

CLASSICAL THEISM IN JOHN WESLEY’S SERMONS

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Abstract

This article examines John Wesley’s sermons in order to assess whether his doctrine of God may best be classified in terms of strict classical theism or modified classical theism. His view of God’s nature is informed by his inherited Anglican theology, which is blended with his evangelical proclivities. Of relevance to the inquiry into Wesley’s theism are several key concepts: (1) the interrelated divine attributes of omnipotence, omnipresence, and omniscience; (2) divine eternity in relation to human time; and (3) divine love. Wesley’s sermons that discuss omnipotence, omnipresence, and omniscience appear to align closely with classical theism. However, in contrast to classical theism, Wesley’s sermons dealing with eternity seem to indicate some form of divine temporality. His understanding of divine love and providence contains elements of reciprocity. Thus, when Wesley’s view of God’s attributes is coupled with Wesley’s understanding of divine eternity and divine love, they indicate a departure from strict classical theism toward modified classical theism.

Keywords: John Wesley, Classical Theism, Modified Classical Theism, Anglicanism, Evangelicalism, divine attributes

Introduction

John Wesley’s theology can be understood from two perspectives. The first is his loyalty to the Anglican institution and theology, exemplified by his clear affirmation of the Anglican *Thirty-nine Articles of Religion*.¹ Wesley remained a faithful member of the Church of England until his death.² He

¹ In *The Sunday Service of the Methodists in North America*, Wesley included a section called “Articles of Religion,” which was his edited version of the Thirty-nine Articles (Charles Yrigoyen Jr., *Belief Matters: United Methodism’s Doctrinal Standards* [Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2001], 71).

² Wesley’s loyalty to the Anglican Church, however, was not blind. He was well aware of her failings and sought to reform the church from within. “I love the

also inherited the theology of those who had gone before him, drawing on “an immense background with a remarkable repertory.”³ One such example of Wesley’s inherited theology is his Arminian soteriology.⁴

The second perspective is his evangelical missiological drive, which pushed him to adopt ideas and practices beyond what was acceptable to the Anglican Church at the time, leading to the establishment of Methodism.⁵

Church of England, I hope, as much as you do. But I do not love her so as to take her blemishes for ornaments” (Nehemiah Curnock, ed., *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.* [London: Epworth, 1938], 8:332).

³ Albert C. Outler, *John Wesley’s Sermons: An Introduction* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1991), 75. While he placed primary authority on Scripture, Wesley was also influenced by the classics, early Christianity, the Reformation, and the Anglican and Puritan traditions (Outler, *Wesley’s Sermons*, 79–88). He regarded the church fathers as “principal sources to be consulted for the proper interpretation of Scripture” though he favored those within the first four centuries of church history (Neil D. Anderson, *A Definitive Study of Evidence Concerning John Wesley’s Appropriation of the Thought of Clement of Alexandria*, *Texts and Studies in Religion* 102 [Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 2004], 38). Wesley consistently defended the “Bible, with the Liturgy, Articles, and Homilies of our [Anglican] Church” (John Telford, ed., *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A. M.* [London: Epworth, 1931], 4:115). David Rainey comments that Wesley “never veered from the foundation of the classical Creeds, especially Nicaea and Chalcedon along with the whole of Christian tradition with varying emphasis in order to develop his distinctive theological approach” (“John Wesley’s Doctrine of Salvation in Relation to His Doctrine of God” [PhD diss., University of London, 2006], 316).

⁴ By the time Wesley entered the scene, there were already elements of Arminian theology within the Church of England (see Waldo E. Knickerbocker, “Arminian Anglicanism and John and Charles Wesley,” *Memphis Theological Seminary Journal* 29.3 [1991]: 79–97). This influence, along with his own readings of Hugo Grotius and Simon Episcopius, exposed Wesley to the teachings of Arminius and led him to accept them (Luke L. Keefer, “Characteristics of Wesley’s Arminianism,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 22.1 [1987]: 89). As such, Wesley believed in a God who conveniently provided human beings the free will to choose salvation for themselves, not a God who deterministically chooses some for salvation and (as a result) chooses some for damnation. It is important to note that I am not attempting to present Anglican theology in opposition to Arminian theology. While there may be nuanced differences between the two, it is not necessary to exclude one in favor of the other. It is logically acceptable to subscribe to both Arminian soteriology and the classical theism of the Anglican Church.

⁵ “It is possible to imagine that, with a little more vigour on the part of the Church of England, and a little more flexibility on the part of Wesley, it might have been found practicable to retain the gifts and graces of Methodism within the Church of England. Almost all Anglicans deeply regret that the separation between Anglican and Methodist took place” (Stephen Neill, *Anglicanism*, 4th ed. [New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1977], 190).

However, his overarching goal was that his Methodist movement would not “differ from our Church in point of doctrine.”⁶ Consequently, the Methodist movement was identical to the Church of England except “in some palpable defects about doctrine, discipline, and unevangelical hierarchy.”⁷ Reflecting on the conflict between Wesley’s institutional loyalty and his missiological-relational understanding of the gospel, Frank Baker observes that “although [Wesley’s] ecclesiastical odyssey was in general from one pole to the other he was subject to occasional fluctuation,” such that, despite his evangelical leanings, Wesley held to some elements of Catholic theology until his death.⁸

It is in light of this perceived “fluctuation” that this article examines Wesley’s doctrine of God. Wesley’s theism was a product of all the influences mentioned above, filtered through the Church of England and Augustinian Trinitarian theology.⁹ Other scholars have competently described his theism, particularly his view of a personal God, his depiction of divine attributes, and even in relation to his soteriology.¹⁰ This study is primarily comparative, observing in more detail Wesley’s relationship with his theological roots as he strives for reform and the resulting tensions that arise. I aim to directly explore how closely John Wesley’s doctrine of God aligns with Article I of the *Thirty-nine Articles of Religion* of the Anglican Church, to identify areas of possible divergence, and to draw observations about what these distinctions may imply.¹¹ I have chosen to limit this comparison to Wesley’s sermons and,

⁶ Telford, *Letters*, 4:131. Wesley’s vision was for his movement to create a reformation of personal holiness within the Church of England, not apart from it. Despite his personal loyalty to the Church, his evangelical theology and pragmatic methodology pushed his movement ever further away from the Anglican Church, until, because of the American Revolution, Wesley felt the need to ordain his own ministers in America, separate from the Church of England.

⁷ Curnock, *Journal*, 8:332.

⁸ Frank Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1970), 138. Keefer notes that it is difficult to label Wesley and his theology because he does not fit the mold. As such, he has been described as “Catholic, Anglican, Pietist, Calvinist, Lutheran, Puritan, Moravian, etc. depending upon the author in question” (“Wesley’s Arminianism,” 90).

⁹ Rainey, “John Wesley’s Doctrine of Salvation,” 55–62.

¹⁰ Kenneth J. Collins, *A Faithful Witness: John Wesley’s Homiletical Theology* (Wilmore, KY: Wesley Heritage Press, 1993), 15–20; Jung Yang, “The Doctrine of God in the Theology of John Wesley” (PhD diss., University of Aberdeen, 2003); Rainey, “John Wesley’s Doctrine of Salvation.”

¹¹ Wesley’s writings are primarily instructive and homiletical in nature. Even so, Luke Keefer argues that while Wesley’s writings are not systematic, they are integrative, which does not lessen their value (“Wesley’s Arminianism,” 91–92). Keefer draws parallels with biblical writings, which are also not systematic but integrative by nature.

though Wesley has also preached on the nature and unity of the Trinity, I have chosen to exclude the subject from this study and focus on selected divine attributes that will be examined below. To make such a comparison, it is necessary to begin with an overview of the theism of the Church of England.

The Anglican Doctrine of God

Though Wesley drew on a wide variety of sources for his theology, the most prominent is the theology of the Church of England. Article I of the Anglican *Thirty-nine Articles of Religion* (1571) summarizes the Church of England's understanding of the unity, nature, and attributes of God.¹² It affirms, "There is but one living and true God, everlasting, without body, parts or passions; of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness; the maker and preserver of all things both visible and invisible. And in unity of this Godhead there be three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost."¹³

The first part of the Article delineates the attributes of God, which were drawn largely from the Augsburg Confession.¹⁴ Both the *via eminentiae* and the

This paper thus treats Wesley's sermons as an integrative theological work, drawing insights on his statements in relation to his belief system as a whole and following his claims to their logical conclusions, whether he explicitly states them or not.

¹² The Articles were the product of a long process, influenced by input from a wide variety of sources. Peter Toon notes that the Articles are "conscientiously eclectic [in that] they make use of the teaching of the patristic period for doctrines of the Trinity, Christology and original sin; of the Augsburg and Württemberg Confessions for the teaching on the gospel and justification; and of the teaching from Geneva and Calvinism/Reformed theology for sacramental understanding" ("The Articles and Homilies," in *The Study of Anglicanism*, ed. Stephen Sykes, John Booty, and Jonathan Knight, rev. ed. [Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1998], 147).

¹³ Jaroslav Pelikan and Valerie Hotchkiss, eds., *Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 2:528. Edward Harold Browne identifies two possible groups that the statements of Article I oppose: the Anthropomorphites, who believed that God had a human form, and the Pantheists, who believed that God is everything and everything is God (*An Exposition of the Thirty-Nine Articles: Historical and Doctrinal* [New York, NY: Dutton, 1890], 19–20). E. J. Bicknell also includes the Anabaptists, who were "reviving all the ancient heresies" (*A Theological Introduction to the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England* [London: Longmans, Green, 1919], 28).

¹⁴ Oliver O'Donovan, *On the Thirty-Nine Articles: A Conversation with Tudor Christianity*, 2nd ed. (London: Hymns Ancient & Modern, 2011), 11. O'Donovan notes that in writing the Article, the English Reformers had nothing new to say about God and were simply reiterating what had already been said. Browne views the statement so "common to natural and revealed religion" that it does not even require much exposition or scriptural proof (*Exposition of the Articles*, 19).

via negativa are evident here. God is incomprehensibly above human beings, “everlasting” and “of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness,” while possessing no human infirmities such as “body, parts or passions.” Of particular interest to this article is one attribute of the *via eminentiae*, “everlasting,” and two of the *via negativa*, “without parts or passions.” The writings of Gilbert Burnet (1643–1715) and William Beveridge (1637–1708) and others provide excellent exposition on the Articles, giving insight regarding the Anglican theology of Wesley’s time.¹⁵

God is “everlasting,” meaning that he “has not a duration defined by succession, but is a simple essence, and eternally was, is, and shall be the same.”¹⁶ According to Beveridge, “God...is not measured by time...but is himself eternity: a centre without a circumference, eternity without time.”¹⁷ God’s time is not sequential and has no duration, for “these words, *before* and *after*, *past* and *to come*, are solecisms in eternity, being only fitted to express the several successions of time by,” but God is unchangeable and cannot experience change in time.¹⁸ “Everlasting” in Article I thus means divine timelessness.¹⁹ God is perfect and timeless, even though the results of his pure actuality may be perceived by humans in a succession of time.²⁰

¹⁵ Gilbert Burnet, *An Exposition of the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England*, 3rd ed. (London: Printed for Ri. Chriswell, at the Rose and Crown in St. Paul’s Church-Yard, 1705); William Beveridge, *On the Thirty-Nine Articles*, vol. 7 of *The Theological Works of William Beveridge, D.D.: Sometime Lord Bishop of St. Asaph*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1846). For easier reading, I have modernized the spelling and punctuation of older texts.

¹⁶ Burnet, *Exposition of the Thirty-Nine Articles*, 23.

¹⁷ Beveridge, *On the Thirty-Nine Articles*, 18.

¹⁸ Beveridge, *On the Thirty-Nine Articles*, 18. Beveridge later quotes Augustine’s idea that God’s immutability means timelessness (*On the Thirty-Nine Articles*, 23–24).

¹⁹ Beveridge quotes Tertullian (*Against Marcion*), “There is no time in eternity, itself being all time. That which acts, cannot suffer... But God is as far from beginning and end as he is from time, the measurer of beginning and ending” (*On the Thirty-Nine Articles*, 22). For God, eternity is “one instant, ever-present and existent,” so that, consequently, biblical references to God’s past and future should be understood in terms of their result and not as God acting within time (A. P. Forbes, *An Explanation of the Thirty-Nine Articles: With an Epistle Dedicatory to the Late Rev. E. B. Pusey*, 5th ed. [New York, NY: E. P. Dutton and Company, 1875], 5). Within the limits of human understanding, eternity can only be “an endless succession of moments,” but God lives “in an eternal present” (Bicknell, *A Theological Introduction*, 35).

²⁰ Burnet, *Exposition of the Articles*, 26. For Beveridge, divine perfection requires timeless eternity: “Eternity is a perfection, such a perfection, without which the great God sometime would not have been, or sometimes will not be, and therefore can never be absolutely perfect, and so not God” (*On the Thirty-Nine Articles*, 20).

God is “without parts” (Lat. *impartibilis*, “incapable of division”).²¹ God is a Spirit and does not occupy space, meaning he has “no composition of matter or form” and therefore is “immaterial and indivisible.”²² God is simple and “without mixture or composition,” not made up of parts, as human beings are, but is “one most pure, simple, Divine essence.”²³ God’s being is indivisible. God is not a “metaphysical composition of action and power” or a “composition of essence and existence.”²⁴ Instead, God is pure act and does not have properties distinct from his essence.

God is “without passions” (Lat. *impassibilis*, “incapable of suffering”), which is strongly tied to his immutability and omnipotence.²⁵ For Burnet, “passion is an agitation that supposes a succession of thoughts” which “arises out of a heat of mind, and produces a vehemence of action. Now all these are such manifest imperfections, that it does plainly appear they cannot consist with infinite perfection.”²⁶ If God does not change, then he does not suffer or feel emotions.²⁷ God is “not subject to, nor capable of love, hatred, joy, grief, anger, and the like, as they daily arise in us imperfect creatures; but

²¹ This is tied to God being “without body.” For God to have a body would be an imperfection, for “God, who is everywhere, and is one pure and simple act, can have no such use for a body” (Burnet, *Exposition of the Articles*, 24). Divine simplicity requires that God be without body. “God in himself is a most simple and pure act, and therefore ... cannot have any thing in himself but himself, but what is that pure and simple act itself” (Beveridge, *On the Thirty-Nine Articles*, 15).

²² Forbes, *Explanation*, 5.

²³ Beveridge, *On the Thirty-Nine Articles*, 25–26. Thus, “all that [God] is, He is essentially and not accidentally.” All of God’s attributes are not separate but part of his “consistent and unchanging being” (Bicknell, *A Theological Introduction*, 36–37).

²⁴ Forbes, *Explanation*, 6. Being without parts also means that God does not have successive thoughts. “The essence of God is one perfect thought, in which He both views and wills all things.... Distinct thoughts are plainly an imperfection, and argue a progress in knowledge, and a deliberation in council, which carry defect and infirmity in them” (Burnet, *Exposition of the Articles*, 26).

²⁵ An omnipotent God cannot be influenced by something outside himself. “Whatever suffers does so from an agent stronger than itself, and is in some measure impotent. But God is a Being of immense power. For He, from whom all power is derived, must necessarily be omnipotent” (Edward Welchman, *The Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England, Illustrated with Notes, and Confirmed by Texts of the Holy Scripture, and Testimonies of the Primitive Fathers*, trans. A Clergyman of the University of Oxford, 3rd ed. [London: Printed for John and James Rivington, 1750], 3).

²⁶ Burnet, *Exposition of the Articles*, 27.

²⁷ “There is no increase in [God]. He is not like us, partly in act, partly in power. He is all act, *actus purissimus*” (Forbes, *Explanation*, 11).

he is always the same unmovable, unchangeable, impassible God.”²⁸ Biblical descriptions of God’s passions are merely anthropomorphic, “only spoken to come down to man’s weakness and to his better understanding the wonderful works of God.”²⁹

From the statements above, it could be said that the Anglican doctrine of God has much in common with strict classical theism.³⁰ O’Donovan observes that the statements of the Article “owe more to the philosophical vocabulary of Platonism than they do to the vocabulary of the Scriptures.”³¹ He describes the influence this way:

[Early] Christian thinkers pointed out that Platonic philosophers shared the prophets’ hostility to crude anthropomorphic ideas of God. The world we know is full of things that come to an end; but God has no end and no beginning, he is ‘everlasting.’ The world we know is full of things that are limited spatially by their bodies, of things analysable in terms of their constituent elements, of things subject to other forces than themselves; but God is ‘without body, parts or passions.’ The key term is ‘infinite.’ We are ‘finite’, limited. God is ‘infinite’, unlimited. Whatever bounds our imagination may put upon God (because we are used to thinking only of things that are bounded in one way or another), those bounds must be removed.³²

He points out that a key theme of a theism influenced by Platonism is a separation between the human and the divine.³³ God is infinitely unlike human beings, and God must thus be understood in terms of this dissimilarity. Article I is visibly a product of these philosophical premises.

²⁸ Beveridge, *On the Thirty-Nine Articles*, 26.

²⁹ Thomas Rogers, *A Short Scriptural Explication of the Faith and Doctrine of the Church of England: As Established in Her Thirty-Nine Articles and Creeds* (London: Printed by M. Lewis for the Editor, 1776), 2. “Since [God] is the most simple essence, and is also immutable, and always infinitely happy, He is utterly incapable [of passions]; and therefore that those things are spoken by way of accommodation to the weakness of men, and not as suitably to the perfections of God” (Welchman, *Thirty-Nine Articles*, 3).

³⁰ I am using John C. Peckham’s definition of strict classical theism as a position within the diversity of classical theism that “affirms, as a tightly connected package, divine perfection, necessity, *pure aseity*, *utter self-sufficiency*, *strict simplicity*, *timeless eternity*, *utter immutability*, *strict impassibility*, *omnipotence*, and *omniscience*” (*The Doctrine of God: Introducing the Big Questions* [New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2020], 10).

³¹ O’Donovan, *On the Thirty-Nine Articles*, 12.

³² *Ibid.*, 13.

³³ O’Donovan takes a different approach to the interpretation of the *via negativa* statements in Article I, instead viewing them through the evangelical message, where each statement says something about God’s love, purpose, and relationship with humankind (*Ibid.*, 14).

Considering the sources of Wesley's theology, specifically the influence of Anglican theism, how then is Wesley's doctrine of God best understood? He claims to fully support the classical theism of the Church of England, but do his sermons show complete agreement?

Key Concepts of Wesley's Theism

As suggested above, although Wesley affirmed the *Thirty-nine Articles of Religion*, his sermons may indicate some divergence. Following is an examination of his descriptions of the attributes of God, with the goal of discovering whether Wesley's sermons exhibit harmony with what the Anglican Church taught. The following key concepts of Wesley's theism in his sermons will be examined: (1) the interrelated divine attributes of omnipotence, omnipresence, and omniscience; (2) divine eternity in relation to human time; and (3) divine love. Those of Wesley's sermons that I have examined do not deal explicitly with impassibility and immutability, but some mention of these two attributes will be given in relation to the others.

Omnipotence, Omnipresence, and Omniscience

Wesley manifestly believed that God had no limits to his power, presence, and knowledge. Wesley affirmed God's omnipotence.³⁴ God is sovereign above all his creation.³⁵ God is not limited by anything outside himself. He wills and acts as he wishes.³⁶ It is according to his sovereign will that he created the

³⁴ Collins observes Rene Descartes's distinction of mind and body within Wesley's concept of divine omnipotence. However, unlike Descartes, Wesley rejected the concept of divine withdrawal. Instead, Wesley saw God as actively involved in the affairs of the world through his "continued influx and agency of his almighty power" (John Wesley, "Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount VI," in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Albert C. Outler [Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1984–1987], 1:581). Wesley's understanding of God's omnipotence, then, is best understood in terms of his providence for the earth (Collins, *A Faithful Witness*, 18–19; see also Kenneth J. Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* [Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2007], 26–28).

³⁵ Don Thorsen argues that Wesley's understanding of God's sovereignty is best understood in relation to God's holiness and his "relational attributes of love, grace, patience, goodness, and forgiveness." Sovereignty, then, is not to be understood only in terms of the separation between the human and divine but also in terms of the connection between the two, in God's involvement in human affairs (*Calvin vs. Wesley: Bringing Belief in Line with Practice* [Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2013], 7).

³⁶ God as Creator acts "according to his own sovereign will" and "in the most absolute sense [may] do what he will with his own" (John Wesley, "Thoughts Upon God's Sovereignty," in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Paul Wesley Chilcote and Kenneth J. Collins [Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2013], 13:548). Wesley differentiates between God as sovereign creator and God as governor: "Whenever . . . God acts as a Governor,

world at a given point in eternity and appointed the place and duration of the universe.

God's omnipotence naturally results in omnipresence, for he executes his power everywhere: "And it is nothing strange that he who is omnipresent, who 'filletth heaven and earth,' who is in every place, should see what is in every place, where he is intimately present."³⁷ To undermine omnipresence means also undermining omnipotence: "If there were any space where God was not present he would not be able to do anything there."³⁸ Where God is not present, he has no "duration," and cannot exercise his power, justice, or mercy.³⁹ Thus, "there can be no more bounds to his power than his presence."⁴⁰

For Wesley, omnipresence means not only God's presence "in all places" but also "at all times."⁴¹ Thus, God is present not only in space but also in eternity: "As he exists through infinite duration, so he cannot but exist through infinite space" (more on this below).⁴² Wesley does make an interesting statement about God's omnipresence: "The omnipresent Spirit . . . is not only 'all in the whole, but all in every part'"⁴³ This statement indicates that Wesley understood God to be more present in the world than in the strict classical sense.⁴⁴

God's omnipresence also naturally results in his omniscience, for "if he is present in every part of the universe, he cannot but know whatever is, or is done there."⁴⁵ God's divine attributes of omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence are exercised to sustain the existence of the world: "All his wisdom is continually employed in managing all the affairs of his creation for the good of all his creatures. For his wisdom and goodness go hand in hand;

as a rewarder, or punisher, he no longer acts as a mere Sovereign, by his own sole will and pleasure—but as an impartial Judge, guided in all things by invariable justice" (Wesley, "God's Sovereignty," in Chilcote and Collins, *Works*, 13:549).

³⁷ Wesley, "On Divine Providence," in Outler, *Works*, 2:538.

³⁸ Wesley, "On the Omnipresence of God," in Outler, *Works*, 4:44.

³⁹ Wesley, "Omnipresence of God," in Outler, *Works*, 4:44–45.

⁴⁰ Wesley, "The Unity of the Divine Being," in Outler, *Works*, 4:62.

⁴¹ Wesley, "Divine Providence," in Outler, *Works*, 2:538.

⁴² Wesley, "Unity of the Divine," in Outler, ed., *Works*, 4:61.

⁴³ Wesley, "Divine Providence," in Outler, *Works*, 2:538–539. Wesley is here alluding to Plotinus, suggesting that the relationship between God and the world is similar to the relationship between the soul and the body in the Neoplatonic sense.

⁴⁴ Schubert M. Ogden interprets this statement in the process theism sense of "the world as God's body" ("Love Unbounded: The Doctrine of God," *PSTJ* 19.3 [1966]: 16). Wesley's allusion to the soul-body relationship lends credence to this argument. For a definition of strict classical theism, see footnote 30.

⁴⁵ Wesley, "Unity of the Divine," in Outler, *Works*, 4:62.

they are inseparably united, and continually act in concert with almighty power for the real good of all his creatures.”⁴⁶

Wesley’s statements demonstrate that he saw God’s omnipotence, omnipresence, and omniscience as inseparable. All three must be true, and the denial of one naturally leads to the denial of the others. However, despite God’s unlimited capacities, there are things that God cannot do. He cannot “deny himself . . . counteract himself, or oppose his own work.”⁴⁷ God does not contradict himself, as Yang asserts concerning Wesley’s perspective:

The just God cannot do an unjust act; the good God cannot do an evil act or the God who hates sin cannot make someone commit sin. The just God cannot predestine unjustly some to life and others to eternal death before they come into the world, without consideration of their responsiveness to his love and grace. The holy God cannot be a minister of sin by coercing some to commit sin without their willingness to sin. “God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man.”⁴⁸ God cannot break his promise unfaithfully since he is faithful. God “cannot deny himself.”⁴⁹

In addition to God’s limitation of noncontradiction (which does not undermine his omnipotence), Wesley also describes God as placing limits upon himself in relation to human beings, specifically in bestowing free will upon them. In creation, God gave human beings the capacity of self-motion, understanding, will, and liberty.⁵⁰ God is thus limited in the sense that he does not overpower or override this free will:

If therefore God were thus to exert his power there would certainly be no more vice; but it is equally certain, neither could there be any virtue in the world. Were human liberty taken away men would be as incapable of virtue as stones. Therefore (with reverence be it spoken) the Almighty himself cannot do this thing. He cannot thus contradict himself, or undo what he has done.⁵¹

This self-limitation should not be understood in the sense of an “actual limitation in the sovereignty, power, and majesty of God.”⁵² God is still omnipotent

⁴⁶ Wesley, “Divine Providence,” in Outler, *Works*, 2:540.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Wesley, “Sermon on Mount VI,” in Outler, *Works*, 1:588.

⁴⁹ Yang, “Doctrine of God,” 169–170.

⁵⁰ Wesley, “The General Deliverance,” in Outler, *Works*, 2:440.

⁵¹ Wesley, “Divine Providence,” in Outler, *Works*, 2:541. “God’s government of the universe is absolute in every particular save only in the activity of free men; and God’s providence displays itself, not in overriding human freedom, but rather in affording help to man and assistance in working out his salvation, so far as such assistance can be given without compulsion, without overruling his liberty” (William Ragsdale Cannon, *The Theology of John Wesley: With Special Reference to the Doctrine of Justification* [New York, NY: Abingdon, 1946], 172–173).

⁵² Thorsen, *Calvin vs. Wesley*, 9.

and omniscient, but for Wesley, God's foreknowledge is not determinative. Wesley rejected the notion of God's omnipotence "in the sense that God exercises all power and thus creatures exercised none."⁵³ The concepts of noncontradiction and divine self-limitation apropos of human free will may fit within strict classical theism. Both determinism and libertarianism could coincide with a strict understanding of God's attributes. However, Wesley's emphasis on human free will indicates that to him, God limits his power because of love.

The above statements indicate that Wesley's understanding of omnipotence, omnipresence, and omniscience aligns closely with classical theism (although it does not require it). However, his understanding of God's eternity, which we now turn to, reveals less concurrence.

Eternity

Wesley's 1786 sermon "On Eternity," which Albert C. Outler describes as Wesley's "deepest plunge into speculative theology" at that point in his career, sheds light on his understanding of God's relationship with time.⁵⁴ In the sermon, Wesley differentiates between eternity *a parte ante* (eternity past) and eternity *a parte post* (eternity future).⁵⁵ For Wesley, time is "in some sense a fragment of eternity, broken off at both ends."⁵⁶ Those who exist in the present lie between two eternities—that of the past, and that of the future.

Wesley saw a clear distinction between God and humankind in their experience of time. Reflecting on Psalm 8:4, Wesley asks, "How can he that inhabiteth eternity stoop to regard the creature of a day; one whose life passeth away like a shadow?"⁵⁷ Wesley reminds his audience that "God is not man" and that "there is the same disproportion between him and any finite being as between him and the creature of a day."⁵⁸ However, Wesley affirms that eternity is a communicable attribute of God. He argues that "angels, and archangels, and all the companies of heaven" are recipients of this attribute and that God intends "the inhabitants of the earth who dwell in houses of clay" but whose "souls will never die" to experience the same.⁵⁹ In this sense,

⁵³ Collins, *Theology of John Wesley*, 28. Wesley vehemently protested the Calvinist teaching of predestination because it distorted the loving character of God: "It represents the most Holy God as worse than the devil, as both more false, more cruel, and more unjust" (Wesley, "Free Grace," in Outler, *Works*, 3:555).

⁵⁴ Wesley, "On Eternity," in Outler, *Works*, 2:358.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 2:358–359.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 2:360.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 2:371.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 2:371–372.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 2:361. Human beings are "pictures of [God's] own eternity" and as such, their spirits are "clothed with immortality."

human beings can be eternal *a parte post*.⁶⁰ A person who by faith believes in God “lives in eternity, and walks in eternity.”⁶¹ Yet, it is only God who is eternal in both senses, *a parte ante* and *a parte post*, so that “his duration alone, as it had no beginning, so it cannot have any end.”⁶²

On several occasions in the sermon, Wesley describes eternity in the sense of a “duration without beginning” or “duration without end,” in contrast to Beveridge and Burnet, who insist that God experiences no duration or successive time. Unlike time, which “admits of bounds,” eternity is “unbounded duration,” where measures of length are inapplicable.⁶³ In his sermon “What is Man?” (1787), based on Psalm 8:3–4, Wesley compares the “poor pittance of duration” of modern human beings to that of Methuselah or the “duration of an angel” or even the duration before they were created to “unbeginning eternity.”⁶⁴ The usage of “duration” seems to indicate a sequential understanding of time which may also be applied to God, before whom “no duration is long or short.”⁶⁵ Wesley does differentiate between “finite and infinite duration,” but the distinction is the ability of human beings to comprehend endless duration.⁶⁶ Eternity is simply a sequence of time having

⁶⁰ Wesley even uses the law of the conservation of matter to argue that physical matter is itself eternal *a parte post*. Matter has a beginning but has no end. Even if it may break down and change in form, the substance remains the same (Wesley, “On Eternity,” in Outler, *Works*, 2:362). See Thomas C. Oden, *John Wesley’s Scriptural Christianity: A Plain Exposition of His Teaching on Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 32.

⁶¹ Wesley, “On Eternity,” in Outler, *Works*, 2:369.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 2:359. Thomas C. Oden seems to interpret Wesley’s words in this sermon to mean that God exists in the eternal present, as one who has “a present relation to all past and future moments” (*John Wesley’s Teachings* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012], 1:38). However, I do not see any explicit statement from this sermon that indicates such an idea. One must look to other statements to argue the case.

⁶³ Wesley, “On Eternity,” in Outler, *Works*, 2:365. For those in heaven, any measurement of time is unnecessary, for “when millions of millions of ages are elapsed, their eternity is but just begun.”

⁶⁴ Wesley, “What Is Man?” in Outler, *Works*, 3:458.

⁶⁵ Wesley, “On Eternity,” in Outler, *Works*, 2:372.

⁶⁶ Wesley, “What Is Man?” in Outler, *Works*, 3:458. Wesley cites an illustration of Cyprian: “Suppose there was a ball of sand as large as the globe of the earth; and suppose one grain of this sand as large as the globe of earth; and suppose one grain of this were to be annihilated in a thousand years; yet that whole space of time wherein this ball would be annihilating, at the rate of one grain in a thousand years, would bear less, yea, unspeakably, infinitely less proportion to eternity than a single grain of sand would bear to that whole mass.’ What then are the seventy years of human life in comparison of eternity? In what terms can the proportion between these be expressed? It is nothing, yea, infinitely less than nothing!”

no end (or in the case of God, no beginning) and not necessarily the “antithesis of temporality.”⁶⁷ If this is true, then Wesley would not be subscribing to a strict timeless (no succession of moments) understanding of God, but rather an everlasting (a succession of moments without end) view of God’s time.

There are statements, however, that indicate a classical view of divine time. In his sermon “On Predestination,” where he expounds on God’s foreknowledge, Wesley explains that God “does not know one thing before another, or one thing after another, but sees all things in one point of view, from everlasting to everlasting. As all time, with everything that exists therein, is present with him at once, so he sees at once whatever was, is, or will be to the end of time.”⁶⁸ Thomas C. Oden interprets Wesley’s understanding of time to mean that God “inhabits all eternity” and “has a present relation to all past and future moments.”⁶⁹ This language indicates an “eternal present” understanding of God’s relationship to time. Jung Yang argues that, for Wesley, because it is impossible to measure God’s eternity, “God’s eternity is not the succession of time which has its beginning and end. Rather, God’s eternity produces time.”⁷⁰

How did Wesley understand God’s workings in relation to time? I will here use John Cooper’s identification of the question of time as the distinction between “classical Christian theism” and “modified classical Christian theism,” wherein the former affirms God’s eternity (i.e., strict timelessness) while the latter affirms God’s involvement in time.⁷¹ If Wesley did indeed believe God could work sequentially within time, it could be argued that he held to a modified classical Christian theism. Yang affirms Wesley’s belief that God can work within time although he “transcends the sphere of time.”⁷² For example, Wesley understood that God created the world “at that point of duration which the infinite wisdom of God saw to be most proper.”⁷³ Wesley’s sermon “The Wisdom of God’s Counsels,” presents God as actively involved in human history, from the incarnation of Jesus until Wesley’s present time.⁷⁴ Observing his contemporary ongoing reformations, Wesley says,

⁶⁷ Ogden, “Love Unbounded,” 16.

⁶⁸ Wesley, “On Predestination,” in Outler, *Works*, 2:417.

⁶⁹ Oden, *Wesley’s Scriptural Christianity*, 31. Oden ties this “present relation to . . . future moments” with foreknowledge. It is unclear if Oden understands God’s “inhabiting” of all eternity in the experiential sense or in the cognitive/knowledge sense.

⁷⁰ Yang, “Doctrine of God,” 160.

⁷¹ John W. Cooper, *Panentheism: The Other God of the Philosophers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006), 321.

⁷² Yang, “Doctrine of God,” 161.

⁷³ Wesley, “Unity of the Divine,” in Outler, *Works*, 4:63.

⁷⁴ Wesley, “The Wisdom of God’s Counsels,” in Outler, *Works*, 2:551–566.

And, blessed be God, we see he is now doing the same thing in various parts of the kingdom. In the room of those that have fallen from their steadfastness, or are falling at this day, he is continually raising up out of the stones other children to Abraham. This he does at one or another place according to his own will; pouring out his quickening Spirit on this or another people just as it pleaseth him. He is raising up those of every age and degree—young men and maidens, old men and children—to be ‘a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people, to show forth his praise who has called them out of darkness into his marvellous light.’ And we have no reason to doubt but he will continue so to do till the great promise is fulfilled, till ‘the earth is filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea’; ‘till all Israel is saved, and the fullness of the Gentiles is come in.’⁷⁵

Wesley’s use of the present tense to describe God’s actions implies that Wesley perceives God to be working in the present, within time, alongside history. His comments on God’s providential acts seem to describe God as such. God is “the eternal, omnipresent, almighty, all-wise Spirit, [and] as he created all things, so he continually superintends whatever he has created.”⁷⁶ Of course, it is possible to interpret these statements euphemistically, where God is described in human terms but acts within the “eternal present” that only manifests its results within human history. This would be the case if Wesley subscribed to divine timelessness. However, I believe it more likely that Wesley’s language instead indicates a more flexible view of God’s actions within human time, particularly in light of his statements on the “duration” of divine eternity.

The statements cited above indicate that there is some ambiguity in Wesley’s sermons concerning God’s relationship with time. His pastoral approach does not attempt to answer specific questions regarding God’s temporality or timelessness. For example, Wesley affirms that human beings may receive God’s eternity *a parte post* but does not address whether human beings will experience timelessness. The only distinction he indicates is that God’s eternity has no beginning. It is quite significant that at no point in his sermon “On Eternity” (and in other sermons I have examined) does Wesley use the descriptive language of divine timelessness such as Burnet or Beveridge utilize.

The discrepancy likely stems from the fact that although Wesley thought of God’s eternity “in terms of a temporal rather than timeless duration, he still understood reality from the perspective of Neoplatonic dualism.”⁷⁷ Thus,

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, *Works*, 2:565.

⁷⁶ Wesley, “Unity of the Divine,” in Outler, *Works*, 4:69.

⁷⁷ Fernando Canale, “*Sola Scriptura* and Hermeneutics: Toward a Critical Assessment of the Methodological Ground of the Protestant Reformation,” *AUSS* 50.2 (2012): 190. For example, Wesley clearly adhered to a dualistic understanding of

Fernando Canale observes that Wesley “hints at the possibility that the time of infinite duration may not change at all and thus infinity may be timeless.”⁷⁸ However, Wesley does not make his view explicit, nor does he address the logical question of how a timeless God could become temporal.⁷⁹ One possibility is that the “evangelical” Wesley pictured a God more involved and intimate with human beings, while the “Anglican” Wesley held to a classical dualistic ontology, thereby creating a logical contradiction in his view of divine time.

Yang observes that “Wesley’s God is the author of time who created, controls and works in time, but he is absolutely beyond time and cannot be measured by it.”⁸⁰ Within this description, however, is a possibility of multiple interpretations. This could be taken to mean strict timelessness (“beyond time”) or some element of temporality (“works in time”). My reading of Wesley leans in the direction of some form of temporality, based on three arguments: (1) if Wesley understood the only difference between human and divine eternity is that God has no beginning, then it would make sense that God’s experience of time is somewhat analogous to that of humans; (2) Wesley’s usage of “duration” indicates a succession of moments; and (3)

human nature and the dichotomy of body and soul: “But what am I? Unquestionably I am something distinct from my body. It seems evident that my body is not necessarily included therein. For when my body dies, I shall not die: I shall exist as really as I did before.... Indeed at present this body is so intimately connected with the soul, that I seem to consist of both. In my present state of existence, I undoubtedly consist both of soul and body: And so I shall again, after the resurrection, to all eternity” (Wesley, “What Is Man?” in Outler, *Works*, 4:23). Moreover, Wesley viewed the body as temporal but the soul as eternal: “Consider, that the spirit of man is not only of a higher order, of a more excellent nature than any part of the visible world, but also more durable, not liable either to dissolution or decay. We know all ‘the things which are seen are temporal’, of a changing transient nature; ‘but the things which are not seen’ (such as is the soul of man in particular) ‘are eternal’” (Wesley, “What Is Man?” in Outler, *Works*, 3:460).

⁷⁸ Canale, “*Sola Scriptura* and Hermeneutics,” 190.

⁷⁹ God cannot be both timeless and temporal at the same time—these are contradictory concepts. “Often, laymen, anxious to affirm both God’s transcendence (His existing beyond the world) and His immanence (His presence in the world), assert that God is both timeless and temporal. But in the absence of some sort of model or explanation of how this can be the case, this assertion is flatly self-contradictory and so cannot be true. If, then, God exists timelessly, He does not exist at any moment of time. He transcends time; that is to say, He exists but He does not exist in time. He has no past, present, and future. At any moment in time at which we exist, we may truly assert that ‘God exists’ in the timeless sense of existence, but not that ‘God exists now’” (William Lane Craig, *Time and Eternity: Exploring God’s Relationship to Time* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001], 15).

⁸⁰ Yang, “Doctrine of God,” 162.

Wesley's description of how God works in human history depicts God as able to enter into and work within human time to demonstrate his love.⁸¹

Love

Depending on one's philosophical presuppositions, the dynamics of divine love may be described in different ways. For example, classical theism depicts God's love as transcendent, impassible, purely volitional, and unaffected by human love. In contrast, process theism depicts divine love as immanent, passible, and dynamically relational.⁸² It is therefore beneficial to examine Wesley's descriptions of divine love, which will shed light on his understanding of God as compared with the classical theism of Anglicanism.

God's love may be described as the center of Wesley's theology.⁸³ God loves humankind so much that "he is concerned every moment for what befalls every creature upon earth; and more especially for everything that befalls any of the children of men."⁸⁴ As noted above, Wesley believed that because of love, God limits his power with regard to human free will. Don Thorsen argues that, for Wesley, emphasizing God's love was more crucial than emphasizing his power, "not that the power of God's sovereignty is unimportant, but that power without love misses out on the full self-revelation of God to people in the Bible."⁸⁵ It is through God's love that his other attributes—such as his sovereignty—are to be understood.⁸⁶ Wesley viewed God's love as his "darling, his reigning attribute, the attribute that sheds an amiable glory on all his other perfections."⁸⁷

Wesley did not address the question of whether God's love is purely nonreciprocal—that is, whether he can only give love and not receive it.

⁸¹ Yang even hints that some of Wesley's writings could be interpreted to mean that God experiences his own time in contrast to cosmic time (i.e., analogical temporality). However, he interprets "God's time" to mean that his actions come at their appointed time, "when God does his work either transcendentally or immanently in cosmic time according to his infinite wisdom" ("Doctrine of God," 161–162).

⁸² See John C. Peckham, *The Love of God: A Canonical Model* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 15–44.

⁸³ Charles W. Carter, R. Duane Thompson, and Charles R. Wilson, eds., *A Contemporary Wesleyan Theology: Biblical, Systematic, and Practical* (Grand Rapids, MI: Francis Asbury, 1983), 1:120.

⁸⁴ Wesley, "Divine Providence," in Outler, *Works*, 2:540.

⁸⁵ Thorsen, *Calvin vs. Wesley*, 11.

⁸⁶ Wesley's problem with Calvinism was that, in the process of emphasizing God's sovereignty over salvation, it made God responsible for reprobation, thereby distorting God's loving character.

⁸⁷ John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament* (London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1866), 387.

Wesley's 1733 sermon "The Love of God" expounds on how humans ought to love God and will experience genuine happiness as a result.⁸⁸ Yet, the sermon is silent on whether God also experiences happiness resulting from the love of his creatures.

There are, however, elements of Wesley's sermons that shed light on the dynamics of God's love. In his 1786 sermon "On Divine Providence," Wesley builds on Thomas Crane's imagery of three concentric circles of divine providence. The first circle covers humanity as a whole, not only Christians but also "Mahometans" and "heathens." For support, Wesley cites Psalm 145:9, "The Lord is loving unto every man, and his mercy is over all his works."⁸⁹ God grants general providence for all humankind, regardless of their faith. The second circle covers Christianity at large, those who "in some degree honour [Christ], at least more than the heathens do."⁹⁰ God provides for them and protects them to a greater degree than the first circle. The third circle is comprised of genuine Christians, composed of "all that love God, or at least truly fear God and work righteousness, all in whom is the mind which was in Christ, and who walk as Christ also walked."⁹¹ God takes particular notice and provides particular care toward those who genuinely love and serve him. It is this group that experiences God's miraculous works.⁹²

The "three circles" of providence seem to imply a fore-conditional aspect of divine providence (or love), where God loves humanity in a general way, but offers a special kind of providence/love for those who reciprocate it.⁹³ God's providential acts are an outworking of his love. While Wesley here uses the terms "general providence" and "specific providence" instead of "fore-conditional love," the principles are present. Genuine love from human beings results in special providence/love from God. If true, this would undermine the concept of pure aseity because God receives love as a condition for a more intimate kind of love or providence.⁹⁴

⁸⁸ Wesley, "The Love of God," in Outler, *Works*, 4:331–345.

⁸⁹ Wesley, "Divine Providence," in Outler, *Works*, 2:542. This is quoted from the *Book of Common Prayer*: Of note is that, while most other translations render it "The Lord is good," the *Book of Common Prayer* renders it "The Lord is loving."

⁹⁰ Wesley, "Divine Providence," in Outler, *Works*, 2:543.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.*, 2:546.

⁹³ I am again borrowing Peckham's terminology, with "fore-conditional" meaning that "God's love is freely bestowed prior to any conditions but not exclusive of conditions" (*Love of God*, 191). As such, God's love is universal in that it is given to all, but it is also particular in that only those who lovingly respond share a special intimacy with him.

⁹⁴ In the concept of pure aseity, God is completely independent of anything outside himself. Even his attributes are completely self-sufficient and cannot be influenced by

Central to Wesley's understanding of God is the notion that God is personal.⁹⁵ Yang frames this personalness within God's eternity, omnipresence, omniscience, and omnipotence.⁹⁶ Divine attributes are best understood in light of divine love. It is significant that in Wesley's depictions of God's personalness, there is no mention of his immutability or impassibility. In contrast, God's relational and social nature, as seen within the Trinity, is also evident in the creation of humankind. As Yang puts it, "From the inner life of love, the love which is gracious to others, the triune God enjoyed sharing his love and happiness with others. Thus, he created intelligent beings."⁹⁷

The above statements indicate a dynamic view of the love between God and human beings. Wesley does not make a clear statement in the sermon about reciprocity—that is, whether God receives love—but his descriptions of divine love do not require a great logical leap to conclude that the divine-human relationship shares reciprocal love, thereby indicating a departure from strict classical theism.

Synthesis

It is important to note that Wesley did not write systematically.⁹⁸ His approach was homiletical, focused on exhorting his audience to holy living. As William Ragsdale Cannon observes, "It seems as if Wesley shies away from metaphysical questions in regard to the nature of God and contents himself with an affirmation of the most obvious facts which come to him through the channel

anything external. Contrary to pure aseity, fore-conditional love means that God would be dependent upon reciprocated human love as the basis for a special relationship.

⁹⁵ Yang, "Doctrine of God," 176. "There are times when [Wesley] speaks of God in terms which show that he is, at the moment, thinking in the traditional way of a God outside his creation, as the God of the Deists was outside. But it is evident that Wesley's belief in God's closer, more intimate relation with nature ... was his real answer to the mechanistic, deistic theories of his time. God is both transcendent *and* immanent ... Wesley's theology demanded a closer correlation of God with His world than contemporary thought allowed" (Umphrey Lee, *John Wesley and Modern Religion* [Nashville, TN: Cokesbury, 1936], 115–116).

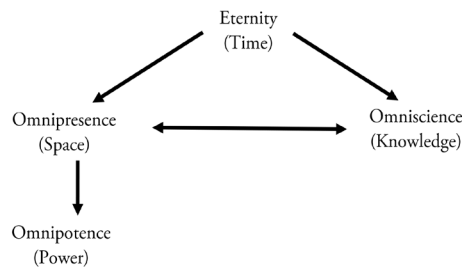
⁹⁶ Yang, "Doctrine of God," 182. Yang cautions against overemphasizing God's love at the expense of His power and sovereignty. He notes that Wesley was more involved with the Calvinists than with those who rejected God's omnipotence, and consequently, his writings reflect more emphasis on God's loving and personal nature than his power or sovereignty.

⁹⁷ Yang, "Doctrine of God," 177.

⁹⁸ Although many since Wesley's lifetime have downplayed his contributions to theology, Randy L. Maddox emphasizes Wesley's relevance as a "theological mentor" for Christianity as a whole ("Reclaiming an Inheritance: Wesley as Theologian in the History of Methodist Theology," in *Rethinking Wesley's Theology for Contemporary Methodism*, ed. Randy L. Maddox [Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 1998], 213–226).

of religions needs.”⁹⁹ Wesley’s pastoral approach meant “his theologizing was related more to the soteriological doctrines.”¹⁰⁰ One must, therefore, admit an element of speculation in these inferences, but the ambiguity in Wesley’s sermons does allow for some conjecture. Others may certainly interpret Wesley’s writings differently than I do.

Wesley drew on the influence of classical theism within the Anglican Church, evident in his terminology in describing God’s essential attributes. Kenneth Collins diagrams Wesley’s understanding of the divine attributes this way:¹⁰¹



Collins indicates that divine eternity is the primary attribute upon which all others are built, which is a key concept in Neoplatonic dualism. Wesley’s sermons, *prima facie*, indicate that he adhered to the classical understanding of omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence. However, I concur with Schubert Ogden that “while much of Wesley’s talk about God clearly presupposes the validity of classical metaphysics, not everything he says on this head ... can be made to cohere with that metaphysical outlook.”¹⁰² As argued above, Wesley may have adhered to some form of divine temporality. If true, then God’s omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence are to be understood within the context of God relating to human beings within sequential time. If God can enter human time, then it follows that he can

⁹⁹ Cannon, *Theology of John Wesley*, 160.

¹⁰⁰ Howard Alexander Slaatte, *Fire in the Brand: An Introduction to the Creative Work and Theology of John Wesley* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983), 116.

¹⁰¹ Collins, *A Faithful Witness*, 19. God exists in all space (omnipresence), thereby knowing everything there is to know in that space (omniscience), and exercises his power wherever he exists (omnipotence). All of these attributes stem from Wesley’s view of God’s eternal existence. Wesley himself does not go into detail about which attribute is the cause of the others. Instead, he highlights the interrelatedness of each attribute with the other.

¹⁰² Ogden, “Love Unbounded,” 15.

also enter human space. He can be present in the world and in time, at least in an analogous sense. Wesley could thus be said to have departed, to some extent, from classical theism in the sense of divine temporality, omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence.

Additionally, God's attributes are best understood within the dynamics of general and specific providence/love, which would indicate a God who is more involved in human affairs than is allowed by the strict classical view. Wesley does not say so explicitly but, following his descriptions of divine love to their logical consequences, an argument could be made that Wesley's view of divine love is reciprocal in nature, thereby undermining the concept of strict aseity. I agree with Ogden's conclusion that "a [classical] metaphysics never has allowed, and, in principle, never could allow, an appropriate theological explication of the central theme of Wesley's evangelical witness, that God is love."¹⁰³

As a response to recent objections against classical theism, Ogden proposes a Wesleyan "neoclassical theism," connected to the concept of love:

The whole idea of moral goodness as we ordinarily make use of it clearly seems to depend for its meaning on such other basic ideas as real relation to others and capacity for change. Consequently, if we are to conceive of the truly perfect One, it can hardly be otherwise than as the supreme exemplification of these very ideas. So far from being the wholly absolute and immutable Being of the classical philosophers, God must really be conceived as the eminently relative One, whose openness to change contingently on the actions of others is literally boundless.¹⁰⁴

Also mentioned above is Wesley's view of God's providential actions toward human beings, where God seems to work within human history, generally for all humankind and specifically for genuine followers. Ogden points out that this notion of a God involved with the world is inconsistent with the classical concept that "while ordinary beings are indeed related to God, he himself is in no way related to them and that the present world of nature and history is neither fully real nor ultimately significant."¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 13. I do not agree with all of Ogden's premises, specifically (1) his claim that some elements of classical theism—creation, eschatology, and miracles—have been proven unscientific and should be understood as mythology, and (2) his claim that religious language is primarily existential-metaphysical, not scientific-historical. Neither do I agree with his proclivity toward process theism. However, I agree with his description of a more personal God and that one does not need to presuppose (strict) classical theism to arrive at theistic conclusions.

¹⁰⁵ Ogden, "Love Unbounded," 13.

Though he remained loyal to the Church of England, Wesley departed from its theology and practice when he deemed it necessary.¹⁰⁶ This may be the case with his theism, such that “one often finds him pressing against these limits [of classical theism] and, in some places, actually breaking through them.”¹⁰⁷ Wesley may have been unaware of the theological implications of some of his claims, but when examined as a whole, his sermons indicate a modified classical theism, in contrast to the strict classical theism of the Church of England.

Conclusion

When John Wesley's theism is compared with that of the Church of England, it is evident that, while Wesley affirmed the statements of the Church and used much of its terminology, there are elements in his sermons that show considerable deviation. At times, he uses language that Burnet and Beveridge would likely disagree with. Wesley's classical descriptions of God's omnipotence, omnipresence, and omniscience align with the position of the Church, but his views of God's temporal eternity and reciprocal love toward humans are a departure from it.

When viewed from a perspective of tension between his Anglican loyalties and his evangelical leanings, Wesley's theism observably moves slightly away from strict classical theism, depicting God as personally involved in human time and affairs (although above them) and exercising special providence/love for those who genuinely love him in return. This article argues that whether Wesley was conscious of it or not, his doctrine of God may best be classified as modified classical theism.

¹⁰⁶ “Frequently [Wesley] had claimed that in his relations with the Church of England he followed two principles: to stay as close as possible to her doctrines and discipline and worship, but to make variations in these whenever and wherever this was demanded by the peculiar work of God to which he was called” (Baker, *Wesley and the Church*, 324).

¹⁰⁷ Ogden, “Love Unbounded,” 16.