

A CONSTRUCTIVE WESLEYAN THEOLOGICAL PROPOSAL: REDEMPTION AND SANCTIFICATION OF HUMAN GENDER AND SEXUALITY

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INTRODUCTION

Wesleyan churches and institutions are struggling with gender issues (from addressing women college students as sexual "stumbling blocks" to debating women's submission in marriage and church to dividing our academic and worship communities over the recognition of same-sex partnerships). Social problems of gender violence and gender discrimination are addressed mainly by feminist and womanist theologians, if at all. These broader social and sexual issues do indeed affect the whole church, however. Divorce, domestic violence, rape, incest and other forms of sexual violence, homosexuality, sexual promiscuity and serial monogamy are concerns that touch the lives of members of every Wesleyan congregation and institution. While secular institutions engage such social issues from an ethos of diversity (including religious, class, and ethnic diversity as well as gender), Wesleyans have an opportunity to engage these issues from our inherited ethos of service and missions. By doing so, we can lovingly but faithfully challenge both the church in its reactionary stance or denial of these issues and those within and perhaps even outside of the Christian community who would analyze these issues without reference to the theological categories of sin and spiritual healing (redemption and sanctification). Having surveyed a good bit of the secular and Christian literature on these issues in tandem with ongoing holistic biblical study and dialogue with contemporary Wesleyan clergy and scholars of theology, biblical studies, philosophy, I offer the following evaluation and proposal toward a Wesleyan theology of gender and sexuality. This Wesleyan response to confusion in evangelical churches over issues of sexuality and gender is one among many possible faithful Christian options.

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THE ASBURY THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL

SPRING / FALL 2004
VOL 59 NO 1 & 2

HERMENEUTICAL ISSUES

Those who use the Wesleyan quadrilateral to engage these issues differ in their interpretations of how biblical and social scientific issues (reason and experience) interact, and how these are interactions to be evaluated. While dialogue among Wesleyans with both hermeneutics would be fruitful, we would all do well to remember Wesley's own frustration with those who "overthrow the whole Christian revelation" by setting Scripture against Scripture, interpreting some texts to "flatly contradict all the other texts."¹

Among Wesleyans, the greatest differences in conclusions about matters of gender and sexuality appear between perspectives heavily favoring scriptural primacy within the quadrilateral and perspectives moving more toward a balance or creative tension between the four quadrilateral elements. Though all Wesleyans affirm biblical authority and primacy, there is a difference in emphasis which affects doctrinal conclusions. Those who weight Scriptures heaviest within the quadrilateral consider all four elements. However, the primacy of Scripture within the quadrilateral guards against individual interpretations based on tradition, reason and experience. Those who emphasize biblical primacy sometimes base this emphasis on the assumption of a traditional interpretation of Scriptures. Most importantly for the purposes of this paper, those who emphasize biblical primacy tend to be certain that the Bible gives us definitive answers to questions of sexual identity and practice.

Those who hold the elements in more of a balance tend to emphasize experiential and rational (literary critical-historical) interpretations of Scripture. Tradition, for example the creeds and liturgies of the church, may be considered as significant sources inspired by the Spirit along with Scriptures. Scriptures "speak a living word...inspired in their being read and lived" as well as in being written – thus we read to learn not only what God did but what God's doing: The Spirit is still using the Scriptures is dynamic, novel, creative, transforming albeit FAITHFUL ways."² Tradition and our understanding of Scripture are understood as emergent. Because the Spirit continues to live and move among Christians as we grow in our understanding and application of Scripture, they approach the text with openness to correction by the Spirit. From this perspective, the material in Genesis 1–3 tends to be read *allegorically* as describing the relationship between God, creation, and humanity rather than as a scientific account of human nature (including gender and sexuality).

OTHER HERMENEUTICAL ISSUES

Evangelical theology as a whole tends not to deal explicitly with gender issues. Further, as Gary Dorrien observes, evangelical theology speaks with a "male voice," expressing male theologians' views of gender (such as those of Paul Jewett) rather than female views of gender (which are dismissed as "feminist").³ More than twenty years after evangelical women such as Virginia Ramey Mollenkott and Nancy Hardesty "first called for the development of an evangelical feminist theology, the promise of evangelical feminism as a systematically articulated theological perspective remains unfulfilled."⁴ Mollenkott and Hardesty have moved on.⁵

Patriarchal and feminist assumptions both affect the reading and translation of the Bible as well. Patriarchal and feminist hermeneutical differences lead to differences in theological assumptions about gender and sexuality. Christian conservatives like James

Dobson, R. C. Sproul, John Piper, and Wayne Grudem find the feminist gender egalitarian hermeneutic fundamentally incompatible with their own biblical hermeneutical assumptions that Christian Scriptures are infallible and that these infallible Scriptures teach male privilege ("headship").⁶ Those with an egalitarian hermeneutic and those with a patriarchal hermeneutic both agree that men and women are biologically different. However, Christian feminists (like humanists) tend to believe that the values and implications of gender differences find their source in culture rather than in God's will. Therefore, those operating out of an egalitarian hermeneutic tend to view patriarchy as a historical system with a historical beginning. (Egalitarian theologians associate the historical beginning of patriarchy with the Fall.) Whether humanist or Christian, those who see patriarchy as a historical phenomenon argue that if it had a beginning, it can be ended. Humanists promote behavioral change and education alone as means to achieve that end, while Christian theologians find hope in Christ's redemptive work and the Holy Spirit's transforming power. However, those who see patriarchy as natural, as part of the divinely instituted order of creation, assume that it neither can nor should be changed. Indeed, to change the patriarchal relations between the genders would require changing human nature itself. Fortunately, this is not beyond God's power! Even those who argue that patriarchy is part of the order of creation believe that salvation and sanctification redeem gender and sexuality.

CORE DOCTRINAL ISSUES: *IMAGO DEI*, THE FALL, AND REDEMPTION

As theologians and biblical scholars discuss issues of gender and sexuality—from the ordination of women to the recognition of same-sex domestic partners, core theological doctrines are either invoked or assumed to support their arguments. Even the secular humanists of second wave feminism recognized that the definition of human nature was central to understanding gender relations. As recently as the 1960s and 1970s, the medical and psychological view of human nature classified women as aberrant from the human norm (implicitly male) due to the influence of female hormones, chemicals, and tissues. Women were, in effect, defined by biological parts instead of as whole human beings. In 1972's *Ms. Reader*, Cynthia Orick observed that defining the identity of any class of people in any historical or social condition externally because their individual humanity is defined as "different" from "standard" humanity debases everyone.⁷

As they struggle to understand God's will for human nature, including gender and sexuality, Wesleyan thinkers seem to focus on Genesis 1–3, arriving at somewhat different conclusions about theological anthropology (particularly the definition of the *imago dei*), hamartiology (especially the nature of the fall), and redemption. These doctrines underlie and are central to contemporary Wesleyan discussions of gender and sexuality. Perhaps, then, it is no coincidence that Wesley considered these same three theological concerns part of the "core of Christian doctrine." Based on his quadrilateral method, he distinguished between the core of Christian faith and the *adiaphora*, identifying the human condition (including both the *imago dei* and original sin), the divine response to the human condition (justification by faith), and the means (holiness) to restore humanity from its present condition as key to the Christian understanding of salvation.⁸

Theologians and biblical scholars always define God's ideal for human nature as a

whole (God's "original blessing") in terms of the *imago dei* mentioned in Genesis 1, 2 and 5. For some, the idea of the order of creation is also a significant theological category for understanding human nature and God's intention for it. Theologians and biblical scholars also relate issues of "fallen," broken and sinful experiences of human sexuality (the current state of gender roles, gender identity, sex roles, and sexual relationships) to the fall of the order of creation and the fall of the *imago dei*. When theologians and biblical scholars differ in their definitions of the *imago dei* and the importance they place on the concept of "the order of creation, their views on human gender and sexuality are correspondingly affected.

IMAGO DEI

In general, it seems that Wesleyans tend to have a relational and social understanding of the *imago dei*, following Wesley himself.⁹ Rather than engaging the debate that some Christian feminist scholars have argued as to whether the priestly version in Genesis 1 or the Yahwist version in Genesis 2 is the definitive creation story, Wesleyans generally concur that even though the stories are distinct, their canonical integrity demands the reader to read them together as complementary parts of a broader truth. Further, Wesleyans agree that the biblical account clearly teaches that humans are created in God's image and that understanding that image is central to understanding God's will for human nature. However, Wesleyans differ in their interpretations of the definition of the *imago dei*, emphasizing different aspects of Wesley's teachings on this issue.

Of the many traditional definitions of the image of God in or as human nature (Nazarene theologian Craig Keen cites at least ten), Wesley favored what Runyon cites as the natural, moral, and political images.¹⁰ The natural image makes us capable of God, able to enter into conscious relationships with God through reason and free will.¹¹ In "On the Fall of Man," Wesley teaches that humans reflect God's likeness in the world by exercising God-given will, liberty, moral agency, and self-determination. These qualities permit us to respond to God freely, allowing genuine holiness and virtue (rather than divinely coerced or manipulated).¹² Wesleyan scholars seem to agree that this aspect of the *imago dei* is involved when they discuss issues of gender and sexuality as they affect individual human nature and behavior. The "moral image" of God is relational: Powered by the Holy Spirit, we related to God and others with love, justice, and grace, according to God's will, power and intention.¹³ Wesleyan scholars seem to agree that this is the norm for human relationships and should guide any Christian response to issues of human sexuality.

Those whose hermeneutic is most traditional in emphasizing the primacy of Scripture may infer from the image of God as relational that both male and female are necessary for that image to be wholly displayed. Others may focus on the functional definition of the image of God, what Wesleyan theologian Theodore Runyon calls the "political image" of God in Wesley's thought: Human beings are to be God's representatives on earth, faithful stewards of God's creation.¹⁴ Creation and human nature before the fall are wholly good because they are complete in their original form. Man and woman are truly one, as they should be. Some may understand male headship to be part of the *imago dei* since Christ is seen as ontologically and spiritually male rather than understanding this as a phenomenal category of his creaturely existence during the incarnation.¹⁵

Those who tend to hold the elements of the quadrilateral in more of a balanced creative tension as they interpret Scripture may emphasize God rather than humanity within the relationally-defined *imago dei*. The image is ever-emerging in response to the aid and call of the Spirit, not an inherent self-contained possession of any human individual.¹⁶ In his later years, Wesley seems likewise to have seen the *imago dei* not as a quality inherent in humans but as a capacity for knowing, loving, obeying, and enjoying God.¹⁷ Runyon summarizes Wesley's view of the *imago dei* as a vocation, a calling, rather than as innate. The fulfillment of this call is the true destiny of humankind.¹⁸ Wesleyan scholars who emphasize or assume this aspect of Wesley's thought about the *imago dei* tend to infer that although the Bible teaches that image of God is relational and social, it does not necessarily follow that the image is best expressed through marriage. Celibate people can display the *imago dei*. (The Bible and church tradition have sometimes promoted unmarried chastity as the ideal Christian lifestyle, for example in 1 Corinthians 7; "tradition" holds that even Jesus Christ himself was unmarried.) For these Wesleyans, God's primary concern in creating humans is the *imago dei* as the relationship between God and humans and the *imago dei* as the norm for human relations in general. Gender and sexuality appear later in Genesis 1.26-28. Both biblical references to the *imago dei* connect human sexuality with God's creation of humanity in God's image but distinguish the two: Sexuality is a phenomenal category shared with other creatures.¹⁹ Wesley himself distinguished such categories as incompatible with God's supreme perfection. For some Wesleyan scholars then, not only are sexuality and gender not part of the *imago dei*, they are among the very aspects of human nature that distinguishes us from God, whose likeness we otherwise bear in the world.²⁰ Creation and human nature are good in their original state because their relationships are holy. Creatures relate to God and each other as God intends. Goodness, like the *imago dei* itself, is not inherent but exists only in relationship (specifically in relation to God).

While Wesleyans agree on many aspects of their definitions of the image of God in human nature, their nuanced differences leave certain questions open. Does the *imago dei* include gender and sexuality? Are gender and sexuality (and sexual behavior / relationships) central to what it means to be human? If so, are a specific *kind* of gender, sexuality, and sexual behavior/relationships central to what it means to be human? These are the very questions that have led to debate and dissension within our churches and institutions.

THE ORDER OF CREATION

Those who read and interpret the Bible with a very strong emphasis on scriptural primacy more often tend to present arguments about gender and sexuality based upon the order of creation. Christian tradition recognizes that the Bible teaches that God cannot be adequately described in human terms. God is physically neither female nor male. However, tradition implies that God is spiritually masculine. Some Wesleyan scholars assume that this divine spiritual masculinity is reflected in the order of creation. In the Yahwist version of creation, the woman is created differently than the man: The male alone is created in God's image.²¹ God-given power of human naming (including the naming of the human female) is given to the man, creating order and meaning. Historian Gerda Lerner observes that in traditional interpretations of this passage, the man names

the male-female relationship itself as intimate and binding: Woman is man's flesh, and he has authority over her.²² Lerner argues that the argument from the order of creation is one of the two most powerful metaphors for female subordination in the Bible. (The other is based upon Eve's role in the fall, but this metaphor seems far less important within the Wesleyan tradition.) The traditional pre-Christian and Christian argument from the order of creation is based upon a literal interpretation of the creation of the first woman from Adam's rib, implying her God-given inferiority to the man. Male headship is inferred from the order of creation as well. Since the man is literally understood to have been created first, men are seen as the primary and comprehensive representatives of humanity. Explanations of woman's appropriate role, even from relatively egalitarian Wesleyan scholars such as Junia Pokrifka-Joe and Joseph Coleson, may explain the creation of the *ezer kenegdo* as implying that the original human (sometimes described as neither male nor female, sometimes as both) was not yet good, not complete (Genesis 2).²³ The human beings are blessed in both Genesis 1 and 2 when they are explicitly both male and female, not before. Conservative Wesleyan scholars and communities may argue from Genesis 1 and 2 that originally, human nature was created with male-female duality and that therefore, heterosexuality is implicit within it. Such arguments assume heterosexual coupling as a necessary (rather than contingent) condition of human nature.

Those who balance the Wesleyan quadrilateral differently, though still basing their arguments on the scriptural authority that they assume, may argue that gender and sexuality simply aren't the point of the creation story and what it teaches us about divine or human nature. Keen summarizes this view: "Genesis 1:27 is all about *God*, not about us." For these scholars, gender as part of the "order of creation" is not central or even clear.²⁴ While the power and priority of the male may be part of traditional Christian theology, it does not necessarily follow from the biblical text.²⁵ Like Wesley, they appeal to empirical evidence as they try to understand and apply Scripture and may point out that some species are neither or both genders, some species change genders over the course of their life cycles, and others (including humans) may include individuals whose "gender" may be unclear ("hermaphrodites" and others). Mollenkott in particular is notable for critiquing what she calls "the binary gender construct" as a theologian rather than on a medical or psychological case history basis alone.²⁶ For these theologians and biblical scholars, these variations on the theme of gender may be an example of God's creativity and will (per Stephen Jay Gould's *Wonderful Life*), rather than a symptom of the fall of the order of creation.²⁷ Christian feminists from the nineteenth-century's Sarah Grimke to contemporary biblical scholar Phyllis Trible have also argued that the Bible (particularly the priestly version of the creation) teaches that men and women were created together by God, both in God's image.²⁸ The male does not have priority in this account. Some feminist theologians even infer from this that together men and women express the unity and identity of complete humanity, reflecting masculine and feminine aspects of God. Wesleyan theologian Alan Padgett observes that even Paul seems to reject the argument for male primacy from the order of creation, even to counter it directly in 1 Corinthians 11 7:4 and 11:11-12 as well as the more famous passage in Galatians 3:28. Paul explicitly teaches that man and woman are not independent from each other, that both come from God, and that in Christ there is neither male nor female.²⁹ Trible further infers that the description of

woman as *ezer kenegdo* literally means she is "a power equal to man," not that she is a subservient "helpmeet."³⁰ Genesis 1 and 2 is understood by Wesleyan scholars such as Padgett to describe only the difference between men and women, not a power relationship requiring female subordination.³¹ While some of the more conservative Wesleyans share these theological assumptions about gender and human nature, their conclusions differ, especially when they have different assumptions about the order of creation as inherently patriarchal rather than inherently egalitarian.

GODLY HUMAN SEXUALITY: INFERRED FROM THE *IMAGO DEI* AND ORDER OF CREATION

All Wesleyan scholars seem to agree that Scripture clearly teaches human sexuality was originally good.³² God created and blessed sexuality, even commanding the first couple to reproduce. As argued earlier, Wesleyans who most heavily emphasize the primacy of Scripture within the quadrilateral may find the order of creation to be an important category for understanding human nature and relationships. Accordingly, they may emphasize Genesis 1 and 2 in their definition of God's will for human sexuality. Doing so, they point to the first couple as normative: One man, one woman. Further, those who are complementarians may argue that the *ezer kenegdo* of Genesis 2 completes and makes good the original genderless human. These Wesleyans affirm sex as part of the originally good order of creation, but sexual behavior should occur only between one man and one woman within marriage.

Wesleyans who hold tradition, reason, experience and Scripture in more of a balance (though still affirming scriptural primacy) may be more open to exploring questions about human sexuality. Empirical evidence demonstrates that sexuality is shared in common with other creatures, but reason and experience do not help us discern quite as clearly whether Scripture teaches that sexuality or gender are part of the *imago dei*. Though originally blessed, perhaps our sexuality and gender are the very aspects of our human nature not made in God's likeness.

THE FALL OF THE *IMAGO DEI*, ORDER OF CREATION, GENDER, AND SEX

Observing the universal persistence of evil in the human heart (not just in the environment), Wesley concluded that sin is a "fundamental problem" in human nature that can't be fixed by human efforts or with human resources. In "God's Approbation of His Works," Wesley defines sin as turning from God to seek "happiness independent of God," using our God-given freedom to turn from (rather than respond to) God. Our fallen nature tends to seek self-sufficiency.³³ Human disobedience disrupts the relationship between the *imago dei*. Since the *imago dei* resides not in the human but in the way we live our relationship with the creator, it can be betrayed in this way.³⁴ Wesleyans in general tend to follow Wesley's lead in interpreting the fall as having bent human nature toward self-focus, preventing us from fulfilling God's intention that we be the image of God. (Remembering that all Wesleyans including Wesley himself have a relational and social definition of the image of God, it follows the isolationism and self-focus are a proper Wesleyan definition of fallen human nature.) Sin breaks the wholeness that is God's ideal for all human relationships, including those between men and women.

I have argued that Wesleyans with the hermeneutic that most emphasizes scriptural

primacy tend to consider the order of creation a more important theological category for discerning God's will in relation to gender and sexuality than do Wesleyans who emphasize the other three sides of the quadrilateral a bit more. Those who emphasize the importance of the order of creation tend to interpret the fall accordingly. Not just creation, but the order of creation, has been tainted by sin. Both genetics and behavior have been affected. Thus, even the genetic explanations of homosexuality, for example, do not preclude their definition as sin (or at least as the effect of sin). Sin distorts the goodness of the *imago dei* (which in this view requires both male and female for its fullest expression). If one shares these assumptions, threats to heterosexual marriage, then, are threats against the very image of God itself. Homosexuality, for example, is defined not only in terms of sexual practice or sexual orientation (behavioral and psychological ideas respectively) but as an issue with important theological implications. Christians who decry it as sin often argue that it is against nature, assuming the argument from the order of creation) and against Scripture (assuming a certain interpretation of Scripture). Even if a genetic explanation for homosexual preference is accepted, it is understood to be a tragic genetic defect caused by the fall, a pathological distortion of the originally good (and originally heterosexual) order of creation. Homosexual practices and behavior are explicitly understood as sin.³⁵ Christian homosexuals must avoid this sinful practice by remaining celibate. Some reject the notion that Christians could have homosexual orientation, arguing that even homosexual desires are sin.³⁶

Wesleyan perspectives which do not consider the order of creation as central to understanding human nature tend to focus their attention on the effects of the fall on the *imago dei* rather than on a divinely-instituted order of relations. For these Wesleyan scholars, as for Wesley himself, the fall caused humans to become so utterly godless at birth that divine intervention in the form of prevenient grace is required in order for us even to come to faith. These scholars favor Wesley's own view that fallen humans suffered a "total loss" of the image of God (specifically "the moral image") and cannot find a way to God without the help of the Holy Spirit.³⁷ Just as these Wesleyans tend to define the image of God in terms of our relation to God, the fall is defined likewise. For such scholars, issues of sexuality and gender are not the main point God is trying to teach us in Genesis 3. Rather the focus is on the fall of human relations in general and our relationship with God and creation as a whole. Fallen human relationships can become destructive, abusive, exploitive, and transactional. These scholars consistently reject the idea that patriarchy is part of the order of creation, defining it instead as a result of sin. While these theologians and biblical scholars agree with their more conservative colleagues that homosexuality and Christian responses to it are not merely matters of "lifestyle" choice, they are not as sure that homosexuality is de facto necessarily pathological, tragic, or a defect within fallen human nature. Some may not even be sure if homosexuality is not necessarily sin. Because this position doesn't assume that heterosexuality is part of the "order of creation" it cannot be sure that homosexuality in and of itself is necessarily a fallen sexual condition. These Wesleyans appeal to historical tradition, reason and experience to articulate questions and a lack of certainty about how to interpret scriptural teachings about homosexual practice since "heterosexuality" and "homosexuality" as such are not concepts found in the Bible.³⁸

WESLEYAN ETHICS, GENDER AND SEXUALITY

Wesley taught that the meaning of human life is to live as the image of God in the world. Because Wesleyans understand the image of God as social and relational and embrace an ethos of service and missions, they tend to agree that redeemed and redeeming human relationships are central to helping restore the *imago dei's* original goodness and wholeness. Regardless of their views on gender and sexuality, Wesleyan theologians and biblical scholars seem genuinely committed to an ethic of love, though they may disagree about how that love is best expressed with regard to certain divisive issues. Those who struggle with sin, including gender- and sex-related issues, often tend to be seen as broken and hurting. Therefore, the appropriate expression of Christian love into such a person's life is prayer for their restoration to wholeness. This ethos and praxis of Christ-like love may be the greatest area of agreement among Wesleyan scholars with regard to issues of gender and sexuality. On the other hand, Wesleyan biblical scholars, theologians, and institutions are currently particularly concerned with defining Christian marriage. This issue seems to be one of the most polarizing.

Wesleyan scholars who most emphasize scriptural primacy within the quadrilateral agree with other Wesleyans on the ethos of missions and service in Christian life and practice. All Wesleyans tend to agree with Wesley himself that Christ has called us and the Spirit empowers us to bring Christian grace and love to all situations. From this perspective, the most appropriate response to being affected by the fall with any tragic defect of human nature is a Spirit-empowered life of discipleship that leads toward wholeness. Paul's ethical maxims for the early Christian community in Romans 12.9-13 describe this approach: "Don't just pretend you love others. Really love them. Hate what is wrong. Stand on the side of the good. Love each other with genuine affection, and take delight in honoring each other....When God's children are in need, be the one to help them out...."³⁹ Based on their interpretation of Scripture, however, Wesleyans who emphasize biblical primacy within the quadrilateral tend to view Christian marriage as exclusively heterosexual. Marriage is seen as a theological, biblical, and ecclesiastical concern as well as a civil issue. Those who may entertain the idea that same-sex domestic partnership could be acceptable in some form distinguish it from Christian marriage. Even if recognition of these partnerships is accepted as a civil rights issue, they should not be blessed in a Christian church. Marriage is defined as a church issue, and its sacramental aspect in some traditions may even be invoked.

Those who give greater weight to the other elements of the quadrilateral seem to emphasize the universality of the fallen condition. No human can live a holy life without God's divine intervention, the Spirit empowering the believer. Their deep conviction of the universality of sin may make these Wesleyans less prone to stigmatize one kind of sin over another or to deal with one group of fallen humans in a different way than all the others. Consistent with their tendency to consider historical sources, reason, tradition, and experience in a broader sense and with greater emphasis, they may define marriage as a historical development, not just as a "Christian" issue. A few may even argue that marriage is *always* a civil issue, noting that Wesleyans and other Protestants long ago rejected marriage as a sacramental: only baptism and communion are universally recognized as Christian sacraments.

Debate over this issue is not new. Controversies over “meretricious relations” (the illicit sexual relationship of an unmarried couple) in the 1970s evoked similar arguments. In 1972’s *Ms. Reader*, writer and literary editor Susan Edmiston critiques the civil definition of marriage as a *de facto ménage à trois* with the state as the third party. Civil marriage is a contract in which one agrees to certain rights, obligations, and responsibilities and should not be confused with a vow of eternal love.⁴⁰ As Wesleyans consider various facets of this multi-layered debate, we might consider that Wesley himself valued political structures and order.⁴¹

REDEMPTION AND SANCTIFICATION OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY

Wesley defined salvation and redemption in terms of restoration in the image of God, or entire sanctification.⁴² He understood salvation to include both prayer without ceasing and restoring the human being in the image of God to be what we were created to be.⁴³ Wesley consistently preached that Jesus Christ restores and renews us in his own image.⁴⁴ Being made holy (sanctification) means being restored in God’s image as a living sacrifice, utter and total surrender of self to God. Perfect holiness is continuous, “every moment” needing and being fully sanctified by Jesus Christ.⁴⁵ Wesley defines holiness as a recovery of the image of God, renewing the soul to Christlikeness.⁴⁶ By prevenient grace, God initiates this renewal and regeneration (new birth) of the image of God. Sanctification perfects the new creature.⁴⁷ All Wesleyans consider redemption and sanctification to be God’s ultimate response to our concerns about the current state of human gender and sexuality by selfless love. As Runyon explains, God’s goal is transformation of fallen creation to restore health and holiness.⁴⁸ For Wesleyans, as for Wesley himself, redeemed human nature and relationships are characterized by selfless love. According to Wesley, this coming fulfillment can be experienced “in a degree,” giving us a glimpse into the reality of biblical promises.⁴⁹ Subtle differences may exist regarding the timing of and human cooperation with God’s redeeming work.

Wesleyan scholars who emphasize biblical primacy tend to talk a bit more about the future aspects of redemption—full restoration of the *imago*’s original goodness and wholeness at the consummation of all things. Redeemed human nature will be Christ-like, complete, whole in our relationships with self, others, world, and God. Some of those who hold this position may believe that the completion of God’s redemptive work cannot take place until after death. Other Wesleyan scholars, giving more weight to the other elements of the quadrilateral, including experience, tend to follow Wesley’s view that redemption through the Spirit’s transforming work (including regeneration and sanctification) is a mode of life emergent over time. They may emphasize the central significance of Christian love between all men and women as neighbors, not just the love between a husband and wife in marriage.

Either way, God’s intention for human love is modeled in the *imago dei* (understood relationally), the incarnation, and the Trinity. The human and divine work together synergistically in the *imago dei* and the incarnation as two radically different natures interacting in mutually self-giving, self-emptying love.⁵⁰ In this covenant partnership, “the Creator informs, infuses, and inspires the creature with the original goal of human existence.”⁵¹ British Wesleyan historian Reginald Ward argues that this patristic idea of “*perichoresis*” or

co-inherence was enjoying a renaissance not only in Wesley's thought but also among his evangelical contemporaries.⁵² God is in us and we are in God, mutually participating in each other, distinct yet not separate. This synergetic relationship is at the heart of what Runyon cites as one of Wesley's favorite Pauline passages, Phillipians 2.12-13. By collaborating with God, we bear spiritual fruit.⁵³ The redeemed human surrenders utterly to God, absolutely open, for example in Jesus Christ. Godly relationships transform and redeem the behavior of those in them. As we receive Jesus Christ, we take on His nature. In human relationships, this means giving preference and honor to one another, being a servant to each other.⁵⁴ Godly love is unconditional and includes mutual accountability. Humans cannot love as God or Christ loves. The Spirit is the only source that can communicate such love, empowering us to fulfill the Great Commandment. For Wesley, love is the supreme goal of the sanctification process. Christian perfection itself is the perfection of God's love, received from Christ through the Spirit by grace. Perfection is loving God with all our heart and our neighbor as ourselves. We must then reflect this perfect love in the world to our neighbors and enemies perfectly, as it has been received. Loving our neighbor, for Wesley, means Christ-like service and giving to others.⁵⁵ However, we can only receive and reflect God's love by participating in it.⁵⁶

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR HOLY LIVING, DISCIPLESHIP, AND COMMUNITY

Why should any of this be important for the church? Three concerns relevant to this study of gender issues and sexuality emerge from sociologist Robert Wuthnow's years of interviews with American evangelicals: Women substantially outnumber men at Christian religious services; gender discrimination and limited opportunities drive some of these women out of the church and even away from Christ altogether, and born-again Christians question the church's teachings on sexuality.⁵⁷ If we are going to drive women away from saving faith in Jesus Christ, we had better make sure that the lack of equality and male language for God that alienates them is really God's will and not just our own poor witness. Further, the issue of God's will for sexual behavior needs to be clarified for and upheld by all Christians, not just one small group. Otherwise, we are clearly engaging in hypocrisy and bigotry rather than holiness. Wuthnow's interviews reveal that the majority of evangelical Christians (not just homosexuals) tend to see their sexual behavior as a matter of individual choice. Feelings of romantic love and commitment (emotional desire to marry) are the determining factors for Christian women's decisions about sexual behavior, not obedience to Scriptures or the church.⁵⁸

Wesleyans work from an ethos of devoted service in the name of Jesus Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit and a theological method that integrates Scripture, reason, church traditions, and experience (including and perhaps especially our experiences of relationship with the God). For Wesley, the Spirit's goal in redemption and sanctification was not doctrinal uniformity but human transformation into holiness.⁵⁹ Applying this to issues of gender and sexuality, as with all other matters of Christian life, we must recognize that conversion or justification alone is not the most important aspect of our Wesleyan theological or ethical heritage. The emphasis is on sanctification, a continuing lifetime of renewal and transformation of character and behavior.⁶⁰ This understanding of sanctification emerges as central when this Wesleyan quadrilateral method and ethos of

loving service are applied in practice. What then could a Wesleyan view on gender and sex roles mean in central matters of human life? The redemption of human sexuality, liberation from sin, renewal and regeneration of human personhood through salvation, including the entire sanctification of human sexuality and gender before God and in the world. For Wesley himself, practical application of his own understanding of human nature and God's will led him to oppose the denial of civil rights based on gender, race, or class, most notably with reference to the issues of slavery, voting rights, and women's ministry.⁶¹ Both Wesley and women Methodist preachers he knew agreed that Scripture wouldn't contradict itself. Paul's teachings in verses of 1 Timothy 2 and 1 Corinthians 14 must not violate his assumptions of the validity women's public role in church worship elsewhere in 1 Corinthians 14 and 11.5. Wesley and the early Methodists recognized Scriptures to include extraordinary calls to women. Wesley appealed to Acts 8.4 to justify lay preaching. He insisted that every Methodist, regardless of gender, had a spiritual vocation in the world, including visiting the sick and caring for others.⁶² He pointed to empirical evidence of the spiritual gift of preaching in women.⁶³ Experience and evidence convinced him that "God had blessed the work of women leaders" with pragmatic and spiritual effectiveness.⁶⁴

Sanctified gender roles and identities, sex roles and relationships would affect the way we live as Christians in the world, transforming understandings of family and of role relations between women and men in and out of the home. Paul's teachings on marital relations point in this direction. Husbands and wives are to live in mutual submission, spiritually and physically, out of reverence for Christ. In 1 Corinthians 7.4, he teaches that husbands and wives have authority over each others bodies. In Ephesians 5.21 and Colossians 3.18, he exhorts wives and husbands to be subject to one another and to God or Christ. Both must surrender to God. Mutual submission only works if both the husband and the wife submit to, revere, and love the Lord and only if their relationship with each other flows out of their love for and submission to God, restoring the right balance between them. Redeemed marriage is a covenant commitment like the godly love between humans and God that perfects believers.⁶⁵ Both parties are sustained by the assurance of their commitment to the covenant's steadfast endurance.⁶⁶ Our relationships within the church would also be affected, including worship, our life with God. The Spirit would perfect the relation between the worshipping community and couples and male-female relations in church, including ministry roles and understandings of leadership. All of these relationships, including marriage, would be characterized by the same kind of synergy that Wesley ascribes to the *imago dei* and incarnation. The relationship between God and humanity in the economic Trinity and within the Godhead in the immanent Trinity also provide models for godly love and community, even within marriage. Sanctification of gender and sexuality on the individual level would also occur, including the perfection of personal piety, the individual's life with God. Rather than being separated and broken, both biological and theological meanings of gender would be made whole. The practical theological implications of sanctified gender and sexuality include spiritual gifting regardless of gender (Galatians 3.28). Because we are used to the current fallen condition of human gender and sexuality, moving with the Spirit toward their sanctification is a faith issue. Godly relationships require belief in something hoped for but never before seen.

CONCLUSION

Gender violence and injustice that secular feminists and womanists have identified are better understood not just as social problems, but as both the cause and result of sin: "fallen" and broken experiences of human sexuality, identity, and relationships. In Christ, human sexuality and gender (like all other aspects of human personhood) are redeemed, regenerated and sanctified, restored to the perfection of God's original intention.

NOTES

1. Cited in Theodore Runyon. *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1998, 39.
2. Craig Keen, electronic conversation.
3. Gary Dorrien. *Remaking of Evangelical Theology*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998. Paul Jewett's works include (with Virginia Ramey Mollenkott) *Man as Male and Female: A Study in Sexual Relationships from a Theological Perspective*. (Eerdmans, 1975); (with Margaret Shuster) *God, Creation, and Revelation: A Neo-Evangelical Theology*. (Eerdmans, 1991); and Margaret Shuster, ed. *Who We Are: Our Dignity as Human: A Neo-Evangelical Theology*. (Eerdmans, 1996).
4. Dorrien, 203; Virginia Ramey Mollenkott's works include *Man as Male and Female* with Paul Jewett, cited above; (with Vanessa Sheridan). *Women, Men and the Bible with Study Guide*. Crossroads/Herder and Herder, 1988; and *The Divine Feminine: The Biblical Imagery of God as Female*. Crossroad/Herder and Herder, 1993. Nancy Hardesty's works include (with Letha Scanzoni) *All We're Meant to Be: Biblical Feminism for Today*. Eerdmans 1992 and (with Craig Ballard Millett) *In God's Image: Archetypes of Women in Scripture*. Lunamedia, 1991.
5. More recently, Virginia Ramey Mollenkott has published *Transgender Journeys*. Pilgrim, 2003 and *Omnigender: A Trans-Religious Approach*. Pilgrim, 2001.
6. James Dobson's works on these topics include his edited volume *The Complete Marriage and Family Home Reference Guide*. Tyndale, 2000; *Love for a Lifetime: Building a Marriage that Will Go the Distance*. Multnomah, 2000; and *What Wives Wish Their Husbands Knew about Women*. Tyndale, 1988. R. C. Sproul (with R. Kent Hughes and John McArthur). *The Coming Evangelical Crisis: Current Challenges to the Authority of Scripture and the Gospel*. Moody, 1997. John Piper and Wayne Grudem, ed. *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*. Crossway, 1991.
7. Francine Klagsbrun, ed. *The First Ms. Reader*. New Yorker: Warner, 1974, 66.
8. Runyon, 19.
9. John Wesley. "The Image of God" (1730). *The Works of John Wesley* 4. Sermons 4. ed., Albert C. Outler. Nashville: Abingdon, 1987.
10. Craig Keen. "Homo Precarius: Prayer in the Image and Likeness of God." *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 33:1 (1998). <http://wesley.nnu.edu/WesleyanTheology/theojml/31-35/33-1-7.htm>; Claus Westermann. *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary*. Augsburg Fortress, 1984; Runyon 14-18.
11. John Wesley. "The New Birth" (1760) and "On the Fall of Man" (1782). *The Works of John Wesley* 2, Sermons 2, ed., Albert C. Outler. Nashville: Abingdon, 1985; "The Image of God" (1730) and "Heavenly Treasure in Earthly Vessels" (1790). *The Works of John Wesley* 4, Sermons 4. ed., Albert C. Outler. Nashville: Abingdon, 1987.
12. John Wesley. "On the Fall of Man" 1.1 (1782). *The Works of John Wesley* 2, Sermons 2, ed., Albert C. Outler. Nashville: Abingdon, 1985.
13. John Wesley. "The End of Christ's Coming" (1781) and "The General Deliverance" (1781). *The Works of John Wesley* 2, Sermons 2, ed., Albert C. Outler. Nashville: Abingdon, 1985.
14. David J.A. Clines. "The Image of God in Man" *Tyndale Bulletin* 19 (1968) 53-103; John H. Walton. *Genesis: From Biblical Text...to Contemporary Life*. Zondervan, 2001; Runyon, 14-18.
15. S. M. Hutchens. "Heretical Bibles." *Priscilla Papers* 15/3: 4-5 and "Unmanning the Bible." *Priscilla Papers* 15/5: 3-5.

16. Keen, "Homo Precarius."
17. John Wesley. "The End of Christ's Coming" (1781) and "The General Deliverance" (1781). *The Works of John Wesley* 2, *Sermons* 2, ed., Albert C. Outler. Nashville: Abingdon, 1985 and "Heavenly Treasure in Earthly Vessels" (1790). *The Works of John Wesley* 4, *Sermons* 4. ed., Albert C. Outler. Nashville: Abingdon, 1987.
18. Runyon, 13-14.
19. Alan Padgett. "Is God Masculine? Orthodoxy vs. Traditionalism (In Reply to Touchstone Magazine's Priscilla Papers)." *Priscilla Papers* 16/4 (Fall 2002).
20. Genesis 1.26-28, Genesis 5.1-2.
21. Genesis 2.18-25; Gerda Lerner. *The Creation of Patriarchy: Women and History Volume 1*. Oxford University, 1987, 185.
22. *Ibid.*, 181.
23. Junia Pokrifka-Joe has presented an unpublished paper on this topic to the Haggard School of Theology at Azusa Pacific University and has had her dissertation on this topic approved at Saint Andrew's University, 2003; Joseph Coleson, *Ezer Cenegdo*, The Wesleyan Holiness Women Clergy Association, 1998.
24. Because of their understanding of the way reason and experience can aid biblical interpretation, such scholars cite medical and psychological sources such as Alice Dorumat Dreger. *Hermaphrodites and the Medical Invention of Sex*. Cambridge: Harvard University, 2000; Thomas Laquer. *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*. Cambridge: Harvard University, 1992; Simon LeVay. *The Sexual Brain*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994.
25. Padgett. "Is God Masculine?" and "What is Biblical Equality?" *Priscilla Papers* 16:3 (Summer 2002): 22-25.
26. Alice Dorumat Dreger. *Hermaphrodites and the Medical Invention of Sex*. Cambridge: Harvard University, 2000; Mollenkott, *Trans-Gender and Omnigender*.
27. Stephen Jay Gould. *Wonderful Life: The Burgess Shale and the Nature of History*. W. W. Norton, 2000.
28. Gerda Lerner and Sarah Moore Grimke. *The Feminist Thought of Sarah Grimke*. Oxford University, 1998.
29. Padgett, "Is God Masculine?" See also Thomas Cahill. *Desire of the Everlasting Hills: The World Before and After Jesus*. New York: Doubleday, 1999, 141.
30. Phyllis Trible. "Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation." *Journal of American Academy of Religion* 41 (March 1973): 31-42; Coleson and Pokrifka-Joe (cited earlier) concur with this interpretation.
31. Other evangelical Christian scholars who concur with this biblical interpretation include Stanley Grenz, Denise Muir Kjesbo, Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, Ruth Tucker, and members of Christians for Biblical Equality.
32. Genesis 1:26-28, 5:1-2.
33. *The Works of John Wesley* 2, *Sermons* 2, ed., Albert C. Outler. Nashville: Abingdon, 1985.
34. Runyon, 14.
35. Robert Gagnon. *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics*. Abingdon, 2002; Richard Hays. *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethic*. San Francisco: Harper, 1996.
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40. In Klagsbrun, 91.
41. Runyon, 170-171.
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45. "Heavenly Treasure in Earthly Vessels" (1790).
46. "The Witness of Our Own Spirit," Works 1.
47. Runyon, 56.
48. Ibid., 169.
49. John Wesley. "The Way to the Kingdom. Sermons I Works 1. ed., Albert C. Outler. Nashville: Abingdon, 1985.
50. Keen, electronic dialogue.
51. Runyon, 22.
52. Reginald Ward. "John Wesley and His Evangelical Past." *The Legacy of John Wesley for the Twenty-First Century: Wesleyan Tercentennial Conference*. Asbury Theological Seminary, October 1, 2003.
53. Runyon, 55.
54. Romans 12.
55. Runyon, 224-225; Galatians 5.6.
56. Ibid., 228, 226.
57. Robert Wuthnow. *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s*. University of California, 2000, 34, 117-120.
58. Ibid., 119.
59. Runyon, 35.
60. Ibid., 43.
61. Ibid., 173.
62. Ibid., 198-199.
63. Ibid., 196.
64. Ibid., 197.
65. Ibid., 230.
66. Ibid., 231.