It has been suggested that Methodists are short on theology and long on good works. Some react angrily to this and others respond with pride. John Wesley knew that the relationship between faith and works can be constructive or it can be misused. He spoke of one man whose ethical measurements were decidedly narrow on both faith and practice. He writes in his journal, "I talked with one [who] by the advice of his pastor very calmly and deliberately beat his wife with a large stick till she was black and blue from head to foot. It was his duty so to do, so he said, because she was surly and ill-natured and that he was full of faith all the time he was doing it and had been ever since." Now that's the sort of thing John Wesley faced. I pray that you shall never have to.

On a surface reading, Wesley has appeared to focus on warm-hearted experience to the neglect of reflective thinking, but in reality he tested experience by an intensive examination of its validity through Scripture, tradition, and reason. Most of you are aware of the Wesley quadrilateral — Scripture, reason, tradition, experience — and the way in which Scripture challenges these other criteria of evaluation and authority as well as the ways in which Scripture can be interpreted and illuminated through these sources. Few, however, recognize that Wesley, that man of evangelical zeal, was also such a thinker of profound and sturdy proportions. This led him to an extensive cross-examination of life's issues in which Scripture, interpreted by a hermeneutic of love with a tough-minded commitment to its teaching and always alert to the analogy of faith, is set alongside tradition and reason to assess the contours and direction of experience.

Wesley, however, was a good theologian of a somewhat different bent than the classical figures who created their Summas, their
Wesley: Theology of the Moral Life

Sentences, or their Dogmatics. Outler has described him as a folk theologian. I would choose to call him a theologian of the Christian life or moral life. He was continually aware of the ways in which the church impacts the world and the world impacts the church. He recognized the way in which the world changes the church until the world becomes the transformer of the church, rather than the church the transformer of the world.

I do not want to de-emphasize here his commitment to orthodoxy or doctrine in order to magnify his emphasis on Christian practice, but I believe it is true that his reflective life centered upon the ordering of ethical priorities, offering principles for living, addressing social issues and so on. In his mind holiness is fleshed out more in social life, than in contemplative life. The context for practicing holy living is found in the world where people practice selfish living, where the sick are found, where the prisoners, the enslaved, the unjust, or those who shape society are located. Wesley argued against the "holy solitary," the one who goes away from the world in order to make his or her peace with God, for he suggests that the holy solitary is as much an anomaly as a holy adulterer. Some people are surprised that Wesley placed this statement about social holiness in the preface to his and Charles' collection of Hymns and Sacred Poems published in 1739. I believe this shows that the spiritual life and the earthly, common life linked together are part of the fabric of human wholeness as far as Wesley was concerned. I believe it also signals that at an early stage in his theology he adjusted his ethical priorities from the Catholic conception of love forming faith to the Protestant concept of faith which works through love, so that faith comes first and love flows out from faith.

In any event, Wesley is concerned not to develop a one-sided, imbalanced emphasis on any aspect of the faith. In recent years Wesley's view of the order of salvation, in which prevenient grace initiates confession and repentance and leads to salvation, sanctification, and glorification, has been questioned by some persons. They have argued against Wesley's use of the ordo salutis because they claim there is no adequate place in it for the doctrine or theology of creation. But by the use of the doctrine of ordo salutis, one finds a way from one stage of salvation to the next. By using that, Wesley preserves us from becoming sectarian in our interests so that we only focus upon one theological stance or position. This shows that all of life is linked together by interconnecting sinews, and so it is possible
to avoid the damage inherent in some theologies when they are removed from the whole pattern of salvation. We in the Wesleyan heritage have not escaped the problems which flow from the distortions and imbalance from theological interpretation.\(^4\)

**The Moral Life**

I would like to consider more specifically the ways in which Wesley works out his concept of the Christian life, the moral life of a Christian. I claim it may be done through the development of trinitarian theological ethics in which there is a focus upon God as creator who has created us in His image with the ability to perceive what is right and wrong, with the power of conscience, and with the gift of perception that natural law, conscience and reason make possible. In other words, we are able to understand some things despite the deprivations of the Fall. We are able to perceive what it means to do what is right and good. We are not without guidance in this dark world. Wesley follows this theology of creation with a Christological concept which focuses on salvation, grace, the imitation of Christ, the reconciliation of human life, of humanity before God, and reconciliation between ourselves and others in the world.

Further, I assert that Wesley's ethics contains a pneumatological dimension; it is an ethics of the Holy Spirit. He develops very profoundly the Christian dynamic for social transformation. It is clear that if we want to live as Christians in the world, we must have the power which enables us to live out the meaning of the Christian life in the world.

**Ethics of Creation**

Consider now the ethics of creation in line with the delineation of the Apostle's Creed: "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth." An ethics of creation, an ethics of the first person or the Father, is so-called because it focuses upon what God has done for us in the creation. God Himself exists as the one holy sovereign God of all creation. God has established the moral universe wherein His holiness is regulative of every relationship. Man is the centerpiece of that universe (I speak of Man as male and female).

Wesley does speculate about the great chain of being, but his real interest is in the sphere of human conduct under divine superintendence and providence. The concept of the creation in the image
of God is important for Wesley, and it is a principle that shapes his theological ethics throughout his life. Never, even in his most negative assessment of Man, does Wesley forget the gift of God in creation. It is impossible to be faithful to Wesley’s theology and to consider Man as being worthless, or a worm, or having a life which is meaningless. It is necessary for us to appeal to his doctrine of prevenient grace as the principle by which he insists that, though the Fall has come and we have all lost the moral image of God, the righteousness of God in us, there remains in us a depth of human value that cannot be eroded by the Fall. Anyone who appeals to the Fall of humankind to diminish human value is not appealing to Wesley or to Wesleyan thought, for despite the loss of so much in the Fall, we are not deprived of the image of God. God is holy. Holiness describes absolute worthfulness. We have lost God’s righteousness but, still bearing the image of God in freedom, rationality and government, we possess worthfulness beyond our imagination because we remain the creatures of God. The concept of *imago Dei*, or the image of God, describes humanity’s constituent reality.

In your theological studies you may have encountered the concept of the Roman Catholic Church that God created Man, male and female, in their full humanity and then subsequently added grace to them, the principle of *donum super additum*. The Wesleyan heritage (you may discover this in the Methodist theologians of the nineteenth century) developed the principle that God did not add the Holy Spirit or righteousness to our basic humanity but that righteousness is part of that humanity. In the loss of the Holy Spirit, or what James Arminius described as the privation of the Holy Spirit, we lost moral righteousness but we have not lost that which God granted us in terms of human value and worth.

What is it in Wesleyan theology that holds us before God in value, meaning, and worth? It is the doctrine of prevenient grace. Without grace we would have forfeited the value given to us in creation, but now because of prevenient grace all that God gave in creation is reaffirmed. Prevenient grace begins the drive toward the perfection which God gave and intended in the creation. Prevenient grace picks us up where we have fallen and bears us along toward the goal. The ethical significance of the concept of prevenient grace suggests the affirmation of the goodness of creation. Grace affirms fallen humanity. Grace affirms the value of deprived and depraved human life. Grace promises restoration. Holiness was forfeited, but we shall
be made new by faith in Jesus Christ. Human abilities were impaired. Grace renews and sanctifies. Even the earth, groaning under its inexplicable subjection to suffering because of humanity’s self-enslavement, will again know the liberty of the children of God (Romans 8). Grace proposes all the potential for value which sinfulness diminished and threatened but could not destroy because, as we believe, grace is stronger than sin.

Now in the concept of a theocentric or theological ethics, one may focus upon natural law, the way by which one understands what ought to be done, the power of reason to sort out what is right and wrong for us in life, and what is expected of us under God. The gift of conscience is an aspect of a theological ethics by which we are able to perceive the lines of moral direction for our lives. This does not mean we understand perfectly what we ought to do, but we understand enough in order to develop a moral life even outside of salvation. It is possible for an ethical style to be developed in persons outside Jesus Christ because natural law is an operative force in our universe and because all mankind is graced with the gift of conscience. Since it is possible for those outside Jesus Christ to develop an ethical style and understanding, which strives toward social transformation, surely it is far more the case that Christian believers have in their hands the power to change the world.

From the perspective of personal ethics, the implications which flow from Wesley’s understanding of natural law and conscience are as follows: Persons are conscious of the quality of their thoughts and deeds, and are morally responsible for that which they know. At the level of theological ethics, Wesley would insist on the recurrent failure of humanity to adhere to the right way even when it is clearly known. In the undergirding of prevenient grace lies a possibility for pursuing the goals of goodness revealed by the insights of conscience. In the sphere of political ethics, the claim is made that individual conscience perceives its inherent dignity and priority over the will of the state, the church, or other extraneous powers, significant as they may be. Above all of these, the conscience answers to God. That is a Wesleyan stance and it is an assertion of the exalted possibilities in humanity and of the denigrations which occur to persons when the right of conscience is denied. It is impossible for us to be the truly human beings that God has called us to be when someone else deprives us of the right of life and liberty. That’s the kind of argument Wesley developed so profoundly in his attack against slavery when
Wesley: Theology of the Moral Life

he said it is impossible both for the slave and the slaveholder to be truly human when they exist in that kind of relationship. You can't develop your humanity when you are enslaved, when something keeps from you the freedom to worship God. Wesley will even go so far as to say that even if you are wrong in following conscience — even if conscience is so distorted that it misunderstands the way to go — you and I do not have the right to coerce someone else against conscience. But we have the right and the mandate to teach them the right way to correct their confusion of conscience.

Ethics of Salvation

In Christological ethics, Wesley is primarily concerned with the question of grace and salvation. When he speaks of grace, he is suggesting that the ethical possibilities for humanity after the Fall were sharply changed. Christian ethics reaffirms the promise of creation ethics. Christian ethics is grounded in the grace of God revealed through Jesus Christ who is the Way, the Truth, and Life and through whom came grace and truth (John 1:17).

While creation began with the divine initiative and the raw material of the universe came by His command, the soteriological process began with a different product. Now defaced and defiled, rebellious and discordant, humanity requires another act of God. The saving acts of God are consummated in Jesus Christ. In Christ, the totality of human experience is recapitulated, but whether with creation or salvation the initiative belongs to God whose will is made known to us to the end that we may assume our moral responsibility. Persons are no less morally responsible because of the Fall, although Adam sought to shift the blame from himself to Eve (a recurrent pattern in our history) and to God. God confirms the guilt of Adam and Eve and affirms that Man is morally sensitive and responsible. Emil Brunner has taught us: God speaks to us, and we respond. “Adam, where are you,” and Adam says, “we hid from you?” Alone among the creatures, man is spoken to and responds. He is responsible.

In Christological ethics there is the concept of faith which works through love. The theme is of primary interest. Wesley said in his “Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion” that he had a few favorite tenets that he expressed. Wesley believed that the principle of faith which works through love is a key principle. As you know he adopted that from the Epistle to the Galatians. He declares that “in
Christ Jesus," the thing that counts is faith which works through love. The "in Christ Jesus" gives this whole dimension its Christological reference. Wesley shows us both the priority of evangelical faith and the subsequent certainty that faith nurtures and is nurtured in love. First faith, then love. Faith is energized in love or works through love. I would like us to consider how this worked out in Wesley's own experience. The theological pilgrimage of Wesley provides a continuing company of fellow travellers with a fascinating example of autobiography as theological reflection. Our effort points up the way in which Wesley's theology linked the life of faith, justification and sanctification together with the life of service and love to mankind. In other words, his theology and his ethics are inseparable.

Wesley's union of theology and social ethics is demonstrated with clarity in the way in which he worked out the Christian life in his own experience. More precisely, an understanding of his doctrine of sanctification brings to light the living connection between the holy life lived before God and the neighbor. To Wesley the Christian life is summed up in a convergence of the love of God and man loved by God. He summed up the doctrine of Christian perfection as loving God with all of the heart and soul and mind and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourself. To be a Christian is to be immersed in the life of God and the experience of our neighbor. To choose between the vertical and horizontal dimensions, either to love God or to love Man, is not an option. For life lived for God is always an earthly life — an incarnation of God in the believer in the world. Wesley was unwilling to divorce faith and ethics. His manner of working out their connections provides us with a personal, existential portrait of a person who labored to realize the whole duty of man, to flesh out this realization in human relationships.

The study of Wesley's theology and ethics makes poignantly clear the early link between his Catholic theology and social ethics and the later ties between his evangelical theology and his social ethics. To state it differently, Wesley's social ethics was never separated from his theology of Christian perfection. There is, however, a difference in the priority followed in working out this relationship. It is not, I believe, an oversimplification to suggest that this may be schematized into "before Aldersgate" and "after Aldersgate." What this means is that after 1738 Wesley saw the relationship between faith and ethics in a different way. Before Aldersgate, Wesley's
Wesley: Theology of the Moral Life

approach was essentially Catholic. After it, the relationship was perceived in an evangelical sense. Now lest this appear to be a matter of theological semantics — an ivory tower exercise in beating the air — we must indicate the practical significance of the question. Wesley’s belief prior to Aldersgate had the practical effect of shaping his relationship by faith to God and to Man (social ethics). Before Aldersgate, Wesley’s social ethics grew out of a deep concern to save his own soul. After Aldersgate, he was motivated by the power of a new affection and gave himself to others out of the love that he came to know in Christ. Before Aldersgate, he sought sanctification apart from the grace of justification. To be a Christian one strives for the holy life through prayer, fasting, pilgrimages (in his case to Georgia) and service to the sick, poor, and imprisoned. The Holy Club was indeed a center for social ministry as well as a life of prayer. In his reading of those serious volumes entitled The Serious Call to Devout and Holy Life, or Holy Living and Holy Dying, or The Imitation of Christ, which had so much to do with his early thinking, especially in 1725, he was inspired by the vision of a pure life where motivations are unmixed. How do we achieve such a life? By struggling up the lonely ascent to holy living. The aspirant is adorned by personal reformation in order to be accepted by God. Sam Jones, a Southern Methodist preacher, expressed this Pelagianism by arguing that we may help ourselves toward God by quitting our meanness. If we will do this we can come to the place where God will accept us. The answer of our faith is that we don’t have the power to quit our meanness. It is only when the grace of God is operative that that becomes possible. Wesley tried to attain the meaning of the Christian life through personal effort before Aldersgate. Albert Outler calls this a “gospel of moral rectitude.” I would call it a gospel of human effort. Wesley had learned it from his church and home in his early years. It may seem surprising to suggest that Wesley was Pelagian, believing in a self-help salvation, but not when we consider that the essential theological climate of the Church of England in Wesley’s era was saturated with that kind of teaching. Bishop Cannon has made clear that the work of English Bishop George Bull in the seventeenth century had so shaped the thinking of the Church of England that people believed preparation must be made as a bride adorns herself for her husband. Thus, presenting oneself to God in beauty and radiance, God will say, “Now you are fit to be mine.” It was this atmosphere of self-realization that Wesley in his early years,
especially from 1725 to 1738, tried to work out a sacrificial life. The social ethics of Wesley in this period grew out of his desire to attain salvation. About his journey to Georgia he commented: “I came to America to save the Indians, but, oh, who will save me?” A familiar pattern of those searching years. Luther had asked, “What shall I do to find a gracious God?” Wesley was asking the same question. Wesley, like Luther and others, sought God by performing good works, disciplining self, denying the flesh in order that he might gain a purchase on God. But that battle was fought out and lost long, long ago. We can’t do enough good to be accepted, no matter how good we are. I believe the turning point, symbolic in many ways of the change in Wesley, took place on May 24, 1738. It’s all very familiar to most of us. But I believe that there is something more than simply the usual discussion about the conversion of Wesley in 1738. Or was the conversion in 1725? My own commitment is that 1738 represents his evangelical conversion, but it also represents the inversion of his familiar pattern of ethics. For now he believes that one does not have to do good in order to be accepted by God. Rather, we must accept the goodness and grace of Jesus Christ through faith in order to be saved. When a person is saved, forgiven, regenerated and brought into the family of God, good works are energized out of the life of faith. After Aldersgate Wesley pursued the Christian task with a zeal as great as before but with a different kind of liberty in Christ. After Aldersgate came the revival, the ceaseless itineracy, the thousands of sermons preached to the poor (the common people heard him gladly). After Aldersgate came the ministry to the sick, the intellectually impoverished, the social outcasts. After Aldersgate came the medical clinic. After Aldersgate came electroshock therapy. He is reputed to have helped some ten thousand people with this technique. After Aldersgate came the critique of the loss of human life through hunger and slavery, the condemnation of slavery, the letters of counsel, the touting of human rights, the doing of good to all men. After Aldersgate he said, “Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, for all the people you can as long as ever you can.”

For Wesley, faith produces love. Love grows out of faith into good works. Faith is instrumental to love. Love is the goal. What does this mean in practical terms? It means that Wesleyans commit themselves to social change and the salvation of persons; persons viewed in their totality, not in what is defined narrowly as spiritual. That which is
Wesley: Theology of the Moral Life

spiritual involves the whole human existence, not just part of it. It is dangerously gnostic when we denigrate the human in order to exalt the spiritual. We need to unite together in affirming all that God has made in creation, and especially Man of whom God said: “It is very good.” I suggest to you that when faith came to Wesley he was liberated to love. God worked in his life and the result was love which always has both a vertical and horizontal relation. God had worked and now Wesley could work. He worked to save souls. He worked to change the world. He had a different motivation. This difference of motivation influenced the quality and content of his ethics. His social love became spontaneous and free — not forced out of a sense of duty.

For Christians in the tradition of the Reformation, the concept of faith that works through love seems to echo a Catholic theology which leads to the submersion of faith by love. This means that we lose the objectivity of our justification in the subjectivity of sanctification. I think there is little doubt that the central peril of Wesleyan theology becomes the tendency toward moralism, that is, toward a sanctification which does not continue to rest on the footing of justification. Whenever we, in working out the meaning of sanctification, do not insist that the ground on which all of this rests is salvation by grace through faith, then we find ourselves in a moralistic situation. The peril is always with us and we need to keep the balance which Saint Paul and Wesley knew had to be kept. In Christ the faith which is energized through love is what counts. For Wesley, once the priority of faith was fixed in his experience, the relationship of faith and love was developed creatively.

I believe the doctrine of the faith which works through love has implications not only for social ethics but for evangelism. It was when Wesley understood the relationship between faith and love in his own experience that he became an evangelist, not before. He did not have the best news to bear before Aldersgate, but after Aldersgate he knew the liberating power of that faith which saves. And, oh, the joy of being free, free at last. That’s the freedom in the Gospel.

Ethics of the Spirit

Finally, I would like to stress the principle of purity of intention, which is an aspect of the purifying work of the sanctifying Spirit. I also suggest that purity and simplicity are the benchmarks of
Wesley’s doctrine of perfection. Applied to the sphere of moral influence in the world or to ethical motivation, the doctrine of Christian perfection offers the prospect of a cadre of Christian servants who approach human need with an uncommon quality of concern. We acknowledge as well the ease with which humans overlook their faults and sins, falling repetitively into the Adamic sin of “passing the buck.” Wesleyan teaching holds forth the possibility of persons who refuse to be conformed to this present age. The pure in heart belong to God and they belong to God’s world. I want to assert that redeemed men and women may approach the issues of social ethics: life and liberty and happiness, human distress and hunger, the demoralization (which may be the key issue) of war, with the depth of _agape_, with a purity of motive and intention, with the energy of the Holy Spirit blowing across the ways of our lives. The pure in heart, grasped by the power of the age to come, may bring change which does not bear in itself (as so much social reform does) the seeds of perversion and alienation. I repeat that we may do social ethics outside the context of Christian faith and love, but our actions will always be flawed by the pattern of self-orientation. As Luther expressed it, we are always curved in toward ourselves. But the pure in heart see God and are able to demonstrate a quality of life in the world which can bring change and reformation. We must acknowledge that, although we may carry out a kind of ethical modeling and transformation based upon singleness of heart and mind which changes the world, we will have to recognize that everything we do will be flawed by our finitude. When social ethics are based on a selfish ground, their energy is diminished, their purity is diluted, and they lack world-transforming power. Wherever the Christian lives, the world around is being permeated by the presence of God. The conforming Christian merely parrots or mirrors the structures of the age. Pressed into its mold, he is broken at its wheel. But those who are the pure in heart live out a kind of relationship with God, flawed as it is by limitations, that can bring change in the world — change that the world so desperately needs. But we believe the Wesleyan message affirms that there is a power in the proclaimed Word which can change the world until, in a way of speaking, it is turned upside down.

Let’s consider the issue of ethical ability or inability (the question of the power) to carry out the Christian mandate of love. Bishop Joseph Butler was the outstanding moralist of his time and sometime
nemesis of John Wesley. You will recall when John Wesley went over to Bristol to carry out his mandate to preach the Gospel to the ends of the earth that Bishop Butler told him to go home. Wesley’s response, paraphrased, was: “As long as I recognize that there are people who need the Gospel of Jesus Christ, I will come and stay and preach the ever living Word of God.” Joseph Butler wrote in his ethical writings expressing his concept of duty, “I see the right and I approve it too; condemn the wrong, and yet the wrong pursue.” This is an ethical echo of Saint Paul’s analysis of the sinful man under the law as set forth in Romans 7. Butler’s verse calls to the memory of everyone of us the awesome chasm which seems to mock our efforts to join “ought” with “will” and “may.” Saint Paul sets in stark juxtaposition two laws: the law of sin and death and the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus. Man under the first law is very much aware of what is right and approves it, but he is also aware of the infinite distance between the goodness which law demands and the power to actualize it. “I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind making me captive to the law of sin, which dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from this body of death” (Romans 7:24). There, indeed, is the high hurdle. Who will deliver? In the sphere of personal and social morality, where shall we find the drive to hurdle from demand to fulfillment, from law to grace, from the “ought” to the “is”?

Evangelical theologian, Bernard Ramm, has suggested “that an ethical theory without a realistic doctrine of motivation is but a paper theory. It is an empty ethical theory which believes it can determine the right or good but offers no theory how men concretely achieve the right.” He continues, “Part of the uniqueness of biblical ethics is that the doctrine of the Holy Spirit is at the center of its ethical system. The Holy Spirit is the motivator of Christian ethics. Such great chapters as Romans 8 and Galatians 5 reveal that the power in Christian ethics is the presence of the Spirit, the Spirit of God.” The presence of the Spirit of God in the human spirit is what Ramm is describing. He concludes: “Essential Christian morality is not imposed as a code or a legal prescript, but is is written on the human heart — the wellspring of action by the Holy Spirit. The point is that the Holy Spirit is in the heart of the Christian exercising his moral presence.”

I submit to you that without this divine power, this energy of God, in the long run the Christian reformer or any other reformer will succumb either to disillusionment or weariness. There
The Asbury Seminarian

was a man of the West who was rich with the gold he had found. He thought of his youth, how he had dreamed of romance and adventure until he had run away from home to seek the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. One day he found it, but he lost more. He had unearthed the pot of gold, but the bright face of the rainbow had faded. The message is clear. We must have power, the dynamic of the Holy Spirit, or there will follow the experience of disillusionment and despair.

Charles Wesley wrote in a hymn entitled "Primitive Christianity": "You different sects who all declare, 'Lo, Here is Christ, or Christ is there.' Your stronger proof, divinely give, and show me where the Christians live. Your claim, alas! you cannot prove. You lack the genuine mark of love."^9

My appeal to you today is: Come! Come let us show the lonely world where the Christians live! Come Creator Spirit, Holy Spirit, Spirit of God!

Footnotes

3See Works XIV, pp. 320-322.
7Works, VIII, p. 67.
9Works, VIII, pp. 43-45.