JOHN WESLEY, THE UNITING CHURCH, AND THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

Glen O’Brien

Abstract: This article aims at contributing to the Uniting Church’s theological discourse by appealing to its Wesleyan heritage in order to establish a workable approach to the authority of Scripture. It takes note of attempts by both liberals and conservatives to hijack John Wesley’s opinions to defend idiosyncratic views of biblical authority for political and ecclesial purposes of their own. Rather than relying on Wesley’s ‘rhetorical flourishes’ on scriptural authority, this article considers his overall approach to argue that Wesley affirmed rigorous biblical criticism within the bounds of a generous orthodoxy. Recognising that in the light of reader-response criticism, the Protestant principle of sola scriptura has limited value, it is argued here that some kind of traditioned reading of Scripture (such as ‘canonical theism’) is necessary and desirable. It is suggested that the old battle lines drawn between liberals and conservatives over the authority of the Bible are rapidly becoming the stuff of historical enquiry rather than being situated at the coalface of conflict in the Uniting Church. Instead the area of dispute will lie in determining whether or not the Church’s discourse clearly sets forth the Christian gospel. In such a ‘radical middle,’ biblical authority will be recognised within a framework that embraces scholarly criticism of the text while allowing difference of interpretive opinion within a deeply traditioned commitment to ‘God’s universal, prevenient, transforming love.’

It is sometimes difficult to say too much about one of the precedent traditions of the Uniting Church in Australia since to do so might seem to be privileging the contribution of one tradition over the other two. There are those who feel that hearkening back to John Wesley’s views on Scripture would be a backward step when the Uniting Church is called to be a new, dynamic, and forward looking Church. Yet the Basis of Union calls us to pay close attention to such formative voices of the past. Its paragraph 10 calls upon the Uniting Church to ‘listen to the preaching of John Wesley in his Forty-Four Sermons (1793)’…and commits its ministers and instructors to ‘study these statements, so that the congregation of Christ’s people may again and again be reminded of the grace which justifies them through faith, of the centrality of the person and work of Christ the justifier, and of the need for a constant appeal to Holy Scripture.’ J. Davis McCaughey, in his Commentary on the Basis of Union, reflects on the Uniting Church’s readiness, expressed in Paragraph 1, to ‘go forward together in sole loyalty to Christ, the living Head of the Church.’

There is an exhilaration and a loneliness about this. The reader ought to catch his breath. It would have been easier to say, ‘we shall go forward loyal to the best of our traditions as Calvinists and Wesleyans…And…we would neglect what Calvin and Wesley have to teach us to our peril. But at the beginning the Basis of Union reminds that our loyalty is not to them but to Christ.’

So it is not to be out of mere ‘brand loyalty’ that attention should continue to be given to the thought of Wesley. He should be read, rather, because in his writings we are

1 The Uniting Church was formed in 1977 through the merger of Congregational, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches.
3 Basis of Union, paragraph 1, p. 5.
4 J. Davis McCaughey, Commentary on the Basis of Union of the Uniting Church in Australia (Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 1980), 8.
pointed to Christ. It is worth noting that it is the *Standard Sermons* that are singled out from Wesley’s many writings as having a level of special importance and that these focus on the dynamics of Christian experience. Their inclusion in the Basis of Union no doubt reflects their official status in Australian (and British) Methodism, along with the *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*, as constituting a doctrinal standard. A collection of Sermons is of course very different from a formal Creed or Confession. It constitutes not so much a comprehensive declaration of belief as an example of which beliefs should be privileged in preaching. When a selection of Wesley’s Sermons were chosen for inclusion in a book of ‘Historic Documents of the Uniting Church in Australia,’ those chosen were focused on Christian experience — Salvation by Faith, Justification by Faith, The Witness of the Spirit, The Means of Grace and Christian Perfection. According to Michael Owen, when the Uniting Church listens to these sermons it will be listening to preaching ‘aimed at awakening and reviving faith, not to faith declaring what it believes, nor to systematic instruction in the faith.’ There is one particular place in the Basis of Union where a characteristically Wesleyan emphasis on Christian experience is identified. Paragraph 6 confesses that Christ, by the gift of the Spirit, ‘awakens, purifies, and advances in [us] that faith and hope in which alone [the] benefits [of new life and freedom] can be accepted.’ Close attention to Wesley’s theology can continue to be one way that the Uniting Church can live out of that freedom which is made ever new by the Spirit.

In Bos and Thompson’s *Theology for Pilgrims*, a collection of formal UCA theological statements, there is a the tendency in the documents selected to appeal to John Wesley and the Methodist tradition when wishing to affirm the ongoing significance of Evangelicalism and evangelistic activity in the Uniting Church. This is appropriate of course but it should also be noted that especially since the mid-twentieth century, the importance of Wesley as a theologian has been rediscovered. Not only should the Uniting Church’s Methodist heritage be invoked in reference to evangelism and social conscience; room must also be made for the contribution of distinctively Wesleyan theological insights to the Uniting Church’s mission and witness. The study of Wesley’s writings and other important historical documents must of course be carried out with the recognition that they are bound to a great extent by their historical context and particularity. John Wesley was a man of his time and we cannot simply restate his formulations as though no further thinking were needed. Nonetheless, Wesleyan thought is part of the Uniting Church’s DNA even if it seems sometimes to operate as a recessive gene.

At times more liberal Christians have appealed to Wesley to support a laissez faire attitude toward doctrine or formal theology or in order to stress the primacy of

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6 ‘They are perhaps best thought of as doctrine tested in preaching: they are expositions of the map, rather than the map itself.’ McCaughey, *Commentary on the Basis of Union*, 56.
9 Basis of Union, Paragraph 6, p. 8.
10 Robert Bos and Geoff Thompson, *Theology for Pilgrims: Selected Theological Documents of the Uniting Church in Australia* (Sydney: Uniting Church Press, 2008). This is my anecdotal reflection, though specific page numbers could be provided.
religious experience or the importance of reason in arriving at theological conclusions. It should also be noted, however, that more conservative Christians have often also misused Wesley to support their own conclusions or to garner support for a particular theory of biblical inspiration, such as inerrancy. Some of Wesley’s pronouncements do make him sound like a biblical literalist. For example he said that ‘if there be any mistakes in the Bible there may as well be a thousand. If there be one falsehood in that book, it did not come from the God of truth,’ and ‘Yea I am a Bible bigot. I follow it in all things, both great and small.’ However these rhetorical flourishes need to be placed in the context of his broader approach to Scripture, aspects of which will be discussed here. Wesley does not belong exclusively to liberals or conservatives, though both have misused him to defend their own idiosyncratic views of biblical authority. It is argued here that it is illegitimate to hijack Wesley by using selectively chosen excerpts from his writings for political and ecclesial purposes of our own.

Henry Rack, arguably Wesley’s best biographer, warns us against a constructed Wesley invented to fit our own present needs and preferences.

The problem with John Wesley is not the lack of evidence or even of research on many aspects of his career. It is rather the need to penetrate the Wesley legend created by his followers and biographers and the smoke-screen which Wesley himself consciously or unconsciously created by his Journals and other portrayals of himself and his movement.

In fact, as Albert Outler was always keen to remind Methodists, Wesley looks better without his halo.

John Wesley famously described himself as homo unius libri – ‘a man of one book’ - a term he borrowed from Jeremy Taylor. Of course this did not mean that he read no book but the Bible. He was in fact a remarkably well read person across virtually every area of human enquiry. But it does mean that no book was more important to him than the Bible. When I first commenced theological study I naively thought I would be sitting at a desk with an open Bible and studying its contents without reference to other sources. While there would be nothing wrong with such activity, theological study involves much more than this. Theology is always an act of interpretation because it hears the old word of the gospel and it speaks that word afresh in a new context. The Lutheran theologian, Robert Jenson says that ‘theology is the thinking internal to the task of speaking the Gospel, whether to humankind as message or to God in praise and petition…pleading it before him and praising him for

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13 Outler refers to the term homo unius libri as one such ‘rhetorical flourish.’ Works I:105.
it.’ We have heard the Gospel spoken to us; we must now ask what we should say and do so that the Gospel may be spoken again.\textsuperscript{17}

A similar conviction lies behind paragraph 11 of the Uniting Church’s \textit{Basis of Union}. The Uniting Church acknowledges that God has never left the Church without faithful and scholarly interpreters of Scripture, or without those who have reflected deeply upon, and acted trustingly in obedience to, God’s living Word. In particular the Uniting Church enters into the inheritance of literary, historical and scientific enquiry which has characterised recent centuries, and gives thanks for the knowledge of God’s ways with humanity which are open to an informed faith. The Uniting Church lives within a world-wide fellowship of Churches in which it will learn to sharpen its understanding of the will and purpose of God by contact with contemporary thought. Within that fellowship the Uniting Church also stands in relation to contemporary societies in ways which will help it to understand its own nature and mission. The Uniting Church thanks God for the continuing witness and service of evangelist, of scholar, of prophet and of martyr. It prays that it may be ready when occasion demands to confess the Lord in fresh words and deeds.\textsuperscript{18}

Paragraph 11 has sometimes been used by more liberal Christians to minimise the authority of the Bible and maximise the opinions of scholars but clearly this is to miss the intention of the framers of the Basis of Union. Scripture has always been and remains foundational to the Church’s grammar. At the same time it is recognised that since the earliest days of the Church theological study has involved consulting a range of sources beyond the text of the Bible. In the earliest centuries of the Church the sources of theology were established as twofold - Scripture and tradition – a \textit{Regula Fidei} (Rule of Faith) controlled by the written text and the apostolic faith delivered to each succeeding generation. The Anglican Triad in place in Wesley’s day added a third source and came up with Scripture, tradition, and reason. The so-called Wesleyan Quadrilateral, a term first coined by the Methodist ecumenist Albert Outler in the mid-twentieth century, went on to affirm a fourfold model of Scripture, reason, tradition, and experience.

\[\text{W}e\text{ can see in Wesley a distinctive theological method, with Scripture as its pre-eminent norm but interfaced with tradition, reason, and Christian experience as dynamic and interactive aids in the interpretation of the Word of God in Scripture. Such a method takes it for granted that faith is human re-action to the antecedent action of the Holy Spirit’s prevenience, aimed at convicting our consciousness and opening our eyes and ears to God’s address to us in Scripture.}\textsuperscript{19}

On the one hand the Scriptures shape the life of the Church as an authoritative guide; on the other hand, the Scriptures are themselves the product of the Church (there was a community of Christians before there was a New Testament). Barth described the Bible as ‘the recollection by the Church of God’s past revelation…(and) the concrete medium by which the Church…is called to expect revelation in the future, and is thereby challenged, empowered and guided to proclaim.’\textsuperscript{20} This movement from

\textsuperscript{17} Robert W. Jenson, \textit{Systematic Theology vol. 1} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 5.


\textsuperscript{20} Karl Barth, \textit{The Doctrine of the Word of God (Prolegomena to Church Dogmatics, being Vol.1, Part I)} Translated by G.T. Thomson (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark , 1936), 122-25.
recollection to proclamation cannot take place without interpretation. When somebody says, ‘we need to have a biblical view of this,’ what they generally mean is ‘you need to see this my way,’ for it is not the text of the Bible itself for which a person generally argues but the way he or she interprets a given text or set of texts. To reject additional sources such as tradition, reason and experience is to refuse to allow one’s own limited understanding of the biblical text to be tested by the insights of others.

The ‘Wesleyan Quadrilateral’ has been at the centre of considerable discussion especially in American Methodism, partly because it has moved from being a description of Wesley’s method to being a recommended prescription for Methodist theology in the present. The United Methodist Church’s Theological Study Commission on Doctrine and Doctrinal Standards issued an Interim report in 1970 which was the first official UMC document to use the term. In Our Theological Task (1972) the primacy of scripture was no longer apparent. Tradition was understood pluralistically and the scope of experience was broadened beyond Christian experience to include all of human experience. Many felt that the Quadrilateral had become the Wesleyan “Equilateral.” Controversy continued over the authoritative status of the Quadrilateral within United Methodism. In 1984 after concerns expressed by more conservative Methodists, the Church established a new theological commission leading to the acceptance of a new document in 1988 with a greater emphasis on scripture but debate has continued to the present day. Outler himself came to regret having coined the term. Where he had intended the Quadrilateral as a kind of metaphor, it had instead become a strict method and furthermore a cause of division in the Church, which for an irenicist like Outler must have been particularly galling. It should be noted that the debate over the Quadrilateral seems to have been a uniquely American concern; there has been virtually no discussion of it among British Methodists.

One outcome of this discussion has been that several competing models of or variations upon the Quadrilateral have been offered. Some models depict Scripture as primary and the other three sources in clearly subsidiary roles. Randy Maddox, for example, argues for ‘a unilateral role of Scripture within a trilateral hermeneutic of reason, tradition and experience.’ Others have seen the sources as equal without any hierarchy of value. The Nazarene theologian Michael Lodhal offers a model which affirms Scripture as the base providing the foundation for all the rest. Tradition has less value but more than the remaining. Reason is dependant on scripture and tradition, and experience, while still important, depends on the other three, and is the least authoritative as it confirms rather than forms Christian doctrine.

Though Outler gets the credit for coining the term, his work was anticipated to some extent in the Australian theologian Colin Williams’ influential work John Wesley’s

Theology for Today. 25 Williams saw Wesley as following the classical Protestant view of exalting Scripture to the place of final authority, following Luther and Calvin in their stress on the Holy Spirit’s role in applying the objective reality of Christ’s atonement in Christian experience, and following the Catholic reverence for tradition. 26 To this must be added Wesley’s insistence on the place of reason which had always been important in Anglican theology. In The Case of Reason Impartially Considered, Wesley warned his followers never to speak lightly of reason. At the same time he reminded them that reason cannot generate faith or holiness. He wrote ‘to those who under-value reason.’

Never more declaim in that wild, loose, ranting manner, against this precious gift of God. Acknowledge ‘the candle of the Lord,’ which he hath fixed in our souls for excellent purposes…Of what unspeakable use is even a moderate share of reason in all our worldly employments…When therefore you despise or depreciate reason, you must not imagine you are doing God service: Least of all, are you promoting the cause of God when you are endeavouring to exclude reason out of religion…[I]t directs us in every point both of faith and practice: It guides us with regard to every branch both of inward and outward holiness. Do we not glory in this, that the whole of our religion is a ‘reasonable service?’ Yea, and that every part of it, when it is duly performed, is the highest exercise of our understanding? 27

On the other hand, he also had a word of warning to those who overvalued reason.

Let reason do all that reason can: Employ it as far as it will go. But, at the same time, acknowledge it is utterly incapable of giving either faith, or hope, or love; and, consequently, of producing either real virtue, or substantial happiness. Expect these from a higher source, even from the Father of the spirits of all flesh. Seek and receive them, not as your own acquisition, but as the gifts of God. 28

Wesley was an eclectic thinker who borrowed from a variety of traditions and resources. He read voraciously across the breadth of Christian traditions so that his theology was somewhat pluralistic, but yet remained ‘a coherent, stable, whole, deriving its fruitfulness from its single, soteriological focus in the Christian evangel of Jesus Christ.’ 29 While he affirmed the Protestant principle of sola scriptura he interpreted sola to mean ‘primarily’ rather than ‘solely’ or ‘exclusively.’ 30 By his own estimate it was from the year 1730 that he first ‘began to be homo unius libri regarding none, comparatively, but the Bible.’ 31 The word ‘comparatively’ is significant here as is borne out by The Large Minutes. To one of his preachers who claimed ‘but I read only the Bible,’ Wesley replied, ‘But this is rank enthusiasm. If you need no book but the Bible you are got above St. Paul. He wanted others too. “Bring the books,” says he, “but especially the parchments,” those wrote on

26 Williams, John Wesley’s Theology for Today, 37. Chapter 2 ‘Authority and Tradition’ thoroughly discusses these aspects of Wesley’s theological methodology.
28 John Wesley, ‘The Case of Reason Impartially Considered.’ 600.
parchment. “But I have no taste for reading [books].” Contract a taste for it by use or return to your trade.32

In his Preface to the Standard Sermons Wesley describes his approach to the reading of Scripture. As a model of his experiential approach it is worth quoting in full:

To candid, reasonable men, I am not afraid to lay open what have been the inmost thoughts of my heart. I have thought, I am a creature of a day, passing through life as an arrow through the air. I am a spirit come from God, and returning to God: Just hovering over the great gulf; till, a few moments hence, I am no more seen; I drop into an unchangeable eternity! I want to know one thing, — the way to heaven; how to land safe on that happy shore. God himself has condescended to teach the way: For this very end he came from heaven. He hath written it down in a book. O give me that book! At any price, give me the book of God! I have it: Here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be homo unius libri. Here then I am, far from the busy ways of men. I sit down alone: Only God is here. In his presence I open, I read his book; for this end, to find the way to heaven. Is there a doubt concerning the meaning of what I read? Does anything appear dark or intricate? I lift up my heart to the Father of Lights: — “Lord, is it not thy word, ‘If any man lack wisdom, let him ask of God?’ Thou ‘givest liberally, and upbraidest not.’ Thou hast said, ‘If any be willing to do thy will, he shall know.’ I am willing to do, let me know, thy will.” I then search after and consider parallel passages of Scripture, “comparing spiritual things with spiritual.” I meditate thereon with all the attention and earnestness of which my mind is capable. If any doubt still remains, I consult those who are experienced in the things of God; and then the writings whereby, being dead, they yet speak. And what I thus learn, that I teach.33

This displays a number of interesting aspects of Wesley’s approach to the Bible. The source of the biblical revelation is God. The purpose of that revelation is to point the way to heaven, and the Bible is sufficient for such knowledge. When facing difficulty in understanding the Scriptures, three steps are followed: 1) Prayerfully ask God for understanding; 2) Compare scripture with scripture; 3) Consult mature Christian opinion.

It is not the place here to examine in detail Wesley’s critical approach to biblical study, though a few comments seem to be called for. It is not quite right to refer to Wesley as ‘pre-critical’ though of course the higher criticism of the nineteenth century could not have affected his thinking. It is perhaps unnecessary and certainly difficult to guess at what his response may have been to the later trajectory in biblical studies but his appropriation of the critical study of his own day suggests that he would probably not have taken an overly conservative approach. Though he valued the Authorised Version of the Bible, Wesley always preferred the study of the Scriptures in their original languages over any and all translations. He drew heavily on Johann Albrecht Bengel’s new (1734) critical text of the NT for his own translation, as well as Bengel’s 1742 commentary the Gnomon Novi Testamenti in his Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament, and he departed from the AV in over 12,000 instances. While many of these changes were minor, others reflected serious text-critical

32 John Wesley, ‘Minutes of Several Conversations,’ in Works vol. VIII [Jackson edition], 315.
issues.\textsuperscript{34} Hundreds of Wesley’s changes were followed by the Revised Version of 1880. An interesting example of Wesley’s handling of a textual variant appears in his only sermon explicitly devoted to the subject of the Trinity, published in Ireland in 1775 under the title, ‘A Sermon on 1st John, v.7.’ The words, ‘For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one’ do not appear in any modern translation of the Bible, being thought to be a pious emendation and not part of the original letter. Wesley is aware that the authenticity of the text is open to challenge, lists Bengel’s reasons for including it, and reminds his readers that its absence from many later manuscripts may have been the result of the Arianising party under Constantius.\textsuperscript{35} All of this shows that Wesley was no biblical literalist or fundamentalist. While reading the Scriptures devoutly and prayerfully as a road map to heaven, and depending upon divine counsel and the principle of analogy (comparing scripture with scripture\textsuperscript{36}), he at the same time appropriated the best critical scholarship of his day in order to aid a fuller understanding of its contents.

While affirming that the entire Bible is inspired and authoritative he did not seem interested in demonstrating the historical and scientific veracity of all its statements. It was the saving significance of the Scriptures and their capacity to shape the lives of readers in Christlike ways that mattered most to him.

> Every truth which is revealed in the oracles of God is undoubtedly of great importance. Yet it may be allowed that some of those which are revealed therein are of greater importance than others as being more immediately conducive to the grand end of all, the eternal salvation of [humanity].\textsuperscript{37}

Passages he especially privileged in this soteriological hermeneutic include 1 Corinthians 13, the Sermon on the Mount, and the First Epistle of John each of which has a focus on love as the fulfilment of the law and the most authentic mark of Christianity.\textsuperscript{38} Randy Maddox observes how this reflects ‘his commitment to reading all of Scripture comparatively, in light of [the] motif of God’s universal prevenient transforming love.’\textsuperscript{39}

According to the Nazarene theologian Rob L. Staples, ‘In reality the final religious authority for Wesley was the gospel. But it was the gospel as revealed to us in Scripture, mediated to us through the historic Christian tradition, explicited and made understandable through reason, and authenticated in experience.’\textsuperscript{40} In comparing the
approach to the Bible of both John Wesley and George Whitefield, Ian Maddock concludes:

Wesley and Whitefield expressed little interest in Biblical interpretation as an end in itself. Instead, they unashamedly directed their energies towards proclaiming the results of scriptural exegesis rather than in introspectively evaluating the mechanics of their hermeneutical theory.\(^{41}\)

As well as subordinating everything to the gospel itself, Wesley was well aware of the limitations of the human mind. In his sermon *Catholic Spirit*, Wesley made it clear that human opinion is always subject to the weakness of human capacity.

Although every man necessarily believes that every particular opinion which he holds is true (for to believe any opinion is not true, is the same thing as not to hold it); yet can no man be assured that all his own opinions, taken together, are true. Nay, every thinking man is assured they are not, seeing *humanum est errare et nescire*: ‘To be ignorant of many things, and to mistake in some, is the necessary condition of humanity.’\(^{42}\)

If this insight is applied to the reading of Scripture the inevitability of differing interpretation of the same passage becomes clear. Because of such differing opinions the identification of some kind of *analogia fidei* (‘analogy of faith’) becomes important if interpretative decisions are to remain within the bounds of orthodoxy, however generous that orthodoxy may be. Wesley defined the ‘analogy of faith’ as ‘the general tenor of the [oracles of God]…that grand scheme of doctrine which is delivered therein, touching original sin, justification by faith, and present, inward salvation.’\(^{43}\)

There is a wonderful analogy between all these; and a close connection between the chief heads of that faith which ‘was once delivered to the saints.’ Every article, therefore, concerning which there is any question, should be determined by this rule, every doubtful Scripture interpreted, according to the grand truths which run through the whole.\(^{44}\)

Those who treasure a Protestant Reformation heritage have too often held on to the principle of *sola scriptura* well past its use by date. In the particular polemic of the late medieval/early modern period the idea constituted a brilliant *tour de force*. But can it any longer have currency in a world where quite different theological agenda are on the table? The bankrupt status of the *sola scriptura* principle in the present

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context is difficult to recognise, even when those who affirm it don’t actually follow it. Reader-Response criticism has taught us that no one reads the Bible with complete objectivity. Any reading is always accompanied by our particular perspectives, biases, and personal histories; this cannot be avoided. Thus the declaration ‘scripture alone’ is never really alone.

The Methodist theologian William Abraham has argued that the *sola scriptura* principle should be replaced by a ‘canonical theism’ that posits adherence to the Church’s received consensus of faith of which Scripture is but a part, as a way of norming biblical interpretation.

The Church possesses not just a canon of books in its bible, but also a canon of doctrine, a canon of saints, a canon of Fathers, a canon of theologians, a canon of liturgy, a canon of bishops, a canon of councils, a canon of ecclesial regulations, a canon of icons, and the like. In short, the Church possesses a canonical heritage of persons, practices, and materials. Canonical theism is the theism expressed in and through the canonical heritage of the Church.  

Whatever one may think about this particular move it seems clear that some kind of traditioned reading of the text is inevitable and necessary. The first step is perhaps to recognise our need for it. John Wesley helps us here because though he was unequivocal about the authority of Holy Scripture he consciously read it in the company of the saints and of what the Basis of Union calls ‘faithful and scholarly interpreters.’ Those aspects of the Christian tradition that were most formative for Wesley were the writers of ‘Christian Antiquity’ (the Ante-Nicene Fathers) and his own Anglican tradition. Free Church Evangelicals have sometimes made the mistake of thinking that Wesley was only ‘accidentally’ Anglican or have assumed that ‘even though’ he was an Anglican he somehow ‘still managed’ to understand the Gospel. This was one of the more egregious missteps of nineteenth century Methodists and is still sometimes heard even today. First it should be noted that revisionist historians such as William Gibson and Jonathan Clark have shown that the eighteenth century Church of England was in a much healthier spiritual state than Methodists have supposed.

Rather than seeing Methodism as a revitalizing force alongside of and in competition with the Church of England, it should be seen rather as a sign of the vitality of the Established Church and one of several such movements of the period. Second, while other formative influences must not go unnoticed, it was directly from his Church of England heritage that Wesley drew the overall shape of his Anglican Arminianism.

The old battle lines drawn between liberals and conservatives over the authority of Scripture (and of course other matters) are rapidly becoming the stuff of historical enquiry rather than being situated at the coalface of conflict in the Church. Post-liberals have discovered the value of actually preaching sermons based on the Bible and of calling people to follow Jesus, and Post-conservatives have discovered that

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biblical criticism does not destroy but only enhances the foundations of their faith. The Church should not be sidelined into futile disputes over outdated theories of biblical inspiration, often more driven by epistemological concerns than they are informed by the Christian tradition itself. We may find instead that the area of dispute will lie in determining whether or not the Church’s discourse sets forth the gospel clearly. It is likely that the future of the Uniting Church in Australia will not be in the hands of either liberals or fundamentalists (both of whom will continue to move toward the fringes of the Church). The future may instead lie in the ‘radical middle’ where biblical authority is recognised within the framework of a generous Trinitarian orthodoxy that allows difference of opinion within a deeply traditioned commitment to ‘God’s universal prevenient transforming love.’ Such an approach is deeply Wesleyan but also at the same time the possession of the whole Church.