

John Wesley's Pneumatology: Perceptible Inspiration (Review)

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John Wesley's Pneumatology: Perceptible Inspiration, by Joseph W. Cunningham. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2014. Pp. 155. \$41.03 (paperback). ISBN: 9781138274242.

Inspiration was cause for deep suspicion in eighteenth-century England, regarded as a threat to established religion and the social order following the Civil Wars of the mid-seventeenth century. Jonathan Swift registered his antipathy in *A Tale of a Tub* (1704). Swift caricatured radical dissenters who claimed private knowledge of the divine, drawing on the Latin root of the word “inspire” to depict them as zealots who fed on air, their minds and bodies distended from pumping each other full of wind. Although such criticism reappeared with the rise of the evangelical movement, inspiration developed more favorable connotations over the course of the century. In *John Wesley's Pneumatology*, Joseph W. Cunningham contributes to our understanding of this shift in his interpretive assessment of John Wesley's writings on the inward witness of the Holy Spirit.

“Pneumatology” is a term from academic theology that refers to the Christian doctrine of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity. The *Oxford English Dictionary* cites the term's first appearance in seventeenth-century metaphysics, where it referred to “spirits or spiritual beings” such as angels, demons, and, in general, the human soul (1a). Later, the term briefly became a synonym for “psychology,” reflecting the interest in the mind brought about by Lockean empiricism (1b). This history of usage, with its inflection of Enlightenment philosophy, is significant for understanding how Wesley understood his conversion experience. If Lockean empiricism supplanted the metaphysical study of the soul, Wesley appropriated the new empiricist terminology in continuing to focus on the dialogue between the human spirit and God's spirit. In May 1738, Wesley received a palpable, spiritual sense of salvation while attending a religious meeting in Aldersgate, London. He recorded in his journal the now well-known sentence, “I felt my heart strangely warmed.” Wesley would go on to explain the experience by adapting the Lockean view that knowledge was the result of input from the bodily senses. Just as, for Locke, natural birth marked the moment in which the physical senses began to operate, so for Wesley did spiritual birth mark the moment in which a person was given spiritual senses with which to gather sense impressions of the divine. As he explained in *An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion* (1743), “Faith, according to the scriptural account, is the eye of the new-born soul.” Inward feelings of warmth and joy accompanied this new knowledge as the means of assuring an individual of his or her salvation.

Cunningham draws on sermons, pamphlets, and journal entries to offer a more coherent assessment of Wesley's account of spiritual sensation. The result of this synthesis, he argues, is to clarify Wesley's value for current postfoundationalist theology. The monograph begins by showing Wesley's contribution to a pamphlet exchange with the pseudonymous “John Smith,” which was most likely the pseudonym of Thomas Secker, then Bishop of Oxford. Like many Latitudinarian clergy, “Smith” held the cessationist view that, unlike in the book of Acts, the Holy Spirit no longer communicated directly to the individual. Subsequent chapters build a case

for Wesley's challenge to rationalist epistemology. In chapter 2, "Grace as Pneumatological Operation," Cunningham uses Wesley's doctrine of the Holy Spirit to explain how God acts in the world. Grace, for Wesley, is a "prevenient" gift that works before the experience of conversion, such that "wherever goodness, charity and devotion to God are present, so too is the Spirit's power" (46). In chapter 3, "Faith as Pneumatological Operation," Cunningham explores the implications of pneumatology for thinking about faith. For Wesley, "[t]he Spirit empowers us to know God and imbues us with basic epistemic and moral faculties" (63). If, for Wesley, faith is a faculty of knowing that goes beyond reason, pneumatology is essential for understanding how faith is generated in the believer.

Whereas these chapters largely focus on the explication of key passages in Wesley's writings, the fourth chapter is more interpretive in its method, examining how Wesley developed his claims about the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit over the course of his life. Cunningham shows that, although Wesley continued to emphasize the possibility of direct spiritual encounter, he was forced to qualify his claims in response to what he regarded as abuses and misunderstandings. Such was the challenge presented by the Maxfield-Bell controversy of the early 1760s, when two Methodist preachers prophesied that the end of the world was nigh. Cunningham draws an instructive distinction between Wesley's understanding of the direct and indirect witness of the Spirit. Whereas the direct witness relies on subjective apprehension of inward feeling, the indirect witness is "a posterior cognitive response" mediated through reason, which "serves to confirm one's religious experience through conscience and holy living" (80). As a form of self-awareness or reflexivity, the indirect witness of the Spirit helps to understand how "perceptible inspiration" involves much more than a moment-to-moment awareness of physical emotion. The fifth chapter, "The Fruits of the Spirit as Pneumatological Operation," contributes to this understanding by examining Wesley's pneumatology in light of the turn to virtue ethics. Scholars interested in Wesley's approach to ethics have tended to focus on the account of perfect love, which the Methodist preacher regraded as the *telos* of the Christian life. Cunningham argues convincingly, however, that the Spirit's prior, progressive influence on affect and disposition is more relevant for understanding Wesley's approach to virtue. Cunningham's language in this chapter reveals his interest in providing a more solid ground for Wesleyan pneumatology than what is suggested by the emphasis on inward feeling. The believer must sense God's love but also practice it. Love becomes a process in which one "cultivates" practical wisdom, so that it "takes root in one's heart and life" (115). This view of love "gives *pragmatic steel* to [Wesley's] doctrine of Christian perfection or perfect love" (emphasis mine, 116). For Cunningham, the strange warmth experienced by Wesley at Aldersgate takes concrete, tangible shape in the form of the virtues known as the "fruits of the Spirit."

Whereas Wesley's writings are often regarded as pastoral in nature, *John Wesley's Pneumatology* seeks to provide a theological interpretation of Wesley's views on participating with God through the Holy Spirit. Cunningham meets this modest interpretive goal, though one wishes that he had done more to explain the relevance of Wesley's epistemology for current academic conversations. Cunningham provides ample evidence for the claim that Wesley's account of "direct religious experience challenges the very structure of knowledge itself as defined by foundationalist prescriptions for what makes a noetic structure rational" (104). Yet, given the wide swath cut by such a claim, we are left to wonder how the account of "perceptible inspiration" may illuminate specific debates in current academic theology. Many readers will perhaps find it sufficient, as Cunningham desires, to have gained from *John Wesley's*

Pneumatology a consistent, coherent, and more clearly drawn account of Wesley's doctrine of the Holy Spirit.