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Preliminaries

Holiness is one of the core concepts of the Christian faith. It runs like a thread through the whole of the canonical Scriptures where we are taught to think of the God of Israel, named in the New Testament "the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit," as essentially and inherently holy. But because that is so, the people of God are to be holy. Christian theology must therefore include the concept of sanctification, an understanding of the way in which God "makes holy" (*sanctum facere*) not only a people corporately, but each one personally.

But Christians disagree in their teaching on sanctification. Clearly those who follow Christ will and should be changed by becoming his disciples, but in what ways, and how far? How like their Master can Christians become in this life? How well can they reflect the love of their heavenly Father? How far can they be filled with his Spirit? And can we possibly dare to speak of Christian "perfection"?

Several introductory books in recent decades have tried to set out the differing opinions on this, particularly among the heirs of the Reformation, evangelical Protestants. In *Justification and Sanctification* (1983) Peter Toon dealt with Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican, and Wesleyan views.[1] Gundry's *Five Views on Sanctification* (1987) presented what were called the Wesleyan, Reformed, Pentecostal, Keswick, and Augustinian-Dispensational views. Donald Alexander's *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification* (1988) included the same views, except that it replaced the last of these with the "Contemplative" view. J. I. Packer in

1. Books referred to in this paragraph are all listed in the Bibliography.

his book *A Passion for Holiness* (1992)[2] carried on the Reformed (or, more specifically, Calvinist) tradition of Bishop J. C. Ryle's book, *Holiness,* written to oppose the teaching given at the Keswick convention. Archbishop Rowan Williams was one of the compilers of a book sub-titled *The Anglican Quest for Holiness* (2001)[3] and an ecumenical and scholarly approach was taken in another compilation edited by Stephen Barton, *Holiness, Past and Present* (2003). The list could be extended.[4]

a) Wesley's Catholic and Evangelical Doctrine

The purpose of this book is to look particularly at the historic Christian teaching on Christian holiness as it was formulated by John Wesley. Stanley Hauerwas commented that in spite of the difficulties in Wesley's doctrine, particularly the troublesome word "perfection," he continued to think "that Wesley was right to hold that the peculiar contribution of Methodists to the church universal lies in our struggle to recover the centrality of holiness as integral to the Christian life."[5] William J. Abraham has characterized Wesley's doctrine of perfection as "an exercise in ascetic theology, which was also a form of realized eschatology that posited a distinctive phenomenology of the Christian life." He argues that the recovery and reformulation of this doctrine requires "much more serious endeavors in historical and systematic theology," and particularly calls for attention to "Methodist dogmatics."[6] Wesleyan theologians such Hauerwas, Dunning, Long, and Lowery have addressed the doctrine of Christian perfection creatively in the context of Moral Theology (*alias* Christian Ethics).[7] The aim here is to develop our understanding of the doctrine in the context of doctrinal theology, otherwise known as Christian Dogmatics. Samuel M. Powell differentiates "academic theology," which is close to philosophy of religion (and, we might add, apologetics), from confessional "church theology."[8] The former seems to attract much attention today, but the latter, church dogmatics, requires much more work for the sake of the

2. American title: *Rediscovering Holiness.*

3. The other editors were Geoffrey Rowell and Kenneth Stevenson.

4. Most recently, see Tidball, *Message of Holiness.*

5. Hauerwas, *Sanctify Them*, 124.

6. Abraham, "Christian Perfection," 597f.

7. Dunning, *Divine Image*; Long, *Wesley's Moral Theology*; Lowery, *Salvaging Wesley's Agenda.*

8. Powell, *Theology of Christian Spirituality*.

church. Philosophical theology may help to keep the wolves at bay (except of course when it is the work of a wolf in sheep's clothing!), but it is church doctrinal theology or dogmatics, working closely with biblical theology, that provides food for the sheep.

In keeping with Wesley's "catholic spirit," we will not present his doctrine of Christian sanctification as merely a series of sectarian "distinctives" of interest only to Wesleyans, but as a view that stands within the mainstream tradition of the Christian church. Sadly, the Wesleyan view has too often been presented in a sectarian way. In the disputes among evangelical Christians in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it was often attacked as "sinless perfection," and some of Wesley's heirs deserved to be rebuked for that distortion of his teaching. But unlike his more unbalanced followers, John Wesley was widely read and deeply immersed in the church Fathers and was an Oxford scholar who read the Fathers and the Scriptures in the original languages. He insisted on using the easily misunderstood word "perfection" because of his commitment to Scripture as "a man of one book" (*homo unius libri*). The Bible was Wesley's source of authority for his doctrine, interpreted in the light of the early Fathers and of his own tradition in the Church of England. His doctrine of Christian "perfection" was not, therefore, a new doctrine; it was simply his formulation of the doctrine within the mainstream tradition of the church catholic. The aim here therefore is not just to carry on a conversation within the Wesleyan tradition, but across the church.[9]

One of the key tasks of this book will be to understand from Wesley's own writings what he actually taught. It is necessary to distinguish that from the simplified (and indeed simplistic) teaching of some later teachers who regarded themselves as "Wesleyan."[10] But we will approach Wesley through first undertaking a survey of the ancient Christian tradition that shaped his interpretation of Scripture, noting particularly how far he was echoing the teaching of the Fathers of the church. But of course Wesley was not only an enthusiast for the "primitive Christianity" of the early centuries: he was also an evangelical Protestant. While listening to a reading from Martin Luther, he underwent a conversion in which he trusted in "Christ alone" and received assurance of the forgiveness of his sins. He embraced a doctrine of justification by faith, which, he said, did not differ

9. For an introductory textbook for students written from within the Wesleyan tradition, see Leclerc, *Christian Holiness*.

10. We will use "Wesleyan" rather than "Methodist" since not all Wesleyans are Methodists and not all Methodists are Wesleyan.

by a "hair's breadth" from that of John Calvin. It is this embracing of both the Fathers and the Reformers which makes him a figure of great ecumenical significance. His most original contribution to Christian thought was in "practical divinity."[11] He tried to think through how to integrate the teaching of the Fathers and the Reformers in this area of practical Christian living which Protestants have long referred to as "sanctification" and which today is often included in studies of "spirituality."[12] George Croft Cell, one of the pioneers of the twentieth-century rediscovery of Wesley as a theologian, famously wrote: "The Wesleyan reconstruction of the Christian ethic of life is an original and unique synthesis of the Protestant ethic of grace with the Catholic ethic of holiness."[13] That may not be exactly the best wording, but it does indicate that Wesley was what Kenneth Collins calls a "conjunctive" theologian.[14]

Once we have looked at the biblical roots of Wesley's doctrine, surveyed the earlier heritage of spiritual writers through the patristic and medieval periods, and tried to straighten out the tangled web of misunderstandings and distortions that abound about Wesley's own teaching at the popular level, we will then consider the limitations and weaknesses in Wesley's thought. This is important, for the aim is not to champion Wesley against all comers, but to further a deeper understanding among Christians that will help us all in the practical matter of following Christ. Therefore, we must recognize that, while Wesley was a careful scholar and a clear thinker, he was a man of his time. And while he should be regarded (in David McEwan's phrase) as truly a "pastoral theologian"[15] who took consistent theological positions, yet he was not a dogmatician. He did not engage in the kind of Christian dogmatics that tries to think out afresh Christian theology as an organic whole encapsulated in the creeds. He was clearly trinitarian, he clearly embraced orthodox Chalcedonian Christology, and he clearly stood in the Reformation tradition when it came to the doctrines of the atonement and justification by faith. But as a practical theologian of his time, it never occurred to him (or any of his contemporaries) to think through deeply and rigorously how his particular doctrines of "faith, repentance, and holiness" formed an organic whole with

11. See Langford, *Practical Divinity.*

12. Among recent works on Christian spirituality by Wesleyan theologians, see Collins, *Exploring Christian Spirituality*, and Powell, *Theology of Christian Spirituality*.

13. Cell, *Rediscovery*, 347.

14. See Collins, *Theology of John Wesley*, 4f.

15. McEwan, *Pastoral Theologian*.

the theology of the creeds.[16] In fact much theology since the Reformation has tended to regard the central doctrines of the faith as "ivory tower" matters. We have so often taken the trinitarian heart of the Christian faith for granted in order to get on with what is thought to be more practical and relevant. Specifically in Wesley's case, he did not engage in thinking through in depth and explaining how his doctrine of Christian perfection flowed out of these central Christian beliefs in the atonement, the incarnation, and the Trinity. As a man of his time, he cannot be blamed for that.

But that is the aim of this book. We begin with the belief of the mainstream of the Christian church—from the Apostolic Fathers through Clement and Athanasius, the Cappadocians, and through the spiritual writers of the Middle Ages up to Wesley and beyond—that Christians may be truly sanctified not only in outward consistency of conduct, but inwardly in such a way as to be truly among the "pure in heart." That is not a universal view, of course. Three of the church's greatest theologians, Augustine, Luther, and Calvin, question whether this level of Christian holiness is possible in this life. Our intention here is not to engage directly in polemics with these major doctors of the church, but we will keep their more pessimistic doctrine in mind as a helpful and necessary corrective and balance as we concentrate on the positive theological development of the long tradition from the Greek Fathers through the medieval writers to Wesley.

But the aim is not just historical. We do not have a merely antiquarian interest in Wesley or any of his predecessors. The aim is to address for today the theological question: what basis is there for this positive view of Christian holiness in the central Christian doctrines—atonement, incarnation, and Trinity? If we truly grasp God's action in the world in the incarnation of the Son by the power of the Holy Spirit in order to fulfill the redemptive will of the Father, does that imply that *already*, even in advance of the death of our bodies and our future resurrection, Christians may be pure in heart? Does the doctrine of the Trinity, focused in salvation from the Father in the Incarnate Son by the Spirit, and taken to be the comprehensive doctrine uniting the whole field of Christian theology, give us a basis for such a hope? Or does the trinitarian structure of Christian theology rather support the belief that the Fall is *so* deep and sin *so* entrenched that we can never love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength while we exist in these mortal bodies? Needless to say,

16. See the first two chapters of Campbell's, *Wesleyan Beliefs*, on the "Common Christian Beliefs" and the "Distinctively Methodist Beliefs" in Wesley's theology.

to address such questions within the scope of one little book calls for a broad-brush approach, or, to vary the metaphor, a wide-angle lens. The kind of academic specialism encouraged by minutely careful scholarship will (no doubt) find numerous points for critique. But the church, and particularly the student and the "intelligent lay reader," need to see the big picture. So we will take the risk.

First however, to pursue this aim we need to be clear on how to proceed and it will clarify the procedure we are going to follow to articulate in this first chapter some axioms of theological method. Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and liberal Protestant theologians will not agree fully with these, but here we are taking the Reformation view that these are essential to doing theology in a Christian way. We are not breaking new ground here, but simply attempting to state in a contemporary way the standard Reformation, evangelical position that Wesley shares.

b) First Axiom: Holy Scripture

The first axiom is that the only source of Christian doctrine is the biblical revelation. That is the Reformation position that Wesley accepted as a loyal member of the Church of England and it is clearly expressed in Article IV of the Thirty-Nine Articles:

> *Of the Sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures for Salvation*. Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation; so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation.

This article asserts that it is part of the faith that the articles or doctrines of the faith must either be explicit in the canonical Scriptures, or implied by them. That is the evangelical or Protestant position of the Reformation. Eastern Orthodoxy may regard the historic ecumenical councils of the church as having equal authority, and Roman Catholics may ascribe to the Pope a certain infallibility. But for Protestants, the evangelical doctrine of the Reformation is that no pope or bishop, superintendent, council, or assembly is superior to the authority of the Word of God as expressed in Holy Scripture. The implication is that no church tradition formulated in any creed or confession or article of faith or statement of doctrine, be it ever so venerable or issued by any ecclesiastical dignitary, be he ever so high, is in principle final and binding, definitive and unrevisable. Every

statement of doctrine made by Christians after the passing of the apostles is subject to the authority of the Word of God in Holy Scripture and must be evaluated as an expression of its teaching. The Bible is the one and only source and the one and the only ultimate criterion of Christian doctrine. God has spoken through the prophets and apostles, through the Old Testament and the New, and in drawing up the canon, the church, far from conferring authority on the Scriptures, recognized their authority as the voice and the Word of God.[17] This Reformation position, *sola scriptura*, does not, however, imply the later rationalistic understanding of "inerrancy" developed specifically within American (as distinct from European) Calvinism. Nor does it mean to say that there is no role for church tradition, and we shall come to that positive understanding of its role shortly.

But before we look at the necessary role of the church, several implications follow from this axiom about Scripture. First, it follows that it is not the task of theology merely to expound and elaborate and refine the church's doctrine: that would be a traditional Roman Catholic view of its function. Rather, this gives dogmatic theology a critical function, namely, in every generation to judge the doctrinal statements of the church against the criterion of Holy Scripture. Biblical exegesis, that is to say, must not be held in captivity to dogmatics, as it was in the pre-Reformation Catholic church or (in effect) in the age of Protestant scholasticism. As far as within us lies, exegesis must not become *eisegesis*, reading *into* the text our own doctrinal formulations. Rather, with the reverent, godly use of the tools of biblical criticism, purged from unbelieving and secular presuppositions, the text must be allowed to speak its own message and we must strive to allow it to call in question our understanding of the truth, our doctrinal formulations, so that they may be deepened and expanded and, if need be, corrected. In this way an ongoing dialogue takes place in which the living church of God with its doctrinal formulations listens again and afresh in every generation to the Word of God, and, in the light of new questions and new insights, deepens and corrects its understanding of the truth. That is the ongoing task that has been described as the hermeneutical circle or spiral,[18] and it is this living conversation that gives evangelical Protestant theology its vitality.[19]

17. For Wesley's view of the authority of Scripture, see Jones, *Conception and Use*, also Jones, "The Rule of Scripture," 39–61, and Bullen, *Man of One Book*.

18. See Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral.*

19. See McGrath, *Dangerous Idea*, on the revolutionary Protestant belief that each person could interpret the Bible.

To apply this directly to the doctrine of Christian sanctification, this means, to begin with, that biblical phrases such as "wholly sanctify," "filled with the Holy Spirit," "perfect love," "pure in heart," "indwelling sin," or "the mind of the flesh,"[20] have a priority and authority that cannot be accorded to such phrases as "the second blessing,"[21] "the sinful nature,"[22] or "original sin."[23] These latter words and phrases are not found in Scripture. Whether they offer a legitimate interpretation of Scripture is up for discussion, but they do not carry the same authority as the biblical phrases. Christians are free to reject this later terminology, but they are bound to come to *some* understanding of the biblical phrases, such as what Paul meant when he prayed that the Thessalonians be "wholly sanctified" or (as Luther translated it) "sanctified through and through."[24]

Secondly, this axiom implies that not only can Christian doctrine not be based merely on church tradition, but it certainly cannot be based on secular thinking. The doctrines of the church cannot be based on any metaphysical system, whether Platonist, Hegelian, or any other, nor can Christian theology find its source in the natural sciences, whether psychology or sociology, biology or cosmology. That does not mean to say that philosophy and science are to be excluded from the *articulation* of Christian theology. The Fathers used Platonism in this way, "spoiling the Egyptians" as they put it, and we may *use* other philosophies and the sciences in our contextualization of the Christian faith in today's multicultural world. But we are not to draw the doctrines of the faith from any of these. These may *shape* our expression of doctrine, but they are not *sources* of Christian theology. Applying that specifically to the doctrine of the Christian life, we may for example make use of psychology in articulating our understanding of Christian sanctification, but we cannot *build* our understanding of Christian sanctification on this modern secular science. The doctrine of the Christian life, including the corporate life of the church as well as our regeneration, justification, sanctification, and the

20. 1 Thess 5:23; Acts 2:4; 4:8; etc.; 1 John 4:17f.; Matt 5:8; Rom 7:17, 20, and 8:7.

21. Wesley had an ambivalent attitude to this term. Letters: 24 March 1757, L., III, 212; 3 April 1772, L., V, 315; 8 Oct. 1774, L., VI, 116.

22. The NIV unfortunately interprets *sarx* in various NT passages as "the sinful nature." This is a misleading interpretation, not a strict translation.

23. According to Williams, *Ideas of the Fall*, 327, the phrase *originale peccatum* first occurs in a discussion of Rom 7:7–25 in Augustine's treatise *de diversis quaestionibus ad Simplicianum* written in AD 397.

24. *Holoteleis* is an adjective meaning "wholly perfect." "Entirely" avoids confusing "wholly" with "holy."

work of the Spirit, must be drawn (like every other doctrine of the faith) from the Word of God in Holy Scripture. It is a doctrine of the faith, not a scientific theory.

c) Second Axiom: Tradition

If the first axiom is the authority of the Bible as the Word of God and its priority over the doctrinal statements handed on to us in the tradition of the church, the second is the legitimacy and necessity of church tradition.[25] It is essential that the church should formulate its doctrines in doctrinal statements, creeds, and articles of faith, and hand these on in its tradition from one generation to another. And while in principle the great creeds of the church are revisable and open to correction from further study of Scripture, yet in fact it is almost unthinkable for Christian theology that these should be abrogated or denied.

The historic creeds do not share in the final authority of the Scriptures, but all evangelical traditions follow the Reformers in believing that the ancient creeds are *in fact* a faithful summary of the teaching of the Scriptures and faithfully draw out their implications. They are indeed the church's hermeneutic for the interpretation of Holy Scripture. Even evangelical Protestants in the Anabaptist and Baptist traditions, who refuse to use the creeds in worship or to require subscription to them, generally accept them in fact in that role. But the creeds are always open to criticism. The Chalcedonian Symbol for example, not itself a creed, but a further clarifying of the second article of the Nicene Creed, is often subjected to criticism for the terminology and conceptuality of "two natures" which it employs to speak of the Person of Christ. It is only this freedom to critique the creeds in the light of Holy Scripture that guarantees that theology is a living, open dialogue between the Word of God and the church, with continuing development and increased understanding, and not a dead system of thought to be preserved like some precious antique and passed on undamaged to the next generation.

This idea of doctrinal development was advocated by John Henry Newman in his *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (1845), and he carried it from his Anglican heritage into the Roman Church, thus sowing the seeds that later bore fruit in the Second Vatican Council. But it was endorsed early in the twentieth century by the evangelical theologian, James Orr of Glasgow, in lectures later published as *The Progress of*

25. See Ted Campbell, "The Interpretive Role of Tradition," 63–75.

Dogma. It has indeed become a commonplace that Christian doctrines have developed over the centuries. The doctrine of the Trinity, that God is three Persons but one God, is not stated in so many words in Scripture, but had to be inferred as the *implication* of Scripture in a process of development that reached its climax in the late fourth century. The full doctrine of the Person of Christ as one Person in two natures is similarly not stated in so many words, but had to be drawn out as the implication of Scripture in a process reaching its climax in the middle of the fifth century. The doctrine of the atonement arguably did not begin to be fully developed as a distinct area of study until rigorous thinking was initiated by Anselm's work, *Cur Deus Homo*, in the eleventh century. It is no argument therefore against Wesley's understanding of Christian holiness that he reformulated this ancient Christian doctrine of Christian perfection in the language and concepts of the eighteenth century. Wesley was simply further drawing out and formulating the *implications* of Scripture with reference to Christian sanctification, as the Fathers did with respect to the Trinity, Anselm with respect to the atonement, and Luther with respect to justification by faith.

There is therefore a positive place to be assigned to the role of Christian dogmatics.[26] Over the centuries of the Christian era, it has formulated the major doctrines of the Christian faith in the light of Scripture. In this development over the centuries, it has been self-critical, repeatedly criticizing and developing its formulations. Sometimes, development has gone off in the wrong direction, as in the medieval Roman doctrine of Mary.[27] At times, particularly at the Reformation, whole lines of development have been written off as illegitimate in the light of Scripture. But valid development must continue to take place. In the parting words of John Robinson to the Pilgrim Fathers leaving Leiden on the *Mayflower*, "The Lord has yet more light and truth to shed forth from his Word."[28]

From one point of view, this is the ongoing work analyzed by hermeneutics, the study of methods of interpretation. And interpretation must go on in every age. It is now frequently described as the relating of the two

26. "Dogmatic theology" is a better term than "systematic theology." It implies that theological thinking is not a philosophical or metaphysical system but is centered on the *dogma* ("decree") of the church councils, particularly the Nicene Creed, that declaration of faith which articulates the centre and core of Christian convictions.

27. See Bauckham, *Chosen by God*, on "Mariological Excesses" in the medieval period, and the comment of Karl Barth, *CD*, I, 2, 139: "Mariology is an excrescence, i.e., a diseased construct of theological thought."

28. See the hymn based on these words by George Rawson (Hymn 230 in *Congregational Praise*, 259).

horizons,[29] the first-century world of the New Testament and the present day. Or it may be thought of as the "hermeneutical circle," or better still, as Grant Osborne suggested, a *spiral* moving round and upwards from interpretation to text to interpretation and so on.[30] But it is more than the interpretation of a text to make it speak to the present day or the relation of two widely separated horizons. If it is to be truly a spiral, penetrating ever more deeply into the truth, the history of interpretation must be taken into account. And it must lead to the distillation of the results of interpretation, the progressively more sophisticated and nuanced formulation of the truth about God in the creeds and later doctrines, while still inevitably limited to the fallible words and limited concepts of human language and culture. And just as the hermeneutical task is never finished, so the task of theology is never finished. In the light of new questions thrown up by changes in human culture, new aspects of Christian truth come to light. Neither Athanasius nor Augustine, neither Luther nor Calvin, neither Wesley nor any theologian since, has penned the last word.

As long as "this present evil age" lasts, the final definitive theology will never be written. The church must constantly live in the expectation of penetrating more deeply into the truth of God revealed once for all in Jesus Christ and expressed once for all in the Holy Scriptures. An important distinction is made here in the words of Jaroslav Pelikan, "Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living." It is not a dead traditionalism we must cultivate, but a deeper study of Christian tradition. Any exposition of Christian theology which only takes note of recent writing and ignores the Fathers and the Reformers is bound to be superficial.

With particular reference to the doctrine of sanctification, this second axiom implies that our tradition should be a living one and not a dead one. A dead orthodoxy is a rigid corpse. Or it may be compared to a family heirloom, an antique increasingly useless and irrelevant, destined eventually for the museum. A dead orthodoxy is expressed in language and categories that have petrified. It imagines that it has said the last and final word and therefore in effect claims final authority for itself. But a living orthodoxy tackles the questions of each new generation. A living tradition goes humbly to Scripture with each new set of questions. It goes

29. The simile of the fusion of horizons seems to have originated with Gadamer in *Truth and Method*: trans. of *Wahrheit und Methode*, and was taken up by Pannenberg and Moltmann. Cf. Thistleton, *Two Horizons*.

30. Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*.

to learn, and it develops new models and is not afraid to correct and refine or even perhaps to reject old theological categories in the light of deeper study of Scripture. It is faithful to the essential truth of the tradition, but longs to express it more adequately, more scripturally, with greater insight and penetration, more persuasively and compellingly. The Wesleyan tradition then needs to be a living one in ongoing conversation with the church catholic, not a fossilized and isolated one. That is why it is important to seek to penetrate afresh into the heart of Christian faith in Christ and through Christ in the Father by the Spirit, and to see that the truth of Christian holiness is built upon this foundation and no other.

d) Third Axiom: Rational Spiritual Experience

The third axiom of theological method that we will assume here is the role of what we shall call "rational spiritual experience." This phrase is intended to bring together "reason" and "experience," which have been misleadingly separated, and to qualify the rational experience we are talking about as "spiritual" or "relational."[31]

Since the patristic and Wesleyan scholar, Albert Outler, coined the phrase, the "Wesleyan Quadrilateral," referring to Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience, this has been thought to encapsulate Wesley's theological method. Outler claimed that this was distinctively Wesleyan: "Thus, we can see in Wesley a distinctive theological method, with Scripture as its preeminent norm but interfaced with tradition, reason and Christian experience as dynamic and interactive aids in the interpretation of the Word of God in Scripture."[32] He saw three of these factors—Scripture, tradition, and reason—in the classic Anglican methodology of Hooker and commented: "It was Wesley's special genius that he conceived of adding 'experience' to the traditional Anglican triad." But Outler's view has now become controversial.[33] Wesley certainly used the four terms, although never all at once, and Anglican theology from the time of Hooker is thought to have operated with Scripture, tradition, and reason,[34] and the claim was that, as an eighteenth-century thinker, Wesley added the fourth,

31. See Miles, "Role of Reason," 77–106, and Maddox, "The Enriching Role of Experience," 107–27.

32. Outler, "Wesleyan Quadrilateral," 9.

33. See Abraham, "Quadrilateral," and for a recent summary of the discussion, Thompson, "Outler's Quadrilateral."

34. See Bauckham and Drewery, *Tradition and Reason*.

experience. But the appeal to experience in theology is not original to John Wesley. Perhaps it is better to begin with the proposition that the so-called Wesleyan "Quadrilateral," although easy to remember and a useful teaching tool, is not exclusively Wesleyan and is not a quadrilateral! Just as budding physicists have to learn Boyle's Law and then later learn that it is not in fact true, so perhaps the so-called "Wesleyan Quadrilateral" needs to be treated in the same way.

The so-called quadrilateral is not exclusively Wesleyan because in fact in the modern era, evangelical preachers and theologians, at least since Calvin, have employed all four terms.[35] John Calvin frequently asserted, "Experience teaches . . . (*experientia docet*)."[36] And if by "experience" we are referring particularly to the "religious affections," then as Richard Steele documents, Wesley was to some extent following in the footsteps of the Calvinist theologian, Jonathan Edwards.[37] But more significantly, the so-called quadrilateral is not a quadrilateral, if that is taken to imply, as it appears to, four more or less equal factors, or four factors on the same level. Where it is really misleading is when the four factors are regarded as four distinct *sources* of doctrine. Timothy L. Smith suggested the figure of a three-legged stool, and that is certainly an improvement: Scripture is the floor on which the stool stands, the foundation of doctrine.[38] Doctrine itself is the seat of the stool, standing on this scriptural foundation on three legs, tradition, experience, and reason. The three "legs" then are figurative for the way we interpret Scripture. Randy Maddox expresses it as "a unilateral *rule* of Scripture within a trilateral *hermeneutic* of reason, tradition, and experience."[39] But while that is an improvement, even the figure of the three-legged stool is somewhat misleading. It seems to suggest a movement in only one direction, from Scripture to doctrine, instead of the hermeneutical spiral that is now recognized as more realistic. Further, the separation of reason and experience begs too many epistemological questions.[40]

35. See Noble, "Knowledge of God," and "Scripture and Experience"; also see Rossall, "God's Activity."

36. Torrance, *Hermeneutics*; cf. 24f. and 80.

37. Steele, *"Gracious Affection."*

38. Smith, "John Wesley," 12–15.

39. Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 46.

40. See Abraham, "Quadrilateral," together with his other acute writings on theological epistemology.

"Reason" comprises not just our ability to reason abstractly following some kind of logical process like Descartes retiring into his stove.[41] Rather our rationality also includes the ability to *interact* with the world around us. It is when people lose that ability that we take them into care! Reason (or better "rationality") is not merely abstract, intellectual thought carried out by a mind in a vacuum. It also includes the intuitive activity of the mind in contact with the world around it in both its physical and personal (or spiritual) dimensions, interacting rationally with persons and things.

True experience is thus rational from the beginning and true reason is experiential. To speak of "Reason" and "Experience" (capitalized!) as distinct factors is a misleading abstraction, for there are no such entities. There are simply people, persons who *know* God corporately within the body of the church, but also personally, each one for himself or herself. That is experiential *knowledge*, as all first-hand knowledge is. As such, it is fully rational, for we are most fully rational when we interact with each other in personal, rational relationships. And we are most rational when God makes himself known to us through his Word and by his Spirit so that we know him and rationally respond in faith (trust) and repentance.[42]

The point of adding the word "spiritual" to the phrase "rational experience" is that, for Christian theologians, our thinking takes place as "faith seeking understanding" (*fides quaerens intellectum*). That is to say: theology takes place within the realm of the "spiritual," understood as the *relational*. Theological thinking *begins* within the *personal relationship* that God has established with his people through his Son by his Spirit.[43] While theology, therefore, engages the intellect, and while God's revelation is always in his Word and therefore conceptual from the beginning, theology is not *merely* an intellectual or academic exercise. It is not merely (as it appears to be in some forms of rationalistic, scholastic fundamentalism) the deducing of abstract doctrines from an inerrant text. It is not merely a rationalistic, scholastic knowledge of abstract "truths" or eternal

41. Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, 2. This presumably means that he sat in the seat which is part of the huge porcelain stoves one sees in the Low Countries. For the following alternative view of "reason" and "experience," see Macmurray, *Self* and *Persons*. See also Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, and Torrance, *Theological Science* and *God and Rationality*.

42. See Abraham, *Aldersgate,* for a study of Wesley's "evidences" for the knowledge of God.

43. See Gunter, "Personal and Spiritual Knowledge," on the similarity between Wesley's understanding of the knowledge of God and the understanding of "personal knowledge" in the thought of Michael Polanyi.

"principles." That is Platonism. It is rather analogous to the intellectual, conceptual dimension that is always inherent in relationships between sentient, rational persons. Theology is never merely knowledge of the Bible or knowledge of doctrines, an intellectual system to elaborate and to fight for as a kind of ideology. Theology is the articulation of intelligent, personal knowledge *of the living God,* the God revealed in his Word by his Spirit.

Christian doctrine then is the expression of that knowledge of God we all share in the body, the church. "Experience" is not therefore a distinct *source* of doctrine any more than "Reason" is. The One we experience is the God who makes himself known to his people by his Spirit, but never apart from his Word. Therefore, it is best to say that there is only one source of Christian doctrine, the Word of God.[44] God's revelation in the Word made flesh—known to us through the authoritative witness of the apostles and prophets in Holy Scripture, and experienced by us within the space-time creation by the Spirit—is the only reliable source of truth about God. Any other knowledge we think we have is shadowy and liable to be distorted and misleading. But *our expression* of the Word of truth, that is, church doctrine, is shaped by our rational, spiritual experience of God in and through his Word, and by our rational reflection upon that.

It is important then to emphasize the objective pole expressed in the phrase, "experience *of God*." One of the dangers of the Pietist and Wesleyan traditions, followed by nineteenth-century revivalism and the twentieth-century Pentecostal and charismatic movements, is the danger of subjectiv*ism*, the seeking of subjective *experiences*. When the word "experience" is used as a noun in the plural in that way, it is used to speak of inner, subjective events happening within the mind and heart of the believer.[45] But Wesley never used the later phrase "crisis experiences": that language was coined in nineteenth-century revivalism and it subtly twists his meaning. The English word "experience" comes from the same root as "experiment" and Wesley used them as virtual synonyms. The famous preface to the *Hymns* explains that the hymns are arranged "according to the experience of real Christians, so that this book is in effect a little body of experimental and practical divinity."[46] "Experimental" religion (like ex-

44. Calvin, *Institutes*, I, xiii, 7: "Therefore, as all revelations from heaven are duly designated by the title the Word of God, so the highest place must be assigned to that substantial Word, the source of all inspiration, which, as being liable to no variation, remains for ever one and the same with God, and is God."

45. See Truesdale, "Reification," 95–119, on the reification of experiences.

46. *Works* (BE) 7:74. I have had the temerity to correct Wesley's punctuation to fit

perimental science) certainly requires a *subject* to do the experimenting or experiencing (so there must be a *subjective* pole), but it focused on the *object*, the *objective* reality that is experienced.[47]

Outler commented that in place of innate ideas or proofs for the existence of God, Wesley put an another notion of the self-evidence of God's reality as strictly implied in the faithful person's awareness of God's gracious presence towards him or her. This awareness of God's gracious "presence" is what Wesley meant by "experience," and it was for him as real and unmistakable a perception as any sensory awareness might be.[48]

Spiritual experience comes when, to complement our five physical senses, the Holy Spirit gives us the spiritual sense to be aware of the presence of the reality of God.[49] The inner subjective response is a response by the Spirit to the objective reality of the true and living God who encounters us. That is to say: while Wesley spoke of his heart being "strangely warmed" at his evangelical conversion, his faith in Christ was not based on his warmed heart: rather, his warmed heart was the consequence of his faith in Christ.

All of this is important since teaching about our own sanctification and talk of "religious experience" can too easily drop into a self-centered kind of subjectivism. But when a young man truly falls in love, it is not simply because he has been seeking for such a subjective event or "experience." Nor is it merely that he is undergoing certain emotional and volitional changes that are changing him subjectively. It is because he has met a person. *There* is the objective reality of his experience. He is not just experiencing some entity, or merely some subjective feeling or inner change called "love," but he is experiencing *her*. And he is never more rational, never more of a man, never more unselfish, never more devoted, never more lifted out of himself, never more full of life and energy, never more intelligent and sparkling and witty, never more at his best, than when he is with *her*! The real change in him is the result of the encounter with a person. *She* is the personal objective reality he experiences and the subjective change in him is the consequence.

his grammar!

47. Cf. Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, and T. F. Torrance, *Theological Science*, for a clarification of "subjectivity" and "objectivity" within the bi-polar relationship of subject to object.

48. Outler, *John Wesley*, 29.

49. For a recent study of this, see Joseph Cunningham, "Perceptible Inspiration."

Christian experience then is not merely the experiencing of theological abstractions called "salvation," or "sanctification," or "holiness." Nor is it merely the experiencing of inner subjective events or "crises," and certainly not of induced or self-induced crises. It only has objective validity, it is only real, when we experience or encounter the living God.

> My goal is God himself, not joy, nor peace,
> Nor even blessing, but himself, my God.[50]

The Lord God gives *himself* in grace to be known, to be experienced by us in his Word by his Spirit, to become, if you like, the Divine Object of our experience. God is the One we experience in "an experience," and it is only when we objectively experience *God*, that there is a genuine event, a genuine "crisis" with objective validity. Real inner and outer change, real sanctification, certainly requires self-knowledge and self-examination, but it occurs not when our eyes are inward in introspection but when we look *outward* and *upward* and our eyes are fixed on *him*. Real Christian experience is quite simply falling in love with God. And when we do that, we are never more rational, never more truly human, never more spiritually and intellectually awakened, never more at our best. It is objective experience of the real and living God that results in the subjective inner and outward change we call "sanctification."

Such experiential knowledge of God must not only be understood in a merely individualistic way. It is true, of course, that the tri-personal God enters into relationship with *each* of us as persons. We come to know with Paul, Augustine, Luther, and the Wesleys that Christ died "for me" (Gal 2:20):

> Died he *for me*, who caused his pain?
> *For me*? Who him to death pursued?
> Amazing love! How can it be
> That Thou, my God, shouldst die *for me*?[51]

And yet that *personal* encounter with God must not be understood *individualistically*, but within the fellowship of the people of God. Historically, the apostles experienced "God with us" in Jesus, the Incarnate Son, and ever and again as the story of the gospel is proclaimed and the Scriptures are opened and bread and wine are distributed, the people of God experience God's presence in the *corporate* worship of the church.

50. F. Brook, "My Goal is God Himself, not joy, nor peace," (Hymn 70 in *Redemption Hymnal*).

51. *Works* (BE) 7:322 (italics added).

"Reason" and "Experience" are thus not distinct factors in the shaping of Christian doctrine. The picture is much more unitary. When we experience the God who reveals himself to us in his Word by his Spirit, *that* is a fully rational event. We come to *know h*im. When we think about the God we know in Jesus and express our knowledge of him in words (also a rational act), *that* is theology. We do that together in the church and the result is church doctrine. When we formulate that doctrine in creeds and confessions and articles of faith and hand these on for the guidance of our children, *that* is church tradition.

There is thus one objective source of doctrine, God's own self-revelation, his Word. "Reason," "experience," and "tradition" are ways of speaking about the way we subjectively appropriate that revelation, personally and corporately, and express it. Christian doctrine is formed as the corporate church's rational reflection upon her experience of the living God who speaks to her in and through his Word. She expresses in her doctrine what she knows of God and his ways. That is why it is so important that our understanding of Christian sanctification should never be a separate doctrine, focused on ourselves. A doctrine of Christian sanctification can only be understood in the context of trinitarian doctrine. True Christian sanctification can only take place as the Holy Spirit indwells us, so focusing our attention not on ourselves, but on Christ, through whom alone we come to the Father and reflect his overwhelming, loving compassion.

e) Fourth Axiom: Trinitarian, Christocentric Shape of Christian Theology

The fourth and final theological axiom proceeds from this point. Since God's self-revelation takes place in his Word—by which we mean not only the written word of Scripture, but more fundamentally, the Word made flesh, our Lord Jesus Christ—then Christian theology is centered in him and built upon him. In short, this axiom is that Christian theology is christocentric. It is an organic whole in which the doctrines of Christ (Christology) and his atonement (soteriology) are central and the doctrine of God the Holy Trinity revealed in Christ provides the overall shape and contours.

This final axiom of method rejects two other ways of doing theology. The first is what is sometimes meant by "Systematic Theology," a kind of complete theological system of thought after the style of Origen or Augustine or Aquinas. Here a metaphysic or philosophy plays a determining

role, and a system of thought (Platonist in the case of Origen and Augustine, Aristotelian in the case of Aquinas) is developed to account in a comprehensive, all-embracing way for all reality.

With Origen, the Platonist worldview distorted the doctrine of God in strange ways later judged heretical. With Augustine and Aquinas, the central doctrines remained orthodox but were married to a philosophically-based Christian worldview. This resulted in a systematic theology that can be so all-embracing that it smothers the natural and human sciences in its embrace and is indistinguishable from a philosophy or metaphysic. What this fourth axiom requires instead is a *dogmatic theology*, articulating the core convictions of the Christian faith, centered as they are in Christ, after the style of theologians such as Irenaeus, or Athanasius, or Luther, or Calvin, or Barth. With each of them (although we may disagree with them at many points) the centrality of the classic dogmas of Trinity, incarnation, and atonement makes Christian theology an organic whole with a profound unity and coherence to which Christ himself is the key.

This implies the rejection also of a second style of theology also exemplified by Aquinas, the scholastic model first formulated in the classrooms of the Middle Ages. In this style, doctrines were strung out in distinct, separate articles or *foci*, like washing on a line, as R. P. C. Hanson expressed it.[52] Instead, we need to aim at a holistic theology where, rather than a series of distinct doctrines conceived of almost as separate compartments of truth, the emphasis is on *connections* rather than *distinctions*. Doctrines are seen to inter-connect, to flow into each other, not in an amorphous way, but in a holistic theology that is shaped rather like the ancient creeds, trinitarian in its general shape and christocentric in its focus.

Scholasticism was a great intellectual achievement of the Middle Ages, reaching its highest point in Aquinas, but it can deteriorate into a dead text-book theology, a rigid system, fossilized by a static Aristotelian logic which cannot cope with life and movement. Perhaps some Pietists and revivalists like to have such a safely dead and rigid theology so that they can take it for granted and dismiss it as irrelevantly academic and unimportant for the life of the church! Or perhaps they assume that that is the only shape theology can take. But a theology that is concerned with expressing our experiential, rational knowledge of the living God is living theology.

What then is the implication of this fourth axiom for Christian holiness? It is this: that the doctrine of the Christian life, including

52. Hanson, *Attractiveness*, 47.

sanctification, cannot be articulated in isolation as a separate doctrine. If it is, the danger is that it will become an individualistic, introverted, subjectivist, and spiritually self-centered quest. The sanctification of the Christian can only be understood in the context of the sanctifying of human relationships within the church, the people of God. And the sanctifying of human relationships among those who are drawn into the church can only be understood in turn by seeing that the fellowship enjoyed within the church is the mutual fellowship of the Father with the Son, which is the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Our understanding of Christian holiness finds its immediate context then in the third article of the creed, the doctrine of the Spirit, comprehending the doctrines of the church, the Christian believer, and the Last Things. But the Spirit leads us to Christ and speaks of him, and so the third article depends on the central article, that on Christ and his atonement. Consequently our doctrine of Christian holiness must begin there and find its foundation in him. But it is when we are "in Christ" that we can say, "Abba, Father," and so the doctrine of Christian holiness can only be understood within the context of the Holy Trinity.

It is to trace these inter-connections that we shall be concerned in this book. We shall look for the foundation of Christian sanctification in the atonement, and more profoundly in Christ himself, and then consider how what is his becomes ours through the work of the Spirit and in the context of the Holy Trinity. But before we attempt to do that, in the next four chapters we must consider first how the doctrine of Christian sanctification, or Christian "perfecting," is based in Holy Scripture; secondly how it has developed over the centuries from the earliest days of the church; thirdly how that tradition was expressed as part of the evangelical faith by John Wesley; and fourthly, how Wesley's doctrine may be re-expressed today.