SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The present chapter summarizes the major findings of this study and discusses some of the larger questions related to Wesley's eschatology.

*A Summary of Wesley's Eschatology*

Eschatology in general and Wesley's formulation of eschatology, in particular, was a necessary consequence of his theological method and epistemology as found in the Wesleyan quadrilateral and the great chain of being. As such his eschatology cannot be considered an afterthought to his theological formation but must be understood as integral outgrowth of it. His eschatology was framed in a universe of which was bifurcated into natural and supernatural, the latter being the less obvious to inhabitants of the temporal realm but also the most real. This natural universe was ammenable to scientific description within a scriptural interpretation. Persons existed in both worlds to some extent, "creatures of the day" in their bodily finitude; yet also creatures of eternity with souls originally destined for God. The natural and supernatural worlds were separated by a border made porous by dreams, visions, ghosts, visitations, and ultimately death and the end of the world.

The original world of the supernatural controlled the history of the mundane universe. Cosmic struggles were reflected in earthly battles and prophetic visions dictated the texts of earthly histories. St. John's apocalypse was a unique perspective, a revelation of the future injected into history from the timeless world. In the 1750's Wesley following Bengel adopted a position which saw Revelation as a mathematically ordered and intricate story dominated by the evil of the beast and climaxing in 1836 with the defeat of the antichrist and the imprisonment of Satan. Two consecutive millennia then followed. The first was to be a millennium of blessing to the church on earth. The second, with the devil again loosed, was to be one of spiritual dissolution on earth while the church would reign in heaven. At the end of the second millennium the universe would be shaken, Lord would return, the resurrection and the rapture would occur, the judgments would be rendered, and the universe would be reformed into the new heavens and earth. Prior to and then concurently with this theory, Wesley also held a more traditional premillennial view. These theories apparently existed side by side until the end of his life in a happy agnostic tension as did a tendancy to suggest but avoid committing himself to dates for end time events. In both theories, after the judgment, the evil dead were consigned to hell for eternity and the good dead to heaven.

But eschatology was more than dates and events for Wesley. It was also experience, people, and even animals. Eschatology in a perverse sense was a reality before salvation as one suffered the hell resident in the heart of every fallen person. After salvation, the kingdom of God began to be realized in a renovated heart. This was proclaimed by the Wesley's in prose and verse and realized in justification and regeneration, sanctification, the sacraments, and the supernatural.

The real transition into the next world on a personal level, however, was in the event of death (or, for a few, in translations or the rapture). Through this portal angels escorted the person into hades, or the intermediate, state which consisted of two compartments. One, for the evil dead, typically styled tartarus, was a place of fearful torments and continuing dread. The other, for the good dead, typically styled paradise, was a place of happy activity and increasing bliss and holiness characterized by blessed anticipation. In both states the dead maintained personal identity, communication, and ministry to the temporal world under the guidance of their immediate masters. Until the judgment, the souls in hades existed in a disembodied state, although having an "ethereal vehicle" of some sort in which to function, while they awaited the resurrection of their bodies which were stored in death.

With great physical trauma to the universe the resurrection and rapture would occur with the coming of the Lord. Saints and sinners would be judged with granduer and exactitude. The apostles and then the saints would move in succession from the dock to seats of the great assize with Christ. Sinners, remaining obstinate in their evil, would be convicted. The great chain of being would be shattered and the world would end its very elements being transformed and linked together again in the new earth and heavens. Wicked persons would be cast into eternal hell with those of greatest wickedness being being fartherest from God. The saints, restored into the original but miraculously renovated bodies would go to reign with Christ forever in the new heavens and earth. Here, with a perfection beyond Eden, with even plants and animals uplifted on the new chain of being; the most holy saints would permanently reign in the new Jerusalem over the less holy saints on the earth below. All will be happy and joyous, caught up in eternal praise and continual increasing holiness forever the more holy being nearer to to God.

Practically speaking Wesley used eschatology to motivate through both fear and anticipation and to instruct both believers and unbelievers. In this application he was reflective, attempting to adjust his approach through empirical observations of the effects while not violating the imperatives of Scripture.

A Summary of Contemporary Comparisions

An comparative analysis of contemporary writings demonstarated that Wesley was working well within the milieu of his age. The Moravian Spangenberg and especially the arch-Calvinist Gill had virtually identical categories and similar conclusions. Wesley's distinctiveness was located in his epistemological and metaphysical presuppositions. The quadrilateral and great chain of being allowed Wesley both an increased range of data and a greater interconnectedness of conception than was evident in his contemporaries.

A Summary of Sources

Wesley source were encyclopedic, a comprehensive accounting being beyond the scope of the present work. In addition to Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason; his most important sources were his father, Samuel, and Bengel. It is possible that Josephus' discourse on hades may also be significant. Further research in these area is indicated.

*Remaining Questions*

Several significant questions relating to Wesley's eschatology remain to be answered.

Does God Rule in Hell?

Deschner posed an important question relating to eschatolgy: Are the damned excluded from the rule of God? Clearly, during the current universe of time, God uses evil to his own ends, but in the future universe beyond time does God simply leave evil to its own devices? Is there finaly a point when the God "in whom justice and love are always inseparable . . . become the one in whom there is justice and love fore the blessed, but only justice for the damned?" Are the damned "forgotten." He then concluded that "the Wesleyan material is remarkably poor in answers to these questions."[[1]](#footnote-0)

While definitive answers appear lacking, the dearth of information may not be as great as Deschner concluded. The indications are that the damned will always be fully under the rule of God. First, they are entombed forever in hell by God's righteous judgment but this is based on their rejecting His love. It is not just an exclusion from the holy God, but a positive punishment continuously inflicted because of His holiness. Second, since the levels of hell are determined by their distance from God, God's rule, by definition, must still extend over them. Third, since it seems implicit that the damned's distance from God is realized in their place on the chain of being in the newly recreated universe; it follows that they must still be well within his sovereignty, since the chain is ultimately His work. Thus, God can most easily be understood to continue to use evil to His ends. Further, for Wesley, God's love and mercy will always extend without limit or separation. For the evil choose to continue to sin, to reject God's love, eternally. So Wesley could say: "the gates [of the new Jerusalem] are ever open; but not for *dogs*; fierce and rapacious men."[[2]](#footnote-1)

Is Christ the Means or End of Perfection?

Deschner also posed another question as to whether Christ is a "means" to the "end" which is perfection or is the decree to perfection an expression of Christ's "graciousness."[[3]](#footnote-2) The answer here is less clear, but there does seem to be some indication in the eschatological formation. The chain motif, the levels of heaven and hell, and the centrality of Christ in the eschaton all indicate that God the Son remains the central focus of all creation even beyond history. The chain required that its infinite range of shades of perfection were ultimately defined by the ultimate light of Christ Himself at its apex. Perfection for Wesley was not only increase but also direction. The perfection of increasing love could only look to love Himself. Thus the "the highest honour in the universe" for a believer is not the state attained, but the opportunity to "*worship him*" is ever humanities' "noblest employment."[[4]](#footnote-3)

How Important Was Eschatology for Wesley?

Throughout this dissertation it has been argued that eschatology is not an afterthought or even an area of little interest for Wesley. Rather it is an area of extensive interest which was well integrated into his overall theological ramework. The general reasons for this may now be summarized by examing the importance of eschatology to Wesley.

(1) Eschatology was an important part of Wesley's effort. The shear amount of material and apparent thought concerning eschatology in Wesley's writings indicates its importance to him. Perhaps ten percent of his sermons were formed around eschatological topics.[[5]](#footnote-4) Although never presented as a system, all the elements existed for such a synthesis. More broadly, in the words of Downes: "In a sense all Wesley's theology-like that of the New Testament-is eschatological."[[6]](#footnote-5)

(2) Eschatology was important logically. The famed logician of Lincoln College, would not have constructed such an intricate belief system without bringing the argument to its ultimate conclusion. No consistent follower of God in a universe permeated by the beauty and order of chain could leave the syllogism dangling in eternity.

(3) Eschatology was important for a coherent world view. Notwithstanding his indecision over the millennium, his eschatological material is distinctive and well integrated with the rest of his doctrine. Eschatological materials were discovered at all strata of the Wesley corpus: sermons, journals, letters, commentary, and essays. Eschatology also permeated his theological thinking: God's sovereignty ruled the world on a grand scale as predicted in Revelation. His justice was satisfied in hell and His love expressed in heaven. Angels and demons tangibly played their parts in both the earthly and heavenly dramas. Humanity realized its ultimate end in the new earth and heavens as it climbed the eternal ladder of sanctification. And ecclesiologically the church extended not only in space but in time and eternity. Beyond this theological integration he endeavored to bring in all the fields of learning at his disposal so volcanoes and "ethereal fire" were part of the eschatological landscape. His eschatology was not only connected to the rest of his theology but also to his world view.

(4) Eschatology was important practically. As Wynkoop said: "Wesley's concern was the relating of God's grace to human experience, theology to religion, logic to life, the church to society. The contribution of Wesley is in his ability to put theology into flesh and blood."[[7]](#footnote-6) Eschatology incarnated the practical promise of the future in the spiritual body. Even beyond its utility in preaching, without eschatology, Wesley's system would ultimately only have been a utilitarian praxis pointing to an undefined end. Its very utilitarian praxis, however, virtually required that some precise and substantive goal should be created.

(5) Eschatology was important aplogetically. Eschatology not only described the experience of the "eternal Sabbath," but also explained "the mysterious ways of Providence."[[8]](#footnote-7) In eschatology Wesley found a theodicy which vindicated God. Without the mystery of Calvin's "horrible decree" only the nature of the end could make sense of the enormity of human suffering while preserving human freedom and God's sovereignty.

(6) Eschatology was important personally. One of the most remarkable of all of Wesley's letters was written to his brother Charles on June 27, 1766. In it the great leader of the revival who was contiually accused of "enthusiasm"[[9]](#footnote-8) admitted to a great lack of immediate experience in his spiritual life.

In one of my last [letters] I was saying I do not feel the wrath of God abiding on me; nor can I believe it does. And yet (this is the mystery) [I do not love God. I never did]. Therefore [I never] believed in the Christian sense of the word. Therefore (I am only an] honest heathen, a proselyte of the Temple, one of the *phoboumenoi ton Theon*. And yet to be so employed of God! and so hedged in that I can neither get forward nor backward! Surely there never was such an instance before, from the beginning of the world! If I [ever have had] *that faith*, it would not be so strange. but [I never had any] other *elegxos* of the eternal or invisible world than [I have] now; and that is [none at all], unless such as fairly shines from reason's glimmering ray. [I have no] direct witness, I do not say that [I am a child of God], but of anything invisible or eternal.

And yet I dare not preach otherwise than I do, either concerning faith, or love, or justification, or perfection. And yet I find rather an increase than a decrease of zeal for the whole work of God and every part of it. I am *pheromenous*, I know not how, that I can't stand still. I want all th2e world to come to *hon ouk oida*. Neither am I impelled to this by fear of any kind. I have no more fear than love. Or if I have [any fear, it is not that of falling] into hell but of falling into nothing.[[10]](#footnote-9)

Henry Rack argued that this letter suggests a driving need which animated Wesley quest.[[11]](#footnote-10) A similar conclusion was also reached independently by the present author with respect to eschatology. Further reflection suggests, however, that this need of an inner witness may not only have produced Wesley's eschatological speculation but may have have paritally satisified it. In 1766 Wesley had only "reason's glimmering ray" by which to see the invisible world. In 1768 he could say he had never seen "an apparition."[[12]](#footnote-11) Ten months later in 1769 he "many times found on a sudden so lively an apprehension of a deceased friend, that I have sometimes turned to look" and that "in dreams, I have had exceeding lively conversations with them; and I doubt not but they were then very near."[[13]](#footnote-12) And 1773 he had "known but a few instances" of more than vague awarenesses of souls from the other side.[[14]](#footnote-13) By 1780 "it was not at all uncommon" and he could relate his own experience of "wonderful union" with Fanny Cooper.[[15]](#footnote-14) It may be that Wesley's life long search for assurance was at least partially satisfied by communion with those in paradise.[[16]](#footnote-15)

*Conclusion*

This then is something of John Wesley's eschatological vision. It is not merely the obvious focal point of salvation but it also formed a background to his very understanding of reality. Yet, it was a background whose reflection was so diffused in his writings and its appearance so well-coordinated with events of the everyday that it almost seems to disappear like the wreaths and angels which issued from it. When carefully viewed, however, the backdrop is seen be extensive, comprehensive, detailed, and highly integrated both internally and in relation to the whole of his life, theology, and praxis. It can be perceived pushing through the interstices of his more conventional theological world in much the same way that the spirits of the next world forever hovered behind and even occasionally broke through into his temporal reality. Closer examination revealed that the backdrop was perhaps more important than the ephemeral images which pass before it. If it is colorless and without dimension and substance it so appears only because of sin's myopia unaided by revelation. It is the true reality. It is not only the goal of individuals but their destiny and the fulfillment of their proper nature, and not only of every individual but also of the universe. This was Wesley's vision and the reflection of Wesley's hope:

*Now we see*-Even the things that surround us. But *by means of a glass*-Or mirror, which reflects only their imperfect forms, in a dim, faint, obscure manner; so that our thoughts about them ar puzzling and intricate, and everything is a kind of riddle to us. *But then*-We shall see, not a faint reflection, but the objects themselves. *Face to face*-Distinctly. *Now I know in part*-Even when God himself reveals things to me, great part of them is still kept under the veil. *But them I shall know even as also I am known*-In clear, full, comprehensive manner; in some measure like God, who penetrates the centre of every object, and sees at one glance through my soul and all things.[[17]](#footnote-16)

1. Deschner, *Christology*, 139-140. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. *NNT*, Rev. 22:15; cf. 22:11 where Wesley stated the damned will continue in their way unabated: "The condition of all mankin will admit no change for ever." [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Deschner, *Christology*, 138. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. *NNT*, Rev. 22:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. It seems, however, this number could easily be expanded to fifteen including one adaptation: 15, "The Great Assize" (1758); 54, "On Eternity" (1786); 60, "The General Deliverance" (1781); 63, "The General Spread of the Gospel" (1763); 64, "The New Creation" (1785); 66, "The Signs of the Times" (1787); 71, "Of Good Angels" (1783); 72, "Of Evil Angels" (1783); 73, "Of Hell" (1782); 115, "Dives and Lazarus" (1788); 124, "Human Life a Drean" (1789); 133, "Death and Deliverance" (1725, Wesley's first sermon); 135, "On Guardian Angels" (1726); 136, "On Mourning for the Dead" (1727); and his adaptaion of Calamy's "On the Resurrection of the Dead."

   Downes identified seven sermons (including the adaptation of Calamy) relating to eschatology in a significant manner: "The Great Assize," "On Eternity," "The General Deliverance," "Of Good Angels," "Of Evil Angels," "Of Hell," "Of the Resurrection of the Dead" (adapted from Benjamine Calamy). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. Downes, "Eschatolgoical Doctrines," 251. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. M. B. Wynkoop, "Hermeneutical Approach to John Wesley." *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 6 (1971): 13-22, 14. See also Wynkoop, *A Theology of Love, The Dynamic of Wesleyanism* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1972), 69-71. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. *NNT*, Rev. 22:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. "To the Editor of 'Lloyd's Evening Post,'" Mar. , 1767 (*LJW* 5:43). In this letter Wesley assured Dr. Dodd that "I have told all the world I am not perfect; and yet you allow me to be a Methodist. I tell you flat I have not attained the character I draw, will you pin it upon me in spite of my teeth." [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. "To Charles Wesley," Jun. 27, 1766 (*LJW* 5:16). All the brackets, etc. are as they appear in Telford. Note the radical editing by Jackson (*WW* 12:130-131). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
11. Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Ethusiast, John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1989), 546-547. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
12. *Jrn.*, May 25, 1768 (*WJW* 22:136). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
13. "To Lady Maxwell," Mar. 3, 1769 (*LJW* 5:129-130). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
14. "To Mary Bishop," May 9, 1773 (*LJW* 6:26). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
15. "To Hannah Ball," Feb. 17, 1780 (*LJW* 6:380-381). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
16. This would also help explain his interest in the likes of Old Jeffery.

    On the issue of personal assurance see: Downes, "Eschatologicl Doctrines," 55; Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 277; Schmidt, *John Wesley: A Theological Biography*, 1:200; Timothy Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform, American Protestantism of the Eve of the Civil War* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
17. *NNT*, 1 Cor. 13:12. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)