

CHAPTER 5

NEW CREATION: REPENTANCE, REPARATION, AND RECONCILIATION

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Writing this chapter during a time when the United States is embroiled in international controversy and many peoples are suffering (some explicitly from the actions and policies of my country) is a humbling experience. The global situation of religious tension, political conflict, economic disparity, and fear exacerbates the human yearning for New Creation. With both humility and hope, I put pen to paper.

The front page of Georgia's United Methodist newspaper carried two feature stories the week after the 2002 annual conference sessions. The first described the service of repentance and reconciliation held at the North Georgia Annual Conference; it featured a white woman and African American man in a joyful and compassionate conversation.¹ The service was a time of repentance for the sin of racism and the many ways in which Christian people have damaged and discriminated against others, both within and without the church. Recognizing the values and limitations of one worship service, Bishop Lindsey Davis said to the assembled body: This "is not our first step. It will not be our last step, but it is an important step for all of us."² The second front-page article was

1. Alice M. Smith, "North Georgia UMs Pledge to Work for Inclusiveness," *Wesleyan Christian Advocate* 166:24 (21 June 2002), 1, 7.

2. *Ibid.*, 1.

a description of humanitarian work by The United Methodist Committee on Relief, serving people in times of disaster on every continent and recently raising \$20 million to aid victims of September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States.³

In these two articles, you see a glimpse of New Creation—the people of God reaching out to one another and others, seeking to touch and be touched, to repent and be reconciled, to serve. Yet the articles reveal the limits of the present embodiments of New Creation. In the very next issue of Georgia's *Wesleyan Christian Advocate*, Walter Robinson, a lay delegate to annual conference, wrote these words:

I applaud the efforts being made by the bishop and cabinet related to the "repentance and reconciliation service" at the North Georgia Annual Conference. However, a service, or the specific order of a service, is felt by many African Americans as not enough to begin healing the pains of racism.⁴

Robinson proceeded to make concrete proposals to the bishop, cabinet, and annual conference. In so doing, he reminded all *Advocate* readers of the inadequacy of any single effort (or series of efforts) toward repentance and reconciliation. Such a service, whether that of the United Methodist Church's General Conference 2000 or that of the North Georgia Conference 2002, simply opens the door for continuing critique and renewal of interracial relationships. At its worst, it provides a false security that these matters are resolved and new relationships can now be celebrated. At its best, it provides an honest moment of repentance (turning around), reparation (returning dignity and tending old wounds), and reconciliation (building solidarity and friendship). At its best, such a service exposes and repents the worst of interracial relationships, past and present; uncovers and initiates the best of what is concretely possible in the future; and inspires the beginning of a new relationship in the present moment.

Turning to the church's charitable giving (the second feature article), one can also interpret those actions with hope and skepticism. Such giving is usually inspired by genuine compassion for people who are hurting in the wake of disasters; people may also see themselves as offering reparation for the ills that have befallen others, whether the disaster was caused by earthquake, fire, or human acts of violence. At the same time, the giving might be a deceptive act, serving to placate the guilt of those who are not directly affected by the disaster by responding to the imme-

3. Alice M. Smith, "Relief Work Circles Globe, Dirdak Informs North Georgia," *Wesleyan Christian Advocate* 166:24 (21 June 2002), 1, 7.

4. Walter Robinson, "Bishop, Cabinet Must Do More," *Wesleyan Christian Advocate* 167:1 (5 July 2002), 9.

diate wounds of those who are hurting. The deeper horrors and wounds of the givers and receivers are usually not addressed by such actions; thus, we can critique the ease with which the Christian church performs acts of mercy and its reluctance to participate in acts of justice.

This brief analysis points to my theme: “New Creation: Repentance, Reparation, and Reconciliation.” The purpose is to uncover more full and adequate understandings than have dominated Christian tradition, thus to invite a critical reconstruction of New Creation, drawing upon biblical and Wesleyan traditions. I will give particular attention to underdeveloped dimensions of Christian tradition and a critical-constructive interpretation. In the Postlude, we will return to the North Georgia vignettes and briefly sketch Christian practices that could be shaped by *reconstructed* views of repentance, reparation, and reconciliation. The underlying purpose is to point to God’s New Creation work (the praxis of God) that is often masked by the messy realities of this world, but is continually and forever making all things new.

PRELUDE

As a prelude to analyzing the sources, we will begin with classical theological definitions, drawing upon two dictionaries as examples. The dictionary definitions reveal where present emphases lie in theological discussions. Later in this chapter, I will critique and reconstruct the definitions in light of biblical and Wesleyan tradition. The *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* defines repentance as “the act of expressing contrition and penitence for sin,” and *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* defines it as “the acknowledgement and condemnation of one’s own sins, coupled with a turning to God.”⁵ Both stress the experience of guilt and regret for human sin; they focus less on redirection of one’s life—reconnecting with God and God’s creation. This is particularly true of the *Westminster* definition.⁶ In a similar pattern, the Latin word translated as repentance (*penitentia*), focuses more on contrition, acknowledgment, and condemnation; consequently, Latin teaching over the centuries has emphasized penitence.⁷ In all of these definitions, the full meaning of

5. Donald K. McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1996), 237; F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, Third Edition (New York: Oxford University, 1997), 1384.

6. McKim (237) gives the basic definition of contrition and penitence, but he does add a second sentence to explicate repentance: “Its linguistic roots point to its theological meaning of a change of mind and life direction as a beginning step of expressing Christian faith (Acts 26:20).”

7. Cross and Livingstone, 1384. The Greek word *metanoia* focuses more heavily on turning to God.

the Hebrew *teshuva* and the Greek *metanoia* are rendered as secondary. The physicality of returning to original goodness, turning around, returning from exile, or being reborn is pushed to the side; contrition for sin is in the foreground.

Turning to reparation, the *Westminster* definition is “the action of making amends for past offenses.”⁸ The elaboration describes Christ’s death as restoring “the divine-human relationship,” and also makes allusion to the Roman Catholic practices of good works and acts of penitence for sins.⁹ Again, the first accent is making amends for offenses or sin, while restoration of the God-human relationship follows. Like repentance, the very concept of reparation is grounded in a formula of human sin and God’s grace.

Finally, we turn to reconciliation. Here the accent is more on the new possibilities of relationship. The *Westminster* definition is focused on relationships: “bringing together parties who are estranged.”¹⁰ The sin and grace rubric is still in the forefront however, because the basic work of Jesus Christ is understood as accomplishing reconciliation through Jesus’ death and resurrection. This linkage is further accented in services of reconciliation, which involve contrition, confession, acts of penance, and absolution. The *Westminster Dictionary* describes these elements in the Roman Catholic liturgy of reconciliation, but the elements (especially contrition, confession, and absolution) are also part of many Protestant services, including baptism and Eucharist. Looking at dominant definitions of reconciliation, we see that both human and christic work are described as restoring relationships through responding to sin: through the human acts of confessing sin and receiving forgiveness and absolution, and through Jesus Christ’s atoning death and resurrection. Both dimensions focus on human sin and divine grace.

I do not propose that we should deny the realities of divine grace and human sin. I do argue, however, that they are not the entire picture of God’s relationship with human beings and other creatures. To focus on divine grace and human sin as the central reality of God-human relationships undercuts a more fundamental reality, that is, the inextricable relationship between God and humanity that is permeated with love, delight, anger, hurt, judgment, lament, and hope. To recognize the fullness of this

8. McKim, 237; cf. Cross and Livingstone, 1384. In the latter, the primary definition is “making amends for damage done to another.”

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*, 233. “Reconciliation” is not included in *The Oxford Dictionary*, but its definition of redemption stresses both “deliverance from sin and restoration of man and the world to communion with God” (1373). Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler also exclude a definition of reconciliation, but they refer readers to redemption, where they stress deliverance from sin through God’s work in Jesus Christ. See Rahner and Vorgrimler, *Theological Dictionary*, ed. Cornelius Ernst, O.P., trans. Richard Strachan (New York: Seabury, 1973), 395-97.

reality is to glimpse the fullness of God's New Creation. New Creation is more than deliverance from sin—or the absence of evil. New Creation is a textured and beautiful reality that we can only glimpse, yearn for, participate in, and anticipate during these present days; however, it is a reality that people cannot ignore. We live in a sea of God's grace, and God calls us to respond.

Responsible grace sounds the tones and rhythms of this paper. Responsible grace, as Randy Maddox and John Cobb have framed the central teaching of John Wesley, is a vision of what can be, as well as a critique of the sinful world.¹¹ Responsible grace is responsive to God's goodness in the present world and to God's promises for the fulfillment of creation in the eschaton. Thus, it is not exhausted with juristic understandings of human morality and responsibility to God's laws, or with juristic understandings of Christ's atonement for human sin. Its meanings are larger, and thus more promising, as regards God's grace and more demanding as regards human response. Its meanings point to God's New Creation in ways that vivify human life in the present. Thus, this prelude concludes with tones and rhythms that are familiar to Wesleyan scholars. It also poses unnerving questions to some trends in Wesleyan scholarship and dominant redemption-oriented theologies.

LUKE'S HEALING NARRATIVES AND NEW CREATION

The prelude gives way to more somber tones, as we turn to three healing narratives in the Gospel of Luke, returning later to explore implications for New Creation. In the first narrative, a leader of the synagogue comes to Jesus, kneeling and beseeching Jesus to come and lay a hand on his daughter, who is dying (Luke 8:40-42). Jesus and his disciples follow the leader but, as they travel, another event takes place (vv. 42b-48). A woman who is suffering from twelve years of hemorrhaging comes up behind Jesus and touches the fringe of his cloak. The woman is made well in that instant. Sensing the woman's touch, Jesus turns and asks who has touched him. Everyone denies the touching, and Peter points out that the crowd is pressing in on him. Jesus knows, however, that someone has touched him because he felt power going out of himself. The woman, recognizing that she cannot remain hidden, comes forth trembling and falls down before Jesus, explaining why she touched him and how she has been

11. Cf. Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994); and John B. Cobb Jr., *Grace and Responsibility: Wesleyan Theology for Today* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995).

made well. Jesus then speaks to her: “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace” (v. 48).

The story of this woman is buried within the other story of the synagogue leader’s daughter; thus, when the woman is healed, the other story resumes (vv. 49-56). People come to announce that the child is now dead, and Jesus replies, “Do not fear. Only believe, and she will be saved” (v. 50). When they arrive at the house where the child is lying, Jesus goes inside with only three disciples and the mother and father. Outside, the people are wailing, and when Jesus assures them that the child is not dead but only sleeping, they laugh at him. Jesus takes the girl’s hand, however, and calls out, “Child, get up!” (v. 54). The girl *does* get up, and Jesus asks the parents to give her something to eat and charges them to tell no one what has happened.

One will easily see connections between these two stories, not only by their proximity, but also by common features. One such feature is the identity of “daughter”; Jairus refers to his daughter with the same word that Jesus uses to address the woman. In both stories someone falls down before Jesus, Jairus for his daughter and the woman for herself. In both stories Jesus gives an imperative instruction—“go in peace” to the woman and “get up” to the child. With such instructions, Jesus encourages the woman and child to get on with their lives. In fact, a better translation of Jesus’ instruction to the woman is “go *toward* peace” (emphasis mine), suggesting an ongoing movement rather than a finished state.¹²

The third narrative is separated from the other two, and is enfolded by judgment warnings and eschatological promises in Luke’s Gospel. This is a tale of healing and controversy (13:10-17). The story begins on what appears to be a normal Sabbath day, with Jesus teaching in a synagogue. Jesus catches sight of a woman, whom Luke describes as living “with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She is bent over and quite unable to stand up straight” (v. 11). When Jesus sees the woman, he calls to her, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment” (v. 12b). He lays hands on her, and she immediately stands up straight and begins praising God. This is when the controversy begins. The leader of the synagogue (not necessarily the same person whose daughter was healed earlier) repudiates Jesus for healing on the Sabbath, pointing out that healing work can be done on six days but not on the Sabbath. Jesus responds sharply:

“You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought

12. I am grateful to Tord Ireblad for aiding me in translating the texts, and particularly for his explication of the translation “go toward peace,” which bears strong implications for understanding New Creation.

not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?" (vv. 15b-16)

Luke tells us that Jesus' questions shame his opponents, and the crowd rejoices at his good works.

Considering these three Lukan narratives together, we can uncover some of the textures of healing in Luke's Gospel. I have chosen these narratives from the same Gospel, all of which have to do with healing a woman or girl. On the surface, each reiterates the other; in fact, they do have much in common, but each is distinct. Consider some similarities. Each story speaks of severe injury and heartache: The girl has died; one woman has endured twelve years of hemorrhaging, alongside the social ostracism and physical depletion of continual bleeding; the other woman has been crippled for eighteen years. In addition, each story focuses on a marginal person. The suffering people of these stories are all women, a marginalized status in first century Palestine. The girl is only twelve years old, a second marginalizing reality, although her father is a leader of the synagogue. The first woman is, by virtue of her hemorrhaging, a social outcast, and cut off from normal relations with family, friends, and community. Some wording in the text even suggests that she may have been bearing her malady in secret.¹³ At the very least, she was breaking the purity code at the moment of coming forward and touching Jesus' garment. The woman of the third story is bowed over, which likely interfered considerably with her mobility and social interaction. Further, these three people all experienced *restoration of life and relationships through the healing touch and word of Jesus*.

Here the similarities end. The three people not only have different maladies, but different causes of their maladies. The cause of the girl's death is not even given, apparently not important to the narrative. The cause of the first woman's hemorrhaging is also not given. The second woman is bent over by a spirit, from which Jesus frees her and which Jesus later associates with Satan.¹⁴ Of the three stories, all deal with suffering, but only the third identifies suffering with evil. Further, the three stories offer different explanations of the healing. In the girl's narrative, Jesus tells the

13. For example, the woman came up behind Jesus, and she came forward only when she "saw that she could not remain hidden" (8:44, 47). If secrecy were involved, the woman would have carried the additional burden of interacting with people while hiding her condition, secretly breaking the purity codes and violating the community as a result.

14. Other parts of Luke's Gospel offer further evidence of evil spirits' inflicting suffering. See, for example: 8:1-3; 9:37-43. One might argue that Luke is attributing some infirmities to evil spirits, or that he is simply naming evil spirits and infirmities as maladies to be healed. Whatever is the case, he chooses to mention evil spirits in some healing narratives and not in others. For Luke, the relation between evil and infirmity is neither simple nor uniform.

crowd that she is not really dead but only sleeping (8:52*b*), thus suggesting that the suffering is not what it appears. In the bleeding woman's narrative, Jesus attributes healing to the woman's faith (v. 48). In the bent woman's story, Jesus claims to have freed the woman from the eighteen-year binding of Satan (13:16). Finally, Jesus' practice of healing is different in the three narratives. The father of the girl approached Jesus initially. Later, Jesus declared that the girl was sleeping; he took her by the hand, and called for her to get up (8:54). The woman with a hemorrhage took initiative herself. Jesus felt her touch and declared that her faith had made her well (v. 48). But Jesus himself took initiative with the bent woman. According to Luke, "When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said 'Woman, you are set free from your ailment'" (13:12). Then he laid hands on her, and she stood up straight.

If we give heed to these narratives, we will discover that healing is a powerful theme in Luke, as in much of the biblical witness. We will also discover that healing is not one simple reality. Suffering has different causes, healing has different explanations, and Jesus practiced healing in different ways. This analysis is suggestive for repentance, reparation, and reconciliation. Drawing from this brief engagement with three Lukan texts, we might say that *repentance is more than turning away from sin and evil*; it may also involve a turning away from death (or appearance of death) or a turning away from passivity (e.g., taking initiative for healing into one's own hands). Likewise, *reparation is more than making amends for past offenses*. Reparation may have to do with restoring life in a moment of death; it may have to do with restoring full-bodied physical and social life to one who has been cut off for twelve years; it may have to do with freeing someone from an evil spirit. Finally, *reconciliation is more than bringing together those who are estranged through the death and resurrection of Jesus*. In these stories we see reconciliation taking place not through Jesus' death but through his ministry. He was present with the girl and the crowd that surrounded her, he was alert to the woman with a hemorrhage, and he took initiative with the bent-over woman. In all three cases the individuals were restored to themselves, to their communities, and to God. And reconciliation was heralded by touch—whether by Jesus' touch of the wounded person or the first woman's touch of him.

One final note is important to sound briefly. These three healing narratives were all padded with controversy, although the controversies erupted in different ways. When the father pleaded with Jesus on behalf of his dying daughter, his plea followed closely after another healing where the people were so frightened that they asked Jesus to leave (8:37). Later, Jesus stirred mild controversy in the child's narrative when he told the crowd that the girl was not really dead, she was sleeping. In the hemor-

rhaging woman's story, the controversy is only implicit in Luke's Gospel. The woman was violating purity codes by entering the crowd and touching Jesus' garment, and Jesus was complicit in her act by recognizing her touch and attributing the healing to *her* faith. Finally, the healing of the bent woman was itself a controversial act; Jesus was violating Sabbath laws by healing on the Sabbath day (Exod 20:9-10; Deut 5:13-14). Such controversies deserve more attention, but here we will simply note that healing is not independent of controversy in Luke's gospel. According to Luke's telling of the Jesus story, healing takes place in the midst of, in spite of, and in causal relationship to controversy. In short, the healing of individuals also addresses dissensions and tears in social relationships.

Drawing from this picture, we should not be surprised if God's New Creation does not enter with the clear, joyful sound of trumpets but rather with a cacophony of sound—sometimes pleasant, sometimes rousing, and sometimes troubling. We should also not be surprised if God's New Creation touches the soul of hurting individuals and, simultaneously, the soul of torn and hurting societies. Brokenness characterizes individual lives *and* communities; thus, shalom (wholeness) is a vital promise to both. As Movement One ends, we hear the cacophony but also the complexity of biblical views of healing. The New Creation that happens in the middle of human life offers healing to individuals; it responds to the cries of fathers and mothers; and it challenges communities that are slow to believe in God's wisdom, reluctant to hope, or quick to reject the outcast. A simple theological formula, even a rich one of sin and redemption, cannot hold this biblical tradition.

WESLEYAN TRADITIONS OF NEW CREATION

We move now to the more extensive Movement Two and the complexity of Wesleyan theological traditions of New Creation. John and Charles Wesley, and those who have come after them in Methodist theological traditions, can be described as people in search of holy relationships with God, other people, and the world. The tradition is often interpreted through a more juristic rubric of redemption from sin; however, John Wesley's emphasis on divine grace, though grounded in a sober acknowledgment of human sin, places primary emphasis on grace abundant. This grace permeates every corner of life—redeeming fallen humanity from sinfulness and evil but also manifesting itself in moral guidance, acts of healing and reparation, and reconciliation of relationships. Further, Wesley's theology of grace accents God's "new creation," a recent interpretive

emphasis of Theodore Runyon.¹⁵ For Wesley, God's future promises include new birth for human lives but also the renewal of all creation.¹⁶ Thus, New Creation is grounded in holy relationships of many kinds. To these we now turn, seeking to do more than review Wesleyan theological themes. The effort is to ask relational questions of Wesley's texts, and thus to uncover credible interpretations that are often overshadowed by redemption-oriented frames of interpretation.

Holy Relationships of Individuals with God

Wesley's most obvious concern was with individuals' relationships with God. This was a concern of great social import in a world where advocates for women and slaves argued for freedom and equality by claiming that women and slaves had souls.¹⁷ The act of treasuring of each individual had a power in that world, but the power is easily distorted in the materialistic, individualistic worlds in which many of us live today (though some people in the global Wesleyan communion live in less materialistic and more communal societies). John Wesley was indeed pre-occupied with his own relationship with God but also with the relationship that every individual has with the Maker of heaven and earth.

Looking from this angle, Wesley's theology seems appropriately summarized in a classic redemption formula—God's redemption of sinful humanity through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This was only part of the story for Wesley, however. What is often interpreted as John Wesley's search for salvation, with emphasis on redemption from sin, can also be interpreted as a search for whole and holy relations with God and the world around him. When John Wesley landed on the shores of Georgia, for example, and Mr. Spangenberg asked if he knew Jesus Christ, he was troubled. He answered, "I know he is the Saviour of the world." When Spangenberg then asked whether Wesley knew Jesus had saved *him*, he finally replied, "I do," but Wesley added in his *Journal*: "I fear they were vain words."¹⁸ Although this incident clearly pictures

15. Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998).

16. See, for example: Sermon 60, "The General Deliverance," *Works* 2:439-41; Sermon 62, "The End of Christ's Coming," *Works* 2:474; Sermon 18, "The Marks of the New Birth," *Works* 1:417-30; Sermon 45, "The New Birth," *Works* 2:186-201; Sermon 4, "Scriptural Christianity," *Works* 1:159-80; Sermon 26, "Sermon on the Mount VI," *Works* 1:572-91; and Sermon 63, "The General Spread of the Gospel," *Works* 2:485-99.

17. One example can be found in Eliza Haywood's address to "Ladies" in *The Female Spectator* 1746. See Mary R. Mahl and Helene Koon, *The Female Spectator: English Women Writers before 1800* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), 227.

18. *Journal* (7 February 1736), *Works* 18:146. A more detailed account of this entire Georgia experience can be found in Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*

Wesley as questioning his own redemption, one can also see that he was questioning the strength and quality of his relationship with God. In these early years, he was painfully aware of his broken and partial experience of God, made even more difficult in Georgia by his growing awareness of failed relationships with other people.

John Wesley was indeed preoccupied with redemption from sins during those pre- and post-Georgia days; however, his understanding of redemption was joined with an increasing emphasis on reconciliation. He wrote in his pre-Aldersgate *Journal*:

I met Peter Böhler once more. I had now no objection to what he said of the nature of faith, viz., that it is (to use the words of our Church) "A sure trust and confidence which a man hath in God, that through the merits of Christ *his* sins are forgiven, and *he* reconciled to the favour of God."¹⁹

Wesley expanded even further, pointing the way to a fuller view of salvation:

Neither could I deny either the happiness or holiness which he described as fruits of this living faith. "The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit that we are the children of God," and "He that believeth hath the witness in himself," fully convinced me of the former.²⁰

Even in those early days, Wesley was concerned with the wholeness of salvation and the promise in Paul's epistle to the Romans that he repeated often thereafter: "The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit that we are the children of God." His own Aldersgate experience of assurance was an assurance of sins forgiven through Jesus Christ; it was also an assurance of being reconciled to God's favor, an assurance for which he had been longing.²¹ This, and other experiences before and after, marked the beginning of stronger bonds of relationship in his personal and public life as well. Wesley's understanding of salvation was not only becoming more grounded in his experience, but it was also beginning to grow in meaning and vitality. His yearnings were turning into moments of centeredness and wholeness. On the day after his Aldersgate experience, Wesley described his zest in the early morning: "The moment I awaked, 'Jesus, Master,' was in my heart and in my mouth."²² Later Wesley was to write

(Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 58-73; and Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 107-36.

19. *Journal* (22 April 1738), *Works* 18:233-34. Emphasis is in the original.

20. *Ibid.*, 234. Wesley quotes Romans 8:16 and 1 John 5:10 respectively.

21. Consider, for example, *Journal* (29 January 1738), *Works* 18:213-16, esp. 215-16.

22. *Journal* (25 May 1738), *Works* 18:250. In the days and weeks following Aldersgate, Wesley wrote much internal reflection in his journal, and his inner state varied in terms of assurance and joy. The sense of a major turning to God is clear in this quote, however.

that his early faith had been that of a servant; only later did he know himself as a son of God.²³

This larger understanding of holy relationships with God continues to be important to Methodist people. An exhaustive study of these traditions is not possible here, but we do find one bold instance in the Methodist Church in Kenya when early Methodist missionaries were faced with difficult decisions regarding their stand against the traditional African initiation rights and the resistance of many Kenyan people to abandon the practices. Unlike other mission movements in Kenya, the British and Kenyan Methodists made a choice to offer grace, even when that meant ignoring cultural judgments for a time. They left their critique in place but did not make initiation rights a central issue.²⁴ Their decision was to spend less energy on naming what they saw as sin and more on offering grace in word and deed; thus, they accented the multiple dimensions of grace and the relation of grace to all of life, not limiting their sights of God's work to redeeming people from sin.

Holy Relationships of the Church

We move now to a second Wesleyan concern for New Creation, the holy relationships of the church. One could make a case that John Wesley's zeal to reform and revitalize the church—from his early Oxford days with the Holy Club to his last days of preaching, teaching, and mentoring lay preachers and class leaders—was a zeal to heal broken relationships and build a full-bodied community of grace. Although the questions asked of people in class meetings were focused on redemption from sin, both the questions and the context invited full-bodied relationships within the classes and encouraged full-bodied relationships with God and with other people in their daily lives.²⁵ The first weekly question to class members was: "Have you the forgiveness of your sins?" Three others followed: "Have you peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ? Have you the witness of God's Spirit with your spirit that you are a child of God? Is the love of God shed abroad in your heart?"²⁶ Not only

23. Wesley's emphasis on the witness of God's Spirit that we are children of God is a continuing one. See Sermon 10, "The Witness of the Spirit, I," *Works* 1:269-84; and Sermon 11, "The Witness of the Spirit, II," *Works* 1:285-98.

24. Zablon John Nthamburi, *A History of the Methodist Church in Kenya* (Nairobi: Uzima Press Limited, 1982), esp. 71-81; Mary Elizabeth Moore, "A Wrestling Church: Cultural Pluralism in the Wesleyan Tradition," *Quarterly Review* 12.2 (Summer 1992), 75-94, esp. 77-80.

25. See "The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies," *Works* 9:69-73; and "Rules of the Band Societies," *Works* 9:77-78.

26. "Rules of the Band Societies," *Works* 9:77-78.

do we see a trinitarian understanding of God's work in these questions, but also an obvious connection between the state of one's soul and one's total relationship with God and the world.

We can easily read these texts in highly individualistic ways, especially those of us who live in highly individualistic cultures. If we do this, however, we distort the Wesleyan tradition. The tradition was born before the extremes of individualism. However much Wesley might have fallen into that trap himself, he was always concerned with the well-being of the whole, including the holiness of the church. Albert Outler summarized the situation of the eighteenth-century Church of England as neither zealous nor free: "Over all there hung a stifling miasma of apathy and stale devotion."²⁷ Wesley's response was to call people back to "genuine Christianity" and to the qualities that he espoused for the "people called Methodist."²⁸

Wesley labored to demonstrate the heart of Christianity in God's love. In describing genuine Christianity, he emphasized a Christian's relationship with God, the Author of being. Wesley acknowledged the distance between God and human beings, and also the likeness of God within humanity. With that paradox, Wesley then expounded on the nature of God's likeness in human life:

Above all, remembering that God is love, [a Christian] is conformed to the same likeness. He is full of love to his neighbour: of universal love, not confined to one sect or party, not restrained to those who agree with him in opinions, or in outward modes of worship, or to those who are allied to him by blood or recommended by nearness of place. Neither does he love those only that love him, or that are endeared to him by intimacy of acquaintance.²⁹

This genuine Christianity is manifest in traditional evidence throughout the history of the church, but even more convincing is the internal evidence manifest in each soul. Christianity is thus a doctrine "accomplished in my soul."³⁰ We see here an understanding of Christianity that is corporate, temporal, *and* individual. Wesley's concern for the church's holiness is tied inextricably with his concern for the individual's holiness and the manifestation of God's love in the world.

This emphasis has continued in Methodist theological traditions and Wesleyan churches, manifested in the large views of ministry in these

27. Albert C. Outler, *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 20.

28. "A Plain Account of Genuine Christianity," in Outler, *John Wesley*, 181-96; and "The Character of a Methodist," *Works* 9:32-46.

29. "Plain Account of Genuine Christianity," in Outler, *John Wesley*, 184.

30. *Ibid.*, 191; cf. 191-96.

traditions. Drawing from recent work in practical theology, one sees the church's efforts to respond to and reflect God's largess in the largess of its ministries. Scholars write that the church's ministries are to partake in all of the means of grace, inspired by John Wesley's broad understanding of God's grace, communicated in many forms, and transforming human life in the process.³¹ The church's educational ministry is to be grounded in God's grace, embodied in community, and enacted through an ecology of practices with a full range of leaders.³² Worship too is to be full-bodied and multifaceted—grounded in God's grace, embodied in community, and enacted through many practices and in many forms. In concluding the work of a global panel, Karen Westerfield Tucker summarized the fullness of Methodist Sunday services as ordered and flexible, particular and catholic, traditional and contemporary, spiritual and worldly, local and global, pragmatic and perfectionist.³³

Issues still arise, of course, reflecting the tensions exposed in this paper. For example, Simei Ferreira de Barros Monteiro notes the tendency of Brazilian Methodists to continue worship emphases instituted in the early Methodist evangelization, although the early emphasis "on the salvation of the soul, on individual sanctification, concealed the message that 'there is no holiness but social holiness.'"³⁴ She expresses concern that new songs highlighting social holiness are resisted, for people are in "the habit of not celebrating and never singing our social engagement."³⁵ This reveals the ease with which social engagement can be pushed to the side in some aspects of the church's ministry, even in the Brazilian church that is known for its exceptional social engagement. This points back to the tensions unfolded in my introductory stories. The acts of repentance, reparation, and reconciliation described in the recent Georgia newspaper

31. Cf. Henry H. Knight, *The Presence of God in the Christian Life: John Wesley and the Means of Grace* (Metuchen, Vt.: Scarecrow, 1992) ; and Joerg Rieger, "Between God and the Poor: Rethinking the Means of Grace in the Wesleyan Tradition," in Richard P. Heitzenrater, ed., *The Poor and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2002), 83-99. See also Wesley, Sermon 16, "The Means of Grace," *Works* 1:381; and Sermon 98, "On Visiting the Sick," *Works* 3:385.

32. Sondra Higgins Matthaei, *Making Disciples: Faith Formation in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000); and Dean Gray Blevins, "John Wesley and the Means of Grace: An Approach to Christian Religious Education" (Claremont School of Theology Ph.D. thesis, 1999).

33. Karen B. Westerfield Tucker, "Sunday Worship in the World Parish: Observations," in *The Sunday Service of the Methodists: Twentieth-Century Worship in Worldwide Methodism*, ed. K. B. Westerfield Tucker (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1996), 323-32. This entire volume reflects the wideness of worship within Methodist services across the world.

34. Simei Ferreira de Barron Monteiro, "Singing a New Song: Developing Methodist Worship in Latin America," in Tucker, *Sunday Service*, 275-76.

35. *Ibid.*, 276. Brazilian church leaders speak of tensions that presently inhabit the Brazilian Methodist Church between emphases on individual piety and social involvement. Tensions surrounding music may reflect these larger tensions as well.

are empty if not fully integrated in the church's life and ministry. People yearn for the fullness toward which a service of reconciliation and works of humanitarian assistance point. Herein lies the challenge. To respond to this yearning, we need a bold new analysis and fuller development of Wesley's means of grace and the ways in which the church now celebrates, partakes, and incarnates God's grace.

Holy Relationships with the World

This discussion leads naturally to a third dimension of New Creation—holy relationships with the world. When people within Methodist theological traditions debate whether Wesley's central concern was to evangelize or to reshape social systems, we miss a central point. Wesley was concerned to restore broken relationships and revitalize Christian life with God and the world. This included *all* of life. Consequently, we see the focus on all of life carried forward by Methodist bodies in the intervening centuries, however inadequately.

One can see these concerns in Wesley's ethical commitments: to guarantee human rights and liberty; to eradicate the dehumanizing institution of slavery; to care for the poor and oppose practices that intensify poverty (such as using grain for brewing liquor rather than feeding hungry people); to critique war; to restore farmlands, especially for small farmers; and to encourage people toward holiness and happiness.³⁶ As I have noted elsewhere, Wesley's actions on these ethical commitments were not fully consistent; however, he *was* consistent in voicing the passions.³⁷ He actively advocated against slave trading and unfair treatment of the poor

36. See "Thoughts upon Liberty," *Works* (Jackson) 11:34-41; "Observations on Liberty," *ibid.*, 92-93; "Thoughts upon Slavery," *ibid.*, 70-75; "Thoughts on the Present Scarcity of Provisions," *ibid.*, 53-58; Sermon 50, "The Use of Money," *Works* 2:309-27; "The Doctrine of Original Sin," *Works* (Jackson) 10:196-464, esp. 221-25; "The Character of a Methodist," *Works* 9:32-42; and Sermon 7, "The Way to the Kingdom," *Works* 1:218-32. Discussions of these themes are found in several places, including Theodore H. Runyon, ed., *Sanctification and Liberation: Liberation Theologies in Light of the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1981); Jose Míguez Bonino, "Conversion, New Creature and Commitment," *International Review of Missions* 72 (1983):330; Leon O. Hynson, "Implications of Wesley's Ethical Method and Political Thought," in *Wesleyan Theology Today*, ed. T. Runyon (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1985), 373-88; Theodore W. Jennings Jr., *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley's Evangelical Economics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990); Manfred Marquardt, *John Wesley's Social Ethics: Praxis and Principles* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992); Runyon, *New Creation*; M. Douglas Meeks, "Sanctification and Economy: A Wesleyan Perspective on Stewardship," in *Rethinking Wesley's Theology for Contemporary Methodism*, ed. R. L. Maddox (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1998), 83-98; and Peter Grassow, "John Wesley and Revolution: A South African Perspective," in *Rethinking Wesley's Theology*, 183-95.

37. Mary Elizabeth Moore, "Compassion and Hope: Theology Born of Action," in *Thy Nature and Thy Name Is Love: Wesleyan and Process Theologies in Dialogue*, eds. Bryan P. Stone and Thomas Jay Oord (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2001), 321-23.

over a period of years. Even more consistently, he advocated for human responsibility toward other people and creation.

We see similar concerns evoking passion over more than 250 years of Wesleyan church history in the United States. Wesleyan churches have repeatedly debated and divided over matters of slavery and racism. In fact, the controversies and their consequences form the background against which the service of repentance and reconciliation (cited in the opening story) has meaning. Divisions in the Methodist family, spurred by slavery and racism, have left a legacy of destruction; these now stir a yearning for repentance, reparation, and reconciliation. The same history evokes *cautious* enthusiasm, even skepticism. After all, the record of Wesleyan churches in the United States is pitted with sin and injustice. Even so, a movement is evident. John Wesley was concerned with slave trading, which was an open wound in his society; the Methodist people of the opening story were concerned with the ravages of racism. Both point to the possibility of holy relations with the world and to the urgent need for people to respond. At the same time, both uncover the depth of evil and the inadequacy of any isolated human response.

A similar continuity can be seen with other social concerns of John Wesley. Consider, for example, the most recent Episcopal letter of the United Methodist Church: “Precious Stones”—Statement on the Middle East Crisis.” It echoes some of Wesley’s concerns about war as it pleads for concrete actions toward a just peace in Israel and Palestine. Consider also the Episcopal Initiative of 1996, “Children and Poverty: An Episcopal Initiative, Biblical and Theological Foundations.” It echoes some of Wesley’s concerns for the underclasses as it pleads for concrete actions on behalf of children and their families, especially children living in poverty. Bishops of multiple Methodist bodies have been partners in the children’s initiative, and children have become a major pan-Methodist programmatic emphasis.³⁸ We can see in these brief examples that the Wesleyan concern for holy relationships with the world continues to fuel passion among the people called Methodist, pointing toward God’s New Creation.

38. See Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church, *Children and Poverty: An Episcopal Initiative, Biblical and Theological Foundations* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1996); Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church, *Community with Children and the Poor: Renewing the Episcopal Initiative* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2001); Luther E. Smith, Jr., and Mary Love, *Pan-Methodist Campaign for Children in Poverty* (Charlotte, NC: Commission on Pan-Methodist Cooperation and Union, 2002); and Pamela D. Couture, *Seeing Children, Seeing God: A Practical Theology of Children and Poverty* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000). The first two are UMC Episcopal statements, and the last two are resources developed for the Pan-Methodist effort.

Holy Relationships with God's Creation

One might easily conclude that John Wesley was concerned first with individuals, then with the church, and finally with the larger society. This would not be altogether untrue. However, Wesley's reflections on New Creation were often explicit about the whole of God's creation, the fourth dimension of his vision of New Creation. In preaching from Jeremiah 23:24, Wesley expressed awe before God's creation and "the omnipresence of God," wondering why "so little has been wrote on so sublime and useful a subject."³⁹ He concluded that sermon with an admonition to be cheerful in expecting God's guidance, support, perfecting, strengthening, and preservation "unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ!"⁴⁰ In short, he was linking the omnipresence of God with the return of Jesus. He was also assuring listeners that the work of God in today's world binds people to God's New Creation.

Wesley's vision for the world is manifest again when he preached on God's vineyard (Isa 5:4), which he associates with the whole world, then with all people, with the Christian world, with the Reformed Christian world, and with the "people commonly called Methodists."⁴¹ Wesley admonishes the Methodist people, for whom God has done so much, pointing out that the harvest has brought forth wild grapes. Wesley urges them not to make excuses but to respond to God. Here again a vision of New Creation is implicit, and it is permeated with praise of God and a call for human responsibility.

Wesley's theology of creation is perhaps best summarized in his sermon on Genesis 1:31, "And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold it was very good."⁴² He begins by asking assistance of the Spirit, recognizing that human beings understand only a small part "of this great work of God."⁴³ Wesley imagines the world as God first created it with complete happiness. Likewise, he describes the atmosphere of that ideal world as having "no impetuous currents of air; no tempestuous winds; no furious hail; no torrents of rain; no rolling thunders, or forky lightnings."⁴⁴ In short, the world was made without blemish or defect: God "made it better, unspeakably better, than it is at present."⁴⁵ Wesley

39. Sermon 118, "On the Omnipresence of God," §2, *Works* 4:40.

40. *Ibid.*, §6, 4:47. Cf. Sermon 130, "On Living without God," *Works* 4:169-76. Elaboration on themes of this section and the next can be found in Mary Elizabeth Moore, "God's Spirit and the Renewal of Creation: Living in Committed, Ambiguous Hope," *Quarterly Review* 21:2 (Summer 2001), 169-81.

41. Sermon 107, "On God's Vineyard," preface, *Works* 3:503.

42. Sermon 56, "God's Approbation of His Works," *Works* 2:387-99.

43. *Ibid.*, §1, 2:387.

44. *Ibid.*, §1.8, 2:393.

45. *Ibid.*, §11.1, 2:398.

then interjects the human saga: people rebelled against God and changed the world for all creatures. They tried to create happiness independent of God, and they threw the whole creation “into disorder, misery, death.”⁴⁶ Even in the travail, however, God is at work, and the evils in creation may still “work together for our good.”⁴⁷

In his sermons Wesley emphasizes again and again that God is the source of all that is good; the Owner of the vineyard; the One who is ever-present with creation; the One who helps people understand; the One who celebrates that creation is good; the One who continues, even now, to bring good from evil. Returning to the basic Wesleyan accent on responsible grace, we see the tender concern of God for all creation and God’s pleading for people to be responsible toward this precious world, created in goodness. The opening stories expose the church’s response to God’s world in one moment of time; they also raise questions as to how the full, interconnected reality of God’s creation can be celebrated and served in more than a superficial way. How can we serve God in a way that really does transform the world, and also transforms the church and its own acts of repentance, reparation, and reconciliation?

Much Is Given—Much Is Expected

One cannot conclude a section on the Wesleyan tradition and New Creation without emphasizing the beautiful and sin-filled relationship that people have with God’s creation. According to Wesley, the goodness and evil of humanity is a riddle; people are a “wonderful mixture of good and evil, of greatness and littleness, of nobleness and baseness!”⁴⁸ God created people in God’s own image, but people created *themselves* in another image—evil, carnal, inimical toward God. We are, thus, a “treasure in earthen vessels.”⁴⁹ As such, people are responsible for much of the evil in the world. Indeed, John surely shared Charles Wesley’s view that natural disasters like earthquakes can be attributed to human sin.⁵⁰

Wesley’s cosmology is definitely anthropocentric, and he adeptly turns many cosmic events into morality tales for his audience. He urges people

46. *Ibid.*, §II.3, 2:399.

47. *Ibid.*

48. Sermon 129, “The Heavenly Treasure in Earthen Vessels,” §1, *Works* 4:162.

49. *Ibid.*, §3, 4:163. Cf. the entire sermon, 4:162-67.

50. See Sermon 129, “The Cause and Cure of Earthquakes,” in *Works* (Jackson), 7:386-99, esp. 387. While this sermon was included by Thomas Jackson in his edition of John Wesley’s *Works*, it was written by Charles Wesley.

to fear God, to thank God for deliverance, and to repent and believe the Gospel.⁵¹ Elsewhere, Wesley urges people not to conform to the world or befriend the world and, further, to keep a distance from ungodly people so as not to be influenced by their ungodliness.⁵² One can critique the limitations of these Wesleyan views, especially in their leanings toward a juristic redemption paradigm. My intention here is not to deny those leanings but to reclaim the stronger underlying emphases of Wesley.

However flawed human beings are, they are *called* to act and *able* to act by God's grace.⁵³ Thus, Wesley gives strong ethical teachings regarding stewardship. He admonishes people strongly against riches, urging them not to desire to be rich, endeavor to be rich, store up treasures, possess more goods than God wills for God's stewards (more than is needed for food and covering), nor to love money.⁵⁴ The problem with riches, according to Wesley, is the human tendency to trust them and, thus, to be impeded in loving God and neighbor and living holy lives.⁵⁵ Alongside Wesley's warnings are his frequent urging for people to be good stewards of God's creation. In a sermon on Luke 16:2, he proclaimed a comprehensive message of stewardship. God has entrusted human beings with their souls (in the image of God), their bodies, worldly goods, talents, and the grace of God and power of God's Holy Spirit, over which we were expected to be good stewards. Further, God will ask us in judgment if we *were* good stewards.⁵⁶ For Wesley, God's New Creation is grounded in this worldview of God and humanity: much is given and much is expected. This is why the opening stories of reconciling and giving are such a challenge; they point to God *and* to human responsibility.

51. See Sermon 44, "Original Sin," §III.3-5, *Works* 2:184-85. Cf. Charles's conclusion to "Cause and Cure of Earthquakes," *Works* (Jackson) 7:395-99.

52. Sermon 80, "On Friendship with the World," §§13-17, *Works* 3:132-35; Sermon 81, "In What Sense We Are to Leave the World," §§3-5, *Works* 3:143-45.

53. This theme is elaborated in Mary Elizabeth Moore, *Covenant and Call* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2000).

54. Sermon 87, "The Danger of Riches," §I.1-7, *Works* 3:230-33. See also Sermon 107, "On God's Vineyard," §V.4, *Works* 3:516; Sermon 108, "On Riches," *Works* 3:519-28; Sermon 115, "Dives and Lazarus," *Works* 4:5-18; Sermon 122, "Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity," *Works* 4:86-96; Sermon 126, "On Worldly Folly," *Works* 4:132-38; Sermon 131, "The Danger of Increasing Riches," *Works* 4:178-86.

55. See Sermon 108, "On Riches," §II.7, *Works* 3:526. He intensifies these teachings in another sermon when he suggests that people who "have the conveniences of life, and something over, . . . walk upon slippery ground. . . . Ye are every moment on the verge of hell!" (Sermon 115, "Dives and Lazarus," §II.1, *Works* 4:11).

56. Sermon 51, "The Good Steward," §1, *Works* 2:283-86; §III.6, 296. See also Sermon 108, "On Riches," §II.11, *Works* 3:528; and Sermon 131, "The Danger of Increasing Riches," §II.12, *Works* 4:183-84.

POSTLUDE: THE PROMISE OF REPENTANCE, REPARATION, AND RECONCILIATION

In light of this discussion, we return to repentance, reparation, and reconciliation as sign-bearers of New Creation. I have made no comprehensive attempt to trace the meanings of those doctrines in Christian tradition, nor in Wesleyan tradition. What I have tried to do is discern images of New Creation within Lukan healing narratives and John Wesley's understanding of holiness and God's promises. The very complexity of the healing narratives and the breadth of Wesleyan images suggest that repentance, reparation, and reconciliation need to be understood as large theological concepts—signs that transcend juristic redemption theologies and point to the largeness of God and God's promises for creation. They are signs that point to God's self-giving and the intimate mutuality of relationship between God and every precious creature. The self-giving of God and humanity are critical to New Creation, and it is already glimpsed in the sacraments and in Jesus' giving of his life for his friends (John 15:13).⁵⁷

This move points to complexities and neglected aspects of much dominant theology. It points to the urgency of theologies that illumine God's praxis of liberation and empower human participation in God's work. This move also returns people to deep and enduring traditions. For Jewish people to repent (*shuv* or turn) during the season of Yom Kippur is to turn toward God and the promise of God's future, which includes returning to one's self *and* returning from wrongdoing and exile; the accent is on turning toward God's future.⁵⁸ A new year is unfolding, and people can enter the year with fresh hope and commitment to live in God's way. This is more than an annual ritual, however. The daily morning prayer of faithful Jewish people is a prayer of repentance: "My God, the soul You placed within me is pure."⁵⁹ This is a prayer for remembering the purity that God created and beginning a new day with hope and commitment to live within that purity. This is repentance! The resonance with John Wesley is striking, interweaving the personal and social, and the reality of human sin with the new beginnings and expectations that God offers people again and again.

57. See James F. White, *Sacraments as God's Self Giving: Sacramental Practice and Faith* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983), esp. 13-22; and Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, *Rediscovering Friendship* (London: SCM, 2000), esp. 32-52.

58. See Rabbi Leila Gal Berner, "Sermon on Yom Kippur," Congregation Bet Mishpachah, Washington, D.C., 2002; Bruce C. Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down: The Old Testament, Ethics, and Christian Life* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991); Birch, *Singing the Lord's Song: A Study of Isaiah 40-55* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990, 1981); and 1 Samuel 7:3 as one exemplifying text.

59. Rabbi Nosson Scherman, ed., *The ArtScroll Weekday Siddur* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 2002, 1988), 18-19.

How might we recover and reform our dominant understandings of repentance, reparation, and reconciliation? Words are never adequate to name the movements of God's Spirit, but we can hope for more adequate words than have dominated theology heretofore. I propose that we begin by holding these together as interconnected gifts and commitments. They are gifts from God and commitments to God, and each feeds the other.

Repentance

How might Christian people reformulate repentance with all of its fullness? *Repentance is turning toward shalom—toward the wholeness signified in healing and new birth—made possible by the touch of God.* This includes turning away from sin and exile and oppression; it includes turning toward God's promises for life. God's acts of healing will be as diverse and complex as the healing narratives of Luke, and the means of grace will be as multifaceted as those identified by John Wesley. These will not easily fit into a formula, for the acts of God that flood our souls, and the creations of God that flood our senses, are beyond categorization. Repentance is gift that is given and a response that is called forth.

For all of these reasons, the act of repentance in an annual conference worship service, as described in the opening story, is most appropriate. Where, if not in worship, can repentance be enacted? On the other hand, an act of repentance is a turning with one's whole body—with the whole body of the church—toward shalom. When faced with the destruction of one people's dignity and well-being by another people, a daily and yearly turn toward shalom is required. This turn will not simply be a one-way returning of dignity by an oppressive class (largely white Christians toward African American Christians in the opening story). It will be a full-bodied set of practices (prayer, confession, lament, and so forth) developed by the community together, with special privilege of voice granted to the oppressed, underrepresented, or marginalized. Thus, repentance promises transformation of the oppressed and oppressor, a transformation that breaks open categories and is at once social and personal.

To say this is not just to identify a truism. It is also to signal the kinds of theological and ethical reformations that are needed in a church that repents. Joerg Rieger has emphasized the connection between acts of piety and acts of mercy in the means of grace, revealing how orthodoxy and orthopraxy are intertwined.⁶⁰ Serving others will transform ourselves, and as we are transformed from within, we will be transformative agents in our social worlds. Thus, we dare not participate in a service of

60. Joerg Rieger develops this theme in "Between God and the Poor," esp. 88-99.

repentance and reconciliation if we are not open to the transformation of our very selves. Even if we are not open, which of course we will not always be, we will find that we are transformed, or at least we are confronted with our resistance to transformation.

Reparation

Reparation, likewise, defies easy categorization. *Reparation is returning to God what is God's and returning to those who have been deprived that which God intends for them.* This is far more than making amends for past offenses, although this is included. It is the concrete repairing of injuries and relationships in a continuous cycle of discerning where injury exists and what is needed to respond. In Luke's healing narratives, reparation is returning life, health, and straightness of body. In Wesley's concerns for slaves and people living in poverty, reparation is eliminating slave trade and responding to the physical and spiritual needs of the poor. In the recent bishops' initiatives for children living in poverty, reparation is also reforming the social and economic structures that perpetuate poverty in generation after generation. Reparation is all of these things and more. Further, it is very demanding. Reparation is represented in Wesley's stringent understanding of stewardship, by which people give back "all they can" for the well-being of others, as in the biblical tradition of Jubilee.⁶¹

Whatever the limits of Wesley's view of giving, the stringency cannot be ignored, especially in contemporary consumerist cultures in which the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Just as the opening story of the United Methodist monetary response to people in need is laudable, so is it limited. What is required is a continual practice of reparation, giving all we can in all the ways we can and, in so doing, returning to God what is God's and returning to those who have been deprived that which God intends for them. These practices will never be simple because giving time and effort and money to one people or part of God's creation needs to be done without destroying others; social structures need to be reformed for the good of all. This kind of practice, like repentance, will transform the world, and it will also transform us.

Reconciliation

Turning finally to reconciliation, this is far more than bringing together parties who are estranged. It is more than restoring the relationship

61. Wesley's teachings on stewardship of money are abundant (see note 54 above), and they often include the admonition to "gain all you can, save all you can, and give all you can."

between God and humanity through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is all of this and more. *Reconciliation is restoring relationships between and among God, human beings, and all of God's creation, made possible by the triune God's never-ending work for creation, in creation, and through creation.* As such, reconciliation is not a thing to be accomplished but an ongoing work of God in which people may participate, however inadequately. This is indeed the redemptive work of Christ; it is also the Creator's work, which was and continues to be very good; it is also the work of God's Spirit that moves among us even as we gather in churches, academic institutions, and services of repentance and reconciliation.

Reconciliation seems like a happy term. Indeed, each reconciling moment, as the one in the opening story, is a moment to be celebrated, but each is also a moment that has potential for transforming moments yet to come. This is frightening, of course, because reconciliation is not a place to rest; it is the beginning of the future. Nowhere can we see the power of such reconciliation more boldly than the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, which has revealed the fear (even terror), celebration, and new beginnings involved in serious acts of reconciliation.

Consider parallels to the opening story. Consider the debates about abolishing slavery in the Methodist Church of the mid-nineteenth century United States; every point of view was supported with biblical justification. The church subsequently divided, leading to the formation of Holiness Churches and the division of the Methodist Episcopal Church into North and South. The church was not held together by agreement in human opinion. In the meantime, the suffering caused by slavery and ensuing decades of racism continued. In the past 200 years many moments of reconciliation have been celebrated on the long journey, but they have not yet reconciled the divisions and hurts of slavery, racism, regionalism, and denominationalism.

Consider another parallel. Like the North Georgia Annual Conference of 2002, the United Methodist General Conference of 2000 was able to celebrate a service of repentance and reconciliation in the middle days of a long and strenuous conference. The particular focus was on white racism toward African Americans within the Methodist family. The same Conference was able, in the days that followed, to pass the most oppressive legislation toward gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, and transgendered persons that has ever been passed within the denomination. Very few people made the ironic connection explicitly. When someone did make the connection on the conference floor, the influence seemed negligible; the voting outcome was what had already been predicted in opinion polls prior to general conference.

In short, the people called Methodists can be shortsighted. We can look to the Bible and to John Wesley for specific guidance, but the guidance we

seek is often that which supports our own social and theological stance (which I too have done in the last example). We too often neglect the huge need and the God-given possibilities for healing broken relationships. Reconciliation is always political but never *only* political. It is a gift of God, discerned in moments of precious clarity and beckoning toward a fuller life for all of God's creation. It is a gift to be enjoyed and a challenge to encounter with awe. Underneath the joy and challenge is the promise of New Creation and "a deep, an intimate, an uninterrupted union with God."⁶² This is reconciliation at its best!

The challenge of reconciliation is not to lose faith in the long journey, neither to give up when change seems impossible nor to assume perfection when change seems complete and external harmony abounds. The challenge is to be open as individuals and communities to face the deepest torments of life (year after year), practice prayer upon prayer, and persist in efforts without end. With this challenge in mind, we can also celebrate the opening stories and the possibilities they hold, however transient and partial.

NEW CREATION

If we dare to enlarge and reconstruct our theological frameworks and practices, as shaped by a fresh look at Christian tradition, Christian people are faced with the same humility and hope with which the chapter began. Repentance, reparation, and reconciliation point toward a New Creation that is impossible; however, the work of God repeatedly proves the impossible to be possible. Just as Jesus healed the hopelessly broken in Luke's narratives, God is working among us, renewing us in the image of God. This is the miracle of new birth of which John Wesley speaks.⁶³ Even this miracle is part of an *ongoing* work of God, continuing to generate faith, hope, and love of God and neighbor.⁶⁴ Neither God's work nor our human responses has a beginning or an end.⁶⁵ Thus, New Creation is present and it is yet to come.

The promise of New Creation will touch human lives in a myriad of unexpected ways. Some of these will be welcome, and others will ask the

62. Sermon 64, "The New Creation," §18, *Works* 2:510.

63. Sermon 45, "The New Birth," §1, *Works* 2:187; §II.5, 193-94. See also Sermon 62, "The End of Christ's Coming," *Works* 2:471-84.

64. See Sermon 18, "The Marks of the New Birth," §§I-III, *Works* 1:417-27; and Sermon 7, "The Way to the Kingdom," §I.6-13, *Works* 1:220-25. See also Sermon 40, "Christian Perfection," *Works* 2:99-121; Sermon 76, "On Perfection," *Works* 3:71-87; Sermon 149, "On Love," *Works* 4:380-88; Kenneth J. Collins, *The Scripture Way of Salvation: The Heart of John Wesley's Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 123-26; and Runyon, *New Creation*, 88-91.

65. Sermon 64, "The New Creation," *Works* 2:500-510.

impossible—to let go of our favorite prejudices and practices. The pathway of repentance, reparation, and reconciliation will be filled with celebrative moments, but New Creation will remain beyond our ability to imagine and act. Even so, consolation abounds. When our imaginations fall short, God’s promises are sufficient and God’s impossible expectations are possible!