

## CHAPTER 1

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# JOHN WESLEY AND COMMON CHRISTIAN BELIEFS

### *INTRODUCTION*

Wesleyan communities today evolved from the Wesleyan movement led by John and Charles Wesley, who considered Methodism to be preeminently an expression of Christian faith. As John Wesley stated it in his sermon “On Laying the Foundation of the New Chapel, Near the City-Road, London” (1777): “Methodism, so-called, is the old religion, the religion of the Bible, the religion of the primitive Church, the religion of the Church of England.”<sup>1</sup> John Wesley’s immediate successors thought of his work as being preeminently a work of revival of Christian faith, thus the inscription on his tomb which claims that God had “raised up” John Wesley “To Revive, Enforce and Defend [t]he Pure Apostolical Doctrines and Practices of the Primitive Church.”<sup>2</sup>

This chapter initiates a study of Wesleyan beliefs by asking what John Wesley himself believed to be the most essential, commonly held beliefs of the Christian faith. The next chapter will consider John Wesley’s claims about distinctive teachings of the Methodist movement under his leadership, and the third chapter will consider how Charles Wesley transmitted these common Christian beliefs as well as distinctively Methodist beliefs by way of poetry that formed the nucleus of a body of hymnody utilized by Wesleyan communities. Comprehensive studies of John Wesley’s theology since the 1980s have focused on particular ideas or “axial themes” in John Wesley’s thought that serve as keys to interpreting Wesley’s contemporary theological relevance, for example, the notion of “responsible grace” (Maddox), the liberation and

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redemption of creation (Runyon), and the axial theme of “holy love” (Collins).<sup>3</sup> The account of the origins of Wesleyan theology in this and the next two chapters does not aim to be as comprehensive as these early studies but examines two key questions regarding the theologies of John and Charles Wesley. First, what did they hold to be the most basic or fundamental beliefs of common Christian faith? Second, what did they hold to be the most distinctive beliefs of the Wesleyan movements they led?

“A man of a truly catholic spirit,” John Wesley wrote in 1749, “has not now his religion to seek. He is fixed as the sun in his judgment concerning the main branches of Christian doctrine.”<sup>4</sup> But what were “the main branches of Christian doctrine,” as John Wesley understood them? Because Wesley never gave out a definitive list of essential doctrines, or so it has been claimed, scholars have given a variety of answers to this question. This chapter responds to these questions about John Wesley’s understanding of “essential” or “fundamental”<sup>5</sup> doctrines by offering some criteria by which we may discern Wesley’s understanding of essential Christian doctrines. With these criteria clarified, the chapter proceeds to examine ten doctrines central to John Wesley’s understanding of the Christian faith. The next chapter will identify some doctrines that, in his view, were the distinct characteristics of the Evangelical movement and of the Wesleyan branch of that movement.

When I first approached this subject, I entertained the hypothesis that John Wesley made a clean distinction between doctrines that he considered commonly Christian (“catholic”) and doctrines that he considered distinctive of the Methodist movement, which I supposed to be synonymous with the Wesleyan movement. Historical evidence has led me to modify this earlier hypothesis in two ways. In the first place, it has shown that there was a complex relationship between the doctrines Wesley considered to be commonly Christian and the doctrines he considered to be the distinct emphases of the Methodist movement. In the case of three doctrines he held to be essential or common—original sin, justification, and regeneration—Wesley maintained that each of these was a common Christian teaching and yet each had a distinctive emphasis within the Methodist movement, especially as they supply a basis for the Methodist teaching about the “way of salvation” involving repentance, faith, and holiness.

Moreover, the evidence showed that most of the distinctive emphases of the Methodist movement in the eighteenth century were not limited to the Wesleyan branch or side of the Methodist movement. The teachings of repentance, faith, and even holiness in a broad sense were consistently proclaimed by such Calvinistic Evangelical preachers as George Whitefield as well as the Wesleys and the preachers associated with them, and the term “Methodist” was applied to the Calvinist Evangelical preachers as well as to the Wesleys.<sup>6</sup> The next chapter will examine in more detail some of these common emphases of the Evangelical revival but it will also show that the teaching of entire sanctification was a unique and distinguishing mark of the Wesleyan sphere of the revival movement.

Methodists have come to regard the writings of the Wesleys as a canon of classical literature, but this way of understanding their work does not acknowledge the extent to which the Wesleys functioned as intellectual leaders of a popular religious movement in the eighteenth century. The literature produced by the Wesleys appears today in scholarly editions with footnotes and other academic apparatus, but when it appeared in the eighteenth century it took the form of cheaply printed tracts, pamphlets, fascicles of John Wesley’s *Journal* sold for a penny, copies of single sermons, and small collections of hymns. The process of authorization or “canonization” began with the Wesleys themselves, for example when John Wesley arranged a collection of Charles’s verse into the *Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists* in 1780, or in John Wesley’s “Model Deed” that specified that the doctrines preached in Wesleyan chapels should be those contained in the first four volumes of his own *Sermons on Several Occasions*. The canonical status of the literature, however, should not blind us to the fact that it originated as popular literature, and thus there has been a long interplay between popular and formal expressions of beliefs, with some works originally intended for popular readership eventually taking the form of authorized texts.

## DISCERNING JOHN WESLEY’S “ESSENTIAL” DOCTRINES

John Wesley’s distinction of “essential” or “fundamental” beliefs, as contrasted with “opinions” or “modes of worship”

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over which disagreements could be allowed, reflected an ongoing discussion about Christian doctrine inherited from the time of the Protestant Reformation. One of the suggestions advocated by such Catholic humanists as Desiderius Erasmus and by such Protestant Reformers as Philipp Melancthon was to affirm a relatively short list of central or “fundamental” beliefs that Christians should agree on that would allow wide latitude over nonessential doctrines or opinions. The term *adiaphora* was used in sixteenth-century and seventeenth-century theological disputes to distinguish “nonessential” or “indifferent” teachings.<sup>7</sup> This notion was taken up late in the seventeenth century and early in the eighteenth century by Protestant Pietists, who maintained that Christian piety should be a principal ground of unity and that Christian unity did not rely on detailed agreement in doctrinal matters.<sup>8</sup>

It is widely recognized that John Wesley distinguished between “essential” or “fundamental” doctrines, on the one hand, and non-essential “opinions” and “modes of worship,” on the other hand, most notably in his 1749 sermon “Catholic Spirit,”<sup>9</sup> but also in a wide range of writings through his career.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, the question of what precisely his “essential” doctrines were has continued to puzzle his interpreters. In this section I will try to clarify some criteria by which essential doctrines can be discerned. In doing so, both this chapter and the next chapter attempt to identify what I will call the “ecclesial scope” of essential or fundamental teachings, that is, whether John Wesley understood a particular doctrine to be constitutive of Christianity per se, constitutive of Protestantism (in some cases), constitutive of the Evangelical revival (“Methodism” in the broadest sense),<sup>11</sup> or constitutive of the distinct ethos and message of his own branch of the revival movement. The identification of ecclesial scope will show that Wesley identified specific teachings as being essential to Christian faith in general, he identified other doctrinal emphases that were essential to the more particular definition or identity of the Evangelical revival, and in at least one case he identified a doctrine critical to the definition of the Wesleyan movement within the scope of the Evangelical revival.

## Affirmation of Essential Doctrines in Occasional Comments

Colin W. Williams's *John Wesley's Theology Today* (1960) influenced generations of Wesleyan scholars and students. In this work Williams attempted to identify John Wesley's essential doctrines by collating passages where Wesley himself indicated that a particular teaching was an "essential" or "fundamental" element of Christian faith that could not be abandoned without abandoning the Christian faith itself. Using this method, Williams took the following six items<sup>12</sup> to be essential doctrines for John Wesley:

- (1) original sin,<sup>13</sup>
- (2) the deity of Christ,<sup>14</sup>
- (3) the atonement,<sup>15</sup>
- (4) justification by faith alone,<sup>16</sup>
- (5) the work of the Holy Spirit,<sup>17</sup> and
- (6) the doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>18</sup>

Williams's list and his criterion of identifying doctrines explicitly stated by John Wesley to be essential or fundamental offers a useful beginning point, although as it stands, it is a rather unorganized combination of doctrines. Item 5 is especially problematic: one can argue that it refers to the distinctive teaching of the Methodist movement that insisted on "perceptible inspiration,"<sup>19</sup> although my own reading of the passages that Williams cites at this point is that Wesley did not insist in these loci that any *doctrine* of the work of the Holy Spirit is necessary; rather, Wesley insisted that *the work of the Holy Spirit* is itself necessary to Christian existence. On my reading, Wesley was not making a claim about an essential doctrine in this case. Belief in the work of the Holy Spirit required no more definition of doctrine than was already present in the doctrine of the Trinity defined in the ancient creeds. Moreover, as the text following will show, Williams omitted at least two doctrines that John Wesley did claim as fundamental or essential, namely, the doctrines of biblical authority and the doctrine of regeneration. Further still, Williams did not include in this list some teachings that John Wesley identified as describing necessary Christian institutions, namely, teaching about the Christian church and the Christian sacraments of baptism and the Lord's

Supper, although Williams did devote attention to John Wesley's beliefs about these institutions elsewhere in the book.

In contrast to Williams's list of John Wesley's essential doctrines, a very different list appeared two years after the publication of Williams's work in Lawrence Meredith's 1962 Harvard dissertation, "Essential Doctrine in the Theology of John Wesley with Special Attention to the Methodist Standards of Doctrine."<sup>20</sup> Meredith's dissertation focused on three essential doctrines in John Wesley's thought, namely:

repentance,  
faith, and  
holiness.

This triad is grounded in a passage in John Wesley's "Principles of a Methodist Farther Explained" in which Wesley asserted that "Our main doctrines, which include all the rest, are three,—that of repentance, of faith, and of holiness."<sup>21</sup> It is clear that Meredith had conceived of the project of "essential doctrine" in a different way than Williams, whose book he had seen before the completion of his own thesis.<sup>22</sup> Rather than identifying passages in which Wesley had denoted a doctrine to be "essential" or "fundamental" or otherwise constitutive, Meredith tried to find a logical consistency or coherence to Wesley's claims about characteristically Methodist teachings, thus the significance of Wesley's claim about "*our* main doctrines" (my emphasis) in the passage cited. Despite the focus on "essential doctrine" in his dissertation, then, what he sought was rather different from Colin Williams's quest for the ecumenically significant core or fundamental doctrines in John Wesley's work. Using my own terminology, what Meredith did was to restrict the ecclesial scope of the claims he examined to distinctive claims emphasized by the Methodist movement. This is helpful in its own way and Meredith's work will be particularly important in developing the next chapter, which deals with distinctly Methodist teachings.<sup>23</sup> In this chapter, however, I will focus more on the kinds of doctrinal claims that Williams investigated and in doing so I shall try to examine texts with attention paid to their contexts, especially as contexts reveal the ecclesial scope of John Wesley's doctrinal claims, that is, whether he claims specific doctrines as necessary for Christianity in general, for Protestant identity, or for the identity of the Methodist or Wesleyan movement.

I have already noted a problem with these lists of essential doctrines, and that is the fact that they omit a range of teachings about necessary or essential Christian institutions and practices—specifically, teachings about the church and the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper—that Wesley elsewhere identified as necessary for Christian existence. That is to say, he identified the Christian church itself as necessary, since there can be no “solitary religion,”<sup>24</sup> and he identified the sacraments as indispensable means of grace. As we will see, this raises the issue of identifying teachings about some of these indispensable practices and about the Christian community alongside the definition of strictly essential or necessary doctrines in John Wesley’s thought.

### **Doctrinal Affirmations in the “Letter to a Roman Catholic”**

There are two documents in which John Wesley did in fact give something like a list of essential or constitutive Christian teachings, and these are his “Letter to a Roman Catholic” (1749) and his redaction of the Articles of Religion of the Church of England (1784). Keeping the question of ecclesial scope in mind, I now want to examine some of John Wesley’s specific claims about essential Christian doctrines that appeared in his “Letter to a Roman Catholic.” This was a published (open) letter that he wrote in 1749 around the same time when he wrote his sermon “Catholic Spirit.” It appears that Wesley actually began a statement of essential doctrines within the sermon “Catholic Spirit,” when he asked about the nature of Christian unity with reference to his Scripture text, “Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thy heart?”<sup>25</sup> After dismissing inappropriate notions of Christian unity such as the notion that Christian unity depends on unity in “opinions” or “modes of worship,”<sup>26</sup> Wesley proceeded to state positively what Christian unity should imply, and the first two paragraphs in this statement begin as follows:

The first thing implied is this: Is thy heart right with God? Dost thou believe his being and his perfections? [H]is eternity, immensity, wisdom, power? [H]is justice, mercy, and truth? Dost thou believe that he now “upholdeth all things by the word of his power” and that he governs even the most minute, even the most

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noxious, to his own glory, and the good of them that love him? [H]ast thou a divine evidence, a supernatural conviction, of the things of God? Dost thou “walk by faith not by sight,” looking not at temporal things, but things eternal?

13. Dost thou believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, “God over all, blessed for ever?” Is he revealed in thy soul? Dost thou know Jesus Christ and him crucified? Does he dwell in thee, and thou in him? Is he formed in thy heart by faith? [H]aving absolutely disclaimed all thy own works, thy own righteousness, hast thou “submitted thyself unto the righteousness of God,” which is by faith in Christ Jesus? Art thou “found in him, not having thy own righteousness, but the righteousness which is by faith?” And art thou, through him, “fighting the good fight of faith, and laying hold of eternal life?”<sup>27</sup>

From this point, however, the sermon focuses on signs of Christian unity in heartfelt faith and in appropriate Christian practice. But I note that the passage begins by naming the importance of faith in God the creator and faith in Christ as God, that is, it appears to begin a trinitarian formulation of Christian faith although it does not follow through with this scheme.

John Wesley did follow through with such a scheme in a critical, extended passage in his “Letter to a Roman Catholic,” written in Dublin on 18 July 1749. In this open letter, Wesley urged his Catholic reader to avoid disputes about “opinions,” which here have the same meaning as in the sermon “Catholic Spirit,” namely, nonessential beliefs.<sup>28</sup>

John Wesley employed in this passage a rhetorical device known as *meiosis*. *Meiosis* involves an apparently restricted claim that is later revealed to imply a much larger claim. In this case, Wesley made a series of claims about the beliefs of “a true Protestant,” beliefs about which he might claim some expertise in dialogue with his Catholic reader and in discussing which he could temporarily sidestep the issue of his authority for describing Catholic beliefs. The problem is that if what he meant in these passages was only true of a Protestant, then the ecclesial scope of the claims he made here would apply only to Protestantism. “A true Protestant may express his belief in these or the like words,” he wrote, and then in five numbered paragraphs he paraphrased the substance of the

Apostles' and Nicene Creeds.<sup>29</sup> With this summary complete, though, Wesley revealed his use of meiosis by asking,

Now, is there anything wrong in this? Is there any one point which you [the Catholic reader] do not believe as well as we?

But you think we ought to believe more. We will not now enter into the dispute. Only let me ask, If a man sincerely believes thus much, and practices accordingly, can any one possibly persuade you to think that such a man shall perish everlastingly?<sup>30</sup>

That is to say, Wesley revealed that what appeared to be a restricted claim limited to assertions of Protestant beliefs was actually a set of claims about common Christian beliefs. Bracketed as it is in the text by reference to division over "opinions," what Wesley identified here was what he took to be the essence of Christian belief—Protestant and Catholic. Thus although the passage is literally cast as reflecting the beliefs of "a true Protestant," Wesley's use of meiosis tried to convince his Catholic reader that what "a true Protestant" believes is in fact consistent with the essence of Christian faith that should be shared by all Christians. The ecclesial scope of the passage is ecumenical or "catholic" in the sense in which Wesley affirmed this term and so the passage offers what I believe is as close as John Wesley came to a statement of essential or fundamental Christian teachings.<sup>31</sup>

What specific teachings did John Wesley affirm as common Christian beliefs in this passage? The passage follows the trinitarian pattern of the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds. At a number of points, Wesley followed the language of Anglican Bishop John Pearson's *Exposition of the Creed*, a document well known to the Wesley family. The published works of Susanna Wesley include an extended commentary on the Apostles' Creed based on Pearson's *Exposition*.<sup>32</sup>

The first paragraph of this passage in the "Letter to a Roman Catholic" affirms belief in God the Father, affirming God's fatherhood in relation to Christ's divine sonship and God's fatherhood in relation to God's providence over all things.<sup>33</sup> The second paragraph affirms doctrine about Christ, including Christ's offices as prophet, priest, and king. It affirms the Nicene Creed's assertion that Christ is "God of God, very God of very God," and it affirms

Chalcedonian language about Christ “joining the human nature with the divine in one person.”<sup>34</sup> This paragraph also includes a reference to Wesley’s belief in the perpetual virginity of the Blessed Virgin, an odd point in describing the beliefs of “a true Protestant” but a point that heightened the meiosis employed in the passage. It also affirms the reality of Christ’s work on behalf of human salvation, including Christ’s suffering, death, burial, and resurrection, echoing the words of the Apostles’ Creed and the primitive Christian gospel as expressed in 1 Corinthians 15:1-4.<sup>35</sup>

The third paragraph of this passage affirms belief in the Holy Spirit “equal with the Father and the Son” and the work of the Holy Spirit in bringing about human salvation.<sup>36</sup> The next paragraph affirms belief in the “catholic, that is, universal, Church” which comprises all who have fellowship with the divine Trinity, both the living and the dead.<sup>37</sup> The fifth and final paragraph of this creedal passage affirms that “God forgives all the sins of them that truly repent and unfeignedly believe his holy gospel,” concluding with the affirmation that the unjust will suffer eternal torment and the just will “enjoy inconceivable happiness in the presence of God to all eternity.”<sup>38</sup> The paragraph can be read as affirming a doctrine of justification by faith, although Wesley did not use this distinctly Protestant vocabulary in addressing his Catholic interlocutor.

Framed as it is by the trinitarian shape of the historic creeds, this extended passage affirms five of the six teachings that Colin Williams identified as essential doctrines for John Wesley: the doctrine of the Trinity (Williams’s item 6), the doctrine of the full divinity of Christ (item 2), the atonement (item 3), teaching about the work of the Holy Spirit (item 5), and at least a glancing reference to the doctrine of justification by faith (item 4), though not couched in traditional Protestant language of justification by faith alone. Wesley’s statement on justification appears in the last paragraph (on the Final Judgment), where Wesley asserted that “God forgives all the sins of them that truly repent and unfeignedly believe his holy gospel.”<sup>39</sup> This passage from the “Letter to a Roman Catholic” also includes a reference to the doctrine of regeneration, asserting that God the Father “is in a peculiar manner the Father of those whom he regenerates by his Spirit, whom he adopts in his Son.”<sup>40</sup> The “Letter to a Roman Catholic” also names teachings about the Christian church among the common teachings it discusses. Oddly enough, it is the doctrine of original sin