Essential Beliefs: A Wesleyan Primer
Edited by Mark A. Maddix and Diane Leclerc
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Mark A. Maddix and Diane Leclerc, both professors of Northwest Nazarene University (NNU), are the editors of this collection of essays that proposes to introduce readers to the *Essential Beliefs* of Wesleyan theology. The purpose of the book is to provide *A Wesleyan Primer* (as the subtitle suggests) for devotees of the Wesleyan-holiness tradition to enable them to distinguish the essentials "from the non-essentials of our theology" (10). The editors hold that truth is principally personal, entailing "a personal engagement with God through Christ as enabled by the Holy Spirit" (13), and as such, theology should not be merely informative but "formative and transformative" (13). The editors sought "young theologians, or theologians from other cultures" (16), although only four of the twenty contributors represent cultures outside of the United States. This section also indicates that seven writers have some connection to NNU.

The introduction is entitled "Theology in Overalls," a phrase borrowed from J. Kenneth Grider which points toward a theology for the laity (9). Maddix and Leclerc define theology as "the process of taking the grand truth of the scriptural witness to Jesus Christ and applying it to the present-day context" (9). Borrowing a cue from John Wesley's sermon title, the design of the editors is to theologize in "The Catholic Spirit" (12). They assert that Wesleyans should engage theological challengers with a spirit of love: "…we must always, always love each other despite our differences over doctrine" (12). Against the "relative and *purely* contextual" background of post-modernity (12, emphasis in the original), the editors propose an attempt to transcend the "extreme positions between secular relativism and rigid absolutism" (13) and assert the precedence of genuine relationship with Christ, the Truth, "over static faith statements and cold, doctrinal propositions" (13).

The nineteen chapters are divided into the following five parts: "How to Do Theology," "Who God Is," "Creation, Humanity, and Sin,"

"Saved and Sanctified," "The Church's Meaning, Purpose, and Hope." In the first chapter, "How and Why We Do Theology?" Dick O. Eugenio argues that the theological task is principally inductive, a creative task rather than a deductive one which derives understanding from what is already organized and systematized. He describes Wesleyan theology as scriptural, experiential, practical, grounded in transformative love, optimistic, and ethically responsible. Celia I. Wolff describes the manner and attitude in which Wesleyans read the Bible and the formative role of scripture within the Christian life. John Grant takes on the remaining three sources of theology (tradition, reason and experience) in a chapter on the Wesleyan Quadrilateral.

In Part 2 on "Who God Is" Timothy R. Gaines addresses, in chapter 4, the question "How Can We Understand the Trinity?" He affirms that who God is as Trinity is "substantially love, in mystical three" and that what God does as Trinity is "lead our hearts in love" (46-47). Benjamin R. Cremer appeals for a balanced understanding of Christ and for believers to participate in the cyclical story celebrated in the Christian year in order to experience transformation and to become the body of Christ in the world. Chapter six raises the question, "What Does the Holy Spirit Do?" In response, Rhonda Crutcher underscores the personality and the relationality of the Holy Spirit and the centrality of the Spirit in the work of redemption.

Eric M. Vail mounts a defense of the doctrine of "creation out of nothing" in chapter 7 of part 3 entitled "How Did It All Begin?" Ryan L. Hansen develops a relational view of what it means to be human, arguing his point from both the Old and New Testaments as well as from Wesley. Despite the fallenness of humanity, "Jesus, *the* quintessential human, is the one who opens up a new way to *be* human, healing the relation between God and humanity" (71). Chapter nine raises the question "How Do We Define Sin?" Leclerc discusses personal and original sin. The former is discussed in typical Wesleyan categories. Regarding original sin, Leclerc argues that the primary category is idolatry, which expresses itself as both egocentricity (the idolatry of self) and "exocentricity" (the idolatry of others). For Leclerc, these categories encompass more completely than other paradigms Wesley's own understanding of sin. Sarah Whittle addresses the idea of systemic sin and the social, corporate, and personal responsibility toward it. Joe Gorman, in chapter eleven, addresses the problem of suffering, and while offering some viable explanations (e.g., God does not cause suffering), he concludes that the issue of evil defies explanation. In the last section entitled "A Church

Theodicy," he asserts that the incarnational presence of Christ through the church ministers grace in the midst of suffering.

Part 4 "Saved and Sanctified" opens with the question "What Does It Mean to Be Saved?" Jacob Lett, in response, discusses three "stages" of the impact of the atoning work of Christ upon responsive human beings: reconciliation, new birth, and participation. In chapter 13, David McEwan discusses the doctrine of entire sanctification. He asserts that Wesley held that the essential nature of God is love and living the sanctified life entails the fulfillment of the love command of Christ. The author of this chapter also discusses the limitations of sanctification in the Christian life. Gift Mtukwa grounds Wesleyan ethics in the *imago dei* in his chapter on "What Makes Ethics Christian?" Wesleyan ethics entails a call "to reform the nations" (111) and calls believers to holy living, entailing both "works of piety" and "works of mercy" (114). In response to the question, "How Do We Grow Spiritually?" Mark A. Maddix affirms the importance of the means of grace, i.e. the instituted (commanded by Christ), prudential (wise practices), and general (e.g. watching and denying one's self) means of grace. The Lord's Supper is also discussed in this chapter.

The fifth and final part of this book is entitled "The Church's Meaning, Purpose, and Hope." The author of chapter 16, "What is the Church?" Montague R. Williams discusses the marks of the church: unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity. The four marks are a reality because God has declared it, but they are also an imperative for the church to become what God has called it to be. Joshua R. and Nell Becker Sweeden address the mission of the church in chapter 17. The Wesleys employed the *ecclesiola*e within the *ecclesia* as the Methodist movement served as a renewing force within the larger church. Thus, the church is defined as a renewal movement "as it integrally participates in God's mission in and for the world" (141). Kelly Diehl Yates employs the Wesleyan doctrine of prevenient grace as foundational to an appropriate response to the treatment of people of other religions. She encourages optimism, humility, and coexistence as ways Christians should act toward those of other faiths. Charles W. Christian addresses the subject of eschatology in the final chapter. After a brief discussion of the historical positions, he discusses the themes which he believes arise from a Wesleyan view of the end times: 1) The kingdom is here an now and will be fully realized later; 2) The last days are about a Person [Christ], not a calendar; 3) God's goal is transformation, not escape; 4) Eschatology is about optimism, not pessimism.

The book has been written against the post-modern backdrop of diversity and aims to establish the essentials of the Christian faith from a Wesleyan-holiness perspective in light of such diversity. The writers affirm the importance of understanding the essentials of the Christian faith: "It is only as we understand these essentials that we can then translate them in ways that relate to those with whom we want to communicate" (10). On this point, one can certainly agree with the importance of the essential beliefs. However, the book does not describe the methodology employed for discerning the essentials. If, for example, the method entailed conformity to the creeds of the Christian church, why was a treatment of baptism omitted? The question remains: What determines what the essentials or non-essentials are?

In the opening chapter, Eugenio discusses the theological methodology that presumably sets the stage for the remainder of the book. He identifies the theological methodology as "inductive thinking" (22). He disparages deductive thinking as "simply learning information that is already ordered and systematized" (22). Though I understand that Eugenio is discussing "doing" theology, one must take care not to disparage the didactic role of systematic theology. Naturally, the reader wants to ask: What is the specific data from which a theologian proposes the general principles according to Eugenio? Here he proposes the following:

> Induction involves exploration and discovery through relationships and through looking for the connections between Christian beliefs. *Conferencing* with others is the Wesleyan model of asking and responding to questions. It involves everyone in a worshipping community – leaders, scholars, theologians, and laypeople. All voices are heard with a spirit of humility (22, emphasis in the original).

While Eugenio indicates "students of the Bible and of theology" should engage in conferencing, little clarity is given about the composition of the "worshipping community." Could the "worshipping community" be comprised of individuals from other denominations or faiths? Are there "essential beliefs" to which one must adhere as a prerequisite to participation in this "worshipping community"? One can see the circular reasoning within such an argument.

Eugenio's proposal appears to disparage the didactic role of written theology. The orality of conferencing methodology points to the

tentative nature of the theological task. It also points to incompleteness. Is the task of theologizing done only when "all of the voices are heard with a spirit of humility"? Given the politics prevailing within the institutional church and the economic disparity, can we ensure that the voices of the oppressed and poor are able to present themselves at the conference, much less gain the same hearing in the din and the deference to Western thought found in many of our institutions? Despite the relativistic context of post-modernism, are theologians confined to making only "uncertain sounds"? Thus, one wonders about a methodological shift in Wesleyan-holiness theology as evidenced in the design of the discussions at the Global Theology Conferences of the Church of the Nazarene that reflects Eugenio's conferencing methodology.

Another issue evidenced within this book is the shift in the controlling norm of Wesleyan-holiness theology. Several writers of this tome, if not all, assert the love of God as the essential nature of God. McEwen is representative when he writes: "At the heart of John Wesley's theological understanding is the claim that the essential nature of God is love…" (104) which, in the opinion of this reviewer, reflects a misunderstanding of Wesley. Thus, *Essential Beliefs* seems to have modified the emphasis on the holy-love as the essential nature of God that was found in Wesley and neo-Wesleyan works to an emphasis on the essential nature of God as love alone. H. Ray Dunning (*Grace, Faith, and Holiness a Wesleyan Systematic Theology*, 105–117) underscores that the history of theology demonstrates the danger of the pendulum of theological currents vacillating between the immanence (love) and transcendence (holiness) of God, and he advocates a balance between holiness and love.

Rather than employing an inductive approach to scripture, Wolff recommends, "viewing the whole Bible through passages that highlight God's active love for all of creation remains a sound Wesleyan interpretive lens" (33). Not only does she express the desire to read the Bible through a particular lens, her chapter also demonstrates another concern with the book, the lack of comprehensiveness. For example, Wolff's chapter makes no attempt to address the authority of the Bible or the inspiration of scripture; it only addresses "How Do We Read the Bible for All It Is Worth?" Perhaps the issues of authority and inspiration are deemed non-essentials.

As stated above, *Essential Beliefs* is a collection of essays by various writers and as such, suffers from books of the same genre. The lack of a comprehensive treatment (however cursory the treatment might be)

gives evidence of the lack of usefulness of this book for certain purposes. The book lacks an interrelatedness of one doctrine to all of the other doctrines that characterizes a systematic theology – a feat rarely achieved in a collection of essays of various writers. Despite the faults, the writers make some important contributions to the on-going conversations in Wesleyan theology. The book should be valued for those seeking insights into an understanding of Wesleyan theology.