

## Where Has Systematic Theology Gone? (And Does That Matter for Theological Education?)

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This paper poses a simple question: whether it is worth paying attention to the systematic structure of Christian theology, as has been done with respect to Christian thought throughout the modern period. I want to ask the question not just of those who train formally for some kind of paid church ministry. I want to address the question more widely: in relation to the many voluntary, accredited, ministries such as preachers, worship leaders, or those in recognised pastoral roles. Wherever people do any kind of training which is informed by 'faith thinking', should they be made aware of Christian thought's/theology's 'systematic shape'? Does (or would) such knowledge or awareness actually enhance spirituality, discipleship, Christian learning or quality of life?

The question is in part prompted by a very concrete starting-point: the introduction of a new (online) training course for worship leaders and local preachers in the Methodist Church in Great Britain. Entitled *Worship: Leading and Preaching* this 8-module (24-unit) course has been a major shift in the style and content of training for such ministries. It has moved well away from a structure in which a local preacher will have been required to study, as part of their training, a doctrine text-book such as John Stacey *Groundwork of Theology* 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (London: Epworth 1984), a work comprising three introductory chapters, seven solid chapters on major theological themes, and then a 33-page appendix on 'The Methodist Theological Tradition'. The new online course places Methodist themes prominently throughout (including much theological reflection on hymnody), yet it is arguable whether it has a clearly identifiable 'systematic theological core' or, if it has, that such a theological core might itself be identifiably Methodist (or Wesleyan). Now this may be no bad thing. Trying to claim too much for Methodism's distinctiveness in strictly theological terms may be a grave mistake. Methodism's practical character, its existential drivenness as opposed to its theoretical novelty, may be precisely what marks it out from (some) other Christian traditions. Perhaps there is no need to worry too much about the organisational features of Christian faith/belief/thought/theology. If there is some kind of system, then let others do the thinking and Methodist practice will simply 'slot into' or 'riff' on what others do, based on the history and tradition of Methodist practice.

This has largely always been so anyway. Neither of the Wesley brothers was a systematic theologian. Nor has Methodism produced many systematicians. Richard Watson, William Burt Pope, Geoffrey Wainwright, Walter Klaiber and Manfred Marquardt may be nearest thing Methodism has had to those who have produced systematic theologies. Others – Colin Williams, Randy Maddox, Theodore Runyon, Kenneth Collins – have helpfully knocked John Wesley's theology into some kind of systematic shape to enable interpreters to see what Wesley was up to. Many others – Thomas Langford, Albert Outler, Douglas Meeks, Brian Beck – have reflected in different ways on the Methodist tradition more generally. The labours of all these White men have been extremely valuable. But unlike the Lutheran and Reformed traditions, it would be wrong to imply that there is much of a tradition of Methodism *needing* systematic theologies of its own, or of a culture of producing them for each generation.

This could, again, be seen to be a good thing. Systems are passé anyway. Whether or not we live in post-modern times, systems are often seen as modern(ist) projects. They are much too neat for real life. In theological education, though systematic theologies are still produced, 'constructive' theology is talked about more. 'Constructive' implies greater dynamism.

Theological themes are less clearly defined and static within such constructive approaches, for it is recognised that they need to be re-worked. This is in large part because except in the most conservative of institutions contextual approaches to theology hold sway. It has even been acknowledged how contextual *all* theologies are. Calvin's *Institutes*, Schleiermacher's *The Christian Faith* and Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics* came out of specific contexts and reflect those contexts more than many of their contemporary supporters may care to admit. For all their apparent definitiveness they inevitably related to particular concerns of their day.

That said, they knew they were working with material which transcended their contexts too, as any theology has to accept. Theologies cannot deal solely in absolutes, and cannot skirt round the concreteness of the everyday, but it is trying to say something about God, and God interacts with the world. God really is in the detail. But it is also **God** who is in the detail, and that is what takes some thinking through – perhaps even some systematic thinking.

The question which arose for me, then, in part from the new UK training course, is not about whether we should return to some former way of training (via a doctrine text-book). Nor is it a straightforward pedagogically-driven plea for some kind of abstract, contextless approach to theological thinking. It is much more a question about whether, in getting to grips with the features and themes which make up Christian faith and belief, it would be wise to encourage careful, connected, integrated reflection on those different components. Why is it so important (if indeed it is) to ensure that in thinking of salvation, those who train for ministry recognise how

this might link to creation, anthropology, Christology and Trinity? Why is it useful and desirable that reflection on the sacraments should be deeply connected to thinking about ‘church’, and, in turn, to relate ecclesiology to Christology, to pneumatology and to Trinity? Those kind of questions, at root, produce the central question I am addressing: what is the *point* of systematic theology? And who should bother studying it?

What would a Methodist Systematic Theology look like anyway?

In preparing this paper I took some soundings of how doctrine is being taught, and whether Christian theology’s systematic character is much reflected, and reflected upon, in Methodist/Methodism-related institutions.<sup>1</sup> The word ‘systematic’ appears at a number of points in the academic catalog of Asbury Theological Seminary (US). Where it appears in the phrase ‘systematic theology’, however, is in relation to the teaching of ‘a systematic theology of Christian formation and discipleship processes’ within a module on ‘Wesleyan Tradition and Spiritual Formation’.<sup>2</sup> Beyond this mention, doctrinal themes are dwelt upon in modules such as ‘Triune Theism’, ‘The Doctrine of the Person and Work of Christ’, a ‘Seminar on the Atonement’ and ‘The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit’. Methodist ‘distinctives’ (called ‘Wesleyan theological distinctiveness’) appear early on in a ‘Basic Christian Doctrine’ course, and ‘Theology of John Wesley’, ‘The Theology and Practice of Healing’ and ‘The Christian Doctrine of Holiness’ pick up on specifically Methodist emphases. Bonhoeffer and Barth are the two other prominently named individuals in the programme. Current concerns (with Pannenberg and Moltmann named in the mix) appear in the course on ‘Contemporary Theology’. There is, then, a clear attention to specifically Methodist theological emphases but, quite appropriately, these are not necessarily attached to main doctrinal loci. They are attached to aspects of Methodist spirituality, discipleship and practice.<sup>3</sup> There is no perceived need to develop a Methodist systematics. It is hard to detect whether the *principle* of there being a (systematic) connectedness between doctrinal themes is, however, given any attention.

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<sup>1</sup> I trawled wide to see what is ‘out there’, and though it would have been intriguing to explore the Methodist institutions I located in Samoa, New Zealand, Germany and Kenya, sadly the online information was insufficient to enable me to undertake enough investigation to draw conclusions.

<sup>2</sup> Asbury Theological Seminary Academic Catalog 2017-18, p.203. Kendall Soulen teaches a ‘Systematic Theology’ course at Emory, Joy Ann McDougall offers ‘Introduction to Systematic Theology’ and ‘Contemporary Systematic Theology’, but the details are not available online.

<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, the doctrine of creation appears with respect to modules on BioEthics and Aesthetics, theological anthropology is picked up in a multi-disciplinary course on ‘The Human Person’, church and sacraments feature within the section of the catalog offering modules on worship. Strikingly, ‘salvation’ appears only twice in the courses section, on both occasions within modules on ‘Moral Development’.

Sarah Lancaster teaches a systematic theology course at the Methodist Theological School in Ohio. Striking here is that the course description declares an emphasis on *seeing the relationships between* Christian doctrines. Hence, whilst set texts are varied and include systematic theologies (United Methodist Tyron Inbody's *The Faith of the Christian Church* being the key work), Frances Young is the only other Methodist on the reading list, and the focus of her selected work (*God's Presence*) is the contemporary doctrinal use of early Christian writings. In this case, then, in order to enable students to appreciate theology's systematic character, and the value of noting connections between themes, Methodist specificity is not primary, and perhaps not made direct use of. The important aspect appears to be to enable students to assess a variety of systematic approaches to theology to take note of how theologians of different backgrounds and traditions handle the connectedness between the *loci*.

At the Seth Mokitimi Methodist Seminary in Pietermaritzburg (South Africa) a course on 'Introduction to Systematic Theology' provides opportunity for students to study 'God and Creation' at the beginning of a degree programme. At the next level up 'Introductions to Doctrines II' takes things further, but 'Denominational Theology' does not appear until a student reaches the upper level. The assumption here, then, appears to be that non-specific doctrinal groundwork is undertaken prior to denominational specificity being touched upon. Precisely which doctrines are explored in the middle level is not clear (and may, of course, be left flexible from year to year if students are introduced to the tools of 'handling doctrines' rather than simply being offered cognitive content), although the description of the Theological Studies' section of the degree in question (BTh) does refer to 'the central doctrines of the Christian faith as these have evolved in Christian history'. More particularly, with respect to the different doctrines, it speaks of addressing 'their interrelationships, and their implications for society and the life and ministry of the church.'<sup>4</sup> Systematic interconnectedness is thus clearly in view here.

These are just three relatively random examples of Methodist institutions which offer theological courses and which therefore have to make educational decisions about how to teach Christian doctrine. Implicit assumptions and explicit choices both come into play as these educational decisions are taken. But in the light of the material presented in the first section of this paper – the mixed history of few systematic theologies in the Methodist tradition and the strong emphasis on practice – how are these recent attempts to expound Christian doctrine 'in all its fullness' to be evaluated? And what will emerge as a response to the dilemma which faced the

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.smms.ac.za/academic-programmes/bachelor-of-theology/>

recent compilers of the UK worship leader and preacher training course about how to do justice to ‘the Methodist theological tradition’?

In the third and final section of this paper I shall present a number of programmatic conclusions in the hope of stimulating debate in our working group. In the remainder of this second section I simply offer some reflective observations on selected available Methodist systematic theologies (and the systematic expositions of John Wesley’s theology) in order to see what contribution they might make to those who have to make decisions about how to teach and how to train.

The first observation is a reaction to the structure of William Burt Pope’s *A Compendium of Christian Theology*. Pope’s 1350-page work is a dry read. Fortunately, its structure makes it easy to see both its overall shape and its main contentions. That ‘overall shape’ exposes a major emphasis: that salvation lies at the heart of Pope’s system. Only a Methodist, however (we might want to say), could term the drama and thrill of the theology and experience of salvation ‘the administration of redemption’!<sup>5</sup> Much as we must quickly note that the nearly 500 pages devoted to this topic are no bureaucratization of the Christian experience, some translation is needed. We might now say that what Pope notes is that the question ‘how does salvation actually work?’ becomes the heart of his systematics. A challenge from Pope for contemporary theology, we might therefore say, is how a (systematic) Christian theology might be presented which addressed precisely that question. What must a theology look like which asks the question how salvation works? To answer that question – and to feed in distinctive Methodist theological insights, as appropriate, *en route* to an answer – would have a chance of producing a Methodist systematic theology for the present.

The structure and emphasis of Pope’s work is echoed in substantive terms in Colin Williams’s 1960 study of John Wesley’s Theology.<sup>6</sup> Salvation is decisive here too. Six of the eleven chapters in Williams’s study deal with aspects of ‘The Order of Salvation’. Although some of those chapters incorporate attention to theological loci one might not have immediately expected (Holy Spirit and Eschatology, for example), other aspects are more straightforward (repentance, justification, new birth, assurance). Added to these are themes which have certainly taken on distinctively Methodist forms (prevenient grace, Christian perfection). Again, however, it can be concluded that the purpose of offering a systematic exposition of Wesley’s theology appears to be to make clear the extent to which salvation lies at the heart of his system. If Williams might

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas A. Langford suggests that the ‘central idea in Pope’s thought was that of divine grace as effected in human life by the Holy Spirit’ (*Practical Divinity: Theology in the Wesleyan Tradition*, Nashville: Abingdon Press 1998, 61). I have no quibble, but am still struck with how he structures, names and weights the different sections of his work.

<sup>6</sup> Colin W. Williams, *John Wesley’s Theology Today* (London: The Epworth Press 1960).

not have put it in these terms, he, too, is seeking to articulate Wesley's understanding of 'how salvation works'.<sup>7</sup>

Other emphases do, though, of course appear in systematic Methodist expositions of Christian doctrinal themes, or of John Wesley's theology. Salvation will never be far away, but other features are prominent too. One of the telling elements in Klaiber and Marquardt's exposition is the strategically significant position of their short section on 'the triune God and the missionary dimension of revelation'.<sup>8</sup> This missiological note reappears within their summary of 'specific emphases of our theology, as they can be referred back to John Wesley himself'.<sup>9</sup> They note that the specific emphases they list provide a Methodist theology (an 'evangelisch-methodistische Theologie') with its structure. Hence they see the missiological dimension to be contributing to the shaping of a Methodist theology which is specifically worked out for Methodism in a central European context.<sup>10</sup> It is an exposition which wants to play down difference, on the grounds that Methodism locates itself within Christianity more broadly and is not actually trying to be a denominationally specific.<sup>11</sup> That it has emphases it wishes to expound are not intended to be divisive but are offered as insights for all Christians to take note of and respect. The context in which Klaiber and Marquardt write, though, of course, means that they play off in particular against more numerically dominant Lutheran and Reformed forms of Protestantism in Europe in offering their exposition of Methodist theology.

Whatever the detail of the impact of that context upon their exposition, I wish to draw attention to the fact that a missiological motif appears *at all*. Whilst they do not develop this element within their systematics as much as they might, it is striking by its presence and suggestive of what may become a specifically Methodist way of undertaking the systematic theological task, a point to which I shall return.

Again, these are just three examples of insights which offer suggestions of what shape a Methodist systematic theology might have. Other directions would be possible too. Methodist theologies more influenced by the Holiness tradition might find themselves wanting to accentuate pneumatology more. Geoffrey Wainwright's liturgical 'take' on systematic theology

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<sup>7</sup> This could, of course, also be said to be echoed later in Kenneth Collins' exposition of Wesley's theology: *The Scripture Way of Salvation: The Heart of John Wesley's Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press 1997).

<sup>8</sup> W. Klaiber and M. Marquardt, *Gelebte Gnade: Grundriß einer Theologie der Evangelisch-methodistischen Kirche* (Stuttgart: Christliches Verlagshaus 1993), 49-52. [An English translation of this work is available as *Living Grace: An Outline of United Methodist Theology*, Nashville: Abingdon Press 2002, though I worked with the German original. The politically significant shift in the sub-title should be noted.]

<sup>9</sup> Placed alongside 'an emphasis on the grace of God, evident as preventient, justifying and sanctifying grace, as justification and rebirth, as assurance of faith, which becomes active through love, sanctification as renewal of the image of God and growth in love...and service of all people' (*ibid.* 82).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 81.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 80.

places itself specifically within an ecumenical framework and leaves in its wake a series of questions of how Methodist it is, whilst being written by a Methodist.<sup>12</sup> The fact that such an issue arises shows how difficult it is to characterise what *is* Methodist and what not (and then also invites the question: and does it really matter or not?). Theodore Runyon's *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today* offers a more creation/re-creation-oriented reading of Wesley, presenting in turn fresh challenges to Methodist traditions around the world to attend to the whole person and the whole creation in articulating and participating in God's salvific work. Thus, whilst one might never have expected there to be a single, easily identifiable Methodist approach to systematics, the range of options is perhaps even greater than might have been supposed. But what are we to do with all these varied insights? Given all this, what are we to teach, and how do we best do that *now*, as Methodists, within Methodism, but in and for the world?

What (if anything) should be done?

Let me come clean: I have only taught a year of Methodist theology in my entire professional life in Higher Education. Yes, I have contributed (and am contributing) to the training of worship leaders and preachers locally, outside of my professional life. But most of my Higher Education experience has found me ploughing in other fields. I've been teaching doctrine (and modern Christian thought), on and off, for 29 years, mostly to Anglicans, though also in secular university settings. I have been an accredited Local Preacher in the Methodist Church in Great Britain for the same length of time. The bulk of my detailed earlier research was into 19th and 20th Century German Liberal Protestantism. I mention all this because these personal circumstances are not without significance. No-one has required me – for teaching purposes – to pay much attention to Methodism's theology and, as a lay person, I have in practice been involved very little in theological education in British Methodism. I was, though, Secretary of the Faith and Order Committee for seven years, and it was during that time that I initiated a project to have a look at 'how Methodist theology actually works'. *Unmasking Methodist Theology*, later re-issued (somewhat misleadingly) as *Methodist Theology Today* was a multi-authored attempt to see what Methodist theology looks like if you start 'from the ground up'. I suppose it could more be called an exercise in practical, than systematic, theology, though it would not satisfy the empirical researchers or ethnographers. And it was certainly not a systematic theology project as such. But

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<sup>12</sup> Geoffrey Wainwright, *Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine and Life a Systematic Theology: A Systematic Theology* (London: Epworth Press 1980; later ed. OUP 1984).

it did want to try and find out, theologically, what Methodism (in its British form) seems to want to focus on in and through its practice. The method, though, was interesting. In order to try and ‘get at’ Methodist theology, we didn’t start with Wesley, and we didn’t begin with a denominationally-driven assumption of our difference, shaped by some theological statement (or confession or creed). That is telling.

But why, then, am I wanting to support the notion of our teaching systematic theology to Methodists (be that in universities, seminaries, or local voluntary groups)? In this final section I shall offer some simple reasons (in the form of theses) in the hope that discussion of, or disagreement with, them might enable readers to reach some fruitful conclusions for their own contexts.

*Thesis 1: There is no need for us to write lots of new Methodist Systematic Theologies*

Though I am going to argue that we must teach systematic theology to Methodists, this doesn’t mean that I expect Abingdon Press to receive lots of manuscripts from scholars who have produced large-scale tomes in the W.B. Pope tradition. There really is no point. Because Methodism is a movement, a tradition of discipleship, a spirituality first and foremost, then it has no need to create its own doctrinal system. So whilst we do need Methodist scholars to be informed interpreters of this important ongoing movement, we do not need systematicians of Methodism. What we need are systematicians who happen to be Methodist and who will know, through their Methodist lenses, how to read, in Methodist perspective, the vast gamut of traditions which make up Christianity in all its diversity. So Abingdon Press will still receive manuscripts, but they will be more episodic than would-be definitive, drawing on Methodist insights to illuminate the ongoing, living tradition which Christianity is. Sometimes these Methodist contributions may be on specific doctrinal themes/loci (Christology, creation, anthropology, soteriology, or whatever). What their Methodist writers will need to do, however, is keep on paying attention to the location of their contribution within the systematic framework which makes up Christian theology. Not to do that is where distortions (even heresies!) creep in, at cost both to Methodism and to broader Christianity.

*Thesis 2: We don’t need to teach Methodist Systematic Theology (but we do need to teach Systematic Theology in Methodist perspective)*

This is a way of saying that Methodism as a movement knows that in every place it is dependent on the existence of a broader Christianity. It has no desire to pretend that it is offering a new form of Christian thinking or belief. It has a practical purpose (participation in God’s desire and

activity to save souls) and even if this may mean that it emphasizes some doctrines rather than others (and at different times and in different places), these are doctrinal *emphases*, not new doctrines. So if Methodism plays off against Anglicanism (Episcopalianism) in Great Britain, or Presbyterianism (in Scotland), or Lutheranism and Calvinism (across Central and Northern Europe), Roman Catholicism and Orthodoxy (in Southern and Eastern Europe), or Pentecostalism (in Latin America and Korea), it does so knowing that it makes no claim to be holding all of the truth. No one holds that anyway. But as much as anyone can claim to be participating in Christian truth, that truth is broadly held.

Systematic theology does try and make sense of Christian belief and thought as a whole structure. It is never (in any denominational form) a claim for comprehensiveness. But at its best any systematic theology seeks to show ‘how the belief system works’. So, whether working from a single doctrine outwards (e.g. beginning with salvation and showing how understandings of Trinity, Christ, Spirit, Church, Human Being and Eschatology all intersect with Soteriology), or starting with an overall shape and showing how each theological theme fits in, there is value and sense in being systematic. The Methodist angle on either of these educational approaches is then simply to show how the practice of Methodism informs some of the many ways that Christianity can be understood and presented. That, I assume, is exactly what Sarah Lancaster is doing in Ohio. The challenge then is simply to make such an approach to theology exciting, rather than dull and dry, because exciting is what it is: connected to the whole of life.

*Thesis 3: We need to ensure more people are involved in contributing to, and participating in debates about, Systematic Theology*

There is, though, a major issue about who’s been writing systematic theologies. Again, let’s be clear: most systematic theologies in Christianity have been written by (relatively wealthy) White men, writing out of positions of considerable comfort (whose wives or servants, in the distant past, probably cooked their meals). We are now, perhaps, beyond the days when women in theological education are siphoned off into field education or pastoral theology, as if those are somehow lesser disciplines (and it could, in any case, be argued that that’s always been where it’s really been ‘at’ anyway – that’s where the ‘rubber hits the road’ as far as the practical adequacy of any theology is tested). Perhaps those days *are* gone, though sometimes I am not so sure, even if diversity in faculty staffing is evident at times more perhaps in the US than the UK. But I do not see women or people of colour, in the West at least, filling most of the systematic/ constructive theology posts. Even so, why would one *want* to construct a new systematic theology anyway? Feminist theology has produced some systematic theologies (e.g. Denise Carmody) and

contributed to multi-authored works (e.g. Mary Potter Engel and Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite), but being systematic about theology has not been uppermost on the feminist agenda. Josiah Young (Professor of Systematic Theology at Wesley Theological Seminary, Washington DC) has produced a number of valuable works but not a systematic theology as such. His approach needs to be different in order to do justice to the insights he brings from Black and Pan-African Theology. To express things differently: daily life and the issues people face are too urgent to afford the luxury of compiling systematic accounts of the Christian faith. The faith has to be lived, and that's that. Theological reflection of quality and thoroughness still has to be done. But systematic theology looks suspiciously like an exercise undertaken largely by wealthy, White European men.

Well, not quite. One of the works on Sarah Lancaster's reading list is James H. Evans Jr's *We Have Been Believers: An African-American Systematic Theology*.<sup>13</sup> Here is an example which challenges the notion that liberation and contextual theologies make no attempt to be systematic.<sup>14</sup> Such an example provides a model for the kind of approach to systematics I was proposing in Thesis 2 above: take systematic theology seriously and engaged with it, but acknowledge and make explicit the perspective from which you engage and critique. In the case of Evans' work, traditionalist theologians would write it off simply on the grounds that there is no discussion of the Trinity. The important discussion to be had is *why* there is no discussion. Why does Evans see no need? Systematic theology *as a practice*, then, should most certainly not be seen as the preserve of White wealthy men. It is precisely because theology is so important for life that such systematic accounts are disrupted, *whilst also recognising* that theology still has a systematic shape to it. It is the contents of the system that may need changing, not the fact that theology has a shape. A theological system is a constantly evolving, dynamic configuration of themes not a static set of statements.

*Thesis 4: Make sure that missiology is part of the mix.*

In the early 1990s I taught doctrine for six years at a College of Evangelism (Anglican/Episcopalian). I was responsible for the entire doctrine syllabus. Others taught modules on evangelism and mission. Many of the students liked neither set of classes because they simply

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<sup>13</sup> James H. Evans Jr., *We Have Been Believers: An African-American Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1992; 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. Augsburg Fortress 2012). As an aside, I am one of the thousands of people indebted to James Cone for his work. I have never been quite clear, though, to what extent the 'Methodist' element in his AME background proved significant for him. Perhaps his forthcoming memoir, *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody*, will clarify!

<sup>14</sup> J. Sobrino and I. Ellacuria (eds.), *Systematic Theology: Perspectives from Liberation Theology* (London: SCM Press 2012) is another example.

‘wanted to get on with the evangelism’. What was striking was that whilst lectures on evangelism, mission and church growth seemed at one stage removed from ‘the real work’, the doctrine classes for which I was responsible were even further removed. My task was somehow to try and help all the trainee evangelists see that they would have no vocation and no task without the content of what I was trying to teach them.

As just one part of the process of making the classes exciting (and also trying to disclose not just the ‘relevance’ but also the essential nature of the doctrine sessions) I stumbled upon the possibility that missiology – as a doctrinal theme – needed to be part of the structure of the system of doctrine I was introducing students to. If Missiology does not appear alongside Soteriology, Christology, Ecclesiology etc. then sessions on ‘mission and evangelism’ simply take up a content of theology worked out ‘elsewhere’ and invite the evangelists to pass it on. It has taken me over 25 years to work this through, but I think I can now see that all the work I have done on theology’s interaction with the arts and popular culture during this time has related to this key issue. Unless the content of doctrine is seen to be tangled up in the rich mix of daily life – where faith is shared and wrestled with, rather than simply declared – then those who profess it will always be prone to detach it from those concerns. That is precisely why systematic theology can end up being so dry when, in fact, it is but a framework for pressing theology always to be connected to life, and its component parts to be connected to each other. If missiology is in the mix, then this is less likely to be forgotten. I am not sure that Klaiber and Marquardt would be wholly in agreement with how I have understood missiology to be part of the mix, but am intrigued that I find it there in their systematic account of Methodist theology.

*Thesis 5: We must adopt an explicitly cultural theological method when doing systematic theology*

To take Thesis 4 a stage further, it is vital that the interstitial quality of all theological discourse and construction is taken seriously. By that I mean that all theology which is dynamic recognises that it happens ‘in between’. If missiology is taken seriously then even though Christian theology is ‘internal church work’ in so far as it is critical reflection upon God as experienced in and amongst the Christian believing community, it also has to reflect the fact that every single one of those believing Christians is also a person in the world. Daily interactions of all kinds inform and challenge their faith, and this applies to the theologians (those responsible for overseeing how the faith is understood and presented) too. And God is active in the world. So Christians (and Christian theologians) should not expect only to be reflecting on ecclesial experience. (How sad would that be!)

By ‘cultural theological method’, then, I mean that every doctrinal locus/theme has to be open to what its exposition might receive on the basis of analysis and discernment of what God is doing in the world. Yes, Bible and existing tradition will function as norms, ways of steering understanding of what God may be doing (and becoming clear about what is and what is not of God). But if it is true that God is always one step ahead of us, and if it is true that mission is participation in what God is already doing, then the way that systematic theology is done has to reflect those convictions too.

I have just completed a project on the doctrine of salvation which tries to follow this ‘cultural theological method’.<sup>15</sup> For someone who has been a Methodist for over 35 years it is a little embarrassing for me to see how few Methodist resources I have engaged with and drawn upon in order to complete the project. My theological conversation-partners are wide-ranging but are inevitably affected by where I have taught and what I have needed to do in those institutions. I have, however, come to the conclusion that I would not have come up with my particular version of the method I have followed without my experience in Methodism. I do not think Mr. Wesley would be pleased with some of the (non-church) resources I have used in order to ‘get at’ what I think salvation actually is. But I like to think that at least some of his followers would recognise that the findings of *A Cultural Theology of Salvation* are wholly in keeping with traditional Christianity, and make clear that a doctrine has both to be ‘systematically’ understood in relation to other aspects of Christian faith, and ‘missiologically’ coherent in that it is comprehensible not just to those who are already ‘in the know’.

Methodism did, after all, in its origins seek to ensure that the most ordinary of people, in the most ordinary of settings, had the chance to access the wonderful riches which God in Christ had made available to everyone. That, at root, is perhaps Methodism’s most radical contribution and sharpest challenge to all teachers of theology, systematicians included. Even systematic theology is not exempt from the demand that it be connected to real life and comprehensible. Systematic theology does, still, have to be taught, but not in a way that excludes people from the faith the shape of which it is a systematic theology’s job to describe and explain.

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<sup>15</sup> C. Marsh, *A Cultural Theology of Salvation* (Oxford University Press 2018).