

THE BABYLONIAN CAPTIVITY OF WESLEYAN THEOLOGY

by
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In principle, if not always in practice, Wesleyan theology overcomes and heals four deep problems in Christian theology:

1. The elitism of Eastern spirituality
2. The dualism of both Eastern and Western theology
3. The pessimism of Augustinian theology
4. The individualism of Enlightenment rationalism.

In this essay I show how this is true and also suggest some reasons why, for the most part, Wesleyan theology has not fulfilled its potential.

Has there in fact been a “Babylonian captivity” of Wesleyan theology? I believe so. Despite the dynamism of early Methodism and the vitality of the varied Methodist traditions, nowhere has the potential of Wesleyan theological insights been fully realized or worked out. This is true, I believe, for several reasons. The totality of these reasons constitutes the Babylonian captivity of Wesleyan theology. Rather than redemptively *transforming* the four areas listed above—elitism, dualism, pessimism, and individualism—more often than not Wesleyan theologians and Methodist churches have succumbed to them.

What Babylonian Captivity?

What is this alleged Babylonian captivity of Wesleyan theology? In the days of the Israelite monarchy, the southern kingdom was finally conquered by Babylon and many of its people were carried into exile. The Babylonian exile lasted seventy years. Wesleyan theology has suffered its Babylonian captivity for some two hundred years. True, there have been some escapes and some breakouts. Some captives have returned. A remnant (often the poor!) has been preserved in the land. But the captivity is still not ended. As for me, I want to claim Isaiah 35:10 for Wesleyan theology: “The ransomed of the Lord will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away” (NIV).

The Babylonian captivity of Wesleyan theology is a complex of the four elements listed above. To state the thesis more precisely: Wesleyan theology, which arose within and to date is primarily a part of the Western Christian theological tradition, has never achieved its redemptive potential because it has been shackled by an inheritance of *spiritual elitism, philosophical dualism, theological pessimism, and rationalistic individualism*. These form the cultural matrix in which Wesleyan theology has developed, and they still shape our understanding of Wesley and of the gospel. But, paradoxically, and here is my central thesis, Wesleyan theology inherently offers the resources to break these shackles and end the Babylonian captivity.

I will attempt to show how Wesleyan theology has the resources to break these four shackles. I hope to show also the potential Wesleyan theology has today to make an unprecedented impact for the kingdom of God, especially in this age of the increasing emergence of global Christianity.

Hermeneutical Insights

As we deal with Wesley's theology in face of these issues, some insights from William Webb's book, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis*, are relevant to the discussion.¹ In dealing with Scripture, Webb argues for what he calls "a redemptive-movement hermeneutic." We must pay attention not only to the words of Scripture but to the "redemptive spirit" they manifest with varying degrees of explicitness. In part this is the "trajectory" argument that David Thompson and others have advanced.² And as Webb points out, it is not unrelated to the "analogy of faith" approach that Wesley and others have employed.³ "When taking the ancient text into our modern world, the redemptive spirit of Scripture is the most significant dimension with which a Christian can wrestle," Webb argues. If we fail to pay attention to this redemptive spirit, we will find that in many cases "living out the Bible's literal words in our [contemporary] context fails to fulfill" what God intends.⁴

Webb's approach fits nicely with a Wesleyan biblical hermeneutic. Might the same approach be useful in dealing with Wesley's own writings? Webb proposes eighteen criteria in his "hermeneutic of cultural analysis." It is beyond my purpose here to detail his approach, but I am intrigued especially with his second and third criteria, which he calls "seed ideas" and "breakouts."⁵ It seems to me that these have particular relevance for the interpretation not only of Scripture but also of Wesley texts. Webb defines "seed ideas" and "breakouts" as follows:

¹ William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001).

² Cf. David Thompson, "Women, Men, Slaves and the Bible: Hermeneutical Inquiries," *Christian Scholar's Review* 25:3 (March 1996), 326-49. Webb writes, "I have coined my approach a 'redemptive-movement' hermeneutic because it captures the redemptive spirit *within* Scripture. It looks at a component of meaning *within* the biblical text and canon—a component of meaning easily missed in our application process. Some may prefer calling this interpretive/applicational approach a 'progressive' or 'developmental' or 'trajectory' hermeneutic. That is fine. The label 'redemptive movement' or 'redemptive spirit' reflects my concern that the derived meaning is internal, not external, to the biblical text" (Webb, 31; emphasis in the original).

³ Webb notes that such a "redemptive-movement hermeneutic" is not a new concept. "Aspects of a redemptive-movement hermeneutic are found in other standard approaches to Scripture. For instance, an 'analogy of faith' approach considers that all biblical texts must be used in a dialogue of sorts in order to formulate a synthetic understanding of truth; one must never read a text in isolation from the rest of Scripture" (Webb, 35). The "analogy of faith" (Rom. 12:6) was an important hermeneutical principle for Wesley: "the agreement of every part of [Scripture] with every other is properly the *analogy of faith*" and is key in biblical interpretation (Wesley, Sermon 62, "The End of Christ's Coming," III.5). See Albert Outler's comment here (*WJW* [Abingdon], 2:483); Donald A. D. Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience as a Model of Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), 18f. Wesley's own writings should be similarly interpreted if one wishes to get a sense of his overall theological project.

⁴ Webb, 30.

⁵ Webb's first five criteria are: (1) Preliminary Movement; (2) Seed Ideas; (3) Breakouts; (4) Purpose/Intent Statements; and (5) Basis in Fall or Curse. These are "Intrascriptural criteria" and, Webb argues, the most inherently persuasive of the 18 criteria.

Seed Ideas: “A component of a text may be [merely] cultural if ‘seed ideas’ are present within the rest of Scripture to suggest and encourage further movement on a particular subject.... If later readers in another place and time draw out the implications of the seedling idea from one text, this can lead to taking other texts beyond their original-audience application and form to a more realized expression of the spirit within.”⁶

Breakouts: “While a seedbed idea is subtle and quiet due to its unrealized form, a breakout is a much more pronounced deviation by Scripture from cultural norms. *Here the text completely overturns the expected norms.* Also, the seedbed is theoretical/potential, whereas the breakout is real or actualized relative to the original audience. *It challenges the standard sociological patterns in the present reality.*”⁷ Webb cites a number of such “breakouts” within Scripture—for example, when women like Deborah, Huldah, and Priscilla perform roles approved by God which clearly transcend or “break out” from the norms of the time. These examples should be viewed not as mere exceptions, but rather as pointers toward where God is moving in history.

Do we find any significant “seed ideas” and “breakouts” in Wesley? I believe so. And these may offer hermeneutical clues that can liberate Wesleyan theology from its Babylonian captivity. Webb’s approach provides some suggestive criteria for interpreting Wesley, as well as some needed safeguards against the rampant tendency to selectively pick from Wesley what we like and interpret his statements or insights in a way that is contrary to Wesley’s fundamental theology and the “redemptive spirit” of his theological work.

If we apply Webb’s hermeneutical approach to Wesley, what do we find? I would flag the following key “seed ideas” and “breakouts” in Wesley:

Seed Ideas: (1) Wesley’s optimism of grace (related to prevenient grace); (2) “inward and outward holiness” as God’s provision for all, and the availability of God’s Spirit to all; and (3) salvation as healing.

Breakouts: (1) Salvation surpasses, not merely restores, creation, so that the end is greater than the beginning; (2) the gospel for the poor in which the direction of salvation is “from the least to the greatest,” not vice versa; (3) Wesley’s ecological sensitivity.⁸

I will not deal directly with each of these themes. Rather, these “seed ideas” and “breakouts” serve as background in showing the ways that Wesleyan theology heals, or at least holds the promise of healing, the four problems identified above: Spiritual elitism, spirit/matter dualism, soteriological pessimism, and rationalistic individualism.

1. PENTECOSTAL GRACE: The Answer to Spiritual Elitism

⁶ Webb, 83f.

⁷ Webb, 91 (emphasis added).

⁸ I am not claiming that any of these themes are in themselves original to Wesley.

The Problem: Wesleyan theologians rightly celebrate the way John Wesley appropriated the Eastern Orthodox tradition. Wesley reached back before Augustine to a more dynamic and more optimistic understanding of God, God’s love, human nature, and therefore of Christian experience.⁹ Wesley’s fruitful use of Eastern Christianity has now been quite thoroughly explored by a number of theologians.¹⁰ What is much less acknowledged is the downside of this inheritance. In many ways the Eastern theological inheritance is problematic, even though it accounts for much of the dynamism of Wesleyan theology.

The central problem with the Eastern tradition of spirituality is that its understanding of Christian perfection is elitist. It is not a spirituality for the masses, for the common people, but for religious super-heroes who leave the pursuits of everyday life in quest of holiness. The high ideal of Christian experience espoused by Eastern theology—perfection, *theosis*, the restoration of the image of God in human experience—was a theology for religious specialists. Miroslav Volf has shown how deeply embedded such elitism is in Eastern ecclesiology.¹¹

Wesley in a sense democratized this elitist tradition. Consider the way he appropriated “Macarius the Egyptian.” Though Wesley affirmed virtually all the key themes in the Homilies of Macarius, he applied them much more broadly. Wesley emphasized Christian life in the world, creating and promoting a spirituality and discipleship for the masses, the poor, the common people.¹² Despite Wesley’s own best efforts, however, Wesleyan theology over the years has too often fallen into an un-Wesleyan elitism. The doctrine of Christian perfection or entire sanctification has almost inevitably been seen as an elitist spirituality—a theology for super-saints or spiritual super-heroes. This clearly was not Wesley’s intent—though it may be argued that Wesley himself did not fully extricate himself from such elitism, despite the non-elitist, democratic, liberationist tendencies in his theology and practice.¹³

A deeper issue of elitism arises here, however, an elitism that has shackled and limited Wesleyan theology and Wesleyan-oriented churches over the years. It was already present in early Eastern theology and in fact underlies the spiritual elitism I have already mentioned.¹⁴ This is, of course, the elitism that by the third century had thoroughly infiltrated and infected

⁹ Wesley mined the early centuries of the Christian tradition, tending to value especially “the Greek representatives over the Latin” (Randy L. Maddox, “John Wesley and Eastern Orthodoxy: Influences, Convergences and Differences,” *Asbury Theological Journal* 45:2 [Fall 1990]), 30. More generally, see Kenneth E. Rowe, ed., *The Place of Wesley in the Christian Tradition* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1976), especially the lead essay by Albert Outler, which bears the same title as the book.

¹⁰ See for example Albert C. Outler, ed., *John Wesley* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1980), 31 and *passim*; Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Kingswood, 1994); Kenneth J. Collins, *The Scripture Way of Salvation: The Heart of John Wesley’s Theology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1997), 19f, 205ff; Thorsen, *Wesleyan Quadrilateral*, 34, 53f; and the sources these authors cite.

¹¹ Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998).

¹² Howard A. Snyder, “John Wesley and Macarius the Egyptian,” *Asbury Theological Journal* 45:2 (Fall 1990), 55-60.

¹³ I mean “democratic” in the sense of being for all the people equally (“populist” in this sense), not in the sense of democracy as a political ideology, which Wesley mistrusted.

¹⁴ As Volf shows clearly in *After Our Likeness*, 107-116.

Christianity, namely the clergy/laity distinction that assumed and reinforced a split-level spirituality. The masses were called to a relatively low level of discipleship, but a spiritual elite—clergy, monks, super-saints—were called to obey the so-called “counsels of perfection.” These special ones were to take Jesus’ teachings seriously, to *really practice* what Jesus taught. The fourth-century Constantinian settlement simply reinforced this dichotomy and made it an unquestioned assumption of the Christian worldview. It is hardly ever seriously challenged theologically today, even among Protestants.¹⁵

This clergy/laity elitism has always crippled Wesleyan theology and practice. Though Methodist movements have occasionally broken through this barrier for rather brief periods of time, this heresy has been a constant drag on Wesleyan theology, pulling understanding and practice down well below what Wesley—to say nothing of Jesus—intended.¹⁶ In fact, John Wesley himself (and certainly Charles) never fully freed himself from this clergy/laity elitism. One evidence of this is Wesley’s frequent resorting to the language of “extraordinary” ministers and “extraordinary” gifts of the Spirit.¹⁷ Wesley failed to see that what he thought was “extraordinary” should rather be seen as normative, given a sound biblical theology of charismatic gifts and the priesthood of believers.¹⁸ Even so, I would argue that Wesley’s doctrine of grace does point the way to solving this malady of spiritual elitism.

The Solution: Pentecostal Grace. Wesley’s own theology contains the dynamite to blast these elitist shackles to bits. Wesley carried through the logic of God’s love and of Christ’s atonement to his understanding of Christian experience and ongoing discipleship. God’s grace is “free for all and free in all.”¹⁹

In contrast to the Eastern tradition where perfectionist teaching was for those who would flee the world, Wesley emphasized Christian life *in the world*, an ongoing, everyday discipleship in which the Jesus-follower was to do “all the good you can.” Wesley held that *all* Christians were to grow in sanctification or Christian perfection and that a person could experience entire sanctification as a deeper (or higher) relationship with God after the new birth. He did not teach an absolute perfection or “sinless perfection” in this life, of course, since perfection for him was always a continuing process, not a state—sort of a progressively moving target, with its essence

¹⁵ Important among a number of significant exceptions are Greg Ogden, *The New Reformation: Returning the Ministry to the People of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990) and R. Paul Stevens, *The Other Six Days: Vocation, Work, and Ministry in Biblical Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999). Stevens traces the emergence, historically and theologically, of “clergy” and “laity” in the church.

¹⁶ Typically, genuine Christian revival and renewal movements to some degree break through the clergy/laity (and related male dominance) barrier in their first generation, but then revert to more hierarchical/patriarchal patterns over time. This is true not only of early Methodism but of virtually all movements in the Wesleyan tradition, including Pentecostalism. I give some preliminary attention to this dynamic in *Signs of the Spirit: How God Reshapes the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1989; Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1997). Here the emerging discipline of social movement theory may be of help theologically to the church.

¹⁷ This comes through even in Wesley’s notes on the O.T. See, for example, his comment on Ex. 35:30, *ENOT*.

¹⁸ See the discussion in Howard A. Snyder, *The Radical Wesley and Patterns for Church Renewal* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1980), 93f, 178f.

¹⁹ Wesley, Sermon 110, “Free Grace.”

being love. For Wesley, perfection did not imply perfect knowledge or flawless behavior. Beneath his emphasis on a crisis experience of entire sanctification (as, indeed, beneath his emphasis on the new birth) was his conviction that all of life should be an ascent toward God, continuously enabled and empowered by God's grace, but always involving the cooperation of the will.

In other words, the Wesleyan answer to spiritual elitism is *Pentecostal grace*—the grace of God's Spirit poured out on “all flesh” or “all people” (Acts 2:17, Joel 2:28) at Pentecost and subsequently. Wesley took seriously the new dynamic that entered into history on the Day of Pentecost. God's Spirit has been poured out on all humanity, so that the life Jesus taught and modeled can be the common experience of the whole church. Now, as Wesley put it, with the Pentecostal outpouring of the Holy Spirit “the constant fruits of faith, even righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost” can become the common experience of *everyone*—“persons of every age, sex, and rank.”²⁰ Pentecostal grace, the grace of God poured out by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and, as Wesley says, “Not on the day of Pentecost only,” but all down through history, is now our common inheritance.²¹ Now, by the Spirit, God pours out the grace that restores the image of God, gives the mind of Christ, enables Christians to “walk as [Jesus] walked” (1 Jn. 2:6). This is Trinitarian, Wesley notes: “See the Three-one God clearly proved.”²² Pentecostal grace is the grace of God the Father who sends his Spirit to enable us to be like Jesus. It creates a Trinitarian community, the Body of Christ, endowed with an unpredictable range of spiritual gifts “as the Spirit chooses” (1 Cor. 12:11 NRSV). This is the end of spiritual elitism, for the Spirit gives his gifts to all. The gifts of the Spirit were not just for the few or just for the early church. When the Spirit is poured out, the church will experience “the plentiful effusions of the gifts, and graces, of the Holy Spirit,” Wesley wrote.²³

This understanding of Pentecostal grace is a key *seed idea* for Wesley—more radical than is usually comprehended. Wesley argues that the grace of God is fully available to all people, in all places, through all history. This is the gospel dispensation. This is gracious good news. Theologically, it strikes a fourfold blow at the root of all spiritual elitism, for Pentecostal grace means that: (1) through Jesus the grace of salvation is available to all people; (2) every believer, without exception, may be filled with the Spirit; (3) every believer, without exception, receives graces and gifts for ministry; and (4) this is good news especially for the poor, since in God's economy the “order” is always “from the least to the greatest. . .not first to the greatest, and then to the least.”²⁴

2. THE WESLEYAN PENTALATERAL: The Answer to Dualism

²⁰ John Wesley, *ENNT*, Acts 2:17, 2:38.

²¹ Wesley, *ENNT*, Acts 2:17.

²² Wesley, *ENNT*, Acts 2:38.

²³ Wesley, *ENOT*, Isa. 11:10. The doctrine of spiritual gifts remains, however, a seed idea in Wesley, not fully developed. See the discussion in Snyder, *Radical Wesley*, 94-98.

²⁴ Wesley, *ENNT*, Heb. 8:11. Similarly, in “The General Spread of the Gospel”: “And in every nation under heaven we may reasonably believe God will observe the same order which he hath from the beginning of Christianity. ‘They shall all know *me*,’ said the Lord, not from the greatest to the least (this is that wisdom of the world which is foolishness with God) but ‘from the least to the greatest,’ that the praise may not be of men, but of God” (Serm. 63, “The General Spread of the Gospel,” 19). Some of Wesley's enemies quickly saw that this teaching had disturbing political and socioeconomic, not just spiritual implications! See the discussion in Snyder, *Radical Wesley*, 31-38, 48f, 86f.

The Problem: A nagging problem in Christian theology is an unbiblical spirit/matter dichotomy. This dualism is part of our philosophical inheritance from Platonism and Neo-Platonism.²⁵

In the West, the spirit/matter dualism deriving from Greek philosophy was reinforced by Enlightenment thought, which bequeathed us a faith/reason or faith/science dichotomy. The problem of an unbiblical spirit/matter dualism is as much a problem in Eastern as it is in Western theology, however.

Christian theology has never really succeeded in grounding doctrine in the kind of biblical holism that puts a proper valuation on the material world while maintaining the primacy of spiritual reality. When philosophy or Christian theology has attempted to strike a biblical balance, it generally has gone to the opposite extreme, ending up in materialism or monism.

John Wesley's theology was much more holistic, comprehensive, and conjunctive than that of the dominant theologies of his day. In fact, Wesley's own theology was much more dynamically holistic than are Wesleyan, Pentecostal, or Evangelical theologies today. Viewed in the long tradition of Christian doctrine, Wesley's theology to a significant degree overcame in fact, and certainly overcomes in tendency, the dualism of both the Eastern and Western traditions.

An unbiblical spirit/matter dichotomy is deeply embedded in contemporary Evangelical and Pentecostal theology, piety, and hymnody. Our hymns and songs speak of "raptured souls," of being "weaned from earth," of inhabiting a bodiless, totally immaterial, spiritual eternity. Life on earth is but a "dark maze" and a "transient dream"; the goal is to be borne "safe above, a ransomed soul."²⁶ Thus we sing and thus we apparently believe. Yet at some level we must know this is unsound biblically. Only grudgingly do we confess the resurrection of the body. Only theoretically do we believe that Jesus was fully human. In our piety we often see Jesus rather as the escape route from our materiality into pure non-material spirituality, which of course is where everyone *really should* dwell, not only in eternity but right now, as Christians on earth.

We simply do not know how to deal with, or properly value, the material world without giving it either too little or too much attention. This is a form of Babylonian captivity that Wesleyan theology has not escaped. Yet there is a way out.

The Solution: The Wesleyan Pentalateral. The solution to the dualism of both Eastern and Western theology is a biblical holism, beginning with a biblical doctrine of creation. Here Wesley's insights and theological methodology do help us.

Recovering a *Wesleyan* biblical holism will mean, however, transcending the so-called Wesleyan Quadrilateral of Scripture, reason, tradition, and experience as sources of authority in theology. Helpful as the Quadrilateral has been, it contains a serious flaw that tends to perpetuate an unbiblical spirit/matter dualism. The Wesleyan Quadrilateral, in other words (which of course is a post-Wesleyan construct) is part of the problem. It subtly reinforces a spirit/matter dualism

²⁵ I am speaking here of our assessment and understanding of the material creation, not of the philosophical question of the relationship between God and matter. The biblical worldview is neither dualism nor monism.

²⁶ Though many other examples might be cited, I refer here to the hymns "Jesus, Keep Me Near the Cross" by Fanny Crosby, "Spirit of God, Descend Upon My Heart" by George Croly, and "My Faith Looks Up to Thee" by Ray Palmer. Fortunately we also have many hymns and songs that give a contrasting view, such as "This Is My Father's World" and "Where Cross the Crowded Ways of Life."

by neglecting the very material, space-time reality of the created universe. We need to be more authentically Wesleyan than the Quadrilateral suggests. And here authentic Wesleyan theology, taken on its own terms, points the way.

The Wesleyan Quadrilateral does preserve some essential insights. It reminds us that Wesley, as heir of the Protestant Reformation but also of an Anglican tradition that wanted to preserve the best of Roman Catholicism, generally refused rigid either/or categories.²⁷ The Reformation watchword of *sola scriptura* is right in affirming Scripture as the essential, authoritative revealed basis of salvation. But, of course, in practice we do more than read Scripture in our search for truth. We read it through our rational, experiential, and cultural lenses. We are in fact shaped by tradition and experience, and we use reason to sort out truth and mediate competing claims.

The so-called Wesleyan Quadrilateral is thus an important insight. We use all four elements, and they are all in varying ways valid sources of truth.²⁸ Wesley, however, made use of another key source—*the created order*. He spoke of “the wisdom of God in creation.” In other words, we really have in Wesley (if we wish to use this kind of model) a *pentalateral*, not a quadrilateral. We discern truth through Scripture (primary source), but also through these other great gifts of God: reason, creation, experience, and tradition.²⁹

Wesley was explicit about the key role of the created universe. He wrote in “God’s Approbation of His Works,” “How small a part of this great work of God [in creation] is man able to understand! But it is our duty to contemplate what he has wrought, and to understand as much of it as we are able.”³⁰ For Wesley, such “contemplation” is a theological, not just a devotional, exercise. Similarly, in preaching from the Sermon on the Mount Wesley affirmed:

God is in all things, and. . . we are to see the Creator in the glass of every creature; . . . we should use and look upon nothing as separate from God, which indeed is a kind of practical atheism; but with a true magnificence of thought survey heaven and earth and all that is therein as contained by God in the hollow of his hand, who by his intimate presence holds them all in being, who pervades and actuates the whole created frame, and is in a true sense the soul of the universe.³¹

Wesley’s reliance on the created order as a source of insight and authority runs through all his thought. A particularly pointed statement comes early in his *Compendium of Natural Philosophy, Being a Survey of the Wisdom of God in the Creation*:

In short, the world around us is the mighty volume wherein God hath declared himself. Human languages and characters are different in different nations. And those of one nation are not understood by the rest. But the book of nature is

²⁷ With some exceptions. As Outler notes regarding Wesley’s sermon “Free Grace,” denouncing predestination, “Calvin and Wesley are here poles apart and, for once, Wesley scorns any ‘third alternative.’” *WJW* (Abingdon), 3:556.

²⁸ See Thorsen, *Wesleyan Quadrilateral*.

²⁹ It will not do to “fix” the quadrilateral by subsuming creation under one of the other elements—reason or experience, for instance. While creation may in some sense be implicit in all four elements, it must be made explicit in order to avoid misunderstanding Wesley’s theology, his theological methodology, and his spirituality.

³⁰ Wesley, Sermon 56, “God’s Approbation of His Works,” 2.

³¹ Wesley, Sermon 23, “Upon our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount, Discourse III,” I.11.

written in a universal character, which every man may read in his own language. It consists not of words, but things, which picture out the Divine perfections. The firmament every where expanded, with all its starry host, declares the immensity and magnificence, the power and wisdom of its Creator. Thunder, lightning, storms, earthquakes and volcanoes, shew the terror of his wrath. Seasonable rains, sunshine and harvest, denote his bounty and goodness, and demonstrate how he opens his hand, and fills all living things with plenteousness. The constantly succeeding generations of plants and animals, imply the eternity of their first cause. Life subsisting in millions of different forms, shows the vast diffusion of this animating power, and death the infinite disproportion between him and every living thing.

Even the actions of animals are an eloquent and a pathetic language. Those that want the help of man have a thousand engaging ways, which, like the voice of God speaking to his heart, command him to preserve and cherish them. In the meantime, the motions or looks of those which might do him harm, strike him with terror, and warn him, either to fly from or arm himself against them. Thus it is, that every part of nature directs us to nature's God.³²

Wesley's primary accent here is that the created order shows us God's wisdom, glory, and beauty, leading us to praise him and live responsibly before him in the world.³³ But this implies, as well, *revelation*—creation is the God-given “book of nature.” It is in the light of this book of nature that we interpret the Scriptures, and vice versa.

If we discern Wesley's theological methodology inductively from his own writings and use of sources, we are in fact drawn to something like a Wesleyan Pentalateral, with creation as a key component, rather than just a quadrilateral of Scripture, reason, tradition, and experience. This has been cogently argued by some Latin American Methodist theologians and is well articulated by Luís Wesley de Souza in his essay “‘The Wisdom of God in Creation’: Mission and the Wesleyan Pentalateral.”³⁴ De Souza recognizes, however, the limitations of such quadrilateral/pentalateral language. Although he uses the term “Pentalateral,” the model he

³² John Wesley, *A Compendium of Natural Philosophy, Being a Survey of the Wisdom of God in the Creation*, “A New Edition,” ed. Robert Mudie, 3 vols. (London, UK: Thomas Tegg and Son, 1836), 2:370f. Cf. Burtner and Chiles, *John Wesley's Theology*, 36. Wesley says in his Preface, “I wished to see this short, full, plain account of the visible creation, directed to its right end; not barely to entertain an idle barren curiosity, but to display the invisible things of God; his power, wisdom and goodness.” Wesley hoped this work, “in great measure, translated from the Latin work of John Francis Buddæus,” might “be the means, on the one hand, of humbling the pride of man, by showing that he is surrounded on every side with things which he can no more account for than for immensity or eternity; and it may serve on the other to display the amazing power, wisdom, and goodness of the great Creator; to warm our hearts, and to fill our mouths with wonder, love, and praise!” 1:iii-vi.

³³ Barry Bryant notes the “pronounced aesthetic theme” in Wesley's doctrine of creation. See Barry Bryant, “John Wesley on the Origins of Evil,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 30:1 (Spring 1995), 133, and the discussion in Jerry L. Walls, “‘As the Waters Cover the Sea’: John Wesley on the Problem of Evil,” *Faith and Philosophy* 13:4 (Oct. 1996), 537.

³⁴ Luís Wesley de Souza, “‘The Wisdom of God in Creation’: Mission and the Wesleyan Pentalateral,” in Howard A. Snyder, ed., *Global Good News: Mission in a New Context* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2001), 138-152.

proposes actually puts Scripture at the center with reason, creation, experience, and tradition arrayed around it.³⁵ This moves in the direction of a more adequate conception—one which keeps Scripture central, as it was for Wesley, and sees creation, tradition, reason, and experience as key sources that dynamically orbit around this center (to pick up on some helpful insights from Melvin Dieter).³⁶

It is important to note here that Wesley's key emphasis on the *image of God* was part of his understanding of creation. Man and woman are created in God's image. For Wesley, this is more than an affirmation about human worth or dignity (as it is often taken today). It has key redemptive implications. Since human beings bear God's image, even though marred by sin, they can be redeemed, healed, restored. Created in the divine image, men and women are "capable of God."³⁷ That is, they have an inherent capacity for deep communion and companionship with God if the effects of sin can be overcome. This reality and dynamic is grounded in the biblical doctrine of creation.

According to Wesley, the whole created order in a more remote sense bears God's stamp and image.³⁸ This was more particularly true of animate nature, where the wisdom of God was especially displayed.³⁹ Here Wesley's worldview is more Hebraic and biblical than Greek or Platonic; more ecological, "both/and," than is most Reformed theology. In his mature theology especially, Wesley did not make a sharp break between the physical and the spiritual realms. It was no theological embarrassment to him to see the interpenetration of the material and the spiritual worlds, and to affirm the working of God's Spirit in both, interactively.⁴⁰ This provides (in part) the theological basis for recognizing that salvation has to do not only with human experience but also with the restoration of the whole created order (another key theme in Wesley).

I would not claim that Wesley himself (and certainly not his heirs) fully overcame the spirit/matter dualism of classical Christian theology. He did not. But he points us in the right

³⁵ See De Souza's graphic, p. 143 of *Global Good News*.

³⁶ See the summary of Dieter's model in Catherine Stonehouse, *Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 16-20, 215f. Maddox says, "Wesley's so-called 'quadrilateral' of theological authorities could more adequately be described as a unilateral *rule* of Scripture within a trilateral *hermeneutic* of reason, tradition, and experience" (*Responsible Grace*, 46). I would say, rather: A unilateral or central rule of Scripture within a quadrilateral of creation, reason, tradition, and experience.

³⁷ A phrase Wesley used repeatedly, especially in his sermon "The General Deliverance."

³⁸ As Theodore Runyon notes, "The renewal of the creation and the creatures through the renewal in humanity of the *image of God* is what Wesley identifies as the very heart of Christianity." Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1998), 8 (emphasis in the original).

³⁹ Wesley believed on philosophical and theological grounds that more could be learned about God from the animal creation than from "the music of the spheres"—more from biology than from astronomy. Though behind this lies his use of the "great chain of being" idea, more fundamentally this view is based on the biblical account of creation and of the importance of the image of God. See the helpful discussion in J. W. Haas, Jr., "John Wesley's Vision of Science in the Service of Christ," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 47 (1995), 234-43.

⁴⁰ Wesley's interest in healing, in electricity, and in so-called paranormal phenomena should be seen in this context.

direction with his oft-repeated stress on “all *inward* and *outward* holiness”; in his key theme of “justice, mercy, and truth”; and in his sensitivity to the created order, concern for physical healing and well-being, compassion for animals, even in his interest in gardens and gardening. Especially does Wesley point us in the right direction in his vision for the restoration of the created order.⁴¹

Here the Wesleyan “breakout” (in Webb’s sense) is Wesley’s remarkable ecological sensitivity. As Theodore Runyon notes, Wesley’s view of the original harmony of the created order (to be restored in the new creation) is essentially “what today would be called *ecological balance*.”⁴² Some of Wesley’s ideas and speculations about the restoration of creation, as for instance in his sermon “The General Deliverance,” may sound quaint and romantic. They should not for that reason be dismissed. We should note the theological move Wesley is making; the way he is extending salvation to the whole created order as he reflects on Romans 8:19-22. Consider Wesley’s logic in “The General Deliverance.” His argument runs like this:

- I. Before the Fall, the brute creation was perfectly happy, more nearly resembling human beings. Humans were the great channel of communication and blessing between the Creator and the whole brute creation.
- II. As a result of the Fall, creation is subject to vanity—to sorrow, pain, evil, and death. This was by the wise permission of God who determines to draw eternal good out of this temporary evil. Now the creatures are deformed and alienated from humans.
- III. The brute creation will be redeemed and restored in God's final redemption. All creatures will share, according to their capacity, in the glorious liberty of the children of God, attaining a beauty and perfection far higher than they ever enjoyed— thus making amends for what they have suffered. The new earth will be “one perennial spring.”

Three implications follow:

- A. This illustrates God's mercy to all his works.
- B. It provides an answer to the problem of creature suffering.
- C. It encourages us to show mercy to all God’s creatures.

Wesley wrote, “. . . something better remains after death for these poor creatures [which] likewise, shall one day be delivered from this bondage of corruption, and shall then receive an ample amends for all their present sufferings.” In view of God’s care and ultimate intent for his creation, we ourselves should “imitate him whose mercy is over all his works.” Reflecting on God’s merciful intent of ultimate restoration should “soften our hearts towards the meaner creatures, knowing that the Lord careth for them.” Wesley argues, “It may enlarge our hearts towards those poor creatures, to reflect that, as vile as they appear in our eyes, not one of them is forgotten in the sight of our Father which is in heaven.”⁴³

⁴¹ Based on the KJV of Acts 3:21, Wesley envisioned, hoped for, and spoke of “the restitution [i.e., restoration] of all things.” See, e.g., Serm. 4, “Scriptural Christianity,” 3; Serm. 39, “Catholic Spirit,” I.3.

⁴² Runyon, *The New Creation*, 10 (emphasis in the original).

⁴³ Wesley, Serm. 60, “The General Deliverance,” III.9, 10. As Jerry Walls notes, “Wesley’s suggestions about animal suffering [and ultimate redemption] are fascinating and

I consider such statements to be “breakouts” in Wesley’s theology (even if the ideas were not totally original with him). They indicate an ecological sensitivity that clearly is relevant to a theology of salvation, of discipleship, and of mission today. They also witness to Wesley’s lifelong interest in science and health, which was based in large measure in his understanding of God as creator and sustainer as well as redeemer and restorer.⁴⁴ This also has implications for discipleship and mission.

Calling such passages in Wesley “breakouts” suggests that in some ways they move beyond what Wesley said on other subjects or in other contexts. This is, in fact, the case. In terms of a fully biblical holism and in terms of our contemporary challenges, we can certainly identify areas where Wesley’s theology does not square with these breakouts. Yet these breakouts themselves give us a fuller understanding of Wesley’s theological project.

One significant area where I think Wesley did *not* overcome a non-biblical dualism is his theology of the kingdom of God. Though there are some “seed ideas” and occasional “breakouts” here as well, Wesley’s central focus on Christian perfection caused him to understand God’s kingdom too narrowly. Often Wesley virtually equates the kingdom of God with the experience of Christian perfection. Here, I believe, E. Stanley Jones’ stress on the kingdom of God as “realism” provides from within the Wesleyan tradition a suggestive corrective.⁴⁵

The Bible itself, properly interpreted with openness to the Holy Spirit, provides the cure to the distorting dichotomy between spirit and matter. I believe the Wesleyan Pentateuch offers profound insights, in terms of theological method, to help us rightly discern the Word of truth in our day.

3. HEALING GRACE: The Answer to Pessimism

The Problem: A third malady that has infected Western Christian thought is *theological pessimism*. We still walk and think in the shadow of Augustinian theology. This easily leads to an unbiblical pessimism in soteriology, ecclesiology, and eschatology, limiting our perspective and our hope concerning what God can and wants to do in salvation, in the church, and in

worthy of further exploration, particularly in light of ecological concerns and the renewed appreciation in our time for the natural order. . . . Wesley takes pains to reject the notion that the animal kingdom is of equal value to [human beings, however]. While he shows remarkable sensitivity to animal suffering and supports the significance of animals far more than most traditional theologians, he does not go to the extreme of denying or minimizing the special status of human beings.” Walls, 539.

⁴⁴ J. W. Haas notes that Wesley “encouraged his preachers to become conversant with science, incorporated scientific topics in his sermons and other writings, and used electrotherapy apparatus in his medical clinics. Science correctly understood was to serve the cause of Christ rather than be feared.” In the context of the “new science” of his day, Wesley characteristically steered a middle course philosophically between God’s direct agency and the proper role of human scientific investigation, discovery, and explanation. Haas, “John Wesley’s Vision of Science in the Service of Christ,” 234. See also John C. English, “John Wesley’s Scientific Education,” *Methodist History* 30:1 (Oct. 1991), 42-51.

⁴⁵ See the discussion in Snyder, *Models of the Kingdom*; E. Stanley Jones, *Christ’s Alternative to Communism* (1933) and *Is the Kingdom of God Realism?* (1940). Jones came to see that the holiness movement in which he was raised had too narrow and too individualistic and interior an understanding of the kingdom of God. Yet his more comprehensive view of the kingdom did not go to the other extreme, as so often happens.

history. We have inherited a historical and eschatological pessimism that acts as a dead weight on our understanding and expectation of what God can and desires to do within the present dispensation.

The Solution: Wesley's Optimism of Grace. Wesley overcame the pessimistic cast of Augustine's theology, with its over-emphasis on original sin, by mining the resources of Eastern theology. For this reason Wesleyan theology has always had a genetic predisposition toward optimism that contrasts with the Augustinian-Calvinist tradition (that still remains dominant within American Evangelicalism). Yet Wesley was not "Pelagian" or "semi-Pelagian," as some have thought, for he was well aware of the depths of sin and the absolute need for God-given grace in order for people to respond to the offer of salvation.⁴⁶

Wesley's theology breathes an optimism of grace.⁴⁷ The key accent here is not optimism, however, but *grace*. In Wesley we confront a hopefulness that is all of grace—not an optimism of human effort or an optimism based on ideas of social progress or social perfectibility. Still less when we speak of "optimism of grace" are we talking about temperament of psychology.

While Wesley's optimism of grace traces back to Eastern roots—and more importantly, to the Bible—at this point he was indirectly indebted also to Continental Pietism and particularly to Philip Jakob Spener, for whom "hope for better times" was a key theological category.⁴⁸ Much of Continental Pietist renewal and reform, as also that of the Moravian resurgence under Zinzendorf after 1727, was fed theologically by this optimism of grace, this "hope for better times."

Particularly important here is Wesley's conception of grace as preceding ("preventing"), converting, and sanctifying or transforming.⁴⁹ While this formulation is not original with Wesley, he took it in new directions, so that it qualifies as a "seed idea" in Wesleyan theology. To be authentically Wesleyan—more importantly, to be faithfully biblical—we must maintain Wesley's balance here. There is but one grace, the grace of God—that is, the gracious operation of the Holy Spirit through Jesus Christ. Grace is a quality of God the Trinity.

Preceding, converting, and sanctifying grace are not three different "kinds" of grace. Grace is one; it is the gracious, loving, self-giving activity and influence of God. The threefold distinction refers not so much to the nature of grace itself but to the way people and cultures *experience* that grace. By God's gracious initiative men, women, and children are drawn to God (or they resist that grace). As they respond in faith, preceding grace becomes justifying grace, leading directly into sanctifying grace if people continue to open their lives to the work of God's Spirit. Or, put differently, the loving grace of God precedes us, draws us to Christ, converts us,

⁴⁶ I put these terms in quotation marks because they are themselves problematic. Those who practically equate Augustine's views with Scripture may see the correcting of his views in a more biblical direction as "semi-Pelagian."

⁴⁷ See the discussion in Michael Hurley, S.J., "Salvation Today and Wesley Today," in Rowe, ed., *The Place of Wesley in the Christian Tradition*, 94-112.

⁴⁸ See Snyder, *Signs of the Spirit*, 94.

⁴⁹ "By 'means of grace' I understand outward signs, words, or actions, ordained of God, and appointed for this end, to be the ordinary channels whereby he might convey to men, preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace." Wesley, Sermon 16, "The Means of Grace," II.1.

and progressively sanctifies us, leading finally to “glorification” in the new creation.⁵⁰ In some sense, this trajectory is mirrored also in God’s redemptive work in society and the whole created order. Thus, Wesley’s doctrine of grace, and particularly of the prevenience of grace, is indeed a key “seed idea” that can bear fresh fruit in our day.

In Wesley’s view, all creation is infused or suffused with God’s grace as an unconditional benefit of Christ’s atonement. There is nowhere one can go where God’s grace is not found, though humans (and people corporately, as cultures and societies) can, and do, close their hearts and minds to God’s grace.⁵¹

The first and most basic meaning of prevenient or preceding grace is that in Christ, by the Holy Spirit, God has gone ahead of us (ahead of every person), preceding us, counteracting the effects of sin to the extent that people *can* respond to grace. God’s preceding grace is not in itself saving grace; its function is to draw us to salvation in Christ.⁵²

One key implication of preceding grace is that God’s Spirit is the missionary.⁵³ God is already active in all persons, cultures, societies, and to some degree in many (not all) religions.⁵⁴ God works for good, limiting the effects of evil and seeking to bring people to himself. While some people, responding to preceding grace, may find their way to God, the role of the church and Christian mission is essential so that more people may know and respond to Christ and be saved from their sins. Thus the planting of vital, outreaching churches in all societies and among all people groups is always essential to Christian mission. The work of Christian mission is so to cooperate with God’s preceding grace that people may experience God’s convicting, reconciling, and sanctifying, restoring grace.

⁵⁰ Often in Wesley one can use the terms “grace” and “love” interchangeably, with no essential difference of meaning. This says much, of course, about his fundamental conception of God.

⁵¹ “For allowing that all the souls of men are dead in sin by nature, this excuses none, seeing there is no man that is in a state of mere nature; there is no man, unless he has quenched the Spirit, that is wholly void of the grace of God. No man living is entirely destitute of what is vulgarly called natural conscience. But this is not natural: It is more properly termed, preventing grace.” Wesley, Sermon 75, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation,” III.4.

⁵² There is a sense in which preceding grace may become salvific, Wesley taught, in the case of individuals who have never had opportunity to hear of Jesus but who respond in obedience to the (preceding) grace they have received. Thus Cornelius before Peter’s preaching, though “in the Christian sense. . . then an unbeliever,” was not outside God’s favor. “[W]hat is not exactly according to the divine rule must stand in need of divine favour and indulgence.” Wesley, *ENNT*, Acts 10:4. Anyone thus saved, however, is saved by Christ’s atonement, even though they are unaware of it. In these cases, then, preceding grace becomes (in effect) saving grace. See Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 32-34.

⁵³ This is central to the *missio dei* in a Wesleyan sense.

⁵⁴ Non-Christian religions are not in themselves *means* of grace, but God’s grace to some degree works in them—if in no other way, at least to restrain evil. Presumably most religions are a mixture of good and evil (as Christianity itself can be when it becomes religion). A pagan religion, like an individual person or a culture, may become totally corrupt, but even there God’s grace is at work, to some degree restraining evil, or finally bringing judgment.

An emphasis on preceding or prevenient grace can be pressed too far, of course. The necessary distinction between *preceding* and *justifying* grace may be lost. The danger would be to miss Wesley's balance; to so emphasize that we are saved by grace, not by works, that the necessity of knowing and responding to God's grace in Jesus Christ in faith and obedience is eclipsed. There is an unfortunate tendency today in some Methodist circles to collapse all of grace into the category of prevenient grace, losing the key Wesleyan dynamic that understands God, by his Spirit, to be enabling people at every stage to respond *responsibly* to God's initiative. Grace for Wesley in this sense is sacramental. That is, it signals and extends God's powerful love to us and then, *as we respond responsibly*, it (or better, the Spirit) works *within us synergistically*, "faith working by love," so God's grace effects what God intends.⁵⁵ The whole point of prevenient grace is that it *precedes* in order that there might be response—responses of repentance, faith, love, and good works.

This is where Wesley's fundamental emphasis on salvation as healing—another key seed idea in Wesley—is especially relevant. Wesley's conception of salvation as healing from the disease of sin is profound, and he carries it to surprising lengths. While people are guilty because of their *acts* of sin, the deeper problem is a *moral disease* that alienates people from God, from themselves and each other, and from the physical environment.

Reformed theology has tended to use primarily (or exclusively) juridical and forensic models of salvation, with strong emphasis on the Book of Romans. Jesus' atonement cancels the penalty for sin so that we may be forgiven, justified. Wesley affirmed this, of course, for it is biblical. But for Wesley the deeper issue was the moral disease of sin that needed healing by God's grace. Justification is instrumental to a broader healing, reconciliation, and restoration. Wesley wrote in his sermon "The Witness of Our Spirit":

As soon as ever the grace of God (in the former sense, his pardoning love) is manifested to our soul, the grace of God (in the latter sense, the power of his Spirit) takes place therein. And now we can perform through God, what to [ourselves] was impossible. . . a recovery of the image of God, a renewal of soul after His likeness.⁵⁶

Today "therapeutic" models of salvation are anathema among many Evangelicals because they are thought to undercut the biblical emphasis on the guilt of sin and justification by grace alone. To use healing language for salvation is seen as caving in to humanistic psychology, an over-emphasis on "feeling," and moral relativism. But we are not faced with an either/or choice here. Pardon for sin through the atoning death of Jesus Christ is essential. But the point of Christ's atonement is that human beings, and by extension their societies, cultures, and environments, may be healed from the disease and alienation of sin. This is something that Wesley increasingly signaled in his later writings.

This healing theme has many implications for the church and its mission. The "divine therapy" model underscores the personal and relational nature of salvation. It has the potential for "healing" the divisions between our understandings of spiritual, physical, social-relational, environmental, and cosmic health. God's salvation intends and entails healing in all dimensions. Salvation-as-healing makes it clear that God is intimately concerned with every aspect of our

⁵⁵ Randy Maddox's *Responsible Grace* is particularly important and insightful here. This perspective should be kept in mind as well when considering Wesley's understanding of the sacraments.

⁵⁶ Wesley, Sermon 12, "The Witness of Our Spirit," 15.

lives; yet, biblically understood, it also makes clear that the healing we most fundamentally need is spiritual: Our relationship to God.⁵⁷ Biblically grounded (and as Wesley understood it), the salvation-as-healing motif is no concession to pop psychology; it is rather an affirmation of who God is, what it means to be created in God's image, and what it takes for that image to be restored in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The healing paradigm is often especially relevant in mission contexts. As Philip Jenkins notes in *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, many African and other independent churches “stress Jesus’ role as prophet and healer, as Great Physician. Although this approach is not so familiar in the modern West, this is one of many areas in which the independents are very much in tune with the Mediterranean Christianity of the earliest centuries.”⁵⁸ In this sense authentic Wesleyan theology is inherently more missional in a global context than is a soteriology based exclusively on juridical and forensic models.

4. SOCIAL CHRISTIANITY: The Answer to Individualism

The Problem: The individualism of contemporary Western culture, especially in the United States, makes it very difficult for us to understand community and social solidarity. This is part of our inheritance from Enlightenment rationalism. Here, as in other areas, one can trace a long line of development in theology and culture—including the way the doctrine of the Trinity became deformed in Western theology, the misleading subject/object distinction of Cartesian philosophy, and over-individualized notions of liberty that are so deeply embedded in American consciousness.⁵⁹

This heritage of individualism affects the church, and theology, at several levels. It is difficult for us to understand the social nature of Christian experience and the church as a social (and therefore necessarily political) organism; it is difficult to understand justice other than in terms of individual righteousness and personal morality; it is difficult to understand social transformation other than in terms of the cumulative effect of individual good deeds.

The Solution: Social Christianity. Wesleyan theology provides the resources for overcoming the individualism of Enlightenment rationalism—both as an issue of teaching and as a matter of practice. The solution is Wesley’s understanding of social Christianity in relation to the perfecting, restoring work of the Holy Spirit.

In his own spiritual quest, Wesley became sharply aware of this issue of individualism. For him it was not so much a philosophical as a personal matter. His quest, initially, was very individualistic, as his journal shows. It came as a flash of insight when a “serious man” whom Wesley sought out in 1729 told him, “Sir, you wish to serve God and go to heaven? Remember that you cannot serve him alone. You must therefore find companions or make them; the Bible knows nothing of solitary religion.” Wesley followed this advice for the next sixty years, always avoiding the pitfall of “solitary religion.”⁶⁰

⁵⁷ See for example Luke 5:20-26, where Jesus both heals and forgives the paralytic.

⁵⁸ Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002), 116. Jenkins documents the prominence of the healing emphasis in much of emerging global Christianity.

⁵⁹ Colin Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh, UK: T. & T. Clark, 1997) is especially helpful here.

⁶⁰ See Snyder, *The Radical Wesley*, 148.

This dynamic is the reason Wesley makes such a point of “social Christianity.” When Wesley spoke of “social holiness” he was pointing to New Testament *koinonia*. Christian fellowship meant, not merely corporate worship, but watching over one another in love; advising, exhorting, admonishing and praying with the brothers and sisters. “This, and this alone, is Christian fellowship,” he said. And this is what Methodism promoted: “We introduce Christian fellowship where it was utterly destroyed. And the fruits of it have been peace, joy, love, and zeal for every good word and work,” Wesley wrote in his “Plain Account of the People Called Methodists.”⁶¹

Although the connection has been largely lost in contemporary Wesleyan theology and practice, Wesley himself closely linked the theme of social Christianity with Christian perfection. That is, social Christianity, or social holiness, is the work of the Holy Spirit, creating a community of responsive and responsible love that gives corporate, visible expression to God’s love for us in Christ. Holiness is social, and social Christianity is possible only by the gracious restoring and sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.

We need to be clear that by “social holiness” Wesley meant the experience and demonstration of the character of Jesus Christ *in Christian community*, the church. For Wesley, “social holiness” does not mean social justice or the social witness of the church. That witness grows out of the “social holiness” that is the character of the church itself. The church’s role in society might better be called “kingdom witness” or something similar. Wesley was making a very specific and essential (and often neglected) point in using the term “social holiness”: Holiness (the character of Christ) is not solitary or lone or individualistic sanctity but a social (that is, relational) experience based on our relationship with God the Trinity and experienced, refined, and lived out jointly in Christian community.

Wesley was very clear on this, and it is a disservice to Wesleyan theology to use the term “social holiness” as equivalent to “social witness” without at least acknowledging that we mean something different than Wesley did.⁶² For understanding Wesley’s view of social ethics and the church’s role in society, the key Wesleyan formulation is “justice, mercy, and truth,” another theme and perhaps seed idea in Wesley.⁶³

According to Wesley, insofar as salvation concerns our relation to God and other people, the goal is Christian perfection—that is, the maturing, perfecting, and restoring of Christian character. It is clear from his writings that by Christian perfection Wesley meant the Spirit-given ability to love God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind and our neighbors as ourselves. The central issue is the work of the Spirit in transforming us (personally and communally, as the church) into the image of Christ; of forming in us the character of Christ, which is equivalent to the fruit of the Spirit. Christian perfection is having and living out “the fullness of Christ” or “the fullness of the Spirit.”⁶⁴ We are called to holiness, which means (as Wesley often said) having

⁶¹ See the discussion in Snyder, *The Radical Wesley*, 148.

⁶² “Christianity is essentially a social religion; and that to turn it into a solitary religion, is indeed to destroy it. . . . it cannot subsist at all, without society, — without living and conversing with other men.” Wesley, Sermon 24, “Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount, Discourse IV,” I.1.

⁶³ Wesley spoke of “living in the uniform practice of justice, mercy, and truth” (Sermon 66, “The Signs of the Times,” II.9). “Justice, mercy, and truth” is an important, oft-repeated phrase in Wesley. See, e.g., Sermon 1, “Salvation by Faith,” I.1; Sermon 61, “The Mystery of Iniquity,” 29, 33; Sermon 63, “The General Spread of the Gospel,” 22.

⁶⁴ Key passages are Eph. 3:19, 4:13, Col. 2:10, among others, and those that speak of being filled with the Spirit, such as Eph. 5:18.

the mind that was in Christ Jesus, being conformed to his image, and walking as he walked. This is where salvation-healing leads, if we walk in the Spirit. This healing makes the church a sign and agent of the larger, broader healing that God is bringing in Christ through the Spirit.

Wesley's stress on *preceding grace* and on the power of the Holy Spirit to *perfect Christian character* suggests an optimism of grace that should infuse the church's life and mission. If God can transform people into the likeness of Jesus Christ, he can build communities that transcend racial, ethnic, socio-economic, and cultural differences. Wesley's conviction that *salvation is healing* suggests potent possibilities for building reconciled and reconciling communities that are a foretaste of the "great multitude" pictured in the Book of Revelation.

This Wesleyan emphasis on Christian perfecting has two fundamental aspects that are key for the church's life and witness: First, we must emphasize (and incarnate) the fact that the *goal* (the *telos*) is always growing up into the fullness of the character of Jesus Christ as the corporate experience of the church and the experience of each member of the body. Second, we must stress (and help Christians experience) the fullness of the Spirit—being filled with and walking in the Holy Spirit. Normally, as Wesley taught, this deeper work of the Spirit comes as a distinct experience subsequent to conversion, though (as Wesley acknowledged) it may be experienced more gradually or less perceptibly and thus, no doubt, through multiple fresh fillings (or deeper workings) of the Spirit. With the growing emphasis today on character, moral development, and growth, we must not lose the essential *crisis and process* link that is so central in Wesley. It would be un-Wesleyan as well as unbiblical to lose the crisis/process nexus.

As a practical matter of preaching, discipleship, and growth, we need to help believers understand the deeper life of the Spirit that is available to them in Christ. We should give believers opportunities to enter into that deeper life—to confront the dividedness of their own hearts and enter into the fullness, wholeness, and integration *in Christian community* that God offers to us. This is our inheritance in Jesus Christ and is a foretaste of that communion we will enjoy in the heavenly kingdom. This was Wesley's concern, and it should be ours.

Conclusion

I have argued that the Babylonian captivity of Wesleyan theology consists in the frequent failure to overcome the *elitism* of Eastern spirituality, the *dualism* of both Eastern and Western theology, the *pessimism* of Augustinian theology, and the *individualism* of Enlightenment rationalism. I have tried to show, then, that Wesleyan theology's captivity can be traced to:

1. Neglect of Wesley's understanding of creation.
2. Neglect or distortion of Wesley's doctrine of grace.
3. An eclipse of Wesley's emphasis on Christian community and social solidarity.
4. In general, a failure to maintain the holism of Wesley's theology.

The themes elaborated here do not, of course, exhaust Wesley's theology and its implications for the church. In a holistic theology of church, mission, and Christian experience, more would need to be said about the Trinity; about the doctrine of the church (ecclesiology), particularly with regard to spiritual gifts and the priesthood of believers; and about the kingdom of God. In fact however, as I have already hinted, these themes remained relatively underdeveloped in Wesley's own theology.

Nevertheless, Wesley's mature theology was remarkably comprehensive. One can still be amazed at the vision Wesley set out toward the end of his life in "sermons" (really essays) such as "God's Approbation of His Works" (1782), "God's Love to Fallen Man" (1782), "The General Deliverance" (1782), "The End of Christ's Coming" (1781), and "The General Spread

of the Gospel” (1783). To fully understand Wesley, these sermons must, of course, be interpreted in tandem with his earlier sermons. Despite differences of emphasis, they are all of a piece. The “analogy of faith” must be applied to Wesley’s own writings.

Consider, finally, the conclusion to “The General Spread of the Gospel”—a sermon, as Gerald Bates notes, rich in missiological implications.⁶⁵ Here Wesley summarizes his fundamental conception of the salvation and restoration God is bringing. After quoting the promise in Isaiah 61:11 that “the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring forth before all the nations,” Wesley writes:

This I apprehend to be the answer, yea, the only full and satisfactory answer that can be given, to the objection against the wisdom and goodness of God, taken from the present state of the world. It will not always be thus: these things are only permitted for a season by the great Governor of the world, that he may draw immense, eternal good out of this temporary evil.... It is enough that we are assured of this one point, that all these transient evils will issue well, will have a happy conclusion, and that “mercy first and last will reign.” All unprejudiced persons may see with their eyes, that he is renewing the face of the earth. And we have strong reason to hope that the work he hath begun he will carry on unto the day of the Lord Jesus; that he will never intermit this blessed work of his Spirit, until he has fulfilled all his promises; until he hath put a period to sin and misery, and infirmity, and death; and re-established universal holiness and happiness, and caused all the inhabitants of the earth to sing together, “Hallelujah! The Lord God omnipotent reigneth!” “Blessing, and glory, and wisdom, and honour, and power, and might, be unto our God for ever and ever!”⁶⁶

This biblical, cosmic vision is highly relevant today to an increasingly global church. This one sermon picks up on several of the themes discussed in this essay: optimism of grace, salvation as healing, and spirit-matter integration in the new creation. There are resources in this and similar Wesley writings that, properly understood and constantly grounded in Scripture, can enrich the world church.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Gerald E. Bates, “John Wesley’s Amazingly Modern Missional Vision,” *Free Methodist Historical Society Newsletter* 3:3 (Spring 2003), 2-3.

⁶⁶ Wesley, Sermon 63, “The General Spread of the Gospel,” 26-27. See *WJW* (Abingdon), 2:499.

⁶⁷ Jerry Walls has argued that the logic of “The General Spread of the Gospel” leads naturally to universalism, even though Wesley rejected universalism. Walls helpfully points out that theodicy was a long-standing concern of Wesley. He did not shy away from the issue of evil but sought to show how all evil is overcome and accounted for in God’s work of redemption. Walls may be right that Wesley never fully resolved, on rational grounds, the tension between God’s goodness and human freedom, on the one hand, and the reality of evil and judgment on the other. Yet Wesley believed that ultimately there was a rational explanation within the wisdom of God, even if this is not yet fully accessible to present human reason. Walls argues that Wesley “managed to develop a theodicy which was at once biblically motivated, theologically rich, daring in its speculations, and deeply practical in its implications,” and that “Wesley’s life is a powerful demonstration that those who engage [to defend God’s goodness] need not be insensitive to the harsh reality of evil in the world.” Walls, 560.

One sign of hope today is the *globalization* of Wesleyan theology. This may be part of the solution to the Babylonian captivity. Wesleyan theology is decreasingly the province of the Western church and of Western theologians. Already Wesleyan scholars from Latin America, Africa, Korea, India, the Chinese community, and elsewhere are beginning to make their contributions. This is potentially a highly positive development.

As Christendom crumbles and a new, vigorous, largely non-Western Christianity gains strength and self-consciousness, the end of Wesleyan theology's Babylonian captivity may help release resources that make Wesley's vision of "the general spread of the Gospel" and "new creation" a reality as never before.

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