**A. Wesley’s Non-literal Literalism by Rem Edwards**

Wesley was not literally a biblical literalist. Randy L. Maddox suggests that

Wesley was a biblical literalist—as long as the language was Hebrew or Greek, and

one is an expert in both; but he was not a modern biblical inerrantist, because God

did not directly dictate everything in the Bible. Even for the inerrantist, everything

has to be interpreted within the frame work of certain fundamental doctrinal assumptions

that can be used to correct errors.115 However, these are significant qualifications.

Wesley’s own “stated rule in interpreting Scripture,” was “never to depart

from the plain, literal sense, unless it implies an absurdity.”116 As he first expressed

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this rule, “This is true, if the literal sense of these Scriptures were absurd, and

apparently contrary to reason, then we should be obliged not to interpret them

according to the letter, but to look out for a looser meaning.”117

Ah! “Unless it implies an absurdity!” Every self-professed biblical literalist

requires such an escape clause! But this crack opens a chasm! For Wesley and for

us, it opens doors to the very latest and best in biblical scholarship, the natural

sciences, the social sciences, philosophical theology, and textual hermeneutics, as

the next few paragraphs will explain. Of course, there is much disagreement about

what counts as the “very latest and best”! More importantly, it opens the door to

Wesley’s values-based hermeneutics of love, to a principle of interpretation

grounded in love, in intrinsic values and evaluations. Consider now a few instances

where Wesley explicitly repudiated literalism, always presumably on the grounds

of some sort of absurdity.

Wesley was not consistently a literalist, even if usually so, or even if he said so.

He took the Bible literally when and only when nothing unloving or absurd was

involved, only when he had no good reason to be suspicious, but he often identified

absurdities, and he did not hesitate to say so. He frequently told his hearers and

readers not to take literally what the Bible says. Here are a few good examples.

1. He said that money is not literally the sole root of *all* evil because “There are

a thousand other roots of evil in the world, as sad experience daily shows.”118

2. He said that in the Lord’s Supper, “This is my body” is “not to be taken literally,”

as in the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, because what looks and

tastes like bread, and is also said to be bread, really is just bread.119

3. He said that the “fear and trembling” cited by St. Paul “cannot be understood

literally” because our master does not want us “to stand trembling and quaking

before him.”120

4. I. Chronicles 16:30 denies that the earth moves, but Copernican Wesley knew

that it did. Commenting on astronomy and “those scriptural expressions which seem

to contradict the earth’s motion,” Wesley wrote, “This general answer may be made

to them all, that, the scriptures were never intended to instruct us in philosophy, or

astronomy; and therefore, on those subjects, expressions are not always to be taken

in the literal sense, but for the most part, as accommodated to the common apprehension

of mankind.”121 This qualification is as highly significant for us today as it

was for those in Wesley’s day. It gives Christians access to the very best of today’s

natural sciences and philosophies, though none of these speak with one voice. What

Wesley called “philosophy” included “natural philosophy,” which today is called

“natural science.” Wesley thus authorized us to do for our own Darwinian age what

he did for his own Copernican/Newtonian age (even if this means giving up a literal

Adam and Eve and the original perfection of all creation).

5. In discussing “the books were opened” and God’s judging people by what is

written in them during the last day of judgment (Revelation 20:12), Wesley called

this “a figurative expression, plainly referring to the manner of proceeding among

men.”122 He added that the judgment “day of the Lord” will probably take several

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thousand years, (not literally one day), because there will be so many people to be

judged.123 Note the temporalism here attributed literally to God!

6. He may have been on the wrong track with this one, but since he subscribed

to the classical “*totum simul*” theory of God’s eternity—all time all at once—he

insisted that all biblical and theological language with temporal overtones like

foreknowledge, afterknowledge, making plans, having purposes ordered and expressed

in time, interacting with people as they exist in time and history, changing

his mind in light of positive human responses (as in the book of Jonah), etc., only

speaks “after the manner of men,”124 and is thus a mere “condescension to our weakness.”

He asked rhetorically, “But can we possibly imagine that these expressions

are to be taken literally?”125 Regrettably, his answer was negative. With that stroke,

he dismissed almost everything that the Bible says about God! Temporalistic Theologians

do not dismiss such things; they *can* imagine temporalistic language about

God taken literally. What counts as an “absurdity” always depends on the presuppositions

we bring with us to the hermeneutic process, and on how defensible or

intelligible they are. Temporalistic Thinkers insist that we should *not* classify biblical

affirmations of God’s temporality as totally misleading myths and metaphors.

Wesley’s metaphysical presuppositions about God’s eternity were much more

Greek than Biblical, but his values, though selective, were mostly biblical, highly

plausible, and relevant to our values today.

7. Wesley presupposed that God is a disembodied or incorporeal spirit having

no body or spatial or temporal properties, so when interpreting the story of God’s

showing only his back-side to Moses in Exodus 33:22–23, Wesley said that “hand,”

“face,” and “back-side” were being expressed only “after the manner of men.”126

More generally, “The words, figuratively transferred from one thing to another, do

not agree with the things to which they are transferred, in...their literal sense. So

hands and eyes, when applied to God, are not spoke in any part of their literal signification.”

127 Wesley did not say so, but this also applies to God’s literal masculinity

or femininity. Wesley did not get into that!

8. Wesley heavily and repeatedly emphasized being “born again,” but he explicitly

admitted that this must be construed analogically and not literally. He even

thought that Jesus was a non-literalist who recognized this himself! How can people

be “born again”? To this, Jesus answered, Wesley explained, that “They cannot be

literally. ‘A man’ cannot ‘enter a second time into his mother’s womb, and be born’.

But they may, spiritually. A man may be ‘born from above’, ‘born of God’, ‘born

of the Spirit’—in a manner which bears a very near analogy to the natural birth.”128

9. Consider next what Wesley said about the claim made in Malachi 1:2–3 and

Romans 9:13 that God loved Jacob but hated Esau.

The assertors of this doctrine [predestination] interpret that text of Scripture, ‘Jacob

have I loved, but Esau have I hated,’ as implying that God in a literal sense hated

Esau and all the reprobated from eternity. Now what can possibly be a more flat

contradiction than this, not only to the whole scope and tenor of Scripture, but also

to all those particular texts which expressly declare, ‘God is love’?129

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Despite its very obvious meaning, Wesley absolutely refused to accept this text at

face value when taken literally. So, to generalize Wesley’s values-based objection

to biblical absurdities, *no Biblical text is literally true if it is incompatible with*

*God’s love, justice, and mercy*. That would be the ultimate absurdity! Wesley’s

claim, “All Scripture is infallibly true,”130 must be understood in this light, that is,

with this qualification: as long as it is not absurd and unconscionable, as long as it

is coherent, morally good, and loving.

10. Wesley definitely thought that all Scriptures incompatible with God’s love,

justice, and mercy (e.g., the predestination passages) were just plain wrong because

they are unconscionable. Expressed more softly, less harshly, they were just plain

non-literal. Of course, this too is a matter of interpretation, as Wesley explicitly

acknowledged when he said that predestination is “grounded on such an interpretation

of texts...as flatly contradicts all the other texts...,” especially “all those particular

texts which expressly declare, ‘God is love’.”131 But that is just the problem with

literalism and inerrantism; interpretations are human, they are selective, and *the*

*selections are inevitably made on the basis of the presuppositions, including the*

*value-orientations and priorities, of the interpreters*. This is not less true simply

because Wesley’s values were correct, and because non-loving and contrary-toloving

values would be both spiritually and axiologically absurd.

Thus, Wesley often told people explicitly not to take unloving biblical texts

literally. His sermon on “Free Grace,” preached to combat George Whitefield’s

Calvinistic doctrine of predestination, is the crucial one that refers everything to

love as the ultimate biblical and Christian principle of valuation and interpretation.

Wesley’s love criterion functioned as his ultimate principle of biblical hermeneutics.

We can formulate this as: No matter what the Bible says explicitly and/or

literally, if it is unloving, unjust, or unmerciful, we should just not believe it, i.e.,

not take it literally! We should “look for a looser meaning.” Wesley valued reason,

conscience, love, justice, and mercy far more than biblical literalism, and far more

than inscrutable divine “sovereignty” or power. Calvinists most value inscrutable

divine sovereignty. Which do you value most?

In many other instances, Wesley explicitly identified scriptural language as

“figurative,” “analogical,” or written “after the manner of men,” and advised against

taking the Bible literally,132 but the ten examples given thus far well illustrate the

point.