



SPU Internal Final Grant Report

Academic Year and Type of Grant: 2014-15 FRG

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Original Title of the Proposal: From John to John's Brother: Research on the Gospel of John in the Key of Charles Wesley (for a contracted commentary, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*)

1. Summary of the project goals and the activities that took place to meet these goals during the grant period.

I received an FRG that funded a course release in Fall 2014. It enabled me to have time and space to research and write on my contracted commentary project, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*. The goal of the grant project was to have material, particularly concerning the intersection between Charles Wesley's hymns and the Gospel of John, to teach in THEO 3255: Biblical Texts: The Gospel of John, Winter 2015.

The course release made it possible for me to make significant progress on the initial research on John and Wesleyan theology. John Tyson's book, *Assist Me to Proclaim: The Life and Hymns of Charles Wesley* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007) and S. T. Kimbrough, *The Lyrical Theology of John Wesley: A Reader* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011) were extremely helpful in orienting me to the field.

Several events changed the course of my research slightly, however. First, by the time classes had begun last fall, campus was looking for ways to respond to structural racism that emerged in public consciousness after Michael Brown's death in Ferguson. After the campus-wide forum on Ferguson, I began wondering, as a result of my research on the Gospel of John and the Wesleys, if a Wesleyan reading on the Gospel of John would have anything to say in such a context. Second, I discovered a strange commonality in researching the Gospel of John: it is consistently relegated to the corner of New Testament ethics, as scholars often claim that its ethics is no more specific than Jesus' commandment to "love one another." How, without providing many more specifics, could that be helpful in a discussion about race, gender, or many other aspects of human life in need of reconciliation? I asked my students on the first day of class if they wanted to help me prove that the Gospel of John had more than this to say to a hurting and broken world. The fact that Tent City 3 was staying with us on campus from December 2014-March 2015 raised the question for us again as a class. Personally, I wondered how I could write a commentary from the Wesleyan tradition without addressing the social justice and reconciliation concerns that the Wesleys themselves saw as central to the gospel.

In this way, with the support of my editor, I was encouraged to leave the Wesley hymns aside—just for the time being—and pursue the intersections I saw between John and the hurting world around us. To do so I took the biggest teaching risk of my career so far, and I constructed debates out of hot-button issues: immigration, racial justice, gender dynamics, the value of the body, economic justice, and violence/non-violence. Students had to propose a case study about their issue and then a passage from John that they felt addressed their issue in some way, and I proposed a rebuttal passage from the Gospel of John. These presentations were the most challenging, and the most engaging, part of teaching that class. Students said things like, "We talk about things in here that I never get to talk about anywhere else." "I now see how scripture actually matters in real life." These conversations were augmented by the sermons that students read or watched from diverse contexts (diverse in terms of time, place, and preachers).

2. What were the major findings?

Both the debates and the sermons sparked rich conversations about the Gospel that produced reams of notes for the commentary. To that end, I have made significant progress this summer (full, accepted drafts of three commentary chapters, and working on the fourth) and hope to continue it well into the fall. Furthermore, I also proposed, and was accepted, to present a paper on the debates that I used in class at the Society of Biblical Literature's (SBL) national annual meeting in November 2015 (title: Questioning the Status Quo: Freedom to Debate in the Gospel of John). To this end, through the research for class, the class itself, and my further reflections and development on it, this grant was a definite success.

3. Dissemination

This work will be disseminated in two ways: first, in the SBL presentation mentioned in question #2, presented in the Academic Teaching and Biblical Studies section, and second, in the commentary *The Gospel of John: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Beacon Hill, KS: Beacon Hill Press).

4. Future Scholarly Work

No scheduled future scholarly work is expected to stem from the works listed in #3 above, however, the nature of a commentary is that it sparks ideas that cannot be included in it. Furthermore, taking these teaching risks certainly changed my teaching for the better.

5. External Funding

I am not at the point where I would be interested in pursuing external funding for this particular project.

6. Problems/Difficulties and their resolutions

As noted above, this project did not proceed as I had expected when I applied for it in April 2014. However, I would like to think that this is because I was sensitive to the emerging intersections between how the Spirit is teaching me to read the Gospel of John within this Wesleyan (SPU) community, for the purpose of reaching other Wesleyan communities. My goal was to test a Wesleyan reading of the Gospel of John out in a classroom setting. I was able to do this, and my students taught me more than they know. I was also wise enough to save some of their assignments via Blackboard so that they are accessible for further thoughts on particular passages. Even though the Wesleyan reading of the Gospel did not proceed through the vehicle I had proposed (the hymns), it did proceed by the help of the Spirit, which seems quite appropriate.

7. Student participation

I did not set up the project to involve any one student, but rather, an entire class. As noted above, many students were grateful for the challenge of having to talk about contemporary issues solely with the Gospel of John. It required more discipline and more knowledge of John than they expected, and created helpful teaching and learning moments. In summary, one student evaluation claimed that this class was what she or he expected theological interpretation to look like, and had not seen embodied in other classes: reading scripture with the aid of a scholarly resource (a short textbook), alongside diverse preachers in the body of Christ (sermons), for the purpose of the healing of the world (debates). If my commentary succeeds in embodying such interpretation it will interpret John faithfully, as well as representing the Wesleyan tradition, and SPU, very well.