

*On the Nature, Task and Method of Theology: A Very Methodist Account*<sup>1</sup>

Tom Greggs

Abstract

This article seeks to give a theological account of the task and method of theology in a constructive and systematic way from a Methodist perspective. The first section locates the task of theology within the doctrine of sanctification in order to establish the whence and whither of theology. The second section of the article considers the sources of theology: the four classical Methodist sources of theology (the quadrilateral) are identified through an examination of Wesley's theology as inter-related warrants which do not exist independently but only in relationship to the other sources. The third section moves from sources to consider more directly the question of method, seeking to orientate the theological task away from identification of the four components of the quadrilateral, and instead towards a description of theological method as the enactment of ongoing fractal shifting hierarchies of relationality in relation to the sources and loci of theology as they are multiply arranged in relation to each other in the immeasurable vastness of that task. This section seeks to account for a non-competitive and non-prohibitive systematicity in Methodist theology by identifying systematicity as an attempt at the description of the God who is One and in oneness lives in dynamic and superabundant relationality which requires in the creaturely realm coherent description of God and God's ways with the world.

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It is said that Karl Barth, the theological mountain of the twentieth century, once said to an English Methodist student: ‘Were an English theologian a rare enough thing, a Methodist theologian is altogether unheard of.’ Barth may well have been correct. One leading Methodist recently informed me that ‘doctrine’ is not a term particularly meaningful for Methodists who think of themselves as ‘pragmatic’ theologians. And yet John Wesley himself was a theology tutor and was involved in a range of doctrinal controversies, and lineage can be traced from the Evangelical revival of the eighteenth century account for not only Methodist churches which exist as distinctive denominations, but also Pentecostal and Evangelical churches and Evangelicalism as a trans-denominational movement. What is more, the ‘Wesleyan’ theological approach (the quadrilateral of theological sources of authority from Scripture, tradition, reason and experience) is one which is accepted and taught on almost all introductory courses to theology and in almost all theology text books,<sup>2</sup> though often without any recognition of its Methodist origins.

To respond to this condition, this paper seeks to give a theological account of the task and method of theology in a constructive and systematic way from a Methodist perspective. It does so firstly by locating the task of theology within the doctrine of sanctification: theology arises from (and the order here is important—from) the renewing of the mind and takes place in the transformation of the believer which begins *de facto* in this life. Having established this

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* Sixth Edition (London: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), ch. 6.

whence and whither of theology, the paper turns to consider the sources of theology. In the second section of the paper, the four classical Methodist sources of theology (the quadrilateral) are identified in terms of Wesley's use of them, and the impetus Wesley's approach provides for contemporary Methodist theology. Key to this is the description of the four sources as inter-related warrants, which do not exist independently but only in relationship to the other sources. The third section moves from sources to consider more directly the question of method, seeking to orientate the theological task away from identification of the four components of the quadrilateral, and instead towards a description of theological method as the enactment of ongoing fractal shifting hierarchies of relationality in relation to the sources and loci of theology as they are arranged in relation to each other. This section seeks to account for systematicity in Methodist theology by identifying systematicity as an attempt at expression of the God who is One and in oneness lives in dynamic and superabundant relationality which requires in the creaturely realm coherent description of God and God's ways with the world. It is this attempt at coherence in relation to the Oneness of God which is the basis for attempting a non-competitive and non-prohibitive systematicity in theology.

1) The Whence and Whither of the Theological Task: the Sanctification of the Intellect and the Life and Community of the Believer

For systematic theology, an account of the task and method of theology is a properly theological topic. To consider whether the human creature can think about God and God's ways with the world rests in material theological discourse, rather than in independent or pre-theological heuristics or foundations. Systematic theological methodological reasoning rests on no prior justification of its purposes nor on any independent non-theological prolegomenon. It is not even, indeed, its public relevance which is the reason for the theological enterprise. Its ecclesial functionality has, further, only a secondary and dependent

relationship to theology's more primary purpose: theology does not even exist at its most foundational level either for the sake of evangelization of the world or for the sake of the upbuilding of the community of faith. Theology is instead fundamentally an activity which arises from the commandment to love God with our minds (as well as with our soul and heart – Lk. 10:27). Theology's primary locus rests in the active loving of the God who first loved the creature, and theology is thereby a graced response to grace—an account of what God has done and is doing for and in creation from those who recognize the work of God in them. It is in this way that Methodist understandings of theology may be articulated: as expressions of the work of divine grace as grace transforms and illuminates the mind which freely responds as a sanctified *intellectum* in endeavouring to love with the mind the God who first and graciously loved the believer. For Methodist theology, the very existence of theology is best located in theological topography under the theological locus of sanctification, and more narrowly of the *de facto* sanctification the Spirit effects in the life of the believer in space and time as the believer is freed freely to love God with her mind.

If theology is understood, however, as a loving of God with the mind, the question arises of how we are to speak of the reason the mind exercises in its love of God: where is reason to be located theologically, and where properly do the mind and its reason belong in relation to the theological task in the ordering of theological description?<sup>3</sup> Is reason to be understood as that unique faculty which human beings alone possess?<sup>4</sup> Is the enquiry into God and God's ways with the world simply the application of the human cognitive faculties to the topic of divine

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<sup>3</sup> Here, I am concerned not to limit the idea of reason. Boethius and Augustine, for example, both produced works on music. For a helpful account of the way in which reason is not simply to be reduced to certain modes of logical form, see Denys Turner, *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God* (Cambridge: CUP, 2004), esp. part 1.

<sup>4</sup> See David Clough, *On Animals: Volume 1 – Systematic Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), esp. ch. 3.

things—a science which investigates the divine object and its effects in the same way that any science investigates the world, or a science which arises from a created human capacity to think which is then applied to the subject of the divine life?

One way of responding to such questions is to think of the rational intellect as a created capacity which is *fitting* for a consideration of the divine, and to look to the fittingness of God's economy in relation to God and the world. The properly theological context for the task of theology by this account is a theological account of *creation* as God's establishment of the *fitting* conditions for the theatre of God's revelation, and for reflection upon it by the rational intellect.<sup>5</sup> An account of the creature's created intellect, as the locus in which rational reflection of the divine, is by this account the preceding doctrinal *res* for the account of the task of theology: theology belongs to the fittingness of the exercise of reason by the created mind, and a description of the creature's mind itself belongs to the preceding *res* of a doctrine of creation. By this account, the creature exercises its created capacity to love God with its mind, a capacity which is not destroyed entirely by the fall and the presence of sin in the life of the believer.<sup>6</sup>

It is certainly true, as John Webster has put it, that:

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas Aquinas repeatedly uses the argument from fittingness in relation to his theological argumentation in general, most fully in relation to the consideration of the necessity of the incarnation (ST 3.q46.a1). For a helpful overview of the way this tool functions for Thomas, see Frederick C. Bauerschmidt, *Thomas Aquinas: Faith, Reason, and Following Christ* (Oxford: OUP, 2013), 160-5.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. This is a concern which John Webster presents in his 'Theological Theology Once more', Inaugural Lecture as Professor of Divinity, University of St Andrews (p.10) in relation to this topic. Webster is concerned that 'imprudently prosecuted' a focus on the regenerate might lead to a diminishment of the importance of the created intellect and 'may reflect malformation or restriction of the theology of creation and regeneration alike.'

Divine revelation is not manifestation *tout court*; it is teaching which intends reception and effects learning. Divine teaching is not conditional upon reception; but it is purposive, and its telos is not reached apart from its activation of the work of created intellect.<sup>7</sup>

However, as Webster's quotation begins to hint, the question arises as to whether emphasis is placed on the divine work of creation *or* on the divine work of redemptive activation with regard to the intellect: does theology belong properly to an account of creation or to an account of regeneration? Is it possible for the created (and—crucially—fallen) creature to reason theologically without the active work of God's regeneration? For others, therefore, theology is best located within the doctrine of revelation or of redemption. Certainly, avoiding the threat to the human knower by locating of the task of theology in relation to an account of creation is a means of preventing the excesses of presuming that theology involves some kind of direct or unmediated (special or *gnostic*) redemptive knowledge from God. But there are certainly also various problems with such a view that locates the task of theology within the extant, created intellectual capacity of the human. To say nothing of the question of God's relation to non-human creation,<sup>8</sup> the danger of locating human identity in relation to intellectual rational capacity is a discussion which one should be minded never to forget.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> John Webster, *God without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Christian Theology. Volume 1: God and the Works of God* (London: T&T Clark, 2016), 217.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Clough, *On Animals*.

<sup>9</sup> For an excellent recent discussion of this issue, see John Swinton, *Becoming Friends of Time: Disability, Timefulness, and Gentle Discipleship* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2016), esp. 104-107; cf. Medi Volpe, Medi Volpe, "Saving Knowledge: Doctrine and Intellectual Disability," paper presented at the DThM summer school, University of Durham, UK, September 2013, (accessed August 15, 2016, [https://www.academia.edu/12529752/Saving\\_Knowledge\\_Doctrine\\_and\\_Intellectual\\_Disability](https://www.academia.edu/12529752/Saving_Knowledge_Doctrine_and_Intellectual_Disability)).

Identifying the theological task with a created, fitting capacity humans possess to contemplate the divine is, furthermore, effectively an acceptance of a point of contact between God and creation which rests within creation (an *Anknüpfungspunkt* aside from the reconciliatory and redemptive work of grace),<sup>10</sup> a capacity to receive and know something of God independent of God's work of salvation and unalert to the corruption of the intellect by sin and the need for redemption. It is certainly true that the limits of theological knowledge rest more in the object which it seeks to elucidate than in the sinfulness of the theologian, but the sinfulness of the human places the knowing subject even further away, by way of corruption, from the *holy* God and God's holy ways theology seeks to expound:<sup>11</sup> there is exponential distancing through the intractable object (God) and the corrupted means of contemplation of the object (fallen human intellect) which cannot be crossed from the side of the creation. Is there an impasse, therefore, between thinking of theology as belonging to creation (with all the problems associated with that) and thinking of theology as belonging to redemption or revelation (with the associated problems with that)?

Is there, then, a way of understanding the role of the human mind's active engagement in the task of theology in such a way as to protect creaturely integrity (and the creaturely integrity of theology) without an account resting so much on the place of extant creaturely reason (and the created capacity of that lapsed creature) that the reconciling and redeeming work of God seems an added and unnecessary extra to the knowledge and knowing that human beings possess and are already capable of? Is there a way of accounting for this creaturely integrity of the pursuit of theology at the same time as understanding the reconciling and redeeming

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Karl Barth, 'Nein', in *Natural Theology: Comprising Nature and Grace by Professor Dr. Emil Brunner and the reply No! by Dr. Karl Barth* (Eugene, Wipf & Stock, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> John Webster, *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 144.

work of God as essential to the very condition of receiving divine teaching and being capable of learning? It is in this context that a Methodist emphasis on sanctification might prove helpful, and in this way, understanding the theological rest of the task and method of theology as resting within the doctrine of sanctification is appropriate to preserving both divine agency (without undermining the limits of theology as a creaturely exercise) and human integrity (without a direct understanding that a person with more worldly intelligence is necessarily a better theologian) with regard to the task of theology.

As a task of loving God with our minds, theology finds its existence as resting *within* an account of the *regenerate Christian life*: moved by grace, the believer freely as a creature moves within the grace that moves her.<sup>12</sup> In the movement of grace towards and within creation, the human creature is caught up by the Spirit of God's work of regeneration.<sup>13</sup> In this being caught up, the human mind is also renewed: as the creature *in toto*, so the mind more specifically is moved by God towards God, in order that it is able to move and to move, moreover, towards the God who has moved to it. The justified human (including her mind) exists not only in a state of being justified and sanctified: the justified human exists in a state of activity in which she is made and is being made just and righteous in God's act of

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* VI.v.xiii. What is being suggested in this paper is utilizing the doctrine of sanctification (rather than a doctrine of creation or providence) as a means to explain that the creature's free act does not exclude the 'extrinsic pre-motion' of the divine acting.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Barth's account of election as the movement of God towards humanity in grace. See, for example, Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*. 4 volumes (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1936-77), II/2, 7, 25, 53ff. The creature is caught up in this movement of grace. Hence, for example, very glimpse the elected get of predestination makes them behave more radically and seriously as those caught in the movement (185); and "Grace is the movement and direction of man in accordance with his determination" (567; cf. 756f.). Compare here to A. N. Williams, *The Architecture of Theology: Structure, System, and Ratio* (Oxford: OUP, 2011), ch. 5.

sanctification. In this act of the human becoming just and righteous, God enables the human in time to progress in sanctification and to become conformed more to the likeness of Christ.<sup>14</sup> Sin remains within the believer, but moved by grace and moving within God's way of grace, in the words of Wesley, 'the believer gradually dies to sin, and grows in grace.'<sup>15</sup> In this growing, the believer's whole being is enabled to share in the sanctifying and perfecting work of God, and as such she increasingly has 'the same mind' which was in Jesus Christ (Phil. 2:5).<sup>16</sup> As Wesley expounds in his sermon on the new birth:

While a man is in a mere natural state, before he is born of God, he has in a spiritual sense, eyes and sees not; a thick impenetrable veil lies upon them. He has ears, but hears not; he is utterly deaf to what he is most of all concerned to hear. His other spiritual senses are all locked up; he is in the same condition as if he had them not. Hence he has no knowledge of God, no intercourse with him; he is not acquainted with him. He has no true knowledge of the things of God, either of spiritual or eternal things.<sup>17</sup>

But this very context changes entirely in the state of being born anew, which Wesley sees as the 'great work which God does *in us*, in renewing our fallen nature.'<sup>18</sup> In this work of

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. Eberhard Jüngel, *Theological Essays I* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989), 184, on the capacity for humanity to be increased; cf. also chs 3 & 4.

<sup>15</sup> John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley Volume 13: Doctrinal and Controversial Treatises II*, edited by Paul Wesley Chilcote and Kenneth J. Collins (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013), 159.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Wesley, *Doctrinal and Controversial Treatises II*, 137.

<sup>17</sup> John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley Volume 2: Sermons II*, edited by Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 192. Wesley is quoted without alteration of his language to more gender inclusive language.

<sup>18</sup> Wesley, *Sermons II*, 187.

renewal, there is an asymmetrical reciprocity: God ‘breathes’ continually on the soul of the regenerate, and the regenerate’s soul breathes to God. ‘Grace is descending,’ writes Wesley, ‘into his heart, and prayer and praise are ascending to heaven.’<sup>19</sup> For Wesley, this is the growth in holiness in which a believer must actively be engaged in the life of faith – a growth Wesley describes as being that which is into ‘the whole mind which was in Christ Jesus’.<sup>20</sup> This transformation of the mind is a thankful and loving response to the God who first loved us in Jesus. Crucially for Wesley, this growth is not simply completed by God objectively (*de iure*) at the believer’s coming to faith. Growth (as the concept implies) is ongoing throughout the believer’s life *de facto*: sanctification begins with a coming to faith (through prevenient grace) in the One who sanctifies humanity objectively in Christ, but it continues subjectively throughout the life of faith through the Spirit’s work to transform the creature in space-time into a creature which has the same mind as is in Jesus Christ. There is awakened in the creature a new and regenerate creaturely mind, illuminated by the love and truth of God which seeks in the context of time and growth in holiness to love God in return.<sup>21</sup>

Theology, then, is a discipline which arises from within the sanctified life. Theology exists underneath the command St Paul gives: ‘do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect’ (Rom. 12:2). Since theology belongs to the sphere of *de facto* sanctification of the creature in time, it does not need, warrant or require a

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<sup>19</sup> Wesley, *Sermons II*, 193.

<sup>20</sup> Wesley, *Sermons II*, 194.

<sup>21</sup> In her extremely helpful and careful book, Anna Williams reminds us that this working of grace on the mind can be resisted. She puts the matter thus: ‘grace makes it possible for a sanctified mind to trace the workings of the divine mind, but cannot guarantee the rectitude of any human theology, inasmuch as the human person can resist the intellectual workings of grace just as much as moral ones.’ (Williams, *Architecture*, 215f.).

non-theological introduction on some (falsely) objective ground as any other academic discipline would, but proceeds from the life of faith of the one who is regenerate not only in the body but also in the mind, and who seeks actively to move within the movements of God's grace and to grow to have the same mind as was in Christ.<sup>22</sup> The beginning of theology is the saving and sanctifying work of God as it renews the mind of the believer, and the ends of theology rest in worship and glorification of God. The Episcopal theologian Katherine Sonderegger has recently put this matter powerfully and elegantly in relation to the doctrine of God:

we must say that a doctrine of God cannot but take the wings of prayer. There is no study, no examination nor understanding, without a heart seared by intercession, by repentance, by worship and praise. The Objectivity of God – this Beauteous Light – brings forth from the creatures who behold it a wonder that lies beyond saying. The Subjectivity of God – this Living One – kindles the fiery love that is the Lord's own

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<sup>22</sup> There is an irony with regard to Barth's treatment of the place of theology in the university; see CD I/1 in terms of the university. Barth feels the need to state the relationship of theology to the church and the need for theology not to have an independent heuristics / justification, but in so doing he is reacting to the need to discuss the place of theology in the university, rather than simply begin theology as an ecclesial disciple. See Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, §§1-2. For a survey of further considerations of the relationship between theology and the university, see Mike Higton, *A Theology of Higher Education* (Oxford: OUP, 2013); Stanley Hauerwas, *The State of the University: Academic Knowledges and the Knowledge of God*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007); and John Webster, *God Without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology. Volume II: Virtue and Intellect* (London: T&T Clark), esp. ch. 10.

gift, set ablaze in the creature's heart. This is the proper dogmatic form of the doctrine of God: the intellect, bent down, glorified, in prayer.<sup>23</sup>

As a discipline of the sanctified life, pursued in prayer and humility for the glory of God, the ultimate ends of theology, like the ends of all creaturely existence, should rest in divine adoration which is the *telos* of the sanctified life as it adores the holy God.

That theology's *telos* is worship and adoration of God places some appropriate limits on theology's authority. Theology can never have fully arrived or be complete, any more than the life of the creature can be complete or 'finished' in its worship and adoration of God, or in its journey of holiness.<sup>24</sup> Even if one were to accept the Wesleyan understanding of perfection, it is still the case that perfection has a logic of excess—a superabundant perfection which is ever more perfect. As Ford and Hardy put it, 'perfection itself can be perfected, and the more perfect it is the more wonderfully it evokes new forms of perfection. The logic is that of overflow, of freedom, of generosity.'<sup>25</sup> Theology must always know that it has an eschatological limit-case, the limit of the object to which it corresponds. The insights of theology, however seemingly important or great, must always bear the hallmarks of a *provisio* that rests in the glory of God which the creature will need all eternity to explore. Wolfhart Pannenberg is right, therefore, to state:

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<sup>23</sup> Katherine Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology: Volume 1, The Doctrine of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), xxi.

<sup>24</sup> I am drawing here on the idea of *epektasis*. On this topic, see, for example, Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* 2.224-30; cf. Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St John of the Cross* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1990), 57-8.

<sup>25</sup> David F. Ford and Daniel W. Hardy, *Living in Praise: Worshipping and Knowing God*, Second Revised Edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 9.

the church's dogma, *which is still on the way*, cannot itself be the eschatological form of revealed truth. It always remains under the eschatological proviso, the sign of the 'not yet,' which characterizes all Christian life and thought, and operates within history in the revision of time-bound confessional formulations coined at some particular time.<sup>26</sup>

He further states:

Dogmatics speaks constantly of something that will truly appear only in a future which is inconceivable for us, but which has already happened in Jesus at a specific time. And it speaks of this in a language that necessarily lags infinitely behind the future reality of the resurrection life because this new reality is precisely what we have not experienced, something which we can speak of only in a provisional and symbolic way on the basis of our quite different sort of experience of reality.<sup>27</sup>

The eschatological horizon of any theological statement cannot be forgotten. As St Paul puts it, 'For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known' (1 Cor. 13:12). Even in the eschaton we shall only continue to begin to progress towards God for all eternity, since the God we worship and in whose eternal life we participate is infinite.<sup>28</sup> In Anna Williams words, '[t]his process of continual growth has no end, because there is no end to the

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<sup>26</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Basic Questions in Theology Volume 1*, 210, emphasis added; Pannenberg balances this view, however, with the reminder that dogmatic statements have a prophetic function as their nature is to be a proleptic anticipation of the future which has begun for all people.

<sup>27</sup> Pannenberg, *Basic Questions in Theology Volume 1*, 205.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, 224ff.

boundless divine nature.<sup>29</sup> The ends of theological reason are an active and journeying *contemplation*, even if the starts of theological reason are *practical* in terms of the progressive sanctification (Paul's command, 'be transformed') that comes from the renewing of the creaturely mind as it moves having been moved by grace.

That theology's ends are in the worship of God also places limits on the idea of the 'professional' theologian's special relationship to some limited 'gnostic' secrets available only to those who have pursued intellectual study of the faith: the power and capacity of theology rest in theology's sanctified act of praise, adoration and worship of God, and not in any special knowledge it may have itself. Put otherwise, theology is indexed under sanctified worship and sanctification, and not (symmetrically at least) vice versa.<sup>30</sup> Theology is the act of the worshiping mind, and is not necessarily any different in degree or in kind to any other mode of worship: it is, instead, simply *one* form of worship in which the regenerate *mind* engages. Theology belongs, therefore, to the regenerate human's participation in the divine life and work of redemption. The mind, according to St Paul, is renewed 'so that you may discern what is the *will* of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect' (Rom. 12:2, emphasis added). The purpose of theological enquiry and the renewed mind is to will what the Lord wills (a practical reason, one might say) for the sake of glorification of the divine life (which one might index to contemplation): intellectual pursuit in theology is an aspect of sanctification, and sanctification is an act of God to bring the creature in its willing into conformity with the Lord's holy and glorious willing. There is no necessary competition, therefore, between describing theology in relation to practical or pure (or contemplative or

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<sup>29</sup> Williams, *Architecture*, 219.

<sup>30</sup> Lots of theology arises from theological issues which are really issues about liturgy. So, for example, one could interpret many of the debates over Trinitarian theology in the first four centuries to be questions about what it means to worship Christ (and the Holy Spirit).

speculative) reason:<sup>31</sup> the renewing of the mind (contemplation) arises from non-conformity to the world (practical); willing the will of God (practical) arises from the renewing of the mind (contemplation). Both praxis and contemplation arise from praxis and contemplation chiastically in Romans 12:2. In her discussion of desire and theology, Sarah Coakley points in this kind of direction in her consideration of theology's nature of being 'in via', a 'journey into God'. According to her:

What shifts, on this view of theology, is not merely the range of vision afforded over time by the interplay of theological investigation and ascetical practice, but the *very capacity to see*. What is being progressively purged, in the undertaking, is the fallen and flawed capacity for idolatry, the tragic misdirecting of desire. One is learning, over a lifetime – and not without painful difficulty – to think, act, desire, and *see* right.<sup>32</sup>

This purging of desire so as to see God aright is the activity of sanctification in the life of a believer *under* which theology's existence as the ordering and renewing of the mind should be understood. Crucially, one might say, theology is not in any sense a cause but is *one effect* (with no hierarchical superiority to any other effect) of the Spirit's sanctifying presence. The Spirit sanctifies the people of God, and *in this* renews the regenerate believer's mind.

The activity of reasoning theologically is *neither* singularly an act of divine fiat *nor* singularly one of creaturely intellectual effort, but an act of creaturely adoration and worship of the One who has moved the creature in grace, and in whose grace the creature moves. Put otherwise, it might be possible to say that it is not only the case that sanctification is the appropriate locus for a theological account of the activity of theology, but that such an

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<sup>31</sup> Cf. Thomas, ST I.q1.a4.

<sup>32</sup> Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'* (Cambridge: CUP, 2013), 19-20.

account might well help the tensions that exist in placing too strong an emphasis in theology on the role of created reason such that only those more intellectually able might have access to such a work of God (becoming, one might imagine, some advanced form of gnostic), and too strong a sense on the activity of the divine such that theological statements are afforded too great or too realized an authority separate from the limits of (fallen) creaturely description; and that such an account may well undermine the false dichotomy of practical vs. speculative / contemplative reason.

## 2) Wesleyan quadrilateral – the sources of theology

Having argued that theology is best understood under the doctrine of sanctification, and thereby attempted to define the theological task's foundation and end point (its whence and whither), the question arises of *how* best the regenerate mind might think about the divine life and its ways with the world: what are the sources the mind is to consider as it is regenerate and responds to the work of the Spirit in it. It is here that the paper turns to the sources of theology and the Methodist idea of the Wesleyan quadrilateral.<sup>33</sup>

The idea of the Wesleyan quadrilateral has become so pervasive that it is almost no longer fittingly spoken of as 'Wesleyan'.<sup>34</sup> The idea that the data of theology rest in attention to Scripture, tradition, reason and experience is one which has become almost normative for the

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<sup>33</sup> This article is an article which seeks to offer a constructive account of Wesley's theology for Methodist theological discourse today. To such an extent the following account of the 'quadrilateral' in relation to Wesley's own theology is limited, and serves the purpose only to highlight the sources and norms of Methodist theological practice. For a fuller account of Wesley's own thought, the reader could be no better served than attending to Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood, 2004).

<sup>34</sup> Indeed, Anna Williams, discusses these in an extremely helpful summary as 'warrants', discussing Wesley largely in relation to her consideration of experience; see Williams, *Architecture*, 89-91.

student of theology. However, the origins of this approach to theology are remarkably recent. The term ‘quadrilateral’ is not one original to Wesley, but is a coda or hermeneutical key for unlocking Wesley’s approach to theology, as described by the great Wesley scholar Albert C. Outler.<sup>35</sup> To locate the term with Outler rather than Wesley, however, by no means determines that this description of Wesley’s theological method is inadequate as an account any more than locating the term ‘priesthood of all believers’ in Spener’s account of Luther determines it is an inadequate understanding of a core tenet of Luther’s theology.<sup>36</sup> It is certainly true (with an acknowledgment of the complexity of this and of these terms) that for Wesley the data of theology (the authority on which theological statements might rest) is

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<sup>35</sup> For a survey of Outler’s approach, see ‘The Wesleyan Quadrilateral – in John Wesley’, *Wesleyan Theological Journal* vol. 20:1 (1985), 7-18; cf. Gunter W. Stephen, Ted A. Campbell, Scott J. Jones, Rebekah L. Miles, Randy L. Maddox, *Wesley and the quadrilateral: renewing the conversation* (Nashville: Abingdon: 1997). The term is foreshadowed in the work of Colin W. Williams, *John Wesley’s Theology Today* (London: Epworth, 1960) in his account of authority and experience (ch. 2).

<sup>36</sup> The critique that this quadrilateral is a ‘myth’ in relation to Wesley himself since the term belongs to Outler is hardly the point; see Campbell, ‘The “Wesleyan Quadrilateral”: The Story of a Modern Methodist Myth’, *Methodist History* vol. 29:2 (1991). This point may well-made historically, and the questioning of a ‘static’ fourfold account is well made (p. 93; cf. below in this article). But the constructive role of the historian of theology is to identify schemas which might be helpful today. The argument of this article is that the matter is more complex, but that the fourfold pattern exists. Furthermore, at stake in much of the discussion is the way Wesley speaks about ‘tradition’ (which is claimed to be a negative term for him). Rather than focus on the use of the word in Wesley (and attempt to define it), this article presupposes that tradition in the quadrilateral does not index Wesley’s narrower use of the term, but the way Wesley deals with sources of theological knowledge and authority from figures who precede him: Wesley repeatedly makes use of what theology in the current age would term ‘tradition’ throughout his writings. That he does not use this as an independent authority in and of itself is moot for this article: the very point being made is that the sources of the quadrilateral only exist in relation to each other.

fourfold. Theological statements rest on the coalescence of Scripture, tradition, reason and experience, and what is most particular in this for the theology of Wesley's own time is the final of those four categories—the role of experience in theological statements. As an Anglican cleric, Wesley would have been well schooled in Hooker's account of the norms of theology. In distinction from some of the emphases of the European Reformation, for Hooker (alongside natural law), Scripture, reason and tradition form the bases for theological authority.<sup>37</sup> What Wesley, with his emphasis on the transformed heart, does is to add the experiential in faith (the *fides qua creditur*) as a datum for the objective claims of the faith (the *fides quae creditor*): the faith by which we believe is for Wesley, with his emphasis on sanctification and the economy of God, a contributory component of the faith that is believed, and thereby a source of theological data.

It is absolutely clear, for Wesley, that the pre-eminent source of theological authority is Scripture. Wesley writes in his Preface to *The Sermons on Several Occasions*:

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 given me the Book of God! I have it. Here is knowledge enough for me.<sup>38</sup>

Wesley's Protestant impulses are clearly visible throughout his work. He claimed to be *homo unius libri*,<sup>39</sup> and his sermons and the heritage of his Notes on the New Testament make clear

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<sup>37</sup> Cf. Hooker, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, edited by Arthur McGrade (Oxford: OUP, 2013), 1.16 & 3.9.

<sup>38</sup> John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley Volume 1: Sermons I*, edited by Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 104.

<sup>39</sup> Wesley, *Sermons I*, 104–5.

the unique status he believed Scripture to hold. As Outler puts it in relation to his own account of the Wesleyan quadrilateral:

In such a quaternity, Holy Scripture is clearly unique. But this in turn is illuminated by the collective Christian wisdom of other ages and cultures between the Apostolic Age and our own. It also allows for the rescue of the Gospel from obscurantism by means of the disciplines of critical reason.<sup>40</sup>

Scripture reigns supreme over the life of the church and over its theology. There is a sense in which all other data of theological discourse is dependent on the foundation of Scripture. *Sola scriptura* is at the heart of the Reformation, and a principle Wesley's own theology embodies. As he states in his preface to his *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*:

The Scripture therefore ... is a most solid and precious system of Divine truth. Every part therefore is worthy of God; and together are one entire body, wherein is no defect, no excess. It is the fountain of heavenly wisdom, which they who are able to taste, prefer to all writings of men, however wise, or learned, or holy.<sup>41</sup>

The authority which Scripture has is not, however, simply an objective authority that belongs to the Bible *in abstracto* separate from the reading of the people of God. In an interesting note on II Timothy 3:16 ('All Scripture is inspired of God ...'), Wesley comments about the Bible that '[t]he Spirit of God not only once inspired those who wrote it, but continually inspires, supernaturally assists those that read it with earnest prayer.'<sup>42</sup> Scripture in both

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<sup>40</sup> Outler, 'Wesleyan Quadrilateral', 11.

<sup>41</sup> John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1754), 5 (Preface, para 10).

<sup>42</sup> Wesley, *Explanatory Notes*, Note on 2 Tim 3:16, 554. For a fuller survey of Wesley on the Bible, see Maddox 'The Rule of Christian Faith, Practice, and Hope: John Wesley on the Bible', *Methodist Review* 3 (2011), 1–35;

inspired and inspiring, and this dual nature determines not only its authority but also its manner of use in doctrine and theology.

Tradition is a term Wesley himself does not use of the sources of theology, but is a way of indicating Wesley's Anglican sensibility that the earlier theology, particularly that of the fathers up to the Council of Chalcedon (451), is an authoritative source for the reading of Scripture. Any serious student of Wesley will know of his fondness particularly for the Greek patristic tradition.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, Wesley himself uses the term 'Christian antiquity' as his pointer for this. In his careful article, Ted Campbell has pointed to the problem of the term 'tradition' for Wesley; that the term had (and one is wise to remember this) negative connotations in the post-Reformation church of the eighteenth century is important to note.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, Campbell points to the first of the Church of England's sermons for public reading which asserts that believers should rely on Scripture and not 'the stinking puddles of men's traditions'.<sup>45</sup> For Campbell, 'there simply doesn't seem to exist in Wesley a conceptual category answering to "tradition" as conceived in the "Quadrilateral," that is as describing God's work in the church

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and Randy Maddox, 'John Wesley – "A Man of One Book"', in *Wesley, Wesleyans, and Reading Bible as Scripture*,. Ed. Joel B. Green and David F. Watson (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2012), 3–18.

<sup>43</sup> For an excellent recent account of this see, George Bailey, 'Growing into God: a consideration of the relation between the experience and theology of sanctification, in dialogue with John Wesley's theology of perfection and Gregory Palamas' theology of deification', PhD dissertation, University of Cambridge (2010).

<sup>44</sup> Campbell, 'Wesleyan Quadrilateral', 94.

<sup>45</sup> See *Certain Sermons or Homilies Appointed to be Read in Churches in the Time of Queen Elizabeth of Famous Memory*, 2 ; cf. Campbell, 'Wesleyan Quadrilateral', 94. This is important. With emphases on 'the catholic' Wesley or the 'orthodox' Wesley in recent literature which seeks to see Wesley's worth in an ecumenical context, it is good and appropriate to be reminded of Wesley's thorough-going reformation principles. Even in Wesley's sermon 'The Catholic Spirit' he points to the necessity and benefits of ecclesiastical reform.

after the Scripture period, in the same manner as there *are* conceptual categories of Scripture, reason, and experience.<sup>46</sup> Perhaps, however, one is wise to be reminded of Wittgenstein's mantra that we should ask for *use* rather than meaning in the concept, and one would also be wise to consider what Wesley's theology *shows* as much as what it states. In Outler's understanding of tradition in Wesley, he points to Wesley's authoritative use of 'the living spring of Christian insight.'<sup>47</sup> The historical perspectives of Wesley's work range throughout the history of the church, though his focus is more on the primitive church. In this way, Wesley does not see his use of earlier church teaching (that which Outler short-hands to 'tradition') as either an independent authority separate from Scripture or in contrast to his *Magisterial* Reformation approach.<sup>48</sup> Tradition, especially Christian antiquity, indexes the authority that exists in reception of the Word of God, the reception particularly of the earliest hearers. There is much worth in Karl Barth's description of 'tradition' so-called from a Protestant perspective, a description which shows the non-necessity of a competitive account of Scripture and tradition:

these fathers and brethren have a definite authority, the authority of prior witnesses of the Word of God, who have to be respected as such. Just because the Evangelical confession is a confession of the vitality and the presence of God's Word actualised

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<sup>46</sup> Campbell, 'Wesleyan Quadrilateral', 94

<sup>47</sup> Outler, 'Wesleyan Quadrilateral', 14.

<sup>48</sup> I have spilt much ink on this topic before. See, for example, my 'Relational Responsibility in Biblical Hermeneutics: Towards a Protestant Account of the Authority of Creeds for Scriptural Interpretation' in Stanley E. Porter & Matthew Malcolm (eds), *The Future of Biblical Interpretation: Responsible Plurality in Biblical Hermeneutics* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2013), 93-105; and 'Scripture in the Life of the Church: *Sola Scriptura* and Ecclesial Interpretation', in Donald Wood (ed.), *Scripture, Canon and Interpretation* (London: IVP, forthcoming).

again and again, it is also a confession of the communion of saints and therefore of what is, in a sense, an authoritative tradition of the Word of God, that is, of a human form in which that Word comes to all those who are summoned by it to faith and witness in the sphere of the Church and by its mouth—of a human form which is proper to it in the witness of these fathers and brethren. . . .<sup>49</sup>

The theologian listens to the voices of the past in order to receive Scripture in the present through the living voice of the communion of saints: tradition is the word which describes the *ongoing* nature of interpretation of the Word of God, the inspiring *and illuminating* work the Holy Spirit performs in the reception of Scripture by the faithful across time. This non-dichotomous view of the relationship between Scripture and tradition is one which is well described by Pannenberg: ‘later tradition is viewed not as completing the content of

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<sup>49</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/2, 573.

Scripture, but as having a purely hermeneutical function'.<sup>50</sup> Tradition rests upon the reading of Scripture and is not a source independent of Scripture.<sup>51</sup>

If tradition rests upon Scripture, the third source of theology for Methodists, reason, is more a *tool* with which to think about the faith, than any independent locus of theological data.

Indeed, in the context of the Enlightenment and eighteenth-century rationalism, while Wesley was indebted in certain ways to Locke,<sup>52</sup> Wesley was nevertheless deeply opposed to Deism, and his Pietism was seen as antithetical to the methods and norms of the Enlightenment. A

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<sup>50</sup> Pannenberg, *Basic Questions in Theology I*, 188. It is sometimes said that the Anglicanism in which Wesley was schooled in the Anglicanism of the the 17<sup>th</sup> century which sought to provide a *via media* between Reformed and Catholic approaches to theology; see Maddox, 'Methodist Theology', in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology*, ed. Ian A. McFarland et al. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 311–13. This is correct in its account of the self-understanding of Anglicanism, but that account is in and of itself one which fails to identify the authority that the Reformers themselves placed on councils and creeds as hermeneutical expressions of the collective reading of Scripture in the whole church. Calvin advocates that the very right of councils to gather and claim any authority rests in the promise of Scripture that where two or three are gathered, Christ will be present; and the judgments of councils are authoritative because they are based solely on Scripture, and therefore have authority now and in the future since the church continues to stand under the authority of Scripture (John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 1166ff. Luther makes a similar point in Martin Luther, *On the Councils and the Church*, in Eric W. Gitsch (ed.), *Church and Ministry III*, Luther Works Vol. 41 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966).

<sup>51</sup> The foregoing has accounted for Methodist use of the classical tenets of the Christian faith—the great catholic tradition of the church. There is, of course, a further dimension of the Methodist church's use of (or nervousness about) its own internal traditions over the last quarter of a millennium. On this, see Jonathan Dean, 'Spontaneity, Tradition and Renewal' in *Methodist Theology Today: A Way Forward*, ed. Clive Marsh et al. (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), 220-6.

<sup>52</sup> See Richard Brantley, *Locke, Wesley and the Method of English Romanticism* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1984).

pragmatic respect for the use of reason in theology was a means of assessing and critiquing extant theology, a way of employing the principle of *ecclesia semper reformanda* in relation to theological debate and inherited theological positions. We see Wesley's use of reason not only in the argued and logical structure of his theological work, but also on not infrequent occasions in his employment of deductive logic to argue a point. Thus, even in the most experientially orientated discussions, such as in his account of assurance, Wesley is clear that the reality that a believer can feel the assurance of the Spirit is derived deductively from the teaching of Scripture: the activity of the life of the Spirit in the believer is paid testimony to in Scripture, and thereby the believer might be assured because she is taught that the Spirit assures the believer in Scripture.<sup>53</sup> Scripture teaches in Romans 8:16 that the believer might know in her spirit that she is a child of God: 'The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit that we are the children of God.' Since Scripture teaches this, Wesley argues, it must be a reality for the believer today; and it is only in applying the marks of the children of God as described in the Bible to oneself that one might know if one is a child of God. Thus, writes Wesley, by way of deduction:

He that now loves God — that delights and rejoices in him with a humble joy, an holy delight, and an obedient love — is called a child of God;

But I thus love, delight, and rejoice in God;

Therefore I am a child of God;

then a Christian can in no wise doubt of his being a child of God.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Wesley, *Sermons I*, 271.

<sup>54</sup> Wesley, *Sermons I*, 276.

Reason is used as a tool to relate the teachings of Scripture to the life of the believers in the present in light of the light of the teachings of the primitive church and the theologies of earlier generations.<sup>55</sup>

The experience of the sanctified life comprises perhaps the particular contribution of Methodist accounts of theological method. It is, indeed, experience which demarcates Methodist theology from its Anglican forebears. Experience is a component of the data of theological discourse for Methodists which is also used in conjunction with the other sources of theological data. Crucially, this experience is not some kind of uncritical, unadulterated subjectivist interiority. Experience is rather an account of the experience *of the church*. In his sermons on *The Witness of the Spirit*, Wesley is clear that experience is not the individual's self-understanding. Experience is, instead, 'the experience not of two or three, not of a few, but of a great multitude which no man can number. It has been confirmed, both in this and in all ages, by "a cloud of" living and dying "witnesses"'.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, Wesley is overtly aware of the limitations of this source of theological knowledge, and the capacity for self-deception:

How many have mistaken the voice of their own imagination for this 'witness of the Spirit' of God, and thence idly presumed they were the children of God while they were doing the works of the devil! These are truly and properly *enthusiasts*; and, indeed, in the worst sense of the word.<sup>57</sup>

It is only in conjunction with Scripture, the teaching of the church, and reason that experience can recognize that which is sanctified, and thereby as that which is an aspect of the material

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<sup>55</sup> See Wesley's two sermons on reason and its limits: Wesley, *Sermons II*, 568-600.

<sup>56</sup> Wesley, *Sermons I*, 290.

<sup>57</sup> Wesley, *Sermons I*, 269.

of theology. Doing theology is not a case of reflecting uncritically on any and every experience the human has, but rather a case of locating experience in relation to the other sources and norms of theology so as to judge its capacity to offer theological truth: only when adjudged as part of the sanctified life, an expression of the creature moving within the movement of grace, can the experience of the creature be understood as a source for theology. Part of this judgment is a critical appraisal of experience, such that the truly sanctified believer realizes that the fundamental form of sanctification rests on the recognition of the believer's own propensity to sin and self-deception, and the need to fall back on the grace and mercy of God. As Wesley puts it in his sermon on the witness of the Spirit:

The Scriptures describe that joy in the Lord which accompanies the witness of his Spirit as an humble joy, a joy that abases to the dust; that makes a pardoned sinner cry out, 'I am vile! ...' And wherever lowliness is, there is patience, gentleness, long-suffering. There is a soft, yielding spirit, a mildness and sweetness, a tenderness of soul which words cannot express. But do these fruits attend that *supposed* testimony of the Spirit in a presumptuous man? Just the reverse.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Wesley, *Sermons I*, 280. Cf. Luther: 'God receives none but those who are forsaken, restores health to none but those who are sick, gives sight to none but the blind, and life to one but the dead. He does not give saintliness to any but sinners, nor wisdom to any but fools. In short: He has mercy on none but the wretched and gives grace to none but those who are in disgrace. Therefore no arrogant saint, or just or wise man can be material for God, neither can he do the work of God, but he remains confined within his own work and makes of himself a fictitious, ostensible, false, and deceitful saint, that is, a hypocrite.' Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, Jaroslav Pelikan and Daniel E. Poellot (ed.), Arnold Guebert (trans.), vol. 14 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), 163.

The one who does not, in being conscious of God's presence in her spirit, repent,<sup>59</sup> but becomes confident of her assurance, grows haughty in her behaviour and thereby in the sense of confidence she may have in her own experience. There is always the need in relation to the category of experience to be reminded: 'Discover thyself, thou poor self-deceiver! Thou who art confident of being a child of God ... O cry unto him, that the scales may fall from thine eyes ...'<sup>60</sup> Enthusiasm in the unlovely sense of the word is what it means to mistake our own voice with the voice of God; Methodism is more about the experience of the believer methodically and reasonably related to the life and experience of the church as a whole in its traditions as the church lives under the sovereign authority of Scripture as witness to Jesus Christ.<sup>61</sup>

This description of experience, and in some sense the preceding descriptions of Scripture, tradition and reason, should begin to indicate a primary concern of this article: in describing the quadrilateral of sources and norms for theology, these four locations of theological data do not exist as independent and un-related or competitive sources of theological information; they *exist rather only in relation to each other*. Anna Williams points helpfully in this direction when she states:

'theological warrants' [what this article has referred to as 'the quadrilateral'] do not stand on a par with each other: the claims of tradition, reason, and experience to the states of free-standing warrants are exceedingly weak. They serve as interpreters of

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<sup>59</sup> This is a point that is made repeatedly by the Blumhardts. For a helpful account of the dangers of experience as a warrant or norm, see Williams, *Architecture*, 89-94.

<sup>60</sup> Wesley, *Sermons I*, 281-2.

<sup>61</sup> See Clive Marsh 'Appealing to Experience: What does it mean' in *Methodist Theology Today*, ed. Marsh et al., 118-30 for an account of some of the complexities and issues at stake in the role of experience in Methodist theology.

scripture, rarely as autonomous alternatives to it. The claim of scripture to be the sole warrant is equally implausible...<sup>62</sup>

Williams' discussion helpfully identifies the relationality of the different components of the quadrilateral to each other, though in her account, the primary concern is the location of Scripture in relation to the other three, a concern indeed we can see well in Wesley himself. *But what if we might take this matter further?* As Williams makes clear in her argument, the warrants of theology as she calls them (the four components of the quadrilateral) resist being authorities in and of themselves because they are all 'radically interpretable'.<sup>63</sup> They do not function to provide end points to theological discussion, but starting points (as sources), and the interpretation of each of them rests in each's relation to the others by and through which their interpretation will be made possible.

Theological method is not, for Methodism, about locating what Scripture, then tradition, then reason, then experience may say about a given topic, and then coming to some judgement on it. Theological method is about what each area of theological data says *in relation and in conversation with the other*. It is not that we have four squares, so to speak, but rather four sides to the one quadrilateral. Indeed, I would want to argue that we need to move from thinking about the single one-dimensional quadrilateral to thinking more fully about theology as a multi-dimensional hexadecahedron: an expression of the sources and norms of theology variously inter-related to one another in complex and multi-dimensional ways. It is to this that this paper now turns.

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<sup>62</sup> Williams, *Architecture*, 94.

<sup>63</sup> Williams, *Architecture*, 111.

3) From four separate sources to complex multi-dimensional interaction: a revised description of the what and how of theology

There is a need in theological method for Methodists to consider in more lively, complex and inter-related ways the four sources of their theology. There are three levels to this complex inter-relation.

At a primary level, no one source of theology can ever be understood even in and of itself without relation to the other three. So, for example, Scripture is a source which in itself contains reasoned (in that it is written in meaningful language and on occasion engages in arguments of different forms and narration of story) accounts of the experience of God, and (in internal conversations it has with itself, ‘You have heard it said...’)<sup>64</sup> an expression of engagement with earlier theological statements (tradition). Or else, reason does not exist by itself but is the means by which tradition, experience and Scripture express themselves to enable the theologian to try to penetrate the meaning they contain. Or further, tradition rests on interpretation of Scripture through reasoning about it in the context of the lived experience of the church. Or further still, experience is the context in which Scripture is heard and related to the life of the believer who reflects upon (rationally) the presence of the Spirit of God and the Spirit’s witness in the present, seeking to understand the life of faith in light of reasoning about experiences of the Spirit in past presents in the Scriptures and history of the communion of saints and their accounts of the faith (i.e. tradition). At a primary level of each warrant itself, internal to each of the four sources of Methodist theology already exists, therefore, a relation to the other three.

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<sup>64</sup> For helpful exemplary accounts of this, see Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2016); and R. W. L. Moberly, *The Old Testament of the Old Testament: Patriarchal Narratives and Mosaic Yahwism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).

However, at a secondary level, as these sources are inter-related in the theological task of the sanctified mind reflecting on God and God's economy for the purpose of loving God who first loved us (and in that loving renewing the mind), each source is complexly related to the other: (1) Scripture is not thought of, for example, without thinking of the inherited hearing of the church in its (2) tradition, which is related through critical reasoning ((3) reason) to the present community or individual's hearing of the Word of God in its experience of the witness of the Spirit in the here and now ((4) experience). However, even this does not fully capture the complex relationality of Christian theological claims for the Methodist tradition because the different orderings and priorities of relationality of the quadrilateral which we give to theological thinking will produce importantly different theological emphases and descriptions.<sup>65</sup> Even just taking Scripture as the starting point for a theological discussion, for example, we might recognize the different approaches of theological *taxis* in the way we can think of a theological theme such that in relation to any one theological trope or locus, we can think of: (a) (1) Scripture in relation to critical (2) reasoning in relation to (3) experience in relation to (4) the church's traditional teaching; (b) (1) Scripture in relation to critical (2) reasoning in relation to (3) the traditional teaching of the church; in relation to (4) the experience of the present; (c) (1) Scripture in relation to (2) the experience of the life of faith in relation to (3) the church's traditional teachings about Scripture's content in relation to (4) reason which we use to guide the thinking or to critique aspects that seem contradictory; (d) (1) Scripture in relation to (2) the experience of the life of faith about which we (3) reason critically in relation to (4) the church's traditional teachings about Scripture's content; (e) (1) Scripture in relation to the church's (2) traditional teachings which are assessed by (3) reason

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<sup>65</sup> We see this in a number of Wesley's own sermons and treatises (e.g. Wesley's two sermons on 'The Witness of the Spirit', *Sermons I*, 267-98) where he tackles a theme from several different angles, one by one, building an argument in a non-competitive but also non-irreducible way.

in relation to the lived (4) experience of faith; and (f) (1) Scripture in relation to the church's (2) traditional teachings which are assessed by (3) experience using (4) reason as the tool to help assess. All these different arrangements will produce subtly but importantly different theological descriptions which cannot be reduced to any simple over-arching single approach or essence. This complex multi-relationality is then multiplied in the theological task to the power of four, as in each of these ways, each component of the quadrilateral can be used as a lead trope with which the sanctified and renewed mind can think about the God and God's holy and gracious ways with the world. And those tropes themselves seek to be co-ordinated topologically to each other,<sup>66</sup> in recognition of the dynamic and sanctifying work of the one God whose constancy is not monotonous but the constancy of super-abundant holy loving: God is the one God, who was and is and is to come, who in God's holy and loving freedom is free for the world and moves towards and within the creation.

Such a description of the task of theology is one which seems overwhelming. But if the *telos* of theology, as I have argued above, rests in worship and adoration of God,<sup>67</sup> an adoration with our minds which will require all eternity as we seek to adore the infinity of the glory of God, it should perhaps be of no surprise to us that the theological task is a complex and

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<sup>66</sup> On theological topography (especially in relation to ecclesiology), see my 'Proportion and Topography in Ecclesiology: A Working Paper on the Dogmatic Location of the Doctrine of the Church', in *Theological Theology: Essays in Honour of John Webster* (London: T&T Clark, 2015), ch. 6.

<sup>67</sup> It is worth comparing the presentation offered here, where theology is seen as having its origins and ends in the intellect's worship of God, with Geoffrey Wainwright, *Doxology: The Praise of God, in Worship, Doctrine, and Life* (New York, OUP, 1984). For Wainwright, it is not so much that the task of theology is indexed to worship, as that of drawing on worship and liturgy to correct it: the theologian should 'examine the liturgy ... in order to learn from it and in order to propose to the worshipping community any corrections or improvements which he judges necessary' (3). The presentation in this paper, it is hoped, has less of a hierarchy than the role of the theologian in Wainwright's account has the potential at least to suggest.

multivalent one: the one God in simplicity is gloriously, wonderfully complex; as creatures we need eternity to explore the depths of God's infinity. In understanding the complex task of theology, the words of the Anglican theologian, Daniel Hardy, are wise: 'The increasing complexity is itself the manifestation of the ongoing energetic involvement and participation of God, whereby he intends to move towards fuller and fuller relationship with his people ...'<sup>68</sup> In *de facto* sanctification, the believer is moved and moves towards the God who moves to ever fuller relationship with creation: moved by grace, the believer moves within grace—swims within the infinite tide of divine grace. What this should mean is that the task of theology is never completely reductive or prohibitive. The task of theology should instead be open to the intense complexity that arises through the multivalence of theological tropes which can be approached in manifold dynamic ways. This kind of approach should mean the attitude of the theologian should be one of patience and of humility,<sup>69</sup> perhaps even gentleness. If the theological task is one which arises out of the renewing of the mind, then it should come as no surprise that as it is sanctified that mind will itself grow into the mind of Christ, and display the fruits of the Spirit. (This might again bespeak the relationship between contemplative and practical reason indeed.) The intellectual attitude of the theologian should not always be: 'This is true, so this is not'. Instead, the intellectual attitude should be one aware of the multiplicity of theological narratives that can arise from the almost innumerable different co-ordinations of theological data—an attitude of patience, kindness, self-control, forbearance, etc.

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<sup>68</sup> Daniel W. Hardy, *God's Ways with the World: Thinking and Practising the Christian Faith* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 30.

<sup>69</sup> On humility as a virtue see, Webster, *God without Measure II*, ch 11.

This may seem to suggest that the approach of coherence or systematicity is a lost one—an impossible and futile venture. Not so; the God who is infinitely complex is also simple: God is one. Indeed, to understand what it means to speak of God as one may be the most complex task theology has.<sup>70</sup> The *Shema* reminds us of our constant need to be awakened to the unity of the divine life in all God's energetic, dynamic acts and events. We are to speak of this constantly in the hope we can learn of it: it is not for nothing the *Shema* is the heart of Jewish life and worship. We, like Israel, need to be reminded of the reality that God is one many times each day. Indeed, we are yet to learn what it means to speak of God as one, and need never to forget that what seems disparate perhaps to us is not to God; in the divine life infinite complexity and simplicity are not opposites. Herein lies the *third order* level of complex and dynamic inter-relation, as each locus explored in the various ways pointed to above through the complex nexus of relations that exists in theological sources seeks to understand itself in relation to every other locus in multiple different construals and constellations. Thus, taking the above account of the sources and inter-relation / inter-action of sources as a starting point, if one were to consider sin, for example, one might do this through creation described through anthropology described through reconciliation described through redemption described through the doctrine of God; and the ordering of each of these can be changed and moved up or down stream. Each single locus as thought through every other (as thought through every other loci, and so forth) can be variously placed within the system up or down stream from the starting locus, with an awareness that systematicity involves thinking of any one locus in relation to any other, and as those relations are variously arranged, so subtle but important differences in content and emphasis will emerge in relation to any one given theological locus. Since all of the loci relate to God and God's ways with the world, each

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<sup>70</sup> I have discussed the idea of idolatry in relation to the oneness of God a good deal in my *Theology against Religion: Constructive Dialogues with Bonhoeffer and Barth* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2011).

locus has to relate to every other and can relate in multiple patterns and arrangements across the whole range of theological topics.<sup>71</sup> ‘God is simple’ is no simple statement, and no simple reality to perform in theological topography. Christian Theology cannot speak of the infinite ways of God as if they corresponded to different ‘gods’. Theology must always seek to understand the *one* God who is known and described in God’s many, manifold, infinite ways; this oneness involves recognizing the vastly different arrangements of loci to one another in any attempted systematic presentation.<sup>72</sup> Systematicity is a necessary aspect the theological

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<sup>71</sup> Anna Williams helpfully describes two senses in which one might think of systematicity in relation to Christian theology. The first is in the sense of a comprehensive account of doctrine, ordered locus by locus; the second is in the sense of the treatment of any one locus involving awareness of and dependence upon other loci, and informing other loci simultaneously. (See Anna Williams, *Architecture*, 1-2.) What is being suggested here is that the various and multiple orderings of loci as each locus is related differently to every other produces different emphases and material content for any given description of a single locus. Thus, the comprehensive task is one which is vastly and unendingly complex, and even the treatment of an individual locus must be aware of the architecture with which it is structured in relation to all other loci—architecture that can be variously and immeasurably differently arranged.

<sup>72</sup> Of course, one might point out that the presentation offered here is one which (while vast) is mathematically possible (a point which I am grateful to Professor Karen Kilby for discussing with me): given enough time and enough minds, it might be possible to describe all of the different arrangements of sources internal to themselves, in relation to one another, and in terms of each locus’ relation to every other in their varying different architectural patterns. However, three points should be remembered. First, even were this possible, what is being advocated is no Eunomianism: all that is being spoken about is *theology* and not even revelation and certainly not the divine life in itself; theology is at the level of (fallen) creaturely description, and is limited by the capacity of creaturely minds which can never comprehend the fullness of the divine life. Second, the vastness of the project makes the description unending in practice for the creature in time: while not infinite, the conceptualisation is as close to the concept of infinity as the creature in space-time might imagine. Third, the variety of experience and of people who reason about tradition and are variously illuminated by Scripture determines that there is no end to this task in creaturely space-time.

task not in the first place because of the demands and expectations of human reason, but because of who God is—because God is one. Therefore, systematicity is not a reductive enterprise engaged in identifying an essence to Christianity, and seeking to prohibit other accounts of the infinite holy loving of God.<sup>73</sup>

Thinking of theology in relation to sanctification may again help here. From the perspective of ongoing *de facto* sanctification, God's grace is not understood primarily as a decree, captured in words, recorded and crystallized with ever greater hardness and precision in the theological task. Rather, if theology exists within the work of God's sanctification of the creature, grace may be understood more as a movement (as above) in which the creature moves; and as we are moved by God towards God, there are different ways in creation in which we may ourselves move towards Godself within God's grace. These ways should have direction and order at best (which we might call 'systematicity') so as not simply to turn in ever perpetuating circles; but the identification and direction of these ways do not prohibit other paths, even if we feel we wish to describe why own path might be a wiser one, or one that reaches closer to the reality of God's infinite grace.<sup>74</sup> Indeed, the very sense of the overwhelming complexity of the various approaches of the theological task as that task is performed in relation to each locus in relation to every other locus, as outlined, should point us towards not only the multiplicity of irreducible theological narratives we might offer in our

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<sup>73</sup> The approach of 'essences' to Christian, as was vogue in the nineteenth century, is a doomed one, as in the case of Schleiermacher's sense that everything can be related to the redeeming influence of Christ; see, for example, Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Brief Outline to the Study of Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1850).

<sup>74</sup> On theology and wisdom, see David F. Ford, *Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love* (Cambridge: CUP, 2007).

own theological speech,<sup>75</sup> but also the validity of different approaches and paths of other theologians, as different and variously hierarchically ordered relational interactions of the sources of theological discourse are employed as the believer is transformed in sanctification in part through the renewing of the believer's mind.

Systematicity matters, therefore, but only in the light sense of its capacity to reflect the renewed mind's movement within grace in a manner which desires to be consistent and coherent and to remember the reality (which we have yet to fully learn) that the Lord our God is One. There is, therefore, always provisionality about any system, a provisionality that arises because of both the limits of the creature who is engaging in it (both because of sin and of creaturely finitude) and the ineffability of the object of its reflections. As Webster states, these limits do not 'prohibit' the work of systematic theology, but they do set 'restrictions' on systematic intelligence. As he writes:

the ... assumption – that there are no systematic intellectual virtues, only intellectual vices – betrays lazy trust in indeterminacy to deliver the mind from folly. Excessive systematic pretension is most effectively arrested by dogmatic rules: God's life is infinitely abundant, we are not yet fully the friends of God, a theological system is no more than one staging post on the mind's ascent to paradise.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> See here David Kelsey in his threefold approach to theological anthropology: David Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009). This approach of irreducible narratives is one I share in my own ongoing three volume ecclesiology, which seeks to describe the church in terms of (1) the work of the Spirit in enabling the believer to participate in the priestly office of Christ as a means of describing its catholicity; (2) the work of the Spirit in enabling the believer to encounter the prophetic office of Christ as a means of describing its apostolicity; and (3) the work of the Spirit in transforming the believer into the kingly office of Christ as a means of describing its holiness.

<sup>76</sup> Webster, *The Domain of the Word*, 145.

These different, provisional and reformable systematic attempts arise from the different order and different inter-relation of the four main theological sources, the orderings and different inter-relations of which create manifold different but not necessarily competitive, irreducible theological narratives. This non-competition is not at the level of the capacity to say opposing things without a sense of theological commitment to the correctness of them, or without any investment in coherence. Non-competitiveness exists, rather, at the level of saying that there is a vast multiplicity of systematic arrangements of the articles of the faith (as loci are variously related to one another through every other locus) which can be approached through the multiple differing inter-relations of theological sources as they are themselves multiplied, internally related to other another. *This approach need not, however, create a theology which is fragmentary but one which is fractal and driven by recursion, with a dynamic series of never ending patterns which go on infinitely in relation to the infinity and simplicity of the One God.* As the theologian learns to describe these recursive fractals of theological material, the theologian will learn, to use slightly different terminology borrowed from David Kelsey, different theological ‘narrative logics ... [which] cannot be collapsed into one another’:<sup>77</sup> these will be narrative logics which and related to one another in distinctive orders.

#### 4.) Conclusion

For Methodism such an attempt at accounting for theology may, to use another set of images, be a theological way of describing what it means for us to ‘sing’ its doctrines. Music does not work on repetitious monotone, but has ceaseless capacities, even within a single theme or melody, for harmony, variance, counter-point, and so forth. There need not be a

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<sup>77</sup> Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, 899.

competitiveness that exists in this, and the different harmonies might be variously construed.<sup>78</sup> And where there is competitiveness, it may well be a virtuous competitiveness which seeks to sing louder so as to bring others to sing louder as well—a creation of ‘cathedrals of sound’<sup>79</sup> which resonate and crescendo gloriously such that the metaphorical roofs of our theological minds are raised. Nor does the existence of one set of words mean there need only be one tune. And the existence of any one tune never exhausts or competes necessarily with the existence of others. There can, in other language Methodists like to use, be different *emphases* at different moments—some theological and doctrinal positions which need at certain points in the life of faith or the history of the church to be heard *fortissimo* while others perhaps need to be *diminuendo* or *piano*, though those positions too may need to return more loudly at future points. Organization and orchestration of the music (which we might index to rationality or even systematicity)<sup>80</sup> is, however, important for the music not, at a given moment, to disintegrate into cacophony, discord or dissonance; though even these, too, might serve a purpose within a larger movement, suite or orchestration. It is here where the need to listen to one another is vital,<sup>81</sup> to recognize when we wish to sing harmoniously

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<sup>78</sup> For the very the best accounts of the relationships between theology and music, see Jeremy Begbie, *Music, Modernity and God: Essays in Listening* (Oxford: OUP, 2013); *Resounding Truth: Christian Wisdom in the World of Music* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 2007); and *Theology, Music and Time* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000).

<sup>79</sup> I owe this turn of phrase to David Ford.

<sup>80</sup> Cf. Turner, Turner, *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God*, 108-16.

<sup>81</sup> The need for theology to be engaged in in solitude and together might be considered in relation to Bonhoeffer’s sense that the Christian needs time together and time alone. For the theologian as for all Christians, Bonhoeffer’s words are wise: ‘Whoever cannot be alone should beware of community. Whoever cannot stand being in community should beware of being alone.’ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* and *Prayerbook of the Bible*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works in English Volume 5 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 83.

and when, *and how best*; to introduce competition, counter point or even dissonance, understanding what our particular voice is and where it fits within the broader movement.<sup>82</sup>

Another way to speak of this is to say that Methodists can understand theology and different theological positions to exist in non-prohibitive or non-competitive (in the absolute sense) ways:<sup>83</sup> each of us seeking to join as we are sanctified by the renewing of our minds in the eternal heavenly hymn of irreducible holies: ‘Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come’ (Rev. 4:11).

As construed in this paper, the nature, task and method of theology is not about nailing down four sources of authority and making a pragmatic theological statement that arises inductively from them, given (somewhat arbitrarily indeed) how we might ‘feel’ at any given moment.

The quadrilateral indexes the Methodist belief that in sanctification the believer is fully transformed, including in the intellect. In this transformation, the believer is moved by God to move within the infinite movement of grace which flows forth from the divine life. For all eternity, the believer shall move within God’s movement of grace as she journeys ever deeper into the God whose infinite life requires all eternity in all its multi-dimensionality for God to

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<sup>82</sup> It is at this point that one might be wise to think of the technical distinction between theology and doctrine.

Theology becomes doctrine when it is recognized as a public teaching of the church (see Williams, *Architecture*, 114). Doctrine has, therefore, a markedly communal nature to it, as the church as a body reasons its theology together. The conference and connexional structure of Methodism mean our doctrines are worked out corporately and through debate and discussion. The need to listen to one another and to respond (to do theology together with sensitivity) is part of the need of the theologian to be engaged in shaping (and being shaped by) the teaching of the whole church – being engaged in doctrinal reasoning.

<sup>83</sup> Even as we make doctrinal statements as a church, there should be (and usually is) a recognition of different ways of arranging theological material – different approaches to the topic or locus – which will need to be remembered. The corporate nature of our doctrinal formulation through connexionalism also makes this necessary.

be explored. Believing in *de facto* sanctification in the present means that journey in all its limitations and provisionality begins with the present life of faith. Of course, until we know as we are known (1 Cor. 13:12), there will always be differences, limits, disagreements and different emphases; but we should seek in them to ensure that the only condition of rectitude for theological statements is that the God of glory is glorified, and that in that glorification we join in the heavenly hymns of praise as we seek to be transformed by the renewing of our minds in our being ‘changed from glory into glory’.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Charles Wesley, *Love Divine* (hymn).