

## JOHN AND CHARLES WESLEY ON “GOD IN CHRIST RECONCILING”

PAUL WESLEY CHILCOTE

### The Call to Reconciliation

The turn of the millennium birthed a renewal of concern about reconciliation. Given a world of destructive conflicts and the reality of personal lives characterized by alienation and fragmentation, this renewed interest is hardly surprising. Unfortunately, the Christian community is caught up frequently in the divisive spirit of this age and sometimes contributes to increased alienation by promoting a defective gospel, rather than living in and for God’s vision of beloved community in this world. In a time such as this, those who designed this World Methodist Conference event have served us well by focusing our attention on the foundational Pauline theme of “God in Christ Reconciling.” For this gathering of the Historical Society I have been asked to address this theme from the perspective of John and Charles Wesley. Before examining the contribution they make to our understanding and application of this *missio Dei* (mission of God); however, I think it would be helpful to dwell on the conception of reconciliation itself for just a moment, in light of our contemporary circumstances.

I suppose it was the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa and the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that reintroduced me, and many of us, to the agony and the ecstasy of reconciliation in dramatic ways.<sup>1</sup> That amazing process revealed the cost of true reconciliation.<sup>2</sup> It wrenched us from a foolish or dangerously naïve conception of reconciliation that made life all too simple. In that process we could see again how genuine repentance and accountability, restorative justice and forgiveness are indispensable elements in the quest for reconciliation. As Scott Appleby demonstrates, the complexity of it all has led some skeptics to abandon the “politics of forgiveness and reconciliation” as an empty promise that can

---

<sup>1</sup> According to Kevin Avruch and Beatriz Vejarano, between 1973 and 1995 when the South African commission was established, over 20 “truth commissions” for the purpose of peace-building and reconciliation have been established around the world, and the number has nearly doubled since the turn of the century. See Avruch and Vejarano, “Truth and Reconciliation Commissions: A Review Essay and Annotated Bibliography,” *The Online Journal of Peace and Conflict Resolution* 4, no. 2 (Spring 2002): 1.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the conditions under which genuine reconciliation becomes possible, see Michael Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1997).

hardly hope to deliver its goal in this world.<sup>3</sup> And yet people live in the hope and expectation of—and, in fact, do experience—reconciliation.

Drawn from another context of human brutality, suffering, and sin, the work of Miroslav Volf explores the dynamic of “exclusion and embrace.”<sup>4</sup> Volf reminds us of the centrality of solidarity in suffering to our Christian faith. He helps us rediscover how reconciliation and resurrection become possible for us under the sign of the cross. In his reflections upon similar concerns, another contemporary theologian, Walter Wink, emphasizes the distinction between forgiveness and reconciliation, concepts often blurred in popular Christianity. While forgiveness can be unilateral, true reconciliation requires mutuality.<sup>5</sup> Forgiveness and reconciliation are distinct but not separate; forgiveness being the foundation upon which reconciliation is built. As the leaders of an emergent reconciliation movement remind us, “reconciliation is not forgetting the past . . . Christians are called to fearlessly seek and name the truth of what has happened, guided by repentance and forgiveness.”<sup>6</sup> John Paul Lederach, widely acclaimed Professor of International Peacebuilding in the Notre Dame Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, defines reconciliation quite simply but profoundly as that place where truth, justice, mercy, and peace meet.<sup>7</sup>

These ancient-future lessons must inform our reflections on this theme of “God in Christ Reconciling.” While stunningly contemporary, none of these concepts or ways of thinking about reconciliation is foreign to our Wesleyan heritage. Indeed, as we shall see, the personal dimension of reconciliation with God in Christ (that aspect most common in our way of thinking) is inextricably bound with God’s larger vision for the human family and its history. But before we turn to John and Charles Wesley, we must also sojourn for a moment, as our forebears would have demanded, in the biblical text that frames our conversations.

---

<sup>3</sup> See R. Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> See Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> Walter Wink, *When the Powers Fall: Reconciliation in the Healing of Nations* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 14. Cf. Rodney L. Peterson and Raymond G. Helmick, eds., *Forgiveness and Reconciliation: Religion, Public Policy, and Conflict Transformation* (Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation Press, 2001).

<sup>6</sup> [Chris Rice], *Reconciliation as the Mission of God: Christian Witness in a World of Destructive Conflicts* (Tacoma, WA: World Vision International Peacebuilding and Reconciliation Department, [2005]), 7. This paper is the product of conversations among 47 world Christian leaders gathered together in one of the 31 Issue Groups at the 2004 Forum on world Evangelization in Pattya, Thailand, organized by the Lausanne Committee on World Evangelization. Chris Rice, the principal author of the document, is co-director of the Center for Reconciliation at Duke Divinity School in Durham, North Carolina. Information concerning this emerging network of scholars, theologians, missiologists, practitioners, and pastors may be obtained at [www.reconciliationnetwork.com](http://www.reconciliationnetwork.com).

<sup>7</sup> See the important studies of Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (New York: Oxford UP, 2005) and *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (Herndon, VA: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1997), but particularly *The Journey Toward Reconciliation* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1999) in which he first develops this quadrilateral image.

## The Biblical Vision

St. Paul writes to the embattled church in Corinth: “God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:19). This is the translation that would have been most familiar to John and Charles Wesley, and I really do want us to reflect on this entire verse and not simply the Conference theme which is a sound bite summation of the whole. This verse comes, of course, from a larger discourse in the letter (namely, 2 Cor. 5:11-21) in which the apostle discusses the ministry of reconciliation. Many of Paul’s most familiar themes resound in this fifth chapter: new creation (the theme explored at the most recent Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies), imputation, the righteousness of God. Here we encounter St. Paul’s great manifesto on reconciliation, a statement that should be laid along side the other locus of this teaching, namely, Colossians 1:19-20: “For it pleased the Father that in him should all fullness dwell; And, having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself; by him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven” (using again the Authorized Version of the Wesleys’ day).

In these summary statements St. Paul captures God’s total mission to which, he believes, the entirety of the scriptural witness bears testimony. Friendship with God characterizes this vision of life. Those drawn into this realm love both God and neighbor. Christ makes this kind of existence possible by breaking down all the barriers that divide people and disrupt God’s intended harmony in the created order. Reconciliation itself is a sign of God’s presence and the nearness of God’s rule. “Amidst the world’s profound brokenness,” so claims the Reconciliation Network, “God’s peace in the risen Christ is now powerfully at work, seeking to reconcile humanity to God’s intended purposes for union with God, one another, and the material creation, resulting in the flourishing of all.”<sup>8</sup>

It is noteworthy, perhaps, that the image of Jesus as the agent of this reconciliation is somewhat unique to St. Paul.<sup>9</sup> Jesus’ ministry and mission, in fact, point to a much larger reality than most tend to envisage when they consider the soteriological dimensions of this new creation. Older English translations of 2 Cor. 5 (verse 17 in particular) tended to obscure the more radical nature of St. Paul’s vision. In his *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*, John Wesley actually deviates from the King James Version, with regard to this pivotal verse. Over against the Authorized Version, in which we read, “Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a *new creature*,” Wesley suggests: “Therefore if any one be in Christ, there is a new creation.” His exposition of the verse explores the breadth of Paul’s meaning:

Only the power that makes a world can make a Christian. And when he is so created, *the old has passed away*—Of their own accord, even as snow in spring.

<sup>8</sup> [Rice], *Reconciliation as the Mission of God*, 11.

<sup>9</sup> See F. F. Bruce, “Christ as Conqueror and Reconciler,” *Bibliotheca sacra* 141 (Oct.-Dec. 1984): 291-302.

Behold! the present, visible, undeniable change! *All things are become new*—he has new life, new senses, new faculties, new affections, new appetites, new ideas and conceptions. His whole tenor of action and conversation is new, and he lives, as it were, in a new world. God, men, the whole creation, heaven, earth, and all therein, appear in a new light, and stand related to him in a new manner, since he was created anew in Christ Jesus.<sup>10</sup>

Given the absence of a subject and verb in the original Greek, Richard Hays suggests a more literal rendering: “If anyone is in Christ—new creation.” His interpretation of Paul moves in the same direction as that of Wesley:

Paul is not merely talking about an individual’s subjective experience of renewal through conversion; rather, for Paul *ktisis* (“creation”) refers to the whole created order (cf. Rom. 8:18-25). He is proclaiming the apocalyptic message that through the cross God has nullified the *kosmos* of sin and death and brought a new *kosmos* into being.<sup>11</sup>

The implications that surround these biblical insights are profound. Again, Richard Hays’ discussion is instructive:

Once the church has caught the vision of living as a sign of the new creation in which racial and ethnic differences are bridged at the table of the Lord, how it is possible for the community of Christ’s people to participate in animosity toward “outsiders”? If God is the creator of a whole world who wills ultimately to redeem the whole creation—if the death of Christ was the means whereby “God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross” (Col. 1:20)—then how can the church that is called to bear God’s message of reconciliation in an unredeemed world (2 Cor. 5:17-20) scorn or reject people of any race or tongue, whether they are Christians or not? . . . the church has the task of embodying “the ministry of reconciliation” in the world.<sup>12</sup>

While the reconciliation of the believer in Christ to God is an accomplished fact, the reconciliation of the cosmos is a continuing process into which the community of faith is invited as the representatives of God’s alternative vision in the world. We are called to stand in the juncture, as it were, between the old world which is passing away and the new world that is being birthed in Christ, despite all appearances.<sup>13</sup>

How did these texts and this biblical vision shape the Wesleyan tradition? How did John and Charles Wesley proclaim and manifest this message of God in Christ reconciling in their own day? When we turn to the witness of John and Charles Wesley we discover a profound balance of the individual and the social, the personal and the cosmic, the joy of reconciliation and the claim of discipleship. Without having minimized the importance of per-

---

<sup>10</sup> John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*, 2 vols. (London: Bowyer, 1755; reprint ed., Salem, OH: Schmul, 1975), 457-458.

<sup>11</sup> Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1996), 20.

<sup>12</sup> Hays, *Moral Vision*, 441.

<sup>13</sup> This image simply confirms the conclusions of Herman Ridderbos, namely, that in Paul, God is the Author and Initiator of reconciliation and that this reconciliation has a profoundly eschatological character. See Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), Section 32: “God’s Reconciling Activity in Christ.”

sonal conversion, they expanded the horizon of the early Methodist people to embrace the larger vision of God's shalom. After exploring the "reconciling Word" as the "true foundation" of the life of "faith," I will examine the Wesleyan concepts of "gratitude" and benevolence" as the keynotes of a Wesleyan theology of reconciliation.

### Laying the True Foundation: The Reconciling Word

Lutheran Pietists exerted a profound influence upon John Wesley in his quest for a proper foundation in life. During his sojourn among the Moravians at Herrnhut in the summer of 1738, he encountered a clear articulation of the "true foundation" in the preaching of Christian David, one of Count Zinzendorf's earliest collaborators. Wesley recounts from memory one of David's sermons:

This is "the word of reconciliation" which we preach. This is the foundation which never can be moved. By faith we are built upon this foundation. And this faith also is the gift of God. It is his free gift, which he now and ever giveth to everyone that is willing to receive it . . . . But this gift of God lives in the heart, not the head. The faith of the head, learned from men or books, is nothing worth. It brings neither remission of sins nor peace with God. Labour then to believe with your whole heart. So shall you have redemption through the blood of Christ. So shall you be cleansed from all sin. So shall ye go on from strength to strength, being renewed day by day in righteousness and all true holiness.<sup>14</sup>

In his later letter "To the Moravian Church," which opens the fourth published extract of his journal, Wesley identifies this foundational concept as the source of their common vision: "What united my heart to you is the excellency (in many respects) of the doctrine taught among you: your laying the true foundation, 'God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself'; your declaring the free grace of God the cause, and faith the condition of justification."<sup>15</sup>

This vision of salvation by grace through faith, corroborated strongly by Wesley's own Anglican tradition, revolved around Christ's righteousness, God's grace, and the gift of faith. Wesley expounded these themes in his sermon on "The Righteousness of Faith," drawing heavily upon the 2 Corinthians text. "The righteousness of faith," according to Wesley, "is that

---

<sup>14</sup> W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heizenrater, eds., *The Works of John Wesley*, Volume 18, *Journal and Diaries, I (1735-1738)* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988), 272 (August 10, 1738); volumes in this series hereinafter designated as *Works*. One of Christian David's colleagues, David Nitschmann, recounted his own experience to Wesley—a religious transformation in which the 2 Cor. 5:19 text figured quite prominently: "I then fell into doubts of another kind. I believed in God; but not in Christ. I opened my heart to Martin Dober, who used many arguments with me, but in vain. For above four years I found no rest by reason of this unbelief; till one day, as I was sitting in my house, despairing of any relief, those words shot into me, 'God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself.' I thought, 'Then God and Christ are one.' Immediately my heart was filled with joy; and much more at the remembrance of these words which I now felt I did believe: 'The Word was with God, and the Word was God.' 'And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us'" (*Works* 18:282).

<sup>15</sup> *Works* 19:117.

method of reconciliation with God which hath been chosen and established by God himself . . . it was of mere grace, of free love, of undeserved mercy, that God hath vouchsafed to sinful man any way of reconciliation with himself.”<sup>16</sup> He subsequently pleads with his reader:

Whosoever therefore thou art who desirest to be forgiven and reconciled to the favour of God, do not say in thy heart, “I must first do this: I must first conquer every sin, break off every evil word and work, and do all good to all men; or I must first go to Church, receive the Lord’s Supper, hear more sermons, and say more prayers.” Alas, my brother, thou art clean gone out of the way. Thou art still “ignorant of the righteousness of God”, and art “seeking to establish thy own righteousness” as the ground of thy reconciliation. Knowest thou not that thou canst do nothing but sin till thou art reconciled to God? Wherefore then dost thou say, I must do this and this first, and then I shall believe? Nay, but first believe. Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, the propitiation for thy sins. Let this good foundation first be laid, and then thou shalt do all things well.<sup>17</sup>

In a verse inspired by 2 Cor. 5:17, Charles Wesley celebrates the momentous change in the believer’s life effected by trust in Christ:

Thrice acceptable word,  
I long to prove it true!  
Take me into thyself, O Lord,  
By making me anew;  
Me for thy mercy sake  
Out of myself remove,  
Partaker of thy nature make,  
Thy holiness and love.<sup>18</sup>

The Wesleys also describe this profoundly personal dimension of God in Christ reconciling as justification by faith. In his introduction to the sermon corpus in *The Works of John Wesley*, Albert Outler actually uses the terms “reconciliation” and “justification” interchangeably.<sup>19</sup> When we talk about reconciliation in this sense, as it refers to the Wesleyan way of salvation, we are talking about nothing other than justification by grace through faith, and this is the true foundation of authentic Christian life.

It is no surprise, therefore, to discover that the 2 Corinthians text figures quite prominently in many of John Wesley’s discussions of this fundamental doctrine. Even his standard definition of “faith” makes explicit reference to St. Paul’s words:

Faith in general is a divine, supernatural *ἐλεγχος*, “evidence” or conviction “of things not seen,” not discoverable by our bodily senses as being either past, future, or spiritual. Justifying faith implies, not only a divine evidence or conviction that “God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself”, but a sure trust and confidence

---

<sup>16</sup> *Works* 1:213 (§§II.7, 8).

<sup>17</sup> *Works* 1:214 (§III.1).

<sup>18</sup> Charles Wesley, *Short Hymns on Select Passages of the Holy Scriptures*, 2 vols. (Bristol: Farley, 1762), 2:300.

<sup>19</sup> *Works* 1:80.

that Christ died for my sins, that he loved me, and gave himself for me.<sup>20</sup>

In his sermon on “The Way to the Kingdom,” the autobiographical allusions are obvious in Wesley’s description of faith as “a sure trust in the mercy of God through Christ Jesus. It is a confidence in a pardoning God. It is a divine evidence or conviction that ‘God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, not imputing to them their former trespasses’; and in particular that the son of God hath loved me and given himself for me; and that I, even I, am now reconciled to God by the blood of the cross.”<sup>21</sup> Elsewhere, his prose achieves a poetic quality as he reflects on the foundation of life in Christ:

Also it is a matter of daily experience that “by grace we are thus saved through faith.” It is by faith that the eye of the mind is opened to see the light of the glorious love of God. And as long as it is steadily fixed thereon, on God in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, we are more and more filled with the love of God and man, with meekness, gentleness, long-suffering; with all the fruits of holiness, which are, through Christ Jesus, to the glory of God the Father.<sup>22</sup>

We discover, essentially, our true identity as the children of God. “We then see, not by a chain of *reasoning*,” claims Wesley, “but by a kind of *intuition*, by a direct view, that ‘God was in Christ reconciling’ . . . In that day ‘we know that we are of God,’ children of God by faith.”<sup>23</sup> The love of God constrains the preacher, therefore, to admonish all hearers: “Rejoice to embrace every opportunity of hearing ‘the word of reconciliation’ declared by the ‘ambassadors of Christ, the stewards of the mysteries of God’.”<sup>24</sup>

In his religious verse, Charles Wesley describes this true foundation of life with God as the “reconciling word:”

See me, Saviour, from above,  
Nor suffer me to die!  
Life, and happiness, and love,  
Drop from thy gracious eye;  
Speak the reconciling word,  
And let thy mercy melt me down;  
Turn, and look upon me, Lord,  
And break my heart of stone.<sup>25</sup>

This reconciling word of God illuminates the soul with the gift of faith. God restores sight to the blind and rescues those who dwell in darkness. Those who entrust their lives to God through Christ by faith pray for all the fullness of God in their lives.

<sup>20</sup> *Works* 1:194 (Sermon 5, “Justification by Faith,” §IV.2). Cf. Sermon 43, “The Scripture Way of Salvation,” §II.2 (*Works* 2:161).

<sup>21</sup> *Works* 1:230 (§II.10).

<sup>22</sup> *Works* 1:614 (Sermon 28, “Sermon on the Mount,” §VIII.4).

<sup>23</sup> *Works* 2:481 (Sermon 62, “The End of Christ’s Coming,” §III.1).

<sup>24</sup> *Works* 1:570 (Sermon 25, “Sermon on the Mount,” §V.12). For the numerous occasions upon which John Wesley preached on 2 Cor. 5:19, see *Works* 20:277, 306, 312, 427; 21:318; 24:11, 35, 56, 106, 113, 142, and 152.

<sup>25</sup> *Works* 7:209 (Hymn 103.4). Cf. *Works* 7:230 (Hymn 119.4).

The gift unspeakable impart:  
    Command the light of faith to shine,  
To shine in my dark, drooping heart,  
    And fill me with the life divine;  
Now bid the new creation be!  
O God, let there be faith in me!

Thee without faith I cannot please,  
    Faith without thee I cannot have;  
But thou hast sent the Prince of peace  
    To seek my wandering soul, and save;  
O Father, glorify thy Son,  
And save me for his sake alone!

Save me through faith in Jesu's blood,  
    That blood which he for all did shed;  
For me, for me, thou know'st it flowed,  
    For me, for me, thou hear'st it plead;  
Assure me now my soul is thine,  
And all thou art in Christ is mine!<sup>26</sup>

For those who are "reconciled by grace," God justifies through faith alone, opens mercy's door, offers assurance of forgiveness, relieves burdens, and makes meet for heaven.<sup>27</sup> God's will is that all might be saved and the extent of God's love so great that we "tremble at the word/Of reconciling grace."<sup>28</sup> This reconciling word composes the weary breast and sinks us into visions of eternity, but also raises us to sing our Savior's praise, flows from our hearts, fills our tongues, permeates our life with purest love, and joins us to the communion of God's faithful throughout the ages.<sup>29</sup>

One of Charles Wesley's more familiar hymns, "Prisoners of hope, arise," celebrates God's offer of reconciliation, the true source of the hope of glory in our lives:

Prisoners of hope, arise,  
    And see your Lord appear!  
Lo! on the wings of love he flies,  
    And brings redemption near.  
Redemption in his blood  
    He calls you to receive;  
Look unto me, the pard'ning God!

---

<sup>26</sup> Wesley published first verse cited here as verse 3 in the hymn as it appears in *Works* 7:259 (Hymn 142). The final two verses, restored here from the original *Hymns for those that seek, and those that have Redemption in the Blood of Jesus Christ* (London: Strahan, 1747), Hymn 14.4-5, are also reprinted in many of the subsequent hymnals.

<sup>27</sup> *Works* 7:142 (Hymn 50.2).

<sup>28</sup> *Works* 7:454 (Hymn 298.4).

<sup>29</sup> *Works* 7:475 (Hymn 319.3-4).

Believe, he cries, believe!

The reconciling word  
 We thankfully embrace,  
 Rejoice in our redeeming Lord,  
 A blood-besprinkled race.  
 We yield to be set free,  
 Thy counsel we approve,  
 Salvation, praise ascribe to thee,  
 And glory in thy love.<sup>30</sup>

### Manifesting the True Christian Character: Gratitude and Benevolence

For John and Charles Wesley, God's own reconciling word is the true foundation of the abundant life, and "gratitude and benevolence" constitute the faith-filled response to God's offer of reconciliation. John Wesley rings the changes on this theme in his sermon on "The Unity of the Divine Being." In characteristic fashion he describes the primary threats to genuine Christianity, namely, the false religions of right opinions (or orthodoxy), outward forms, and good works.<sup>31</sup> His fourth critique of what he describes as a "religion of atheism," however, strikes at the heart of our concerns here:

[The religion of atheism is] every religion whereof God is not laid for the foundation. In a word, a religion wherein "God in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself", is not the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last point.

True religion is right tempers towards God and man. It is, in two words, gratitude and benevolence: gratitude to our Creator and supreme Benefactor, and benevolence to our fellow-creatures. In other words, it is the loving God with all our heart, and our neighbour as ourselves.<sup>32</sup>

In his very last sermon, "On Faith," written in January, 1791, John Wesley asks the all-important question about the goal of the Christian life: "How will [the faithful] advance in holiness, in the whole image of God wherein they were created!" He responds with reference to these dual foci of the Christian life: "In the love of God and man, gratitude to their Creator, and benevolence to all their fellow-creatures."<sup>33</sup> First, gratitude is the response of the creature to the Creator; the response of those who are reconciled to the Reconciler.

<sup>30</sup> *Works* 7:549 (Hymn 376.1-2).

<sup>31</sup> See his similar depiction of false religion in the sermon, "Walking by Sight and Walking by Faith," in which he argues that true religion is neither harmlessness, morality, nor formality. Rather, true religion is "living in eternity, and walking in eternity; and hereby walking in the love of God and man, in lowliness, meekness, and resignation" (*Works* 4:57-58, Sermon 119, §18).

<sup>32</sup> *Works* 4:66-67 (Sermon 120, §15-16). In his sermon entitled "An Israelite Indeed," Wesley counters Francis Hutcheson's theories promulgated in a work entitled *The Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*. The Glasgow professor had argued for a naturalist ethic, innate, universal, and disassociated from God's prior love and activity in human life. Wesley counters with his view of the impossibility of virtue apart for the God whose prevenient love is the foundation of all virtue. See *Works* 4:278-289.

<sup>33</sup> *Works* 4:196 (Sermon 132, §11).

God in Christ reconciling produces grateful hearts and lives characterized by thanksgiving. Second, benevolence or good will is the response of the disciple whose vision of life has been transformed by the God of love. Having discovered God’s purpose for life and their place within God’s unfolding story, disciples of Christ immerse themselves in and commit themselves to God’s vision for a just and peace-filled world. In conclusion, I will dwell on each of these images only briefly.

*Gratitude.* Grateful hearts testify to the blessedness of life in Christ. In John Wesley’s sermon “On Love,” he describes the quality of happiness that characterizes the lives of those reconciled to God in Christ: “Without love nothing can so profit us as to make our lives happy. By happiness I mean, not a slight, trifling pleasure, that perhaps begins and ends in the same hour; but such a state of well-being as contents the soul, and gives it a steady, lasting satisfaction.”<sup>34</sup> He directly connects one’s experience of the Triune God with this most profound discovery:

This is religion, and this is happiness, the happiness for which we were made. This begins when we begin to know God, by the teaching of his own Spirit. As soon as the Father of spirits reveals his Son in our hearts, and the Son reveals his Father, the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts; then, and not till then, we are happy.<sup>35</sup>

Gratitude characterized the lives of the early Methodist people who bore witness to the blessed nature of life. Isabella Wilson expressed this sentiment in her journal:

This is love unspeakable! [God’s] delight is to make us happy. O how does his love exceed all that fancy can form, or imagination paint. The favoured soul is ready to say, I have heard great and glorious things spoken of thee, but, oh, how little was said to what I find! O how unable are the tongues of mortals to set forth the pleasures of those who are united to this Jesus! We joy in his redeeming love.<sup>36</sup>

Charles Wesley captures this spirit of gratitude in one of his “family hymns”:

With singing we praise  
The original grace  
By our heavenly Father bestowed;  
Our being receive  
From his bounty, and live  
To the honour and glory of God.

For thy glory we are,

---

<sup>34</sup> *Works* 4:386 (Sermon 149, §4).

<sup>35</sup> *Works* 4:67 (§17).

<sup>36</sup> John Pipe, “Memoir of Miss Isabella Wilson,” *Wesleyan Methodist Magazine* 31 (1808): 465. A journal entry from the final year of her life (January 5, 1807) is a fitting testimony to her happy life in Christ: “It is with gratitude of heart I recount the mercies of the last year. Upon the whole, it has been one of the best years of my life. Glory be to God for preserving grace. I feel my heart more united to Jesus than ever. With joy I draw water from the wells of salvation” (601).

Created to share  
 Both the nature and kingdom divine;  
 Created again,  
 That our souls may remain  
 In time and eternity thine.

Hallelujah we sing  
 To our Father and King,  
 And his rapturous praises repeat;  
 To the Lamb that was slain  
 Hallelujah again  
 Sing all heaven, and fall at his feet!<sup>37</sup>

He celebrates the rapture of the newfound child of God:

Abba, Father! hear thy child,  
 Late in Jesus reconciled;  
 Hear, and all the graces shower,  
 All the joy, and peace, and power,  
 All my Saviour asks above,  
 All the life and heaven of love.<sup>38</sup>

*Benevolence.* For most Methodist people, this kind of praise—this response and quality of gratitude—comes as no surprise as we contemplate the meaning of God in Christ reconciling. God’s love in Christ elicits a reciprocal love in God’s child. But for the Wesleys, as important as this newly discovered relationship is, ultimately, salvation is not all about us! They are adamant in their claim that love of God must move the believer ineluctably toward love of neighbor. In his sermon on “The Case of Reason Impartially Considered,” John Wesley demonstrates how the love of neighbor springs, in fact, from gratitude to God.

As reason cannot produce the love of God, so neither can it produce the love of our neighbour, a calm, generous, disinterested benevolence to every child of man. This earnest, steady goodwill to our fellow-creatures never flowed from any fountain but gratitude to our Creator. And if this be . . . the very essence of virtue, it follows that virtue can have no being unless it spring from the love of God.<sup>39</sup>

Elsewhere he proclaims: “And if any man truly love God he cannot but love his brother also. Gratitude to our Creator will surely produce benevolence to our fellow-creatures. If we love him, we cannot but love one another, as Christ loved us. We feel our souls enlarged in love toward every child of

<sup>37</sup> *Works* 7:663-664 (Hymn 478.3, 4, 7).

<sup>38</sup> *Works* 7:552 (Hymn 379.2).

<sup>39</sup> *Works* 2:598 (§11.9).

man."<sup>40</sup>

Benevolence means mission.<sup>41</sup> The Wesleys believed that God calls the community of faith to live for others. The ultimate goal of Wesleyanism is for those within the family of God to become God's partners in the redemption of the whole world. "The primary question for the Methodist," as I have written elsewhere, "is not, am I saved? The ultimate question is, for what purpose am I saved? For the Wesleys, the answer was clear. My neighbor is the goal of my redemption, just as the life, death and resurrection of Christ are oriented toward the salvation of all humanity."<sup>42</sup> "Benevolence," for the Wesleys, consisted in all efforts to realize God's shalom in the life of the world. This mission, this good-will toward our fellow-creatures, this ministry of reconciliation, this benevolence manifests itself in particular ways in the Wesleyan tradition, but none more distinctive than outreach to the marginalized and resistance to injustice, both actions expressed through works of mercy that bear witness to God's rule over life.<sup>43</sup>

In his great family hymn, Charles Wesley bears witness to the eschatological vision of the peaceable kingdom, referring once again to the consequences of God in Christ reconciling:

Jesu, Lord, we look to thee,  
Let us in thy name agree;  
Show thyself the Prince of peace,  
Bid our jars for ever cease.

By thy reconciling love

---

<sup>40</sup> *Works* 3:336 (Sermon 94, "On Family Religion," §1.3). Cf. Wesley's discussion of St. Paul's conception of "neighbor love" in his exposition of 1 Cor. 13:1-3, in which he observes: "such a love of our neighbour as can only spring from the love of God. And whence does this love of God flow? Only from that faith which is of the operation of God; which whoever has, has a direct evidence that 'God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself'" (*Works* 3:295. [Sermon 91, "On Charity," §1.2]).

<sup>41</sup> See the exceptional study of Tore Meistad, "The Missiology of Charles Wesley: An Introduction," *Proceedings of The Charles Wesley Society* 5 (1998): 37-60. "Because Wesleyan soteriology begins in the creation and ends in the new creation," he observes, "the transformation of the person becomes a part of the transformation of the entire cosmos (cf. Col. 1:15-23; cf. Rom. 8:33-39)" [49]. In his examination of "The Messianic Kingdom and the Year of Jubilee," Meistad argues that the concept of "jubilee" shaped the common life of the early Christian community, leading them to share resources and care for the poor. The early Methodists modeled their lives after this pattern.

<sup>42</sup> Paul W. Chilcote, *Recapturing the Wesleys' Vision: An Introduction to the Faith of John and Charles Wesley* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 101.

<sup>43</sup> For a helpful discussion of "works of mercy," see Rebekah Miles, "Works of Mercy as Spiritual Formation: Why Wesley Feared for the Souls of the Rich," in *The Wesleyan Tradition: A Paradigm for Renewal*, ed. Paul W. Chilcote (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 98-110. For the ethical implications of discipleship in the Wesleyan spirit, consult Leon O. Hynson, *To Reform the Nation: Theological Foundations of Wesley's Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Francis and Taylor Press, 1984); D. Stephen Long, *John Wesley's Moral Theology: The Quest for God and Goodness* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005); Manfred Marquardt, *John Wesley's Social Ethics: Praxis and Principles*, trans. John E. Steely and W. Stephen Gunter (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992); and Ronald Stone, *John Wesley's Life and Ethics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001).

Every stumbling-block remove,  
 Each to each unite, endear:  
 Come, and spread thy banner here!

Let us each for other care,  
 Each the other's burden bear;  
 To thy church the pattern give,  
 Show how true believers live.<sup>44</sup>

“The first Methodists, who intended to revive the life of the original Christian church,” as Tore Meistad attempted to demonstrate, “made a just distribution of economic, educational, and medical resources their top priority. This is evident in John Wesley’s sermons as well as in Charles’s hymns.”<sup>45</sup>

Responding to the insanity of human strife and warfare, and using language just as relevant today as in his own age, Charles Wesley cries out in prayer for the healing of a broken world:

Our earth we now lament to see  
     With floods of wickedness o'erflowed;  
 With violence, wrong, and cruelty,  
     One wide-extended field of blood,  
 Where men like fiends each other tear,  
 In all the hellish rage of war.

O might the universal Friend  
     This havoc of his creatures see!  
 Bid our unnatural discord end;  
     Declare us reconciled in thee!  
 Write kindness on our inward parts  
 And chase the murderer from our hearts!<sup>46</sup>

Gratitude and benevolence—love of God and love of neighbor—functioned as keynotes in the Wesleyan song of life. These are the marks of those who have been reconciled to God in Christ.

Permit me to leave you with a series of questions. It is one thing to discuss the Wesleyan understanding of “God in Christ Reconciling;” it is something quite different to permit God’s reconciling love to penetrate our hearts and lives right here, right now. John Wesley posed these questions to his followers who had gathered for the laying of the foundation of the Methodist chapel in City Road, London. May they pierce our hearts:

Are you a witness of the religion of love? Are you a lover of God and all mankind? Does your heart glow with gratitude to the Giver of every good and perfect gift? The Father of the spirits of all flesh, who giveth you life, and breath, and all things? Who hath given you his Son, his only Son, that you “might not perish, but

<sup>44</sup> *Works* 7:683-684 (Hymn 495.1, 2, 4).

<sup>45</sup> Meistad, “The Missiology of Charles Wesley,” 51.

<sup>46</sup> *Works* 7:607 (Hymn 430.1, 3).

have everlasting life"? Is your soul warm with benevolence to all mankind? Do you long to have all men virtuous and happy? And does the constant tenor of your life and conversation bear witness of this? Do you "love, not in word only, but in deed and in truth"? Do you persevere in the "work of faith, and the labour of love"? Do you "walk in love, as Christ also loved us, and gave himself for us"? Do you, as you have time, "do good unto all men"? And in as high a degree as you are able? "Whosoever" thus "doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother." Whosoever thou art whose heart is herein as my heart, give me thine hand.<sup>47</sup>

---

<sup>47</sup> *Works* 3:592 (Sermon 112, "On Laying the Foundation of the New Chapel," §17).