

# What Wesleyans Can Learn from Karl Barth

By John L. Drury

As a Wesleyan, I am often asked why I am studying systematic theology at Princeton. Particularly, my interest in Karl Barth seems peculiar both to my fellow Wesleyans and my Princeton colleagues. To be honest, I have been asking *myself* for years how these two worlds might congeal. There are a number of points of interest in Karl Barth's theology that provide insights for the practice of Wesleyan theology.<sup>1</sup> As I outline three such points, allow my thought process to display not only materially *what* Wesleyans can learn from Karl Barth, but also formally *how* one Christian tradition might learn from another.

## I. The Threefold Word of God and the Wesleyan Quadrilateral

Both those within and without the Wesleyan tradition are familiar with the so-called Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience. The Quad was first lifted up by Albert Outler as a description of Wesley's eclectic use of sources and norms in his theology. From its inception, it was used as more than just a hypothetical historical description of Wesley; it was also offered as a normative method for establishing doctrine and guiding life.

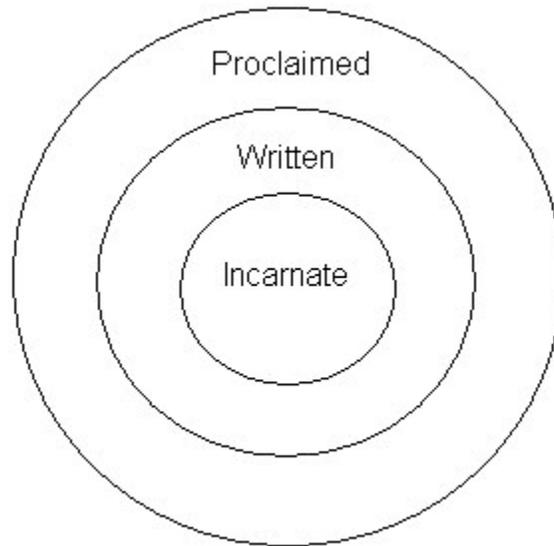
As a method, the Quad has fallen on perennial hard times. Despite its initial attraction as a mediating and inclusive method, it unfortunately raises as many questions as it does provide answers. How are these four entities to be related? Does one rule over the others? Are they sources or are they norms? Does the Quad affirm *Sola Scriptura* in any meaningful sense? Is there an ordering principle? All of these questions deserve answers, but this last one of order is particularly interesting to me. It comes up often when I have presented the Quad to others for the first time. Since I do not want to give up on the Quadrilateral, I have long searched for a satisfactory understanding of the ordering of the four corners.

Enter Karl Barth. Barth's presentation of authority in theology is different than Wesley-via-Outler. Instead of a Quadrilateral, Karl Barth speaks of the threefold Word of God. There is one Word of God spoken to us and on which theology reflects. This one word of God can be found in three forms: (1) the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ, (2) the written Word of the Bible, and (3) the proclaimed Word of Christian preaching through the centuries up to and including today. At the most basic level, this is just a semantic insight into the three things which are referred to by Christians as the "word of God." But at a deeper level, Barth has found a way to affirm *Sola Scriptura* in a complex manner. On the one hand, he affirms the Lordship of Jesus Christ over even his Scriptural witnesses. On the other hand, the Bible is not set aside but re-established on the sure ground of the incarnate Word of God. The living Lordship of Jesus also means that he continues to call witnesses today. So all three (Jesus Christ, the Bible, and the proclamation of the church in word and deed) are the one Word of God, differentiated,

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<sup>1</sup> Although a conversation between Wesley and Barth would be fruitful, it is beyond the scope of this essay. My purpose is to bring Barth into conversation with contemporary Wesleyan theology and its unique questions, problems and context.

united, and in proper order. So theology is not concerned with one thing, two things, or four things, but attends to the one threefold Word of God in all its unity and richness.<sup>2</sup>



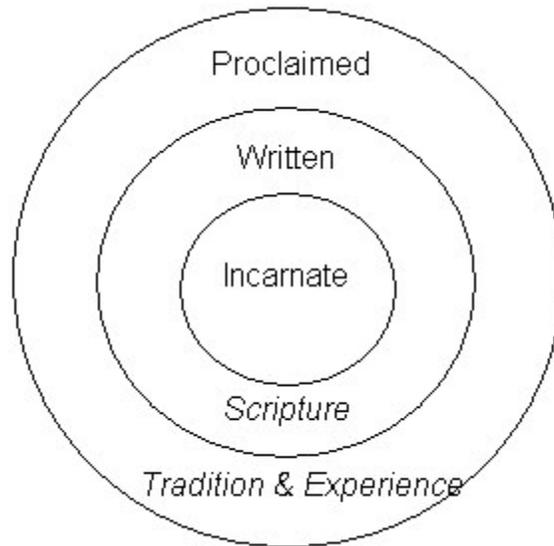
Barth's Threefold Word of God can embrace the best insights of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral while at the same time help it answer the question of an ordering principle. The ordered, differentiated unity of the Threefold Word of God includes the eclecticism of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral without the usual confusion. First of all, the center would remain firm as the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ. Secondly, the written Word of Scripture can be rightly placed in the second ring in close proximity to Christ yet under his authority. Next, the proclaimed word of God throughout history (tradition) and today (experience) forms the third ring. Note that I am adjusting Barth's language (though not necessarily his substance) in order to include Wesley's "experimental Christianity" or "practical divinity," treating the lives of believers as a testimony to Jesus Christ's living Lordship.<sup>3</sup> This embrace of the Quadrilateral within the Threefold Word of God presents

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<sup>2</sup> For the *locus classicus* of the threefold Word of God, see Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/1* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1936) 88-124. It is important to note that this shorter section (§4) is only an introduction to the concept, for the architectonic of *Church Dogmatics* Vol. 1 (parts 1 & 2) is built around the Threefold Word of God. Barth's initial development of the threefold Word of God can be found at great length in his Göttingen lectures given ten years earlier, see Hannelotte Reiffen, ed., *Göttingen Dogmatics: Instruction in the Christian Religion*, Vol. 1 (Transl. by Geoffrey W. Bromiley; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990) 43-314. For a careful analysis that clears up common confusions about Barth's doctrine of Scripture, see Bruce L. McCormack, "The Being of Holy Scripture is in Becoming: Karl Barth in Conversation with American Evangelical Criticism" in Vincent Bacote, Laura C. Miguez & Dennis L. Okholm, eds., *Evangelicals & Scripture: Tradition, Authority and Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004) 55-75.

<sup>3</sup> Barth's theology is more open to the function of experience than it is often interpreted. Although he is highly critical of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century special category of religious experience (for good reason), he explicitly grounds his reflection in the contemporary situation of the church and its concrete practices. The decision to rename his work Church Dogmatics is both illustrative and instructive on this point.

the authorities in an ordered unity that affirms a complex approach to theology yet anticipates the question of priority.



Finally, one might note a conspicuously absent member of the Quadrilateral from this diagram: reason. Now, despite the fideist reputation of many Barthians, I am no irrationalist. I, like both Barth and Wesley, love to think clearly and rationally. But reason, sorry to say, is not really something you have, but something you use. It is not a concrete historical reality like the God-human Jesus, the text of Scripture, or the Church's proclamation in word and deed. Reason is a tool by which we ponder these things. So I have not left reason out as much as redefined it as something that is in play at any moment of theological reflection on the threefold Word of God.<sup>4</sup> Once again, I am taking my cue here from Karl Barth. While on his first and only lecture tour of America, Karl Barth was asked by a young University of Chicago graduate student, "What is the status of reason in your theology?" Barth replied, "I use it."

## II. Christocentric Procedure for Doctrinal Reformulation

Every tradition has its *distinctive doctrine*. Christian sub-groups foster their identity through the cultivation of their distinctive doctrine. Not only do they have a distinctive take on this doctrine, but they also place distinctive emphasis on it. The unique gift that each tradition offers the church universal is its distinct doctrinal emphasis. Yet, the temptation of each tradition is to turn their distinctive doctrine into a trump card that subjects every other Christian doctrine to its service. The challenge for each tradition is to

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<sup>4</sup> The role of reason as tool rather than an object of reflection has been brought home to me in different ways by two Wesleyan thinkers. It was Ken Schenck who first pointed out to me that reason is at work *in* the processing of all the sources of Christian thought rather than *as* one such source. And it was Billy Abraham who argued conclusively for me that "reason" as it is typically construed in the quadrilateral is mistaken for a source when it is by definition a norm.

offer their gift to others while at the same time reformulating their doctrine in light of the whole Christian faith.

It should be uncontroversial that the distinctive Wesleyan doctrine is *sanctification*. Not only do Wesleyans have a distinctive take on this common Christian doctrine, but we also lay particular emphasis on it as central to our theological formulations. To be part of the Wesleyan tradition is to be committed to “spreading Scriptural holiness across the land.” But as we spread this message, we run into problems because we begin to second-guess it. We have questions about the legitimacy and appeal of the doctrine. So we have a choice to make: (1) either keep affirming it with our fingers crossed behind our back, (2) dump the doctrine entirely to focus on something else, or (3) roll up our sleeves to begin reformulating the doctrine in a true and compelling way.

Hopefully, we choose the third option: *reformulation*. But if we choose this path, how will we go about it? What is the best way to reformulate a doctrine? Enter Karl Barth. He comes from a tradition with a distinctive doctrine that has created just as much (if not more) problems for them. Barth is a Reformed theologian. He hails from the Calvinist corner of the Christian community. (By the way, it is usually his Reformed heritage that raises an eyebrow among Wesleyans about my interest in Barth and thus occasions this essay.)

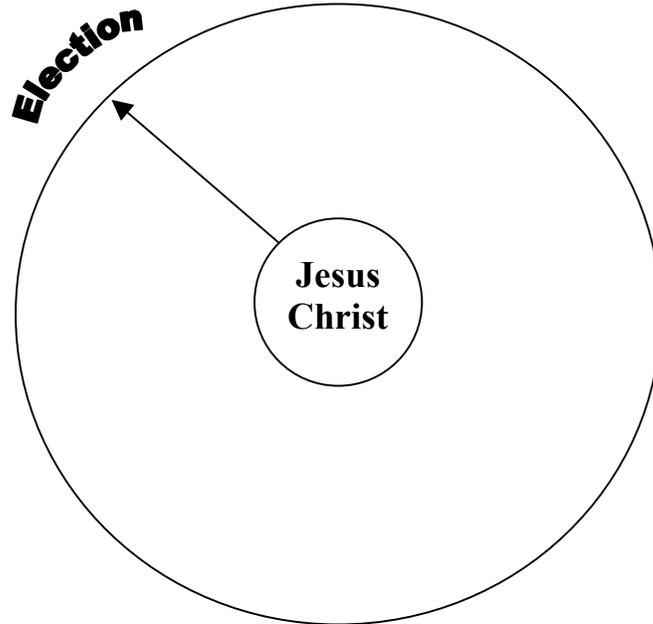
The distinctive doctrine of the Reformed tradition is *predestination*. Barth wanted to stay true to his tradition by affirming this doctrine, but desired to reformulate it in a compelling way that took care of some of the inherent problems in it. I will not go into the details of his reformulation, because what is most relevant for our purposes is his procedure: *he recasts the whole doctrine of election in Christocentric terms*. He takes the triune God revealed in Christ as his central point and reorganizes the material accordingly.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the electing God is not some unknown God above Christ, but rather Jesus Christ is the electing God.<sup>6</sup> And the object of election and rejection is not particular individuals, but rather Jesus Christ in his life, death and resurrection is the elect and rejected human (*CD II/2*, §33). Surrounding the electing-and-elect God-man Jesus Christ is his chosen community of witness, Israel and the Church (*CD II/2*, §34). The elect individual is the one who joins this community of witness to Jesus Christ’s election, e.g., the disciples (*CD II/2*, §35.1-3). The reprobate is the one who fails to bear proper witness, e.g., Judas (*CD II/2*, §35.4). This is only a sketch, so please do not make too much of it (see *Church Dogmatics II/2* for the 500 page version). But one can see how this reformulates the doctrine of predestination in accordance with the central Christian

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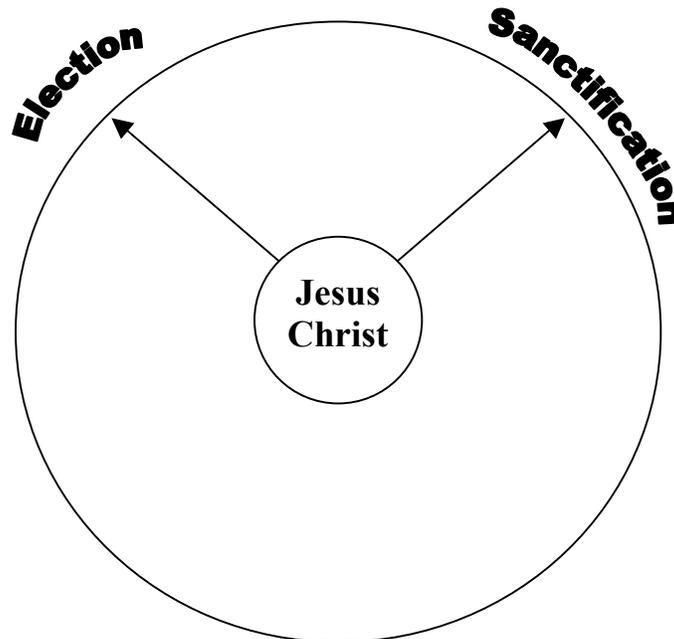
<sup>5</sup> It worth noting that progeny of the Holiness movement are inclined to supplement (or even supplant) Barth’s Christocentrism with a Pneumatocentrism grounded in the proto-Pentecostal theology of the Wesleyan tradition. Although I am warm to such suggestions, they usually betray a fundamental misunderstanding of Barth’s Christocentrism. At the most basic level, the Spirit of the New Testament is the Spirit of Jesus Christ. Christocentrism does not exclude but includes pneumatic modes of thought. Christomonism stops with Christ; Christocentrism simply begins with Christ, moving freely from him to the work of his Spirit. Furthermore, the union of God and humanity in Christ provide the critical concrete orientation for testing the spirits to determine whether they are from the Lord. Finally, Barth’s Christocentrism (and any Christocentrism worthy of the name) presupposes a robustly trinitarian ground and thus obviates cries for so-called trinitarian “balance” (cries which often betray tri-theistic tendencies).

<sup>6</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics II/2* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1957) §33. Hereafter cited in-text as *CD II/2*.

affirmation that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.



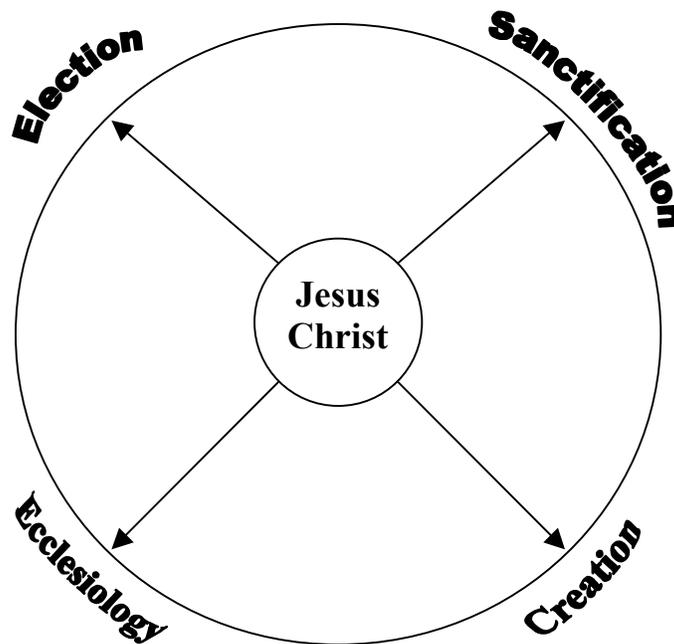
The lesson here is not necessarily to follow Barth in his specific reformulations (although detailed study of the content is the best way to learn the procedure), but rather to cherry-pick his *Christocentric procedure for doctrinal reformulation*. The Wesleyan doctrine of sanctification is certainly in need of a shot-in-the-arm. Few will argue with this, although there are many suggested shots. My prognosis is that we take our procedural bearings from Barth by thoroughly reworking the doctrine of sanctification with Christ at the center.



What would that look like? Since this is a life-long project, I cannot go into the details here. But I can point out one aspect of the doctrine of sanctification that would

benefit from such a procedure. When we talk about sanctification there is a lot of talk about *natures*: human nature and sinful nature. How do we know about these so-called “natures?” It would seem to me that the best place to start in a Christian reflection on human nature, sinful nature, and what the divine nature does to them, is the meeting of divine and human natures in Jesus Christ. I suspect that starting here will yield fruitful insights about the way our “natures” are cured. For instance, Maximus the Confessor’s insistence on the two wills of Christ casts light on the notion of a sanctified human nature. Although the hypostatic union is unique to Christ (only in him are God and humanity one person), the voluntary union is communicable to us. By the same Holy Spirit that binds together the dual-willing natures of Christ, our will can be bound to God’s will, so that we will what he wills. We no longer encounter his will as a heteronomous affront to our will, but rather submit to his will in the faith that God wills the good for us. Thus our sanctification is a matter of teleological obedience – a construal warm to the Wesleyan tradition but reformulated with Christ at its center.<sup>7</sup>

More broadly, Barth’s Christocentric procedure paves the way for the development of a full-blown systematic theology that is both distinctively Wesleyan yet avoids sectarian one-sidedness. We must be careful to avoid treating our understanding of sanctification as some kind of foundation or first principle from which we derive the content of the remaining *loci* of theology. Such a procedure is not the way of a living theology that serves a living Lord. The live alternative is to move out again and again from a center in the trinitarian God revealed in Jesus Christ as we reformulate each and every Christian doctrine with freshness and life.



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<sup>7</sup> I am certainly not the first Wesleyan to engage Barth for the purpose of reformulating the doctrine of sanctification. See Daniel B. Spross, “The Doctrine of Sanctification in Karl Barth,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 20:2 (Fall 1985) 54-76. The difference between Spross’s approach and mine is that I draw on Barth’s general dogmatic procedure rather than on his particular understanding of sanctification.

### III. Theological Ethics

We have learned that Wesleyans can take a cue from Karl Barth in matters of theological authority and in doctrinal procedure. But the significance of Karl Barth is not limited to these theoretical matters alone. Barth is also a beneficial guide for the practical world of Christian living.

Wesleyans are known for their ethical concern. We have a strong heritage of ethical action, both personal and social. Our distinctive doctrine itself has an ethical thrust. To be sanctified is to be empowered for obedience to Christ by his Holy Spirit. Wesleyans do not need any help *caring* about ethics.

And yet Wesleyans face the same challenges as every other Christian in the modern and post-modern world: *How* do we know what is right? *How* do we determine the best way forward? *How* shall we then live? Wesleyans certainly know *that* we should pursue righteousness; but *how* do we find the path of righteousness?

A pre-modern Christian might simply say, "I do what the Bible says." Wesleyans have always known that, although it testifies to the authority of Scripture over our lives, this approach is still too simple. The Bible does not address every possible situation. Christians must make *decisions* and develop *ends* that guide us through the complexities of our concrete lives. In the midst of this hermeneutical struggle, Wesleyans have far too often been enticed by the sense of security provided by non-theological foundations for ethical decision-making. Whether it be the classical forms of Plato or Aristotle, the modern calculations of Kant or Mill or Marx, or contemporary contextualism or pragmatism, Wesleyans have often been quick to ground their ethical decisions on some external structure. Our motivations have remained distinctively Christian, but our mode of ethical deciding and acting has been guided by seemingly brighter lights.

So who can lead us out of this valley of confusion? How can we learn to decide and act in a distinctively Christian way? Enter Karl Barth. In his unfinished life-work, the *Church Dogmatics*, Barth did the unthinkable: he concluded each volume with a part-volume on ethics. Now this was not simply to make an already impossibly long work even longer. The purpose was to render ethics an explicitly theological task. Just this structural decision alone is commendable: Christian ethics is not an independent discipline with its own ground but rather flows directly from the word and work of God reflected upon by theology. This may seem obvious to those of us living in the wake of the 50-year development of theological ethics since Barth.<sup>8</sup> But in Barth's day, this was a radical approach. And despite the proliferation of theological ethicists, the inclusion of ethics within dogmatics remains a radical reminder of the distinctively Christian core of ethical reflection (see diagram below).

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<sup>8</sup> I am thinking here of the turn to a more distinctively Christian form of ethical reasoning represented by a wide variety of Anglo-American theological ethicists including Paul Lehmann, James Gustafson, John Howard Yoder, Oliver O'Donovan, and Stanley Hauerwas.

**An Outline of Karl Barth’s *Church Dogmatics*:**

Vol. I Revelation	Vol. II God	Vol. III Creation	Vol. IV Reconciliation	Vol. V Redemp- tion
I/1:  Ch. 1 The Word of God as the Criterion of Dogmatics  Ch. 2 The Revelation of God  I/2:  Ch. 2 (con’t) The Revelation of God  Ch. 3 Holy Scripture  Ch. 4 The Proclamation of the Church	II/1:  Ch. 5 The Knowledge of God  Ch. 6 The Reality of God  II/2:  Ch. 7 The Election of God  Ch. 8 <b>The Command of God</b>	III/1:  Ch. 9 The Work of Creation  III/2:  Ch. 10 The Creature  III/3:  Ch. 11 The Creator and his Creature  III/4:  Ch. 12 <b>The Command of God the Creator</b>	IV/1:  Ch. 13 Introduction  Ch. 14 Jesus Christ, The Lord as Servant  IV/2:  Ch. 15 Jesus Christ, The Servant as Lord  IV/3:  Ch. 16 Jesus Christ, The True Witness  IV/4:  Ch. 17 <b>The Command of God the Reconciler</b>	(unwritten)

The material benefits of this structural move are even more crucial. Barth discusses all the classic and contemporary “issues” from a center in Jesus Christ. The contours of each issue are shaped by the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. All human action is under the Lordship of God’s action in Jesus Christ. Any good that is done (whether explicitly or implicitly related to Jesus) is a witness to Christ’s act of reconciling God and humanity. The basis of determining the rightness or goodness of an action is its alignment (or “correspondence”) with the action of God.<sup>9</sup> Accordingly, Barth

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<sup>9</sup> See Karl Barth, *CD* II/2, 568-69 for a uncharacteristically brief description of this relationship between the particularity of Jesus and good actions of humans everywhere (even and especially outside the church). This description follows references to Matthew 5:48 and Zinzendorf – citations which should immediately pique the interest of a Wesleyan reader. For a more elaborate development of this relationship, see Barth’s treatment of “The Light of Life and other lights” in *Church Dogmatics* IV/3.1 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1961) 86-165, along with the insightful commentary in George Hunsinger, *How To Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) 234-80.

can take unique views on issues ranging from abortion to war to economics that are seldom found held by the same person.<sup>10</sup> How is he able to keep this all in tension? By moving out from Jesus Christ to human action as a witness to him, rather than being guided by some non-theological foundation or partisan ideology.

What does Barth's radically theological approach to ethics have to say to Wesleyans? The first lesson is a negative one: we ought to repent of our unhealthy reliance on non-theological foundations. Like the Ephesian Church in the Book of Revelation, we have forsaken our first love. Although we should not bury our heads in the sand, we must certainly avoid using these external frameworks as a ground for our ethics. Jesus is Lord. Neither Plato nor Aristotle, Kant nor Mill, Left nor Right have lordship over us. We ought to be in constant conversation with these traditions, but they must never supplant Jesus Christ as the Church's one foundation.

But the lessons from Barth are not wholly negative. We can take a positive cue from his work by developing explicit connections between doctrine and ethics. The doctrine of sanctification has only done half of its job if it merely informs us of the spiritual power that enables us to perform the duties we know by other means. We ought to be asking about the implications of a sanctifying God for concrete ethical issues. Rather than taking for granted what God desires in an individual case, we should think through from the beginning what sanctification looks like for the people involved in the situation at hand. These are the kinds of questions that guide ethics down an genuinely theological path.

Finally, Barth's bold structural move to include ethics within dogmatics raises a question about Wesleyan theological education. In my ministerial training, the two courses that seemed to have the least to do with each other were "Ethics" and "Theology of Holiness." It is telling of their separation that the former bore the registration category PHL, while the latter was designated REL. And the foundational status given to Ethics was revealed by it being placed *before* Theology of Holiness in the recommended sequence of courses. Finally, the difference in content was striking, as anyone who has read Wesley and Kant on the same day can testify. The two courses were simply not aimed at the same student. One taught us how to reason through moral problems; the other formed us in a tradition that testified to the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. If Wesleyan ministers are going not only to profess holiness but to live it out, there must be a more conscious connection between these two courses. What would this look like? It may be addressed simply by the Ethics and Holiness professors having a conversation about how these courses form students. It may require more complex curricular solutions regarding designation, loading, and sequence. But whatever it looks like, the divorce between theology and ethics in Wesleyan institutions should be concretely addressed.

### Conclusion

Of the many times I have been asked about my strange combination of Wesleyanism and Barthianism, one stands out as the most memorable. During the awkward months of my first semester as an M.Div. student at Princeton, I shared with an doctoral candidate in theology that I was Wesleyan. He bluntly retorted, "What are you

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<sup>10</sup> Regarding such issues, see Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/4 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1961).

doing here?” When I later shared this story with one of my Wesleyan mentors, he said, “Next time, you know what you should do? You should say, ‘I’m cherry-picking.’” I have been carefully cherry-picking for a few years now, and this essay has offered up some of these cherries. I can only hope that others will find them to be as sweet I have.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> I would like to thank the hosts and participants of the 43<sup>rd</sup> Annual Graduate Student Theological Seminar held at the Free Methodist World Ministries Center in Indianapolis, IN where this paper was first delivered on September 23, 2006. Although their feedback was crucial to shaping the final form of this essay, any remaining flaws are, of course, entirely my responsibility.