justification.'<sup>10</sup>

## What are the problems with Wesley's Christology?

Before working within these broad characterisations to seek the opportunities they present for Wesleyan Christology, it will be illuminating to explore the major problems which Deschner identifies within Wesley's Christology. Wesley's Christology presents problems in two key ways:

- an under-emphasis on the humanity of Christ;
- a problematic relationship between Christ and the law.

### *Under-emphasis on the humanity of Christ*

This is the clearest symptom of a deeper problem. Especially in his *Notes on the New Testament* Wesley emphasises the divinity of Christ, and on several occasions complements this with a failure to fully describe and develop Christ's human nature. In the most extreme instances Christ's human nature is deliberately limited. One of the strongest critics of Wesley over this point was Albert Outler. His harshest comment is made when Wesley identifies Jesus clearly as God in order to explain the authoritative weight of the Sermon on the Mount. Wesley describes Jesus as

something more than human; more than can agree to any created being. It speaks the Creator of all – a God, a God appears! Yea, *ὁ ὤν*, the being of beings, Jehovah, the self-existent, the supreme, the God who is over all, blessed for ever!<sup>11</sup>

Outler comments that at times he so made 'a direct correlation between the human Jesus and the Second Person of the Trinity' that there is 'no kenosis here, but more than a hint of Wesley's practical monophysitism'.<sup>12</sup> Though Wesley does not ever state any monophysite doctrine – that Christ has just one divine nature – his practical description of the human Jesus can sometimes invite this conclusion. Other critical potential accusations include Nestorianism, the notion that there are two separate hypostases in Christ, and docetism, the notion that Christ ever remains divine and merely appears to be human – Kenneth Collins sees the need to defend Wesley against the charge of Nestorianism,<sup>13</sup> and Deschner defends him against the charge of docetism.<sup>14</sup> However, as Richard Riss wisely points out, these various accusations of heresy are mutually exclusive and they cannot all be correct.<sup>15</sup> The aim here is to seek a more optimistic diagnosis to allow correction, or at least understanding, of

the more problematic comments, while also opening new perspectives on the wider scope of Wesleyan Christology.

There are two key examples in Wesley's *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament* where the deliberate under-emphasis on the humanity of Christ is apparent from the way in which Wesley interprets gospel verses which suggest Jesus experienced human weakness or emotion.

This is a factor throughout Wesley's commentary on the death and rising of Lazarus in John 11. John 11:33 states that Jesus, 'groaned deeply and troubled himself'. However, Wesley comments that 'the affections of Jesus were not properly passions, but voluntary emotions, which were wholly in his own power. And this tender trouble, which he now voluntarily sustained, was full of the highest order and reason.'<sup>16</sup> Then, in verse 35, he does not allow that Jesus wept out of grief and sadness, but only 'out of sympathy with those who were in tears all around Him, as well as from a deep sense of the misery sin had brought upon human nature.'<sup>17</sup> Wesley here denies Jesus ordinary human emotional reactions to bereavement.

Discussing the wilderness temptations of Matthew 4, in a sermon describing the perfected Christian, Wesley also suggests that Jesus is not capable of having any evil thoughts. When invited to fall down and worship the devil, though Jesus may have 'thought of the sin', he was not *capable* of actually having any 'sinful thought', and so it is for 'real Christians'; 'if he was free from evil or sinful thoughts, so are they likewise.'<sup>18</sup> Here Wesley's optimistic view of the prospects for sinlessness is complemented by a Christology which limits the extent to which Christ's human nature is similar to our imperfect human state.

Going beyond this is the associated, and more unusual, claim of Wesley that when Jesus escapes from angry crowds he does so by becoming invisible. John 8:59 describes how Jesus 'concealed himself' to evade the angry crowd in the Temple, and Wesley explains, 'probably by becoming invisible.'<sup>19</sup> Wesley makes a similar comment on Luke 4:30 when Jesus escapes from the crowd at Nazareth. These are striking in that there was no need here for Wesley to defend Christ's divinity, and suggests that there may be more to his particular christological views than just concern for the doctrine of perfection. Wesley is at least wary, but at most disallows, that Jesus has human emotional responses, suffers temptation from evil thoughts, or is limited by usual physical human constraints. Some react to this christological problem by downplaying its significance. Principal among those taking this approach are Randy Maddox and Kenneth Collins. Both argue that these are unusual examples among a

much stronger body of evidence that Wesley's basic Christology of the two natures in one person is simply in line with Chalcedonian orthodoxy and the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England. Both give support for this view from Wesley's own stated reserve over describing Christ too casually. In Wesley's sermon 'On Knowing Christ after the Flesh' Wesley argues against 'fondling expression' and 'improper familiarity' with Christ.<sup>20</sup> Incidentally, the introduction to this sermon is another place where Outler raises the concern of monophysitism! Although the reverent reserve of Wesley may explain some of the ways that he refers to Christ, it is a matter of interpretation as to the extent to which this can excuse doctrinal issues. Combined with this is the concern that at least some of the examples of Wesley's are also associated with explicit related doctrinal factors. It is Wesley's soteriology which shapes his Christology, and it has already been noted that one of his limitations on the humanity of Christ was in the sermon on 'Christian Perfection' and pertained to the relationship between the nature of humanity in Christ and the nature of sanctified humanity in Christians.

There are three other examples of Wesley's doctrinal reserve concerning the humanity of Christ in the *Notes Upon the New Testament*,<sup>21</sup> and a further concern is raised by his editing of the Thirty-Nine Articles.<sup>22</sup> However, these various texts present similar christological concerns to the more stark instances already discussed. Rather than discussing the nuances of multiple examples, it will be helpful at this point to turn to Deschner's christological analysis of Wesley's soteriology, for there he locates an even more challenging problem.

### *Problematic relationship between Christ and the law*

A problematic relationship between Christ and the law is apparent when Wesley is giving an account of how the work of Christ relates to the call for those who trust in that work to live a holy life. This account is dependent upon particular decisions which Wesley takes regarding the work of Christ. It is in Wesley's presentation of the priestly work of Christ that Deschner sees the key to understanding the prophetic and kingly work, and the heart of the relationship between his Christology and his soteriology. Deschner connects the over-prominence of the divinity of Jesus with Wesley's view of the atonement and its relation to sanctification. Wesley's view of the atonement turns on the fact that the Son of God has died for us, because of which we are justified, and this opens the way to a distinct regeneration and subsequent sanctification. The emphasis on the divinity of Christ which this atonement requires is accompanied by a focus on the passive righteousness of Christ

rather than on his active righteousness.<sup>23</sup> Drawing this distinction starkly, Wesley bases his understanding of the atonement on the way that Christ passively gives himself over to suffering for our sake, rather than on the way that in Christ's active life and ministry is realised the sinless human life which we are unable to achieve. In this, Wesley treads a very fine line in his polemics with Calvinists, and goes so far in one of his most complete statements on this matter, the sermon on 'The Lord Our Righteousness' published in 1771, as to quote Calvin's *Institutes* extremely carefully on the subject: 'Christ by his obedience procured and merited for us grace and favour with God the Father.'<sup>24</sup> Outler points out that Wesley does not go on to include Calvin's subsequent thought that faith is the formal cause of justification;<sup>25</sup> this is because it would entail predestination of the elect and irresistible grace. It is also clear that although Wesley quotes this line from Calvin appreciatively, he understands the way in which Christ's obedience is imputed to believers, particularly his active obedience, in a quite different way.

For Wesley, what is most significant about the life of Jesus is that in him the divine Son of God in passive obedience allowed himself to be handed over to suffering and death for our sake. This emphasis on the passive righteousness of Christ is complementary with Wesley's polemics against Calvinist accounts of the imputed active righteousness of Christ, which he fears may discourage striving for holiness and encourage antinomianism. Wesley makes a fine, though not always clear, distinction between the way righteousness is merited to us because of Jesus Christ's self-offering, and the righteousness which he actively demonstrates by leading a life without sin. This active righteousness is not imputed to us in the same way as the passive righteousness. Though the active obedience of Christ is inseparable from the passive obedience,<sup>26</sup> and *is imputed* to us in justification, it is not imputed as holiness. In some way, though, it is still connected to the holiness which is expected to be realised in the believer as fruit of sanctification. Deschner argues that it is hard to imagine exactly how – but somehow, 'Wesley's explicit position is that the active obedience which counts for the believer is his own obedience, not Christ's.'<sup>27</sup>

It is precisely by the avoidance of imputed active righteousness that Wesley's sanctification-led soteriology allows for growth in the Christian life. The active righteousness of Christ is not imputed to us but is rather the image of perfect human life towards which we strive. It is only the passive righteousness which establishes a change in our relationship with God through the justifying death of Jesus Christ. This makes space for Wesley's central theological concern for sanctification: the work of Christ is primarily to open the way for the potential



work of the Spirit in the life of believers as they are sanctified towards the holiness of Christ-likeness. Deschner sees here the danger of excessive individualism, which combined with the limited role for the active righteousness of Christ means there is no place in Wesley's Christology for the notion that it is the Incarnation which can sanctify humanity corporately. Wesley's lack of development of the human nature of the incarnate Christ and the complementary under-development of its relation, on the one hand, to the divine nature, and on the other hand, to the general nature of humanity, precludes any such corporate effect of the Incarnation. This then opens the question of what precisely the process of sanctification is progressing individual humans towards. 'Following the example of Jesus' seems insufficient as it fails to denote exactly what in the nature of the incarnate Christ is an aspect of sanctified humanity and what is reserved to the nature of divinity. Wesley must still make this distinction as he does not, for example, expect that all sanctified believers will work nature miracles.

Deschner adds to this critical analysis of Wesley's Christology by noting that, in place of the active righteousness of Christ and the corporate effects of the unity of the dual nature in the Incarnation, Wesley depends on 'the law' to play a significant part. When Wesley describes the law in three sermons published in 1750, the christological language he uses shows that following the law is a necessary aspect of pursuing Christ-likeness, and thus the law has a bearing on the understanding of the identity and nature of Christ. The strength of identification of the law with Christ is well illustrated by these two lines:

Now this law [the 'moral law'] is an incorruptible picture of the high and holy one that inhabiteth eternity ... Yea, in some sense we may apply to this law what the Apostle says of his Son – it is the 'streaming forth' or outbeaming 'of his glory, the express image of his person. [cf Heb. 1:1]<sup>28</sup>

The law of God (speaking after the manner of men) is a copy of the eternal mind, a transcript of the divine nature; yea it is the fairest offspring of the everlasting Father, the brightest efflux of his essential wisdom, the visible beauty of the Most High.<sup>29</sup>

The law to which Wesley applies this christological language is the 'moral law', rather than the Mosaic Law, by which he means the discernment of the divine will which is initially available to conscience after the fall, then exemplified by the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount and finally fulfilled in



the life of Christ. The law for Wesley has a continuing vital role after justification in sanctification. The *imago Dei* in Christ, as revealed by his active obedience, is a fulfilment and re-proclamation of the moral law, which it is promised will be written on the hearts of those who trust in the Lord.

He describes sanctification as the realisation of this law within oneself, and the law plays a twin role with Christ in the process of sanctification: 'Indeed each is continually sending me to the other – the law to Christ, and Christ to the law.'<sup>30</sup> Wesley identifies three uses for the law – the first two, wherein the law acts like a 'severe schoolmaster', are to convince the world of sin, and to bring the sinner to Christ. The third use of the law is to 'keep us alive. It is the grand means whereby the blessed Spirit prepares the believer for larger communications of the life of God.'<sup>31</sup> The 'law of Christ', using that as shorthand for the law as fulfilled in Christ, serves the first two uses for a believer. However, for the third use, bearing in mind Wesley's refusal to allow the imputed righteousness of Christ in sanctification, what role exactly does the law play? Is it really a mere example to be followed? It is continuous with the moral law as proclaimed in creation, in the prevenient grace at work in the fallen world, in the re-establishment in Christ, and so also in the future as the standard by which all are to be judged; so, if the law of Christ is an example to be followed, how will this judgement function for the saved who fail to fully follow it?

From this juncture arise the two most cutting of Deschner's criticisms of Wesley's Christology. First, Deschner fears that in this identification of the law with Christ, particularly with the way it encompasses the 'moral law' acknowledged by all through conscience, Wesley has opened the way for other principles, from outside of Christian theology, to become the guiding definition of holiness:

Does the Wesleyan holiness derive from Christ's revelation of what holiness is, or does it find in Christ a confirmation for an idea of holiness whose content has been learned, possibly only in part, elsewhere?<sup>32</sup>

And further:

And to this understanding of the content of holiness corresponds the fact that for Wesley sanctification is not primarily a participation in Christ who, as Paul says, is also our sanctification (I Cor. 1:30), but rather such a relation to Christ as allows his Spirit to establish in us

a 'temper,' a more abstract, stylized kind of holiness ... Wesley here makes his most significant departure from his own most characteristic path: from the cross to holiness. It is in this departure that the danger of a periodic identification of Wesleyan holiness with a puritan, socialist, existentialist, or any other stylized morality is greatest.<sup>33</sup>

The second associated key criticism Deschner levels at Wesleyan Christology is whether the justice and mercy of God can be reconciled if the promise of the law is dependent upon the realisation of human holiness rather than solely on the work of Christ. Is God's justice ever really satisfied in Wesley's atonement? Deschner does concede that Wesley makes clear that 'the positive fulfilling of the law's demand takes place not in justification, but in sanctification.'<sup>34</sup> The remaining hope for Deschner of the satisfaction of God's justice in declaring his holy people righteous (or not) can only be met in the final justification. Yet here, too, Wesley follows the particular view of imputed righteousness he already established as operative in first justification. Although the imputed righteousness of Christ continues to merit justification for sins, the actual works of the righteous will also be counted in the judgement, and if they are found lacking it will not be according to justice, but to love alone that they can be declared righteous. Wesley makes this clear in his comment on Matthew 12:37, where Jesus refers to the final judgement:

Your words as well as actions shall be produced in evidence for or against you, to prove whether you was a true believer or not. And according to that evidence you will either be acquitted or condemned in the great day.<sup>35</sup>

In Wesley's final justification, there is a combined action of the passive righteousness of Christ applying the merit of atonement for sins committed, with faith in the sanctifying work of the Spirit to actually realise the law fulfilled by Christ in the life of those justified. In the late sermon 'On the Wedding Garment', published in 1791 (outside the scope of Deschner's research which was limited to the earlier standard sermons), Wesley argues that it is possible for the grace of God to go further than merely to cover over our corrupt nature, but actually to accomplish 'the renewal of the soul "in the image of God wherein it was created" ... the imagination that faith supersedes holiness is the marrow of antinomianism.'<sup>36</sup>

Deschner responds by asking whether the semi-independent moral law is a demand that humanity can ever meet, and so the divine mercy triumphs over and above the law – hence, does God really die for mercy, but without justice? Deschner comments first:

the divine nature is there [on the Cross] much more to make tolerable a situation where ‘justice’ is not being done, according to that semi-independent moral law. Could there be a more eloquent testimony that the moral law actually does have penultimate significance, and that Wesley really does mean for the law to lead us to Christ and to keep us there?<sup>37</sup>

And then Deschner laments further: ‘It must be said that Wesley’s evangelical intention has the final word. And the price of this word is a qualified satisfaction of the positive demand of God’s justice.’<sup>38</sup>

Both these most drastic of criticisms from Deschner have a particularly Reformed flavour to them. The easiest remedies which his criticisms invite are essentially a return to what Deschner has characterised as ‘Protestant Orthodoxy’, with imputed active righteousness of Christ to fulfil divine justice in the final justification, and a sole priority for the Word of God realising holiness in humanity, rather than relying on humanity’s own fulfilling of the law of Christ. Either of these remedies would resolve the difficulties of Wesley’s Christology, but with the unfortunate complementary effect of negating what he fought so hard to protect: the possibility of the realisation of holiness and fulfilment of the law in the life of believers in *this* day, not only in the great final day of judgement.

## Opportunities for Wesleyan Christology

Deschner has helpfully and thoroughly diagnosed the unusual problematic features of Wesleyan Christology, but in so doing also highlights the positive outcomes of these.

To some extent unsurprisingly, this analysis using what is most often a Reformed schema has reproduced some of the doctrinal tensions between Wesleyan theology and the Calvinism of the eighteenth century. With regard to Calvin on justification, Wesley famously claimed only to ‘differ from him a hair’s breadth’.<sup>39</sup> However, in the letter to John Newton, the famous ex-slaver

and Calvinist, where he argues this, Wesley goes on in the next line to say, 'But the main point between you and me is perfection.' Newton has made the accusation that perfection leads to 'dangerous mistakes,' and Deschner's analysis has shown how in fact there may be something in this, at least from Newton's own doctrinal perspective. Wesley compares Newton's opposition to perfection as a 'grave mistake leading to grievous errors' with Wesley's own similar opposition to Calvinist understandings of predestination. Wesley's conception of the relation of the righteousness of Christ to justification does differ from Calvin's and, even if Wesley himself did not see them, there are apparent problems both in the doctrine of the human nature of Christ, and of the reconciliation of God's justice and mercy in salvation. However, Wesley finally defends his doctrine of perfection to Newton, not on doctrinal grounds, but explaining the continuity of his call to holiness from 1725 to the present, and that it is based on the experience of over twenty thousand people (though this seems likely to be hyperbole rather than a precise statistical argument!).

Deschner attributes the tension in Wesley's soteriology and Christology to the fact that he had a moralistic approach to sanctification from an early age, which was interrupted by an evangelical conversion in 1738. This view of Wesley's theological biography, and especially Aldersgate, is overly simplistic, and demonstrates Deschner's bias towards giving too much weight to Wesley's doctrine of justification by faith. Wesley does indeed develop this doctrine in the years immediately following 1738, but equal, or even extra, weight should be given to Wesley's own claim that the pivotal point and 'grand depositum' of his teaching was not justification by faith, but full sanctification.<sup>40</sup>

Assuming that Wesleyan Christology desires to retain this pivotal point of sanctification (or else it ceases to be Wesleyan?), response to Deschner's critique needs to positively defend the focus on sanctification in the life of the Church. It is this that Wesleyan theology prioritises, and which the subsequent difficulties of other aspects of theological thinking must be fitted around or within. Deschner himself does suggest some key areas for christological development which would serve to strengthen the outline of justification and sanctification at the heart of a Wesleyan theology. However, having now established some critique of his particular diagnosis, this essay proposes four corrective strategies which seek to draw together the experience of sanctification with the systematic theology necessary to connect Christology and soteriology in a distinctively Wesleyan way:

- 1 The development of a strong pneumatology, in close relation to the Christology.
- 2 A focus on the present experience of sanctification as the primary locus for christological revelation, rather than only in the experience of justification.
- 3 The priestly work of Christ as intercessor can become the primary way that Christians relate to Christ, accompanied by, but not led by, the priestly work of justification.
- 4 A discovery, or rediscovery, of how a Wesleyan ecclesiology has christological roots and content.

This essay will end with a brief account of how these four correctives might interact, beginning in dialogue with two Wesleyan theologians who do go some way to explore in these directions how they respond to Deschner.

Henry Knight argues that Deschner has too excessively viewed the work of Christ in Wesley's theology as a past event and that Deschner neglects Wesley's guiding concern to preserve room for the continuing work of Christ in the contemporary life of the believer.<sup>41</sup> Christ's active obedience can be at work as more than a mere exemplar, through the way that human affections are shaped to produce a sanctified life. Wesley uses the affections to re-focus the believer on Christ at work in her own present and future. Knight explains: 'They are truly our affections, but are only Christian affections if they remain continually related to God as their object.'<sup>42</sup> Employing a similar argument against Deschner, Geoffrey Clapper uses the term 'transitive' to describe how for Wesley the affections properly take as their object the active obedience of Christ, which produces love, joy and peace in the believer's heart. Furthermore, he uses the term 'dispositional' to describe how these transformed affections result in altered behaviour. The affections, having been transformed by 'targeting' attention on Christ, become right dispositions towards the world.<sup>43</sup>

However, though both Knight and Clapper concentrate their interpretations on the inward process of sanctification achieved through the affections in a Wesleyan psychological framework, this is somewhat at the expense of adequate recognition for Wesley's insistence upon the direct experience of the Holy Spirit which drives this process. Using Wesley's terminology derived from Romans 8, they focus on the 'witness of our own spirit' without a preceding and primary focus in the 'witness of the Spirit'. The problems with Wesley's

depiction of the Incarnation and his unusual relation between Christ and the law can be seen to be the result of a desire to focus on the experience of Christ in the present life of believers through the work of the Spirit. Christ's active obedience, consisting of love for God and humanity and a right ordering of affections and dispositions towards the neighbour, is neither only past exemplar nor only future criteria of judgement, but also a present reality unfolding through the witness and work of the Spirit made available to humanity now. Though there are clearly deficiencies in Wesley's account of the humanity of Jesus, the present experiential and pneumatological centre of his theology is where these problems can be resolved. The union between the divine and human natures established in the Incarnation is made effective by the witness of the Spirit in the lives of the saints. The relationship of Christians to the Trinity by union with Christ through the Spirit both reveals the incarnate nature of Christ and generates a human participation in the sanctifying effects of the divine nature upon the human nature in Christ. This does not mean that justification is left behind at the beginning of Christian life, but it is made an ever-present reality in the priestly work of Christ as intercessor. In a helpful section identifying the potential, but under-developed, importance of Christ's priestly intercession, Deschner also notes the links between this and the gift of the Holy Spirit, 'who makes intercession for us in our hearts as Christ intercedes in heaven',<sup>44</sup> and also with the 'doctrine of the church as the Body of the interceding Christ'.<sup>45</sup>

Wesley's christological view of the moral law is not necessarily, as Deschner fears, an open door to secular influence on the Christian pursuit of holiness, but instead encourages Christians not to rely solely upon the active righteousness of Christ to describe the detail of moral decisions and habits necessary for Christ-likeness. It is as Christians consider how the law written on their hearts, by the Spirit and through Christ, can be lived with faith and integrity in their own place and day, that this law, and so also Christ, is understood in new ways. Christ-likeness is not received as an historically fixed image, but is discovered afresh as we live the law of Christ in each situation. What Deschner feared to be a back door allowing a way in for non-Christian morality should be seen, from a Wesleyan perspective, as an open front door to the world. With a Wesleyan Christology focused on the Christian community as it is being sanctified, the realities of all life are included as part of the formation of scriptural holiness.

Any theology based on the Wesleyan debates of the eighteenth century ever runs the risk of remaining overly individualistic. However, if faithful to the

insights of a sanctification-led Christology, there is also the potential for a corporate aspect in the present sanctifying work of Christ. A key concept in Wesleyan ecclesiology will be 'social holiness', which defends sanctification against individualism. This demands a renewed Wesleyan ecclesiology and a complementary sacramental and liturgical focus. An adequate Wesleyan Christology can only be worked out by turning to the lives and worship of the present people of God as they are sanctified both as individuals and corporately in relation to the world.

Finally, what might all this mean for the invisible Jesus in the Temple? It has been argued that the problems with Wesley's Christology over the humanity of Christ and the relation between Christ and the law are correctly identified by John Deschner, but that the invitation to adopt Reformed solutions, or even simply to prioritise evangelical justification, is not the way to tackle them. Rather, the identification of the problems should be accompanied by an understanding that they are caused by the shaping of a theology which is led always by the practical desire to facilitate and encourage the experience of sanctification. Hence it is through this lens that any Wesleyan corrective theological work should be carried out on Wesleyan Christology.

The discovery of Christ-like sanctified living in the contemporary Christian Church can only be pursued in dialogue with the scriptural Jesus. Whereas Wesley protected the human nature of Jesus from the physical and harsh realities of human life, including grief, ignorance, sinful thoughts and attack by angry mobs, it has been argued that a sanctification-led Christology demands a Christ-like engagement with these human realities in the world. It is a helpful Wesleyan principle that our understanding of Scripture is in tune with the evidence of the work of the Spirit in the world, and so in the world we might seek the Christ-like model for understanding Christ in the Gospels. Jesus facing the mobs in John 8 and Luke 4 provides just one example of how this theological position might work exegetically. Contemporary Christians do face angry mobs when called to speak prophetically of God's saving justice. They will not be escaping with miracles of invisibility, but they may practise non-violent resistance and work for reconciliation, and these patterns can also be discovered in the human Christ of the Gospels as he walks away from the crowds and lives within the vulnerability of his human nature.

This essay has engaged with John Deschner's seminal work on Wesley's Christology and found there much insight for identifying the shape of the apparent problems. These problems have though been diagnosed differently



as the open edges of a theology which is led more by the present experience of sanctification than by the demand for internal coherence. As such, they have been seen less as problems and rather as opportunities to invite the construction of a Christology which takes on the current experience of Christ in the Church and the world as a conversation partner with the Christ of Scripture. Meeting Christ in the world and in our lives, by the work of the Holy Spirit, can make Wesley's invisible Christ visible again, both in Scripture and in our present reality.

## Notes

1. John Deschner, *Wesley's Christology: An Interpretation*, Dallas, TX: Southern Methodist University Press, 1960, 2nd edn, 1985.
2. The whole range of available analyses of Wesley's Christology is summarised and surveyed, Richard M. Riss, 'John Wesley's Christology in Recent Literature', *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 45(1) (Spring 2010), pp. 108–129.
3. In this he was following nineteenth-century Wesleyan systematics, for example William Burt Pope's *Compendium of Christian Theology* (London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1880), and more recent German work on John Wesley's theology by David Lerch: *Heil und Heiligung bei John Wesley* (Zurich: Christliche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1941).
4. Franz Hildebrandt, 'Wesley's Christology', *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society* 33(6) (June 1962), pp. 122–124. See also the review by Geoffrey Wainwright which attributes all the criticisms he makes to Barth's influence: Geoffrey Wainwright, *Perkins Journal* 39(2) (April 1986), pp. 55–56.
5. Deschner, *Wesley's Christology*, p. 82, n. 10.
6. Geoffrey Wainwright, *For Our Salvation: Two Approaches to the Work of Christ*, London: SPCK, 1997.
7. Wainwright, *For Our Salvation*, p. 119.
8. Wainwright, *For Our Salvation*, p. 107.
9. Deschner, *Wesley's Christology*, p. 186.
10. Deschner, *Wesley's Christology*, p. 186.
11. References to Wesley's sermons are to the text as published in A. C. Outler (ed.), *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, vols 1–4, Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1984, 1985, 1986, 1987; abbreviation: *Works*. Sermon 21, 'Sermon on the Mount I' (1748), §9, *Works*, vol. 1, p. 474.
12. Sermon 21, 'Sermon on the Mount I' (1748) §2, note f, *Works* vol. 1, p. 470.
13. Riss, 'John Wesley's Christology', p. 115; citing Kenneth J. Collins, *A Faithful Witness: John Wesley's Homiletical Theology*, Wilmore, KY: Wesley Heritage Press, 1993, pp. 35–43.
14. Deschner, *Wesley's Christology*, p. 28.
15. Riss, 'John Wesley's Christology', p. 128.
16. John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament* (1755), London: Epworth Press, reprint edn 1976; abbreviation: *NT Notes*, John 11:33.

17. *NT Notes*, John 11:35.
18. Sermon 40, 'Christian Perfection' (1741), §II.21, *Works*, vol. 2, p. 117.
19. *NT Notes*, John 8:59.
20. Sermon 123, 'On Knowing Christ After the Flesh', §§8–9, *Works*, vol. 4, pp. 101–102; Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology*, Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994, p. 116; Kenneth J. Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace*, Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007, pp. 94–95.
21. Mark 6:6, Mark 13:32, Luke 2:52; in each of these, Wesley makes a distinction between the limited knowledge of the human nature of Christ and the all-knowing divine nature. See Deschner, *Wesley's Christology*, p. 31; see also Matthew Hambrick and Michael Lodahl, 'Responsible Grace in Christology? John Wesley's Rendering of Jesus in the Epistle to the Hebrews', *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 43 (Spring 2008), pp. 91–92.
22. Randy Maddox (in *Responsible Grace*, p. 116) points out that in Wesley's *Twenty Five Articles*, his edited version of the Anglican Thirty-Nine Articles, from the Article II statement that Jesus 'took man's nature in the womb of the blessed Virgin', he omits the next clause that Jesus was 'of her substance' (*John Wesley's Sunday Service of the Methodists in North America: With an Introduction by James F. White*, Nashville, TN: United Methodist Publishing House, 1984, p. 306). A similar doctrinal reserve in Wesley's *Christian Library* was also noted by Ted Campbell in his analysis of Wesley's excerpted edition of the *Ignatian Epistles* from which are omitted any passages describing Jesus as born 'of the race of David according to the flesh' (*John Wesley and Christian Antiquity: Religious Vision and Cultural Change*, Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1991, pp. 80–81).
23. Deschner, *Wesley's Christology*, pp.152ff.
24. Sermon 20, 'The Lord our Righteousness', §II.9, *Works*, vol. 1, p. 457; citing Calvin, *Institutes* III.xiv.17, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, ET Ford Lewis Battles, Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1960, vol. 1, p. 784. Wesley has extracted this passage from John Goodwin's *Imputatio Fidei* (1642). See *Works*, vol. 1, p. 457, note c.
25. Sermon 20, 'The Lord our Righteousness', §II.9, note 44.
26. Sermon 20, 'The Lord our Righteousness', §I.4, *Works*, vol. 1, p. 453.
27. Deschner, *Wesley's Christology*, p. 164.
28. Sermon 34, 'Original, Nature, Properties and Use of the Law', §II.3, *Works*, vol. 2, p. 9.
29. Sermon 34, 'Original, Nature, Properties and Use of the Law', §II.6, p. 10
30. Sermon 34, 'Original, Nature, Properties and Use of the Law', §IV.7, p. 18.
31. Sermon 34, 'Original, Nature, Properties and Use of the Law', §IV.1–3, pp. 15–16.
32. Deschner, *Wesley's Christology*, p. 103.
33. Deschner, *Wesley's Christology*, pp. 105–106.
34. Deschner, *Wesley's Christology*, p. 174.
35. *NT Notes*, Mt 12:37.
36. Sermon 127, 'On the Wedding Garment' (1791), §§17–18, *Works*, vol. 4, p. 148. Outler attributes the impulse for Wesley to publish this sermon to the persistent

- accusations from Calvinists that he espoused works-righteousness – as Outler describes it, Wesley responds with a summary of ‘his distinctive emphasis on the unity of faith *and* love in true holiness, as a sort of “last word”’. *Works*, vol. 4, p. 140.
37. Deschner, *Wesley's Christology*, p. 168.
  38. Deschner, *Wesley's Christology*, p. 179.
  39. Journal, 14 May 1765, *Works*, vol. 21, p. 509.
  40. ‘This doctrine [full sanctification] is the grand depositum which God has lodged with the people called Methodists; and for the sake of propagating this chiefly He appeared to have raised us up.’ *Letters*, vol. 8, p. 238.
  41. Henry H. Knight III, *The Presence of God in the Christian Life*, Meutchen, NJ, and London: The Scarecrow Press Inc., 1992.
  42. Knight III, *The Presence of God in the Christian Life*, p. 59.
  43. Geoffrey S. Clapper, *John Wesley on Religious Affections*, London: The Scarecrow Press, 1989, p. 79.
  44. Deschner, *Wesley's Christology*, p. 170.
  45. Deschner, *Wesley's Christology*, p. 172.