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Feminist Wesleyan Theology?

PAMELA D. COUTURE
Guest Editor

Why an issue of Quarterly Review on feminist Wesleyan theology? For some, feminist theologies are an aberration that should remain on the margins; for others, Wesleyan theologies are mere hagiography. But people holding these views should reconsider. In the past four decades, both feminist and Wesleyan theologies have grown from curiosities into mature schools of thought, each the subject of numerous articles and books. They have expressed the religious experience of many people seeking to love God and neighbor in societies that define people by gender, race, class, and region. They have articulated people’s longings to participate in God’s grace and to cross social barriers to be with “the other.” Female scholars and candidates for ordained ministry have claimed both of these schools of thought.

That said, no volume has attempted a sustained conversation between feminist theologies and Wesleyan theologies. No set of essays has been available to students who are trying to integrate feminist and Wesleyan theologies. A single issue of Quarterly Review cannot fill that void, but it can seek to be a starting point for such a conversation.

Why is this an interesting conversation? First, there are intriguing feminist impulses in earliest Methodism. John Wesley’s writings and his brother Charles’s hymns speak movingly of the plight of women impoverished by eighteenth-century British economic practices and lift up men and women as worthy ministers. Second, in the Wesleyan family women were theologians. The theological influence of Susanna Wesley on John’s theological development is famous, warranting a critical edition of what remains of Susanna’s writings (Charles Wallace, ed., Susanna Wesley: The Complete Writings [Oxford University Press, 1997]). Also, John and his sisters wrote letters of intense existential and theological importance.
Third, in the United States, the Methodist movement and the Woman Movement in the nineteenth century energized each other with a momentum that continued into the twentieth-century Methodist and feminist movements. The bulk of scholarship on the Wesleyan movement and women records the amazing activity of women seeking social justice on behalf of children, women, and men. Scholarly projects from the 1980s to the present have recorded the accomplishments of many of these women, as the biographies of Wesleyan women were researched and written. In the first essay, Rosemary Keller traces the retrieval of the “her-story” of Wesleyan women, a prerequisite for feminist Wesleyan theology.

Developing a constructive feminist Wesleyan theology represents a further step in the story of Wesleyan women. In this issue some of the grand theological themes are addressed. Pamela Couture approaches the problem of evil and the nature of God. Sarah Heaner Lancaster wends her way through the difficulties women have had with the idea of original sin and the Genesis texts. Naomi Annandale uses literature to help us think about the difficulties of the Atonement. Susie Stanley describes the way the doctrine of sanctification has supported many women’s journeys, including her own. Mary Elizabeth Moore argues for an ecclesiology based on the notion of “commissioning.” Catherine Keller creates a theopoetics of feminist and Wesleyan eschatology. The approaches of these six women differ, given their different theological disciplines: Couture, Moore, and Annandale write as practical theologians; Lancaster and Stanley as historical theologians; and Keller as a constructive theologian. Their disciplines and audiences are diverse. It is apparent in their essays that the students they teach, the congregants to whom they preach, and the audiences to whom they speak have differing comfort levels with feminist theology.

While this volume has a precedent in Quarterly Review’s Summer 2000 issue, which featured the writings of women-of-color scholars, it remains only a beginning. Yet it makes a distinct attempt to begin to build a corpus of writings that can be identified as feminist Wesleyan theology. It is our hope that these essays will inspire other women to explore and interpret their religious experience as women, as feminists, as womanists, and as Wesleyans.

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This edition of Quarterly Review is a historic volume, representing the first effort to address a range of theological themes from a feminist and Wesleyan standpoint. Theology traditionally has been developed by academic scholars who study the public thought and recorded sermons of men in a tradition. In contrast, a Wesleyan feminist theology is rooted in the recovery of stories of women’s experience over four centuries of the Wesleyan heritage in the British Isles and the United States. Wesleyan feminist theology deals with a range of themes often dealt with by systematic theologians, but does it in a contextual and diverse way that is consistent with Wesley’s “practical theology.”

The written records of Wesleyan women typically have been their journals, diaries, and letters. Their experiences have been retrieved from these private and personal sources, and a rich and lively history of women in the Methodist heritage has emerged. That history of women’s lived experience becomes the basic source out of which a Wesleyan feminist theology may now be constructed as feminist Wesleyan authors draw from that tradition or stand in that tradition as they write. Their stories have been laden with theological expression and practice, though that theological grounding has not been named until now.

The year 1980 marks the beginning of the modern recovery of Wesleyan women’s history. On February 1–3, four-hundred people attended the national conference “Women in New Worlds: Historical Perspectives on the United Methodist Tradition” (hereafter WNW) held in Cincinnati, Ohio.
Sponsored by the United Methodist General Commission on Archives and History, it was the first conference to focus on the heritage of women in a major Christian denomination and the first to be sponsored by the historical agency of a general church body. This conference introduced denominational history as a major facet in the history of women, and women's history as a necessary part of denominational studies.

The Women's Division of the General Board of Global Ministries has consistently been at the center of advocacy for women's issues in The United Methodist Church. This was also the case in the creation of the WNW Conference. The initial impetus grew out of a recommendation from the National Seminar of United Methodist Women in 1975. It authorized the directors of the Women's Division to petition the 1976 General Conference for the General Commission on Archives and History to appoint a special committee to research and publish a history of the contribution of women to the denomination. The petition was adopted and the mandate was handed to the Commission without funding. Through the skill and commitment of Commission staff and members, subsequent grants were obtained from general church agencies, philanthropic foundations, and individuals to launch the Women's History Project.

A major part of the work of the Women's History Project was the preparation of the two volumes of *Women in New Worlds: Historical Perspectives on the Wesleyan Tradition* (ed. by Rosemary Keller, Louise Queen, and Hilah Thomas [Abingdon, 1981, 1982]). From the fifty-eight papers delivered at the Conference, forty essays appeared in the two volumes. The essays covered an amazing breadth and depth of topics, including the life experience and spiritual empowerment of individual women; women's organizations in the African Methodist Episcopal Church and in antecedent denominations of The United Methodist Church; church women in social reform, national and international missions; and women in church professions.

The most far-reaching word from the WNW Conference and collections of articles came in the address of one of the plenary speakers, Donald G. Mathews. He stated, “The significance of women’s history is that the injection of women into our historical consciousness demands a rewriting of everyone’s history” (*Women in New Worlds*, 1:30). Ever since, feminist historians have been committed not to let women’s history be simply an add-on to traditionally written history but to place women and men, of different races and classes, side by side in the writing of everyone’s history.
Three years after the WNW Conference, several United Methodist agencies held a major theological conference at Emory University to celebrate the Methodist Bicentennial 1784–1984. The papers from this conference were brought together under the title of the consultation, “Wesleyan Theology Today: A Bicentennial Theological Consultation,” edited by Theodore Runyon and published by Kingswood Books (1985). Nine papers were published from a section in this consultation under the title “Constructing a Feminist Theology in the Wesleyan Tradition.” They covered topics of women’s experience in the origins of the movement under John Wesley’s leadership in Britain and in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America, biblical foundations, Christology, and African-American issues.

Since these two conferences in the early 1980s, dissertations, books, and essays have been written that focus on Methodist women’s historical experience and that interpret their lives within wider church and women’s history. A feminist theology emerges naturally out of the embracing theme of the spiritual empowerment of Wesleyan women. These studies describe and analyze an array of more specific themes through which their spiritual empowerment unfolds: calling, conversion, inclusion and exclusion within movements and institutions, leadership styles, community building, and social witness, to name some. In this essay, I discuss only a few monographs to consider this question: What have we learned about Methodist women’s experience that guides us in writing their history and developing a feminist Wesleyan theology at the beginning of the twenty-first century?

Women in Late Eighteenth-Century British Methodism

Focusing on books describing and interpreting women in late eighteenth-century British Methodism, the African-American tradition, and American Methodism more broadly, I am stunned by the way in which history repeats itself and points to similar theological conclusions growing out of all three perspectives.

In *She Offered Them Christ: The Legacy of Women Preachers in Early Methodism* (Abingdon, 1993), Paul Chilcote sets the context for understanding the place of women’s leadership in early British Methodism:

The heartbeat of the whole [Wesleyan] movement was personal religious experience and its power to transform both the individual and society. Wesley was ready to adopt and adapt any idea that might further this cause. His chief
purpose was to help the Church proclaim the gospel more effectively. The spirit of the movement and the vision of the founder contributed both to the acceptance and encouragement of female leadership. Wesley pioneered and sustained the revival. Women, as well as men, were allowed to express themselves freely. (24)

Chilcote also builds upon the early work in the recovery of the place of women in the Wesleyan movement by Earl Kent Brown, *Women of Mr. Wesley’s Methodism* (Edwin Mellen, 1983), in two other books, *John Wesley and the Women Preachers of Early Methodism* (Scarecrow, 1991) and *Her Own Story: Autobiographical Portraits of Early Methodist Women* (Abingdon, 2002). Through studies of women’s journals, diaries, and letters (some exchanged with John Wesley), these books trace an evolution of females’ spiritual experience, telling the stories of women’s expanding roles in the Wesleyan movement and their important contribution to making the Methodist revival in the British Isles a powerful religious awakening.

Theologically, the women repent of what they see to be their sinful conditions; seek forgiveness and justification; experience conversion, calling, new birth, and assurance; and go on to sanctification and even entire sanctification. These women shared their experiences as Wesley allowed women to speak increasingly freely in public gatherings—first expressing their faith and praying in class and band meetings; then moving to praying, testifying, and expounding their faith in worship settings; and finally exegeting their own biblical texts and preaching. Wesley’s attitude toward women liberalized under the impact of the evangelical success of the movement as it moved toward independence from the Church of England. There were not enough ordained ministers to do the work of preaching and bringing converts to Christ. It became increasingly clear to Wesley that he must accept occasional women preachers because they exhibited an “extraordinary calling” from God. They were bringing in a harvest of souls. Their effectiveness as preachers was proof that God was blessing their ministries.

Wesley never took the final step of ordaining women, which would have meant that they could have been called by the church, as did men, to the official preaching ministry. However, he did allow and support women to “travel the connection” as preachers. A number of them, including Sarah Mallett, Sarah Crosby, and Mary Bosanquet, traveled with Wesley himself. The
The decade of the 1780s was a time of blossoming for the ministries of women, both in terms of numbers and of official recognition and acceptance of their worth. At the Methodist Conference of 1787, Sarah Mallett was officially authorized to preach. “Female Brethren” in Norfolk, Suffolk, and Leeds were given wide clerical and lay support due to their extraordinary effectiveness.

A new generation of Wesleyan women preachers was coming onto the scene, women who saw themselves empowered by God to preach. Mary Barritt, the most famous female evangelical preacher of the early nineteenth century, described her own and other women’s success in bringing conversions and the theological conviction undergirding their ministries:

In the Yorkshire Dales, extending from Ripon to Bainbridge, Reeth, and Richmond, the Lord enabled me, and others, to gather the harvest, in handfuls, and everywhere he gave us fruit, for, at that time, those circuits had little help from the travelling preachers. . . . Suffice it to say, that the Almighty, in a most extraordinary manner, removed my scruples, answered my objections, and thrust me out into his vineyard. Indeed, nothing but a powerful conviction that God required it at my hand . . . could have supported me in it. (Chilcote, She Offered Them Christ, 114)

While Wesley liked to think that negative attitudes toward women preaching were decreasing in his later years, a severe conservative reaction set in after his death in 1791. At the same time that women such as Mary Barritt were winning a growing number of souls, her opponents cried out against her “emotionalism” and even called her a man in woman’s clothing who had left her children. In the decade after Wesley’s death, an entrenched conservatism and desire for respectability set in.

Theologically, women in the Wesleyan movement in late eighteenth-century Britain were spiritually empowered for their ministries by a belief in God’s direct call and communication with them and by the belief that the Holy Spirit was guiding their every move. This indisputable message from God was confirmed by the earthly leadership of John Wesley and the egalitarian emphasis of the revival he led. That spirit was quenched by the ministers who followed after Wesley’s death. Women became an embarrassment and a threat to the clergy and laity of the next generation. As the movement became institutionalized, structural survival took precedence over their confidence in the gifts of the Spirit.
Women in the African-American Tradition

In the decade between the mid-1980s and the mid-1990s, three African-American scholars set out to recover a black female activist tradition in American history. While figures such as Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman had become larger-than-life representatives of black female activism, these recent authors sought to uncover a larger cultural heritage in which Truth and Tubman were neither isolated nor atypical. The writers recorded this emerging tradition in three collections of primary sources, including autobiographical memoirs, sermons, and interpretative essays: William L. Andrews, ed., *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women’s Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century* (Indiana University Press, 1986); Marcia Y. Riggs, ed., *Can I Get A Witness? Prophetic Religious Voices of African American Women: An Anthology* (Orbis, 1997); and Bettye Collier-Thomas, *Daughters of Thunder: Black Women Preachers and Their Sermons, 1850–1979* (Jossey-Bass, 1997).

These authors were not trying specifically to discover a Wesleyan tradition of black female activism. In each study, however, the prominence of women in the Methodist heritage is striking and points to the activism that was embedded in the theological tradition.

Andrews reprints and analyzes the full autobiographies of Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, and Julia Foote, three women who were born in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and practiced their ministries in the nineteenth century. A focus on these women frames the broader experience of all the women in these volumes. As Andrews writes,

> Probably without consciously intending, these women exemplify in their lives a feminism that challenged male leadership and prerogatives, that found in the Spirit an authority transcending the imposing presence of the ecclesial voice. Although this “spiritual feminism” was still in its formative phases, Lee, Elaw, and Foote pointed the way along a path that other American religious women would tread. All three of these women embraced both a feminist and racial radicalism, but for the three, slave or free, black or white, were secondary characterizations when placed beside the primacy of the Spirit’s call. (*Sisters of the Spirit*, vi)

After feeling a call from God to preach around 1811, Jarena Lee sought that endorsement from Bishop Richard Allen of her denomination, the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME). Allen rejected her request on the
grounds that Methodist rules did not allow it. Later, in 1819, he endorsed her call to preach. She then began an itinerant preaching career and her effectiveness gained her significant acceptance among male clergy. As an official traveling exhorter, and not as a licensed preacher, Lee traveled hundreds of miles and preached hundreds of sermons each year over an extended period.

Zilpha Elaw was drawn as a teenager to the Methodists who were evangelizing in her area. Through religious visions in which Jesus Christ appeared to her, she was converted and joined a Methodist society in 1808. After successive trances and visions and the encouragement of several Christian women, she felt divinely commissioned by the Holy Spirit to preach and began an itinerancy under no license or denominational sanction. Elaw took her preaching ministry into slaveholding states on the East Coast, preached together with Jarena Lee in 1839, and traveled to England, where she delivered more than a thousand sermons. The opposition she received, in common with other black and white women, was that it was either unseemly or unscriptural for a woman to preach. Elaw was not deterred.

Converted at age fifteen, Julia Foote married three years later and became a member of an African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) congregation. She soon believed that God had called her to a preaching career, but the minister of Foote’s church would not allow her in his pulpit. He forced her out of the church after she began to hold evangelistic services in her home. Gaining no satisfaction from higher authorities of the AME Church, Foote began an itinerant career of her own and preached in many Methodist pulpits in the Northeast and Midwest. Later in life, her ministry gained official authorization and she became a missionary, ordained deacon, and ordained elder in the AMEZ church, only the second woman to become an elder in her denomination.

The autobiographical accounts of these women are filled with their theological expressions and witnesses to spiritual empowerment. Each describes her conversion and transformation (before which she felt her life was of little worth) that led immediately to her call by God for a special purpose. Finding it impossible to fulfill their callings in acceptable ways in the church, they chose to act upon the freedom they received in Christ. Commenting on the censure of Elaw and Foote by their husbands, Andrews writes, “[T]he more convinced each woman became of her divine appointment, the more independent she felt of his censure and the more serenely confident she became in judging her behavior by a higher authority than his” (Sisters of the Spirit, 18).
Women in North American Methodism


Grace Sufficient, the first narrative synthesis of women in the American Methodist tradition, is drawn from a wealth of primary source documents and smaller interpretative studies. The book begins with the origins of the Methodist movement in the colonial period and concludes with the creation of the Methodist Church in 1939, through the merger of the Methodist Episcopal Church with the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and the Methodist Protestant Church.

Its primary emphasis is upon Methodist women in the nineteenth century. Through her study of diaries, spiritual autobiographies, and letters, Schmidt focuses on women’s religious lives rather than on their activities. She emphasizes that God’s loving care and guidance provided “grace sufficient” to give women deep spiritual experience, particularly through the Wesleyan experiences of holiness and sanctification, and to carry them through the struggles of their daily lives.

Spirituality and Social Responsibility is a collection of biographical studies and primary source documents of fifteen women in the United Methodist tradition in the United States, from the American Revolution to the late twentieth century. The accounts represent a feminist analysis of women’s individual religious experience and activity as they tested the perimeters of the permissible roles of females in differing racial and ethnic cultures and challenged and stretched acceptable boundaries. The writers present the essential theological connection of their subjects’ personal faith and social activism through a pervading Wesleyan commitment to the equality of all persons in Jesus Christ. The inner assurance of Christ’s saving power led these women—including Catherine Garrettson, Amanda Berry Smith, Frances Willard, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Georgia Harkness, and Thelma Stevens—to correct injustices in social conditions and structures that oppress God’s people.
Strangers and Pilgrims takes a major step in integrating women’s religious history into the wider stream of American religious history, demonstrating that the experience of women makes the longstanding grand narrative of religious history out of date. Brekus’s study gives us a glimpse of one century of what “everyone’s history” might mean. She did not start out to write about Methodist women. Her purpose was to write a social and cultural history of female evangelists prior to the Civil War who tried to forge a tradition of female leadership in early America. Little has been known about any female preaching tradition in antebellum America because the women’s stories have been written out of the records by clergy and historians who followed after them. From the beginning of her study Brekus knew that if a female preaching tradition did exist in early American history, she would be compelled to uncover it and write a first piece of history that includes the history of these women and reconceives the traditional grand narrative.

She discovered over one-hundred evangelical women in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America who lived out of the unalterable conviction that God called them to be “laborers in the harvest” to preach the gospel. These women were members not of established denominations but of the Methodist, African American Methodist, Freewill Baptist, and Christian Connection sects—groups that stood over against the secular values they felt predominated in mainline denominations. In contrast to the trust in the market economy, upward mobility, and the “anxious spirit of gain” held by established churches, the sects sought to create “islands of holiness” that provided a clear alternative to a materialistic and secular society.

Brekus sums up the theological conviction underlying the commitment of these sects and their advocacy of women in the pulpit:

Populist and anti-intellectual, the Freewill Baptists, Christians, Methodists, and African Methodists created a religious culture in which even the most humble convert—the poor, the unlearned, the slave, or the female—felt qualified to preach the gospel. First, intuitively, and then more deliberately and self-consciously, they shaped a culture in which inspiration was more important than education, emotional revivals more important than genteel worship services, and the call to preach more important than the hierarchy of sex. Influenced by the shortage of ordained ministers, the growing numbers of female converts, the turbulence of revival meetings, and popular beliefs in immediate revelation, they allowed
hundreds of women to pray aloud, testify, exhort, and even preach in public, overturning cultural expectations of female silence. (Strangers and Pilgrims, 145)

The women preachers were empowered theologically by their heartfelt religious experiences and the religious authority they gained from their conversions and direct calling from God. Until the third decade of the nineteenth century, clergy of these sects affirmed their ministries, as John Wesley had earlier, because they were bringing converts and saving souls. As with Wesley’s day, by the 1830s and 1840s (as early as 1830 among the Methodists and later in the decade among the other sects), a severe backlash had set in. The reasons were much the same. The sects were outgrowing their lower-class roots and becoming more middle-class, with their congregations made up of larger numbers of professional people. They began to call for a more educated clergy, with women and lesser-educated males no longer wanted in the pulpits. Women in the pulpit created fears and threats that undermined the increasing elevation by society of the woman’s “proper,” domestic role.

Conclusion

History too surely had repeated itself. The theological grounding for the full ministries of women was strong. As long as the people, clergy and laity, supported the women, and in turn their basic Wesleyan theological convictions, women could freely live out their ministries. The calls of early Wesleyan women in Great Britain and of black and white women in America were repressed not by more conservative theological stances but by altered cultural conditions that led the clergy and laity to deny their gospel and increasingly to conform the church to the world. In each case, the official leaders sought to gain status and respect for their movements and denominations in order to establish them institutionally within the social milieu of their culture and day. Yet, they lacked the faith to let the Spirit be released. The preaching ministries of women were received as threats to institutional birth and blossoming rather than as gifts that might enable the God-given equality of women and men to take root among them. May the foundations of Wesleyan theology be the grounding for advancing the ministries of women, beside men, in the early twenty-first century.

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Other harrowing scenes show the partially decapitated body of a little girl, her red scarf still wound round her neck. Another small girl was lying on a stretcher with her brain and left ear missing. Another dead child had its feet blown away.

—“Death, Lies, and Grim Basra Videotape,” Robert Fisk in Baghdad

*The Toronto Star* (28 March 2003)

Before the war, this maternity hospital had been busy as women sought caesarians to complete their deliveries quickly in advance of the bombing. They continued operating during the war until an Iraqi army unit moved in next door in preparation for street battles. After three days the army left and the hospital re-opened. Now families have no money for hospital services and are afraid to come because of security concerns, especially at night. There are gunfights in the neighbourhood every night, she said. So women have to deliver their babies at home. . . . “We need security. We don’t care who brings it. We weren’t safe under Saddam and we aren’t safe now.”


[F]or our sakes who adore Thee, Lord,
blast their hopes,
blight their lives,
protract their bitter pilgrimage,
make heavy their steps,
water their way with their tears,
stain the white snow with the blood of their wounded feet!
We ask it, in the spirit of love, of Him
Who is the Source of Love, and
Who is ever-faithful refuge and friend of all that are sore beset
Robert Fisk, the Christian Peacemaker Team, Samuel Clemens, and John Wesley have this in common: They narrate the horrors of war in graphic and realistic detail. They do not offer abstract images of bombs like fireworks, lighting the horizon in glory like God descending in a pillar of fire on Mt. Sinai. Rather, they illumine the shadowy images of the inevitable innocent victims—the orphans and widows, the families and elderly—whose live and dead bodies shed the blood that tells the truth.

For John Wesley, the fact that human beings—Christians at that—make war on one another is the consummate indictment of humankind. It proves that sin and evil are alive and well in the world and in human nature. Though some feminist theologians eschew the categories of original sin and evil, the fact of violence against women and children, as occurs in war and other times, prompts feminist pastoral theologians to adopt this language.

If we, too, are convinced by stories of war, abuse, and exploitation that sin and evil exist in the world, then we may ask how we are to know sin and evil when we see them. In light of humankind’s inhumanity to humankind, is it possible to proclaim a God of justice, mercy, and love? How are we to use the words sin and evil with congregants, students, or readers who deny that sin and evil exist or who are perplexed about the various pastoral connotations of these words? Feminist pastoral theology and Wesleyan theology help us answer these questions.

I approach these questions not as a systematic or historical theologian but as a practical theologian of care. I am not accountable to abstract principles or historical authorities. Rather, I am accountable to God and to the persons in my mind’s eye who are suffering as I sit with them or write.
about them. My theological method in answering these questions is to seek help from those feminists and Wesleyans who have wrestled with these questions before me. The standard for my answer is created by potential and existing innocent victims—in other words, the standard is the blood that tells the truth.

How Do I Know Sin and Evil When I See Them?

Like many of the congregants, seminarians, and readers of today, when I entered seminary, I had little use for the ideas of sin and evil. I first contemplated the idea of evil in a serious way when a seminary professor wrote on a term paper, “Is there no positive evil for you?” No one had ever asked me that before. Since then I have met evil in the suddenly narrowed eyes of a person in a counseling room, in the flow of raw power in institutions, and in the gross dehumanization of children, women, and men in poverty, famine, and genocide. How does a feminist and Wesleyan pastoral theology help me identify those circumstances that are rightly called “sin” and “evil”?

Sin occurs when we do harm to one another, and in so doing, do harm to God. Sin is individual and interpersonal. It consists of attitudes and actions toward one another that we can hope to control in some measure, even if we cannot eradicate them. It results from lack of understanding or from miscalculation. Sin has partial sight; and when the angle of vision widens, sin knows itself. When we recognize the sinfulness of the way we treat one another, with God’s grace we can seek forgiveness and change our ways.

Evil is most easily recognized when it premeditates malice and delights in harm. Sometimes evil is simply unmoved by suffering; at other times it seeks satisfaction in it. This kind of evil has no motivation for seeking the good—it is the positive evil to which my seminary professor called my attention. People who motivate or act on this kind of evil are often called “perpetrators.” However, evil that deceives is more subtle. It is a self-perpetuating system that seduces and entraps people into cooperation with its ways. Even when we agonize over the ways in which our actions may be involved in systems that exploit others, evil makes it seem nearly impossible to eradicate our involvement if we are to live at all. Let us call “perpetrators” those people who know that they are caught in this system.

In “Thinking in a Clinical Mode: Claiming Resistance in the Face of Evil,” pastoral theologian Margaret F. Arms describes the effects of evil on
Sally, an adult woman who was sexually abused by her grandfather. As part of this abuse, the grandfather “offered” her to his friends. When she resisted and fled, he caught her and allowed the friends to gang rape her. Using the work of Wendy Farley and Elaine Scarry, Margaret observes that evil robs the victim(s) of the capacity to resist, of language that describes evil, and of meaning through which to transform the experience. Evil takes, but it does not teach. These victims, regardless of the sins of their lives, are “innocent,” because they suffer beyond any reasonable meaning. These characteristics distinguish evil from the suffering of ordinary life.

Sexual and physical abuse seems like an obvious manifestation of evil that everyone should recognize. But not everyone does. Even in the church, many people find it difficult to say that abuse is unacceptable, much less to call it sinful or evil.

People find it even more difficult to imagine that they participate in evil in their everyday lives. We eat food that has been produced by people who work in inhumane conditions. We buy clothes that have been sewn by sweatshop labor. We transport ourselves in vehicles that leave contaminants that risk our health. Self-perpetuating systems that provide the inducements for human beings to exploit one another or create disease are evil. Even the most radical of activists cannot extract themselves from these systems, because, paradoxically, their activism against some forms of exploitation often depends on their access to other systems that exploit.

Frequently, the systems of everyday life that create radical suffering are based on gender discrimination. In many countries girls receive less education, medical care, and nutrition than their brothers. Some population experts believe that female infanticide or selective abortion exists because the gender ratios of some countries are radically different from the biological norm. In part, this discrimination can be traced to the belief systems and interpersonal practices of families. An interpersonal explanation of the problem, however, is not adequate. Law often supports discriminatory practices against women, denying them access to property, inheritance, and employment; and even where law upholds women’s rights, custom prevents the adequate implementation of law. These systems, too, fit the seductive pattern of evil.

In her feminist pastoral theology of white privilege, Nancy Ramsay describes the way in which she discovered herself to be a perpetuator of racist and classist beliefs. She writes, “That summer . . . I watched these chil-
dren begin class by pledging allegiance to the flag. . . . I came to realize that, however bright they might be, these children would never have the opportunity to succeed. . . .” She affirms Fumitaka Matsuoka’s description of an interlocking, systemic sin as “the negation of relation”\(^5\)—a description for which I use the word evil. Nancy’s work describes the ways that people in dominant positions demean themselves, as well as others, when they become witting or unwitting accomplices in complex systems of exploitation.

Margaret and Nancy identify two sets of victims of evil: the direct, “innocent” victims of abuse and exploitation, such as Sally and “the children,” and the perpetuating but dehumanized victims, such as Nancy. Using a different means, evil achieves the same end denying its victims the ability to resist, describe, and make meaning. Paradoxically, the process of resisting, describing, and making meaning is the only way to defeat evil. Though all are victims, some have an easier time than others gaining footing on the healing side of the paradox.

Wesley’s thorough description of sin and evil (he uses the words interchangeably) fits the descriptions above. Evil has its most dramatic and all-encompassing effects when it creates war or destitution. Evil is perpetuated by the misuse of wealth, liberty, and power.\(^6\) The forces of political and economic domination, including the part played by the egos of powerful political and religious leaders, blind the average person to the suffering that will be caused when violence is the answer to conflict. The effects of this evil are perpetuated in such a way that one powerful man can dispose thousands of men to create suffering in the lives of others, with the effects lasting for multiple generations. Women and children suffer the effects of this self-perpetuating evil. God may discipline the evildoers through suffering but not the innocent, as they are already suffering at the evildoer’s hands.

**A God of Mercy and Love?**

Where is a good and merciful God in the midst of this evil? Sally remembers that as she was raped, “I gave up. I stopped fighting. All I could do was focus on the blue wildflower I saw on the ground and somehow know for a fleeting moment that God loved me. Then awareness of God was gone, and I couldn’t resist anymore.” Remembering the flower at a later time in her life, Sally also remembers thinking, “They don’t know this flower is here. They don’t know there is beauty here. They don’t know that God loves me. . . . But I knew. . . . Grandpa didn’t steal my soul—it went to my God-place
deep inside for safekeeping, hidden from me until I was safe.”

For Nancy, victims, perpetrators, and perpetuators who resist evil receive grace. This grace is found in “relationships with other persons of European American heritage who are also committed to accountability in the process of confronted racism” and in “conversation partners whose racial difference from [her] own stimulates further understanding and revises and expands the limits of [her] imagination.”

How is it possible to make sense of the fact that, in the midst of evil, Sally could remember that God loves her, if for only a fleeting moment? How is it possible that Nancy can identify resistance to her enculturation as an act of grace? What theological ideas about God matter to a person—victim or perpetrator—who discovers evil around her?

Wesleyan and feminist pastoral theologians claim that humanity is created by God in God’s image. This image is sustained, even when it seems barely present. It is a potential that cannot be fully obliterated. This potential is always cradled in God’s prevenient grace. Pastoral care supports human flourishing by seeking to discern, support, and regenerate the image and likeness of God in humanity over against the distortions that result from sin and evil.

The evil that Sally was subjected to and the evil that Nancy found herself perpetuating are dependent upon a belief system that makes some people the property of others by virtue of a biological or social quality. Prominent interpreters of the gospel, including the writers of pseudo-Pauline epistles and theologians Augustine and Aquinas, have tried to maintain that women and men are created of equal godly worth and unequal social worth. To challenge this belief, feminist theologians have understood the ineradicable image of God as a grand equalizer. If all of humanity—women and men, children and adults, poor and wealthy, slave and free, of low and high status—are equally made in God’s image, then we are also of equal value in this life. We are equally worthy of healing.

In Wesleyan theology evil is understood to be a disease that infects the image of God. Christian religion is a “theraphy of the soul.” God, then, is understood to be the great Physician who heals the image of God in humanity of any of the effects that evil has left behind. Significantly, for Sally and Nancy, God is not a judge who condemns us when we cannot resist evil but a therapist who heals us from the damage evil has done. Wesley ties this insight directly to the Atonement, so that God heals all
unbelief, including the belief that God deems us unworthy of healing, by this particular truth: “Christ loved me, and gave himself for me.” In this therapeutic understanding of the Atonement, Jesus’ blood is the blood that knows the truth.

A therapeutic understanding of the Atonement emphasizes that the blood of Jesus identifies with the blood of victims. The symbolism of Jesus’ blood in Wesleyan hymnody originally may have been more like the meaning of blood in the spirituals than like the meaning of blood in ransom theories of atonement (though ransom language is also used in the Wesleys’ theologies). Anne Streator Wimberly explains that the blood imagery found in the spirituals connotes solidarity between Jesus and innocent victims rather than blood shed for the purpose of a necessary sacrifice. 

Cheryl Kirk-Duggan emphasizes that singing the spirituals is an act of resistance in the presence of evil.

As the effects of evil begin to heal and victims grow in the likeness of God, they begin to gain the strength to resist that which harms them, to describe both the evil and the God they experience, and to make meaning. Their description of evil becomes more full-bodied, but so does their description of God. Feminist believers and theologians have claimed this freedom by naming God in unorthodox but meaningful ways. Struggling with traditional and emerging images of herself and God, Betsy Phillips Fisher asks,

And you, God, are you also chained and hidden by your images, your names, your roles? Creator, Judge, Father, Redeemer, King, Savior, Christ, Son of God, Holy Spirit, Light? Are you also lost among the images, Struggling to emerge into new roles, Fresh revelations of your real self? Are you not also Poet, Artist, Mother, Daughter, Mystery, Becoming, Suffering, Loving, Changing, Singing, Rejoicing, Darkness, Despair?

The feminist impulse to expand the imagery for God in worship proceeds from the therapeutic understanding of God.

The Wesleys understood this impulse. They used a wide variety of images for God, especially in their hymnody. The array of images was not reserved for the mature Christian but was introduced at the beginning of the new believer’s “therapy of the soul.” The range is apparent in The Collection of Hymns for the People Called Methodists (1780), an edition of
Charles’s hymnody edited by John and structured to communicate what the believer could expect as he or she grew in the likeness of God.

The opening section of the *Collection*, “Exhorting, and beseeching to return to God,” seeks to introduce the inquirer to the nature of God and to persuade him or her to establish a relationship with God. It contains diverse forms of trinitarian language: “Maker, Savior, Spirit” (hymn 6); “Father, Savior, Spirit” (hymn 9); “Father, Son, Holy Ghost” (hymn 9); “God, Savior, Comforter” (hymn 10); “God, Christ, Judge” (hymn 10). In his sermon “On the Trinity,” John comments that the most scripturally precise form of the Trinity is “Father, Word, and Holy Ghost.” However, he claims that he is not wedded to a particular version of trinitarian language. In fact, he does not consider the words *Trinity* or *Person* to be essential Christian vocabulary.


Part of the pastoral theological problem with exclusively narrow and male imagery for humanity or God, such as repeated and exclusive use of “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” for the Trinity, is that women such as Sally and Nancy often need female imagery to assist them in claiming the power of resistance to the evil they have identified. However, despite their diverse imagery, the Wesleys did not draw on the biblical female imagery for God.

That leaves it to feminist Wesleyans to add images that express God for them. It also suggests that feminist Wesleyans might explore the meanings within such a diverse well of imagery.

For example, feminist theologians of pastoral care have rightly criticized the images of *Shepherd* and *flock* because they establish the male godhead/clergy over the female/laity. Margaret and Sally, and Nancy and her friends need images of mutual participation to ground their healing
relationships. When I bring a feminist concern to this Wesleyan image, I realize that we have flattened and narrowed this traditional image for God. The Collection uses the christological imagery of Shepherd, Lamb, and Friend in ways that suggest an unusual mutuality between Christ and Christians in a male-engendered corpus.

Despite the reliance on male imagery, the Collection represents mutuality and co-participation in the relationship between God the Physician and the Christian in the process of healing. Christians are often referred to as “flock,” “sheep,” and “lambs.” But Christians are not the only lambs. Lamb is the most frequently used title for Christ. (If this imagery were sustained for bishops as representatives of Christ, then Lamb would be a more appropriate image than Shepherd.) Christ as Lamb emphasizes images of Christ’s vulnerability and sacrifice. Yet, since Wesleyan theology considers Christ’s sacrifice to be unique, it prevents the Christian’s full identification with Christ as Lamb. On the other hand, Wesleyan theology considers the Christian to be a participant in the atoning work of Christ. The vulnerability of Christ as Lamb is like the vulnerability of victims and perpetuators—Sally and Nancy. Jesus Christ became incarnate and participated in human systems, perpetuating them by his participation, and became a victim when he resisted these systems. When he resists, Jesus is imaged as both Lamb and Shepherd, meaning that he is both protective and vulnerable, just as Sally was protective of her God-part in the midst of her vulnerability. Finally, the ability to engage in role reversals—the reversal between the Shepherd and the Lamb—is central to genuine mutuality. Just as Christ is imaged as both Shepherd and Lamb, so Christians are shepherds and lambs with one another at different times and in different ways.

Therefore, it is all the more interesting that the Collection uses the christological title Friend as frequently as it does the titles Shepherd and Lamb. Like Jesus as Lamb, Jesus as Friend is vulnerable—Jesus is the Friend who lays down his life for his friends. However, the Friend metaphor extends the image of what Jesus does. Jesus as Friend goes places that respectable people will not go and eats with those who are despised—“publicans and sinners”—(hymns 31, 106, 107, 128, 138, 187); cures the lame, halt, blind/deaf, sick, and poor (hymn 31); clears the debt of sinners (hymns 106, 139); hears human pain and comforts tenderly (hymn 107); aids the lost and undone, who are weary of earth, self, and sin (hymn 128); offers a strong arm to the sinner to hold toward eternal life (hymn 138); sheds
blood for sinners and inspires and accepts prayers (hymn 303); provides safety from harm (hymn 395); sees the havoc of creatures (hymn 430); and is a universal Friend—a friend to all (hymns 430, 440).

In addition to suggesting that the person who is genuinely pastoral associates with those who do not have status and prestige, the title Friend gathers up a number of images of pastoral care. It is associated with a series of other titles that communicate the deep kinship and intimacy of divine and human friendship: Friend and Advocate (hymn 139); Savior, Brother, Friend (hymn 303); and Maker and Friend (hymn 395). These God-images help to communicate the mutuality that is necessary in the healing relationships between Margaret and Sally and between Nancy and her community of “intentional” friends.

Wesleyan expressions of the nature of God offer a rich, though not completely satisfying, banquet for feminist pastoral theologians and for feminist Christians seeking healing from the effects of evil. Ultimately, the attempts by Wesleyan and feminist pastoral theologians to express their understanding of God converge at a common point. Feminists have insisted that our God-language can only be metaphorical; it tells us what God is like but also communicates that there is much about God we cannot know. For Wesley, trinitarian language should point toward, rather than detract from, the mystery of God; too much analysis destroys the doctrine. We know God, in part, through Jesus Christ, through the Scriptures by which he lived, and through the Scriptures that attest to his life. We express this knowledge through metaphors—Jesus’ metaphors, scriptural metaphors, and metaphors such as Trinity and Person or Poet and Artist, which are abstracted from Scripture. In the end, feminist and Wesleyan theologians agree with Hebrew Scripture that God, YHWH, is a mystery beyond our comprehension.

The Language of Evil and the Nature of God: Pastoral Implications

If one begins with the nature of God in God’s natural attributes (omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence) and then tries to account for evil, one inevitably ends up in the quandary of theodicy: How do people account for a good God when evil exists in the world? If one begins with a description of evil and sin, as one so often does in pastoral care, then the problem of the divine nature may emerge differently. Given extensive evil and sin, the problem becomes this: How do people continue to find God?
In answering this question God’s moral and relational attributes (mercy, justice, compassion, love, friendship) come to the fore. This difference suggests that pastoral preaching and liturgy focus more on the moral than on the natural attributes.

Nonetheless, some people are unwilling or unable to use the language of sin and evil. Especially for those subjected to “fire-and-brimstone” preaching as children, this language reinforces an unbearably negative sense of self. They need other rhetorical strategies to communicate both the beauty and the horror of life.

For those who find the language of sin and evil helpful, it is one thing to have vivid descriptions of sin and evil and a rich array of images for God, the Trinity, and Christ. It is quite another thing to know when and how to call on these images in a pastoral friendship and in the presence of God the Physician and those God seeks to heal. Ultimately, the feminist pastoral theologian is accountable for the use of her language to the person with whom she is sitting. Vivid imagery of evil, named for what it is, is essential but is not appropriate at all times. Too often a discussion of evil and sin with a person already traumatized by their effects brings not self-knowledge that promotes healing but rather further self-deprecation. Narrative-pastoral-counseling techniques suggest that a strategy for dealing with evil rests in relocating the evil outside the individual, as in the biblical story of the Gerasene demoniac. A parent suffering the death of a child in war may feel compassion from a Christian who is willing to admit that war is evil, or he or she may feel burdened by such an admission. The participation of “shepherds,” “lambs,” and “friends” in the wisdom and grace of God, as well as careful, reflective training and practice, guides the one who needs to know the difference.

The same is true for language that proclaims God’s goodness. Even stocked with a wide array of imagery for God, a wise friend does not indiscriminately overpower others with God metaphors. Wesleyan theology and feminist theology agree that God, portrayed through a rich variety of images but often imaged as male, does not overpower, coerce, or intimidate humanity into a divine–human relationship. Rather, through the images humans create, God seeks and invites.
Endnotes


3. To communicate mutuality I have disregarded the convention of referring to authors by their last names.


11. John Wesley, “Sermon on Original Sin,” Works 2: 184, n. 63. Outler claims that Wesley preferred the therapeutic concept of salvation to juridical and
forensic metaphors. See also Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994).

12. Ibid., 184.

13. Since the publication of Robert Bellah, et. al., *Habits of the Heart*, the word *therapeutic* has received an increasingly poor reputation because of its association with individualism. Wesley reminds us of the dignity and value of the idea of healing that is captured by the word *therapeutic*.


19. Fisher’s list of “emerging” images have biblical referents in the psalms (poet, artist, singing), wisdom literature (mother, daughter), Gethsemane and the Cross (darkness, despair, suffering), Hannah’s Song (mystery, becoming, rejoicing), and in Jesus’ encounter with the Syrophoenician woman (changing).
Women, Wesley, and Original Sin

SARAH HEANER LANCASTER

From its earliest stages, feminist theology has been concerned with thinking about what it means to be human. In 1960, Valerie Saiving wrote a seminal piece entitled “The Human Situation: A Feminine View,” in which she argued that what theologians have often called the “human” situation has really been “men’s” situation. Women and men develop differently and are socialized to regard their physical development differently; but theological attempts to talk about human life before God have done so onesidedly from the male point of view. Saiving’s claim that women face a different dilemma and temptation than men do, namely, that they have too little “self” rather than too much “self,” has been examined and elaborated in feminist literature for decades. Feminist thinking has come to recognize that differences are more complex than Saiving initially described; but the basic recognition that women’s experiences have traditionally been left out and need to be included in any description of the human situation has been foundational to feminist studies.

This fundamental feminist insight into the human situation strikes right at the heart of a basic insight in Christian theology, namely, that the human situation before God can be described as a condition of original sin. For centuries this doctrine has been developed in ways that feminists find enormously problematic. Judith Plaskow, in Sex, Sin, and Grace, argues persuasively that conceiving the basic sin of human beings as “pride” fails to take into account the difference for women that Saiving named. Conceiving basic sin as pride misses the point for women. Moreover, the further implication of original sin, namely, that all humans are “unworthy” because we are born into sin, exacerbates the problem that women have. In other words, if one already has too little “self,” then talk of unworthiness only serves to negate the self even more. Additionally, Eve’s place in the Fall has set up women to share not only the fundamental guilt that comes to humankind through Adam but also the particular guilt of Eve, who succumbed to temptation first and then persuaded Adam into sin. As the first one seduced into sin, Eve appears gullible because she believed the
serpent. As the seducer of Adam, Eve becomes the primordial temptress. In both cases, Eve’s legacy has presented enormous difficulties for women. With all these problems, what are feminists who stand in the Wesleyan tradition to make of original sin?

**Why Bother with Reconception?**

In thinking about original sin, one of the first things that feminists have to consider is whether a reconception of the doctrine is even worthwhile. The above-named problems are not the only ones connected with this doctrine, and feminists are not the only ones who have objected to them. Modern and postmodern thinkers no longer tend to describe human beings as corrupt and unworthy. Furthermore, the theory of evolution runs counter to the idea of a pristine past from which humans have fallen in a first act of sin. Despite all these objections, there are two reasons why Wesleyan feminists ought to take some idea of original sin seriously.

First, original sin has a central place in John Wesley’s theology and cannot be ignored. In his own day, Wesley faced significant resistance to the doctrine of original sin, because the idea that human beings were corrupt and wicked did not fit well with Enlightenment confidence in human reason and celebration of human accomplishments. Wesley valued reason, but he never thought that reason could replace revelation as the way to know the truth about God. He saw a threat to revelation in the Deism that had arisen from the Enlightenment, for its way of understanding the relationship between God and humanity did away with the need for Jesus Christ. The seriousness with which he regarded this threat is apparent in one of his longest works, *The Doctrine of Original Sin according to Scripture, Reason, and Experience*. Wesley wrote the treatise as a response to an argument by John Taylor that denied the reality of original sin in human life. In the preface to this work, Wesley says,

> “They that are whole have no need of a Physician;” and the Christian Revelation speaks of nothing else but the great “Physician” of our souls. . . . If we are not diseased, we do not want a cure. If we are not sick, why should we seek for a medicine to heal our sickness? What room is there to talk of our being renewed in “knowledge” or “holiness, after the image wherein we were created,” if we never have lost that image? If we are as knowing and holy now, nay, far more so, than Adam was immediately after his creation? If, therefore,
we take away this foundation, that man is by nature foolish and sinful, "fallen short of the glorious image of God," the Christian system falls at once; nor will it deserve so honourable an appellation, as that of a "cunningly devised fable."\(^3\)

For Wesley, the very truth and necessity of Christian faith rest on a human problem that is deep and broad enough that we cannot overcome it on our own. Although this statement was written in 1756, through his long ministry Wesley never seemed to waver in the conviction that we need God’s help to be restored to what we were created to be.

Despite distance in time, intellectual climate, and experience, women today recognize serious problems in human life and the need for healing. Serene Jones writes about participating in a Lenten study group of women at which the topic was sin.\(^4\) Not surprisingly, women recognized the problems with the doctrine of original sin that I have outlined above. But it was surprising to discover that when they “remapped” the doctrine according to their own experiences, it offered an explanation of and comfort for the brokenness they felt they had experienced in life. The language of “sin” showed that human actions and relationships could be measured against God’s will as a standard. The doctrine spoke to the extensiveness of sin in human life and to our complicity in sin, even when we are unaware of the effects our attitudes and actions have on others. It also pointed to the need for God’s grace and the hope for wholeness that grace provides. Because of Wesley’s conviction that this doctrine is central to Christian faith and because of actual women’s experience of finding relevance in it, the doctrine deserves a close look. In this brief examination of the doctrine, I begin with the particular problems that Eve’s role in the Fall presents for women and then move to more general problems associated with thinking about original sin itself.

**Starting with Eve**

Wesley assumed a framework for thinking about the Fall that has influenced Western theology ever since Augustine wrote the *City of God*. It is to be expected that Wesley would accept certain presuppositions that were simply given with his time and place. What is interesting is to look at how he makes use of them and in some cases modifies them. So, within the framework of the Fall that Wesley inherited, what did he think was important to say about Eve?
Not surprisingly, Wesley’s most concentrated discussion about Eve is found in his *Explanatory Notes upon the Old Testament*. This work is mostly an abridged form of Matthew Henry’s commentary on the Bible, although Wesley not only makes some additions based on Matthew Poole’s commentary but also changes a few things on his own. The account of Eve given in the notes to the first chapters of Genesis is mostly a shortened form of what Henry said. These notes contain a description of how Eve was seduced by the serpent into sin and of how she further persuaded Adam to eat the fruit. Wesley accepts the basic description that Henry provides, including that Eve “gratified her pleasure and pride” and that she “was ring-leader in the transgression.”

Wesley did not completely avoid a portrayal of Eve that supports the problematic ideas stated above. There are, though, a few places where his depiction is open to a more positive reading.

When Wesley abridged Johann Bengel’s notes on the New Testament, he interpreted Bengel’s explanation of 1 Tim. 2:13 to mean that, since Eve was created after Adam, she was “originally the inferior.” Later, though, when he abridged Henry’s work for the Old Testament *Notes*, Wesley accepted Henry’s notion that women’s subordination to men was not the original intent for creation. One note to Genesis reads that, like Adam, Eve was made “immediately by the hand of God” so that “between the sexes there is not that great difference and inequality which some imagine.” Another note shows that women’s subjection to men is seen as the result of sin. Wesley and Henry seem to read that result as punishment (“the whole sex, which by creation was equal with man, is for sin made inferior”). Feminists would certainly object to any idea that women’s subjection is deserved; but the recognition that women’s subjection to men is not the way things were originally intended to be is an important insight on which feminists already build new readings of Genesis 3.

The most notable difference in Wesley’s view of Eve is in the way he conceives her capacity for understanding. Again, when he is working in 1 Timothy, Wesley accepts Bengel’s note that Eve is “more easily deceived, and more easily deceives.” However, Wesley does not include Bengel’s further comment that Eve’s deception “indicates less strength in the understanding.” In the notes on Genesis, Wesley edits out similar descriptions in Henry’s work. He does not include Henry’s description of Eve as “the weaker vessel,” who is “inferior to Adam in knowledge, and strength, and presence of mind.” While Henry suggests that Eve was surprised at
hearing a serpent talk, Wesley explicitly modifies that note to say, “It is not improbable, that reason and speech were then the known properties of the serpent. And therefore Eve was not surprised at his reasoning and speaking, which otherwise she must have been.” Eve was beguiled by the serpent, but it does not seem to be because of some weakness in her capacity to understand or her lack of awareness about the way the created order operated. If she had any lack of awareness, it was simply that she was “ignorant of evil.”

In another writing, Wesley goes even further. He corresponded with John Smith over a period of time about several issues that Smith questioned in Wesley’s theology. One of their disagreements was over the matter of “perceptible inspiration.” What Wesley wanted to defend in this correspondence was the idea that Christians really do have a testimony of God’s Spirit that is distinct and credible. Smith raised the question of how it is possible to begin to doubt that testimony if it really has been so clear. One way that he pressed the point was to name the case of “H.R.,” who had been justified but later denied or doubted that her sins really had been forgiven. Wesley responds by comparing her case to that of Eve. It is possible, he argues, to have a clear testimony and a sound understanding of sin and then later to begin to doubt whether it is true. His argument depends on the soundness of Eve’s understanding of God’s command. The problem was not that she somehow failed to grasp or believe what God said; the problem was that the serpent through “subtlety” was able to deceive her. Only when the serpent masked the truth with falsehood did her understanding of God’s command become unsound. How much more so, argues Wesley, are we also liable to be misled by the subtlety of those who mount arguments against the faith we know to be true? Eve becomes the paradigm for all who struggle with half truths.

A comparison between how Eve was beguiled and how Adam was persuaded to disobey God’s command leads to some interesting observations. The soundness of Adam’s understanding has never been at issue; so it is especially puzzling how he could have come to the point of disobeying in the first place. Early in his career, Wesley described Adam’s understanding as clear, swift, extensive, and accurate. It functioned so well that he was not mistaken about the way things really are—and it is hard to see how he could ever be. He ought to recognize a half truth when he sees it! Adam falls into sin, then, not by deception but by persuasion. In compar-
ison, it does appear there is something different about Eve’s way of falling into sin, even if Wesley denies that her understanding was “unsound” or “weak.” In the last section, I will take up a possible way of reading this difference between deception and persuasion without disparaging Eve’s intellectual capacity.

Whatever difference there might be between Adam and Eve, there are two striking similarities. First, for both, there is some external factor that presents the occasion for sin. For Eve, the external factor is the serpent; and for Adam, it is Eve. Neither simply falls into sin alone. Second, whether by deception or by persuasion, the first step into sin is unbelief. In both cases, pride follows from unbelief. However, it is important to see that some failure (a negative inward sin) takes place before pride (a positive inward sin) can find a place in their hearts. Despite the different temptation and the words used to describe how they succumb, the internal path to sin is the same.

The difference between the way that Eve and Adam fall into sin plays an important role in how culpability is assigned in the Fall. Eve’s ability to persuade Adam into eating the fruit has been the foundation for seeing her as the primordial temptress. But Adam’s clarity about the situation makes it hard to see how Adam could ever have been persuaded. It seems much more perverse to go knowingly into sin than to be deceived into it, and Wesley says of Adam, “He sinned with his eyes open.” Wesley follows Henry in assigning a fault to both Adam and Eve. Eve’s fault was in trying to persuade Adam and Adam’s fault was in listening to her. Thus, they share blame, but Adam’s failure has more serious consequences. It is through him, not through Eve, that sin has come to the rest of us. In both his explanatory notes for Romans 5 and in his description of the Fall in his treatise on original sin, Wesley clearly maintains that Adam, not Eve, was the “representative head: through whom sin affected our nature.” This point does not relieve Eve of responsibility in the Fall, but it does show that Adam clearly bears his share of the weight—perhaps even the greater share. If sin started with Eve, then it reached its culmination in Adam.

This brief look at how Wesley utilized Eve in his description of the Fall indicates that some of the most pressing objections to the common depiction of Eve are tempered in Wesley’s thought. While he certainly accepts pride as a monumental hurdle to relationship with God, he also acknowledges that this relationship is already at risk because of a prior failure. Even
if Wesley can call pride “the grand work of the devil,” his actual description of how this work is done in us involves a complexity that allows for a more flexible understanding of the human problem than has often been acknowledged.\(^{18}\) In the final section of the article I show how that recognition connects to his project of bringing people back into relationship with God. Furthermore, Eve is not simply weak and gullible. Although Wesley sometimes uncritically accepts that view, at other times he explicitly argues against it. Finally, Eve does tempt Adam, but Wesley describes the situation so that it does not in any way minimize Adam’s own responsibility. In fact, Adam’s responsibility seems greater. Each of these points allows room for feminists to explore an understanding of original sin that does not simply vilify Eve and, by association, all women.

But even if Eve is not treated as badly by Wesley as she sometimes has been in Christian tradition, there still remains the larger problem of original sin itself. I want to turn now to an examination of how this doctrine has functioned in Wesleyan theology.

**What Is “Original” about Sin?**

The word *origin* has a range of meanings: source, point of origination, derivation, inception, root. It is important to see this range because these meanings tend to get bound up in our thinking of original sin in ways that sometimes bring confusion rather than clarity. The word *original* is similar to the word *ultimate* in that there are two quite different ways in which it can be, and has been, used in Christian tradition. *Ultimate* can mean either the last in a series or a maximum. An automobile manufacturer’s claim that a vehicle will give you the “ultimate driving experience” does not mean that it is the last drive you will ever take. Rather, it refers to an experience that cannot be surpassed. Similarly, *original* can be about “origins” in different ways. It can indicate either the first in a series or the fundamental source from which every instance of something comes. These two meanings have been brought together in the way Christians traditionally have talked about Adam and Eve: Our forebears in the Garden of Eden committed the first sin in a series, but all their progeny have been fundamentally affected by it. Because of their first sin, there is something about the way we are that accounts for our problem. The source for our sin is in our very nature.

Wesley presupposed the idea of a “first sin,” and he lived in a time
when this presupposition was widely shared. Even his major opponent, Dr. Taylor, could speak of Adam and Eve as real people; and Taylor’s project was simply to give a different account of how their sin affected us. Serious objections in our day to this idea of first sin do not necessarily undermine the usefulness of this doctrine in its other meaning. Even in his own time, Wesley was unable to explain consistently how the effects of a first sin could be passed on to us; but he persisted in the idea that all human beings share a problem. The real importance of original sin for Wesley’s theology lies not in the idea of a first sin but rather in the other meaning of original, namely, that the source for our sinfulness somehow lies within us. Eve and Adam do not have to be seen as the initiators of the human problem in order to serve as its representatives.

Redirecting attention in the meaning of original from “first” to “source” brings us to a different difficulty in reconceiving the doctrine. The notion that human nature serves as a source for sin has led to the idea of “unworthiness”—a concept that has haunted women, as well as many men, who find this idea problematic. Objections do not simply arise from a changed culture but come from within Christian faith itself. Christian faith talks not only about a fundamental problem that humans have but also about our fundamental goodness as God’s creation, especially as we have been made in the image of God. We may have a profound problem, but we also have a profound gift from God and a profound value to God. There is a deep-seated tension in these two claims. Thus, in what follows, I look at how Wesley held together the ideas of original sin and original goodness.

In his early work Wesley often referred simply to the “image of God” but later began to distinguish between the “natural” image, the “moral” image, and the “political” image. The natural and moral images are relevant to this discussion, and they function similarly to the distinction in Eastern theology between “image” and “likeness.” The natural image consists of human capacity for understanding, will, and liberty, while the moral image is described as righteousness and holiness. Wesley uses the word natural in another context as well, and it is important to see the difference between these two uses. “Natural image” refers to that which constitutes us as human beings. It consists of capacities that are fulfilled in the way we exercise them. When he speaks of the “natural man,” or of how we are in our “natural state” (also called “present state”), Wesley is referring not to what we are but to the way we are—that is, to the way in which we exercise those capacities.19
If our God-given natural capacities (understanding, will, and liberty) are directed toward desiring God and living as God would have us live, then we exist in a state of righteousness and holiness, namely, in the moral image of God. If, instead, those capacities are directed toward desiring something other than God and doing something other than the will of God, then we exist in a state of unrighteousness and “lose” the moral image of God. What we are (the natural image) is not lost—we still retain the capacities God has given us—but they function in the wrong way. This state is “natural” to us because when we fail to make use of the grace that God provides we easily and unavoidably realize this tragic alternative.

It is possible, then, even when talking about original sin as a state, to say that the “source” of sin lies within us. We are responsible for using our capacities well, but we do not. We have a problem for which we are accountable and which is inescapable through our own effort alone. But states can change. The capacities that are natural in the sense that they constitute our being make possible both sin (our “natural” state in the sense that when left to our own devices we do not use our capacities well) and righteousness (a state that requires God’s grace to attain). In this sense, our God-given capacities allow for the possibility of righteousness, but God is the “source” of the grace that helps us realize it. And indeed, the hope for all of us is that our state of unrighteousness can change to a state of righteousness as we are empowered by God’s grace to live as we were intended to live.

If original sin is conceived as a state, then we have not lost our essential value to God or our ability to be made right with God. It is not our nature (what we are) that is “unworthy”; rather, it is “worthy” of God’s effort to restore us to wholeness. What is “unworthy” are attitudes, actions, etc., (the way we are) that do not fulfill our nature as it was intended to be. If this is what a Wesleyan doctrine of original sin is intended to convey to us, then the Fall story functions as a description of how human life before God goes wrong not simply in the beginning but over and over again. As our representatives, Eve and Adam play an important role in illuminating our situation, reminding us both of how we fail to realize our capacities and of what is needed to fulfill them.

**Toward a Reconception**

Wesley’s descriptions of how Eve and Adam enter into sin allow us to recapture the insight into the human situation that Valerie Saiving first
brought to light. In both cases, external factors play a role, but those external factors work on Eve and Adam somewhat differently, as indicated by the words “persuasion” and “deception.” Because Adam knowingly allowed himself to be persuaded, his decision to sin is described as “ambition,” “rebellion,” and “disobedience.” The word **persuasion** indicates that Adam has found temptation to be convincing; so he is making a judgment about what is to be believed. Furthermore, part of temptation’s persuasive appeal lies in what Adam believes will happen to him. When only his case is considered, it is easy to see how pride becomes the central pattern for sin. But Eve’s case illumines a different side to the problem that is equally important for understanding how sin takes place. Although she also knew what God had commanded, she was deceived rather than persuaded. The word **deception** indicates that, instead of trusting in her own direct relationship with God, she listened too much to what another had said. The description of Adam’s entry into sin indicates a strong notion of self in his decision to defy God, while the description of Eve’s entry into sin indicates too little self in not holding on to what she knows in the face of external pressure. Eve’s problem is not weakness of understanding but rather a lack of confidence in her understanding. Many women know this to be the deepest truth about their own failure to be who God created them to be.

Recognizing these two paths to sin helps to bring feminist insight about the full scope of the human situation into a doctrine of original sin, but it is important not to draw the contrast too sharply. Even though Wesley distinguishes between persuasion and deception, he can also describe Adam’s pride as being rooted in unbelief and Eve’s unbelief as leading into pride. Adam could not have been persuaded had he not somehow disbelieved God and believed Eve and the serpent—that is, had he not listened to other voices. And Eve could not have actually eaten the fruit had she not in some way judged for herself whom she should believe. Perhaps this blurring of the difference has something to say to us. If, indeed, we can even attempt to talk about the “human” situation instead of “men’s” or “women’s” situations, then we need to recognize that these two ways of falling into sin share something in common. Unbelief and pride, deception and persuasion, external temptation and internal decision constitute complex dynamics of the human problem, to which men and women are vulnerable, although perhaps in different ways. Together, Eve and Adam illumine what is going on in human life before God. In Genesis
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sin (even Adam’s pride) is not an isolated, individual occurrence but one that has social dimensions. Eve and Adam’s joint participation in sin can help us see the social dimensions of sin in our own situations.

Wesley’s main concern in talking about original sin is not simply to say that there is a human problem; he wants us to acknowledge our problem so that we will seek “the Physician,” who can bring us to a state of health. The way that Wesley describes what has gone wrong provides the framework for how healing takes place. Because for both Eve and Adam unbelief precedes pride, the human problem really starts with not taking proper account of God. This problem is more relational than intellectual. It is not soundness of understanding that we lack but trust in what we know God is saying to us. Healing, then, has to address our deepest way of going wrong. Indeed, for Wesley, justification by faith centers on believing in the fullest possible way God’s own testimony to God’s own love. In this moment of distinct and credible witness, unbelief is overcome. “Belief” here involves trust; so there is a relational (not simply an intellectual) component to God’s answer to our problem. The faith that matters for answering the problem that we have is the fides qua creditur, or the existential faith by which we truly trust God’s desire to love us into wholeness.

Not simply justification but also sanctification requires attention to this deepest aspect of our lives. Just as Eve became vulnerable to disbelief in the face of half truths over time, so do we become vulnerable. As Wesley contemplated the possibility of sin in believers following justification, he developed a way of thinking about how life with God either grows or slips back. Progress depends on “spiritual respiration,” by which we continually make use of the grace that God offers to us.22 That progress can be thwarted, though, if we stop “breathing” God. When that happens, the slippage into sin resembles the original slippage described in Eve’s deception: a negative inward sin (failing to stir up the gift of God) can lead to a positive inward sin (giving way to an inward desire or temper), which can in turn lead to losing sight of God so fully that one can even commit an outwardly sinful act that transgresses the command of God.

The doctrine of original sin in the Wesleyan tradition allows feminists to speak of the human problem in the following way. The most basic failure in human life that leads to all our other sinfulness in all its different forms is a failure to remain in proper relationship with God. We live in the midst of a world full of people, objects, ideas, obligations, etc., that tempt us to
give ourselves to them rather than to God; and we regularly do so, sometimes because of a lack of confidence in what we know God wants for us and sometimes because of confidence in our own judgment over God’s. In either case, when our relationship to God becomes less than it should be, our relationship with others also becomes distorted. Movement away from God’s desire for us and for the world is never an isolated, individual matter. There are always “voices” that tempt us, but they also never succeed without our own involvement. Furthermore, the consequences of our failure to live as God would have us live extend beyond our small circle. Inward movement away from God leads ultimately to a broken world for all of us. But in this hurting and hurtful situation, God offers us healing. Through grace, we may know the love that enables us to live in the way that God created us to live and thus experience health and wholeness.

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Endnotes

10. Wesley, “Gen. 3:1-5,” in *OT Notes*.
11. John Wesley, “2 Cor. 11:3,” in *NT Notes*.
13. Ibid., “Letter to Miss Ritchie (20 September 1776), in *Works* (Jackson), 13: 58, shows an example of how he employs Eve’s situation to illumine the situation of a woman in his time.
15. Pride is not the only positive inward sin that may follow from unbelief. See Diane Leclerc, *Singleness of Heart: Gender, Sin, and Holiness in Historical Perspective* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2001). Her study examines sin beyond the specific references to Eve that I have used. Leclerc uses the term *relational idolatry* as women’s particular problem in contrast to pride or self-will.
An Arrow to God": Wesleyan Atonement beyond Forgiveness

NAOMI ANNANDALE

Ian Bedloe, the main character in Anne Tyler’s novel *Saint Maybe*, is struck by a prayer at the funeral for his sister-in-law. His sister-in-law has died about six months after the death of her husband, leaving three young children. The minister prays, “We ask thee to console those left behind. . . . Let thy mercy pour like a healing balm upon their hearts.” Seventeen-year-old Ian, who believes that both deaths were suicides and were his fault, wonders whether the “healing balm” can soothe not just grief but also guilt, the wracking anguish of a horrible deed that cannot be undone.

One night he joins a gathering of strangers at a prayer meeting in a little storefront church called “The Church of the Second Chance” and asks for prayers for God to forgive him. Later, he shares the whole story with the pastor. He had suspected that his sister-in-law, Lucy, was cheating on his brother, Danny. He had blurted this out to Danny as Danny sat, intoxicated, in his car. He had heard the car backing up and gathering speed and hurtling at the stone wall at the end of the street. He had witnessed Lucy’s disintegration, the neglect of her three children, and her death, an empty bottle of sleeping pills beside her. Ian hoped for forgiveness. “Don’t you think I’m forgiven?” he asks. “Goodness, no,” Rev. Emmett says.

Rev. Emmett leads a church of “atonement and complete forgiveness,” in which one must make reparation for sins—even when what is broken cannot be put back together again, at least not in the way it was before. Ian finds hope there. In fact, he begins to find himself.

For John Wesley, the end and aim of life—salvation—are the “renewal of our fallen nature.” Eventually, Ian Bedloe understands this to be his aim in life, too. More than mere forgiveness, Ian eventually understands that God is calling him to reconciliation and oneness with God’s holy purposes in the world. For feminist and other theologians critical of disturbing messages in traditional Western atonement models, the recovery of the image of God in humankind—a constant theme in Wesley’s writing—offers a window of hope.
It is true that Wesleyan salvation is undeniably based in a juridical atonement in which Jesus is variously propitiation, supreme sacrifice, and payment in blood for the sins of humanity. But we should remember that Wesley had no systematic “doctrine” of the Atonement. As a practical theologian, he utilized a shifting set of images in an effort to convince a public yearning for salvation of God’s abundant grace. And his juridical atonement imagery stands in tension with his more therapeutic understandings of salvation and of humanity’s relationship with the divine.

Yet one wonders how Wesley would write about the Atonement today. Would the critiques of twentieth-century feminist and womanist theologians sensitize him to concerns about sacralizing abuse? Would the insights of liberation theology broaden his understanding of sin, so that systemic evil takes its place alongside individual guilt? Would biblical criticism give him a deeper appreciation for the lessons of Jesus’ life? Would the suffering endured by most of our world open his eyes to the possibility that Jesus may have suffered in solidarity with the millions who suffer for the sake of justice rather than as payment for an unpayable debt?

The Wesleyan tradition is grounded in a hopeful sense of the possibilities of God’s grace. And yet, as both a Wesleyan Christian and a twenty-first-century feminist committed to the freedom to live into the image of God that should belong to *all* people, I am convinced that we must enlarge the scope of our understanding of atonement. Atonement, in the most general sense, is about reconciliation. Is a violent sacrifice the most congruent way to draw together humanity and a God of love?

This essay seeks first to discern the contours and context of Wesley’s understanding of the Atonement. It addresses some of the major influences and points to the important and helpful tensions that arise when we try to “fit” Wesleyan atonement theology within the larger framework of Wesleyan anthropology and soteriology. Reviewing some of the feminist and liberationist critiques of a juridical understanding of the Atonement prompts questions about the general theme of Wesleyan atonement. Finally, I propose a number of images and image interpretations that remain in conversation with the *telos* of a Wesleyan understanding of salvation, even as they seek to be faithful to human experience. The article is framed by the story of Ian Bedloe, a reminder that what we seek in the heart of God is not just forgiveness but also redemption; not just pardon but also purpose for life; not just release but also reconnection with a God of powerful, empowering grace.
“Grace upon Grace”

Ian joins the Church of the Second Chance. He quits college to work as a carpenter and to help his aging parents care for three young children. The years run together—endless rounds of parent–teacher conferences, financial strains, and petty arguments, interspersed with moments of grace. Ian still wonders when he will be forgiven. How much is enough? How long must he struggle with these children who are not his? What he cannot see is that he is being redeemed all along, even as he waits for the assurance of forgiveness.

For Wesley, pardon is part of the larger process of salvation. We are most faithful to Wesley when we hold on to the bigger picture—the power of God’s grace to heal and renew and the potential of humanity to be renewed, to experience salvation. In addition, the tension between his Western, juridical atonement theology and his East-leaning anthropology and soteriology makes sense when we understand his own spiritual development. This section, therefore, addresses three issues: What were Wesley’s teachings on the Atonement? How do these fit with his anthropology and soteriology? And how does his theology reflect his development and his experience as a practical theologian?

Generally, Wesley had a forensic understanding of the meaning of Christ’s death. In forensic views, often described in “penalty-satisfaction” language, God’s mission is to sustain righteousness. But human sin violates the laws that can do so. Humanity cannot satisfy the penalties; and God, whose desire is to maintain divine righteousness, is hard pressed simply to forgive the sins. So God provides Christ to “pay” the penalty we cannot pay. By providing for the payment of the penalty, God maintains righteousness and expresses deep mercy. Thus, in sermons such as “Justification by Faith,” Wesley declares, “[L]aying upon him [Christ] the iniquities of us all, [God] hath redeemed me and all mankind; having thereby made a full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world.” God’s provision of Christ is a merciful gift that frees humanity from sin. How does it happen? Through faith, Wesley says, “not only a divine evidence or conviction that ‘God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself,’ but a sure trust and confidence that Christ died for my sins, that he loved me, and gave himself for me.” A personal conviction that sin has been pardoned through God’s provision of Jesus’ blood is the means to justification.
Why does God require a “payment” of some sort? Why separate God’s justice and God’s mercy? By simply abdicating “the law,” Wesley responds, God would negate its value for healthy human life. Thus, God’s provision of Jesus is an expression of mercy that holds on to justice at the same time.6

This points us in a helpful direction for understanding Wesley’s atonement theology. For Wesley, the Atonement was the source of free grace offered to the whole world for the purpose of redeeming the world. We must be freed from the guilt of sin in order to grow in love of God and neighbor. The ultimate goal of the “cosmic drama”—to reconcile all things to God—cannot be reached without humanity’s willing response to God’s offer of grace. As Theodore Runyon points out, there is an important difference between Wesley’s description of the Atonement and Anselm’s classic formula. Rather than a “private,” or two-way, transaction between God and Jesus, from which humanity can gain benefits, “Wesley turns the whole drama into a [trinitarian] event of communication in which humanity is the intended recipient of divine love.”7 The Spirit calls forth love and gratitude that have the power to redeem individuals and through them, the world. Faith is relational, and how we respond in that relationship matters.

For Wesley, our freedom to live as agents of redemption is empowered by God’s grace, which not only pardons us from sin but also frees us from its power over us. This takes place in the context of a hopeful anthropology and a broad soteriology. While Wesley placed strong emphasis on human sinfulness and its dire consequences, he put an equally strong emphasis on the abundance of God’s grace and its power to heal human nature. The effect of sin is powerful, extensive, and omnipresent; the root to restoration is through a converting faith in a God of grace; and God’s desire is for the healing and restoration of humanity’s corrupted nature.8

Wesleyan anthropology is greatly informed by Wesley’s appreciation for the teachings of the early church, which was a product of Eastern Christianity. A brief summary of Maddox’s useful delineation of some of the differences regarding sin and grace between East and West will be helpful.9 The Western traditions generally have assumed that humanity was created in a perfect state that was utterly corrupted in the Fall. The guilt of original sin now will be inherited by generations of humanity forever. We are bound by sin as well as bound to sin. Redemption is generally limited to pardon bought by the blood of Christ.

For Eastern Christianity, humanity was created innocent but not
complete. Life in communion with God is necessary for further human development, the aim of which is *theosis*, or deification—the reflecting of the image of God through the individual. The guilt of sin is not inherited, but results from imitating the sins of parents and others. Perhaps most significantly, the early Eastern church fathers asserted that while death and the disease of sin have so corrupted our nature that we cannot attain *theosis* on our own, people do retain some grace, and with it the responsibility of responding to God’s gracious offer of communion in Christ. The aim of salvation is not merely forgiveness of sin but also therapeutic restoration of the image of God in the individual and in the world.

Wesley blends East and West. He assumed the Western notion of a fall from perfect grace but also emphasized the East’s therapeutic concerns and the possibility of growth and development within the human spirit. What guided all of Wesley’s theology is what Maddox (with Eastern theologians) calls a “third state, the gracious and gradual restoration of humanity to God-likeness.” For Wesley, whether the first humans were created perfect or simply innocent and incomplete, creation is God’s gracious gift. Whether sin is inherited or imitated, it is obvious in human life. Thus, we are all in need of and able to accept God’s restoring grace, through which we receive not merely forgiveness of sins but also the healing and renewal of our nature, until “that mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus.”

How does this happen? Wesley probably would have nuanced the answer to that question differently over the course of his life. In early adulthood, he was drawn to the holy living movement, with its emphasis on intensive study of Scripture, personal moral discipline, and charity for the disadvantaged. His dogged pursuit of holy living, notwithstanding, Wesley did not feel loved or accepted by God. Meanwhile, his study of Luther and Calvin and his experience of the “heart religion” of the Moravian communities, with their emphasis on salvation by faith, led him in another direction as he sought God’s acceptance. Thus, it is not surprising that his first public sermon following the Aldersgate event, “Salvation by Faith,” emphasized the justification of sinners bought by Jesus’ death on the cross.

As justifying grace became more important to Wesley, it grew more prominent in his pastoral work and was reinforced by the enthusiastic response he received from people. Over time, he moderated this position fearing that those who saw justification by faith as the aim of the Christian life would see no need to grow toward the renewal of the image of God.
Thus, late in his life, Wesley placed greater emphasis on both God’s empowering and God’s pardoning grace. For example, in “The Lord Our Righteousness,” he worries about those who use Christ’s righteousness as a “cover” for their own unrighteousness; in “The Witness of Our Spirit” he reminds the early Methodists that the empowering grace of God follows pardoning grace, which allows us to move toward the renewal of self and the recovery of the divine image.

The mature Wesley, therefore, was emphatic in his understanding that pardon is merely a springboard for renewal, which is the true aim of the Christian faith. Both pardon and renewal happen through the abundant grace of God, which simply waits for our acceptance.

**Raising Questions**

After years of self-sacrifice marked by isolation from friends, lack of intimacy, and worry over his parents’ failing health and the well-being of his nephew and nieces, Ian wonders when he will have his life back. “This is your life,” says Rev. Emmett. “Lean into it. View your burden as a gift. It’s the theme that has been given you to work with. This is the only life you’ll have.”

It is an unsatisfactory answer, both for Ian and for those of us who critique traditional atonement models, especially for the way in which they tend to sacralize suffering. Does Rev. Emmett really mean to say that Ian should revel in his burden and view the pain of isolation and worry as a gift? We shall see. But it is clear that even a theology so self-consciously opposed to the immediate grace of forensic atonement can easily adopt questionable language and images.

Feminist theologians have raised significant questions about some of the messages offered in traditional models of the Atonement. They point out that what is meant to offer a life-giving promise of radical grace and love often sends dark messages that may perpetuate patriarchy and the victimization of the most vulnerable. Twenty-first-century Wesleyan Christians have inherited a tradition that views the redemption we receive in the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ as the necessary base for all further redemption. Therefore, we must not only hear these critiques but also ask how our own tradition might respond to them. Feminists and womanists, especially those sensitive to the liberation of the poor, have raised at least four major critiques of forensic models of the Atonement.

Forensic models define sin in ways that do not resonate with women's
experience or support those who seek to leave or overcome abusive situations or that are nearly blind to the reality of systemic evil. Traditionally, sin has been construed along the lines of willfulness, rebellion, or disobedience—qualities that are unlikely to reflect women’s experience in patriarchal cultures. In addition, popular piety has literalized the story of the Fall and placed most of the blame on women. Thus, the virtuous life, especially for women and others who are subject to domination, has been one of obedience, submission, selflessness, and sacrificial love. There are two obvious problems. First, the “virtues” taught in a patriarchal, Christian culture discourage women—even those in unhealthy, abusive situations—from seeking to take control of their own destiny. The understanding of sin has actually been a barrier to the wholeness of women and other out-of-power communities. Second, “Christianity has preached submission but practiced domination; socialized women and the poor to passivity while acting with ruthless aggression to maintain its power and control at any cost.”

Finally, by defining sin almost exclusively as individual willfulness or rebellion, the juridical atonement tradition has offered few resources for understanding the reality of evil systems that bind whole groups of people. Who has been “disobedient” in the case of industries that abuse and overuse workers? The factory owner? The managers? The government that offers incentives for the building of the factory? The people who buy its products? Where, in this definition of sin and redemption, can the worker who suffers unjustly, perhaps merely by an accident of birth, find herself or himself?

Forensic models elevate suffering in a way that is or can be dangerous for people who are victimized here and now. Jesus is celebrated because he endured pain and suffering and gave up his own life for the sake of others. Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn’s essay, “For God So Loved the World,” offers a helpful discussion of this theme. They point out that our world has become acculturated to abuse, especially physical and sexual abuse of women, and assert that Christianity has been a primary—often the primary—force in encouraging this acculturation. “The central image of Christ on the cross as the savior of the world communicates the message that suffering is redemptive. Any sense that we have a right to care for our own needs is in conflict with being a faithful follower of Jesus.” Coincidentally or not, they add, the submission and meekness that Christianity has idealized for women are also the qualities exemplified in the Christ who submits to his fate on the cross. The sacralization of suffering is often
supported by the promise of resurrection—the notion that no matter how miserable life is here and now, the victim’s role is to endure because in the end she will receive a heavenly reward. In addition, this idealization of victimhood has been used in particularly insidious ways to uphold dominance and power in colonial situations.  

Forensic models raise serious questions about the character of God. God is often portrayed as the Father who allowed—or, even more grim, sent—his Son to be tortured, humiliated, and executed. We inherit a picture of divine child abuse and a messiah who was born merely to die.

Such doctrines of salvation reflect and support images of benign paternalism, the neglect of children, or, at their worst, child abuse. . . . The goodness and power of the father and the unworthiness and powerlessness of his children make the father’s punishment just and the blame-the-children . . . theology has tended to protect the authority, omnipotence and omniscience of the father by justifying suffering as deserved or allowed.  

We are left to wonder about a God who requires the suffering of one for the redemption of many. Why would a loving God require a “price” in blood to forgive? Why can’t God redeem humanity without horrifying violence?  

Finally, forensic models can offer a dangerous route of escape from personal responsibility for participation in sin and evil. Wesley was aware of this danger, as we saw in his thoughts in “The Lord Our Righteousness.” In the forensic model, Jesus bears the burden of sins that are not his. So, if Jesus’ suffering and death save us from the consequences of our sins, why should we worry about how we live? This issue has troubling implications, not least of which is its resonance with the life experiences of women and people of color. Delores Williams has shown how the experience of social-role surrogacy—in which black women have been coerced into performing the tasks deemed unfitting for white people, especially white women—is reflective of the surrogacy role that Jesus performs in carrying our sins for us. Jesus becomes the ultimate scapegoat, saving humanity from responsible participation in God’s work of redemption and wholeness in the world.

The “burden” that Rev. Emmett had urged Ian to “lean into” was not the burden of childcare or of reparation for his sin or of loneliness and isolation. It was the burden of forgiveness—his call to forgive his brother.
and sister-in-law for whatever had happened so many years before. Ian was being forgiven all along. More importantly, he was being redeemed.

“An Arrow to God”

Initially, Ian was stunned by Rev. Emmett’s teachings on forgiveness. How could he possibly make reparation for the tragedy he had brought upon his family? “What if it’s something nothing can fix?” “Well, that’s where Jesus comes in, of course,” Rev. Emmett responds. “Jesus remembers how difficult life on earth can be. He helps with what you can’t undo. But only after you’ve tried to undo it.”

Not because we earn God’s acceptance, but because in the trying to undo, we become whole people working in concert with God’s desire for wholeness in our world.

Rev. Emmett offers an insight about the significance of the Incarnation: God expresses solidarity with humanity, our struggles and pains, our joys and moments of grace. Later insights have taught us that it is not just solidarity in suffering that matters—that can quickly become an end in itself—but solidarity in the struggle to end suffering. Or as Wesley would put it, solidarity in the struggle to renew our fallen nature and the fallenness of the world.

Throughout this essay, I have used the term atonement in its traditional meaning. Yet, as Maddox reminds us, atonement need not be “primarily forensic in nature, dealing with removal of guilt.” Really, atonement is simply anything that helps reconcile parties estranged from one another. And there are many ways of thinking about how God and humanity can be reconciled. United Methodists have inherited a practical theology driven not by a desire to formulate a logically perfect system but by a need to convince ordinary people of God’s extraordinary grace. As inheritors of this tradition in an increasingly diverse church that struggles to affirm a rich variety of life experiences and to be a life-sustaining force for the full personhood of all people, including women, I do not believe we need a new, one-size-fits-all theology of the Cross. Instead, we need to be open to a number of images and themes to express how humanity may live into the reconciled life. Then the aim of Wesley’s understanding of salvation—that we might live in God and God in us for the sake of the renewal of the world—may become a present and growing reality.

To that end, I offer the following image-themes that point to reconciliation and seek to be faithful to Wesley’s concerns and the questions raised by feminists and liberationists.
Incarnation. Jesus saves by virtue of his entire existence. One of the church’s earliest thoughts on the meaning of the Messiah was the notion that Jesus reclaimed human life by joining divinity and humanity, living through the effects of sin and into a life that reflected God’s image to the world, suffering the world’s punishment for his challenge, and overcoming agonizing defeat. Thus he recapitulates human life and conquers the evil and death that steal it. The image-theme of incarnation reminds us that this is not God’s son in the sense of a human child who models for us the redeemed life and for it is crucified. It is the Son, the meeting point of human and divine—an aspect of Godself who is willing to live humbly and to die in humiliation because such are the demands of his life of mission.

With the Son, we are accompanied in our own struggles to bring redemption to the intimate and the public places of our lives—to a shaky family of three motherless and fatherless children and, in the case of Ian Bedloe, to the hole in his own heart; to our neighborhoods and our workplaces and the yearning for purpose in our souls when we work to create and enhance communities of wholeness and justice for all people.

Cross. Any theology of reconciliation must attend to both the need for forgiveness for individual guilt and the reality of systemic evil. Every time I hear that Jesus died “for our sins,” I want to ask if it might not be that Jesus died “because of our sins”—because humanity has been a violent creation. I agree with Saiving, Soelle, and other feminists that on a personal level women have been much more likely to be violated than to be violators. Yet, both women and men participate in systemic injustice and even evil every time we buy without concern for the conditions under which products are made, when we eat without concern for the impact of the production of our food on God’s creation, etc. The Gospels give us a picture of Jesus challenging people with the reality of their inhumanity to one another and with God’s call for true repentance, which is the mending of one’s ways. And they/we crucified him. On the cross, Jesus carries and displays our sins, which are violence toward and abandonment of one another as holy creations of God. The Cross calls us to self-examination and to the struggle for justice and righteousness—the struggle in which we find God and God’s endless grace.

Christus Victor. The basic idea in this ancient interpretation of the Crucifixion and Resurrection is alluded to in incarnation: evil forces (or Satan) are at work in the world; Jesus’ work on earth was to oppose them; in the Crucifixion it may have looked as if evil/Satan has triumphed, but in the
Resurrection Christ emerges victorious over the forces of darkness and evil. God, in Christ, reigns. This theme certainly has a checkered history. Visiting Spain last spring with an interfaith group of Muslims, Christians, and Jews, I was especially attentive to the fact that many crucifix-laden cathedrals had been built to honor and celebrate the Christian “victory” in the expulsion of Jews and Muslims in the fifteenth century and the conquest of the “New World” (and, of course, its peoples). We cannot ignore the horror-laden side of this theology, which has an inherent tendency toward simplistic dualisms about good and evil.\(^{25}\) And yet, there is an inherent tension in this mythic tale that is instructive for life today and especially for a Wesleyan understanding of salvation. Sin, evil, and death persist in our world. In bringing this theology in touch with life experience, we can say that Christ reigns in this world today—with love and justice, understanding and reconciliation—only as we participate in his work. It is as Christ is resurrected in our lives that the image of God is renewed in us and shines forth through us into the world and that we actually feel and experience God’s grace.

**Resurrected Community.** Neither sacrifice nor suffering is a good in itself. Women, the poor, and the oppressed have borne more than their fair share of abusive teachings about the value of redemptive suffering. And yet, at times, the struggle for well-being and the building of healthy communities that link persons as they provide them with purpose and meaning for life demand sacrifice. This is merely evidence that God calls us to live beyond ourselves, even as God also insists that we honor the image that is inside each of us. The Resurrection is made real to us as hope and new life arise from relationships, families, and communities.

When Ian Bedloe’s nieces and nephew discuss who would fit into the family shelter in case of a nuclear war, Ian is deemed essential. “He holds us all together,” the older girl says. Later, he begins to understand that God’s forgiveness has been coming all along—that is the part he doesn’t really have to worry about. The hard part is his own transformation, his forgiveness of those who left him in this position, and his sorting out of the meaning of this one life he has to live. He senses himself in defining motion, like an arrow—not an arrow sent by God (at least, that is not the point), but an arrow going to God with every step he takes. “[A]nd if it took every bit of this only life he had, he believed he would get there in the end.”\(^{26}\)
Transformed by God-with-Us

Over the years, Ian had come to think of Jesus very personally. And it is through that shared experience of struggle and love, the beauty of grace, and the participation in God’s continuing work in the world that Ian’s life is renewed and that, eventually, he even becomes aware of its renewal.

A juridical atonement alone offers no window for a relationship of solidarity with God-in-Christ. There is merely a giver and a receiver and little need for the receiver to work cooperatively with divine purposes. Wesley’s emphasis on renewal seeks to remedy the shortcomings of overemphasis on pardon and justification as ends in themselves. Yet his insistence that acceptance of juridical pardon was the necessary springboard to all future renewal is almost incongruous with his grace-filled anthropology and soteriology. As Kathryn Tanner points out, Jesus saves us not by paying some unpayable debt but by lifting us out of a debt economy. We can count on God’s forgiveness; but it is not the whole point. The point is that as God’s image comes alive in each of us, we become not God but fully human. Forgiveness is ever present because grace is ever present. We know grace—we experience its power and feel ourselves renewed and growing into God’s life-giving purposes—as we turn to the Incarnate One, make the struggle of the Cross a reality in all of life, participate in the victory of love over hate, and make room for Jesus to be resurrected in us so that the Incarnation is a present reality, day by day.

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Endnotes

4. Ibid., 101-02.
6. See Maddox, Responsible Grace, 105, and the original sources cited there.
7. See Theodore Runyon, The New Creation: John Wesley’s Theology Today
8. See ibid., 20-21; see also Wesley, Sermon 44, “Original Sin,” III.5, in *Sermons*.
10. See “Original Sin,” in *Sermons*, 334.
23. Ibid.
25. See Ray, “Mending and Discarding” and “Undermining Evil,” in *Deceiving the Devil*, to address advantages and disadvantages of this approach from a feminist perspective attuned to liberation of the poor and suffering.
Sanctified Feminism

Susie C. Stanley

The terms sanctification and feminism often evoke negative connotations. Stereotyping and generalizations cloud true understanding of their meaning and create misperceptions. While some shun one or both designations, I am an apologist for both.

Harold Raser applied the term sanctified feminist to Phoebe Palmer (1807–1874), the mother of the Wesleyan/Holiness Movement in the United States. Palmer’s interpretation of John Wesley’s understanding of sanctification became the standard for many Methodists, including those who ultimately left Methodism to form churches that now comprise the Wesleyan/Holiness Movement. Since the term feminism was not coined until the early twentieth century, it is impossible to determine if Palmer herself would have embraced it. Raser employs “sanctified” as an adjective to limit the extent of Palmer’s feminism, which he applies primarily to the area of evangelism. However, he acknowledges that her ideas had “revolutionary possibilities and did in fact contribute to an expanded role for women.” In this essay, I pursue the “revolutionary possibilities” of Palmer’s incipient feminism and adopt the phrase sanctified feminism to suggest the close relationship between sanctification and feminism. Historically, sanctification provided the basis for a Christian anthropology that affirms the equality of women and men in all areas of life. It offers a “usable past” for contemporary Christian feminists, who likewise advocate equality.

Embracing Feminism and Sanctification

Feminism simply means the political, economic, social, and religious equality of the sexes. A student recently questioned this definition, so I encouraged him to check out a dictionary. To his chagrin, he discovered that I had quoted my definition directly from Webster’s. The student was surprised to learn that his prior understanding of feminism was influenced entirely by the negative stereotypes he had associated with the term. There are actually many types of feminists just as there are many categories of Republicans or Democrats. We do not define a political party by one individual or subgroup...
within the party. The same is true of feminism. “Biblical feminism” most accurately reflects my conception of feminism. I define myself as a biblical feminist because I believe there is warrant in the Scriptures for the conviction that women and men have equal worth and value and should work together in partnership in all areas of life. I have attempted by my own life and ministry to challenge the stereotypes clouding feminism’s true meaning. For instance, it is hard to classify someone who has been happily married for thirty-two years as a “man hater”!

People also at times associate sanctification with negative connotations. Sanctification is a doctrine best described by one word: love. Sanctification results in holiness—a process of maturation by which Christians grow to be more like Christ as their love for God and neighbor increases. I am well aware of the fanatical expressions of the doctrine and the debates surrounding the meaning of holiness, but I choose to focus on the positive aspects of holiness and its potential for promoting Christian growth.

Experience is a crucial component of both holiness doctrine and feminism. To share one’s experience in a Christian context is “testimony,” while to share it in a feminist context is “consciousness raising.” The following summarizes my journey toward embracing both holiness and feminism, drawing on my experience as a means of understanding both.

My parents initiated my journey toward holiness by taking me to the Church of God (Anderson, IN) when I was two weeks old. I became a Christian at age six. There, I found opportunities for leadership and self-expression within a supportive atmosphere. I played the piano and sang in the choir and in smaller groups. The music minister taught me how to lead singing. I preached on Youth Sunday. Since my church had affirmed the calling of women to the pulpit ministry from the beginning, I had always believed in equality and benefited from its practice in the church. I do not remember hearing sermons admonishing me as a woman to be “submissive.” Although I encountered the concept of male-only leadership in Youth for Christ in high school, I did not hear the word headship until I was an adult. My extensive involvement in Youth for Christ introduced me to the world of evangelicalism, which differed drastically from my holiness upbringing. I experienced sanctification as a teenager at a Church of God state youth rally. I understood holiness as a commitment to be more like Christ with the help of the Holy Spirit. Somehow, I bypassed a personal rebellion against Christianity as an adolescent, despite the fact that my
teenage years occurred during the “turbulent” 1960s.

My feminist vision of liberation and equal rights grew out of my religious heritage and understanding of Scripture. (A student recently asked if I was a card-carrying feminist. Later, I wished that I had responded that I’m a Bible-carrying feminist.) Initially, I did not embrace the term feminism. Looking through some old notes from the early 1970s reminds me of my original aversion to the term and helps me understand those who still find the word feminist problematic. Like others, I had been influenced by the media’s perception of feminism rather than by its actual meaning. My journey to feminism was primarily rational, not experiential. I did not face a personal experience that opened my eyes to the reality of sexism.

In the 1970s, some feminists, and some Christians, were declaring feminism and Christianity incompatible. I first encountered this view by reading Mary Daly’s Beyond God the Father. I agreed with many of her arguments about the reality of sexism in the church, but I was unwilling to heed her drastic advice for feminists to leave Christianity and the church. Instead, I read the Bible from cover to cover to see if Christianity was as hopelessly opposed to feminism as Daly argued. I ended up agreeing with the suffragist Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who claimed, “The Gospel rightly understood pointed to a oneness of equality.” I listed all the texts in the Gospels where Jesus talked with women or used parables that related to their everyday activities. The first expression of what became my professional calling was to give Bible studies on Jesus and women. In 1975, following a long process of reading and reflection, I claimed the feminist label. As I did so, I realized that my church had planted the seeds of feminism in me as a young child.

I began reading about Christians and activism in the nineteenth century, searching for a usable past among the writings of suffragists and others working for justice. I discovered a strong heritage of Christians who connected faith and feminism. It wasn’t until seminary that I discovered that many of these activists included Wesleyan/Holiness adherents.

I had experienced a call to ministry in 1975, during the same weekend I embraced the feminist label. The ordination process began in 1980, while attending seminary at Iliff School of Theology. After my initial interview, the Credentials Committee (the equivalent of the United Methodist board of ordained ministry) told me I would be licensed at the next ministers’ meeting. Six months later, my name was missing from the licensing list distributed at the ministers’ meeting. The committee ultimately returned
my name to the list, but the experience was painful and disillusioning. The
sticking point was not so much that I was a woman but that I described
myself as a feminist. It took some time for the members of the Credentials
Committee to comprehend my understanding of biblical feminism. It was
an educational process for the committee, ultimately resulting in a public
apology by the committee chair at my ordination service.

My experience as a ministerial intern served as a confirmation of the
connection between biblical feminism and holiness. Half of my responsibil-
ities were in the church, leading Bible studies, performing baptisms,
preaching, etc. The other half involved working for passage of the Equal
Rights Amendment (ERA), which would have eliminated constitutional
laws that favored males over females. Members of the congregation
affirmed this schedule. (I realize that this is not a universal experience for
all Wesleyan/Holiness churches, but it also is not unique.) One Sunday, the
pastor outlined his own journey toward support of the ERA by comparing
how his son and daughter had been treated differently in business transac-
tions because of their sex. He denounced the sin of sexism from the pulpit.

My ordination service also illustrated the intersection of feminism and
holiness. A friend sang “Sister,” by feminist songwriter and performer
Chris Williamson. The congregation sang several of my favorite heritage
hymns. Attendees included people from various denominations and orga-
nizations, including the president of the Denver National Organization for
Women and the state coordinator of the ERA campaign in Colorado.
Patricia Schroeder, at that time a Colorado congressperson, and my pastor
shared the speaking responsibilities.

The connections between feminism and holiness have been the focus
of much of my scholarship over the years and have formed the basis of my
activism. My personal vision of liberation grew out of my religious heritage.
One of the first displays I created for an international women’s day celebra-
tion incorporated John 8:32, “[Y]ou will know the truth, and the truth will
make you free.”

Someone once asked my dad how his daughter could possibly be a
feminist. He replied, “Susie’s always been a feminist.” Even prior to the
second wave of feminism, my dad recognized a conviction nurtured by my
church that affirmed equality. I had always been a feminist; it just took me
until 1975 to recognize and claim the label for myself.

Others also have made the connection between holiness and the quest
for women’s equality. Nancy Hardesty, Lucille Sider Dayton, and Donald Dayton suggest six characteristics that contribute to the Holiness Movement’s affinity with feminism. Several explicitly connect the doctrine of sanctification, or holiness, with feminism: “The emphasis on perfection and holiness is always an implicit critique of the status quo and is thus intrinsically reformist, even revolutionary.”4 In her recent dissertation, Mary Ann Hawkins has joined others who stress the positive correlation between holiness and the support of women clergy.5

Historically, Wesleyan/Holiness women preachers have acknowledged the relationship between holiness and equality in the pulpit. In Holy Boldness: Women Preachers’ Autobiographies and the Sanctified Self, I examine the narratives of thirty-four of these women.6 While they did not write theological books, their autobiographies describe how their understanding and experience of holiness offer a usable past for appropriating the doctrine today as men and women continue the quest for equality in all areas of life. Randy Maddox claims it is “easier for a Wesleyan to dialogue with or appropriate the feminist perspective than for those of other traditions.” He observes, “The Wesleyan tradition shares a distinctively kindred theological spirit with contemporary Christian feminism. . . . I would contend that the two movements are attuned in their more fundamental connections.”7 Holiness is a primary basis for this compatibility. In what follows, I briefly outline these women preachers’ description of holiness and its impact on their lives as they faced both sexism and racism.

Holiness and Feminism

For these women, sanctification required two steps: consecration and faith. Consecration meant putting God first in one’s life, even before one’s family. Women sometimes found this difficult but understood it as a necessary step toward achieving holiness. The second step toward holiness was faith. God could not perform the work of sanctification until the seeker met these two conditions. The result of sanctification was holiness, or “God in you,” as Amanda Smith put it.8 The sanctified individual was transformed, as evidenced by language such as the “old man” being crucified and replaced by the “new man.” Old man and new man were generic terms defining the self before and after sanctification. Rather than eliminating self, however, sanctification resulted in a “new creation.” Following Phoebe Palmer’s theology, holiness adherents believed that sanctification placed a
Christian at the beginning of the “highway” of holiness, understanding holiness as a process of maturity characterized by love.

Sanctified women rejected the inferior status society sought to impose upon them and, instead, affirmed their position as equals with men based on texts such as Gen. 1:27-28. A creation-centered focus emphasizes the potential of humans rather than their perversity. Sanctification provides the theological foundation for women’s transformation from a lack of self-esteem to a sense of their full humanity. Holiness theology assumes that people can change. Its positive anthropology stresses what the sanctified person can become rather than what the sinful person has been. The accent falls on how humans mature through the work of the Holy Spirit.

**Pentecostal Power**
The new creation exhibited another consequence of sanctification—the power of the Holy Spirit. Holiness believers maintained that the Holy Spirit’s purifying and empowering ministry makes the renewal of persons possible in the here-and-now rather than waiting for a future age. (In their view, the “end times,” or eschatology, had already been inaugurated by Jesus’ life and resurrection.) Phoebe Palmer equated holiness and power, while her sister, Sarah Lankford, advised a correspondent, “Get the blessing of holiness, and it will be a gift of power.” Women sometimes referred to this power as “holy boldness” that often transformed a timid personality into a fiery minister, unafraid of any opposition. Holy boldness enabled women to overcome a “man-fearing” spirit—a formidable barrier to ministry prior to their experience of holiness. Sanctified women were no longer inhibited by shyness and timidity or plagued by self-doubt or fear. The power of the Holy Spirit had helped them conquer their fears. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, women effectively challenged sexism in their ministries. Quoting Acts 5:29, sanctified women pledged their allegiance to God rather than to “man” and asserted their autonomy against those who employed a polemic based on the stereotypical argument that woman’s place was in the home. Such attempts to limit women’s ministries proved to be fruitless. Armed with biblical support and the authority of the Holy Spirit, women exhibited holy boldness by preaching to sometimes hostile crowds, both in churches and in dangerous prison yards. Sanctification transformed women. They committed themselves to God through consecration and faith. In return, God empowered them to act in ways they had never imagined.
Fear did not always arise from sexism alone. Sanctification released African-American evangelist Amanda Smith from her fear of white people. Galatians 3:28 (“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”) became clear to her on the morning of her sanctification. Her new understanding of this verse enabled her to break down the racial barriers and eliminated her fear of speaking to whites.\(^\text{11}\)

Race inhibited the development of a positive self-esteem among African-American women. They found their full humanity threatened on two counts: (1) they were women; (2) they were black. Sanctification enabled women to challenge and overcome attacks on their full humanity that were based on sexist assumptions. It also strengthened their resistance to racist presuppositions. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, African-American women challenged sexism and racism, both of which could have inhibited their ministries. African-American women faced practical problems as well, even while traveling to preaching engagements. Racist practices often prevented them from traveling freely on canal boats or stagecoaches.\(^\text{12}\)

The scriptural foundation for the intimate connection of holiness and power reflected the emphasis on the experience at Pentecost recorded in Acts 1–2. As recorded in Luke 24:49, Jesus promised his disciples that they would receive the promise of the Father, which Luke identified as power. The promise was fulfilled at Pentecost, when both women and men received the power of the Holy Spirit. Palmer described the experience of holiness in Pentecostal terms. Borrowing from both Luke 24:49 and Acts 1:14, she titled her book advocating women preachers *Promise of the Father*.

**Egalitarian Primitivism**

Primitivists seek to follow the example of Christians in the New Testament church. They claim the Holy Spirit is active in the present just as it was then. Linking sanctification with the baptism of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost demonstrates a primitivist mindset. For them, the Pentecost experience in the early church clearly showed women’s involvement in ministry and served as the precedent for women’s involvement in the church. The “promise of the Father” was not restricted to the early church but is still available to all Christians through the experience of the Holy Spirit. The reliance on the experience of Pentecost as the model for the theology of sanctification provides a key illustration of primitivism. I have coined the term *egalitarian*
primitivism to emphasize the understanding that the early church believed that men and women equally could be gifted and empowered by the Holy Spirit for public ministry. As holiness leaders often pointed out, the Holy Spirit is no respecter of persons, designating some gifts for women and others for men. B. T. Roberts indicated the Holy Spirit’s inclusiveness at Pentecost, as did Luther Lee: “Thus did the Holy Ghost, in his first descent, crown females as well as males, with tongues of fire, to speak the wonderful works of God.”

There are not two lists of spiritual gifts in the Bible, one for each sex. Pentecost illustrates egalitarian primitivism when the Holy Spirit fell on both women and men in the upper room.

Nineteenth-century Holiness writers traced the primitivism of the early church to the example of Jesus. Fannie McDowell Hunter contended: “In all that we have ever read against woman’s right to preach the Gospel, we have never read a single quotation from the words of Jesus against this right. This is significant.” Hers is just one of many statements included in holiness apologies for women preachers that illustrate the claim that Jesus was the “great emancipator of the female sex.” Holiness adherents highlighted Jesus’ experience with women to demonstrate his commitment to equality. Examples included the Samaritan woman, Mary and Martha, and Mary Magdalene, whom Jesus, according to Mark and John, chose as the first preacher of the Resurrection. Present-day biblical feminists believe that Jesus’ treatment of women can serve as a model for Christian relationships today.

Along with the experience of Pentecost and the example of Jesus, holiness authors examined ministry in the early church. After listing several women in the New Testament who preached, Luther Lee contended: “All antiquity agrees that there were female officers and teachers in the Primitive Church.” B. T. Roberts added that in the New Testament church women and men “took a part in governing the Apostolic church,” filling offices from apostle to pastor. His book Ordaining Women supported his contention. He and other apologists for the equality of women in ministry looked beyond Pentecost for examples of women active in ministry in the early church. For example, Philip’s four daughters prophesied. In Romans 16, Paul lists several women as among his co-laborers: he commends Phoebe (vv. 1-2), a deacon in the early church; he mentions the clergy couple, Prisca and Aquila, who risked their lives for him (v. 3); and he includes the apostle Junia (v. 7). Less is known about the other women on the list, but Paul does praise Mary, Tryphena, and Tryphosa for their hard work. Elsewhere, female co-laborers
include Eudia and Syntyche, who ministered at Philippi (Phil. 4:2). By referencing these biblical women in their writings, holiness apologists for women preachers exhibited egalitarian primitivism. They advocated the restoration of women to the prominent place they filled in the life of the early church. Biblical feminists today use the same biblical examples to promote equality and emphasize the liberating core of Christianity.

**Ethics and Activism**

Over the years, holiness has become a complicated doctrine. I was reminded of this recently when I taught a course on Wesleyan/Holiness theology to undergraduates. In an attempt to help students stay focused on the important aspects of the doctrine, I started the semester with an emphasis on love. We spent the first class session reading verses about love, eating candies shaped like hearts, and listening to music conveying the primacy of love, such as the Beatles’ “All You Need Is Love.” I asked each student to write the word **love** on the board to help them see that holiness can be defined by one word. When students became perplexed by John Wesley’s explanation of holiness in *Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, we sang Charles Wesley’s “Love Divine, All Love’s Excelling” to remind us that love is the key to holiness. Listening to “The Power of Love,” sung by Huey Lewis and the News, gave me the opportunity to stress the relationship between holiness and power and the nature of holiness as love.

John Wesley stressed love for God and neighbor. Ethics is a direct outgrowth of Wesley’s emphasis on love. As we become more like Christ, our love for God grows, and our love for neighbor should grow proportionately.

It has been said that holiness stresses ethics over doctrine. Addie Wyatt, a prominent Church of God pastor, has claimed, “Our religion is a way of life.” I agree and have sought to model my own ministry after her example. How we behave indicates the level of our growth and maturity as Christians committed to loving God and neighbor. John Wesley articulated an ethic of empowerment, which ethicist Leon Hynson describes as “a social ethic conceived largely in pneumatological terms.” The Holy Spirit empowers Christians to demonstrate God’s love in society. Hynson explains, “In this empowerment we may see believers undergirded to carry out the world-transforming mandate that has been given to the Christian church. ‘You are the salt of the earth,’ Jesus said. ‘You are the light of the world.’ (Matt. 5:13-14).” Wesley’s “doctrine of love is at the heart of his life-
long effort to reform the nation and the church.” In 1893, Jennie Fowler Willing elaborated on the consequences of love and holiness power, “The ‘enduement of power’ is the Holy Spirit filling the soul with His own love, and giving zeal, skill, success. This love fills with the divine ‘go.’”

Empowered by the Holy Spirit, holiness adherents have addressed societal issues and worked to alleviate social injustice. Phoebe Palmer insisted that sanctification insured usefulness. In 1840, Wesleyans in New York joined others in forming a political party to end slavery. Jennie Fowler Willing and Hannah Whitall Smith were suffragists. C. E. Brown, an early twentieth-century holiness leader, wrote that in Gal. 3:28 Paul “cancelled prejudice and privilege for all time.” I once saw this verse printed on a card that had the text of the Equal Rights Amendment on the reverse side. Someone else had made the connection between the Bible and feminism!

Addie Wyatt has devoted her life to addressing injustice as manifested in classism, racism, and sexism. She is motivated by the conviction that God wants Christians to make a difference in this world. Wyatt provides a contemporary model of a holiness believer who has worked for justice as an expression of her holiness theology. In my application essay for a Ph.D. program in 1982 I wrote that, as an activist, I hoped my studies would be relevant beyond the academic setting. The program offered me the opportunity to explore a “usable past.” I have appropriated this past in my ministry since 1974 to serve as a foundation for my activism, which continues to address the need for equality in all areas of life. Like others, I see an explicit connection between the theology of holiness and activism.

**Holiness for the Twenty-first Century**

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza contends that the writing of feminist history is activism and hope. My writing on holiness themes and women expresses my activism in the area of equality for women and men. Sometimes my hope wavers but is renewed as others address the importance of holiness. Bryan Stone offers one example when he writes, “I believe that the twenty-first century will witness a new holiness movement.” He argues for the rediscovery of the doctrine in The United Methodist Church and outlines its potential for determining how we should live as Christians. Stone too recognizes the importance of Pentecost as a theological basis for equality between the sexes when he notes that the “lines of gender were crossed” there. Likewise, he credits the Holy Spirit for breaking down all barriers
between people writing, “Indeed, whenever the Holy Spirit shows up in the
book of Acts, social categories are being obliterated as new communities of
faith are being formed from across ethnic, cultural, and gender lines.”

Early on, the Wesleyan/Holiness Movement implemented the radical
implications of the doctrine of holiness by affirming women preachers and
ordaining them. While not always achieving the goal of egalitarian primitivism, it modeled inclusiveness and mutuality by recognizing the call and
supporting the ministries of thousands of women.

Schüssler Fiorenza’s claim that historical forgetfulness can be dangerous has proven true for women pastors in the Holiness Movement. While no
direct correlation has been documented, it is clear that as holiness churches
have accommodated to Protestant evangelicalism and neglected the doctrine
of holiness over the past several decades, the number of women clergy has
dramatically declined. The radical and revolutionary potential of holiness has
diminished. Some holiness denominations report that only 1 to 3 percent of
their parish clergy are women. (While The United Methodist Church has
placed women in all areas of church leadership since granting women full
ordination in 1956, this percentage is comparable to the number of women
serving larger United Methodist churches as senior pastors.)

A recent encounter demonstrates the consequences of historical
forgetfulness. A Wesleyan/Holiness church was scheduled to ordain a
young woman in June 2000. A week before the service, the Southern
Baptist Convention declared its opposition to women clergy. A man who
had been supportive of this woman’s ministry in his church frantically
emailed her, wondering if this meant her ordination would be cancelled.
Obviously, he was unaware of the theological differences between his
Wesleyan/Holiness denomination and the Southern Baptists and assumed
that the latter’s statement would end his church’s practice of ordaining
women. As the role of women in ministry continues to be debated, the
holiness message of inclusiveness and mutuality is desperately needed.

While the doctrine of sanctification can be utilized to work for equity
in Wesleyan churches, it can also benefit other feminist theologians who
are exploring holy living and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit in a
Christian context. Many Christian feminists, as well as many Wesleyans, are
unaware of the implications of holiness doctrine as a model for mutuality.
The usable past furnished by holiness doctrine and practice offers a
theology that parallels the goals of feminism.
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Endnotes

House, 1891), 88; and Luther Lee, *Five Sermons and a Tract*, ed. by Donald W. Dayton (Chicago: Holrad House, 1975, 86.) Roberts founded the Free Methodist Church, while Lee was an early leader in the Wesleyan Methodist Connection.


18. Addie Wyatt, “Religion and the Feminist Movement.” Conference sponsored by Harvard Divinity School, 1-3 November 2002. The Rev. Dr. Wyatt was one of twenty-five women invited to share about the intersection of feminism and religion in their lives. Wyatt represented a holiness perspective.


Commissioning the People of God: Called to Be a Community in Mission

MARY ELIZABETH MOORE

The United Methodist Church, as many other Christian communions, perennially is embroiled in questions regarding the mission of the church, simultaneous with discussions of who can be ordained and what ordination and ministry mean. At the same time, people in pan-Methodist traditions are asking what it means to be Wesleyan in 2003. The interplay of these questions is often not considered; yet, a significant opportunity for such discussion emerged in the 1996 United Methodist decision to commission people toward deacon or elder as the probationary step toward ordination. The church needs now to dive deeply into that opportunity, especially taking into account traditions of women. Commissioning has promise to enrich the church’s sense of common mission and to deepen the meaning of probationary membership, a time of being sent out together in mission. In this essay, I probe the theological frontiers of commissioning, asking questions with a woman’s eye. Where? Why? Whom? Is it I? If so, how and when?

Where Do We Begin? What Is at Stake?

The greatest irony in the current United Methodist debates on the meaning and purpose of commissioning, especially that of people moving toward elder and deacon, is that the concept of commissioning is far larger than the debate. It promises to shed light on the entire ministry of the church—the ministry of all God’s people, who are called to be a community in mission. In what follows, I wrestle in depth with the meaning and challenges of commissioning, especially to uncover riches that inform the mission of the church and the mission of the ordained. Key to this effort is to deepen and radicalize the reflections by bringing feminist criticism and women’s experience to bear on the traditions and on the reshaping of those traditions.

To explore the meaning of commissioning more deeply, I draw upon diverse sources. Biblical and ecumenical traditions reveal the roots and richness of commissioning; early Methodist women preachers reveal the costs
of commissioning; and current United Methodist practices reveal the richness of commissioning for contemporary church life.

**Why? God Is a Sending God!**

The word *commissioning* is not common in the Bible, but the *practice* of commissioning permeates Scripture. Further, the word *commit* does have abundant usage in the Bible, referring primarily to the human will, which can be directed negatively or positively. Here we briefly consider biblical texts from Matthew and John. Each text involves God’s asking total commitment of the people and God’s commissioning the people to active engagement with the messy world.

Consider the parables, morality tales, and instructions that Matthew shares from Jesus’ last days. Jesus warns the disciples and crowds to be watchful (24:36-44), faithful (24:45-51), prepared (25:1-13), stewards (25:14-30), and self-giving (25:31-46). After the Resurrection, Matthew tells of Jesus’ instructing the disciples to go and make disciples, to baptize and teach people what Jesus has taught them, and to trust Jesus to be with them “to the end of the age” (28:16-20). In these various instructions, Jesus commissions his followers to attitudes and practices that will be important after he is gone.

In John, Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene after the Resurrection, calling her by name and asking her to go tell his brothers that he will ascend to his Father (20:11-18). Soon after, Jesus appears to the disciples, saying, “Peace be with you,” and “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (20:21). Then, breathing the power of the Holy Spirit on them, he tells them that they have power to forgive sins. In these texts, commissioning is radical—given first to a woman (who is not even recognized by the Christian church as a disciple) and inviting the disciples to receive the power of God’s Spirit and to forgive sins. In one instance, Jesus prepares breakfast for the disciples and then addresses Peter three times, “Feed my lambs . . . tend my sheep . . . feed my sheep” (21:15-17). In these texts, Jesus charges his friends with powerful ministries of forgiving sins and feeding the hungry.

**Whom? God Calls the Church and Its Leaders**

These biblical themes are carried throughout the history of the church, and others are added, particularly in relation to ministries of laity and clergy. As the Christian church became more institutionalized, offices of ministry became more sharply delineated. Starting in the fourth century, this move-
ment took place against the background of the Roman Empire, which intensified the hierarchy of political, social, and religious structures in the Greco-Roman world. The result is a hierarchy-leaning heritage in Christianity; this is one reason why a feminist critique is so important regarding ministry. The early church patterned itself after the larger sociopolitical structures and was simultaneously entwined in those structures, yielding what Elisabeth Schüessler-Fiorenza calls a kyriarchy. Relationships between clerical offices and laity were shaped within these kyriarchal social patterns, and the patterns are relevant to commissioning. They are also critical in a feminist analysis, which points to “the radical democratic horizon of the ekklesia of wo/men.” One particularly crucial issue is the relationship between the priesthood of all believers and the ministry of clergy.

For John Wesley, God calls both the church and its leaders. Although he did not often use the word commissioning, Wesley’s practice was to call and commission lay preachers and class leaders, and to support the ongoing ministry of deacons, elders, and superintendents. Wesley commonly spoke of minister rather than priest or elder, indicating a strong sense of shared ministry. James White notes that only in the eucharistic liturgy and a few points in the ordinal did Wesley specify elders; thus, the Sunday Service marked “significant shifts away from signs of priestly power.” Wesley did see ordained roles as distinct but defined them in relation to the ministry of the Body. His own understanding of the church was that of “a congregation or body of people united together in the service of God.” The ministry of all Christians was thus central to the words and practices of the early Wesleyan movement.

Commissioning was not a practice in the ordination process of the early Wesleyan movement. At the same time, the early Methodist service for ordaining deacons carried some of Matthew’s commissioning language: “Let your loins be girded about, and your lights burning, and ye yourselves like unto men that wait for their Lord, when he will return from the wedding, that when he cometh and knocketh, they may open unto him immediately.” This is not to say that the order of deacon and the practice of commissioning are identical in Wesleyan tradition; yet there are commissioning dimensions within the early Wesleyan services of ordaining deacons.

The history of the church evidences clearly that God calls the whole church and its leaders. More specifically, the priesthood of all believers, established by God through baptism, is made visible and whole by the ministry
of the ordained. In all its forms, commissioning is God’s act of calling people into service and sending them out together to be the body of Christ in the world, giving themselves to God’s work with words and deeds as each is uniquely called and all are called together. For laity, commissioning is the act of being sent into service with one another in a world of crying need. For people moving toward ordination, commissioning is the act of being sent to serve together with other commissioned ministers—exploring frontiers of ministry, engaging in spiritual preparation for ordination, and giving leadership with and to the ministering community. Only if we understand the power of commissioning for both laity and clergy can we grasp the communal nature of all ministry and the distinctive ministry of unity to which the ordained are called. A ministry of unity is not above, but within and with and to, the people of God. It exists for the sake of God’s larger purposes and for the magnification and intensification of the whole community’s ministry in the world.

Is It I, Lord? God Sends People Whom Others Reject

Who is commissioned? This question often evokes controversy because the human community of the church cannot always discern those whom God has called. Certainly, the church’s discernment process is critical in matters of commissioning missionaries and deaconesses and in ordaining deacons and elders. At the same time, the church is capable of ignoring God’s commissions—a danger that is particularly strong when the church practices the systematic exclusion of a whole class of people, as women and African Americans were excluded in earlier decades of American Methodism and homosexual people are excluded today. Another reason that commissioning is controversial is that, although it clearly refers to God’s calling and sending, it does not create a sharp divide between clergy and laity. As we will see below, commissioning is a practice that can take many forms, but it always points back to the sending God and the work of ministry to which all people—individually and collectively, lay and ordained—are called. Commissioning is finally an act of God, and God selects curious assortments of people to send out for God’s work.

A study of women’s ministries can illumine many forms of commissioning. Consider women preachers of the early Methodist movement in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Britain. John Wesley encouraged these women to preach and saw their ministries as central to the revival. The same women were later restricted in their preaching (1803 Conference in
Manchester), with objections and limitations mounting in later years (1832). Though restrictions escalated, the ministries of women continued, both in Britain and elsewhere. Consider the deaconess movement of nineteenth-century American Methodism or the Wesleyan/Holiness women of the same century. The institutional church often squeezed these women, as it had pressured earlier women preachers; yet they were determined to follow their vocations. In this essay, we focus particularly on the women’s sense of call (or commission) and their determination to follow their calls through thick obstacles and thin encouragement. We focus on two early Methodist women preachers who exemplify the larger movement.

Dorothy Ripley (1769–1831), daughter of a Methodist local preacher, was in her late twenties when, upon entering her room to worship God, “the power of God struck me to the earth where I lay as covered with his glorious majesty beholding as through his Spirit the riches of his kingdom.” In this experience of several hours, she experienced assurance and more: “In this situation the Lord commanded me to ‘go ten thousand miles.’” Ripley interpreted her vision as God’s call to minister to Africa’s children, who were oppressed by American planters. Later she said, “Ah! the solitary path that I took! Who but a God of everlasting strength could have brought me safe through?”

Ripley responded by traveling to the United States, where she addressed James Madison, General Dearborn, and President Thomas Jefferson. She asked the President how many slaves he held, to which he responded that he had earlier had three hundred, but now had fewer. She told him that her nature “was shocked to hear of the souls and bodies of men being exposed to sale like the brute creation” and she “implored his pity and commiseration.” They parted in peace, but Ripley continued her mission for many years, proclaiming the need to eliminate slavery and ministering with African Americans. In time, Ripley was enjoined to preach, which she did thereafter; and she was invited to speak against slavery to the United States Congress. Her ministry also expanded to include prison reform and advocacy for Native Americans.

One is grasped by the drama of Dorothy Ripley’s call, which played a large part in empowering her to face her solitary path. Over decades of ministry, Ripley often was faced with objections to her leadership, whether from slave owners or men who objected to women speaking and preaching; yet, others urged her on and she persisted, dying in the country to which
God had commissioned her more than three decades earlier.

Another controversial figure of the same period was Mary Barritt Taft (1772–1851), who traveled for many years preaching and leading in the revival movement, first as a single woman and later as wife to Zechariah Taft, a Methodist preacher and ardent supporter of women preachers. Obstacles were part of the mainstay of Mary Taft’s life, especially from professors of religion and ministers of the gospel. Yet she came to see the objections of others as a natural part of following the call of God. She also came to appreciate the many friends who supported her. She said:

I believe there never yet existed any, singularly useful in the Church of God, who have not been opposed by their fellow-creatures in their benevolent career of doing good. . . . In the midst of all, God hath given me his approving smile and a blessed consciousness. . . . In addition to this, the Lord has graciously raised me up numerous friends.

Mary Taft’s ministry consisted of preaching, praying with others, holding public meetings, and correspondence. Valuing the Methodist connection, she limited herself to visiting places where she was invited by traveling preachers and others on the circuit. This practice sometimes led to criticism by people who wanted her to come to them without formal invitations, but she rarely made exceptions. Even with such loyalty to the connectional system, Taft received persistent criticism from a few vocal clergy. Some of these eventually joined the ranks of her strongest supporters; others continued to protest until the Methodist Conference placed official limitations on women preachers.

One cannot presume to understand Mary Taft’s motivations, but some are visible on the surface. One is a sense of being called and sent out by God—a commission that was repeatedly confirmed by people’s response and by the support of friends and appreciative admirers during her years of trial. Another motivation was compassion for her neighbors, which initiated her ministry in prayer meetings and permeated her ministry thereafter. In autobiographical notes, she described passing a house where a child was crying. She stopped to inquire and was told that the mother had little or no milk. Taft then offered to give the baby milk and, when she did, the baby ceased crying. At Taft’s invitation, the mother brought her baby to the Taft home for feedings in ensuing days. In time, the child was well fed.
and the parents experienced a spiritual awakening through their healing relationship with Mary Taft.

In face of controversy, from time to time Mary Taft reassessed her call; and she was strengthened at each juncture. Like Dorothy Ripley, she was grounded first in a strong conversion experience and active prayer life. The conversion experience gave her compassion for her neighbors, exhorting from house to house and praying in class meetings. Her praying soon led to more public exhorting, and others encouraged her to continue this work. Though she was attacked by others and periodically questioned herself, she received repeated confirmation: “Suffice it to say that the Almighty, in a most extraordinary manner removed my scruples, answered my objections, and thrust me out into his vineyard.” Taft’s words reveal her overwhelming sense of being commissioned by God. As with Dorothy Ripley, but in a different kind of ministry, Mary Taft received her conversion and her commissioning to evangelistic ministry with conviction and courage.

The nineteenth-century deaconesses were akin to these early women preachers of the Wesleyan movement in the sense that they recognized God’s call and responded. They clearly understood themselves to be commissioned by God to service, and their responses were determined and full-bodied. Further, they gave themselves to incarnational ministries of compassion and hospitality. Similarly, the nineteenth-century Wesleyan/Holiness women understood themselves to be authorized and empowered by the Holy Spirit and, by this spiritual calling, commissioned to serve the poor, afflicted, and lonely of their world.

These various groups of women—preachers, deaconesses, and holiness leaders—point to the work of God in nonconventional places by nonconventional people through nonconventional forms of ministry. Such is the power of focusing on God’s acts of commissioning (however diversely these acts are understood by the people who experience and respond to them). In the commissions of women discussed here, God’s work is manifest, breaking through ordinary social structures and codes of behavior. We see God’s Spirit inspiring, empowering, and guiding people in paths they would not otherwise have chosen. Of course, we could analyze the social-psychological influences on these women as well, and we could do the same for more conventional calls into ordained ministries. Such analyses can await other occasions. For this essay, the power of commissioning is sufficient focus, alongside the multiple and diverse manifestations of God’s
commissions, which are given to the people of God so they will give themselves to God’s urgent work in the world.

How and When? Sending People for Service and Preparation

The United Methodist Church is reflecting on questions not only of why, whom, and is it I but also of how and when commissioning should be practiced. Thus we now turn to the how and when of commissioning in the contemporary church, as recorded in the United Methodist Book of Worship (BW).

BW offers two services of commitment and four of commissioning. No explication is given for these, but the services of commitment focus primarily on the individuals making a commitment, whereas the services of commissioning focus more on the communities that are sending, being sent, and/or receiving the ministries for which people are commissioned. Each service is coherent in itself, but no material is given to suggest that they have been analyzed as a body to uncover the implicit theology of commissioning within these various practices. This is my purpose here.

Services of commitment include commitment for lay speakers and commitment to Christian service. The former opens, “Those persons wishing to make this commitment will please present themselves.” The service concludes with the leader saying to the candidate, “Go forth to fulfill the ministry that you have received in the Lord.”¹⁸ This service is an act of the church, conducted by a church body, but it focuses on the gifts, preparation, and commitment of persons who present themselves to be lay speakers. Similarly, the “Order for Commitment to Christian Service” opens with “This order is intended to recognize and consecrate a commitment to the service of Christ in the world . . .”¹⁹ The order focuses on the calling of the person being commissioned.

Orders of commissioning might be divided into two types—the local and the denominational. The local type includes orders for commissioning persons to short-term Christian service or as class leaders. Both take place in public worship and commission persons to serve with and for others, either within their own community or in another. Commissioning to short-term service may send people on a work trip or project.²⁰ Commissioning class leaders is an order “intended for the public commissioning of class leaders following their appointment by a Charge or Church Conference of the congregation”; it also involves congregational affirmation.²¹ Both
services are marked by communal grounding, mutual responsibility, and prayers for God’s blessing. The other two commissioning practices are liturgical enactments of the denomination’s sending persons into missionary service—commissioning as missionaries or to the office of deaconess. The first order begins with the presiding bishop’s giving an explanation of the early church practice, closing with “This commissioning and sending will strengthen the bonds we maintain with the faith-filled communities to which they are going.” The prayer of blessing that closes this service is for the power of the Holy Spirit and for the ministries of these missionaries.

The other order has a different tone, more focused on the candidates for deaconess and missionary. However, the accent on God’s grace and calling and on the sending into mission is equally strong. The liturgy closes with the presiding bishop’s saying, “Christian friends, I commend to you these persons whom we this day have recognized and commissioned to carry into all the world the sacred and imperishable message of eternal salvation.” The congregation responds with words of calling and support, also acknowledging their common mission: “Together we are the people of God, whose task is to participate in God’s mission in the world.”

I have shared some details of these orders to highlight the elements—God’s call, the church’s commissioning, the oneness of ministry, the unique calling of missionaries and of deaconesses, and the power given by the Holy Spirit. Comparing these liturgical practices of commissioning in The United Methodist Church with the understanding of commissioning in the ordination process, one can see a strong congruence of theology. All are anchored in baptism and, then, in God’s call to a specific ministry. All are acts within the church’s worship, and the church participates in sending the persons into ministry. As part of these orders, the sending congregation acknowledges its call to ministry as well, and this includes supporting the persons who are commissioned to a term of specific service in the local congregation or the world.

Where the commissioning toward deacon or elder is unique is in the distinctiveness of the ministries toward which people are commissioned. The denomination is working toward more clarity about the roles, preparation, mentoring, and apprenticeship in this period. What is also needed is greater clarity regarding the meaning and promise of commissioning for the whole church, the relationship among diverse practices of commis-
sioning in the denomination, the communal relationship between commissioned ministers and their annual conferences and communities of faith, and the power of commissioning, in all its forms, to send people together into ministry. Wrestling with these questions will help the church discern how and when commissioning is important to the mission of the church.

Looking toward the Future

Our study thus far has shown that commissioning moves in many directions. Throughout, two affirmations have become clear. First, God is the Great Commissioner. Second, commissioning is multifaceted and purposive, challenging individuals and communities to discern and live boldly from their unique charisms as they participate in God’s work of love and justice.

Where do these affirmations lead? The narratives of marginalized women reveal the intensity and determination that people can experience in commissioning and the prophetic nature of God’s call. Contemporary United Methodist practice further reveals a living tradition; however, the significance of commissioning is partially revealed and partially obscured by current discussions. What is needed now is attention to the commissioning of God’s people and to the call on the whole body to be a community of mission in the world. Thus, I offer proposals for action that could enhance the church’s theology and embodiment of commissioning.

First, honor God the Great Commissioner and the sacredness of God’s commissions. Beginning with baptism and God’s commission of people into the body of Christ, the church has responsibility to discern God’s movements in people’s lives, to honor the commissioning God, and to support those who are commissioned, even when they push the boundaries of convention. Discerning God’s commissions can be never a matter of what is popular or comfortable but a process of discerning the pull of God toward New Creation. Dorothy Ripley, Mary Taft, and other courageous souls witness to the need for radical openness to God’s call. Thus, we need practices of discernment:

• Create opportunities for people in local congregations to discern their spiritual gifts (charisms) and orient their lives around their charisms.
• Create opportunities for commissioned ministers, missionaries, and deaconesses to engage in communal discernment of their gifts in relation to needs of the church and the world, especially during probationary periods but also throughout their ministries.
The second proposal for action is to honor the many forms of commissioning and the community of diverse people with diverse commissions. Commissioning runs deep in the Christian tradition and it has never had just one meaning. The church should not expect one meaning now. For commissioning to be associated with ordination and lay ministry, with short-term and long-term commitments, with individual experiences of God, and with church-guided processes of authorizing missionaries, deaconesses, and ordained ministers is a sign of vitality, not confusion. What is urgent is that all practices of commissioning be centered in God’s call and God’s mission for the world. Beyond that, commissioning will take many forms, shaped by the mysteries of God’s movements, the unique lives of those who are called, the church communities in which those persons live, and the social contexts where God’s Spirit is moving. This proposal points to practical possibilities:

- Find or create avenues for the ministry of each person and group, so that no gift is ignored or belittled.
- Celebrate annual commitment services in clergy sessions of annual conferences—presenting commissioned ministers, identifying their individual and communal service of the past year, and honoring their commissions for the coming year.
- Renew the commissioning of missionaries, deaconesses, congregations, and ordained clergy each year in annual conferences, inviting them to discern and make commitments for the coming year.
- In local churches, celebrate the many colors and textures of commissioning: commissioning a youth group for a mission trip or Bible study; a group of children for a week of Christian living in camp; an older person for a new life in retirement; a family for its move to a new city; a group of community volunteers for their year’s work, and so forth.

These practices symbolize God’s many ways of calling people into ministry. The church needs to resist temptations to grant ontological or elevated status to ordained ministry. We need to recognize differences of ministries without creating hierarchies of value. What is needed are liturgical celebrations that mark God’s sending people out together to do sacred work in the church and world.

This leads naturally to a third proposal for action—honor the communal nature of commissioning. In baptism, the church is called upon to welcome and support those who are baptized and to renew their own commitments.
In all acts of commissioning the community mediates God’s actions; thus, the communal nature of commissioning needs to be emphasized in church structures, discernment processes, and liturgical celebrations. This suggests possibilities for practice, building upon those already named:

- Engage congregations and communities (boards, classes, choirs) in discerning their communal charisms and equipping themselves for their communal missions.
- Enhance the missional emphasis during the probationary period of commissioned ministers (toward deacon and elder), seeking ways that probationary members can journey together in that mission.

Every calling from God is a divine commission, thus requiring openness, discernment, courage, and strength, both for the one(s) called and for the larger community. Even in their lonely journeys, Dorothy Ripley and Mary Barritt Taft had people who supported and confirmed their callings. When the community does not authorize a call, it needs to support people in further wrestling and discernment. On occasion (as for Ripley and Taft), people may need to persist in a persistent call and relate with the community from the margins. The challenge for the church is to appreciate the distinctive commissions of distinctive people and to discern and work with each and all for the sake of God’s mission in the world.

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Endnotes


4. John Wesley’s Sunday Service of the Methodists in North America, with an introduction by James F. White (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House
8. Chilcote, Her Own Story, 154, 174; Chilcote, John Wesley and the Women Preachers, 221-52.
10. Chilcote, Her Own Story, 132.
11. Ibid., 140.
12. See Taft, Biographical Sketches.
13. Chilcote, Her Own Story, 154-55.
15. Ibid., 156-57, 158.
23. Ibid., “The Order for Commissioning to the Office of Deaconess or as Missionaries II,” 743.
Salvation Flows: Eschatology for a Feminist Wesleyanism

Catherine Keller

“The sea is an excellent figure of the fulness of God, and that of the blessed Spirit. For as the rivers all return into the sea, so the bodies, the souls, and the good works of the righteous return into God, to live there in [God’s] eternal repose.”

John Wesley, A Plain Account of Christian Perfection

Where rivers flow into the sea, carrying their accumulation of sediments, they form a delta, widening dramatically as the oceanic tide meets their currents. Might we start here, with Wesley’s invocation of the ancient mystical trope of the divine ocean, to meditate on eschatology? Eschatology in Wesley may be said to consist of his teachings on “salvation” and “new creation.” So this essay offers its contribution to theology by way of a doctrinal delta formed by those two teachings, through which flow long accumulations of eschatological symbolism—biblical, patristic, Wesleyan, and feminist.

The word *eschatology* is a nineteenth-century neologism coined to categorize the whole symbolic cluster of “end things”: salvation, eternal life, kingdom of God, resurrection, judgment, apocalypse, new creation. *Eschaton* in the biblical Greek means “end,” in both the spatial and temporal senses, and so is best translated as “edge.” Biblically there is no literal “end” of the world, though many kinds and aspects of world certainly die. But there is a present life lived at the edge—the edge of history; the edge of our worlds; the edge of ourselves—a boundary where we get stretched between what has been and what might be, between our limitations and our expectations, between our history and our hope. That edge resembles less a cut or a wall than a shoreline—shifting, layered, and fluid, jagged or smooth, sometimes turbulent, sometimes pacific. Indeed, perhaps it can be conceived in its inviting aspect even as a confluence—like that of a river emptying into the ocean.

The eschaton shapes and bounds our lives, not just as death but also as
the edge of every lived moment—bodily, soulful, working. Consider how edges—limitations—give our bodies, souls, and works their living shape, their contour. Mortal creatures in our perpetual flux would otherwise wash away. Or as Wesley suggests in the above citation, they might instead, if they have turned to the good, re-turn into God. Are these the lives that are not drying out, not holding back, but flowing like a river? Not just to God, but “into God”; saved then not just by God but within God. How would this metaphor of salvation, this droplet of soteriology, pertain to the symbol of the new creation?

We will return to this eschatological delta. But let us consider what specific edge, what shoreline, we who are called “methodist” and “feminist” are privileged to wander. Nothing I have said above seems gender specific. The rare figure of the divine sea is free of masculine personification, although subliminally it suggests the saltwater of the womb (Gen. 49:25)—indeed, an entire theology of the primal deep.3 But in this essay I will not fish for traces of a maternal image of divinity in Wesley’s Works. I will not try to relate his empowerment of actual women to his eschatology. We need no longer justify feminist work by prooftexting an idealized John Wesley or by exposing his imperfections and those of the movement. But still, is it enough to declare, “I am a feminist and a United Methodist; therefore my theology is a Wesleyan feminism”? I think not.

Therefore, in this essay I lift up a profound affinity between Wesley’s distinctive concept of salvation and feminist sensibility. In this affinity I believe there lies the still-unrealized (“reposing”) potentiality for an eschatology adequate to a Wesleyan feminism of the third millennium. I interpret Wesley’s symbol of the new creation by means of his radical innovation of soteriology. For in John Wesley’s edgiest soteriological insight—that of the saving synergy of divine grace and human response—lies the sympathy between feminism and Wesleyanism. From it flows the potential for a vital Wesleyan future.

**Strong Attractions**

Wesley’s Plain Account continues by associating the depth currents of the divine ocean with the sympathetic energies of relationship: “By strong though invisible attractions [God] draws some souls through their intercourse with others. The sympathies formed by grace far surpass those formed by nature.”4

To personalize this text: my own sympathies for Wesley would certainly belong among those formed by “grace” rather than by “nature.” Yet it would
take years before I would care about, for instance, how nearly the process
notion of a relational “lure from God” is anticipated by Wesley’s concept of
“preventing grace” as universally available attraction, operating through the
sympathetic interfluency of relations. Even when I found myself teaching at
Drew Theological School, and we invited Marjorie Suchocki to lecture, I
listened at a respectful distance to her lecture on “Coming Home: Wesley,
Whitehead, and Women.” I did not realize until years later how well her
triadic alliteration had charted my peregrination. Yet, as Suchocki put it:
“‘[C]oming home’ is not a process of arriving, but a process of joining a
band of pilgrim people who are continuing the journey.”

But the sympathy of Wesleyan grace with the feminist sense of the
connective self continues to grow. If feminist theology has a core sensi-
bility, it could be called “relationalism”: the realization that as humans we
come interrelated with one another and that our sociality is constitutive of
who we inwardly become. From this perspective, the autonomous “male
ego” looks like an artifice of that form of social organization characteristic
of Western patriarchal cultures. Feminism in theology imagines the libera-
tion of a fully human sociality not just from sexual oppression but also
from all structures of domination. We recognize that not just men and
women but all creatures are radically interdependent; we know no exis-
tence outside of our flowing, shifting, layered relations. This alternative has
been elaborated through a process theology, for which all creatures live in
an oceanic interconnectedness with one another and with God. The core
insight of process theology comes to this: The relationship of the divine to
the creature is one of cooperation, in which the divine initiative (the “initial
aim”) acts upon the creature and the creature reacts upon God.

To rejoin the triad, in a famous passage (cited by the Oxford English
Dictionary as a first usage of the word react) Wesley enunciates his relational
claim: “God does not continue to act upon the soul unless the soul re-acts
upon God.” This reciprocity is couched in pneumatological language: God
“will not continue to breathe into our soul unless our soul breathes toward
him again: unless our love, and prayer, and thanksgiving return to him.” This
metaphor of a rhythmic inter-breathing invokes the divine ruach of in/spira-
tion and re/spiration—the Spirit of Life who is God. Notice the similarity of
its “return” to the oceanic rhythm of “return into God.” Randy Maddox
observes “how closely Wesley ties the affirmation that grace is responsive”
to the insistence that it is also responsible—if we do not re-act, “God will
cease to act.” This tie, he argues, “reflects Wesley’s equally strong commitment to the integrity of the human response in salvation.” I am suggesting that this interaction not only reflects but also defines Wesley’s soteriology.

Grace initiates. Grace saves. The saving grace is not irresistible but perilously resistible—dependent upon our free response! Within the context of the Protestantism of Wesley’s day, his insistence upon a divine–human cooperation in salvation represents a courageous break from the sola gratia tradition—which, by rendering grace a unilateral act of divine control over the person, arguably takes the graciousness out of grace. Synergy is replaced by “monergy.” For in the logic of a sovereign omnipotence predetermining our salvation—justifying us in spite of ourselves, requiring no cooperation from our sinful selves—thrives the imaginary of God the lordly patriarch.

Is it not precisely in Wesley’s emphasis upon a human agency cooperator with divine agency that the sympathy with feminist theology roots itself? No relationalism would have liberating force without this “breathing room.” Women and other systemically disempowered others already know their own (inter)dependencies. These are the signifiers of our free cooperation in the work of saving both self and world that empowers. The liberating potentialities of Wesleyanism for women and other Others flow—when they flow—from this theological opening. For does injustice not boil down to the violation of the integral freedom of the Other? Dominance suppresses the agency of its subjects, demanding mere obedience and conformity rather than inviting assent and mutuality.

A divine power defined in terms of total control chokes off the creature’s breath, the spirit of freedom that lends integrity to the human response. Of course, when God is envisioned as—above all—a masculine Superpower, men [sic] compete to make themselves in his [sic] image. They dominate rather than empower those around them. The feedback loop between divine and human models of unilateral sovereignty (visible in the crypto-Christian politics of American empire) has not relented. At least as early as Constantine’s conversion of the Roman Empire, “the Lord of Power and Might” was displacing the God of Love.

Methodists also succumb to the worship of Power. Unfortunately, it is not simply a matter of misinterpreting Wesley. For despite Wesley’s heartwarming salvation-mutualism, the question of eschatology steers us into some choppy soteriological waters.
Salvation Here, Now

According to Theodore Weber, the eschatological problem lies in the gap between Wesley’s synergistic doctrine of salvation and his cosmic notion of the “new creation.” Weber’s sharp formulation of the problem cuts through heavenly clouds: “[T]he concept of New Creation represents a major failure in John Wesley’s theological thinking. . . . His theology of salvation is a universalism of opportunity that protects freedom of response; his expectation of New Creation is a universalism of result that requires the suppressing of freedom.” If God ultimately overpowers the creation, even for the sake of the creatures’ own “restoration,” would this not violate the human creature’s freedom to “react upon” grace, either resisting or embracing it? According to Weber, a unilateral new creation would violate creaturely integrity. Yet, despite his synergism, Wesley seems to have presumed such a final, monergistic, consummation. But surely no Wesleyan eschatology can well dispense with the new creation. Maddox argues that it is Wesley’s new creation that integrates his soteriology with his eschatology. Might a deep breath of sanctifying grace save Wesleyan eschatology from contradicting its own saving freedom?

To emphasize the freedom of the human response to grace, Wesley appeals not to Enlightenment norms but to Paul’s dictum to “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.” Wesley underscores the phrase “‘your own,’” for “you yourselves must do this, or it will be left undone for ever.” Hence the constant accusations of Pelagianism, of self-salvation (also imputed to feminist or liberation theology). But they miss Wesley’s point. “There is no opposition between these—God works: therefore do ye work. . . . Inasmuch as God works in you, you are now able to work out your own salvation.” For Wesley, unlike for the classical Reformers, humans remain capax dei—“capable of God.” Thus, we are responsible for our salvation—not to save ourselves but to respond to the persistent divine initiative.

In Wesley’s complex cartography of grace, an initiating, prevenient (preventing) grace is always present in all persons. The Creator is nowhere absent from the creation. When it comes to the dramatic moment of justifying grace, the story has still only begun—our bad habits persist, our chains still bind, and if we do not continuously “grow in grace,” through the process so methodically known as “sanctification,” the salvation we have
in Christ still cannot “save us.” Like the manna, grace cannot be hoarded. Only if we continue, in Wesley’s words, to “stir up the sparks of grace” do we move on toward that perfection that Suchocki argues is no static endpoint but rather a continuous process. “Christian perfection is a fullness which is called to a self-surpassing fullness yet again, and in this process, the divine destiny is achieved.” In other words, for Wesley, to “continue on to perfection” comprises a relative, not an absolute or final, state and so a “processive condition, adapted to the situation of the believer.”

I suggest we interpret this soteriology of synergetic divine–human work eschatologically—but not in the conventional sense of a salvation deferred until after death. Wesley’s notion of salvation cuts against standard conventions in two important ways: it takes place now, and it takes place socially, not privately. In “The Scripture Way of Salvation,” Wesley defines salvation as “not what is frequently understood by that word, the going to heaven, eternal happiness. It is not the soul’s going to paradise. . . . It is not a blessing which lies on the other side of death; or (as we usually speak) in the other world.” This Wesleyan deconstruction of traditional assumptions opens the space for the salvation he does intend: “[I]t is a present thing; a blessing which, through the free mercy of God, ye are now in possession of.” But it is this blessing that we ourselves nip in the bud whenever we do not “return” it. The “free mercy” is a gift. Our response makes it present. Not fully present, for life in grace remains on the edge, subject to the next challenge, the next connection—and ultimately to the coming of “the kingdom of glory in heaven, which is the continuation of the kingdom of grace on the earth.”

And so we begin again—here and now.

The “now” is no self-contained kingdom of the soul. The soul’s depth relation to the divine depth may have mystical edges; but it does not collapse in on itself, into the musty privacy of “me and my God.” “Solitary religion is not found [in the gospel]. . . . The gospel of Christ knows of no religion but social: no holiness but social holiness.” It is this social holiness that obliges Christians to work out their own salvation—not as their reward but as their responsibility for the church, the nation, and the world.

Social Salvation and New Creation

Feminist theology is predicated on the sociality of the self. Whether introvert or extrovert, the subject is inherently interactive. Our private habits show the marks of impersonal public patterns. So the notion of social holi-
ness as relational wholeness is congenial. For both Wesley and for feminists, the heart-to-heart of mutual intimacy flows into ever-widening circles of relation. But because, like liberation theology, feminism analyzes those relations in terms of social structures of race, ethnicity, and economics, a feminist Wesleyanism works in “synergy” with an evolving tradition of liberation Methodism. Drawing upon this global heritage, Hong-Ki Kim argues that Wesley teaches a “realized eschatology.” This is not triumphalism, but “the optimism of grace to realize jubilee as the perfection of social sanctification.”

For Wesley, the justice that is the work of justification flows not from a self-righteous religious politics or from a secular eschatology that squeezes religion into its most judgmental utopia, but from the freedom of love. Similarly, Theodore Jennings proclaims as a critical principle of Wesleyanism that “Wesley directed himself to the poor and to the marginalized.”

The suffering of the poor (the majority of whom are women) represents the most pervasive evidence of the failure—and so of the possibility—of our species to live “in the image of God.” As that imago begins to show its female face, will the work of just love become more—probable?

Jennings notes that the vision of “new creation” in Isaiah 65, Romans 9 and Revelation 21 has always called for a socioeconomic realization. For the most part social responsibility took theocratic form; church leaders were uneasy with any serious reflection on the new creation as a potential and for structural reform within history. Most acquiesced to Augustine’s identification of the conversion of the Roman Empire as the realization of the “millennium,” the best to be hoped for in this world.

Though Wesley certainly began with a conventional preoccupation with the salvation of the soul, his gradual embrace of a more terrestrial and so more cosmic new creation flows from his increasingly relational and synergistic sense of salvation. Maddox traces the Wesleyan trajectory through its development of the “cooperant dynamics” of the spiritual new creation into this more fully socioeconomic dimension. He locates the evolution of Wesley’s thought as an interaction between the premillennial and postmillennial movements of his day, both of which suggest eschatologies more attentive to the earth than did the reigning amillennialism. In his late sermons, Wesley presents the socioeconomic work of new creation as already present, though not yet nearly what God intends for the “Christian age.” According to Maddox, Wesley tries to preserve this tension by emphasizing “the processive character” of God’s renewing work.
As the maturing Wesley increasingly embraces the socioeconomic dimension, his soteriology becomes radically inclusive. In the 1780s it becomes cosmic. Thus, Wesley amplifies his soteriology by way of the apocalyptic imaginary of "new creation." As Maddox notes, "[T]he elderly Wesley issued strong affirmations of the inclusion of both animals and the physical world in God’s new creation. Most of his contemporaries considered these affirmations idiosyncratic and wrong-headed." The notoriety was not altogether undeserved. His vision of the new creation indulges in sheer fancy: rolling hills but no scary peaks, breezy sun and no more rain.

Yet Wesley read the science of his day seriously. His key cosmological affirmations will delight an ecofeminist Wesleyanism. He envisions a cosmos whose material elements are healed and restored in the end and therefore matter now. For him, making “all things new” means the whole creation, which will be restored to a “far higher degree” than it had at creation. While Wesley’s cosmic eschatology tends toward an idealization that can hurt environmentalism more than it helps, it does have an ecological “edge.” He castigates the “human shark,” who torments animals not of necessity but “of his free choice.” For the new creation in all elements, species, and dimensions begins within this creation. To participate in the kingdom of God we are called here and now to a restorative work of both personal and social “cosmic sanctification” (Kim).

**Total Salvation versus Synergistic Freedom**

Here comes the rub. In its cosmic holism the symbol of the new creation drives toward a terminal eschatology—a state “such as it has not yet entered into the heart of men to conceive—the universal restoration which is to succeed the universal destruction.” Yet in an earlier sermon Wesley insists that “annihilation is not deliverance.” Why this inconsistency? It points to the deeper problem. On the one hand, the vision of the restoration of all things flows naturally from the insight into the interconnectedness of all creatures in the creation and to the Creator. On the other hand, this hope for restoration shifts from an empowering historical hope to an apocalyptic dream for a death-free creation—unimaginable without reconstituting the very elements of which all life is made. Once the hope thus literalizes the resurrected life of the new creation, it demands the death not just of unfair death but of death itself. This second creation from nothing entails the annihilation of this creation: finite life as it actually works in its creaturely interdependencies.
Eschatology thus succumbs to its special temptation: *responsible hope* mutates into *wishful thinking*. But this mutation goes against the grain of the Wesley who resists the deathward displacement, the reduction of salvation to death-and-after. So we return to Weber’s sharp intervention:

In the first place, Wesley failed to confront the fact that the promise of *totality* is unrealizable without dissolving the divine–human synergy of free grace and free response at the heart of his evangelical message. If *all things are reconstituted*, then *all persons are saved*—a result made possible only if sovereign grace overrides the resistance Wesley observed and recorded in the populations to whom he preached. Conversely, if *not all persons are saved* (Wesley’s expectation), then *not all things are reconstituted*. Wesley cannot have it both ways.

Nor can we. Does this mean that the only alternative to a totalizing notion of the new creation is to give up the cosmic width of the vision and return to a meaner-spirited eschatology (in which God saves some persons and damns the rest)?

There is a Wesleyan third way. We can affirm the mutualism of free grace and free response as characteristic not only of the divine–human relation but of all divine–creaturely relations. The whole universe can then be seen as unfolding in a synergistic dance of grace. The edge of decision is here and now; we humans can dance with grace, however clumsily. The Spirit breathes into us, and we breathe back into God. The divine ocean flows into the world, and the world returns into God. But if as humans we “return” to God, we do not circle back. We return *forward*. Each return becomes part of the divine ocean. That ocean surges forth in the next moment, releasing the next wave of creaturely creativity. I suggested earlier that the “eternal repose” of the divine ocean—which Wesley likens to the calm at the bottom of a sea that may be heaving wildly on the surface—enables the wave action of the new creation.

Is everything saved, then, in a universal restoration? Or only that which “returns to the sea” as “good works of the righteous return into God”? For Wesley, the criterion of salvation is love: “the love of God is the principle and the end of all our good works. . . . [T]hese good works in a spiritual manner die in God, by a deep gratitude, which plunges the soul in God as in an abyss, with all that it is.” Salvation becomes kenotic gratitude. This wave action is analogous to the breath-work of the divine *ruach*, that is, without the return, the flow is blocked. “[God] will not continue to breathe
into our soul unless our soul breathes toward him again; unless our love, and prayer, and thanksgiving return to him.”

So that which does not return into the divinity and so does not partake in the gratitude of grace itself resists the flow. It resists the churning sympathies, the complex, demanding relationality that only love makes livable. It clutches and clings to itself and produces of its defenses and aggressions an ego with the illusion of independence. But it lacks breath and flow. It resists the cosmic ocean of relations surging all around it and so obstructs the very divinity from which the creation itself flows. Such an ego, a body, a soul, a work holds onto itself for dear life—the ultimate futility. But is it “damned”? It might feel that way. Yet, as Wesley insisted, it is not that God is willing anyone’s damnation. It is more that such a person does not will to be saved—to let go, to be recycled in the divine ebb and flow of connectional life. Such a habit of self-enclosure and blockage does not so much damn as dam us! Such persons do not “return to their source, as rivers seem willing to empty themselves when they pour themselves with all their water into the sea.” If they cannot be “saved,” it is not because they have been condemned but because they have “dried up.”

But are we “saved,” only for our “souls, bodies and good works” to dissolve in a bottomless, divine abyss? Yet even the river returning through the delta ripples endlessly within the sea. This language of process theology may help: The “consequent nature of God” is “the judgment of a tenderness which loses nothing that can be saved.” It takes into itself each perishing moment of our experience: the moment affects God—and thus tilts the grace toward our next moment’s possibility. We sense this in the meditative depths of prayer. As Suchocki puts it beautifully, “Prayers of gratitude touch God, empty into God, and in so doing bring intimations of our final destiny, which is everlastingly to participate in the eternal mystery of God, whose depths are love.”

Dancing on the Waves

I have elaborated a kenotic doctrine of salvation. It protects Wesley’s radical sense of free synergy and of an all-inclusive, oceanic Love that can be resisted, obstructed, and, therefore, by definition cannot force whoever does not want to be “saved.” We are remembered, recycled, and reconstituted as part of the new creation. But what about The End? The final reconstitution of all things?
Here let me suggest that rather than try to reconcile the free synergy of grace with a totalizing recreation, we consistently interpret Wesley’s new creation in terms of his soteriology. In other words, we need not adopt the literalist interpretation of the biblical new creation as an absolute finality. No matter how perfect, beautiful, and joyful is the restoration, if it finally overrides the agency of the creature and its capacity to respond in love, then the reconstitution is a work not of love but of dominance. But why should we imagine that at some point in time, God would tire of the creation and shut it down forever? Is not the “eternal repose” of the divine ocean also an eternal life surging forth into infinite creativity? As persons we might tire of the exasperating chaos, diversities, and demands of life. As a species we might exhaust ourselves. We might unlove our blue heaven and green earth to death. But let us not project our death-drives onto God. If the rich and powerful of the earth pull off a manmade apocalypse, it will be no divine revelation. It will be the ultimate work of ingratitude. Such a termination will not be the work or the will of the God who is Life and Love, who as Spirit breathes and flows incessantly into the world. World without end.

If Wesley’s specific social, political, and ecological analyses disappoint present liberative readings, Christianity in his work surges toward a responsive and thus responsible eschatology—a new creation beginning now and only with our efforts. Therefore, a Wesleyan feminist eschatology does not interpret salvation in terms of a terminal new creation. Rather, it interprets the new creation in terms of the soteriology of the synergistic now. Such an eschatology choreographs no macabre dance of the endtime. Its faith dances at the edge of time. It teaches the flow, dignity, and grace of an everlasting relation.

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Endnotes

1. I thank Michael Nausner and Laura Bartels, Ph.D. candidates at Drew University’s Caspersen School who know much more Wesleyanism than I, for their generous critique of this paper.


10. For the distinction between the Reformation emphasis upon justification as “monergistic interpretation” and the Wesleyan emphasis upon sanctification as “synergistic,” as well as for many of the sources and clues that led to this paper, I thank Professor Hong-Ki Kim of Methodist Theological Seminary in Seoul. See “The Theology of Jubilee Examined in the Thought of John Wesley and Its Application to the Reunification Movement of North and South Korea,” paper delivered at Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies, August 1997, 49.


20. Ibid., 3.
21. I thank Laura A. Bartels for originally alerting me to the seriousness of Wesley’s scientific interests and to the specific potential for a Wesleyan eco-theology. See her “The Political Image as the Basis for Wesleyan Ecological Ethics,” *Quarterly Review* 23/3 (Fall 2003): 294-301.
28. For a fuller statement of such a theology of creation from the primal depths, as well as a review of mystical theologies of the divine ocean, cf., Keller, *Face of the Deep*. 
As mission statements go, the United Methodist statement—
"to make disciples of Jesus Christ"—holds its own. Clear and direct, it
identifies one of the many activities we engage in as crucial to our iden-
tity. It says that disciple-making is an activity without which the
church ceases to be the church. It also raises some questions for us.

For instance, one might ask whether or not this particular
mission statement distinguishes United Methodist Christians from
other Christians. A good mission statement, it might be argued,
should clarify our uniqueness as an organization. Because our mission
statement is virtually identical with the Great Commission, we might
wonder if any Christian church wouldn't embrace it; or, to put it
more bluntly, which of the move-
ments within Christendom would
actually reject it? It seems to me,
however, that this kind of rutting
around misses the real point of this
particular mission statement.

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The United Methodist Church
says its mission is “to make disci-
ples of Jesus Christ. Local churches
provide the most significant arena
through which disciple-making
occurs” (Book of Discipline, ¶120). I
believe that “disciple-making” is only
a part of the mission of the church,
not the whole—not even the central
part. That our church has so
constricted itself in this definition
draws it away from other important
parts of its mission and skews it to a
technologically driven “manufac-
turing” motif of Christianity as a
kind of work, a preoccupation with
service-with-an-objective.

Surely, “making disciples” is
part of the church’s mission,
deriving from Jesus’ statement in
Matt. 28:19-20, sometimes called
the Great Commission: “Go there-
fore and make disciples of all
nations, baptizing them in the
name of the Father and of the Son
and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching
them to obey everything that I have
commanded you.”

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Why not just admit it? The real purpose of this mission statement is not to distinguish us from other Christian movements but to identify our own core. It represents an important effort to press United Methodism to fess up. What do we value? What are we passionate about? Can we say what that is? Might we dare to agree? Could we find something more substantial that unites us than the sanctioning of diversity?

The significance of our mission statement emerges only when we drape it in the dynamics of contemporary United Methodism. Far from stating the obvious, its proponents believed they were challenging the church to reclaim a central theological activity that was in danger of slipping to the periphery. In this respect, the mission statement sifts and sorts. It says:

- The mission of United Methodism is not to make members but to make disciples who are growing by the power of the Holy Spirit into Christ-like lovers of God and neighbor.
- Our primary purpose is not to do justice but to equip disciples of Jesus Christ who stand for God's justice in the world.
- Understanding evangelism as winning converts to Jesus Christ is not sufficient; evangelism means inviting unbelievers into a life of growth and transformation in Jesus Christ.
- A particular cause is the church's cause only to the extent that it fosters or flows from the making of disciples for Jesus Christ.

Our mission statement proposes a direction for the church today. It helps us clarify what we need to start doing, what we need to stop doing, and what we need to do differently.

First, the mission statement invites us to start getting specific about what it means to be a disciple. To “make disciples of Jesus Christ” is a valuable mission statement precisely because we have gotten fuzzy about what Jesus might have meant by this comment and what it would mean to obey this teaching. The Wesleyan tradition has been quite clear about this and can be a tremendous resource here. As a movement within the church, Methodism has focused on the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, with a clear goal of Christ-likeness, or, as Wesley was fond of saying, “the mind which was in Christ.” Wesley identified Methodism as nothing more than a restatement of “primitive Christianity,” but he also pointed to “perfection” and “scriptural holiness” as the distinctive emphases of the people called Methodists. We might say, then, that our mission statement’s focus on
discipleship represents a pretty fair gloss on the historical strengths of the Wesleyan tradition. (I find Wesley’s sermons on the Beatitudes [“Sermon on the Mount I–XXX”] to be a helpful and psychologically nuanced discussions of Jesus’ plan for discipleship.)

This is particularly true when discipleship is understood in the context of the Scripture’s “thick description” of disciple. Disciples of Jesus Christ have left their fishing nets to follow Jesus; they have committed to a process of intensive training at Jesus’ side, a regimen that immerses them in anecdotes, parables, teachings, prayers, and healings and then walks them past the Cross, the empty tomb, a table in Emmaus, and tongues of fire on a street corner in Jerusalem. After that, they were ready to transform the world as disciples of Jesus.

The effects of this process on Jesus’ disciples was to equip them as a powerful, world-changing cadre of healers, preachers, prison breakers, and church-planters. They were a band of followers, filled and shaped by the living word of God in such a way that they could not rest until the fire in their bones had consumed their days.

Second, the mission statement pushes us to stop doing all the stuff that makes us look like we have nothing better to do than to hang out at church. Disciples of Jesus Christ are not people who have been “house-broken” in the church. They are women and men who have been newly created by the power of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 5:17) to represent the kingdom of God in the world. Their hunger is for God’s justice. The presence of the Lord is their daily bread.

I believe our mission statement calls into question the church as we know it. The disciples were sometimes remarkable for their cluelessness; but they were equally remarkable for their deep and abiding willingness to grow and to deepen their understanding of Jesus and his work in them. Our mission statement says that when the church is the church, it is healing and growing disciples, not providing custodial services for those who have no intention of changing. People like to say that the church is a hospital for sinners. That is fine. But a hospital is a place for people with some reasonable expectation for healing.

A disciple-making church might ask us to work out our own issues: anger, frustration, crabbiness, mean-spiritedness, intolerance, busyness. Becoming a disciple of Jesus means that we are willing to take off the masks and deal with our own lovelessness.
Third, the mission statement challenges the church to change our understanding of membership and loyalty. United Methodism will thrive when the power of Jesus Christ rather than the denomination becomes the center of our attention—when John the Baptist’s claim “he must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30) becomes our model for church growth, membership, and worship. It challenges us to rest our identity in Jesus Christ and his teachings and to surrender our institutional loyalties and traditions to the power of a life lived in the reality of Jesus.

We ought to quit gnawing on the mission statement and begin to form our life around its generous strength. Is it not time for United Methodists to refocus our attention on the world that our God came to redeem? The question for a lot of people who may never willingly walk through the doors of a church is not “Do they have a good mission statement?” Rather, they want to know, “Is there something real there?” “Is the Jesus these people are worshiping and preaching real?” “Are these people who follow Jesus authentic?” The more seriously United Methodism takes its mission statement, the more likely people will be able to answer these questions with a resounding yes.

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Unless we want to evacuate the word of serious meaning and use it as an empty term for “being a Christian,” discipleship is the relation of students to a teacher. Teaching, along with baptism as admission to the Christian community, is the content of Jesus’ commandment here. In Matthew 28 Jesus was speaking to the Eleven alone (Judas had died), not to the women who were so much a part of his following or to the many others who had serious relations with him, such as Nicodemus, Mary, Martha, Lazarus, and Joseph of Arimathea. The Eleven had been close students of Jesus; and this direction was for them to spread his teachings and to baptize. Jesus’ main point was that the teaching should be spread beyond Israel to the other nations, in direct contradiction to the limitations he had set on his previous sending of the disciples in Matt. 10:5-6. Collectively, the teachings show how to be a Christian, and they include a lot more than teaching others and baptizing.

Ironically, the United Methodist statement blunts—or deliberately obscures—Jesus’ intent that the disciples should take his teachings beyond the local area to other lands and cultures. It does so by juxtaposing the claim that “local churches provide the most significant arena through which disciple-making occurs,” which fosters a “take-care-of-our-own” priority. The Eleven, and other early church leaders such as Paul and Barnabas, did indeed take Jesus’ teachings beyond Israel into the several Gentile worlds in Europe, Asia, India, and Africa. So that commandment was powerful and fruitful. The question is whether making disciples, especially with an emphasis on other cultures, is the whole of the Christian mission, or even its center.

For me, the Christian mission, which should be adopted straightforwardly by The United Methodist Church, is to foster people’s living rightly before God as Jesus showed his followers. The epitome of living rightly before God is to love God and also love other people (Matt. 22:37-39). Perhaps the central exposition of this is in the Last Supper and Farewell Discourse in John 13–17, in which Jesus both demonstrates love by washing the feet of his friends and explicitly teaches about love from God and to God and among friends. However, love is not just an adolescent sentiment. One of its chief obstacles is the burden of sin and guilt before God and others; the great themes of atonement, forgiveness, and reconciliation address this obstacle. In large part, salvation means being enabled to love
properly. Love takes place within communities, and much of the New Testament, especially but not exclusively the letters of Paul, addresses the question of how Christian communities should be managed internally and brought into relation with the wider communities where people live. Living before God as a lover has both interpersonal and impersonal, charitable dimensions. The complexities of ethical life lived in love of God and neighbor are explored throughout the New Testament, especially in the teachings of Jesus, such as the Sermon on the Mount and some parables. For instance, to live in love with God and neighbor it is important that we judge not so that we be not judged.

To be sure, living the life of love is something that must be learned; and so being a disciple of teachers, beginning with Jesus, is a dimension of every Christian’s life. However, not every Christian needs to be a teacher of the gospel to those in foreign parts or to those in different social classes from our own (a contemporary parallel to “all nations”). Nor does every Christian need to engage in specialized ministries of the church (those of us who write about these things usually are in specialized ministries and sometimes exaggerate our importance as paradigms of love). Rather, most Christians work out their love of God and neighbors in the specific contexts of their lives—in their homes, their work, their leisure, and in their contributions to culture.

Some United Methodists believe that the local congregation is overwhelmingly important for the Christian mission, and in many ways its importance certainly is great. Those same people often define ordained and other specialized ministries as located primarily in local congregations. Nevertheless, the life of love of God and neighbors needs to be worked out wherever God and neighbors are—and they extend far beyond local congregations. Sometimes the issues of love are political ones of war and peace or economic ones of justice. These are not merely congregational matters; and congregations have limited, though sometimes effective, powers in these matters. All too often local congregations reflect cultures with a too-small presentation of the God to be loved and a too-constricted sense of neighborliness. Frequently, an individual’s community of spiritual friends (in the sense of John 13–17) is socially structured in ways quite different from a local congregation. United Methodists can correct the preoccupation with local congregations by remembering Wesley’s dictum that “the world is my parish.” Making disciples in foreign parts (geographically and socially) is
part of accepting the world as the church’s parish. The actual contexts of our lives and loves extend far beyond local congregations.

Love of God is difficult and we learn to love as God has loved us. God’s problem with us is our sin and the way we let it bind us. Our problem with God is that the Creator’s wild fecundity gives us a life filled with suffering and death, and perhaps inevitable sin, as well as great riches. (Our neighbors are not always winners, either.) So serious love involves swallowing righteous anger with forgiveness. Love requires a ruthless honesty that takes Christ’s cross as its emblem.

The saints of love include some great heroes. They include energetic people with specialized ministries who want to go out and “make” something, such as more disciples. But the saints also include simple people who strive to perfect love of God and neighbor in very ordinary lives, creative people who glorify God through the arts, and questioning people who ask whether the ways in which the church has institutionalized the ways of love are true means of grace. The mission of the church is to foster all the saints in love and to extend the enabling power to love to all people. Making disciples is a part of this but only an instrumental part.

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A Word on The Word

Lectionary Study

ROBERT ALLAN HILL

One-hundred years ago Marcel Proust designed his seminal, sprawling work *A La Recherche de Temps Perdu,* a teeming morass of memory and reflection. At one point he asks what would happen if, every morning, instead of a newspaper, someone deposited a single book on your front step, marked to the place you had arrived in reading the previous morning. Would that be a better use of time? I confess that I wonder many mornings after I have finished reading the paper.

Say, for the sake of argument, that Proust is right—one long book read over many days is better than reading the daily paper (hard as that is to imagine). If you could choose just one book, which would it be? Plato’s *Republic,* Shakespeare’s *Complete Works,* Tolstoy’s, *Anna Karenina,* Watson and Krick’s *The Double Helix,* Mario Puzo’s *The Godfather,*

Since this is a religious journal, you are right to anticipate another suggestion—the Bible. But should we read all of the Bible or just parts? What if the person who delivers your paper starts depositing a fresh translation of the Book of Psalms on your doorstep every morning, with a bookmark locating the previous day’s reading? What would happen to our spiritual lives, our personal faith, if we were to read a psalm carefully each day?

We affirm the Bible as God’s word to us; we also recognize that its pages include many human words directed from humans to humans. The psalms, however, are human words to God—hymns of the heart. They are hymns of blessing (e.g., Ps. 1), faith (e.g., Ps. 23), courage (e.g., Ps. 46), joy (e.g., Ps. 100), hope (e.g., Ps. 121), lament (e.g., Ps. 139), and praise (e.g., Ps. 150).

The psalms provide a rhetorical open space for us. These 150 hymns of the heart clear out some spiritual ground on which, if we are so inclined, we may stroll and wander and lollygag. That is, the psalms allow us to be human—to breathe, listen, and smile in the image of God the Breather, the Listener, and the Smiler. With the ancients we may commune to meet and greet and to watch our children grow and our grandparents age. The
psalms are common property. They are a written, old-English commons. They are, shall we say, a verbal Village Green. They arose out of the gathered people of God and were shaped in their singing. Conversely, they have done their part in gathering and shaping God’s people.

For the most part, we are engaged in ministry with literate Christians—not people who can read, but people who do read. Yet, we are awash in a visual culture. One of the undertold stories about twenty-first-century American Protestantism, and also one of our evangelistic challenges, is that we are literate Christians in ministry with other literati. We read—alone, together, in study groups, in worship, in hymnody.

Reading is almost countercultural today. Finding joy and peace and “soul” in books is not always the norm. Reading makes evangelism harder and preaching truer. But this means we have an obligation to celebrate the joy of reading, beginning with biblical reading, like reading the psalms.

Before we move on to comment on the lections, it is worth remembering that the psalms have several common features. With modification, Hermann Gunkel’s categorization seems to have stood the test of time. He divides the psalms into five primary types: hymn, lament, royal, personal, thanks. Recent scholarship has tended to explore more fully and notice more exactly the layers of writing and editing latent in the Book of Psalms. Writers need editors and editors need publishers—and all are present in the psalms. The poetic rhythms of the psalms, particularly their forms of parallelism (synonymous, antithetic, synthetic), give the psalms their heartbeat. The Benedictines recite the whole Psalter in a week; and St. Patrick, it is rumored, recited the whole of the Psalter every day. Perhaps John Calvin captures the complexity and variety of our Psalter best in his recognition that, together, these 150 hymns provide “an anatomy of the parts of the soul.”

We follow now our lectionary selections for the psalms in Lent. Our interest lies at the intersection of exegetical inquiry and homiletical expression. To our good fortune, the collection of psalms, and especially the four under consideration here, are well acquainted with such a spiritual cliff walk.

February 29, 2004—First Sunday in Lent
Ps. 91:1-2, 9-16; Deut. 26:1-11; Rom. 10:8b-13; Luke 4:1-13
Like Psalm 46, Psalm 91 is a psalm of trust, with some didactic qualities. We might wonder how fully the writer appreciates the complexities of evil. We have an easier time seeing evil in others than we do in ourselves.
Our singer is a person of simple faith. He has one, and only one, word for us: “You are covered.” We could raise many complaints about the author of the hymn. He has a dangerously simple view of evil, especially for the complexity of a postmodern world. He implies that trust or belief is rewarded with safety, a notion that Jesus scornfully dismisses in Luke 13. He has an appalling lack of interest in the scores of others, who, unlike the ones being “saved,” fall by the wayside. He seems to celebrate a foreordained, foreknown providence that fits poorly our sense of God’s openness to the future and the freedom God has given us for the future. He makes dramatic and outlandish promises not about what might happen but about what will be. For thoughtful Christians the psalmist fails us in our need to rely on something sounder and truer than blind faith. To us, he seems to be whistling past the graveyard.

And yet, for those who have walked past a graveyard or two or have walked through “the valley of the shadow of death” (Ps. 23:4, KJV); for a world searching to match its ideals of peace with its realities of hatred; for all who are in trouble or worried about others and other graves and graveyards and who have seen the hidden traps, unforeseeable dangers, and steel-jawed snares of life—for all of us there is something encouraging in this simple song’s declaration: “[H]e will deliver you from the snare of the fowler” (v. 3a).

Our writer is not a philosopher or a systematic thinker. He does not worry about the small stuff. In fact, I have a sense that the psalmist is desperate. His song is one for that point on the road when you just have to take the risk and jump. You have made your assessment and have drawn up your plan, and you have prayed. Yet you see all the pestilence about you in homes and institutions and nations; and so you wonder, Is it worth the risk?

This hymn of the heart is one you sing when you are unsure but confident. It is possible to be confident without being certain. In fact, genuine confidence includes the ability to admit uncertainty. After all, faith involves risk. Our writer has reached the point of decision and is forced to choose between walking forward and slinking away. For Christians, the choice is very simple. Either God lives or not. Either God is in Christ or not. Either God in Christ touches us by the Spirit or not. Either we move forward in faith or not. The psalmist wants his student or grandson or parishioner to choose in faith. So he urges: Abide in “the shelter of the Most High” (v. 1); he is our “refuge” and “fortress” (v. 2), our “shield” and our “buckler” (v. 4).

Perhaps in a time of war we are more direct about our “terror[s]” of the
night” (v. 5). As a country we have taken a new military course with our invasion of Iraq. Our leaders have taken us into the uncharted territory of “preemption.” At a minimum, such a profound change in national policy deserved far more earnest congressional and communal debate than took place. At present, the spiritual consequences of the preemptive strike against Iraq are unquantifiable and leave us in a dark forest. What can we as Christian people do but to go forward? The psalmist addresses our immediate need. He counsels us not to fear the terror of the night and to go about our discipleship—to pray, study, learn, make peace, love our neighbor, to agree to disagree. The night is not as terrifying as we fear.

There is an irrational side to the psalmist’s message. “A thousand may fall at your side . . . but it will not come near you,” he declares (v. 7). It will not help us to ask about the ethics of this promise or to question the sense of destiny involved here. I hear the psalm as a father’s prayer or a mother’s dearest hope. I cannot help but think that this psalm perfectly captures the visceral hope that is on the minds of American parents of soldiers and sailors right now. With the psalmist, we pray that “the destruction that wastes at noonday” (v. 6) will not come near us.

When there is nothing else we can give our daughters and sons, we want them to have faith to go forward bravely, without being sure of what they will find at noonday. We are desperate for one hope: that they will come home. And we sing the song without any chords of doubt, because we want to admit none. We make no uncertain sound because we want our beloved to carry no worry, but to be armed with the confidence of the Lord. This is a battle hymn. It is the kind of song you sing to yourself when all about you is mayhem. If I were a chaplain, it is the kind of psalm I might give to a soldier to memorize by day and recite by night in the face of mayhem.

The teacher implores his student to make God his “dwelling place,” his home (v. 9). Evil will not befall, or at least will not define, the one who rests in God. Contrary to the psalmist, we know that evil touches us all (v. 10). But this misses the meaning of the poem. The writer is praying to be delivered not from some or most evil but from all evil! Religion is a matter of the heart before it is a matter of the head.

Our psalm ends at the edge of a remarkable announcement. Like Yahweh addressing Job, the psalm ends with a divine word. It is what we hope will happen with every one of our children, in every one of our worship services, and in every sermon. Everything gives way to God. The
Lord speaks in the first person, and his word is a lasting joy: God will deliver, protect, answer, be with, rescue, and honor those who love God (vv. 14-15).

March 7, 2004—Second Sunday in Lent

Psalm 27; Gen. 15:1-12, 17-18; Phil. 3:17-4:1; Luke 13:31-35

In the church I pastor, we frequently offer a portion of this psalm in a soaring musical arrangement, sung by a strong tenor soloist, during one particular hour of worship—the funeral service. In the face of sin, death, loss, and a form of the threat of meaninglessness that surpasses most others, with the body of the deceased before us and the tear-wrung family to tend—here a great hymn of faith is regularly affirmed: “The L̲ORD is my light and my salvation” (v. 1).

Those gathered before burial are ready to hear the wisdom of faith that comes in the experience of the community of faith. The psalmist lifts a hymn of faith, a song of courage, in the face of adversity. He speaks from his experience. He teaches, like a grandfather teaching a grandson, how to spin a fishing fly, boil the sap down in the sugar house, watch a basketball game, watch the sun set. To such similarly familiar rhetorical forms—the experience of faith learned in the community of faith—a congregation and grieving family may regularly and healthily return during the time of saying goodbye.

Psalm 27 consists of two songs, divided at v. 7. The first is a hymn of thanksgiving and faith, the second a song of loss and lament. Both may well fit into a set of forms for worship, and they may in fact fit well together (as some earlier editor has clearly decided). Yet they make two distinct movements and statements. Within the movements of all the psalms (recall Gunkel’s five types of psalms, mentioned earlier) they capture the two most significant themes: thanksgiving and lament. A congregation that knows how to face disappointment with honesty and death with dignity is being prepared for the singing of this psalm. Recently, Elaine Pagels, known best for her work on Gnosticism and the New Testament, spoke about stopping for a moment in the vestibule of a church at worship and realizing that “here is a family that knows how to face death.” Both honest lament and faithful thanksgiving are parts of facing the uncertain present in light of God’s future.

In considering the two parts of Psalm 27, it is good to remember some of the features that they share with the rest of the Psalter. For instance, v. 7, dividing itself from v. 6, recalls quickly how much writers need editors and how much editors need writers. The Bible overflows with the interplay of
careful, cautious, prudent editing and creative, fiery, courageous writing, as the Psalms exemplify in the Hebrew Scripture and as the Gospel of John best displays in the New Testament. The community of faith includes natural writers and born editors. Sometimes a set of conflicts can be ameliorated by arranging things so that particular gifts may be spiritually used to the upbuilding of the church. Let those who are creators be creative and those who are redeemers be redemptive! In addition, Psalm 27 carries examples of other typical features within the psalms: rhythm and parallelism (synonymous, antithetic, synthetic), which give the psalms their beat (vv. 1-2); poetic echoes, which later reverberate in the New Testament (v. 5); hymnic cadence that makes the psalms so healthy for regular prayer.

There is one exegetical curiosity embedded in the first part of the psalm that may provide a final interest for the one charged with speaking a divine word in life and before death. A possible translation of 27:4 reads: “to behold the beauty of the LORD in the morning in his temple.” After a time of trouble, has the singer gone alone to the Temple? Has he there prayed and stayed all night? Has he lifted his heart to God in the darkness of the dark night of the soul? Has he then watched through the anxious terrors of the night to see the sunrise and so been cleansed and healed? Death, he seems to say, is not a candle snuffed but an oil lamp turned down—because the Dawn has come! In the morning.

March 14, 2004—Third Sunday in Lent
Like the twenty-third Psalm, Psalm 63:1-8 is about faith, confident trust in God. The characteristic forms of lament are also present here. In this psalm, though, the words are spoken to God, not about God. Here we may find a helpful correction for some of our current spiritual life. This psalm should put a little steady 4/4 rhythm into our willingness to talk to God. We affirm God as righteous, just, merciful, faithful, and gracious. So, as this psalm encourages us, we may find courage to lift our heartfelt prayers directly to God, to speak from the heart. It is healthy so to do. Recently, a college sophomore, considering the early choices about studies and majors that loom with later and larger consequences, said in full and honest confession, “It’s scary to think hard about your future.” It is a brave person who honestly will admit and lament some fear, as this psalm encourages us to do.

Furthermore, this hymn of the heart assumes a divine presence—a
lasting horizon to life and faith. God simply “is,” continuing like a percussive beat under all of life, down in the ground of being. This singer is beset, before and behind, by troubles. A soul thirsty, a body fainting, a heart longing—there is an empty, God-shaped hollow in the heart of our hurting.

In the life of the community of faith, women and men present themselves for marriage. They may confess, with some assistance, all manner of thirsts and faintings and longings. It is healthy so to do. But when they can separate those that carry a human remedy from those meant only for the Lord of every heart, then they can sometimes prepare to treat each other in a truly human way and not expect to be mated to gods or goddesses. As commitment and delight and wonder, human love really rises up in imperfect response to the God who so loved—committed to, delighted in, and wondered at—God’s only Son. Loving is giving, not taking or using. A soul nourished by a longing for the divine will gradually know these things about love. The “cry” of the heart is the start of the hymn. We start where we hurt. The introit is a lament, at least for two verses.

This matter of thirst both unites and complicates our poem. Like a fugue appearing and disappearing, the song of Psalm 63 names a “thirst” that will not be slaked by anything other than Ultimate Reality. Now, some of this thirsty confusion may be due to a long-observed confusion in the order of verses. Following Gunkel, many commentators have arranged the verses to the order of 1, 2, 6, 7, 8, 4, 5, 3. Yet the exact ordering of the psalm has little full influence on its interpretation. The verses hold together, whether in the inherited order or in the edited improvement, guided by a desire for lasting meaning. Once during a continuing education session at the local Veterans’ Hospital each staff person was asked to describe with one word what he or she brought to the work of the hospital. I don’t remember what the nurses, technicians, physicians, and administrators said, but the chaplain’s word remains vivid: “meaning.” Her presence brings meaning to those singing in lament.

Finally, one formal feature of this set of verses deserves some remark. Like a repetitive, staccato interruption, there is a physical praise at work in this song, a praise that employs “lips” (v. 3), “hands” (v. 4), “mouth” (v. 5). Praising God is a physical act. It is healthy so to do. Praise involves presence. A pastor once went for his physical exam to the office of a backsliding parishioner. Said the doctor, “Why do you worry so much about numbers—worship attendance, giving totals, numbers of members? I don’t need to be
a part of the numbers game to be faithful.” To which the minister replied, “Oh, for the same reason you worry so much about numbers—blood pressure, cholesterol count, even the dreaded weight scale. The body craves health—true of your body and true of the body of Christ.” There is a physical interest at work in Psalm 63. There is also an awareness of physical intimacy here that is startling: “on my bed . . . in the watches of the night” (v. 6). Our psalm lifts a physical, even intimate, grace note that surprises and disturbs and sets us on a course of healing. The poet has found that there is some “help” here. A choral swell lifts the end of the song: “because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you” (v. 3).

March 21, 2004—Fourth Sunday in Lent
Ps. 32; Josh. 5:9-12; 2 Cor. 5:16-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Any interpretation of Psalm 32 will inevitably run headlong into its rendering of the nature of sin. For ill or good, our psalm forces this upon us. Just what is the “sin” covered in v. 1? How do we understand the “iniquity” of v. 2? What physical dimensions to sin does v. 3 assume?

For our writer, sin is primarily a personal condition. Note the several references of this type: “[T]hose whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered” (v. 1); “While I kept silence, my body wasted away” (v. 3); “I acknowledged my sin to you . . . ‘I will confess my transgression’ to the L ORD” (v. 5). Our text affords some clues to the psalmist’s hamartiology. Sin is deceit (v. 2)—“living a lie,” as we might say. Sin brings with it a kind of weakness (v. 4), an unhealthy and lasting ennui. Sin includes ignorance (v. 8), recalling Wesley’s yoking of learning and piety.

Nonetheless, in at least one place the writer acknowledges an orb of influence extending well beyond the merely individual or purely personal aspects of our human condition. He acknowledges “a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters” (v. 6). The reference is to a flood, natural or cultural. Even in the reaches of Scripture, like this psalm, that seem most individually oriented, there abides a recognition of sin as pervasive. The God who delivers us from such personal and pervasive sin deserves highest praise: “Be glad in the L ORD . . . rejoice . . . shout for joy!” (v. 10).

The psalm’s penetrating ruminations have a disquieting relevance in our twenty-first-century world. Like the psalmist, we recognize that sin is utterly personal. As grace touches ground in Jesus Christ, so sin touches sand in personal confessions. We get lost in lust, gluttony, avarice, sloth,
anger, envy, and pride. And recent events have revealed in disturbing detail that sin is pervasive. It has a corporate, expansive, even institutional reality. We mistake its power, if we see only, say, several dozen individuals acting to destroy property and life in lower Manhattan. That, of course, is real—and true. But sin is the power of death throughout life. It is the condition of life under which such treachery takes place. Sin is the absence of God. It is an orb of confusion in the world.

The power of sin vastly surpasses any individual, human attempt at cure. Individuals may behave morally or immorally, usually some of both. But corporate sin marches on, as Richard Niebuhr showed in 1932: “Man’s capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but man’s inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.” Sin is that “inclination.” “If social cohesion is impossible without coercion, and coercion is impossible without the creation of social injustice, and the destruction of injustice is impossible without the use of further coercion, are we not in an endless cycle of social conflict?” Sin is that “impossible.” As a rule, in American Protestant Christianity, we vastly underestimate this primary, pervasive form of sin. This is both our achievement and our defeat.

Robert Allan Hill is Senior Pastor at Asbury First United Methodist Church in Rochester, New York.

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Why an issue of *Quarterly Review* on feminist Wesleyan theology? For some, feminist theologies are an aberration that should remain on the margins; for others, Wesleyan theologies are mere hagiography. But people holding these views should reconsider. In the past four decades, both feminist and Wesleyan theologies have grown from curiosities into mature schools of thought, each the subject of numerous articles and books. They have expressed the religious experience of many people seeking to love God and neighbor in societies that define people by gender, race, class, and region. They have articulated people's longings to participate in God's grace and to cross social barriers to be with "the other." Female scholars and candidates for ordained ministry have claimed both of these schools of thought.

That said, no volume has attempted a sustained conversation between feminist theologies and Wesleyan theologies. No set of essays has been available to students who are trying to integrate feminist and Wesleyan theologies. A single issue of *Quarterly Review* cannot fill that void, but it can seek to be a starting point for such a conversation.

Why is this an interesting conversation? First, there are intriguing feminist impulses in earliest Methodism. John Wesley's writings and his brother Charles's hymns speak movingly of the plight of women impoverished by eighteenth-century British economic practices and lift up men and women as worthy ministers. Second, in the Wesleyan family women were theologians. The theological influence of Susanna Wesley on John's theological development is famous, warranting a critical edition of what remains of Susanna's writings (Charles Wallace, ed., *Susanna Wesley: The Complete Writings* [Oxford University Press, 1997]). Also, John and his sisters wrote letters of intense existential and theological importance.
Third, in the United States, the Methodist movement and the Woman Movement in the nineteenth century energized each other with a momentum that continued into the twentieth-century Methodist and feminist movements. The bulk of scholarship on the Wesleyan movement and women records the amazing activity of women seeking social justice on behalf of children, women, and men. Scholarly projects from the 1980s to the present have recorded the accomplishments of many of these women, as the biographies of Wesleyan women were researched and written. In the first essay, Rosemary Keller traces the retrieval of the "her-story" of Wesleyan women, a prerequisite for feminist Wesleyan theology.

Developing a constructive feminist Wesleyan theology represents a further step in the story of Wesleyan women. In this issue some of the grand theological themes are addressed. Pamela Couture approaches the problem of evil and the nature of God. Sarah Heaner Lancaster wends her way through the difficulties women have had with the idea of original sin and the Genesis texts. Naomi Annandale uses literature to help us think about the difficulties of the Atonement. Susie Stanley describes the way the doctrine of sanctification has supported many women's journeys, including her own. Mary Elizabeth Moore argues for an ecclesiology based on the notion of "commissioning." Catherine Keller creates a theopoetics of feminist and Wesleyan eschatology. The approaches of these six women differ, given their different theological disciplines: Couture, Moore, and Annandale write as practical theologians; Lancaster and Stanley as historical theologians; and Keller as a constructive theologian. Their disciplines and audiences are diverse. It is apparent in their essays that the students they teach, the congregants to whom they preach, and the audiences to whom they speak have differing comfort levels with feminist theology.

While this volume has a precedent in Quarterly Review's Summer 2000 issue, which featured the writings of women-of-color scholars, it remains only a beginning. Yet it makes a distinct attempt to begin to build a corpus of writings that can be identified as feminist Wesleyan theology. It is our hope that these essays will inspire other women to explore and interpret their religious experience as women, as feminists, as womanists, and as Wesleyans.

Pamela D. Couture is Professor of Practical Theology and Pastoral Care at Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School in Rochester, New York.
Toward a Feminist Wesleyan Theology

Historical Foundations of a Feminist Wesleyan Theology

ROSEMARY SKINNER KELLER

This edition of Quarterly Review is a historic volume, representing the first effort to address a range of theological themes from a feminist and Wesleyan standpoint. Theology traditionally has been developed by academic scholars who study the public thought and recorded sermons of men in a tradition. In contrast, a Wesleyan feminist theology is rooted in the recovery of stories of women's experience over four centuries of the Wesleyan heritage in the British Isles and the United States. Wesleyan feminist theology deals with a range of themes often dealt with by systematic theologians, but does it in a contextual and diverse way that is consistent with Wesley's "practical theology."

The written records of Wesleyan women typically have been their journals, diaries, and letters. Their experiences have been retrieved from these private and personal sources, and a rich and lively history of women in the Methodist heritage has emerged. That history of women's lived experience becomes the basic source out of which a Wesleyan feminist theology may now be constructed as feminist Wesleyan authors draw from that tradition or stand in that tradition as they write. Their stories have been laden with theological expression and practice, though that theological grounding has not been named until now.

The year 1980 marks the beginning of the modern recovery of Wesleyan women's history. On February 1–3, four-hundred people attended the national conference "Women in New Worlds: Historical Perspectives on the United Methodist Tradition" (hereafter WNW) held in Cincinnati, Ohio.
Sponsored by the United Methodist General Commission on Archives and History, it was the first conference to focus on the heritage of women in a major Christian denomination and the first to be sponsored by the historical agency of a general church body. This conference introduced denominational history as a major facet in the history of women, and women's history as a necessary part of denominational studies.

The Women's Division of the General Board of Global Ministries has consistently been at the center of advocacy for women's issues in The United Methodist Church. This was also the case in the creation of the WNW Conference. The initial impetus grew out of a recommendation from the National Seminar of United Methodist Women in 1975. It authorized the directors of the Women's Division to petition the 1976 General Conference for the General Commission on Archives and History to appoint a special committee to research and publish a history of the contribution of women to the denomination. The petition was adopted and the mandate was handed to the Commission without funding. Through the skill and commitment of Commission staff and members, subsequent grants were obtained from general church agencies, philanthropic foundations, and individuals to launch the Women's History Project.

A major part of the work of the Women's History Project was the preparation of the two volumes of *Women in New Worlds: Historical Perspectives on the Wesleyan Tradition* (ed. by Rosemary Keller, Louise Queen, and Hilah Thomas [Abingdon, 1981, 1982]). From the fifty-eight papers delivered at the Conference, forty essays appeared in the two volumes. The essays covered an amazing breadth and depth of topics, including the life experience and spiritual empowerment of individual women; women's organizations in the African Methodist Episcopal Church and in antecedent denominations of The United Methodist Church; church women in social reform, national and international missions; and women in church professions.

The most far-reaching word from the WNW Conference and collections of articles came in the address of one of the plenary speakers, Donald G. Mathews. He stated, "The significance of women's history is that the injection of women into our historical consciousness demands a rewriting of everyone's history" (*Women in New Worlds*, 1:30). Ever since, feminist historians have been committed not to let women's history be simply an add-on to traditionally written history but to place women and men, of different races and classes, side by side in the writing of everyone's history.
Three years after the WNW Conference, several United Methodist agencies held a major theological conference at Emory University to celebrate the Methodist Bicentennial 1784–1984. The papers from this conference were brought together under the title of the consultation, "Wesleyan Theology Today: A Bicentennial Theological Consultation," edited by Theodore Runyon and published by Kingswood Books (1985). Nine papers were published from a section in this consultation under the title "Constructing a Feminist Theology in the Wesleyan Tradition." They covered topics of women's experience in the origins of the movement under John Wesley's leadership in Britain and in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America, biblical foundations, Christology, and African-American issues.

Since these two conferences in the early 1980s, dissertations, books, and essays have been written that focus on Methodist women's historical experience and that interpret their lives within wider church and women's history. A feminist theology emerges naturally out of the embracing theme of the spiritual empowerment of Wesleyan women. These studies describe and analyze an array of more specific themes through which their spiritual empowerment unfolds: calling, conversion, inclusion and exclusion within movements and institutions, leadership styles, community building, and social witness, to name some. In this essay, I discuss only a few monographs to consider this question: What have we learned about Methodist women's experience that guides us in writing their history and developing a feminist Wesleyan theology at the beginning of the twenty-first century?

**Women in Late Eighteenth-Century British Methodism**

Focusing on books describing and interpreting women in late eighteenth-century British Methodism, the African-American tradition, and American Methodism more broadly, I am stunned by the way in which history repeats itself and points to similar theological conclusions growing out of all three perspectives.

In *She Offered Them Christ: The Legacy of Women Preachers in Early Methodism* (Abingdon, 1993), Paul Chilcote sets the context for understanding the place of women's leadership in early British Methodism:

> The heartbeat of the whole [Wesleyan] movement was personal religious experience and its power to transform both the individual and society. Wesley was ready to adopt and adapt any idea that might further this cause. His chief
purpose was to help the Church proclaim the gospel more effectively. The spirit of the movement and the vision of the founder contributed both to the acceptance and encouragement of female leadership. Wesley pioneered and sustained the revival. Women, as well as men, were allowed to express themselves freely. (24)

Chilcote also builds upon the early work in the recovery of the place of women in the Wesleyan movement by Earl Kent Brown, *Women of Mr. Wesley's Methodism* (Edwin Mellen, 1983), in two other books, *John Wesley and the Women Preachers of Early Methodism* (Scarecrow, 1991) and *Her Own Story: Autobiographical Portraits of Early Methodist Women* (Abingdon, 2002). Through studies of women's journals, diaries, and letters (some exchanged with John Wesley), these books trace an evolution of females' spiritual experience, telling the stories of women's expanding roles in the Wesleyan movement and their important contribution to making the Methodist revival in the British Isles a powerful religious awakening.

Theologically, the women repent of what they see to be their sinful conditions; seek forgiveness and justification; experience conversion, calling, new birth, and assurance; and go on to sanctification and even entire sanctification. These women shared their experiences as Wesley allowed women to speak increasingly freely in public gatherings—first expressing their faith and praying in class and band meetings; then moving to praying, testifying, and expounding their faith in worship settings; and finally exegeting their own biblical texts and preaching. Wesley's attitude toward women liberalized under the impact of the evangelical success of the movement as it moved toward independence from the Church of England. There were not enough ordained ministers to do the work of preaching and bringing converts to Christ. It became increasingly clear to Wesley that he must accept occasional women preachers because they exhibited an "extraordinary calling" from God. They were bringing in a harvest of souls. Their effectiveness as preachers was proof that God was blessing their ministries.

Wesley never took the final step of ordaining women, which would have meant that they could have been called by the church, as did men, to the official preaching ministry. However, he did allow and support women to "travel the connection" as preachers. A number of them, including Sarah Mallett, Sarah Crosby, and Mary Bosanquet, traveled with Wesley himself. The
decade of the 1780s was a time of blossoming for the ministries of women, both in terms of numbers and of official recognition and acceptance of their worth. At the Methodist Conference of 1787, Sarah Mallett was officially authorized to preach. "Female Brethren" in Norfolk, Suffolk, and Leeds were given wide clerical and lay support due to their extraordinary effectiveness.

A new generation of Wesleyan women preachers was coming onto the scene, women who saw themselves empowered by God to preach. Mary Barritt, the most famous female evangelical preacher of the early nineteenth century, described her own and other women’s success in bringing conversions and the theological conviction undergirding their ministries:

In the Yorkshire Dales, extending from Ripon to Bainbridge, Reeth, and Richmond, the Lord enabled me, and others, to gather the harvest, in handfuls, and everywhere he gave us fruit, for, at that time, those circuits had little help from the travelling preachers... Suffice it to say, that the Almighty, in a most extraordinary manner, removed my scruples, answered my objections, and thrust me out into his vineyard. Indeed, nothing but a powerful conviction that God required it at my hand... could have supported me in it. (Chilcote, She Offered Them Christ, 114)

While Wesley liked to think that negative attitudes toward women preaching were decreasing in his later years, a severe conservative reaction set in after his death in 1791. At the same time that women such as Mary Barritt were winning a growing number of souls, her opponents cried out against her “emotionalism” and even called her a man in woman’s clothing who had left her children. In the decade after Wesley’s death, an entrenched conservatism and desire for respectability set in.

Theologically, women in the Wesleyan movement in late eighteenth-century Britain were spiritually empowered for their ministries by a belief in God’s direct call and communication with them and by the belief that the Holy Spirit was guiding their every move. This indisputable message from God was confirmed by the earthly leadership of John Wesley and the egalitarian emphasis of the revival he led. That spirit was quenched by the ministers who followed after Wesley’s death. Women became an embarrassment and a threat to the clergy and laity of the next generation. As the movement became institutionalized, structural survival took precedence over their confidence in the gifts of the Spirit.
Women in the African-American Tradition

In the decade between the mid-1980s and the mid-1990s, three African-American scholars set out to recover a black female activist tradition in American history. While figures such as Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman had become larger-than-life representatives of black female activism, these recent authors sought to uncover a larger cultural heritage in which Truth and Tubman were neither isolated nor atypical. The writers recorded this emerging tradition in three collections of primary sources, including autobiographical memoirs, sermons, and interpretative essays: William L. Andrews, ed., *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century* (Indiana University Press, 1986); Marcia Y. Riggs, ed., *Can I Get A Witness? Prophetic Religious Voices of African American Women: An Anthology* (Orbis, 1997); and Bettye Collier-Thomas, *Daughters of Thunder: Black Women Preachers and Their Sermons, 1850–1979* (Jossey-Bass, 1997).

These authors were not trying specifically to discover a Wesleyan tradition of black female activism. In each study, however, the prominence of women in the Methodist heritage is striking and points to the activism that was embedded in the theological tradition.

Andrews reprints and analyzes the full autobiographies of Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, and Julia Foote, three women who were born in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and practiced their ministries in the nineteenth century. A focus on these women frames the broader experience of all the women in these volumes. As Andrews writes,

> Probably without consciously intending, these women exemplify in their lives a feminism that challenged male leadership and prerogatives, that found in the Spirit an authority transcending the imposing presence of the ecclesial voice. Although this "spiritual feminism" was still in its formative phases, Lee, Elaw, and Foote pointed the way along a path that other American religious women would tread. All three of these women embraced both a feminist and racial radicalism, but for the three, slave or free, black or white, were secondary characterizations when placed beside the primacy of the Spirit's call. (*Sisters of the Spirit*, vi)

> After feeling a call from God to preach around 1811, Jarena Lee sought that endorsement from Bishop Richard Allen of her denomination, the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME). Allen rejected her request on the
grounds that Methodist rules did not allow it. Later, in 1819, he endorsed her call to preach. She then began an itinerant preaching career and her effectiveness gained her significant acceptance among male clergy. As an official traveling exhorter, and not as a licensed preacher, Lee traveled hundreds of miles and preached hundreds of sermons each year over an extended period.

Zilpha Elaw was drawn as a teenager to the Methodists who were evangelizing in her area. Through religious visions in which Jesus Christ appeared to her, she was converted and joined a Methodist society in 1808. After successive trances and visions and the encouragement of several Christian women, she felt divinely commissioned by the Holy Spirit to preach and began an itinerancy under no license or denominational sanction. Elaw took her preaching ministry into slaveholding states on the East Coast, preached together with Jarena Lee in 1839, and traveled to England, where she delivered more than a thousand sermons. The opposition she received, in common with other black and white women, was that it was either unseemly or unscriptural for a woman to preach. Elaw was not deterred.

Converted at age fifteen, Julia Foote married three years later and became a member of an African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) congregation. She soon believed that God had called her to a preaching career, but the minister of Foote's church would not allow her in his pulpit. He forced her out of the church after she began to hold evangelistic services in her home. Gaining no satisfaction from higher authorities of the AME Church, Foote began an itinerant career of her own and preached in many Methodist pulpits in the Northeast and Midwest. Later in life, her ministry gained official authorization and she became a missionary, ordained deacon, and ordained elder in the AMEZ church, only the second woman to become an elder in her denomination.

The autobiographical accounts of these women are filled with their theological expressions and witnesses to spiritual empowerment. Each describes her conversion and transformation (before which she felt her life was of little worth) that led immediately to her call by God for a special purpose. Finding it impossible to fulfill their callings in acceptable ways in the church, they chose to act upon the freedom they received in Christ. Commenting on the censure of Elaw and Foote by their husbands, Andrews writes, "[T]he more convinced each woman became of her divine appointment, the more independent she felt of his censure and the more serenely confident she became in judging her behavior by a higher authority than his" (Sisters of the Spirit, 18).
Women in North American Methodism


*Grace Sufficient*, the first narrative synthesis of women in the American Methodist tradition, is drawn from a wealth of primary source documents and smaller interpretative studies. The book begins with the origins of the Methodist movement in the colonial period and concludes with the creation of the Methodist Church in 1939, through the merger of the Methodist Episcopal Church with the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and the Methodist Protestant Church.

Its primary emphasis is upon Methodist women in the nineteenth century. Through her study of diaries, spiritual autobiographies, and letters, Schmidt focuses on women's religious lives rather than on their activities. She emphasizes that God's loving care and guidance provided "grace sufficient" to give women deep spiritual experience, particularly through the Wesleyan experiences of holiness and sanctification, and to carry them through the struggles of their daily lives.

*Spirituality and Social Responsibility* is a collection of biographical studies and primary source documents of fifteen women in the United Methodist tradition in the United States, from the American Revolution to the late twentieth century. The accounts represent a feminist analysis of women's individual religious experience and activity as they tested the perimeters of the permissible roles of females in differing racial and ethnic cultures and challenged and stretched acceptable boundaries. The writers present the essential theological connection of their subjects' personal faith and social activism through a pervading Wesleyan commitment to the equality of all persons in Jesus Christ. The inner assurance of Christ's saving power led these women—including Catherine Garrettson, Amanda Berry Smith, Frances Willard, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Georgia Harkness, and Thelma Stevens—to correct injustices in social conditions and structures that oppress God's people.
Strangers and Pilgrims takes a major step in integrating women’s religious history into the wider stream of American religious history, demonstrating that the experience of women makes the longstanding grand narrative of religious history out of date. Brekus’s study gives us a glimpse of one century of what “everyone’s history” might mean. She did not start out to write about Methodist women. Her purpose was to write a social and cultural history of female evangelists prior to the Civil War who tried to forge a tradition of female leadership in early America. Little has been known about any female preaching tradition in antebellum America because the women’s stories have been written out of the records by clergy and historians who followed after them. From the beginning of her study Brekus knew that if a female preaching tradition did exist in early American history, she would be compelled to uncover it and write a first piece of history that includes the history of these women and reconceives the traditional grand narrative.

She discovered over one-hundred evangelical women in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America who lived out of the unalterable conviction that God called them to be “laborers in the harvest” to preach the gospel. These women were members not of established denominations but of the Methodist, African American Methodist, Freewill Baptist, and Christian Connection sects—groups that stood over against the secular values they felt predominated in mainline denominations. In contrast to the trust in the market economy, upward mobility, and the “anxious spirit of gain” held by established churches, the sects sought to create “islands of holiness” that provided a clear alternative to a materialistic and secular society.

Brekus sums up the theological conviction underlying the commitment of these sects and their advocacy of women in the pulpit:

Populist and anti-intellectual, the Freewill Baptists, Christians, Methodists, and African Methodists created a religious culture in which even the most humble convert—the poor, the unlearned, the slave, or the female—felt qualified to preach the gospel. First, intuitively, and then more deliberately and self-consciously, they shaped a culture in which inspiration was more important than education, emotional revivals more important than genteel worship services, and the call to preach more important than the hierarchy of sex. Influenced by the shortage of ordained ministers, the growing numbers of female converts, the turbulence of revival meetings, and popular beliefs in immediate revelation, they allowed
The women preachers were empowered theologically by their heartfelt religious experiences and the religious authority they gained from their conversions and direct calling from God. Until the third decade of the nineteenth century, clergy of these sects affirmed their ministries, as John Wesley had earlier, because they were bringing converts and saving souls. As with Wesley’s day, by the 1830s and 1840s (as early as 1830 among the Methodists and later in the decade among the other sects), a severe backlash had set in. The reasons were much the same. The sects were outgrowing their lower-class roots and becoming more middle-class, with their congregations made up of larger numbers of professional people. They began to call for a more educated clergy, with women and lesser-educated males no longer wanted in the pulpits. Women in the pulpit created fears and threats that undermined the increasing elevation by society of the woman’s “proper,” domestic role.

Conclusion

History too surely had repeated itself. The theological grounding for the full ministries of women was strong. As long as the people, clergy and laity, supported the women, and in turn their basic Wesleyan theological convictions, women could freely live out their ministries. The calls of early Wesleyan women in Great Britain and of black and white women in America were repressed not by more conservative theological stances but by altered cultural conditions that led the clergy and laity to deny their gospel and increasingly to conform the church to the world. In each case, the official leaders sought to gain status and respect for their movements and denominations in order to establish them institutionally within the social milieu of their culture and day. Yet, they lacked the faith to let the Spirit be released. The preaching ministries of women were received as threats to institutional birth and blossoming rather than as gifts that might enable the God-given equality of women and men to take root among them. May the foundations of Wesleyan theology be the grounding for advancing the ministries of women, beside men, in the early twenty-first century.

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The Blood That Tells (Knows) the Truth: Evil and the Nature of God

PAMELA D. COUTURE

Other harrowing scenes show the partially decapitated body of a little girl, her red scarf still wound round her neck. Another small girl was lying on a stretcher with her brain and left ear missing. Another dead child had its feet blown away.


Before the war, this maternity hospital had been busy as women sought caesarians to complete their deliveries quickly in advance of the bombing. They continued operating during the war until an Iraqi army unit moved in next door in preparation for street battles. After three days the army left and the hospital re-opened. Now families have no money for hospital services and are afraid to come because of security concerns, especially at night. There are gunfights in the neighbourhood every night, she said. So women have to deliver their babies at home... . "We need security, We don't care who brings it. We weren't safe under Saddam and we aren't safe now."


For our sakes who adore Thee, Lord,
blast their hopes,
blight their lives,
protract their bitter pilgrimage,
make heavy their steps,
water their way with their tears,
stain the white snow with the blood of their wounded feet!
We ask it, in the spirit of love, of Him
Who is the Source of Love, and
Who is ever-faithful refuge and friend of all that are sore beset
and seek His aid with humble and contrite hearts. Amen.

—Samuel Clemens, *The War Prayer* (1904–05)

If, then, all nations, Pagan, Mahometan, and Christian, do, in fact, make war their last resort, what farther proof do we need of the utter degeneracy of all nations from the plainest principles of reason and virtue? Of the absolute want, both of common sense and common humanity, which runs through the whole race of mankind?

—John Wesley, “The Doctrine of Original Sin, according to Scripture, Reason, and Experience” (1756)

Robert Fisk, the Christian Peacemaker Team, Samuel Clemens, and John Wesley have this in common: They narrate the horrors of war in graphic and realistic detail. They do not offer abstract images of bombs like fireworks, lighting the horizon in glory like God descending in a pillar of fire on Mt. Sinai. Rather, they illumine the shadowy images of the inevitable innocent victims—the orphans and widows, the families and elderly—whose live and dead bodies shed the blood that tells the truth.

For John Wesley, the fact that human beings—Christians at that—make war on one another is the consummate indictment of humankind. It proves that sin and evil are alive and well in the world and in human nature. Though some feminist theologians eschew the categories of *original sin* and *evil*, the fact of violence against women and children, as occurs in war and other times, prompts feminist pastoral theologians to adopt this language.

If we, too, are convinced by stories of war, abuse, and exploitation that sin and evil exist in the world, then we may ask how we are to know sin and evil when we see them. In light of humankind’s inhumanity to humankind, is it possible to proclaim a God of justice, mercy, and love? How are we to use the words *sin* and *evil* with congregants, students, or readers who deny that sin and evil exist or who are perplexed about the various pastoral connotations of these words? Feminist pastoral theology and Wesleyan theology help us answer these questions.

I approach these questions not as a systematic or historical theologian but as a practical theologian of care. I am not accountable to abstract principles or historical authorities. Rather, I am accountable to God and to the persons in my mind’s eye who are suffering as I sit with them or write
about them. My theological method in answering these questions is to seek help from those feminists and Wesleyans who have wrestled with these questions before me. The standard for my answer is created by potential and existing innocent victims—in other words, the standard is the blood that tells the truth.

**How Do I Know Sin and Evil When I See Them?**

Like many of the congregants, seminarians, and readers of today, when I entered seminary, I had little use for the ideas of sin and evil. I first contemplated the idea of evil in a serious way when a seminary professor wrote on a term paper, "Is there no positive evil for you?" No one had ever asked me that before. Since then I have met evil in the suddenly narrowed eyes of a person in a counseling room, in the flow of raw power in institutions, and in the gross dehumanization of children, women, and men in poverty, famine, and genocide. How does a feminist and Wesleyan pastoral theology help me identify those circumstances that are rightly called "sin" and "evil"?

_Sin_ occurs when we do harm to one another, and in so doing, do harm to God. Sin is individual and interpersonal. It consists of attitudes and actions toward one another that we can hope to control in some measure, even if we cannot eradicate them. It results from lack of understanding or from miscalculation. Sin has partial sight; and when the angle of vision widens, sin knows itself. When we recognize the sinfulness of the way we treat one another, with God's grace we can seek forgiveness and change our ways.

_Evil_ is most easily recognized when it premeditates malice and delights in harm. Sometimes evil is simply unmoved by suffering; at other times it seeks satisfaction in it. This kind of evil has no motivation for seeking the good—it is the positive evil to which my seminary professor called my attention. People who motivate or act on this kind of evil are often called "perpetrators." However, evil that deceives is more subtle. It is a self-perpetuating system that seduces and entraps people into cooperation with its ways. Even when we agonize over the ways in which our actions may be involved in systems that exploit others, evil makes it seem nearly impossible to eradicate our involvement if we are to live at all. Let us call "perpetrators" those people who _know_ that they are caught in this system.

In "Thinking in a Clinical Mode: Claiming Resistance in the Face of Evil," pastoral theologian Margaret F. Arms describes the effects of evil on
Sally, an adult woman who was sexually abused by her grandfather. As part of this abuse, the grandfather "offered" her to his friends. When she resisted and fled, he caught her and allowed the friends to gang rape her. Using the work of Wendy Farley and Elaine Scarry, Margaret observes that evil robs the victim(s) of the capacity to resist, of language that describes evil, and of meaning through which to transform the experience. Evil takes, but it does not teach. These victims, regardless of the sins of their lives, are "innocent," because they suffer beyond any reasonable meaning. These characteristics distinguish evil from the suffering of ordinary life.

Sexual and physical abuse seems like an obvious manifestation of evil that everyone should recognize. But not everyone does. Even in the church, many people find it difficult to say that abuse is unacceptable, much less to call it sinful or evil.

People find it even more difficult to imagine that they participate in evil in their everyday lives. We eat food that has been produced by people who work in inhumane conditions. We buy clothes that have been sewn by sweatshop labor. We transport ourselves in vehicles that leave contaminants that risk our health. Self-perpetuating systems that provide the inducements for human beings to exploit one another or create disease are evil. Even the most radical of activists cannot extract themselves from these systems, because, paradoxically, their activism against some forms of exploitation often depends on their access to other systems that exploit.

Frequently, the systems of everyday life that create radical suffering are based on gender discrimination. In many countries girls receive less education, medical care, and nutrition than their brothers. Some population experts believe that female infanticide or selective abortion exists because the gender ratios of some countries are radically different from the biological norm. In part, this discrimination can be traced to the belief systems and interpersonal practices of families. An interpersonal explanation of the problem, however, is not adequate. Law often supports discriminatory practices against women, denying them access to property, inheritance, and employment; and even where law upholds women's rights, custom prevents the adequate implementation of law. These systems, too, fit the seductive pattern of evil.

In her feminist pastoral theology of white privilege, Nancy Ramsay describes the way in which she discovered herself to be a perpetuator of racist and classist beliefs. She writes, "That summer . . . I watched these chil-
students begin class by pledging allegiance to the flag. . . . I came to realize that, however bright they might be, these children would never have the opportunity to succeed. . . ." She affirms Fumitaka Matsuoka's description of an interlocking, systemic sin as "the negation of relation"—a description for which I use the word evil. Nancy's work describes the ways that people in dominant positions demean themselves, as well as others, when they become witting or unwitting accomplices in complex systems of exploitation.

Margaret and Nancy identify two sets of victims of evil: the direct, "innocent" victims of abuse and exploitation, such as Sally and "the children," and the perpetuating but dehumanized victims, such as Nancy. Using a different means, evil achieves the same end denying its victims the ability to resist, describe, and make meaning. Paradoxically, the process of resisting, describing, and making meaning is the only way to defeat evil. Though all are victims, some have an easier time than others gaining footing on the healing side of the paradox.

Wesley's thorough description of sin and evil (he uses the words interchangeably) fits the descriptions above. Evil has its most dramatic and all-encompassing effects when it creates war or destitution. Evil is perpetuated by the misuse of wealth, liberty, and power. The forces of political and economic domination, including the part played by the egos of powerful political and religious leaders, blind the average person to the suffering that will be caused when violence is the answer to conflict. The effects of this evil are perpetuated in such a way that one powerful man can dispose thousands of men to create suffering in the lives of others, with the effects lasting for multiple generations. Women and children suffer the effects of this self-perpetuating evil. God may discipline the evildoers through suffering but not the innocent, as they are already suffering at the evildoer's hands.

A God of Mercy and Love?

Where is a good and merciful God in the midst of this evil? Sally remembers that as she was raped, "I gave up. I stopped fighting. All I could do was focus on the blue wildflower I saw on the ground and somehow know for a fleeting moment that God loved me. Then awareness of God was gone, and I couldn't resist anymore." Remembering the flower at a later time in her life, Sally also remembers thinking, "They don't know this flower is here. They don't know there is beauty here. They don't know that God loves me. . . . But I knew. . . . Grandpa didn't steal my soul—it went to my God-place
deep inside for safekeeping, hidden from me until I was safe." For Nancy, victims, perpetrators, and perpetuators who resist evil receive grace. This grace is found in "relationships with other persons of European American heritage who are also committed to accountability in the process of confronting racism" and in "conversation partners whose racial difference from [her] own stimulates further understanding and revises and expands the limits of [her] imagination."8

How is it possible to make sense of the fact that, in the midst of evil, Sally could remember that God loves her, if for only a fleeting moment? How is it possible that Nancy can identify resistance to her enculturation as an act of grace? What theological ideas about God matter to a person—victim or perpetrator—who discovers evil around her?

Wesleyan and feminist pastoral theologians claim that humanity is created by God in God's image. This image is sustained, even when it seems barely present. It is a potential that cannot be fully obliterated. This potential is always cradled in God's prevenient grace. Pastoral care supports human flourishing by seeking to discern, support, and regenerate the image and likeness of God in humanity over against the distortions that result from sin and evil.

The evil that Sally was subjected to and the evil that Nancy found herself perpetuating are dependent upon a belief system that makes some people the property of others by virtue of a biological or social quality. Prominent interpreters of the gospel, including the writers of pseudo-Pauline epistles and theologians Augustine and Aquinas, have tried to maintain that women and men are created of equal godly worth and unequal social worth.9 To challenge this belief, feminist theologians have understood the ineradicable image of God as a grand equalizer. If all of humanity—women and men, children and adults, poor and wealthy, slave and free, of low and high status—are equally made in God's image, then we are also of equal value in this life.10 We are equally worthy of healing.

In Wesleyan theology evil is understood to be a disease that infects the image of God. Christian religion is a "therapy of the soul."11 God, then, is understood to be the great Physician who heals the image of God in humanity of any of the effects that evil has left behind.12 Significantly, for Sally and Nancy, God is not a judge who condemns us when we cannot resist evil but a therapist13 who heals us from the damage evil has done. Wesley ties this insight directly to the Atonement, so that God heals all
unbelief, including the belief that God deems us unworthy of healing, by this particular truth: “Christ loved me, and gave himself for me.” In this therapeutic understanding of the Atonement, Jesus’ blood is the blood that knows the truth.

A therapeutic understanding of the Atonement emphasizes that the blood of Jesus identifies with the blood of victims. The symbolism of Jesus’ blood in Wesleyan hymnody originally may have been more like the meaning of blood in the spirituals than like the meaning of blood in ransom theories of atonement (though ransom language is also used in the Wesleys’ theologies). Anne Streator Wimberly explains that the blood imagery found in the spirituals connotes solidarity between Jesus and innocent victims rather than blood shed for the purpose of a necessary sacrifice. Cheryl Kirk-Duggan emphasizes that singing the spirituals is an act of resistance in the presence of evil.

As the effects of evil begin to heal and victims grow in the likeness of God, they begin to gain the strength to resist that which harms them, to describe both the evil and the God they experience, and to make meaning. Their description of evil becomes more full-bodied, but so does their description of God. Feminist believers and theologians have claimed this freedom by naming God in unorthodox but meaningful ways. Struggling with traditional and emerging images of herself and God, Betsy Phillips Fisher asks,

And you, God, are you also chained and hidden by your images, your names, your roles? Creator, Judge, Father, Redeemer, King, Savior, Christ, Son of God, Holy Spirit, Light? Are you also lost among the images. Struggling to emerge into new roles, Fresh revelations of your real self? Are you not also Poet, Artist, Mother, Daughter, Mystery, Becoming, Suffering, Loving, Changing, Singing, Rejoicing, Darkness, Despair?

The feminist impulse to expand the imagery for God in worship proceeds from the therapeutic understanding of God.

The Wesleys understood this impulse. They used a wide variety of images for God, especially in their hymnody. The array of images was not reserved for the mature Christian but was introduced at the beginning of the new believer’s “therapy of the soul.” The range is apparent in The Collection of Hymns for the People Called Methodists (1780), an edition of
Charles's hymnody edited by John and structured to communicate what the believer could expect as he or she grew in the likeness of God.

The opening section of the Collection, "Exhorting, and beseeching to return to God," seeks to introduce the inquirer to the nature of God and to persuade him or her to establish a relationship with God. It contains diverse forms of trinitarian language: "Maker, Savior, Spirit" (hymn 6); "Father, Savior, Spirit" (hymn 9); "Father, Son, Holy Ghost" (hymn 9); "God, Savior, Comforter" (hymn 10); "God, Christ, Judge" (hymn 10). In his sermon "On the Trinity," John comments that the most scripturally precise form of the Trinity is "Father, Word, and Holy Ghost."17 However, he claims that he is not wedded to a particular version of trinitarian language. In fact, he does not consider the words Trinity or Person to be essential Christian vocabulary.

A later section in the Collection, "Describing the Goodness of God," foregoes the trinitarian images for christological ones. Images for Christ in these sixteen hymns include "Jesus" or "Jesu" (ten hymns), "Savior" (six hymns), "Lamb" or "Lamb of God" (seven hymns), "Son of God" (three hymns), "Lord" (three hymns), "King of Glory" (two hymns), "God of love" (two hymns), "My Love" (two hymns), "heavenly King" (one hymn), "Prince of Life and Peace" (one hymn), "Deliverer" (one hymn), "Prince of Glory" (one hymn), "friend" (one hymn), "Friend" (two hymns), "God-incarnate" (one hymn), "Passion" (one hymn), "Lover of souls" (one hymn), "Shepherd" (one hymn), "Man of griefs" (one hymn). Clearly, the Wesleys felt the need for a wide range of images with which to express their understanding of a good God.

Part of the pastoral theological problem with exclusively narrow and male imagery for humanity or God, such as repeated and exclusive use of "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" for the Trinity, is that women such as Sally and Nancy often need female imagery to assist them in claiming the power of resistance to the evil they have identified. However, despite their diverse imagery, the Wesleys did not draw on the biblical female imagery for God. That leaves it to feminist Wesleyans to add images that express God for them. It also suggests that feminist Wesleyans might explore the meanings within such a diverse well of imagery.

For example, feminist theologians of pastoral care have rightly criticized the images of Shepherd and flock because they establish the male godhead/clergy over the female/laity.18 Margaret and Sally, and Nancy and her friends need images of mutual participation to ground their healing
relationships. When I bring a feminist concern to this Wesleyan image, I realize that we have flattened and narrowed this traditional image for God. The *Collection* uses the christological imagery of *Shepherd*, *Lamb*, and *Friend* in ways that suggest an unusual mutuality between Christ and Christians in a male-engendered corpus.

Despite the reliance on male imagery, the *Collection* represents *mutuality* and *co-participation* in the relationship between God the Physician and the Christian in the process of healing. Christians are often referred to as "flock," "sheep," and "lambs." But Christians are not the only lambs. *Lamb* is the most frequently used title for Christ. (If this imagery were sustained for bishops as representatives of Christ, then *Lamb* would be a more appropriate image than *Shepherd.*) Christ as Lamb emphasizes images of Christ's vulnerability and sacrifice. Yet, since Wesleyan theology considers Christ's sacrifice to be unique, it prevents the Christian's full identification with Christ as Lamb. On the other hand, Wesleyan theology considers the Christian to be a participant in the atoning work of Christ. The vulnerability of Christ as Lamb is like the vulnerability of victims and perpetrators—Sally and Nancy. Jesus Christ became incarnate and participated in human systems, perpetuating them by his participation, and became a victim when he resisted these systems. When he resists, Jesus is imaged as both Lamb and Shepherd, meaning that he is both protective and vulnerable, just as Sally was protective of her God-part in the midst of her vulnerability. Finally, the ability to engage in role reversals—the reversal between the Shepherd and the Lamb—is central to genuine mutuality. Just as Christ is imaged as both Shepherd and Lamb, so Christians are shepherds and lambs with one another at different times and in different ways.

Therefore, it is all the more interesting that the *Collection* uses the christological title *Friend* as frequently as it does the titles *Shepherd* and *Lamb*. Like Jesus as Lamb, Jesus as Friend is vulnerable—Jesus is the Friend who lays down his life for his friends. However, the Friend metaphor extends the image of what Jesus does. Jesus as Friend goes places that respectable people will not go and eats with those who are despised—"publicans and sinners"—(hymns 31, 106, 107, 128, 138, 187); cures the lame, halt, blind/deaf, sick, and poor (hymn 31); clears the debt of sinners (hymns 106, 139); hears human pain and comforts tenderly (hymn 107); aids the lost and undone, who are weary of earth, self, and sin (hymn 128); offers a strong arm to the sinner to hold toward eternal life (hymn 138); sheds
blood for sinners and inspires and accepts prayers (hymn 303); provides safety from harm (hymn 395); sees the havoc of creatures (hymn 430); and is a universal Friend—a friend to all (hymns 430, 440).

In addition to suggesting that the person who is genuinely pastoral associates with those who do not have status and prestige, the title Friend gathers up a number of images of pastoral care. It is associated with a series of other titles that communicate the deep kinship and intimacy of divine and human friendship: Friend and Advocate (hymn 139); Savior, Brother, Friend (hymn 303); and Maker and Friend (hymn 395). These God-images help to communicate the mutuality that is necessary in the healing relationships between Margaret and Sally and between Nancy and her community of “intentional” friends.

Wesleyan expressions of the nature of God offer a rich, though not completely satisfying, banquet for feminist pastoral theologians and for feminist Christians seeking healing from the effects of evil. Ultimately, the attempts by Wesleyan and feminist pastoral theologians to express their understanding of God converge at a common point. Feminists have insisted that our God-language can only be metaphorical; it tells us what God is like but also communicates that there is much about God we cannot know. For Wesley, trinitarian language should point toward, rather than detract from, the mystery of God; too much analysis destroys the doctrine. We know God, in part, through Jesus Christ, through the Scriptures by which he lived, and through the Scriptures that attest to his life. We express this knowledge through metaphors—Jesus’ metaphors, scriptural metaphors, and metaphors such as Trinity and Person or Poet and Artist, which are abstracted from Scripture. In the end, feminist and Wesleyan theologians agree with Hebrew Scripture that God, YHWH, is a mystery beyond our comprehension.

The Language of Evil and the Nature of God: Pastoral Implications

If one begins with the nature of God in God’s natural attributes (omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence) and then tries to account for evil, one inevitably ends up in the quandary of theodicy: How do people account for a good God when evil exists in the world? If one begins with a description of evil and sin, as one so often does in pastoral care, then the problem of the divine nature may emerge differently. Given extensive evil and sin, the problem becomes this: How do people continue to find God?
In answering this question God’s moral and relational attributes (mercy, justice, compassion, love, friendship) come to the fore. This difference suggests that pastoral preaching and liturgy focus more on the moral than on the natural attributes.

Nonetheless, some people are unwilling or unable to use the language of sin and evil. Especially for those subjected to “fire-and-brimstone” preaching as children, this language reinforces an unbearably negative sense of self. They need other rhetorical strategies to communicate both the beauty and the horror of life.

For those who find the language of sin and evil helpful, it is one thing to have vivid descriptions of sin and evil and a rich array of images for God, the Trinity, and Christ. It is quite another thing to know when and how to call on these images in a pastoral friendship and in the presence of God the Physician and those God seeks to heal. Ultimately, the feminist pastoral theologian is accountable for the use of her language to the person with whom she is sitting. Vivid imagery of evil, named for what it is, is essential but is not appropriate at all times. Too often a discussion of evil and sin with a person already traumatized by their effects brings not self-knowledge that promotes healing but rather further self-deprecation. Narrative-pastoral-counseling techniques suggest that a strategy for dealing with evil rests in relocating the evil outside the individual, as in the biblical story of the Gerasene demoniac. A parent suffering the death of a child in war may feel compassion from a Christian who is willing to admit that war is evil, or he or she may feel burdened by such an admission. The participation of “shepherds,” “lambs,” and “friends” in the wisdom and grace of God, as well as careful, reflective training and practice, guides the one who needs to know the difference.

The same is true for language that proclaims God’s goodness. Even stocked with a wide array of imagery for God, a wise friend does not indiscriminately overpower others with God metaphors. Wesleyan theology and feminist theology agree that God, portrayed through a rich variety of images but often imaged as male, does not overpower, coerce, or intimidate humanity into a divine–human relationship. Rather, through the images humans create, God seeks and invites.
Endnotes


3. To communicate mutuality I have disregarded the convention of referring to authors by their last names.


11. John Wesley, “Sermon on Original Sin,” Works 2: 184, n. 63. Outler claims that Wesley preferred the therapeutic concept of salvation to juridical and
forensic metaphors. See also Randy Maddox, Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994).

12. Ibid., 184.

13. Since the publication of Robert Bellah, et. al., Habits of the Heart, the word therapeutic has received an increasingly poor reputation because of its association with individualism. Wesley reminds us of the dignity and value of the idea of healing that is captured by the word therapeutic.


19. Fisher's list of "emerging" images have biblical referents in the psalms (poet, artist, singing), wisdom literature (mother, daughter), Gethsemane and the Cross (darkness, despair, suffering), Hannah's Song (mystery, becoming, rejoicing), and in Jesus' encounter with the Syrophoenician woman (changing).
Women, Wesley, and Original Sin

SARAH HEANER LANCASTER

From its earliest stages, feminist theology has been concerned with thinking about what it means to be human. In 1960, Valerie Saiving wrote a seminal piece entitled “The Human Situation: A Feminine View,” in which she argued that what theologians have often called the “human” situation has really been “men’s” situation.¹ Women and men develop differently and are socialized to regard their physical development differently; but theological attempts to talk about human life before God have done so onesidedly from the male point of view. Saiving’s claim that women face a different dilemma and temptation than men do, namely, that they have too little “self” rather than too much “self,” has been examined and elaborated in feminist literature for decades. Feminist thinking has come to recognize that differences are more complex than Saiving initially described; but the basic recognition that women’s experiences have traditionally been left out and need to be included in any description of the human situation has been foundational to feminist studies.

This fundamental feminist insight into the human situation strikes right at the heart of a basic insight in Christian theology, namely, that the human situation before God can be described as a condition of original sin. For centuries this doctrine has been developed in ways that feminists find enormously problematic. Judith Plaskow, in Sex, Sin, and Grace, argues persuasively that conceiving the basic sin of human beings as “pride” fails to take into account the difference for women that Saiving named.² Conceiving basic sin as pride misses the point for women. Moreover, the further implication of original sin, namely, that all humans are “unworthy” because we are born into sin, exacerbates the problem that women have. In other words, if one already has too little “self,” then talk of unworthiness only serves to negate the self even more. Additionally, Eve’s place in the Fall has set up women to share not only the fundamental guilt that comes to humankind through Adam but also the particular guilt of Eve, who succumbed to temptation first and then persuaded Adam into sin. As the first one seduced into sin, Eve appears gullible because she believed the
serpent. As the seducer of Adam, Eve becomes the primordial temptress. In both cases, Eve's legacy has presented enormous difficulties for women. With all these problems, what are feminists who stand in the Wesleyan tradition to make of original sin?

Why Bother with Reconception?

In thinking about original sin, one of the first things that feminists have to consider is whether a reconception of the doctrine is even worthwhile. The above-named problems are not the only ones connected with this doctrine, and feminists are not the only ones who have objected to them. Modern and postmodern thinkers no longer tend to describe human beings as corrupt and unworthy. Furthermore, the theory of evolution runs counter to the idea of a pristine past from which humans have fallen in a first act of sin. Despite all these objections, there are two reasons why Wesleyan feminists ought to take some idea of original sin seriously.

First, original sin has a central place in John Wesley's theology and cannot be ignored. In his own day, Wesley faced significant resistance to the doctrine of original sin, because the idea that human beings were corrupt and wicked did not fit well with Enlightenment confidence in human reason and celebration of human accomplishments. Wesley valued reason, but he never thought that reason could replace revelation as the way to know the truth about God. He saw a threat to revelation in the Deism that had arisen from the Enlightenment, for its way of understanding the relationship between God and humanity did away with the need for Jesus Christ. The seriousness with which he regarded this threat is apparent in one of his longest works, The Doctrine of Original Sin according to Scripture, Reason, and Experience. Wesley wrote the treatise as a response to an argument by John Taylor that denied the reality of original sin in human life. In the preface to this work, Wesley says,

"They that are whole have no need of a Physician;" and the Christian Revelation speaks of nothing else but the great "Physician" of our souls. . . . If we are not diseased, we do not want a cure. If we are not sick, why should we seek for a medicine to heal our sickness? What room is there to talk of our being renewed in "knowledge" or "holiness, after the image wherein we were created," if we never have lost that image? If we are as knowing and holy now, nay, far more so, than Adam was immediately after his creation? If, therefore,
we take away this foundation, that man is by nature foolish and sinful, "fallen short of the glorious image of God," the Christian system falls at once; nor will it deserve so honourable an appellation, as that of a "cunningly devised fable."³

For Wesley, the very truth and necessity of Christian faith rest on a human problem that is deep and broad enough that we cannot overcome it on our own. Although this statement was written in 1756, through his long ministry Wesley never seemed to waver in the conviction that we need God's help to be restored to what we were created to be.

Despite distance in time, intellectual climate, and experience, women today recognize serious problems in human life and the need for healing. Serene Jones writes about participating in a Lenten study group of women at which the topic was sin.⁴ Not surprisingly, women recognized the problems with the doctrine of original sin that I have outlined above. But it was surprising to discover that when they "remapped" the doctrine according to their own experiences, it offered an explanation of and comfort for the brokenness they felt they had experienced in life. The language of "sin" showed that human actions and relationships could be measured against God's will as a standard. The doctrine spoke to the extensiveness of sin in human life and to our complicity in sin, even when we are unaware of the effects our attitudes and actions have on others. It also pointed to the need for God's grace and the hope for wholeness that grace provides. Because of Wesley's conviction that this doctrine is central to Christian faith and because of actual women's experience of finding relevance in it, the doctrine deserves a close look. In this brief examination of the doctrine, I begin with the particular problems that Eve's role in the Fall presents for women and then move to more general problems associated with thinking about original sin itself.

Starting with Eve
Wesley assumed a framework for thinking about the Fall that has influenced Western theology ever since Augustine wrote the City of God. It is to be expected that Wesley would accept certain presuppositions that were simply given with his time and place. What is interesting is to look at how he makes use of them and in some cases modifies them. So, within the framework of the Fall that Wesley inherited, what did he think was important to say about Eve?
Not surprisingly, Wesley's most concentrated discussion about Eve is found in his *Explanatory Notes upon the Old Testament*. This work is mostly an abridged form of Matthew Henry's commentary on the Bible, although Wesley not only makes some additions based on Matthew Poole's commentary but also changes a few things on his own. The account of Eve given in the notes to the first chapters of Genesis is mostly a shortened form of what Henry said. These notes contain a description of how Eve was seduced by the serpent into sin and of how she further persuaded Adam to eat the fruit. Wesley accepts the basic description that Henry provides, including that Eve "gratified her pleasure and pride" and that she "was ring-leader in the transgression."^5 Wesley did not completely avoid a portrayal of Eve that supports the problematic ideas stated above. There are, though, a few places where his depiction is open to a more positive reading.

When Wesley abridged Johann Bengel's notes on the New Testament, he interpreted Bengel's explanation of 1 Tim. 2:13 to mean that, since Eve was created after Adam, she was "originally the inferior."^6 Later, though, when he abridged Henry's work for the Old Testament *Notes*, Wesley accepted Henry's notion that women's subordination to men was not the original intent for creation. One note to Genesis reads that, like Adam, Eve was made "immediately by the hand of God" so that "between the sexes there is not that great difference and inequality which some imagine." Another note shows that women's subjection to men is seen as the result of sin. Wesley and Henry seem to read that result as punishment ("the whole sex, which by creation was equal with man, is for sin made inferior").^7 Feminists would certainly object to any idea that women's subjection is deserved; but the recognition that women's subjection to men is not the way things were originally intended to be is an important insight on which feminists already build new readings of Genesis 3.

The most notable difference in Wesley's view of Eve is in the way he conceives her capacity for understanding. Again, when he is working in 1 Timothy, Wesley accepts Bengel's note that Eve is "more easily deceived, and more easily deceives." However, Wesley does not include Bengel's further comment that Eve's deception "indicates less strength in the understanding."^8 In the notes on Genesis, Wesley edits out similar descriptions in Henry's work. He does not include Henry's description of Eve as "the weaker vessel," who is "inferior to Adam in knowledge, and strength, and presence of mind."^9 While Henry suggests that Eve was surprised at
hearing a serpent talk, Wesley explicitly modifies that note to say, “It is not improbable, that reason and speech were then the known properties of the serpent. And therefore Eve was not surprised at his reasoning and speaking, which otherwise she must have been.” Eve was beguiled by the serpent, but it does not seem to be because of some weakness in her capacity to understand or her lack of awareness about the way the created order operated. If she had any lack of awareness, it was simply that she was “ignorant of evil.”

In another writing, Wesley goes even further. He corresponded with John Smith over a period of time about several issues that Smith questioned in Wesley’s theology. One of their disagreements was over the matter of “perceptible inspiration.” What Wesley wanted to defend in this correspondence was the idea that Christians really do have a testimony of God’s Spirit that is distinct and credible. Smith raised the question of how it is possible to begin to doubt that testimony if it really has been so clear. One way that he pressed the point was to name the case of “H.R.,” who had been justified but later denied or doubted that her sins really had been forgiven. Wesley responds by comparing her case to that of Eve. It is possible, he argues, to have a clear testimony and a sound understanding of sin and then later to begin to doubt whether it is true. His argument depends on the soundness of Eve’s understanding of God’s command. The problem was not that she somehow failed to grasp or believe what God said; the problem was that the serpent through “subtlety” was able to deceive her. Only when the serpent masked the truth with falsehood did her understanding of God’s command become unsound. How much more so, argues Wesley, are we also liable to be misled by the subtlety of those who mount arguments against the faith we know to be true? Eve becomes the paradigm for all who struggle with half truths.

A comparison between how Eve was beguiled and how Adam was persuaded to disobey God’s command leads to some interesting observations. The soundness of Adam’s understanding has never been at issue; so it is especially puzzling how he could have come to the point of disobeying in the first place. Early in his career, Wesley described Adam’s understanding as clear, swift, extensive, and accurate. It functioned so well that he was not mistaken about the way things really are—and it is hard to see how he could ever be. He ought to recognize a half truth when he sees it! Adam falls into sin, then, not by deception but by persuasion. In compar-
ison, it does appear there is something different about Eve's way of falling into sin, even if Wesley denies that her understanding was "unsound" or "weak." In the last section, I will take up a possible way of reading this difference between deception and persuasion without disparaging Eve's intellectual capacity.

Whatever difference there might be between Adam and Eve, there are two striking similarities. First, for both, there is some external factor that presents the occasion for sin. For Eve, the external factor is the serpent; and for Adam, it is Eve. Neither simply falls into sin alone. Second, whether by deception or by persuasion, the first step into sin is unbelief. In both cases, pride follows from unbelief. However, it is important to see that some failure (a negative inward sin) takes place before pride (a positive inward sin) can find a place in their hearts. Despite the different temptation and the words used to describe how they succumb, the internal path to sin is the same.

The difference between the way that Eve and Adam fall into sin plays an important role in how culpability is assigned in the Fall. Eve's ability to persuade Adam into eating the fruit has been the foundation for seeing her as the primordial temptress. But Adam's clarity about the situation makes it hard to see how Adam could ever have been persuaded. It seems much more perverse to go knowingly into sin than to be deceived into it, and Wesley says of Adam, "He sinned with his eyes open." Wesley follows Henry in assigning a fault to both Adam and Eve. Eve's fault was in trying to persuade Adam and Adam's fault was in listening to her. Thus, they share blame, but Adam's failure has more serious consequences. It is through him, not through Eve, that sin has come to the rest of us. In both his explanatory notes for Romans 5 and in his description of the Fall in his treatise on original sin, Wesley clearly maintains that Adam, not Eve, was the "representative head: through whom sin affected our nature." This point does not relieve Eve of responsibility in the Fall, but it does show that Adam clearly bears his share of the weight—perhaps even the greater share. If sin started with Eve, then it reached its culmination in Adam.

This brief look at how Wesley utilized Eve in his description of the Fall indicates that some of the most pressing objections to the common depiction of Eve are tempered in Wesley's thought. While he certainly accepts pride as a monumental hurdle to relationship with God, he also acknowledges that this relationship is already at risk because of a prior failure.
if Wesley can call pride "the grand work of the devil," his actual description of how this work is done in us involves a complexity that allows for a more flexible understanding of the human problem than has often been acknowledged. In the final section of the article I show how that recognition connects to his project of bringing people back into relationship with God. Furthermore, Eve is not simply weak and gullible. Although Wesley sometimes uncritically accepts that view, at other times he explicitly argues against it. Finally, Eve does tempt Adam, but Wesley describes the situation so that it does not in any way minimize Adam's own responsibility. In fact, Adam's responsibility seems greater. Each of these points allows room for feminists to explore an understanding of original sin that does not simply vilify Eve and, by association, all women.

But even if Eve is not treated as badly by Wesley as she sometimes has been in Christian tradition, there still remains the larger problem of original sin itself. I want to turn now to an examination of how this doctrine has functioned in Wesleyan theology.

What Is “Original” about Sin?
The word origin has a range of meanings: source, point of origination, derivation, inception, root. It is important to see this range because these meanings tend to get bound up in our thinking of original sin in ways that sometimes bring confusion rather than clarity. The word original is similar to the word ultimate in that there are two quite different ways in which it can be, and has been, used in Christian tradition. Ultimate can mean either the last in a series or a maximum. An automobile manufacturer's claim that a vehicle will give you the “ultimate driving experience” does not mean that it is the last drive you will ever take. Rather, it refers to an experience that cannot be surpassed. Similarly, original can be about “origins” in different ways. It can indicate either the first in a series or the fundamental source from which every instance of something comes. These two meanings have been brought together in the way Christians traditionally have talked about Adam and Eve: Our forebears in the Garden of Eden committed the first sin in a series, but all their progeny have been fundamentally affected by it. Because of their first sin, there is something about the way we are that accounts for our problem. The source for our sin is in our very nature.

Wesley presupposed the idea of a “first sin,” and he lived in a time
when this presupposition was widely shared. Even his major opponent, Dr. Taylor, could speak of Adam and Eve as real people; and Taylor's project was simply to give a different account of how their sin affected us. Serious objections in our day to this idea of first sin do not necessarily undermine the usefulness of this doctrine in its other meaning. Even in his own time, Wesley was unable to explain consistently how the effects of a first sin could be passed on to us; but he persisted in the idea that all human beings share a problem. The real importance of original sin for Wesley's theology lies not in the idea of a first sin but rather in the other meaning of original, namely, that the source for our sinfulness somehow lies within us. Eve and Adam do not have to be seen as the initiators of the human problem in order to serve as its representatives.

Redirecting attention in the meaning of original from "first" to "source" brings us to a different difficulty in reconceiving the doctrine. The notion that human nature serves as a source for sin has led to the idea of "unworthiness"—a concept that has haunted women, as well as many men, who find this idea problematic. Objections do not simply arise from a changed culture but come from within Christian faith itself. Christian faith talks not only about a fundamental problem that humans have but also about our fundamental goodness as God's creation, especially as we have been made in the image of God. We may have a profound problem, but we also have a profound gift from God and a profound value to God. There is a deep-seated tension in these two claims. Thus, in what follows, I look at how Wesley held together the ideas of original sin and original goodness.

In his early work Wesley often referred simply to the "image of God" but later began to distinguish between the "natural" image, the "moral" image, and the "political" image. The natural and moral images are relevant to this discussion, and they function similarly to the distinction in Eastern theology between "image" and "likeness." The natural image consists of human capacity for understanding, will, and liberty, while the moral image is described as righteousness and holiness. Wesley uses the word natural in another context as well, and it is important to see the difference between these two uses. "Natural image" refers to that which constitutes us as human beings. It consists of capacities that are fulfilled in the way we exercise them. When he speaks of the "natural man," or of how we are in our "natural state" (also called "present state"), Wesley is referring not to what we are but to the way we are—that is, to the way in which we exercise those capacities.
If our God-given natural capacities (understanding, will, and liberty) are directed toward desiring God and living as God would have us live, then we exist in a state of righteousness and holiness, namely, in the moral image of God. If, instead, those capacities are directed toward desiring something other than God and doing something other than the will of God, then we exist in a state of unrighteousness and "lose" the moral image of God. What we are (the natural image) is not lost—we still retain the capacities God has given us—but they function in the wrong way. This state is "natural" to us because when we fail to make use of the grace that God provides we easily and unavoidably realize this tragic alternative.

It is possible, then, even when talking about original sin as a state, to say that the "source" of sin lies within us. We are responsible for using our capacities well, but we do not. We have a problem for which we are accountable and which is inescapable through our own effort alone. But states can change. The capacities that are natural in the sense that they constitute our being make possible both sin (our "natural" state in the sense that when left to our own devices we do not use our capacities well) and righteousness (a state that requires God’s grace to attain). In this sense, our God-given capacities allow for the possibility of righteousness, but God is the "source" of the grace that helps us realize it. And indeed, the hope for all of us is that our state of unrighteousness can change to a state of righteousness as we are empowered by God’s grace to live as we were intended to live.

If original sin is conceived as a state, then we have not lost our essential value to God or our ability to be made right with God. It is not our nature (what we are) that is "unworthy"; rather, it is "worthy" of God’s effort to restore us to wholeness. What is "unworthy" are attitudes, actions, etc., (the way we are) that do not fulfill our nature as it was intended to be. If this is what a Wesleyan doctrine of original sin is intended to convey to us, then the Fall story functions as a description of how human life before God goes wrong not simply in the beginning but over and over again. As our representatives, Eve and Adam play an important role in illuminating our situation, reminding us both of how we fail to realize our capacities and of what is needed to fulfill them.

**Toward a Reconception**

Wesley’s descriptions of how Eve and Adam enter into sin allow us to recapture the insight into the human situation that Valerie Saiving first
brought to light. In both cases, external factors play a role, but those external factors work on Eve and Adam somewhat differently, as indicated by the words “persuasion” and “deception.” Because Adam knowingly allowed himself to be persuaded, his decision to sin is described as “ambition,” “rebellion,” and “disobedience.” The word persuasion indicates that Adam has found temptation to be convincing; so he is making a judgment about what is to be believed. Furthermore, part of temptation’s persuasive appeal lies in what Adam believes will happen to him. When only his case is considered, it is easy to see how pride becomes the central pattern for sin. But Eve’s case illumines a different side to the problem that is equally important for understanding how sin takes place. Although she also knew what God had commanded, she was deceived rather than persuaded. The word deception indicates that, instead of trusting in her own direct relationship with God, she listened too much to what another had said. The description of Adam’s entry into sin indicates a strong notion of self in his decision to defy God, while the description of Eve’s entry into sin indicates too little self in not holding on to what she knows in the face of external pressure. Eve’s problem is not weakness of understanding but rather a lack of confidence in her understanding. Many women know this to be the deepest truth about their own failure to be who God created them to be.

Recognizing these two paths to sin helps to bring feminist insight about the full scope of the human situation into a doctrine of original sin, but it is important not to draw the contrast too sharply. Even though Wesley distinguishes between persuasion and deception, he can also describe Adam’s pride as being rooted in unbelief and Eve’s unbelief as leading into pride. Adam could not have been persuaded had he not somehow disbelieved God and believed Eve and the serpent—that is, had he not listened to other voices. And Eve could not have actually eaten the fruit had she not in some way judged for herself whom she should believe. Perhaps this blurring of the difference has something to say to us. If, indeed, we can even attempt to talk about the “human” situation instead of “men’s” or “women’s” situations, then we need to recognize that these two ways of falling into sin share something in common. Unbelief and pride, deception and persuasion, external temptation and internal decision constitute complex dynamics of the human problem, to which men and women are vulnerable, although perhaps in different ways. Together, Eve and Adam illumine what is going on in human life before God. In Genesis
sin (even Adam's pride) is not an isolated, individual occurrence but one that has social dimensions. Eve and Adam’s joint participation in sin can help us see the social dimensions of sin in our own situations.

Wesley’s main concern in talking about original sin is not simply to say that there is a human problem; he wants us to acknowledge our problem so that we will seek “the Physician,” who can bring us to a state of health. The way that Wesley describes what has gone wrong provides the framework for how healing takes place. Because for both Eve and Adam unbelief precedes pride, the human problem really starts with not taking proper account of God. This problem is more relational than intellectual. It is not soundness of understanding that we lack but trust in what we know God is saying to us. Healing, then, has to address our deepest way of going wrong. Indeed, for Wesley, justification by faith centers on believing in the fullest possible way God’s own testimony to God’s own love. In this moment of distinct and credible witness, unbelief is overcome. “Belief” here involves trust; so there is a relational (not simply an intellectual) component to God’s answer to our problem. The faith that matters for answering the problem that we have is the fides qua creditur, or the existential faith by which we truly trust God’s desire to love us into wholeness.

Not simply justification but also sanctification requires attention to this deepest aspect of our lives. Just as Eve became vulnerable to disbelief in the face of half truths over time, so do we become vulnerable. As Wesley contemplated the possibility of sin in believers following justification, he developed a way of thinking about how life with God either grows or slips back. Progress depends on “spiritual respiration,” by which we continually make use of the grace that God offers to us. That progress can be thwarted, though, if we stop “breathing” God. When that happens, the slippage into sin resembles the original slippage described in Eve’s deception: a negative inward sin (failing to stir up the gift of God) can lead to a positive inward sin (giving way to an inward desire or temper), which can in turn lead to losing sight of God so fully that one can even commit an outwardly sinful act that transgresses the command of God.

The doctrine of original sin in the Wesleyan tradition allows feminists to speak of the human problem in the following way. The most basic failure in human life that leads to all our other sinfulness in all its different forms is a failure to remain in proper relationship with God. We live in the midst of a world full of people, objects, ideas, obligations, etc., that tempt us to
give ourselves to them rather than to God; and we regularly do so, sometimes because of a lack of confidence in what we know God wants for us and sometimes because of confidence in our own judgment over God's. In either case, when our relationship to God becomes less than it should be, our relationship with others also becomes distorted. Movement away from God's desire for us and for the world is never an isolated, individual matter. There are always "voices" that tempt us, but they also never succeed without our own involvement. Furthermore, the consequences of our failure to live as God would have us live extend beyond our small circle. Inward movement away from God leads ultimately to a broken world for all of us. But in this hurting and hurtful situation, God offers us healing. Through grace, we may know the love that enables us to live in the way that God created us to live and thus experience health and wholeness.

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Endnotes

11. John Wesley, "2 Cor. 11:3," in NT Notes.
13. Ibid., "Letter to Miss Ritchie (20 September 1776), in Works (Jackson), 13:58, shows an example of how he employs Eve's situation to illumine the situation of a woman in his time.
15. Pride is not the only positive inward sin that may follow from unbelief. See Diane Leclerc, Singleness of Heart: Gender, Sin, and Holiness in Historical Perspective (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2001). Her study examines sin beyond the specific references to Eve that I have used. Leclerc uses the term relational idolatry as women's particular problem in contrast to pride or self-will.
Ian Bedloe, the main character in Anne Tyler's novel *Saint Maybe*, is struck by a prayer at the funeral for his sister-in-law. His sister-in-law has died about six months after the death of her husband, leaving three young children. The minister prays, “We ask thee to console those left behind... Let thy mercy pour like a healing balm upon their hearts.” Seventeen-year-old Ian, who believes that both deaths were suicides and were his fault, wonders whether the “healing balm” can soothe not just grief but also guilt, the wracking anguish of a horrible deed that cannot be undone.

One night he joins a gathering of strangers at a prayer meeting in a little storefront church called “The Church of the Second Chance” and asks for prayers for God to forgive him. Later, he shares the whole story with the pastor. He had suspected that his sister-in-law, Lucy, was cheating on his brother, Danny. He had blurted this out to Danny as Danny sat, intoxicated, in his car. He had heard the car backing up and gathering speed and hurtling at the stone wall at the end of the street. He had witnessed Lucy’s disintegration, the neglect of her three children, and her death, an empty bottle of sleeping pills beside her. Ian hoped for forgiveness. “Don’t you think I’m forgiven?” he asks. “Goodness, no,” Rev. Emmett says.

Rev. Emmett leads a church of “atonement and complete forgiveness,” in which one must make reparation for sins—even when what is broken cannot be put back together again, at least not in the way it was before. Ian finds hope there. In fact, he begins to find himself.

For John Wesley, the end and aim of life—salvation—are the “renewal of our fallen nature.” Eventually, Ian Bedloe understands this to be his aim in life, too. More than mere forgiveness, Ian eventually understands that God is calling him to reconciliation and oneness with God’s holy purposes in the world. For feminist and other theologians critical of disturbing messages in traditional Western atonement models, the recovery of the image of God in humankind—a constant theme in Wesley’s writing—offers a window of hope.
It is true that Wesleyan salvation is undeniably based in a juridical atonement in which Jesus is variously propitiation, supreme sacrifice, and payment in blood for the sins of humanity. But we should remember that Wesley had no systematic “doctrine” of the Atonement. As a practical theologian, he utilized a shifting set of images in an effort to convince a public yearning for salvation of God’s abundant grace. And his juridical atonement imagery stands in tension with his more therapeutic understandings of salvation and of humanity’s relationship with the divine.

Yet one wonders how Wesley would write about the Atonement today. Would the critiques of twentieth-century feminist and womanist theologians sensitize him to concerns about sacralizing abuse? Would the insights of liberation theology broaden his understanding of sin, so that systemic evil takes its place alongside individual guilt? Would biblical criticism give him a deeper appreciation for the lessons of Jesus’ life? Would the suffering endured by most of our world open his eyes to the possibility that Jesus may have suffered in solidarity with the millions who suffer for the sake of justice rather than as payment for an unpayable debt?

The Wesleyan tradition is grounded in a hopeful sense of the possibilities of God’s grace. And yet, as both a Wesleyan Christian and a twenty-first-century feminist committed to the freedom to live into the image of God that should belong to all people, I am convinced that we must enlarge the scope of our understanding of atonement. Atonement, in the most general sense, is about reconciliation. Is a violent sacrifice the most congruent way to draw together humanity and a God of love?

This essay seeks first to discern the contours and context of Wesley’s understanding of the Atonement. It addresses some of the major influences and points to the important and helpful tensions that arise when we try to “fit” Wesleyan atonement theology within the larger framework of Wesleyan anthropology and soteriology. Reviewing some of the feminist and liberationist critiques of a juridical understanding of the Atonement prompts questions about the general theme of Wesleyan atonement. Finally, I propose a number of images and image interpretations that remain in conversation with the telos of a Wesleyan understanding of salvation, even as they seek to be faithful to human experience. The article is framed by the story of Ian Bedloe, a reminder that what we seek in the heart of God is not just forgiveness but also redemption; not just pardon but also purpose for life; not just release but also reconnection with a God of powerful, empowering grace.
“Grace upon Grace”

Ian joins the Church of the Second Chance. He quits college to work as a carpenter and to help his aging parents care for three young children. The years run together—endless rounds of parent-teacher conferences, financial strains, and petty arguments, interspersed with moments of grace. Ian still wonders when he will be forgiven. How much is enough? How long must he struggle with these children who are not his? What he cannot see is that he is being redeemed all along, even as he waits for the assurance of forgiveness.

For Wesley, pardon is part of the larger process of salvation. We are most faithful to Wesley when we hold on to the bigger picture—the power of God’s grace to heal and renew and the potential of humanity to be renewed, to experience salvation. In addition, the tension between his Western, juridical atonement theology and his East-leaning anthropology and soteriology makes sense when we understand his own spiritual development. This section, therefore, addresses three issues: What were Wesley’s teachings on the Atonement? How do these fit with his anthropology and soteriology? And how does his theology reflect his development and his experience as a practical theologian?

Generally, Wesley had a forensic understanding of the meaning of Christ’s death. In forensic views, often described in “penalty-satisfaction” language, God’s mission is to sustain righteousness. But human sin violates the laws that can do so. Humanity cannot satisfy the penalties; and God, whose desire is to maintain divine righteousness, is hard pressed simply to forgive the sins. So God provides Christ to “pay” the penalty we cannot pay. By providing for the payment of the penalty, God maintains righteousness and expresses deep mercy.1 Thus, in sermons such as “Justification by Faith,” Wesley declares, “[L]aying upon him [Christ] the iniquities of us all, [God] hath redeemed me and all mankind; having thereby ‘made a full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world.”2 God’s provision of Christ is a merciful gift that frees humanity from sin. How does it happen? Through faith, Wesley says, “not only a divine evidence or conviction that ‘God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself,’ but a sure trust and confidence that Christ died for my sins, that he loved me, and gave himself for me.” A personal conviction that sin has been pardoned through God’s provision of Jesus’ blood is the means to justification.
Why does God require a "payment" of some sort? Why separate God's justice and God's mercy? By simply abdicating "the law," Wesley responds, God would negate its value for healthy human life. Thus, God's provision of Jesus is an expression of mercy that holds on to justice at the same time.6

This points us in a helpful direction for understanding Wesley's atonement theology. For Wesley, the Atonement was the source of free grace offered to the whole world for the purpose of redeeming the world. We must be freed from the guilt of sin in order to grow in love of God and neighbor. The ultimate goal of the "cosmic drama"—to reconcile all things to God—cannot be reached without humanity's willing response to God's offer of grace. As Theodore Runyon points out, there is an important difference between Wesley's description of the Atonement and Anselm's classic formula. Rather than a "private," or two-way, transaction between God and Jesus, from which humanity can gain benefits, "Wesley turns the whole drama into a [trinitarian] event of communication in which humanity is the intended recipient of divine love."7 The Spirit calls forth love and gratitude that have the power to redeem individuals and through them, the world. Faith is relational, and how we respond in that relationship matters.

For Wesley, our freedom to live as agents of redemption is empowered by God's grace, which not only pardons us from sin but also frees us from its power over us. This takes place in the context of a hopeful anthropology and a broad soteriology. While Wesley placed strong emphasis on human sinfulness and its dire consequences, he put an equally strong emphasis on the abundance of God's grace and its power to heal human nature. The effect of sin is powerful, extensive, and omnipresent; the root to restoration is through a converting faith in a God of grace; and God's desire is for the healing and restoration of humanity's corrupted nature.8

Wesleyan anthropology is greatly informed by Wesley's appreciation for the teachings of the early church, which was a product of Eastern Christianity. A brief summary of Maddox's useful delineation of some of the differences regarding sin and grace between East and West will be helpful.9 The Western traditions generally have assumed that humanity was created in a perfect state that was utterly corrupted in the Fall. The guilt of original sin now will be inherited by generations of humanity forever. We are bound by sin as well as bound to sin. Redemption is generally limited to pardon bought by the blood of Christ.

For Eastern Christianity, humanity was created innocent but not
Life in communion with God is necessary for further human development, the aim of which is theosis, or deification—the reflecting of the image of God through the individual. The guilt of sin is not inherited, but results from imitating the sins of parents and others. Perhaps most significantly, the early Eastern church fathers asserted that while death and the disease of sin have so corrupted our nature that we cannot attain theosis on our own, people do retain some grace, and with it the responsibility of responding to God's gracious offer of communion in Christ. The aim of salvation is not merely forgiveness of sin but also therapeutic restoration of the image of God in the individual and in the world.

Wesley blends East and West. He assumed the Western notion of a fall from perfect grace but also emphasized the East's therapeutic concerns and the possibility of growth and development within the human spirit. What guided all of Wesley's theology is what Maddox (with Eastern theologians) calls a "third state, the gracious and gradual restoration of humanity to God-likeness." For Wesley, whether the first humans were created perfect or simply innocent and incomplete, creation is God's gracious gift. Whether sin is inherited or imitated, it is obvious in human life. Thus, we are all in need of and able to accept God's restoring grace, through which we receive not merely forgiveness of sins but also the healing and renewal of our nature, until "that mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus."10

How does this happen? Wesley probably would have nuanced the answer to that question differently over the course of his life. In early adulthood, he was drawn to the holy living movement, with its emphasis on intensive study of Scripture, personal moral discipline, and charity for the disadvantaged.11 His dogged pursuit of holy living, notwithstanding, Wesley did not feel loved or accepted by God. Meanwhile, his study of Luther and Calvin and his experience of the "heart religion" of the Moravian communities, with their emphasis on salvation by faith, led him in another direction as he sought God's acceptance. Thus, it is not surprising that his first public sermon following the Aldersgate event, "Salvation by Faith," emphasized the justification of sinners bought by Jesus' death on the cross.12

As justifying grace became more important to Wesley, it grew more prominent in his pastoral work and was reinforced by the enthusiastic response he received from people.13 Over time, he moderated this position fearing that those who saw justification by faith as the aim of the Christian life would see no need to grow toward the renewal of the image of God.
Thus, late in his life, Wesley placed greater emphasis on both God's empowering and God's pardoning grace. For example, in "The Lord Our Righteousness," he worries about those who use Christ's righteousness as a "cover" for their own unrighteousness; in "The Witness of Our Spirit" he reminds the early Methodists that the empowering grace of God follows pardoning grace, which allows us to move toward the renewal of self and the recovery of the divine image.

The mature Wesley, therefore, was emphatic in his understanding that pardon is merely a springboard for renewal, which is the true aim of the Christian faith. Both pardon and renewal happen through the abundant grace of God, which simply waits for our acceptance.

**Raising Questions**

After years of self-sacrifice marked by isolation from friends, lack of intimacy, and worry over his parents' failing health and the well-being of his nephew and nieces, Ian wonders when he will have his life back. "This is your life," says Rev. Emmett. "Lean into it. View your burden as a gift. It's the theme that has been given you to work with. This is the only life you'll have."

It is an unsatisfactory answer, both for Ian and for those of us who critique traditional atonement models, especially for the way in which they tend to sacralize suffering. Does Rev. Emmett really mean to say that Ian should revel in his burden and view the pain of isolation and worry as a gift? We shall see. But it is clear that even a theology so self-consciously opposed to the immediate grace of forensic atonement can easily adopt questionable language and images.

Feminist theologians have raised significant questions about some of the messages offered in traditional models of the Atonement. They point out that what is meant to offer a life-giving promise of radical grace and love often sends dark messages that may perpetuate patriarchy and the victimization of the most vulnerable. Twenty-first-century Wesleyan Christians have inherited a tradition that views the redemption we receive in the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ as the necessary base for all further redemption. Therefore, we must not only hear these critiques but also ask how our own tradition might respond to them. Feminists and womanists, especially those sensitive to the liberation of the poor, have raised at least four major critiques of forensic models of the Atonement.

Forensic models define sin in ways that do not resonate with women's
experience or support those who seek to leave or overcome abusive situations or that are nearly blind to the reality of systemic evil. Traditionally, sin has been construed along the lines of willfulness, rebellion, or disobedience—qualities that are unlikely to reflect women’s experience in patriarchal cultures. In addition, popular piety has literalized the story of the Fall and placed most of the blame on women. Thus, the virtuous life, especially for women and others who are subject to domination, has been one of obedience, submission, selflessness, and sacrificial love. There are two obvious problems. First, the “virtues” taught in a patriarchal, Christian culture discourage women—even those in unhealthy, abusive situations—from seeking to take control of their own destiny. The understanding of sin has actually been a barrier to the wholeness of women and other out-of-power communities. Second, “Christianity has preached submission but practiced domination; socialized women and the poor to passivity while acting with ruthless aggression to maintain its power and control at any cost.”  

Finally, by defining sin almost exclusively as individual willfulness or rebellion, the juridical atonement tradition has offered few resources for understanding the reality of evil systems that bind whole groups of people. Who has been “disobedient” in the case of industries that abuse and overuse workers? The factory owner? The managers? The government that offers incentives for the building of the factory? The people who buy its products? Where, in this definition of sin and redemption, can the worker who suffers unjustly, perhaps merely by an accident of birth, find herself or himself?

Forensic models elevate suffering in a way that is or can be dangerous for people who are victimized here and now. Jesus is celebrated because he endured pain and suffering and gave up his own life for the sake of others. Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn’s essay, “For God So Loved the World,” offers a helpful discussion of this theme. They point out that our world has become acculturated to abuse, especially physical and sexual abuse of women, and assert that Christianity has been a primary—often the primary—force in encouraging this acculturation. “The central image of Christ on the cross as the savior of the world communicates the message that suffering is redemptive. Any sense that we have a right to care for our own needs is in conflict with being a faithful follower of Jesus.” Coincidentally or not, they add, the submission and meekness that Christianity has idealized for women are also the qualities exemplified in the Christ who submits to his fate on the cross. The sacralization of suffering is often
supported by the promise of resurrection—the notion that no matter how miserable life is here and now, the victim's role is to endure because in the end she will receive a heavenly reward. In addition, this idealization of victimhood has been used in particularly insidious ways to uphold dominance and power in colonial situations.  

Forensic models raise serious questions about the character of God. God is often portrayed as the Father who allowed—or, even more grim, sent—his Son to be tortured, humiliated, and executed. We inherit a picture of divine child abuse and a messiah who was born merely to die.

Such doctrines of salvation reflect and support images of benign paternalism, the neglect of children, or, at their worst, child abuse. . . . The goodness and power of the father and the unworthiness and powerlessness of his children make the father's punishment just and the blame-the-children. . . . theology has tended to protect the authority, omnipotence and omniscience of the father by justifying suffering as deserved or allowed.  

We are left to wonder about a God who requires the suffering of one for the redemption of many. Why would a loving God require a "price" in blood to forgive? Why can't God redeem humanity without horrifying violence?  

Finally, forensic models can offer a dangerous route of escape from personal responsibility for participation in sin and evil. Wesley was aware of this danger, as we saw in his thoughts in "The Lord Our Righteousness." In the forensic model, Jesus bears the burden of sins that are not his. So, if Jesus' suffering and death save us from the consequences of our sins, why should we worry about how we live? This issue has troubling implications, not least of which is its resonance with the life experiences of women and people of color. Delores Williams has shown how the experience of social-role surrogacy—in which black women have been coerced into performing the tasks deemed unfitting for white people, especially white women—is reflective of the surrogacy role that Jesus performs in carrying our sins for us. Jesus becomes the ultimate scapegoat, saving humanity from responsible participation in God's work of redemption and wholeness in the world.

The "burden" that Rev. Emmett had urged Ian to "lean into" was not the burden of childcare or of reparation for his sin or of loneliness and isolation. It was the burden of forgiveness—his call to forgive his brother.
and sister-in-law for whatever had happened so many years before. Ian was being forgiven all along. More importantly, he was being redeemed.

"An Arrow to God"

Initially, Ian was stunned by Rev. Emmett’s teachings on forgiveness. How could he possibly make reparation for the tragedy he had brought upon his family? "What if it’s something nothing can fix?" “Well, that’s where Jesus comes in, of course,” Rev. Emmett responds. “Jesus remembers how difficult life on earth can be. He helps with what you can’t undo. But only after you’ve tried to undo it.”21 Not because we earn God’s acceptance, but because in the trying to undo, we become whole people working in concert with God’s desire for wholeness in our world.

Rev. Emmett offers an insight about the significance of the Incarnation: God expresses solidarity with humanity, our struggles and pains, our joys and moments of grace. Later insights have taught us that it is not just solidarity in suffering that matters—that can quickly become an end in itself—but solidarity in the struggle to end suffering. Or as Wesley would put it, solidarity in the struggle to renew our fallen nature and the fallenness of the world.

Throughout this essay, I have used the term atonement in its traditional meaning. Yet, as Maddox reminds us, atonement need not be “primarily forensic in nature, dealing with removal of guilt.” Really, atonement is simply anything that helps reconcile parties estranged from one another.22 And there are many ways of thinking about how God and humanity can be reconciled. United Methodists have inherited a practical theology driven not by a desire to formulate a logically perfect system but by a need to convince ordinary people of God’s extraordinary grace. As inheritors of this tradition in an increasingly diverse church that struggles to affirm a rich variety of life experiences and to be a life-sustaining force for the full personhood of all people, including women, I do not believe we need a new, one-size-fits-all theology of the Cross. Instead, we need to be open to a number of images and themes to express how humanity may live into the reconciled life. Then the aim of Wesley’s understanding of salvation—that we might live in God and God in us for the sake of the renewal of the world—may become a present and growing reality.

To that end, I offer the following image-themes that point to reconciliation and seek to be faithful to Wesley’s concerns and the questions raised by feminists and liberationists.
Incarnation. Jesus saves by virtue of his entire existence. One of the church's earliest thoughts on the meaning of the Messiah was the notion that Jesus reclaimed human life by joining divinity and humanity, living through the effects of sin and into a life that reflected God's image to the world, suffering the world's punishment for his challenge, and overcoming agonizing defeat. Thus he recapitulates human life and conquers the evil and death that steal it.\textsuperscript{23} The image-theme of incarnation reminds us that this is not God's son in the sense of a human child who models for us the redeemed life and for it is crucified. It is the Son, the meeting point of human and divine—an aspect of Godself who is willing to live humbly and to die in humiliation because such are the demands of his life of mission.\textsuperscript{24} With the Son, we are accompanied in our own struggles to bring redemption to the intimate and the public places of our lives—to a shaky family of three motherless and fatherless children and, in the case of Ian Bedloe, to the hole in his own heart; to our neighborhoods and our workplaces and the yearning for purpose in our souls when we work to create and enhance communities of wholeness and justice for all people.

Cross. Any theology of reconciliation must attend to both the need for forgiveness for individual guilt and the reality of systemic evil. Every time I hear that Jesus died "for our sins," I want to ask if it might not be that Jesus died "because of our sins"—because humanity has been a violent creation. I agree with Saiving, Soelle, and other feminists that on a personal level women have been much more likely to be violated than to be violators. Yet, both women and men participate in systemic injustice and even evil every time we buy without concern for the conditions under which products are made, when we eat without concern for the impact of the production of our food on God's creation, etc. The Gospels give us a picture of Jesus challenging people with the reality of their inhumanity to one another and with God's call for true repentance, which is the mending of one's ways. And they/we crucified him. On the cross, Jesus carries and displays our sins, which are violence toward and abandonment of one another as holy creations of God. The Cross calls us to self-examination and to the struggle for justice and righteousness—the struggle in which we find God and God's endless grace.

Christus Victor. The basic idea in this ancient interpretation of the Crucifixion and Resurrection is alluded to in incarnation: evil forces (or Satan) are at work in the world; Jesus' work on earth was to oppose them; in the Crucifixion it may have looked as if evil/Satan has triumphed, but in the
Resurrection Christ emerges victorious over the forces of darkness and evil. God, in Christ, reigns. This theme certainly has a checkered history. Visiting Spain last spring with an interfaith group of Muslims, Christians, and Jews, I was especially attentive to the fact that many crucifix-laden cathedrals had been built to honor and celebrate the Christian “victory” in the expulsion of Jews and Muslims in the fifteenth century and the conquest of the “New World” (and, of course, its peoples). We cannot ignore the horror-laden side of this theology, which has an inherent tendency toward simplistic dualisms about good and evil. And yet, there is an inherent tension in this mythic tale that is instructive for life today and especially for a Wesleyan understanding of salvation. Sin, evil, and death persist in our world. In bringing this theology in touch with life experience, we can say that Christ reigns in this world today—with love and justice, understanding and reconciliation—only as we participate in his work. It is as Christ is resurrected in our lives that the image of God is renewed in us and shines forth through us into the world and that we actually feel and experience God’s grace.

Resurrected Community. Neither sacrifice nor suffering is a good in itself. Women, the poor, and the oppressed have borne more than their fair share of abusive teachings about the value of redemptive suffering. And yet, at times, the struggle for well-being and the building of healthy communities that link persons as they provide them with purpose and meaning for life demand sacrifice. This is merely evidence that God calls us to live beyond ourselves, even as God also insists that we honor the image that is inside each of us. The Resurrection is made real to us as hope and new life arise from relationships, families, and communities.

When Ian Bedloe’s nieces and nephew discuss who would fit into the family shelter in case of a nuclear war, Ian is deemed essential. “He holds us all together,” the older girl says. Later, he begins to understand that God’s forgiveness has been coming all along—that is the part he doesn’t really have to worry about. The hard part is his own transformation, his forgiveness of those who left him in this position, and his sorting out of the meaning of this one life he has to live. He senses himself in defining motion, like an arrow—not an arrow sent by God (at least, that is not the point), but an arrow going to God with every step he takes. “[A]nd if it took every bit of this only life he had, he believed he would get there in the end.”
Transformed by God-with-Us

Over the years, Ian had come to think of Jesus very personally. And it is through that shared experience of struggle and love, the beauty of grace, and the participation in God's continuing work in the world that Ian's life is renewed and that, eventually, he even becomes aware of its renewal.

A juridical atonement alone offers no window for a relationship of solidarity with God-in-Christ. There is merely a giver and a receiver and little need for the receiver to work cooperatively with divine purposes. Wesley's emphasis on renewal seeks to remedy the shortcomings of overemphasis on pardon and justification as ends in themselves. Yet his insistence that acceptance of juridical pardon was the necessary springboard to all future renewal is almost incongruous with his grace-filled anthropology and soteriology. As Kathryn Tanner points out, Jesus saves us not by paying some unpayable debt but by lifting us out of a debt economy. We can count on God's forgiveness; but it is not the whole point. The point is that as God's image comes alive in each of us, we become not God but fully human. Forgive us is ever present because grace is ever present. We know grace—we experience its power and feel ourselves renewed and growing into God's life-giving purposes—as we turn to the Incarnate One, make the struggle of the Cross a reality in all of life, participate in the victory of love over hate, and make room for Jesus to be resurrected in us so that the Incarnation is a present reality, day by day.

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Endnotes

4. Ibid., 101-02.
5. Wesley, Sermon 5, "Justification by Faith," 1.7, in *Sermons*.
7. See Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today*
8. See ibid., 20-21; see also Wesley, Sermon 44, "Original Sin," III.5, in Sermons.
15. Tyler, Saint Maybe, 235.
18. Fabella, Asian Faces of Jesus, 218-21; see also in the same volume, Chung Hyun Kyung, "Who Is Jesus for Asian Women?" 225-29.
21. Tyler, Saint Maybe, 133.
22. Maddox, Responsible Grace, 97.
23. Ibid.
25. See Ray, "Mending and Discarding" and "Undermining Evil," in Deceiving the Devil, to address advantages and disadvantages of this approach from a feminist perspective attuned to liberation of the poor and suffering.
Sanctified Feminism

SUSIE C. STANLEY

The terms sanctification and feminism often evoke negative connotations. Stereotyping and generalizations cloud true understanding of their meaning and create misperceptions. While some shun one or both designations, I am an apologist for both.

Harold Raser applied the term sanctified feminist to Phoebe Palmer (1807–1874), the mother of the Wesleyan/Holiness Movement in the United States. Palmer’s interpretation of John Wesley’s understanding of sanctification became the standard for many Methodists, including those who ultimately left Methodism to form churches that now comprise the Wesleyan/Holiness Movement. Since the term feminism was not coined until the early twentieth century, it is impossible to determine if Palmer herself would have embraced it. Raser employs “sanctified” as an adjective to limit the extent of Palmer’s feminism, which he applies primarily to the area of evangelism. However, he acknowledges that her ideas had “revolutionary possibilities and did in fact contribute to an expanded role for women.” In this essay, I pursue the “revolutionary possibilities” of Palmer’s incipient feminism and adopt the phrase sanctified feminism to suggest the close relationship between sanctification and feminism. Historically, sanctification provided the basis for a Christian anthropology that affirms the equality of women and men in all areas of life. It offers a “usable past” for contemporary Christian feminists, who likewise advocate equality.

Embracing Feminism and Sanctification

Feminism simply means the political, economic, social, and religious equality of the sexes. A student recently questioned this definition, so I encouraged him to check out a dictionary. To his chagrin, he discovered that I had quoted my definition directly from Webster’s. The student was surprised to learn that his prior understanding of feminism was influenced entirely by the negative stereotypes he had associated with the term. There are actually many types of feminists just as there are many categories of Republicans or Democrats. We do not define a political party by one individual or subgroup.
within the party. The same is true of feminism. "Biblical feminism" most accurately reflects my conception of feminism. I define myself as a biblical feminist because I believe there is warrant in the Scriptures for the conviction that women and men have equal worth and value and should work together in partnership in all areas of life. I have attempted by my own life and ministry to challenge the stereotypes clouding feminism's true meaning. For instance, it is hard to classify someone who has been happily married for thirty-two years as a "man hater"!

People also at times associate sanctification with negative connotations. Sanctification is a doctrine best described by one word: love. Sanctification results in holiness—a process of maturation by which Christians grow to be more like Christ as their love for God and neighbor increases. I am well aware of the fanatical expressions of the doctrine and the debates surrounding the meaning of holiness, but I choose to focus on the positive aspects of holiness and its potential for promoting Christian growth.

Experience is a crucial component of both holiness doctrine and feminism. To share one's experience in a Christian context is "testimony," while to share it in a feminist context is "consciousness raising." The following summarizes my journey toward embracing both holiness and feminism, drawing on my experience as a means of understanding both.

My parents initiated my journey toward holiness by taking me to the Church of God (Anderson, IN) when I was two weeks old. I became a Christian at age six. There, I found opportunities for leadership and self-expression within a supportive atmosphere. I played the piano and sang in the choir and in smaller groups. The music minister taught me how to lead singing. I preached on Youth Sunday. Since my church had affirmed the calling of women to the pulpit ministry from the beginning, I had always believed in equality and benefited from its practice in the church. I do not remember hearing sermons admonishing me as a woman to be "submissive." Although I encountered the concept of male-only leadership in Youth for Christ in high school, I did not hear the word headship until I was an adult. My extensive involvement in Youth for Christ introduced me to the world of evangelicalism, which differed drastically from my holiness upbringing. I experienced sanctification as a teenager at a Church of God state youth rally. I understood holiness as a commitment to be more like Christ with the help of the Holy Spirit. Somehow, I bypassed a personal rebellion against Christianity as an adolescent, despite the fact that my
teenage years occurred during the "turbulent" 1960s.

My feminist vision of liberation and equal rights grew out of my religious heritage and understanding of Scripture. (A student recently asked if I was a card-carrying feminist. Later, I wished that I had responded that I'm a Bible-carrying feminist.) Initially, I did not embrace the term feminism. Looking through some old notes from the early 1970s reminds me of my original aversion to the term and helps me understand those who still find the word feminist problematic. Like others, I had been influenced by the media's perception of feminism rather than by its actual meaning. My journey to feminism was primarily rational, not experiential. I did not face a personal experience that opened my eyes to the reality of sexism.

In the 1970s, some feminists, and some Christians, were declaring feminism and Christianity incompatible. I first encountered this view by reading Mary Daly's Beyond God the Father. I agreed with many of her arguments about the reality of sexism in the church, but I was unwilling to heed her drastic advice for feminists to leave Christianity and the church. Instead, I read the Bible from cover to cover to see if Christianity was as hopelessly opposed to feminism as Daly argued. I ended up agreeing with the suffragist Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who claimed, "The Gospel rightly understood pointed to a oneness of equality." I listed all the texts in the Gospels where Jesus talked with women or used parables that related to their everyday activities. The first expression of what became my professional calling was to give Bible studies on Jesus and women. In 1975, following a long process of reading and reflection, I claimed the feminist label. As I did so, I realized that my church had planted the seeds of feminism in me as a young child.

I began reading about Christians and activism in the nineteenth century, searching for a usable past among the writings of suffragists and others working for justice. I discovered a strong heritage of Christians who connected faith and feminism. It wasn't until seminary that I discovered that many of these activists included Wesleyan/Holiness adherents.

I had experienced a call to ministry in 1975, during the same weekend I embraced the feminist label. The ordination process began in 1980, while attending seminary at Iliff School of Theology. After my initial interview, the Credentials Committee (the equivalent of the United Methodist board of ordained ministry) told me I would be licensed at the next ministers' meeting. Six months later, my name was missing from the licensing list distributed at the ministers' meeting. The committee ultimately returned.
my name to the list, but the experience was painful and disillusioning. The sticking point was not so much that I was a woman but that I described myself as a feminist. It took some time for the members of the Credentials Committee to comprehend my understanding of biblical feminism. It was an educational process for the committee, ultimately resulting in a public apology by the committee chair at my ordination service.

My experience as a ministerial intern served as a confirmation of the connection between biblical feminism and holiness. Half of my responsibilities were in the church, leading Bible studies, performing baptisms, preaching, etc. The other half involved working for passage of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), which would have eliminated constitutional laws that favored males over females. Members of the congregation affirmed this schedule. (I realize that this is not a universal experience for all Wesleyan/Holiness churches, but it also is not unique.) One Sunday, the pastor outlined his own journey toward support of the ERA by comparing how his son and daughter had been treated differently in business transactions because of their sex. He denounced the sin of sexism from the pulpit.

My ordination service also illustrated the intersection of feminism and holiness. A friend sang "Sister," by feminist songwriter and performer Chris Williamson. The congregation sang several of my favorite heritage hymns. Attendees included people from various denominations and organizations, including the president of the Denver National Organization for Women and the state coordinator of the ERA campaign in Colorado, Patricia Schroeder, at that time a Colorado congressperson, and my pastor shared the speaking responsibilities.

The connections between feminism and holiness have been the focus of much of my scholarship over the years and have formed the basis of my activism. My personal vision of liberation grew out of my religious heritage. One of the first displays I created for an international women's day celebration incorporated John 8:32, "[Y]ou will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."

Someone once asked my dad how his daughter could possibly be a feminist. He replied, "Susie's always been a feminist." Even prior to the second wave of feminism, my dad recognized a conviction nurtured by my church that affirmed equality. I had always been a feminist; it just took me until 1975 to recognize and claim the label for myself.

Others also have made the connection between holiness and the quest
for women's equality. Nancy Hardesty, Lucille Sider Dayton, and Donald Dayton suggest six characteristics that contribute to the Holiness Movement's affinity with feminism. Several explicitly connect the doctrine of sanctification, or holiness, with feminism: "The emphasis on perfection and holiness is always an implicit critique of the status quo and is thus intrinsically reformist, even revolutionary." In her recent dissertation, Mary Ann Hawkins has joined others who stress the positive correlation between holiness and the support of women clergy.

Historically, Wesleyan/Holiness women preachers have acknowledged the relationship between holiness and equality in the pulpit. In Holy Boldness: Women Preachers' Autobiographies and the Sanctified Self, I examine the narratives of thirty-four of these women. While they did not write theological books, their autobiographies describe how their understanding and experience of holiness offer a usable past for appropriating the doctrine today as men and women continue the quest for equality in all areas of life. Randy Maddox claims it is "easier for a Wesleyan to dialogue with or appropriate the feminist perspective than for those of other traditions." He observes, "The Wesleyan tradition shares a distinctively kindred theological spirit with contemporary Christian feminism... I would contend that the two movements are attuned in their more fundamental connections." Holiness is a primary basis for this compatibility. In what follows, I briefly outline these women preachers' description of holiness and its impact on their lives as they faced both sexism and racism.

Holiness and Feminism

For these women, sanctification required two steps: consecration and faith. Consecration meant putting God first in one's life, even before one's family. Women sometimes found this difficult but understood it as a necessary step toward achieving holiness. The second step toward holiness was faith. God could not perform the work of sanctification until the seeker met these two conditions. The result of sanctification was holiness, or "God in you," as Amanda Smith put it. The sanctified individual was transformed, as evidenced by language such as the "old man" being crucified and replaced by the "new man." Old man and new man were generic terms defining the self before and after sanctification. Rather than eliminating self, however, sanctification resulted in a "new creation." Following Phoebe Palmer's theology, holiness adherents believed that sanctification placed a
Christian at the beginning of the "highway" of holiness, understanding holiness as a process of maturity characterized by love.

Sanctified women rejected the inferior status society sought to impose upon them and, instead, affirmed their position as equals with men based on texts such as Gen. 1:27-28. A creation-centered focus emphasizes the potential of humans rather than their perversity. Sanctification provides the theological foundation for women's transformation from a lack of self-esteem to a sense of their full humanity. Holiness theology assumes that people can change. Its positive anthropology stresses what the sanctified person can become rather than what the sinful person has been. The accent falls on how humans mature through the work of the Holy Spirit.

**Pentecostal Power**
The new creation exhibited another consequence of sanctification—the power of the Holy Spirit. Holiness believers maintained that the Holy Spirit's purifying and empowering ministry makes the renewal of persons possible in the here-and-now rather than waiting for a future age. (In their view, the "end times," or eschatology, had already been inaugurated by Jesus' life and resurrection.) Phoebe Palmer equated holiness and power, while her sister, Sarah Lankford, advised a correspondent, "Get the blessing of holiness, and it will be a gift of power." Women sometimes referred to this power as "holy boldness" that often transformed a timid personality into a fiery minister, unafraid of any opposition. Holy boldness enabled women to overcome a "man-fearing" spirit—a formidable barrier to ministry prior to their experience of holiness. Sanctified women were no longer inhibited by shyness and timidity or plagued by self-doubt or fear. The power of the Holy Spirit had helped them conquer their fears. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, women effectively challenged sexism in their ministries. Quoting Acts 5:29, sanctified women pledged their allegiance to God rather than to "man" and asserted their autonomy against those who employed a polemic based on the stereotypical argument that woman's place was in the home. Such attempts to limit women's ministries proved to be fruitless. Armed with biblical support and the authority of the Holy Spirit, women exhibited holy boldness by preaching to sometimes hostile crowds, both in churches and in dangerous prison yards. Sanctification transformed women. They committed themselves to God through consecration and faith. In return, God empowered them to act in ways they had never imagined.
Fear did not always arise from sexism alone. Sanctification released African-American evangelist Amanda Smith from her fear of white people. Galatians 3:28 ("There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.") became clear to her on the morning of her sanctification. Her new understanding of this verse enabled her to break down the racial barriers and eliminated her fear of speaking to whites.\textsuperscript{11}

Race inhibited the development of a positive self-esteem among African-American women. They found their full humanity threatened on two counts: (1) they were women; (2) they were black. Sanctification enabled women to challenge and overcome attacks on their full humanity that were based on sexist assumptions. It also strengthened their resistance to racist presuppositions. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, African-American women challenged sexism and racism, both of which could have inhibited their ministries. African-American women faced practical problems as well, even while traveling to preaching engagements. Racist practices often prevented them from traveling freely on canal boats or stagecoaches.\textsuperscript{12}

The scriptural foundation for the intimate connection of holiness and power reflected the emphasis on the experience at Pentecost recorded in Acts 1–2. As recorded in Luke 24:49, Jesus promised his disciples that they would receive the promise of the Father, which Luke identified as power. The promise was fulfilled at Pentecost, when both women and men received the power of the Holy Spirit. Palmer described the experience of holiness in Pentecostal terms. Borrowing from both Luke 24:49 and Acts 1:14, she titled her book advocating women preachers \textit{Promise of the Father}.

\textbf{Egalitarian Primitivism}

Primitivists seek to follow the example of Christians in the New Testament church. They claim the Holy Spirit is active in the present just as it was then. Linking sanctification with the baptism of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost demonstrates a primitivist mindset. For them, the Pentecost experience in the early church clearly showed women's involvement in ministry and served as the precedent for women's involvement in the church. The "promise of the Father" was not restricted to the early church but is still available to all Christians through the experience of the Holy Spirit. The reliance on the experience of Pentecost as the model for the theology of sanctification provides a key illustration of primitivism. I have coined the term \textit{egalitarian
primitivism to emphasize the understanding that the early church believed that men and women equally could be gifted and empowered by the Holy Spirit for public ministry. As holiness leaders often pointed out, the Holy Spirit is no respecter of persons, designating some gifts for women and others for men. B. T. Roberts indicated the Holy Spirit's inclusiveness at Pentecost, as did Luther Lee: "Thus did the Holy Ghost, in his first descent, crown females as well as males, with tongues of fire, to speak the wonderful works of God." There are not two lists of spiritual gifts in the Bible, one for each sex. Pentecost illustrates egalitarian primitivism when the Holy Spirit fell on both women and men in the upper room.

Nineteenth-century Holiness writers traced the primitivism of the early church to the example of Jesus. Fannie McDowell Hunter contended: "In all that we have ever read against woman's right to preach the Gospel, we have never read a single quotation from the words of Jesus against this right. This is significant." Hers is just one of many statements included in holiness apologies for women preachers that illustrate the claim that Jesus was the "great emancipator of the female sex." Holiness adherents highlighted Jesus' experience with women to demonstrate his commitment to equality. Examples included the Samaritan woman, Mary and Martha, and Mary Magdalene, whom Jesus, according to Mark and John, chose as the first preacher of the Resurrection. Present-day biblical feminists believe that Jesus' treatment of women can serve as a model for Christian relationships today.

Along with the experience of Pentecost and the example of Jesus, holiness authors examined ministry in the early church. After listing several women in the New Testament who preached, Luther Lee contended: "All antiquity agrees that there were female officers and teachers in the Primitive Church." B. T. Roberts added that in the New Testament church women and men "took a part in governing the Apostolic church," filling offices from apostle to pastor. His book Ordaining Women supported his contention. He and other apologists for the equality of women in ministry looked beyond Pentecost for examples of women active in ministry in the early church. For example, Philip's four daughters prophesied. In Romans 16, Paul lists several women as among his co-laborers: he commends Phoebe (vv. 1-2), a deacon in the early church; he mentions the clergy couple, Prisca and Aquila, who risked their lives for him (v. 3); and he includes the apostle Junia (v. 7). Less is known about the other women on the list, but Paul does praise Mary, Tryphena, and Tryphosa for their hard work. Elsewhere, female co-laborers
include Eudia and Syntyche, who ministered at Philippi (Phil. 4:2). By referencing these biblical women in their writings, holiness apologists for women preachers exhibited egalitarian primitivism. They advocated the restoration of women to the prominent place they filled in the life of the early church. Biblical feminists today use the same biblical examples to promote equality and emphasize the liberating core of Christianity.

Ethics and Activism
Over the years, holiness has become a complicated doctrine. I was reminded of this recently when I taught a course on Wesleyan/Holiness theology to undergraduates. In an attempt to help students stay focused on the important aspects of the doctrine, I started the semester with an emphasis on love. We spent the first class session reading verses about love, eating candies shaped like hearts, and listening to music conveying the primacy of love, such as the Beatles' "All You Need Is Love." I asked each student to write the word love on the board to help them see that holiness can be defined by one word. When students became perplexed by John Wesley's explanation of holiness in Plain Account of Christian Perfection, we sang Charles Wesley's "Love Divine, All Love's Excelling" to remind us that love is the key to holiness. Listening to "The Power of Love," sung by Huey Lewis and the News, gave me the opportunity to stress the relationship between holiness and power and the nature of holiness as love.

John Wesley stressed love for God and neighbor. Ethics is a direct outgrowth of Wesley's emphasis on love. As we become more like Christ, our love for God grows, and our love for neighbor should grow proportionately.

It has been said that holiness stresses ethics over doctrine. Addie Wyatt, a prominent Church of God pastor, has claimed, "Our religion is a way of life." I agree and have sought to model my own ministry after her example. How we behave indicates the level of our growth and maturity as Christians committed to loving God and neighbor. John Wesley articulated an ethic of empowerment, which ethicist Leon Hynson describes as "a social ethic conceived largely in pneumatological terms." The Holy Spirit empowers Christians to demonstrate God's love in society. Hynson explains, "In this empowerment we may see believers undergirded to carry out the world-transforming mandate that has been given to the Christian church. 'You are the salt of the earth.' Jesus said. 'You are the light of the world.' (Matt. 5:13-14)." Wesley's "doctrine of love is at the heart of his life-
long effort to reform the nation and the church." In 1893, Jennie Fowler Willing elaborated on the consequences of love and holiness power. "The 'enduement of power' is the Holy Spirit filling the soul with His own love, and giving zeal, skill, success. This love fills with the divine 'go.'"

Empowered by the Holy Spirit, holiness adherents have addressed societal issues and worked to alleviate social injustice. Phoebe Palmer insisted that sanctification insured usefulness. In 1840, Wesleyans in New York joined others in forming a political party to end slavery. Jennie Fowler Willing and Hannah Whitall Smith were suffragists. C. E. Brown, an early twentieth-century holiness leader, wrote that in Gal. 3:28 Paul "cancelled prejudice and privilege for all time." I once saw this verse printed on a card that had the text of the Equal Rights Amendment on the reverse side. Someone else had made the connection between the Bible and feminism!

Addie Wyatt has devoted her life to addressing injustice as manifested in classism, racism, and sexism. She is motivated by the conviction that God wants Christians to make a difference in this world. Wyatt provides a contemporary model of a holiness believer who has worked for justice as an expression of her holiness theology. In my application essay for a Ph.D. program in 1982 I wrote that, as an activist, I hoped my studies would be relevant beyond the academic setting. The program offered me the opportunity to explore a "usable past." I have appropriated this past in my ministry since 1974 to serve as a foundation for my activism, which continues to address the need for equality in all areas of life. Like others, I see an explicit connection between the theology of holiness and activism.

**Holiness for the Twenty-first Century**

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza contends that the writing of feminist history is activism and hope. My writing on holiness themes and women expresses my activism in the area of equality for women and men. Sometimes my hope wavers but is renewed as others address the importance of holiness. Bryan Stone offers one example when he writes, "I believe that the twenty-first century will witness a new holiness movement." He argues for the rediscovery of the doctrine in The United Methodist Church and outlines its potential for determining how we should live as Christians. Stone too recognizes the importance of Pentecost as a theological basis for equality between the sexes when he notes that the "lines of gender were crossed" there. Likewise, he credits the Holy Spirit for breaking down all barriers.
between people writing. "Indeed, whenever the Holy Spirit shows up in the book of Acts, social categories are being obliterated as new communities of faith are being formed from across ethnic, cultural, and gender lines."25

Early on, the Wesleyan/Holiness Movement implemented the radical implications of the doctrine of holiness by affirming women preachers and ordaining them. While not always achieving the goal of egalitarian primitivism, it modeled inclusiveness and mutuality by recognizing the call and supporting the ministries of thousands of women.

Schüessler Fiorenza’s claim that historical forgetfulness can be dangerous26 has proven true for women pastors in the Holiness Movement. While no direct correlation has been documented, it is clear that as holiness churches have accommodated to Protestant evangelicalism and neglected the doctrine of holiness over the past several decades, the number of women clergy has drastically declined. The radical and revolutionary potential of holiness has diminished. Some holiness denominations report that only 1 to 3 percent of their parish clergy are women. (While The United Methodist Church has placed women in all areas of church leadership since granting women full ordination in 1956, this percentage is comparable to the number of women serving larger United Methodist churches as senior pastors.)

A recent encounter demonstrates the consequences of historical forgetfulness. A Wesleyan/Holiness church was scheduled to ordain a young woman in June 2000. A week before the service, the Southern Baptist Convention declared its opposition to women clergy. A man who had been supportive of this woman’s ministry in his church frantically emailed her, wondering if this meant her ordination would be cancelled. Obviously, he was unaware of the theological differences between his Wesleyan/Holiness denomination and the Southern Baptists and assumed that the latter’s statement would end his church’s practice of ordaining women. As the role of women in ministry continues to be debated, the holiness message of inclusiveness and mutuality is desperately needed.

While the doctrine of sanctification can be utilized to work for equity in Wesleyan churches, it can also benefit other feminist theologians who are exploring holy living and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit in a Christian context. Many Christian feminists, as well as many Wesleyans, are unaware of the implications of holiness doctrine as a model for mutuality. The usable past furnished by holiness doctrine and practice offers a theology that parallels the goals of feminism.
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Endnotes


House, 1891), 88; and Luther Lee, *Five Sermons and a Tract*, ed. by Donald W. Dayton (Chicago: Holrad House, 1975, 86.) Roberts founded the Free Methodist Church, while Lee was an early leader in the Wesleyan Methodist Connection.


18. Addie Wyatt, "Religion and the Feminist Movement." Conference sponsored by Harvard Divinity School, 1-3 November 2002. The Rev. Dr. Wyatt was one of twenty-five women invited to share about the intersection of feminism and religion in their lives. Wyatt represented a holiness perspective.


23. Wyatt, "Religion and the Feminist Movement."


26. Fiorenza, "Religion and the Feminist Movement."
Commissioning the People of God: Called to Be a Community in Mission

MARY ELIZABETH MOORE

The United Methodist Church, as many other Christian communions, perennially is embroiled in questions regarding the mission of the church, simultaneous with discussions of who can be ordained and what ordination and ministry mean. At the same time, people in pan-Methodist traditions are asking what it means to be Wesleyan in 2003. The interplay of these questions is often not considered; yet, a significant opportunity for such discussion emerged in the 1996 United Methodist decision to commission people toward deacon or elder as the probationary step toward ordination. The church needs now to dive deeply into that opportunity, especially taking into account traditions of women. Commissioning has promise to enrich the church’s sense of common mission and to deepen the meaning of probationary membership, a time of being sent out together in mission. In this essay, I probe the theological frontiers of commissioning, asking questions with a woman’s eye. Where? Why? Whom? Is it I? If so, how and when?

Where Do We Begin? What Is at Stake?

The greatest irony in the current United Methodist debates on the meaning and purpose of commissioning, especially that of people moving toward elder and deacon, is that the concept of commissioning is far larger than the debate. It promises to shed light on the entire ministry of the church—the ministry of all God’s people, who are called to be a community in mission. In what follows, I wrestle in depth with the meaning and challenges of commissioning, especially to uncover riches that inform the mission of the church and the mission of the ordained. Key to this effort is to deepen and radicalize the reflections by bringing feminist criticism and women’s experience to bear on the traditions and on the reshaping of those traditions.

To explore the meaning of commissioning more deeply, I draw upon diverse sources. Biblical and ecumenical traditions reveal the roots and richness of commissioning; early Methodist women preachers reveal the costs
of commissioning; and current United Methodist practices reveal the richness of commissioning for contemporary church life.

**Why? God Is a Sending God!**

The word *commissioning* is not common in the Bible, but the *practice* of commissioning permeates Scripture. Further, the word *commit* does have abundant usage in the Bible, referring primarily to the human will, which can be directed negatively or positively. Here we briefly consider biblical texts from Matthew and John. Each text involves God's asking total commitment of the people and God's commissioning the people to active engagement with the messy world.

Consider the parables, morality tales, and instructions that Matthew shares from Jesus' last days. Jesus warns the disciples and crowds to be watchful (24:36-44), faithful (24:45-51), prepared (25:1-13), stewards (25:14-30), and self-giving (25:31-46). After the Resurrection, Matthew tells of Jesus' instructing the disciples to go and make disciples, to baptize and teach people what Jesus has taught them, and to trust Jesus to be with them "to the end of the age" (28:16-20). In these various instructions, Jesus commissions his followers to attitudes and practices that will be important after he is gone.

In John, Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene after the Resurrection, calling her by name and asking her to go tell his brothers that he will ascend to his Father (20:11-18). Soon after, Jesus appears to the disciples, saying, "Peace be with you," and "As the Father has sent me, so I send you" (20:21). Then, breathing the power of the Holy Spirit on them, he tells them that they have power to forgive sins. In these texts, commissioning is radical—given first to a woman (who is not even recognized by the Christian church as a disciple) and inviting the disciples to receive the power of God's Spirit and to forgive sins. In one instance, Jesus prepares breakfast for the disciples and then addresses Peter three times, "Feed my lambs . . . tend my sheep . . . feed my sheep" (21:15-17). In these texts, Jesus charges his friends with powerful ministries of forgiving sins and feeding the hungry.

**Whom? God Calls the Church and Its Leaders**

These biblical themes are carried throughout the history of the church, and others are added, particularly in relation to ministries of laity and clergy. As the Christian church became more institutionalized, offices of ministry became more sharply delineated. Starting in the fourth century, this move-
ment took place against the background of the Roman Empire, which intensified the hierarchy of political, social, and religious structures in the Greco-Roman world. The result is a hierarchy-leaning heritage in Christianity; this is one reason why a feminist critique is so important regarding ministry. The early church patterned itself after the larger sociopolitical structures and was simultaneously entwined in those structures, yielding what Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza calls a kyriarchy. Relationships between clerical offices and laity were shaped within these kyriarchal social patterns, and the patterns are relevant to commissioning. They are also critical in a feminist analysis, which points to "the radical democratic horizon of the ekklesia of wo/men." One particularly crucial issue is the relationship between the priesthood of all believers and the ministry of clergy.

For John Wesley, God calls both the church and its leaders. Although he did not often use the word *commissioning*, Wesley's practice was to call and commission lay preachers and class leaders, and to support the ongoing ministry of deacons, elders, and superintendents. Wesley commonly spoke of *minister* rather than *priest* or *elder*, indicating a strong sense of shared ministry. James White notes that only in the eucharistic liturgy and a few points in the ordinal did Wesley specify elders; thus, the *Sunday Service* marked "significant shifts away from signs of priestly power." Wesley did see ordained roles as distinct but defined them in relation to the ministry of the Body. His own understanding of the church was that of "a congregation or body of people united together in the service of God." The ministry of all Christians was thus central to the words and practices of the early Wesleyan movement.

Commissioning was not a practice in the ordination process of the early Wesleyan movement. At the same time, the early Methodist service for ordaining deacons carried some of Matthew's commissioning language: "Let your loins be girded about, and your lights burning, and ye yourselves like unto men that wait for their Lord, when he will return from the wedding, that when he cometh and knocketh, they may open unto him immediately." This is not to say that the order of deacon and the practice of commissioning are identical in Wesleyan tradition; yet there are commissioning dimensions within the early Wesleyan services of ordaining deacons.

The history of the church evidences clearly that *God calls the whole church and its leaders.* More specifically, the priesthood of all believers, established by God through baptism, is made visible and whole by the ministry
of the ordained. In all its forms, commissioning is God’s act of calling people into service and sending them out together to be the body of Christ in the world, giving themselves to God’s work with words and deeds as each is uniquely called and all are called together. For laity, commissioning is the act of being sent into service with one another in a world of crying need. For people moving toward ordination, commissioning is the act of being sent to serve together with other commissioned ministers—exploring frontiers of ministry, engaging in spiritual preparation for ordination, and giving leadership with and to the ministering community. Only if we understand the power of commissioning for both laity and clergy can we grasp the communal nature of all ministry and the distinctive ministry of unity to which the ordained are called. A ministry of unity is not above, but within and with and to, the people of God. It exists for the sake of God’s larger purposes and for the magnification and intensification of the whole community’s ministry in the world.

**Is It I, Lord? God Sends People Whom Others Reject**

Who is commissioned? This question often evokes controversy because the human community of the church cannot always discern those whom God has called. Certainly, the church’s discernment process is critical in matters of commissioning missionaries and deaconesses and in ordaining deacons and elders. At the same time, the church is capable of ignoring God’s commissions—a danger that is particularly strong when the church practices the systematic exclusion of a whole class of people, as women and African Americans were excluded in earlier decades of American Methodism and homosexual people are excluded today. Another reason that commissioning is controversial is that, although it clearly refers to God’s calling and sending, it does not create a sharp divide between clergy and laity. As we will see below, commissioning is a practice that can take many forms, but it always points back to the sending God and the work of ministry to which all people—individually and collectively, lay and ordained—are called. Commissioning is finally an act of God, and God selects curious assortments of people to send out for God’s work.

A study of women’s ministries can illumine many forms of commissioning. Consider women preachers of the early Methodist movement in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Britain. John Wesley encouraged these women to preach and saw their ministries as central to the revival. The same women were later restricted in their preaching (1803 Conference in
Manchester), with objections and limitations mounting in later years (1832). Though restrictions escalated, the ministries of women continued, both in Britain and elsewhere. Consider the deaconess movement of nineteenth-century American Methodism or the Wesleyan/Holiness women of the same century. The institutional church often squeezed these women, as it had pressured earlier women preachers; yet they were determined to follow their vocations. In this essay, we focus particularly on the women's sense of call (or commission) and their determination to follow their calls through thick obstacles and thin encouragement. We focus on two early Methodist women preachers who exemplify the larger movement.

Dorothy Ripley (1769–1831), daughter of a Methodist local preacher, was in her late twenties when, upon entering her room to worship God, "the power of God struck me to the earth where I lay as covered with his glorious majesty beholding as through his Spirit the riches of his kingdom." In this experience of several hours, she experienced assurance and more: "In this situation the Lord commanded me to 'go ten thousand miles.'" Ripley interpreted her vision as God's call to minister to Africa's children, who were oppressed by American planters. Later she said, "Ah! the solitary path that I took! Who but a God of everlasting strength could have brought me safe through?"

Ripley responded by traveling to the United States, where she addressed James Madison, General Dearborn, and President Thomas Jefferson. She asked the President how many slaves he held, to which he responded that he had earlier had three hundred, but now had fewer. She told him that her nature "was shocked to hear of the souls and bodies of men being exposed to sale like the brute creation" and she "implored his pity and commiseration." They parted in peace, but Ripley continued her mission for many years, proclaiming the need to eliminate slavery and ministering with African Americans. In time, Ripley was enjoined to preach, which she did thereafter; and she was invited to speak against slavery to the United States Congress. Her ministry also expanded to include prison reform and advocacy for Native Americans.

One is grasped by the drama of Dorothy Ripley's call, which played a large part in empowering her to face her solitary path. Over decades of ministry, Ripley often was faced with objections to her leadership, whether from slave owners or men who objected to women speaking and preaching; yet, others urged her on and she persisted, dying in the country to which
God had commissioned her more than three decades earlier.

Another controversial figure of the same period was Mary Barritt Taft (1772–1851), who traveled for many years preaching and leading in the revival movement, first as a single woman and later as wife to Zechariah Taft, a Methodist preacher and ardent supporter of women preachers. Obstacles were part of the mainstay of Mary Taft's life, especially from professors of religion and ministers of the gospel. Yet she came to see the objections of others as a natural part of following the call of God. She also came to appreciate the many friends who supported her. She said:

I believe there never yet existed any, singularly useful in the Church of God, who have not been opposed by their fellow-creatures in their benevolent career of doing good... In the midst of all, God hath given me his approving smile and a blessed consciousness... In addition to this, the Lord has graciously raised me up numerous friends.

Mary Taft's ministry consisted of preaching, praying with others, holding public meetings, and correspondence. Valuing the Methodist connection, she limited herself to visiting places where she was invited by traveling preachers and others on the circuit. This practice sometimes led to criticism by people who wanted her to come to them without formal invitations, but she rarely made exceptions. Even with such loyalty to the connectional system, Taft received persistent criticism from a few vocal clergy. Some of these eventually joined the ranks of her strongest supporters; others continued to protest until the Methodist Conference placed official limitations on women preachers.

One cannot presume to understand Mary Taft's motivations, but some are visible on the surface. One is a sense of being called and sent out by God—a commission that was repeatedly confirmed by people's response and by the support of friends and appreciative admirers during her years of trial. Another motivation was compassion for her neighbors, which initiated her ministry in prayer meetings and permeated her ministry thereafter. In autobiographical notes, she described passing a house where a child was crying. She stopped to inquire and was told that the mother had little or no milk. Taft then offered to give the baby milk and, when she did, the baby ceased crying. At Taft's invitation, the mother brought her baby to the Taft home for feedings in ensuing days. In time, the child was well fed.
and the parents experienced a spiritual awakening through their healing relationship with Mary Taft.

In face of controversy, from time to time Mary Taft reassessed her call; and she was strengthened at each juncture. Like Dorothy Ripley, she was grounded first in a strong conversion experience and active prayer life. The conversion experience gave her compassion for her neighbors, exhorting from house to house and praying in class meetings. Her praying soon led to more public exhorting, and others encouraged her to continue this work. Though she was attacked by others and periodically questioned herself, she received repeated confirmation: "Suffice it to say that the Almighty, in a most extraordinary manner removed my scruples, answered my objections, and thrust me out into his vineyard." Taft's words reveal her overwhelming sense of being commissioned by God. As with Dorothy Ripley, but in a different kind of ministry, Mary Taft received her conversion and her commissioning to evangelistic ministry with conviction and courage.

The nineteenth-century deaconesses were akin to these early women preachers of the Wesleyan movement in the sense that they recognized God's call and responded. They clearly understood themselves to be commissioned by God to service, and their responses were determined and full-bodied. Further, they gave themselves to incarnational ministries of compassion and hospitality. Similarly, the nineteenth-century Wesleyan/Holiness women understood themselves to be authorized and empowered by the Holy Spirit and, by this spiritual calling, commissioned to serve the poor, afflicted, and lonely of their world.

These various groups of women—preachers, deaconesses, and holiness leaders—point to the work of God in nonconventional places by nonconventional people through nonconventional forms of ministry. Such is the power of focusing on God's acts of commissioning (however diversely these acts are understood by the people who experience and respond to them). In the commissions of women discussed here, God's work is manifest, breaking through ordinary social structures and codes of behavior. We see God's Spirit inspiring, empowering, and guiding people in paths they would not otherwise have chosen. Of course, we could analyze the social-psychological influences on these women as well, and we could do the same for more conventional calls into ordained ministries. Such analyses can await other occasions. For this essay, the power of commissioning is sufficient focus, alongside the multiple and diverse manifestations of God's
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commissions, which are given to the people of God so they will give themselves to God's urgent work in the world.

How and When? Sending People for Service and Preparation

The United Methodist Church is reflecting on questions not only of why, whom, and is it I but also of how and when commissioning should be practiced. Thus we now turn to the how and when of commissioning in the contemporary church, as recorded in the United Methodist Book of Worship (BW).

BW offers two services of commitment and four of commissioning. No explication is given for these, but the services of commitment focus primarily on the individuals making a commitment, whereas the services of commissioning focus more on the communities that are sending, being sent, and/or receiving the ministries for which people are commissioned. Each service is coherent in itself, but no material is given to suggest that they have been analyzed as a body to uncover the implicit theology of commissioning within these various practices. This is my purpose here.

Services of commitment include commitment for lay speakers and commitment to Christian service. The former opens, "Those persons wishing to make this commitment will please present themselves." The service concludes with the leader saying to the candidate, "Go forth to fulfill the ministry that you have received in the Lord." This service is an act of the church, conducted by a church body, but it focuses on the gifts, preparation, and commitment of persons who present themselves to be lay speakers. Similarly, the "Order for Commitment to Christian Service" opens with "This order is intended to recognize and consecrate a commitment to the service of Christ in the world ..." The order focuses on the calling of the person being commissioned.

Orders of commissioning might be divided into two types—the local and the denominational. The local type includes orders for commissioning persons to short-term Christian service or as class leaders. Both take place in public worship and commission persons to serve with and for others, either within their own community or in another. Commissioning to short-term service may send people on a work trip or project. Commissioning class leaders is an order "intended for the public commissioning of class leaders following their appointment by a Charge or Church Conference of the congregation"; it also involves congregational affirmation. Both
services are marked by communal grounding, mutual responsibility, and prayers for God's blessing.

The other two commissioning practices are liturgical enactments of the denomination's sending persons into missionary service—commissioning as missionaries or to the office of deaconess. The first order begins with the presiding bishop's giving an explanation of the early church practice, closing with "This commissioning and sending will strengthen the bonds we maintain with the faith-filled communities to which they are going." The prayer of blessing that closes this service is for the power of the Holy Spirit and for the ministries of these missionaries.

The other order has a different tone, more focused on the candidates for deaconess and missionary. However, the accent on God's grace and calling and on the sending into mission is equally strong. The liturgy closes with the presiding bishop's saying, "Christian friends, I commend to you these persons whom we this day have recognized and commissioned to carry into all the world the sacred and imperishable message of eternal salvation." The congregation responds with words of calling and support, also acknowledging their common mission: "Together we are the people of God, whose task is to participate in God's mission in the world."

I have shared some details of these orders to highlight the elements—God's call, the church's commissioning, the oneness of ministry, the unique calling of missionaries and of deaconesses, and the power given by the Holy Spirit. Comparing these liturgical practices of commissioning in The United Methodist Church with the understanding of commissioning in the ordination process, one can see a strong congruence of theology. All are anchored in baptism and, then, in God's call to a specific ministry. All are acts within the church's worship, and the church participates in sending the persons into ministry. As part of these orders, the sending congregation acknowledges its call to ministry as well, and this includes supporting the persons who are commissioned to a term of specific service in the local congregation or the world.

Where the commissioning toward deacon or elder is unique is in the distinctiveness of the ministries toward which people are commissioned. The denomination is working toward more clarity about the roles, preparation, mentoring, and apprenticeship in this period. What is also needed is greater clarity regarding the meaning and promise of commissioning for the whole church, the relationship among diverse practices of commis-
sioning in the denomination, the communal relationship between commissioned ministers and their annual conferences and communities of faith, and the power of commissioning, in all its forms, to send people together into ministry. Wrestling with these questions will help the church discern how and when commissioning is important to the mission of the church.

**Looking toward the Future**

Our study thus far has shown that commissioning moves in many directions. Throughout, two affirmations have become clear. First, God is the Great Commissioner. Second, commissioning is multifaceted and purposive, challenging individuals and communities to discern and live boldly from their unique charisms as they participate in God’s work of love and justice.

Where do these affirmations lead? The narratives of marginalized women reveal the intensity and determination that people can experience in commissioning and the prophetic nature of God’s call. Contemporary United Methodist practice further reveals a living tradition; however, the significance of commissioning is partially revealed and partially obscured by current discussions. *What is needed now is attention to the commissioning of God’s people and to the call on the whole body to be a community of mission in the world.* Thus, I offer proposals for action that could enhance the church’s theology and embodiment of commissioning.

First, *honor God the Great Commissioner and the sacredness of God’s commissions.* Beginning with baptism and God’s commission of people into the body of Christ, the church has responsibility to discern God’s movements in people’s lives, to honor the commissioning God, and to support those who are commissioned, even when they push the boundaries of convention. Discerning God’s commissions can be never a matter of what is popular or comfortable but a process of discerning the pull of God toward New Creation. Dorothy Ripley, Mary Taft, and other courageous souls witness to the need for radical openness to God’s call. Thus, we need practices of discernment:

- Create opportunities for people in local congregations to discern their spiritual gifts (*charisms*) and orient their lives around their charisms.
- Create opportunities for commissioned ministers, missionaries, and deaconesses to engage in communal discernment of their gifts in relation to needs of the church and the world, especially during probationary periods but also throughout their ministries.
The second proposal for action is to *honor the many forms of commissioning and the community of diverse people with diverse commissions.* Commissioning runs deep in the Christian tradition and it has never had just one meaning. The church should not expect one meaning now. For commissioning to be associated with ordination and lay ministry, with short-term and long-term commitments, with individual experiences of God, and with church-guided processes of authorizing missionaries, deaconesses, and ordained ministers is a sign of vitality, not confusion. What is urgent is that all practices of commissioning be centered in God’s call and God’s mission for the world. Beyond that, commissioning will take many forms, shaped by the mysteries of God’s movements, the unique lives of those who are called, the church communities in which those persons live, and the social contexts where God’s Spirit is moving. This proposal points to practical possibilities:

- Find or create avenues for the ministry of each person and group, so that no gift is ignored or belittled.
- Celebrate annual commitment services in clergy sessions of annual conferences—presenting commissioned ministers, identifying their individual and communal service of the past year, and honoring their commissions for the coming year.
- Renew the commissioning of missionaries, deaconesses, congregations, and ordained clergy each year in annual conferences, inviting them to discern and make commitments for the coming year.
- In local churches, celebrate the many colors and textures of commissioning: commissioning a youth group for a mission trip or Bible study; a group of children for a week of Christian living in camp; an older person for a new life in retirement; a family for its move to a new city; a group of community volunteers for their year’s work, and so forth.

These practices symbolize God’s many ways of calling people into ministry. The church needs to resist temptations to grant ontological or elevated status to ordained ministry. We need to recognize differences of ministries without creating hierarchies of value. What is needed are liturgical celebrations that mark God’s sending people out together to do sacred work in the church and world.

This leads naturally to a third proposal for action—*honor the communal nature of commissioning.* In baptism, the church is called upon to welcome and support those who are baptized and to renew their own commitments.
In all acts of commissioning the community mediates God's actions; thus, the communal nature of commissioning needs to be emphasized in church structures, discernment processes, and liturgical celebrations. This suggests possibilities for practice, building upon those already named:

- Engage congregations and communities (boards, classes, choirs) in discerning their *communal* charisms and equipping themselves for their *communal* missions.
- Enhance the missional emphasis during the probationary period of commissioned ministers (toward deacon and elder), seeking ways that probationary members can journey *together* in that mission.

Every calling from God is a divine commission, thus requiring openness, discernment, courage, and strength, both for the one(s) called and for the larger community. Even in their lonely journeys, Dorothy Ripley and Mary Barritt Taft had people who supported and confirmed their callings. When the community does not authorize a call, it needs to support people in further wrestling and discernment. On occasion (as for Ripley and Taft), people may need to persist in a persistent call and relate with the community from the margins. The challenge for the church is to appreciate the distinctive commissions of distinctive people and to discern and work with each and all for the sake of God's mission in the world.

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**Endnotes**

1. One example of this discussion appears in a recent issue of *Circuit Rider.* See “What Does It Mean to Be Wesleyan in 2003?” *Circuit Rider* (May–June 2003). This essay focuses historically on the ecumenical and Wesleyan traditions, but contemporary issues focus on The United Methodist Church.


8. Chilcote, Her Own Story, 154, 174; Chilcote, John Wesley and the Women Preachers, 221-52.
10. Chilcote, Her Own Story, 132.
11. Ibid., 140.
12. See Taft, Biographical Sketches.
13. Chilcote, Her Own Story, 154-55.
15. Ibid., 156-57, 158.
22. Ibid., "The Order for Commissioning as Missionaries I," 740, 741.
23. Ibid., "The Order for Commissioning to the Office of Deaconess or as Missionaries II," 743.
Salvation Flows: Eschatology for a Feminist Wesleyanism

Catherine Keller

"The sea is an excellent figure of the fulness of God, and that of the blessed Spirit. For as the rivers all return into the sea, so the bodies, the souls, and the good works of the righteous return into God, to live there in [God’s] eternal repose.”

John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*

Where rivers flow into the sea, carrying their accumulation of sediments, they form a delta, widening dramatically as the oceanic tide meets their currents. Might we start here, with Wesley’s invocation of the ancient mystical trope of the divine ocean, to meditate on eschatology? Eschatology in Wesley may be said to consist of his teachings on “salvation” and “new creation.” So this essay offers its contribution to theology by way of a doctrinal delta formed by those two teachings, through which flow long accumulations of eschatological symbolism—biblical, patristic, Wesleyan, and feminist.

The word *eschatology* is a nineteenth-century neologism coined to categorize the whole symbolic cluster of “end things”: salvation, eternal life, kingdom of God, resurrection, judgment, apocalypse, new creation. *Eschaton* in the biblical Greek means “end,” in both the spatial and temporal senses, and so is best translated as “edge.” Biblically there is no literal “end” of the world, though many kinds and aspects of world certainly die. But there is a present life lived at the edge—the edge of history; the edge of our worlds; the edge of ourselves—a boundary where we get stretched between what has been and what might be, between our limitations and our expectations, between our history and our hope. That edge resembles less a cut or a wall than a shoreline—shifting, layered, and fluid, jagged or smooth, sometimes turbulent, sometimes pacific. Indeed, perhaps it can be conceived in its inviting aspect even as a confluence—like that of a river emptying into the ocean.

The eschaton shapes and bounds our lives, not just as death but also as
the edge of every lived moment—bodily, soulful, working. Consider how edges—limitations—give our bodies, souls, and works their living shape, their contour. Mortal creatures in our perpetual flux would otherwise wash away. Or as Wesley suggests in the above citation, they might instead, if they have turned to the good, re-turn into God. Are these the lives that are not drying out, not holding back, but flowing like a river? Not just to God, but “into God”; saved then not just by God but within God. How would this metaphor of salvation, this droplet of soteriology, pertain to the symbol of the new creation?

We will return to this eschatological delta. But let us consider what specific edge, what shoreline, we who are called “methodist” and “feminist” are privileged to wander. Nothing I have said above seems gender specific. The rare figure of the divine sea is free of masculine personification, although subliminally it suggests the saltwater of the womb (Gen. 49:25)—indeed, an entire theology of the primal deep. But in this essay I will not fish for traces of a maternal image of divinity in Wesley’s Works. I will not try to relate his empowerment of actual women to his eschatology. We need no longer justify feminist work by prooftexting an idealized John Wesley or by exposing his imperfections and those of the movement. But still, is it enough to declare, “I am a feminist and a United Methodist; therefore my theology is a Wesleyan feminism”? I think not.

Therefore, in this essay I lift up a profound affinity between Wesley’s distinctive concept of salvation and feminist sensibility. In this affinity I believe there lies the still-unrealized (“reposing”) potentiality for an eschatology adequate to a Wesleyan feminism of the third millennium. I interpret Wesley’s symbol of the new creation by means of his radical innovation of soteriology. For in John Wesley’s edgiest soteriological insight—that of the saving synergy of divine grace and human response—lies the sympathy between feminism and Wesleyanism. From it flows the potential for a vital Wesleyan future.

**Strong Attractions**

Wesley’s Plain Account continues by associating the depth currents of the divine ocean with the sympathetic energies of relationship: “By strong though invisible attractions [God] draws some souls through their intercourse with others. The sympathies formed by grace far surpass those formed by nature.”

To personalize this text: my own sympathies for Wesley would certainly belong among those formed by “grace” rather than by “nature.” Yet it would
take years before I would care about, for instance, how nearly the process notion of a relational "lure from God" is anticipated by Wesley's concept of "preventing grace" as universally available attraction, operating through the sympathetic interfluency of relations. Even when I found myself teaching at Drew Theological School, and we invited Marjorie Suchocki to lecture, I listened at a respectful distance to her lecture on "Coming Home: Wesley, Whitehead, and Women." I did not realize until years later how well her triadic alliteration had charted my peregrination. Yet, as Suchocki put it: "'[C]oming home' is not a process of arriving, but a process of joining a band of pilgrim people who are continuing the journey."

But the sympathy of Wesleyan grace with the feminist sense of the connective self continues to grow. If feminist theology has a core sensibility, it could be called "relationalism": the realization that as humans we come interrelated with one another and that our sociality is constitutive of who we inwardly become. From this perspective, the autonomous "male ego" looks like an artifice of that form of social organization characteristic of Western patriarchal cultures. Feminism in theology imagines the liberation of a fully human sociality not just from sexual oppression but also from all structures of domination. We recognize that not just men and women but all creatures are radically interdependent; we know no existence outside of our flowing, shifting, layered relations. This alternative has been elaborated through a process theology, for which all creatures live in an oceanic interconnectedness with one another and with God. The core insight of process theology comes to this: The relationship of the divine to the creature is one of cooperation, in which the divine initiative (the "initial aim") acts upon the creature and the creature reacts upon God.

To rejoin the triad, in a famous passage (cited by the Oxford English Dictionary as a first usage of the word react) Wesley enunciates his relational claim: "God does not continue to act upon the soul unless the soul re-acts upon God." This reciprocity is couched in pneumatological language: God "will not continue to breathe into our soul unless our soul breathes toward him again: unless our love, and prayer, and thanksgiving return to him." This metaphor of a rhythmic inter-breathing invokes the divine ruach of in/spiration and re/spiration—the Spirit of Life who is God. Notice the similarity of its "return" to the oceanic rhythm of "return into God." Randy Maddox observes "how closely Wesley ties the affirmation that grace is responsive" to the insistence that it is also responsible—if we do not re-act, "God will
cease to act." This tie, he argues, "reflects Wesley's equally strong commit­
ment to the integrity of the human response in salvation." I am suggesting
that this interaction not only reflects but also defines Wesley's soteriology.

Grace initiates. Grace saves. The saving grace is not irresistible but
perilously resistible—dependent upon our free response! Within the
context of the Protestantism of Wesley's day, his insistence upon a
divine-human cooperation in salvation represents a courageous break
from the sola gratia tradition—which, by rendering grace a unilateral act of
divine control over the person, arguably takes the graciousness out of
grace. Synergy is replaced by "monergy." For in the logic of a sovereign
omnipotence predetermining our salvation—justifying us in spite of
ourselves, requiring no cooperation from our sinful selves—thrives the
imaginary of God the lordly patriarch.

Is it not precisely in Wesley's emphasis upon a human agency coop­
erant with divine agency that the sympathy with feminist theology roots
itself? No relationalism would have liberating force without this "breathing
room." Women and other systemically disempowered others already know
their own (inter)dependencies. These are the signifiers of our free cooperation in
the work of saving both self and world that empowers. The liberating poten­
tialities of Wesleyanism for women and other Others flow—when they
flow—from this theological opening. For does injustice not boil down to the
violation of the integral freedom of the Other? Dominance suppresses the
agency of its subjects. demanding mere obedience and conformity rather
than inviting assent and mutuality.

A divine power defined in terms of total control chokes off the crea­
ture's breath, the spirit of freedom that lends integrity to the human
response. Of course, when God is envisioned as—above all—a masculine
Superpower, men [sic] compete to make themselves in his [sic] image. They
dominate rather than empower those around them. The feedback loop
between divine and human models of unilateral sovereignty (visible in the
crypto-Christian politics of American empire) has not relented. At least as
early as Constantine's conversion of the Roman Empire, "the Lord of Power
and Might" was displacing the God of Love.

Methodists also succumb to the worship of Power. Unfortunately, it is
not simply a matter of misinterpreting Wesley. For despite Wesley's heart­
warming salvation-mutualism, the question of eschatology steers us into
some choppy soteriological waters.
Salvation Here, Now

According to Theodore Weber, the eschatological problem lies in the gap between Wesley's synergistic doctrine of salvation and his cosmic notion of the "new creation." Weber's sharp formulation of the problem cuts through heavenly clouds: 

"[T]he concept of New Creation represents a major failure in John Wesley's theological thinking. . . . His theology of salvation is a universalism of opportunity that protects freedom of response; his expectation of New Creation is a universalism of result that requires the suppressing of freedom." If God ultimately overpowers the creation, even for the sake of the creatures' own "restoration," would this not violate the human creature's freedom to "react upon" grace, either resisting or embracing it? According to Weber, a unilateral new creation would violate creaturely integrity. Yet, despite his synergism, Wesley seems to have presumed such a final, monergistic, consummation. But surely no Wesleyan eschatology can well dispense with the new creation. Maddox argues that it is Wesley's new creation that integrates his soteriology with his eschatology. Might a deep breath of sanctifying grace save Wesleyan eschatology from contradicting its own saving freedom?

To emphasize the freedom of the human response to grace, Wesley appeals not to Enlightenment norms but to Paul's dictum to "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." Wesley underscores the phrase "your own," for "you yourselves must do this, or it will be left undone for ever." Hence the constant accusations of Pelagianism, of self-salvation (also imputed to feminist or liberation theology). But they miss Wesley's point. "There is no opposition between these—God works: therefore do ye work. . . . Inasmuch as God works in you, you are now able to work out your own salvation." For Wesley, unlike for the classical Reformers, humans remain capax dei—"capable of God." Thus, we are responsible for our salvation—not to save ourselves but to respond to the persistent divine initiative.

In Wesley's complex cartography of grace, an initiating, prevenient (preventing) grace is always present in all persons. The Creator is nowhere absent from the creation. When it comes to the dramatic moment of justifying grace, the story has still only begun—our bad habits persist, our chains still bind, and if we do not continuously "grow in grace," through the process so methodically known as "sanctification," the salvation we have
in Christ still cannot “save us.” Like the manna, grace cannot be hoarded. Only if we continue, in Wesley’s words, to “stir up the sparks of grace” do we move on toward that perfection that Suchocki argues is no static endpoint but rather a continuous process. “Christian perfection is a fullness which is called to a self-surpassing fullness yet again, and in this process, the divine destiny is achieved.” In other words, for Wesley, to “continue on to perfection” comprises a relative, not an absolute or final, state and so a “processive condition, adapted to the situation of the believer.”

I suggest we interpret this soteriology of synergetic divine–human work eschatologically—but not in the conventional sense of a salvation deferred until after death. Wesley’s notion of salvation cuts against standard conventions in two important ways: it takes place now, and it takes place socially, not privately. In “The Scripture Way of Salvation,” Wesley defines salvation as “not what is frequently understood by that word, the going to heaven, eternal happiness. It is not the soul’s going to paradise. . . . It is not a blessing which lies on the other side of death; or (as we usually speak) in the other world.”

This Wesleyan deconstruction of traditional assumptions opens the space for the salvation he does intend: “[I]t is a present thing; a blessing which, through the free mercy of God. ye are now in possession of.” But it is this blessing that we ourselves nip in the bud whenever we do not “return” it. The “free mercy” is a gift. Our response makes it present. Not fully present, for life in grace remains on the edge, subject to the next challenge, the next connection—and ultimately to the coming of “the kingdom of glory in heaven, which is the continuation of the kingdom of grace on the earth.”

And so we begin again—here and now.

The “now” is no self-contained kingdom of the soul. The soul’s depth relation to the divine depth may have mystical edges; but it does not collapse in on itself, into the musty privacy of “me and my God.” “Solitary religion is not found [in the gospel]. . . . The gospel of Christ knows of no religion but social: no holiness but social holiness.” It is this social holiness that obliges Christians to work out their own salvation—not as their reward but as their responsibility for the church, the nation, and the world.

Social Salvation and New Creation

Feminist theology is predicated on the sociality of the self. Whether introvert or extrovert, the subject is inherently interactive. Our private habits show the marks of impersonal public patterns. So the notion of social holi-
ness as relational wholeness is congenial. For both Wesley and for feminists, the heart-to-heart of mutual intimacy flows into ever-widening circles of relation. But because, like liberation theology, feminism analyzes those relations in terms of social structures of race, ethnicity, and economics, a feminist Wesleyanism works in “synergy” with an evolving tradition of liberation Methodism. Drawing upon this global heritage, Hong-Ki Kim argues that Wesley teaches a “realized eschatology.” This is not triumphalism, but “the optimism of grace to realize jubilee as the perfection of social sanctification.” For Wesley, the justice that is the work of justification flows not from a self-righteous religious politics or from a secular eschatology that squeezes religion into its most judgmental utopia, but from the freedom of love. Similarly, Theodore Jennings proclaims as a critical principle of Wesleyanism that “Wesley directed himself to the poor and to the marginalized.”

The suffering of the poor (the majority of whom are women) represents the most pervasive evidence of the failure—and so of the possibility—of our species to live “in the image of God.” As that imago begins to show its female face, will the work of just love become more—probable?

Jennings notes that the vision of “new creation” in Isaiah 65, Romans 9 and Revelation 21 has always called for a socioeconomic realization. For the most part social responsibility took theocratic form; church leaders were uneasy with any serious reflection on the new creation as a potential and for structural reform within history. Most acquiesced to Augustine's identification of the conversion of the Roman Empire as the realization of the “millennium,” the best to be hoped for in this world.

Though Wesley certainly began with a conventional preoccupation with the salvation of the soul, his gradual embrace of a more terrestrial and so more cosmic new creation flows from his increasingly relational and synergistic sense of salvation. Maddox traces the Wesleyan trajectory through its development of the “cooperant dynamics” of the spiritual new creation into this more fully socioeconomic dimension. He locates the evolution of Wesley's thought as an interaction between the premillennial and postmillennial movements of his day, both of which suggest eschatologies more attentive to the earth than did the reigning amillennialism. In his late sermons, Wesley presents the socioeconomic work of new creation as already present, though not yet nearly what God intends for the “Christian age.” According to Maddox, Wesley tries to preserve this tension by emphasizing “the processive character” of God's renewing work.19
As the maturing Wesley increasingly embraces the socioeconomic dimension, his soteriology becomes radically inclusive. In the 1780s it becomes cosmic. Thus, Wesley amplifies his soteriology by way of the apocalyptic imaginary of "new creation." As Maddox notes, "[T]he elderly Wesley issued strong affirmations of the inclusion of both animals and the physical world in God's new creation. Most of his contemporaries considered these affirmations idiosyncratic and wrong-headed." The notoriety was not altogether undeserved. His vision of the new creation indulges in sheer fancy: rolling hills but no scary peaks, breezy sun and no more rain.

Yet Wesley read the science of his day seriously. His key cosmological affirmations will delight an ecofeminist Wesleyanism. He envisions a cosmos whose material elements are healed and restored in the end and therefore matter now. For him, making "all things new" means the whole creation, which will be restored to a "far higher degree" than it had at creation. While Wesley's cosmic eschatology tends toward an idealization that can hurt environmentalism more than it helps, it does have an ecological "edge." He castigates the "human shark," who torments animals not of necessity but "of his free choice." For the new creation in all elements, species, and dimensions begins within this creation. To participate in the kingdom of God we are called here and now to a restorative work of both personal and social "cosmic sanctification" (Kim).

**Total Salvation versus Synergistic Freedom**

Here comes the rub. In its cosmic holism the symbol of the new creation drives toward a terminal eschatology—a state "such as it has not yet entered into the heart of men to conceive—the universal restoration which is to succeed the universal destruction." Yet in an earlier sermon Wesley insists that "annihilation is not deliverance." Why this inconsistency? It points to the deeper problem. On the one hand, the vision of the restoration of all things flows naturally from the insight into the interconnectedness of all creatures in the creation and to the Creator. On the other hand, this hope for restoration shifts from an empowering historical hope to an apocalyptic dream for a death-free creation—unimaginable without reconstituting the very elements of which all life is made. Once the hope thus literalizes the resurrected life of the new creation, it demands the death not just of unfair death but of death itself. This second creation from nothing entails the annihilation of this creation: finite life as it actually works in its creaturely interdependencies.
Eschatology thus succumbs to its special temptation: responsible hope mutates into wishful thinking. But this mutation goes against the grain of the Wesley who resists the deathward displacement, the reduction of salvation to death-and-after. So we return to Weber’s sharp intervention:

In the first place, Wesley failed to confront the fact that the promise of totality is unrealizable without dissolving the divine–human synergy of free grace and free response at the heart of his evangelical message. If all things are reconstituted, then all persons are saved—a result made possible only if sovereign grace overrides the resistance Wesley observed and recorded in the populations to whom he preached. Conversely, if not all persons are saved (Wesley’s expectation), then not all things are reconstituted. Wesley cannot have it both ways.24

Nor can we. Does this mean that the only alternative to a totalizing notion of the new creation is to give up the cosmic width of the vision and return to a meaner-spirited eschatology (in which God saves some persons and damns the rest)?

There is a Wesleyan third way. We can affirm the mutualism of free grace and free response as characteristic not only of the divine–human relation but of all divine–creaturely relations. The whole universe can then be seen as unfolding in a synergistic dance of grace. The edge of decision is here and now; we humans can dance with grace, however clumsily. The Spirit breathes into us, and we breathe back into God. The divine ocean flows into the world, and the world returns into God. But if as humans we “return” to God, we do not circle back. We return forward. Each return becomes part of the divine ocean. That ocean surges forth in the next moment, releasing the next wave of creaturely creativity. I suggested earlier that the “eternal repose” of the divine ocean—which Wesley likens to the calm at the bottom of a sea that may be heaving wildly on the surface—enables the wave action of the new creation.

Is everything saved, then, in a universal restoration? Or only that which “returns to the sea” as “good works of the righteous return into God”? For Wesley, the criterion of salvation is love: “the love of God is the principle and the end of all our good works. . . . [T]hese good works in a spiritual manner die in God, by a deep gratitude, which plunges the soul in God as in an abyss, with all that it is.” Salvation becomes kenotic gratitude. This wave action is analogous to the breath-work of the divine ruach, that is, without the return, the flow is blocked. “[God] will not continue to breathe
into our soul unless our soul breathes toward him again; unless our love, and prayer, and thanksgiving return to him."^^

So that which does not return into the divinity and so does not partake in the gratitude of grace itself resists the flow. It resists the churning sympathies, the complex, demanding relationality that only love makes livable. It clutches and clings to itself and produces of its defenses and aggressions an ego with the illusion of independence. But it lacks breath and flow. It resists the cosmic ocean of relations surging all around it and so obstructs the very divinity from which the creation itself flows. Such an ego, a body, a soul, a work holds onto itself for dear life—the ultimate futility. But is it “damned”? It might feel that way. Yet, as Wesley insisted, it is not that God is willing anyone’s damnation. It is more that such a person does not will to be saved—to let go, to be recycled in the divine ebb and flow of connectional life. Such a habit of self-enclosure and blockage does not so much damn as dam us! Such persons do not “return to their source, as rivers seem willing to empty themselves when they pour themselves with all their water into the sea.” If they cannot be “saved,” it is not because they have been condemned but because they have “dried up.”

But are we “saved,” only for our “souls, bodies and good works” to dissolve in a bottomless, divine abyss? Yet even the river returning through the delta ripples endlessly within the sea. This language of process theology may help: The “consequent nature of God” is “the judgment of a tenderness which loses nothing that can be saved.”^^ It takes into itself each perishing moment of our experience: the moment affects God—and thus tilts the grace toward our next moment’s possibility. We sense this in the meditative depths of prayer. As Suchocki puts it beautifully, “Prayers of gratitude touch God, empty into God, and in so doing bring intimations of our final destiny, which is everlastingly to participate in the eternal mystery of God, whose depths are love.”^^

Dancing on the Waves

I have elaborated a kenotic doctrine of salvation. It protects Wesley’s radical sense of free synergy and of an all-inclusive, oceanic Love that can be resisted, obstructed, and, therefore, by definition cannot force whoever does not want to be “saved.” We are remembered, recycled, and reconstituted as part of the new creation. But what about The End? The final reconstitution of all things?
Here let me suggest that rather than try to reconcile the free synergy of grace with a totalizing recreation, we consistently interpret Wesley’s new creation in terms of his soteriology. In other words, we need not adopt the literalist interpretation of the biblical new creation as an absolute finality. No matter how perfect, beautiful, and joyful is the restoration, if it finally overrides the agency of the creature and its capacity to respond in love, then the reconstitution is a work not of love but of dominance. But why should we imagine that at some point in time, God would tire of the creation and shut it down forever? Is not the “eternal repose” of the divine ocean also an eternal life surging forth into infinite creativity? As persons we might tire of the exasperating chaos, diversities, and demands of life. As a species we might exhaust ourselves. We might unlove our blue heaven and green earth to death. But let us not project our death-drives onto God. If the rich and powerful of the earth pull off a manmade apocalypse, it will be no divine revelation. It will be the ultimate work of ingratitude. Such a termination will not be the work or the will of the God who is Life and Love, who as Spirit breathes and flows incessantly into the world. World without end.

If Wesley’s specific social, political, and ecological analyses disappoint present liberative readings, Christianity in his work surges toward a responsive and thus responsible eschatology—a new creation beginning now and only with our efforts. Therefore, a Wesleyan feminist eschatology does not interpret salvation in terms of a terminal new creation. Rather, it interprets the new creation in terms of the soteriology of the synergistic now. Such an eschatology choreographs no macabre dance of the endtime. Its faith dances at the edge of time. It teaches the flow, dignity, and grace of an everlasting relation.

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Endnotes

1. I thank Michael Nausner and Laura Bartels, Ph.D. candidates at Drew University’s Caspersen School who know much more Wesleyanism than I, for their generous critique of this paper.
Catherine Keller


10. For the distinction between the Reformation emphasis upon justification as "monergistic interpretation" and the Wesleyan emphasis upon sanctification as "synergistic," as well as for many of the sources and clues that led to this paper, I thank Professor Hong-Ki Kim of Methodist Theological Seminary in Seoul. See "The Theology of Jubilee Examined in the Thought of John Wesley and Its Application to the Reunification Movement of North and South Korea," paper delivered at Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies, August 1997, 49.


20. Ibid., 3.
21. I thank Laura A. Bartels for originally alerting me to the seriousness of Wesley’s scientific interests and to the specific potential for a Wesleyan eco-theology. See her "The Political Image as the Basis for Wesleyan Ecological Ethics," *Quarterly Review* 23/3 (Fall 2003): 294-301.
28. For a fuller statement of such a theology of creation from the primal depths, as well as a review of mystical theologies of the divine ocean, cf., Keller, *Face of the Deep*. 
Is the true mission of The United Methodist Church to “make disciples of Jesus Christ”? 

MARK HORST

As mission statements go, the United Methodist statement—“to make disciples of Jesus Christ”—holds its own. Clear and direct, it identifies one of the many activities we engage in as crucial to our identity. It says that disciple-making is an activity without which the church ceases to be the church. It also raises some questions for us.

For instance, one might ask whether or not this particular mission statement distinguishes United Methodist Christians from other Christians. A good mission statement, it might be argued, should clarify our uniqueness as an organization. Because our mission statement is virtually identical with the Great Commission, we might wonder if any Christian church wouldn’t embrace it; or, to put it more bluntly, which of the movements within Christendom would actually reject it? It seems to me, however, that this kind of rutting around misses the real point of this particular mission statement.

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ROBERT C. NEVILLE

The United Methodist Church says its mission is “to make disciples of Jesus Christ. Local churches provide the most significant arena through which disciple-making occurs” (Book of Discipline, ¶120). I believe that “disciple-making” is only a part of the mission of the church, not the whole—not even the central part. That our church has so constricted itself in this definition draws it away from other important parts of its mission and skews it to a technologically driven “manufacturing” motif of Christianity as a kind of work, a preoccupation with service-with-an-objective.

Surely, “making disciples” is part of the church’s mission, deriving from Jesus’ statement in Matt. 28:19-20, sometimes called the Great Commission: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.”

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Why not just admit it? The real purpose of this mission statement is not to distinguish us from other Christian movements but to identify our own core. It represents an important effort to press United Methodism to fess up. What do we value? What are we passionate about? Can we say what that is? Might we dare to agree? Could we find something more substantial that unites us than the sanctioning of diversity?

The significance of our mission statement emerges only when we drape it in the dynamics of contemporary United Methodism. Far from stating the obvious, its proponents believed they were challenging the church to reclaim a central theological activity that was in danger of slipping to the periphery. In this respect, the mission statement sifts and sorts. It says:

- The mission of United Methodism is not to make members but to make disciples who are growing by the power of the Holy Spirit into Christ-like lovers of God and neighbor.
- Our primary purpose is not to do justice but to equip disciples of Jesus Christ who stand for God's justice in the world.
- Understanding evangelism as winning converts to Jesus Christ is not sufficient; evangelism means inviting unbelievers into a life of growth and transformation in Jesus Christ.
- A particular cause is the church's cause only to the extent that it fosters or flows from the making of disciples for Jesus Christ.

Our mission statement proposes a direction for the church today. It helps us clarify what we need to start doing, what we need to stop doing, and what we need to do differently.

First, the mission statement invites us to start getting specific about what it means to be a disciple. To “make disciples of Jesus Christ” is a valuable mission statement precisely because we have gotten fuzzy about what Jesus might have meant by this comment and what it would mean to obey this teaching. The Wesleyan tradition has been quite clear about this and can be a tremendous resource here. As a movement within the church, Methodism has focused on the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, with a clear goal of Christ-likeness, or, as Wesley was fond of saying, “the mind which was in Christ.” Wesley identified Methodism as nothing more than a restatement of “primitive Christianity,” but he also pointed to “perfection” and “scriptural holiness” as the distinctive emphases of the people called Methodists. We might say, then, that our mission statement’s focus on
Discipleship represents a pretty fair gloss on the historical strengths of the Wesleyan tradition. (I find Wesley's sermons on the Beatitudes ["Sermon on the Mount I-XXX"] to be a helpful and psychologically nuanced discussion of Jesus' plan for discipleship.)

This is particularly true when discipleship is understood in the context of the Scripture's "thick description" of disciple. Disciples of Jesus Christ have left their fishing nets to follow Jesus; they have committed to a process of intensive training at Jesus' side, a regimen that immerses them in anecdotes, parables, teachings, prayers, and healings and then walks them past the Cross, the empty tomb, a table in Emmaus, and tongues of fire on a street corner in Jerusalem. After that, they were ready to transform the world as disciples of Jesus.

The effects of this process on Jesus' disciples was to equip them as a powerful, world-changing cadre of healers, preachers, prison breakers, and church-planters. They were a band of followers, filled and shaped by the living word of God in such a way that they could not rest until the fire in their bones had consumed their days.

Second, the mission statement pushes us to stop doing all the stuff that makes us look like we have nothing better to do than to hang out at church. Disciples of Jesus Christ are not people who have been "house-broken" in the church. They are women and men who have been newly created by the power of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 5:17) to represent the kingdom of God in the world. Their hunger is for God's justice. The presence of the Lord is their daily bread.

I believe our mission statement calls into question the church as we know it. The disciples were sometimes remarkable for their cluelessness; but they were equally remarkable for their deep and abiding willingness to grow and to deepen their understanding of Jesus and his work in them. Our mission statement says that when the church is the church, it is healing and growing disciples, not providing custodial services for those who have no intention of changing. People like to say that the church is a hospital for sinners. That is fine. But a hospital is a place for people with some reasonable expectation for healing.

A disciple-making church might ask us to work out our own issues: anger, frustration, crabbiness, mean-spiritedness, intolerance, busyness. Becoming a disciple of Jesus means that we are willing to take off the masks and deal with our own lovelessness.
Third, the mission statement challenges the church to change our understanding of membership and loyalty. United Methodism will thrive when the power of Jesus Christ rather than the denomination becomes the center of our attention—when John the Baptist's claim "he must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30) becomes our model for church growth, membership, and worship. It challenges us to rest our identity in Jesus Christ and his teachings and to surrender our institutional loyalties and traditions to the power of a life lived in the reality of Jesus.

We ought to quit gnawing on the mission statement and begin to form our life around its generous strength. Is it not time for United Methodists to refocus our attention on the world that our God came to redeem? The question for a lot of people who may never willingly walk through the doors of a church is not "Do they have a good mission statement?" Rather, they want to know, "Is there something real there?" "Is the Jesus these people are worshiping and preaching real?" "Are these people who follow Jesus authentic?" The more seriously United Methodism takes its mission statement, the more likely people will be able to answer these questions with a resounding yes.

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Unless we want to evacuate the word of serious meaning and use it as an empty term for "being a Christian," discipleship is the relation of students to a teacher. Teaching, along with baptism as admission to the Christian community, is the content of Jesus' commandment here. In Matthew 28 Jesus was speaking to the Eleven alone (Judas had died), not to the women who were so much a part of his following or to the many others who had serious relations with him, such as Nicodemus, Mary, Martha, Lazarus, and Joseph of Arimathea. The Eleven had been close students of Jesus; and this direction was for them to spread his teachings and to baptize. Jesus' main point was that the teaching should be spread beyond Israel to the other nations, in direct contradiction to the limitations he had set on his previous sending of the disciples in Matt. 10:5-6. Collectively, the teachings show how to be a Christian, and they include a lot more than teaching others and baptizing.

Ironically, the United Methodist statement blunts—or deliberately obscures—Jesus' intent that the disciples should take his teachings beyond the local area to other lands and cultures. It does so by juxtaposing the claim that "local churches provide the most significant arena through which disciple-making occurs," which fosters a "take-care-of-our-own" priority. The Eleven, and other early church leaders such as Paul and Barnabas, did indeed take Jesus' teachings beyond Israel into the several Gentile worlds in Europe, Asia, India, and Africa. So that commandment was powerful and fruitful. The question is whether making disciples, especially with an emphasis on other cultures, is the whole of the Christian mission, or even its center.

For me, the Christian mission, which should be adopted straightforwardly by The United Methodist Church, is to foster people's living rightly before God as Jesus showed his followers. The epitome of living rightly before God is to love God and also love other people (Matt. 22:37-39). Perhaps the central exposition of this is in the Last Supper and Farewell Discourse in John 13-17, in which Jesus both demonstrates love by washing the feet of his friends and explicitly teaches about love from God and to God and among friends. However, love is not just an adolescent sentiment. One of its chief obstacles is the burden of sin and guilt before God and others: the great themes of atonement, forgiveness, and reconciliation address this obstacle. In large part, salvation means being enabled to love
properly. Love takes place within communities, and much of the New Testament, especially but not exclusively the letters of Paul, addresses the question of how Christian communities should be managed internally and brought into relation with the wider communities where people live. Living before God as a lover has both interpersonal and impersonal, charitable dimensions. The complexities of ethical life lived in love of God and neighbor are explored throughout the New Testament, especially in the teachings of Jesus, such as the Sermon on the Mount and some parables. For instance, to live in love with God and neighbor it is important that we judge not so that we be not judged.

To be sure, living the life of love is something that must be learned; and so being a disciple of teachers, beginning with Jesus, is a dimension of every Christian's life. However, not every Christian needs to be a teacher of the gospel to those in foreign parts or to those in different social classes from our own (a contemporary parallel to "all nations"). Nor does every Christian need to engage in specialized ministries of the church (those of us who write about these things usually are in specialized ministries and sometimes exaggerate our importance as paradigms of love). Rather, most Christians work out their love of God and neighbors in the specific contexts of their lives—in their homes, their work, their leisure, and in their contributions to culture.

Some United Methodists believe that the local congregation is overwhelmingly important for the Christian mission, and in many ways its importance certainly is great. Those same people often define ordained and other specialized ministries as located primarily in local congregations. Nevertheless, the life of love of God and neighbors needs to be worked out wherever God and neighbors are—and they extend far beyond local congregations. Sometimes the issues of love are political ones of war and peace or economic ones of justice. These are not merely congregational matters; and congregations have limited, though sometimes effective, powers in these matters. All too often local congregations reflect cultures with a too-small presentation of the God to be loved and a too-constricted sense of neighborliness. Frequently, an individual's community of spiritual friends (in the sense of John 13–17) is socially structured in ways quite different from a local congregation. United Methodists can correct the preoccupation with local congregations by remembering Wesley's dictum that "the world is my parish." Making disciples in foreign parts (geographically and socially) is
part of accepting the world as the church’s parish. The actual contexts of our lives and loves extend far beyond local congregations.

Love of God is difficult and we learn to love as God has loved us. God’s problem with us is our sin and the way we let it bind us. Our problem with God is that the Creator’s wild fecundity gives us a life filled with suffering and death, and perhaps inevitable sin, as well as great riches. (Our neighbors are not always winners, either.) So serious love involves swallowing righteous anger with forgiveness. Love requires a ruthless honesty that takes Christ’s cross as its emblem.

The saints of love include some great heroes. They include energetic people with specialized ministries who want to go out and “make” something, such as more disciples. But the saints also include simple people who strive to perfect love of God and neighbor in very ordinary lives, creative people who glorify God through the arts, and questioning people who ask whether the ways in which the church has institutionalized the ways of love are true means of grace. The mission of the church is to foster all the saints in love and to extend the enabling power to love to all people. Making disciples is a part of this but only an instrumental part.

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One-hundred years ago Marcel Proust designed his seminal, sprawling work *A La Recherche de Temps Perdue,* a teeming morass of memory and reflection. At one point he asks what would happen if, every morning, instead of a newspaper, someone deposited a single book on your front step, marked to the place you had arrived in reading the previous morning. Would that be a better use of time? I confess that I wonder many mornings after I have finished reading the paper.

Say, for the sake of argument, that Proust is right—one long book read over many days is better than reading the daily paper (hard as that is to imagine). If you could choose just one book, which would it be? Plato's *Republic?* Shakespeare’s *Complete Works?* Tolstoy’s, *Anna Karenina?* Watson and Krick’s *The Double Helix?* Mario Puzo’s *The Godfather?*

Since this is a religious journal, you are right to anticipate another suggestion—the Bible. But should we read all of the Bible or just parts? What if the person who delivers your paper starts depositing a fresh translation of the Book of Psalms on your doorstep every morning, with a bookmark locating the previous day’s reading? What would happen to our spiritual lives, our personal faith, if we were to read a psalm carefully each day?

We affirm the Bible as God’s word to us; we also recognize that its pages include many human words directed from humans to humans. The psalms, however, are human words to God—hymns of the heart. They are hymns of blessing (e.g., Ps. 1), faith (e.g., Ps. 23), courage (e.g., Ps. 46), joy (e.g., Ps. 100), hope (e.g., Ps. 121), lament (e.g., Ps. 139), and praise (e.g., Ps. 150).

The psalms provide a rhetorical open space for us. These 150 hymns of the heart clear out some spiritual ground on which, if we are so inclined, we may stroll and wander and lollygag. That is, the psalms allow us to be human—to breathe, listen, and smile in the image of God the Breather, the Listener, and the Smiler. With the ancients we may commune to meet and greet and to watch our children grow and our grandparents age. The
psalms are common property. They are a written, old-English commons. They are, shall we say, a verbal Village Green. They arose out of the gathered people of God and were shaped in their singing. Conversely, they have done their part in gathering and shaping God's people.

For the most part, we are engaged in ministry with literate Christians—not people who can read, but people who do read. Yet, we are awash in a visual culture. One of the untold stories about twenty-first-century American Protestantism, and also one of our evangelistic challenges, is that we are literate Christians in ministry with other literati. We read—alone, together, in study groups, in worship, in hymnody.

Reading is almost countercultural today. Finding joy and peace and "soul" in books is not always the norm. Reading makes evangelism harder and preaching truer. But this means we have an obligation to celebrate the joy of reading, beginning with biblical reading, like reading the psalms.

Before we move on to comment on the lections, it is worth remembering that the psalms have several common features. With modification, Hermann Gunkel's categorization seems to have stood the test of time. He divides the psalms into five primary types: hymn, lament, royal, personal, thanks. Recent scholarship has tended to explore more fully and notice more exactly the layers of writing and editing latent in the Book of Psalms. Writers need editors and editors need publishers—and all are present in the psalms. The poetic rhythms of the psalms, particularly their forms of parallelism (synonymous, antithetic, synthetic), give the psalms their heartbeat. The Benedictines recite the whole Psalter in a week; and St. Patrick, it is rumored, recited the whole of the Psalter every day. Perhaps John Calvin captures the complexity and variety of our Psalter best in his recognition that, together, these 150 hymns provide "an anatomy of the parts of the soul."

We follow now our lectionary selections for the psalms in Lent. Our interest lies at the intersection of exegetical inquiry and homiletical expression. To our good fortune, the collection of psalms, and especially the four under consideration here, are well acquainted with such a spiritual cliff walk.

February 29, 2004—First Sunday in Lent
Ps. 91:1-2, 9-16; Deut. 26:1-11; Rom. 10:8b-13; Luke 4:1-13
Like Psalm 46, Psalm 91 is a psalm of trust, with some didactic qualities. We might wonder how fully the writer appreciates the complexities of evil. We have an easier time seeing evil in others than we do in ourselves.
Our singer is a person of simple faith. He has one, and only one, word for us: "You are covered." We could raise many complaints about the author of the hymn. He has a dangerously simple view of evil, especially for the complexity of a postmodern world. He implies that trust or belief is rewarded with safety, a notion that Jesus scornfully dismisses in Luke 13. He has an appalling lack of interest in the scores of others, who, unlike the ones being "saved," fall by the wayside. He seems to celebrate a foreordained, foreknown providence that fits poorly our sense of God's openness to the future and the freedom God has given us for the future. He makes dramatic and outlandish promises not about what might happen but about what will be. For thoughtful Christians the psalmist fails us in our need to rely on something sounder and truer than blind faith. To us, he seems to be whistling past the graveyard.

And yet, for those who have walked past a graveyard or two or have walked through "the valley of the shadow of death" (Ps. 23:4, kJV); for a world searching to match its ideals of peace with its realities of hatred; for all who are in trouble or worried about others and other graves and graveyards and who have seen the hidden traps, unforeseeable dangers, and steel-jawed snares of life—for all of us there is something encouraging in this simple song's declaration: "[H]e will deliver you from the snare of the fowler" (v. 3a).

Our writer is not a philosopher or a systematic thinker. He does not worry about the small stuff. In fact, I have a sense that the psalmist is desperate. His song is one for that point on the road when you just have to take the risk and jump. You have made your assessment and have drawn up your plan, and you have prayed. Yet you see all the pestilence about you in homes and institutions and nations; and so you wonder. Is it worth the risk?

This hymn of the heart is one you sing when you are unsure but confident. It is possible to be confident without being certain. In fact, genuine confidence includes the ability to admit uncertainty. After all, faith involves risk. Our writer has reached the point of decision and is forced to choose between walking forward and slinking away. For Christians, the choice is very simple. Either God lives or not. Either God is in Christ or not. Either God in Christ touches us by the Spirit or not. Either we move forward in faith or not. The psalmist wants his student or grandson or parishioner to choose in faith. So he urges: Abide in "the shelter of the Most High" (v. 1); he is our "refuge" and "fortress" (v. 2), our "shield" and our "buckler" (v. 4).

Perhaps in a time of war we are more direct about our "terror[s] of the
night" (v. 5). As a country we have taken a new military course with our invasion of Iraq. Our leaders have taken us into the uncharted territory of "preemption." At a minimum, such a profound change in national policy deserved far more earnest congressional and communal debate than took place. At present, the spiritual consequences of the preemptive strike against Iraq are unquantifiable and leave us in a dark forest. What can we as Christian people do but to go forward? The psalmist addresses our immediate need. He counsels us not to fear the terror of the night and to go about our discipleship—to pray, study, learn, make peace, love our neighbor, to agree to disagree. The night is not as terrifying as we fear.

There is an irrational side to the psalmist's message. "A thousand may fall at your side . . . but it will not come near you," he declares (v. 7). It will not help us to ask about the ethics of this promise or to question the sense of destiny involved here. I hear the psalm as a father's prayer or a mother's dearest hope. I cannot help but think that this psalm perfectly captures the visceral hope that is on the minds of American parents of soldiers and sailors right now. With the psalmist, we pray that "the destruction that wastes at noonday" (v. 6) will not come near us.

When there is nothing else we can give our daughters and sons, we want them to have faith to go forward bravely, without being sure of what they will find at noonday. We are desperate for one hope: that they will come home. And we sing the song without any chords of doubt, because we want to admit none. We make no uncertain sound because we want our beloved to carry no worry, but to be armed with the confidence of the Lord. This is a battle hymn. It is the kind of song you sing to yourself when all about you is mayhem. If I were a chaplain, it is the kind of psalm I might give to a soldier to memorize by day and recite by night in the face of mayhem.

The teacher implores his student to make God his "dwelling place," his home (v. 9). Evil will not befall, or at least will not define, the one who rests in God. Contrary to the psalmist, we know that evil touches us all (v. 10). But this misses the meaning of the poem. The writer is praying to be delivered not from some or most evil but from all evil! Religion is a matter of the heart before it is a matter of the head.

Our psalm ends at the edge of a remarkable announcement. Like Yahweh addressing Job, the psalm ends with a divine word. It is what we hope will happen with every one of our children, in every one of our worship services, and in every sermon. Everything gives way to God. The
March 7, 2004—Second Sunday in Lent

Psalm 27; Gen. 15:1-12, 17-18; Phil. 3:17-4:1; Luke 13:31-35

In the church I pastor, we frequently offer a portion of this psalm in a soaring musical arrangement, sung by a strong tenor soloist, during one particular hour of worship—the funeral service. In the face of sin, death, loss, and a form of the threat of meaninglessness that surpasses most others, with the body of the deceased before us and the tear-wrung family to tend—here a great hymn of faith is regularly affirmed: “The LORD is my light and my salvation” (v. 1).

Those gathered before burial are ready to hear the wisdom of faith that comes in the experience of the community of faith. The psalmist lifts a hymn of faith, a song of courage, in the face of adversity. He speaks from his experience. He teaches, like a grandfather teaching a grandson, how to spin a fishing fly, boil the sap down in the sugar house, watch a basketball game, watch the sun set. To such similarly familiar rhetorical forms—the experience of faith learned in the community of faith—a congregation and grieving family may regularly and healthily return during the time of saying goodbye.

Psalm 27 consists of two songs, divided at v. 7. The first is a hymn of thanksgiving and faith, the second a song of loss and lament. Both may well fit into a set of forms for worship, and they may in fact fit well together (as some earlier editor has clearly decided). Yet they make two distinct movements and statements. Within the movements of all the psalms (recall Gunkel’s five types of psalms, mentioned earlier) they capture the two most significant themes: thanksgiving and lament. A congregation that knows how to face disappointment with honesty and death with dignity is being prepared for the singing of this psalm. Recently, Elaine Pagels, known best for her work on Gnosticism and the New Testament, spoke about stopping for a moment in the vestibule of a church at worship and realizing that “here is a family that knows how to face death.” Both honest lament and faithful thanksgiving are parts of facing the uncertain present in light of God’s future.

In considering the two parts of Psalm 27, it is good to remember some of the features that they share with the rest of the Psalter. For instance, v. 7, dividing itself from v. 6, recalls quickly how much writers need editors and how much editors need writers. The Bible overflows with the interplay of
careful, cautious, prudent editing and creative, fiery, courageous writing, as the Psalms exemplify in the Hebrew Scripture and as the Gospel of John best displays in the New Testament. The community of faith includes natural writers and born editors. Sometimes a set of conflicts can be ameliorated by arranging things so that particular gifts may be spiritually used to the upbuilding of the church. Let those who are creators be creative and those who are redeemers be redemptive! In addition, Psalm 27 carries examples of other typical features within the psalms: rhythm and parallelism (synonymous, antithetic, synthetic), which give the psalms their beat (vv. 1-2); poetic echoes, which later reverberate in the New Testament (v. 5); hymnic cadence that makes the psalms so healthy for regular prayer.

There is one exegetical curiosity embedded in the first part of the psalm that may provide a final interest for the one charged with speaking a divine word in life and before death. A possible translation of 27:4b reads: "to behold the beauty of the LORD in the morning in his temple." After a time of trouble, has the singer gone alone to the Temple? Has he there prayed and stayed all night? Has he lifted his heart to God in the darkness of the dark night of the soul? Has he then watched through the anxious terrors of the night to see the sunrise and so been cleansed and healed? Death, he seems to say, is not a candle snuffed but an oil lamp turned down—because the Dawn has come! In the morning.

March 14, 2004—Third Sunday in Lent
Like the twenty-third Psalm, Psalm 63:1-8 is about faith, confident trust in God. The characteristic forms of lament are also present here. In this psalm, though, the words are spoken to God, not about God. Here we may find a helpful correction for some of our current spiritual life. This psalm should put a little steady 4/4 rhythm into our willingness to talk to God. We affirm God as righteous, just, merciful, faithful, and gracious. So, as this psalm encourages us, we may find courage to lift our heartfelt prayers directly to God, to speak from the heart. It is healthy so to do. Recently, a college sophomore, considering the early choices about studies and majors that loom with later and larger consequences, said in full and honest confession, "It's scary to think hard about your future." It is a brave person who honestly will admit and lament some fear, as this psalm encourages us to do.

Furthermore, this hymn of the heart assumes a divine presence—a
lasting horizon to life and faith. God simply “is,” continuing like a percus­sive beat under all of life, down in the ground of being. This singer is beset, before and behind, by troubles. A soul thirsty, a body fainting, a heart longing—there is an empty, God-shaped hollow in the heart of our hurting.

In the life of the community of faith, women and men present them­selves for marriage. They may confess, with some assistance, all manner of thirsts and faintings and longings. It is healthy so to do. But when they can separate those that carry a human remedy from those meant only for the Lord of every heart, then they can sometimes prepare to treat each other in a truly human way and not expect to be mated to gods or goddesses. As commitment and delight and wonder, human love really rises up in imper­fect response to the God who so loved—committed to, delighted in, and wondered at—God's creation as to give God's only Son. Loving is giving, not taking or using. A soul nourished by a longing for the divine will gradually know these things about love. The "cry" of the heart is the start of the hymn. We start where we hurt. The introit is a lament, at least for two verses.

This matter of thirst both unites and complicates our poem. Like a fugue appearing and disappearing, the song of Psalm 63 names a "thirst" that will not be slaked by anything other than Ultimate Reality. Now, some of this thirsty confusion may be due to a long-observed confusion in the order of verses. Following Gunkel, many commentators have arranged the verses to the order of 1, 2, 6, 7, 8, 4, 5, 3. Yet the exact ordering of the psalm has little full influence on its interpretation. The verses hold together, whether in the inherited order or in the edited improvement, guided by a desire for lasting meaning. Once during a continuing education session at the local Veterans' Hospital each staff person was asked to describe with one word what he or she brought to the work of the hospital. I don't remember what the nurses, technicians, physicians, and administrators said, but the chaplain's word remains vivid: "meaning." Her presence brings meaning to those singing in lament.

Finally, one formal feature of this set of verses deserves some remark. Like a repetitive, staccato interruption, there is a physical praise at work in this song, a praise that employs "lips" (v. 3), "hands" (v. 4), "mouth" (v. 5). Praising God is a physical act. It is healthy so to do. Praise involves presence. A pastor once went for his physical exam to the office of a backsliding parishioner. Said the doctor, "Why do you worry so much about numbers—worship attendance, giving totals, numbers of members? I don't need to be
a part of the numbers game to be faithful." To which the minister replied, "Oh, for the same reason you worry so much about numbers—blood pressure, cholesterol count, even the dreaded weight scale. The body craves health—true of your body and true of the body of Christ." There is a physical interest at work in Psalm 63. There is also an awareness of physical intimacy here that is startling: "on my bed ... in the watches of the night" (v. 6). Our poem lifts a physical, even intimate, grace note that surprises and disturbs and sets us on a course of healing. The poet has found that there is some "help" here. A choral swell lifts the end of the song: "because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you" (v. 3).

March 21, 2004—Fourth Sunday in Lent
Ps. 32; Josh. 5:9-12; 2 Cor. 5:16-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32
Any interpretation of Psalm 32 will inevitably run headlong into its rendering of the nature of sin. For ill or good, our psalm forces this upon us. Just what is the "sin" covered in v. 1? How do we understand the "iniquity" of v. 2? What physical dimensions to sin does v. 3 assume?

For our writer, sin is primarily a personal condition. Note the several references of this type: "[T]hose whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered" (v. 1); "While I kept silence, my body wasted away" (v. 3); "I acknowledged my sin to you ... 'I will confess my transgression' to the LORD" (v. 5). Our text affords some clues to the psalmist's hamartiology. Sin is deceit (v. 2)—"living a lie," as we might say. Sin brings with it a kind of weakness (v. 4), an unhealthy and lasting ennui. Sin includes ignorance (v. 8), recalling Wesley's yoking of learning and piety.

Nonetheless, in at least one place the writer acknowledges an orb of influence extending well beyond the merely individual or purely personal aspects of our human condition. He acknowledges "a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters" (v. 6). The reference is to a flood, natural or cultural. Even in the reaches of Scripture, like this psalm, that seem most individually oriented, there abides a recognition of sin as pervasive. The God who delivers us from such personal and pervasive sin deserves highest praise: "Be glad in the LORD ... rejoice ... shout for joy!" (v. 10).

The psalm's penetrating ruminations have a disquieting relevance in our twenty-first-century world. Like the psalmist, we recognize that sin is utterly personal. As grace touches ground in Jesus Christ, so sin touches sand in personal confessions. We get lost in lust, gluttony, avarice, sloth,
anger, envy, and pride. And recent events have revealed in disturbing detail that sin is pervasive. It has a corporate, expansive, even institutional reality. We mistake its power, if we see only, say, several dozen individuals acting to destroy property and life in lower Manhattan. That, of course, is real—and true. But sin is the power of death throughout life. It is the condition of life under which such treachery takes place. Sin is the absence of God. It is an orb of confusion in the world.

The power of sin vastly surpasses any individual, human attempt at cure. Individuals may behave morally or immorally, usually some of both. But corporate sin marches on, as Reinhold Niebuhr showed in 1932: “Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.” Sin is that “inclination.” “If social cohesion is impossible without coercion, and coercion is impossible without the creation of social injustice, and the destruction of injustice is impossible without the use of further coercion, are we not in an endless cycle of social conflict?” Sin is that “impossible.” As a rule, in American Protestant Christianity, we vastly underestimate this primary, pervasive form of sin. This is both our achievement and our defeat.

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