

Preface

YOU MAY BE READING this because you recognized the name John Wesley in the title of this book and are curious to learn more about him. Or perhaps the words “covenant theology” piqued your interest either because it is something you know something about or relatively nothing about, or because you’ve never actually seen “John Wesley” and “covenant theology” appear in such close proximity to each other. These are good reasons to keep reading. But if what lured you in was “the way of salvation” then you have arrived at ground zero of what motivated the research leading to his volume.

Having spent a good deal of my life listening to people tell the story of their lives, I almost always am listening with this question milling about in my mind: “Just where is this person on their spiritual journey?” The answer to that question matters. It has always mattered, especially to those entrusted with the spiritual care of others. And since it has always mattered, it seemed worthwhile to see what might be learned from someone of honorable and historic stature who spent a good deal of his life thinking about and responding to this same question. Enter John Wesley.

I began my research simply as an investigation into a rather curious distinction Wesley made among those to whom he gave spiritual counsel. Some people, he said, have “the faith of a servant”; others have “the faith of a son.” That distinction seemed to be a thoughtful conclusion he had reached in his own pursuit of an answer to the question that must have lingered in his mind, too, as he heard and read the stories of real, every-day people over the course of his long ministry. And perhaps more importantly, it seemed to be his confident answer to the question posed to *him* by these same people—the question they themselves pondered in their own hearts and minds, “Just where *am* I on my spiritual journey?”

It was in the thick of my research on Wesley’s distinction that the imprint of covenant theology on his theological thought came to the fore. The more I investigated, the more I realized how powerfully his soteriology was impacted by it, and how significantly and creatively he

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adapted it to the template of his evangelical Arminianism. In the end, the original research was cast in a doctoral thesis examining the distinction between the faith of a servant and the faith of a son. This volume represents a reconfiguration of that research in order to highlight Wesley's covenant theology, with the metaphors of servant and son serving as "Exhibit A" of its profound influence on his theological thought.

Because the whole idea of a real connection between Wesley's theological thought and covenant theology seems to be somewhat foreign, I am hopeful that the material in this volume will be convincing enough to compel a new attentiveness in the reading and researching of the Wesley corpus. There are, for example, a number of instances where reading the term "Christian" in light of Wesley's covenant theology (rather than as a generic term opposed to "pagan") will fundamentally impact the theological meaning of the passage. My aim in this volume is to present a comprehensive introduction to the influence of covenant theology on Wesley that will be taken seriously and, in the end, further a more accurate understanding of his theological thought.

I would hope, too, that it would incite further investigation into the subject. There are many aspects needing further research and implications waiting to be pondered. If my fellow Wesleyans gain from learning of the contributions of covenant theology to Wesley's theological formulations, and those from other theological traditions discover the same, that is a significant gain. Above all, a major personal goal of this study will have been accomplished if it proves to be a helpful resource to those entrusted with the spiritual care of others, or inspires applications in practical theology that turn out to be an asset to them. And if we all are encouraged to advance "from faith to faith" in our walks with God, that is best of all.