

CHRISTIAN PERFECTION:  
A METHODIST PERSPECTIVE  
ON ECCLESIOLOGY

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It is time honored—traditional in the best sense of the word—to define the church in two parallel ways: the gathering of believers where the word of God is preached and the sacraments are duly administered, which speaks primarily to functions within the church, and the more ancient creedal formulation of the church as the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic people of God, which suggests an enduring and defining essence of the church. Perhaps ever since Albert Outler’s provocative Oxford Institute lecture in 1962, however, Methodist theologians have struggled with the distinctiveness (or absence thereof) of a peculiarly Methodist understanding of the church.<sup>1</sup> The focus of many of our writings on the theme tends toward explicating the missional nature of a Methodist ecclesiology (for example, reforming the church and spreading scriptural holiness throughout the land) and applying that missional nature to the essence as well as function of the church. This is to say that there is a characteristic pragmatism to any Methodist ecclesiology.

My musings on Methodist ecclesiology flow from the theological work that has been most influential in my thinking as a process theologian, Wesley’s *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*.<sup>2</sup> I first

read this marvelous little book during an airplane trip in April 1984, several months after I had become a United Methodist, and please do not think me trite by telling you that it strangely warmed my heart, because it simply did. I thought it the most exciting theological book I'd ever read, and it has shaped all my subsequent studies in Methodist theology, influenced my way of writing process theology, and certainly is central to my efforts here in suggesting that it offers a distinctively Methodist perspective on ecclesiology. That is, our self-understanding as Methodists and our contribution to ecumenical ecclesiology are to clarify the sense in which Christian perfection illumines the traditional formulations of the church.

To clarify my perspective on Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfection, I briefly summarize it as this: God created the world for the sake of the love that was possible for creation, a love mirroring God's own love, which is to say, love as the image of God. Love is essentially an active and intentional care for the well-being of the other. Well-being, in its turn, involves the use of all one's powers (physical, mental, emotional) to the glory of God. This brings us full circle because the glory of God is nothing other than the love of God, an active and intentional care for the well-being of the other. Because God intends this, it is really possible for us to be loving creatures (and this is where Wesley seems to me to be so distinctive). Christian perfection—that is, a life of love which is interchangeably love of God and creatures—is no carrot on a stick, no end-of-the-line reward at death's door, but an ever-present empowerment by the grace of the ever-present God. Precisely because this empowerment is for love, it is necessarily communal, creating interwoven webs of care for one another's well-being, so, of course, it is an important basis for any Methodist perspective on a doctrine of the church.

At this point I need also to clarify that for me there is a natural fusion between process and Wesleyan theologies. Both depend upon the efficacious omnipresence of God—and I think a case could be made that in both process and Wesleyan theologies, omnipresence is the most significant of the three traditional omni's assigned to God. Wesley's final words were, "The best of all is, God is with us."<sup>3</sup> The words undoubtedly refer to Wesley's

experience of God's presence at that holy time, but the tenor of his life and thought is that God is indeed always present to creation; there is no place where God is not, regardless of whether there exists any creaturely consciousness of God's presence. The doctrine of Christian perfection entails a fundamental life stance attuned to the presence of God, a kind of holy assumption that takes omnipresence seriously, even for granted. And the presence of God is never passive but always active, which means that the presence of God is at the same time the continual availability of the grace of God. Since the grace of God flows from the love of God, grace is always adapted to the condition of the creature.

While phrased in different terminologies, all of the above also applies to process modes of thought. Existence by definition requires the ever-present creative power of God, not just once, long ago, whether in a "big bang" or otherwise, but everlastingly, moment by moment. Apart from the continuous and efficacious presence of God, there is nothing. Nothing whatsoever comes into existence without the attendant influence of God, called most infelicitously by Whitehead as "the initial aim," and more appropriately by Wesley as "grace." This aim, or grace, is adapted to the condition of the creature. Wesley, of course, described this adaptation in terms of prevenient, justifying, or sanctifying grace; Whitehead speaks more generally of the aim as adapted to the context and possibilities of the creature in every moment. Precisely because it is so adapted, it is an enabling aim, hence gracious.

But it is not a controlling aim. The creature must take that aim into account at its deepest level of becoming, finally becoming what it will within the parameters available to it. Insofar as the creature adopts/adapts the aim, it constitutes itself in light of its own personal and communal good, achieving God's gracious intent for it. The alternative is, of course, also possible. The becoming creature can refuse or distort God's influence, which is to constitute itself in ways that are less conducive to its own and the common good. In Wesleyan terms, grace is always given; grace is always resistible. But the omnipresence of God means that the refusal of grace cannot annul the continuous presence of God to

every moment in the becoming creature's life, even though the creature can dull itself to God's presence.

Both process and Wesleyan theologies assume an essential responsiveness and therefore responsibility in creaturely existence. Wesley terms it "resistible grace"; process speaks of the power of the becoming occasion to subvert the influence of God. In both process and Wesley, grace is enabling—it is truly possible to respond positively to the grace of God. But grace is not forcing—it is truly possible to resist grace. Resistance cannot send God away, as if somehow God could no longer be present to the individual. But resistance builds up cumulative roadblocks that hinder the grace of God.

Process and Wesleyan theologies are intensely relational—Wesley because of the dominance of love, which is of all things most relational, and process because of its analysis that to exist at all is to be in relation to that which is other than the self. Existence is essentially and necessarily social.

And process and Wesleyan theologies are both transformational—Wesley because love is itself a transforming quality, continuously adapting to the condition of the loved one toward the increase of well-being and the building of community. Christian perfection is the process of being continuously formed in the image of God, participating in God's own love. It is of all things dynamic, not static. In process thought, God pushes the world toward its creative transformation into increasing intensities, which are dynamic interrelated communities of well-being. Wesley would call it love.

With this rather extended introduction, then, let us turn to the issue I have proposed: that Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfection forms the bedrock of a Methodist perspective on ecclesiology. We first consider this in relation to the definition of the church in Article XIII as that "congregation of faithful men and women in which the pure Word of God is preached, and the sacraments be duly administered" (see the *Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church*) and second in relation to the four traditional marks of the church. My remarks are intended to be suggestive rather than exhaustive since obviously a full development of this theme would require seven essays.

*CHRISTIAN PERFECTION: WORD AND SACRAMENT*

I have summarized Wesley's doctrine by saying that God creates the world for the sake of divine love, that the world is intended to mirror that love in its own ways, participating in God's love and thus glorifying God. In the middle of *A Plain Account*, Wesley fleshes this out a bit in his description of the ideal Adam.<sup>4</sup> Today we might take that ideal not as a past event from which we have fallen but as a goal toward which we should aim, enabled by the grace of God. Wesley says that all of Adam's powers—physical, affectional, intellectual—were to be fully developed in service to love. By implication, our formation in the image of God requires that we develop the fullness of our humanity—physical, affectional, intellectual—in the service of love.<sup>5</sup>

Wesley well notes that we exist within circumstances that limit what that fullness might be. We are, he asserts, "hedged in by outward circumstances."<sup>6</sup> Our physical development may be hindered by cerebral palsy, mental disorder, blindness, or some such limiting condition. Our affectional life may be hindered by childhood abuse; our intellectual developments will vary according to our different capacities. The norm is that we should grow into, that which is best fitted to us, that which is possible for us, and—most centrally—that this growth shall be guided by the norm of participation in the love of God. Our physical, affectional, and intellectual lives are channels of God's love for the particularities of the world, so that God's love infuses our love, and our love becomes a part of God's love.

Because Wesley develops the above in relation to Adam, one could be misled into considering this a very individualistic doctrine. But because Wesley considers Adam representative of humanity, and because the whole concept deals with love—the intentional care toward the well-being of others—we must recognize it as an essentially communal doctrine. Love cannot be love apart from that which is loved. Even potential love is not love until one's concern, one's very being, extends toward empathic caring for another. Simultaneously, to love is to be open to love, to be receptive to the empathic caring of others toward the self. Love necessarily creates community. In process terms, love builds upon

the essential relationality of existence by responding empathically to others toward the end of mutual well-being. In Wesley's terms, God's very nature is this love; this care toward well-being is the foundation of God's creative work: "thy nature and thy name is Love."<sup>7</sup> We are called to participate in God's own love by receiving it, being formed by it, and endlessly giving it. Love is the energy of the universe, the creation of community, the enrichment of all aspects of becoming. Christian perfection is our participation in the love of God, which is at the same time our formation in the image of God.

If this is so, how can Christian perfection be separated from the functions of the church in preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments? Does it not provide the depth and the dynamic of both? And is it not so that, apart from communicating the love of God, in a depth sense neither preaching nor sacraments amount to anything? Since the love of God is the creative aim of God in creation, it clearly must inform our understanding of the preaching and sacramental functions of the church.

Preaching is for the sake of strengthening the community of believers in their several and communal ways of incarnating the love of God in their joint and their diverse circumstances. It involves a traditioning function, wherein "one generation proclaims the works of God to the next," to paraphrase Psalm 145. In this sense, word and sacraments make the past a present reality, so that tradition is a living participation in ancient faith. But both also have transformative functions, eschatological functions if you will, calling us to shape ourselves according to God's love here and now for the sake of what might yet be. The doctrine of Christian perfection suggests that the underlying force of past and future dimensions of word and sacrament is their role in the church's continual renewal in the image of God. Word and sacrament are both for the sake of increasing our active care for the well-being of those within and those beyond the community of faith. Both are means of incorporating us into God's love for the world.

I recognize that this appears to be a quite functional understanding of word and sacrament, but as a process Wesleyan, I cannot so neatly separate what a thing does from what a thing is. Consider: preaching is the act of expounding the gospel, whether through exegesis of biblical texts or through application of

Christian sensitivity to local circumstances. But if the gospel *is* the expressed love of God in Jesus Christ toward the well-being of the creature, then proclamation of the gospel *always* entails an influence toward our personal and communal participation in God's love, so that we severally and together mirror that love, channeling it to one another and to the world. God created us so that we might mirror God's love; this mirroring is accomplished through God's gracious influence and our response; God's influence is always contextual, taking account of where and when we are. The preached word is to explicate that which is happening all the time; it is the manifest word accompanying the hidden word of God's omnipresent activity within us. Hence preaching brings God's past activity in Christ into the present for the sake of the present community's deeper participation in the love of God. Preaching, then, is also participation in God's love.

Consider the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper in relation to the doctrine of Christian perfection. We call them "means of grace," and that they are, but certainly not exclusively or exhaustively. Indeed, Wesley easily includes holy conversation, prayer, and class meetings as means of grace insofar as these also lead to the strengthening of the Christian's growth in love. However, there is a peculiarity to baptism and the Lord's Supper that sets them apart, for they uniquely pull the past and future into our present growth in love. Both explicitly refer to the manifestation of God with us in the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Christ; both are explicitly eschatological, referring to the fullness of God's purposes in creation. Both deal with the present constitution of the community of God's people as a manifestation of the love of God. Both involve the grace of God mediated through physical stuff within a community, and both pull God's "time" into our times and set our times within God's time. That is to say, both present an intersection of time and eternity.

Baptism and the Lord's Supper are by definition intensely communal acts. Baptism requires the participation of a community of faith, for an essential aspect of baptism is the community's vow to nurture the one baptized. Every educational program within the church is an extension of baptism, being a part of the fulfillment of that baptismal vow.

The Lord's Supper likewise requires the community of faith, for through this supper we co-communicate, realizing ourselves as together the body of Christ. All of this, however, tends toward a single purpose: creating us in the image of God, as a people who participate in the love of God receptively and actively. Apart from the love of the omnipresent God, calling us to participation in God's love, there are no sacraments within the church.

If Christian perfection is renewal in the image of God, and if the image of God is love, and if love is the intentional care for the full well-being—physical, affectional, intellectual—of the other, then the sacraments serve the end of Christian perfection.

Having said this, then, it would be foolish to leave this discussion of Christian perfection relative to word and sacrament without speaking of the church's mission in the world. Ecclesiology cannot be about the formation of a church as if it existed in and for itself. If the church exists to participate in the love of God, and if God loves the world, and if love cares for the fullness of well-being, then the church, which is strengthened in love through word and sacrament, necessarily expends itself in service to the needs of the world. These needs, in keeping with the doctrine of Christian perfection, deal with the physical, affectional, and intellectual well-being of persons and society, and the root of that well-being in the image of God.

How could it be otherwise? Wesley writes an interesting little paragraph near the end of *A Plain Account* that we all do well to memorize: "One of the principal rules of religion is, to lose no occasion of serving God. And since God is invisible to our eyes, we are to serve God in our neighbor, which God receives as if done to [Godself] in person, standing visibly before us."

If we participate in God's love, we will care intensely about the physical, affectional, and intellectual well-being of everyone and everything. For God does. Think about this in the fairly simple terms of your closest loves. To love someone is to care about the things that make for their well-being—their friends, their opportunities, their growth, their own loves. Love is such an expansive thing! If there is no greater love than God's love, then to say that "God so loved the world" means that God cares intensely about the well-being of each individual within the world. If God loves

that other, and we participate in the love of God, then perforce we also must love that other. Jesus' words—"love your enemies, do good to those who hate you"—take on an awesome meaning in light of the doctrine of Christian perfection. We love precisely because God loves; therefore, we cannot say that love goes so far and no farther.

Truthfully, no finite individual can have an active love for everything, but the church is not an individual. It is community, and in and through the community as a whole we participate in the love of God in myriad ways. To view both word and sacrament as that which tends toward the building of the community in the image of God is to view both as intensely missional, calling and empowering us to active love for the world. Mission, then, is not something added on to word and sacrament; it is part and parcel of word and sacrament. Because word and sacrament, as means to our growth in Christian perfection, are themselves rooted in Christian perfection.

Should you ask whether I have woven any particularly process perspectives into my development here, perhaps taking you unaware, the answer would be yes (though I would rather take you "aware" than "unaware"). My process assumption is that God guides us within the depths of who we are at every second of our being, bending every element of our past and our peculiar situation in the present toward our communal good. I have called this a "whispered word," since it is deeper than consciousness. The preached word and the tangible sacramental words are manifest words through which God intensifies that whispered word, strengthening our capacity to be formed in God's image. Hence both word and sacrament are means of grace, used of God toward our growth in love and therefore intensifying our responsiveness to God and one another in the formation of community.

### *CHRISTIAN PERFECTION AND THE MARKS OF THE CHURCH*

One, holy, catholic, and apostolic church—so speaks the creed. To view these marks under the rubric of Christian perfection gives them a far less divisive character than too often obtains. The unity of the church makes this perhaps most plain.

Often the unity of the church has been framed in terms of universal communion, so that no Christian is barred from the Lord's Supper in any congregation, be it Protestant, Catholic, or Orthodox. At other times the unity of the church has been interpreted as organizational, so that in and through the episcopacy, or papacy, the church receives its unity. Yet another variation perceives unity as agreement as to doctrine. But in all these cases, the most prominent aspect of unity is that it isn't. The definitions divide rather than unify the various modes of Christian community. The doctrine of Christian perfection, of course, roots the unity of the church in love. By extension, one can also say that the unity of the church exists through prayer, but we first treat unity and love.

Wesley's relevant passages are in his advices to those seeking Christian perfection, found in the latter part of this small work. His first advice, dealing with pride, is as relevant as his specific advices dealing with schism, for he defines pride as the refusal to learn from those who differ from oneself. In the advices regarding schism, he cautions Methodists to expect controversy and differences of theological opinion. Ecumenically, we see his principle extended to that "olive branch" offered to the Romans. And it is certainly in his sermon "A Catholic Spirit." Christian perfection suggests that the unity of the church, whether within a congregation or denomination, or ecumenically, is fundamentally love. Further, this love—this unity—is expressed through goodwill, prayer, and works of mercy. And it depends upon theological diversity.

The odd implication is that theological conformity—that which has sometimes been held to be essential for any real unity within the church—actually functions against unity. The reason is found within Wesley's advices, as noted above. Controversy actually has a positive function within the church, for it becomes a means toward growth in Christian love. The reason is both complex and simple: God loves each person personally and contextually; God wills the well-being of the persons and the community as a whole. We love God, and in so doing, we participate in God's love for the world. Therefore, regarding the other as the beloved of God, we too are called to be oriented toward the other's well-being.

The catch is that we too often think that the well-being of the other entails their becoming just like us. But Wesley cautions us in *A Plain Account* to recognize fully our fallibility: we cannot always reason correctly, and therefore we must expect to make mistakes. There must always be the question hanging upon any theological or ethical controversy: perhaps the other is right, even though I most heartily do not think so. But since by definition we do not know when we make mistakes—else we would not be so prone to make them—we must hold our opinions with some humility. The God whom we are so sure has given us light also gives light to the other.

You can see how this circumstance enhances growth in Christian love. It means the one who differs from us, even vehemently, cannot be considered alien, and must even be considered as a possible means of enlightenment. “You have need to be taught . . . by the weakest preacher in London, yea, by all,” says Wesley, and he includes among those from whom we must learn several who disagreed strongly with Wesley himself. Differences of theological or ethical or organizational opinion become occasions of grace, of entering into God’s love for the one who differs with us, and therefore regarding that one with respect and curiosity rather than anger or dismissal.

A further entailment is that extending love toward those who differ with us strengthens our capacity to participate in God’s love. A humble analogy is the attempt to build one’s muscle strength through exercise. Loving those who are like ourselves is like exercising our capacity to love by lifting feathers. But loving those who are unlike ourselves is like exercising our capacity to love by lifting weights. The latter, not the former, strengthens our capacities—for it is easy to love that which is like, and far harder to love that which is different. But God is as present to and is as caring toward the one who differs from us as toward the one who is like us. Participating in God’s love requires our openness to those who differ from ourselves as occasions of grace.

Such unity is not easy to achieve. But the doctrine of Christian perfection claims that it is truly possible for us to participate in God’s love: it is possible for us to love those unlike ourselves. It does not plunge us into indifferentism; that would hardly be

Wesleyan. And it certainly does not squelch theological arguments or lead to conferences in which no one disagrees with another. Quite to the contrary: just as the other may be light to us, we may possibly be light to the other. But it is God's love in which we participate, not God's omniscience: we are called to dig deeply into the depths of our faith, to formulate it as carefully as possible—but always as we press our point, our participation in God's love means that we offer our arguments, opinions, or judgments in loving regard for the other's worth—and possible correctness.

Obviously, loving does not always entail liking, and the unity of the church depends on loving one another, not necessarily liking one another. I believe that the highest form of love involves the emotional warmth that we associate with liking, since it involves the fullness of our physical, affectional, and intellectual selves in orientation toward the other's well-being. But at its basic level, to love means to care about the well-being of the other, whether or not we have a liking for that other. I mention this only because sometimes in the hurtfulness of our human situation, persons are severely damaged by others: a rapist, a molester, a murderer, a character assassinator. To like those who have so damaged one may not be possible, but to love those is possible. Clearly, the well-being of the other includes transformation from raping, molesting, or whatever form of harm has been inflicted; one can will such well-being for the other, and in and through that transformation, will their flourishing. Loving can transcend the particularities of liking. Even within the church, in our disagreements we can disparage rather than respect one another, making the liking of friendship very difficult. But we can love those who despitefully use us, willing and acting toward their well-being, and so participate in God's unending love for that other.

Love, then, is the basis of the unity of the church, even in the midst of theological, ethical, or organizational controversies. Hence Wesley can hold out his "olive branch to the Romans" and reason with the Calvinists. But it also follows that prayer is the unity of the church, and this from love. Simply put, prayer is our openness to God, our communion with the source of all love, our responsiveness to the omnipresent God. Prayer opens us to partic-

ipation in the love of God. And when it is hard for us truly to will the well-being of the other because of antagonism or dislike, our recourse is to pray for that well-being, uniting us with the other in God's care. In the process of praying for the other, God's love works in our hearts, forming us not so much according to our injuries but according to God's love. It is possible through prayer to begin to mirror in some degree the fullness of God's love for the ones for whom we pray. Prayer is participatory; hence prayer follows the lines of love.

The image of Christian perfection as the unity of the church, then, does not conceive of differing denominations as the brokenness of the church, even though the controversies initiating the denominations were unloving or schismatic. The unity of love requires differentiation and can even bear with strong theological differences over who may participate in the Lord's Supper that exclude some Christians from the Lord's table in some church settings. The response of Christian perfection is to regard the other, looking for the well-being achieved within that different context; it is to pray for the other; it is to engage the other in Christian conversation so as to understand one another's perspective, with the expectation that each perspective will be offered persuasively and, ideally, with openness to learning from the other. Unity does not require that we become like the other or the other like us. Unity requires that we participate in God's love for the other. And I think it an interesting oddity attendant upon this view that sometimes when we have met together ecumenically, bemoaning our disunity, we are in fact exercising the unity of Christian perfection: participating in God's love for one another.

I have perhaps belabored the point, since I ought not to treat holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity in equal length. But brevity might be sufficient, given our joint familiarity with Christian perfection. Holiness is a different way of speaking about our participation in the love of God. It is therefore personal and communal simultaneously, and is that quality of communal life wherein our worship services open us communally to the love of God so that as community, we extend God's love to the world's physical, affectional, and intellectual well-being. Our hospitals, our schools, our distributions of aid, our ways of nurturing, are all extensions of

holiness, since each is a communal expression of participation in the love of God.

Holiness cannot be restricted to works of mercy, since these works follow from holiness, which is love of God and therefore love of neighbor. The holiness of the church is manifest in the regard of the members one for the other, and this regard in turn is rooted in the love of God: God's love for us, and our responsive love for God. Again, I must stress that to love God is to participate in God's love, in which case it is impossible for love not to be communal. Love of God necessitates the continual creation of the community. Holiness, as the love of God, is the lifeblood of the church.

Catholicity recognizes the diverse communities of Christian faith, adapted by the grace of God to various cultures, but all infused with God's love, all open to being shaped by God's love, all open to living God's love within and beyond the church. Wesley speaks of the catholicity of the church in terms of its geographical adaptations, but he is also at some pains to note that catholicity includes diversity of doctrine and modes of worship as well as diversity of location (see for example his sermon "Of the Church").

The catholicity of the church relativizes every form of the church. That is, if differences are embraced within catholicity, then no single form of the church is the norm or judge of the others. The diversity given to strengthen love within a single congregation or annual conference within our Methodism is multiplied exponentially in light of the ecumenical church. Ideally, this diversity of forms within the catholicity of the church is an astonishing occasion for the practice of love, not only toward one another across our differences, but together in works of mercy throughout our globe. Ecumenical organizations such as Bread for the World witness to the root of catholicity in Christian perfection.

Apostolicity is not only our standing within the two-thousand-year-old tradition of Christianity as mediated through our Scriptures and through the diverse writings of these centuries, but it is in fact our contemporary participation in the ongoing tradition. Christian perfection is as applicable to apostolicity as to the other marks of the church, revealing the necessarily witnessing nature of participation in divine love. The love of God cannot be contained; participation in God's love likewise has an essentially

giving nature, a telling forth that continually replicates the living message of the gospel throughout the ages.

Apostolicity is the living witness to the resurrection power of God in every human circumstance; as such, we are all eyewitnesses of the resurrection. The love of God has a transforming power gracing us to deal with the various forms of death that afflict us, the tombs that would bury us while we yet live. Christian perfection is the experience of the transforming love of God that offers personal and social resurrections even in the midst of our tragedies. Our experiences of God's resurrecting power are continuous with the apostolic witness, forming our present witness. Thus Christian perfection informs the apostolicity of the church, making it a contemporary as well as historic proclamation.

As Methodists, we affirm the church as that gathering of faithful men and women where the pure word of God is preached and the sacraments are duly administered. We affirm the unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity of the church. As such, we do not proclaim a distinctive doctrine of the church, nor should we. We participate in the whole people of God, which surpasses any particular denomination—no matter how loved! Nor does any particular body within the whole people of God have the distinctive privilege of offering *the* doctrine of the church, to which all others must conform. Rather, we are all called to recognize the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, which is the gathering of faithful people where the word is preached and sacraments administered. As distinctive bodies within the whole people of God, we have the duty to probe the peculiar perspective on God's grace that has been given to us, and to offer that perspective for the enrichment of others. We do so not to force our doctrines upon them, for this would go quite contrary to the very love of God we espouse. Rather, we offer them as gifts to be taken or left as deemed fit by our brother/sister participants. And likewise, our task is to appreciate the particular perspectives offered by those other recipients of the grace of God through Jesus Christ, discerning what it is in the gift that God would have us receive. I submit that as Methodists, we offer to the whole people of God the gift of a Wesleyan account of Christian perfection—the love of God informing our hearts and lives, so that we become channels of God's love within and beyond

our several communities. No community is a stranger to the love of God. But Wesley's conviction that by God's grace we are continuously renewed in this image, so that now in this place and time it is possible to live God's love, is a message of hope to enliven the whole people of God in our own and, indeed, in every age.

Baptism is not something reduced to happening "once" in our lives. Truly, we are initiated into baptism at an identifiable event, but that into which we are baptized is the body of Christ, the people of God, the fellowship of believers in the Spirit; we are baptized into an ongoing condition that necessarily entails the loving, shaping, nurturing response of the community. For Wesley, baptism is the "cleansing grace" of God, leading progressively to the justifying and sanctifying grace of God, but this is to say that God graces us according to our need and our condition. The baptismal condition is the surrounding community of those pressing on to Christian perfection, who as mirrors of God's love, care for the personal and communal well-being of the one baptized. As Luther so famously said to his perceived opponent, the devil, "I *am* baptized," not "I *was* baptized." Baptism initiates our everlasting condition of participation in God's love through Christ. "Remember your baptism, and be thankful" is analogous to the anamnesis of the Lord's Supper, recalling us to our deepest condition. Baptism is constant communion with God in Christ.

Even so, in reference to the Lord's Supper, constant communion does indeed entail frequent participation in the Lord's Supper, but there is a deeper dimension in that the supper *is* (and not represents only) our participation in Christ and therefore one another, for we are in Christ severally, relationally, personally, communally. The visible and tangible communion of bread and wine is the manifestation of that which is in time, but deeper than time, insofar as we participate in the ever-living love of the omnipresent God given to us through Christ. It is a constant communion in the shaping love of God.

These forms of constant communion—prayer, baptism, Lord's Supper—open us to our participation in God, and therefore in one another. That is, opening ourselves to the pervasive influence of God is necessarily opening ourselves to participating in God's love, and therefore to our increase in love. But to participate in

God's love is necessarily to participate in God's love for others as well as ourselves. It is probably too obvious to belabor, but God's love, while personal, is never private; it is always communal: God so loved the world. To love God is to participate in God's love for the world. This is why Wesley can say, "To love and serve God is the principal rule of all religion. And since God is invisible to our eyes, but our neighbor is not, we are to love God in our neighbor, which God receives unto God's own self as standing visibly before us." We love God by caring for the well-being of our neighbor. Thus growth in the love of God is necessarily communal. Christian perfection, as renewal in the image of God, necessarily binds persons communally into care for and of one another. In Christ, it is the continuous formation of the church.

*Rediscovering Wesley for Africa: Themes from John Wesley for Africa Today* (Pretoria: Methodist Church of Southern Africa, 2005), 23.

26. John Perkins, *Confessions of an Economic Hit Man* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2004).
27. Thomas Jackson, ed., *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley, M.A.*, 3rd ed., 14 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979).
28. See Outler, ed. *John Wesley* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), 85-86. The letter in full reads as follows:

Dear Sir, Unless the divine power has raised you up to be as Athanasius contra mundum, I see not how you can go through your glorious enterprise in opposing that execrable villainy which is the scandal of religion, of England and of human nature. Unless God has raised you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by the opposition of men and devils. But "if God be for you, who can be against you?" Are all of them together stronger than God? O "be not weary in well doing!" Go on, in the name of God and in the power of his might. Till even American slavery (the vilest that ever saw the sun) shall vanish away before it. Reading this morning a tract, wrote by a poor African, I was particularly struck by that circumstance, that a man who has a black skin, being wronged or outraged by a white man, can have no redress, it being a law, in all our colonies, that the oath of a black against a white goes for nothing. What villainy is this? That He who has guided you from your youth up, may continue to strengthen you in this and all things, is the prayer of, Your affectionate servant, John Wesley

29. Rustenberg conference 1987; recorded in JTSA and the Methodist Heritage Day document.
30. See Itumeleng Mosala, "Wesley Read from the Experience of Social and Political Deprivation in South Africa," *Journal for Theology for Southern Africa* 68 (September 1989): 87ff.
31. For a full account relating Mr. Wesley's ability to analyze the political economy of his time and its possible implications for South Africa today, see Keith A. Vermeulen, "Wesleyan Heritage, Public Policy and the Option of Poverty Eradication," in Neville Richardson and Purity Malinga, eds., *Rediscovering Wesley for Africa*, 159-74.
32. LenkaBula, *Botho/Ubuntu and Justice*, 24-25.
33. The full text of Steve de Gruchy's address may be found at [www.sacc.org.za/news07/oikos.html](http://www.sacc.org.za/news07/oikos.html).

## 6. Christian Perfection: A Methodist Perspective on Ecclesiology

1. Albert Outler, "Do Methodists Have a Doctrine of the Church?" in *Doctrine of the Church*, ed. Dow Kirkpatrick (New York: Abingdon Press, 1964).
2. John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (hereafter PACP) (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1966).
3. Percy Livingstone Parker, ed., *The Journal of John Wesley* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), 419.

4. "The Adamic law . . . required that man should use, to the glory of God, all the powers with which he was created. Now, he was created free from any defect, either in his understanding or his affections. His body was then no clog to the mind. . . . Consequently, this law, proportioned to his original powers, required that he should always think, always speak, and always act precisely right, in every point whatever. . . . he was well able to do so." Wesley, *PACP*, 79.
5. *Ibid.* Again and again in *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* Wesley equates Christian perfection with the renewed image of God, and this image itself with love. See, for example, 28, 32, 51, 55, 60, 81, 91.
6. *Ibid.*, 59.
7. The reference is to Charles Wesley's hymn, "Come, O Thou Traveler Unknown."

### 7. Human Rights, Vocation, and Human Dignity

1. Ian Brownlie, *Principles of Public International Law*, 6th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 529–33.
2. David Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 159–64.
3. Michael Perry, *Toward a Theory of Human Rights* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 33–36.
4. John Nurser, *For All Peoples and Nations: The Ecumenical Church and Human Rights* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2005), 143–71.
5. Jacques Maritain, *Man and the State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 76–80.
6. Sam Harris, *The End of Faith* (New York: Norton, 2004).
7. Stanley Hauerwas, *After Christendom? How the Church Is to Behave If Freedom, Justice, and a Christian Nation Are Bad Ideas* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991).
8. See "What If Wesley Was Right?" in this volume.
9. John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971).
10. The definitive analysis of Wesley's understanding of "natural," as opposed to legal or "civil," rights is found in Theodore R. Weber, *Politics in the Order of Salvation: Transforming Wesleyan Political Ethics* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2001), 303–52.
11. ST Kimbrough and Oliver A. Beckerlegge, eds., *The Unpublished Poetry of Charles Wesley*, vol. 1 (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1988), 279. The 2007 Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies heard a performance of "To Dr. Boyce," set to music by Mary Jackson, as part of its celebration of the three hundredth anniversary of Charles Wesley's birth.
12. Wesley, *Works* (Jackson), 11:74–76.
13. Herbert Schlossberg, *The Silent Revolution and the Making of Victorian England* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2000), 28–46.
14. Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty: England in the Early Industrial Age* (New York: Knopf, 1984), 31–34.