

PROPOSAL

Manchester Wesley Research Centre Visiting Fellow Programme

Applicant

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Project Title

“Testing the Tenability of John Wesley’s Soteriology: The Historical Roots and Theological Gravity of an Early Nineteenth-Century Methodist Controversy on the Witness of the Spirit”

Project Synopsis

In the second half of the opening decade of the 19th Century, an intense disagreement erupted between Joseph Cooke and Edward Hare, and Melvill Horne and Thomas Coke concerning John Wesley’s understanding of the witness of the Spirit in relation to justifying faith. Research into the controversy will focus on the theological and historical challenge to core elements of Wesley’s understanding of the way of salvation and posit implications for the subsequent trajectory of Methodist soteriology.

Proposal

A primary, though unanticipated, finding of my doctoral research on Wesley’s distinction between the faith of a servant and the faith of a son was that covenant theology belonged to the very infrastructure of John Wesley’s theological thought and deeply influenced the shape of his soteriology. This discovery challenges the assumption that the influence of covenant theology was confined to a rather tight orbit about its Reformed roots and, subsequently, calls for a fresh reading of Wesley in light of its profound impact on his thought. I have argued this important point in *From Faith to Faith: John Wesley’s Covenant Theology and the Way of Salvation* (Wipf & Stock, 2013), a reconfiguration of my 2011 doctoral thesis. *From Faith to Faith* introduces the various strains of covenant theology and examines Wesley’s appropriation of it as an evangelical Arminian. By design, this publication did not explore the influence of Wesley’s appropriation of covenant theology beyond his lifetime.

However, in the course of my doctoral research I discovered that a core component of Wesley’s adaptation of classic covenant theology became the flashpoint of a controversy just two decades after his death. This controversy, represented in the exchanges between Joseph Cooke and Edward Hare, and Melvill Horne and Thomas Coke was particularly intense from 1806 to 1810 and will be the focus of my research. These conversations and their common themes warrant close examination for several reasons. First, these exchanges provide a window into how early 19th Century Methodism wrestled with the long-term tenability of Wesley’s soteriology, particularly as it came to be understood with respect to his pneumatology. The controversy seems to have arisen

over both theological and experimental complications attending a core affirmation of Wesley's soteriology: the witness of the Spirit in its relation to justifying faith. I suspect this controversy may have also, in particular ways, enriched the soil in which Phoebe Palmer's teaching on the witness of the Spirit in relation to entire sanctification took root among many rank and file Methodists on both sides of the Atlantic. Second, this controversy is of interest because those who believed they accurately represented Wesley's convictions on the matter of the witness of the Spirit stood in opposition to each other. In some ways, it is a vibrant example of an early wrestling match over what constitutes an identifiably Wesleyan soteriology.

All of the above is intricately influenced by Wesley's covenant theology. In *From Faith to Faith* I specifically argued that the strain of covenant theology adapted by Wesley and shaping his soteriological convictions bears the imprint of Johannes Cocceius, frequently described as the father of covenant theology. Significantly, a particular exchange in the early 19th Century controversy described above provides incontrovertible evidence of Cocceius' influence on early Methodist conceptions of soteriology. Thus, what is implicit in the evidence from the extant Wesley corpus is now made explicit in the course of this controversy. This not only furthers the argument for the place of covenant theology in Wesley's theological thought but also illustrates its continued vibrancy in turn-of-the-century Methodist conceptions of soteriology. While this itself is certainly worth bringing to light as a contribution to Wesley Studies, the question remains as to the formational impact of this controversy on Methodist conceptions of soteriology. I intend to explore this question to an extent that will, I trust, provoke further scholarly research on the matter.

In addition to writing a scholarly article on this important controversy for *Wesley and Methodist Studies*, I hope to incorporate the critical issues explored in this research in the theological education of present-day Wesleyans, particularly those with pastoral responsibilities within the context of my own denomination where I have the most immediate opportunity.