



## PART I

My purpose is to recommend classic Methodist literature that may not be known. Mainline Methodism does not appreciate these works because they hold to an evolutionary view of doctrine. For them, newer is better because it reflects all the current theologically correct positions. And evangelicals outside the mainline Methodist institution tend to disregard classic Methodist literature because they assume it is liberal, like modern Methodism.

It is my hope that we can discover the rich, biblical-based theology of early Methodism and appropriate its dynamic for our growth. I would like to see Foundry Press and Bookstore become a center where such material may be found and even reprinted. I also can envision this commentary on Methodist literature to serve as a Christmas list in which congregations might invest in their pastor.

The obvious starting point is the writings of John Wesley. It may come as a surprise to learn that the Articles of Religion, Wesley's Standard Sermons, and his Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament are all authoritative statements of doctrine in the United Methodist Church. This was reaffirmed as recently as the 1988 General Conference. Of course, the unfolding tragedy is that the UMC is at the point of splitting because its bishops refuse to enforce Methodist doctrine and practice.

Every Bible-believing Methodist

# Vic's Pics

## BOOKS EVERY METHODIST PREACHER SHOULD OWN

BY DR. VIC REASONER, PRESIDENT SOUTHERN METHODIST COLLEGE

preacher should own Wesley's Standard Sermons. While there is an academic debate over whether there are 44 or 52 standard sermons, the point is that Wesley intended some of his sermons to serve as a doctrinal standard for Methodism. While he never wrote a systematic theology, his genius was that he provided model sermons for his lay preachers. This provision kept Methodism conservative until recent times because it kept everyone on the same page.

Thomas Oden explained that these standard sermons and notes fulfill six functions:

1. The standards serve as an authoritative *guide* to one seeking the essential and central truth of Scripture.
2. They serve as an authoritative *standard* to which appeal can be made in matters of controversy.
3. They serve as an authoritative *source* from which the truth is received.
4. They serve to *regulate* the teaching office of the church. Those ordained into Christian ministry ought to clearly understand essential Christian teachings.
5. They *unite* a diverse church body in a common doctrinal purpose.
6. They *defend* church property against abuses by those who would not hold these views.

As you read these standard sermons, keep in mind that Wesley embellished these sermons with frequent illustrations. He was even criticized for telling too many stories. However, he published his sermons without illustrations to give his lay preachers a basic outline with which to work. They were expected to supply their own illustrations.

Also remember that while the English language has changed since Wesley's day, he intended to be un-

derstood by the common people. As a young preacher he once read a sermon to a servant and got her to stop him whenever she did not understand. And so his language will have to be updated and his outlines will have to be adapted, but his doctrine does not need to be modernized.

If you are buying only the standard sermons, keep in mind you have five options: annotated editions by W. P. Harrison (1886), Nathaniel Burwash (1881), Edward H. Sugden (1921), Albert C. Outler (as part of the Bicentennial Edition - 1984-1987), and most recently Kenneth J. Collins (2013).

Scholars may also find his New Testament notes disappointing because of their brevity. It was Wesley's practice to organize a Methodist society and start by reading and explaining the first chapter of Matthew. When he moved on, his notes were to serve as a guide as lay leaders continued the exposition chapter-by-chapter. They reflect an awareness of textual issues and theological controversies, but they are written at a lay level. They would be helpful for any Sunday School teacher.

It should be noted, however, that when Wesley came to the book of Revelation, he translated Johann Albrecht Bengel, a German Lutheran, without necessarily endorsing all that Bengel wrote. This was unfortunate since many people assume that these notes reflect Wesley's opinion. However, they were published with the disclaimer from Wesley, "Every part of this I do not undertake to defend." Bengel proposed an advent of Christ before the millennium as well as a third advent after the millennium. While this interpretation is not unique to Bengel, it is not a common interpretation. As one scholar explained, "Wesley did not commit him-

self to Bengel's views but merely put them forward for consideration."

Wesley also wrote a three-volume commentary on the Old Testament. It was never considered to be as valuable as his notes on the New Testament, which exist in many formats. He relied upon Matthew Henry for his Old Testament notes, but stated openly that he had edited out all Henry's references to the doctrine of "absolute, irrespective, unconditional predestination." There is a facsimile reprint of the Explanatory Notes Upon the Old Testament (1975), but they would be more beneficial to the scholar.

G. Roger Schoenhals edited a one-volume condensation of Wesley's notes on the Old and New Testament. It was originally published in 1987 under the title *Wesley's Notes on the Bible*. In 1990 Zondervan Publishing House reprinted this edition as *John Wesley's Commentary on the Bible*.

It is out of print, but if you can find one it is worth having.

In 1872 Thomas Jackson edited a 14-volume set of the Works of John Wesley. This set contains his journal, his sermons, and his letters. If Wesley's journal was his accountability, and his sermons were his theology, then his letters were his spiritual counsel. This Jackson edition of Wesley's Works has been reprinted several times since 1959 and are relatively inexpensive. They contain 141 sermons, not just the standard sermons.

For scholars the new Bicentennial Edition, which was begun in 1975, now has 19 volumes in print. This includes 151 sermons (some of which were discovered since Jackson did his compilation) and an annotated journal. There are 16 more volumes to be released making this a projected 35-volume set. Volumes 5-6 will contain Wesley's Explanatory Notes Upon the

New Testament. This bicentennial edition is expensive and is necessary only for scholars.

I want to close by pointing out the difference between primary and secondary literature. There are many books about John Wesley and they invariably reflect the bias of the author. Thus, a liberal paints Wesley as a liberal. A charismatic attempt to show Wesley was charismatic. The holiness movement describes Wesley as their founder. There is no substitute for reading Wesley himself. Through my education, I had been prejudiced against Wesley until I actually read his own writings.

However, there is some value in reading a good analysis of Wesley because it gives a background and puts the pieces together showing the bigger picture. There is no rival to the recently completed four-volume set by Thomas Oden, *John Wesley's Teachings 2012-2014*.

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