How the Heart Needs the Community:
Wesleyan Reflections on Trinitarian Spiritual Formation

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If Christian spiritual formation is the art of embodying the truths of Christianity in
a human life (or, becoming "transcripts of the Trinity,"), then it follows that those
seeking such formation will need to know just what the key truths of Christianity are (and
how the Trinity looks "transcribed" into human life.) In his "Principles of a Methodist
Farther Explained," John Wesley gave a clear and bold answer to these questions in the
form of a strikingly simple image:

Our main doctrines, which include all the rest, are three. --that of repentance, of
faith, and of holiness. The first of these we account, as it were, the porch of
religion; the next, the door; the third, religion itself. 1

In this paper I will illustrate each of these three parts of the "house of religion" with biblical material that shows not only how to understand repentance, faith and
holiness, but also how these three doctrines are inter-connected one with another. I will
then consider Wesley’s "works of piety" and "works of mercy" as practical methods for
both forming and expressing the believer’s heart and life in trinitarian 2 ways that reflect
the truths of the three "house of religion" doctrines. In discussing the works of piety and
works of mercy, I will show how the gathered community of believers plays an
indispensable role in spiritual formation and discipleship.

John Wesley’s Blueprint for Spiritual Formation: The “House of Religion”

At several points in Wesley’s writings, one can find summaries of the
fundamental doctrines of Christianity as he understood them. While there are some
differences between these various summaries, it is clear that throughout his mature life,
Wesley never renounced any of these three doctrines of repentance, faith and holiness as

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1 See hymn number seven in A Collection of Hymns For the Use of the People called
3 Because of limited space, I will not devote any attention to elaborating trinitarian
doctrine per se. but in taking Wesley's emphasis on the saving work of Jesus on the cross
as my own, I freely acknowledge that this leads ineluctably to trinitarian conceptions of
God.
being foundational for the Christian life, and nowhere else does he provide such a helpful visual image as he does here in this reference to the “house of religion.”

While there are shortcomings to having these three key doctrines linked through this image of the house - and I will point out some of these shortcomings below - it is also a very powerful way to summarize in a memorable way the essence of Christianity. Let us now turn to the first part of the image and that doctrine which Wesley saw as absolutely fundamental for the Christian life: repentance.

The Porch of Repentance

People often have ideas of “repentance” that do more harm than good. Very often when people talk about repentance, an image of a nagging and judgmental authority figure comes to mind. People often think of being scolded about their sins when they think about repentance. They see a dreary vision of God and the Christian life, as though God were like a parent who is always telling us to “Stand up straight!” when we would rather slouch. Who would desire such a “heart religion” that makes us cross such a “porch” that seemingly is made up of up-turned rusty nails and splintered wood waiting to pierce our tender feet?

Fortunately, scripture provides us with quite a different understanding of “repentance.” It is an understanding that does not crush the human spirit, but instead gives us new life in surprising and powerful ways. Let us consider how Wesley understood biblical repentance and then see how this repentance is brought about by looking at several specific scriptural texts.

Wesley’s Understanding of Repentance: Poverty of Spirit and Self-knowledge

In his thirteen part series of sermons “Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount” Wesley states that in the fifth chapter of Matthew “the sum of all true religion is laid down in eight particulars…” These “eight particulars” are, of course, the “beatitudes,” and the first of these is “Blessed are the poor in spirit; for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” In commenting on this first beatitude, Wesley says that “...real Christianity always begins in poverty of spirit...” [475] and, again, “The foundation of all is ‘poverty of spirit.”’ [475] So what does this phrase mean? Wesley says that Jesus was not here referring to they who are poor as to outward circumstances but “the poor in spirit”; they who, whatever their outward circumstances are, have that disposition of heart which is the first step to all real, substantial happiness, either in this world or that which is to come.” [475-476]

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Accordingly, we ask with Wesley: “Who then are the ‘poor in spirit’?” Without question, the humble; they who know themselves, who are convinced of sin; those to whom God hath given that first repentance which is previous to faith in Christ. “[477]

How is the sinner aware of his or her state? The sinner sees more and more of the evil tempers which spring from that evil root: the pride and haughtiness of spirit, the constant bias to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; the vanity . . . the hatred or envy, the jealousy or revenge, the anger, malice, or bitterness; the inbred enmity both against God and man which appears in ten thousand shapes; the love of the world, self-will, the foolish and hurtful desires which cleave to his inmost soul . . .

His guilt is now also before his face . . . [477-478]

Poverty of spirit, then, “. . . is a just sense of our inward and outward sins, and of our guilt and helplessness.” [479]

Another phrase that was equivalent to meaning “truly repentant” for Wesley was to say that someone had true “self-knowledge.” For instance, at the end of his series of sermons on the Sermon on the Mount, Wesley asks the reader to examine on what foundation he or she builds (with reference to Matthew 7:21-27). Wesley asks the reader: Do you expect to enter the kingdom of heaven by orthodoxy (having right ideas)? Or perhaps based on the fact that you do no harm, or perhaps because you are zealous of good works (orthopraxis)? He scoffs at all of this saying

Learn to hang naked upon the cross of Christ, counting all thou hast done but dung and dross. Apply to him just in the spirit of the dying thief, of the harlot with her seven devils; else thou art still on the sand, and after saving others thou wilt lose thy own soul. [“Sermon on the Mount XIII,” p. 695]

And how are we to accomplish this? “Now, therefore, build thou upon a rock. By the grace of God, know thyself.” [696]

When we repent, instead of denying ourselves, we name the truth of who we are, and we name it to God, to the world, and to ourselves. We know that God already knew it (and chances are extremely good that the world around us already knew it!) but when we consciously confess that we are in need of God’s help, we free ourselves from the prison of self-hatred that we imposed on ourselves because of our fearful and tragically misguided desire to hide it. We know ourselves, and we repent. Instructive here is one short verse in the story of the prodigal son. When the prodigal decided to say “no” to his old way of life and repent, the Bible says that he “came to himself” (Luke 15:17) - a description of true self-knowledge if I ever heard one!

If we now have a sense of what Wesley meant when he spoke about “repentance,” let us move on to the very practical question of how this repentance is to be brought about in human hearts. For this task we will see how repentance is brought about in two Bible stories and, in good Wesleyan fashion, a song lyric.

**How Repentance is Brought About: Isaiah 6: 1-5**

Chapter six of the book of Isaiah records Isaiah’s call to his role as prophet. If people are familiar with it, it is usually because of Isaiah’s answer to God’s call with the words “Here am I, send me,” which is often held up as a model of obedience to the call of God. What is important for our concerns with repentance, however, are the first few verses that relate Isaiah’s initial encounter with God. These read as follows:
In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.”

The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”

Isaiah is given a fleeting glimpse of God, and the angelic Seraphs put the experience into words by announcing that God is holy and the earth is full of his glory. What is Isaiah’s response to this confrontation with God’s presence, a presence best described as “holy” and filling the earth with his “glory”? The first words out of Isaiah’s mouth are “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips: yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!” (v. 5) In other words, almost simultaneous with Isaiah’s awareness of the holiness of God is his awareness of his own sinfulness.

This is a pattern found throughout scripture, yet so often overlooked by people trying to walk the Christian life: repentance - the awareness of and sorrow for our sinfulness, our awareness that we are not the creature that God created us to be - comes most powerfully when we are confronted with God’s holiness. You will notice that it was not somebody nagging at Isaiah about how bad he was that brought him to a confession of his “lostness,” it was seeing God, and immediately being aware that, compared to God, we are unclean. “Woe is me!” Confronting holiness brings true and deep repentance. Let us look at a different scriptural example of this, one which comes from the New Testament.

Luke 5: 4-9

In the beginning of the fifth chapter of Luke, Jesus gets into Simon’s boat, pushes off a little way from shore, and then teaches the crowds of people who are gathered on the banks.

When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.” Simon answered, “Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.” When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken.

Simon Peter utters the simple statement that is definitive of true repentance: “I am a sinful man!” and he does this not because someone has scolded him about his

* All scripture quotations are from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.
behavior, but because he has confronted true holiness in the miraculous catch of fish. He says to Jesus: “Go away from me, Lord . . . ” Being in the presence of one who could work such a miracle - one so holy - was painful for Simon Peter, because it showed him so clearly what he was not. Yet Peter was not left stammering and cowering for, like Isaiah before him, out of the midst of his sense of unworthiness he was called into a life of service of the Holy One:

Then Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid: from now on you will be catching people.” When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him. (Luke 10b-11, NRSV)

Also like Isaiah before him, it was Peter’s personal self-judgment that was elicited by the holiness of God.

“I Surrender”

The same dynamic that is seen in these scripture passages is also beautifully conveyed in the lyrics to a contemporary Christian song titled “I Surrender.” “Surrender” is usually associated with the grim realities of war, the degradation of denying who you want to be, and unwillingly taking on a new identity - prisoner. This song, however, beautifully puts the word in a Christian context:

To your majesty, and your beauty, I surrender.  
To your holiness and your love, I surrender.  
For you are an awesome God who is mighty,  
You deserve my deepest praise.  
With all of my heart, and all of my life, I surrender.  

It is not to the nagging or judging of some moralistic nanny-God that the singer surrenders to, but God’s beauty, majesty, love and holiness. Nothing could so clearly convey what true repentance is all about.

The student of scripture might say at this point: “What about stories like Nathan confronting David? Was not that an example of someone coming to repent because of being confronted by their sinfulness?” Similarly, those who know Wesley’s career know that he often “preached the law” to people until they repented. Are these not counter examples to our paradigm of repentance resulting from an encounter with holiness? No.

For both the prophet Nathan and for John Wesley, to confront people with the law of God is to confront them with the holiness of God. It was only after David was invited to consider the law of God by being asked to judge a fictitious case that he named his own sinfulness, and when we read Wesley’s sermon explaining the law, we see that one of the most basic defining characteristic of God’s law is that it is holy. On this point we can also look to the prophets of the Old Testament and their constant desire to bring repentance, not judgment. (See especially the book of Jonah for the all-too-human and ungodly desire to prefer, unfortunately, the destruction of our enemies rather than their repentance).

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8 II Samuel 12:1-13
9 In “Original, Nature, Properties, and Use of the Law,” sermon # 34, Wesley says that the law of God is holy, just and good, pp. 6, 10ff.
None of this detracts from our basic principle that pointing people to their sins can only bring guilt, while pointing them to God brings a genuine awareness of sinfulness. David, like the nominal Christians in Wesley’s time, had agreed to be accountable for a certain standard of behavior in light of God’s commitment to them. To point out to someone that they have not lived up to their commitment is a sad but necessary part of the Christian life. But when done in the right spirit, it does not focus the fallen person on their sins but instead directs them to the holiness of God.

True repentance, then, brings about not only a deep awareness of sin, it brings with it a burning desire to change, to become more like the holiness that brought us to our knees. That is why Wesley’s “porch of repentance” leads directly to the “door of faith” and hence into the “house of holiness.”

The House of Religion: The Door of Faith

“Faith” is certainly a word that is heard often in discussions of religion, and it can take on several meanings. For our purposes, though, we will focus on two meanings of the term. These two meanings of “faith” are distinguishable from each other, yet are closely related to each other.

Two Understanding of “Faith” or “Belief”

“Faith” – and its closely related term “belief” – can mean either the doctrines that describe the essential core of a religion, or it can mean simply “trust.” In the first sense of the word, we might hear someone refer to “the Christian Faith” or “Christian beliefs” and mean by that a collection of such statements as “Jesus was God incarnate,” “Jesus died for the sins of the world,” or “Jesus was raised from the dead.” Sometimes these statements are gathered into a compact summary statement of the important things about the Christian life that need to find a home in the life of a believer. These are called “creeds” from the Latin word credo which means “I believe.” These gospel summaries have been a part of Christianity since the very beginning.

In Acts 10:34ff we find Peter preaching and his sermon is one of the earliest collections of the basic components of the Christian “faith.” He recounts the preparatory ministry of John the Baptist, how Jesus was anointed with the Holy Spirit, how he performed healings, was crucified, was raised on the third day, appeared to the apostles and commanded them to preach the good news to the people. Interestingly enough, at the end of his recitation of this creed-like declaration of what God has done in Christ, Peter uses “believe” in the second sense of the term, that is, as meaning “trust.”

In verse 43 of chapter 10, Peter finishes his recitation of this creed by saying of Jesus that “All the prophets testified about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.” [emphasis mine] (NRSV) Here the sense of “believe” is clearly trust: all those who trust in him will receive forgiveness of their sins. The fact that belief as doctrine and belief as trust are linked here is no coincidence, so let me address the necessary connection between these two different senses.

When one analyzes these two different understandings, it becomes apparent immediately that neither one of these senses of “faith” or “belief” could stand alone as

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10 A friend and colleague once told me that in a West African language, the word for faith literally means “You can rest your weight on it.” This beautifully describes the understanding of faith-as-trust.
adequately describing a religious life. A person, could, for instance, memorize all of the classical creeds of the church - such as the Apostle’s Creed, the Nicene Creed and the Athanasian Creed - and have a tremendous intellectual grasp on all of the doctrines of the “faith,” and yet have a life that looks nothing like what a Christian life should be. John Wesley called this kind of faith a “cold, lifeless assent, a train of ideas in the head.” Wesley went on to say that without faith as a “disposition of the heart” - that is, trust - the intellectual assent had no saving power. But the opposite is also true.

If one were to try to live religiously by faith-as-trust alone the immediate question would be: “All right, well whom or what do you trust?” This question gets at the “transitive” nature of trust. Trust, like all of the “religious affections” is transitive, it takes an object. To say “I trust . . .” leaves people asking “What?” What is the object of your trust? The object of our trust as Christians is the God revealed in Christ, the God whose actions are described by our creeds, that is, the God who forgives sins, gives eternal life, raises from the dead. Just as faith-as-assent-to-doctrine cannot stand alone, neither can faith-as-trust, they need each other. This can be seen in this quote from Wesley’s sermon “Salvation by Faith:”

What faith is it then through which we are saved? It may be answered: first, in general, it is a faith in Christ—Christ, and God through Christ, are the proper object of it. This faith is best exemplified in scripture by Ephesians 2:8-9 and Hebrews 11.

Ephesians 2:8-9 reads: “For by grace you have been saved through faith and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast.” (NRSV) Hebrews 11 - a passage that Wesley referred to time and again when giving a concise summary of faith - reads: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” (NRSV) But this faith that comes as a gift of grace - this faith that is an assurance and conviction - is finally not just a general trust in the God of the Bible. The faith that is the door of Wesley’s “house of religion” is at its heart the specific faith that our sins are forgiven and our broken relationship with God is healed.

The Substance of Our Faith: Christ’s Work has Brought About Our Forgiveness

The center of virtually every local church’s worship space contains a cross. They can be found in a seemingly endless varieties of appearance with some being small and made of metal, some being large and made of wood, while others are depicted in stained glass. But regardless of appearance, the cross stands at the center of the worship space, and it stands there - and is the most recognizable symbol in all of Christianity - because it stands at the center of our faith. On the cross, that cruel form of execution used by the ruling Romans in first century Palestine, Jesus died a death that made him the savior of the world. Let us consider a few texts from the Bible that speak to this point.

Hebrews 9 contains what is perhaps the classic statement on the death of Christ and the forgiveness of sin. The author of Hebrews says that when Christ came as a high priest he entered into the temple “not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption.” (vs. 12) This was necessary because, as verse

11 See his sermon “Salvation by Faith” I.4, p. 120, Wesley’s Works Abingdon edition, Volume 1.
12 P. 120
22 says, “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.” This is recapitulated in verses 26b-27 where the author says:

... he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself. And just as it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

In chapter one of Colossians, we see that God the Father is to be thanked because “He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” (vss. 13-14) Later in this same chapter we see more explicitly how this redemption came about: “For in [Jesus Christ] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.” (vss. 19-20)

St. Paul in Galatians 3:13-14 says that “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree’—in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.” Ephesians 1:7-10 reinforces this theme when it proclaims that:

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

Later in that same book we see this central act of forgiveness used as a motivation for our own behavior:

Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. (Ephesians 4:31-2)

The fact that forgiveness is at the center of the Christian faith is seen even in the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples, which includes the clause “And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.” (Matthew 6:12) Immediately after the Lord’s prayer, Jesus emphasizes the point of forgiveness by saying “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive you.” (Matthew 6:14)

The references could go on and on, but the point is clear: the death of Jesus on the cross has brought about the forgiveness of sins, and all can have access to that if they have faith, that is, trust that God has in fact worked in the cross and resurrection of Christ to forgive our sins. This pivotal point in the believer’s journey with God is called “justification” by theologians. John Wesley put it this way:

The plain scriptural notion of justification is pardon, the forgiveness of sins. It is the act of God the Father whereby, for the sake of the propitiation made by the
Blood of his Son, he showeth forth his righteousness (or mercy) by the remission of the sins that are past.\textsuperscript{13}

From the Porch to the Door

To accept forgiveness we have to be able to say that we need forgiving, and that is why the “porch of repentance” stands in front of the “door of faith.” When we are caught up in the worldly way of life where we have to grasp and clutch and defend our self-identity, where we have to maintain the facade of innocence if we are not going to be “put-down” by our peers, it does not come naturally to speak of our failures. But when, in humility, we can name our sinfulness in the face of holiness, we no longer have to scratch and bite to defend our pitiful little self-images that we claw out of the world. We are given a whole new identity, and it comes completely free: we are forgiven sinners! We are redeemed! It is only after crossing that porch, though, that we are in a position spiritually speaking, to receive that gift by trusting in Christ’s redemption.

The “door of faith,” then, is marked with the sign of the cross, and it is only reachable from the porch of repentance. Furthermore, it is only by going through this specific door of the forgiveness of sins that we can gain access to the house of holiness.

Repentance, and faith in the forgiveness of our sinfulness, together free us from sin. We no longer have to carry that tremendous burden around on our backs, we can stand up straight and spend our energy on things other than dealing with our sinfulness. But what are we freed for? What is it that we should be spending all of our new-found energy on once we realize that we are forgiven? The answer is that we are freed for - and called into - a life of holiness.

The House of Religion: The House Itself - Holiness

First let us understand how Wesley understood this “holiness” that is to define our lives as believers.

Holiness as Love

In many places in his writings, John Wesley said that human beings are made for happiness and that the only way to achieve real happiness is to achieve holiness.\textsuperscript{14} While holiness might seem a daunting or even pretentious goal for human life, Wesley saw that as what scripture required of believers.\textsuperscript{15} So just what is this holiness that no believer shall attain heaven without? Wesley saw holiness as nothing more or less than love.\textsuperscript{16} Let us consider several scripture passages that can lead us to agree with Wesley that the biblical view of the end goal of life is a life of love.

Mark 12:28-34

This passage contains the famous “great commandment” or “dual commandment” to love. Jesus is confronted by a scribe who asks him “Which

\textsuperscript{13} Sermon no. 5 “Justification by Faith.” Works vol. 1, p. 189. The scripture reference Wesley gives is to Romans 3:25.
\textsuperscript{14} See, for example, his comments on John 12:36; Hebrews 2:3; Hebrews 12:11. See also Outler’s introduction to the Sermons, 35, sermon # 6 “The Righteousness of Faith,” 213, and sermon # 7 “The Way to the Kingdom,” 223.
\textsuperscript{15} See, for example, Hebrews 12:14; 1 Peter 1:15-16; 2 Corinthians 7:1; 1 John 3:2-3.
\textsuperscript{16} See p. 223 volume one of Sermons for Outler’s references to holiness-as-love in Wesley’s sermons.
commandment is the first of all?” To this Jesus answers by quoting Deuteronomy 6:4, saying “Hear O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” (vss. 29-30) Jesus then continues by saying “The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” (vs. 31)

This last statement is a reference to Leviticus 19:18, so in just a few verses of Mark, Jesus quotes two different passages from the Jewish scripture in order to sum up the Jewish law, and he is boldly addressing this summary to one who would be in a position to correct his views - a Jewish scribe. But the scribe does not correct him, instead the scribe says “You are right teacher. . .” (vs. 32) This dual commandment to love God and love our neighbor, then, is the core of Jewish spirituality.

But it is not just an idle historical point that Jesus makes by so summarizing the law in this way, for he also specifically endorses this summary. After the scribe says that such love of God and neighbor is “much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices” (vs. 33), Jesus said that he has “answered wisely” and that he was “not far from the Kingdom of God.” (vs. 34) Love is to be the basic orientation, the basic disposition, of every believer’s heart.

**John 13:34-35**

In this short but powerful passage in John Jesus says:

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

This is a radical and challenging passage for all who want to claim the title “Christian” for themselves: you will be known as a disciple of Christ’s if you are a loving person. The reader might be familiar with a simple church song that expresses this same fundamental point - “They will know we are Christians by our love.” This is an example of how sometimes the most profound statements are also the most simple: followers of Christ are people who are known for their love.

**Why Should We Love? From the "Door" into the "House"**

We have seen how love is clearly the highest virtue in the scriptures and so aptly called the “house of religion.” Let us now consider how this love is related to the “door of faith.” For as John Wesley said, faith is not the end or the highest goal of life, faith is but the door that leads into love, it is the “handmaid to love.” To see this connection, let us again turn to scripture.

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17 A “handmaid” in the medieval sense is one who helped a more “important” person by performing certain necessary functions for that person. In this metaphorical sense of the term as Wesley is using it, philosophy was often called the “handmaid” to theology - helping the theologian in certain ways, but not an end in itself. Faith is specifically called the handmaid to love in Wesley’s sermon # 36 “The Law Established Through Faith II.” 38.
Luke 7:36-47

In this passage Jesus goes to a Pharisee’s house for a meal. It is there in this house that

A woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee’s house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with ointment. Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner.” Jesus spoke up and said to him, “Simon, I have something to say to you.” “Teacher,” he replied, “Speak.” “A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?” Simon answered, “I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt.” And Jesus said to him, “You have judged rightly.” Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.

This woman who was “a sinner” apparently heard Jesus preaching the good news and felt her sins forgiven. She immediately felt compelled to lead a life of gratitude and love, starting with the anointing of Jesus himself. Jesus explains this behavior by telling the parable of the two debtors. Who is most loving? The one who has been forgiven the most. Why is this woman so loving? Precisely because she was such a great sinner.

This is perhaps one of the clearest examples in all of scripture of the forgiveness of sins leading to a life of love, that is, the door of faith leading to the house of holiness which is love. The end of the passage that I quoted also gives us a working hypothesis to bring to our encounters with unloving people: “The one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.” When we are confronted with people who seem closed-in on themselves and are bitter, it is a good working hypothesis to assume that they are not feeling forgiven, that they are feeling judged. Such people (or should I say all of us when we are drawn into such moods) need to be reminded of God’s love for us expressed in the death of Jesus and the forgiveness of our sins.

On that rock we can erect the kind of lasting joy that goes beyond the surface insipid giddiness that so often passes for joy (and it is such false displays of “joy” that often are the occasion people becoming embittered and cynical about the realities of Christianity). When those times do come up, and they will, when we are feeling judged, we must, as the hymn puts it, “Turn our eyes upon Jesus,” we must be reminded of the source of our life of love - God’s forgiveness.

1 John 4:19-21

The first letter of John is a tremendous source of reflections on the power of love, but I will focus on three verses in the fourth chapter. Verses 19-21 read
We love because he first loved us. Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

On verse nineteen, the first sentence in the above quote, Wesley wrote “This is the sum of all religion, the genuine model of Christianity. None can say more: why should any one say less, or less intelligibly?” This shows us that it is God’s love reaching out to us “while we were yet sinners” that allows us (in fact compels us as only unconditional love can compel) to live out this love toward both God and others. Why should we love? Because we have been forgiven. Because we have been forgiven we can drop the worldly pretenses to innocence and superiority to our fellow humans and freely love them as our equals - sinners all, but forgiven sinners. But having seen these connections between forgiveness and love, it is now time to be more specific about just what is meant by Christian love.

What is "love?"

Many of the most basic concepts in Christianity are also some of the most misunderstood. There is probably no concept that is more misunderstood, however, than love, and that is probably because the word is so often used in a way that avoids its most important Christian meaning.

On television or in movies, when someone says to somebody else “I just want to love you,” we know what is in store for us. Immediately the slow saxophone music will appear in the background, the protagonists will start to kiss, and clothes will start coming off. Love equals sex in our popular culture. This is perhaps seen most clearly when people try to justify their pre-marital or extra-marital sexual liaisons by saying “What is wrong with loving another person?” It sounds as if they are giving a high-minded and even Christian defense of their actions, when in fact they have not really grasped what Christian love is all about. As we have done previously, let us go to the scriptures for our definition of this key term.

1 John 3:10-24

Instead of reproducing this whole passage, let me lift up the one key verse that gives us a concise definition of love. Verse 16 says: “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.” Jesus’ death on the cross is not only the means for the forgiveness of our sins, it is the ultimate example of love.

Love defined by the total self-giving of Jesus on the cross is radically different from love-as-sex. In fact, the Greek language in which the New Testament was originally written has several different words for love. *Eros* is the word used to described sexual love in Greek, while *agape* is the self-giving love of God. It is unfortunate that English translates these two quite different realities with the same word, but theologians have written much about the importance of the original distinctions and how they should not
be blurred over. While this distinctively Christian notion of love defined by Jesus on the cross is helpful in distinguishing Christian love from pleasure-seeking sexuality, it might seem to be too dramatic of an example to be useful in an everyday way for many people. For a fuller elaboration of this love depicted by the cross of Christ, we can turn to one of the most famous passages in the Bible.

1 Corinthians 13

This passage is the one that people choose to have read at their weddings more than any other passage in the Bible, and with good reason. In this beautiful chapter Paul describes the nature of true agape love. While the whole chapter is definitely worth reading, I reproduce here a whole lifetime’s agenda compressed into just over four verses: Love is patient, love is kind, love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. (vss. 4-8a)

Just how far Christian love is from sexual desire is obvious when we read these words. That is not to say, of course, that Christianity is somehow anti-sexual - far from it! But it is to say that love is more than warm feelings when you are alone with your special person. In fact, this definition of love should remind us about the nature of all of the religious affections as Wesley talked about them, namely, that they are not the same as feelings. According to these definitions we can see that love is not merely a feeling but is positive energy spent in a relationship, it is living for the well-being of others, being patient with others and not resentful, bearing all things, having a caring orientation to them that does not end. If there is anything that is distinctive about feelings it is that they come and go, but this love “never ends.”

This feature of agape above all others should make it clear that it comes from God alone and is beyond our measly human capacities. No one can “pull themselves up by their bootstraps” into a love that “never ends.” This love grows when we target our attention on the object that can generate it: Jesus on the cross, dying for us before we even knew him, let alone loved him.

This love can take many forms and can be expressed in such a wide variety of ways that I would not try to catalog them. But one passage of scripture helps to show the kind of company that this love keeps, the kind of virtues that surround it and grow from it, and that is found in another of Paul’s letters.

Galatians 5:22-24 and the Fruit of the Spirit

In Galatians 5, after describing some of the ways of life that the Christian should avoid (the “works of the flesh”), Paul describes character traits that the Christian should seek after and grow in his or her own soul with the help of the Holy Spirit. These he terms the “fruit of the Spirit” and this list of nine virtues was one of John Wesley’s favorite summaries of holiness. The fruit that grows when the Holy Spirit is in our lives

20 See C.S. Lewis’s The Four Loves (Glasgow: Collins and Sons, 1987) for an accessible treatment of this important issue.
21 To explore the theological issues that surround this question of how God’s love becomes our love, see my article “Wesley’s Heart Religion and the Righteousness of Christ” in Methodist History xxxv, 3 (April 1997) pp. 148-156.
consists of: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” Wesley, in commenting on this passage, said that “Love is the root of the rest,” meaning that once true love has taken root in one’s heart the rest of these virtues will start to grow as well. One can in fact notice a number of parallels between this passage and Paul’s definition of love in 1 Corinthians where love itself is seen as patient and kind.

So whether it is expressed as these nine “fruit of the Spirit,” or more compactly expressed simply as “love,” the goal or end of the Christian life, the true house of religion, is a character that is defined by - and lives out of - this orientation of patient, joyous, kindness and generosity. If all of our behavior can be traced back to this motivation of love, then we have arrived at what Wesley called “sanctification” or “perfection.”

You will remember that Wesley said that we are made for happiness, and that happiness only comes from achieving holiness. We can now expand on that by saying that since holiness is love - especially love of our enemies - that happiness is best understood as a by-product of loving service. This leads us to one final deduction, and it is hard to over-emphasize the importance of seeing that

Happiness is an evaluation, not a feeling.

If happiness comes from holiness, and holiness is all about leading a life of self-giving love (that in turn comes from knowing that our sins are forgiven), then we need not worry about seeking out the feeling of happiness. In fact, if we target our attention on our feelings, we will lose sight not only of God - the source of our forgiveness and love - but we will also lose sight of the neighbor we are called to love. Happiness - our evaluation that we are leading the kind of life that we were made for, namely, the completely fulfilling life of holiness - will come as a by-product of our paying attention to what we are called to pay attention to: God and our neighbor.

The deepest sense that we are on the right course, that we are living out a life of being who we are called to be, is not only how we should understand happiness, but also those other key words in the Christian vocabulary “peace” and “joy.” At the deepest level, happiness, holiness, joy and peace are all the same as holy agape love. The all-encompassing nature of this love is why Wesley termed it the “house itself.” It is where we are called to live.

Now I turn to the question of how to grow and foster Wesley’s vision for heart religion today. How are repentance, faith and love grown and expressed in contemporary life? What would Christian life aimed at this goal of heart religion look like today? Just how are we to fix our attention on God and our neighbor so that we might love them, and what specifically does this call to love entail?

**Living a Heart Religion in the World Today:**

**How the Heart Needs the Community**

We have seen how the Christian spiritual journey becomes energized when we are confronted by holiness, that this leads us to repentance, trusting that our sins our forgiven.

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23 See Matthew 5:43-48 where Jesus’ command to be perfect is set in the context of loving one’s enemies.
and growing towards holiness ourselves. The journey that starts with holiness ends with holiness. How are we to attain this heart religion today? How are we able to encounter the holiness that leads us to repentance? How are we to grow in the faith that Jesus’ death brought about our forgiveness? How are we to grow in the love that makes us holy? I will begin this task by first pointing out the greatest drawback that this image of the “house of religion” has.

What the “House” Image Leaves Out: The Continual Nature of Formation

While Wesley’s compact doctrinal summary has many benefits (as I hope I have shown), it does invite one important misunderstanding, namely, that one need take only one trip across the “porch” and through the “door” in order to be once and for all “in the house.” For Wesley, as well as for the mainstream of Christian orthodoxy, repentance and trust in Christ are to be daily features of the Christian life, not just vague memories of a summer camp conversion experience, an altar call, a baptism or a confirmation ritual of many years ago. The house of religion is something that we need to consciously enter into each day of our lives.

While there is nothing wrong with remembering past spiritual highlights of our lives - and in fact there are many good things about occasionally rehearsing such holy memories - God wants to meet us not only in our remembrance of things past, but also in the living vitality of the present. Perhaps we can put this “house of religion” image into the right context of ongoing formation if we see it in the light of John 14:2: “In my Father’s house there are many mansions.” Each day we can cross the porch of a different mansion in our Father’s house, we can walk through the a new door of faith and find a whole new house of holiness, marked by a different quality of God’s love.

But now we might ask: How can we experience that presence of God and grow in repentance, trust and love in an ongoing way? In response to this, Wesley gives us three general rules to follow.

In his “General Rules” for the “societies” that would become the Methodist church, Wesley listed three broad categories of actions, three ways to spend the energy that God has given us.24 These might seem like “common sense,” but the problem is that they are not commonly practiced. In their simplest form, these rules are: do no harm and avoid evil, do good of every possible sort to all people, and attend to all of the “ordinances of God” (what he termed the “works of piety”). In order to understand this lifelong agenda for spiritual formation, let us first understand the “works of piety” and then look at how to live out the injunctions to “do no harm” and “do all of the good that we can” by attending to what Wesley called “works of mercy.”

What we must always remember in discussing these “works” is that underlying them, and going before them, is God’s grace. God’s loving grace goes before us and makes possible our growth, and we, in our freedom, can choose either to make use of that grace or say “no” to it. When we lead a life defined by following these three rules, we are responding to God’s gracious initiative with a grateful “yes.”

The Works of Piety or Means of Grace: Targeting our Hearts on the Right Objects

We often use the distinction “means vs. ends” in our everyday discourse. If someone wants to achieve a certain goal (or end), they have to use the appropriate tools

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24 See Wesley’s Works, volume 9, pp. 67-75.
(or means). This is the same use of "means" that Wesley had in mind. In order to achieve the goal of holiness - living completely out of a motivation to love - one has to use the means that bring that about. These means are the means of grace, and for Wesley they included several actions and duties that are familiar to Christians today, but also several that seem foreign or strange. Let us briefly consider these. 25

**Baptism**

The religious action that many might think of first in terms of growing in holiness - baptism - is not something that Wesley spoke about much. The reason for that is that virtually everyone in the England of Wesley’s time was baptized as a matter of course in their infancy. Wesley did believe that baptism was the way to get started on the Christian walk because that has been the basic church teaching since the very beginning. In his work among the people, though, most everyone he encountered had already experienced this. Accordingly, Wesley assumed the reality of baptism rather than emphasized it. It should be said, though, that the act of remembering our baptism - remembering the fact that we are baptized - can be a way to make this past action relevant to our present spiritual lives (and there are some helpful liturgies for this now 26). What makes baptism unique among the "works of piety," though, is that it is meant to be a one-time, unrepeatable event. The other five "instituted means of grace" 27 are all meant to be regular, ongoing features of the Christian life.

**Prayer**

The most basic "work" of the Christian life, the most fundamental way that we should spend our energy in order to grow in grace, is to pray. Since the works of piety are to focus us on God so that we might repent, have faith and grow in love, there could be no more helpful action than to address God - and listen for God - in prayer. For Wesley, this included public prayer and family prayer as well as private prayer. Certainly, spontaneous prayer is to be encouraged, but using prayers written by others can also be helpful in that they help us to target our attention not on a God of our own design, but the one true God that was known by the fathers and mothers of the faith that went before us. Wesley had his Anglican Book of Common Prayer to draw on, and he published an abridgment of this, as well as other, collections of prayers in his own lifetime.

**Searching the Scriptures**

Wesley did not want to promote the kind of Bible study that people so often

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26 See the United Methodist Hymnal, pages 50-54 for an excellent example.

27 See Wesley’s sermon on the means of grace (#16) and Harper’s book, note 25 above, for more on the instituted means of grace. Basically, this term meant those channels for God’s grace that were ordained by God. This does not mean that God acts only through these means, but that these are the ordinary ways that God makes God’s grace available to us.
engage in today, namely, a kind of dry learning of facts about one or another of the various books of the Bible. That is why he did not say “study” the Bible as a way to grow spiritually, he said “search the scriptures.” The attitude implied in this latter phrase makes all the difference.

When you are searching for something, you have a specific need and you are trying to satisfy that need. For example, when you are searching for your keys, you have a very clear objective, something that is a clear motivation. Similarly, when you are searching for God and God’s word in the Bible, you are looking with a specific awareness of your need for spiritual growth. God is more often found by those committed to the search rather than the merely curious. The Bible is the church’s book, so we need to do our searching in the company of others seekers and searchers within the community of faith. This would hopefully occur under the tutelage of ones who have experience in the quest for God in the Bible. There should be no reason to try to go it alone.28

The Lord’s Supper

In many Protestant churches in the U.S. today, the sacrament of the Lord’s supper (or “communion” or the “Eucharist”) is not celebrated very frequently, and this is something that would puzzle Wesley. In fact, Wesley himself sometimes took communion several times in one week, as opposed to the common American practice of taking it several times a year. One of the reasons that it was not celebrated often in the early days of America was the shortage of ordained ministers on the frontier. People had to wait for the traveling “preachers” to come to their town in order to take communion, and that was sometimes months. Too often these patterns of infrequent communion became well-entrenched habits in American churches with no underlying theological justification.

Consider the words that are recited in most worship services when communion is celebrated to see how this sacrament can target our hearts on God. They are usually a quote of, or a variation on, 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 where Paul is telling the Corinthians how to celebrate this ritual correctly:

For I have received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me. In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

The action of remembering Christ on the cross, and then voluntarily associating ourselves with that sacrificial action by taking the bread and wine - the “body and blood” of Christ - cannot but help to orient us to God’s saving act in Christ. What we need to understand is that, like the mystery of Christ on the cross, the sacrament of communion does not have to be fully understood in order to be effective. We need not become a proponent for one

28 One excellent program is the Disciple Bible Study Program, published by the United Methodist Church. This program takes the Wesleyan view of Bible study, namely, that the point of studying it is not to compile a lot of facts but to grow disciples of Jesus. That is, of course, the final point of the whole process of sanctification.
or another theory about how communion works, our job is to take it in faith and be formed by it.

**Fasting**

In our culture, fasting might seem like something to do primarily in order to lose weight. Doing it for spiritual purposes might strike some as rather medieval, but Wesley knew what the great spiritual masters since the beginning knew: fasting works. How can fasting work to orient us to God? There are many answers that shed light on fasting, but let us settle for one that goes right to the heart of matters: when we fast, we learn to say “no” to ourselves, and if we cannot do that, we will not get very far in the spiritual life.

Richard Foster has said that fasting is the decision to abstain from an otherwise normal function for spiritual purposes, and I think that is a helpful way of seeing it. When Christians fast, for example, from food, or sex, or television, they are not saying that these things are bad in themselves. What they are doing is learning to discipline themselves so that nothing masters them except God. If we cannot put our passions on “hold” and say “no” to ourselves, we cannot be free to say “yes” to God with all of our hearts.

While people with medical conditions need to be careful about fasting from food for extended periods of time, most people can skip a meal as a way of acknowledging our neediness and our dependence on God for what is truly filling. Wesley himself fasted from breakfast and lunch on most Fridays (in honor of the saving events of Good Friday). Even today, all United Methodist ministers affirm at their ordination that they will recommend and practice Christian fasting. The failure to pursue this work of piety is perhaps one of the causes of the lack of focus in some of our denominations today.

**Christian Conference**

This means of grace might seem very strange on today’s ears, but it was of undoubted importance to Wesley. What he meant by this is simply getting together with other Christians regularly in order to encourage one another and, even more important, to hold each other accountable for the commitments that the Christian life calls for. These were not simply prayer or support groups. These were small groups of people who would open their hearts to each other, who would confess their sins and shortcomings to each other, and in that context of openness and honesty, they would “speak the truth in love” to one another.

It is easy to get caught up in self-deception when you are not receiving feedback from someone you trust. You might, for example, think of yourself as someone who is generous and a good steward of God’s gifts - until you are face to face with someone who knows how much you actually give to church and charities! Likewise, it is easy to say in general “I am doing the best I can as a Christian,” but it involves a different level of humility, honesty and commitment when you leave the generalities behind and allow people to ask you specific questions about our Christian “walk.” These questions would include those such as “John, we know you have had a problem with gambling away your family’s grocery money, so tell us: How much did you spend on lottery tickets this last week?”

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29 See Foster’s *Celebration of Discipline* (San Francisco: Harper, 1978), Chapter Four on fasting.
It is in these small groups that our repentance is made to stick in very real and concrete ways. Our faithfulness and love are also quickly demonstrated when we talk about what has really been going on in our lives. Mutual trust, humility and a loving sense of being accountable to all of the members of the group are obviously important in this kind of endeavor so it is not something to be taken up lightly. There are, happily, some signs that this means of grace is becoming more and more available and practiced today. While there are several programs and books that describe in great detail what is necessary to make this kind of covenant group a reality, what is needed more than anything else is a group of people committed to God, each other and the process of Christian growth. Wesley knew that when these elements were there, God’s Holy Spirit would use them for the cause of sanctification.

The “House of Religion” as Formed by the Sunday Morning Worship Service

To varying degrees, each of these works of piety can find a home in the weekly gathered worship that takes place in local churches, and in so doing, the house of religion can be formed in the lives of the worshippers. Hymns and anthems can provide a sense of the holiness of God that can invite us to the porch of repentance. This sense of repentance can be expressed through prayers of confession, either in silence or in spoken in unison with others.

Reciting creeds and hearing the Bible preached can target our attention on the saving act of Christ, so that we can once again consciously trust that our sins are forgiven and walk through the “door of faith.” Intimate acts of trust that take place in the sanctuary, like baptisms and funerals, can help us fully to engage the depths of our hearts with the reality of God’s forgiving and comforting love.

Being a part of rituals of love and commitment - like marriages - can deepen our dispositions to love others, whether we are the ones being married or merely celebrating the marriage of others. Prophetic preaching can show us where our love should be working in the world today, how we can best express our call to live in the “house of religion itself” - love. Hymns and songs of gratitude can express our deepest sense of thanksgiving for all that we have been given.

A special word should be said here for the practice of the Lord’s Supper or communion during all of these aspects of worship, during all of the seasons that our spirits pass through. In some Protestant communities, communion has been associated with the porch or the door only, it is often practiced only as a time of repentance and sorrow. The truth, however, is that we do not get the fullest sense of what communion has to offer us until we see that it is something to be celebrated not just in time of repentance, but also in times of great joy and thanksgiving. The eucharist should be practiced year-round and we should allow it to take on different shades of meaning as the seasons of the church, and the seasons of our lives, change.

These means of grace or works of piety, especially as nested in the church’s liturgy, can form us in repentance, faith and love by targeting our hearts on both the

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30 David Lowes Watson has written several books on “Christian conference” and accountability groups. See his *The Early Methodist Class Meeting* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1985) and his *Covenant Discipleship* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1989).
holiness of God and our need for that holiness in our lives. This addresses the “transitive” nature of the affections of the heart by providing the right objects for our attention. To some extent, the liturgy not only forms these affections, but expresses them as well. Wesley reminds us, though, that liturgical expression of our heart is not enough. We also need a way to express these affections of our hearts beyond the doors of the church. That is the purpose of the “works of mercy,” that is, they allow for the dispositional nature of the religious affections by giving outlets for expression of our religious affections.

**The Works of Mercy: Expressing Our Hearts to Complete the Cycle of Holiness**

Most of us are aware on an intuitive level of what I have called the “dispositional” nature of emotions, even if we are not used to that kind of language. The dispositional nature of emotions is clear when we say things such as “If you really loved me, you would . . .” with each of us able to fill in some duty we would expect of someone claiming to love us. Well, what if we took that dispositional nature of the religious affections of repentance, faith and love seriously? What kind of actions should Christians engage in if they are to be termed “works of mercy?” What kind of works should define a Christian?

No one can give a more profound answer to these questions than Jesus did when he said “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” what is rightly called the “golden rule.” (Matthew 7:12) In some places in scripture, we can find attempts to further specify the kinds of things that this “golden rule” would entail, and Wesley often echoed these commands to, for instance, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the imprisoned and the sick, entertain the stranger, and make disciples among all nations. How might we embody these charges today? Our answers will be as diverse as the various circumstances in which we find ourselves.

For some, “doing no harm” might mean no longer driving after drinking, or perhaps entering a program to curb the anger that leads to spouse abuse. “Doing good” might mean working at a Habitat for Humanity house, or it may mean teaching a Sunday school class, helping to care for a disabled person, or being an overseas missionary. What we see here is that there are many ways of living a life of gratitude and, in so doing, praising God. What enables the process, though, is not only God’s grace but our willingness. When we follow Wesley’s three simple rules, we are expressing the life that God has formed within us, and we are freed to use our discernment of the world around us as to just how we live out this call.

All of this discussion about “rules,” “will” and “works,” however, might lead us to overlook the fundamental nature of Wesley’s vision of Christianity, and that is the primacy of the life of the heart. In his 1745 letter to “John Smith” Wesley tried to ensure that “faith working by love” did not degenerate into a works righteousness:

I would rather say that faith is ‘productive of all Christian holiness’ than ‘of all Christian practice’; because men are so exceeding apt to rest in ‘practice’, so called, I mean in outside religion; whereas true religion is eminently seated in the heart, renewed in the image of him that created us.

[emphasis his] [letter of 12/30/1745, XXVI, 179]

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Wesley knew that it is always a temptation to define Christianity by outwardly observable things, such as church attendance or going to Bible studies. As he constantly guarded against such shallow understandings, so must we.

In this emphasis on the heart, Wesley is but once again reinforcing the message of scripture. After all, it was not Wesley but St. Paul who said: “If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.” (1 Corinthians 13:3)

The “House of Religion” Image: Not As Rigid As One Might Think

Just as I pointed out above that the house image should not give the impression that Christianity is a static reality to be entered into only once, I want here to give another caution about the image. The fact that Wesley used a three-part image to summarize the most central truths of Christianity - and used this image to show how these truths are linked theologically - does not mean that we will always experience repentance, faith and love in such a neat and distinguishable sequence. The difference is between logical connections and temporal connections. Let me give an example to illustrate.

It is quite possible, for instance, that a child would grow up in a congregation where Christian love is abundant because the adults in that congregation have understood and embodied the Gospel. The child may show signs of being a loving child by being around so many positive role models. The child gets the idea that loving is the best way to live, and so he or she starts living that way. It might only be later in the child’s life that they understand that this agape love can only be sustained by understanding its sources - the death of Christ on the cross and his glorious resurrection.

But there will come a time (if the congregation’s worship and life together is as it should be) when that child will no longer be able to skate through life on the borrowed love of the community. Sooner or later the child will grow up and confront his or her own sinfulness and be driven to the wellsprings of God’s forgiving grace directly. Then he or she will know that it was that cross of Christ that made possible the love he or she experienced in the first place, he or she just did not understand that until later. This is part of the maturing and growing process.

So, in this example, the first thing encountered in time was the love of the community, and the logic of how that love developed was only understood later. This does not mean that the love experienced was not generated in the way Wesley specified, namely, by the cross of Christ. Wesley’s vision of the logical order of the Christian life, as expressed in the house image, is not violated or negated by someone experiencing these stages in a different temporal order.

We can appreciate the convenience of travel by automobile without understanding everything about internal combustion engines. But if we do not have a minimal knowledge about what makes them work, such as that they need gas periodically, we will not be going far. The same is true with the Christian life. We do not have to know much to experience love from others, but if we are going to sustain that love in our own lives, we need to know more. To use another example, we might say that trying to live a life of Christian love without consciously trying to grow it (through attendance on the means of grace) and effectively expressing it (through the works of mercy) is like spending all of your capital instead of investing it and generating more: sooner or later you end up bankrupt.
The caution about imposing a rigid order on the way our spiritual lives develop (even while having faith in the underlying logic of the process) can be confirmed in the experiences of believers. Many people can testify to times when their intention was to be performing a “work of mercy” - expressing love to some unfortunate person(s) - which in fact turned out to do as much forming of love within the workers as it did express love for the recipients of the action (and hence was more of a “work of piety.”) The “work” trip that the youth group takes can sometimes build more fellowship than so-called “fellowship” trips.

When we become daunted at the prospect of leading someone to repentance by showing them God’s holiness, we should remember the story of the calling of Peter. What was the medium for Peter’s awareness of the holiness of Jesus? It was nothing more exalted than a net full of fish.

A net full of fish was nothing that had not been encountered before, but the timing and the circumstances made it an occasion for encountering the Holy One. Such everyday things can be the occasion for anyone to encounter God, if we are looking for God in them, that is, if we have “eyes to see and ears to hear.” God’s grace meets us in surprising ways if we are but open to it.

**Summary: The House of Religion and the Life of the Heart**

From all of this we can see how Wesley's "heart religion" is intrinsically social and grounded in the truths of the Christian tradition, and that it is in the local congregation that the repentance is made to stick, the faith is deepened and the love generated and directed to expression. If the central purpose of the local community of faith is fulfilled - worshipping God with a well-balanced liturgy and program - then the Christians who worship there will have the virtues or character traits that they are called to have. These Christians will embody the “house of religion” by showing forth the humility that comes from repentance, the gratitude, trust and peace that come from having faith that our sins are forgiven, and the whole “fruit of the spirit” - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control - that grows in the soil of humble, Christian trust.