Doctrinal Standards in the Wesleyan Tradition

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CHAPTER ONE

THE FORMATION OF WESLEYAN STANDARDS OF DOCTRINE

A doctrinal standard attempts to formulate for a believing community a reliable, durable, normative expression of Christian teaching. The final standard of Christian teaching is Scripture. Additional standards of doctrine seek to assist the Christian community in gaining clarity concerning the accountability of the believing community to Scripture. No valid Christian doctrinal standard is separable from Scripture.

Those who seek to be accountable to Scripture are obliged to develop a method of interpretation appropriate to the mystery of revelation attested in Scripture. In listening carefully to the divine address in Scripture, the serious reader makes interconnected judgments about what unifies the varied statements of Scripture and what enables Scripture to be a cohesive witness to God’s saving action in human history. Serious traditions of Scripture interpretation have sought to develop some unified norm of teaching, a cohesive assessment of the central truth of Scripture, without which Scripture would lose its centeredness, internal consistency, and intrinsic unity. This view does not seek to identify a canon within the canon (for that implies arbitrary selectivity), but rather it recognizes the cohesive center of the canon (which implies integrity and internal congruence in the canon). “The Bible is the rule of faith (regula fidei); the confession, the rule of doctrine (regula doctrinae).”

Doctrinal standards seek to assist the worshipping community in developing this accountability to Scripture in six complementary ways in the Wesleyan tradition: (1) The standards serve as an authoritative guide to one seeking the essential and central truth of Scripture. (2) They serve as a dependable standard to which appeal can be made in matters of controversy. (3) They serve as a
trustworthy source by which the truth is attested and received (cf. Burwash, WDS, viii). (4) Doctrinal standards serve to regulate the teaching office of the church, for essential Christian teachings ought to be clearly understood by those whose ordination distinctly calls them to such instruction.

Doctrinal standards also serve in two additional ways related to their legal and sociological function: (5) They unite a diverse church body in a common doctrinal purpose. And (6) they defend against abuses (such as the misuse of church property, a major motive for the Restrictive Rule to be written) by those who would demean or degrade these teachings.

These six functions appear in the confessional statements and church teachings of most Christian traditions. All six play a crucial role in Wesleyan doctrinal standards.

The earliest summaries of Christian teaching, and hence the earliest summaries of the teaching of the Scriptures, are found in three complementary types of sources: (a) the apostolic preaching of the New Testament, (b) commentaries on biblical teaching, and (c) the ancient baptismal formulae, which later formed the basis for instruction of catechumens. These three basic forms of instruction have been passed on to the Wesleyan tradition so as to become integral to Wesleyan doctrinal standards in Wesley’s Sermons, Notes, and Articles (along with the later added E.U.B. Confession)—one is homiletic, one exegetical, and the third confessional in approach and method. These three forms correspond to major divisions of the theological curriculum in our seminaries: homiletical, exegetical, and systematic theology.

Is There a Distinctive Wesleyan Form of “Doctrinal Standard”?

Did Wesley create a new type of “doctrinal standard” or did he revise available older types? It is useful to review briefly these three types of standards—both in their origin and development—in order to understand how Wesley received and adapted them.

**Apostolic Preaching**

The earliest form of doctrinal standard was the apostolic preaching itself, such as that of Peter and Paul in Acts, Paul in Romans, and Paul’s recollection in
1 Corinthians 15 of the tradition of preaching that had been passed on to him. This form of preaching was passed on to Timothy, who was urged to preach according to “the pattern of sound teaching” (2 Tim 1:13), to urge others “not to teach false doctrines” (1 Tim 1:3), and to preach as one “brought up in the truths of the faith and of the good teaching that you have followed” (4:6). It is this apostolic standard and type of preaching that Wesley sought to recover when he set forth his *Sermons on Several Occasions* as doctrinal standards for Methodist preachers. Through the Minutes of the early conferences, they became embedded in the Constitution of the United Methodist Church and all Wesley-based churches.

In utilizing sermons as teaching models, Wesley was following a familiar Anglican pattern. The Church of England had developed a form of doctrinal standard relatively unfamiliar within the sixteenth-century Lutheran and Reformed traditions. For Anglicans, church-appointed homilies were designed to be read and used as a model doctrinal standard for preaching. Wesley stood in this tradition when he designated certain sermons as “the substance of what I have been preaching” (*SSO*, preface). Wesley gave his followers “not merely the outlines of a system of truth to be subscribed and believed, but the method and substance of doctrine in the form of sermons delivered from the pulpit” (Harrison, *WS*, 7). The forms of error addressed in these sermons have been perennial, not limited to a particular age. In what context were they to be tested? “That which was to be tested by them was the *pulpit in every Methodist Church*. This was to be the type of preaching for which these houses were created” (Sugden, *WSS*, xviii). The building was created for the preaching, and the standard of preaching was set forth in the *Standard Sermons*.

**Early Commentaries**

The apostolic preaching was soon followed by *commentaries* on Scripture. Origen, John Chrysostom, Ambrose, Augustine, and Jerome wrote extensive annotations, interpretations, and expositions of Scripture texts. Wesley continued this tradition in his *Notes*, as a model for the Methodist people of the use of the best available linguistic, textual, and critical resources for the translation and interpretation of Scripture. By introducing the *Notes* along with the *Sermons* into every Trust Deed in the Methodist connection, Wesley also sought to assure, “so far as human means can do so, an Arminian evangelical preaching and exposition of God’s Word” (Sugden, *WSS*, xviii).
Conciliar Formulae

During the classical period of ancient ecumenical orthodoxy, carefully constructed formula statements by Ecumenical Councils summarized Christian teaching and erected a defense against its distortions. This third pattern—quite different in form from either preaching or exegesis—was continued in the Reformation, wherein articles of faith were articulated and agreed upon by a confessional community as the basis for their confession of faith. These articles were then used as the basis for catechisms of Christian instruction, as a rule and guide for Christian confession and preaching accountable to Scripture. In this way, the baptismal formula was expanded into ecumenical creedal definitions that formed the basis for Confessions of the Protestant Reformation. Of these, the Anglican Thirty-nine Articles became the basis for Wesley’s Articles of Religion.

A summary of the Wesleyan adaptation of these three types of doctrinal standards was concisely formulated by Nathaniel Burwash in a memorable, oft-quoted statement:

The Wesleyan standards of doctrine . . . are three-fold, viz.:
I. The Standard of Preaching—the fifty-two sermons embraced in the four volumes.
II. The Standard of Interpretation—the notes on the New Testament.
III. The Standard of Unity with the Sister Churches of the Reformation—the Twenty-five Articles (Burwash, WDS, xi).

The Sermons set before us that great, distinctive type and standard of gospel preaching, by which Methodism is what she is as a great, living Church. When she ceases to preach according to this type and standard she will no longer be Wesleyan Methodism. . . .

The Notes . . . open up to us the mode of interpretation by which the grand type of preaching contained in the Sermons was derived from its fountainhead—the New Testament of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. They are thus the link which binds our subordinate standard to the original Apostolic standard. . . .

But the Articles of Religion have their own appropriate place in our doctrinal foundations. They indicate that which we have received as our common heritage from the great principles of the Protestant Reformation, and from the still more ancient conflicts with error in the days of Augustine and Athanasius. (Burwash, WDS, x, italics added)
This threefold complementarity in the development of Methodist doctrinal standards may be pictured as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Standards of:</th>
<th>Preaching</th>
<th>Interpretation</th>
<th>Unity</th>
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<tr>
<td>In the Early Church</td>
<td>Apostolic preaching</td>
<td>Exegesis</td>
<td>Baptismal Formula</td>
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<tr>
<td>In the Reformation</td>
<td>Homilies (Anglican)</td>
<td>Commentaries</td>
<td>Confessions</td>
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<tr>
<td>In the Wesleyan Connection</td>
<td>Sermons</td>
<td>Notes</td>
<td>Articles and Confession</td>
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In none of these three types of standards do we find any attempt at theological novelty or presumptuous innovation. The steady focus is rather upon fidelity to the faith once delivered. “The student should keep in mind the important truth that there is no new principle in Christian theology. While the modes of interpretation, the terms by which the Word of God is explained and illustrated, will in different ages vary according to the degree of enlightenment and the environment of the ministry and the laymen of the Church, yet the truth is always old” (Harrison, WS, 13). Accordingly, our theological task is not to fancy that we can improve upon the substance of apostolic teaching, but to remember and interpret it accurately and accountably within our own ever-emergent cultural settings. Progress in doctrinal reflection is possible, therefore, but is best viewed as moving further toward a more reliable and adequate interpretation and re-presentation of apostolic teaching.

The ecumenical balance of the Wesleyan doctrinal synthesis was fittingly expressed by Nathaniel Burwash:

This full-orbed conception of scriptural religion embraced the great scriptural verities of all ages and schools of Christian thought. It grasped the wideness of God’s love with the old Greek Christian and the modern Arminian, and it sounded the depths of the human heart with Augustine. It maintained the necessity of good works with the Roman Church, and it recognized the peculiar import of faith with Protestantism. With the Churchman it held the importance of means, and with the evangelical mystic, it recognized the peculiar office of inward grace; and it built the doctrines of inward holiness and Christian perfection of the English mystics upon their true foundation, by uniting them to the evangelical principle of saving faith. (Burwash, WDS, xiii)
Those today who are most deeply committed to the recovery of ancient ecumenical Christian teaching may also take pleasure at the extent to which Wesley himself participated in such a recovery in his own time:

The fundamental principle of Wesley’s doctrine, the impartial universality of God’s provision of grace in Christ, was clearly apprehended and taught by all the Greek fathers, and has been unquestioned in all the eastern Church down to the present time. It was obscured, though not directly denied by Augustine; but firmly held by the great body of the Latin Church, both before and since the Reformation. . . . In fact, during Mr. Wesley’s student days, the whole strength of the English Church divines had been devoted for nearly half a century to the formation of a system of theology on the basis of the first five centuries. This was evidently the School of Divinity from which Mr. Wesley most largely received his opinions, and this revival of patristic theology held as tenaciously as did the ancients to the dogma of human freedom and responsibility. (Burwash, WDS, xiv–xv, italics added)

“Our Doctrines” and the “Doctrinal Minutes”

It is noteworthy that “our doctrines” were first specified through a dialogical process (“conversations”) as reported in minutes of extended colloquies between Wesley and his associates. This was done through:

doctrinal declarations which were published in the Minutes of Wesley’s yearly Conference, the first of which was held in 1744, one year after the General Rules were prepared, and which Conferences continued thereafter from year to year. In these Minutes, particularly in the earlier years, much space was given to the definition and statement of religious doctrine, and in 1749, Mr. Wesley took from the Conference “Conversations” of 1744, 1745, 1746, 1747, and 1748, the matter relating to doctrines, and printed his combination under the title of “Minutes of some late Conversations . . . ,” and this publication, because of the specific nature of the contents, was popularly called “The Doctrinal Minutes.” This presentation of Wesleyan doctrines doubtless had a position of authority. (Thomas B. Neely, DSM, 104)

The Minutes of these dialogues were designated “our doctrines” long before the Twenty-five Articles were compiled by Wesley. The rationale for the development by which these standards initially emerged—first from conference minutes and then to include Wesley’s Sermons and New Testament commentary—
THE FORMATION OF WESLEYAN STANDARDS OF DOCTRINE

was aptly described by the United Methodist Theological Study Commission on Doctrine and Doctrinal Standards in their “Interim Report to the General Conference, 1970,” edited by Albert C. Outler (hereafter TSC):

The doctrinal guidelines hammered out in these first conferences served the Methodists in England and America throughout their formative years. . . . Wesley then conceived the idea of supplementing the conference progress with a collection of exemplary sermonic essays in which he attempted to sum up all the “essentials” of his doctrine and most of his “opinions,” putting his written word in place of his personal presence. In 1746, he published the first of four volumes of *Sermons on Several Occasions* in which he sets forth his basic method of theologizing and suggests, indirectly, that the *sermons* are a more nearly adequate medium for doctrinal teaching than “confessions,” on the one hand, or formal theological treatises, on the other! . . .

However, if doctrinal teaching is to be truly “biblical,” then preachers and hearers need guidelines for their exegesis and interpretation of Scripture; therefore, Wesley undertook to provide them with yet a third standard reference: his *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament.* (TSC, 9, 10)

Chronologically, the sequence of doctrinal definition moved from *Minutes* (beginning 1744) to *Sermons* (beginning 1746) to *Notes* (1754) to *Articles* (1784, which came last without displacing the others to which the E.U.B. *Confession* of 1962 was added).

The familiar Methodist code phrase, “our doctrines” (*Disc.,* 2004, ¶ 336.9, 235), has remained a weighty, traditional Wesleyan phrase for over two centuries (*WJW*, 8:275ff.; cf. Outler, *John Wesley*, 136ff.). In “Conversation I” of the “Minutes of Some Later Conversations Between the Rev. Mr. Wesley and Others, Monday, June 25th, 1744,” the questions that first brought the conversants together (the first minute of the first Conference) were: “1. What to teach; 2. How to teach; and 3. What to do; that is, how to regulate our doctrine, discipline and practice” (*WJW*, 8:275).

The phrase “our doctrines” came to refer to the early editions of the Minutes, which required the preacher “To preach the *old* Methodist doctrines, and no other, as contained in the Minutes of the Conferences” (*Large Minutes*, 1780, 588). These “Doctrinal Minutes” explicated the very teachings that were central concerns of Wesley’s *Sermons* and *Notes:* justification by grace through faith, atonement, assurance of pardon by the witness of the Spirit, sanctification, free grace, and holiness of heart and life (*WJW*, 8:275-339; Outler, *John Wesley*, 134-77).
If one possessed only the *Articles of Religion* without the *Minutes, Sermons,* or *Notes,* one would have general ecumenical teaching without specific Methodist teaching. The *Articles of Religion* affirm what is commonly held in Protestant religion, which Wesley also clearly affirmed, such as the sufficiency of Scripture, the triune God, and justification by faith. When Wesley amended the Thirty-nine Articles in 1784, he aligned them more closely to distinctive Methodist teaching. Yet these *Articles* do not fully reveal the themes that are distinctively Methodist, for Methodists share them with Protestantism generally.

The *Discipline* does not attempt to make fine distinctions between four key phrases: “established standards of doctrine,” “the doctrines of the United Methodist Church,” “our doctrines,” and “our doctrinal standards.” They are all requisite to the ministry and are required by Methodist discipline. All four phrases point to the same, not different, teachings. “Established standards of doctrine” designates the standards protected by the First Restrictive Rule of 1808. “The doctrines of the United Methodist Church” and “our doctrinal standards” are those defined and consensually assumed by the Rules. They include, but are not limited to, the *Articles of Religion* as explicitly confirmed by all *Disciplines* following the debates of 1968.

In 1968 the Plan of Union of the Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren, the E.U.B. *Confession* of 1962, was included under the Restrictive Rules of The United Methodist Church. The *Confession* is now protected just as firmly as the other standards by the Second Restrictive Rule: “The General Conference shall not revoke, alter, or change our Confession of Faith” (*Disc.*, 2004, 27). Since the constitutional status of the former E.U.B. *Confession* is unambiguous and not presently under challenge or debate, its status is settled, and will not be our primary concern, though in part 2 its complete text appears in the section comparing it with variants of the *Articles of Religion* in the Wesleyan tradition.

Note that doctrinal criteria for *laity* are not principally at question in the discussion of Wesleyan doctrinal standards; instead, they apply primarily to *clergy* charged with the task of preaching. No direct doctrinal tests were prescribed for preliminary entry into the early Methodist societies. Rather, as the *General Rules* declared: “There is only one condition previously required of those who desire admission into these societies: ‘a desire to flee from the wrath to come, to be saved from their sins’ ” (*WJW*, 8:279; *Disc.*, 2004, 72). This assumed that members would in due time manifest the seriousness of this intent by Scripture study, prayer, mutual accountability, and attendance upon the ordinances of God. Those who defaulted risked not being permitted to continue in the...
Societies. Although the *General Rules* do not require of members positive subscription to a doctrinal formula, they do imply and assume doctrinal beliefs (see Tigert, *CH*, 144). Doctrinal teaching came through preaching.

Hence our question focuses essentially upon doctrinal standards for preaching in the Wesleyan tradition: *Are they textually defined? Does the traditional definition enjoy a long and uninterrupted history of consensual reception? Is this historic definition applicable today?*

The thesis to be investigated is this: From 1763 onward (and from 1773 on in America) it has been assumed by preachers throughout the connection that to preach contrary to “our doctrines” would be to preach counter to and against Wesley’s teachings as defined textually in the *Sermons* and *Notes* (and after 1784, the *Articles of Religion*, and after 1968, the *Confession*). Do the facts warrant this conclusion?
CHAPTER TWO

THE TRANSPLANTING OF STANDARDS TO AMERICA, 1773–1784

The question of doctrinal standards recurs in the early documents of American Methodism from their inception in the 1770s to their constitutional settlement in 1808. A brief chronicle of key documents will recount the story of how Wesley’s doctrinal standards were transplanted to America consistently and continuously.

The doctrinal criteria of the British Minutes were transferred immediately and directly into the American Minutes, and into legal contracts defining the right use of Methodist properties in the United States. Evidence of this may be found by examining property deeds of conveyance during this period, which specified the doctrinal standards. The original deed to the John Street Methodist Church in New York City, dated November 2, 1770, for example, provides: “that the said person or persons, so from time to time to be chosen as aforesaid, preach no other doctrine than is contained in the said John Wesley’s Notes upon the New Testament and his four volumes of Sermons” (CS, 118–19, italics added).¹

Similarly, the deed for the first Methodist meetinghouse in Philadelphia—St. George’s, June 14, 1770, before John Street—contained precisely the same proviso (Neely, DSM, 139). Hence these doctrinal criteria remained in place, although with language adapted according to changing American property laws, during the period following 1773. Borgen concludes that “The earliest deeds of record in America followed Wesley’s form of 1763” (Borgen, SDUMC, 2).
Methodist/Wesleyen Studies

The doctrinal history of the Wesleyan family of churches

What are our core beliefs? *Doctrinal Standards in the Wesleyan Tradition, Revised Edition*, narrates the history of the formation of Wesleyan doctrines, describing how they were transplanted from the British Isles to North American, how they became constitutionally protected in Wesleyan-rooted churches. This revised edition addresses the continuing hunger for precise and useful information on the doctrinal traditions of mainline Protestantism. Hence the arguments have been updated with more than 400 changes.

Included are doctrinal statements for the Evangelical United Brethren, Free Methodist, Methodist Protestant, Wesleyan, Nazarene, African Methodist Episcopal Zion, Christian Methodist Episcopal, and African Methodist Episcopal Churches; as well as an outline syllabus of a Course on the Articles of Religion.

"In a masterful study Tom Oden has laid out a compelling argument as to why John Wesley’s Sermons and Notes were rightly affirmed as doctrinal standards by the United Methodist General Conference in 1968. Indeed, this gifted theologian not only rightly appreciates the Wesleyan tradition and its distinctives, but he also helps to support those elements of the heritage that are so necessary for real, vital, scriptural Christianity today."

--Kenneth J. Collins, Professor of Wesley Studies and Historical Theology, Asbury Theological Seminary

"Thomas Oden’s fine treatment of our doctrinal standards will not bring to an end the debate about the content, nature, and significance of doctrine in The United Methodist Church; on the contrary, it is should rekindle the dispute about this neglected topic in the life and work of the church. This makes it indispensable reading for all who care about the doctrinal integrity of the Methodist tradition. In addition this book should go a long way in addressing the doctrinal deficit that bedevils so many of our conversations about the future of United Methodism and so much of our deliberation about ministry, mission, and moral commitment."

--William J. Abraham, Outler Professor of Wesley Studies, Altshuler Distinguished Teaching Professor, Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University

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