

## Wesley in His Own Words

by Robert Mayo

Over the past two years there has been considerable discussion regarding which beliefs and values should be guiding the United Methodist Church in terms of its direction and purpose. What seems remarkable in this important conversation is the limited input from the writings of John Wesley himself, especially in terms of the place and function of the Scriptures in determining the mission of the United Methodist Church. Fortunately there is a wealth of information available to the reader interested in knowing more about the role of Scriptures in the rise of the Methodist movement both in England and in America.

Included below are three passages that outline Wesley's approach to the Scriptures. All three are readily available, and I have provided the necessary footnotes to allow the reader to access not only these three passages, but other materials that may be of interest to the reader. It may be noted that two of these passages are taken from Wesley's *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament* and his *Standard Sermons*, which historically represent the assumed theological foundation guiding faith and practice for Methodist preachers and congregations.

The first reading is taken from Wesley's *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*. In Wesley's preface to his reflections on the books of the New Testament, we find the following statements revealing his convictions regarding the Scriptures themselves.

*Concerning the Scriptures in general, it may be observed, the word of the living God, which directed the first patriarchs also, was in the*

*time of Moses, committed to writing. To this were added, in several succeeding generations, the inspired writings of the other prophets. Afterward, what the Son of God preached, and the Holy Ghost spake by the apostles, the apostles and evangelists wrote. This is what we now style the Holy Scripture: this is that word of God which remaineth for ever: of which, though heaven and earth pass away, one jot or tittle shall not pass away. The Scripture therefore of the Old and New Testament, is a most solid and precious system of Divine truth. Every part thereof is worthy of God; and all together are one entire body, wherein is no defect, no excess. It is the fountain of heavenly wisdom, which they who are able to taste, prefer to all writings of men, however wise, or learned, or holy.”<sup>1</sup>*

The second passage is taken from *Wesley Standard Sermons*, printed in two volumes by The Epworth Press in 1921. In his preface to the sermons, Wesley describes his understandings of the Scriptures and the role they played in the development of his preaching. As is usual, Wesley organizes his thoughts as a numbered series, and presented below are items 3 through 6.

*3. I design plain truth for plain people: therefore, of set purpose, I abstain from all nice and philosophical speculations; from all perplexed and intricate reasonings; and, as far as possible, from even the show of learning, unless in sometimes citing the original Scripture. I labour to avoid all words which are not easy to be understood, all which are not used in common life; and, in particular, those kinds of technical terms that so frequently occur in Bodies of Divinity; those modes of speaking which men of reading are intimately acquainted with, but which to common people are an unknown tongue. Yet, I am not assured, that I do not sometimes slide into them unawares; it is so extremely natural to imagine that a word which is familiar to ourselves is so to all the world.*

4. Nay, my design is, in some sense, to forget all that ever I have read in my life. I mean to speak, in the general, as if I had never read one author, ancient or modern (always excepting the inspired). I am persuaded, that, on the one hand, this may be a means of enabling me more clearly to express the sentiments of my heart, while I simply follow the chain of my own thoughts, without entangling myself with those of other men; and that, on the other, I shall come with fewer weights upon my mind, with less of prejudice and pre-possession, either to search for myself, or to deliver to others, the naked truths of the gospel.

5. To candid, reasonable men, I am not afraid to lay open what have been the inmost thoughts of my heart. I have thought, I am a creature of a day, passing through life as an arrow through the air. I am a spirit come from God, and returning to God, just hovering over the great gulf; till few moments hence, I am no more seen! I drop into an unchangeable eternity! I want to know one thing — the way to heaven; how to land safe on that happy shore. God Himself has condescended to teach the way; for this very end He came from heaven. He hath written it down in a book. O give me a that book! At any price, give me the book of God! I have it: here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be homo unius libri. Here then I am, far from the busy ways of men. I sit down alone: only God is here. In His presence I open, I read His book; for this end, to find the way to heaven. Is there a doubt concerning the meaning of what I read? Does anything appear dark or intricate? I lift up my heart to the Father of Lights: Lord, is it not Thy word "If any man lack wisdom, let him ask of God"? Thou "givest liberally, and upbraidest not." Thou hast said, "If any be willing to do, Thy will, he shall know." I am willing to do; let me know. Thy will I then search after and consider parallel passages of Scripture, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. I meditate thereon with all the attention and earnestness of which my mind is capable. If any doubt still remains, I consult those who are experienced in the things of God; and then the writings whereby, being dead, they yet speak. And what I thus learn, that I teach.

*6. I have accordingly set down in the following sermons what I find in the Bible concerning the way to heaven; with a view to distinguish this way of God from all those which are the inventions of men. I have endeavoured to describe the true, the scriptural, experimental religion, so as to omit nothing which is a real part thereof, and to add nothing thereto which is not. And herein it is more especially my desire, first, to guard those who are just setting their faces toward heaven (and who, having little acquaintance with the things of God, are the more liable to be turned out of the way), from formality, from mere outside religion, which has almost driven heart-religion out of the world; and, secondly, to warn those who know the religion of the heart, the faith which worketh by love, lest at any time they make void the law through faith, and so fall back into the snare of the devil.”<sup>2</sup>*

The final passage is abstracted from *Wesley's Works*, volume 10, printed in 1827 in New York. And his brief article "Thoughts Upon Methodism," Wesley unveils his concerns regarding the future of the Methodist movement, and along the way describes the place of Scripture in the development of Methodist doctrine.

*I am not afraid, that the people called Methodists, should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am afraid, lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power. And this undoubtedly will be the case, unless they hold fast both the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out.*

*What was their fundamental doctrine? That the Bible is the whole and sole rule both of Christian faith and practice. Hence they learned, 1. That religion is an inward principle; that it is no other than the mind that was in Christ: or in other words, the renewal of the soul after the image of God, in righteousness and true holiness. 2. That this can never be wrought in us, but by the power of the Holy Ghost. 3. That we receive this and every other blessing, merely for the sake of Christ; and, 4. That whosoever hath the mind that was in Christ, the same is our brother, and sister, and mother.”<sup>3</sup>*

The above passages provide clear insight into the importance of Scripture both for faith and practice in the early Methodist church, and further illuminates the discussion taking place in our day revolving around the Bible and its teachings. How helpful it is to remember our beginnings as we seek to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ in the present day.

<sup>1</sup> *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*. John Wesley, Carlton and Phillips, New York, 1853, p. 5

<sup>2</sup> *Wesley's Standard Sermons*. Volume 1, Edward Sugden (Editor), The Epworth Press, London, 1921, pp. 30-33.

<sup>3</sup> *The Works of Rev. John Wesley*. Volume 10, J. and J. Harper, New York, 1827, p. 145.

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