

DOCTRINAL STANDARDS IN THE WESLEYAN TRADITION
REVISED EDITION

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This book is printed on acid-free paper.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Oden, Thomas C.
Doctrinal standards in the Wesleyan tradition / Thomas C. Oden.—Rev. ed.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-687-65111-5 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Methodist Church—Doctrines. 2. Methodist Church—United States—Doctrines.
3. United Methodist Church (U.S.)—Doctrines. 4. Authority—Religious aspects—Methodist Church. I. Title.

BX8331.3.034 2008

230'.7—dc22

2007031195

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MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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A. Sanctification Defined

1. Sanctification may be defined as the renewal of our fallen nature
 - a. Occurring by the power of the Holy Spirit
 - b. Received through faith in Christ's atoning sacrifice
 - c. Cleansing us from all sin
- B. Extent and Consequence
 1. The full extent and consequence of sanctification includes:
 - a. Deliverance from the guilt of sin
 - b. Cleansing from the pollution of sin
 - c. Salvation from the power of sin
 - d. Enabling one to love God with the whole heart
 - e. Enabling one to walk blameless in God's holy commandments

Discussion Questions for Session 10

- Once baptized, is one ever thereafter prevented from falling?
 Does God continue to offer forgiveness, even after the believer has backslidden? Is one given only a single opportunity for repentance, or may it occur repeatedly?
 What if one appears to receive forgiveness, but one's life does not change at all—nothing is amended—has repentance occurred?
 How is God's justifying grace distinguishable from God's sanctifying grace?
 How is our fallen nature renewed in sanctification?
 Is this only a partial renewal?
 What is the full extent of this renewal promised in the New Testament?

APPENDIX

THE WARD MOTION

Much of the debate about the Methodist doctrinal standards twenty years ago hinged on the discovery of one curious incident in the manuscript record: the defeat of Francis Ward's motion during the General Conference of 1808. It has been argued that this case stands as "conclusive evidence that the General Conference did not understand its standards of doctrine to include Wesley's *Sermons* and *Notes*" (Heitz, 18). It appears that other hypotheses for explaining the evidence may have been neglected. To settle future speculation, we will review this intriguing case and its circumstances.

Alternative Hypotheses for Interpreting Its Meaning

Francis Ward was the assistant secretary of the 1808 General Conference. On Tuesday, May 24, 1808, at 3:00 p.m., it was "moved by Francis Ward and seconded by Lewis Myers, that it shall be considered as the sentiment of this Conference, that Mr. Wesley's Notes on the New Testament, his four first volumes of Sermons, and *Mr. Fletcher's Checks*, in their general tenor, contain the principal doctrines of Methodism, and a good explanation of our articles of religion; and that this sentiment be recorded on our Journal without being incorporated in the Discipline" (manuscript journal, General Conference of 1808, 68, italics added).

In the original manuscript of the minutes of the Conference at the United Methodist archives at Drew University, however, the motion is merely noted as "lost" and there is a note in the margin in the same hand: "NB: It was voted that

this motion be struck out of the Journal" (manuscript journal, General Conference of 1808, 68). The motion has a single large "X" through it. That is all we know, with no further explanation. It is clear that the Conference did not accept the motion, but it is not clear why.

For what possible reason could the 1808 Conference have preferred not to accept this motion at this time in this form? Why strike it from the record? One leading hypothesis is: "The General Conference was not willing to go on record defining its standards of doctrine in terms of documents other than the Articles" (Heitz, 17). The implication is then drawn that no doctrinal standards other than the *Articles of Religion* are protected by the constitution. But is this the most likely explanation? If the Conference members had meant their defeat of the Ward motion to be a publicly declared positive rejection of its entire substance and intent, they would have been much more likely to have *left it in the record as acted upon*. The X-ing out suggests that the legislative body preferred to have the whole affair expunged—hence not even mentioned—or at best to be discussed later after more study and reflection.

We may imagine various reasons for the loss and deletion of this motion. We cannot be sure whether any of the following hypotheses might be correct, because we do not have enough written evidence. But there are at least five reasons why the Ward motion was probably never treated seriously as a decisive change of doctrinal standards then, and should not be so treated now:

First, the motion proposed a colossal *innovation* seldom even hinted at elsewhere in the literature on Methodist doctrinal standards: namely, that John Fletcher's writings be inserted into the well-known list of traditionally received standards provided by the deeds and Conference minutes since 1773. This would have been a controversial proposal at any time; but at this delicate time it was unthinkable. The motion seemed to be suggesting that Fletcher's Checks be put on comparable ground with the other established standards—Wesley's *Sermons* and *Notes*—as explanatory of the *Articles*. This would have constituted an unprecedented reversal of the previous established tradition, entirely inconsistent with the rigorously conserving spirit evident elsewhere in the Conference—a fact that alone would be enough to defeat the motion. Every other action the Conference took indicated a strong desire to maintain the doctrinal standards previously received and specified textually in legal deeds and conveyances.

Second, there are other technical reasons why a motion of this sort might be defeated: perhaps the motion was rejected not because it was too strong, but too

weak. It was proposed as a mere "sentiment of the Conference"; hence it could be taken frivolously. Perhaps the Ward motion was simply thought unnecessary; or it could have been regarded as poorly worded or inappropriately formulated. Whatever the inadequacy, it did not muster the votes necessary to pass.

Third, the motion did not unambiguously propose that Fletcher's Checks might become a formal doctrinal standard on par with the other established doctrinal standards because it was proposed to be viewed merely as a "sentiment" to "be recorded on our Journal *without being incorporated in the Discipline*" (italics added). It was a vague attempt at inclusion of Fletcher, not a serious attempt at changing established doctrinal standards.

Fourth, in any event, the motion was exquisitely *ill-timed*. The Conference was not ready at that time to act on such a broadly stated and potentially controversial motion made without due consideration, referral, and deliberate study. At this critical stage of primary constitution-building when many votes had been extremely close, alliances fragile, and other issues yet to be faced, the deliberative body may have felt (without any demeaning of theological debate) that it was more prudent not to enter this hazardous territory and try to settle upon delicate language at this stage.

The Ward motion, insofar as it might be thought to be asking for an abrupt and radical change in doctrinal standards (namely, to include Fletcher), would have been too much to handle under these sensitive circumstances. It was very poorly timed, but not rejected for the reason that the esteemed Dr. Heitzenrater has proposed: that is, that the Conference was deliberately setting aside Wesley's *Sermons* and *Notes* as established doctrinal standards—an unjustifiable speculation for which there is no evidence. Had Ward's motion been a serious proposal for changing doctrinal standards, there surely would have been some residue of debate recorded in the minutes.

Fifth, the Ward motion itself contains important internal evidence that Wesley's *Sermons*, *Notes*, and *Articles* were in fact being regarded as the established standards of the 1808 Conference, because they were the only doctrinal standards mentioned by Ward, other than the possibility of Fletcher's Checks. Is not the evidence clear that it was not just the *Articles*, but the *Sermons* and *Notes* to which Ward was comparing Fletcher's Checks? Ward's own motion proposed that it "be considered as the sentiment of this Conference" that Mr. Fletcher's Checks be added to "Mr. Wesley's Notes on the New Testament, his four first volumes of Sermons." Upon the Conference's refusal to act favorably on this motion, it seems evident that Wesley's *Sermons* and *Notes* remained the clearly

established standard *over against which Fletcher was being measured*, by both Ward and the Conference.

Borgen's Analysis

Ole Borgen, former president of the United Methodist Council of Bishops, proposed more compelling explanation of this curious record, in three perceptive steps. First:

The inclusion of Fletcher's Checks may have been, at least in part, a reason for the defeat of the motion. However, the most likely reason for not adopting the Ward motion is the opposite of what is proposed by Heitzenrater: The motion was defeated (a) because the matter was already cared for in the second part of the [First Restrictive] rule, and (b) because it was not a proposal to *strengthen* the place of the *Sermons* and *Notes*. Just the contrary: it was proposed to be "the sentiment" of the Conference, not a decision; the *Notes* and the *Sermons* were not said to *contain* the principal doctrines, but only "in their general tenor" to contain them. (Borgen, *SDUMC*, 13)

The second step of Borgen's explanation returns to the intriguing question of why the language first proposed for the First Restrictive Rule on May 16, 1808 was turned down. The Conference's journal recorded this initial wording: "The General Conference shall not revoke, alter, or change our Articles of Religion, nor establish any new standards of doctrine" (*JGC*, 1808, 82). This preliminary language for the Rule was defeated, precisely because it lacked reference to the other "established standards." This was corrected by the language later accepted on May 24, 1808, which added the statement, "or rules [of doctrine] contrary to our present existing and established standards [in the plural] of doctrine" (*Ibid.*, 312). Borgen says, "This motion from the floor carried, clearly showing that the General Conference *was not willing to reduce the doctrinal standards* to include only the Articles of Religion" (Borgen, *SDUMC*, 14, italics added).

The third step of Borgen's explanation hinges on the technical grammatical point concerning the "use of the word 'nor' instead of the coordinating 'or' before the last part of the rule" (*Ibid.*):

The original text of 1808 of the first restrictive rule had "revoke, alter, or change our articles of religion, *nor* establish. . . ." This remained unchanged until 1884,

where the "or" — "nor" were changed to "nor" — "nor." The 1939 Discipline of the Methodist Church changed the two conjunctions again, to "or" — "or," which then has remained unchanged till today, giving the two parts of the rule a coordinative place, instead of the parallel place given through the use of the word "nor." (Borgen, *SDUMC*, 36n)

Any further speculation about the Ward motion only muddies the waters and deepens its irony. The debate of twenty years ago focused upon why the Conference struck the Ward motion from the record. My view: it was voted down and expunged precisely to avoid the kind of speculation that has been advanced. A needless Pandora's box has been opened by basing a momentous constitutional argument upon an unwarranted speculation about a motion that was stricken intentionally from the record. The record was rubbed out to circumvent precisely this sort of conjecture as to its meaning. If so, it would be unwise for current legislators to bring the Ward motion once again back into the center stage of awareness, let alone make it a linchpin of a new hypothesis with far-reaching and imprudent ramifications. The most highly respected living historian of Methodist Doctrinal Standards, Richard Heitzenrater, who first published his views in 1985 and again in 1989, could provide needed leadership in resolving the difficulty by withdrawing or qualifying his view at that time that, in part due to the Ward motion, the 1808 "General Conference did not understand its standards of doctrine to include Wesley's *Sermons* and *Notes*." This could serve as a major contribution to the doctrinal peace of the church.