JOHN WESLEY'S "HEART RELIGION" AND THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF CHRIST

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The question of how human beings appropriate the righteousness of Christ was a matter of keen theological debate in Wesley's time. Wesley's views on this subject, though, have often been misunderstood—both in his own time and ours. One reason for this failure to understand Wesley's position is attributable to a more fundamental failure to understand Wesley's sophisticated understanding of the role of the human "heart" in matters of religion. In this paper I will first give a brief sketch of the theological and conceptual structure of Wesley's "religion of the heart." I will then make clear the role that the righteousness of Christ plays in this "heart religion." Finally, I will show how some influential construals of Wesley's views have misinterpreted his religion of the heart and, hence, his understanding of the righteousness of Christ.

I

John Wesley affirmed the orthodoxy of the creeds of the church. He also affirmed, espoused and practiced what has come to be called in the 20th century "orthopraxis," which is to say that he recognized that certain actions are necessary if one is to consider oneself a Christian. These actions he termed the "works of piety" (e.g., taking the sacraments, attending worship, praying, and searching the scriptures) and the "works of mercy" (or "charity," e.g., visiting those imprisoned, feeding the poor, and clothing the naked). What makes Wesley's vision of Christianity different from many others, though, is something that cannot be captured by either "orthodoxy" or "orthopraxis." This element is what I have elsewhere termed "orthokardia."

1 Portions of this article were previously presented at the American Academy of Religion's "Wesley Studies" working group, 1992 national meeting, and at the 1992 Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies.

2 See sermon #14 "The Repentance of Believers" I.13 and Outler's note, 343; and sermon #26 "Upon our Lord's Sermon on the Mount: Discourse the Sixth," 573ff, both in The Works of John Wesley Volume I (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984). All references to Wesley's Works will be to the Abingdon edition unless otherwise indicated.


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Though Wesley himself never used the term "orthokardia" ("right heart"), he never stopped proclaiming the "religion of the heart." Even a brief listing of his references to this concept would run to many pages. Suffice it to point out that at the end of his thirteen-part series of sermons on the Sermon on the Mount, Wesley summarized both his own sermon series and Jesus's original sermon by saying "In a word: let thy religion be the religion of the heart."4

Let us get clear on Wesley's basic intention in using the phrase "religion of the heart." "Heart" as Wesley used it meant nothing more (or less) than the true center of the person, that which is essentially definitive of who we are. When explicating "heart religion" Wesley usually spoke about the "affections" or "tempers" as the true indicators of the nature of the heart. Certainly, what we do says a lot about who we are, as does what we think and what creeds we assent to. But Wesley knew that if you want to know who a person truly is, then you have to find out what they love, what they hate, what they take joy in, what they fear, and in what they find peace. If you know these things, you know a person in an unmistakable way. Wesley's view was that if Christianity does not affect a person on this most elemental level, then it has not really taken root.

By preaching and writing about a religion that affects the core of who we are—a religion that reorders the loves and fears of our everyday existence—Wesley knew that he was running very clear risks. But in his mature reflections, which showed a very subtle insight into both human nature and the nature of Christian truth, he did avoid the worst pitfalls which endanger "heart religion." Let us briefly examine three key elements of his understanding of the "religious affections" that helped him avoid some of these pitfalls. I will here share the skeleton of Wesley's understanding without sharing the full documentation in the original sources that I have presented elsewhere.5

First of all, for Wesley the affections or tempers are not the same as "feelings" (understood as a conscious awareness of sensation). Though Wesley sometimes spoke without observing this distinction (especially early in his career), his mature thought reflected this insight. A person can love God (or anything else, for that matter) without constantly feeling that love. To take a secular, common-sense example to illustrate this distinction: just because a mechanic is not feeling love for her husband while she is concentrating on rebuilding a carburetor is no proof that she in fact does not love her husband. Accordingly, defining the religious affections (e.g., humility, love, joy, peace, and patience) as the essence of Christianity does not entail advocating constant awareness of specific felt sensations. Having a set of emotions is different

4 Works, Volume I, 698. On "heart religion" see Outler's note 134 to sermon #25 ("Sermon on the Mount, V"), Works, Volume I, 571, and my works cited above.
5 See above, note 3.
than always *feeling* those emotions. As Wesley said in a letter to Thomas Olivers: "Barely to feel no sin, or to feel constant peace, joy, and love, will not prove the point."6

A second crucial feature of Wesley's understanding of heart religion is that the religious affections are transitive, that is, they take objects. The objects that are taken determine, in part, whether the affections are truly religious or not. If what we love is our own lust, or riches, or fame or flattery, then our affections are targeted on things of the "world" or the "flesh." If, on the other hand, what we love is God and our neighbor, if we take joy in the burden of sin being lifted, if it is our walk with God and not our bank account that gives us peace, then our heart is focused on the objects that make for a true "heart religion." In his *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament* he makes this point while commenting on Romans 8:5:

> They that are after the flesh . . . mind the things of the flesh—Have their thoughts and affections fixed on such things as gratify corrupt nature: namely on things visible and temporal: on things of the earth, on pleasure (of sense or imagination), praise, or riches. But they who are after the Spirit—Who are under His guidance. **Mind the things of the Spirit—** Think of, relish, love things invisible, eternal; the things which the Spirit hath revealed, which He works in us, moves us to, and promises to give us.7

The third key element in Wesley's understanding of the Christian heart is that the affections or emotions act as dispositions to behave. If the above-mentioned mechanic tends to place her husband's needs on the same level as her own, if she shares her time and money with him, if his welfare is at least as important as her own, then we might be willing to grant that she in fact loves her husband. But those things (to varying degrees) are all observable, they are a function of her behavior. In this way, emotions dispose people to behave in certain ways. Just as a glass is, by its nature, disposed to break when it is struck, so a loving person is disposed to act in the perceived best interests of the beloved. The *feelings* will come and go, but if the behaviors are not there, then true love surely is not. In his fourth discourse on the Sermon on the Mount, Wesley states that while the "root of religion lies in the heart," it is also true that such a root "cannot but put forth branches."8

These last two points bring out the fact that the religious affections as Wesley understood them are *intrinsically relational* and are, hence, not primarily individual events. If we do not reach beyond ourselves and target the God that is rendered in the narrative of scripture then we are not growing the truly "religious" affections. Similarly, if our affections are not strong enough to act as dispositions to behave in the social world, they are not truly "religious." The "religious affections" must break out of the cocoon of individuality at

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8 *Wesley's Works*, Volume I, #24, 541.
both their *genesis* and their *telos* in order for Wesley’s version of “heart religion” to be fostered.

Since Wesley’s understanding of the religious affections—his “orthokardia”—displays an awareness of these three features of affectivity, we can now better understand how Christ’s righteousness is conveyed to the believer in the life of the heart. Sanctification, the process of becoming more and more holy (or, to use one of Wesley’s favorite images, the process of “recovering the Image of God” in human beings) was seen by Wesley as directly related to the righteousness of God that is available to us through the work of Jesus Christ. As someone trained to be an Oxford Don, Wesley was well aware of the theological issues that surround the question of how this righteousness of Christ’s becomes active in human reality. Wesley walked very carefully through this conceptual realm that Albert Outler once termed a “soteriological minefield.”

In taking measured paces amidst the mines, Wesley made it clear that he was not content to let the phrase “imputed righteousness” be the definitive understanding of how we become holy. In a 1741 exchange with Zinzendorf, Zinzendorf equated justification with sanctification and states that there can be no growth in holiness in the Christian life because the “whole Christian perfection is *imputed* not *inherent*.” In trying to sharpen his conceptions in this dialogue with Zinzendorf, Wesley never denies imputation, but neither does he single-mindedly embrace the term “inherent,” for he knows that neither one of this dyad of terms is adequate to describe fully the reality at issue. In his sermon “The Lord Our Righteousness” (#20), first preached in 1765 and published in 1766, Wesley presents his fullest explanation of this issue.

After agreeing with the usual Protestant formulation that the human righteousness of Christ is imputed to the believer “when they believe,” Wesley asks himself the rhetorical question “‘But do you not believe *inherent* righteousness?’” To this he answers “Yes, in its proper place; not as the *ground* of our acceptance with God, but as the *fruit* of it; not in the place of *imputed* righteousness, but as consequent upon it. That is, I believe God *implants* righteousness in every one to whom he has *imputed* it.”

Here Wesley uses the term “inherent” in a qualified way, but he finally prefers “implanted.” One connotation of the term “inherent” is “intrinsic,” which certainly could raise the specter of moralistic self-reliance or works righteousness. But Wesley specifically avoided that interpretation by using

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9Wesley’s *Works*, Volume I, 454, note.
13Another example of this is found in his note on Matthew 22:12 in his *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament* (London: Epworth Press, 1976) where he explains that the wedding garment is “The righteousness of Christ, first imputed, then implanted.” 105.
the term “implanted” as a means of specifying what he meant by “inherent.” The term “implanted” removes that part of the range of meaning of “inherent” that would invite us to read it as “intrinsic” (i.e., part of the essential nature of the person and unrelated to external agents). “Implanted” moves beyond the “legal fiction” of “imputation” but still conveys our dependence on God as the “implanter.”

Why would Wesley speak thus about the reality of righteousness or holiness and run the risk of being thought to deny the important Protestant emphasis on imputation? He wrote,

... what we are afraid of is this: lest any should use the phrase, ‘the righteousness of Christ’, or, ‘the righteousness of Christ is “imputed to me”,’ as a cover for his unrighteousness. We have known this done a thousand times. A man has been reproved, suppose, for drunkenness. ‘Oh, said he, I pretend to no righteousness of my own: Christ is my righteousness.’ ... And thus though a man be as far from the practice as from the tempers of a Christian, though he neither has the mind which was in Christ nor in any respect walks as he walked, yet he has armour of proof against all conviction in what he calls the ‘righteousness of Christ.’

He goes on to warn such people,

against ‘continuing in sin that grace may abound!’ Warn them against making ‘Christ the minister of sin!’ Against making void that solemn decree of God, ‘without holiness no man shall see the Lord,’ by a vain imagination of being holy in Christ. O warn them that if they remain unrighteous, the righteousness of Christ will profit them nothing! Cry aloud (is there not a cause?) that for this very end the righteousness of Christ is imputed to us, that ‘the righteousness of the law may be fulfilled in us,’ and that we may ‘live soberly, religiously, and godly in this present world.’

Here we see an example of Wesley’s understanding of the difference between present and final salvation. For Wesley, at the moment of faith, we are justified. However, if we have time to obey God’s commands and do not make use of our Spirit-given ability to do so, then we would still be damned, unless new confession, repentance and obedient living follow. In other words, we can experience “present” salvation by trusting now in the work of Christ, but we can also fall away or “backslide” by failing to live the life of grateful service which comes from this trust and, hence, not experience “final” salvation. Righteousness is imputed to us so that it then might be implanted. Our lives will be effectually changed when we trust that Christ has changed them.

In 1772 and 1773, in responding to bitingly sarcastic criticism from a Mr. Hill, Wesley is clearly fed-up with trying to make the difference between justification and sanctification clear through the use of this theological terminology of “imputation” and he says:

\[14\] Wesley’s Works, Volume I, 462.

\[15\] Wesley’s Works, Volume I, 463.

With regard to this, . . . that we are justified merely for the sake of what Christ has done and suffered, I have constantly and earnestly maintained above four-and-thirty years. And I have frequently used the phrase, ["the imputed righteousness of Christ"] hoping thereby to please others 'for their good to edification.' But it has had a contrary effect, since so many improve it into an objection. Therefore, I will use it no more, unless it occur in an hymn, or steal upon me unawares; I will endeavor to use only such phrases as are strictly scriptural.\(^7\)

As Albert Outler has said, Wesley's goal was "an alternative to both of the older polarizations that had separated the notions of Christ's imputed righteousness in justification from an actual imparted righteousness."\(^8\) Again, Outler states that "the much vaunted distinction between the imputed righteousness of Christ (the ground of our justification) and his imparted righteousness (the Spirit's work in regeneration) posed a false alternative."\(^9\) What Outler never made explicit, however, is that the biggest part of the difficulty that Wesley had in using these categories of "imputed," "imparted," "inherent," and "implanted" stems directly from the fact that Wesley saw the righteousness of God in terms of the affections of the heart. In order to understand the process of sanctification, one has to be able to understand the life of the affections.

The realized righteousness of the religious affections is shown when love, reverence, humility, and "every other holy and heavenly temper"\(^20\) are displayed as integral parts of the character of the believer. This is seen succinctly in Wesley's "Sermon on the Mount, IX" where he says,

> 'Seek the kingdom of God and his righteousness.' Righteousness is the fruit of God's reigning in the heart. And what is righteousness but love? The love of God and of all mankind, flowing from faith in Jesus Christ, and producing humbleness of mind, meekness, gentleness, long-suffering, patience, deadness to the world; and every right disposition of heart toward God and toward man. And by these it produces all holy actions, whatsoever are lovely or of good report; whatsoever works of faith and labour of love are acceptable to God and profitable to man.

> 'His righteousness.' This is all his righteousness still: it is his own free gift to us, for the sake of Jesus Christ the righteous, through whom alone it is purchased for us. And it is his work: it is he alone that worketh it in us by the inspiration of his Holy Spirit.\(^21\)

If righteousness is love, and our love will only grow by targeting our heart on the God who is available through faith, then it becomes apparent why "implanted" is Wesley's preferred term for the working of God's righteousness in the human heart. "Implanted" best expresses the synergistic relationship between subject and object in the vitality of an affection. Both subject and object bring their nature to the experience: it is not one-sided on God's side of things (which is suggested by the word "imputed"), nor is it one-sided

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\(^7\)Wesley's Works, Jackson, ed., Volume X (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 388.
\(^8\)In Outler's "Introduction" to volume I of the collected sermons in Wesley's Works, 1984, 63.
\(^9\)Wesley's Works, Volume I, 80.
on the human side of things (which is suggested by some connotations of the word "inherent"). "Implanted" conjures images of a seed taking root, and we all know that such implantation will yield little without cultivation. Perhaps this is why Wesley’s oft-used biblical description of holiness is Galatians 5:22ff—the “fruit of the Spirit.”

Several recent commentators have, unfortunately, characterized Wesley’s vision of sanctification (the development of the religious affections) in such a way that obscures Wesley’s true understanding of the righteousness of Christ. Let us, then, consider these critiques of Wesley’s views and show how they reflect misguided notions of how Wesley sees Christ’s righteousness bringing about our righteousness through the development of the affections.

II

John Deschner in Wesley’s Christology says that Wesley “means by love, not primarily a participation in the being of Christ’s love, but an inherent ‘temper,’ ‘affection,’ or ‘intention’ in man, himself.” He continues by saying that “the independence of the love demanded from the holiness of Christ’s active obedience is the root of a far-reaching question about the justice of man’s final justification.”

A similar characterization can be found in Harald Lindstrom’s Wesley and Sanctification where he says that, “To the Reformers perfection was perfection in faith, but to Wesley it was an inherent ethical perfection in love and obedience.”

Here we can see Deschner reading “inherent” to mean “independent from Christ’s active obedience,” whereas Lindstrom opposes “inherent” to “in faith.” Both of these views ignore the logic or grammar of the religious affections by failing to see that the love which Wesley equates with true righteousness must, by its very nature, take the God who is available through faith as its object. The affections are not “inherent” in the sense of “independent.” They always rely on an object that is presented to them for their growth. "Inherent" as interpreted by Deschner and Lindstrom seems to imply “self-sustaining” or “without outward cause,” in which case they have twisted Wesley’s views. Wesley’s use of the term “inherent” seems to imply more “lying within us,” without ever denying that the source of this righteousness is God. Only in this sense can we see how Wesley understood “implanted” and “inherent” as similar in meaning.

Parallel to the remarks of Deschner and Lindstrom is the view of William J. Abraham in The Logic of Evangelism. In this book, Abraham makes a

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22The Index of the four volumes of Sermons in the Abingdon edition shows 27 references to all or part of Galatians 5:22–23 in the corpus of Wesley’s sermons. See Wesley’s Works, Volume IV, 677.
23(Dallas: SMU Press, 1985), 106.
24Wesley’s Christology, 106.
compelling case for understanding evangelism as "primary initiation into the kingdom of God." He then, however, proceeds to say that in the thought of both John Wesley and Jonathan Edwards (whose Treatise on Religious Affections was much appreciated by John Wesley) "we can detect a shift away from a focus on the reality of the kingdom as it comes in Christ and in the operations of the Holy Spirit to a focus on the religious affections and on personal religious experience." He goes on to say that,

Edwards . . . made the crucial change when he developed a keen interest in the morphology of conversion, and when he decided to locate true religion in the affections. This anthropocentric turn has been the undoing of modern evangelism. Over the years it has lead to a fierce concentration on the response of the individual, as we can see in the primary focus of Wesley's standard sermons.

Here we need to point out that on Wesley's understanding of the transitive nature of the religious affections, they will not grow if the attention of the believer is focused on one's own response. This kind of "anthropocentric turn" would be self-defeating on Wesley's terms and is exactly the opposite of what he recommended. Only when we are fixed on God will the religious affections flourish. The religious affections are not felt sensations but object-centered dispositions to behave.

Abraham does make an accurate historical point about Wesley's 19th century followers mis-emphasizing the response of the believer, but this phenomenon is best understood in terms of a mis-guided focus on feelings which are to be distinguished from the affections. If we take our own feelings as the objects of our affections, we will obviously be caught-up in a self-defeating, vicious circle. I readily grant that such misunderstandings often took place before, during and after Wesley's time, but it is wrong to ascribe such an approach to the heart religion promulgated by Wesley (or Edwards for that matter). Wesley's vision, which emphasizes taking only certain objects for our affections, and which specifies the behaviors towards which these affections should dispose us, does not allow for an individualistic religion of pure feeling.
When, through the prompting and guiding of the Holy Spirit, the sinner targets the awesome, forgiving love of God, which makes him/her aware of his/her own sinfulness, the affection of repentance or sorrow for sins grows. This leads to trusting in the God who forgives sin, which leads us into the life of holiness where our love and joy target God and we are disposed to act in the best interests of our neighbors. This active and energy-filled process of developing heart-holiness could certainly never be fully described in terms of an “imputation.” The intrinsic relatedness between the affections, God and our neighbors also rules out seeing this heart-religion-righteousness as “independent” from faith in God, or entailing an “anthropocentric turn.” Only as long as the branches are attached to the vine will the life of the vine be “inherent” within them.

The primary way that Wesley saw the affections growing and developing was attendance on the means of grace, and this fact reinforces the assertion that the righteousness or holiness of Wesley’s heart religion is not something “independent” of the Spirit of God. The church provides the formative community which is the context where sanctification occurs. When Wesley warns his hearers that they should “expect to achieve no ends without using the means” he is giving the church and its means of grace a place of privilege. The church helps to form the affections by turning the believer to the “works of piety,” and the church also directs the believer as to how the affections are best expressed by encouraging the believer in the “works of mercy.”

John Wesley’s Orthokardia is a necessary relational, spirit-dependent and communal vision of the righteousness of Christ enfleshed on earth.

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33 In “The Nature of Enthusiasm,” Wesley’s Works, Volume II, 56 Wesley terms any who would try to attain the end of holiness without using the means of grace an “enthusiast,” i.e., someone who has gone “overboard” with inner experience or supposed “revelations.”
34 The works of mercy can, interestingly enough, also help in the process of formation of the Christian heart and not be expressions of it only. This can be seen when a youth work trip to rebuild an old house ends up creating more of a sense of fellowship in the youth group than a “fellowship” trip to an amusement park.