I. Introduction: An Explanation of the Title of This Paper

To begin with, it is necessary to explain the terms “traditional” and “innovative” in context of this paper. “Traditional,” at least in this essay, does not imply outdated; nor does innovative necessarily imply “better” in some qualitative sense. In fact, it is often true that some “innovative” ideas are really traditionally held ones revamped for a contemporary audience. So, for the purposes of this paper, I will speak of the “traditional” elements of Wesley’s anthropology as those which tend to echo the approaches of his day. These approaches, as I will note below, are often those held by Evangelicals in the past 300 years as “traditional” anthropological conclusions.

By innovative I mean recent approaches to anthropology which have emphasized a more holistic approach to anthropology and have called into question the dichotomy and trichotomy so prevalent in many Evangelical anthropologies. The difficulty in assessing Wesley’s anthropology comes from the fact that Wesley wrote comparatively little on the issue of the “constituent elements” of human anthropology, seeking to concentrate much of his work on other matters pertaining to the image of God, salvation, sanctification, and the like. In this paper I argue that the sermons and writings of Wesley that do either directly or indirectly pertain to anthropology, although more dualistic in nature (reflecting the “traditional” position and therefore mirroring much of the anthropology of his day), do not directly define Wesley’s approach to ministering to human beings either individually or collectively. From this, I seek to cast a holistic vision for theology and ministry that is directly connected to a more holistic (and more systematic) anthropology.

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II. JOHN WESLEY'S ANTHROPOLOGY: AN OVERVIEW

As Randy Maddox notes in regard to Wesley's anthropology: "His basic anthropological convictions sought to emulate the holism of biblical teachings."1 This is the case for Wesley in spite of the fact that many of Wesley's direct teachings are (ontologically speaking) dualistic. For example, as Maddox observes, his evaluation of "bodiliness" was not always positive, and his view of the separateness of body and soul became more pronounced in his teachings, especially in his later years.4

On the one hand, Wesley seems to see a strong dichotomy expressed in the New Testament (cf., his comments on 1 Thess. 5:23), but on the other hand he at times attributes terms like "flesh" and "spirit" as different aspects of the whole person (cf., his comments on Gal. 6:8).5 It seems that Maddox, like others, notes the incongruities at times present in Wesley's anthropology. It is at once a product of the dualism of Wesley's day (a time of Thomistic dualism and, more immediately in Wesley's day, Cartesian dualism, etc.). At the same time, in practical outworkings of his anthropology, a holistic approach to the human being surfaces, specifically in the relational or corporate aspects of his anthropology. It is here that the innovativeness of Wesley's practice outstrips the rather "traditional" dualistic approach he takes in his formally stated anthropology.

In assessing the holistic elements of Wesley's anthropology, one encounters frustration at times, since Wesley's approach to anthropology is less a product of "systematic theology" as it is an attempt at philosophical theology. Furthermore, at times Wesley seems to separate his holistic practice from his dualistic teachings on the subject. To observe this tension, it would be helpful to outline Wesley's statements on anthropology and then observe his basic anthropological convictions as expressed in the practical outworkings of his anthropology.

A. WESLEY'S TECHNICAL DUALISM

First of all, it is noteworthy that specific teachings of Wesley regarding anthropology express a great deal of the body/soul dualism of his day. In Wesley's sermon entitled, "What is Man," he states that there exists something in human beings beside the body: "But beside this strange compound of the four elements, — earth, water, air, and fire, — I find something in me of a quite different nature, nothing akin to any of these."6 This other "part" of the human being is what Wesley calls the "soul."7 Wesley locates the "I" of human existence in this part called the "soul": "But what am I? Unquestionably I am something distinct from my body."8

This part called the "soul" by Wesley is what constitutes the existence of the human being after the "body" dies. He holds out the hope that the soul will live, even though the body dies. Although, undoubtedly owing to Paul's discussion of resurrection in terms of soma in 1 Cor. 15,9 Wesley does not opt for a non-corporeal resurrection, stating that the body-soul unity of the human being will be restored at the resurrection: "In my present state of existence, I undoubtedly consist of both soul and body: And so I shall again, after the resurrection, to all eternity."10

Wesley expounds upon this view, citing it as an explanation of the parable of Jesus concerning the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16, where he describes paradise as: "... the antechamber of heaven, where the souls of the righteous remain till, after the general
judgement, they are received into glory.” Similarly, Hades in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (at least the part of Hades from where the rich man cries out) is described as “...where the souls of wicked men reside.” Death is therefore expressed in dichotomistic terms: “Death is properly,” says Wesley, “the separation of the soul from the body.” However, Wesley sees the resurrection of the “body” as essential to the Christian faith, stating that the same body and soul possessed before the resurrection will be the possession of the human being for all eternity.

In summary, then, Wesley’s anthropological dualism is exhibited in the following characteristics. First, it does speak of a real distinction between that which is called the body and the soul. Secondly, Wesley identifies the “I” of the human being as bound up in the concept of a separately existing “soul,” seeing the soul as the “essential self.” Finally, the “otherness” of the soul is an important factor in Wesley’s explanation of concepts such as death and the intermediate state (i.e., the Luke 16 parable). For Wesley, at death the soul temporarily separates from the body, existing in a (conscious) state of waiting for the resurrection, when the body and soul are reunited.

B. Wesley’s Dichotomy and His Ministry

Although a dichotomist in the technical sense, Wesley’s approach to ministering to human beings takes on many holistic elements. His “holism” may be most clearly seen in his concern for both physical and “spiritual” aspects of the human being. More clearly, especially in light of recent criticisms to anthropological dualism (discussed below), one may characterize the social concerns of Wesley’s preaching and writing as evidence of a functional holism at work in Wesley’s approach to ministry. Furthermore, Wesley’s assertions regarding the dignity and equality of the whole person distances his anthropological dualism from recent critiques of dualism by those who rightly point out the dangers of dichotomy and trichotomy in this regard.

1. Social Concern as Holistic Expression

First we may see Wesley’s social concern as an expression of his functional anthropological holism. Despite some of Wesley’s individualistic concerns (e.g., salvation and perfection of the individual), Wesley at times clearly identifies the parameters of Christianity as involving the whole person, including physical, spiritual, and social aspects. One need only to read Wesley’s take on Jesus’s words in the Sermon on the Mount recorded in Matt. 5:13–16. “Christianity is essentially a social religion,” says Wesley, “and...to turn it into a solitary religion, is indeed to destroy it.” According to Wesley, many of those characteristics which are to define the human being in his/her Christian life—patience, meekness, gentleness, and long-suffering—have “no place under heaven, without an intercourse with other men.” These statements echo what Wesleyan theologian Mildred Bangs Wynkoop describes as essential principles in understanding biblical anthropology in general. Human beings are “corporate” in nature in that they find meaning in social relatedness, not in “static beingness.” This understanding of the human being also comes to the fore in Wesley’s understanding of the invago dei in relational rather than strictly ontological terms. The individuation, then, that Wesley denotes in the concept of “soul,” does not lead him to an overly individualistic anthropology.
The saving of "souls" emphasis is indeed a strong one in Wesley's thought; however, Wesley's relational anthropology and holistic approach to the human being in the realm of the social (the "corporate," relational nature of the human being) helps keep Wesley's anthropology from leading him into the myopic approach sometimes employed by many of his theological progeny, for whom "saving souls" is often emphasized at the exclusion of broader social concern.22

2. Wesley, Dignity, and Equality

While notable twentieth-century theologians, especially those identified with Liberation thought, have cited the dangers of anthropological dualism in regard to the dignity of human beings, Wesley's holistic approach in the 1700s would be nearly above reproach, despite some of his straying into anthropological dualism (dichotomy). Anyone familiar with Wesley's strong opposition to slavery, his arguments for the dignity of the poor, and his encouragement of women in every aspect of ministry, would have little trouble with the speculation that he would agree with the assertion of Gustavo Gutierrez that the "spiritual pursuits" of the poor "do not eliminate their physical hunger, and we must keep both dimensions before us."23

The holistic spirit of John Wesley's anthropology shines forth in the sense that he did not allow his speculations regarding the ontological distinction between physical and spiritual (e.g., body and soul) to produce an intellectual or racial bigotry that has at times emerged from both Platonic and non-Platonic expressions of anthropological dualism in the history of Christianity.24 For Wesley, then, the dignity of the human being does not lie simply in one's possession of a "soul," nor does it lie in one's attainment of things more "spiritual" and less "physical" or mundane. Rather, for Wesley, the dignity of human beings lies in their capacity to be loved as an expression of God's love in us. He states, "The slave is the brother of the slave owner or trader and should be respected as such."25 To put it another way, as does Dunning, "When God set out to redeem and restore his fallen creation he intended to renew people's relations not only to him but also to each other."26 That which impedes human dignity, then, impedes the full display of the grace and love of God in God's creatures.

C. Summary

Two concerns of those who have been critical of anthropological dualism are the neglect of (to incorporate Wynkoop's terminology) the social "relatedness" of human beings (i.e., in the areas of social elements of Christianity and the ideals of human dignity) in favor of individual "beingness." This neglect has occurred when, in regard to anthropology for example, we (in the words of Justo Gonzalez) ask the wrong question of the texts of Scripture, since the concern of the biblical authors seems much more to be in regard to the whole person in relationship to God and others rather than "parts" or "composites" the human being in relation to each other.27 This can easily occur when dichotomist anthropologies, even those that are non-Platonic in nature, are consistently explicated.

For Wesley, however, his dichotomist teachings concerning the nature of human beings did not cause him fall into the ditches of social neglect or ontological hierarchies prevalent in much of the dualistic thought and practice of his Evangelical progeny. At the
same time, Wesley’s holistic approach maintained a clear undertone of orthodoxy in regard to matters such as original sin, salvation by grace, and sanctification. His approach to human beings, while “traditional” in conception, appears rather innovative in practice as one assesses the recent trends in Christian anthropology.

III. DUALISM AND EVANGELICALISM SINCE WESLEY

Much of Evangelicalism, indeed much of Christianity, has held to some form of ontological dualism in regard to the human being. Ancient debates regarding the human being as composed of a body and an “immortal soul,” in the words of Tertullian, or the soul as “essential self” in Origen’s view, continued to fill the theological landscape in the time of Wesley and beyond.28 Indeed, according to Hendrikus Berkhof, by studying how systematic theologies have poured meaning into the creation and composition of the human being, one could write a piece of Europe’s cultural history.29

As the twentieth century approached, a great deal of discussion emerged as to the meaning of anthropological terms in the Old and New Testament that were normally translated into English as “soul,” “spirit,” “heart,” “flesh,” and “body.”30 Evangelicals, such as H. Wheeler Robinson (a Baptist),31 along with non-Evangelicals such as Rudolf Bultmann,32 John A. T. Robinson,33 and Karl Barth34 began to question the dichotomy and trichotomy debates so prevalent in biblical anthropology by offering another solution. This solution was not simply materialistic monism, which asserts that the human being is only physical. Rather, through either etymological analysis (e.g., Bultmann) or through a combination of etymological and cultural analysis (e.g., Hebrew/Greek contrasts, as in H. W. Robinson’s work), there arose a more holistic conception of the human being as a being consisting of more than simply physical attributes, yet essentially a unified whole. Although these seemed like “innovations” in the doctrine of biblical anthropology, these authors argued that they were simply rescuing “traditional” anthropology from those who had, through the centuries, disfigured biblical anthropology with “lenses ground in Athens,” or Hellenistic anthropology subsumed into biblical interpretation.35 The anthropological terms of the Old and New Testaments were seen as identifiers of various aspects of the human being rather than as a philosophical description of separately existing “parts.”

Despite the voices of Evangelicals36 who have come to oppose dichotomy or trichotomy as an adequate biblical paradigm, there has recently emerged fresh new “defenses” of dualism from among the ranks of Evangelicals, even Wesleyans. John W. Cooper’s defense of a form of Thomistic dualism is now enjoying a second printing, likely due to the popularity of a work by J. P. Moreland and Scott Rae that commends and defends Cooper’s dualism and takes it a step further by applying it to ethics.37 Thomas Oden, a Wesleyan (Methodist), asserts dualism as in line with patristic teaching and biblical doctrine.38 These recent defenses of dualism (dichotomy) have taken greater care than most earlier expressions of dualism to, first of all, distance this “Evangelical” brand of dualism from Platonic views which degrade the material or physical. Secondly, as Wesley did, this view asserts the “resurrection of the body” as essential Christian doctrine. As a further expansion of this, these Evangelical dualists assert their main reasons for a dualistic conception of the human being is, in their view, the “clear biblical teaching” of the possibility of the “soul” to survive apart from the body at death.39 These Evangelical apologists for dualism
are often quick to point out that this partitive conception of the intermediate state, however blissful, is incomplete, since wholeness requires a “reuniting of soul and body.” However, most Evangelical conceptions such as those just described are careful also to distance themselves from the Hellenistic (Platonic) concept of the innate immortality of the soul.

Despite these attempts to distance dichotomy (or trichotomy) from the Platonic overtones of the past, three areas where a more dualistic anthropology has drawn criticism, both from inside and outside of Evangelicalism, has been in regard to the holistic nature of salvation, the dignity and equality of all human beings, and dealing with death and the intermediate state. The consistent critique handed down to this renewed form of dualism can be summed up in the words of Gonzalez: “Here again, . . . what has been done is to pose in ontological terms what the Bible poses in a different manner.”

**A. Salvation as Holistic**

For much of Evangelicalism since Wesley, savings “souls” has been a clarion call. Ray Anderson reminds that the Greek word *soteria* “can mean either salvation or [physical] healing, and often, it is only the context that reveals which particular meaning the biblical author intended.” However, in the early part of the twentieth century and beyond, the inherent dangers of dichotomistic anthropology were brought to bear, causing an “either/or” mentality to arise in the minds of Evangelicals (either be about the business of “saving souls” or of “feeding the bodies”). Added to this was the work of the Social Gospel movement of Rauschenbusch and others like him who emphasized the need for doing good tangibly. In light of Evangelicalism’s emphasis upon “saving souls” and spiritual transformation over and above meeting physical needs, Rauschenbusch asks: “Will the atrocities of the Congo cease if we merely radiate goodness from our regenerate souls?”

In response, debates raged for decades between Evangelicals and those in the Social Gospel Movement regarding the pendulum swing of neglect of the “spiritual” matters such as repentance in favor of meeting physical needs. The result became that the emphasis upon salvific concern for the whole person and indeed for all of creation (cf., Rom. 8:20-25) became an often neglected biblical theme. And debates at times caused many of those who would assert ties to Wesley’s thought to become narrowly and individually focused in their approach to ministering to human beings.

Although a dichotomist in a technical sense, Wesley’s approach to salvation includes broader social concerns, allowing both Social Gospel proponents and conservative Evangelicals to claim legitimate birthrights from the ministry of Wesley. However, these groups who claim at least Wesley’s influence (or even direct lineage) have often gone to extremes: either failing to properly address the “spiritual” aspects of human need (Social Gospel), or emphasizing the “spiritual” in a manner that eclipses the plight of human beings in desperate need (Evangelicalism, including branches of conservative Wesleyanism).

**B. Anthropological Dualism as a Threat to Human Dignity and Equality**

A further critique of dichotomistic approaches is the tendency of dichotomy (or trichotomy) to assail the dignity and equality of human beings. This may prove shocking to some in light of the fact that the concept of “soul” is often used to justify the dignity of
human beings (e.g., direct creationism of the soul arguments in Roman Catholic and Protestant pro-life defenses). However, the cost of arguing for a dualistic conception of "soul" or "spirit," for many (especially in the twentieth century) has come at too high a price.

As Justo Gonzalez (a Methodist historian and theologist) notes: "...the common understanding of the human being as consisting of two (or three) parts is not a sociopolitically neutral notion." This kind of dualism has at times justified oppression. An example of this is seen in the elevation of those who pursue intellectual matters over those involved in manual labor (which is a more "earthy" or "physical," and consequently more lowly pursuit). Catholic Liberation theologian Jose Comblin echoes these sentiments, citing that with the rise of dualism in the ancient Church, "soul" oriented activities such as thinking and contemplation, were treated as superior to other activities. Therefore, "intellectual activity was divorced from bodily, manual activity," so that manual labor was seen as "inferior to contemplation."

Although Wesley held a high view of human dignity and equality, these views came in the context of his dualistic anthropology. Recent attempts at developing a Christian anthropology have addressed the need for a consistent biblical ministry to the whole person flowing from a stated holistic anthropology. Wesley's approach tended to separate theoretical and speculative elements of his dualistic theology from his holistic approach to ministry in this sense, meaning that his dichotomy did not seem to pull his focus away from the biblical paradigm of the dignity and equality of all human beings who were created in God's image.

C. DUALISM'S LAST HOPE: DEATH AND THE INTERMEDIATE STATE

A final area of interest in regard to Wesley's approach to ministry is in regard to death and resurrection. These concepts are intimately tied to one's anthropology. This is particularly true in many recent Evangelical defenses of dichotomy/trichotomy, which seem to begin with a defense of a conscious partitive existence after death and then proceed toward building a dichotomistic anthropology. Wesley began with philosophical assertions about anthropology and then tied them into his views of the intermediate state (as in his comments on Luke 16). However, much of recent Evangelical defenses of dichotomy begin with the assertion that survival of the human being's "soul" at death apart from the "body" is a biblical "fact." Therefore, one must posit anthropological dualism in order to satisfy this paradigm.

To many, however, this seems to put the theological cart before the horse. It would seem preferable to begin with an attempt at an adequate assessment of anthropological terms and concepts to determine whether or not they seem dualistic. From there, one could then interpret the more difficult eschatological passages (especially those pertaining to personal eschatology, such as 2 Cor. 5, etc.) in this light. By reversing this process, proponents of dualism open themselves up to criticism of poor exegesis. And, on a very practical level, they risk the error pointed out by Barth in his Dogmatics in Outline: resurrection does not replace death, rather it follows death (of the believer). Likewise, it would seem correct to assert that the "soul" living on apart from the body seems to nullify the concept of resurrection, which is a key paradigm in New Testament theology.
IV. A Wesleyan Anthropology for the 21st Century

It is remarkable that we are still talking about aspects of the theology and ministry of a man who was born three hundred years ago. This is largely due to the fact that he was such an ardent follower of a man who lived two thousand years ago. This second man, Jesus Christ, his life and work, is the true focus of Christian theology. Anthropology is secondary. However, as Kevin Vanhoozer states, "in light of the incarnation...humanity is a theme of theology, not in spite of, but because God is the theme of theology." This would seem, then, that any relevant expression of Wesleyan theology needs to move into the twenty-first century with a holistic approach that mirrors the holistic concern of Wesley, and more importantly, the concern of Jesus. The ministry of Jesus demonstrates concern beyond the "salvation of souls" and into an ethic of social concern and transformation. This is seen in the very uses of the term soteria in the New Testament (e.g., Acts 4:9-12). Also noteworthy is the Messianic promise of Is. 35:5-6, in which the Messiah's ministry is marked by physical as well as spiritual transformation: "Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped.

The centuries since Wesley's innovative holistic practices in his approach to human beings have brought about a purging of some traditionally held dichotomistic views of human nature by those who read anthropological terms as attempts at philosophical ontology, rather than (properly) as relational expressions of the dignity of the human being in relation to God and one another. The struggle that we as recent interpreters of Wesley's anthropology face is the dilemma of his theoretical anthropology, characterized by a type of dualism, did not produce the myopic practice that much of his fellow dichotomists produced in following generations. In a real sense, Wesley practiced his very biblically holistic anthropology with "one hand tied behind his back"; his interpretation of anthropological terms was more colored by the strong dualistic voices of his day than by thorough exegesis. No matter, though, since in the end, the innovativeness of his practice set the stage for a truly "social" Christianity (to use Wesley's words) that can now be strengthened by untying the hand of sound biblical exegesis in regard to the human being as seen in the various relational terms (soul, spirit, heart, mind, body, etc.) used in the biblical texts.

Notes

1. Cf., John W. Cooper, Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), xvi-xx, where Cooper deems anthropological dualism (i.e., dichotomy) as the "traditional" (meaning "orthodox" in his context) position. So, too, argues Wayne Grudem, Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 473.


4. Ibid.

7. Ibid., 7:227.
8. Ibid., 7:228.
12. Ibid., 7:247. It is noteworthy that in this portion of the sermon, Wesley takes a moment to eschew the doctrine of purgatory, citing that "No suffering, but that of Christ, has any power to expiate sin; and no fire, but that of love, can purify the soul either in time or in eternity."
13. "What is Man?" in Works, 7:229. Wesley adds, however, that often only God can truly detect when that full separation has occurred.
15. There is much to choose from to illustrate this. Note, for example, the "body/mind" connection Wesley makes in his assessment of "nervous disorders," in Works, 11:515.
16. E.g., Justo L. Gonzalez, Ma ana: Christian Theology From a Hispanic Perspective (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 128. This work and others like it will be further discussed below.
17. For a critique of Wesley's approach to anthropology as too individualistic, see E. C. Gardner, Biblical Faith and Social Ethics (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 122. As this paper will note, Gardner's assertion that Wesley "tends to neglect the biblical concern for the transformation of society..." is an incorrect assertion.
19. Ibid., 5:297.
24. While this issue will be discussed more below, it is noteworthy to include Gutierrez's summary of anthropological conclusions from Romans 8 (See Ibid., 54-71), since they tend to generally express the emphasis of those who have seen a more holistic anthropology in the Old and New Testaments. On p. 70, Gutierrez states: "The choice in not between body and soul; nothing could be further from the thinking of Paul... He is always dealing with the human person as a whole... . Christian spirituality consists of embracing the liberated body and thus being able to both pray, 'Abba, Father!' and to enter into a concomitantly [sic] communion with others." He goes on to say (pp. 71) that life in the Spirit is "not an existence at the level of the soul and in opposition to or apart from the body; it is an existence in accord with life, love peace, and justice (the great values of the reign of God) and against death."
27. Justo Gonzalez, Ma ana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 125.


36. Another noteworthy rejection of dichotomy/trichotomy is found in Stanley J. Grenz, Theology for the Community of God (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994), 772.


39. This is essentially the key to the argument of recent Evangelicals who hold to some form of dichotomy. See Erickson, Cooper, Moreland and Rae, et al.

40. Cf., Erickson, 1189.

41. Note for example, Moreland and Rae, 22, where they assert that the “soul” is not “innately immortal,” but it is possible that God, at the soul’s creation, may have endowed it with some form of immortality.

42. Ma ana, 126.


44. Walter Rauschenbusch, Christianity and the Social Crisis (New York: Eaton and Mains, 1907), 151.

45. For a recent Evangelical critique of the Social Gospel Movement’s de-emphasis upon spiritual concerns, see Millard J. Erickson, Christian Theology 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 904-905.

46. This trend, especially among more conservative Wesleyan groups is alluded to in R. Larry Shelton, “A Wesleyan/Holiness Agenda for the Twenty-First Century” Wesleyan Theological Journal 33, no. 2 (Fall, 1998), 70.


48. Ibid.


51. As stated above, this is the foundational argument for Moreland and Rae, Cooper, and others.

