

“John Wesley’s Biblical Exegesis as Related to the Doctrine of Christian Perfection”

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I. Introduction

“If I am a heretic, I became such by reading the Bible.”² So said John Wesley (1703-91). This paper begins with a summary of Wesley’s view of religious authority. Secondly, it will detail Wesley’s rules for interpreting the Bible. Finally, the paper will assess how faithfully Wesley applied his own hermeneutical principles by examining his comments on Scripture passages he cited as supportive of the doctrine of Christian perfection.

II. John Wesley’s view of religious authority

John Wesley called himself *homo unius libri*, a “man of one book.”³ Randy Maddox correctly noted that this hardly means that Wesley discouraged the reading of other books. Rather, “to be *homo unius libri* is to be one who regards no book *comparatively* but the Bible.”⁴

¹ This is a revised and expanded version of a seminar paper presented in the module, *CT 620: John Wesley’s Concept of Christian Perfection*, May 2002 at Nazarene Theological College in Didsbury, Manchester, United Kingdom.

² John Telford, ed., *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.* 8 volumes. (London: Epworth Press, 1931), 4:216; hereafter, *Letters*.

³ *The Works of John Wesley*, Bi-Centennial edition (Frank Baker, ed. 35 vols. Projected. Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1984 to present), 1:104-5; hereafter, *Works* [BE].

⁴ Randy L. Maddox, “John Wesley on the Bible: The Rule of Faith and Practice,” Chapter 8 in Richard P. Thompson and Thomas J. Oord, eds., *The Bible Tells Me So: Reading the Bible as Scripture*, Kindle edition (Nampa, Idaho: SacraSage Press, 2011), location 1821.

Much has been written about the so-called “Wesleyan quadrilateral,” the four-fold view of religious authority that begins with Scripture but also allows a secondary role for tradition, reason, and experience.⁵ Some, however, have misconstrued the quadrilateral as teaching that the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments constitute one source among equals. Such a misunderstanding obscures the *primacy* of Scripture, a source unlike all others that Wesley taught was the Christian’s rule of both faith and practice.⁶ Because of this common misconception of the relative authority of the four elements that constitute the quadrilateral, Thomas Noble has proposed an alternative conception, that of a three-legged stool. The “legs” of the stool represent tradition, reason, and experience, but the floor on which the stool rests is Scripture. Theology is “seated” on these three legs, but without the stable ground of Scripture, it would soon topple.⁷ This writer finds Noble’s image both more helpful and more easily explained than the obtuse concept of a quadrilateral.

⁵ This image was never used by Wesley himself but was first developed by Albert Outler. A standard treatment using Outler’s methodology can be found in chapters 2 and 3 of H. Ray Dunning, *Grace, Faith, and Holiness* (Kansas City, Missouri: Beacon Hill Press, 1988), 55-94. See also Michael Lodahl, *The Story of God: Wesleyan Theology and Biblical Narrative* (Kansas City, Missouri: Beacon Hill Press, 1994), 16-48, and more recently Diane Leclerc, *Discovering Christian Holiness: The Heart of Wesleyan-Holiness Theology* (Kansas City, Missouri: Beacon Hill Press, 2010), 37-38.

⁶ Maddox noted that for Wesley “practice” was a term encompassing questions of worship practice, testing the Spirit’s leading and moral issues. See Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon/Kingswood Press, 1994), 37.

⁷ Thomas Noble presented this alternative image during his summative remarks at the Global Nazarene Theology Conference held in Guatemala City, Guatemala, April 4-7, 2002.

III. John Wesley's Rules for Biblical Interpretation

Beyond the question of John Wesley's understanding of Scripture's authority is his method for interpreting Scripture. Groundbreaking work on the question was carried out by Scott Jones, who identified what he called "seven rules of interpretation" scattered throughout Wesley's *Works*.⁸ These rules are as follows:

1. *Speak as the oracles of God.* 1 Peter 4:11a affirms: "If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God."⁹ The preacher or the one praying in public should speak using the words of Scripture. Wesley modeled this in his sermons, stringing together biblical citations, resulting in what W.E. Sangster dubbed a "catena of quotations."¹⁰ Scripture words are best for expressing Scriptural truth, requiring a minimal amount of interpretation.¹¹

2. *Use the literal sense unless it contradicts another Scripture or implies an absurdity.* The literal sense is defined as the "plain, ordinary meaning of the passage."¹² An "absurdity" is something contrary to reason or obvious truth.¹³ When a literal interpretation seems absurd, a figurative interpretation is permitted.¹⁴

⁸ Scott J. Jones, *John Wesley's Conception and Use of Scripture* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon/Kingswood, 1995), 110-27. The validity of Jones' work is affirmed by Diane Leclerc in *Discovering Christian Holiness*, 35-36.

⁹ All Scripture verses cited unless otherwise noted are from the King James Version. Though the language of the Authorized Version is (unfortunately) non-inclusive, it is retained here since it was the language Wesley employed in his sermons and other writings. It should be noted that he also often cited the *Koine* Greek when referencing NT passages.

¹⁰ W.E. Sangster, *The Path to Perfection* (London: The Epworth Press, 1957), 36.

¹¹ Jones, 113-14.

¹² John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 3rd. ed. 14 vols. (1872; reprint, Kansas City, Missouri: Beacon Hill Press, 1978), 13:432; hereafter, *Works*.

¹³ Jones, 118.

¹⁴ Jones, 119.

3. *Interpret the text with regard to its literary context.* The context includes the verses immediately surrounding the passage in question, as well as parallel passages on the same subject.¹⁵ To be understood, the literal meaning must be considered in relation to a verse's context.¹⁶

4. *Scripture interprets Scripture, according to the analogy of faith and by parallel passages.* The *analogia fidei* refers to the overall sense of Scripture as understood through a reading of its many parts.¹⁷ Scott Jones observed: "For Wesley, all interpretation must be according to the whole message of the Bible."¹⁸ Wesley often referred to this as the Bible's general "tenor."¹⁹ Regarding the importance of Scripture interpreting Scripture, Wesley wrote: "The general rule of interpreting Scripture is this: the literal sense of every text is to be taken, if it be not contrary to the sense of other texts. But in that case, the obscure text is to be interpreted by those which speak more plainly."²⁰

5. *Commandments are covered promises.* For John Wesley, every divine requirement implied a divine enablement. Otherwise, God would be asking individuals to accomplish the impossible. Jones explained: "Thus, the legalistic commandments must be understood as promises, because when met in faith, God's grace will always enable the believer to fulfill that which has been demanded of him."²¹

¹⁵ Jones, 122.

¹⁶ *Works*, 11:429.

¹⁷ Oden, 57.

¹⁸ Jones, 199.

¹⁹ Jones, 201.

²⁰ Jones, 123.

²¹ Jones, 124.

6. *Interpret literary devices appropriately.* In this category are included arguments based on “parity of reason,” others that move from the “less to the greater” or the use of figurative language.²²

7. *Seek the most original text and the best translation.* John Wesley believed that every good Divine is a good textuary.²³ Mastery of the biblical languages allowed Wesley to make arguments based on grammatical analysis.²⁴ Wesley wrote: “I apply no Scripture phrase either to myself or any other without carefully considering both the original meaning and the secondary sense, therein (allowing for different times and circumstances) it may be applied to ordinary Christians.”²⁵ Though he depended upon Bengel for his opinion regarding the trustworthiness of manuscripts, Wesley acknowledged the emerging discipline of textual criticism.²⁶

IV. Christian Perfection: An Analysis of Selected Bible Texts

In *Path to Perfection*, W.E. Sangster identified texts that John Wesley cited as supportive of the doctrine of Christian perfection:²⁷

Ezek. 36:26-29
Matt. 5:8, 5:48, 6:10, 22:12
John 8:34, 17:20-23
Romans 2:29, 12:1
1 Cor. 12:31; 2 Cor. 3:17, 5:17, 7:1
Gal. 2:20
Eph. 2:8, 3:14-19
Phil. 2:12, 3:15
1 Thess. 5:23
Titus 2:11-14

²² Jones, 125.

²³ *Works*, 10:482.

²⁴ J.N. Oswalt, “Wesley’s Use of the Old Testament in His Doctrinal Teachings,” in the *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, vol. 12 (Spring 1977), 42.

²⁵ *Letters*, 2:206.

²⁶ Jones, 208-14.

²⁷ Sangster, 37-52.

Heb. 6:1, 7:25, 10:14
James 1:4
1 John 1:5-7, 8-9; 2:6, 3:8-10

We will examine a representative sample from this list, with special emphasis upon 1 John, since Wesley favored it.²⁸ At the close of this survey, we will be in a better position to answer the question: *Are Wesley's exegetical conclusions demonstrably sound and convincing?*

○ **Ezekiel 36:24-29** – When God promised to “sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean” (v.25), Wesley observed that this “signifies both the blood of Christ sprinkled upon their conscience, to take away their ceremonial uncleanness...and the grace sprinkled upon the whole soul, to purify it from all corrupt inclinations and dispositions.”²⁹ The “new heart” of v. 26 is “a new frame of soul, a mind changed, from sinful to holy, from carnal to spiritual...a sanctified heart, in which the almighty grace of God is victorious, and turns from all sin to God.”³⁰ Salvation from “all your uncleanness” (v. 29) “includes justification, entire sanctification and meetness for glory.”³¹

Walther Eichrodt joined John Wesley in a high view of what God accomplishes through His Spirit, the sprinkling of v. 25 constituting an “inward act of renewal.”³² He saw a direct link with justification and sanctification, as presented in 1 Cor. 6:11. On Ezekiel 36:27, Eichrodt noted: “The spirit of God permeates each individual

²⁸ Sangster, 48.

²⁹ John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the Old Testament* (Salem, Ohio: Schmul Publishers, 1975), 2395; hereafter, *OT Notes*.

³⁰ *OT Notes*, 2395.

³¹ *OT Notes*, 2395.

³² Walther Eichrodt, *Ezekiel: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970), 499.

member of the people of God so as to carry out an inward transformation through which the regenerative power of God's purity and holiness lays hold of the most intimate part of man's nature and assimilates it to the nature of God."³³

○ **Matthew 5:8, 48; 22:12** – “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matt. 5:8). For John Wesley, the pure in heart were “the sanctified: they who love God with all their hearts.”³⁴ In his “Sermon on the Mount, III” he advised:

The ‘pure in heart’ are those whose hearts God hath ‘purified even as he is pure,’ who are purified through faith in the blood of Jesus from every unholy affection; who, being ‘cleansed from all filthiness of flesh and spirit,’ ‘perfect holiness in the loving fear of God.’ They are through the power of his grace, purified from pride by the deepest poverty of spirit; from anger, from every unkind or turbulent passion...³⁵

Likewise, Donald Hagner observed that Matthew 5:8 addressed the “inner springs of one's conduct and the conduct itself.”³⁶ R.T. France also affirmed that the “pure in heart” is one whose “inward nature corresponds with his outward profession.”³⁷

In Matthew 5:48, Jesus admonished his listeners: “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.” The adjective “perfect” is *teleioi*, the plural form of *teleios*.³⁸ John Wesley set the word in the context of verses 43-47,

³³ Eichrodt, 500.

³⁴ John Wesley, *The New Testament with Explanatory Notes*, revised ed. (London: W. Nicholson & Sons, n.d.); hereafter, *NT Notes*.

³⁵ *Works* [BE], 1:510-11.

³⁶ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, volume 33 in the *Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1993), 94.

³⁷ R.T. France, *The Gospel According to Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary* (Leicester, England and Grand Rapids, Michigan: InterVarsity and Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985), 110.

³⁸ See “perfect,” in *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Fleming H. Revel, 1981), 3:173.

identifying the essence of perfection as love: “God is love, and you shall be like him, in proportion as you manifest his Spirit.”³⁹

Though he chided those who – based on Matthew 5:48 – would teach a “sinless perfection,” R.T. France was comfortable in joining Wesley, defining “perfect” in terms of “love”: “*Teleios* is wider than moral perfection: it indicated “completeness,” “wholeness” ...a life totally integrated to the will of God, and thus reflecting his character.”⁴⁰ In place of “perfection,” France favored the word “maturity,” not only in Matthew 5:48 but also in 1 Corinthians 2:6, 14:20 and Philippians 3:15.⁴¹

In addition to Matthew 5:8 and 5:48, John Wesley drew on Matthew 22:12 as the text for his 1790 sermon, *On the Wedding Garment*.⁴² Since Protestants deny purgatory, a cleansing preparing us for heaven must occur in this life. This sermon is an attempt to reconcile Hebrews 12:14 (“without holiness no-one will see the Lord” – NIV) with Ephesians 2:8-9 (“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith...” – NIV). For Wesley, the wedding garment symbolized “the righteousness of Christ...first imputed, then imparted.”⁴³ Elsewhere, he claimed: “The righteousness of Christ entitles us to heaven; personal holiness makes us fit for heaven.”⁴⁴ For those who would accuse Wesley of teaching “works righteousness,” it is clear in *The Wedding Garment* that the grace of God was the source of all holiness.⁴⁵

³⁹ See *NT Notes* on Matt. 5:48.

⁴⁰ France, 129.

⁴¹ France, 129.

⁴² *Works* [BE], 4:139-48.

⁴³ See *NT Notes* on Matthew 22:12.

⁴⁴ *Works* [BE], 4:144.

⁴⁵ *Works* [BE], 4:148.

Robert Gundry argued that the “few” who were chosen (Matt. 22:14) represented “the minority in professing Christendom who manifest the genuineness of their discipleship with works of righteousness.”⁴⁶ On the other hand, R.T. France believed that the “garment” symbolized simply “a life appropriate to one of God’s new people” and should not be pressed to represent repentance, justification, or any specific works.⁴⁷ That being said, France also admitted that the parable’s lesson was that “...though entry to God’s salvation is free for all, it is not therefore without standards or to be taken lightly.”⁴⁸ On balance, Wesley’s interpretation of the parable seems justified.

- **Romans 2:29** – Here is the text for John Wesley’s 1733 sermon, *The Circumcision of the Heart*.⁴⁹ Deuteronomy 30:6 is a key Old Testament passage, where God – speaking through Moses – promised to “circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you will love him with all your heart and soul and you will live” (NEB). The reference to love in Deut. 30 was not lost on Wesley, who remarked: “Let your soul be filled with so entire a love of him that you may love nothing but for his sake. Have a pure intention of heart, a steadfast regard to his glory in all your actions.”⁵⁰ “Circumcision of the heart” is the “putting away all inward impurity.”⁵¹

⁴⁶ Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), 440.

⁴⁷ France, 313.

⁴⁸ France, 313.

⁴⁹ *Works* [BE], 1:398-414.

⁵⁰ *Works* [BE], 1:413-14.

⁵¹ See *NT Notes* on Romans 2:29.

Unfortunately, Wesley neglected the preceding context in Romans 2.

J.D.G. Dunn better explained the verse in the light of the Jewish law as it related to Gentile converts.⁵² While Romans 2:29 does relate to inward purity, the “lens” through which Wesley interpreted the passage was clearly that of William Law.⁵³

○ **Ephesians 3:14-19** – This Pauline prayer is fertile soil for holiness preaching. The only surprising thing is that Wesley based no published sermon on the text. The key phrase is found in v.19 – “that ye may be filled with all the fullness of God.” Wesley explained this to mean “with all his light, love, wisdom, holiness, power and glory. A perfection far beyond the bare freedom from sin.”⁵⁴

Andrew Lincoln used a similar description: “The fullness of God, which is best explained as his presence and power, his life and rule, immanent in creation, has been mediated to believers through Christ, in whom the fullness was bodily present.”⁵⁵ On the other hand, some see this promise as only being fulfilled in the *eschaton*.⁵⁶ The “fullness” (Gk. *pleroma*; Barth “perfection”) has already begun, but is not yet complete. This would seem to fit well with Wesley’s theology, where Christian perfection allowed for further growth in grace, even after the moment of entire sanctification.⁵⁷

⁵² James D.G., *Romans 1-8*, volume 38a in the *Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1988), 127-28.

⁵³ Sangster, 39. William Law (1686-1761) had influenced both John and Charles Wesley (1707-88) through his 1729 *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*.

⁵⁴ See *NT Notes* on Ephesians 3:19.

⁵⁵ Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, vol. 42 in the *Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1990), 214.

⁵⁶ Marcus Barth, *The Anchor Bible: Ephesians 1-13 – A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1974), 373.

⁵⁷ See the 1785 sermon, *On Working Out Our Own Salvation*, in *Works* [BE], 3:204.

○ **Philippians 3:12-15** – The use of *teleios* in verses 12 and 15 seems contradictory. In v. 12, we read: “Not that I have already attained, or am already *perfected*.” Then, in v. 15: “Let us therefore, as many as are *perfect*, be thus minded.” The *NT Notes* explain that v. 12 means “ready to receive the prize,” whereas v. 15 signifies “fitted for the race.” W.E. Sangster concurred with Wesley, espousing a translation much akin to the NIV’s use of “mature” instead of “perfect” in v. 15.⁵⁸ Maturity means recognizing one “...will never in this life attain perfection in the sense that no further spiritual progress is possible and nothing is left to aim at beyond the point he has reached.”⁵⁹

In his 1741 sermon, *Christian Perfection*, with Philippians 3:12 as his text, Wesley did little with the immediate context. He recognized the apparent contradiction described above, but made no real effort to reconcile it. Rather, he jumped to his better-loved Johannine texts. Phil. 3:12 became a mere starting point to introduce a clearly thematic sermon.

○ **Hebrews 7:25** – God is able to save us “to the uttermost.” In his *NT Notes*, Wesley explained that God delivers us “from all the guilt, power and consequence of sin.”

The Greek word *panteles* is translated by the NIV as “completely,” but includes a footnote, suggesting “forever” as an alternate translation. R. McL. Wilson opted for “completely,” noting that it would be redundant to say “forever,” since “he always

⁵⁸ Sangster, 42-43.

⁵⁹ F.F. Bruce, *New International Biblical Commentary: Philippians* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1989), 120.

lives to intercede for them” carries the same idea.⁶⁰ The context of Hebrews 7 is the priesthood of Melchizedek, and provides little help in understanding what a “complete salvation” might mean. This is not a strong passage upon which to base holiness teaching.

○ **1 John 1:5-7, 8-9; 3:8-10** – The doctrine of Christian perfection takes deeper root in Johannine soil. John Wesley seemed to have sensed this, and made frequent appeals to its language throughout his sermons.

The *paseis harmartias* (“all sin”) of 1 Jn. 1:7 has always been a key phrase for holiness terminology. Wesley noted that this refers to sin that is “original and actual” and that its “guilt and power” are cleansed by the blood of Christ.⁶¹ The deliverance is not future, but present, as indicated by the stress Wesley put on the present tense of the verbs.⁶²

The insistence upon the present tense was not a peculiar hermeneutic, but was ratified by John Stott.⁶³ Furthermore, the use of the singular may suggest cleansing “from the defilement of our fallen nature.”⁶⁴ What we can affirm with certainty, according to Stott, is that “...if we walk in the light, God has made provision to cleanse us from whatever sin would otherwise mar our fellowship with Him or each other.”⁶⁵

⁶⁰ R. McL. Wilson, *Hebrews*, in *The New Century Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1987), 127.

⁶¹ See *NT Notes* on 1 John 1:7.

⁶² Sangster, 48.

⁶³ John R.W. Stott, *The Epistles of John*, in the *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Leicester, England and Grand Rapids, Michigan: InterVarsity and Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1983), 75.

⁶⁴ Stott, 75.

⁶⁵ Stott, 76.

The pericope continues in 1 John 1:8-9 with phrasing that affirms both justification and subsequent sanctification. Wesley affirmed that if we confess our sins, God will “forgive us our sins,” i.e. “take away all (our) guilt.”⁶⁶ To “cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (9b) is to “purify our souls from every kind and degree of it.”⁶⁷ Howard Marshall conceded that many see the phrases as synonymous, but contended that “...it is possible that purification signifies the removal not only of the guilt of sin but also of the power of sin in the human heart.”⁶⁸ The essence of Marshall’s hermeneutic was ratified by Rick Williamson, who noted: “When we dare to ‘confess our sins,’ we tap into God’s awesome grace that brings pardon and cleansing.”⁶⁹

Finally, 1 John 3:9 provided the text for John Wesley’s 1748 sermon, *The Great Privilege of those that are Born of God*.⁷⁰ The previous verse affirms that the Son of God appeared to “destroy the works of the devil,” and to Wesley this meant “all sin: and so he will in all that trust in him.”⁷¹ In what sense can a Christian not sin?

Wesley replied:

But ‘whosoever is born of God,’ while he abideth in faith and love and in the spirit of prayer and thanksgiving, not only ‘doth not,’ but ‘cannot’ thus ‘commit sin’ ...so long that ‘seed’ which ‘remaineth in

⁶⁶ See *NT Notes* on 1 John 1:8-9.

⁶⁷ *NT Notes* on the same passage

⁶⁸ I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John, in The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1978), 114.

⁶⁹ Rick L. Williamson, “This We Proclaim: Preaching from the Johannine Letters,” Chapter 29 in Richard P. Thompson and Thomas J. Oord, eds., *The Bible Tells Me So: Reading the Bible as Scripture*, Kindle edition (Nampa, Idaho: SacraSage Press, 2011), location 7876.

⁷⁰ *Works [BE]*, 1:431-43.

⁷¹ See *NT Notes* on 1 John 3:8.

him' (that loving, praying, thankful faith) compels him to refrain from whatsoever he knows to be an abomination in the sight of God.⁷²

Howard Marshall corroborated Wesley's view on 3:9. He questioned the NIV's translation "continue in sin," calling it a "grammatical subtlety."⁷³ Marshall further noted: "As a result of the continuing presence of the Word in the believer's heart through the Spirit he cannot sin. Whatever is born of God must share God's character, and his opposition to sin."⁷⁴

V. Strengths and Weaknesses of John Wesley's Exegesis

Having seen Wesley's exegesis of selected passages related to the doctrine of Christian perfection, we return to the crucial question: *Are Wesley's exegetical conclusions demonstrably sound and convincing?* The answer to this is a slightly qualified "yes." To use a favorite phrase of Wesley's, their general "tenor" is convincing, even if his hermeneutical principles as outlined earlier in this paper are sometimes unevenly applied.

John Wesley's greatest strength was his ability to logically organize his arguments. His *NT Notes* are concise and his sermons are clear. His constant reference to other Scripture passages, while sometimes distracting, lent weight to his ideas and can have a soothing effect on the spirit of the reader.

On the negative side of the ledger, Scott Jones has rightly observed that Wesley's first rule of hermeneutics, i.e. "speak as the oracles of God," could lead him to abandon his third rule, which is interpreting the text within its context.⁷⁵ George

⁷² *Works* [BE], 1:436.

⁷³ Marshall, 186.

⁷⁴ Marshall, 187.

⁷⁵ Jones, 199.

Allen Turner concurred, maintaining that Wesley's "...use of the Bible is fragmentary. He notes the context too infrequently, and instead, strings together passages from different parts of the Bible which have a 'spiritual' association but no literary or historical connection."⁷⁶ The fourth rule, the use of parallel passages, or the "analogy of faith," was practiced so vigorously that the principle of context was often overshadowed. To use analogy, if Wesley had been a scientist, he would *not* have been a microbiologist; he would have been an ecologist. He always saw the "big picture," the "ecosystems" of biblical doctrine, but in so doing, he could neglect to harvest the fruit that a more minute analysis of his sermon text might yield. In the same way, John Oswalt concluded: "While he rarely expounded a text or passage of Scripture, his sermons were profoundly biblical. Any one sermon or a subject would cover a whole range of the relevant biblical teaching, so that one writer says: 'His method was biblical expository, not text-expository.'⁷⁷

VI. Conclusion: From "Christian Perfection" to "Christian Maturity"?

This paper, though limited in scope, has examined John Wesley's view of religious authority. Though tradition, reason, and experience were seen as secondary sources of insight, recourse to the light of Scripture was established as paramount to Wesley's theological method. By examining selected passages that he cited as supportive of the doctrine of Christian perfection, some appreciation of how he applied his seven hermeneutical principles was gained.

⁷⁶ George Allen Turner, *The Vision Which Transforms: Is Christian Perfection Scriptural?* (Kansas City, Missouri: Beacon Hill Press, 1964), 263.

⁷⁷ Oswalt, 41.

A final note on the term “Christian perfection” is in order. In Wesley’s day, he was constantly obligated to explain what he did *not* mean by the term.⁷⁸ That this confusion persists to our day is evidenced by J.I. Packer’s critique: “It was indeed confusing for Wesley to give the name of *perfection* to a state which from many standpoints was one of continued imperfection.”⁷⁹ Yet we have seen that the term *teleios*, translated by the King James Version as “perfect,” can also be translated as “mature,” as do many modern translations. Since Wesley mastered the original language of the New Testament, it is curious that he never translated *teleios* in this alternate way. This paper does not rule out the expression “Christian perfection,” but in light of this linguistic difficulty, it does call into question Wesley’s *preference* for the term. For this reason, Wesleyan theologians may better serve the current generation by phasing out the language of “Christian perfection” in favor of that of “Christian maturity.”

⁷⁸ See for example Wesley’s 1766 treatise, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*. Kenneth Collins was forced to present the same *via negativa* caveats regarding Christian perfection in a three page section of *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2007), 298-300.

⁷⁹ J.I. Packer, *Keep In Step With The Spirit* (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1984), 138.

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