

JOHN WESLEY'S NON-LITERAL LITERALISM AND HERMENEUTICS OF LOVE

By

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Whether John Wesley was a biblical literalist or inerrantist is an ongoing debate among Wesley scholars, as exemplified by G. Stephen Blakemore's article in the Spring, 2016, issue of the *Wesleyan Theological Journal*.¹ Blakemore defends a strong inerrantist view and suggests a slightly weaker literalism. His "minority report" defends inerrancy while rejecting what he calls "wooden literalism,"² to which he gives little attention. He cites many authorities on inerrancy but pays relatively little attention to what Wesley himself said, except for a reference, given shortly, where Wesley seems to endorse inerrancy.

The best way for us to find out what Wesley really thought about any given issue is not to consult other authorities; it is to review Wesley's own writings thoroughly to obtain the most complete picture we can of what he actually said. Regrettably, like the rest of us, Wesley was not always logically consistent. Blakemore's quote, where Wesley seems to affirm both infallibilism and literalism, is, "Nay, if here be any mistakes in the Bible, here may as well be a thousand. If there be one falsehood in that book, it did not come from the God of truth."³

It is difficult to see how anyone could be an inerrantist without being a literalist, though these are logically independent concepts. Inerrantism says that every sentence in the Bible is true; literalism (in the relevant sense) says that every word, phrase, or sentence in the Bible is to be construed literally. If some biblical language is metaphorical or figurative, the problem is that metaphors can be interpreted in many different ways by fallible human beings. So which particular interpretation is the right one, the inerrant one, and how we are to discern that one? Many metaphors must be de-

¹ G. Stephen Blakemore, "How to Know the Words are "The Word"? Re-evaluating the Legitimacy of Biblical Inerrancy as a Wesleyan Commitment," *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, 51:1, 65-91.

² *Ibid.*, 85, n. 47.

³ *Ibid.*, 89, n. 55. Blakemore cites this from Wesley's *Journal*, July 24, 1776.

metaphorized or de-mythologized—in our own very human ways. But taking figurative language literally is absurd, Wesley insisted.

This article shows that and why Wesley was not a literalist or an inerrantist in practice. It identifies his own most important rules for dealing with biblical language. First, construed literally, some biblical language may be “absurd,” perhaps only “figurative,” or spoken only “after the manner of men,” or defective in some other way. Second, “No Scripture can mean that God is not love, or that his mercy is not over all his works.” Scripture interprets Scripture only in the light of love.

Randy L. Maddox suggests that Wesley may have been a biblical literalist—as long as the language was Hebrew or Greek, and one is an expert in both; but he was not a modern biblical inerrantist, because God did not directly dictate everything in the Bible. Even for the inerrantist, everything must be interpreted within the framework of certain doctrinal assumptions, pre-selected as fundamental.⁴ Obviously, these are significant qualifications, but this is not the whole story.

Wesley’s own first very clearly “stated rule in interpreting Scripture” was “never to depart from the plain, literal sense, unless it implies an absurdity.”⁵ Variations of this rule appear in at least a dozen or so of his writings.⁶ As expressed elsewhere, “This is true, if the literal sense of these Scriptures were absurd, and apparently contrary to reason, then we should be obliged not to interpret them according to the letter, but to look out for a looser meaning.”⁷ In other formulations, “nor contradicts other Scriptures” was added.⁸ Wesley taught logic at Oxford and wrote a logic textbook, so he well understood that where two texts contradict each other, if one is true, the other is invariably false. He did not deny that the Bible sometimes contradicts itself, but when it does, love comes first.

“Unless it implies an absurdity!” Every self-professed biblical literalist requires such an escape clause! In this sermon on “Free Grace,” Wesley did not strictly define “absurdity,” but his many examples of non-literal biblical expressions, given later, will elucidate this. Obviously, Wesley’s

⁴ Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology*. (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994), 36-38.

⁵ John Wesley, “Of the Church,” *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984—), 3, 50.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 1, 473, n. 22.

⁷ Wesley, “The Love of God,” *Works*, 4, 337.

⁸ Wesley, “A Call to Backsliders,” *Works*, 3, 215; and Wesley, “Upon our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount,” *Works*, 1, 473.

qualifications of “absurd,” “contrary to reason,” and “contrary to even more basic Scriptures” open many doors very widely for Wesleyans (for his day and ours) to the very latest and best in biblical scholarship, the natural sciences, the social sciences, philosophical theology, and textual hermeneutics, as shown in what follows. Admittedly, there is much disagreement about what counts as the “very latest and best”! More importantly, these qualifications open the door for Wesley’s values-based hermeneutics of love, his primary principle of biblical interpretation, grounded in love, loving, and loved ones—creaturely and divine.

Wesley was not consistently, strictly, or usually a literalist or inerrantist, even if he occasionally claimed to be. In practice, he understood the Bible literally and without errors only when it proclaimed nothing absurd or unloving. He also identified many scriptural absurdities without hesitation. As this discussion will show, he frequently advised his hearers and readers to disregard the literal or unethical meaning of biblical texts, presumably because they are in some way absurd when taken at face value, and to “look for a looser meaning.” To summarize in advance, Wesley thought that biblical language may be absurd and unloving as it stands if it:

1. contradicts other scriptures regarded as more basic—e.g., the love texts.
2. is taken literally when only metaphorical or “figurative”—his usual word for it, or is misleadingly metaphorical,
3. is oversimplified or exaggerated,
4. is “after the manner of men” or culture-bound,
5. is contrary to reason or experience, or
6. is clearly unethical, unconscionable, or unloving.

In 2011, William J. Abraham complained that Wesley belonged to a tradition that thought of “Scripture as a criterion of truth without qualification.”⁹ The following discussion will show that Wesley thought of Scripture as a criterion of truth only with many qualifications—all of the above, maybe more.

Please now consider eleven instances where Wesley explicitly refused to take biblical words, phrases, or sentences literally, presumably because somehow absurd or otherwise unloving and unconscionable.¹⁰ His own

⁹ William J. Abraham, “The Future of Scripture: In Search of a Theology of Scripture,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, 46:2, 13.

¹⁰ A much briefer explanation of ten of these eleven instances is given in Rem B. Edwards, *John Wesley’s Values—And Ours* (Lexington: Emeth Press, 2013), 158-161. In the *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, 51:1, 2016, Timothy R. Gains recognizes, with several other Wesleyan scholars, that there is “a dearth of

many examples did not cover every such anomaly in the Bible, but they give us plausible guidelines for dealing with all of them.

1. Despite what 1 Timothy 6:10 says, Wesley insisted that money is not *literally* the sole root of *all* evil because “There are a thousand other roots of evil in the world, as sad experience daily shows.”¹¹

The problems here are oversimplification and being contrary to both experience and most of the rest of the Bible. The love of money is not the whole or even the main story about sin. Taken literally, this sentence is obviously false. There are many other real roots of, sources of, or basic motives for sin or wrongdoing. Oversimplification is often accompanied by exaggeration. Regarding the love of money as the “sole root” of every human evil immensely overemphasizes its significance and scope. Daily human experience says otherwise. So does the Bible—again and again.

2. He may have affirmed explicitly that in the Lord’s Supper, “This is my body” (1 Corinthians, 11:24) is “not to be taken literally,” as it seems to be in the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, because what looks like bread, tastes like bread, and is usually said to be bread, really is nothing but bread.¹² (We might say, “What looks like a duck, acts like and duck, and quacks like a duck, really is a duck.” Something like this common sense insight was functioning when early American Methodists insisted on referring to Wesley’s “Superintendents” as “Bishops.” They thought that what looks like a Bishop, acts like a Bishop, and quacks like a Bishop really is a Bishop!) Perhaps the sermon containing these words about bread was not first written by Wesley, but he would have agreed and may have preached it. In his own commentary elsewhere on this verse, it means, Wesley explained, that “this broken bread is the *sign* of my body”¹³ (*italics added*), thus not literally the body of Christ that still looks, tastes, and smells like bread.

literature” on Wesleyan moral theology and Wesleyan ethics. I believe that my book is just such a well-researched and helpfully organized book, written by a philosopher specializing in ethics and the philosophy of religion who is also a lifelong Methodist.

¹¹ Wesley, “Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount, I,” *Works*, 1, 476.

¹² Wesley, “Popery Calmly Considered,” *The Works of the Reverend John Wesley, A.M.*, ed. John Emory. (New York: T. Mason and B. Waugh, 1831), 5, 811.

¹³ Wesley, *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*, 1 Corinthians 11:24. Available on line through the Wesley Center at: <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/john-wesleys-notes-on-the-bible/>. This includes his explanatory notes on both testaments.

The difficulty here is that taking “body” literally would be contrary to reason, experience, and the obvious facts. Wesley rejected transubstantiation on rational/empirical grounds. It confuses signs with realities. It takes sensory metaphors literally but not empirically, if that makes any sense at all. It is a potentially misleading metaphor.

3. Wesley insisted that the “fear and trembling” mentioned by St. Paul (Philippians 2:12) “cannot be understood literally” because our master does not want us “to stand trembling and quaking before him.”¹⁴

The issue here seems to be that, understood literally, this would make God’s requirements unethical, unconscionable, unloving. Kierkegaard should have read Wesley! But Wesley’s own revival preaching caused many to tremble and quake.¹⁵ Wesley himself did not completely avoid “terror preaching.”

4. 1 Chronicles 16:30 denies that the earth moves and says it stands still and always will. So do Psalms 93:1, 96:10 and 104:5 in their own way. Wesley clearly did not believe this, even though he did not comment on these verses in his *Explanatory Notes on the Old Testament*. Both Testaments presuppose a three-story universe in which the heavens are above, the flat but circular earth is centered between the heavens above and the waters (or fires) beneath the earth, and the sun rotates daily around the earth, as in Ecclesiastes 1:5 and Psalms 19:6.¹⁶ This is known to us as the Ptolemaic worldview.

John Wesley was definitely not Ptolemaic; he was a Copernican who knew that the earth rotates daily on its axis and annually around the sun. Wesley understood and clearly affirmed Copernican cosmology, and in doing so he clearly went far beyond both infallibilism and literalism. In practice, he outright rejected both in the name of reason or what was then called “natural philosophy.” Some texts are just plain factually mistaken and can’t be excused or classified simply as misleading metaphors.

The best evidence for Wesley’s Copernicanism is found in his “Christian Library.” There he published many books very cheaply for popular consumption and education, so that even the poor could buy and

¹⁴ Wesley, “On Working Out Our Salvation,” *Works*, 2, 204.

¹⁵ See Albert C. Outler’s comments on the effects of Wesley’s preaching in *Works*, 1, 200-201.

¹⁶ The three-story universe is expressed in or presupposed by many biblical texts such as: Genesis 1:8-10, 14-18, Isaiah 40:22, Job 22:14, 26:7-14; 28:24; Proverbs 8:26-29; Mark 16:19, Luke 16:23-24, 26, Acts 1:9-11, Revelation 4:1-2, 12:7-12, 20:1, 3, 10.

read them. This “Library” included several books that explained and defended the Copernican Theory.¹⁷ These were originally written by other authors, but Wesley abridged them, rewrote them to his own satisfaction, and republished them in his own name.

In my own book, *John Wesley’s Values—and Ours*,¹⁸ my relevant example of his non-literal literalism on scientific topics quoted the words “not always to be taken in the literal sense” from one edition of Wesley’s *Compendium of Natural Philosophy*. It was originally written by Charles Bonnet, but Wesley republished it in his own name and with his explicit endorsement. Here, commenting on “those scriptural expressions which seem to contradict the earth’s motion,” we find, “This general answer may be made to them all, that, the scriptures were never intended to instruct us in philosophy, or astronomy; and therefore, on those subjects, expressions are not always to be taken in the literal sense, but for the most part, as accommodated to the common apprehension of mankind.”¹⁹ I have since learned from Randy Maddox that these words are not part of Wesley’s original text. They are part of the revision introduced into this and later editions in North America, where the editors chose to replace much of Wesley’s discussion of astronomy with text drawn from James Ferguson, *Astronomy Explained Upon Sir Isaac Newton’s Principles* (London: for the author, 1756); see p. 48 for this quote. It is unclear if Wesley would have agreed with Ferguson.²⁰

Unclear or not, it is obvious enough that Copernican Wesley simply did not believe the biblical picture according to which the flat earth stands still

¹⁷ Two of the most important of these Copernican books were published in the first two volumes of John Wesley’s *Compendium of Natural Philosophy*. The first volume, written first by Charles Bonnet, explains and defends the Copernican worldview in Part V. It is available online at: <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/a-compedium-of-natural-philosophy/>. The second volume contains Wesley’s *Extract of Mr. Duten’s Inquiry Into the Origin of the Discoveries Attributed to the Moderns*. Chapter 14 of this affirms and defends the Copernican worldview. It is available online at: <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/a-compedium-of-natural-philosophy/extract-of-mr-dutens-inquiry-into-the-origin-of-the-discoveries-attributed-to-the-moderns/>.

¹⁸ Edwards, *John Wesley’s Values—And Ours*, 159.

¹⁹ John Wesley, *Compendium of Natural Philosophy*. (Philadelphia: Jonathan Pounder, 1816), 2, 139-140.

²⁰ Randy L. Maddox, “The Rule of Christian Faith, Practice, and Hope: John Wesley on the Bible,” *Methodist Review*, 3, 2011, 11-12, n. 38.

in the center of a three story universe and the sun rotates daily around the earth. Whether or not he wrote, “not always to be taken in the literal sense,” Wesley clearly did not accept biblical expressions of this obsolete cosmology as either true or literal. On rational grounds, (we would say “scientific grounds”), Wesley adopted the unbiblical, modern, scientific, Copernican cosmology and understood the biblical world-view non-literally, indeed as untrue, in its light.

Wesley’s example of how Wesleyan Christians should deal with the best-established theories of natural science is highly significant for us today. It allows us access to the very best of today’s natural sciences and philosophies, even though they do not speak with one voice about everything. Even Philosophers can be good Methodists! What Wesley regarded as “philosophy” included “natural philosophy,” which we call “natural science.” What Wesley did for his own Copernican/Newtonian era models for us what we should do for our own Darwin/Einstein/Quantum era (even if this means giving up a literal Adam and Eve and the original perfection of all creation in the Garden of Eden, which Wesley himself was definitely not ready to do).

5. Commenting on “the books were opened” and God’s judging people by what is written in them on the “day” of judgment (Revelation 20:12), Wesley called this “a figurative expression, plainly referring to the manner of proceeding among men.”²¹ He speculated (with others) that the judgment “day” of the Lord might take a thousand years, (not literally one day), because there will be so many people to be judged.²² Note the temporality attributed here to God. Are we to take this literally, or, was this was meant only according to “the manner of proceeding among men,” in which case it was culture-bound?

The problem here might be that that this biblical language is misleadingly metaphorical, or that it reverts to cultural or then-traditional modes or images of thinking and speaking, or perhaps it is simply inaccurate. Anyhow, given Wesley’s example, should we take “day” or “days” in the creation story seriously, even if he clearly did?

6. He may have been on the wrong track in this instance, but Wesley subscribed to the classical “*totum simul*” theory of God’s eternity as “all of time all at once,” which means that there is no literal or real-to-God successiveness at all. Time is real to us, but not to God, in classical theology.

²¹ Wesley, “The Great Assize,” *Works*, 1, 358-359.

²² *Ibid.*, 360.

Logically, this should apply even to the six days of creation, but surprisingly, in his commentary on Genesis 1:31, Wesley insisted on taking this particular real-time-in-God passage literally. He wrote, “So that in six days God made the world. We are not to think but that God could have made the world in an instant: but he did it in six days, that he might shew himself a free agent, doing his own work, both in his own way, and in his own time.”²³

Usually, however, Wesley insisted that all biblical and theological theistic expressions with temporalistic overtones—like all of God’s actions in a literal past, present, or future, or God’s *foreknowledge* and *afterknowledge*, or God’s past, present, or future plans and deeds, or God’s purposes ordered and expressed in time, or God’s interacting with people as they exist in real time and history, or God’s change of mind in light of positive human responses (as in the book of Jonah), etc.—only speak “after the manner of men,”²⁴ and each is thus a mere “condescension to our weakness.” He asked rhetorically, “But can we possibly imagine that these expressions are to be taken literally?”²⁵

Regrettably, his answer was negative. With that stroke, he dismissed almost everything that the Bible says about God! Temporalistic theists (Process, Relational, and Open) do not dismiss such things; they *can* imagine taking literally much temporalistic or process language about God, and in that respect they are much closer to biblical theism than were the classical theologians. One can be a temporalistic theist, however, without taking all biblical temporalistic language about God literally, for example, without believing that God created the universe in literally six days. What counts as an “absurdity” always depends on the presuppositions we bring with us to the hermeneutic process, and on how intelligible or overall defensible they are. Temporalistic theists insist that we should *not* classify all biblical affirmations of successiveness in God as totally misleading non-literal myths or metaphors. Wesley’s classical metaphysical presuppositions about God’s timeless eternity were much more Greek than Biblical. His own theology was more culture-bound to Greek philosophy in some respects than to biblical theism. Fortunately, his values were mostly biblical, highly plausible, and very relevant to us today.

²³ Wesley, *Explanatory Notes on the Old Testament*, Genesis 1:31.

²⁴ Wesley, “On Predestination,” *Works*, 2, 417.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 420-421.

7. Wesley assumed that God is a disembodied or incorporeal spirit having no spatial or temporal properties whatsoever. Explaining the “image of God” concept in Genesis 1:27, Wesley said, “That man was made in God’s image, and after his likeness; two words to express the same thing. God’s image upon man, consists, in his nature, not that of his body, for God has not a body, but that of his soul. The soul is a spirit, an intelligent, immortal spirit, an active spirit, herein resembling God, the Father of spirits, and the soul of the world.”²⁶ Wesley was a Cartesian mind/matter dualist who had few difficulties with the idea of disembodied souls.²⁷

If God has no body, it follows logically that the story of God’s showing only his back-side, etc., to Moses in Exodus 33:22-23 must be interpreted as metaphorical, (as must all physicalist images of God). According to Wesley, in this story “hand,” “face,” and “back-side” are being expressed only “after the manner of men.”²⁸ These are culture-bound and misleading metaphors. More generally, “The words, figuratively transferred from one thing to another, do not agree with the things to which they are transferred, in...their literal sense. So hands and eyes, when applied to God, are not spoke in any part of their literal signification.”²⁹ He did not say so, but this also applies to God’s literal masculinity or femininity. Wesley did not get into that!

8. Wesley repeatedly emphasized being “born again,” but he insisted that this biblical expression must be construed analogically, not literally. He even thought that Jesus himself was a self-conscious non-literalist about it! When Jesus was asked how people can be “born again” (John 3:4), he answered, Wesley explained, “They cannot be literally. ‘A man’ cannot ‘enter a second time into his mother’s womb, and be born’. But they may, spiritually. A man may be ‘born from above’, ‘born of God’, and ‘born of the Spirit’— in a manner which bears a very near analogy to the natural birth.”³⁰

²⁶ Wesley, *Explanatory Notes on the Old Testament*, Genesis 1:27.

²⁷ Edwards, *John Wesley’s Values—And Ours*, 228-235/

²⁸ Wesley, *Explanatory Notes on the Old Testament*, Exodus 33:22-23.

²⁹ Wesley, *Compendium of Natural Philosophy*, 2, 437. For more details on Wesley’s rejection of time or process in God, see Edwards, *John Wesley’s Values—and Ours*, 45-49.

³⁰ Wesley, “The New Birth,” *Works*, 2, 191-192.

So, Wesley acknowledged, Jesus himself realized and explained that he did not always speak literally! More on Jesus as a non-literalist who understood that some metaphors can be misleading comes next.

9. As seen in John 11:11-14, Jesus thought that his disciples sometimes deceived themselves when they construed his words literally. When he told them that deceased “Lazarus has fallen asleep,” they took him literally. They “thought he meant taking rest in sleep,” and they responded, “if he has fallen asleep, he will recover.” About this Wesley commented, “Sleepeth - Such is the death of good men in the language of heaven. But the disciples did not yet understand this language. And the slowness of our understanding makes the Scripture often descend to our barbarous manner of speaking.”³¹

Metaphorically, “sleep” means “death.” Literally, “sleep” means “sleep.” Wesley classified this poetic metaphor as “the language of heaven.” The literal was a “barbarous manner of speaking.” Metaphorical language is very good if not taken literally or not otherwise culture bound or misleading. Metaphors are the poetic language of worship, devotion, and heaven. They are the primary language of love and intrinsic evaluation. May we come to “yet understand this language”!

10. Wesley definitely thought that all Scriptures (as in Romans 8:28-30 and Ephesians 1:3-6) that affirm or imply predestination are incompatible with God’s own goodness, morality, love, justice, and mercy. Here we have his most conspicuous case of Scripture interpreting Scripture, that is, of fundamental texts that deny or reinterpret other texts. Because predestination texts are grossly unethical and unconscionable, they are just plain wrong and should not be understood literally or regarded as infallibly true. What such scriptures mean is a matter of interpretation, but many morally and spiritually offensive biblical texts, along with those on predestination, seem quite clear. Predestination, Wesley declared, is “grounded on such an interpretation of texts...as flatly contradicts all the other texts...,” especially “all those particular texts which expressly declare, ‘God is love’.”³² Logically, where some scriptures, like “God is love,” are regarded as more fundamental or true than others, their contradictions must be false. If loving Scriptures ever conflict with unloving Scriptures, those affirming God’s love and goodness are always more basic.

³¹ Wesley, *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*, John 11:11.

³² Wesley, “Free Grace,” *Works*, 3, 552,

Wesley cited *many* predestination texts, which, by the way, are quite substantial. He also acknowledged that these texts can be plausibly *interpreted* as affirming God’s predestination of everything, including who will and who will not be saved and go to Heaven. His judgment was that *these texts and interpretations are simply wrong!* Why? Because predestination makes God not merely unloving, but downright malicious. Predestination texts turn God into a devil! Any such text “destroys all his attributes at once. It overturns both his justice, mercy, and truth. Yea, it represents the most holy God as worse than the devil; as both more false, more cruel, and more unjust.”³³ The most fundamental Christian truth is, “God is love” (1 John 4:8). That is the text that properly “interprets” all other scripture.

Wesley’s sermon on “Free Grace” was composed and preached to combat George Whitfield’s Calvinistic doctrine of predestination. It clearly states his hermeneutical principle of love for interpreting all biblical texts: “*No Scripture can mean that God is not love, or that his mercy is not over all his works.*”³⁴ In dealing with current “hot button” social issues, Wesleyans today would do well to note that Wesley deliberately disregarded all biblical texts (metaphorical or not) that are incompatible with God’s goodness and love. We should constantly remember, “*All who love are of God.*” All texts suggesting otherwise are non-literal or otherwise fallible, so there really is at least “one falsehood in that book,” maybe more. How do we identify them? Look for whatever is absurd or unloving. That is how we tell the difference between what is after the manner of men and what is after the manner of God.

11. A final example of rejecting the clear meaning of a biblical text in the name of love is what Wesley said about Malachi 1:2-3 and Romans 9:13, both of which say that God loved Jacob but hated Esau.

The assertors of this doctrine [predestination] interpret that text of Scripture, ‘Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated,’ as implying that God in a literal sense hated Esau and all the reprobated from eternity. Now what can possibly be a more flat contradiction than this, not only to the whole scope and tenor of Scripture, but also to all those particular texts which expressly declare, ‘God is love’?³⁵

³³ Wesley, “Free Grace,” *Works*, 3, 555.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 556.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 552.

Despite the very obvious literal meaning of this text, Wesley absolutely refused to accept or believe it at face value. He clearly regarded it as fallible and false, taken literally. But how else can we take it? Its meaning is very clear. Wesley did not even try to re-word or interpret it in a loving way. As far as Wesley was concerned, “God...hated Esau” was simply untrue because unloving. Are there any other unloving things in the Bible?

To generalize Wesley’s values-based position on absurd-because-unloving biblical words, phrases, and sentences: *No Biblical text is true, literally or otherwise, if it is incompatible with God’s love, justice, mercy, and goodness.* Such “truth” would be the ultimate absurdity! As Wesley acknowledged, “There are some Scriptures which more immediately commend themselves to every man’s conscience” than others.³⁶ Here, conscience is the judge of Scripture, as Scripture is of itself.

In many other instances,³⁷ Wesley explicitly identified scriptural expressions as “figurative,” “analogical,” or “after the manner of men,” and deliberately advised against taking them literally. The eleven examples given thus far well confirm that Wesley was no biblical literalist or infallibilist. He also applied his hermeneutics of love to many other morally and spiritually perplexing problems in the Bible, but that is a story told elsewhere.³⁸

Wesley firmly insisted that *we should not regard any biblical texts as literally true or infallible if they are absurd or otherwise logically or rationally incompatible with the main love-themes of the Bible.* No list of Wesley’s basic love themes is likely to be complete, but here are some of

³⁶ Wesley, “On Charity,” *Works*, 3, 292.

³⁷ See Wesley, “On the Sabbath,” *Works*, 4, 272-273; “Self-Denial,” *Works*, 2, 245; “The Important Question,” *Works*, 3, 183; “The Reward of the Righteous,” *Works*, 4, 402; “A Call to Backsliders,” *Works*, 3, 215; “Of the Church,” *Works*, 3, 53; “On Knowing Christ After the Flesh,” 3, 99; “The New Creation,” *Works*, 2, 508-509; “The Great Assize,” *Works*, 1, 358-359; “In What Sense We Are To Leave the World,” *Works*, 3, 145. For other instances, search Wesley’s *Works* for “absurdity,” “the manner of men,” “figurative,” “analogical,” and related terminology.

³⁸ See Edwards, *John Wesley’s Values—And Ours* for well documented and detailed examples of how Wesley applied his hermeneutics of non-absurdity and love to such issues as slavery, 162-163, allowing women to speak (preach) in church, 163, treating women as “agreeable playthings,” 163, womens’ absolute obedience to their husbands, 163-164, etc.

the most obvious and important instances. All of these are more carefully and fully elucidated elsewhere, as the footnotes below indicate.

1. God is love. Love is God's most important perfect-making attribute, not reason, as Classical theologians had it.³⁹

2. God is a Universalist who loves, wills to save, and gives prevenient grace to everyone, everywhere, of every religion, even while yet sinners.⁴⁰ But people are free to refuse God's universal grace.

3. Jesus came to show us how to love and how much God loves the world.⁴¹

4. Because he first loved us,⁴² we should love God with all that is in us, and we should love every person, indeed every creature that God has made,⁴³ as we love ourselves. We should think, feel, choose, and act accordingly. That is the essence of Christian ethics.⁴⁴

5. Salvation, now present, involves the restoration of the dominance of love in our souls, the rebirth within us of the image of God, understood primarily as the image of love.⁴⁵

6. Sanctification, saint-making, which takes forever, is the ongoing process of striving for and gradually achieving perfection in love, both here and hereafter.⁴⁶ This involves both God's help and our cooperation. Absolute perfection is absolute love, "entire sanctification," which some achieve in this world, Wesley thought. Yet, obviously, most of us are still striving for it.

Wesley defined a "Methodist" as "one who has 'the love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost given unto him'; one who 'loves the

³⁹ Ibid., 37-49, 191-193.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 61-64, 152-155, 186-189.

⁴¹ Ibid. References to "Christ" and "Jesus" are scattered throughout the book. See the Index.

⁴² Ibid., 54-55.

⁴³ This includes animals, who, Wesley thought, we should also do unto as we would be done unto. For details on Wesley's complex and for the most part incredibly advanced thoughts about animals and our moral duties to them see: Ibid., 73-82.

⁴⁴ Ibid. The whole book is relevant here, especially 200-208.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 57-64, 179-185, 191-194. Wesley had a very complex understanding of "the image of God," but he was one of the earliest theologians to insist on the priority of love in that image. Classical theologians insisted on the priority of reason as the image of God in us.

⁴⁶ Ibid., Ch. 5.

Lord his God with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his mind, and with all his strength.”⁴⁷ He defined an “almost Christian” as one who either does little more than believe all the doctrines of Christian orthodoxy, which even the Devils do, or else one who excels in good works while manifesting little else of true Christianity. An “almost Christian” may have well-developed Christian systemic and/or extrinsic values, but not Christian intrinsic values.

To explain this a bit, systemic values are beliefs, laws, or conceptual values of some kind. Wesley thought that the Devils in Hell fully affirm and have faith in all orthodox Christian doctrines, but they act hatefully, not lovingly. Externally, they do not act in ethical ways; thus they lack in extrinsic Christian moral values. Internally, they lack love; thus they fail in internal Christian intrinsic values. So do many highly dogmatic and legalistic Christians who equate saving faith with nothing more than believing the right rules and doctrines, but who do not *act or feel* in Christian ways. They value what Wesley called “opinions” more than good works, or people, or God; and their “hearts” are all wrong.

By contrast, worldly persons (who prevail in human societies) are not much into beliefs, theories, and orthodoxy. They just want worldly prosperity and success, and they will believe almost anything that “works” for them. Some of them respond to the “prosperity gospel” and act on Christian extrinsic moral values because they regard them as efficient means to selfish worldly ends. Viewed externally, they may look and act like altogether Christians, (as Kierkegaard and many others understood). Systemically, they are guided by the right “commandments” or rules of behavior. Extrinsicly, in practice they obey these commandments. They consistently do all the right things, but not from love, and not as means to Christian or unselfish ends. Internally, they lack Christian motives and tempers. They act morally “because it pays,” “because it is good business,” because it will bring “prosperity,” because of self-interested “reciprocal altruism,” or because doing so is basic to an egoistic “social contract.” They fall short of inner intrinsic Christian motives, dispositions, virtues, and values.

An “altogether Christian,” by contrast, manifests all three dimensions of Christian values, properly developed and prioritized. This is an ongoing process of striving for and practicing perfection in all three dimensions of

⁴⁷ Wesley, “The Character of a Methodist,” *Works*, 9, 35.

value. He or she has the right faith⁴⁸ and does the right thing⁴⁹ from love,⁵⁰ that is, through “faith working by love.”⁵¹

Given the dominance of love themes in Wesley’s whole theology, we should not be surprised to discover that love was his principal guide to interpreting the Scriptures. When two scriptures are in conflict, which one comes out on top? The love scriptures. In light of what has been said, Wesley’s claim that “All Scripture is infallibly true,”⁵² must be understood to apply only with significant qualifications. Biblical language is infallibly and literally true only if it is not absurd, which means: not contradicted by more fundamental scriptural texts, not construed literally when metaphorical, not misleadingly metaphorical, not oversimplified or greatly exaggerated, not culture bound, not contrary to reason and experience, and not ethically unconscionable and unloving. It really does not matter if the Scriptures are errant and fallible as long as they motivate us to love and show us how, who, and what to love. Wesley did not name his “Quadrilateral;” Albert Outler did. And Wesley may have suggested otherwise, but in dealing with Scripture, reason, tradition, and experience in actual practice, Scripture was not always absolutely first and foremost—except for “God is love” and the love commandments.

When interpreting the Scriptures, Wesleyans today would be well advised to follow and promote Wesley’s own hermeneutical guidelines. Our churches would be much stronger, saner, and more growing, effective, peaceful, harmonious, confessional, fulfilling, compassionate, and loving if we did. And if we did, our Wesleyan churches might not split apart, and our divinity schools would not fire some of our most promising and competent theologians.

⁴⁸ Edwards, Ch. 4.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, Ch. 3

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 142-146

⁵¹ Wesley, “The Almost Christian,” *Works*, 1, 131-141. Edwards, 145-148.

⁵² Wesley, “The Means of Grace,” *Works*, 1, 388. For a book-length analysis of the themes developed in this and the two preceding paragraphs in a much broader Christian context, one not centered on Wesley, see Rem B. Edwards, *Spiritual Values and Evaluations*, (Lexington, KY: Emeth Press, 2012).