

# John Wesley and the Protestant Reformers on Scripture

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WHAT DID JOHN WESLEY HOLD in common with the leading sixteenth-century Protestant reformers—most notably Martin Luther and John Calvin—concerning the nature and purpose of Scripture and its interpretation, and in what ways is Wesley distinctive? Studies of Wesley’s views of and approaches to Scripture often note that he shared several central commitments with the Protestant reformers.<sup>23</sup> At least six shared affirmations can be identified. First, Wesley and the Protestant reformers affirmed Scripture as divine revelation, as the divinely inspired Word of God.<sup>24</sup> As the divinely inspired Word of God, a second affirmation immediately follows: Scripture functions

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23 See, for example, Larry Shelton, “John Wesley’s Approach to Scripture in Historical Perspective,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 16, no. 1 (1981): 23–50; Scott J. Jones, “The Rule of Scripture,” in *Wesley and the Quadrilateral: Renewing the Conversation*, ed. W. Stephen Gunter et al. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 43, 55–56; and Scott J. Jones, *John Wesley’s Conception and Use of Scripture* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1995), 121–27.

24 For studies that discuss Wesley’s view of Scripture as revelation and divinely inspired, see Jones, *John Wesley’s Conception and Use of Scripture*, 17–36; Jones, “The Rule of Scripture,” 50–51; Duncan S. Ferguson, “John Wesley on Scripture: The Hermeneutics of Pietism,” *Methodist History* 22, no. 4 (1984): 240; and Shelton, “John Wesley’s Approach to Scripture in Historical Perspective,” 37–38. For concise descriptions of Luther’s and Calvin’s affirmation of Scripture as revelation and divinely inspired, see Mark Thompson, “Biblical Interpretation in the Works of Martin Luther,” in *A History of Biblical Interpretation: The Medieval through the Reformation Periods*, vol. 2, ed. Alan J. Hauser and Duane F. Watson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 299–302; and Wulfert de Greef, “Calvin’s Understanding and Interpretation of the Bible,” in *John Calvin’s Impact on Church and Society, 1509–2009*, ed. Martin Ernst Hirzel and Martin Sallmann (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 69–70.

for both Wesley and the Protestant reformers as the *prime* authority for all Christian faith and practice. Indeed, Wesley, Luther, and Calvin each clearly stated that Scripture is the primary authority above and beyond the authority of the church.<sup>25</sup> Third, Wesley and the Protestant reformers together maintained that the primary purpose of Scripture is to communicate the message of salvation. They strongly upheld the *soteriological* function and purpose of Scripture: that Scripture is given by God to reveal God's path of salvation for humanity. They further agreed that this soteriological message of Scripture is *clear*. Consequently, as a fourth shared commitment, Wesley and the Protestant reformers together affirmed the principle of Scripture's clarity and located the content of that clarity precisely in Scripture's teachings concerning salvation.<sup>26</sup> These affirmations of Scripture's primacy of

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25 See John Wesley, "Roman Catechism and Reply," in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1958), 10:91, 94. In "Letter to 'John Smith,'" Wesley wrote, "What is scriptural in any church, I hold fast; for the rest, I let it go," *Letters of the Rev. John Wesley*, ed. John Telford (London: Epworth Press, 1960), 2:46, hereafter cited as "Letters." Similarly, in a letter to James Hervey, he exclaimed, "If by catholic principles you mean any other than scriptural, they weigh nothing with me. I allow no other rule, whether of faith or practice, than the Holy Scriptures," *Journal*, in *Works* 19:67. See also Jones, *John Wesley's Conception and Use of Scripture*, 31–35. For clear examples of Luther's and Calvin's assertions of Scripture's prime authority above that of the church, see Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, ed. J. Pelikan and H. Lehman, 55 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957–86), 36:145, hereafter cited as "LW"; and John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1.7.2, hereafter cited as "Institutes."

26 Luther wrote, "The proper subject of theology is the human guilty of sin and condemned and God the Justifier and Savior of the human sinner. . . . All Scripture points to this . . . the God who justifies, repairs and makes alive and the human who fell from righteousness and life into sin and eternal death. Whoever follows this aim in reading the Holy Scriptures will read holy things fruitfully" (LW 12:311). Calvin made similar statements; see *Institutes* 2.10.1–2. Scholars of John Wesley point out that Wesley also affirmed Scripture's prime soteriological purpose and directly identified this with Scripture's clear content (i.e., Scripture's clarity). See Don Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience as a Model of Evangelical*

authority, soteriological purpose, and clarity can be seen as culminating for both Wesley and the Protestant reformers in their common appeal (the fifth shared commitment) to the hermeneutical principle of the *analogia fidei* (“analogy of faith”). Wesley and the Protestant reformers counseled that any faithful reading of Scripture must be according to the analogy of faith (Rom. 12:6), in which the clear central content of Scripture (its teachings on salvation) serves as the standard by which to gauge all faithful interpretation. More specifically, in practice this means that any faithful interpretation of Scripture should resonate with and certainly not conflict with Scripture’s clear soteriological teachings concerning original sin, justification, new birth, and sanctification.<sup>27</sup>

Lastly, a sixth point of agreement between John Wesley and the Protestant reformers pertains to their mutual assertion of the necessity of the Holy Spirit’s guidance in any faithful interpretation of Scripture. Wesley wrote, “We need the same Spirit to understand the Scripture

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*Theology* (Lexington, KY: Emeth, 1990, 2005), 82, 86; Jones, “The Rule of Scripture,” 49, 53; Ferguson, “John Wesley on Scripture,” 241; Timothy L. Smith, “John Wesley and the Wholeness of Scripture,” *Interpretation* 39, no. 3 (1985): 253; Mack B. Stokes, “Wesley on Scripture,” in *Basic Methodist Beliefs: An Evangelical View*, ed. James V. Heidinger II (Wilmore, KY: Good News Books, 1986), 13; and Robert W. Wall, “Toward a Wesleyan Hermeneutics of Scripture,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 30, no. 2 (1995): 63–65.

27 For example, Wesley instructed, “Have a constant eye to the analogy of faith—the connection and harmony there is between those grand, fundamental doctrines [of] original sin, justification by faith, the new birth, [and] inward and outward holiness” (Preface, *Explanatory Notes Upon the Old Testament*, 1). Likewise, in his comments on Romans 12:6, Wesley defines the “analogy of faith” as expounding Scripture “according to the general tenor of them; according to that grand scheme of doctrine which is delivered therein, touching original sin, justification by faith, and present inward salvation. . . . Every article therefore concerning which there is any question should be determined by this rule [and] every doubtful scripture interpreted according to the grand truths that run through the whole” (*Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*, Romans 12:6). These notes to both Old and New Testaments are available at *Wesley’s Notes on the Bible*, accessed January 22, 2021, <https://ccel.org/ccel/w/wesley/notes/cache/notes.pdf>. One might note the similarities with Luther’s description of Scripture’s clear soteriological content quoted in note 4.

which enabled the holy men of old to write it.”<sup>28</sup> He defined the “testimony of the Spirit” as an “inward impression on the soul, whereby the Spirit of God directly witnesses to my spirit that I am a child of God, that Jesus Christ loves me and has given himself for me, and that all my sins are blotted out, and I, even I, am reconciled to God.”<sup>29</sup> In other words, the witness of the Holy Spirit testifies to the truth of Scripture’s central salvific message—a sentiment that is much in line with Luther’s and Calvin’s appeals to the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit to authenticate Scripture, as well as to aid in its proper interpretation. For example, Luther wrote, “No one perceives one iota of what is said in the Scriptures unless [one] has the Spirit of God.”<sup>30</sup> Moreover, Calvin pointed to the work of the Holy Spirit to testify to the truth of Scripture’s soteriological message, stating that the “Spirit is the inner teacher by whose effort the promise of salvation penetrates into our minds, a promise that would otherwise only strike the air and beat upon our ears.”<sup>31</sup> In these ways, Wesley affirmed, alongside the Protestant reformers, the necessity of the Holy Spirit both to authenticate the truth of Scripture in the hearts and minds of believers and to guide faithful interpretation of Scripture.

It should be recognized, on the one hand, that all of these central commitments concerning Scripture resonate with the larger commitments of Christian antiquity (Christian tradition) though, of course,

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28 As quoted by Randy L. Maddox, “The Rule of Christian Faith, Practice, and Hope: John Wesley on the Bible,” *Methodist Review* 3 (2011): 14. Wesley, “Letter to Bishop of Gloucester,” II.10; *Works* 11:509. Similarly, he wrote in his preface to *Explanatory Notes upon the Old Testament*, “Scripture can only be understood through the same Spirit whereby it was given,” in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson (repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1979), 14:253. In *An Address to the Clergy*, Wesley pointed to the promise of the Holy Spirit by which they are “assured of being assisted in all their labor by [God] who teaches knowledge [and] . . . gives wisdom to the simple” (*Works* 10:486).

29 Wesley, Sermon 10, “The Witness of the Spirit (I)” §I.7, in *Works* 1:254.

30 LW 33:28. Similarly, Calvin exclaimed that the Word of God “cannot penetrate into our minds unless the Spirit, as the inner teacher, through illumination, makes entry for it” (*Institutes* 3.2.34).

31 Calvin, *Institutes* 3.1.4.

with some notable variations of emphasis particularly concerning questions of church authority in relation to Scripture.<sup>32</sup> One might then ask, “What is distinctive about the Protestant reformers, let alone John Wesley?” In another article, I have argued that the Protestant reformers set themselves apart from prior tradition concerning their views of Scripture exactly in the intersection of four of their key teachings: (1) Scripture’s primacy of authority, (2) Scripture’s clarity, (3) the necessary aid of the Holy Spirit, and (4) the pivotal doctrine of justification by faith alone, the latter of which serves as the glue that holds these together in a distinctively Protestant way.<sup>33</sup> The Protestant reformers staunchly challenged the authority of the Roman Catholic Church and asserted the primacy of Scripture. Alongside this, they declared that Scripture is clear, thereby negating the necessity of the church’s authoritative oversight of Scripture’s interpretation. Rather, since Scripture is clear, any person who has been justified by faith alone receives the Holy Spirit, who—as the only true interpreter of Scripture—enables the believer to interpret Scripture faithfully. Consequently, the doctrine of justification by faith alone is exactly what holds together the early Protestant reformers’ assertions of Scripture’s primacy and clarity and the necessary aid of the Holy Spirit in a distinctly Protestant fashion. Justification by faith alone is both the clear *content* of Scripture according to the Protestant reformers—a content that is sufficiently clear to act as the authoritative guide for Christian life above and beyond the authority of the church—and it is the very *principle* that operationalizes Scripture’s authority and clarity. That is, for the Protestant reformers, “Scripture is clear solely because of *God’s* actions, because of God’s *gifts* of faith and the Holy Spirit to the believer. [In other words,] Scripture is clear only

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32 Larry Shelton offers a very good, concise account of this, so there is little need to make this case again. See Shelton, “John Wesley’s Approach to Scripture in Historical Perspective,” 23–50.

33 G. Sujin Pak, “The Perspicuity of Scripture, Justification by Faith Alone, and the Role of the Church in Reading Scripture with the Protestant Reformers,” *Covenant Quarterly* 75, no. 2 (2017): 3–23.

through the effective working of justification by faith alone in the life of the believer.”<sup>34</sup>

If justification by faith *alone* is the crucial, distinctive element of the Protestant reformers’ views of Scripture, then this immediately underscores the source of Wesley’s divergence from them. Namely, Wesley’s and the Protestant reformers’ descriptions of the soteriological character and purpose of Scripture—and thus, its clear content—differ in a key substantive manner. Luther and Calvin located the clear content of Scripture specifically in the doctrine of justification by faith alone and its corollary teachings—specifically teachings concerning original sin, the human will in bondage to sin, the necessity of Christ, the necessity of faith as 100 percent gift in which works play no role, and so on. More specifically, the sixteenth-century reformers’ conception of justification by faith alone entailed a corollary affirmation of some form of a doctrine of predestination—whether one that is viewed as necessary but unfruitful to talk about (Luther) or a doctrine of double-predestination seen as a source of comfort (Calvin). For Luther and Calvin, if one is justified by faith alone, which is a pure gift of God and in which human will or works play absolutely no role, then it follows that *only God* acts in justification; salvation is solely in the hands of God with no space of even an iota of human cooperation. Wesley, on the other hand, identified the clear soteriological content of Scripture with the overarching principle not of justification by faith *alone*—and certainly not a teaching on predestination—but with the conviction of God’s universal love.<sup>35</sup> Wesley affirmed a doctrine of justification by faith, but not one of faith

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34 Pak, “The Perspicuity of Scripture,” 14.

35 See especially Mildred Bangs Wynkoop, “A Hermeneutical Approach to John Wesley,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 6, no. 1 (1971): 13–22; Maddox, “The Rule of Christian Faith, Practice, and Hope,” 26–30; Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral*, 84–86; Ferguson, “John Wesley on Scripture,” 235; Shelton, “John Wesley’s Approach to Scripture in Historical Perspective,” 41; and Jones, “Rule of Scripture,” 54–55. Wesley defined a Methodist, as well, in terms of love: a Methodist is one who has “the love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost given unto him” and one who loves the Lord his God with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength. “The Character of a Methodist,” §5, in *Works* 9:35.

*alone.* He also affirmed a form of the primacy of God’s action, but he identified divine action first and foremost as the act of *divine universal love*—a love given to all without distinction—rather than an act of divine election oriented to only particular, chosen persons.

Indeed, Wesley directly argued that a belief in the total bondage of the human will that leads to an assertion of a doctrine of predestination is directly contrary to the clear teachings of Scripture. In his sermon “Free Grace,” Wesley affirmed that grace is indeed “free”—it “does not depend on any power or merit of [humanity]”; “it does not in anywise depend on the good works or righteousness of the receiver”; it does not depend on good purposes or intentions. These, insisted Wesley, “are the *fruits* of free grace and not the root. They are not the cause but the effects of it.”<sup>36</sup> Yet Wesley went on to add that this grace is free *for all* and *in all*. Pointing to the universal offering of God’s love and grace, he immediately countered the view that this grace is free “only for those whom God has ordained to life” (i.e., the decree of predestination).<sup>37</sup> He proffered five arguments why predestination cannot be a scriptural doctrine or doctrine of God. I summarize these briefly: first, predestination makes void the ordinance of God’s love and sets God against God’s self; second, it undercuts the very holiness God ordains; third, it destroys the peace, joy, and comfort God ordains; fourth, it destroys zeal for good works; and fifth, it overthrows Christian revelation and makes it contradict itself. This last point is of most interest to our concerns here, because Wesley ultimately argued that the doctrine of predestination is contrary to “the whole scope and tenor of Scripture.”<sup>38</sup> In this statement, we see Wesley’s appeal to the clear “scope and tenor” of Scripture—its central soteriological teachings. In a similar fashion, he appealed to the “analogy of faith” in another sermon, in which he proclaimed that the “real religion” of God’s love “runs through the Bible from the beginning to the end, in one connected chain; and the agreement of every part of it, with every other, is, properly the analogy of faith.” Wesley then exhorted, “Beware of taking anything else or anything less than this for

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36 Wesley, Sermon 110, “Free Grace,” ¶3, in *Works* 3:545.

37 Wesley, Sermon 110, “Free Grace,” ¶4, in *Works* 3:545.

38 Wesley, Sermon 110, “Free Grace,” ¶2, in *Works* 3:552.

religion! . . . Do not take part of it for the whole! What God has joined together, put not asunder! Take no less for his religion than the ‘faith that worketh by love’ all inward and outward holiness.”<sup>39</sup>

In these statements, we begin to see Wesley’s alternative conception of the role of works and the human will from that of the Protestant reformers. Wesley affirmed the necessity of faith as the only condition of justification and sanctification.<sup>40</sup> Yet, even as he affirmed that faith is most certainly *God’s* work, he also maintained that there is no opposition between the statement that “God works; therefore, do we work.” Indeed, these are not only *not* in opposition, Wesley insisted that they have the “closest connection,” arguing that because “God works, therefore you *can* work” and, secondly, because “God works, therefore you *must* work.”<sup>41</sup> He thus concludes, “Therefore inasmuch as God works in you, you are now able to work out your own salvation”—pointing to both the primacy of God’s action and the responding, cooperative role of the human will.<sup>42</sup>

John Wesley emerges as distinctive from the Protestant reformers’ understanding of Scripture exactly in how he identified the chief elements of Scripture’s central soteriological message. Wesley’s prioritization of the love of God and the identification of “faith that works inward and outward holiness by love” as the scope and tenor of all Scripture have immediate implications for the role of the will in salvation. It is a “faith that *works*,” and the overarching purpose of that working is toward *inward and outward holiness*, which speaks directly to Wesley’s profound emphasis upon *sanctification* as equally (if not more so) a clear teaching at the heart of Scripture’s soteriological message.<sup>43</sup> These scriptural convictions of the cooperative role of the will

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39 Wesley, Sermon 62, “The End of Christ’s Coming,” §III.5–6, in *Works* 2:482–83.

40 Wesley, Sermon 43, “The Scripture Way of Salvation,” §III.1, in *Works* 2:162.

41 Wesley, Sermon 85, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation,” §III.2, in *Works* 3:206.

42 Wesley, Sermon 85, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation,” §III.5, in *Works* 3:207–8.

43 To be more careful, sanctification is a key emphasis of John Calvin, though Luther tended to emphasize justification (by faith alone) quite profoundly at

alongside Scripture's sanctifying purposes culminate in Wesley's championing Christian *perfection* as a core scriptural teaching.<sup>44</sup> Even as Wesley, together with the Protestant reformers, affirmed the authoritative, clear, soteriological message of Scripture, *different* components of that message emerged as pivotal in his reading of Scripture—namely, sanctification, perfection, and the will redeemed by divine grace.

It seems quite possible that Wesley's conviction that the clear teaching of Scripture includes an understanding of a human will aided by God's grace that is able to work toward and reach perfection has additional implications for more positive conceptions of the roles of experience and reason in the Christian life.<sup>45</sup> While Wesley maintained a clear primacy of Scripture, in which Scripture serves as a rule or

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the expense of sanctification. Yet, as scholars have pointed out, Luther was a situational theologian; he believed the church of his day knew plenty about sanctification but misunderstood justification.

44 There is not space here to go into detail about Wesley's doctrine of perfection or its contrast to the Protestant reformers' teachings. It is sufficient to point out its clear implications for conceptions of sin, particularly sin in the Christian's life. For example, in interpreting Proverbs 24:16 ("A just man falls seven times and rises up again," NASB), Wesley insisted that the text does not say that a just person "sins." He asserted, "Here is no mention of falling into sin at all." Rather, the text is about "falling into temporal affliction"—a reading that Wesley supported through appeal to the larger literary context. See Wesley, Sermon 40, "Christian Perfection," §II.9, in *Works* 2:108–9.

45 Comparing Wesley with Luther and Calvin on the topics of reason and experience is a much trickier task. On the one hand, Luther (given his aim to critique the nominalism of the schools of his day) spoke very harshly against any trust in reason. For example, in his debate with Erasmus over the will, Luther insisted on the necessary aid of the Holy Spirit in contrast to a trust in reason, pointing to the example of David: "he wants to lay hold of the real teacher of the Scriptures so that he may not seize upon them pell-mell with his reason and become his own teacher" (LW 34:286). Calvin is much more positive toward reason while simultaneously affirming total human depravity. As to experience, both Luther and Calvin seemed to carve a positive place for experience, yet they were much less explicit about it than Wesley. Thus, it is a difference of whether the appeal is more explicit or implicit. Yet, on a few occasions Calvin invoked experience to verify Scripture. See *Institutes* 1.7.5, 1.13.14, 2.4.7, 3.20.12, and 3.22.1.

standard for all Christian belief and practice, he also held a significantly optimistic view of the role of experience and reason as useful, necessary, and powerful tools for engaging Scripture and understood the Spirit's work as operating alongside them.<sup>46</sup> On the one hand, clarified Wesley, it is true that no right Christian doctrine or practice can be founded on reason or experience alone, for it must first be founded on Scripture. On the other hand, he maintained that experience *confirms* Scripture's teaching and that reason is given by God to provide additional guidance.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, Wesley often identified experience exactly with the experience of the Holy Spirit in one's life. In his two-part sermon "The Witness of the Spirit," he equated Christian experience with the experience of the Spirit, as seen most clearly in his assertion that the conviction that we are children of God is a "conclusion drawn partly from the Word of God and partly from our own experience."<sup>48</sup> He immediately thereafter pointed to the joint roles of Scripture, experience, and reason: "The *Word of God* says that everyone who has the fruit of the Spirit is a child of God; *experience* or inward consciousness tells me that I have the fruit of the Spirit and hence I *rationally* conclude, 'Therefore I am a child of God.'"<sup>49</sup> He thus appealed to the joint

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46 In a letter to Thomas Whitehead, Wesley distinguished between the role of Scripture as a rule and the Spirit as the guide, writing, "For though the Spirit is our principal leader, yet [the Spirit] is not our rule at all; the Scriptures are the rule whereby [the Spirit] leads us into all truth. . . . Call the Spirit our guide, which signifies an intelligent being, and the Scriptures our rule, which signifies something used by an intelligent being, and all is plain and clear." Wesley, "Letter to Thomas Whitehead," in *Letters* 2:117.

47 Wesley, Sermon 11, "The Witness of the Spirit (II)," §III.6, in *Works* 1:290; Sermon 70, "The Case of Reason Impartially Considered," §II.6, 10, in *Works*, 2:596, 598; Sermon 45, "The New Birth," §I.1, in *Works* 2:188; and "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection," §25, *Works* 11:429. See also the discussions of Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral*, 88–89, and Jones, *John Wesley's Conception and Use of Scripture*, 65–80, 176–83. Most clearly, Wesley maintained that if it is established that a doctrine is founded on Scripture, then experience can most certainly serve to confirm it. See Wesley, Sermon 11, "The Witness of the Spirit (II)," §IV.1, in *Works* 1:293.

48 Wesley, Sermon 11, "The Witness of the Spirit (II)," §II.6, in *Works* 1:287–88.

49 Wesley, Sermon 11, "The Witness of the Spirit (II)," §II.6, in *Works* 1:287–88.

work of Scripture, experience, and reason within the larger purpose of describing “the witness of the Spirit.”

In sum, Wesley shared common commitments with the Protestant reformers, but he offered a distinctive way of holding those Protestant commitments. In his rejection of the twin doctrines of justification by faith *alone* and predestination, Wesley is not “protestant” in the manner of the sixteenth-century Protestant reformers. Yet, Wesley is “protestant” in his insistence on Scripture’s clarity as a principle that can function authoritatively above and beyond the authority of the church. Distinctively, he located that clarity not in the doctrine of justification by faith alone, but in the doctrine of God’s universal love. Similarly, in his conception of the cooperative role of the human will in salvation and the corresponding implications for potentially more expansive roles of human reason and experience, Wesley is not “protestant” in the way of the sixteenth-century Protestant reformers. Yet, he is “protestant” in the ways he carefully outlines Scripture as the prime authority and standard by which to regulate the proper bounds of experience and reason—that only insofar as experience and reason confirm and resonate with what is already clearly taught in Scripture are they to be trusted.

I conclude with some brief reflections on some of the implications of this for the church today. Wesley, the Protestant reformers, and much of Christian tradition (both premodern and modern) have often claimed that Scripture is clear in its core teachings, its teaching concerning salvation. A favorite saying is that Scripture is sufficiently clear concerning salvation. Yet, what happens when we define and identify the key components of Scripture’s clear soteriological message differently? This is exactly the bane of Protestant existence. The appeal to the clear teachings of Scripture (and thus to its authority) falls apart when the actual content of such clarity is not shared. To this, though, Wesley had a profound response for the church—which makes me proud to be a Methodist. Wesley and the Protestant reformers both pointed to the necessity of humility—recognizing the limits of human knowledge and the posture of humility necessary to actually receive and follow the

Spirit's guidance.<sup>50</sup> But Wesley advocated an important step beyond humility; he pointed to the character to which Christians are called—a character distinctly shaped by divine love. In this, he asks us, “Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion?” That is, though we may not think alike, can we not *walk alike*? Can we not walk alike in bearing the fruits of the Spirit even in the midst of difficult, passionate disagreements? To this he unwaveringly responds, “Without all doubt we may!”<sup>51</sup> As Tom Greggs, in a recent article on Wesley’s little-“c” catholicity so eloquently summarizes, “Catholicity for Wesley is not brought about by a negative denial of the significance of doctrines and practices, but it is brought about by a positive loving enactment of fellowship in the context of disagreement.”<sup>52</sup> In the midst of sharp divides and disagreements today, Wesley poses the important question, “Is not right and holy ethics—how we act and behave—equally, if not more, important than right and holy doctrine?” And he would insist such a question—such a teaching of the overarching call to such loving, holy living together even in our brokenness—is exactly the clear call of Scripture on the life of the faithful Christian.

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50 See LW 10:332 and Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, trans. Ross Mackenzie, ed. David Torrance and Thomas Torrance (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 4. In his preface to *Notes upon the New Testament*, Wesley began with a “deep sense of his own inability” (§1). Likewise, the necessity of “serious and earnest prayer” was one of the key steps in his instructions on how to read Scripture well (*Explanatory Notes upon the Old Testament*, Preface §18).

51 Wesley, Sermon 39, “Catholic Spirit,” §I.4 and §I.3, in *Works* 2:83–84.

52 Tom Greggs, “The Catholic Spirit of Protestantism: A Very Methodist Take on the Third Article, Visible Unity, and Ecumenism,” *Pro Ecclesia* 26, no. 4 (2017): 357.

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## Articles, Homilies, and Liturgies: John Wesley and the English Reformation

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THE QUESTION OF JOHN WESLEY’S commitment to his own national Church of England and of the measures he took that made separation from it more and more inevitable, even as he trumpeted his loyalty to it, is a well-trodden path in Wesleyan scholarship.<sup>53</sup> There is not room here to explore these issues in greater depth, but it may be worth a brief consideration, in the five hundredth anniversary season of the Protestant Reformation, of a more basic issue. To *which* Church of England was this loyalty expressed?

Perhaps it seems a strange question to ask. It is certainly worth remembering the varieties of what we might anachronistically call *Anglicanism* in the eighteenth century—a strange collection of

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53 Still one of the finest accounts remains Frank Baker’s *John Wesley and the Church of England* (London: Epworth Press, 1970).