

‘ELEMENTARY MY DEAR WATSON’: THE EFFECT OF RICHARD WATSON ON AMERICAN METHODISM

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It is true to say that just as the source of American Methodism was in various regards its English counterpart, so too in the early decades of the American Methodist Church the source of its foundational theology may be traced back to the Mother Country. The influence of John Wesley was considerable well into the 19th century, and when his views were expounded and systematized by his fellow countryman, Richard Watson, in the 1820s this influence was magnified several times. The works of early native American Methodist theologians, such as Asa Shinn, ‘...had nowhere near the influence among Methodists as did the perennial favorite, Richard Watson’s *Theological Institutes...*’,¹ and thus it behooves us to examine closely how Watson interpreted and presented both the life and works of Wesley before we explore the reaction to Watson’s efforts among American Methodists.

I. Watson’s Wesley — Refutations and Commendations

In this section of our discussion it will be necessary to focus on two of Watson’s works: his early reply to Robert Southey’s popular life of Wesley entitled, *Observations on Southey’s ‘Life of Wesley’: Being a Defence of the Character, Labours, and Opinions of Mr. Wesley, Against the Misrepresentations of that Publication;*² and his own positive presentation that appeared about ten years later entitled, *The Life of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*³

It is quite clear that Watson’s *Observations* was intended to be a strong antidote to the work of Southey which gained considerable popularity in the early 19th century, not least because it was written by England’s poet laureate. Watson was quite upset over some of the misrepresentations and misinterpretations in Southey’s work, and he sets forth to rebut them with vigor. Watson is exercised to point out that Southey’s life is defective mainly because he is out of his element, being no theologian, and secondly because Southey vacillates between interpreting Wesley in light of the popular philosophy of the day (in terms of ‘natural’ causes) and in light of Christian considerations. The following quote is somewhat representative of Watson’s complaints:

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Devotional ardour is resolved into constitutional temperament; religious joys and depressions into buoyancy of the spirits, and the influence of disease; Mr. Wesley's selection of the means of usefulness into the blind impulse of surrounding circumstances; his active zeal into ambition; the great effects of his preaching into his eloquence and opportune occurrence of a new contagious disease; his enterprise into a consciousness of his own powers; and his want of clerical regularity into his natural unsubmitiveness of mind.⁴

In short, Southey errs because he fails to allow for supernatural causes and the workings of divine Providence in Wesley's life and work. Watson attempts to correct this error and at the same time strives to show that Wesley was not guilty of various sorts of 'false enthusiasm'. Thus, Watson's *Observations* has a good deal of the flavor and substance of Wesley's *Earnest* and *Farther Appeals* in it, and like Wesley he shows a great deal of skill in logical argumentation. Watson, in this work, contends for a full-blooded and heartfelt sort of Christianity, just as Wesley did before him, but it appears that he is slightly more reticent than Wesley to accept as genuine various stories about miracles and supernatural manifestations (or side effects) that accompanied the conversion of various people who heard Wesley preach.⁵ This is not to say that he denies the reality of these phenomena, but it is clear that he strives to emphasize the more sober side of Methodism and to downplay the experiential.⁶

When Southey presses on to charge Wesley with "enthusiasm" not only in the effects of his preaching but also in some of his doctrines (particularly those of assurance and Christian perfection) Watson takes a somewhat surprising approach to answer this charge. While his arguments for finding a precedent for Wesley's view of assurance and the witness of the Spirit in various other Protestant (and Anglican) divines raise no eyebrows, it is quite unexpected to hear him say about Wesley's view of Christian perfection as well as the unique aspects of the Calvinistic system advocated by Whitefield, "Neither the one nor the other was successful in the conversion of men by the peculiarities in which they differed, but by preaching those great principles of the Gospel of Christ in which they cordially agreed."⁷ This view may explain why it is that Watson, without in any way denying Christian perfection, spends only seven pages out of more than 1200 in his *Institutes* explaining the doctrine of entire sanctification. At least in emphasis, Watson is far from Wesley at this juncture, who repeatedly affirmed that Methodists and Methodism existed to promulgate this doctrine of perfection.

Finally, we may note that Watson's way of handling Southey's charges that Wesley intended, or did not try forcefully to prevent, schism with the Church of England, reveals a certain distance between Watson and Wesley on these matters. Watson notes the various measures that Wesley took to avoid schism. Like Wesley, he argues that the forms of Church government are a matter of prudential regulation, not divine prescrip-

tion.⁸ In regard to the Lord's Supper, Watson says that Methodists have not willingly departed from Wesley's precepts but in some cases it was a choice of either providing it for them in the societies or they would not get it, for some would not in good conscience take it in an Anglican Church, and the Methodist Societies did not want to force them to take Communion in a dissenting Church.⁹ It is evident that Watson is not uneasy about being separated from the Anglican Church, nor does he think it propitious for Methodists to try and reunite at the present. There is none of Wesley's agonizing over the split in Watson's works. In fact, he complains that the conference should have made provisions to provide those societies who wished to become self-sufficient churches with an enlarged order of Sunday worship, and a plan of catechising. He clearly advocates a complete worship service with full liturgy for the societies.¹⁰ These observations likely struck a responsive chord among American Methodists who were already independent and busy establishing a new and vibrant denomination. As a summary observation, E. J. Brailsford, an early biographer of Watson, is probably right in saying that Watson overreacted to Southey's work and it is notable that Watson, while at some points being extremely critical of Southey, is forced to admit at others that Southey is generally fair to Wesley.¹¹

When we turn to Watson's *Wesley* we gain further insights into both the closeness at various points, and the distance between Watson and Wesley. Watson's *Wesley* is more in the nature of an encomium than a critical biography, but it is not the case that Watson is wholly uncritical of his hero in the faith, as we shall see. This work is not unlike other biographies of that day in that Watson quotes other authors on his subject extensively (chiefly Southey and Whitehead), as well as long segments from Wesley's Journals. In the midst of his historical narrative he is not adverse to stop and expound certain theological principles of Wesley that he felt needed defense or explanation.

Watson does not reflect the affinity for certain mild forms of Christian mysticism that Wesley reflects. Watson is quite critical of Bishop Taylor and Mr. Law, calling them "the most erring guides to that 'peace of God' " and saying, "Both are too defective in their views of faith and of its object the atonement of Christ to be able to direct a penitent and troubled spirit into the way of salvation..."¹² While Wesley would agree that these men confounded justification and sanctification, he still believed them good guides to 'holy living and holy dieing' after one was converted. Watson attributes Wesley's preoccupation with saving himself prior to Aldersgate to the influence of Taylor for, Watson avers, it led Wesley to have "...more confidence in a certain class of means, to secure his religious safety, than in the grace of God."¹³ It is typical of Watson's biography that he mainly criticizes Wesley only at the points where Wesley himself later came to criticize or reject his own thinking and actions. The most he will say against Wesley's decision not to return

to Epworth and help his family is that some of his arguments for staying in Oxford were not very weighty.¹⁴

Watson is somewhat more bold in his critique of the conduct of both Wesleys in relation to the parishioners in Georgia, for he states, "...they were not faultless, although their intentions were entirely upright. They had high notions of clerical authority; and their pastoral faithfulness was probably rigid and repulsive; for in spite of the excellence of their own natural temper, an austere cast had been given to their piety. They stood firmly on little things as well as great; and held the reins of ecclesiastical discipline with a tightness unsuitable to infant colonists..."¹⁵ In regard to the Sophy Hopkey matter, Watson points out that Wesley was at times guileless and imprudent having an "unsuspecting heart" that had not the "skill or the inclination" to be a severe judge of others or to discern their artifices.¹⁶ Interestingly, John Emory, in an appended note, protests against the way this incident in Wesley's life is portrayed in various American publications (i.e., Hale's *History of the United States*) and believes that Watson's *Wesley* will in its excellence and cheapness have wide circulation, thus countering such misrepresentations.¹⁷ This note indicates to us that in the first half of the 19th century in America Wesley was scarcely held in universal esteem, especially among the well-educated.

Watson follows Wesley in his concern about Luther's *Galatians* and the antinomian effects it might lead to. In fact, he attributes the ever increasing antinomian tendencies in the Fetter Lane Society to that very source, and their quietism he says came from "Madame Guion, and other French mystic writers."¹⁸ Watson, in the *Life*, continues (10 years after his *Observations* appeared) to argue against Southey's view about Wesley the enthusiast who produced extravagant effects in his listeners, and there is no noticeable change in his attitude towards supernatural phenomena. He still allows some of them to be genuine and affirms once more, "We do not attach primary importance to secondary circumstances; but they are not to be wholly disregarded."¹⁹ So too, with God's providential intervention in answer to prayer, Watson allows that there are some cases that Wesley claims in his *Journal* that may reasonably appear doubtful, though these examples are the exception, not the rule.²⁰

There is perhaps a somewhat stronger apology made by Watson in the *Life* for the eventual split between Methodists and the Church of England than is found in his *Observations*. For example, he calls Mr. Wesley's insistence on the Societies not interfering with Anglican Church services by meeting at the same time, and his exhorting them to communicate in the Anglican Church a reflection of Wesley's Anglican "prejudices".²¹ He argues that perhaps Mr. Wesley had "overhastily and peremptorily committed himself"²² to the arrangement whereby the Societies were still dependent upon the Anglican Church for sacraments

and regular Church services, a view which no doubt would be warmly supported by American Methodists. He also argues in the *Life* that “the idea of uniting the modern Methodists to the Church is a very visionary one”.²³ Watson insists throughout that all that Wesley did, he did because the circumstances demanded it, and because on occasion the circumstances required actions *in extremis*. Watson cites as an example his ordination of various preachers, but stresses that Wesley in his views about ecclesiastical polity had a precedent in Lord King, and even as early as 1745 he was “very free in his opinions” on such matters.²⁴ He makes pointed remarks about Wesley’s love for his Christian brethren in the Church of England and elsewhere, but points out that his Catholic spirit did not lead him to relinquish his fundamental beliefs or practices,²⁵ or for that matter to disregard “the heavenly vision” when it led him to act in irregular fashion in certain cases. Watson strives very hard to prove that even in the Minutes of 1745 and 1747 Wesley had already laid the ground work and was actually intentionally ordaining preachers, but it is perhaps better to say that he was gradually feeling his way in that direction at this point. The ordination of Coke was prepared for in these Minutes and actions, but Watson probably overreaches the evidence at this point to try and show that what Wesley did with Coke (and later others) was not impulsive but long thought out and not without precedent in his own work.

In the long section on Wesley’s theological views in the middle of the biography Watson goes to some length to vindicate Wesley’s views on assurance, Christian perfection, and other points by quoting Wesley and adding certain annotations. It is curious but nonetheless true that Watson spends more time on the distinctives of Wesley’s system here than in his own *Institutes*.²⁶ This may perhaps be explained in part by the fact that the biography is directed to the general public while the *Institutes* was apparently intended for young Methodist preachers and students of divinity who presumably would already know the Wesleyan distinctives.²⁷ Watson also gives sufficient extracts to make clear Wesley’s interest in regulating almost every aspect of his preacher’s life including his eating habits. He allows that Wesley sometimes got things out of proportion in such matters but, “If little things were by him sometimes made great; this praise, however, he had without abatement, that he never made great things little.”²⁸ One way that Watson impresses upon his reader the stature of John Wesley is by contrasting him with ‘lesser’ men — including even Charles Wesley. It is notable that Watson is wholly on John’s side in the matter of Grace Murray and also when Charles made efforts to bind the preachers to a strict allegiance to the Church of England.²⁹ Further, he also presents various of John Wesley’s ‘thorns in the flesh’, including his own wife, in a decidedly negative light. He does not try to see both sides of the case; he simply defends Wesley.³⁰

So, too, in the Calvinist controversy, he strives to portray Wesley as searching for unity with Whitefield, and he quotes the statements Wesley made that came close to Calvin's views. He does not mention or quote "Predestination Calmly Considered".³¹ He does, however, quote the famous (or infamous) Minutes of 1744 with only the remark "that there were passages calculated to awaken suspicion, and that they gave the appearance of inconsistency to Mr. Wesley's opinions."³² He is obviously reluctant to ever say that Wesley was simply wrong in some of his theological statements. About Wesley's intention to fund a college or seminary for the connection at large, Watson is strongly approving and regrets that in this design Wesley did not succeed, for often children of Methodists ended up in schools, "Where their religious principles have been neglected or perverted..."³³

It is interesting that when Watson turns to make a few remarks on Methodism in America, Emory has to step in at various points to correct or qualify Watson's remarks.³⁴ When he speaks on Methodism in his own day, he continues to argue from John Wesley's point of view claiming that even yet the Methodist Societies had not separated on such principles or with such feelings of hostility as Charles Wesley feared.³⁵ Watson, however, seems to depart somewhat from his mentor on the matter of itinerancy by suggesting that more liberty should be allowed instead of insisting that all ministers move every three years. This tentative suggestion is strongly repudiated by Emory in his note which speaks of the glories and glorious effects of itinerancy.³⁶ Our author also seems to make light of Wesley's anger about Coke and Asbury calling themselves bishops. Indeed, he says, "The only objection he could have to the name was, that from a long association, it was likely to convey a meaning beyond his own intention. But this was a matter of mere prudential feeling, confined to himself; so that neither were Mr. Coke and Mr. Asbury to be blamed for using that appellation in Mr. Wesley's sense..."³⁷ Further, he is willing to allow that Wesley was often too anxious to appear perfectly consistent, when some of the things he sanctioned and did were in fact inconsistent with Church of England practice and tradition.³⁸ Wesley was a man wise enough to realize that circumstances sometimes require changes in any organization, and Watson, true to his Master's method of operation, justifies the changes that had then been and would be made after Wesley's death in Methodist Societies on these same grounds.³⁹ We have seen that Watson was quick to rebut or qualify any serious charges made against Wesley, while allowing some lesser faults. As a final example of this tendency we may note how Watson handles the charge of Southey and others that Wesley yearned for power. He says,

As to the love of power, it may be granted that like many minds who seem born to direct, he desired to acquire influence; and when he obtained it, he employed his one talent so as to make it gain more talents.

If he had loved power for its own sake, or to minister to selfish purposes, or to injure others, this would have been a great blemish; but he sacrificed no principle of his own, and no interest or right of others, for its gratification.⁴⁰

Such is the portrait Watson paints of Wesley for his readers, a portrait intended for the most part to depict Wesley in the most favorable light that conscience and honesty would allow. The work is not without certain small criticisms made by Watson of Wesley, but on the whole it is a full-blooded defense of the great man in response to earlier less favorable biographies (Moore, Whitehead, and Southey). Undoubtedly, this work helped to reassure Methodists of the day and made them proud of their founder, and also aided the efforts to show the general public that Wesley was a respectable and admirable religious leader.

II. Watson's *Institutes* — “the Arminian Antidote”

Watson's *Institutes* is surely one of the major works of Methodist theology in any age. Watson was highly skilled in argumentation and systematization on theological subjects, and in this work he finds the perfect vehicle for his talents. As we shall see, this work so adequately filled a need and was so full of brilliant discussion that it became the standard theological work for Methodist preachers almost as soon as it was published. It may even be suspected that in various regards it eclipsed Wesley's Sermons and Notes as a source for preaching and teaching.

The work is self-consciously cast in the mold of the systematic theologies of Watson's day and earlier and is divided into four very uneven (quantity-wise) parts. Of the more than 1200 pages in the *Institutes*, 236 are spent in the Evidences of Christianity, 815 on the Doctrines of Christianity, 104 on the Morals of Christianity, and 100 on the Institutions of Christianity. It is when Watson discusses the *ordo salutis* that he is most comfortable and in his element, and it is here ultimately in Part II of his *Institutes* that he makes his greatest contribution. It appears that in the main Watson wrote the *Institutes* as an *apologia* in order to defend the Methodist faith against deism, Calvinism, Antinomianism, and the popular naturalistic and ‘Socinian’ philosophies of his day. This would explain why it is that so much time is spent by Watson arguing against these views in the first two parts of his work, and at the same time why so little time is spent discussing such Wesleyan essentials as prevenient grace and Christian perfection. Apparently, the work was written to provide Methodists with ammunition to combat their detractors, and Watson assumed that the basic Wesleyan distinctives were too well known by Methodist preachers to need much exposition. E. D. Dunlap is probably correct in saying that this lack of sufficient discussion of the positive distinctives of Wesleyan theology by Watson led in later generations to a loosening hold on true Wesleyan

views.⁴¹ Be that as it may, Watson made some considerable contributions in this work.

The first portion of the *Institutes* was the part destined to raise the most objections among American Methodists for several reasons. Primarily, the difficulty lay in the fact that Watson, like Wesley before him, did not accept the concept of “the necessary truths of reason” or the doctrine of “innate ideas”.⁴² In this he was influenced by Locke’s empiricism, believing that all knowledge came to one from outside of himself and that reason was a discursive, not intuitive, faculty. Reason was strictly subordinate to faith in the study of religious matters. Watson thus placed no stock in *a priori* arguments for the truthfulness or reasonableness of revelation and religion. He had no faith in *a priori* arguments for God’s existence. Once God was accepted on faith, however, reason could serve to confirm and provide evidence to support such a conviction. Watson thus proceeds to provide various *a posteriori* proofs for the Divine Authority of the Holy Scriptures.⁴³

A second sticking point also arose because of Watson’s denial that human reason left to itself could “feel after God and find him”. He thus denied the value of so-called natural theology. His point was that human reason was often and too easily mistaken and the evidence of God’s existence in nature, too diffuse and general to lead to any sort of sufficient knowledge of God, much less belief in the God of the Bible. If one was to know God, God must reveal Himself directly to him — He could not be found by exploring either the epistemic principles of the mind or the vastness of nature.⁴⁴ Watson was also quick to point out that after all, the Fall and the original sin tainted all one’s thinking. None of this sat well with various American Methodist thinkers who were growing in their praise of a belief in one’s innate abilities, our rational faculties, our independence and freedom in this world. We shall have occasion to discuss this further later in this study.

The second portion of the *Institutes* is a *tour de force*. It is perhaps true that Watson here does not do full justice to the confirmation of spiritual truth in evangelical experience,⁴⁵ but apart from this the second section of the *Institutes* would likely have been wholeheartedly endorsed by Wesley.

On original sin, Watson follows essentially in Wesley’s footsteps. He argues that a human being is trichotomous: body, soul, and spirit (the former two being innate in one’s creation, the latter a special gift of God). That Adam sinned and that all humanity has felt the effects or consequences of his sin is central to his argument. It is true that Watson denied that “we sinned in Adam” or that “Adam as man sinned for us and thus we sinned the original sin”. He appears to object to these views because of his strong notion of individual accountability before God. He would not allow that any sin which we did not actually (individually) commit would be imputed to us by God.⁴⁶ He seems also

to have been influenced at certain points by Calvin's views of Adam as humanity's federal head, to a greater degree than Wesley was.⁴⁷ Like Wesley, Watson talks of a deprivation (of God's presence) which led to a deprivation (of man's nature),⁴⁸ and Watson does not in the least doubt that a human being is *non posse, non peccare* after the Fall, if left to his own devices. When the Spirit of God withdrew from Adam, once he sinned, he became totally depraved, i.e., corrupt in every facet of his being (physically, mentally, morally, spiritually). Also, like Wesley, Watson believed that one of the universal benefits of the atonement of Christ is the extension to everyone of "pre-venting" grace which works to re-establish one in the position where he can choose between good and evil. Watson, like Wesley, was using the Bible as the essential source book of his theology, but it is interesting that at this point both men have few Scriptures (apart from talking about the "light that enlightens every man...") to support the notion of prevenient grace. In one sense, Watson and Wesley are more consistent at this point than Calvin in assigning whatever good one may do after the Fall to God's grace (not to vestigial good tendencies left in the *Imago Dei* after the Fall). The 'pessimism of nature' and the 'optimism of grace' is to be found in both men's writings. But Watson, by failing to spell out this doctrine of prevenient grace more clearly, opened the door for Whedon, Miley, and others especially in America to assign fallen humanity's free agency simply to his own human capacities.

When we turn to the exposition of Watson on the Atonement and its benefits, we find very little if anything substantial to differentiate Watson's treatment of the subject from Wesley's. Both men stressed personal substitutionary atonement, and both men agreed that Christ's death was sufficient for all and efficient for all who believed. Dunlap claims that Watson focuses more specifically on Christ's death as obedience and of salvific value, but he provides little evidence to substantiate this claim.⁴⁹ Both Watson and Wesley had reservations about the use of the term 'imputed righteousness', and were constantly striving to make clear that it was the imputation of faith for righteousness, the acceptance of the former in place of the latter that allows one to be pardoned. It is clear that both men wish to avoid the idea of God accepting Christ's righteousness in place of ours so that righteousness is no longer required of God's people.⁵⁰ The strong emphasis on moral obedience in both men's works precluded their allowing any suggestion that one did not need to work out his own salvation (and sanctification) with fear and trembling. Both men maintain this stress in part because their hermeneutical approach to the Old Testament demanded it, i.e., it is still incumbent on the Christian to obey all of the Old Testament law unless it has been abolished or fulfilled in the New Testament. If anything, Watson is even more insistent on obedience to God's law than Wesley. This is perhaps because Watson is determined to take on

Calvinism in both its theology and implications for religious practice. His arguments and exegesis are often brilliant, but sometimes, especially where he strives to make every text fit an Arminian view of the extent or nature of the Atonement, he resorts to theological gymnastics.⁵¹ There is, in Watson's systematizing of the Arminian view, a tendency also to tidy up loose ends, sometimes unnecessarily, with the end result that something of the excitement and interest in Wesley's teaching about spontaneous sanctification and justification is lost. Watson, however, was known to have had a 'heart-warming' experience of assurance (to have claimed the witness of the Spirit in his life) himself, and it is unfortunate that he did not spend more time exploring the experiential as well as the cognitive aspects of the Methodist faith.⁵²

Watson spent little time expounding our moral duties, or the nature of the Christian sacraments. The 3rd and 4th portions of his *Institutes* are quite brief and appear almost tacked on at the end after the author had finished writing about what really interested him.⁵³ By simply rehearsing our duties in his ethical section in part 4, Watson separates practice from theology, even if not intentionally, and there is little to distinguish his exposition from the standard moralizing of his day about duties to God, country, and countrymen and family.⁵⁴ Then, too, Watson does not seem to hold the sacraments in as high a regard as did Wesley. There is only a hint of the idea of the "real presence" in his explanation of the Lord's Supper,⁵⁵ and he avers that communicating once a month is sufficient, while Wesley took the sacrament several times a week.⁵⁶ Finally, it appears that Watson did not view the Lord's Supper as a converting, as well as confirming, sacrament as Wesley did, or at least not to the same extent as Wesley.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, in Watson's *Institutes*, we find an exposition essentially faithful to the preaching and teaching of Wesley.⁵⁸

None of the criticisms mentioned above, however, were the main criticisms leveled at Watson's *Institutes* by American Methodists. Thus, we must now examine the impact of Watson's work in American Methodist circles.

III. Watson's Work in the New World — Reception and Rejection

When, in 1816, American Methodists began to show their concern about the education of their preachers and established a Course of Studies, Richard Watson was still six years away from publishing any of his *magnum opus*. But it was not long (perhaps only 14 years) before Watson's *Institutes* was the theological textbook for the first year of the course of studies. Thus it was recognized quite early as an able, even definitive, exposition of Methodist doctrines. As Leland Scott says, "Richard Watson, directly or indirectly, was the determinative theological force in the mind of the Methodists. It was Watson's systematic treatment of the theological motifs of Wesley and Flet-

cher...which proved to be the standard theological source in American Methodism for at least three decades following the early 1840s.’’⁵⁹ In fact, it was the standard treatment for 50 years or more.⁶⁰ In 1877, Daniel Curry, a leading theologian of his day, ascribes the theological unity of Methodism principally to Watson’s *Institutes*.⁶¹ Even until the turn of the 20th century, Methodist theologians were writing their own works with one eye constantly on Watson’s work. Ralston, Wakefield, Lee, Binney, and Raymond all issued their own American ‘translations’, modifications of Watson’s original study.⁶² We know, furthermore, that in 1850 John McClintock’s 90 page analysis was printed in the *Institutes* as a key and introduction to the work. This greatly increased the usefulness and influence of this huge tome.⁶³ Not until the last decade of the 19th century when we come to John Miley’s *Systematics* do we discern the disappearance of Watson as the determinative theological influence on the content and structure of Methodist theology.⁶⁴

This does not mean that were not various criticisms leveled at Watson’s *Institutes* prior to Miley. But the development of a truly indigenous Methodist theology for Americans did not really take place before Miley. The earliest serious criticisms of Watson’s work came in the Methodist Quarterly Review in 1838-1839 by W. M. Bangs, the son of the famous Nathan Bangs. Bangs, who appears to have taken Watson’s side on the question of the place of reason and the possibilities of natural theology, criticizes Watson for not being consistent enough in his appeal to the unique primacy of the testimony of revelation with respect to man’s knowledge of God. In short, Watson spent too much time on evidences in the first part of his *Institutes* to suit Bangs, even though his aim of refuting the Deists on this matter was noble.⁶⁵ Quite the opposite critique is, however, the usual response to Watson’s work.

Abel Stevens, in history of Methodism, says of the *Institutes*, ‘‘It is deficient in its treatment of the abundant arguments for and against revelation which have been drawn from the late progress of the natural sciences...’’⁶⁶ Watson’s main critics, however, were the influential editor of the *Methodist Quarterly Review*, Daniel Whedon, and one of its more vocal contributors during the 1860s, B. F. Cocker. Both men reflected the tendency in American Methodism of that day towards an increasing stress on the capabilities of human reason, on individual responsibility, and consequently on human freedom of the will. Whedon is particularly distressed with Watson’s Lockian epistemology, as is Cocker. Cocker believes Watson cast doubts on our faculties and thus unsettles all the foundations of truth — for if our means of knowing are of uncertain consistency then what we know must likewise be uncertain.⁶⁷ Further, if we owe our knowledge of God to revelation alone we cannot prove by an independent means, such as human reason, that the Bible is God’s revelation. Finally, Cocker thinks that if one rejects the concept of innate ideas, it is impossible to account for the existence

of belief in God and in moral behavior that even a non-Christian person has intuitively in every age and culture.⁶⁸ Cocker's writings were serious enough that they elicited a full response by John Levington in 1863 who defends Watson at every point.⁶⁹ While at some points Levington does get carried away, he is probably right that both Whedon and Cocker overreacted to Watson's epistemology. Watson certainly did reject the concept of innate ideas as did Wesley and thus he certainly argued for reason as a discursive, not intuitive, faculty, but he did not deny that there was evidence in humanity of God's existence. What he did deny was that such evidence in nature (cf. Romans 1) was sufficient to lead one to an adequate, much less saving, knowledge of God. Both Cocker and Whedon reflected the increasing tendency in American thinking towards an "optimism of nature" that eventually replaced the true Wesleyan emphasis on an "optimism of grace". Indeed, Scott says that Whedon, in his reviews from 1856-1881 in the *Quarterly* and in his other writings, was a major force in diverting the 19th century American mind from an unqualified acceptance and appeal to Watson, and this is likely an accurate analysis.⁷⁰ By the time Miley wrote his *Systematics* it was acceptable to differ with Watson in fundamental ways because Whedon, Cocker, and others had prepared the Methodist reader for a change in approach.

It is perhaps significant that the critiques of Watson were leveled almost exclusively against the first section of his *Institutes* — the *Evidences of Christianity*. The battle of presuppositions about the relation of reason and faith, free will and grace, had to be settled before one could venture openly to disagree with Watson on the doctrines of faith. What the conflict in fact tends to show is that American Methodist thinking in general, in the heady atmosphere of independence and expansion, and ultimately under the influence of Kant and others, was more and more moving in the direction of a Pelagian view of human nature. Consequently, an increasingly shallow view of human sin and the necessity of Christ's substitutionary atonement arose. Unfortunately, the drive for a more indigenous Methodist theology in this country in the 19th century led, at least in some circles, to a gradual departure from a Wesleyan and Biblical position. That which replaced Watson in Methodist thinking was not a new systematic and biblically grounded reflection on Wesley's doctrines, but adoption by Methodist theologians of the popular or 'folk' philosophy of the day that placed humanity at center stage and relegated God to the role of our helper. Methodism in the United States was moving from the 'folk' theology of Wesley, systematized by Watson, to the indigenous 'folk' philosophy of the New World tempered by a strong tendency toward moralism and emotionalism.⁷¹

Yet it would be unfair to suggest that this was all that was happening in the 19th century American Methodist theological development. What

we are able to trace is primarily what happened among educated Methodists who wrote. Probably Watson's (and Wesley's) influence continued to be strong well into the 20th century among some scholars and among many Methodist lay people. A small, but perhaps telltale, indication of the ongoing impact of both Watson's theological works and his *Life of Wesley* can be seen in a copy of Watson's *Wesley* that this author owns. It once belonged to one Sally Houghton (d. 1834) of Leominster, Mass., and was passed down in her family. On the inside of its front cover we find pasted family wedding notices, while on the inside back cover we find pasted Sally Houghton's obituary. In short, the work was treated as many people have treated their family Bible. Doubtless, there were many who cherished and followed their Wesleyan heritage regardless of the work of the theologians of the day, as this family apparently had done. In any event, it may be safely concluded that even in the New World Richard Watson's influence endured throughout the century, though with decreasing force. The Wesley that many, if not most, American Methodists knew in the 19th century was the Wesley Watson presented and interpreted.



ENDNOTES

- ¹F. A. Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism* (Nashville, 1974), 226.
- ²Richard Watson, *Observations on Southey's 'Life of Wesley'* (2nd ed.; London, 1821). The second edition is the only one available to this author. The work was apparently written in 1820 or even in part before that date while Watson was still in his 30s.
- ³Richard Watson, *The Life of John Wesley, A.M.* (New York, 1831). John Emory, the publisher, also prepared notes and translations for this edition which perhaps says something about the sort of clientele to which it was directed.
- ⁴*Observations*, 4-5.
- ⁵For instance, at one point (*Observations*, 40) he says that miracles are of rare occurrence. Later on in the work (94) he argues that the dramatic side effects were not nearly so usual as Southey thought, but that because they were out of the ordinary Wesley noted them in his Journal. Watson notes that some of them were in fact "truly extravagant" (95), yet he notes that Wesley was not uncritical about such matters.
- ⁶Cf. *Observations*, 100-22. He even appeals to the precedent in the NT and in Church history to validate the authenticity of at least some of these experiences.
- ⁷*Observations*, 185.
- ⁸*Observations*, 141, n. 3.
- ⁹*Observations*, 142-3.
- ¹⁰*Observations*, 144-50.
- ¹¹E. J. Brailsford, *Richard Watson, Theologian and Missionary Advocate* (London, n.d.) 108; cf. *Observations*, 162.
- ¹²*The Life*, 18.
- ¹³*Life*, 28, cf. 34.
- ¹⁴*Life*, 28; contrast S. Ayling, *John Wesley* (Nashville, 1979) 56-8.
- ¹⁵*Life*, 35-6.
- ¹⁶*Life*, 39-40, 44-5.
- ¹⁷*Life*, 44 note.
- ¹⁸*Life*, 81; contrast Wesley's own more balanced remark on "Madame Guion" in *Life*, 207.
- ¹⁹*Life*, 87-8.
- ²⁰*Life*, 127.
- ²¹*Life*, 92.
- ²²*Life*, 94.

²³*Life*, 307.

²⁴*Life*, 134-5. Emory notes that circumstances of emergency necessitated the ordination of Coke and Asbury for the U.S., thus making it clear to the American audience that Wesley even at this point did not wish to be schismatic.

²⁵*Life*, 115.

²⁶Cf. *Life*, 146-172 to *Theological Institutes*, vol. II (New York, 1850) 450-7.

²⁷Cf. Brailsford, *Watson*, 100.

²⁸*Life*, 177.

²⁹*Life*, 183-7

³⁰*Life*, 187 ff. Mrs Vazeille was, "...wholly swallowed up in the passion of jealousy." Contrast Ayling, *John Wesley*, 215-31.

³¹*Life*, 210-13.

³²*Life*, 213-20.

³³*Life*, 191-2. To this point Emory adds an annotated 'amen', noting how applicable such remarks are to the American situation of Methodists.

³⁴*Life*, 201-3; corrections come on the numbers of Baptists in relation to Methodists, and on the state of Methodist education in the U.S.

³⁵*Life*, 232.

³⁶*Life*, 241-2 and note.

³⁷*Life*, 247.

³⁸*Life*, 252.

³⁹*Life*, 322.

⁴⁰*Life*, 318.

⁴¹E. D. Dunlap, *Methodist Theology in Great Britain in the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven, 1956) 151-2.

⁴²*Institutes* I, 274-5.

⁴³Contra R. E. Chiles, *Theological Transition in American Methodism 1790-1935* (Nashville, 1965) 48-9, who wrongly contends that "Watson's extended and varied efforts to establish the divine authority of Scripture clearly hint that his ultimate allegiance was to evidence external to Scripture itself." Nothing could be further from the truth. For Watson, revelation was essentially self-authenticating, though external evidence could be corroborative. It is also hard to see any justice in Chiles' critique (87-9) that Watson is furthest from Wesley in his discussion of revelation and reason. Cf. Dunlap, *Methodist Theology*, 165 ff. Part I of the *Institutes* resonates with echoes from Wesley's *Earnest Appeal*.

⁴⁴*Institutes* I, 15-44.

⁴⁵As Chiles, *Theological Transition*, 97 avers.

- ⁴⁶Cf. Watson, *Institutes* II, 46-53. Chiles, *Theological Transition*, 124-9; Dunlap, *Methodist Theology*, 112-4, 140 ff. Watson does, however, allow the imputation or sin in the sense that Watts took it, i.e., the imputation of the effects of that sin. Cf. Vol. II, 53-5.
- ⁴⁷Cf. *Institutes* II, 48 ff. At several places in the *Institutes* we see the effects of Calvin's federalistic notions on Watson. Cf. also Watson on baptism (*Institutes* II, 614 ff.).
- ⁴⁸Cf. *Institutes* II, 55, to Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley A.M.* (ed. T. Jackson; 3rd ed.; London, 1829) VI.244.
- ⁴⁹Dunlap, *Methodist Theology*, 212-3.
- ⁵⁰Cf. *Institutes* II, 215-43; John Wesley, *Sermons on Several Occasions* (London, n.d.) 62 ff. Watson, in perfect parallelism to his argument that we feel the effects or consequences of Adam's sin, argues that we receive the benefits or consequences of Christ's righteousness.
- ⁵¹Cf. *Institutes* II, 314 ff. on Exodus 33.19, Malachi 1.2, 3 *et al.*
- ⁵²Cf. Dunlap, *Methodist Theology*, 125-6 and n. 1. Watson does, however, stress the Wesleyan point that while faith is *sola* it is not *solitaria*. Cf. *Institutes* II, 246-50.
- ⁵³It may however, be the case that this was not Watson's fault, as his health was failing as he was finishing the *Institutes*.
- ⁵⁴Cf. *Institutes* II, 665-671.
- ⁵⁵Cf. Dunlap, *Methodist Theology*, 217-8.
- ⁵⁶*Institutes* II, 670.
- ⁵⁷*Institutes* II, 669-70.
- ⁵⁸Cf. Chiles, *Theological Transition*, 46-7; Dunlap, *Methodist Theology*, 217.
- ⁵⁹Leland Scott, *Methodist Theology in America in the Nineteenth Century* (unpub. Yale Univ Diss., 1954) 143.
- ⁶⁰Cf. C. A. Rogers, "The Theological Heritage of the Early Methodist Preachers", *Duke Divinity Review* 34 (3, 1969) 205. G. O. McCulloch, "The Changing Theological Emphases" in *The History of American Methodism* II (ed. E. Bucke; Nashville, 1964) 593).
- ⁶¹Cf. Dunlap, *Methodist Theology*, 144.
- ⁶²Cf. Chiles, *Theological Transition*, 54-5; Scott, *Methodist Theology*, 140.
- ⁶³Scott, *Methodist Theology*, 144.
- ⁶⁴Scott, *Methodist Theology*, 470.
- ⁶⁵Scott, *Methodist Theology*, 145-6.
- ⁶⁶A. Stevens, *The History of the Religious Movement of the Eighteenth Century, called Methodism, considered in its Different Denominational Forms and its Relations to British and American Protestantism* (New York, 1861) III, 474.

- ⁶⁷Cf. B. F. Cocker, "Metaphysics of Watson's Institutes", *Methodist Quarterly Review* 44 (1862) 181-207; Cocker, "The Moral Philosophy of the 'Institutes of Theology' by Rev. Richard Watson", *Methodist Quarterly Review* 46 (1864) 5-28, 181-94.
- ⁶⁸Cf. Cocker, "The Moral Philosophy", 5-28 to Scott, *Methodist Theology*, 146-7.
- ⁶⁹John Levington, *Watson's Theological Institutes Defended* (Detroit, 1863) cf. pp. 11 ff. etc.
- ⁷⁰Scott, *Methodist Theology*, 142-3, 148-9.
- ⁷¹Cf. Scott, *Methodist Theology*, 498; Chiles, *Theological Transition*, 200-06; F. A. Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism* (Nashville, 1974), 226-9.

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