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Perfecting One Another: Friendship and the Moral Implications of Wesley’s Small Groups

One of the aspects of Wesley that my students in Latin America seem to appreciate is his emphasis on small groups. Part of the appeal perhaps lies in that the Wesleyan groups emphasized in a praxis-oriented way some of the tenets of the Wesleyan theological vision; also, my students are aware of a “cell group” movement that has become quite prominent among many Protestant groups in Latin America, and Wesley represents a figure who gives credibility to the concept in general. For these and other reasons, the interest level of my students rises when we come to this part of the course, and the topic becomes an integral one within the class.

Of course, Wesley did not “invent” the notion of small groups, for he found this idea congenial to his thought through a number of experiences, including his association with the Moravians. Wesley believed his groups were “means of grace associated with the renewal movement” he helped spawn and were often characterized by him as “prudential” in that they “were concerned with the maintenance and advancement of the Christian life” in a way “related to their historical and cultural context.” In time, Wesley’s groups, including the classes and bands, came to be an important part of the Wesleyan ethos, and when one looks at the movement from the perspective of the early followers of Wesley, the organizational embodiment of Wesley’s theology within these groups was a very appealing factor that contributed to the movement’s growth and expansion throughout England and beyond.

This last detail may be quite jarring for the contemporary observer, for when the issue is scrutinized through the procedural mechanisms associated with some of these groups, little if anything appears congenial to the present-day mindset. One need only look at the “Rules of the Band-Societies” drawn up on December 25, 1738 and some of their questions for anyone wanting to be admitted to the group: “Do you desire to be told of all your faults, and that plain and home? Do you desire that every one of us should tell you from time to time whatsoever is in his heart concerning you?” Such questions are not only incisive but could lead to trifling and even slander.

With modernity’s turn to the subject for all that is true and just, this process appears both unsettling and unfair. My students usually share these opinions, for despite their initial enthusiasm for the concept of small groups,
every class eventually asks the ubiquitous, all-important question of practicality: “Are these groups even possible today?” Some of their follow-up questions include: “Can we really be this honest with one another? How can we know for sure that people will not use this information to hurt us down the line? Will people become offended and leave to another church if we ask them these kinds of things, and will people who are naturally vindictive enjoy this process for all the wrong reasons?”

These are valid questions, but their answers require serious thought and reflection, for our tendencies to answer them may be more indicative of who we are than who we should be. My contention is that these groups are possible today and in fact are necessary if we are to align ourselves with part of the totality that is the Wesleyan vision, but such a possibility would only be accessible through a radical reorientation of what we find to be involved in the process of moral maturation. Wesley’s groups, especially the classes and bands, were not simply harmless times of Christian fellowship and interaction; rather, these groups were “moral workshops” that implied intentionality and effort. This endeavoring was not individually undertaken but was engaged in the company of others, and in this regard, the moral category of friendship, whether appropriated implicitly or explicitly, was operational.

Essentially, Wesley’s groups worked in his times in a way that seems offensive to us today because anticipated as part of the process was the support and formation of friendship. But again, the friendship in question here is not the random relationships that come and go through time within specific circumstances or for particular purposes or advantages; friendship in this context would be closely aligned with the category of discipleship and would carry a number of moral connotations that would make the dynamic of the small groups possible. Without the moral category of friendship, Wesley’s small groups would not have been and could not be possible. And if this assessment is true, then the contemporary issue is not a matter of whether these groups are viable but whether we in our contemporary context know how to be friends and whether we really appreciate what it means to be a friend, both with God and with one another.

In elevating the moral category of friendship in this way, one cannot help but see the implications of what this theme would mean for Wesley’s more prominent moral categories: holiness and Christian perfection. If one sees Wesley’s small groups as the embodiment of what he spoke of as the way of holiness, then it seems that Wesley had a hold on a certain truth that is difficult for us in our modern context of individualism to appreciate: the growth in holiness that leads to Christian perfection is a journey that takes place only in the company of others. These “others” are not bystanders or reluctant participants but a group of disciples who are called to be friends of Christ and who are called to love one another (John 15:15, 17).
If Wesley’s groups are going to be considered in this alternative light, then it would be proper to reconsider friendship as a moral category, both in its ancient and Christian understandings. This task will consume the next section, followed by a closer look at the Wesleyan paradigm for small groups in order that possible parallels and divergences from the sources originally surveyed can illuminate some of the implications for moral development inherent to Wesley’s small groups.

I. Friendship as a Moral Category

The ancients considered friendship as crucial to the development and maturation of capable and morally upright citizens. Perhaps the exemplary work that demonstrates this view is Aristotle’s monumental *Nicomachean Ethics*. In many ways friendship is the culminating moment for Aristotle in this work, for without friendship a true and active polis would not be viable since it is in friendship that humans acquire the virtues necessary to be adequate participants in public life. Interestingly, Aristotle speaks of the necessity of friendship, for according to his anthropology humans are born in a state requiring refinement and intentionality in order that the goal or *telos* of the species may be enacted over time. This depiction of the moral life, then, is one that signals the sense of journey or adventure in line with the great epics of Greek culture, and as most would concede, journeys are better undertaken with friends.

Aristotle differentiates types of friendship on the basis of the objects of love inherent to each. In the case of friendships of utility, the good sought is the usefulness of the other person in a given situation for a certain purpose; friendships of pleasure arise when the fancy of another creates longing and interest. These kinds of friendship are fleeting since what would be useful or pleasurable changes with the course of time. Friendship based on the good, however, is the ideal of these prior types, and it has gained the attention of many subsequent readers of the *Ethics* because of its moral implications.

Friendship based on the good or “friendship of character” lasts because what binds the friends together endures, namely the character or moral goodness of each participant involved: “But complete friendship is the friendship of good people similar in virtue; for they wish goods in the same way to each other insofar as they are good, and they are good in their own right. Hence these people’s friendship lasts as long as they are good; and virtue is enduring.” This generosity provides the conditions for growth in the good, which is considered by Aristotle as a proper end of human existence, and its achievement is based largely on the collective efforts of friends who serve as mirrors to the self. Complete or perfect friendship depends on a proper basis, one that has as its focus the good, and this condition provides the possibility for further growth in the good.
The integral role of friendship within moral maturation is why Aristotle can say that friendship is a necessity. At this point the term “necessity” does not imply instrumentality but rather is offered in light of the observation that humans are “political animals.” According to Aristotle the good life cannot be envisioned apart from friends because the good naturally should be shared and cultivated in the company of others: “It is proper to the good person and to virtue to do good,” and no better context for this activity exists than in the midst of friends.

With its focus on the good, “character friendship” contrasts the fleeting nature of the other kinds of friendship, yet its complexity and demands indicate why this higher kind of friendship is uncommon. Despite its scarcity, however, character friendship is important for a person’s growth in virtue, for a person who aspires to be good could not possibly do so alone: “Virtue cannot be attained in solitude. By definition it is relationship because the virtuous life is the activity of doing good, of practicing good, of developing good habits.” The good requires habitation, and this process implies both models for how the good is to be embodied and occasions when the good can be enacted among others. As Wadell continues, “By spending time together with people who are good, by sharing and delighting with them in our mutual love for the good, we are more fully impressed with the good ourselves... Friendship is not just a relationship, it is a moral enterprise.”

Christians should have some important misgivings about Aristotle’s account of friendship, but they equally should note its seminal implications for discipleship. In fact throughout Christian antiquity, one finds the theme of friendship aligned not only to the way Christians should relate to one another but also to the way they should relate to God. In the case of Thomas Aquinas, one finds an articulation of charity based on the general Aristotelian account of friendship. In Thomas’ first article on the theme of charity in the *Summa Theologiae*, he asks if charity is friendship and moves to say that friendship, according to Aristotle, includes more than well-wishing but a certain kind of communication. From this understanding he moves to state that “since there is a communication between man and God, inasmuch as He communicates His happiness to us, some kind of friendship needs be based on this same communication.” With the qualifying term “some kind,” Aquinas makes friendship with God the goal of the Christian moral life, and he considers this theme as parallel to the beatitude that is the goal of human existence. For Thomas, the notion of friendship implies a kind of moral maturation that affects both one’s relationship with God and subsequently one’s relationship with others.

Many of these themes resonate with the accents of the Wesleyan movement, for the latter has emphasized growth in the moral life through the appropriation of terms such as “sanctification” and “Christian perfection.”
Naturally, important differences exist in the moral visions of Aquinas and Wesley, but the two are not as antithetical as they would appear _prima facie_. The recent work of G. Stephen Long represents a culmination rather than a beginning of this trend to rethink the parallels between Thomistic and Wesleyan modes of moral reflection. Long goes so far as to state that Wesley’s vision is more akin to the term “moral theology” than to “Christian ethics” because the former bypasses the latter’s preoccupation with method and the “right” and insists instead on a generalized account of the “good.”

Interestingly, Long can reference the moral category of friendship to describe some of the implications of the Wesleyan moral vision, but this move is more of a side note than a category that engages in theological work within Long’s reflections. Nevertheless, Long’s impulse is telling: even though Wesley did not make use of the category to the degree found in the _Summa_, friendship is not antithetical to Wesley’s views; actually, the category is quite congenial when it is engaged in broad terms. In this regard, one is best served by looking at the principal embodiments of the kind of friendship Wesley found as desirable for the Christian moral life, and for these one must look at the ethos surrounding his many kinds of small groups.

II. Wesleyan Small Groups as Moral Workshops

When one moves to consider Wesley’s group hierarchy, it is easy to see how these groups were more than simply times of fellowship. The groups fulfilled a vital part of Wesley’s theological vision in that they facilitated “behavioral change, spiritual growth, personal interaction, and community transformation.” These and other factors made Wesley’s groups “moral workshops” because they not only dealt with overt behavior but also with internal dispositions and judgments. Given Wesley’s indebtedness to sources such as de Renty and the Moravians, he knew that practical performance had to accompany cognitive acquisition in order that true change could evolve.

Wesley justified the existence of his groups on the basis of the pietist principle of _ecclesiola in ecclesia_. The groups were not separate from the church but rather served the church by fulfilling a complementary role. The groups worked to give pastoral care and guidance at an intimate level, and in this way Wesley proved that one of his greatest gifts to the future would be his organizational acumen. In making his groups part of congregational life during his Georgia missionary experience, Wesley realized that attentive and intentional formation was needed at the personal level in addition to the more generalized experiences of formal church life. By creating a structure that facilitated this kind of interaction, Wesley ensured that his followers would interact in a way that they could become friends of God and one another.

Wesley had five levels of organizational structure in his movement: the society, band, class, select society, and penitent band. According to Henderson,
each group served a particular function within the Methodist ethos: the society existed for cognitive instruction, the band for affective change, the class for behavioral modification, the select society for advanced training, and the penitent band for rehabilitation. Each group fulfilled its vital role within Wesley’s movement, and as an organizational scheme, the groups were invaluable for future movements as well as the general morale of the cultures in which they flourished.

In discussing the moral category of friendship, two of these groups seem prominent for further analysis, namely the class and the band. The case of the class is a very important one, for many have remarked at how important this group was for the Methodist movement’s early success. Although originally formed in part for fundraising activities, the class came to be a prominent feature of Methodism, for every Methodist belonged to both a society and a class, and the latter became the entry point into the former. The class came to be a way of facilitating pastoral attentiveness among the Methodists since they were organized according to regions. Each class had its leader who would take care of visiting regularly the members of the class.

The benefits of the class were remarkable for their time period. A certain egalitarian push was implicit in the classes, for rich and poor were treated and grouped indiscriminately, and a number of individuals (including women) who would normally not achieve social advancement could reach leadership positions if they demonstrated faithfulness to the classes for sustained periods of time. By being the entry point into Methodist life, the classes immediately showed their alterity to the world’s standards for value and success in that no exceptions were allowed: everyone had to give an account of his or her discipleship during the weekly class meeting.

When one moves to consider the main objective of the class, the moral implications of this group come to the fore: “The class was to be an intimate group of ten or twelve people who met weekly for personal supervision of their spiritual growth.” Implicit within this goal is the assumption that spiritual growth requires supervision. This kind of supervision is normally associated with the class leader, a person who was genuinely concerned for the group and who was not status-directed in his or her care. Nevertheless, this relationship between class leader and class member was not strictly one of “spiritual direction,” for the supervision existed within the company of the other class members as well. In other words, this supervision was significantly constituted as a communal enterprise, and the leader proved to be more of a “facilitator” than a “director.” As Henderson remarks of the class leader in the weekly meetings, “He (or she) would give a short testimonial concerning the previous week’s experience, thanking God for progress and honestly sharing any failures, sins, temptations, griefs, or inner battles. In this sense, he was ‘modelling the role’ for the others to follow.”
The members of the class were expected to be honest and sincere in relating the difficulties in applying and incorporating the practices associated with holy living. They gave an account of their progress during the week and invited the rest of the members for their discernment and feedback. In striving for holiness, the class members were at different stages, but their purpose in meeting together was to share and encourage one another in this process. In a very telling passage, Henderson continues: “The members of the class often stayed together for years, cultivating the most intimate and helpful of friendships. In this circle of companionship, it was difficult to be evasive or hypocritical. Deep levels of trust and affection were engendered: an optimum environment for the cultivation of personal character.”

In the case of the bands, individuals were divided by certain demographic features, a detail in line with the Moravian practice. The divisions according to age, sex, and marital status were meant to facilitate greater openness and trust, and these were needed as the bands were the context in which the questions alluded to above were made. In Wesley’s own day, these questions were controversial as well, leading some individuals to call them a form of “popery” that had made its way into the Methodist fold. Wesley stood by the bands and the questions associated with them despite the fact that they were not as popular as some of his other groups. One of the reasons for Wesley’s support undoubtedly was that the bands prompted greater maturity, introspection, and growth than the other groups and therefore provided a pivotal social embodiment for followers who were seriously searching for holiness. James 5:16 became a pivotal passage for the orientation of the bands: “Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed.”

These groups were voluntary, but they provided a level of communal edification not available in Wesley’s other groups. Although similar in certain procedural elements, the distinction between the class and the band is that the former “was designed to implement the behavioral quest for [a] holy lifestyle” while the latter “facilitated the cultivation of inner purity and the purging of the attitudes.” This distinction is important, and the order is noteworthy. Wesley saw that behavioral change (as represented by the class meetings) preceded affective or dispositional change (as represented by the bands). For some individuals and ethical traditions, this order is erroneously reversed, but this logic is in line with the Aristotelian account of growth in virtue. For Aristotle, a courageous person (to take one example) is courageous because she performs courageous acts; however, the reverse is also true: if one wishes to be courageous, one performs courageous acts. This circularity in logic actually demonstrates the complexity of human behavior that both Aristotle and Wesley understood, namely that the inner and external components of human action are much more interrelated than perhaps one is led to believe.
Because the demands upon band members were significantly greater than those of the classes, no visitors were allowed to band meetings. As Knight remarks of the fragile nature of the bands, “The highly confessional character of the bands required an openness and vulnerability on the part of the members which was only possible in a context of mutual forgiveness and love. Each member was both the recipient of the advice and prayers of the others and a spiritual director for the others.” This increased mutuality implied a high level of trust, one in which each could speak “freely and plainly the true state of [their] souls.” Evidently, this context implied that one was in the company of friends.

The intimate questions that were made of probationary members were routinely asked of long-term members as well, and they ranged from doctrinal issues of forgiveness and assurance to a person being open to hearing from others, even when these remarks had to do with negative opinions or detected faults. From a strict rights-oriented mode of understanding, this process appears offensive and excessively demanding. After all, why does anyone need to have one’s heart searched “to the bottom” or to be told of one’s faults openly and without reserve? Again, Wesley was aware that introspection, if undertaken in solitude, can lead to self-deceit and self-justification. If one of the main reasons for Wesley’s groups was to rehabilitate individuals from their self-centeredness, then few places show this tendency more than when one reaches the affective and dispositional life, for it is in this realm where one’s true god can be detected.

When one considers these questions within the moral category of friendship, an entirely different picture of the encounter appears. If “character friendship” or “virtue friendship” is based on the good and this basis provides the ground for continual growth in the good, then it would seem that these questions are not simply interesting but vital for growth in the Christian’s good, namely the similitudo Dei. How else are Christians to escape the clutches of individualized morality and self-serving justification than through the help of friends? Without the support and help of other like-minded disciples, one cannot possibly know the good in its various intricacies and details, especially when those come into conflict with patterns and habits that one must yield to God. In seeking holiness together, band members had as their basis of friendship God’s holiness, and this good for the Christian is so encompassing and overwhelming that it can only be approximated in the company of fellow disciples. Certainly, growth in the Christian good can be “confrontational” and requires vulnerability and openness; for these reasons the bands were not very popular within the Wesleyan movement. And yet their presence was important for communicating the expectation inherent in the Wesleyan vision of “growing in grace,” namely that Christians should push forward and continually grow together in the quest to have “the mind of Christ.”
III. Christian Perfection as Commually Pursued

This comparison between friendship as a moral category and the Wesleyan small groups proves that Christian perfection has to be understood and undertaken as a collective enterprise. Without excluding the experiential aspect of a potential “crisis-experience,” the other side of a “responsible grace” implies that Christians must be attentive to their spiritual growth through active and self-sacrificial practices. Wesley believed this to be the case, for “the mature structure of the Methodist societies seems to reflect Wesley’s peculiar doctrine of perfection as a condition of perfect love towards God and man which can be achieved in a moment by grace yet can also be cultivated by spiritual discipline.” If Christian perfection is a moral category that implies maturity, then this state is one that is achieved by the grace of God in the company of others across the span of time. The time element allows for individuals to “work out their salvation” and to attend to all that God requires of them in awaiting the gift of God’s grace. This process of waiting and of being diligent is a constituent part of what may be termed “Christian perfection” because the notion implies the synergistic operation of God’s work and the grace-enabled human work that are required in a Christian view of moral development. It is in light of the human role that Christian perfection should be considered as a collective enterprise because Christians cannot be diligent, attentive, patient, obedient, and zealous alone.

Christian friendship, then, is necessary for moral maturation within the Wesleyan theological vision; in other words, we need one another in order to “perfect one another,” to help one another grow in the good of the Christian life. Wesley’s small groups were a prudential means of grace for a reason: God manifests his grace in the hearts of individuals and also through and in the company of others. This necessity of friendship for Wesley’s notion of Christian perfection is similar to the necessity of friendship within the Aristotelian ethical framework, and for this reason the latter will be surveyed briefly in order to illuminate the former.

First, friendship is necessary within the Aristotelian account of friendship because it is “an important source of self-awareness and self-understanding.” This suggestion is true because ultimately what binds friends is a principle of commonality, a sharing in a perceived good. Since a person sees this point of similarity in the other, he or she is drawn to this person, and in this way, the friend becomes a “mirror to the self” or “another self.” These expressions are true in that through this commonality the friend can provide a certain objectivity to the other that otherwise may be missed. In other words, proper self-knowledge is impossible apart from others.

Wesley seemed aware of this principle. His small groups existed to facilitate proper self-knowledge since this form of knowledge is crucial for growth in holiness. By creating an environment in which a group of people were seeking
the same thing, Wesley’s groups fulfilled a very specific and important function within his theological vision, i.e., embodying and putting into practice behaviors and deeds that were appropriate to growth in Christian perfection. Such acts as giving an account of one’s spiritual progress, publicly acknowledging one’s faults, and both receiving and giving spiritual edification and support helped one grow in the way of holiness.

Second, friendship is necessary to moral formation in that “friends protect us from the boredom to which even the most important and interesting activities are prone.” The rigors and mediocrity of daily living invite a certain stagnant or lethargic quality to even the most important things in one’s life. In a telling passage, Wadell notes:

No matter how worthwhile an activity may be, if we are forced to pursue it by ourselves we will likely tire of it. We tire of our projects not because their value lessens, but because left to ourselves we are incapable of appreciating what their value is; we require others in order to learn why the projects and concerns of our life actually are so important to us.

Friends are needed as companions on life’s journey because they help remind us of the goal or telos of our lives. Without this reminder and reassurance of that which guides our lives, we would tend to despair because at certain moments we would forget or ignore the importance of the journey in the first place.

Wesley knew that the quest for holiness contained a number of possible dangers, and his groups “helped [fellow Methodists] to keep a ‘single eye’ on God in the midst of a world full of distraction.” This process helped avert the constant threat of dissipation and other dangers that result from the privatization of Christian morality. Both antinomian and legalistic tendencies can be checked with the help of another’s loving and attentive eye. Without this help, abuses can run rampant, leading to skepticism and the various complaints associated with schemes that propose advancement in Christian morality. For this reason and others, many have skewed understandings of the possibility and desirability of true Christian growth. When undertaken in the company of like-minded people, however, Christian maturation becomes a less risky enterprise for the simple reason that it does not depend on a single individual’s limited and fractured understanding of the good. In this light, brothers and sisters can help one another in weakness, encourage one another to press on, and remind one another of the beauty of Christian holiness. Without the help of the friend, Christian perfection becomes a threatening and impossible goal for Christians, and such perceptions lead to disillusionment and moral decline.

At this point the issue of constancy in the moral life comes to the fore. The need for Wesley’s small groups is no clearer when one considers this theme, for the issue of sustaining goodness over time is crucial for all moral
programs. As Hauerwas and Pinches say of the author of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, “Aristotle is fundamentally concerned with sustaining goodness. He recognizes well that it is time that tests our momentary flights of good intention, that not only cruel fortune but we ourselves are capable of turning us from the way, of losing our bearing as we are overwhelmed by change and flux.” Wesley was aware of this danger as well, and for this reason it can be said that one of the important functions of the small groups was to maintain accountability. In many ways, Wesley and Aristotle share the notion that “constancy is a communal virtue. It is not something one of us possesses alone, but something we share and into which we help each other grow.”

Third, in participating in those common activities that friendships inspire, “we are able to be involved in those activities much more extensively than we could be if those activities were private.” Friends are necessary to the moral life because they inspire a deepening in the demands and stringencies of moral development. This possibility proves itself when the many virtues and gifts present in each person come to the fore during the course of communal activity. When this kind of interaction occurs, the possibilities of the moral life are exponentially increased in that a person can see how the commonly-held good flourishes and is embodied in the life of others. As Wadell remarks, “It is this mutual, communal seeking of the good that makes us good. But even more than that, in this mutual, communal seeking of the good we make one another good.” In growing in conformity to Christ, which is another phrase for holiness, we essentially learn how to be holy from one another in this shared quest.

Friendships require negotiations in part because no one has an exclusive footing on the truth. Learning from one another the various dimensions of the commonly sought good requires exchange, debate, attentiveness, and sensitivity. Aristotle sensed this truth when he remarked that “the friendship of decent people is decent, and increases the more often they meet. And they seem to become still better from their activities and their mutual correction. For each molds the other in what they approve of, so that ‘[you will learn] what is noble from noble people.’”

These qualities are the ones that made Wesleyan small groups so appealing. Wesley knew that the processes inherent to each group facilitated good order and progress, but they were not the proper ends of such meetings; rather, the kind of growth that ensued from the exchanges and interactions that occurred in such gatherings proved to be immediately important for the ultimate goal of growing in the love of God. Even Wesley himself needed this kind of support and guidance: he needed friends because he was human, and just as Wesley was wise enough to admit that one could always grow more in one’s walk with God, he was attentive to the fact that this walk could not be undertaken alone.
Finally, friendship is necessary in Aristotle’s ethical project for the simple reason that a person cannot be good without friends. Several underlying considerations substantiate this simple claim. As noted above, Aristotle believes humans are “political animals” and so the good life is unimaginable apart from the company of friends. According to Aristotle it is part of our nature to be in the company of others. In this company, however, we come to be formed and constituted as persons, so being good requires friends in the additional sense that one needs models to imitate in order to grow in virtue. This understanding is entirely congruent with Aristotle’s understanding of moral formation, for becoming a virtuous person requires performing virtuous acts “in the right way.” This latter qualification is only available in the company of others who occupy themselves in this proper way of acting. Finally, the good is not simply a static entity or idea; one cannot behold the good without wishing to share it since the good is meant to be held among others. A virtuous person cannot possibly retain this qualifier in an individualized sense, for the “good” requires performance directed to others.

Of course, the performance and embodiment of the good, like friendships, take time, and in this regard the quest for holiness does as well. Wesley was aware of this need, and the groups provided a safe environment in which people could gradually mortify the inbred sin that still remained so that they could be evermore directed to God. Such a process, however, appears painstakingly long to a milieu in which efficiency and results are highly valued, a fact that ultimately leads to the conclusion that our contemporary world does not facilitate or value these important conditions for spiritual growth.

As a case in point, friendships require trust, which is built over time, and patience for others to come around to see complementary perspectives and views, but sometimes these conditions are tested when individuals abuse or lose sight of the true meaning of Christian friendship; that is why Wesley had to implement different measures to ensure that discipline was a vital part of his organizational vision. As notorious as the “ticket system” has been conceived by followers of Wesley, the mechanism was quite helpful in ensuring that those with the proper disposition and mindset would continue in the fold while those who would create long-lasting damage could be excluded. These efforts, however, required intentionality in order to assess one by one the way people progressed in their moral development, and this task is one that many of us would not be willing to facilitate, much less endure.

IV. Conclusion

As Hauerwas and Pinches remind us of Aristotle’s project, “the activity of happiness requires learning and practice,” and if happiness and holiness are the same thing, as they appear to be for Wesley, then these can be embodied only within a community of friends. Wesley was aware of this need, and he
offered the small groups as “prudential helps” in service of aiding the formation of friendships, those relationships that contribute to moral maturation. The results that ensued from these groups were astounding. In speaking of the bands, Wesley remarked:

They prayed for one another, that they might be healed of the faults they had confessed – and it was so. The chains were broken and sin had no more dominion over them. Many were delivered from the temptations out of which till then they found no way to escape. They were built up in our most holy faith. They rejoiced in the Lord more abundantly. They were strengthened in love, and more effectually provoked to abound in every good work.

These fruits of Wesley’s small groups were only possible within a group context constituted by those bound by the ultimate good: fellowship with and participation in God. With such a basis, the groups were able to foster an environment in which true Christian piety and vitality were readily apparent.

In this light, Wesley’s rules for the bands were not ends in and of themselves. They were instruments that helped promote true Christian friendship. Only through discipline and a commonly-held good could Wesley’s vision of the holy life be enacted in the company of others. Such an environment facilitates the trust and openness that my students find so difficult to embody and sustain in today’s context. Nevertheless, if such qualities are not available among Christians, where can they be found? Are these qualities not part of the call to be Christ’s disciples? Wesley’s groups proved that this kind of embodiment is not only possible but desirable if the church is to grow in holiness as a community of disciples and as a group of friends bound by the all-consuming good that is God.

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Endnotes

1 This article was originally presented at the 41st Annual Meeting of the Wesleyan Theological Society, March 2-4, 2006 in Kansas City, MO. Thanks to the participants for their lively engagement.

2 For an historical assessment of the small group concept in light of Wesley’s vision, see David Hunsicker, “John Wesley: Father of Today’s Small Group Concept?” Wesleyan Theological Journal, 31/1 (Spring 1996): 192-212.


5 Paul J. Wadell summarizes Aristotle when he remarks, “A teleological ethic such as Aristotle’s argues that life is given to achieve something, a matter of making good on some purpose it is the meaning of life to complete. The teleological language of goal, purpose, and aim underscores the conviction that to be human is to have some good to become, some good into which we must grow and according to which we must be formed if we are to understand what being human means at all” (Friendship and the Moral Life [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1989], 32).

6 A work that interprets Aristotle in this way is Stanley Hauerwas and Charles Pinches, Christians among the Virtues (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1997), especially Chapter 3.

7 Nicomachean Ethics, 2nd ed., trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999), 122 [1156b].

8 “It is in the activity of virtue friendships that the good qualities we have are developed and enhanced” (Wadell, Friendship and the Moral Life, 55).

9 Nicomachean Ethics, 148 [1169b].

10 Friendship and the Moral Life, 64.

11 Friendship and the Moral Life, 62.

12 These reservations would include Aristotle’s call for denying the otherness of the other and his view that suffering should be endured apart from the support of friends. Hauerwas and Pinches consider these matters in Christians among the Virtues, 44ff.

13 Summa Theologica, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province(Allen, TX: Christian Classics, 1948), Ia-IIae, q. 23, a. 1. In incorporating the theme of happiness here, Aquinas brilliantly maintains a eudaimonistic framework while acknowledging simultaneously that humankind’s happiness is in participating in and being united with God (see ST, Ia-IIae, q. 3, a. 2).

14 Aquinas earlier speaks of the relationship between friendship and charity in similar terms: “Charity signifies not only the love of God, but also a certain friendship with Him” (ST, Ia-IIae, q. 65, a. 5.).

15 “Charity is aimed at the Triune God, who destines human beings to friendship with Himself, and, along with this aspect directed to its inmost center, encompasses as its concrete object the neighbor, who is called to the very same end—because humans are united with God as their highest good, they also become worthy of each other’s love” (Eberhard Schockenhoff, “The Theological Virtue of Charity [Ila IIae, qq. 23-46]” in The Ethics of Aquinas, ed. Stephen J. Pope [Washington,
Wesley's sermon “The Circumcision of the Heart” proves the point readily with such statements as the following: “[The circumcision of the heart] is that habitual disposition of soul which in the Sacred Writings is termed ‘holiness’, and which directly implies the being cleansed from sin and by consequence the being endued with those virtues which were also in Christ Jesus” (The Works of John Wesley, vol. 1, ed. Albert C. Outler [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984], 402-403) and “Whatever ye desire or fear, whatever ye seek or shun, whatever ye think, speak, or do, be it in order to your happiness in God, the sole end as well as source of your being. Have no end, no ultimate end, but God” (ibid., 408).

H. Ray Dunning has already remarked: “I have come to the conclusion that Christian ethics, especially when viewed from a Wesleyan perspective, is thoroughly teleological” (Reflecting the Divine Image: Christian Ethics in Wesleyan Perspective [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998], 35). Dunning adds a bit later: “Wesley’s rules functioned in a teleological context as prudential means to move the believer toward the goal of an ever more perfect conformity to the image of God as embodied in Jesus Christ” (ibid.). Albert Outler also made similar comments at various times.


Long states: “Wesley remained indebted to a medieval, dogmatic, sacramental world where the moral life depended upon friendship with God and was fundamentally oriented by the church. His world was more like that of Thomas Aquinas than like ours” (John Wesley’s Moral Theology, xix).

David Michael Henderson, “John Wesley’s Instructional Groups” (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1980), 2.

Henderson makes an interesting point about de Renty’s model: “The Anglicans hoped that Christian service would be the eventual outcome of their quest for personal holiness; de Renty viewed Christian service as the context in which personal holiness developed” (“John Wesley’s Instructional Groups,” 46). Given Wesley’s practices since his Oxford days, it is clear that Wesley took de Renty’s view seriously.

Henderson believes that the demand for practical performance was a way Wesley innovated the model prevalent among the Societies of his day (“John Wesley’s Instructional Groups,” 35).

The other groups have their implications for moral maturation, but these two have been selected to make the present endeavor manageable. Even in the largest group context of the Wesleyan scheme, the society, one sees how the moral category of friendship was operative: “Such a Society is no other than ‘a company of men “having the form, and seeking the power of godliness”’, united in order to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they may help each other to work out their salvation’” (“The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies,” in The Works of John Wesley, 9:69). In this light it is difficult to follow Henderson in his rigid schematization of the groups; Henry Knight also has a similar reservation (The Presence of God in the Christian Life, 218-219, ft. 6 and 220, ft. 22).

See Wesley’s account of the beginnings of the class in “A Plain Account of
the People called Methodists” (*The Works of John Wesley*, 9:260ff.).


27 “All Methodists, whether starting out as ‘awakened’ sinners or having received the gift of perfect love, whether they were meeting in band or even in a select society, had to meet once a week as members of their class to give an account of their discipleship” (David Lowes Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting* [Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 1987], 122). In addition to the egalitarian notion, Watson emphasizes throughout his work how important the theme of accountability was for the classes and its place within the Methodist ethos.

28 Henderson, “John Wesley’s Instructional Groups,” 132.

29 Ibid., 144.

30 The leader was responsible “to see all the rest weekly” and in doing so occasionally found individuals who were in sin and admonished them accordingly (“On God’s Vineyard,” 509). In this regard, the leader asked about the spiritual condition of his class members as well as advised, reproved, comforted, or exhorted as the occasion required (“The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies,” 69-70). This activity was complemented by the weekly class meeting where a “catechetical exchange” was undertaken for the purposes of sharing how one attended to the three General Rules during the week (Knight, *The Presence of God in the Christian Life*, 100).

31 “John Wesley’s Instructional Groups,” 141.

32 “John Wesley’s Instructional Groups,” 146-147. Because of this intimacy, classes were regulated in the way they would incorporate new members; Henderson remarks that “in order to protect the fragile environment of the class, every other session was closed to all outsiders” (ibid., 154).

33 “A Plain Account of the People called Methodists,” 268.

34 One sees the increased demands of the bands with the amplification of the General Rules: band members were “carefully” to abstain from doing evil, “zealously” to maintain good works, and “constantly” to attend on all the ordinances of God (“Directions given to the Band Societies” in *The Works of John Wesley*, 9:79).


36 Aristotle believed virtues are acquired through the process of habituation, a process analogous to learning a craft: “We become builders, for instance, by building, and we become harpists by playing the harp. Similarly, then, we become just by doing just actions, temperate by doing temperate actions, brave by doing brave actions” (Nicomachean Ethics, 19 [1103b]).


38 “Only applicants who had been thoroughly screened, recommended by members of the group who already knew them, and acquainted with the procedures were allowed to join, and then only after a probation period” (Henderson, “John Wesley’s Instructional Groups,” 176-177).

“Rules of the Band Societies,” 77.

Henderson, “John Wesley’s Instructional Groups,” 46.

When seen in their proper light, these questions are instruments for aiding one in the growth of Christian perfection. As Knight notes, the “discipline begun in the classes and intensified in the bands” became a way of life in the select societies. What Wesley aimed for was the spontaneity of the moral life in which love of God and neighbor gradually became more and more intuitive so that eventually such rigidity would not be needed formally (The Presence of God in the Christian Life, 102-103).

Knight relates of the bands’ activity: “The members of the band endeavored together to discern the ways in which dissipation still had a hold on their affections and actions. They were encouraged to critically examine one another and themselves in order to increase awareness of those practices and desires which continued to cloud the vision of faith and divide the heart” (The Presence of God in the Christian Life, 108-109).


I am here depending on Randy Maddox’s analysis in Responsible Grace (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 1994), 187

Although not willing to put constraints on the Spirit’s work, Wesley acknowledged that there was “an instantaneous, as well as a gradual work of God in His children,” and that this gradual aspect was very much a part of his experience since he did not know “a single instance, in any place, of a person’s receiving, in one and the same moment, remission of sins, the abiding witness of the Spirit, and a new, a clean heart” (A Plain Account of Christian Perfection [Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 1966], 30-31).

The moral implications of what Wesley terms proper “waiting” are sundry. Wesley offers this extensive definition: “[We are to wait] not in careless indifference, or indolent activity; but in vigorous, universal obedience, in a zealous keeping of all the commandments, in watchfulness and painfulness, in denying ourselves, and taking up our cross daily; as well as in earnest prayer and fasting, and a close attendance on all the ordinances of God. And if any man dream of attaining [Christian perfection] any other way (yea, or of keeping it when it is attained, when he has received it even in the largest measure), he deceiveth his own soul. It is true, we receive it by simple faith; but God does not, will not, give that faith, unless we seek it with all diligence, in the way which He hath ordained” (A Plain Account of Christian Perfection, 62). For these reasons I am thinking of Christian perfection as more than a crisis-experience but as a way or “form” of life.

The following four points will be based on Wadell’s reading of John M. Cooper’s “Aristotle on Friendship” in Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics, ed. Amélie

50 Wadell, Friendship and the Moral Life, 58.

51 Wadell, Friendship and the Moral Life, 59.

52 Wadell, Friendship and the Moral Life, 59.


54 When Wesley was asked what advice he would give to those who had reached Christian perfection, it is interesting that he suggests the avoidance of pride first, followed by enthusiasm (“the daughter of pride”) and antinomianism. Evidently, Wesley had witnessed far too many cases in which individuals believed they did not need to be taught by their fellow Christians. See A Plain Account of Christian Perfection, 95ff.

55 Christians among the Virtues, 31.

56 Hauerwas and Pinches, Christians among the Virtues, 36.

57 Wadell, Friendship and the Moral Life, 61.

58 Friendship and the Moral Life, 66.

59 Nicomachean Ethics, 153.

60 One sees this aspect of Wesley’s spiritual life when he shares that part of the motives for establishing select societies was “to have a select company, to whom [he] might unbosom [himself] on all occasions, without reserve” (“A Plain Account of the People called Methodists,” 270).

61 Wadell, Friendship and the Moral Life, 61ff.

62 Wadell makes the important point about friendship and virtue: “[Virtue] needs opportunities to be exercised, it demands others on whom the good can be bestowed” (Friendship and the Moral Life, 64).

63 Christians among the Virtues, 33.

64 “A Plain Account of the People called Methodists,” 268.
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SAMUEL J. ROGAL

Whitefield, Whittier, and the Poetic Bridge to the Issue of Slavery

Introduction: The State of Whittier’s Poetry

Those days within earlier generations when American school children would read, memorize, and recite such among the poems of John Greenleaf Whittier (1807-1892) as “The Yankee Girl” (1835), “A Sabbath Scene” (1850), “Maud Muller” (1854), the “Burial of [Thomas] Barber,” (1856), “Skipper Ireson’s Ride” (1857), “Barbara Frietchie” (1863), and bits and pieces from Snow-Bound: A Winter Idyl (1866) have all but faded into the quiet corners of historical and pedagogical slumber, and along with them the significant portions of the poet and his once popular, and even revered, verse. Essentially, after the political and social passion of such issues as the debates over slavery and its abolition, as well as the political divisiveness that accentuated the middle third of the nineteenth century, had been banked and allowed to cool, Whittier’s lines have found little room for expression along the crowded streets where poets have, seemingly, spoken more directly, and in more loosely defined poetic forms, to audiences of the twentieth century and beyond.

Indeed, even as early as the 1830’s, when Edgar Allan Poe, but two years Whittier’s junior, had reached his poetic maturity during a time in literary history when Whittier and William Cullen Bryant stood as the foremost poets in the United States, Poe “had nothing to learn from them” and, instead “turned for nourishment” away from the romantic view of the American scene, as but partially painted by Whittier, to the English Romantic poets.¹ A century later, American poets as Hart Crane (1899-1932), Yvor Winters (1900-1968), and Robert Lowell (1917-1977) reacted to Whittier’s poetic output as “vulgar concessions to popular taste” and simple artistic misjudgments. When the free-verse prejudice against metrical poetry combined with a high art bias against iambic verse (in an environment that down-graded all narrative poetry and popular art), who was left to defend such gems as [Henry Wadsworth] Longfellow’s “Paul Revere’s Ride” or Whittier’s “Maude Muller” and “Barbara Frietchie?” Whittier’s reputation as poet appears to have been cast into the ash-heap of critical commentary, labeled as nothing more than “a writer to love, not to belabor.”²

Nevertheless, certain of Whittier’s poetry stands worthy of an occasional “belaboring,” if for no other reason than that poet demonstrated to later
generations of American versifiers both the willingness and the ability of the poet to call attention to his craft as a medium by which to communicate observations of, and reactions to, the traumatic national issues of his day. Upon the middle pinnacle of the nineteenth century, but two years away from civil war, the adolescent United States staggered under the dual burden of the slavery issue and the willingness to divide itself, either by political and geographical compromise or by war, because of a condition brought about by its own manufacture. Slavery had not simply arisen in Africa and spread to British colonial America; it had been created and carefully nurtured by traders and landowners in America for well in excess of two centuries, and such heralds of the anti-slavery movement as William Lloyd Garrison (1805-1879) and his apostle, Whittier, could easily uncover the evils of the system in the early history of the nation, as well as in the most volatile circumstances of its present.

From Whittier to Whitfield

The path from Whittier, the nineteenth-century Quaker turned Quietist, to the eighteenth-century Church of England priest turned Methodist itinerant preacher George Whitefield (1714-1770), the Gloucestershire evangelist who carried Calvinist Methodism to British North America, might appear circuitous and even disconnected. However, the evangelical work of Whitefield within the confines of Whittier’s native New England and the position of each toward the issue of slavery and the state of the American Negro appeared to have found a common ground for discussion in Whittier’s 1859 poem, “The Preacher.” That piece of 413 lines (and thus perhaps far too lengthy for school children to have committed to their memories), which has received extremely little critical discussion among Whittier’s poems, serves well, perhaps, as a partial but significant example of why, according to at least one voice from the literary history of the nation, “Thirty years of intense absorption in humanitarian reform left their mark on Whittier. He had little time for general reflection and his principles, once adopted, remained fixed. To the end he remained apparently unaware that the Industrial Revolution created situations which could not be solved in terms of a simple personal morality. It was in part an evidence of limitation that Whittier turned to the New England past and to religion as the favorite subjects of his late maturity.” By approximate count, “The Preacher” comprised the 245th of Whittier’s total of 495 poems composed or published between 1825 and 1892.

During George Whitefield’s evangelical career, which began, technically, in June 1735, when he formed a small religious society at Gloucester and ended only with his death some thirty-five years later, the field preacher of Calvinist Methodism undertook seven journeys to British North America: (1) February-September 1738; (2) October 1739-January 1741, (3) October 1744-June 1748;
(4) October 1751-May 1752; (5) May 1754-May 1755; (6) July 1763-June 1765; (7) October 1769-3 September 1770—the date of his death at Newburyport, Massachusetts. To Whitefield alone must be extended the credit for implanting the roots of Methodism and evangelical Protestantism into the spiritual soil of North America. Perhaps one of the more accurate of contemporary summations of Whitefield’s journeys to America appears in Charles Wesley’s poetic tribute to the journeyman preacher the twenty-nine-pages and 536 lines of An Elegy on the Late Reverend George Whitefield, M.A., Who Died September 30, 1770, in the 56th Year of His Age (Bristol: William Pine 1771). The poet began his praise of the departed with an attempt to establish and then to emphasize the totality of his relationship with his subject—a relationship that well qualifies the former for his poetic task:

And is my Whitefield entered into rest,
With sudden death, with sudden glory, bless’d?
Left for a few sad moments here behind,
I bear his image on my mind;
To future times the fair example tell
Of one who lived, of one who died, so well;
Pay the last office of fraternal love,
And then embrace my happier friend above. (1-8)

Eventually, Wesley identified, in his imaginative view, the source of Whitefield’s success in America, and he proceeded to drive home the well-worn but nonetheless still applicable notion of the prophet having been without honor within the spheres of his own labor:

With ready mind th’ American receive
Their angel-friend, and his report believe;
So soon the servant’s heavenly call they find,
So soon they hear the Master’s feet behind:
He comes—to wound, and heal! At His descent
The mountains flow, the rocky hearts are rent;
Numbers, acknowledging their gracious day,
Turn to the Lord, and cast their sins away,
And faint and sink beneath their guilty load
Into the arms of a forgiving God.
His Son reveal’d they now exult to know,
And after a despised Redeemer go,
In all the works prepared their faith to prove,
In patient hope, and fervency of love. (178-191)

Thus, the fact that Whitefield died in America appears to have been a most proper application of spiritual, as well as political and poetic, justice. Charles Wesley could easily identify the principal quality that anchored Whitefield the
person to his overseas mission: “Lover of all mankind, his life he gave,/ Christ to exalt, and precious souls to save.” (445-446)⁴

Whitefield and Slavery

Unfortunately, within the context of Whitefield’s overall reputation, his experience with the American institution of slavery brought down a blemish upon his evangelical work in that part of the world, causing moments of rhetorical discomfort for his contemporary and later biographers. During Whitefield’s early visits to the Georgia, he—as had John and Charles Wesley before him—found that the settlers there seethed in a stew of discontent under the strict rules and regulations imposed upon them by a group of trustees housed in London and administered by a subordinate group of local magistrates appointed by those trustees. Both imposed upon the inhabitants of Georgia prohibitions of hard liquor, of slaves, and of fee-simple land ownership;⁵ they even went so far as to hand down regulations governing the planting of mulberry trees. Relaxation of those prohibitions came gradually: the legalization of rum in 1742; the permission to hold slaves in 1749; the provision of fee-simple land ownership on 1750. Eventually, the London trustees abandoned their charter in 1752, and Georgia came under the administration of a royal governor. Little wonder then, that by the middle of the eighteenth century, the population of the Georgia colony numbered but two thousand white settlers and one thousand negro slaves.⁶ Thus, in 1740, when Whitefield, and his friend and associate, the Yorkshire-born Calvinist Methodist schoolmaster James Habersham (1712-1778), began serious planning for the construction and development of an orphan house, Bethesda, some five miles from Savannah, they had to confront directly the issues of slave ownership. Both men—most likely for practical political reasons—accepted the prevalent contemporary argument that native Englishmen, accustomed to the temperate climate of their native island, could not endure manual labor in the heat and humidity of the Georgian climate; only those persons born into and residing within such an environment could work the fields. The Carolinas and Virginia colonies, according to the pro-slavery argument, appeared well on their way to economic success because of the importation of native African slaves; Georgia, at the extreme, struggled to survive because of the prohibition of such importations. Insofar as concerned the Georgia colonists, negro labor would need to emerge there as essential to the growth and development of the land as had, centuries ago, the most basic items of agricultural equipment.⁷

However, Whitefield (much to the relief of his biographers) rationalized a route around the divisive issue of the ownership of slaves without actually denouncing the institution of slavery. He openly declared his evangelical ministry to all levels of society; thus, he would rekindle the dampened spirits
of American slaves by preaching to them the gospel of the New Birth—and, in the process, condemn those plantation owners for failure to do the same. The neglect of American slaveholders in providing their human chattel opportunities to access the Gospel proved, according to the Methodist evangelist, an act “worse than irresponsible. It reflected a mentality that denied the slaves a soul—a pernicious assumption that Whitefield meant to undo with his preaching.” Thus, the argument to counter Whitefield’s ownership of slaves—he and Habersham eventually set them to work on the construction, and then the physical maintenance, of the Bethesda orphanage—focused on the claim that Whitefield, more than any of the small number of contemporary clerics at Charleston and Savannah combined, actually brought the message of Christianity directly to the slave communities of the colonial American South. Since the English Church could or would not expeditiously dispatch clerical missionaries to Africa, Africans, when brought to North America as slaves, could then more readily receive the Gospel in their new homeland. In other words, the logic of the Church (which Whitefield appeared to have embraced) dictated that the conversion of those poor enslaved creatures to the freedom of religious conscience arose as a far more meaningful priority than did the physical freedom of their actual persons from the bonds of their masters.

Finally, there emerged the historical view that those members of the slave communities who gathered to receive “Whitefield’s open sympathy and attention” found, as early as the late 1740’s and then extending through the two decades following, “the beginnings of an evangelical Christianity that they would, in time, take over for themselves.” Such a perspective gave rise to the presumptive conclusion that Whitefield’s preaching to negro slaves in Georgia, the Carolinas, Pennsylvania, and New England produced the earliest seeds from which would sprout, commencing at Philadelphia in 1787, the Free African Society. From the formation of that organization would come, in 1793 Richard Allen (1760-1831), a former slave, leading his fellow negro congregants to the establishment, at Philadelphia, of the Bethel Church for Negro Methodists. Finally, in 1814, Allen would complete the cycle when he severed the bonds of negro Methodists with the white-dominated congregations of the city and founded the African American Episcopal Church. Seven years later, James Varrick (1750?-1827), another former slave, having repeated the same action of removing negro worshipers from the John Street Methodist Church, New York City, convened the first annual conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church.

Slavery and Protestantism
However, pure speculation and wishful thinking, no matter how reasonable such exercises might appear, cannot alone draw a clear connection between the
effectiveness of Whitefield’s preaching to the negro slave communities of British North America and the establishment of American negro Protestant religious organizations that occurred in the North thirty to forty years following his death. If African slaves in eighteenth-century North America could claim even a distant voice to assess the effectiveness of Whitefield’s missionary labors among them, it appeared most noticeably in the form of the African born poet Phillis Wheatley (1753?-1784), brought to Boston in 1761, at age seven or eight, by an affluent tailor, John Wheatley. The child came not in shackles to labor in fields baked by sun and drenched with humidity, but as a bonded companion and attendant for Wheatley’s wife, Susannah, and in those capacities to reside within the comforts of their home. There the African girl learned to read and to write, and then to master Latin, classical history, the Bible, Christianity, and the classics of English literature. Phillis Wheatley, no doubt, had heard Whitefield preach during one of his several sojourns to Boston. She had reached the age of seventeen or so upon the news of the Methodist field preacher’s death in September 1770, an event that obviously aroused both her religious conscience and her muse, and thus she came forth with her broadside published at Boston in 1770 under the title An Elegiac Poem on the DEATH of That Celebrated Divine and Eminent Servant of JESUS CHRIST, the Late Reverend and Pious GEORGE WHITEFIELD (Boston: Printed and Sold by Ezekiel Russell, in Queen-Street, and John Boyles in Marlboro-Street, 1770). Within the context of the perceived effectiveness of Whitefield in America, the young poet claimed,

A greater gift not GOD himself can give:
He urg’d the need of HIM to every one;
It was no less that GOD’s co-equal SON!
Take HIM ye wretched for your only good;
Take HIM ye starving souls to be your food.
Ye thirsty, come to his life-giving stream:
Ye Preachers, take him for your joyful theme:
Take HIM, “my dear AMERICANS,” he said,
Be your complaints to his kind bosom laid:
Take HIM, ye Africans, he longs for you;
Impartial SAVIOUR, is his title due;
If you will chuse to walk in grace’s road,
Ye shall be sons, and kings, and priests to GOD. (32-44)

In that poem, Wheatley did not directly mention, or even allude to, any reference to Whitefield and his hesitance to speak out against the institution of slavery—a subject that could have served only to deflate the expansive heroic tone of the piece. Whitefield’s position on the matter apparently proved not to have caused a problem for her or for her New England readers—if, indeed, they even knew of it. At the end of the piece, the image of Whitefield
remains unchanged from the one set down in the opening line—that of a “happy saint on thy immortal throne!” (1) Essentially, the adoring Phillis Wheatley sounded the poetic voice of the polite Christian in mourning over the death of a significant Christian figure of her own times; she sounded no notes here that even resembled the melodic wailing emanating from the transported Africans in captivity.

The potential contemporary voice for revealing, explicating, and perhaps even defining Whitefield’s stance on the matter of slavery might well have come from the field preacher’s principal Methodist rival, John Wesley, particularly since the two of them had been waging theological skirmishes of varying intensities for more than three decades. Wesley certainly had the opportunity when, following Whitefield’s death, he found himself with the responsibility (principally and reportedly because Whitefield had requested that he do so) of delivering the latter’s funeral sermon in London on Sunday, 18 November 1770—first at the Calvinist Methodist Chapel in Tottenham Court Road, then later, at the Whitefield’s Tabernacle near Moorfields. However, the sixty-seven-year-old Wesley held firm the sound and the sense of his address to the formality of the occasion, choosing to confine his remarks to an outline of the life and missionary career of his subject; to citing journalistic accounts of his character as a preacher and the substance of his preaching; and to setting forth, with ample support from Biblical texts, the essence of Whitefield’s scriptural doctrines. Appropriately enough, Wesley concluded his sermon text with four verses of his brother’s hymn written for the homiletic occasion, beginning—

Servant of God, well done!  
Thy glorious warfare’s past,  
The battle’s fought, the race is won,  
And thou art crowned at last;  
Of all thy heart’s desire  
Triumphantly possessed,  
Lodged by the ministerial choir  
In thy Redeemer’s breast. (1-8)

Insofar as concerns the matter of slavery and the slave trade, John Wesley would wait for four years and for a more appropriate occasion upon which to express his condemnation of that practice. In his tract, *Thoughts upon Slavery* (1774), he called out, “If . . . you [every landowner throughout Britain’s North American colonies] have any regard to justice, (to say nothing of mercy, nor the revealed law of God,) render all to all their due. Give liberty to whom liberty is due, that is, to every child of man, to every partaker of human nature. Let none serve you but by his own act and deed, by his own voluntary choice. Away with all whips, all chains, all compulsion! Be gentle
toward all men; and see that you invariably do unto every one as you would he should do unto you.” Of course by that moment in history, the debate over the ownership of slaves and the slave trade had extended far beyond Whitefield’s orphanage outside of Savannah, and Wesley certainly knew that little profit would come from berating the past actions of the dead.

“The Preacher”: Geographical Background

The apparent division between Whitefield’s middle-ground position on slavery and John Wesley’s plea for liberty for all human beings represents nonetheless, a reasonable point of transition in this discussion to Whittier’s mid-nineteenth-century poem, “The Preacher.” Before proceeding, however, one needs to consider, first, the geographical backdrop for the poem, Newburyport, in Essex County, Massachusetts, a town in the extreme northeastern section of the state and at the mouth of the Merrimack River, that relates to aspects of the lives of both the poet and his subject.

In the midst of his seventh and final pilgrimage to North America, the fifty-five-year-old Whitefield, not in the best of health (most likely suffering from asthma), had left Savannah on 24 April 1770, preaching throughout the Pennsylvania colony, then moving on to New York before proceeding to Boston, Portsmouth, and Portland—preaching practically every day and intending, incredibly and eventually, to cross over into Canada. Indeed, if John Wesley, figuratively, viewed all the world as his parish, George Whitefield became the earliest Methodist itinerant to attempt an actual “internationalization” of his evangelical mission. At any rate, he addressed his last piece of correspondence on Sunday, 23 September 1770, and delivered his final sermon, extending two hours in length—and in the open air, no less—at Exeter, New Hampshire, on Saturday, 29 September 1770. Late that afternoon or early evening he arrived, in an extreme state of fatigue, at Newburyport—the first recorded occasion upon which he had ventured into that town—the guest of the Rev. Jonathan Parsons (1705-1776), pastor of the Old South Presbyterian Church in Federal Street since 1746. The Methodist itinerant had planned to preach there on the day following. However, by Sunday morning, 30 September, George Whitefield’s life had come to an end. His funeral service went forth on Tuesday, 2 October, with burial in a vault beneath the pulpit of Parson’s Newburyport Presbyterian Church.

East Haverhill, Massachusetts, the site of Whittier’s birth and his place of residence, education, and early physical and literary labors, lies less than fifteen miles southwest of Newburyport. William Lloyd Garrison (1805-1879)—a native of Newburyport, self-educated journalist with hard-line Baptist upbringing, and virtually a lifetime resident of that town—published Whittier’s first poem, “The Exile’s Departure,” in an 1826 edition of his
weekly *Newburyport Free Press* (formerly the *Essex Courant*), after which he encouraged young Whittier to pursue formal academic education at Haverhill Academy. Eventually, Garrison proved a strong influence upon the mature poet’s participation in and total commitment to the abolition movement in New England. Whittier then proceeded to publish, in 1826, no less than sixteen additional poems in Garrison’s *Free Press*. In 1833, the year of the founding of the New England Anti-Slavery Society and a year following the publication of Garrison’s *Thoughts on African Colonization* (1832), Whittier composed and directed perhaps the earliest of his “anti-slavery poems” to Garrison, which he read at the first convention of that organization at Philadelphia in December 1833, exclaiming,

I love thee with a brother’s love,  
I feel my pulses thrill,  
To mark thy spirit soar above  
The cloud of human ill.  
My heart hath leaped\textsuperscript{22} to answer thine,  
And echo back thy words,  
As leaps the warrior’s at the shine  
And flash of kindred swords. (17-24)\textsuperscript{23}

The brotherly love would endure a note of disharmony six years later over the question of the relationship between civil nonresistance and the cause of antislavery.\textsuperscript{24}

The point to be made, then, that, at least on the surface of its introductory lines, Whittier’s “The Preacher” appears as a “local” poem in terms of the poet traversing familiar physical and symbolic ground. At an outdoor meeting of the Essex County Anti-Slavery Society in Newburyport on 30 May 1836, Whittier not only found himself elected secretary of the group, he had to endure, and then flee the scene in the midst of a riot, “assailed with decayed eggs, sticks, and light missiles.”\textsuperscript{25} On a less volatile note, the poet claimed cousins, Joseph and Gertrude Whittier Cartland, who maintained an attractive and comfortable home in Newburyport, and with whom (especially in his later years), he visited with regularity.\textsuperscript{26}

**“The Preacher” As Poem**

In constructing a poem of in excess of four hundred lines, Whittier allowed himself, in “The Preacher,” the luxury of carefully and slowly approaching his subject, which, as the reader of the piece will discover, transcends its seemingly innocuous title. The narrator of the piece and an unidentified friend who accompanies him approach Newburyport from a distance, near the close of the day—“Far down the vale, my friend and I/ Beheld the old and quiet town.”\textsuperscript{27} The travelers—perhaps two pilgrims or
itinerant preachers, even—after initially capturing the reflections from “windows flashing to the sky,/Beneath a thousand roofs of brown” (1-2), observe, a series of clear topographical images, each becoming more distinct from the other, as they close the distance from the edge of the valley to the town itself: “ghostly sails” of ships out to sea; the beaches “glimmering in the sun”; “low-wooded capes” running into the sea-mist; sand bluffs at the mouth of the river; a swinging chain bridge; the “foam-line of the harbor-bar” (3-12).

The progress of the travelers comes to a halt as they behold what would appear to be a magnificent sunset in the form of a “crimson-tinted shadow” of clouds that casts “a slant of glory far away.” That image crosses “the woods and meadow-lands” (13), permeating the wet sand and the white sails of the ships in the harbor before gliding over the church steeples of the town (13-21). It directs the attention of the narrator’s fellow traveler to a survey of the entire scene, leading him to inquire as to the identity of “‘Yonder spire/Over gray roofs, a shaft of fire;/What is it, pray?’” (23-25)—to which the narrator replies,

“The Whitefield Church!”
Walled about by its basement stones,
There rest the marvelous prophet’s bones.” (25-27)

The travelers continue their walk, engaged in conversation relative to “the great preacher’s life” (29), the narrator being aware of the consistently “crimson-tinted shadow” as a means by which Nature can interpret “the doubtful record of the dead,” transforming itself into a symbol of a “Pentecostal flame” that virtually pricks the conscience as it comes into contact with “the shadows of our blame/With tongue of Pentecostal flame.” (31-38).

At that early point in the poem Whittier has not yet anchored his heavenly imagery to the specific substance of George Whitefield’s life or to his evangelical mission in North America, nor does the poet, as yet, appear quite prepared to do so. Instead, he shifts his imagery to century-old moss that gathers upon the roof-tops of the village buildings. He pauses to dwell, initially, upon what he terms the “living faith” (47) of the early settlers to the Merrimac River valley—a faith that, he laments, has since given way to a lust and greed for matters material, to a Church that no longer holds its parishioners responsible for their own worldly sins. “Time has forgotten Eternity!” (61)—the moss has begun to rot and the present has forgotten the past. In almost that same moment, however, the narrator’s evangelical eye catches hold of young growth emerging from the rotting roots of the moss—a new faith, that “From the death of the old the new proceeds,/And the life of truth from the rot of creeds” (64-65). He envisions the presence of a “ladder of God” (66), the steps of which have been held together by the purely human spiritual needs
and its entire length intended to lead the way upward, out of the darkness of human misery. Within those lines lies the first hint of Whittier’s poem approaching a discussion of the issue of human slavery in North America.

Whittier then thrusts his mind’s eye back to earlier times, to a relative New England wilderness dominated by a Church that directed the minds and the hearts of the early settlers—a Church then fed and led by the sharp and fiery spirit of Jonathan Edwards,

Shaping his creed at the forge of thought;  
And with Thor’s own hammer welded and bent 
The iron links of his argument,  
Which strove to grasp in its mighty span  
The purpose of God and the fate of man! (73-77)30

In so doing, however (and according to the poet-narrator), Edwards never neglected his principal role as a minister of the Gospel, as a visitor to and comforter of the sick and the poor, as a guide along the path to the “New Jerusalem,” where “the Lord and His love are the light alone!” (86, 89) Whittier places Edwards at the head of the actual preparations for the religious revival that came down upon New England in the middle of the eighteenth century—the “central force” of an “impulse [that would] spread like the outward course/Of waters.” (125-126) In the poet’s view, Edwards prepared the Church of New England for the later prophet who would come to give new shape and new purpose to the spirits of all people: “Lo! By the Merrimac Whitefield stands/In the temple that never was made by hands.” (135-136).

Whitefield As Poetic Subject

For Whittier, however, George Whitefield proved no savior, no spiritual emancipator, not even an easily definable ecclesiastical hero. Instead, the brush of his poetic language paints the picture of “A homeless pilgrim, with dubious name/Blown about on the winds of fame,” alternatively classified as “an angel of blessing” and as “a mad enthusiast.” (139-142) Essentially, Whittier’s portrait of Whitefield yields the image of a “marvelous preacher” with distinct flaws, an enthusiast who came upon the New England scene “With step unequal, and lame with faults,/His shade on the path of History halts.” (159-161).

At this point, before proceeding further in the discussion of Whittier’s “The Preacher” and the treatment within it of Whitefield relative to the issue of slavery, the curiosity of the reader of that poem might be aroused as to the possible sources consulted by the poet in collecting biographical details for his work. Aside from hearsay and general knowledge, the most possible and most easily accessible published source for Whittier, one devoted to the life,
times, and works of the Methodist field preacher, would have been, perhaps, a volume of 373 pages with the usual eighteenth-century extraordinarily lengthy title, Memoirs of the Life of the Reverend George Whitefield, M.A., Late Chaplain to the Countess of Huntingdon: In Which Every Circumstance Worthy of Notice, Both in His Private and Public Character, Is Recorded. Faithfully Selected from His Original Papers, Journals, and Letters. Illustrated by a Variety of Interesting and Entertaining Anecdotes, from the Best Authorities. To Which Are Added, A Particular Account of His Death and Funeral; and Extracts from the Sermons, Which Were Preached on That Occasion (London: Printed for Edward and Charles Dilly, in the Poultry; and Messieurs Kincaid and Creech, at Edinburgh, 1772), by Rev. Dr. John Gillies (1712-1796)—a book that comprises the seventh and final volume of an edition of Whitefield’s Collected Works (1771-1772). Minister of the New College Church, Glasgow, from 1742 until his death, a fairly close friend of John Wesley, and a frequent correspondent of Jonathan Edwards, Gillies spent the largest portion of his clerical life as a committed activist in the evangelical revival of the eighteenth century. Later and revised editions of Gillies’ Memoirs, which Whittier could well have consulted, appeared in the United States at New London, Connecticut, and New York in 1798; Salem, Massachusetts, 1801, Philadelphia and New Haven, 1812; Boston (the “Fifth Edition”), 1813; Philadelphia, 1820, 1853-1854, 1859; Lexington, Kentucky, 1823; Middletown, Connecticut, 1829, 1833, 1834, 1836-1841, 1853; New Haven, 1834; Hartford, 1845, 1848, 1851. Be aware, however, that had Whittier relied upon Gillies’ Life of Whitefield, the poet would have had to review carefully the heavy ingredients of the editor’s admiration for his subject and strain them through the equally subjective filter of own abolitionist judgments.

At any rate, Whittier began his consideration of Whitefield in strong acerbic tones that focused upon the Methodist field preacher’s early labors at Savannah, Georgia, and the establishment of his orphanage there. The view appears far from pleasant; the aroma reeks with invective:

The stones of his mission the preacher laid
On the hearts of the negro crushed and rent,
And made of his blood the wall’s cement;
Bade the slave-ship speed from coast to coast,
Fanned by the wings of the Holy Ghost;
And begged, for the love of Christ, gold
Coined from the hearts of its groaning hold. (194-200)

Whittier portrayed Whitfield as a schemer, a dreamer of false dreams, a cleric who sought “To honor God through the wrong of man” and whose legacy would assume the form of “the bondman lifting his hands in chains.” In a word, George Whitefield—who had refused to condemn slavery and who
had gone so far as to own slaves—had “erred.” (208-210)

Then follows an abrupt halt to the flailing of the poet’s rhetorical whip and a decided shift to a higher ground. Whitefield might have committed moral errors, but do and should those errors negate the positive qualities inherent in certain of his ministerial gifts? “For his tempered heart and wandering feet,/Were the songs of David less pure and sweet?” (228-229) Whitefield, a human being prone, as all human beings, to error, had traveled both the light and the dark roads—an erring agent of God and the Church, but at the same time an instrument of the work of both Church and God. Those persons in New England, in the middle colonies of Pennsylvania and Delaware, in the southern settlements of Virginia, Georgia and the Carolinas—all had sinned, had listened to his words, had awakened to the revival of religion, had admitted to their guilt and become better persons because of him. Indeed, in the age-long and age-less battle between good and evil, who among us, asks the poet, should be particularly shocked “if evil went/Step by step with the good intent”? (322-323) Whittier proceeds to unveil his notion of the existence of a spiritual duality within the world—

In the war which Truth or Freedom wages
With impious fraud and the wrongs of ages,
Hate and malice and self-love mar
The notes of triumph with painful jar,
And the helping angels turn aside
Their sorrowing faces the shame to hide. (338-343)

The reason for such shame lies at the core of the essential question: How can a world that supposedly embraces the teaching of Christ tolerate the existence of the institution of slavery?

Conclusion: Whittier's Realization of Whitefield

Nevertheless, at the end of it all, Whittier appears content to rest his case with the realization that “Time tests all.” (358). The poet returns the focus of his mind’s eye to Whitefield’s Church in Federal Street, Newburyport. Therein, at the middle point of the nineteenth century, the remains of George Whitefield yet lie; his soul might cry for saintly honors never bestowed, but at least the memory of the man and his labors will have carried from that tomb upon the words of poets and orators at his funeral service. For his part, from the distance of time, Whittier cannot bring himself to leave his subject with the rancorous notes of hatred or condemnation. Instead,

Long shall the traveller strain his eye
From the railroad car, as it plunges by,
And the vanishing town behind him search
For the slender spire of the Whitefield Church;
And feel one moment the ghosts of trade,
And fashion, and folly, and pleasure laid,
By the thought of that life of pure intent,
That voice of warning yet eloquent,
Of one on the errands of angels sent. (396-404)

Despite the uneven manifestations of his political and social morality, despite his failure to rise in opposition against a political and social sin, should the virtues that motivated and generally governed the mission of the Methodist field preacher lie buried with him beneath the pulpit of the Presbyterian Church in Federal Street? The Quaker poet answers his own question by concluding that the memory of George Whitefield “hallows” the ancient town of Newburyport. (413)

That conclusion to the poem leads to other questions: What exactly comprises the poetic bridge that links John Greenleaf Whittier to George Whitefield? What, on the eve of secession and civil war, led the poet’s imagination to the old church in Federal Street and to the recollection of the corpse interred therein?

The year 1859, the year in which Whittier composed the “The Preacher,” also witnessed the seizure of the town and the arsenal at Harper’s Ferry, Virginia, by the Connecticut-born Kansas abolitionist John Brown (1800-1859)—an exercise financed by Massachusetts abolitionists. That event certainly must have shaken and put to the test Whittier’s guiding principle as an abolitionist, a determination that he had espoused since 1833: “The burning, withering concentration of public opinion upon the slave system is alone needed for its total annihilation. Nothing unconstitutional, nothing violent should be attempted; but the true doctrine of the rights of man should be steadily kept in view; and the opposition to slavery should be inflexible and constantly maintained.”32 In the simplest of terms, one disgraceful and immoral entity should not be eliminated through the commission of an equally abhorrent and far more dangerous action. The institution of slavery alone should not be sufficient cause for the division or destruction of a democratic nation. Reacting to John Brown’s raid in an essay published in the Essex Transcript of 17 November 1859, “The Lesson of the Day,” the Quaker Whittier declared, at the outset, that “The painful intelligence of the tragic events at Harper’s Ferry has affected us, in common with every right-minded man, with profound sorrow and regret. With our natural loathing of violence and bloodshed, and with the stern and emphatic condemnation which we are compelled to pronounce upon this and all similar attempts to promote the good of freedom by the evil of servile strife and civil war,—is mingled a deep pity for the misguided actors in this outbreak. In condemning the mad scheme we cannot forget the wrongs and outrages which caused it. Our abhorrence of human slavery is only deepened and

...
His lines intensified by it.”33 His lines on “The Preacher, “as well as the sound and the sense of his argument in the piece, might well stand as a poetic variation upon that very expression of “deep pity.” Far removed from the rhetorical embellishments of Whitefield’s contemporaries who, in the main, chose only to bestow glory and praise and honor upon their subject on the convenient occasion of his death, Whittier, alone, a century later, offered an accurate assessment of the evangelical field preacher’s proper position in the recorded history of the eighteenth century evangelical revival. That “The Preacher” also proved, for Whittier, an opportunity to explicate further his abolitionist principles adds further depth to a piece too long ignored by commentators upon historical and literary history.

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**Footnotes**


5 A legal term meaning that a landed estate belonged to the owner and his heirs forever, without limitation to any class of heirs. In other words, to sell the land, the owner had to prove a complete absence of heirs.


7 For a further discussion of this issue and the argument for slavery, see Alan D. Candler (ed.), *The Colonial Records of the State of Georgia*, Compiled under the Authority of the Legislature (Savannah, Georgia: The Georgia Historical Society, 1904-1916), 2:92-94.


9 See Stout, Divine Dramatist, 101, 107, 111; Arnold A. Dallimore, George

10 Stout, Divine Dramatist, 197

11 Ahlstrom, Religious History, 707-709.

12 A second and shorter version carried to London and published there under the title “An Ode of Verses on the Much-Lamented Death of the Rev. Mr. George Whitefield,” indicates revisions adapted specifically to an English audience.


17 The Works of John Wesley, ed. Thomas Jackson. 3rd ed. (London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1872), 11:78. This tract reveals the essence of John Wesley’s position on slavery and the extent to which he had consulted the available literature on the subject.

18 In June 1773, the main building of the orphanage and academy at Bethesda had burned.

19 Although he had noted a visit to nearby Newbury in February 1740. See Ian Murray (ed.), George Whitefield’s Journals (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1960): 549.

20 Parsons, when minister of the First Congregational Church at Old Lyme, Connecticut, had met Whitefield at Portsmouth, New Hampshire, on Saturday, 27 November 1744, in company with several other New England ministers who had called on the Methodist field preacher. See Murray (ed.), George Whitefield’s Journals, 517-518.

21 See Dallimore, Whitefield, 495-509; Stout, Divine Dramatist, 275-281. Jonathan Parsons preached the first of Whitefield’s funeral sermons at Newburyport, the published title being To Live Is Christ, To Die Is Gain. A Funeral Sermon on the Death of the Rev. Mr. George Whitefield, Chaplain to [Selina Shirley Hastings] the Countess of Huntingdon, Who Died Suddenly of a Fit of the Asthma, at Newbury-Port, at Six of the Clock Lord’s Day Morning, Sept. 30th 1770. The Sermon Preached the Same Day, Afternoon. (Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Printed and Sold by Daniel and Robert Fowle; and also by Bulkley Emerson, at Newbury-Port, 1770). Interestingly enough, four years later, Parsons delivered and published a nineteen-page sermon under the title of Freedom from Civil and Ecclesiastical Slavery the Purchase of Christ. A Discourse Offered to a Numerous Assembly on March the Fifth, 1774, at the Presbyterian Meeting-House, in Newbury-Port (Newburyport, New England: Printed by I. Thomas and

22 See William Wordsworth’s lines, beginning, “My heart leaps up when I behold/A rainbow in the sky” (1802, 1807).


26 Pollard, Whittier, 282, 488-490, 492.

27 “The Preacher,” in Scudder, *Poetical Works of Whittier*, 69-74, lls. 2-3; all references in my text to this edition, with line numbers in parentheses.

28 One might notice that, four years later, Whittier would transfer a number of phrases from the Newburyport of “The Preacher” to the town of Frederick, Maryland, and to “Barbara Freitchie” (1863)—most noticeably in the opening lines of the latter piece—

Up from the meadows rich with corn,
Clear in the cool September morn,
The clustered spires of Frederick stand
Green-walled by the hills of Maryland.


29 Jonathan Parson’s Presbyterian Church, Federal Street, Newburyport, eventually became known by its popular name, “The Whitefield Church.”

30 See John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (1667, 1674), “That to the highth of this great Argument/I may assert Eternal Providence,/And justify the ways of God to men.” (1:24-26)


32 *From Justice and Expediency* (1833), quoted in Pollard, Whittier, 118.

33 Quoted in Pollard, Whittier, 600.
In recent years, there has been what could be called a “rise of neuroscience.” This science has as its primary object the workings of the brain. The goal of the science is to develop adequate theories on the functions of the human brain. Answers begin to come forth concerning the structure of the brain, the reaction of the brain to certain stimuli, the way the brain functions, and how the brain responds to the world in general. With this, many neuroscientists feel themselves led to ask about the nature of the person and about what it is that really makes a person. Often, the answer ends up residing in a purely physicalist description.

The theological response to the rise of neuroscience has been significant. The response usually consists of a theologian looking at the data from neuroscience and then making a judgment upon said data, followed by how this correlates with the theological endeavor. Inevitably, the theologian ends up either succumbing to the demands of neuroscience and arguing for a physicalist perspective of the human person, or she denies much of the work of neuroscience as adequate evidence for reflection upon the person, embracing a dualism. There are those, however, which embrace a middle way, an emergence theory of the human person as the most proper way to think about humanity. It is in the midst of this emergent perspective that this paper will later find itself.

However, for the moment, let me suspend the question of which view of the human person I will support, as this is not the task of the paper. Rather, the task of the paper is to answer a certain lack on the part of theologians in their current discussions with neuroscience. This lack has resulted from the neglect by theologians to put neuroscience in conversation with doctrinal positions. Consistently, theologians have only sought how a dialogue with neuroscience informs a theological anthropology. Other doctrinal positions have been exempted from reflection in conversation with neuroscience. Rather, the only doctrinal thinking that does arise from interaction with neuroscience is in relation to anthropology, if any is raised at all.

This paper seeks to explore how a theological encounter with neuroscience changes how one deals with certain doctrines. Thus, this paper will seek to put the neurosciences into conversation with the doctrine of soteriology, and
specifically the distinctively Wesleyan perspective on sanctification. The neuroscientific conclusion that this paper will start from is that of emergence, arguing that embracing the conclusion of emergence sheds light onto the Wesleyan discussion surrounding sanctification. In order to understand how neuroscience may shed light on doctrine, this paper will consist of three parts. First, I will discuss the notion of emergence in relation to neuroscience, emphasizing the way that this idea views the human person. Second, I will discuss the two predominant views on sanctification in the Wesleyan tradition: those exemplified by the work of Kenneth Collins and Randy Maddox. Third, I will offer a constructive proposal as to how I see the notion of emergence shedding light on the debate between Collins and Maddox. The goal of the paper, then, is to show the possibility that an engagement with the neurosciences has for shaping the way that a theologian approaches a certain doctrine. However, as a caveat, this paper is only intended as a proposal of how science may enrich the discussion of doctrinal matters; the end result of the paper, though, is to give an example of how when theology encounters the thinking which science brings about (specifically in this paper, the neurosciences), it may use this kind of thinking in regard to articulating its own ideas in regards to doctrine (in this paper, entire sanctification).

I. Emergence

First, I will discuss the idea of emergent phenomena within the neurosciences. However, before doing this, let me first explain why I choose to embrace and work with an emergent position rather than with the more commonly embraced positions of dualism and physicalism. This choice is due to the fact that an emergent position attempts to avoid the pitfalls of either of these two positions by embracing a compatibilist position, holding that neuroscience cannot disprove theological claims, nor can theological claims do away with the conclusions of neuroscience. Rather, it seeks to reduce conflict between the two disciplines, something that dualism and physicalism, in my opinion, fail to do.4

Let us now move to a discussion of what I mean by emergence. The idea of emergence is, by definition, very complex. To begin, then, let us work from Philip Clayton's one sentence definition: "emergence is the theory that cosmic evolution repeatedly includes unpredictable, irreducible, and novel appearances."5 In this definition, we see the key words for understanding where we might find emergent phenomena. We see emergence present in those phenomena that are seemingly unpredictable, that are irreducible and that are novel. And so, we are dealing with limited numbers of phenomena—not all phenomena end up being emergent, only those that point to a certain unpredictability, to irreducibility, and to being novel.

We see emergence present, then, when we are not able to explain a
phenomenon based upon a detailed, exhaustive description of its underlying, physical parts. The physical basis of a system or property is not enough to explain said property, if it is emergent. Rather, emergent properties are more than the “sum of their parts.” These properties cannot be understood through an analysis of the properties of its parts, rejecting any attempt at a fundamental level of ontology. Rather, emergent phenomena tend to be complete, complex systems which are best explored through an analysis of structure, behavior, and laws of said systems. In order to understand the system or explain the system, there is a certain necessity for a plurality of sciences and plurality of methods. We see then that the parts do not make up the whole of the phenomenon, but rather the phenomenon rises out of the parts without being reducible to said parts. The emergent system is different than its parts, but not completely “other than” its parts. Rather, it is simultaneously dependent upon its parts, but is a distinct system from its underlying parts.

When discussing an emergent property, though, one must also discuss its influence upon its parts. As a whole, emergent systems come to fruition by attaining “the appropriate level and kind of organizational complexity which exerts a causal influence on the behavior of its possessor.” We see, then, that emergent property exerts influence, and specifically cause, upon its parts. The parts also have causal powers upon each other, but this is distinct from the causal influence of the whole. Although the whole never influences in a way that would be inconsistent with the way the parts behave. However, we must not forget that the whole of the system, the emergent property, is also reliant upon the nature and dispositions of its fundamental physical properties as it is due to these properties that emergent properties actually are able to arise. So, then, there is a certain relationship where the whole influences the parts while the whole is reliant upon the parts to give rise to it. This is implies a wholistic understanding of the phenomenon, incorporating both parts and the system.

With this initial understanding of emergence, the natural question arises as to what phenomena count as emergent. Philip Clayton gives three such phenomena, not wanting to limit emergence to these three, but using the three to point to emergence. They are in a certain hierarchy: first we have life, second emerges self-awareness, and third comes consciousness. For Clayton, these three all point to a whole that is not reducible to the parts of the whole, even though the whole is dependent upon the parts. We see in these three phenomena emergent characteristics. In these three we also see process of evolution at work: first there comes life; second, at some point different parts of this life become aware of themselves; and lastly, some of these phenomena that have self-awareness become conscious.

The methods used to come to the conclusion that life, self-awareness and consciousness are emergent phenomena cannot just come from one of the
scientific disciplines. Rather, there must be multiple disciplines involved in order to see the rise of emergent properties. The two disciplines which seem to be most pertinent are physics and biology. However, they cannot be used in isolation from each other; rather, they must be used together, shedding light on each other. This becomes even more pertinent when we turn to the question of personhood. As Philip Clayton says, “The language of physics or biology and the language of personhood only partly overlap; one cannot do justice to the one without using the tools of the other.”

The reason that we need both biology and physics in a discussion of the person as conscious is because the real problem is “how and why” essentially physical phenomena in the brain give rise to consciousness. The answer to this cannot be a pure reduction to either physics or biology, but must take into account the conclusions of both.

Let me now give a detailed discussion of the emergent phenomenon of the mental, consciousness. This will serve not only as a good example for understanding emergence, but also has implications for theology. For the one who embraces an emergentist position, the answer to the question of personhood lies in consciousness. However, how this gets worked out becomes very important. So, we will work out what it means, in the eyes of a neuroscientific, emergentist position, to be a human person.

In an emergentist position on personhood, for a person to be a person, there must be a certain level of consciousness. Timothy O’Connor notices two striking qualities of conscious experience. First, there is the experience of the apparent simplicity or nonstructurality of the most basic elements of experience. As conscious, a person is able to have experience and, while experience may cause the physical properties to change, the most basic experiences always remain apart from the physical. Second, a person realizes her own subjectivity. Here, we notice that one can only come into contact with consciousness when one has consciousness. The experience of one’s own consciousness gives us the entrance into being able to think and talk about consciousness.

We must, though, further this experience of our own subjectivity. Our experience of our subjectivity comes in the experience of other people and of our environment. This leads Clayton to say that consciousness “is an emergent feature of a complex biological structure, the human brain, in its interaction with its environment.” He believes that any discussion of personhood must understand the way in which the person is coupled to those persons that he exists with, along with the environment in which he lives. Any attempt at understanding personhood must understand that the link to the environment—and the interactions that take place between a person and his environment—are not only physically constitutive, but also ontologically constitutive of the person. There is an incredible connection between the
person and his world. This leads Clayton to conclude that a coherent theory of the human person must not only talk about the physical nature of the person but must also have an adequate understanding of the effect of the surrounding environment upon the person.

However, it must be quickly noted that one cannot reduce consciousness, in an emergentist paradigm, to a purely physical phenomenon. Rather, one must remember that there is a certain aspect of consciousness that is irreducible to the purely physical. The emergence position represents a discussion of the person as reliant, but distinct from the purely physical processes in the brain. One, then, cannot translate consciousness into a pure physical bodily state, but must remember that there is a certain nonphysicality to consciousness, without necessarily endorsing a Cartesian soul. For the emergentist, there is the constant reminder that there is not a thesis that explains everything. Rather, mystery still remains regarding the human person.

And, so, with consciousness, we must remember that everything cannot always be explained because we cannot reduce all things to the physical. What is it that we are able to explain? Or, at least, postulate? For Timothy O’Connor, there are three features of consciousness as an emergent phenomena that help us here: supervenience, non-structurality, and novel causal influence. Through an analysis of these three features we should be able to get a firmer grasp on the nature of consciousness as explained from an emergent perspective.

First, we must look at supervenience. At its most basic, “supervenience means that one level of phenomena or type of property is dependent upon another. While at the same time not being reducible to it.” Supervenience sees that mental properties are dependent upon certain physical properties, but that the mental is not reducible to the physical. The importance of supervenience for a study of consciousness is to notice that while the mental does arise from the complex, physical structures of the brain, it is not reducible to these structures. Rather, the mental arises from the physical but is something different from the physical. This is important because we realize, with the idea of supervenience, that while the mental arises from the physical, the physical is not the primary influence upon the mental.

Next, after discussing supervenience, we must move to the second quality of an emergent account of consciousness: non-structurality. Timothy O’Connor believes that non-structurality involves three components. First, a property that is emergent is “potentially had only by objects of some complexity.” A purely simple phenomena cannot be emergent, but there must involve some complexity in that the emergent property arises from complex physical properties. Second, the property that is emergent is “not had by any of the object’s parts.” The physical parts that give rise to an emergent phenomenon do not actually contain the phenomenon. For
example, the brain is not consciousness, but gives rise to conscious states. Third, the emergent property is “distinct from any structural property of the object.” The physical structure of the parts of a phenomenon does not encompass or structure the emergent phenomenon, but the phenomenon is distinct from this structure, not being able to be structured in the same way. These three properties, then, point to the non-structurality of emergent phenomena.

The last quality that we must discuss is novel causal influence. With the quality of novel causal influence, the emergentist position shows how the causal influence on an emergentist phenomenon is not reducible to the microstructures that give rise to the phenomenon. Rather, the emergent phenomenon has influence on the micro-properties in a certain downward fashion, which is distinct from the actual activity of the micro-properties. However, this does not undo the supervenient relationship between the physical and mental; instead novel causal influence says that, while being dependent upon the physical for its possibility to arise, the mental are different in kind and “exercise a type of causal influence which is unique to the emergent level.” With this information we must embrace a theory of downward causation, which is “the process whereby some whole has an active non-additive causal influence on its parts.” Downward causation affirms the emergentist position by saying that as a phenomenon emerges as a whole, this whole has a causal influence on its parts, even though it is separate from the parts.

With our discussion of these three qualities complete, we finish the part of the paper that deals with emergence. In this section, we have seen that emergence plays an adequate explanatory role for discussing the idea of the person, especially as the person is conscious. It does this especially by bringing out the conscious qualities of supervenience, non-structurality and novel causal influence.

II. Two Views on Entire Sanctification – Collins and Maddox

In approaching the doctrine of entire sanctification, the Wesleyan movement has endorsed two general views: either assuming the instantaneous nature of entire sanctification or by taking the nature of entire sanctification to be one of process. However, I want to make explicit that I do not see these two views as mutually excluding the other—the instantaneous view still allows for process, while the process view still allows for certain moments to occur. So, the difference between the two is not complete, but can still be significant.

I want to begin with the instantaneous view espoused by Kenneth J. Collins. While Collins has been prolific in his writing on the subject, I want to give just a brief summary of his thought on entire sanctification here. Collins begins with the problem of sin, which he sees as twofold—there is the
problem of the outward appearance of sin and the problem of original, inbred sin. Both of these cut the person off from relationship with God. This, of course, is the problem that the doctrine of salvation attempts to solve. Collins, then, goes to work to show how the problem of the twofold nature of sin is solved in the work of John Wesley. Primarily, the problem of sin is solved by the work of God, which is also twofold. The first work addresses the problem of the outward appearance of sin. This work is in the free grace which is freely given by God, based upon no work of the person at all. In receiving this gift of the grace of God, the person is lead to justifying faith; this faith, though, is not just belief that there is a God, but is faith in the work of Jesus Christ as the work of God, culminating in his death and resurrection as the only means of saving humanity from sin. Justification, then, solves the legal, forensic aspect of sin as now the justified believer is not viewed by her sinful actions but is viewed through her belief and faith in God.

However, to simply be justified is not enough for Collins’ Wesley. Instead, Collins sees Wesley as emphasizing that the person must grow in grace leading to sanctification. The goal of sanctification is to remove the inbred sin that inhabits the person as original sin. This comes about through the process whereby the person realizes that she is justified and is being regenerated by God. However, there is also the realization that she is not whole yet and that it is only by the grace of God that one may be whole. Collins’ Wesley, then, believes that there must be a second, distinct work of God, removing the original sin that inhabits the person, keeping her from being whole. The person, though, must have faith in God that God will remove original sin and make her whole. Faith is the condition on the part of the person that is necessary—the work of actually removing the sin is only in the hands of God. For Collins, then, there is a moment, a distinct instant, in the life of the believer where God works in her life and the believer becomes free from the bondage of original sin, having faith that God has done this work. This is a moment, an instant and is the goal of the Christian life.

In contrast to the Collins’ emphasis on the instantaneous nature of entire sanctification, Randy L. Maddox will take a different approach. He will emphasize that for Wesley, the impetus of sanctification is not on the distinct moments but on the continual growth in grace toward God.

Similarly to Collins, Maddox begins with a discussion of how Wesley views the person. Wesley views the person as in need of salvation, and the reason for this need is due to humanity’s sinfulness. However, differing from Collins, Maddox sees Wesley as articulating an understanding of original sin that emphasizes sin as the inevitable consequence of Adam’s sin, rather than the understanding of sin as juridical punishment upon all of humanity for the sin of Adam. The result of this inheritance is a corruption of the
person’s natural inclinations. Maddox posits that for Wesley humanity was created for participation in God through God’s empowering grace which becomes severed with the sin of Adam. The sin that results is an “inbeing sin” whose “corruption pervades every human faculty and power, leaving us utterly unable to save ourselves.” Sin, then, results in a darkening of the person’s understanding, her will becomes seized by wrong tempers, her liberty is lost and her conscience has no standard.

In Maddox’s reading Wesley believes that God’s grace is about empowering the individual to participate in God. Maddox says that for Wesley, “We are creatures totally dependent upon God’s forgiving and restoring Presence if any of this [our sinful condition] is to change. Happily, we are each also recipients of this unmerited Presence in its initial degrees. For this reason alone, we are creatures capable of responding to and welcoming God’s further transforming work in our lives.” God’s grace, then, empowers from the beginning, giving humanity the ability to respond to God. God gives Godself to humanity, calling humanity back to Godself, empowering humanity to awaken from its sinful situation and to begin to turn back to God.

Due to this initial empowering the person is able to respond to the God who calls. This response initializes one on the Way of Salvation. The first step is God’s empowering through prevenient grace which results in an initial awakening in the person. The person, then, comes to a place of justification, receiving forgiveness from God. Justification is a possibility for the believer due to the work of Christ in the Incarnation. Wesley sees Jesus’ virtuous life as the meritorious cause of justification and the empowering, merciful grace of God as the formal cause. With this Maddox shows that for Wesley one can never earn or deserve the grace of God, but that a person has a responsibility to respond to God in acceptance of both the formal and meritorious cause. This responsibility and response to God comes from the pardon of God and brings the power of God to participate in God. In justification, the believer recovers the capacity for spiritual life, “pardoned in order to participate” in the God who pardons, overcoming the penalty of the sin that occurs in Eden.

With the initial pardon of justification, the believer realizes God’s gracious love for her. This realization moves one to participation, which is the beginning of one’s movement to deliverance from the inbeing sin that plagues humanity through the Fall. This movement is the beginning of sanctification. God gives grace in order to empower the person to respond to God and to continue to respond, overcoming the power of sin in one’s life. Justification, then, is inherently a part of entire sanctification as the beginning of the process whereby one becomes fully delivered from one’s sinfulness. At the time of justification comes the “new birth,” which subsequently means that one is reborn in order to continue growing in grace. The new birth begins the
growth whereby one becomes a full Christian, just as the birth is the beginning of a person becoming an adult.\textsuperscript{53} Growth in grace results in a continual, gradual change in the person, resulting in the person being filled more and more with love. Love, though, as one of the holy tempers, is never complete, but always being strengthened and shaped by the person’s response to God’s empowering grace.\textsuperscript{54} It is the continual response to God’s grace that is the foci of Wesley’s understanding of sanctification because it is through learning to continually respond to God that one overcomes the plague of sin in one’s life. As one continues to grow in grace, responding to the empowering grace of God, Maddox’s Wesley believes the plague of sin (the inbeing sin) can be completely eradicated resulting in entire sanctification or Christian perfection. However, Maddox shows that Wesley’s emphasis on the distinct act of entire sanctification grows less and less as Wesley grows older and theologically more astute; rather, Maddox believes Wesley begins to put “stress on the responsibility of gradual growth in sanctification”\textsuperscript{55} curbing much of the “enthusiasm” and abuses of claiming entire sanctification.\textsuperscript{56}

Now, it must be noted that my discussion of Collins and Maddox has been slightly arbitrary; the two are much more nuanced than I have shown. Instead, I have brought out the major difference that exists between the two—namely, the nature of entire sanctification. It is with this specific difference in mind that I want to move the discussion.

### III. A Critical Correlation – Emergence and Entire Sanctification in Dialogue

In the last section of the paper, I want to engage emergent theories of the person with the doctrine of sanctification. Specifically, I will show how an emergent understanding of the person and the sciences points one to side with Maddox, embracing a process view of sanctification. I will show this in two ways: first, I will draw out the analogous relationship between emergence and Maddox’s view of sanctification. Second, I will briefly develop an understanding of creation as emergent, drawing certain conclusions from this.

A caveat is needed before I begin though. Both of these conclusions are made to be brief and only point to ways we can begin to think about the relationship between emergence and sanctification. I do not believe that these are complete or encompass all the ways one could describe the relationship between emergence and sanctification. Rather, they are “pointers” to give an example of how one could begin to think about the relationship.

First, then, let me discuss the analogous relationship that exists between emergence theories of the person and the doctrine of sanctification. I want to develop this idea of analogy because I do not believe that I can conclusively say that entire sanctification \textit{is} an emergent phenomenon. Rather, the two
share a certain structural relationship that allows one to see how emergence enlightens one’s understanding of sanctification.

First, for both, the idea of process points to greater development of the person. We have seen that in emergence theories, the idea is set forth that life emerges first, which through different emergence processes gives rise to self-awareness, and self-awareness allows for continuing emergent properties which ultimately result in the emergence of consciousness. There is a continuing process of the evolution of life. While there are distinct moments along the way, the development of these is a process. And, the boundaries between these distinct moments are more porous than they are hard boundaries. Life tends to bleed into self-awareness, while self-awareness bleeds into consciousness. Although, after the fact, we can always point to those species that definitely have life, are self-aware, or that have consciousness.

Analogously, the process of sanctification is a process of movement from one “state of grace” to the next. One moves from prevenient grace to justification to sanctification and finally to entire sanctification. This is a process with definite moments, or markers, along the way. However, these markers are not completely distinct: there is a certain amount of bleeding between the states of grace. For example, one may know that one is justified, but one may not know exactly when one was justified; the person just has the assurance that she is a child of God, justified and being regenerated. A similar argument may be made for some people with the experience of entire sanctification. This is because the goal is not entire sanctification, but dwelling with God; so, the necessity of the process of being cleansed of both outward and inbred sin is not about being sanctified, but about dwelling in communion with the divine.

The second part of the analogous relationship that I want to develop is that both possess a wholistic understanding of the person and nature. We have seen that when emergence develops the notion of the person, the goal is to view the person as wholistically as possible. However, this does not result in a purely physicalist understanding of the person; rather, emergence theories of the person are concerned to show that consciousness is another type of phenomenon, arising from the physical and so dependent upon the physical, but not reducible to the physical. And, this results in understanding the person as more than just one’s physical parts, but taking into account experiences and emotions, resulting in an account of the person that takes the person to be one whole.

Entire sanctification, in a process (Maddox) understanding, also looks to develop a wholistic understanding of the person. As we have seen, Maddox views sanctification as a recovery of the image of God that was so badly marred in the Fall. This image does not correlate to just a part of the individual but to the sanctification of the entire person. Maddox’s concern is to show
that the cleansing of grace results in freeing the person from the power of outward sin. Then, he shows how the process of sanctification, as the recovery of the image of God, results in a overturning of the power of inner sin. The whole person was sinful, and in a process view, the entire person must become sanctified through the process of sanctification. For Maddox, the process of sanctification results in the recovering of the whole person in the recovery of the whole image of God; this is similar to the way that emergence points to the process of the development of the whole person.

The second way that I believe emergence points to a process understanding of sanctification is through an emergent view of creation. To put it briefly, I understand the creation of the world to have come about by an emergent process, evolution. Both physics and biology point to the fact that the world as it is came to exist through a long process of development. From the moment of the big bang to its present day, the universe has slowly come to exist through a long outgrowth. We seen, then, various emergent phenomena developing, always new but never reducible to the phenomena from which they came. Creation as it exists, then, can be understood as an emergent phenomenon. Creation has only come to exist through various processes that allow for the development and emergence of new phenomena. Ultimately, then, I think that we can posit that creation, as it exists, is inherently emergent. Emergence is built into the fabric of creation.

If this is the case, then, I believe that we can understand a process view of sanctification to coincide with our understanding of creation as emergent. If emergence is built right into the fabric of what it means to be part of creation, can we not then speculate that God, in God's saving activity, has built emergence into the way that sanctification occurs? I am postulating that if emergence is part of creation, and we are part of that creation, humanity, as conscious beings, is an emergent phenomenon. And, if humanity is an emergent phenomenon, I also think that we can speculate that the salvation of humanity by God, the Creator, is accomplished by God through a process similar to that of emergence, which I would call sanctification.

Concluding, then, I have shown how the theory of emergence in the sciences helps our understanding of sanctification. Particularly, I have shown how emergence points to a process view of entire sanctification. I, then, showed this in two ways: first because emergence and the process of sanctification share an analogous structure and, second, by showing that an understanding of creation as emergent points to a process understanding of salvation.

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Endnotes

1 An original version of this paper was presented at the Joint Meeting of the Wesleyan Theological Society and Society for Pentecostal Studies, March 14, 2008 at Duke University. I would also like to thank John Sanders, who at the conference offered helpful suggestions for making the paper much better.

2 Malcolm Jeeves, “Introduction,” in From Cells to Souls-and Beyond: Changing Portraits of Human Nature, ed. Malcolm Jeeves (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), x. While at times I will refer to neuroscience in the singular, it must be noted that there is not just one, unified neuroscience. Rather, there are many approaches to the science and it must be kept in mind that neuroscience actually consists of a plurality of sciences, for example neurobiology, neurology, neuropathology, neuropsychology, psychiatry, psychology, and genetics. See Jeeves, xii.


4 This is also the opinion of Philip Clayton. See his “Neuroscience, the Person, and God: An Emergentist Account,” in Zygon 35, no. 3 (September 2000): 619-20.


6 Clayton, “Neuroscience, the Person, and God: An Emergentist Account,” 635.


8 Clayton, Mind and Emergence, 39.

9 Ibid., 39.


12 Timothy O’Connor, “Groundwork for an Emergentist Account of the Mental,” Progress in Complexity, Information and Design 2.3.1 (2003): 6-7. This was attained from the website http://www.iscid.org/pcid/2003/2/3/oconnor_ontological_emergence.php. All page number citations are made in regard to the document accessed from this website.). This is a theme that will be brought up again at a later point in our discussion of emergence.

13 Clayton, Mind and Emergence, 108-10.

Clayton, Mind and Emergence, 145.


I would want to tenor this statement, though. I do not want to discount many mentally ill or handicapped people from having the place as person. Rather, I would want to work out an idea of consciousness that encompasses the mentally ill and handicapped. However, time will not allow me to do this at this time in this paper.


Clayton, “Neuroscience, the Person and God: An Emergentist Account,” 640.

Ibid., 628.

Ibid., 628.

Ibid., 630-31.

I do not want to get into a discussion, here, of whether or not emergence proves there is a soul (monism vs. dualism debate). This would fall outside the scope of this paper. Rather, I am more interested in a general explanation of personhood, staying away from a discussion on the nature of the soul, as much as this is possible. But, if one is interested, emergence can be used in both a monist and a dualist paradigm. For a discussion of emergent monism, see the work of Philip Clayton, especially Mind and Emergence. For a defense of the emergent dualism position, see the work of William Hasker, especially The Emergent Self (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999).

This is a common sentiment of scholars working here: see Clayton, “Neuroscience, the Person and God: An Emergentist Account,” 621-24; Clayton, Mind and Emergence, 2; and O’Connor, “Groundwork for an Emergentist Account of the Mental,” 9.

O’Connor, “Emergent Properties,” 97

Clayton, Mind and Emergence, 124.

Clayton, “Neuroscience, the Person and God: An Emergentist Account,” 632.

Here I am embracing a weak supervenience rather than a strong supervenience. For the distinction, see Clayton, “Neuroscience, the Person and God: An Emergentist Account,” 632-34.

Ibid., 634.

O’Connor, “Emergent Properties,” 97

Ibid., 97

Ibid., 97

Ibid., 97-98.

Clayton, “Neuroscience, the Person and God: An Emergentist Account,” 637

Clayton, Mind and Emergence, 49.

While this may sound like it endorses dualism, Clayton believes that this position does not for it focuses on the person as a whole which comes from (and in a sense, is dependent upon) the physical. For a discussion on downward causation, see Clayton, Mind and Emergence, 49-54.

In describing one view as “process,” I do not want it to be confused with the thinking of process theologians. Rather, the idea of process points strictly to
the emphasis developed in relation to how sanctification occurs.

38 I find it interesting that these two views are based primarily on readings of Wesley. If the gap between the two was unbridgeable, an abyss, then Wesley would be incredibly problematic. As becomes clear in reading Collins and Maddox though, the problem comes with how one reads Wesley and how one preferences certain parts of his corpus. I wonder at one point, though, a Wesleyan theology of entire sanctification will be put forth that does not rely primarily on a certain reading of Wesley, but develops in conversation with Wesley and the greater Christian tradition and other disciplines as well.


40 Ibid., 165-69.

41 Ibid., 280.

42 Ibid., 28-92.

43 This is not to say that Collins believes that growth in grace stops at this instant; it is only to say that Collins believes there is a moment where a person is not entirely sanctified and then a moment where a person is entirely sanctified.

44 Randy L. Maddox, Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 77

45 Ibid., 81.

46 Ibid., 82.

47 Ibid., 82.

48 Ibid., 87

49 Ibid., 93.

50 Ibid., 166.

51 Ibid., 167-68.

52 Ibid., 172.

53 Ibid., 177-78.

54 Ibid., 178-79.

55 Ibid., 186.

56 For a discussion on how Wesley changes his views over time, see Ibid., 180-86.

57 This is not to suggest that Collins does not embrace a wholistic understanding of the person, but I believe that Maddox’s process view does a better job of theologically developing this understanding of the person. However, here, I do not have time to develop this.
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“Justification by Faith”: Richard Baxter’s Influence upon John Wesley

I. Introduction

Justification by Faith, one of John Wesley’s most soteriologically mature sermons, was first preached on May 28, 1738, and later published in 1746. This homily presented not only his maturing theology of salvation, but also conveyed his affinity for the protestant keystone, sola fide. His work, however, was not fashioned without noteworthy influence. Within a year prior to first preaching the sermon, Wesley published in Newcastle upon Tyne an extract of Richard Baxter’s Aphorisms of Justification. Originally composed by Baxter in 1640, this vehement work sought to “once and for all” crush the doctrine of antinomianism and fasten in its place a more developed view of human participation in salvation. It was received unfavorably, however, as Baxter’s contemporaries dissected the work with stringent criticism, objecting to the notion that “obeying trust” preconditioned justification. Yet, not all of his theology would be repudiated. Certain of its elements remained congruent with earlier protestant assumptions. Recognizing the work’s great significance, John Wesley, founder of the Methodist reform movement, extracted and published certain of Baxter’s Aphorisms, so that they might, in his words, “once again [be] a powerful antidote against the spreading poison of antinomianism.” By putting them to press, Wesley exposed the depth of Baxter’s impact upon his own theology that would later manifest itself in his sermon on Justification by Faith. The aim of this particular study is to identify and trace the similarities found in Wesley’s sermon on Justification by Faith and Baxter’s Aphorisms of Justification (which Wesley later extracted), and to understand the contextual situations that occasioned their respective development and publication. By doing so, that is, by highlighting the two minister’s commonly held positions, the present study aims to both strengthen and invigorate the bond between Reformed and Wesleyan theology.

II. Likeminded Polemicists

The seventeenth century puritan reform had an overwhelming influence on Richard Baxter’s religious convictions. Having been infected by its contagious religious fervor, he came to question his own long-held ecclesial assumptions. Finding his leanings incongruent with the national church,
reluctantly bore the label of non-conformist and opposed the Church of England. In part to propound his newfound message, Baxter became Chaplain of the parliamentary army. This particular tenure helped him to grow in discernment and, as he put it, to press on “toward the resolution of many theological questions.” However, the army exposed him to a kaleidoscope of personal beliefs, ranging from Arminianism and Dutch Remonstrance to moral laxity and antinomianism. This in turn led Baxter to embrace a polemical attitude towards those who considered themselves unbound theologically to the moral law of righteousness. His contempt for such “libertarianism” swelled into fear and borderline obsession, when he became terribly afraid that “London was apparently being overrun by Antinomians,” a phobic claim, which fueled his ministerial passions, though without substantial socio-religious warrant. Nevertheless, Baxter’s commitment to fostering puritan reform resulted in an immense outpouring of theological literature.

Among his writings, Aphorisms of Justification (1649) was a piece he thought might equilibrate the swells of antinomianism. His impetus for writing was to challenge any who considered righteous living (subsequent to justification) inconsequential to the process of salvation. Underlying his theology of justification then, was the conviction that human participation and response were needed to actuate God’s redemptive offer of salvation. However, many of his contemporaries remained apprehensive. They suspected that his theology refracted glints of Pelagianism. Nevertheless, he strove at length to disassociate himself from any doctrine wherein recipients of God’s grace were exempt from the laws of love and morality, especially as regarded the doctrine of imputed righteousness. According to Baxter, such a theology invariably led to lax Christian practice. For, once we are justified by the work of Christ, and receive the exact fruit of his labor, we need not ourselves live accordingly, as the work has already been done for us. On the other hand, he did not intend his Aphorisms to warrant the opposite extreme of “moralism.” Baxter simply sought to “confound the antinomians who misconstrued the doctrine of justification by faith to mean that works are unnecessary,” while acknowledging Christ’s atonement as the primary cause of justification. Amid similar circumstances, John Wesley later shared Baxter’s commitment to exploring a via media between moralism and antinomianism.

However, before moving on to Wesley’s context, it would be wise to carve out the roots of both “moralism” and “antinomianism.” To both Baxter and Wesley, these words connoted ravenous depravity. The theological tenets of moralism can be traced far back into the annals of Christian antiquity, finding their base in the teachings of Pelagius. This patristic writer envisioned the morally upright nature of human beings to be a sufficient medium for carrying out righteousness and holy living. To him, God had fastened human
nature with such a capacity at creation, which enabled humans to lead ethically sound lives. We do not need any special gift from God to be good, because our nature has already been conditioned to uphold God's statutes. One might posit, to use other words, that a primordial grace has been infused with humanity at the ground of creation, whereby we have been equipped with every tool necessary to carry out our moral responsibilities. To be sure, Pelagius did not abnegate the meritorious work of Christ; rather, he appropriated it differently. God's grace is given to those who strive for the righteous life. It aids them in Christian discernment. Even so, since God has already fashioned humanity with the ability to keep the commandments, soteriological grace becomes unnecessary. It is here that Wesley and Baxter poignantly took issue with moralist doctrine, stressing its usurpation of Christ's atoning sacrifice. Together, they recognized its destructive implications, which more than diminished the efficacy of God's grace and supplanted beneficence with human agency.

Secondly, moralism is contrasted by an opposite extreme, antinomianism, with which both Baxter and Wesley were heavily occupied. If moralism placed too high a priority on human agency in effecting salvation, then the latter moved to the other end of the pendulum swing. According to this teaching, God's righteousness is imputed and imparted, literally handed over to the believer, dismissing them of any responsibility to lead lives of holiness. It excuses them, in the name of righteousness, from charitable practice. In essence, one may well be fortified by God's salvific grace and continue to lead a life of cruelty. This theology is problematic, as it does not reconcile God's justifying grace with an authentic conversion from sin. Wesley and Baxter detested this position as well, as it hindered Christian practice and thwarted any genuine move toward holiness. Baxter and Wesley were loath to accept two such heterodox ideas, which spawned controversy in the latter's context as well.

Like Baxter, Wesley took profound influence from the Puritan reform movement. He was convicted by their zeal for the gospel, and their diligent propensity to evangelize the world over. While embracing certain puritan ideals, however, his sympathies did not move him to abandon his confessions. Even so, while remaining a steadfast Anglican minister, Wesley allowed the puritan emphasis on spirituality both to permeate his theology of faith and Christian living, and to inform his practice of liturgy. An implicit hope was that the fire of reform would rekindle the awareness of sola fide Protestantism. Like Baxter, Wesley expressed the need for faith-filled response to God's offer of salvation, which could not be merited by any performed work of righteousness. Wesley's soteriology hinged on this, that faith alone justifies and restores the sinner to right relationship with the Father. In other words, since humans were originally created for communion with God, for concert
and friendship toward this end, the process of justification was one that refashioned human beings into a state reminiscent of their original, created nature (deliverance from culpability). In Wesley’s view, to participate in the experience of justification by faith, is to conjointly allow God’s presence to manifest in our lives and accompany us on the road to Christian perfection. As with Baxter before him, Wesley’s convictions sparked heated polemicism. Not all theologians shared his understanding of the nature of God’s grace. According to Alan Clifford, Wesley’s “long ministry,” as evangelical preacher and minister, “was frequently punctuated by the [Calvinist/Arminian] controversy.” Engaged in dialogue with the Calvinistic Methodist, George Whitefield, Wesley defended the freedom of personal response to God’s offer of salvation, and labored to illustrate the inadequacy of any position suggesting otherwise. He maintained that the grace given to humans by God is “universal,” reaching out to the entirety of humankind. Yet, we are justified by God’s grace to the extent that we faithfully respond to God’s offer of redemption. God is not whimsical or random; God justifies those who approach with contrition and repentance.

Such arguments exposed Wesley’s inherent evangelical Arminianism, in which the gift of grace cannot be relegated to a status of particularity, since freely offered to everyone. Being strictly opposed to High Calvinist soteriology—which suggested that Christ’s atonement was meant for a select few, and excluded the reprobate—Wesley was fearful of the negative, impractical consequences that would accompany it: “All preaching [would be] in vain. The elected would not need it; the reprobated were infallibly damned in any case and no preaching would ever alter the fact.” The effect of such teachings could inadvertently lead to an antinomian theology, which considered any virtuous, loving act of righteousness superfluous and even inconsequential for the Christian life. One needed only happen to “be” a member of the unconditionally elect to reap the benefits of God’s grace. That is to say, one could potentially remain in the graces of God while mindfully continuing a life of turpitude.

The Calvinist/Arminian debate shaped Wesley’s theology of salvation, and provided a background for his preaching on the topic of justification by faith. Like Baxter, Wesley was concerned for the eternal well being of souls, that all should embrace the merits of Christ’s life and atoning death, and likewise be conformed in heart and mind to his genuine example of holiness. Through moralism and antinomianism, the practical consequences of God’s justifying grace are compromised and subdued. Attempting to navigate the choppy seas of “divine sovereignty” and “human freedom,” Wesley salvaged from his puritan predecessor not only a pastoral spirit committed to fostering authentic, Christian practice, but also an important body of theological writings confronting the same issues plaguing Wesley’s ministry. Turning now to the
documents themselves, the breadth of similarity between the respective writings can hardly be overstated. The influence of the earlier on the later is obvious.

III. A Critical Comparison of Wesley’s Sermon on “Justification by Faith” and Extract of “Aphorisms of Justification”

The intent of both authors centered on the salient matter of justification by faith. They sought to clarify a severely misunderstood doctrine. Concerning the theological relevance of justification, Wesley stated, “it contains the foundation of all our hope,” while angrily continuing, “And yet how little hath this important question been understood.”13 His corrective mood is addressed to those who suggested that God had designated justification only for the elect, that the reprobate were precluded from receiving the fruits of God’s grace. Baxter also warned against this, that God arbitrarily bestowed justifying grace upon unsuspecting individuals: “there is no more required to the perfect irrevocable justification of the vilest murderer or whore-master, but to believe that he is justified, or to be persuaded that God loveth him.”14 Being “persuaded” of one’s forgiveness—as Baxter here uses the term—does not imply faithful repentance, but mental assent to a given proposition. Wesley and Baxter were mutual in their contempt for a position where no change in heart, mind, or practice needed to accompany justification, as long as one has been imputed the righteousness of Christ that covered any sinful blemish the elect might incur. Wesley and Baxter starkly countered such a claim in their writings, suggesting that any theology forgoing charitable Christian practice ought to be seriously questioned.

Even so, neither Wesley or Baxter envisioned human beings to be the meriting principle of God’s favor, nor that by practicing charity one could earn justification or saving faith. Wesley was adamant in this regard, as he summarized “justification” as God’s act of “pardon, [or] the forgiveness of sins.”15 He believed that as sinful human beings, we are unable to cause our own justification, for it “implies what God does for us through his Son.”16 Wesley maintained that all of humanity inherited the sin of our first father, Adam, but are regenerated by “the sacrifice for sin made by the second Adam, as the representative of us all,” grounded in the reality that “God is so far reconciled to all the world that he hath given them a new covenant.”17 We are justified by the freely offered grace of the Father through the atoning death of Jesus Christ, his Son. No longer bound to the law of sin and death, we become recipients of his grace as we respond in faith to his newly established covenant, and are pardoned from sinfulness and forgiven of all transgressions.

To be sure, this echoed an earlier sentiment put forth by Baxter: namely, the human inability to merit salvation. He affirmed as Wesley would later,
that humanity has fallen short of God’s law and moral precepts. Only one can fulfill our need for right-standing by atoning for our sinfulness. “Jesus Christ, at the will of his Father, and upon his own will, being perfectly furnished for this work, with a divine power and personal righteousness, first undertook, and afterwards discharged this debt, by suffering what the law did threaten, and the offender himself was unable to bear.” By willingly subjecting himself to our would-be punishment for contravening God’s law, Jesus atones for our sins and reconciles us unto the Father. Baxter’s theology of justification matched Wesley’s in this regard, as both held the person of Jesus Christ to be the redeemer who fulfills God’s strict commandments, where we fail. By his atonement, God provisions our righteousness as we respond to the offer of salvation with faithful repentance.

Furthermore, both writers asserted that, prior to God’s gift of grace, we cannot exhibit righteousness of any sort, nor can we act charitably toward others. We must first be justified by God’s righteousness, be put into a standing of right relationship with the divine, before decent living can be occasioned. Goodness inheres to our works only after we are justified by the Father through Christ’s atoning death. By his act of expiation, we are delivered of culpability and made recipients of his favor. Upon reception, we are made able to live as God has commanded. As Wesley maintained, “all our works should be done in charity, in love, in that love to God which produces love to all mankind. But none of our works can be done in this love while the love of the Father is not in us.” Until we experience the forgiveness of the Father, we cannot live charitably, for the nature of charitable living assumes life in accordance with the Father’s will. To Wesley, we are sinners saved by God’s free offer of justifying grace to which we respond and receive with faith. “Without grace we can no more believe than perfectly obey, as a dead man can no more remove a straw than a mountain.” Grace goes before righteousness and pre-conditions our ability to follow Christ’s example of love and self-sacrifice. God does not justify those who are already righteous, for “it is only sinners that have any occasion for pardon: it is sin alone which admits of being forgiven.”

Wesley maintained in his sermon that justification was not synonymous with sanctification, the latter being “what [God] works in us by his Spirit” that leads us to holiness and Christian perfection. The believer’s moment of justification does not entail “the being made actually just and righteous. This is sanctification, which is indeed in some degree the immediate fruit of justification, but nevertheless is a distinct gift of God, and of a totally different nature.” Still, when one is justified unto the Father, God delivers him or her of all blameworthiness. In the strictest sense of Wesley’s definition, the believer is pardoned from sin and graced with the possibility of growth and Christian betterment. She is not, however imputed the righteousness of
Christ. Imputation suggests a transmission of Christ’s meritorious activity. The substance of his work is different from our own. To assimilate the two, is to run the risk of the antinomian fallacy, which takes Christ’s righteousness to be our own, excusing our lives from the decency of moral uprightness. As Woodrow Whidden suggests, “When Wesley speaks of imputation, he always seems to sense the ominous specter of quietistic Moravianism or hyper-Calvinism lurking about.”24 As Baxter so avidly pointed out, one must distinguish between the quality of Christ’s merits, and the righteousness practiced by those whom the Father justifies. “The primary, and most proper righteousness, lieth in the conformity of our actions to the precept.”25 As Baxter maintained, the first order of righteousness belongs only to Jesus of Nazareth who modeled his life after the law without committing any sin or moral offense. Our situation is a bit different, however. As humans tainted by willful disobedience, we are unable to follow his perfect example of love. We can only hope for the second order, “when, though we have [broken] the precepts, yet we have satisfied for our breach, either by our own suffering, or some other way.”26 To him, our hope of righteousness lay in “some other way,” as we ourselves have flouted God’s demanded perfection. Jesus appropriates the second order of righteousness to humankind through his steadfast abidance by the Mosaic Law. Emulating his selfless example of holiness, we too can participate in Christ’s first order of righteousness, though it belongs to him alone. Our righteousness, which is of the second sort, germinates from Christ’s exemplary act of atonement. As Baxter differentiates the two, “the righteousness we have in Christ, is one of the same sort with his; for his is a righteousness of the first kind. But Christ’s righteousness, imputed to us, is only that of the second sort; and cannot therefore possibly be joined with our perfect obedience, to make up one righteousness for us.”27

We are not imputed the righteousness of Christ, for his is perfect and sinless. Instead, God mends our sinful infirmity when we acknowledge its imperfection and allow his grace to take root in our lives. To Baxter then, second order righteousness is imputed to believers. As he understood it, the righteousness of God was appropriated by God alone, which contoured those enabled ascension to God in faith. God’s imputed righteousness is participatory, that is, involves both the divine and human. God is gracious lover and gift-giver, which in turn correlates to our part: to the extent that humans receive God’s gift through belief and holiness in and through the expiatory work performed by the Son, we are made righteous. The “righteousness of God” is not merited by any human endeavor (works of the Law), but manifests in those who are justified freely by the grace of God. God’s righteousness alone reverses our errant ways; and it is Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who freely offers himself as the medium unto this profound
realities. Laying groundwork for Wesley and his sermon, Baxter distinguished between Christ’s righteousness and ours, the latter of which begins to develop pending our faithful reception of God’s gracious offer of pardon.

To both Baxter and Wesley, the process of becoming righteous is not instantaneous, but gradual. It begins in the moment when one is justified, and comes to fruition (holiness) with continued faithful obedience to God’s will. Unable to merit the rewards of salvation, we are justified by faith alone. Humanity must recognize its frailty and plead for God’s mercy and forgiveness. Baxter further explicated this notion, which was deeply embedded within Wesley’s sermon as well. “It is faith which justifieth men, 1. In the nearest sense directly and properly, as it is the fulfilling of the condition of the new covenant, 2. In the remote and more proper sense, as it is the receiving of Christ and his satisfactory righteousness.” According to Baxter then, one is justified when she repents of her sin and grasps the righteousness of Christ. Not received according to merit but through mercy and grace, God imputes saving faith and unfailingly guides us toward righteousness. Baxter’s definition of faith was broad and overarching. It included 1) repentance, the pleading for mercy from what we actually deserve, 2) prayer for pardon, closely linked with repentance, and 3) living a life of genuine love and service, which entailed works of charity and forgiveness of others. In short, faith assumes the general quality of Christian practice that causes us to live in accord with the Father’s commandments. We are imputed this all-encompassing Christian faith through obedience and servitude, as it is the necessary condition of our salvation: “even to our taking the Lord for our God, and Christ for our Redeemer and Lord, doth imply our sincere obedience to him, and is the sum of the conditions on our part.”

When we are obedient to the will of the Father, and to Christ who atones for our sins, we are justified by faith and made fertile for righteousness.

Likewise, Wesley posited the same in his sermon. Faith was essential to experiencing the righteousness of Christ: “But on what terms then is he justified who is altogether ‘ungodly’, and till that time ‘worketh not? On one alone, which is faith.” Wesley defines faith as our conviction of the redeeming significance of Christ, and the acknowledgement of our sin and culpability. In Christ, we experience God’s forgiving affability and are reconciled to the Father by the Son’s meritorious work. In recognizing this objective, salvific reality, we too are justified to the Father by our belief in Christ’s atoning sacrifice. As Wesley explained it, “Justifying faith implies, not only a divine evidence or conviction that ‘God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself’, but a sure trust and confidence that Christ died for my sins, that he loved me, and gave himself for me.” Only by recognizing God’s genuine offer of grace, in and through the Redeemer of sins who extends his love even to “me,” one is justified to the Father and forgiven of all her past
transgressions. In their respective soteriology then, it is clear that Baxter and Wesley held much in common.

IV. Conclusion

Wesley resonates with Baxter that the Father imputes to the believer justifying faith. Wesley maintained that “[It] is the necessary condition of justification.” Since we cannot will our own salvation, the prerequisite to our forgiveness is wrought by the Father alone, who imputes faith to the sinner in the instant of justification. Prior to which, we remain in our sin, lacking the empowerment to respond to God’s loving call. However, in “the very moment God giveth faith (for it is the gift of God)” to the ‘ungodly’, ‘that worketh not’, that ‘faith is counted to him for righteousness’ Convicted of his guilt, and made aware of Christ’s saving presence, “Faith is imputed to him for righteousness,” and he is reconciled to the Father. By faith alone is one justified and enabled to live the life of Christ, the life of righteousness. God imputes this faith to sinners who look to Christ for forgiveness and redemption. Justification by faith then is both something that God does in and for us which we cannot do ourselves, and an obedient act of contrition by which we recognize our sinful nature.

This rondo resounds throughout the movements of John Wesley’s sermon, and corresponds in detail with much of the material extracted from Richard Baxter’s Aphorisms of Justification. As noted, the two shared much in common: a deep disdain for the antinomian doctrine of salvation, a high esteem for Christ’s atonement, a mutual recognition of unmerited grace, a shared valuing of imputed faith as the condition of justification, and a profound emphasis on the call to righteousness which we are presented in and through Christ’s self-sacrificial death. Common throughout the two texts, these features illustrate the influence sustained by Wesley’s sermon from Baxter’s earlier Aphorisms. That Wesley incorporated into his own soteriological framework certain theological implications previously held by Baxter is significant. By publishing—and prefacing with positive remarks—his predecessor’s material, Wesley affirmed the text’s validity, and allowed its meaning and intention to contour his own mission and purpose. Moreover, by composing a sermon on the same matter, that incorporated similar language, intentions, and theological content from Baxter’s earlier work, Wesley exposed an indebtedness to the seventeenth century non-conformist, whose immense influence helped to lay the foundations for his sermon on Justification by Faith.
Bibliography


Footnotes

1 Richard P. Heitzenrater and Albert C. Outler, ed. John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1991), 111. Throughout this analysis the title of Wesley's homily, Justification by Faith, will be interchanged with its ordinal designation, “sermon no. 5.”


4 Though it was John Wesley who published the extract, the text itself belongs to Richard Baxter; the brief synopsis provided of the work’s historical emergence will reflect this, and be placed within Baxter’s 17th century context of debate.


7 Ibid., 31.


9 Jeffrey S. Chamberlain, “Moralism, Justification, and the Controversy over Methodism” in Journal of Ecclesiastical History 44 (1993) 663. He neatly defines the term, moralism, as “any system which assigns merit or causation in salvation to human effort,” 655.

10 Atonement and Justification: English Evangelical Theology, 1640-1790, 55.


12 Ibid., 164.


14 John Wesley, ed. An Extract of Mr. Richard Baxter’s Aphorisms of Justification, 4th ed. (Dublin, Ireland: Bride-Street, 1802), 47

15 Justification by Faith, 115.

16 Ibid., 114.

17 Ibid., 114.

18 An Extract of Mr. Richard Baxter’s Aphorisms of Justification, 6.

19 Justification by Faith, 117

20 An Extract of Mr. Richard Baxter’s Aphorisms of Justification, 13.

21 Justification by Faith, 116.
22 Ibid., 114.
23 Ibid., 114.
24 Woodrow W Whidden “Wesley on Imputation: A Truly Reckoned Reality or Antinomian Polemical Wreckage?” in *Asbury Theological Journal* no. 52 (Fall 1997)
25 An Extract of Mr. Richard Baxter’s Aphorisms of Justification, 20.
26 Ibid., 20.
27 Ibid., 22.
28 Ibid., 23.
29 Ibid., 37
30 Ibid., 39.
31 Justification by Faith, 117
32 Ibid., 118.
33 Ibid., 119.
34 Ibid., 119.
35 Ibid., 119.
William J. Abraham

A Response to Professor Kenneth Collins

I have long admired Professor Kenneth Collins for his incisive readings of the Wesley corpus. His work in this arena has been marked by a fearless and close reading of the text. His skills in this arena, while not always as theologically subtle as I would like, have been extremely fruitful; I have used his writings on a regular basis in my seminars in Wesley Studies. Beyond that I have always benefited from the clear and forthright expression of his views in private conversations and public discussions. It comes therefore as a surprise to find that his reading skills have deserted him in his recent review of Canonical Theism, A Proposal for Theology and The Church, edited by myself, Jason Vickers and Natalie Van Kirk. The problems in his review run so deep that it is clear that my work has touched a raw nerve in Professor Collins. In this response I want to correct the record and show that Professor Collins has at best a superficial understanding of what is at stake. I beg the indulgence of my readers when I have to refer to my own work, but I trust this will be seen as essential for purposes here.

Reviews in serious academic journal generally begin with a substantial summary of the content of book under consideration. Professor Collins dispenses with this convention. The result is that the reader is given little or no idea of what the book is about. Canonical Theism is in fact a collection of essays by a team of eleven scholars from different ecclesial traditions. Not one of them other than myself is mentioned by name, much less taken seriously. Their agency and their contribution are set aside on the grounds that it is my voice that predominates. If Professor Collins were to take these scholars seriously, he would quickly find out that they have their own original, independent voices.

Even then, Professor Collins fails to situate this volume accurately in the context of my own work. Thus he begins the review with the claim that a decade ago I laid out an agenda for contemporary in my Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology. This is simply false. The agenda at issue was not laid out in that volume; it had other aims and intentions. The second sentence of his review is equally false. There he claims that I say that Western Christianity
“should take on the understanding of the Church and tradition that has been developed and preserved in Eastern Orthodoxy.” I make it very clear in *Canon and Criterion* that I do not speak for Eastern Orthodoxy; I prefer to let Eastern Orthodoxy speak for itself. Moreover, it is a singular misunderstanding of that book to say that I even develop “an understanding of the Church and tradition.” The book is fundamentally about the history of the epistemology and how debates about canon play into that.

For the record, it is important that readers get a sense of the book as a whole. The book begins with Thirty Theses that lay out formally what canonical theism is. The opening sentences of the first thesis and of the introduction will suffice here to capture the central thrust of the book as a whole. “*Canonical Theism* is a term invented to capture the robust form of theism manifested, lived, and expressed in the canonical heritage of the church.” “Canonical Theism is both a vision of church renewal for the twenty first century and a long-haul, intergenerational theological project.” The first sentence denotes the subject matter of the book; the second signals its ecclesial and academic intentions. The book then divides into three sections. After rooting the whole project in pneumatology, the first section lays out more fully what we mean by canonical theism and how it is expressed in the canonical heritage of the church. Hence there are essays on scripture, creed, episcopacy, liturgies, sacraments, saints and teachers, and images. The second section begins with my own personal account of how canonical theism was birthed in my own work over the years in philosophy, evangelism, and systematic theology. This is then followed by a set of seven essays that deal in turn with the primacy of ontology in theology, some epistemic issues raised by canonical theism, the authority of scripture, the Jesus of history, means of grace, and Evangelicalism. All of these chapters pick up on the intersection between canonical theism and various constituencies in Christianity, that is, with Eastern Orthodoxy, mainline Protestantism, Roman Catholicism, as well as Evangelicalism. The final short section deals with the potential repercussions of canonical theism for theological education, systematic theology, and the life of the church. Beyond the short introduction and Theses, the book is made up of eighteen essays. I wrote the introduction, Theses, and six other essays. By focusing on my work, the reviewer pretty much ignores two-thirds of the volume.

The flavor of the review is nicely captured by running through the adjectives and verbal phrases that crop up in his description of the “agenda” on offer. The agenda is “backward-looking;” it turns systematic theology into merely the bringing “forward the finished theological products of the dead to new social locations;” it is inconsistently (and perhaps hypocritically) driven by my need for “certitude;” it involves being “bedazzled” by an appeal to the Holy Spirit; it is “antiquarian;” it is committed to “unquestionable normative
standards;” it is “little more than an intellectual project headed up by Abraham and a few other scholars;” it involves biting “off the theological and ecclesiastical hand that feeds it;” it is an “oddly composed book.” Besides all this, I have “misprized the resources of my [his] own Methodist tradition .because I [he] have [has] been so captivated by another;”

This last phrase, “an oddly composed book,” tells us indirectly why Professor Collins failed to include a summary of the book: he does not understand the central claims of canonical theism. The relevant evidence for this claim is that he continues to think of canon in epistemic terms and thus has next to no clue what canonical theism really is. For canonical theism canon means simply a list. This may be right or wrong, but this is what we mean. Further we argue on historical grounds that canon was not confined to scripture, but that it was constituted by a canonical heritage of materials, persons, and practices that were developed over time under the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the church of the first millennium. In addition we insist that the canonical heritage is best seen theologically as means of grace given in the church for the healing of our souls and the evocation of holiness. This does not mean that we ignore questions about norm, or authority, or those issues that crop up in debates about the justification of Christian belief. On the contrary, we think these matters are both intrinsically and missiologically important. They are also spiritually important insofar as they prevent folk from using the full medicine bequeathed in the church by the Holy Spirit.

Professor Collins begins to get hold of what is at issue in his remarks about the dangers of inerrancy, papal infallibility, and rationalism. However, he quickly resorts to precisely the vision of canon that we find so troublesome and thus shows he has not really grasped what is at issue. Thus he does not see that the issue of authority is precisely one of epistemology. He thinks that “once the epistemological stage is cleared, questions pertaining to authority remain.” On the contrary, questions of authority belong in the field of epistemology if they are to be addressed comprehensively and carefully. This error is compounded when he says that, if one holds that the church decided the canon, then this puts the church above scripture, and thus the authority of scripture may be undervalued. The first of these claim is an old saw; the second I will come back to later. It is simply false to say that because the church decided what was canonical then this puts the church above scripture. To make this claim is to confuse executive authority with epistemic authority. Worse still it shows that Collins has gone back to thinking of canon as norm and then reads our work in the light of that conception.

A similar slippage back into epistemic issues arises: a) when he accuses me of a quest for certitude; b) when he thinks that linking divine inspiration to the non-scriptural elements in the canonical heritage gives them the same status of scripture; c) when he suggests that Protestants are likely to view canonical
theism to what Oberman dubs *Tradition Two*, “that is, a dual source view of revelation in which Scripture and tradition are deemed revelatory;” d) when he intimates that I hold that the proper form of church government “has been revealed in the same way the gospel has been revealed;” d) when he assumes that we think of the church councils as *inerrant;* f) when he proposes that we hold that “church fathers, councils, icons and the like have now been placed far above criticism in their status as canons;” g) that the canons we champion constitute “the unquestionable normative standards of the church itself;” and h) that “canonical theists embrace church tradition as eagerly as Protestant fundamentalists embrace the *inerrancy* of scripture.” No one who grasped what was at stake in canonical theism could see any of this as an accurate account of what is at issue. Professor Collins is simply wedded to the kind of thinking which we find unsatisfactory; he thinks that canon is a criterion, an item in the epistemology of theology, and then proceeds to read this vision of canon into what we say about the wider canonical heritage of the church. He has completed missed the point that we see that heritage as a complex means of grace.

Given this failure it is no surprise that Professor Collins misreads canonical theism in other ways. He thinks that systematic theology, as I understand it, will mean simply bringing back the finished theological products of the dead into new social locations and thus systematic theology has been reduced to historical theology. A careful reading of the chapter on systematic theology overturns this caricature of what is at stake. Worse still, he holds that the vision of systematic theology as university-level catechesis fosters an emphasis on receptivity and docility. On the contrary, it stretches students in ways they never anticipated and sends them away reeling with new insight and a host of problems they never imagined. He reduces the work of episcopacy to that of a defensive move against heresy; the primary purpose was to guard and hand over the treasures of the gospel and the faith. He thinks we see the first millennium as “privileged and revelatory.” It is only privileged in the sense that we believe in the deep historicity of Christianity and in appropriating what we are convinced the Holy Spirit has made available to the church. To speak of it being revelatory takes us back into the old world of epistemology which Professor Collins still fitfully inhabits.

Furthermore, Professor Collins imposes on the whole discussion a set of rigid historical grids on the past that are stultifying and incoherent. He holds to a cyclical vision of history in which Catholic and Protestant take turns in the wheel of fortune, and wherein a swing to sinful human tradition evokes a corresponding swing back to the clarity and purity of the faith. He thinks that if we are not Protestant then we must be either Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox. Given that the first two are excluded, this leaves us with the third option, even though our commitment to critical work in
epistemology has never been a mark of the Eastern Orthodox tradition. Even then, at one and the same time we are hostage to Eastern Orthodoxy, and to a “catholic paradigm” of the first millennium, and to the eighteenth century Anglicanism that Wesley was called to reform. It is hard to occupy these three spaces all at once. Moreover, he has no idea how one might hold that the production of the canonical heritage of the church was both a thoroughly human process and one that was directed by the Holy Spirit. Nor has he any sense of a providence that could work through the rough and tumble of church history and church councils.

One way to bring out the conceptual myopia in play is to note that canonical theism is entirely compatible with various accounts of the authority of scripture. Indeed my own paper on Evangelicalism briefly explores how this might be pursued; and the paper by Douglas Koskela is devoted entirely to this subject. Canonical theism is not opposed to doctrines of the authority of scripture; all they insist is that such doctrines not be treated as canonical for the church as a whole. What we need, in my view, in order to deal with epistemic dimensions of scripture is a meaty vision of divine revelation, something I have sought to offer in *Crossing the Threshold of Divine Revelation*. Nor is canonical theism incompatible with developing a substantial and celebratory account of the gospel in evangelism. If anything, canonical theism will liberate the church to retrieve the good news of the arrival of the kingdom of God in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ through the power of Holy Spirit. After all, the continuing use of the canon of scripture that canonical theism champions would foster a clear commitment to the gospel; it will not be the fault of canonical theists if the church fails on this count. For more on this I refer readers to the clear account of the gospel I developed in *The Logic of Evangelism*. The same can be said about genuine reform of the church. Appropriating the canonical heritage in repentance and a lively faith inspired by the Holy Spirit will certainly not leave things the way they are. Here, Professor Collins animus against Eastern Orthodoxy comes through with a vengeance. He thinks we are proposing that “Luther, Calvin, Cranmer, and Meno Simmons should have simply plopped themselves in a catechesis class and listened to “father,” until they got it right.” This is a laughable proposal that could easily have been dispelled by even a cursory reading of the lengthy sections on the Reformers in *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology*.

Interestingly, when Professor Collins comes to his analysis of Methodism he deploys exactly the kind of categories that are central to canonical theism. Thus he develops an informal list of the functional equivalents of the materials, persons, and practice which are constitutive of the Methodist tradition. This is precisely the kind of rereading of Methodism which canonical theism will engender. Once we do this, then we can begin working through
what needs to be done by way of the renewal and revision of this vital experiment in evangelicalism and modern Protestantism. This is where Collins proposes that I voluntarily excommunicate myself from Methodism and join the Eastern Orthodox Church. If he had read the material carefully he might just as easily have sent me off to Pentecostalism, given the prominence given to the work of the Holy Spirit. I plead guilty if not exactly being dazzled by the Holy Spirit then at least to being constantly delighted by the wisdom of the Spirit. At the same time, he thinks that canonical theism involves a take-over from within from the right as opposed to the left. To lump me with the right is bizarre given that he falsely claims that I no longer consider myself as an evangelical and hints that I may have betrayed my graduation from Asbury Theological Seminary. It is equally bizarre to think of a take-over from within given that canonical theists are dismissed “as little more than an intellectual project headed up by Abraham and a few other scholars.”

All this shows the poverty of the categories deployed. We are saddled with a Procrustean bed in which theological and political categories are run together without subtlety or comprehension. The fact is canonical theism is what it is; it is a research agenda that should be rejected or received on its merits. However, it should be noted that all involved are deeply involved in the life of their churches. For myself, I teach no less than three bible studies per week in local churches, and I moonlight in missionary work overseas. So this is not an ivory tower project; it is developed by scholars who love and serve sacrificially in the church. It does indeed have ecclesial implications. If Professor Collins really wants to know how canonical theism fares as a proposal for renewal, then he should read my book, The Logic of Renewal. I may be totally wrong about renewal, but I have given it serious attention over the years, and my proposals should not be dismissed with a rhetorical flourish. If there really is medicine that is being overlooked, then it is not to Professor Collins credit that he scares folk away by systematic mislabeling and misrepresentation. Time will tell whether in the providence of God canonical theism will benefit the church for good or ill.

Permit two more cavils before I conclude. First, Professor Collins mentions that I managed to unite both liberals and evangelicals at the 2007 Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies in that both were equally opposed to my understanding of scripture. The actual claim I made there was this: ecumenism is collapsing in part because an epistemic conception of scripture is the visible cause of a new round of divisions within Christianity. I did not in fact lay out my own understanding of scripture; neither the time allotted nor the setting would have allowed this. The issue is a causal claim about the impact of epistemic conceptions of scripture on the unity of the church. If Professor Collins wants to dispute this claim, I would be glad to hear him
make his case. Unfortunately this looks like one more instance where he heard what he wanted to hear rather than actually capture the crucial point at issue.

Second, Professor Collins excoriates me for pointing out that Evangelicalism runs the risk of collapsing into an anthropomorphic vision of the Christian faith and in this “even John Wesley’s Fifty-Two standard sermons...are held up to criticism simply because they don’t mention the word, “Trinity,” often enough.” For one thing I have never accepted the Fifty-Two standard sermons of Wesley as his standard sermons, in that I have always followed the British and Irish account of the identity of Wesley’s canonical sermons. More importantly, if anyone thinks that my worry about Wesley on this score is even remotely well represented by this statement of my grounds of this claim, then I am glad to refer them to my John Wesley for Armchair Theologians for a refutation of this rendering of what is at stake.
RUTH ANNE REESE

Power: Its Origin and Abuse

This short presentation on the origin and abuse of power in the biblical context was given as part of a faculty training session on issues related to sexual harassment. It was presented orally on March 2, 2009 and is here presented much as it was given in its original setting. All the biblical quotations are taken from the NASB.

“Once God has spoken; Twice I have heard this: That power belongs to God” (Ps. 62:11). All power derives its existence from God, and God in his graciousness allows humans to exercise power. This exercise of power begins with creation and the giving of a garden to tend and protect and the power of choice. ...in this case choices about obedience, about being satisfied with all that God has given and about not taking that which is forbidden. But I’m getting ahead of myself. We know the story of Gen 3:1-5 the serpent [who] was more crafty than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said to the woman, “Indeed, has God said, ‘You shall not eat from any tree of the garden?’” v.2 And the woman said to the serpent, “From the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat; v.3 but from the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden, God has said, ‘You shall not eat from it or touch it, lest you die.’” v.4 And the serpent said to the woman, “You surely shall not die! v.5 “For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

Ahhhh. the temptation of humanity, “you will be like God.” There is a long theological discussion in the church about the temptation that humanity faced and the sin that was committed, but for this setting, I want to point our attention to the longing to be like God, to know in the same way that God knows, to know good and evil. One of the things that I wonder about when I think about knowing good and evil is whether this pertains to the ability to see all the consequences of an action, all the ways that it would unfold – to understand that a bite of fruit is not just about the taste of the fruit on the tongue or about the juice sliding down the throat, but to see that it is about curses and death, to see that it is about a husband’s toil and a
woman’s pain, to see that it is about two sons who fight to the death, and
countless myriads of people who have violated trust, betrayed confidence,
desired what was not theirs, hoarded that which would have benefited others –
but generally humanity has been more focused on the immediate, on the
pleasure. .on the fruit that looks “so good I could eat it.” One little bite
won’t really hurt, will it? Our eyes wouldn’t deceive us, would they?

Gen 3: 19,22,23 [Then to Adam the LORD said] By the sweat of your face
You shall eat bread, Till you return to the ground, Because from it you were
taken; For you are dust, And to dust you shall return.” v.22 Then the LORD
God said, “Behold, the man has become like one of Us, knowing good and
evil; and now, lest he stretch out his hand, and take also from the tree of life,
and eat, and live forever “— v.23 therefore the LORD God sent him out
from the garden of Eden, to cultivate the ground from which he was taken.

In this season of Lent, many of us have gone to church and received the
imposition of ashes, and many of us heard the words, “You are dust and to
dust you shall return...” We are the creature, the ones who are created. We are
the ones who till the ground from which we came, the ones who must work
to live. We are dependent on so much for life itself: food, water, air, warmth

And, most reminiscent of how unlike God we are, we return to the dust.
We are those who despite medicine and surgery and physical therapy and
health care do not have the power in ourselves to live forever.

And yet, we live: we are born and grow, we belong to families and tribes,
we work and struggle, we raise children and walk alongside friends and
neighbors, we grow and change, and sometimes we come to positions of
power. In Israel, there were judges and kings, priests and prophets, farmers
and peasants, widows and strangers and some were people with positions
that gave them power. And over and over again even the very best of those
leaders struggled to use their power rightly in every circumstance. We could
mention Moses and the rock he struck or Sampson and his “meeting” with
Delilah but for our purposes let’s turn to that most famous of Israel’s
leaders, David, the shepherd boy who trusted God and who
ventilated to become king over all of Israel. And after he already had armies and wives and
palaces, he looks out one day and sees a woman bathing, and she is beautiful.
We all know the story of how he took her, slept with her, and she became
pregnant. We all know the story of how he tried to cover over the situation
by recalling Uriah from battle, how he watched to see if he would go to his
house and sleep with his wife, how he got him drunk to see if he would go
home and sleep with his wife, and how he sent faithful, honorable Uriah back
to the fighting with his own death warrant in his hand. And we know how
the fighting was fierce and “some of David’s servants fell; and Uriah the
Hittite also died” (2 Sam 11:17). How many men died to cover up that
moment of passion?
2 Sam 12:1 Then the LORD sent Nathan to David. And he came to him, and said, “There were two men in one city, the one rich and the other poor. 2 “The rich man had a great many flocks and herds. v.3 “But the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb Which he bought and nourished; And it grew up together with him and his children. It would eat of his bread and drink of his cup and lie in his bosom, And was like a daughter to him. v.4 “Now a traveler came to the rich man, And he was unwilling to take from his own flock or his own herd, To prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him; Rather he took the poor man’s ewe lamb and prepared it for the man who had come to him.”

When Nathan comes to David it is not with a story about a man who commits adultery, rather it is with a story about a rich man who steals from a poor man. It is a story about the abuse of power. This is one of the things about power. The one with power often does not want to give up anything that they already have, and they are willing to take from those with less in order to keep their own resources or situation the same. Here Nathan describes the rich man as taking from the poor man his very treasure. The man with riches uses his ability to take from the poor man who seems to have no ability to protect his treasure. David, upon hearing this story is rightly angered at the injustice that has occurred.

v.5 Then David’s anger burned greatly against the man, and he said to Nathan, “As the LORD lives, surely the man who has done this deserves to die. v.6 “And he must make restitution for the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing and had no compassion.”

David’s response is a call for that injustice to be righted. He does not yet see that he himself is the one that this story is about. It is still a theoretical story about a rich guy. And that is another thing about power, it often makes the one who holds it unable to see from the perspective of others. There is very little that challenges the person with power to see things from the perspective of the powerless – from the position of one who is affected by the actions of the powerless. (To give an example for our profession, when was the last time that we found ourselves in a class that was beyond our ability to understand? Has it been so long since we have been students that we are no longer able to see from the perspective of the student?) Why should the rich man think about the consequences to the poor man when the lamb the poor man has nurtured from his own cup becomes food for a passing traveler?

2 Sam 12:7-10 [then] Nathan said to David, “You are the man! Thus says the LORD God of Israel, ‘It is I who anointed you king over Israel and it is I who delivered you from the hand of Saul. v.8 ‘I also gave you your master’s house and your master’s wives into your care, and I gave you the house of Israel and Judah; and if that had been too little, I would have added to you
many more things like these! v.9 ‘Why have you despised the word of the LORD by doing evil in His sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, have taken his wife to be your wife, and have killed him with the sword of the sons of Ammon. v.10 ‘Now therefore, the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised Me and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife.’

Sometimes when I read these verses tears come to my eyes...a sadness for all that was lost. David had such a good beginning—the shepherd boy who trusted God and conquered Goliath, the boy anointed by Samuel to be king, the one who fought armies and defeated Israel’s enemies. He had it all. But the consequences for his actions begin to unfold...the death of a child, sons who fight against each other, murder, rape. Did David suspect any of this when he sent for Bathsheba? And these verses make me sad not just for David but for Israel. His actions resulted not only in death and dysfunction within his own family but they also created hardship for Israel herself. The wider community was also damaged by the actions of the individual. In this case an individual in whom much power was vested. So, these verses make me sad.

At the same time, these verses also make me sit up. The prophet confronts the king. This observation raises a question for me about my own responsibility. In what case is it my responsibility to confront someone in power with “the facts of the case.” The prophet speaks truth to David in such a way that he is able to see the reality of the situation and come to repentance. The Lord speaks through the prophet to one in power. This leads me to ask, in what way could God speak through me to confront an abuse of power that is damaging another individual or the wider community?

From our brief exploration of David, it could seem that power is so tempting that it is impossible to avoid the temptation to misuse it for our own gain. But I want to finish with these reflections.

Any power that we have, any position, any prestige, any wit—indeed, our very life is derived from God. And God in his wisdom has chosen to demonstrate for us the use of power. Power is located in the crucified Christ. Paul puts it this way: “we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor 1:23b-24). And we know that Jesus was the one “who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men” (Phil 2:6-7). The one with the most power gives it up voluntarily to walk alongside us in our humanity. And Paul follows a similar pattern in 1 Corinthians. In chapter 9 he has talked about all the rights that he has given up for the sake of the gospel and then he says, “we did not use this
right [to monetary reward], but we endure all things, that we may cause no
hindrance to the gospel of Christ” (1 Cor 9:12). This too is our calling to live
and act and engage in life in such a way that nothing we do hinders the good
news of the gospel; the good news that Christ died for sinners, even for
those who might abuse the gifts that he has given them.

In this season of Lent when many of us have undergone the imposition
of ashes and heard the words, “You are dust and to dust you will return,” it
is good to also hear this reminder about power: “For none of us has life in
himself, and none becomes his own master when he dies. For if we have life,
we are alive in the Lord, and if we die, we die in the Lord. So, then, whether
we live or die, we are the Lord’s possession” (Rom 14:7-8). Ultimately, our
power is not ours and our call is to recognize that any power we have is given
to us as a gift from God to exercise in such a way that the good news of Christ
is not hindered by the way in which we use the power we possess.

**Discussion Questions**

1. Do you think of yourself as a person with power? Why or why not?

2. Are you aware of how you use your power? Are you alert to the potential
to abuse your power? Discuss.

3. Have you thought about intentional boundaries that might keep you
from intentionally (or unintentionally) abusing the power you have
because of your position?
Xiaoqiang and his wife Fen started a house church (Canaan Church) in their rented apartment in T City in northern China about two years ago. They themselves had come to the city for job opportunities not long ago. The Canaan Church started to grow almost immediately as they ministered among the migrant workers around them. In time, the Canaan Church grew so big that it had to split several times in order to accommodate the increasing attendance. Throughout the week, Xiaoqiang and Fen made itinerant visits to the churches they established. Today the Canaan Church has grown to more than twenty house churches with over 1,000 in regular attendance.

Canaan Church represents an emerging kind of church presence that is closely associated with China’s economic growth and urbanization process in recent years.Traditionally, churches in China were often categorized into two bodies, namely, the TSPM church and the House Church. TSPM is the government sanctioned organism that was created in the 1950s to supervising the affairs of the Protestant churches in China. All churches were then required to register with the TSPM. Those churches that have been registered with the TSPM since the early 1950s are then officially TSPM churches. The House Church represents those churches, home or community, small or large, that are not registered with the TSPM and are therefore subject to interference from state or local government. These two church bodies have grown separately and are responsible for 70-80 million baptized Christians.

In recently years, however, with the socio-economic change in China, the church body has become diversified. Christian presence has been more and more evident in multiple layers of society among the urban poor, intellectuals, artists, business circle, and even party members (cf. Aikman 2003:245-62). Stories of transformed lives and communities are often heard amidst news of persecution and prayer requests for imprisoned Christian leaders. Perceiving the future, three issues stand out that will be closely relevant to the church in China: Urbanization, Christian education, and registration.
Urbanization

Urbanization and economic growth in China has seen a phenomenal migration of rural population into the cities. Statistics show that more than 100 million young and adult from rural population have moved to urban areas since the 1980s when China adopted market economy policy. This has created both a crisis and opportunity. When young adult believers, including some in ministerial positions, had to leave for cities for job opportunities to support their families, rural churches inevitably experienced an immediate impact in all aspects of ministry: decreased attendance, inadequate pastoral care, and shortage on evangelistic teams.

On the other hand, this migrant Christian force can create, if not already, great opportunities in terms of the future of Christianity in China. At the moment, most urban churches, both the TSPM and house churches, seem to be limited in their ability to provide adequate care for the incoming rural believers. Cultural differences only add to the limitation. We have seen, however, cases of effective ministry established among the migrant community. Canaan Church is one of the examples. Typically, this kind of migrant church retains much of the rural church characteristics and is able to address the specific needs of the community. Missiologicaly speaking, migrant churches have the natural advantage of reaching their own, taking advantage of the natural affinity toward the migrant community. In the initial stage of development, migrant church community is growing slowly but steadily. In time, a significant Christian movement may well be ignited among the urban poor.

What's more, as some rural believers gradually settle in the urban churches, they bring with them fresh blood and vitality. Ripples of renewal may well extend through these rural believers to the urban churches.

Theological education

Both the TSPM and the House Church community are and will be in great need for more trained pastoral personnel to care for their increasing congregations. Since the 1980s, the thirteen TSPM seminaries have produced approximately 3,000 graduates, an obviously inadequate number contrasted to the 20 million members within the TSPM churches. The House Church community, on the other hand, especially in central China, started the intensive short-term training for pastoral and evangelistic ministry in the mid 1980s. In just three to six months the underground seminaries were able to graduate trained workers into Christian service (cf. Chao 1993:92). In urban area there are also some training centers that offer more formal seminary courses for students to undergo one to three years theological education.

The challenge for operating these underground seminaries, however, has been ever present. Above everything else, these underground seminaries do not have legal status and are therefore subject to opposition. Secondly, shortage
of qualified teachers has been a constant reality. A lot of the underground seminaries depend on overseas church and organization to supply teaching personnel, which has not been timely and reliable. Thirdly, coordination among the house church networks has not been as prevalent as desired. In recent years, however, a trans-regional coworkers’ meeting was established for the sake of coordinate ministry across the House Church community, which has helped in areas of underground seminary training.

How the churches, both the TSPM and House Church, respond to the challenges in theological education will be directly relevant to the total health of the Chinese Church. The House Church community has come to the realization, after years of very successful evangelistic effort in the pervasive rural China regions, that they need to consolidate the new churches through Christian education. Some house church networks have since been re-appropriating their workforce to meet the needs.

Returnees (those who studied in the West and were trained theologically) are making a great difference. They tend to attract urban young adult and educated group, taking advantage of the experience and training they received in the west. Overseas churches have helped and can continue to help in terms of supplementing training personnel and materials. It will be, however, a task primarily of the Chinese Church itself, that believers prayerfully find ways to meet their own needs for the best advancement of the kingdom work in China.

Registration

In official terms, registration means a house church gets legal status, is better guarded against false teachings, and receives better support in terms of Christian education. In the eyes of the House Church community, registration means restriction, limitation, and compromise. Historically, the House Church community has always been antagonistic toward the officially sanctioned TSPM church. One can trace the feud as far back as the beginning of the twentieth century when two Christian camps started to emerge onto the China scene: the Fundamentalists and the Modernists. When some from the Modernist camp settled in the newly created TSPM leadership in compliance with the new Communist government, while some from the Fundamentalist camp were persecuted and imprisoned for refusing to join the TSPM, the division became further widened. Today, even when the theological differences have already become much blurred with most of the first generation leaders from both camps gone, some house church leaders reject TSPM outright on the issue of registration. It becomes more complicated when a house church network, such as the Word of Life Church, has a trans-provincial membership of millions, with underground seminaries in operation in various areas of the country and trans-regional/provincial missionary activities.
Some smaller house church groups are trying out registration. One of the Little Flock church in southern China registered with the TSPM a few years ago and was granted permission to use the TSPM church facilities for worship and other ministry use. They have been able to retain much of their theological and ministerial tradition within their own community. Other urban house churches, without registering, cooperate with the local officials by means of participating in social charity work, making their presence and love felt in the community.

Conclusion

The Church in China has been through tough times and good times, particularly during the past century. History has witnessed how God graciously sustained his church even in the darkest period of time in history, and how believers followed the signs of the Spirit of God, identifying opportunities and responded in faith. In the perceivable future, the above discussed three issues are among some of the essential challenges as well as tasks that the Church needs to face squarely. How Chinese Christian meet the challenges and embrace the opportunities that have set before them for the sake of the gospel will make a great difference in the future development of the Church in China.

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Mission and Purpose

The principal mission of a Christian seminary is to serve the church (in both ecclesial and academic settings) by preparing students for effective ministry in their witness to the world of the resplendent love of the Father in giving the gift of the Son, a gift that is attested to and received by the presence of the Holy Spirit. By means of this mission, seminaries are necessarily committed to pursuing and expounding the truth of the Lordship of Christ (“For Jesus said, ‘I am the Way, the Truth and the Life’” [John 14:6]), a task that represents both corporate and personal endeavors, and ever includes not only transformation in being, in accordance with increasing Christ-likeness, but also the importance of speaking the truth in love. Indeed, plain speaking (“plain truth for plain people”) that is free, accurate and helpful has always been a part of the Wesleyan tradition.

In particular, Asbury Theological Seminary’s mission as a community called by God is “to prepare theologically educated, sanctified, Spirit-filled men and women to evangelize and to spread scriptural holiness throughout the world through the love of Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit and to the glory of God the Father.”

Scriptural holiness or the holy love of God and neighbor embraces both sound learning and vital piety, the life of mind and the heart of the soul. It has both personal depth, transforming the hearts of people, and social extent, revitalizing the communities in which they live. In inculcating scriptural holiness, a seminary actively and intentionally fosters the intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual health of its students, faculty, staff, administrators and trustees. Holiness, in other words, is holistic and is indicative of the balance and harmony that results from being in a proper relationship to both God and humanity. Accordingly, though Asbury Theological Seminary aims at the highest levels of academic excellence, it never considers such excellence to be sufficient preparation—apart from significant moral, spiritual, and emotional growth—for the increasing challenges of ministry in a complicated and hurting world.
Theological Reflection on Scriptural Holiness or “Holy Love”

Current word studies of the term “holy” reveal that it is the opposite of the word “profane” and that it, therefore, entails a movement of separation, precisely for the sake of purity. Such an understanding falls hard on contemporary ears with their preference for inclusion. During the twentieth century, however, Emil Brunner, Swiss dialectical theologian, expressed this same idea of separation in his observation, “The Holiness of God is therefore not only an absolute difference of nature, but it is an active self-differentiation, the willed energy with which God asserts and maintains the fact that He is Wholly other against all else.”

Or as the late Richard Taylor put it more recently, “there is a moral intensity in God’s holiness that makes tolerance of unholliness an impossibility.”

And yet love, on the other hand, involves a movement of revelation, engagement, and at its highest levels, communion. Again, love is outgoing, embracing, and inclusive. It is “the movement which goes-out-of-one’self, which stoops down to that which is below: it is the self-giving, the self-communication of God.” Consequently, as Wesley, Brunner, Taylor and others have known so well, the term “holy love” is not a simple and straightforward expression, but involves a conjunction that is expressed in the ideas of separation for the sake of purity and communion for the sake of love. Both therefore must be held in tension, not one to the neglect of the other. As such the best and most accurate summarizing word or phrase and Wesley’s ultimate hermeneutic is not love, as has sometimes been argued, but holy love.

Secondly, just as holiness informs love, so too love informs holiness. Indeed, according to Wesley, “no true Christian holiness can exist without the love of God for its foundation.” Thus, in his sermon, “The Witness of the Spirit, I” Wesley maintains that we must love God first “before we can be holy at all; this being the root of holiness.” And this love of God that is so intimately connected to holiness, giving it form, is implanted in human hearts and is evident among the community of the faithful through the gracious agency of the Holy Spirit. That is, believers are “led into every holy desire, into every divine and heavenly temper,” Wesley points out, by the Holy Spirit who “sheds the love of God abroad in their hearts, and the love of all mankind.”

Identity and Mission: Dynamically Related

Asbury Theological Seminary has its identity in undertaking its distinct mission. By way of analogy, the seminary is not a noun but a verb. That is, its essence is comprehended in the love of God manifested in the worship of the Most High, and in service to others. The kenotic passage of Philippians 2:6-8 charts the way, and reveals the substance of that service in both humility
and love. In one sense, humility entails not only lowliness but also being open to giving love to and receiving love from all people. As such this grace, this mark of mature Christians, listens to and genuinely hears “the other.”

Precisely because of the meekness of Christ, His taking on the form of a servant, the gospel necessarily highlights the universal love of God and neighbor. Therefore the constitution of a seminary community (in terms of trustees, faculty, staff, and students) as well as the constituencies it serves will be inclusive and diverse representing the broad reach of humanity.

Since all people bear the *imago dei*, their dignity and preeminent worth do not utterly arise out of their particular group identifications, but emerge out of a consideration of the relation of men and women to a God of holy love. Indeed, implicit in the *imago dei* are the elements of accountability, responsibility, and other-directedness. God has created humanity, in other words, through Christ as those beings made for a relationship with the Most High and with others through the presence of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the members of a community who bear the impress of the divine being will watch over one another in love, foster a Christ-like spirit, and exercise care and judgment in all of their service.

**Theological Reflection: Universality of the Gospel**

Seminaries may rightly rejoice in their diversity and appreciate all the many cultural variations in their midst, for they are greatly enriched in many ways by such diversity. They, nevertheless, do not find their unity in their diverse populations nor in some ideological script that makes diversity itself the over-arching value, but in Jesus Christ whose Lordship is the highest value, transcending particular group identifications, and through whom the community enjoys “one faith, one hope, one baptism.”

Reacting against a few of the maxims of the Enlightenment, some recent trends in postmodernism have suggested that little basis exists for affirming common elements in the human community. Various group identities that are informed by ethnicity, race, socio-economic status, religion, sexual orientation, and language are supposed to create structures of affiliation and identity that make a universal narrative for humanity virtually impossible. Beyond the logical contradiction of maintaining that all grand narratives are henceforth precluded, a claim that actually functions as yet another universal script, some current postmodern perspectives not only fail to grapple seriously with what common elements actually remain in human communities (such existential concerns as “guilt, the question of meaning, and death”), but they also fail to appreciate how religion in general or Christianity in particular actually functions in human lives.

Though some even in the church today encourage members of their congregations to draw their identity largely from their particular group
commitments, and in doing so call this the “gospel,” such a move in the end is largely divisive and does not represent the genius of a gospel ethic. Mistaking a particular polarity (whether poor/rich or black/white) as the locus of valuation, thereby making it virtually ultimate, such an approach fails to see the “evil” in one population—among the poor, for example—or what good characterizes the “rich.” Nor is such an analysis improved by substituting any of the other popular polarities (female/male for example) if they become, once again, the very center of valuation. Granted universal Christian values will be, and should be, expressed in a culturally specific manner, but the form of that expression should never take priority over being a “new people” in Jesus Christ who remains the common and celebrated Lord of the community of faith.

Beyond critiquing the sectarianism and factionalism of the polarizing approaches that are so popular today at educational institutions, the gospel indicates to the consternation of some postmodernists that a universal dimension does indeed remain in the human community regardless of different social locations. Men and women, black or white, rich or poor are best defined not in terms of the provincial groups in which they participate, but with respect to their relation to a God of holy love. Thus, to call poor people sinners, which by the way John Wesley often did, is not to detract from their dignity as human beings (as some leaders in mainline denominations claim today) but is actually to affirm it. That is, such a judgment reveals that the most important thing about human beings is not their economic status, no matter how severe it may be, but that they are beings made for God, created to enjoy a relation with the Most High marked by the richest love. Put another way, all human beings, regardless of their group commitments, are united in their sin; they are also, therefore, joined in their need for grace. Again, the gospel is universal, despite some postmodern protests to the contrary, and it has a word of hope and liberation for all people. The narrative of God’s reconciling action in Jesus Christ (neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female) does not mistake what is penultimate (such as ethnicity, race, economic status etc.) and make it ultimate.

The Variegated Nature of Seminaries

Theological seminaries are not the church per se but are institutions, parachurch structures, which serve the Body of Christ. Simply put, a seminary is not the local church, and to treat it as such is to fail to recognize the distinct promise that such an institution holds for both leadership and service. Nevertheless seminaries are composed of a community of Christian believers united, among other things, by worship, participation in the sacraments, and by a statement of faith. As such, seminaries are multi-dimensional institutions that integrate ecclesial, spiritual, and academic purposes. A seminary becomes
unbalanced when it fails to hold all of these elements in their proper place or when its structures of governance do not evidence the mutuality and concern of responsible, accountable leadership at every level.

Seminaries are made up of members whose function in the institution is distinct (trustees, administrators, faculty, staff and students) but who are united in the goals of theological education. A seminary community must, therefore, be governed by leaders who understand the complex nature of the institution, its many levels and dimensions, and who are able, therefore, to think in terms of a number of different frameworks. Ongoing study by seminary leaders with respect to the nature of theological education is therefore vital.

**Theological Reflection: The Apostle Paul’s Analogy of the Body**

Just as a seminary is a multi-faceted institution in its labors, so also is it composed of people who serve the institution in a variety of ways, in accordance with clearly defined roles.

The analogy of the body, utilized by the Apostle Paul to affirm the interdependent nature of the church while confronting mentalities of divisiveness and superiority, readily comes to mind. In 1 Corinthians 12 Paul reasons:

12 Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. 13 For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. ..18 But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. 19 If they were all one part, where would the body be? 20 As it is, there are many parts, but one body.

(TNIV).

In the same way, the seminary community is marked by one Spirit, that of Jesus Christ who is the Head of the body, and He unites the various organs in their service. Again, just as the organs of the body, in fulfilling their distinct roles are united, a part of a unity that transcends them, so too the members of a seminary community, connected in so many ways by the life-giving arteries of grace and love, are united in their common mission of serving Jesus Christ. Such service occurs in the context of differentiation of function and is informed by responsibility, accountability, and mutuality.

By way of analogy, under healthy conditions the cells of an organ are in communication with the other cells in their immediate environment. The cues offered are both chemical (proteins) and physical (membrane ruffling). Now when cells of a particular organ of the body, let’s say the lungs, sever themselves from the community and are no longer a part of the cellular communication system, things quickly go awry. As Natalie Angier points out, “A cancer cell is a cell that is deaf to the chemical tutelage around it and indifferent to the slings and ruffles of its neighbors.” These aberrant, “self-
willed” cells set about to do the work of cells heedless of the information and response of other members in the environment. Their task is simply to divide, divide, divide until, if left unchecked, the cancerous cells not only destroy organs, but the entire body as well.

In the similar way, the gracious harmony of a seminary community is torn asunder, when particular cells of an organ fail to receive the communication of other members of the environment. With the loss of communication comes the loss of genuine community as well—and the larger good it serves.

**Our Particular Theological Tradition**

Asbury Theological Seminary represents the best of the Wesleyan-Holiness, Evangelical tradition. It is mindful of the past, of the legacy of tradition, and open to the future, that is, to the challenges of an international community in the twenty-first century.

Though the seminary is one of the principal institutional guardians of the Wesleyan-Holiness, Evangelical tradition, it remains ecumenical in outlook and drinks deeply of a broad and rich catholic spirit. It clearly recognizes that vibrant Christian communities exist in other traditions, denominations, and parachurch structures. The seminary and its leaders, therefore, will be in dialog with other theological institutions in order to understand the current challenges of theological education in a thoroughgoing way and to be ready to profit from the wisdom and counsel of others.

**Theological Reflection: Wesley’s Sermon, “The Catholic Spirit”**

In his sermon “The Catholic Spirit,” Wesley maintains that love is due to all humanity, but a special love is warranted for those who love God. Two hindrances that sometimes prevent this love, resulting in various levels of narrowness, self-isolation, and in the worse cases outright bigotry, are differences with respect to both thought and practice. That is, in the church, constituted as it is by several communions of faith, believers will not all think alike, having various opinions that do not strike at the heart of the faith, nor will they all engage in the same modes of worship.

Given such diversity, in this sermon Wesley does not recommend either speculative or a practical latitudinarianism. Unsettledness in thought and practice (especially in terms of worship) is not a blessing but a curse. A truly catholic person, then, is as “fixed as the sun” in his or her judgment of fundamental truths, distinguishes essentials from opinions, and extends the hand of fellowship in love to all whose hearts are right with God. In other words, believers can be firm in their judgments while recognizing that other real Christians, animated by the love of Christ, yet differ both in thought and practice.

In a similar way, Asbury Theological Seminary, representing a distinct
tradition in the universal church, can prosper by being in an appropriate relationship with seminaries of other theological traditions since all—when viewed in their best sense—share common goals. A spirit of humility, marked by love and teachableness, should therefore characterize the leadership of these institutions as they dialog with one another in their service of Jesus Christ.

The Importance of Narratives that Inform Mission

Wesleyan seminaries are orthodox communities that seek to embody a Trinitarian understanding of God in their daily life and practices. The Christian Godhead whereby three distinct persons are one, and whereby the mutual relations of love characterize the divine being, should inform the seminary’s life in general and its structures of governance in particular. Put another way, each person of the Trinity is other-directed and is ecstatic (in the best sense of the word) in loving and celebrating the other. Such mutual relations are marked by humility (openness to love) and the richest expressions of love in celebrating the other. And in terms of the relation of the Trinity to humanity, what theologians call the “economic” trinity, the Father freely gives the gift of the Son; the Son delights in being given, and the Spirit attests to the precious gift that is Jesus Christ. Here then is not the reign of self-will but an outpouring, a generous giving of the divine being, for the sake of humanity in an embracing, inclusive love.

In light of these preceding theological understandings, seminaries must be governed in such a way that the love of God manifested in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit is and remains the central narrative of the community. This narrative is held in place by the pre-eminent and normative authority of Scripture which is received by the Wesleyan community of faith, reflected upon by reason, and fleshed out in vital Christian experience. Accordingly, the seminary must take special care that the gospel of grace that animates and gives substance to her vision is actualized in structures of governance that are in harmony with that vision.

Other narratives from social science, the business community, and academia, for example, are vital to seminaries and should be consulted but such stories are always secondary. What is called for, then, on the part of the seminary community is a critical appropriation of the insights from a diversity of sources whereby the gospel of the universal love of God and neighbor remains the normative pattern.

A seminary runs the risk of having its stated purpose and mission weakened, if not undermined, by elevating a secondary narrative and making it the principal script of the institution. For example, though seminaries obviously have business and financial dimensions, to carve the institution principally along these lines (whereby students are deemed “consumers” and faculty and staff are considered “employees”) is to fail to take into account the
spiritual and ecclesial dimensions through which students, faculty and staff view their own labors as the gracious and divinely empowered exercise of a “vocation.”

Moreover, the structures of governance that are created by the seminary must be in harmony with its identity and mission as a servant of Jesus Christ who is the one, supreme, head of the community. Indeed, a community that testifies to the beauty of holy love in its highest expression of entire sanctification should be marked by the gracious behaviors and practices that are consonant with this witness.

**Summary of Theological Elements Necessary for the Governance of Seminaries**

Christ-like governance at a seminary entails the following elements:

- Attentiveness to the mutual relations of love that characterize the Trinity and that should be emblematic of vibrant Christian communities
- Lowliness and service to others in spreading scriptural holiness, in inculcating holy love
- Recognition of the universal love of God manifested in Christ through the Holy Spirit as well as the dangers of being diverted into egoism, sectarianism or a party spirit.
- Understanding that in the fulfillment of its mission a seminary is multi-dimensional in function and diverse in population and constituency
- Given such diversity, care has to be taken that the seminary does not forsake its *common* mission nor the universality of the gospel itself.
- In a similar fashion, the genius of the Wesleyan Theological tradition, in particular, must be held in a catholic spirit and one that is animated by the love of Christ. This is evidenced by dialog with other institutions.
- The principal narrative of the love of the Father in giving the gift of the Son and attested to by the Holy Spirit that informs the seminary must be intentionally held and fostered by trustees, faculty, staff, and students. Otherwise some other narrative will be unintentionally held and could possibly skew the mission of the seminary.
- Responsibility and accountability at every level of governance (since all are servants of a risen Lord); teachableness in receiving and developing the gifts and talents of others; and a bracketing out of self-interest and provincial concerns in order to pursue the larger good of the institution in its witness to a God of holy love—all of these elements represent appropriate ways in which a seminary can and should pursue its goals.
Conclusion

A theology of governance from a Wesleyan-Holiness Evangelical perspective underscores the goodness of divine authority that is mediated to the servants of the body of Christ. Only those who are and remain *servants* are a part of the community that is knit together by the cords of accountability, responsibility, and gracious affection. As stewards of the gifts that find their source not in human attainment but in the beneficence of God, all servants of the seminary community, whether trustees, administrators, faculty, staff, students, or alumni will seek to grow in those graces, especially humility and love, that will help them to keep their eyes focused upon the love of the Father, the grace of the Son and the enabling power of the Holy Spirit as they actualize the mission of the seminary.

Moreover, a theology of governance from a Wesleyan vantage point is realistic and critical enough to offer suitable checks and responsible balances when either individuals or groups, at any level of the seminary’s institutional life, seek to pursue their own self-referential will as if it were the general good of the seminary. In such instances various levels of pretense may have to be unraveled in the name and for the sake of holy love. Egoism, a party spirit, and power seeking have no place in a community that glorifies and celebrates a crucified Lord. This vital truth must constantly be brought before the community in the pulpit, classroom, and boardroom.

It is therefore incumbent upon the seminary to craft and articulate polices of governance that will operationalize these important truths in particular practices—practices that can and should be measured in terms of clear biblical and theological principles. In this way, greater light will be focused on the labors of the community, especially in terms of mutual relations, such that the larger good of the seminary, that is, spreading scriptural holiness throughout the world, will thereby be fostered through the witness, the very life, of the gracious and peaceful community itself.
In a book that reads like the thesis it once was (submitted to Liverpool Hope University), Donald Bullen attempts to argue that John Wesley came to Scripture with a theology already formed in his mind, drawn nearly exclusively from his supposed High Church Anglican upbringing. Developing some of the insights of Reader-Response criticism, whereby the social location of the reader is given significant weight in the interpretation of Scripture, Bullen maintains that Wesley actually brought to the Bible the beliefs that he later claimed to have found there. Such an judgment is problematic in at least two ways: first of all, though High Church Anglicanism did indeed help to shape the contours of Wesley’s theology, other traditions such as Moravianism, Puritanism and German Pietism were nearly equally as significant. However, in a very flat reading of the diversity of traditions that actually streamed into Wesley’s theological judgments, Bullen plops down on High Church Anglicanism and sees little else. What emerges then is at best a caricature of Wesley.

Second, though Bullen claims Reader-Response critics for his cause, they actually approach the interpretative task with far more sophistication than he does. To illustrate, Bullen views the arrow of interpretive influence in one direction only: that is, Wesley brought to the Bible his traditional understandings from Epworth and Oxford but Scripture brought to him virtually nothing, its voice having been effectively silenced by an overweening heritage. However, more sophisticated and dynamic conceptions of the interpretive process view the arrow of influence in a bi-directional way. Yes, Wesley was a part of a particular interpretive community (far more broad than merely High Church Anglicanism) but he was also influenced by Scripture (and the Holy Spirit speaking through Scripture) in a way that challenged at times his own received tradition. All of this, however, is missed by Bullen with the result that he argues Wesley’s basic approach to the Bible was one of *eisegesis* rather than exegesis. A further consequence of this line of reasoning (which is not fully
acknowledged by Bullen) can only be that tradition, not Scripture itself, was actually the norm, the lodestar of Wesley’s thought and practice, thereby turning the father of Methodism’s claim of being a man of one book utterly on its head.

After laying out his basic (and problematic) thesis, Bullen then scours recent Wesley scholarship to determine if it shares his own reading of Wesley with respect to Scripture. Naturally such scholarship does not, and for some very good reasons, for Bullen has a distorted view of the proper use of the genuine insights of Reader-Response criticism. At this point, however, Bullen’s work takes a sharp polemical turn and he accuses both Wesley and his biographers of “having created a smokescreen that obscures as least some of the truth about the man and his work.” In order for this argument to be credible Bullen should have mastered the secondary literature of Wesley scholarship such that an accurate and fair assessment of this body of literature would emerge. This is something, however, that Bullen repeatedly failed to do. Not only is the scholarship of the late Albert Outler found wanting in this very contrived scheme (“In the references to the Wesley Quadrilateral Outler did not offer any extensive comment on Wesley’s indebtedness to the Anglican Church within the context of his formative years and his allegiance to that Church in later days.”) but also my own work is inaccurately represented. Indeed, few have argued more vigorously that Wesley was a Western theologian (influenced by his own Anglican tradition as well as by Pietism and Puritanism) than I, but apparently this is not enough for Bullen. Nor does he recognize that I have affirmed the significant influence of the Epworth rectory on Wesley’s understanding of Scripture in my work, John Wesley: A Theological Journey as is so evident in the following: “Every morning at the Epworth rectory, for example, the Wesley family read psalms as well as chapters from the Old and New Testaments, the household being filled with the Word, the very sounds of salvation.” To be sure, Bullen has taken so little care to understand the contributions of Wesley scholars that he dogmatically insists that I am an elder in the Free Methodist Church though I have been an elder in the United Methodist Church for about a decade! In a similar fashion, Bullen’s treatment of the writings of other scholars is equally problematic and remarkably patchy. It’s little more than a broad stroke assessment when great care and sophisticated nuances should have ruled the day.

For all these reasons and more I cannot recommend this book to my doctoral students in Wesley studies nor even to a broader audience, except of course as a negative example of scholarship. If time is limited, it would be much better spent reading, John Wesley’s Conception and Use of Scripture by Bishop Scott Jones.
Relational Holiness: Responding to the Call of Love
Thomas Jay Oord and Michael Lodahl
Reviewed by Kenneth J. Collins

Nazarene professors Thomas Oord and Michael Lodahl (who by the way are related) intend to change present-day perceptions of holiness in their book Relational Holiness. Arguing that the classical terms of holiness such as “Christian perfection,” “entire sanctification,” “the second blessing,” and baptism of the Holy Spirit” no longer seize the imaginations of many people, these scholars attempt to rethink the traditional language of holiness and to present the core of the Christian message in new ways in order to seize our hearts and imaginations.

To be sure, the careful contextualization of Wesley’s own language and that of later Methodism with respect to holiness is needed for subsequent ages and for diverse locales. However, in this worthy project Oord and Lodahl essentially end up with a definition of holiness that in our estimation does not properly encapsulate Wesley’s own best thinking on the matter. For though Wesley considered simplicity and purity to be the essence of Christian holiness, Oord and Lodahl reject this understanding, judging it to be static and not relational enough, and they therefore prefer to maintain that “love is the heart of holiness.”

Granted holiness is intimately connected to love in the best of Wesleyan theologies but the two terms are not virtually identical as Oord and Lodahl seem to suggest. Otherwise we would end up with a basic tautology along the lines that love (holiness) equals love. But holiness actually brings something to the phrase “holy love” that the simple mention of the term love does not. Put another way, this current re-visioning of holiness language unravels Wesley’s key conjunction of holy/love decidedly in the favor of the latter. But the tension of the conjunction is best left in place: holiness entails separation for the sake of purity and beauty; love entails the embrace of communion. On the one hand, if holiness were understood apart from the outgoing love of God that ever seeks fellowship and communion, then it could easily become the bricks and mortar of an all too human, dour religion in which separation for the sake of purity would lead to isolation and indifference. On the other hand, if love were conceived apart from holiness then it would likely become soft, naively wishful and largely self-indulgent. Simply put, holiness apart from love is a consuming fire, but love apart from holiness is cheap.

Yet another difficulty with Relational Holiness is that it reads Wesley and the later tradition utterly within a synergistic paradigm of divine/human cooperation. This, however, is to offer readers simply the “Catholic” or “Eastern
Orthodox” Wesley. That is, such a view represents, once again, only half of the conjunction because Wesley also underscored the sheer gratuity of grace, the gifts of God alone, especially in his articulation of free grace, in a way similar to what many Protestants before him had done.

Despite these criticisms, I must conclude that Relational Holiness is an important work in that it will undoubtedly spark a lively conversation that at this point in the life of Wesleyan communions is sorely needed.

Seized by Truth: Reading the Bible as Scripture
Joel B. Green
2007 Nashville: Abingdon Press
Reviewed by Kenneth J. Collins

During the early twentieth-century Karl Barth opened up for the Christian community “the strange new world” of the Bible in part by culling some of the insights of the Protestant Reformers, especially Luther. Today in our twenty-first century postmodern context Joel Green, professor of New Testament at Fuller Theological Seminary, has performed a similar service by displaying the evocative, world-creating power of the Bible when it is approach as Scripture. Such a reading represents a theological judgment about the nature of the Old and New Testaments, and the essential character of the division between the world of the Bible and our own is therefore not so much historical, as biblical criticism has led us to believe, but theological. Put another way, the approach, the openness that we bring to the Bible, that is, the willingness to inhabit its strange new world, is decisive.

The participatory approach to the Bible that Green articulates means not only must the text be properly exegeted using the best resources available but also the very narratives of our lives must be called into account as they are caught up in the larger story of Scripture. Given this engaging and challenging perspective two mistaken readings of the Bible are possible: the first from the theological left; the other from the theological right.

The first misstep, hailing from the Enlightenment, takes the useful tools of higher criticism but then employs them in a scientific, rational and utterly objective way such that a reading of the Bible as Scripture is never in the offing. As Green points out, “three hundred years of biblical studies and the last century of educational priorities generally work against reading the Bible in just this way—as Scripture.” Here an overweening concern with method and epistemology, which place the autonomous self at the center of the knowing process, results interestingly enough in an anemic view of learning. Simply put, an utterly objective approach to the Bible eliminates at the outset
the kinds of engaging, participatory and life-changing truths that a full-orbed and more generous approach would allow.

The second error, found among some evangelicals and many fundamentalists, is to limit the full range of the Bible’s power, especially in terms of spiritual and existential truth, by focusing simply or predominantly on its propositional content. That is, the facts of the Bible stated in clear propositions (and in accordance with the correspondence theory of truth) becomes the chief reading strategy here where appropriate cues are taken not from the nature of the Bible itself but form philosophical rationalism. However, just as the best methods of higher criticism do not necessarily guarantee reading the Bible as Scripture, especially if they are heedless of the attitudes that readers actually bring to the text, so too a carefully delineated objectivist and rationalistic epistemology does not guarantee reading the Bible as Scripture. In fact, such an epistemology may actually leave readers very much alone, self-encased in their own theoretical reason, unable to be addressed and called into account by the evocative and uncanny voice of the Bible.

In light of these mistaken readings, Green calls for greater attention to the perspective that we bring to the task of reading the Bible. Indeed, in the end it is not so much that we must translate an ancient message into a contemporary idiom, as Bultmann and other biblical critics had suggested. Rather it is that we ourselves must be open and willing to have the Bible translate us into its powerful narrative whereby all things become new. Simply put, it is not that the message of the Bible requires transformation but that we require transformation. And Green’s helpful, engaging and very readable book reveals just why this is so.
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