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# Text and Performance in John Wesley's Final Oxford Sermon: Antithesis and Appeal in Scriptural Christianity

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## Text and Performance in John Wesley's Final Oxford Sermon:

### Antithesis and Appeal in *Scriptural Christianity*

Without question, John Wesley, the principal leader of the Methodist movement and thus the torch-bearer of England's Evangelical Revival, is recognized as the most prolific itinerant preacher of eighteenth century Christendom. For the entirety of the nineteenth century, and half of the twentieth, church historians largely relegated his title to "British evangelical revivalist," until new critical editions of his Works emerged by the mid 1980's and a legitimate movement of Wesleyan scholarship was launched which today re-values Wesley multifaceted contribution as a missionary, organizational catalyst, populist author, spiritual director, creative educator and, most essential to our current topic, an Anglican homiletical theologian.<sup>1</sup>

To fully appreciate Wesley's preaching, and the particular sermon we will momentarily analyze, we must place his preaching in its proper tension between two contexts. First, his ecclesial rhetorical context. He is a conventional, eighteenth-century, neoclassical Anglican homilist. Here, we need not trace the development of Oxford's own advocacy of the resurgence of the classics, but Wesley's sermon form clearly identifies his continuance of prevailing homiletic expectations.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The *Bicentennial Edition* remains the most substantial critical edition, the initial four volumes dedicated to Wesley's published sermons. Albert C. Outler, *The Bicentennial Edition of The Works of John Wesley: Sermons* (4 vols.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1984-1988).

<sup>2</sup> Witherington helpfully summarizes the classical *dispositio* elements. Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 44. Anglican neoclassical sermons, of which Wesley's is normative, often streamlined the elements into *exordium/partitio*, *probatio/refutatio*, and *peroratio*. Jean Claude also discusses the versions of Anglican homilies influencing Wesley's time. Jean Claude, *Essay on the Composition of a Sermon in Two Volumes* (1779) ed. Robert Robinson, (Cambridge: printed by Francis Hodson: sold by J. Buckland, London: and T. Fletcher, Cambridge, 1778). Another excellent source is Lessenich. Rolph P. Lessenich, *Elements of Pulpit Oratory in Eighteenth-Century England (1660-1800)* (Cologn: Bohlen Verlag, 1972).

This is in tension, however, with Wesley's experiential rhetorical context. Wesley's own spiritual journey had dramatically shifted his preaching life, in doctrine and in scope. Doctrinally, he now emphasized two essential orthodox doctrines—soteriology and pneumatology. In scope, Wesley's ministry oscillated between urban to rural settings, between British and Colonial soil, between chaplain to the wealthy and proclamation among the Bristol miners, between the learned halls of Oxford and charity work in prisons, between cathedral and meeting house, between multi-volume publishing ventures and inexpensive tracts, between the spiritual formation of society and class members and polemical exchanges with his detractors. These dynamics constantly thrust him into a panoply of rhetorical situations. Wesley became a communicator adept at audience analysis, message clarity (known then as "plain" style), and performance effectiveness. The mature Wesley later trained his circuit riders according to a pamphlet entitled, *Directions Concerning Pronunciation and Gesture*.<sup>3</sup>

These tensions are dynamically at work in the text and performance of one of Wesley's most consequential sermons, *Scriptural Christianity*. Let us briefly examine the setting, audience, sermonic movements and auditor reactions of this pivotal sermon in Wesley's storied homiletic career.

### **Setting and Audience**

As an Oxford fellow, Wesley's name was placed in the regular rotation of chapel preaching, and he was scheduled for the St. Mary's canopied pulpit on August 24, 1744, overlooking the dozens of pews designated properly according to the roles of their occupants.<sup>4</sup> The

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<sup>3</sup> James H. Potts, *Living Thoughts of John Wesley: A Comprehensive Selection of the Living Thoughts of the Founder of Methodism as Contained in His Miscellaneous Works* (New York: Hunt and Eaton, 1891). 374.

<sup>4</sup> Southerland, L.S. and L.G. Mitchell, eds. *The History of the University of Oxford: Vol. V, The Eighteenth Century*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 411-412.

English Gothic nave, as it stood that day, had been completed only 100 years earlier, and undergraduates would have been in the gallery to Wesley's pulpit left.<sup>5</sup> The occasion is the regular University service, but later, Wesley strongly suggests that the unspoken occasion of this sermon is St. Bartholomew's Day, commemorating the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre in France during August 23-24, 1572. As an active tutoring fellow only a few years earlier, some students had already complained of Wesley's unfair expectations of spiritual discipline as demonstrated by the derisively-called "Holy Club," in which he was a leader. Now, the early successes and resulting controversies over "Methodism" were well underway, and his reputation as a revivalist had preceded him. Stephen Gunter reminds us that the well-informed of Wesley's Oxford audience already viewed him as an enthusiast.<sup>6</sup> From Wesley's own perspective, he does not enter the pulpit as a foe, rather as an interventionist. To him personally, Oxford will always be a beloved institution, though it deserves sermonic, spiritual correction.<sup>7</sup>

### **Sermonic Movements**

Such correction comes in the form of *Scriptural Christianity*. Wesley's *exordium* begins quite deftly, for his theme is pneumatological and, with this audience, the doctrine of the Holy Spirit must be affirmed without enthusiasm, that is, emotionalism. So, he dispels any intention of re-instigating controversies around the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Many in the congregation knew well that Wesley himself was, of late, generating such controversy by the charismatic expressions manifest in his own revival meetings. But Wesley seems intent

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<sup>5</sup>University Church of St. Mary the Virgin website. [Cited 9.10.2017]. <http://www.university-church.ox.ac.uk/church/history.htm>

<sup>6</sup> Stephen W. Gunter, *The Limits of Love Divine: John Wesley's Response to Antinomianism and Enthusiasm* (Nashville: Kingswood, 1989), 13-26.

<sup>7</sup> As Rack summarizes: "Oxford culture and the instincts of an Oxford tutor never really deserted him." Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992), 360.

to sermonically create a theological commons, an initial agreement between himself and the congregation. He announces his intention to focus on the fruit of the Holy Spirit, that Pauline list from Galatians 5:22-23: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control. Surely, Wesley reasons, these are declared by Scripture to be normative for all Christians, and “by scripture” is indeed the operative phrase. In the fourth introductory paragraph, Wesley indicates that “no one can deny that God sent the Holy Spirit for a purpose that is undeniably essential to all Christians in all ages.”<sup>8</sup> He then punctuates the *exordium* by insisting that this very list of spiritual virtues, endowed supernaturally by the Holy Spirit, are the distinguishing mark of a Christian, indeed the New Testament’s very definition of a “Christian.”

Wesley then proceeds, in chronological fashion, to argue from multiple scriptural accounts (especially the Acts narrative) that Christians, from past to future, are identified by their display of these spiritual virtues. In the first heading (or main point I.), Wesley chronicles these transformative virtues in individual convert’s lives. Wesley assembles Scripture quotations and references which verify that individual believers experienced private, inward transformation which soon manifested as all nine of the spiritual qualities listed by Paul. The second heading (II.) argues that, as Christianity spread, the surrounding culture was threatened by these spiritual virtues (though all nine are here assumed rather than listed) and culture responded with persecution. In the third heading, Wesley envisions the prophetic day when Christianity has spread throughout the earth, what he terms “the coming Christian world.” Here, he describes how four of the fruit—love, joy, peace, and kindness—will prevail in the divine Kingdom on Earth. The thread of Wesley’s sermonic

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<sup>8</sup> Kenneth C. Kinghorn, ed. *John Wesley on Christian Beliefs: The Standard Sermons in Modern English, Volume I*. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002). For presentational readability, the *Scriptural Christianity* text quoted in this paper is from the Kinghorn edition.

argument in *Scriptural Christianity*, then, is that Scripture insists that every level of the Christian experience, from individual to societal to worldwide, is marked by the manifestation of Paul's list of Spirit-fruit. This thesis is thoroughly Anglican, and Wesley's congregation should have nodded approvingly of his *exordium* and argumentative sections of the sermon. Yet, there is one heading remaining: Wesley's "clear and practical" (IV, i.) application.

In the opening paragraph of the application, Wesley asks eight rhetorical questions, each of which his audience tacitly hopes to answer positively. Among the questions are: "Where does this Christianity now exist? Where can we find a place in which the inhabitants are all filled with the Holy Spirit? Can we properly term any territory a Christian country, if it does not conform to this description?" Wesley is aware, however, that the answers he is to propose will not be affirmative, so in a pivotal paragraph he anticipates congregant's coming rejection of the sermon, based on a rejection of his own controversial ministry, and pleads for a hearing: "I entreat you, sisters and brothers....Even if you consider me a fool, hear me out...If I do not speak to you in a direct way, who will?" (IV. 2) He then begins a comprehensive spiritual censure of his audience, beginning with their national identity and narrowing toward the naming each identifiable group immediately present in the sanctuary. Is this a Christian country? (IV. 1.) Is "genuine, scriptural Christianity to be found in this city?" (IV. 3) "Are the Magistrates, Principles, Governors of Colleges and Halls, and their respective societies, (not to mention the inhabitants of the town), "of one heart and mind" with love, the chief fruit of the Spirit?" (IV. 3) Based on Wesley's aforementioned definition of Christianity as marked by spiritual fruit, the implicit answer, on all accounts, is "no." Wesley then turns to the Oxford faculty. "You respected teachers, are you 'filled with the Spirit' that your office so absolutely requires?" (IV. 6) The preacher then specifically

mentions the fruit of love, patience, gentleness and self-control (IV. 6-7). Do these “characterize...the fellows of our colleges?” (IV. 7). What of those at Oxford representing the “ministerial office”? (IV. 8) He then addresses the student body. “What shall we say of the young people of this place?” (IV. 9.) Wesley then readily and humbly confesses that he, as a student, failed to exhibit spiritual fruit, but this does not alter his estimation of them as “a generation of triflers.” (IV. 10). In all, ninety-eight rhetorical questions (implying a negative answer) are posed in the application of the sermon, a barrage which no other of Wesley’s revival sermons display. These are reinforced with twelve exclamations.

I have previously proposed that Wesley’s chief rhetorical strategy in his early revival sermons is antithesis, a claim to which the entirety of *Scriptural Christianity* adds substantiation.<sup>9</sup> We noted that, in the *exordium*, he contrasts the then-controversial subject of spiritual gifts with the broadly accepted subject of the fruit of the Spirit. In the first main point, he highlights the antithesis between the unspiritual characteristics of the pre-convert with the Spirit-fruit of the convert. In the second heading, several antitheses appear: light versus darkness (II. 1), idleness versus work (II. 2), experiencing divine wrath versus fleeing divine wrath (II. 3), spiritual sleep versus spiritual awakening (II. 4), the joyous growth of the church versus the hate-filled growing persecution of the church (II. 5-9). In the third main point, the future “Christian world” envisions Israel’s *diaspora* versus Israel’s regathering, and Wesley quotes Isaiah’s poetic antithesis of the lion lying down with the lamb (III. 1). Then, Wesley contrasts Israel and Gentiles (III. 2), war and peace (III. 3), justice and mercy (III. 4), abusive language and kindness (III. 5), a violent land and a peaceful land (III. 6). And, finally, the application section also displays the pattern of antithesis in pairings

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<sup>9</sup> H. Vaughn Whithead, “A Rhetorical Analysis of the Published Sermons Preached by John Wesley at Oxford University” (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1958).

like these two sentences describing the Oxford faculty: “Do you demonstrate earnestness, calmness, patience, humility, moderation and self-control? (IV. 7)” versus “Instead, have we not been charged with pride...impatience...laziness, gluttony, sensuality...? (IV. 8). Wesley, for three sermonic sections, patiently established the characteristics of scriptural Christianity and, in the final section, the St. Mary’s congregation is deemed as spiritually antithetical to this definition of Christianity. With the rhetorical allowances of neoclassical sermonic style, Wesley’s crescendo conclusion generates *pathos* in a fervent, evangelical prayer for divine mercy on the nation and the congregation. In the final breath of the sermon, Wesley contrasts no human hope of spiritual transformation with, instead, earnest repentance and divinely extended hope for transformation (IV. 11.).

### **Auditor Reactions**

From the congregants present that day in St. Mary’s for a milestone sermonic rebuke, there are a few helpful reactions to Wesley’s performance. Benjamin Kennicott, an undergraduate at the time, noted that Wesley had a generally composed countenance, and added: “I liked some of his freedom...and just invectives. But considering how many shining lights are here that are the glory of the Christian cause, his sacred censure was much too flaming and strong, and his charity much too weak....”<sup>10</sup> Kennicott also notes that, for the final prayer, Wesley’s eyes remained opened and uplifted, and his prayer was greeted with “universal shock.” Four days after the sermon, future author of the Commentaries on the Laws of England, William Blackstone, recalled his sense that Wesley’s censure was wholesale: “Wesley informed the congregation that there was not one Christian among all the Heads of Houses, and that pride, gluttony, avarice, luxury, sensuality and drunkenness

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<sup>10</sup> Printed in the *Methodist Magazine*, January, 1866, pp. 44-48

were general characteristics of all Fellows of the Colleges.”<sup>11</sup> John’s brother, Charles, was present, and wrote in his own journal soon afterward: “Never have I seen a more attentive congregation. They did not let a word slip them. Some of the Heads stood up the whole time and fixed their eyes on him....”<sup>12</sup> After preaching, Wesley also journaled: “The Beadle came to me afterwards, and told me the Vice-Chancellor had sent him for my notes. I sent them without delay....”<sup>13</sup> The result was Wesley’s permanent dis-invitation to preach there. In a real sense, it is Wesley’s calculated break with his Oxford influence and an embracing of his revivalist trajectory.

## **Conclusion**

*Scriptural Christianity* is perhaps the most reliably documented, and among the most controversial, of John Wesley’s eighteenth-century evangelical revival sermons. For its first half, it befitted the inspiring setting of St. Mary’s Church, and its largely academic congregation, but the evangelical challenge of the application section made it, in the least, sermonically uncouth to the majority of its observers and, to others, inflammatory and inexcusable. It is, rhetorically speaking, conventional in form and creatively refined in argument, especially marked by the power of rhetorical questions and pivot of antithesis. In scriptural quotation, it is broad. In application, specific. In appeal, emotive. In performance, consequential and memorable.

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<sup>11</sup> Kinghorn, *Standard Sermons*, 75-76.

<sup>12</sup> Kinghorn, *Standard Sermons*, 76.

<sup>13</sup> Wesley’s journal entry for August 24, 1744. W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater, eds. *The Works of John Wesley: Journal and Diaries III (1743-1754)* (7 vols.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1988-2003), III: 37.