



Editorial

Andrew Stobart

I

In a world where seemingly intractable differences polarise and poison national, international and even ecclesial discourse, the relevance of Wesleyan theological commitments is hard to underestimate. Such commitments, of course, have their origin in the mission and ministry of the Wesley brothers, who wrestled with the thorny issues of their age, no less divisive than those that face the contemporary church: the politics of human trafficking and slavery, the theology of antinomianism and human agency, and the question of uniformity in the incipient Methodist movement. In the earliest years of Methodism, the Wesley brothers and others expended considerable effort to address the issues of doctrine, discipline and public engagement that the fledgling movement was raising. Indeed, many of Methodism's characteristic theological commitments were forged in the process.

In August 1749, gathered in conference in Bristol, the first item on the agenda for John and Charles Wesley, George Whitefield and Howell Harris was the inquiry: 'How far can we unite with each other? Either in affection? In judgment? Or in jointly carrying on the work of our common Master?' The men, who agreed about justification but not about predestination, nevertheless concluded the conference with an expression of resolve to 'facilitate an union in carrying on the work of God'. This resolve included general undertakings to speak kindly and carefully about each other, and even a specific intention 'to use each other's expressions, mixing them with our own, as far as we can honestly'. Importantly, the success of this 'union' would not only rely on the willing attitudes of these four men; the conference ended with an agreement

that copies of the Conference Minutes would be taken by each of them and read, as each found occasion, to preachers and other 'prudent persons of our flock'. The reading of Conference proceedings thus became an instrument of what became known as Methodist connexionalism.¹

Connexionalism soon became a striking feature of the Methodist Church, and it was understood as *conversational* in character. The conferring of Mr Wesley and others was offered as an example for practice across the connexion. The 'Large' Minutes, which dealt with doctrine and discipline, and went through several editions within Wesley's lifetime, codified this in 1763, when Wesley itemised *five* instituted means of grace: prayer, searching the Scripture, the Lord's Supper, fasting and, finally, 'Christian Conference'. The following questions, among others, were to be asked: 'Are we convinced how important and how difficult it is to order our conversation right? Is it always *in grace*? Seasoned with salt? Meet to minister grace to the hearers?'²

This elevation of Christian conference as a means of grace alongside the more typical disciplines of prayer, Scripture study, fasting and Eucharistic worship acknowledges an important trend in the Methodist movement. Undoubtedly the travails of contemporary Methodist churches were not in the mind of Mr Wesley and his colleagues when these minutes were recorded; however, they recognised that one of the pressing tasks that defined their movement was *conversational*: both articulating how and why the Methodist movement existed, and inviting others to move within its transformative circumference. Despite the classic picture of Wesleyan field-preaching, small gatherings around kitchen tables or at firesides to discuss, debate, even disagree – in short, to confer – were in fact the means by which the Methodist movement grew and strengthened.

The Minutes of Conference became one among other instruments of conferral: Wesley expected his preachers to keep a journal (we might call it conferring with themselves), to read from his library publications (we might call it conferring with the tradition of scholarship), and to meet with others to pray, search the Scriptures, examine their preaching practice, and to hear and give testimony (we might call it conferring within the community). Nor was conference reserved for the Methodist family; from visiting the sick and imprisoned to giving a public account of faith, Wesley expected that his people would be engaged in conferring beyond the boundaries, with those who might be uninterested, unwilling, or unfavourable to the Christian gospel or the Methodist message.

The first supplementary question in the 'Large' Minutes thus makes eminent sense: 'Are we convinced how important and how difficult it is to order our conversation right?' Here is recognition of an inherent difficulty in the conversational task; a quite modern-sounding awareness of the complexities of the speech-act. Even for such a prolific communicator (and one might add, conversationalist) as John Wesley, ordering conversation rightly required careful and deliberate preparation and, as is made clear in later questions, prayer – both before and after.

Against this background, the task of theology in the Wesleyan tradition becomes clearer: to *foster* rather than foreclose such transformative conversation; to *resource* rather than reduce the exchange of perspectives and insight; to promote theological *engagement* rather than exclusion – all, in the words of the Conference Minutes of 1749, to 'facilitate an union in carrying on the work of God'. Wesleyan commitments unashamedly relegate theological dispute to second order discourse. First order is the work of God, the spreading of Scriptural holiness, the transformation of the world by the unmerited graciousness of God, the perfecting of the character of Christ in us, and the knowledge of the love of God shed abroad by the Holy Spirit. Theological reflection is merely – and yet also profoundly – the thinking necessary for us to engage in this work of God, as *God's* work not ours. Characterised by connexionalism, Christian conference, and conversation, the Wesleyan approach provides a salutary signal in today's world that for *us* to follow God's transformative path, we *need* to attend carefully, deliberately and graciously to each other. Wesleyan theological commitments thus possess a healthy dose of perspective that we so urgently need today.

II

While this issue of *Holiness* is the first of our non-themed issues, there is nevertheless a common thread that holds the contents together. The articles are animated by the kind of Wesleyan commitment described above – intentional engagement with the complex issues of ministry and mission today. Like any living tradition, Wesley's heritage is never static, and these articles are examples of the theological work that is being done at that interface of past and future. How, now, are we to unite around God's work, and serve our 'common Master'?

Take, for example, Carla Works' article exploring God's promise that his people would 'inherit the world'. While salvation in the Wesleyan tradition is often equated with personal transformation, Works skilfully traces another strand of thought, evident even in Wesley's hymnody, that insists on cosmic renewal. This broader vision is deeply Scriptural, drawing on Paul's renewed understanding of the Old Testament promise of land in the light of his encounter with Jesus. Methodism today 'needs to be reminded of just how big this good news really is', and Works provides 'theological reasons for caring for strangers and for caring for our planet' (p. 21).

This extended vision of renewal is often described as 'social justice', or even 'social holiness', which we happily – and often uncritically – associate with the Wesleyan tradition. In Roger Walton's article, the two terms are carefully separated, as Walton traces the differences and connections between the two terms. Both are evident in Wesley's own life and ministry, and both are carried down the tradition to today; but we must avoid eliding the two as if they were one and the same thing. As Walton puts it, 'Social holiness and social justice are, thus, part of a divine ecology where one follows the other in the rhythm of discipleship' (p. 34).

Daniel Pratt Morris-Chapman provides a worked example of the complex interplay of theological commitment and practical engagement by exploring the manoeuvring of American Methodists on the issue of slavery in the antebellum (pre-civil war) period. Issues of slavery and racism are, of course, still not relegated to history, and so understanding past Methodist engagement on the issue can be salutary for today's Church. Morris-Chapman's conclusion is timely and challenging:

'Although the institutional church regularly compromised the integrity of Wesley's social vision of Christianity, the idea that Methodism could only flourish by engaging in struggles against societal evils like slavery was regurgitated by African Methodists and others, who recognised themselves as agents of God's transforming power in this world' (p. 50).

The interaction between belief and experience that is crucial for such transformative engagement with the world is explored in James Garnett's article, 'Assimilation, Accommodation and Appropriation'. Why, he asks, do we sometimes ignore experiences that contradict our beliefs (leading to social inaction), while at other times we let experience prompt us to apply our beliefs

in new, even daring ways (for example, Wilberforce's work for the abolition of slavery)? With skill, Garnett leads us through various ways of understanding the interplay between belief and experience, promoting a nuanced understanding of the often-stylised relationship between science and faith, humanism and Christianity. Such careful understanding helps us to 'negotiate more adroitly the pathway from a shared understanding of the world as it is to a shared vision of the future' (p. 74).

Mike Wilson's contribution to our series, 'What have the sermons of John Wesley ever done for us?' introduces another kind of theological conversation – how contemporary faith can interact with the philosophical formulations of the fourth- and fifth-century controversies that led to the various creeds of the Church. Wilson finds in Wesley an unexpected partner to wrestle with trinitarian language, and to find a way to hold biblical testimony and Christian experience together.

Finally, in Kim Cape's covenant sermon, reflecting on Norman Adams' painting *The Golden Crucifixion*, we encounter the sharp implications of committing to a Wesleyan heritage. In connexionalism, God may indeed, as Cape puts it, 'call us to claim as kin' (p. 83) the most unexpected people. But such is the meaning of our own 'being kin' with Christ.

III

This issue concludes with a healthy selection of reviews, to help readers direct their own theological reading. It remains the intention of this journal to resource the global Wesleyan community with cutting-edge scholarship and research-led content, at times through the articles we publish, and at other times by signposting relevant work published elsewhere.

As with the previous two issues of *Holiness*, we are indebted to the trust fund named by and for John Newton Davies and Sarah Davies, which is currently helping to finance this open-access journal. The availability of *Holiness* as a free-to-readers and free-to-contributors journal is only possible because of the generosity of this and other funding sources. Such partners share the ambition of Wesley House, that the transformation of Church and world is promoted by well-resourced, thoughtful and articulate Wesleyan scholarship. If you also feel able to partner with us by helping to fund *Holiness*, you can contact me at Wesley House.

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Wesleyan scholarship has found a quinquennial home at the Oxford Institute for Methodist Theological Studies since 1958. We are delighted that two of the articles in this issue have arisen from that forum, and further articles will follow in forthcoming issues. Conferences like that one, and like the Methodist Studies Seminar and the Global Scholars Retreat to be held shortly in Cambridge, are opportunities for fostering, resourcing and engaging theological conferral that is a characteristic Wesleyan commitment. By reading this journal, we hope that you will not simply 'consume', but 'confer' too, with us, with others and with the world; and through such Christian conference, may we carry on the work of our common Master.

Andrew Stobart, Editor
Trinity 2019

Notes

1. Rack, HD. (ed.) 2011. *The Works of John Wesley: Volume 10 The Methodist Societies, The Minutes of Conference*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, pp. 229–30.
2. Rack, pp. 855–7.