

CHRIST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
History Series: The History of John Wesley and the Methodist Church
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PART 25: WESLEY'S THEOLOGY

It is a common misconception that John Wesley was not much of a theologian. It is thought that his understanding of Christian faith is based only on personal experience without much investigation into its content and foundation and, therefore, just an elaboration of Wesley's own experience.

This view is very mistaken. If you follow some of the controversies that he was involved in it becomes clear that Wesley probed deeply into the sources of Christian faith in his search to understand its content and significance. However, as he says, Wesley sought always to state "plain truth for plain people". It is true he did not write theological books or articles as such; so where do we find his theology? It is dispersed throughout his journal, diaries and letters, sermons, pamphlets and in the hymns he and his brother Charles produced. The three most important and concentrated sources of Wesley's theology are his sermons, his hymns and a pamphlet he wrote titled *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*.

Wesley preached thousands of sermons, but only about 140 were written out and printed. Reading these it is difficult to see why people were so moved by them. There are several reasons for this. First, they were published for the instruction of members of his societies. Second, they were meant to help "plain people" deal with their commitment to Christ and its implications for their daily lives. Thirdly, missing from the written versions are the nuances of the rise and fall of language, facial expressions and gestures, the entire body language, etc. Furthermore, the context of the society and the inner worlds of his hearers were vastly different from that of our current time. Lastly, it seems that the Holy Spirit was at work. Nevertheless, these sermons are worth reading today.

Wesley's *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament* was first published in 1755. It uses Wesley's own translation, along with comments. While Wesley was very much a biblical scholar and "at home" with languages, this was not meant to be a book for academics and scholars. As he tells us, it was an aid for "plain people who love the Word of God". These are still doctrinal standards for Methodists.

In cooperation with his brother, Charles, John Wesley deliberately sought to create hymns that conveyed scriptural teachings and enhanced faith while drawing his followers into a more united community of worship and ministry. Partly because of these hymns Methodists have always been known for their enthusiastic singing and music. Help keep up the tradition!