John Wesley’s Hermeneutics of Primitive Christianity and Practical Piety

One grand preventative of pain and sickness of various kinds, seems intimated by the grand Author of Nature in the very sentence that intails death upon us: ‘In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return to the ground’.

John Wesley, ‘The Preface’, *Primitive Physic*

Hereby the great physician of souls applies medicine to heal this sickness; to restore human nature, totally corrupted in all its faculties… ‘in Adam ye all died;’ in the second Adam, ‘in Christ, ye all are made alive’ now ‘go on’ from ‘faith to faith’, until your whole sickness be healed…

John Wesley, *Sermon on Original Sin* (1759)

**Primitive Christianity**

Primitivism provided a holistic framework for Wesley’s thinking and praxis, both generally and in *Primitive Physic*. This was his *modus operandi* and the ideals of Primitivism, whether it applied to the Apostolic age or an ancient standard in physic, are intricately woven into ‘The Preface’ of Wesley’s medical volume. The theme of wholeness was central to his theology and structured all of his work, in its written, oral and practical forms. The motif of Primitive Christianity was deeply personal. From an early age Wesley inherited the traditions of both Puritan and Anglican practical piety directly from his parents, Samuel and Susannah Wesley, who taught him to revere the Apostolic age, that first and golden period of the Christian Church. Born on 17 June 1703, at the family home of Epworth Rectory in Lincolnshire, Wesley’s parents, however, were originally of dissenting stock, but conformed to the Church of England.

He was born into an era in which Christian antiquity and patristic studies had been a focal point for theological, ecclesiastical and moral discourse for more than a century. Patristics involved making a theological study of the Church Fathers, usually between the first and eighth centuries, though sometimes extending its reach to encompass thirteenth-century
theologians. It was primarily concerned with the emergence of Christianity and the early Church. During the seventeenth century, the University of Oxford played a prominent role in this debate, while providing a stronghold for High Church Anglicanism, with numerous Anglican leaders and writers expressing their approbation of Primitive Christianity. Writings from the patristic revival were readily available to Wesley as a scholar at Oxford and he made a point of studying a great number of them, including William Cave’s *Primitive Christianity* (1672) and Anthony Horneck’s *The Happy Ascetick* (1681). Bishop Jeremy Taylor’s *The Whole Duty of Man* (1657) and *Doctor Dubitantium* (1660) also served to teach Wesley the Christian life of devotion and provided guidance on inward holiness.

After attending Charterhouse school, Wesley was elected scholar of Christ Church, Oxford, in 1720, graduating in 1724 before becoming a fellow of Lincoln College in 1726. His reading of patristic texts, combined with his involvement in the Holy Club at Oxford, helped to compound the reverence for Primitive Christianity that had been instilled into him as a child. Like an historian, Wesley sensed that he had discovered something precious that had hitherto been lost, and felt compelled to make ancient texts intelligible through his writings and sermons. He esteemed those writings closest to The Acts, over and above second- and third-century texts, and believed that exceptional purity existed in this period; the most authentic commentators on Scripture were those nearest the fountain, which were also eminently imbued with that Spirit. He articulated this in *An Address to the Clergy* (1756), a reworking of a sermon written by his father, and again in 1777 when giving his sermon *On Laying the Foundation of the New Chapel*.

During his time at Oxford, Wesley had a voracious appetite for patristic writings and A.C. Outler has suggested that one of the bonuses of an Oxford education was a living sense of history. The Holy Club, initially intended as a fellowship for the study of classical literature and the New Testament, soon shifted its attention towards patrology and the cultivation of practical piety. In tandem with this development, the Holy Club came to regard itself as an experiment in early Christianity and, reminiscing late in life, Wesley emphasised its performative nature by claiming that the movement sought to practice the community of goods modelled in The Acts.

There was, however, nothing programmatic about Wesley’s use of Primitive Christianity and his conception of the early Church altered significantly over time. During his missionary trip to Georgia (1735–7) Wesley came into contact with the evangelical primitivism of the Moravian Brethren, and this association deepened his understanding of the spirit of early Christianity. The simplicity and discipline of this group led him to question the idealised, static and conservative view of Primitive Christianity.