Putting Legs on Your Longings
John Wesley’s Vision of Spirituality

The first point I want to make might seem an obvious one, but in today’s spirituality marketplace of ideas, it is not a universally shared one: John Wesley took an explicitly theological approach to spiritual formation.

When one looks at what is labeled “spirituality” or “spiritual formation” in the typical bookstore (on-line or otherwise), one will encounter a bewildering array of options. Some visions of spiritual formation come explicitly out of the realm of psychology, where “spiritual” concerns are addressed without reference to anything transcendent, and typically avoid that dreaded boogeyman word: “religion.” Other visions of “spiritual formation” seem to be about making the reader a more effective salesperson or business manager. Sometimes the idiosyncratic, autobiographical musings of particular authors are lifted up as providing the kind of guidance that the contemporary “post-modern” world really needs. Undefined concepts like “happiness” or “fulfillment” are typically assumed to be self-explanatory. Unlimited diversity in models for formation seems to be not only acknowledged, but celebrated in the marketplace of today.

Christianity, on the other hand, while acknowledging that we are, indeed, all on different journeys because of our different histories, interests and talents, nonetheless unashamedly proclaims that there are some deep commonalities to all of our journeys. These commonalities don’t cancel out the distinctiveness of our journeys, but they do give a recognizably common shape and goal to our pattern of life change.
This is where the Christian vision of spiritual formation takes a specifically theological turn, and here one might well ask: why should we consider John Wesley’s particular theological approach?

**Wesley’s Theological Approach to Spiritual Formation**

One reason why John Wesley’s vision of spiritual formation is so compelling is that he defines Christianity itself as a *way of life*. Instead of saying that Christianity can be exhaustively defined in a creed, a system of doctrine, or a book, which then must, somehow, be translated from words-on-paper into real life, Wesley says that Christianity can only really be understood when it is seen in a real, flesh-and-blood life. Christianity can only convincingly be portrayed, in other words, not in verbal declarations, but in the shape of that metaphorical center of person—the “heart.” Wesley time and again called for a “religion of the heart.”

His habitual preference for defining Christianity in terms of the visibly changed life that comes from a renewed heart can be seen most clearly in his little publication titled “Plain Account of Genuine Christianity.” In describing this genuine Christianity, Wesley begins his account not by asking the typically person-independent question of “What is Christianity?” but instead he opens by asking the very person-dependent—and heart-dependent—question: “Who is a Christian?” His answer tells us that a Christian is marked by humility, that the “ruling temper of his heart” is absolute “submission to God and the tenderest gratitude to his sovereign benefactor;” that the Christian is above all marked by love, which is productive of all right

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1 For example--“In a word: let thy religion be a religion of the heart.” This is found at the conclusion of his 13 part series of sermons on Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. *The Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984) Volume 1, Sermon 33, 698.
affections, and he has no fear of dispraise, for since God loves him, human dispraise is not to be feared.2

He begins this account of “genuine Christianity,” then, by first writing about what the personal enfleshment of Christianity looks like, and he expresses this in terms of the characteristics of a heart shaped by the Spirit. Only after this is done does he turn to discussing what Christianity itself is. But even at that point, it is crucial to note the very person-dependent way in which he describes “Christianity.”

Wesley is clear that Christianity can be conceived of as a “scheme or system of doctrine.” However, this “scheme’s” primary accomplishment is to “describe the character above recited”—that is, theology’s first job is to describe what Christianity looks like when it is enfleshed by describing the heart and its “affections” that genuine Christianity engenders. Christianity, thus realized in a human life, is the embodiment of “holiness and happiness, the image of God impressed on a created spirit, ‘a fountain of peace and love springing up into everlasting life.’” 3

Wesley’s Scripturally-Informed Vision of the Christian Life

Christianity for Wesley, then, gives us an image of the best way to live, in light of who God is and how God has chosen to relate to us. At the center of this vision is the biblical story of the incarnation, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus. Wesley, consistent with the mainstream Christian tradition, believed that the relationship between God and humanity forever changed because of what Jesus accomplished, and a new way of living was made possible because of His work—a way of living shaped by the Holy Spirit.

2 “A Plain Account of Genuine Christianity,” first published in 1753 now found in The Works of John Wesley Volume 11, 527-38. The material I draw on in this passage is found on 527ff, passim.
3 Ibid. 534. The scriptural allusion in single quotes is to John 4:14.
It is this last piece of the Gospel—the life-transforming gift of the Holy Spirit—that is particularly relevant to our concerns in this essay. Christian spirituality, unlike a lot of our contemporary culture’s free-floating and amorphous spiritualities, calls us to a very particular and non-negotiable way of life—a way of life shaped by the Holy Spirit, the Spirit that came into the world in a particular and powerful way after Jesus left the earth. In the Christian tradition, speaking of the “spirit-formed life” does not leave us scratching our heads and wondering what such a thing looks like or how to achieve it. The picture is very clear in the Bible and the classical text that Christians look to (after understanding the basic story of Christ in the Gospels) is Galatians Chapter 5.

This passage, one that Wesley refers to constantly throughout his sermons, commentaries, letters and journals, says that when the Holy Spirit grows in a person, certain characteristics of that person grow and others fade away. The features that grow and come to define the mature Christian are called the “fruit of the Spirit” and these are love, joy, peace, patience kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. (NRSV) Just as we know an apple tree by the apples that grow on it, and we know an orange tree by the oranges that grow on it, so we know a Christian by these metaphorical fruit, visible in the way that person lives.

This is, in greater specificity, what Wesley meant when he called his hearers and readers to live a “heart religion.” The Bible says the “heart” is the metaphorical center of a human, and it is our hearts that are called to be made new when we come to God. (“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me” David says in his psalm of confession, Ps 51:10 NRSV). If you know a person’s heart, you know who or what they love, what they fear, what brings them joy, what makes them angry, what brings them peace, etc? I think most would agree that if you truly know the answers to those “heart” questions, you know that person in the most
profound way possible. Bringing our hearts into conformity with a particular, Scripture-formed, pattern or “grammar” of loves, joys, fears, etc. is what Wesleyan spiritual formation is all about.

A key point that needs to be clarified here is that these “fruit” are not primarily judged to be present by the presence or absence of feelings. We would not say that one is a saint if they never showed love to others, but only reported extreme feelings of love. (This is where some of the 19th Century “holiness” followers of Wesley went wrong.) No, the fruit of the Spirit are best seen in the quality of our relationships—our relationships with God, our relationships with other people and in our relationship with ourselves. This is the central feature of a Wesleyan, and I would argue, any Christian, spirituality: it is in the quality of one’s relationships that is the clearest indicator of Christian spiritual maturity.

**Wesley’s Vision in Our 21st Century Context**

This not only gives Christians a clear vision of the kind of change they are called to embody, but it gives a clear set of criteria for comparing and contrasting competing programs of spiritual formation. Christians need not arrogantly assume (without actually comparing) that the Christian way of life is unquestionably superior to all the other calls for transformation available in our marketplace of ideas. Christians can simply compare their embodied Gospel with competing examples of embodiment.

Christians are called to a life of humble, serving love, and this is defined not by some vague call to intense feelings, but in concrete images of lived life that our Scripture presents to us, e.g., in 1 Corinthians 13 (“love is patient and kind. . .”) and 1 John 3:16 (“we know love by this, that [Christ] laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.”) (NRSV) We are called to be people who take joy not in unlimited sexual exploits,
but, most decisively, in serving others. We are called to be people who have peace not because of our bank accounts, but because we are in the right relationship with God and their neighbors.

Some, who are a little jittery about losing their all-important autonomy by committing to one particular tradition, often say things like: “Well, everyone recognizes that what you call the ‘fruit of the Spirit’ are desirable characteristics, so I will just embrace those ‘fruit’ as the goal for my spirituality, but I will leave behind all the tradition, Bible, creeds, doctrines, and Christian community that Wesley and other Christians see as part of the spiritual life.” The presumption is that in taking this approach, these folks are being more open-minded and, thus, are not as provincial as their Christian friends. My response to those who, in this way, want to avoid making a commitment to an explicitly Christian pattern of formation, is twofold.

First, what evidence leads you to think that all people actually embrace a vision of the life of love, joy and peace, as Christians understand these terms? People might endorse these characteristics as being desirable in some anonymous opinion poll, (and that widespread endorsement is, I think, one of the reasons for Christianity’s growth into the largest religion in the world.) But to assert that most, if not all, people are actually, consciously, trying to live such a life? That is not what I see on my computer newsfeed, or even in the stands of the local high school football game. The empirical facts don’t back up that assertion.

My second response to the person who wants to take the goals of Christianity without adopting its authorities, methods, guidance and discipline is that there is not a very encouraging track record for those who have tried this. This approach of adopting Christian ends without using the Christian means has been tried by many, especially those who were raised as Christians but have fallen away from an active practice of the faith. They say “I don’t need to go to____ [fill in the blank: go to church, read the Bible, pray, etc.] to be a good person,” and, of course,
what it means to be a “good person” for them is typically defined by some version of the heart-characteristics found in the fruit of the Spirit. In the end, though, they find that this is not sustainable.

As they start out on this untethered exploration, these “seekers” are living on the spiritual capital, so to speak, of past Christian formation. But, as in the economic realm, if you spend your inherited capital and don’t generate any new capital, sooner or later, you end up bankrupt. Wesley, like most Christian theologians, clearly asserts that if you don’t regularly cultivate the fruit of the Spirit by worship, sacraments, prayer, bible study,—all in a community of fellow seekers-after-the-fruit—then you cannot expect much of a harvest. The community is there to hold you accountable and give you objective feedback as to how well you are doing in the cultivation of the Spirit’s fruit. Trying to grow the fruit guarded only by attempts at self-policing through introspection puts you at the mercy of your ever-deceiving ego. As Wesley said: “Christianity is essentially a social religion, and that to turn it into a solitary one is to destroy it . . .”

In short, being on this spiritual path with Wesley as a guide does not mean simply having deep and profound longings, which is seemingly enough for some in our culture. Instead, following Wesley’s Christian vision means, putting legs on those longings and participating in the hard, but ultimately fulfilling, work of heart renewal.

**The Wesleyan Vision and Competing Visions of Formation**

Part of my charge in writing this piece was not only to describe the Wesleyan vision, but also to say a bit about how this vision of spiritual formation differs from other traditions. While it is in the Wesleyan tradition to emphasize a positive proclamation of what we are for rather than be obsessed with what we are against, there does come a time to honestly name differences.

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If we are to be true to our basic calling to be people of the fruit of the Spirit, though, this must be done in a way that is not belligerent or bellicose.

In that spirit, then, it is important to point out, first of all, that in the Wesleyan tradition, salvation consists of (to use two fancy theological terms) both justification and sanctification, whereas some other communities emphasize one or the other of those. For those who are not familiar with these terms, justification refers to our trusting in the saving work of Jesus to save us from sin, to realize our forgiveness, and to be reconciled to the one God who was revealed in the teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus. Justification is faith-as-trust in the God described by the scriptures and creeds. For some, this kind of faith alone is what it means to be “saved”—as long as you have at some point in your life had this act of faith, you are a Christian and destined for heaven.

Wesley, like the vast majority of Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox Christians and many other Protestants, says that this isolated moment of trust is not the whole story of salvation. For this majority segment of the Christian tradition, a certain quality of life must follow the faith of justification. This quality does not necessarily crop up fully developed in the believer’s life all of a sudden after conversion—it typically has to be cultivated and grown through the Spirit-guided use of human freedom over many years. Whether it is called “sanctification,” “holiness,” or some related (though not completely equivalent) term such as “theosis,” the Christian life must lead to a growth in saintliness—paradigmatically defined by (guess what!) the fruit of the Spirit. Salvation starts at justification, but that is only just a start.

Implied in this concern for a robust understanding of the process of salvation is another indispensable part of the Wesleyan vision of salvation and spiritual formation that does set this view apart from some Christians (though, again, not the historic majority of Christianity.) That
is Wesley’s emphasis on the reality of human freedom. Wesley himself struggled mightily with those in his age who denied that humans are free, but his unshakable conviction was that to deny human freedom is to make our moral struggles, and in fact, the demanding challenges of spiritual formation itself, meaningless. He read the Bible as proclaiming God’s act of predestination (for example, see Romans 8:29-30), but, like many others, Wesley said that this predestination could be understood as flowing more plausibly from God’s foreknowledge of all time rather than from God acting as a puppet-master to passive humanity on a string. His untiring efforts for evangelization were energized by the scriptural declaration that God “desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” (1 Timothy 2:4, NRSV) He did not believe that some people were simply doomed from before their birth, but saw the good news of Christ as good news for all.

Such discussions about doctrines like predestination, of course, cannot be decided solely by quoting one scripture and pitting it against another scripture, but involves complex philosophical and exegetical issues that we cannot settle here. Wesley was clear, though, that denying human freedom was destructive to the very essence of Christianity—the process of human transformation.5

In addition to these inter-Christian differences over spirituality, Wesley’s vision of spirituality is also clearly divergent from some Eastern religions which call the spiritual seekers to extinguish their desires, attachments or cravings or, even more extreme, to empty their minds of all conscious content. Wesley’s emphasis, in contrast, was on directing our desires and attachments to the heart’s proper objects: God and our neighbors. Our appetite should continue, and even increase, for the kind of life that our relationship to God calls for—a life of loving

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5 For further reading on this topic, see Jerry L. Walls and Joseph R. Dongell’s book *Why I am Not a Calvinist* (Downer’s Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004).
service, deep joy, and lasting peace, all marked by gratitude because our sins have been forgiven. Wesley’s pattern of spiritual formation is a call not to empty our minds, but to focus our hearts and minds (aided by worship, prayer, singing hymns, the Holy Scriptures) on God and the things of God. His heart religion was not an endorsement of a kind of introspective navel-gazing, but is an active cooperation with the Spirit in the task of heart-renewal, as informed by Scripture, and made visible in the relationships of our lives.

**The Christian’s Calling**

This life of the fruit of the Spirit, then, is the truest definition of the Christian’s “calling.” The Christian’s calling is not a calling primarily to a particular job or a geographical location, which, unfortunately, is a widespread misunderstanding. The Christian’s calling is the call to be a person of love, joy and peace, in whatever career or life circumstances in which we find ourselves. God’s foundational activity is to call the world to repent and live in God’s kingdom—to live as if God is our King.

What does God promise us as we try to live God’s way of life in this good but broken and sinful world, where people often misuse their God-given freedom?

God promises to give us God’s Holy Spirit (Luke 11:13), and our answering call is to grow the Spirit’s fruit. This is a potentially dramatic and challenging vocation to be sure. But it is, finally, a joyful calling, for, as John Wesley reminded his followers on his deathbed, in the midst of our trying to live out this calling, “God is with us.” (See Matthew 28:20, NRSV).

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