

READING SCRIPTURE AS WESLEYANS

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This book is printed on acid-free paper.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Green, Joel B., 1956-
Reading Scripture as Wesleyans / Joel B. Green.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.
ISBN 978-1-4267-0691-2 (trade pbk. : alk. paper)
1. Bible. N.T.—Criticism, interpretation, etc. 2. Wesley, John, 1703-1791. I. Title.
BS2361.3.G74 2010
225.6088'287—dc22

2010002087

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Introduction

For the heirs of John Wesley—I will call them “methodists”¹—the central importance of Scripture in the formation of God’s people is nonnegotiable. Evidence for this claim in Wesley is easy to document. Consider Wesley’s own words: “Bring me plain, scriptural proof for your assertion, or I cannot allow it.”² “You are in danger of enthusiasm every hour if you depart ever so little from Scripture.”³ In his eighteenth-century Britain, Wesley and his movement were slandered for their emphasis on Scripture. Like rotten tomatoes, names like Bible-bigots and Bible-moths were tossed at them by their detractors.⁴ Wesley wore these derisive words as badges of honor.

As important as Scripture is within the Wesleyan tradition, though, I do not think I am exaggerating much when I suggest that methodists have not always known what to do with Scripture. More particularly, we have not always known what to do with Scripture as *methodists*. We have tended in recent decades, for example, either to follow the patterns of reading the biblical materials taught and learned in universities and seminaries, or to reject those patterns. Neither approach is particularly methodist. Neither leads to our reading Scripture as Wesleyans.

I will of course have far more to say about this in the chapters that follow, but let me provide some initial hints here. Simply put, the typical patterns of reading the biblical materials taught and learned in formal biblical studies today have little to do with reading the Bible in and for the church, methodist or otherwise. In fact, one of the hallmarks of the reigning approach to biblical studies has been its requirement that practitioners put their faith commitments on hold. Serious biblical studies, according to this

approach, neither assumes nor necessarily leads to religious commitments. This is not to say that these patterns of biblical study ought to be rejected wholesale, but it is to say that, left to themselves, these interpretive practices have little to do with the life of the people called methodists. As I have just suggested, the answer does not lie in rejecting this sort of disciplined approach to the Bible in favor of what is sometimes called "taking the Bible literally." Wesley made a number of assumptions about the nature of Scripture, and these led to characteristic practices for reading the Bible. The result could hardly be called "precritical" or "naive."

We find one of the most telling comments Wesley made about the Bible in the opening to his "Sermons on Several Occasions":

I want to know one thing, the way to heaven—how to land safe on that happy shore. God himself has condescended to teach the way: for this very end he came from heaven. He has written it down in a book. O give me that book! At any price give me the Book of God! I have it. Here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be *homo unius libri* [a person of one book]. Here then I am, far from the busy ways of others. I sit down alone: only God is here. In his presence I open, I read his Book—for this end, to find the way to heaven.⁵

Wesley urges in no uncertain terms that the aim of Scripture is to lead us to and in "the way to heaven." We might take exception to the way Wesley has thus described biblical interpretation as something he does "alone." We might also take exception to the fact that someone who wrote so many books and who was himself so widely read could thus aim to be "a person of one book."⁶ In the pages that follow, we will see how Wesley's practice as a reader of Scripture undermines these two criticisms. Clearly, when Wesley interpreted the Bible, he was never alone, but surrounded by other interpreters, contemporary and past. Moreover, as he worked with Scripture he drew on a wide range of learning—including commentaries and devotional works, which we might have expected, but also classical philosophers, early church writers, and the latest science of his day. These criticisms, then, should not detract from the central point of this passage from his

"Sermons on Several Occasions." This is that, for Wesley, reading Scripture is tied to the journey of salvation. The Bible teaches "the way to heaven." And Wesley reads the Bible with this aim in mind—"to find the way to heaven."

How do we know if the Bible is "true," then? If it shows us the way to heaven. How do we know if we have read the Bible well? If our reading of Scripture has furthered our progress on the way to heaven. "The way to heaven," of course, is for Wesley not simply a statement about eternal bliss. It refers more broadly to the journey of salvation—from original sin to justification and new birth, and on to holiness. Reading Scripture as Wesleyans means taking seriously both this aim of Scripture (to show the way to heaven) and these consequences of our reading Scripture (to find the way to heaven).

This also means that it is never enough to say that methodists "take the Bible seriously" or that we think "the Bible is important for faith and life." This would be true of Christians generally. More is at stake than these statements, however true they might be. To push further, we need to recognize that our heritage as Wesleyans is a tradition that underscores the importance of theological formation for biblical interpretation. As Wesleyans, we read with a constant eye to what Wesley called "the Scripture way of salvation." We read with a constant eye toward the ongoing formation of the people of God in holiness. There are other ways to read the Bible, to be sure. But methodists locate their reading of the Bible within the larger Wesleyan tradition. We read the Bible as Wesleyans. And we need to know what this looks like.

My focus in this book is the New Testament, and more particularly a sampling of New Testament books with which Wesley engaged in his preaching and his *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*. Generally, I have been less interested in what Wesley says about how he reads Scripture and more concerned with what he actually does as he reads Scripture. What motifs surface? What informs and shapes his interpretation? The result has been a fascinating exploration of how Wesley engaged in disciplined theological interpretation of Scripture. Here we see something of what it means to be Wesleyan—not in the sense of marching lockstep to his cadence or matching his gait with our own. Instead, we see

how certain assumptions about the nature of Scripture and how certain commitments about the overall message or theme of Scripture might shape serious, engaged reading of the Bible. Here we see how we might exhibit in our interpretive practices and beliefs the distinctive keys of our Methodist heritage.

I have cited Wesley's own words extensively, but in doing so have taken some liberties. I have edited for punctuation and archaic word usage, for example, as well as introduced gender-inclusive language in references to the human family. In each case, I have provided a reference back to Wesley's writings in order to aid those interested in consulting Wesley's original prose.

Unless indicated otherwise, biblical citations follow the NRSV. Finally, let me express my genuine appreciation to Kathy Armistead, for extraordinary encouragement and behind-the-scenes support, to former colleagues—especially Ken Collins, Larry Wood, and Mike Pasquarello—for many a formative conversation, to Fuller Theological Seminary, for a sabbatical during which this book was completed and more generally for a community of friends among whom I have experienced remarkable hospitality; and especially to the fortnightly Theological Interpretation Reading Group, companions on the way to heaven.

1

Gospel of Matthew

The Gospel of Matthew, sometimes called the First Gospel on account of its position as the first of the Four Gospels, serves as a bridge between the Old and the New Testaments. As we turn the page from the end of the Old Testament to the beginning of the New, we find a startling continuity. Malachi 4:4-6 reads,

Remember the teaching of my servant Moses, the statutes and ordinances that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel.

Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse.

First, like Moses, Jesus is threatened by a ruler and narrowly escapes, then returns from exile on divine instructions (Matt 2:13-21). As Moses received and delivered the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, so Jesus delivers his great Sermon on a mountain (Matt 5-7). And just as Moses' name is associated with the first five books of the OT, collectively labeled "the book of Moses" (see Mark 12:26), so Matthew provides five major blocks of Jesus' instruction (Matt 5-7; 10; 13; 18; 24-25). Second, prior to the public ministry of Jesus we read in Matthew's Gospel the story of John the Baptist (Matt 3), about whom Jesus later remarks, "He is Elijah who is to come" (11:14; see also 17:10-12). Clearly, the story of Jesus and his church is deeply rooted in the OT story of Israel, God's people.

John Wesley regarded the Gospel of Matthew as the "first"

Gospel in another sense. Following a long tradition, he considered it the first Gospel to have been written, and thought that the other Gospel writers, or Evangelists, knew the First Gospel and supplied what it had omitted.¹ Study of the Gospels since Wesley's day has tended in a different direction, identifying the Gospel of Mark both as the first to have been written and as a key source for Matthew's Gospel. Gospels study has also come to emphasize more that each Gospel has its own emphasis as it presents the significance of the one person, Jesus of Nazareth.² In fact, in Greek, the title of the Gospel of Matthew is simply "according to Matthew." This is because "gospel" or "good news" refers first to the advent of Jesus and only then to a kind of book that narrates the career of Jesus, focusing especially on his public ministry, his suffering and death, and the empty tomb.

Three Themes in Wesley's Reading of Matthew

We get a flavor of how Wesley interpreted the Gospel of Matthew by focusing on three aspects of his reading. First, *Jesus is the Christ*, about which Wesley writes:

The word "Christ" in Greek and "Messiah" in Hebrew both signify "Anointed"—and imply the prophetic, priestly, and royal qualities that were to meet in the Messiah. Among the Jews, anointing was the ceremony whereby prophets, priests, and kings were initiated into those offices. And if we look into ourselves, we shall find our need of Christ in all three respects. We are by nature at a distance from God, alienated from God, and incapable of a free access to God. Hence, we need a Mediator, an Intercessor; in a word, we need Christ in his priestly office. This regards our state with respect to God. And with respect to ourselves, we find a total darkness, blindness, ignorance of God, and the things of God. Now here we want Christ in his prophetic office, to enlighten our minds, and teach us the whole will of God. We find also within us a strange misrule of appetites and passions. For these we want Christ in his royal character, to reign in our hearts, and subdue all things to himself.³

Wesley writes these words as a comment on the second appearance of the term "Messiah" in Matthew's Gospel, at the end of

Matthew's account of Jesus' lineage: "and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, *who is called the Messiah*" (1:16, emphasis added). Matthew himself draws out the significance of Jesus' messiahship with reference to Jesus' royal status as the Son of God whose rejection by leaders in Jerusalem is central to his mission to bring salvation (e.g., 2:4-6; 16:16; 26-27). Wesley goes further, reflecting a working assumption that the Gospel of Matthew was written not only for a first-century audience but for the church of his day and ours.

This does not mean that he was simply interested in the question, What does this biblical text mean to me? Instead, he is trying to sort out what it means to call Jesus "Messiah" or "Christ" for the faith of the whole church. Note, then, that his reading is grounded in Israel's story in the OT and in the long-standing doctrinal interest in the "three offices" of Christ: Prophet, Priest, and King. We see in Wesley's reading his belief in the "simultaneity of Scripture"—that is, the ability of the one scriptural text to speak effectively at the same time to its original audience and to the church that identifies the Gospel of Matthew as its Scripture.

We can think about what Wesley is doing this way. According to a classical definition, the church is "one, holy, catholic (or universal), and apostolic." To say that the church is "one" is to admit that the people of God to whom Matthew first addressed his Gospel, the people of God in Wesley's day, the people of God in our day, and those who will be gathered as the end-time people of God are actually one people. There is only one church. So words addressed to God's people in the first century are actually addressed to the whole people of God, everywhere and at all times. And for this people, even the title given Jesus, "Christ," has immediate and far-reaching significance for identifying and addressing the human condition and faithful discipleship.

The second theme is the *kingdom of heaven*. The Gospel of Matthew tends to use this phrase where the Gospels of Mark and Luke have "kingdom of God." Wesley observes that "kingdom of heaven" and "kingdom of God" are simply two ways of referring to the same thing. One way to translate this might be "heavenly empire," though Wesley was clear that this was not simply "a future happy state in heaven." Nor is it our possession. Rather, the

kingdom of heaven refers to the gathering of God's people, "subjects" of the kingdom, under the leadership of God's Son. Accordingly, Jesus' proclamation of the "heavenly empire" refers to the social order (Wesley calls it a "society") that would be formed by God's people first on earth and then with God in glory. The condition of entry into the kingdom is repentance, and for Wesley this demonstrated that the kingdom of heaven "was a spiritual kingdom, and that no wicked person, no matter how politic, brave, or learned, could possibly be a subject in it."⁴ Wesley thus highlights what subsequent interpreters, including many contemporary readers, failed to grasp.

The centrality of God's dominion for Jesus' mission is hard to miss, given that Matthew mentions the kingdom more than fifty times in his Gospel. On this everyone agrees. More elusive has been a consensus around the nature of the kingdom. Wesley saw clearly, though, that the presence of a "kingdom" implied "subjects," and that this had immediate implications for social relations. Elsewhere, he works these out especially in terms of love of God and love of neighbor.

What Wesley did not take fully into account, though, is the relationship of the heavenly kingdom to all other "kingdoms." If our allegiance to God is primary and nonnegotiable, what bearing does this have for our relationships with all sorts of institutions that seek our reverence and obedience? This would have been crucial in the first-century Roman world, but it is an important question for us, too.

Third, it is interesting to find Wesley thinking about the relationship of *Christian Scripture and modern science*. In his reading of the First Gospel, questions about science and theology surfaced because of Jesus' miracles. In 4:23-25, Matthew summarizes the nature of Jesus' ministry throughout Galilee as proclamation and healing, and this combination is continued throughout the Gospel. Immediately following the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7 (proclamation), Matthew reports a series of miracles concerned with healing (Matt 8-9) as Matthew depicts Jesus as one who makes available the presence and power of God's kingdom to those dwelling on the margins of society in Galilee—a leper, the slave of a Gentile army officer, an old woman, the

demon-possessed, a paralytic, a collector of tolls, a young girl, and the blind.

Wesley lived in an age of exciting, unprecedented scientific discovery, when all sorts of mysteries had begun to be explained in terms of natural causes. So he was aware that some educated people had begun to question Jesus' miracles. For example, in his note on Jesus' commission to the disciples that they should "cast out devils" (10:8 AV), Wesley observed that someone had said that diseases ascribed to the devil in the Gospels "have the very same symptoms with the natural diseases of lunacy, epilepsy, or convulsions," leading to the conclusion "that the devil had no hand in them." Wesley continues:

But it were well to stop and consider a little. Suppose God should allow an evil spirit to usurp the same power over a man's body as the man himself has naturally, and suppose him actually to exercise that power, could we conclude the devil had no hand therein, because his body was bent in the very same manner wherein the man himself bent it naturally?

And suppose God gives an evil spirit a greater power to affect immediately the origin of the nerves in the brain, by irritating them to produce violent motions, or so relaxing them that they can produce little or no motion, still the symptoms will be those of over-tense nerves, as in madness, epilepsies, convulsions, or of relaxed nerves, as in paralytic cases. But could we conclude thence, that the devil had no hand in them?⁵

Reading Wesley's comments, we might forget that serious study of the central nervous system and its relationship to human behavior was barely a century old. Nevertheless, elsewhere Wesley writes that, "for six or seven and twenty years, I had made anatomy and physic the diversion of my leisure hours."⁶ In this way, he documented for us his interest in the new worlds that science had begun to open and his desire to take seriously the importance of science for biblical interpretation and for Christian mission. Methodists have always emphasized health care, especially for the poor—and this emphasis goes right back to the health clinics Wesley set up in the eighteenth century. In terms of biblical interpretation, here his solution is openness to the truth of both faith and science, rather than deny the truth of stories of

demonized persons in the Gospels or of scientific explanations, he allows that both could be true.

The Gospel of Matthew and Wesley's Concern with Discipleship

The importance of Matthew's Gospel for Wesley is suggested by the number of sermons he drew from it:

- Sermons 21–33: Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount (13 discourses on Matt 5–7)
- Sermon 49: The Cure of Evil-speaking (Matt 18:15-18)
- Sermon 66: The Signs of the Times (Matt 16:3)
- Sermon 84: The Important Question (Matt 16:26)
- Sermon 98: On Visiting the Sick (Matt 25:36)
- Sermon 99: The Reward of Righteousness (Matt 25:34)
- Sermon 108: On Riches (Matt 19:24)
- Sermon 125: On a Single Eye (Matt 6:22-23)
- Sermon 127: On the Wedding Garment (Matt 22:12)
- Sermon 134: Seek First the Kingdom (Matt 6:33)
- Sermon 145: (a sermon outline) In Earth as in Heaven (Matt 6:10)

Notice how many of these—sixteen!—are drawn from the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5–7). To these may be added several others that, together with his study notes on Matthew's Gospel, make plain Wesley's special interest in Matthew's portrait of holy living.

One of the areas where Wesley's notes invite Christian reflection is *prayer*. His comments have little relationship to workbooks and seminars on prayer on offer today, with their focus on various "technologies" of prayer (different kinds of prayer, things for which to pray, times to pray, prayer-records to keep, postures for praying, etc.). Instead, Wesley's emphasis falls on the One to whom we pray. Speaking of the prayer Jesus taught his disciples in 6:9-13, what we call the "Lord's Prayer," he writes:

He who best knew what we ought to pray for, and how we ought to pray, what matter of desire, what manner of address, would

most please himself, would best become us, has here dictated to us a most perfect and universal form of prayer, comprehending all our real wants, expressing all our lawful desires—a complete directory and full exercise of all our devotions.⁷

The Lord's Prayer itself he divides into three parts—the preface, the petition, and the conclusion—and he insists that every part is directed to the triune God—Father, Son, and Spirit—and that each section emphasizes the nature of the God to whom we pray. Recognizing God's majesty and mercy, not only do we have all the motivation we need to pray, but we are able to pray from our hearts.

A second area where Matthew's message is especially challenging has to do with *faith and wealth*, a point on which Wesley's rhetoric was unrelenting. In his sermon "On Riches," Wesley reflects on the story of the rich young man in 19:16-30. Wesley:

- Refuses any suggestion that Jesus softens his tough saying about the wealthy: "Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God" (19:23-24). Jesus really did mean to say that those who have wealth cannot but place their trust in things.
- Keeps a low bar on what it means to be rich. Anyone is rich who "possesses more than the necessities and conveniences of life." But what is necessary and "convenient"? He goes on to rule that "whoever has food and raiment sufficient for themselves and their family, and something over, is rich" (S4). By this definition, many of us who regard ourselves as "just getting by" or even as "poor" need to look again at Jesus' challenge to the rich.

Why is wealth detrimental to Christian life? Riches are an obstruction to faith; to loving God and neighbor; and to the cultivation of humility, meekness, graciousness, and patience. Wesley refers to these latter qualities as "temper," a word that we no longer use in this way. We might better think of patterns of believing, thinking, feeling, and behaving that so fully guide our

lives that they seem to be inborn qualities. Riches, Wesley urges, distract us from cultivating these patterns. What is more, riches encourage the development of alternative patterns, unholy ones, such as forgetting God (Wesley calls this "atheism"); worshipping things as though they were gods and seeking happiness in things ("idolatry"); taking pride in what we have, as though one's wealth was an index of one's goodness; and a slew of other qualities: self-will, resentment, vengefulness, anxiety, and more.

"Let us come to the point!" we can almost hear Wesley say.

How many rich people are there among the Methodists (observe, there was not one when they were first joined together!) who actually do "deny themselves, and take up their cross daily"? Who resolutely abstain from every pleasure, either of sense or imagination, unless they know by experience that it prepares them for taking pleasure in God? Who declines no cross, no labor or pain, which lies in the way of one's duty? Who of you that are now rich deny yourselves just as you did when you were poor? Who as willingly endure labor or pain now as you did when you were not worth five pounds? Come to particulars. Do you fast now as often as you did then? Do you rise as early in the morning? Do you endure cold or heat, wind or rain, as cheerfully as ever? See one reason among many why so few increase in goods without decreasing in grace—because they no longer deny themselves and take up their daily cross! They no longer, alas! endure hardship, as good soldiers of Jesus Christ! (§10)

The barometer Wesley gives his Methodists is a hard one. Has the fervor of one's devotion to God and concern for the needs of others changed as a result of increased income?

A third aspect of Wesley's emphasis on discipleship in Matthew's Gospel focuses squarely on Matthew 18 and its counsel regarding "giving offence" and "evil-speaking" *within the church*. In his sermon "The Cure of Evil-speaking," Wesley reflects on Jesus' words in Matthew 18:15-17:

If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not

listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church, and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

Rather than interpreting this text from within the Gospel of Matthew, as we might expect of preachers today, he sets the stage with words borrowed from Titus 3:2: "Speak evil of no one." This approach carries with it an important assumption, that the individual intentions of the writers of the Gospel of Matthew and the letter to Titus are not the only guide to the meaning of these texts. Wesley does not ask, "I wonder what the author was thinking?" Instead, he operates with the assumption that behind both texts—even though they come from different pens and address different circumstances—stands a single Author. These are the words of God, and from this perspective it makes good sense to ask how one text might illuminate another.

For Wesley, speaking evil of one another cannot be reduced to lying or slandering. He thinks more along the lines of today's category of "gossip":

For evil-speaking is neither more nor less than speaking evil of an absent person; relating something evil that was really done or said by one that is not present when it is related. Suppose, having seen someone drunk, or heard someone curse or swear, I tell this when that person is absent, it is evil-speaking. In our language this is also by an extremely proper name termed "backbiting." Nor is there any material difference between this and what we usually style "talebearing." If the tale be delivered in a soft and quiet manner (perhaps with expressions of goodwill to the person, and of hope that things may not be quite so bad) then we call it "whispering." But in whatever manner it be done the thing is the same—the same in substance if not in circumstance. Still it is evil-speaking. (§11)

Wesley must not have known the practice so widespread among Christians today—of sharing "prayer concerns" as a way of trafficking in scuttlebutt; otherwise, he surely would have condemned this, too, as "evil-speaking."

Although Wesley elaborates at length on the procedures set out in Matthew 18, the basic guard against evil-speaking is straightforward: Talk to the person who committed the offense (with its corollary: Do not talk to others about the person who committed the offense). "Can anything be plainer?" Wesley asks.⁸

Wesley devotes a sermon to this text, as well as a couple of pages in his *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*. I mention this because, clearly, he did not latch onto every passage in Scripture the way he did this one. What propelled this text off the pages of the New Testament and into this kind of attention? Undoubtedly, this is due to the premium Wesley placed on genuine Christian fellowship, which included ingredients like truth-telling, and accountability. Indeed, further along in the sermon he writes, "Let this be the distinguishing mark of a Methodist: 'They ensure no one behind their backs'" (SIII.5). This is how Christians put into practice their love and care for one another.⁹

Finally, there is the issue of *holiness* itself, which Wesley develops in several ways in his reflections on the Gospel of Matthew. For example, he seems to think of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7) as a tract on holiness. Matthew 5, and especially the Beatitudes, describe "the nature of inward holiness." Matthew 6 "describes that purity of intention without which none of our outward actions are holy." And Matthew 7 "warns us against the chief hindrances of holiness."¹⁰ Even from this outline, we see Wesley's interest in holiness of heart giving rise to holiness of life.

This is demonstrated well in Wesley's sermon "On the Wedding Garment," based on the parable of the royal wedding banquet (22:1-14). This parable has two related concerns: who gets invited to the banquet and who is appropriately attired for it. Wesley's concern is the second half of the parable, in which someone who had been invited and had joined the party was forcefully removed.

But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?" And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, "Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." For many are called, but few are chosen. (22:11-14)

Here is a puzzle: This man had responded to the royal invitation and, having been invited, he has joined others in the wedding hall, yet his garment indicates that he does not belong. Why? In what way does the man's clothing insult the king? What does he lack by way of outward attire? Wesley responds that what is lacking "is the 'holiness without which no man shall see the Lord'":

The righteousness of Christ is, doubtless, necessary for any soul that enters into glory. But so is personal holiness, too, for every person. But it is highly needful to be observed that they are necessary in different respects. The former is necessary to entitle us to heaven; the latter, to qualify us for it. Without the righteousness of Christ we could have no claim to glory; without holiness we could have no fitness for it. By the former we become members of Christ, children of God, and heirs of the kingdom of heaven. By the latter we are "made meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light." (S10)

Here is a hallmark of Wesleyan faith. Becoming Christian is not simply an event in the past; rather, one "becomes" Christian through ongoing formation of heart and life in ways that reflect the image of Christ. It is the renewal of the person "in the image of God wherein it was created." It is "faith that works by love." "It works love to God and all humankind," and it produces in believers such character qualities as "lowliness, meekness, gentleness, temperance, and long-suffering."

"It is neither circumcision," the attending on all the Christian ordinances, "nor uncircumcision," the fulfilling of all heathen morality, but "the keeping of the commandments of God"; particularly those, "You will love the Lord your God with all your heart, and your neighbor as yourself."

Wesley concludes: "In a word, holiness is the having 'the mind that was in Christ,' and the 'walking as Christ walked'" (S17).

Again, we should notice how Wesley is making sense of the Scriptures. He is not like one of our contemporary Bible scholars concerned primarily with what Jesus thought he was saying or what the Gospel writer intended to communicate by reporting

Jesus' parable, or even what Matthew's first audience might have imagined they heard. Wesley is interpreting Matthew's Gospel according to a theological pattern that takes into account the whole of Scripture. This pattern is the "way of salvation" and it touches important points of the parable of the royal wedding banquet:

- God graciously invites
- People respond negatively or positively to God's gracious initiative
- Those who respond negatively bring judgment upon themselves
- Those who respond positively demonstrate their faith by continuing the journey of salvation through holiness of heart and life.

Rather than simply reading this or that text on its own terms, then, Wesley located biblical texts within the overarching pattern of Scripture. He worked to read biblical texts within the architecture of the overall scriptural message. What is more, he sought for himself and for Methodists everywhere that he and they should be so formed according to this pattern of thought that they would understand not only biblical texts but all of life according to the overall architecture of Scripture.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. If we understand that Jesus is our Messiah, what does it mean for you to say, "Jesus is Lord of my life"?
2. According to Wesley, the kingdom of heaven is the people of God gathered and acting together to do God's will. What would have to happen for your church to become a foretaste of heaven here on earth?
3. What does it mean to say that our first allegiance is to God? What and who takes your first priority?
4. How do you understand the miracles of Jesus? What is the difference between Jesus' miracles and magic? Have you ever seen a miracle?
5. Wesley emphasized the One to whom we pray. Discuss how, when, and where you pray. Does your prayer life bring you into

a deeper fellowship with God? How? Share a meaningful prayer experience.

6. Is wealth detrimental to Christian life? Why is money so hard to talk about in the church?
7. All agree that "evil speaking" and gossip are divisive and hurtful. What can you do to make sure that people can share prayer concerns and personal stories in confidence?
8. Wesley was concerned about holiness of heart and life. Think of persons you know who demonstrate holiness. What are their characteristics? What are some ways that you could become more like Jesus?