

JOHN WESLEY'S CHRISTOLOGY IN RECENT LITERATURE

by

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There have been a variety of interpretations of John Wesley's Christology, some claiming that Wesley was well within the boundaries of orthodoxy as defined by the Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451), others saying that he moved in the direction of monophysitism, and yet others indicating that he may actually have come close to advocating a form of docetism.¹ This spectrum of perspectives seems broad enough to be consistent with William J. Abraham's observation that "there are as many Wesleys as there are Wesley scholars."² Nevertheless, it will be assumed here that it should be possible to determine Wesley's own view on this important theological matter.

The following review of some of the relevant literature is in chronological order and will concern itself primarily with interpretations of Wesley's Christology by Robin Scroggs (1960), William Ragsdale Cannon (1974), Charles R. Wilson (1983), Albert C. Outler (1984), John Deschner (1960, 1985, 1988), Kenneth J. Collins (1993, 2007), Randy L. Maddox (1994), Thomas C. Oden (1994), Timothy L. Boyd (2004), and Matthew Hambrick and Michael Lodahl (2007). There will also be an attempt to assess this literature in light of some of Wesley's own writings.

¹According to docetism, Jesus was not a real man, but only appeared to be. He thus only appeared to have a body. See Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace* (Nashville, Tenn.: Kingswood Books), 311, note 128.

²William J. Abraham, "The End of Wesleyan Theology," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 40 (spring 2005): 13.

Although Wesley never wrote a systematic theology, in various places he discussed many aspects of Christology, including the atonement, the work of Christ, the three offices of Christ as prophet, priest, and king, the incarnation, the person of Christ, and the nature or natures of Christ. Although there is a considerable body of literature on all of these aspects of Wesley's Christology, the ensuing discussion will be confined primarily to the last of these, Wesley's understanding of the divinity and/or humanity of Jesus.

Much of the work in English on Wesley's Christology seems to have been dependent, either directly or indirectly, on the work of David Lerch, a Swiss scholar who wrote on this topic in 1941.³ With respect to Christology, Lerch's study, which may be translated as *Salvation and Sanctification in John Wesley, with particular consideration of his Notes on the New Testament*, is concerned with Wesley's views of the person of Christ, the two states (humiliation and exaltation), and the three offices of Christ. According to Lerch, the key to Wesley's Christological position lay in the doctrine of shared properties, the *communicatio idiomatum*. John Deschner, a key interpreter of Wesley's Christology, with certain qualifications, agreed with Lerch on this point.⁴ Lerch also made reference to what he believed to be a weakening of Jesus' humanity in Wesley's Christology resulting from his fights against deism and a lack of emphasis upon *Heilsgeschichte*.⁵

John Deschner. The first edition of John Deschner's work, *Wesley's Christology*, was published in 1960, and followed David Lerch's lead in attributing to Wesley an emphasis upon the divinity of Jesus at the expense of his humanity.⁶ Deschner's work was originally written as a doctoral dissertation under the direction of Karl Barth at the University of Basel in 1956. While there may have been some influence, neither Deschner's nor Lerch's work was specifically mentioned in a 1960 article

³David Lerch, *Heil und Heiligung bei John Wesley, dargestellt unter besonderer Berücksichtigung seiner Anmerkungen zum Neuen Testament* (Zürich: Christlichen Vereinsbuchhandlung, 1941).

⁴John Deschner, *Wesley's Christology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Francis Asbury Press, 1985), 37.

⁵Deschner, 40, note 10.

⁶John Deschner, *Wesley's Christology* (Dallas, Texas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1960), 6, states, "Wesley betrays a decided emphasis on the divine nature and a corresponding underemphasis on the human."

by Robin Scroggs in the *Journal of Bible and Religion*, which stated that, "since the Jesus of John's Gospel is largely the inspiration for Wesley's Christology, it is perhaps not surprising that Wesley does not always hold rigorously to the true humanity of Jesus. There are hints that at times Wesley came close to docetism."⁷ The reasoning that Scroggs provided was that, in his *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*, Wesley, in his comments on John 8:59, "accepts the view that Jesus probably concealed himself by becoming invisible and passed through them as if there had been no physical obstacle. This raises some doubt as to whether the flesh of Jesus is very real to Wesley."⁸ One example provided by Scroggs was Wesley's explanation of John 11:33, according to which "the affections of Jesus were not properly passions, but voluntary emotions, which were wholly in his own power."⁹

In June of 1962, Franz Hildebrandt wrote a review of the first edition of Deschner's book on Wesley's Christology.¹⁰ There is no specific reference in the review to the extent to which Wesley may have emphasized or de-emphasized the divinity or humanity of Christ, but Hildebrandt did observe of Deschner's work that there are several points at which the reader is "inevitably and avowedly taken beyond Wesley," and that he suspects that at certain points Deschner is "reading Wesley through Barthian spectacles."¹¹

Both the 1985 and 1988 editions of John Deschner's book *Wesley's Christology: An Interpretation* reaffirmed his understanding that "it is not especially significant that it is possible to construct a doctrine of the two natures from Wesleyan fragments; it is significant, however, to learn that when his material is made to speak to this point, Wesley betrays a decided emphasis on the divine nature and a corresponding underemphasis on the

⁷Robin Scroggs, "John Wesley as Biblical Scholar," *The Journal of Bible and Religion* 28 (October 1960), 420.

⁸Scroggs, 420. See also John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* (London: Epworth Press, 1952), 342, where Wesley wrote as follows on John 8:59: "Then took they up stones—To stone Him as a blasphemer. But Jesus concealed himself—probably by becoming invisible. And so passed on—With the same ease as if none had been there."

⁹Scroggs, 420-421, and Wesley, *Explanatory Notes*, 353.

¹⁰Franz Hildebrandt, "Wesley's Christology," *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society* 23 (June 1962): 122-124.

¹¹Hildebrandt, 123.

human."¹² Deschner's comments are based on Wesley's *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*, his "Letter to a Roman Catholic" (Dublin, July 18, 1749), and sections of his sermons on "the Lord Our Righteousness," "The End of Christ's Coming," and "Spiritual Worship."¹³ For Deschner, the *Notes* were "by far the most fruitful source for Wesley's Christology, doubtless because the character of this book is peculiarly suited to illumine Wesley's presuppositions."¹⁴ In other words, Deschner felt that there were certain assumptions that Wesley was making, not necessarily explicitly stated by Wesley, that would throw light on his Christology, and that these assumptions were most evident in his *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*.

Deschner observed that, although Wesley expressed a distrust of abstract Christology, he nevertheless had an elaborated Christology which accompanied and reflected his soteriology.¹⁵ Wesley's distrust of abstract Christology is evident in the sermon "On the Trinity," where he wrote, "Again: 'The Word was made flesh.' I believe this fact also. There is no mystery in it; but as to the *manner* he was made flesh, wherein the mystery lies, I know nothing about it; I believe nothing about it: It is no more the object of my faith than it is of my understanding. . . . But would it not be absurd of me to deny the fact, because I do not understand the manner?"¹⁶

Deschner acknowledged that in his *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*, Wesley's expressions of his views on the two natures of Christ were within the Chalcedonian framework.¹⁷ Some of the expressions that Wesley used in the *Notes* included "real God, as real man,"¹⁸ "perfect, as God and as man,"¹⁹ "the Son of God, and the Son of Man . . . the one [title] taken from His divine, and the other from His human nature."²⁰ Deschner also acknowledged that Wesley considered his Christology "to

¹²John Deschner, *Wesley's Christology: An Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Francis Asbury Press, 1988), 6.

¹³Deschner (1988), 5.

¹⁴Deschner (1988), 10.

¹⁵Deschner (1988), 14.

¹⁶Wesley, *Works* (Jackson), 6:204.

¹⁷Deschner (1988), 15.

¹⁸Wesley, *Explanatory Notes*, 730, on Philippians 2:6.

¹⁹Wesley, *Explanatory Notes*, 815, on Hebrews 2:10. Deschner, 15, inadvertently leaves out the second occurrence of the word "as."

²⁰Wesley, *Explanatory Notes*, 290-291, on Luke 2:70.

be that of the Anglican *Thirty-Nine Articles*, and therefore of the ecumenical creeds.”²¹ Nevertheless, Deschner noted what he believed to be “the very heavy emphasis on the divinity [of Christ] throughout the Wesleyan writings.”²² On the other hand, Deschner admitted that, in Wesley, “there is a clear teaching about the human nature, and he intends it to fall within Chalcedonian limits,”²³ and that for this reason, “it is too much to say that Wesley’s is a docetic Christology.”²⁴

William Ragsdale Cannon. In a 1974 work, *The Theology of John Wesley*, William Ragsdale Cannon made no reference either to Deschner or to Lerch, but offered his own opinion that “Wesley, in line with the thought of the Council of Chalcedon, is content merely to affirm the two natures in Christ and to say our Lord Jesus Christ [is] ‘the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly God and truly man.’”²⁵ However, Cannon’s conclusion is based primarily on sermon 141, “On the Holy Spirit,”²⁶ which is now known to be authored, not by John Wesley, but by John Gambold.²⁷ The second part of this sermon, on the person of Christ, states, “what does more obviously present itself in the Saviour of the world, than an union of man with God?—an union attended with all the propriety of behaviour that we are called to, as candidates of the Spirit; such as walking with God in singleness of heart, perfect self-renunciation, and a life of sufferings.”²⁸

Charles R. Wilson. In 1983, Charles R. Wilson provided a fairly extensive discussion of John Wesley’s Christology in which he advocated the idea that Wesley “adhered to the Chalcedonian creed and to the *Thirty-*

²¹ Deschner (1988), 15.

²² Deschner (1988), 17.

²³ Deschner (1988), 28.

²⁴ Deschner (1988), 28.

²⁵ William Ragsdale Cannon, *The Theology of John Wesley with Special Reference to the Doctrine of Justification* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1974), 206.

²⁶ John Wesley, *Works* (Jackson), 7:508-520.

²⁷ See Frank Baker, ed., *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), 4:547, where Albert C. Outler lists four sermons not by John Wesley, but included in Jackson’s edition.

²⁸ Wesley, *Works*, 7:513-514.

Nine Articles of the Church of England.”²⁹ Wilson supported this view with Wesley’s *Letter to a Roman Catholic* (July 18, 1749), in which Wesley wrote of Jesus, “I believe that he was made man, joining the human nature with the divine in one person; being conceived by the singular operation of the Holy Ghost, and born of the blessed Virgin Mary. . . .”³⁰ Wilson also contended that, according to Wesley, salvation is only possible because Christ united in himself both divinity and humanity. In support of this contention, he quoted from John Wesley’s sermon on Justification by Faith, I. 7, in which he made reference to Christ as the second Adam: “In the fullness of time he was made man, another common head of mankind, a second general parent and representative of the whole human race.”³¹

Albert C. Outler. In the first volume of *The Bicentennial edition of the Works of John Wesley*, in his notes to Wesley’s “Sermon on the Mount, I,” Albert C. Outler made reference to “Wesley’s practical monophysitism.”³² In this sermon, Wesley wrote:

Let us observe who it is that is here speaking [the sermon on the mount], that we may “take heed how we hear.” It is the Lord of heaven and earth, the Creator of all, who, as such, has a right to dispose of all his creatures; the Lord our Governor, whose kingdom is from everlasting, and ruleth over all; the great Lawgiver, who can well enforce all his laws, “being able to save and to destroy,” yea, to punish with everlasting destruction from his presence and from the glory of his power. It is the eternal Wisdom of the Father, who knoweth whereof we are made, and understands our inmost frame: who knows how we stand related to God, to one another, to every creature which God hath made; and consequently, how to adapt every law he prescribes to all the circumstances wherein he hath placed us. It is he who is “loving unto every man, whose mercy is over all his works”: the God of love, who, having emptied himself of his eternal glory, is come forth from his Father to declare his will to the children of men, and then

²⁹Charles R. Wilson, “Christology,” in chapter 9 of Charles W. Carter, ed., *A Contemporary Wesleyan Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Francis Asbury Press, 1983), 1:346.

³⁰Wilson, 1:346, quoting Wesley, *Works* (Jackson), 10:81.

³¹Wesley, *Works* (Jackson), 5:55.

³²Wesley, *Works* 1:470.

goeth again to the Father; who is sent to God to "open the eyes of the blind," "to give light to them that sit in darkness." It is the great Prophet of the Lord, concerning whom God had solemnly declared long ago, "Whosoever will not hearken unto my words, which he shall speak in my name, I will require it of him," or, as the Apostle expresses it, "Every soul which will not hear that prophet shall be destroyed from among the people."³³

In a footnote to this passage, which refers to Acts 3:23, Outler wrote, "'The Apostle' here is St. Peter. Note the direct correlation between the human Jesus and the Second Person of the Trinity: no *kenosis* here, but more than a hint of Wesley's practical monophysitism; cf. §9 below."³⁴ Outler referred to Wesley's exhortation to observe that the one who was speaking the Sermon on the Mount was no ordinary person. The passage that he cited for comparison is along similar lines:

At the same time with what authority does he teach! Well might they say, "not as the scribes." Observe the manner (but it cannot be expressed in words), the air with which he speaks! Not as Moses, the servant of God; not as Abraham, his friend; not as any of the prophets; nor as any of the sons of men. It is something more than human; more than can agree to any created being. It speaks the Creator of all—a God, a God appears! Yea, *ὁ ὢν*, the being of beings, Jehovah, the self-existent, the supreme, the God who is over all, blessed for ever!³⁵

Wesley's point was that we must pay careful attention to the words of Jesus because he was divine. His strong emphasis on Christ's divinity in the practical outworking of his theology in these two passages led Outler to conclude that, despite any statements that he may have made affirming Christ's humanity, in practice, Wesley tended toward monophysitism.

Kenneth J. Collins. In his 1993 work, *A Faithful Witness: John Wesley's Homiletical Theology*, Kenneth J. Collins affirmed that John

³³Wesley, *Works* 1:470.

³⁴Wesley, *Works* 1:470, note f. See also Outler's comments in Wesley, *Works* 4: 97-98.

³⁵Wesley, *Works*, 1:474.

Wesley held to both the divine nature and the human nature of Christ.³⁶ In his discussion of Wesley's adherence to the divine nature, Collins made extensive use of Wesley's sermon, "Spiritual Worship," with reference to several other sermons. He examined Deschner's comments comparing some of Wesley's statements to nestorianism, concluding that Deschner underestimated Wesley's conception of the humanity of Christ.

Collins provides two primary reasons for this conclusion, the first being that "Wesley, unlike Nestorius, affirmed, taught, and expounded the communication of properties . . . between the divine and human natures."³⁷ In his *Explanatory Notes* on John 3:13, Wesley wrote, "He is omnipresent; else He could not be in heaven and on earth at once. This is a plain instance of what is usually termed the communication of properties between the divine and human nature: whereby what is proper to the divine nature is spoken concerning the human; and what is proper to the human is, as here, spoken of the divine."³⁸ Collins wrote that "the demphasis of the humanity of Christ in the Christology of Nestorius grew out of his separation of the two natures and out of his denial of the *communicatio idiomatum*. Wesley, on the other hand, neither devalued the human nature of Christ nor did he reject 'a communication of properties.'"³⁹

The second reason that Collins gives for his belief that Deschner underestimated Wesley's view of the humanity of Christ was that, while Wesley did indeed underscore the divinity of Christ, this should not be taken as a necessary indication that Wesley did not fully appreciate Christ's humanity. All of this, according to Collins, should be "viewed against the backdrop of Wesley's prior commitment to the language of the Anglican second article which affirms 'one Christ, very god and very man.'"⁴⁰ He also points out that both Wesley's affirmations that Jesus was born of a virgin and his statements regarding the incarnation as a condescension would argue in favor of his understanding that Jesus had a human nature.

In the third chapter of a recent book, *The Theology of John Wesley*, Collins makes some additional observations with respect to Wesley's

³⁶Kenneth J. Collins, *A Faithful Witness: John Wesley's Homiletical Theology* (Wilmore, Ky.: Wesley Heritage Press, 1993), 35-43.

³⁷Collins (1993), 41.

³⁸Wesley, *Explanatory Notes*, 312, on John 3: 13.

³⁹Collins (1993), 41.

⁴⁰Collins (1993), 41-42.

Christology.⁴¹ His comments on Wesley's view of the human nature of Christ begin with some comments reminiscent of Oden's discussion of the "descent motif." Collins writes, "For Wesley, the Word becoming flesh—this descending movement from the form of God to a more humble human form (that of a servant)—bespeaks of the divine love in a remarkable way."⁴² This *kenosis*, bridging the gap between God and humanity, "demonstrates a basic tension in Christian theology, as Wesley understood it, between transcendence on the one hand and immanence on the other."⁴³ The incarnation, for Wesley as understood by Collins, brings an accompanying illumination; yet, at the same time, God does not simply remain distant, but comes into our very midst.

Collins says that Wesley believed in the virgin birth of Christ, but "nevertheless apparently balked at too close an identification with Mary and 'her substance.'"⁴⁴ Here, following Deschner⁴⁵ and Maddox,⁴⁶ Collins points out that, regarding Mary, Wesley omitted the phrase "of her substance" in the second of his *Twenty-Five Articles* while retaining this type of language with respect to the Father, indicating that Wesley "was unwilling to affirm, for whatever reason, that Christ was of one substance with Mary."⁴⁷ Collins points out, however, that Wesley did maintain in the same article of faith that "two whole and perfect natures, that is to say, the Godhead and manhood, were joined together in one person, never to be divided; whereof is one Christ, very God, and very man."⁴⁸

⁴¹Kenneth J. Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 2007).

⁴²Collins (2007), 92. In support of this statement, Collins made use of Wesley, *Works*, 2:428: "What manner of love is this wherewith the only-begotten Son of God hath loved us! So as to 'empty himself,' as far as possible, of his eternal Godhead! As to divest himself of that glory which he had with the Father before the world began! As to 'take upon him the form of a servant, being found in fashion as a man!' And then to humble himself still farther, 'being obedient unto death, yea, the death of the cross!'"

⁴³Collins (2007), 93.

⁴⁴Collins (2007), 94.

⁴⁵Deschner (1988), 25.

⁴⁶Maddox, 116.

⁴⁷Collins (2007), 94.

⁴⁸Collins (2007), 94. Wesley's omission of the words "of her substance" in his abridgement of the Anglican *Thirty-Nine Articles* may have been for the purposing of omitting a redundancy and/or making the article easier to understand for his contemporary readers in the United States, many of whom lacked formal education.

Attention is also called by Collins to Wesley's omission, in his edition of the epistles of Ignatius for his *Christian Library*, of passages referring to Jesus as born "of the race of David according to the flesh,"⁴⁹ and to Wesley's reticence to use such phrases as "Dear Lord" or "Dear Saviour," which Wesley judged would express too great a degree of familiarity. He pointed out, though, that the latter phenomenon was due to Wesley's understanding that the use of common, sentimental language of this kind would constitute "knowing Christ after the flesh."⁵⁰ In his sermon of that title, Wesley wrote, "I have indeed particularly endeavoured, in all the hymns which are addressed to our blessed Lord, to avoid every *fondling* expression, and to speak as to the most High God, to him that is 'in glory equal with the Father, in majesty co-eternal.'"⁵¹

Collins says that, "despite some of the material that appears to downplay the human nature of Christ in Wesley's writings, and thereby moves in a direction of monophysitism, we nevertheless must conclude that Wesley's Christology is in line with orthodoxy, with the Council of Chalcedon in particular . . . even if there was admittedly some hesitancy on Wesley's part in the genuine affirmation of the human nature of Christ."⁵² It was out of respect and honor, according to Collins, that Wesley tended to emphasize the divinity of Christ, though Wesley truly considered him to be both divine and human.⁵³

Randy L. Maddox. The fourth chapter of the careful and comprehensive work *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* by Randy L. Maddox is devoted to Wesley's understanding of Christ. The

⁴⁹Collins (2007), 94, citing Maddox, 116.

⁵⁰Collins (2007), 95. In his sermon, "On Knowing Christ after the Flesh," *Works* 4:104, Wesley wrote, "And let it not be thought that 'the knowing Christ after the flesh,' the considering him as a mere man . . . is a thing of a purely indifferent nature." Some of Albert Outler's comments on this sermon in *Works* 4:97-98, were that "Wesley's targeted heresy here is psilanthropism, 'thinking or speaking or acting with regard to our blessed Lord *as a mere man*,' as though any professing Christian in the eighteenth century had ever thought or spoken of Jesus Christ 'as a *mere man*' and nothing more. It would be interesting to speculate on Wesley's response to a possible turning of the tables to a charge against him that in his zeal against psilanthropism he had fallen into its opposite—viz., monophysitism."

⁵¹Wesley, *Works* 4:101-102.

⁵²Collins (2007), 95.

⁵³Collins (2007), 95.

concluding pages of this chapter begin with the observation, supported by Wesley's "Letter To a Roman Catholic," that Wesley "would have understood himself as simply affirming the traditional position of the historic Church."⁵⁴ Maddox then observes that Western theologians have been concerned to maintain the distinctness of Christ's two natures, while Eastern theologians, within the limits of the classic Christological creeds, have emphasized participation in God and God's deification of human nature. To Western observers "this has often appeared to reach the point of monophysitism, with the divine nature swallowing up the human nature. Naturally the East denies this, countering that the West places inadequate stress on the co-inherence of the two."⁵⁵ Maddox also points out that one of Wesley's major concerns was to combat Arianism and Socinianism, which Wesley believed denied Christ's full divinity.

Maddox refers to Wesley's "discomfort, noticeable throughout his *NT Notes*, with those biblical accounts that highlight Jesus' humanity."⁵⁶ Following Scroggs, Maddox cites Wesley's comments on John 11:33 and 35 as examples. He further observes that, in commenting upon John 11:41 where Jesus lifted up his eyes to pray, Wesley "added that it is not that Jesus needed assistance from the Father, he was merely thanking the Father for arranging this situation so that he could demonstrate his power."⁵⁷ Maddox also observes that, in his edition of the Ignatian Epistles for the *Christian Library*, Wesley consistently omitted passages describing Jesus as "born of the race of David according to the flesh,"⁵⁸ and that in his edition of the *Thirty-Nine Articles*, Wesley deleted the phrase according to which the human nature of Christ was "of the sub-

⁵⁴Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville, Tenn.: Kingswood Books, 1994), 114.

⁵⁵Maddox, 114-115.

⁵⁶Maddox, 115.

⁵⁷Maddox, 116. In his *Explanatory Notes*, 354, on John 11:41, Wesley wrote, "*Jesus lifted up his eyes*—Not as if He applied to His Father for assistance: there is not the least show of this. He wrought the miracle with an air of absolute sovereignty, as the Lord of life and death. But it was as if He had said, I thank Thee that, by the disposals of Thy providence, Thou hast granted My desire in this remarkable opportunity of exerting My power and showing forth Thy praise."

⁵⁸Maddox, 116, citing Ted Allen Campbell, *John Wesley and Christian Antiquity* (Nashville, Tenn.: Kingswood Books, 1991), 81.

stance of Mary."⁵⁹ Maddox judges that Wesley's comments on Ephesians 1:3 indicate that, while he did not deny that Christ had a human nature, Wesley considered the human nature of Christ to have been a direct creation of God.⁶⁰

In attempting to understand why Wesley might have been reticent to emphasize Christ's humanity, Maddox mentions Deschner's suggestion that "it is a reflection of his concern that a stress on Christ's active obedience undercuts our own obedience,"⁶¹ stating that while this was possible, Wesley's reticence to emphasize Christ's humanity may have been "more an expression of his distaste for being overly 'familiar' with the Great Lord of Heaven,"⁶² a concern that Wesley expressed at length in his sermon "On Knowing Christ After the Flesh."⁶³ Maddox disagrees with Deschner's hypothesis that Wesley betrayed a negative attitude regarding human nature. On the contrary, Wesley emphasized humanity as created in God's Image and Likeness, and as having a destiny of regaining both in their fullness.

Maddox argues that Wesley's emphasis on the divine nature resembles a characteristic trait of Eastern Orthodox Christology. Was Wesley, like the Eastern Orthodox, "drawn to Christ's divinized human nature as an expression of what all Christians can become through restored participation in God?"⁶⁴ His answer is that this was not the central focus of

⁵⁹Maddox, 116. Regarding this omission, see also Henry Wheeler, *History and Exposition of the Twenty-Five Articles of Religion of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York: Easton & Mains, 1908), 16, which states regarding the article in question (article II) that "Wesley omitted but one brief phrase, the words 'of her substance.' The phrase is borrowed from the controversies of the first four Ecumenical Councils as to the relations of the two natures in the one divine person of Christ. It may be that Wesley deemed them superfluous, as the nature of Christ is unequivocally stated without them."

⁶⁰Maddox, 116. See Wesley, *Explanatory Notes*, 702, on Ephesians 1:3, according to which, "He is His *Father*, primarily with respect to His divine nature, as His only-begotten Son; and secondarily, with respect to His human nature, as that is personally united to the divine."

⁶¹Maddox, 116, citing Deschner (1960), 167, according to which, "Wesley's dislike of the antinomian understanding of imputed holiness has led him to play down Christ's active human obedience. This agrees with, if it is not actually the root of, Wesley's general reserve about Christ's human nature."

⁶²Maddox, 116.

⁶³Wesley, *Works* 4:98-106.

⁶⁴Maddox, 117.

Wesley's Christological agenda. Rather, "he was interested in Christ primarily as the locus of God's activity in our midst, rather than as an example of what the Divine power can effect in human nature."⁶⁵ For Maddox, Wesley's emphasis on Christ's deity was "an expression of his conviction that God is the one who takes initiative in our salvation; it is God who died in Christ to make possible our pardon," and who in Christ the Prophet awakens us to our need of grace and drives us to Christ the Priest.⁶⁶ "It is God who initiates our restored relationship in Christ the Priest; and it is God who guides us as Christ the King, leading us into all holiness and happiness."⁶⁷

Thomas C. Oden. Thomas C. Oden also wrote a chapter on Christology in his work *John Wesley's Scriptural Christianity*, beginning with the observation that "Wesley at no point hinted that there is a needed purification, progression or remodeling of ancient ecumenical Christological definitions."⁶⁸ Wesley, according to Oden, "effortlessly employed the language of Chalcedon" in his descriptions of Christ's humanity and divinity,⁶⁹ and was distrustful of novelty, not only in theology generally, but most of all with respect to Christology.⁷⁰ He quotes statements on Wesley's view of the humanity of Christ, including his sermon "Justification by Faith" in which Wesley states (i. 7) that "in the fullness of time he was made Man, another common Head of mankind, a second general Parent and Representative of the whole human race."⁷¹ Another statement on Christ's humanity may be found in Wesley's notes on John 1:14, upon which Oden comments that, according to Wesley, "in becoming 'flesh,' God becomes fully human, not simply body but all that pertains to humanity."⁷²

⁶⁵Maddox, 117.

⁶⁶Maddox, 117-118.

⁶⁷Maddox, 118.

⁶⁸Thomas C. Oden, *John Wesley's Scriptural Christianity: A Plain Exposition of His Teaching on Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 177.

⁶⁹Oden, 177.

⁷⁰Oden, 177, note 1.

⁷¹Oden, 178, quoting Wesley, *Works*, 1:185-186.

⁷²Oden, 178. See Wesley, *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*, 304, on John 3:16.

Oden notes that Wesley “anticipated the nineteenth-century historicist’s interest in the biography of Jesus,”⁷³ in that he commented on Christ’s temperament, interpersonal relationships, psychological dynamics, and courage, without displacing the theandric premise that he was God/man. “In all this there is no hint of a docetic (flesh-repudiating) tendency in Christology. Above all, his humanity is seen in his death and burial.”⁷⁴ Oden adds that Wesley “explicitly affirmed the classic principle of *perichoresis*,” the communication of properties between the divine and human nature, which he pointed out was understood by David Lerch to be the Christological key to Wesley, a point also made by Franz Hildebrandt.⁷⁵ In an ensuing discussion of the Christology of Wesley’s *Articles of Religion*, Oden notes that Article 2 on the Son of God was a clear statement in agreement with the ancient creeds. “In one person we have not half God or half man, not an arian-like almost god, not part God, but, according to the teaching of the ancient Christological tradition, Godhead and humanity joined together in one hypostatic union of two natures in one person never to be viewed as separable.”⁷⁶

Timothy L. Boyd. In 2004, Timothy L. Boyd wrote *John Wesley’s Christology*,⁷⁷ the fourth chapter of which discusses the incarnation and the atonement. Boyd observes that “Wesley was not interested in circumventing the classic and balanced formulas of Chalcedon.”⁷⁸ Although he “had a preoccupied tendency to emphasize the divinity of Jesus,” he did not in any manner “intend to deny, eliminate, or reduce the reality of Jesus’ humanity.”⁷⁹ According to Boyd, Wesley’s comments on Matthew

⁷³Oden, 179.

⁷⁴Oden, 179.

⁷⁵Oden, 180. On David Lerch, see above. Franz Hildebrandt, *From Luther to Wesley* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1951), 40, did not specifically indicate that the *communicatio idiomatum* was central to Wesley’s Christology, but wrote of one of the early Methodist hymns that Christ “is pictured, in exact correspondence to the Lutheran doctrine of the *communicatio idiomatum*, as ‘our flesh and blood’ at God’s right hand.”

⁷⁶Oden, 181.

⁷⁷Timothy L. Boyd, *John Wesley’s Christology: A Study in its Practical Implications for Human Salvation, Transformation, and its Influences for Preaching Christ* (Salem, Oh.: Allegheny Publishing, 2004).

⁷⁸Boyd, 100.

⁷⁹Boyd, 100.

17:2 provide evidence that Wesley believed in “a relationship of interpenetration between the natures of Christ.”⁸⁰ Wesley wrote:

The indwelling Deity darted out its rays through the veil of His flesh, and that with such transcendent splendour that He no longer bore the form of a servant. His face shone with divine majesty, like the sun in its strength; and all His body was so irradiated by it that His clothes could not conceal its glory, but became white and glittering as the very light with which He covered Himself as with a garment.⁸¹

According to Boyd, although it was typical of Wesley to prefer emphasis on Christ’s divinity, the language of humanness is also present. Wesley seemed to imply that “the properties of Jesus’ being could co-indwell in such a manner as to ‘change from one of these forms into the other.’”⁸² The purpose of Christ’s humanity for Wesley was “to effect a means of redeeming man.”⁸³

For Wesley, as Boyd understands him, the purpose of the incarnation was the reversal of the fall of humanity; God became man in order that humanity might partake of the divine nature and likeness.⁸⁴ For example, in his *Explanatory Notes* on John 1:14, Wesley wrote:

And in order to raise us to this dignity and happiness, the eternal Word, by a most amazing condescension, was made flesh, united Himself to our miserable nature, with all its innocent infirmities. And He did not make us a transient visit, but tabernacled among us on earth, displaying His glory in a more eminent manner than ever of old in the tabernacle of Moses.⁸⁵

Wesley thus “understood Christ’s coming in the flesh to redeem mankind as an act of condescension.”⁸⁶ According to Boyd, when Wesley affirmed the human nature of Christ, the witness to the divine nature was usually not far from his mind. His habit was “to press the divinity of the glorious

⁸⁰Boyd, 101-102.

⁸¹Wesley, *Explanatory Notes*, 84, on Matthew 17:2.

⁸²Boyd, 102, quoting Wesley, *Explanatory Notes*, 167, on Mark 9:2.

⁸³Boyd, 102.

⁸⁴Boyd, 103.

⁸⁵Wesley, *Explanatory Notes*, 304, on John 1:14.

⁸⁶Boyd, 103.

Christ."⁸⁷ Nevertheless, there were clear statements by Wesley affirming Jesus' full humanity.⁸⁸ Such affirmations may be found, for example, in his *Explanatory Notes* on Luke 2:52, Luke 22:43, John 5:27, 2 Corinthians 13:4, and 1 John 1:2.

Crucial for Boyd's understanding is the role that Christ's humanity served in redemption. In explaining this, Wesley "affirmed the classic Christological witness to the suffering and servanthood of Christ."⁸⁹ The role that Christ served was "in the form of a servant, the fashion of a man."⁹⁰ He "takes human nature upon him . . . [because] it was highly fit and proper, yea, necessary, in order to his design of redeeming them. *To be made all things*—That essentially pertain to human nature, and in all suffering and temptations."⁹¹

According to Boyd, Christ's coming as a servant, renouncing His glory and humbling Himself, was for Wesley "a radical expression of God to display the lengths He assumes to redeem and save humans."⁹² Wesley, therefore, affirmed the *kenosis* or emptying of Christ's glory, insisting that "He always had it, till he emptied himself of it in the days of his flesh."⁹³ Wesley reiterated this understanding in his *Explanatory Notes* on Philipians 2:7, 8.

Boyd indicates that "Wesley did not speculate about the manner of Christ's incarnation. Instead, he affirmed the fact of the incarnation as attested in Scripture: Jesus being born of a virgin and possessing a full human nature."⁹⁴ He agrees with John Renshaw that "whereas the Wesleys always viewed the incarnation as preparatory to Christ's sacrificial self-offering on the cross, they nonetheless regarded the former event as an essential or integral part of the work of atonement wrought by Christ."⁹⁵ Boyd concludes this section of his work with this: "Wesley also

⁸⁷Boyd, 104.

⁸⁸Boyd, 104.

⁸⁹Boyd, 104.

⁹⁰Boyd, 104, quoting Wesley, *Explanatory Notes*, 778, on 1 Timothy 3:16.

⁹¹Boyd, 104, quoting Wesley, *Explanatory Notes*, 816, on Hebrews 2:16 and Hebrews 2:17.

⁹²Boyd, 104.

⁹³Boyd, 105, quoting Wesley, *Explanatory Notes*, 374, on John 17:5.

⁹⁴Boyd, 105.

⁹⁵Boyd, 105-106, quoting John R. Renshaw, "The Atonement in the Theology of John and Charles Wesley" (Ph.D. diss., Boston University, 1965), 225.

affirmed the classic Christian witness to Jesus' full humanity as being a person of thandric nature, meaning existing in being with both natures of God and man simultaneously."⁹⁶

Matthew Hambrick and Michael Lodahl. In 2008, Matthew Hambrick and Michael Lodahl wrote an article on John Wesley's view of Jesus in the epistle to the Hebrews, responding to "the problematic defense of Wesley's Christology offered by Randy Maddox."⁹⁷ The authors believe that Wesley's Christology is "insufficiently attentive to the biblical and traditional witness to Jesus' true humanity."⁹⁸ One concern is that "Wesley's questionable Christology disallows appreciation for the power of Hebrews' message regarding the sufferings, struggles, and obedience of Jesus as the paradigm for Christian discipleship and growth in holiness."⁹⁹

Following Deschner,¹⁰⁰ Hambrick and Lodahl make reference to the comments that Wesley made on Mark 6:6, that Jesus marveled because of their unbelief: "As man. As He was God, nothing was strange to Him."¹⁰¹ The authors also follow Deschner¹⁰² in observing that Wesley wrote as follows in his comments on Mark 13:32, "*Neither the Son*—Not as man: as man He was no more omniscient than omnipresent; but as God he knows all circumstances of it."¹⁰³ According to Hambrick and Lodahl, Wesley thereby "undercut the human nature of Jesus immediately after acknowledging it ever so perfunctorily. He thereby compromised, and so effectively dismissed, the human limitations of the Nazarene."¹⁰⁴ These authors quote Deschner's comment to the effect that "even more curious" was "Wesley's repeated explanation for Jesus' escape from angry crowds: He simply becomes invisible (Jn. 8:59, Lk. 4:30)!"¹⁰⁵ They conclude that

⁹⁶Boyd, 106.

⁹⁷Matthew Hambrick and Michael Lodahl, "Responsible Grace in Christology? John Wesley's Rendering of Jesus in the Epistle to the Hebrews," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 43 (spring 2008), 87.

⁹⁸Hambrick and Lodahl, 87.

⁹⁹ Hambrick and Lodahl, 91.

¹⁰⁰Deschner (1988), 31.

¹⁰¹Hambrick and Lodahl, 91-92, citing Wesley, *Explanatory Notes*, 157, on Mark 6:6.

¹⁰²Deschner (1988), 31.

¹⁰³Wesley, *Explanatory Notes*, 185, on Mark 13:32.

¹⁰⁴Hambrick and Lodahl, 92.

¹⁰⁵Hambrick and Lodahl, 92, quoting Deschner (1988), 25.

it is "problematic that Wesley even countenanced such disappearing acts by Jesus 'during the days of his flesh.'"¹⁰⁶ They write:

The Logos or divine nature, in this (heretical) case, occupies and manipulates the human body (*a la* "the ghost in the machine"), relegating Jesus' human consciousness to irrelevance if not outright non-existence. If Wesley were willing to imagine the possibility that the indwelling divine nature could even make Jesus' body disappear on demand, his Apollinarianism becomes more extreme. We wonder if it really is "too much to say that Wesley's is a docetic Christology." If it is, it certainly is not *way* too much.¹⁰⁷

These authors then examine Wesley's abridgement of Anglicanism's *Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion* to the *Twenty-Five Articles* for the Methodists, and his elimination of the phrase "of her substance" from Article II, observing:

Randy Maddox daringly suggests that, while Wesley "did not deny that Christ had a human nature," he "apparently considered it a direct creation of God." That would seem to be the implication of Wesley's subtle sidestepping, by silence, of the church's traditional affirmation that Christ received the very "substance" of his mother Mariam. Given an adequate appreciation for the solidarity of the human race, even to leave the door ajar to the notion of a uniquely created human nature in the person of Jesus is to remove him thoroughly from participation in our common humanity. It is to deny the incarnation itself.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶Hambrick and Lodahl, 92, note 11. The authors did not mention that, regarding the disappearance of Philip in Acts 8:39, Wesley wrote in his *Explanatory Notes*, 427, "*The Spirit of the Lord caught away Philip—Carried him away with a miraculous swiftness, without any action or labour of his own. This had befallen several of the prophets.*"

¹⁰⁷Hambrick and Lodahl, 92-93. Note, however, that in his *Explanatory Notes* on Matthew 27:50, Wesley stated that He could have "retired from the body," not that He could have "retired the body," as if the body were a mere appendage.

¹⁰⁸Hambrick and Lodahl, 93. On the other hand, Wesley seemed to imply that it was because of Christ's participation in our common humanity as the second Adam that redemption was made possible. In his sermon on Justification by Faith, I. 7, *Works* (Jackson), 5:55, Wesley referred to Christ as the second Adam as follows: "In the fullness of time he was made man, another common head of mankind, a second general parent and representative of the whole human race."

In a footnote, Hambrick and Lodahl add that, "while Wesley's deletion of the phrase 'of her substance' raises serious questions, it is not entirely clear that Wesley therefore necessarily believed Jesus' human nature to be 'a direct creation of God,' as Maddox suggests."¹⁰⁹ The authors suggested that Wesley's comments on Ephesians 1:3, which Maddox provided as evidence for this possibility, might rather be "construed as claiming . . . that, by virtue of the union of the Logos' divine nature with human nature, the human being Jesus is properly denoted the Son of God."¹¹⁰

These authors consider Wesley's editing of his Article III to provide further evidence of "Wesley's nervousness, if one may call it that, about Christ's human nature in general."¹¹¹ In this case, Wesley omitted the phrase "with flesh, bones" from the article which stated that Christ "took again His body, with flesh, bones and all things appertaining to the perfection of man's nature."¹¹² They note that, while Maddox explained Wesley's emphasis on Christ's divinity by explaining it in terms of "the sovereignty of mercy displayed," this interpretation would need to be reconciled with Wesley's understanding that "divine grace . . . never replaces or annuls human response, but in fact evokes and empowers such response. God initiates, of course; but God does not pre-empt human agency and responsibility."¹¹³ According to Hambrick and Lodahl, "Wesley's Christology tended to conflict with his soteriology, which did indeed take seriously the element of real human responsibility. Wesley does not appear to have allowed the dimension of human response its full and proper place in Jesus."¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁹Hambrick and Lodahl, 93, note 15.

¹¹⁰Hambrick and Lodahl, 93, note 15. In his *Explanatory Notes*, 702, on Ephesians 1:3, Wesley wrote, "He is the *God of our Lord Jesus Christ*, as man and Mediator; He is His *Father*, primarily, with respect to His divine nature, as His only-begotten Son; and secondarily, with respect to his human nature, as that is personally united to the divine."

¹¹¹Hambrick and Lodahl, 94.

¹¹²Henry Wheeler, *History and Exposition of the Twenty-Five Articles of Religion of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York: Eaton & Mains, 1908), 18.

¹¹³Hambrick and Lodahl, 95.

¹¹⁴Hambrick and Lodahl, 95. However, see Wesley, *Explanatory Notes*, 822-823 on Hebrews 5:8, where Wesley wrote of Christ, "He *learned obedience*, when he began to suffer; when he applied himself to drink that cup; obedience in suffering and dying."

According to Hambrick and Lodahl, Wesley "downplayed or even avoided Hebrews' strongest affirmations of Jesus' humanity."¹¹⁵ They wrote that this is evident in Wesley's translation of and commentary on Hebrews 2:10, "For it became [God], for whom are all things, and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to perfect the captain of their salvation by sufferings."¹¹⁶ These authors point out that Wesley had never addressed the proposition that God perfected Jesus through suffering, and that his commentary on Hebrews 2:10 was "untypically belabored." They conclude that there was, for Wesley, "little (if any) pedagogical value in suffering for Jesus, and relatively little for Jesus' followers as well—which is the inverse of Hebrews' argument."¹¹⁷ They say:

Where Hebrews lifts Jesus as a model of patient and enduring suffering (Heb. 12:1-4), whose example is to inspire his disciples to like faithfulness, for Wesley the category of "suffering" was relevant only in terms of Jesus' "atoning sufferings" (narrowly conceived) for us, and the only "perfection" Jesus undergoes is "the bringing Him to a full and glorious end of all His troubles."¹¹⁸

In a discussion of Hebrews 4:15, these authors state that Wesley's translation of the phrase "in all points tempted like we are" received no comment in his *Explanatory Notes*.¹¹⁹ This, they judge, suggests that Wesley preferred to avoid acknowledgements of Jesus' humanity and his struggles with temptation, leading to "a reticence, historically, for Wesley's followers to reflect often or deeply on the pedagogical possibilities of suffering, especially suffering as a result of faithful obedience to God in the midst of resistance and persecution."¹²⁰ In this context, Hambrick

¹¹⁵Hambrick and Lodahl, 96.

¹¹⁶Hambrick and Lodahl, 96, quoting Wesley's translation of Hebrews 2:10 in his *Explanatory Notes*, 815.

¹¹⁷Hambrick and Lodahl, 97. On the other hand, Wesley, in his *Explanatory Notes*, 847, on Hebrews 12:3, wrote: "*Consider—Draw the comparison and think. The Lord bore all this; and shall His servants bear nothing? Him that endured such contradiction from sinners—Such enmity and opposition of every kind. Lest ye be weary—dull and languid, and so actually faint in your course.*"

¹¹⁸Hambrick and Lodahl, 97.

¹¹⁹Hambrick and Lodahl, 97.

¹²⁰Hambrick and Lodahl, 103. On the other hand, a major thesis of D. Dunn Wilson, in *Many Waters Cannot Quench* (London: Epworth Press, 1969), is that early Methodism was able to endure persecutions because of Wesley's understanding of the redemptive value of suffering, all of which is under the direct control of God, who uses suffering for character development.

and Lodahl do not specifically address Wesley's comments on Matthew 16:24 or Acts 6:1. Regarding Acts 6:1, Wesley wrote that persecution is "a means both of purifying and strengthening those whose heart is still right with God."¹²¹

Evaluating Multiple Perspectives

The wide variety of perspectives that have been articulated recently regarding Wesley's Christology result from a number of possible factors. One such factor is that Wesley may not always have been internally consistent in his theological thought over the course of a ministry that spanned a good portion of the eighteenth century. Also, certain tensions in Wesley's theology often become evident when attempts are made to categorize him. Another possibility is that interpreters of Wesley often single out specific considerations of Wesley's without balancing them with the entire corpus of his writings.

In any case, it would be difficult to maintain that Wesley's Christology was simultaneously Chalcedonian, nearly Docetic, nearly Monophysite, and/or nearly Nestorian, since these are usually considered to be mutually exclusive categories. Did Wesley understand Christ only to have appeared to be a real man, as was the case for Docetism? Alternatively, did he believe that Christ's humanity was united with his divinity in such a way that his humanity was not the same as ours, as would be the case for Monophysitism? Or did Wesley believe that Christ shared our humanity without change? Did he understand Christ's divine nature to be separate or divided from his human nature, as the Nestorians did, or did he consider his humanity to be united with his divinity without division and without separation? In answering these questions, it is necessary to consider the entire corpus of Wesley's writings; it will not do simply to isolate certain statements made by Wesley and consider them to be definitive for an understanding of his theology.

Any evaluation of Wesley's Christology should take into full account that he repeatedly asserted that he believed in both the humanity and the divinity of Christ. If his numerous statements to this effect are to be regarded as inconsistent with his practical theology, then one should seek to understand why he was giving lip service to a fully Chalcedonian Christology without adhering to it in practice, and try to ascertain if it

¹²¹Wesley, *Explanatory Notes*, 414, on Acts 6:1.

could have been possible for him to have been totally unaware of such an inconsistency. One should also seek to understand how such a discrepancy, if it existed, could have escaped the notice of his critics and the enemies of early Methodism.

John Wesley's Christology should be re-evaluated in light of his own statements regarding the humanity of Christ, the context of his comments emphasizing Christ's divinity, his cultural context, the Christology of Charles Wesley's hymns, his own adherence to the theology of the Anglican Church, and his soteriology.

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