WESLEY'S EPISTEMOLOGY

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To ask what John Wesley's epistemology is may seem ostentatious. Were not his concerns practical? Did he not say he was a man of one Book—*homo unius libri*? Did he not say he wanted to know one thing—the way to heaven?[1] Such isolated excerpts from his writings make any talk about his epistemological theory immediately suspect. The popular image of Wesley is that he was an evangelist who preached a theology of experience rather than a systematic theologian with metaphysical interests.

I do not wish to try to refute this image altogether, but I do think it ought to be adjusted to include the fact that Wesley did speak to metaphysical issues. And I especially think his concept of experience should be carefully defined.

A look at some of the titles of Wesley's writings show his metaphysical interests—"A Compendium of Logic," "The Case of Reason Impartially Considered," "The Imperfection of Human Knowledge," "Remarks upon Mr. Locke's 'Essay on Human Understanding,'" "An Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion," "Thoughts upon Necessity," "Thoughts upon Taste," and "Of the Gradual Improvement of Natural Philosophy." In his journals, there are many references to his having read most of the significant philosophers of his day—Voltaire, Locke, Malebranche, D'Alembert, Montesquieu, Hume, Reid.[2]

That Wesley valued the study of metaphysics is indicated in his diary of March 4, Wednesday, 1747: "This week I read over with some young men a Compendium of Rhetoric, and a System of Ethics. I see not, why a man of tolerable understanding may not learn in six months' time more of solid philosophy than is commonly learned at Oxford in four (perhaps seven) years."[3] (Incidentally, if this evaluation of the status of philosophical studies at Oxford seems a bit harsh, it should be remembered that Wesley had taught logic at Oxford and would be in a position to know.)[4]

What I propose to do is to extract from Wesley's writings four things that are fundamental to his epistemology—tradition, the senses, reason, and faith. This of course can be done only in a sketchy fashion within the space allotted. One word of caution. I do not mean to suggest Wesley articulated an epistemological theory as such. Nor should it be implied from my presentation that his critical remarks upon the various philosophical issues were intended for philosophical scholars.

I. Tradition

That Wesley treated the historical tradition of the Church (especially the ante-Nicene fathers) with high respect is well known. My remarks thus will not focus upon his actual use of the written tradition, but upon the problem of historical knowledge.

Wesley was living in "the age of philosophy par excellence," "the age of criticism."[5] Tradition was looked upon with skepticism; it no longer was authoritative. Everything was subjected to critical analysis. Truth had to be established at the bar of reason, not on the authority of any written tradition. Ernst Cassirer points out that it was "the eighteenth century which raised the central philosophical problem" of historical knowledge.[6] So Wesley was living in the age that ushered in what has come to be called "the rise of the modern historical consciousness."[7]

The rise of this philosophical critique of historical knowledge stems from Cartesian philosophy.[8] Descartes with his methodological skepticism had set up the criterion of self-certainty as the basis for all knowledge. Whatever was not clearly self-evident to reason was considered an inferior kind of knowledge. Thus, Descartes deprecated historical knowledge since it could only provide one with opinion.[9]

This historical skepticism was passed on to the eighteenth-century English deists of Wesley's time by way of Spinoza (1632-77),[10] the father of modern biblical criticism.[11] Spinoza with his pantheistic concept of God as pure being wanted to show that the Bible could not serve as the basis of a metaphysical theology. Since pure being is the source of absolute truth, this means finite being exists in a state of becoming and is thus relative. The philosopher must then transcend the temporal, finite level of being.

Spinoza believed the philosopher could do this since he has built within the structure of his reason the idea of ultimate reality.[12] This rationalistic presupposition that man can know absolute truth through the sheer exercise of thought alone could have only negative implications for the biblical claim to absolute validity, for its truth is contingent upon historically conditioned events.

Cassirer has pointed out that Spinoza's writings are the most unlikely place one would expect to find the rise of modern biblical criticism. Nevertheless, his critical analysis of the Bible stems from his intention to show that nothing historical could serve as the basis for absolute certainty, thus exposing the weakness of a historical revelation.[13]

The deists of Wesley's day were influenced by this historical agnosticism of Spinoza.[14] They were further influenced by Locke's empiricism in which Locke attempted to give a rational proof for God's existence cosmologically.[15] Thus, the deists looked upon the Bible with its historically conditioned truths as inferior to the absolute certainty of truth attainable through reason.

I have found no direct indication that Wesley was acquainted with Spinoza, though it is almost certain he was (at least through his reading of the deists and such Cartesian rationalists as Malebranche).[16]

It is at least evident that Wesley was well versed in the philosophical problem of historical knowledge. This is seen in his 79-page letter to the Rev.

Dr. Conyers Middleton, who had written in typical deistic fashion an essay entitled "A Free Inquiry."17 Middleton says the veracity of any historical document "depends on the joint credibility of the facts, and of the witnesses who attest them." He further says that "if the facts be incredible, no testimony can alter the nature of things."[18]

While Wesley subscribes to these premises, he disagrees with Middleton's thesis that "the credibility of witnesses depends on a variety of principles wholly concealed from us."[19] This smacked too much of an epistemological subjectivism which undercut the reliability of the biblical witness. Wesley agrees that "the credibility of facts lies open to the trial of our reason and senses," but he also insists that there is a rational basis for accepting the credibility of a witness."

This tension between the "credibility of the facts" and the "credibility of the witnesses" is a fundamental problem of the eighteenth-century mind. David Hume insisted that, no matter how honest and reliable a witness may be, nothing can alter the fact that miracles never happened.[21] Hume's denial of miracles occasioned Wesley's comment against "David Hume's insolent book."[22]

It was Ephraim Lessing (1729-81) who gave the classical theological formulation of this problem of faith and history, which was later picked up by Kierkegaard[23] and passed on to Barth,[24] Tillich,[25] and Bultmann.[26] Lessing writes: "We all believe that an Alexander lived who in a short time conquered almost all Asia. But who, on the basis of this belief, would risk anything of great, permanent worth, the loss of which would be irreparable?" He answers by saying: "Certainly not I," for "it might still be possible that the story was founded on a mere poem of Choerilus."[27] He concludes: "Accidental truths of history can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason."[28] It is this divorce between reason and history which "is the ugly, broad ditch which I cannot get across, however often and however earnestly I have tried to make the leap."[29]

It is this attitude of a distrust in the historical that Wesley is addressing himself to in his letter to Middleton. Middleton believes God's existence can be established rationally on cosmological grounds and thus has priority over the historical witness of the Holy Scriptures. Though Wesley had an appreciation for traditional evidences for theism,[30] his answer to this is a resounding NO.

To deprecate the historical on the grounds that there are no sure principles one can use to establish the integrity of a witness is to undermine faith. Wesley deplored this historical skepticism. If there are no objective principles by which one can judge the reliability of a witness, "then it is plain, all the history of the Bible is utterly precarious and uncertain; then I may indeed presume, but cannot certainly know, that Jesus of Nazareth ever was born; much less that he healed the sick, and raised either Lazarus or himself from the dead."[31]

The implications of this historical skepticism extend further to the study of history in general.

> If this be as you assert . . . then farewell the credit of all history.

> Sir, this is not the cant of zealots; You must not escape so: It is plain, sober reason. If the credibility of witnesses, of all witnesses, (for you make no distinction,) depends, as you peremptorily affirm, on a variety of principles wholly concealed from us, and, consequently, though it may be presumed in many cases, yet can be certainly known in none; then it is plain, all history, sacred or profane, is utterly precarious and uncertain. Then I may indeed presume, but I cannot certainly know, that Julius Caesar was killed in the Senate-house. . . . Now, let any man of common understanding judge, whether this objection has any sense in it, or no.[32]

It is thus apparent Wesley would have been no Kierkegaardian historical skeptic. He would not have subscribed to the idea of a nonhistorical moment of revelation which somehow eludes the historian. To be sure, Wesley did not believe the truths of the Bible could be sustained apart from faith, for it is faith that enables one to "judge truly" and "reason justly."[33] One who has thus entered this deeper experience of faith can see with his "reason" that faith's historical point of departure is solidly established.

II. The Senses

A second aspect of Wesley's epistemology is sense experience. The metaphysical shaping of Wesley's concept of experience comes mainly from Locke, who rejected Cartesian rationalism with its emphasis upon innate ideas and a priori knowledge:

Wesley was well versed in this debate between empiricism and rationalism.[34] He likewise rejected the notion of innate ideas: "For many ages it has been allowed by sensible men*, Nihil est in intellectu quod non fuit prius in sensu*: That is, 'There is nothing in the understanding which was not first perceived by some of the senses.' All the knowledge which we naturally have is originally derived from our sense."[35]

The presupposition of this realism is that there is an ontological distinction between what is "out there" and my idea of it. However, Locke insisted that our knowledge is restricted to ideas which in no way tell us what reality is itself.[36] This means our ideas are reduced to sense data and do not extend to reality itself.

Wesley in the name of "common sense" rejected this idea of a wedge between our experience and reality.[37] This metaphysical agnosticism—that there is an unknowable material substance (an "I-know-not-what)[38] behind our experience—was no more acceptable to Wesley than the historical agnosticism of the deists. For Wesley, experience merges with reality without their ontological distinction being thereby dissolved. Truth is more than a formulation of ideas, but rather it is an active involvement of the whole person in reality itself.

III. Reason

Reason is a third aspect of Wesley's epistemology. He defines reason as an intellectual activity rather than a faculty of innate ideas. In this respect,

Wesley was in accord with the eighteenth-century mind. Whereas the great metaphysical systems of the seventeenth century—Descartes, Malebranche, Spinoza, Leibniz—saw reason to be the realm of eternal truths held in common by the human and the divine mind, the eighteenth-century thinkers looked upon reason as an intellectual activity.[39]

Wesley cautioned against two extremes—overvaluing and undervaluing the role of reason for faith. The rejection of reason leads to a blind enthusiasm in which one will mistake his own imagination for the truth of God.[40] Wesley says:

> Never more declaim in that wild, loose, ranting manner, against this precious gift of God. Acknowledge "the candle of the Lord," which he hath fixed in our souls for excellent purposes. You see how many admirable ends it answers, were it only in the things of this life: Of what unspeakable use is even a moderate share of reason in all our worldly employments, from the lowest and meanest offices of life, through all the intermediate branches of business; till we ascend to those that are of the highest importance and the greatest difficulty! When therefore you despise or depreciate reason, you must not imagine you are doing God service: Least of all, are you promoting the cause of God when you are endeavouring to exclude reason out of religion. . . . You see it directs us in every point both of faith and practice.[41]

Wesley further says that reason "duly performed, is the highest exercise of our understanding."[42] He further speaks out against the sincere but misguided attitude that thinks the study of the Bible alone is of importance. He calls this "rank enthusiasm."[43] Preaching is more than a mere repetition of Bible verses. "If you need no book but the Bible, you are got above St. Paul." He thus counsels his preachers who have "no taste of reading" to either "contract a taste for it by use," or to leave the ministry and "return to your trade."[44] He further advises learning to read metaphysics "with ease and pleasure, as well as profit."[45] The Cartesian rationalist, Malebranche, and the empiricist, Locke, are recommended as giving one a good introduction to metaphysics.[46]

On the other hand, there is the extreme of rationalism which prejudices men against the "oracles" of the Holy Scriptures.[47] In his own way, Wesley called for a "Critique of Pure Reason." He sought for a happy medium between these two extremes. He believed Locke in particular was moving in the right direction, though he fell short of the ideal of relating reason to faith. Thus Wesley says, "I would gladly endeavour in some degree to supply this grand defect" of Locke's.[48]

He gives to reason a twofold function. It is a reliable guide to the everyday affairs of life, and it "can do exceeding much, both with regard to the foundation of it [faith], and the superstructure."[49] Of the second aspect of reason's function, Wesley writes:

> The foundation of true religion stands upon the oracles of God. It is built upon the Prophets and Apostles, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner-stone. Now, of what excellent use is reason, if we would either understand ourselves, or explain to others, those

> living oracles! And how is it possible without it to understand the essential truths contained there? a beautiful summary of which we have in that which is called the Apostles' Creed. Is it not reason (assisted by the Holy Ghost) which enables us to understand what the Holy Scriptures declare concerning the being and attributes of God?—concerning his eternity and immensity; his power, wisdom, and holiness?[50]

IV. Faith

The key to Wesley's epistemology is faith. Here is where all the great metaphysical problems are resolved. The philosophers are perplexed by such problems as: What is reality? Can reality be known? Is reality merely matter or merely mind? Is matter intelligible to the mind? If so, how can two realities so different interact? What is the self? Where is it located? Is the self activitated by freedom or necessity? Is nature governed by cause and effect? If so, what happens to the concept of God? Further, doesn't the Newtonian law of gravitation make God an irrelevant notion, since He is no longer metaphysically needed to account for motion?

Wesley dealt with each of these questions. For him, there is no doubt that matter is real and that it is intelligible to the mind. He makes no apology for this commonsense view of reality.[51] How body and mind interact, whether through the pineal glands[52] as Descartes believed or not, is in the final analysis beyond our comprehension: "After all our researches, we can only say, 'I am fearfully and wonderfully made!'"[53]

That the self, the world, and God have existence is a matter of speculation in philosophy. It may be that the untutored mind may have difficulty in answering the "finely woven schemes"[54] of the philosophers with their perplexing questions which militate against a commonsense view of the world, the self, and freedom. But the "man of common understanding" intuitively knows that unless his commonsense view is tenable we "must necessarily sink into universal scepticism."[55] As it is well known, it is just this skepticism Hume logically drew from Locke's metaphysical agnosticism.

But Wesley did not have to rely on common sense alone to support his belief in the reality of the self, the world, and God, for these realities are made known in faith. "In particular, faith is an evidence to me of the existence of that unseen thing, my own soul. Without this I should be in utter uncertainty concerning it."[56] Indeed Wesley concludes that, apart from faith, knowledge is an uncertainty.

> The short of the matter is this: Those who will not believe anything but what they can comprehend, must not believe that there is a sun in the firmament; that there is light shining around them; that there is air, though it encompasses them on every side; that there is an earth, though they stand upon it. They must not believe that they have a soul; no, nor that they have a body.[57]

So far as the scientific laws of cause and effect and gravitation are concerned, they are only "vulgar [common] expressions";[58] i.e., they are scientific descriptions and not philosophical explanations.[59]

Likewise, the Incarnation is no more of a metaphysical problem than is

physical motion or the interaction of body and mind. How the "Word was made flesh" defies human comprehension, but such a rational demand is not made upon the believer. Wesley writes: "As to the manner how he was made flesh, wherein the mystery lies, I know nothing about it; I believe nothing about it: It is no more the object of my faith, than it is of my understanding."[60]

Thus, it is in faith that the great metaphysical problems are resolved—they all have their explanation in the reality of God. Wesley points out that "this circumstance [that God exists] the Doctor [Hume] had forgot." But so have "almost the whole tribe of modern philosophers. They do not at all take God into their account; they can do their whole business without him. But in truth this their wisdom is their folly; for no system, either of morality or philosophy, can be complete, unless God be kept in view, from the very beginning to the end."[61]

It can thus be seen that, for Wesley, faith is a way of knowing. He draws the distinction between faith in general and justifying faith,[62] which corresponds to the Reformers' distinction between faith as insight (*notitia*) and faith as trust (*fiducia*).

To say that faith is a way of knowing is to say that "faith is sight."[63] As the senses are the guide to the truth of things physical, so faith gives us insight into the invisible world. God thus does not leave man enclosed within the natural world of sense experience: "He hath appointed faith to supply the defect of sense; to take us up where the sense sets us down, and help us over the great gulf."[64]

This does not mean, however, the truths of faith are found by looking inward to one's religious consciousness. This is the fallacy of mysticism: "the not being guided by the written word."[65] In "the Mystic writers," Wesley says, "you will find as many religions as books; and for this plain reason, each of them makes his own experience the standard of religion."[66]

The truths which faith sees are contained in the written Word of God.[67] Even as the senses have as the basis of their knowledge the physical world, so faith has as the basis of its knowledge the Bible. This means faith does not create its own knowledge. Nor does faith look "inward" to any religious consciousness to discover what is valid doctrine; nor does one have recourse to a set of innate ideas about God. Rather, faith is a way of coming to see the things of God in the Holy Scriptures. Likewise, the senses do not create their knowledge, but are directed "outward" to see the things in the world of nature. (Philosophically, this realism is fundamentally opposed to the transcendental idealism of Kant.)

Thus, Wesley insists that "experience is sufficient to confirm a doctrine which is grounded on Scripture"; but on the other hand, "experience is not sufficient to prove a doctrine which is not founded on Scripture."[68]

As already noted, reason's activity is to interpret the "given" of biblical revelation. Reason, however, can no more "pick and choose" from the "given" of the Bible what it considers authentic truth than it can arbitrarily select from the material furnished to it by the senses concerning the world of nature. The truths of faith are derived thus from the Scriptures, which are

inspired of God, which for Wesley means that "all Scripture is infallibly true."[69]

Wesley's "Critique of Reason" brings one thus to see that reason's task is to interpret reality as it is encountered directly through the senses or faith. That reason's task is to interpret explains why Wesley says that the study of logic is of next importance to the study of the Bible.[70] Wesley is not being a "scholastic" when he says this. In this respect, he criticizes the scholastics for their "vain speculations" and especially praises Francis Bacon for reinstating the inductive method." He knows that the profundity of divine truth and the wealth of human experience cannot be squeezed into any logical system. He needs no philosophy to support his theology—whether it be Locke's or Aristotle's. He gladly uses from them what enhances understanding, but the truths of God's Word must be expressed, in the final analysis, biblically both in content and in terminology.[72]

That Wesley stressed a practical theology of experience instead of a systematic theology of doctrine is said to have prepared the way for the experience-oriented theology of Schleiermacher, implying that Wesley was some kind of John-the-Baptist forerunner.[73] I think this judgment to be wrong, for Schleiermacher's concept of experience is different from Wesley's.

Schleiermacher's theology of experience is an attempt to get around the theological agnosticism of Kant's transcendental idealism in which reality is dichotomized into noumena and phenomena. Man, according to Kant, can never know the noumenal realities of the self, the world, or God; rather, man's knowledge is restricted to sense experience alone. While recognizing the validity of the ideas of the self, the world, and God, Kant says we cannot know their realities.[74] Man thus is the arbiter of what he does know, and for Kant that means truth is subjective knowledge, not an objective knowledge of what really is.[75]

In order to get around this metaphysical agnosticism, Schleiermacher set up another knowing capacity in man which he called the *das Gefüh!* That is, all theological assertions are derived from one's religious consciousness.[76] This pantheistic idea of experience in which the individual himself participates existentially in the being of God[77] has nothing in common with Wesley's concept of experience.

For Wesley, subjective experience is an experience of something which comes to one from "the outside" and not something derived subjectively from "the inside" (as in transcendental idealism). This postulate of an antecedent reality which is intelligible to the mind is fundamental to Wesley's world view. Otherwise, if Locke's metaphysical agnosticism or Hume's skepticism is valid, then Wesley said one will be forced to admit God is the "Father of lies" who has deceived man into believing as true something that is false.[78]

In accord with Wesley's commonsense world view, one can say, for example, that my experience of this paper is possible because this piece of paper imposes its own reality upon me and its reality is not contingent upon my mere perception of it. To be sure, my experience of this paper is subjective; it is I who experience it. But I experience it because its reality

imposes itself upon me from "the outside." Thus, my subjective experience is at the same time a knowledge of objective reality.

Likewise, the believer's experience of God is subjective, not because God is the depth of his being in a pantheistic sense. That is, though he experiences God, it is not because existentially he participates in the being of God; nor is it because of any innate idea. Rather, his experience of God is subjective because in the very depth of his being he is encountered by One who is other than he, One who is other than the world. In this way, the believer's experience of God is possible because God comes to him from "the outside."

It can be seen, then, that Wesley's idea of experience is objective in that reality (whether the world or God) is intelligible to the mind because God as Creator has so constituted man that he can know the truth of what is. It is this postulate of an antecedent reality which is intelligible to the mind that is denied by Kant's transcendental idealism.

It is this man-centered experience of Schleiermacher (and Ritschlian theology which presupposes the Kantian model of truth)[79] that provoked the NO! of Barth in which he could see only the destruction of Protestant theology.[80] The early Barth, in order to preserve the transcendence of God, overreacted to his liberal background and spoke of God as "wholly other." Kant's epistemology lurks in the background to Barth's *Epistle to the Romans*, in which God is thought of as "permanently transcending time.'[81] This accords with Kant's deistic idea, but Barth was not satisfied with anything less than the self-revelation of God, which is not possible within Kant's epistemology.

Thus, Barth utilized the Kierkegaardian concept of the nonhistorical moment which breaks into the world without becoming a part of world history; this was Barth's way out of the Kantian agnosticism.[82] Historical revelation was nonetheless jeopardized by this existentialist narrowing down of truth. Barth realized this, and thus retracted his position in *Romans*.[83] But in my judgment, Barth never got away from the joint influences of Kant and Kierkegaard with their emphasis upon God's "infinite qualitative" distance from man. The result is that Barth never freed himself from a skeptical attitude toward historical knowledge.

I have digressed at this point to indicate that our Wesleyan evangelical heritage should, it seems to me, extend back to the Reformers by way of Wesley, not neoorthodoxy. Barth had to retrace his way back to the Reformers by trying to free himself from the clutches of German idealism with its anthropocentric concept of experience. In so doing, in my judgment, he fell into some unhealthy emphases, though this is not to indicate a lack of appreciation for his most impressive *Church Dogmatics*.

Conclusion

One concluding observation. Corresponding to its confidence in reason, the eighteenth-century mind believed in the perfectibility of man. This can be seen in Locke's utilitarian ethic in which he defined the greatest good as happiness which is obeying the will of God as seen in natural law.[84]

Wesley did not share this ethical optimism of moral philosophy: "Have we any true knowledge of what is good? That is not the result of our natural understanding."[85] Wesley complains that the philosophers "look upon it [reason] as the all-sufficient director of all the children of men; able, by its native light, to guide them into all truth, and lead them into all virtue."[86] For Wesley, truth is to be had, not according to our natural understanding, but in faith.

Herein lies the epistemological significance of Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfection, which he defines as "casting down everything that exalts itself against the knowledge of God" and "bringing into captivity every thought" in obedience to Christ.[87] While the philosophers believed in the perfectibility of man based on a life of reason, Wesley believed in a perfection of love available to any man who comes into the experience of faith.

For Wesley, man's greatest good is thus to be realized in the knowledge of God. Since knowledge is total involvement with reality, this means that to know God is to love God.88 It can be seen, then, that Wesley's quest for knowledge-to know the way to heaven-is an ethical quest for holiness, for truth is experienced through the believer's participation in divine love. It is this theistic concept of truth and love that provides the answer to a metaphysical agnosticism concerning the ideas of the self, the world, and God.

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3. *Ibid*., 2:48.

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28. *Ibid*., p. 53.

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30. *Works*, 10:76.

31. *Ibid*., 10:3.

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33. *Ibid*., 8:13.

34. *Ibid*., 6:339; 8:13; 13:445; *et passim.*

35. *Ibid*., 7:231.

36. *Ibid*., 13:462-63; cf. *The Works of John Locke* (London, 1823, reprinted by Scientia Verlag Aalen, Germany, 1963), 2:1-3, 330.

37. *Works*, 13:460-62; 10:470-71.

38. *Ibid*., 13:462.

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40. *Works*, 6:351.

41. *Ibid*., 6:359-60.

42. *Ibid*., 6:360.

43. *Ibid*., 8:315

44. *Ibid.*

45. *Ibid*., 10:492.

46. *Ibid*., 12:262.

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49. *Ibid*., 6:354.

50. *Ibid.*

51. *Ibid*., 6:343, 202-3.

52. *Ibid*., 13:497

53. *Ibid*., 13:495.

54. *Ibid*., 10:463.

55. *Ibid*., 10:472; *et passim.*

56. *Ibid*., 7:232.

57. *Ibid*., 6:204.

58. *Ibid*., 6:427.

59. *Ibid*., 6:427-28; 13:487.

60. *Ibid*., 6:204.

61. *Ibid*., 10:473.

62. *Ibid*., 8:48.

63. *Ibid*., 13:20.

64. *Ibid*., 7:232.

65. *Ibid*., 14:277.

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67. *Ibid*., 13:487.

68. *Ibid*., 5:129, 133.

69. *Ibid*., 5:193.

70. *Ibid*., 10:483.

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72. *Ibid*., 5:1-6.

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74. Cf. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1929), pp. 32, 300f., 82, 182, 147, 323; also cf. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, trans. E. S. Haldane (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., 1892), 3:427, who rejects this subjectivism.

75. This is why Kant calls his philosophy a "transcendental idealism," since man can only know that something lies at the basis of his experience, but he cannot know what that something is. If man knew what that something is that lies at the basis of his experience, then he would have a transcendent knowledge of reality, not a transcendental idea of reality. *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, with an introduction by Lewis White Black (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1950), pp. 41, 60f.

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79. Barth, *Protestant Thought*, trans. Brian Cozens (New York: Harper and Row, 1959), p. 190; Tillich, Perspectives ... , pp. 216-17, 230.

80. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G. T. Thomson (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1963), 1:i, x.

81. *Ibid*., 1:2, 50; cf. Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. E. C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University, 1933), pp. 367, 386, 432, 468.

82. Barth, "A Thank You and a Bow: Kierkegaard's Reveille," *Canadian Journal of Theology* 11:5, 7.

83. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1:2, 50; cf. also *Church Dogmatics*, 1:i, ix-x.

84. Locke, *Essays on the Law of Nature*, ed. W. Von Leyden (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 199.

85. *Works*, 8:106.

86. *Ibid*., 6:351.

87. *Ibid*., 8:22.

88. *Ibid*., 8:47.

SEMANTICS AND HOLINESS:
A Study in Holiness-Texts' Functions

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My topic involves our language statements which deal with the subject of Christian holiness. By "our language statements" I refer both to the New Testament writers and our Wesleyan holiness emphasis. To treat this subject from the perspective of semantics is but to use another methodological approach to our perennial task of interpreting the biblical text.

Holiness is both a subject and an experience, and with respect to both of these the New Testament tradition has a lot to say. Semantics helps us to see how the saying was done, the focus being upon the forms and logic of the language system used and how these functioned to express and provide meaning.

We are familiar with the syntactical approach to biblical interpretation, an approach in which we use grammars and lexicons as our tools to dig out meanings. The science of semantics offers an additional approach and another useful set of tools by which to interpret the texts.

Christian holiness is an experience of depth and ultimacy. The New Testament writers have used a dynamic religious language system in writing about their own experience of holiness; and the statements, expressions, and prescriptions used in their language system vividly reflect the experiential stance, thought-categories, and intentions of these writers with reference to that experience. When the sentence units within their language system are analyzed in terms of functions to be served, then the basic meanings within what they wrote tend to become quite clear.

Semantics has to do with this concern for clarity and understood meaning. The interrogation of sentence forms and the isolation and interpretation of sentence functions help us to discern meaning. This paper is based upon that method of approach in interpreting the function of New Testament holiness-texts.

I

The science of semantics is of a comparatively recent origin, but sufficient growth and development have occurred to make it a mature and valuable member within the family of sciences. Simply put, the science of seman-

tics deals with the logic of language and explores the conditions under which language statements become meaningful. The work of semantics is language analysis, the exploration and classifying of sentence forms and functions, and testing the empirical basis for what is said and meant.[1]

There are many determinants at work in the use of a language: assumptions, attitudes, culture, experiences, perceptions, etc. When these determinants are considered for what they are, it is possible to see the way that they influence what is said, and to see as well how they condition what is meant. The use of "religious language" is also deeply influenced and conditioned by many determinants, the foremost being the religious situation or experience within which the speaking person is based or to which he stands related.

The new concern among philosophers about language analysis called the attention of the world to the "meaning" and "significance" of all language uses. The new emphasis was upon a more precise "placing" of words and phrases to insure a more precise function toward clear meanings. "Religious language" has also been explored and examined against the new criteria. Many philosophers (logical positivists and others) who tested religious language for its limits and functions differed in their final assessments of its validity and value, but the encounter has not been without value to the Church.[2]

Some philosophers who were more congenial to the Christian faith recognized in the new philosophical concern an important tool by which to render theological statements more precise; they also saw its value for studying the logic at work within the unique religious statements within the Bible. At the present time there are many studies available which deal with religious language as a specialized category, and essential treatments have been offered of the assumptions, terminology, logic, locus, essence, functions, and truthfulness (empirical placing) of such a language system.3 This new and prolonged look into the nature and function of religious language has been shared by a sizable number of investigators, including ethnologists, anthropologists, linguists, theologians, historians of religion, and even sociologists."

II

I have referred to the dynamic religious language system of the New Testament writers, and I somewhat passingly categorized their treatment of Christian holiness under three function-headings: "statements," "expressions," and "prescriptions." It is in order now to treat these designations in more detail because this is crucial to the purpose of the paper.

Semanticists have pointed out that in uttering a sentence in our everyday use of language we do one or more of four things: (1) We make a *statement*—analytical terminology for asserting or affirming some fact; (2) We make an *expression*, an utterance in which emotion and impulse play a considerable role; (3) We speak *prescriptives*, directing that something should be done; (4) We utter *performatives*, saying something that creates a new state of affairs, like making a promise. (The very speaking of the promise is the

act of creating the new situation, which is to say that a performative is a spoken action.) Meaning is intended through the use of any and all of these ways of speaking; performatives, however, are of a more critical nature since they have to do with speech-action in which meaning, emotion, and effect all go along hand in hand.[5]

These categories of sentence-function provide us with an interesting measure for testing the function level of New Testament holiness-texts.[6] Although I am drawing upon these descriptive categories from the current perspective of semantics, it should be mentioned, however, that the study of sentences by function-level and intention is not a new effort at all. Aristotle categorized sentences in this way long, long ago in his *Poetics*,[7] although he outlined five categories rather than four. However ancient the categorizing might be, there is an evident history of its influence upon later cultures.[8] With the current help we have for utilizing language theories and refining language uses, we have a meaningful tool for our research into the intended meanings of the New Testament message. We also possess a relevant method to help us pass on those meanings in our preaching, teaching, and theological work.

III

I am impressed by the number and functional forcefulness of the many New Testament holiness-texts. In terms of sentence-functions, the "statements" and "prescriptives" are the most plentiful. This is characteristic not only of the holiness-texts but of other teaching and hortatory themes, particularly in the Epistles, since these materials were addressed to evoke within readers a reaction-response of faith and commitment. The holiness-texts are being highlighted here, however, since the whole issue of the kerygma and the experience of salvation are toward righteousness and the fulfillment of the will of God in the holiness of obedient love.

It is instructive to watch the massive dependence of the writers upon the function of prescriptives in aiding this end; their usage of the imperative keeps us mindful of how the imperative and the indicative relate in the holiness experience.[9] There are many implications to be seen in this epistolary constant for developing a theological ethic of holiness, as well as for a constructive psychology of Christian experience of holiness.[10]

As a basic illustration of how plentiful the "statements" and "prescriptives" are within holiness-texts, consider the following instances drawn only from sentences using words based on the root *HAG*." Observe the sentence-functions with care.

1. Beginning with the 27 appearances of *hagiazō* (meaning: to sanctify, consecrate, make holy), 4 are not applicable to our concern here (Matt. 6:9; 23:17, 19; Luke 11:2); 9 are *statements* (1 Cor. 6:11; 7:14; Eph. 5:26; 1 Tim. 4:5; 2 Tim. 2:21; Heb. 2:11; 9:13; 10:14; 13:12); 4 are *expressions* (John 17:17; Rom. 15:16; 1 Cor. 1:2; 1 Thess. 5:23); 6 are of a mixed character, showing either a double function as *statement-expression* (John 10:36; 17:19; Acts 20:32; Heb. 10:10, 29), or *statement-prescription* (Acts 26:18); while 2 are