entitled, "An Apology for the Methodists" in which he defended Methodism from misrepresentation. Watson enjoyed taking the role of "devil's advocate" in doctrinal matters in order to sharpen his skills as a debater. However, he was misunderstood and fell under suspicion of heresy. Refusing to defend himself, he resigned the ministry in 1801. After his marriage, his father-in-law persuaded him to unite with a small society. Two and a half years later he reentered the ministry with the Methodist New Connection. By 1807 he was appointed their secretary.

In 1812 he returned to the original Methodist body through the influence of Jabez Bunting. He was active in the formation of the Wesleyan Missionary Society and served as its secretary for fourteen years. He was also involved in the opposition to slavery. On his death bed, he rejoiced in the news that the British Parliament was moving toward their emancipation in the West Indies.

In 1818 Watson wrote Remarks on the Eternal Sonship of Christ. Nothing he wrote brought him greater satisfaction than this pamphlet (which was discussed in part 2 of my series). When a biography of John Wesley reduced Wesley’s faith to philosophic principles, the Wesleyan book committee asked Watson to write a defense of Wesley.

At the conference of 1821 he was relieved of pastoral duties so that he might oversee the work of missions and write. Eighteen months later the first section of his Theological Institutes was published. Thomas Jackson wrote that "on all doctrinal questions an absolute deference is paid to the authority of Scripture." The final section was completed in 1829. Jackson noted that the sentences were sometimes too long and involved.

However, it was the first Methodist systematic theology and became a standard text in 1825 — even before the last section was completed. It remained on the Course of Study for half a century. The works of American Methodist theologians, such as Thomas Ralston, Luther Lee, Samuel Wakefield, and Amos Binney, were imitations of Watson’s Institutes. Robert Chiles wrote, “Both in Britain and in America Richard Watson was easily the single most determinative of the early Methodist theologians.”

On his deathbed he stated, "The Methodists have right views of the atonement; and they also know the way of coming to the atonement, and the right use to be made of that important doctrine." Everything he uttered was a reference to the atonement. He repeatedly declared, "The atonement is the sinner’s short way to God. On this rock I rest, and feel it firm beneath me.”

Before his untimely death at age 52, Watson wrote a biography of John Wesley, as well as a theological dictionary. None of Watson’s writing are currently in print except for this dictionary. In his dictionary Watson addresses philosophical issues, comparative religions, apologetics, matters of hermeneutics, and basic Christian beliefs.

Watson rejected the rationalism formulated in German schools. He affirmed the full authority and inerrancy of Scripture. He held that it was legitimate to use reason in sorting out textual variants and in interpreting the meaning of the text, but once the text was established and understood — revelation takes priority over reason. Regarding the assurance of personal salvation, Watson clearly embraces the doctrine of the direct witness of the Spirit.

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Watson held that Genesis 1-3 was to be accepted as a literal account and that the flood was universal. While his article on Arianism might be thought obsolete, actually his refutation of Arianism will also work against Jehovah’s Witnesses. Watson had an adequate grasp of the Trinity and dealt with early Church heresies concerning the nature of Christ.

Watson contended for the virgin birth of Christ and dealt extensively with the atonement. Included are articles on atonement, expiation, propitiation, and sacrifice. Watson is most helpful in his analysis of Calvinism. Included is a 15-page account of the Synod of Dort which shows the intolerance and injustice with which Arminians were treated. Watson’s definition of such terms as calling, election, foreknowledge, necessity, predestination, reprobation, will, and vocation are Arminian.

Watson rejected such doctrines as universalism and annihilationism, which have been embraced by some liberal Arminians of our day. Watson’s vigorous denunciation of Roman Catholicism reflects the view of the Reformers. In a day when the only sin is intolerance and evangelicals are compromising with Rome, Watson’s emphasis will come as a surprise to some who do not have the true facts.

While holding to a historical approach to the interpretation of prophetic passages, Watson’s greatest strength regarding eschatology is his optimism that the kingdom of Christ will prevail.

Richard Watson was one of the greatest theologians the Church has ever known. Although he is fallible, the chief value of this dictionary is its refutation of Calvinism. Whoever defines the terms controls the debate. Watson’s definitions and historical accounts, his exegesis, and citation of primary sources will strengthen this generation of ill-equipped Arminians to defend their faith. For these reasons, Fundamental Wesleyan Publishers printed a second edition in 2000. While this book sells for $50 on Amazon, you can get your copy through Foundry Press for $35 through the end of 2014. Watson’s Theological Institutes are available on the Southern Methodist College website in pdf format for a free download.