

Wesley: Plagiarist or
Purveyor of German Critical
Scholarship?

Troy Martin

Olivet Theological Journal

Sponsored By:

Ministerial Fellowship Club

and

The Division of Religion, O.N.U.

A few years ago, frustrated by the vast sea of knowledge, I decided to examine every writing which related to 1 Peter. I thought that at least I would then know everything about one small region of that sea. In plotting my voyage, I resolved to read every commentary which had been written on 1 Peter beginning with the earliest and proceeding to the most recent. As I embarked, consumed by excitement, I could hardly wait to arrive at a commentary published in 1754 by a mentor of my religious tradition, John Wesley.

After plodding through the Greek commentaries of the Early Church, the Latin commentaries of the Medieval Church, and the German commentaries of the Reformation, I happily arrived at John Wesley's Notes on the New Testament, one of the earliest English commentaries of the Bible. Eagerly I read the first paragraph:

There is a wonderful weightiness, and yet liveliness and sweetness, in the epistles of St. Peter. His design in both is, to stir up the minds of those to whom he writes, by way of remembrance, 2 Peter iii. 1, and to guard them, not only against error, but also against doubting, v. 12. This he does by reminding them of that glorious grace which God had vouchsafed them through the gospel, by which believers are inflamed to bring forth the fruits of faith, hope, love, and patience.¹

As I read that paragraph, I remembered reading these exact words in some commentator prior to Wesley. I quickly looked for a footnote in Wesley's work which would give credit to the author who first penned these words. Wesley gave no footnote or reference. Grippled with the fear that the mentor of my religious tradition had plagiarized, stolen some other scholar's work, I decided to investigate.

Beginning with Wesley, I retraced my course reading my notes on each commentator. Very quickly I found the note I had taken from John Albert Bengel's Gnomon Novi Testamenti published just twelve years before Wesley's notes. The relevant passage reads as follows:

There is a wonderful weightiness and liveliness in the style of Peter, which most agreeably arrests the attention of the reader. The design of each Epistle is, to stir up by way of remembrance the pure mind of the faithful, 2 Pet. iii. 1, and to guard them not only against error, but even against doubt, ch. v. 12. This he does by reminding them

of that Gospel grace, by which believers, being anointed, are inflamed to bring forth the fruits of faith, hope, love, and patience, in every duty and affliction.²

Although no English translation of Bengel's Latin commentary existed in Wesley's day, Wesley certainly had access to Bengel's work since Wesley knew Latin well enough to write a Latin grammar.³ A comparison of this passage, as well as other passages from Wesley's *Notes* clearly indicates wholesale plagiarism on the part of Wesley.

Distraught at what I had found, I turned to the "Preface" of Wesley's *Notes*, hoping to find some acknowledgement of his dependence upon Bengel. A few pages into the "Preface" I found a welcomed statement of Wesley's purpose and design in writing. The passage reads as follows:

I once designed to write down barely what occurred to my own mind, consulting none but the inspired writers. But no sooner was I acquainted with that great light of the Christian world, (lately gone to his reward), Bengellus, than I entirely changed my design, being thoroughly convinced it might be more service to the cause of religion, were I barely to translate his *Gnomon Novi Testamenti*, than to write many volumes upon it. Many of his excellent notes I have therefore translated; Many more I have abridged; omitting that part which was purely critical, and giving the substance of the rest. Those various readings likewise which he has shewed to have a vast majority of ancient copies and translations on their side, I have without scruple incorporated with the text; which, after his manner, I have divided all along (though not omitting the common division into chapter and verses, which is of use on various accounts) according to the matter it contains, making a larger or smaller pause, just as the sense requires. And even this is such an help, in many places, as one who has not tried it can scarcely conceive.⁴

Relieved that Wesley had cleared himself of plagiarism by including this passage in his "Preface," I began to muse upon the significance of this passage for aspiring pastors/scholars of the Wesleyan tradition.

First, Wesley rejects his original design of simply reading the Scriptures or the inspired writers and of writing what came to his mind. Although many in the Wesleyan tradition would argue that Wesley's original design is the appropriate method of using Scripture, it is significant that Wesley himself rejects this method. Instead, he opts to make available to his readers the best in German scholarship, Bengel's commentary. Wesley acquired an education which gave

him access to German scholarship. He learned Latin. From Wesley's own example, a pastor/scholar in the Wesleyan tradition should seek an education which will give him access to the best scholarship available, even if it means learning a foreign language.

Secondly, Wesley is not reticent to engage in critical scholarship. Textual criticism, the science used to determine the original text of the New Testament, was in its early stages during Wesley's life. Wesley is not only aware of the advances in textual criticism but also incorporates the fruits of this science into his *Notes*. He comments on his usage of textual criticism, saying:

I design, first, to set down the text itself, for the most part, in the common English translation, which is, in general, so far as I can judge, abundantly the best I have seen. Yet I do not say it is incapable of being brought, in several places, nearer to the original. Neither will I affirm that the Greek copies from which this translation was made are always the most correct; and therefore I shall take the liberty, as occasion may require, to make here and there a small alteration.⁵

Wesley is of course referring to the King James Version. Although he considers it to be the best English translation available in his day, he does not hesitate to bring it nearer to the original by the use of textual criticism. Again Wesley's example indicates that the true Wesleyan pastor/scholar should engage in critical scholarship.

Third, using German critical scholarship to enable him to understand the Scriptures better, Wesley attempted to make this understanding, shorn of its critical jargon, available to serious persons "who have not the advantage of learning." He says, "I write chiefly for plain, unlettered men, who understand only their Mother-tongue . . ."⁶ Thus, Wesley's agenda in his *Notes on the New Testament* is to make current critical scholarship available to his uneducated readers in a palatable form. It is little wonder that the public read and heard Wesley with great eagerness as he exposed them to the educated views and perspectives of their day. Wesley's example summons the Wesleyan pastor/scholar from a life of ease to the rigors of critical scholarship and language study. The Wesleyan pastor/scholar must know current scholarship so well that he can present the views and perspectives of that scholarship in the language of the common person.

My musings on this passage from the "Preface" to Wesley's *Notes on the New Testament* summon every Wesleyan pastor/scholar to ponder how he/she is plying through the sea of knowledge. Wesley should be our rudder directing us toward excellence in scholarship and persuasiveness in

continued on page 12

¹⁰Jung, Carl Gustav. *Psychology and Religion*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1938, p. 6.

¹¹The "Wesleyan quadrilateral" was intended by Outler as "a metaphor for a four-element syndrome, including the four-fold guidelines of scripture in Wesley's theological method." The term itself does not originate in the writings of Wesley. See Outler, Albert C. "The Wesleyan Quadrilateral--In John Wesley." *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 20, no. 1 (Spring 1985): pp. 11, 16.

 Dan McFeeley is a graduate student in the Religion Division at Olivet Nazarene University.

continued from page 5
 presenting our understanding of the New Testament. To abandon this rudder would only invite shipwreck.

Notes

¹John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*, Vol. 2, *Romans to Revelation* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1986), n.p.

²John Albert Bengel, *Gnomon of the New Testament*, Vol. 5, Andrew Fausset, trans. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1860), 43.

³Thomas Jackson, ed. *The Works of John Wesley*, 3rd ed. (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1978 reprint edition). 33-77.

⁴Wesley, *Notes*, Preface.

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶*Ibid.*

 Professor Martin is a professor in the Biblical Literature Department at Olivet Nazarene University.