

**“CELEBRATING THE WHOLE WESLEY”:
A LEGACY FOR CONTEMPORARY WESLEYANS**

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The last fifteen years have witnessed an unprecedented series of celebrations of John Wesley by his ecclesial descendants and the larger church. The series began in 1988 with several events marking the 250th anniversary of Aldersgate, continued with broader commemoration of the bicentenary of Wesley's death in 1991, and culminated with the many celebrations of the tercentenary of his birth in 2003.

In an earlier article reflecting on the first of these occasions I noted that there is no evidence that Wesley's experience at Aldersgate had been commemorated a century earlier. Formal memorials of this experience emerged only in the 20th century. Once introduced, however, I traced how celebrations of Aldersgate displaced several other events that had been commemorated by Wesley's 19th-century heirs. While affirming the inclusion of this aspect of his spiritual journey, I closed that article with some reservations about an exclusive focus on Aldersgate in considering Wesley's legacy for contemporary Wesleyan traditions.¹

In this light, the scope of the celebrations of the bicentenary of Wesley's death and of the tercentenary of his birth is heartening. Focus on these boundary markers encourages reflection upon the *whole* of Wesley's life and ministry, seeking what wisdom he might have to offer his contemporary heirs—and the larger Christian family—for our central task of participating in God's salvific mission in our world. I offer the present essay as an instance of such reflection, suggesting that Wesley's developed emphases concerning the nature of salvation are an important legacy that remains to be fully appreciated and appropriated.

I

When the elderly Wesley paused to contemplate the mediocrity of Christian character and the ineffectiveness of Christian witness and service in his world, he diagnosed the most basic cause to be an inadequate understanding of the nature of salvation.² While he had most in mind the simple lack of knowledge of Christian teachings among those claiming adherence to the faith on this specific occasion, other instances make clear that Wesley

¹Randy L. Maddox, “Celebrating Wesley – When?” *Methodist History* 29 (1991): 63–75.

²See Sermon 122, “Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity,” in *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, edited by Frank Baker, et al. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984ff) 4:86–96; esp. §6, p. 89. This edition will be referred to hereafter simply as *Works*.

was also concerned about the adequacy of certain conceptions of salvation that were broadly embraced in popular Christianity. Indeed, Wesley’s renewal efforts in 18th-century Britain could well be summarized as an attempt to reclaim an understanding and embodiment of the full scope of salvation that is affirmed in Scripture and in the broad Christian tradition.

When Wesley’s writings and ministry are considered in this regard, a growing awareness of the characteristics that ought to be included in this conception of salvation can be traced. The following survey highlights five characteristics, ordered to reflect Wesley’s progressive focus of emphasis. Attention is also paid within each characteristic to any growth that might be evident in Wesley’s pastoral insight concerning the dynamics of God’s salvific work. In this way I hope to help us benefit from the wisdom of the *whole* Wesley about both the scope and the dynamics of truly *holistic* salvation.

II

Wesley’s concern about an adequate understanding of the nature of salvation is already evident in letters from his student years. The aspect of this understanding that most drew his early attention related to the desire for assurance. As he expressed his concern in a letter to his mother, “if we can never have any certainty of our being in a state of salvation, good reason it is that every moment should be spent, not in joy, but fear and trembling.”³ The question that this raised, of course, is the source of such certainty. The young Wesley knew well that the classic answer to this question, given particular emphasis in Protestant traditions, was that assurance of salvation comes by faith. He was also aware of competing understandings of the nature and dynamics of faith. His mature conception of holistic salvation was framed in part by revising his initial stance within these alternatives.⁴

Wesley was influenced initially by thinkers who, reacting against superstitious credulity, defined faith primarily as *assent* to the truth of a proposition based on its rational credibility. Dialogue with his parents and broader reading soon led him to question the adequacy of this conception of faith, but it was his encounter with the Moravians in the events leading up to Aldersgate that most helped solidify an alternative conception. This alternative focused the nature of faith more on the will than on reason. It emphasized faith as *trust*, rather than mere assent. As Wesley put it shortly after Aldersgate:

Christian faith is then not only an assent to the whole gospel of Christ, but also ... a trust in the merits of his life death, and resurrection. ... It is a sure confidence

³Letter to Susanna Wesley (18 June 1725), *Works* 25:169–70.

⁴The transitions traced below were pointed out by Rex Matthews, “Religion and Reason Joined: A Study in the Theology of John Wesley” (Harvard University Th.D. thesis, 1986), 240–45. For more details and documentation see also Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994), 124–28.

which a man hath in God, that through the merits of Christ *his* sins are forgiven, and *he* reconciled to the favour of God.⁵

By the mid-1740s initial indications of another transition can be discerned in Wesley's emphases concerning faith. The focus of his discussion increasingly broadened from our act of trusting in God's pardoning love to include the *divine evidence* that awakens this trust, i.e., the witness of the Spirit that sheds the love of God abroad in our heart. More to the point, Wesley's mature conception of faith eventually placed primary emphasis on the divine evidence that calls forth this response. His comment in a letter to Samuel Walker is characteristic, "I hold a divine evidence or conviction that Christ loved *me* and gave Himself for *me* is essential to if not the very essence of justifying faith."⁶

These transitions in Wesley's emphases concerning faith reflected growing appreciation for the role of the affections in human willing and action. In essence, he was working through a major shift in "moral psychology" (that is, his basic assumptions about what inclines and enables humans to act in appropriate ways).⁷ With his upbringing, Wesley imbibed a long-standing model that portrayed the main obstacle to Christian life as our emotions, and that placed hope for moral action in the assertion of rational control over these unruly forces. But he became convinced over time that: 1) reason alone was unable to effect human action, our acts flow instead from more holistic affections; and 2) these affections are not self-initiating, they are enlivened and inclined toward specific actions in response to external stimuli. To put this in terms of Wesley's mature conception of faith: 1) faith involves more than rational assent, it is a holistic affection of trust; and 2) this trust is not generated by human initiative, it is made possible responsively when the Spirit addresses our affections assuring us of God's love.

As the last point suggests, Wesley viewed the temporal priority of the witness of the Spirit to our response of loving trust as a practical corollary of the conviction that humans are saved by grace, not works. This helps explain why *experiencing* the Spirit became so central to the definition of early Methodism. As Wesley himself once put it:

[We affirm] that inspiration of God's Holy Spirit whereby he fills us with righteousness, peace, and joy And we believe it cannot be, in the nature of things, that a [person] should be filled with this peace and joy and love ... without perceiving it. ... This is ... the main doctrine of the Methodists.⁸

⁵Sermon 1, "Salvation by Faith," §I.5, *Works* 1:121. Cf. *Principles of a Methodist*, §9, *Works* 9:53.

⁶Letter to Samuel Walker (19 September 1757), in *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, edited by John Telford (London: Epworth, 1931), 3:222. Hereafter: *Letters* (Telford).

⁷For more definition of "affections" and a detailed discussion of this shift, see Randy L. Maddox, "A Change of Affections: The Development, Dynamics, and Dethronement of John Wesley's 'Heart Religion'," in "*Heart Religion*" in the *Methodist Tradition and Related Movements*, edited by Richard Steele (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 2001), 3–31.

⁸Letter to "John Smith" (30 December 1745), §13, *Works* 26:181.

While Wesley was aware of potential dangers in this emphasis on experiencing the Spirit, and issued occasional cautions against these dangers, he continued to affirm the importance of experiential encounter with the Spirit throughout his ministry. However, he did eventually nuance this affirmation in one crucial way, revealing hard-won wisdom from his pastoral oversight of the movement. This refinement is hinted at in a comment near the end of his life:

When fifty years ago my brother Charles and I, in the simplicity of our hearts, told the good people of England that unless they *knew* their sins were forgiven, they were under the wrath and curse of God, I marvel ... that they did not stone us! The Methodists, I hope, know better now; we preach assurance as we always did, as a common privilege of real Christians; but we do not enforce it, under pain of damnation, denounced on all who enjoy it not.⁹

As this quote suggests, in the initial glow of their own experience of the Spirit’s assuring witness, both John and Charles tended to expect a uniformity in the psychological dynamics of this witness. They assumed that the Spirit would work in other persons with the same temporal patterns and intensity as the Spirit had worked in their lives and judged examples that did not meet this norm to be invalid. John’s pastoral advice in later years was much different. A good example is his response to one who was questioning the validity of her experience because it was not as dramatic as that of a friend. Wesley assured her that:

There is an irreconcilable variability in the operations of the Holy Spirit on [human] souls, more especially as to the manner of justification. Many find him rushing in upon them like a torrent, while they experience “The o’erwhelming power of saving grace.” ... But in others he works in a very different way: “He deigns his influence to infuse; Sweet, refreshing, as the silent dews.” It has pleased him to work the latter way in you from the beginning; and it is not improbable he will continue (as he has begun) to work in a gentle and almost insensible manner. Let him take his own way: He is wiser than you; he will do all things well.¹⁰

The conviction of the importance of experiencing the empowering affect of the Spirit remains clear in this response, but it is framed with an appreciation of God’s sensitivity that breathes the wisdom of the *whole* Wesley concerning this first characteristic that he highlighted in truly *holistic* salvation.

III

If Wesley’s encounter with the Moravians played a positive role in forming his mature convictions about the nature of saving faith, his resistance to

⁹A comment to Melville Horne in 1788, recorded in Robert Southey, *The Life of Wesley* (New York: W.B. Gilley, 1820) 1:258.

¹⁰Letter to Mary Cooke (30 October 1785), *Letters* (Telford) 7:298. Note that the first quotation within this quote is from a Charles Wesley hymn included in the 1780 *Collection of Hymns* (Hymn #9, st. 10, *Works* 7:92). The second quotation is from Samuel Wesley, Jr., “The Song of Three Children Paraphrased,” st. 16, as included in John Wesley’s *Collection of Moral and Sacred Poems* (Bristol: Farley, 1744) 2:116.

certain tendencies in Moravianism was more indicative of the second characteristic that he highlighted in truly holistic salvation. The issues at stake in this case were expressed most vividly in a quote from the mid-1740s:

By salvation I mean, not barely (according to the vulgar notion) deliverance from hell, or going to heaven, but a present deliverance from sin, a restoration of the soul to its primitive health ... the renewal of our souls after the image of God in righteousness and true holiness, in justice, mercy, and truth.¹¹

The notion of salvation that Wesley is rejecting in this quote is a popularization (and a bit of a caricature) of the Augustinian strand of western Christianity. With the majority of the early church, Saint Augustine recognized that the problem of sin is deeper than just the guilt incurred by particular transgressions. There is an underlying spiritual infirmity from which these wrong acts flow and to which they provide reinforcement. While there were differences among early Christian writers about how to account for this infirmity, the more significant spectrum of views concerned the degree to which it was susceptible to healing in this present life. In his concern to emphasize divine initiative and the pure gratuity of salvation, Augustine's later writings took an increasingly pessimistic stance on this question. He affirmed that all who enter God's redeeming presence after death are instantaneously and completely delivered from all inclination to sin, but he cautioned against expecting too much healing in this life. He worried that those who stressed such present expectation: 1) underestimated the depth of the infirmity; and 2) placed too much confidence in human efforts at betterment. By default, Augustine ended up focusing the present nature of salvation primarily in the forgiveness of the guilt of our sins which guarantees our future access to heaven, where our nature is fully healed.

While Augustine's views were influential, they were not universal. They stood alongside earlier and contemporary voices that spoke more positively of human co-operation in salvation, and that stressed the present therapeutic potential of the empowering gift of the Spirit. These alternative voices became normative in eastern Christianity and offset Augustine somewhat in the main stream of the medieval western church. It was in the Protestant Reformation, and particularly its Lutheran branch (including the closely related Moravian movement), that Augustine's more limited expectations about present salvation found their strongest echo.

Wesley's family setting and early training instilled firmly the broader catholic stance on the nature of present salvation. This comes through clearly in his early sermons. One of his earliest sermons stresses that we are commanded to seek *now* not only God's Kingdom, but also God's righteousness.¹² Likewise, a 1734 sermon asking about the "one thing needful," highlights not the need to be assured we are forgiven, but the need for, "the renewal of our fallen nature ... to have our diseases cured, our wounds

¹¹*Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, Pt. I, §3, *Works* 11:106.

¹²Sermon 134, "Seek First the Kingdom," §6, *Works* 4:219.

healed, and our uncleanness done away.”¹³

In the events surrounding Aldersgate Wesley came to appreciate more deeply the truth that God’s pardoning love is not contingent upon our prior recovery of righteousness. But he showed no tendency to allow emphasis on our gracious acceptance to displace concern for our present spiritual healing. Instead, Wesley stressed how assurance of this acceptance is what provides the impetus for spiritual healing. He made this connection by means of the emphasis in his revised moral psychology about the responsive nature of human action. Consider another of his seasoned definitions of salvation:

What is *salvation*? ... It is not a blessing which lies on the other side of death ... it is a present thing There is a *real* as well as a *relative* change. We are inwardly renewed by the power of God. We feel the “love of God shed abroad in our heart by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us,” producing love to all humankind.¹⁴

Note that it is our experience of God’s pardoning love that enables and inclines us to love God and neighbor, reflecting the renewal of our nature.

While some strands of Moravianism were prone to emphasize the gratuity of justification in a way that undercut concern for holy living, this was not the case with the English Moravians who were so influential upon Wesley prior to Aldersgate. They connected justifying faith with holy living, but in a way that Wesley soon found to be equally problematic. They encouraged him to expect that when he experienced the assurance of God’s love, he would be immediately and completely renewed, all of his doubts and fears would be gone, and all sinful inclinations would be replaced by Christ-like inclinations.¹⁵

Wesley’s experience after Aldersgate quickly cast doubt on these expectations. Assurance of God’s love had awakened new strength to resist his sinful inclinations, but he recognized that the inclinations themselves were still present. As he noted in his *Journal*, “my wound was not fully healed.”¹⁶ But this realization did not lead Wesley to downplay the concern for full spiritual healing. Instead, reflecting on his own experience and his pastoral supervision of the early Methodist movement, Wesley eventually distinguished carefully between the initial renewing effect of the “new birth” and the further transformation of our inclinations that the Spirit makes possible in the ongoing journey of salvation (*via salutis*).¹⁷ In the new birth the Spirit gives us power to resist our unholy inclinations (or, as Wesley called them, “tempers”) and evokes nascent holy tempers. In the subsequent process of sanctification, as we respond to the Spirit’s continuing empowerment, these holy tempers grow in strength, displacing the unholy tempers. The goal,

¹³Sermon 146, “The One Thing Needful,” §I.2–5, *Works* 4:354–55.

¹⁴Sermon 43, “The Scripture Way of Salvation,” §I.1–4, *Works* 2:156–58.

¹⁵The best study of these expectations, and Wesley’s later revisions, is Richard P. Heitzenrater, “Great Expectations: Aldersgate and the Evidences of Genuine Christianity,” in *Mirror and Memory: Reflections on Early Methodism* (Nashville: Kingswood, 1989), 106–49.

¹⁶*Journal* (6 June 1738), *Works* 18:254.

¹⁷For more discussion of these distinctions, see Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 176–90.

which Wesley could call “Christian perfection,” and which he insisted was potentially available in this life, was the emergence of a stability of character with, “the humble, gentle, patient love of God, and our neighbor, ruling our tempers, words, and actions.”¹⁸

The deepest pastoral wisdom in Wesley’s mature understanding of salvation is found not in his description of this progressive “growth in grace” but in his prescription for facilitating the growth. One of his most succinct accounts of this prescription is in a late sermon, “On Zeal”:

In a Christian believer love sits upon the throne which is erected in the inmost soul; namely, love of God and [neighbor], which fills the whole heart, and reigns without a rival. In a circle near the throne are all holy tempers—longsuffering, gentleness, meekness, fidelity, temperance; and if any other were comprised in “the mind which was in Christ Jesus.” In an exterior circle are all the works of mercy, whether to the souls or bodies of [others]. By these we exercise all holy tempers; by these we continually improve them, so that all these are real means of grace, although this is not commonly adverted to. Next to these are those that are usually termed works of piety—reading and hearing the word, public, family, private prayer, receiving the Lord’s Supper, fasting or abstinence. Lastly, that his followers may the more effectually provoke one another to love, holy tempers, and good works, our blessed Lord has united them together in one body, the Church.¹⁹

Notice how this account relates the means of grace directly to the goal of forming holy tempers. It also reflects Wesley’s hard-won conviction (against other one-sided perspectives in the Christian tradition) that the means of grace serve not only as avenues by which God conveys gracious empowerment, they are also formative disciplines by which we co-operatively shape our character into Christ-likeness.²⁰ Wesley made the means of grace central to salvation because within the various means we are exposed to the ever-deeper empowering affect of the Spirit and we are prodded to exercise our affections, shaping them into holy tempers.

Concern for providing his followers with this twofold benefit is evident in the specific set of means of grace that Wesley developed as the framework of Methodist life.²¹ In addition to regular use of such valued traditional means as prayer, liturgy, and eucharist, Wesley enjoined those serious about salvation to live within the rhythms of less common means like class meetings, love feasts, and works of mercy. Some of these other means were adopted primarily for their tendency to open us to God’s empowering affect while others were incorporated more for their role in habituating (tempering) our affections. As a case in point, Wesley’s stress on works of mercy in the

¹⁸“Brief Thoughts on Christian Perfection,” in *The Works of John Wesley*, edited by Thomas Jackson (London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1872), 11:446. This collection of Wesley’s *Works* will be cited hereafter as *Works* (Jackson).

¹⁹Sermon 92, “On Zeal,” §II.5–6, *Works* 3:313–14.

²⁰Cf. Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 192–201.

²¹This point is developed in Henry H. Knight III, “The Role of Faith and the Means of Grace in the Heart Religion of John Wesley” elsewhere in this volume. See also Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 201–16.

preceding quote focuses on the second benefit, though he valued as well the empowering affect of visiting the poor.²²

In his encouragement of his followers to weave experience of God’s pardoning love into God’s broader gracious concern for their spiritual transformation, and in the well-rounded and balanced set of means of grace that he discerned over the years best fostered this transformation, we have a truly valuable legacy from the *whole* Wesley concerning *holistic* salvation.

IV

The third characteristic that Wesley consistently highlighted as integral to an adequate understanding of salvation is suggested by his well-know aphorism: “The gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness, but social holiness.”²³

This aphorism is well known because it has been invoked by so many Methodists since the late 19th century to warrant their focus on socio-economic transformation as they embraced the emphases of the Social Gospel movement, Liberation Theology, and the like. In other words, this is one place where his heirs have been ready to claim Wesley’s legacy. But few of those making this claim have seemed to recognize that Wesley’s primary focus in the specific text cited is different from the implication they were suggesting.

In the early years of the revival, the context of this quotation, the dimension of the “social” character of salvation on which Wesley focused most attention was the importance of corporate support and accountability for our ongoing growth in grace. He was championing small groups as a crucial means of grace. Thus, his preface to the aphorism on social holiness read: “‘Holy solitaires’ is a phrase no more consistent with the gospel than holy adulterers.”²⁴ In a later sermon he elaborated:

Christianity is essentially a social religion ... to turn it into a solitary religion, is indeed to destroy it. ... I mean not only that it cannot subsist so well, but that it cannot subsist at all, without society—without living and conversing with other [people]. ... Not that we can in anywise condemn the intermixing solitude or retirement with society. ... Yet such retirement must not swallow up all our time. ... That the religion described by our Lord cannot subsist without society, without our living and conversing with other [people], is manifest from hence, that several of the most essential branches thereof can have no place if we have no intercourse with the world. There is no disposition, for instance, which is more essential to Christianity than meekness²⁵

²²Cf. Randy L. Maddox, “‘Visit the Poor’: Wesley, the Poor, and the Sanctification of Believers,” in *The Wesleys and the Poor: The Legacy and Development of Methodist Attitudes to Poverty, 1729–1999*, edited by Richard Heitzenrater (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 2002), 59–81.

²³*Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1739), Preface, §5, *Works* (Jackson) 14:321.

²⁴*Ibid.*

²⁵Sermon 24, “Sermon on the Mount, IV,” §I.1–4, *Works* 1:533–34.

Wesley inherited this appreciation for “religious society” from his father, who sponsored a small group in his parish at Epworth, and he shared it with his brother Charles, who described such corporate support as God’s way of “nourish[ing] us with social grace.”²⁶ The depth of John’s appreciation is evident in the multi-layered structure of support groups that he progressively crafted for the benefit of his Methodist people.²⁷

While the dimension of corporate spiritual formation is always central in Wesley’s affirmations of the social character of salvation, a second dimension can be discerned as well in nearly every case. He took it for granted that those who were being renewed in the Methodist societies would express this change in society at large. Note how this comes through in his longest elaboration of the Methodist understanding of salvation:

By *salvation* [the Methodist] means holiness of heart and life. ... a Methodist is one who has “the love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost given to him”; one who “loves the Lord his God with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his mind, and with all his strength.” ... [and] this commandment is written in his heart, that “he who loveth God, loves his brother also.” ... His obedience is in proportion to his love, the source from whence it flows. And therefore, loving God with all his heart, he serves him with all his strength. ... Lastly, as he has time, he “does good unto all men”—unto neighbours, and strangers, friends, and enemies. And that in every possible kind; not only to their bodies, by “feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting those that are sick or in prison,” but much more does he labour to do good to their souls.²⁸

This “social service” dimension of holistic salvation found its most formal expression in the General Rules, which admonished Methodists: 1) to do no harm to others; and 2) to do as much good for the bodies and souls of others as they could.²⁹

While more recent Methodists who have invoked the aphorism “no holiness but social holiness” would appreciate such acts of caring for the needy and suffering, their focal concern has typically been to transform political and economic structures that ignore the poor or cause human suffering. Is there evidence of concern for this possible third dimension in Wesley’s affirmation of the social character of salvation? There is indeed, though it emerges only in his later years and is never his primary focus. The clearest expressions are two tracts: *Thoughts on the Present Scarcity of Provisions* (1773),³⁰ which proposes several political and economic moves to increase production of basic foods; and *Thoughts upon Slavery* (1774), which focuses on undercutting supposed humanitarian and theological justifications for

²⁶See his hymn written for love feasts, *Hymns*, #507, st. 1, *Works* 7:698.

²⁷Cf. the discussion of these structures in Thomas Albin, “‘Inwardly Persuaded’: Religion of the Heart in Early British Methodism,” in *Heart Religion*, edited by Steele, 33–66.

²⁸*Character of a Methodist*, §§4–16, *Works* 9:35–41.

²⁹*The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies*, *Works* 9:69–73.

³⁰See *Works* (Jackson) 11:53–59.

slavery, but thereby lays the basis for his support of political moves to abolish slavery.³¹

What accounts for the rareness of emphasis on socioeconomic reform, particularly in Wesley’s earlier years? Many have assigned it to conservative political commitments which they believe Wesley inherited, commitments that led him to distrust all revolutionary agendas.³² One could also make a case that Wesley rarely addressed the larger political arena, especially prior to the 1770s, because of how politically insignificant his movement was within the culture at large. I have argued elsewhere that another major factor was the amillennial eschatology which Wesley imbibed with his training.³³ This long-dominant eschatology was given prominence by Saint Augustine and tended to postpone hopes for significant healing of societal ills until “heaven above” just as he had postponed such hopes for spiritual infirmities. While Wesley challenged the postponement of spiritual transformation from the beginning, his convictions about the parallel possibility of present transformation of socioeconomic reality coalesced only in his later years with his embrace of the relatively new model of postmillennialism.

While it is not without its problems, postmillennialism allowed the mature Wesley to broaden: 1) his confidence in the present empowering affect of the Spirit; and 2) his conviction that God values human co-operation, so that they applied not only to the personal realm but also to societal realities. But what is most significant is the way the mature Wesley wove personal and socioeconomic transformation together by continuing to highlight the role of small support groups in nurturing both the inclination and tenacity for serving others in need and for struggling to transform socioeconomic structures. Here again we sense the wisdom of the *whole* Wesley, as he urged his followers to support one another in the pursuit of truly *holistic* salvation.

V

The fourth conviction that came to characterize Wesley’s functional understanding of the nature of salvation also ran counter to assumptions about eschatology that had reigned for some time in the church. Although Scripture speaks of our ultimate hope in terms of resurrection of our bodies

³¹Ibid, 59–79. Wesley’s last known letter was an encouragement of William Wilberforce in his political fight against slavery (Letter to William Wilberforce [24 February 1791], *Letters* [Telford] 8:265). He had earlier included in the *Arminian Magazine* a letter by Thomas Walker requesting petitions against the slave trade be sent to Parliament (*AM* 11 [1788]:263–64).

³²A quick survey of alternative identifications of Wesley’s political philosophy can be found in Theodore R. Weber, *Politics in the Order of Salvation: Transforming Wesleyan Political Ethics* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2001), 28–32.

³³For elaboration of the following points, see Randy L. Maddox, “Nurturing the New Creation: Reflections on a Wesleyan Trajectory,” in *Wesleyan Perspectives on the New Creation*, edited by M. Douglas Meeks (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2004).

and life in a future new “heavens and earth” (i.e., a transformed physical universe), a variety of influences had led most Christians by Wesley’s day to assume that our final state is “heaven above.”³⁴ The latter was seen as a timeless realm that our spirits enter the moment that we are set free from our mortal bodies, where we join all other spiritual beings in continuous worship of the Ultimate Spiritual Being. Those most concerned to honor biblical imagery allowed that our spirit would eventually be reunited with our body, but with a body transformed into an ethereal form that is fit to reside in the heavenly realm where we remain eternally.

Wesley was raised with this spiritualized model of the afterlife and through most of his ministry its assumptions were presented as obvious and unproblematic. They shine through, for example, in an often-cited portion of the preface to his first volume of *Sermons*:

I am a spirit come from God and returning to God; just hovering over the great gulf, till a few moments hence I am no more seen—I drop into an unchangeable eternity! I want to know one thing, the way to heaven—how to land safe on that happy shore. God himself has condescended to teach the way: for this very end he came from heaven.³⁵

However, in the last decade of his life Wesley began to take the scriptural imagery of bodily resurrection and of the new heavens and earth more at face value. In particular, drawing on a suggestion of Charles Bonnet, a prominent Swiss biologist, he described a model of the afterlife in which humans are embodied and reside in a physical universe, though we are higher on the “Chain of Being” than in our current setting.³⁶

While late in date and speculative in nature, this emphasis on our bodies participating in ultimate salvation was consistent with Wesley’s life-long conviction that God’s saving intent in the *present* includes our bodies. The corollary that many drew from the spiritualized model of the afterlife was that physical health was incidental, if not antithetical, to spiritual welfare. Wesley’s contrary conviction is evident in his advice to Alexander Knox, “It will be a double blessing if you give yourself up to the Great Physician, that He may heal soul and body together. And unquestionably this is His design. He wants to give you . . . both inward and outward health.”³⁷

If this is God’s design, then for Wesley it was obvious that we should cooperate by doing all that we can to restore and preserve our physical health.³⁸

³⁴For a good history of the ascendancy of this model, see Colleen McDannell & Bernhard Lang, *Heaven: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).

³⁵*Sermons* (1746), Preface, §5, *Works* 1:105.

³⁶The original suggestion was in Charles Bonnet, *La Palingénésie philosophique; or Idées sur l’état passé et sur l’état futur des êtres vivans*, vol. 2 (2nd edition. Munster: Philip Henry Perrenon, 1770). Wesley owned this volume and republished a translation of the relevant last section as *Conjectures Concerning the Nature of Future Happiness* (Dublin: Dugdale, 1787).

³⁷Letter to Alexander Knox (26 October 1778), *Letters* (Telford) 6:327. Another good example is Letter to Miss Agnes Gibbes (28 April 1784), *Methodist History* 6.3 (1968): 53.

³⁸For more details on what follows, see Randy L. Maddox, “A Heritage Reclaimed: John Wesley on Holistic Health and Healing,” (forthcoming in book of essays from a tercentenary conference at Emory University).

How seriously he felt about this is evident in his instructions to his lay assistants about their ministry among the Methodist people. As they visited the various societies, Wesley charged them to leave behind books that could provide ongoing guidance, highlighting most often two works that should be in every house: 1) his excerpt of Thomas à Kempis’s *The Imitation of Christ*, which Wesley valued as a guide to spiritual health; and 2) *Primitive Physick*, which he had prepared as a guide to physical health.³⁹

Most Methodists today are unaware of the second volume, and scholars who come across it often dismiss it as a collection of “home remedies.” This seriously misjudges its nature and its centrality to Wesley’s ministry. He read broadly on the topic of medicine throughout his life and gathered most of the remedies in *Primitive Physick* from prominent medical authors of his time. This was as much a use of his scholarly gifts to provide aids for his people as was his collection of theological writings in the *Christian Library*. Moreover, in the preface to this volume (and in other publications) Wesley added advice for preserving health to his suggestions for treating wounds and illnesses.⁴⁰ He was interested not simply in offering cures but in promoting wellness.

Wesley was also clearly interested that Methodist ministry to others address their needs for physical healing as well as for spiritual healing. This conjunction came naturally, because the Anglican model in which Wesley was trained expected priests to offer medical care as part of their overall ministry, at least in smaller villages. To be sure, he was aware of the efforts of the newly-founded Royal College of Physicians to professionalize the practice of medicine by restricting the ranks of those certified to offer treatment. But Wesley also recognized that there were simply not enough trained physicians available yet, and the poor were the ones most likely to be left without care. His deep concern about this led him to take the “desperate expedient” of opening free clinics in Bristol and London where he offered medical treatment for the poor.⁴¹ It was also led him to include basic medical texts in the readings assigned for his lay assistants, so that they could offer medical advice as they rode their circuits, and to create a lay office of the “visitor of the sick” within Methodist societies.⁴²

As all of this reflects, the *whole* Wesley longed for Christians to see that participation in God’s present work of *holistic* salvation involves nurturing not only our souls but our bodies, and addressing both of these dimensions in our outreach to others.

³⁹For examples, see “Large Minutes,” Q. 42, *Works* (Jackson) 8:319; *To the Societies at Bristol* (1764), *Letters* (Telford) 4:272; Letter to Christopher Hopper (20 November 1769), *Letters* (Telford) 5:161; and Letter to Joseph Taylor (9 September 1782), *Letters* (Telford) 7:139.

⁴⁰Cf. Preface of *Primitive Physick*, §16, *Works* (Jackson) 14:314–15.

⁴¹See *A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists*, §XII:1–2, *Works* 9:275.

⁴²*Ibid.*, §XI.4, *Works* 9:274.

VI

The final characteristic that Wesley came to assign to a truly adequate understanding of salvation is one that most differed from the spiritualized model he had inherited. It is also likely the one that is least familiar to his present heirs.

We have noted that the spiritualized model of “heaven above” that became dominant in medieval western Christianity found it difficult to admit our bodies to the afterlife, allowing them only in an ethereal form. It struggled all the more with notions of animals or physical elements having a place in ultimate salvation. Even the early Protestant reformers, who worried most about conformity to Scripture, and accordingly affirmed that God would recreate an earth populated with animals, denied that humans would reside on this recreated earth. Moreover, their heirs broadly reverted to the assumption that animals and the physical elements have no place in the afterlife, in part because of the dualism of contemporary thinkers like Descartes.⁴³

We also noted above that in his later years Wesley became more explicit about the human body participating in ultimate salvation. This point can be made more broadly. As the aged Wesley continued to probe the biblical witness to salvation he decisively shifted the focus of his ultimate hope from “heaven above” to the promised new creation. Indeed, the new creation became one of the most prominent themes of his late sermons. These sermons leave no doubt that this future creation will be a physical place, even as Wesley speculated about how each of its basic elements will be dramatically improved over present conditions.⁴⁴

There is also no doubt that Wesley became convinced that the range of animals would be present in this renewed creation. He had actually shown sympathy for the minority view that animals have souls for some time, apparently devoting one of the required lectures in his Oxford degree program to this topic.⁴⁵ He offered a guarded reaffirmation of this point in 1775.⁴⁶ Then in 1781 he issued a bold affirmation of final salvation for animals in his sermon, “The General Deliverance.”⁴⁷ While not unprecedented, this sermon was unusual for its time and is often cited today as a pioneer effort at reaffirming the doctrine of animal salvation in the western church.⁴⁸ Wesley reinforced the sermon two years later by placing in the *Arminian Magazine* an extended extract of John Hildrop’s spirited defense of animal

⁴³Cf. McDannell & Lang, *Heaven*, esp. chapter 6.

⁴⁴See in particular Sermon 64, “The New Creation,” *Works* 2:500–10.

⁴⁵One of Wesley’s “Wall lectures,” delivered in February 1727, was titled *de anima brutou*. While we have no copy, it seems likely that it addressed the question of whether animals have souls, since his Oxford diary records discussing this topic several times in the prior year.

⁴⁶See Sermon 55, “On the Trinity,” §11, *Works* 2:382.

⁴⁷Sermon 60, “The General Deliverance,” *Works* 2:437–50.

⁴⁸See the positive reference to this sermon in Andrew Linzey, *Christianity and the Rights of Animals* (London: SPCK, 1987), 36.

salvation which contested the alternative comments of such notables as John Locke. In the preface to his extract Wesley noted that some might think that this issue was an ingenious trifle, but he considered it central to our confession of the wisdom and goodness of God. As Hildrop had argued, to allow that God did not redeem all that God created and called good would mean that God had not truly overcome the work of Satan.⁴⁹

The connection of the issue of animal salvation to affirmation of God’s goodness lies behind what is surely the most unusual element in the aged Wesley’s reflections on the cosmic dimension of new creation. He had long doubted the adequacy of a theodicy that justified God’s goodness in permitting the possibility of the fall by noting that God would eventually restore things to their pre-fallen condition. In Wesley’s view, a truly loving God would only permit the present evil in the world if an *even better* outcome might be achieved by allowing this possibility than without it. On these terms, he believed that God would not just restore fallen creation to its original state, God would recreate it with greater capacities and blessings than it had at first.⁵⁰ What all might this entail? Drawing again on the work of Bonnet, Wesley proposed in “General Deliverance,” that as compensation for the evil they experienced in this life God would move the various animals higher up the Chain of Being in the next life granting them greater abilities, including perhaps even the ability to relate to God as humans do now!⁵¹

Whatever we make of this speculation, the most significant aspect of Wesley’s reflection on this cosmic dimension of ultimate salvation is his sense of its relevance for present Christian life. He recognized that convictions about God’s ultimate purpose should serve as guides for what we value now. Thus, he defended his speculation about God’s future blessings of animals on the grounds that it might provide further encouragement for us to imitate now the God whose “mercy is over all his works.”⁵² Lest this be left in generalities, he frequently exhorted against abusive treatment of animals.⁵³ Avoiding such abuse ourselves, and helping prevent it by others, was one more way that the *whole* Wesley came to affirm that we can participate in the truly *holistic* salvation that God offers in and through Christ.

VII

Such is the legacy that Wesley bequeathed to his ecclesial descendants and—through them—to the whole church. I wish that I could next recount how his descendants fully embraced this legacy and gladly shared it with

⁴⁹The extract is scattered through *Arminian Magazine* 6 (1783), starting on page 33. Hildrop’s reference to Satan is on p. 598. The preface is reprinted in *Works* (Jackson) 14:290.

⁵⁰Cf. Sermon 59, “God’s Love to Fallen Man,” *Works* 2:423–35.

⁵¹See Sermon 60, “General Deliverance,” §III.6–7, *Works* 2:448. Bonnet presents the model of animals moving up the Chain of Being in the future life in *Palingénésie* 2:62–84.

⁵²*Ibid.*, §III.10, *Works* 2:449.

⁵³See Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley’s Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 202–205 for a convenient collection of such exhortations.

others. Unfortunately, the historical reality was much more mixed than this, particularly in the North American setting where Methodism most flourished.

To begin with, in the interplay of Enlightenment culture and super-charged revivalism 19th-century Methodists found it difficult to retain Wesley's holistic assumptions about the affections. Many reverted to more polarized emphasis on reason or the emotions, and this helped drive the splits between the mainline church and the holiness movements, and then between the holiness churches and the Pentecostal movement.⁵⁴

In significant part because of losing touch with Wesley's mature moral psychology, his North American descendants found it increasingly hard to make sense of his affirmation of the possibility of Christian Perfection. What had been the cornerstone of his theology became, as Albert Outler once put it, an annoying pebble in the shoe of Methodists, and many sought to distance themselves from his perceived unrealistic claim about the goal of sanctification. In the process his emphasis on the centrality of spiritual transformation to salvation was muted. Add to this the impact of popular expositions of genetic determinism, psychological determinism, and the like, and it is little wonder that Wesley's current descendants are as likely as anyone else to doubt that we can expect much transformation in our character.

While, as we have seen, 20th-century Methodists picked up and elaborated Wesley's emphasis on socioeconomic transformation, most of them did so in a context that had already abandoned the small groups that Wesley valued for nurturing the inclination and tenacity for consistent engagement in social service and advocacy.⁵⁵

The early circuit riders in North America followed Wesley's instructions to offer medical advice as part of their ministry, until increasing professionalization made this unacceptable. In the 19th-century Wesley's commitment to this aspect of holistic salvation was honored more by building colleges across the continent that emphasized training physicians and nurses. At the turn of the century this was supplemented by establishment of several church-supported "charity" hospitals.⁵⁶ Then came the financial pressures of health care in recent decades which have largely removed the church from direct involvement and have again left the poor in danger of inadequate access. Methodists are only beginning to explore how to honor their Wesleyan legacy within this new reality.

⁵⁴For some elaboration of this and the next point, see Randy L. Maddox, "Reconnecting the Means to the End: A Wesleyan Prescription for the Holiness Movement," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 33.2 (1998): 29–66.

⁵⁵Cf. Randy L. Maddox, "Social Grace: The Eclipse of the Church as a Means of Grace in American Methodism," in *Methodism in its Cultural Milieu*, edited by Tim Macquiban (Oxford: Applied Theology Press, 1994), 131–60.

⁵⁶These transitions are traced well in Elmer Brooks Holifield, *Health and Medicine in the Methodist Tradition* (New York: Crossroad, 1986).

Finally, it is clear that Wesley’s support of animal welfare, and their ultimate salvation, continued in at least some strands of British Methodism into the 19th-century.⁵⁷ But there is little evidence that this particular emphasis in the whole Wesley’s understanding of holistic salvation ever carried across the Atlantic to the North American church, or that it was consciously echoed on either side of the Atlantic by the later 19th century.

In other words, we who stand today in the traditions tracing back to Wesley’s ministry face much the same challenge as he did—the challenge of reclaiming an understanding and embodiment of the full scope of salvation that is affirmed in Scripture and in the broad Christian tradition. I can think of no better way to honor the 300th anniversary of his birth than to join Wesley in encouraging Christians to affirm and to embody a salvation that is: 1) not just about rational assent, but responsive trust as well; 2) not just about forgiveness, but spiritual transformation as well; 3) not just for individuals, but for society as well; 4) not just for souls, but for bodies as well; and 5) not just for humans, but for the whole of creation!

⁵⁷Cf. E. S. Turner, *All Heaven in a Rage* (New York: St. Martins, 1965), 50, 72, 161; and Samuel Thompson (a Methodist minister), *Essays Tending to Prove Animal Restoration* (Newcastle: Edward Walker, 1830).