

**“And new-create a world of grace / in all the image of thy love’:
Charles Wesley’s Theology of New Creation”**

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This paper will explore the holistic soteriology and the eschatology of fulfilled love reflected in the sacred hymns and poems of Charles Wesley, which point the way toward a contemporary ecumenical theology of mission and evangelism. In the past history of western Christianity, and still today, an emphasis upon the renewal of the whole of creation is often sacrificed to an over emphasis on human redemption. Charles Wesley shapes a more balanced view. He espouses a view of all creation being renewed by God’s ongoing creative process. The earth, as well as its creatures and nature, is created anew. This an emphasis found in many eastern religions, particularly Orthodox churches, and has long been emphasized by Native Americans. Charles Wesley’s holistic soteriology and eschatology of fulfilled love are seminal for Wesley studies, the life of the church, and contemporary ecumenical relationships.

First of all, it should be noted that one of Wesley’s ascriptions for God is the “New Creator.” God is the Creator, the one who has set all creation in motion through divine will, but God is also the One who continues to make all things new. In stanza 1 of Hymn 7 of his *Hymns for the Nativity of our Lord*¹ Wesley writes:

Jesus, show us thy salvation,
 (In thy strength we strive with thee)
By thy mystic Incarnation,
 By thy pure nativity,
Save us thou, our New-Creator,
 Into all our souls impart,
Thy divine unsinning nature,
 Form thyself within our heart.

In the discussion of Wesley’s holistic soteriology I shall return to the matter of personal and corporate salvation, for which he pleads here, however, it is the ascription for God, “our New-Creator” that is of vital importance at this point. There is an ongoing creative process in which

¹ (Bristol: Felix Farley, 1946), p. 12. There are originally 9 stanzas.

God makes creation anew. It is the Incarnation which makes such renewal possible.

Indeed, through the Incarnation God reveals the divine self as the New-Creator, who continues to impart the divine energy to transform human nature.

In a poem based on Zephaniah 3:9 (“For then I will turn to the people a pure language, that they may call upon the name of the Lord, to serve him with one consent”) Charles writes:

1. On thee, great God, we still attend,
’Till judgment shall in mercy end,
And wrath in universal grace:
The promise to thy church is sure,
Our hearts, and lives, and language pure
Shall speak our New-Creator’s praise.

Zephaniah’s words of hope are understood as a promise to the church by Wesley. All creatures of

creation shall praise the New-Creator! He continues in stanza two of the poem:

2. Then every soul his Lord shall know,
And every spotless saint below
Perform thy will, like those above;
We all shall think, and speak the same
And serve our God, and praise thy name
With perfect harmony and love.

The eschatological dimension of this text will be discussed later. Suffice it to say at this point, all creation moves toward the praise of the New-Creator in a unified language of harmony and love. Hence, a goal of creation is to praise or worship the New-Creator. This emphasis sets the tone for what may be called Charles Wesley holistic soteriology.

Holistic Soteriology

The soteriology of new creation espoused by Charles Wesley is holistic and is rooted in the Holy Scriptures. While he unquestionably affirms and preaches salvation of the individual, he does not do so outside the realm of the church and of all creation. Though Wesley affirms an overarching Christology, and tends to christologize the Old Testament at times to the extreme, he is clear that a theology of creation is the fulcrum of soteriology. Salvation does not begin at

Calvary, or at the cross of Jesus Christ, it begins in creation and with the God who continues to make all things new.
New creation of all creation

One of the most eloquent expressions of the foundational perspective that salvation begins with creation and the Creator is found in Charles Wesley's paraphrase of Psalm 104, "Author of every work divine." It is as an example of an interpretation that is faithful to the spirit of the psalm in its Old Testament context.

Psalm 104 often is designated as a psalm of nature. In Wesley's paraphrase as in the psalm, one's soul effervesces with praise of God the Creator. Both express a theology of the renewal of all creation by God's continuing creative process. The earth *and* its creatures are renewed.

Psalm 104²

Author of every work divine,
Who dost through both creations shine,
 The God of nature and of grace!
Thy glorious steps in all we see,
And wisdom attribute to thee,
 And power, and majesty, and praise.

Thou didst thy mighty wings outspread,
And, brooding o'er the chaos, shed
 Thy life into th'impregn'd abyss,
The vital principle infuse,
And out of nothing's womb produce
 The earth, and heaven, and all that is.

That all-informing Breath thou art,
Who dost continued life impart,
 And bidd'st the world persist to be:
Garnish'd by thee yon azure sky,
And all those beauteous orbs on high
 Depend in golden chains from thee.

Thou dost create the earth anew,

² From *Hymns of Petition and Thanksgiving for the Promise of the Father* [1746], No. 28; see *Poet. Works*, 4:198-199.

(Its Maker and Preserver too,
By thine almighty arm sustain:
Nature perceives thy secret force,
And still holds on her even course,
And owns thy providential reign.
Thou art the Universal Soul,
The Plastic Power that fills the whole,
And governs earth, air, sea, and sky:
The creatures all thy breath receive;
And who, by thy inspiring, live,
Without thy inspiration, die.

Spirit immense, Eternal Mind!
Thou on the souls of lost mankind
Dost with benignest influence move:
Pleased to restore the ruined race,
And new create a world of grace
In all the image of thy love.

What does Wesley mean in stanza 1 by “God of nature *and* of grace”? Does he mean that God is the God of the heavens *and* the earth? Or the God of nature *and* human relationships? That is difficult to determine, but his intention is clear; namely, God does not bestow grace upon human beings and withhold it from the rest of creation. *All* creation receives God’s grace!

With the words “Thy glorious steps in all we see” Wesley affirms no shallow pantheism, nor does the psalm, rather he declares that God’s imprint is everywhere to be found in creation. This is a primary emphasis throughout the entire psalm.

The concluding line of stanza one “And power, and majesty, and praise” is reminiscent of stanza 1 of the psalm.

Stanza 2 does contain the element of *creatio ex nihilo* which is not found in Psalm 104, but it is often attributed to the Genesis creation story.

And out of nothing’s womb produce
The earth, and heaven, and all that is.

Wesley’s main stress, however, is on God’s imparting of life.

Thy life into th’impregn’d abyss,
The vital principle of life infuse.

Verses 8-23 of the psalm are a proclamation of the Creator's setting life in motion. God creates life out of lifelessness, and plants and animals begin their cycles of nourishment, growth, and survival. Human beings begin their cycles of labor (104:23).

Wesley's use of the word "abyss" should not be understood as referring to some primeval deep but to the emptiness and lifelessness which are infused with life.

Interestingly Wesley captures the spirit of the psalmist's use of participles, which may indicate God's ongoing and sustaining, creative action, by the use of verbs in the present tense which infer the continuity of God's support and action.

Wesley refers to the Creator in stanza 3 as the "all-informing Breath," which recalls verse 104:30a of the psalm. Creation expires without God. It lives from God's ongoing creative action. God is creation's life and breath. This is no doubt an important link to the inclusion of Psalm 104 in many lectionary readings for Pentecost.

When thou sendest forth thy breath,
they are created.

Psalm 104:2-4 declares that God has created the world of the heavens by self-will. Wesley responds,

And bidd'st the world persist to be.

This is the one idea which dominates Psalm 104 from beginning to end: God by self-will has created, and the celestial world is dependent upon that will and bears testimony to its power and wisdom (see Psalm 104:2-4).

Stanza 4 proclaims the affirmation of Psalm 104:5-9: the earth like the heavens is the result of divine creative action. In 104:30 the psalmist avers, "Thus thou renewest the face of the earth." Not only is God its Creator but its renewer as well. Wesley paraphrases:

Thou dost create the earth anew,
(Its Maker and Preserver too,)
By thine almighty arm sustain.

Even the inanimate earth and its mountains respond to God. (See Psalm 104:32).

Nature perceives thy secret force,
And still holds on her even course.

Wesley's poetry is characterized by names for God which grow out of Scripture, scriptural contexts and life situations. As he views the inclusive nature of God as perceived by the psalmist in, through, over, above, and beyond creation, he sings a hymn of praise to God, the Universal Soul, in stanza 5. Since all that exists issues from this Universal Soul, God is for Wesley "The Plastic Power which fills the whole". God molds life and fills creation with life in every form. Such is the plasticity of God's power. It shapes itself to every need in creation.

Wesley's poem reviews the arenas of God's provenance: the earth (Psalm 104:10-18), the sea (104:25-26), the air and sky (104:2-4, 19-23). Of the seven wonders of creation mentioned in the psalm—(1) sky (104:2-4), (2) earth (104:5-9), (3) water (104:10-13), (4) vegetation (104:14-18), (5) moon and sun (104:19-23), (6) sea (104:24-26), (7) life (104:27-30)—Wesley omits (3), (4), and (5). Nonetheless, he claims boldly that *all creation* hinges upon God's life-giving and sustaining breath.

The creatures all thy breath receive.

The absence of God's life principle means death. (See Psalm 104:29.)

And who, by thy inspiring, live,
Without thy inspiration, die.

Stanza 6 is a prayer which moves beyond the psalmist's perception of God in nature and the understanding of the origin of life and the world expressed in Psalm 104. Wesley reflects upon the world as a Christian. He views its inhabitants as lost.

Thou on the souls of lost mankind
Dost with benignest influence move.

To connect this emphasis with the psalmist's confidence in God's renewal of creation is appropriate for Wesley and by no means does an injustice to the psalm. New creation and renewal are themselves acts of God's grace and he concludes his prayer with the plea:

And new create a world of grace
In all the image of thy love.

The idea of a new creation accompanied by the image of love in all throughout the world is certainly a New Testament emphasis and is Charles Wesley's central theme of new creation. However, Wesley has not used the idea to appropriate the psalm. Rather, he has let the psalmist's word declare itself without imposing a New Testament christology on the psalm. When he concludes the psalm with a prayer for the creation of a "world of grace" marked by the image of love, he does so within the context of Psalm 104's affirmation that it is God and God alone who renews creation. This is the foundation of biblical faith in the Old and New Testaments. Hence, Wesley understands the New Testament perception of love on the basis of the psalmist's faith, not vice versa.

New creation of the individual

Wesley's holistic soteriology most certainly includes the salvation of the individual, but not at the expense of the whole. Reflecting on Genesis 1:12 ("And the earth brought forth grass, and herb yielding fruit after his kind, whose seed is in itself, upon the earth: and it was so"), he exclaims:

1. Come thou universal blessing,
Abraham's long-expected seed,
Perfect peace, and joy unceasing
Thro' the ransom'd nations spread,
Devilish pride, and brutal passion
Far from every heart remove,
Bless us with thy full salvation,
Bless us with thy heavenly love.

2. Happy is the man forgiven:
This let every sinner feel,
Taste in thee his present heaven,
Pant for greater blessings still:
O that all anew created
Might thine image here retrieve,
Then to Paradise translated
In thy glorious presence live.³

³ *Short Hymns* 1:18, Hymn #50, based on Genesis 1:1.

Each individual is to be created anew. The Incarnation is a universal blessing for every heart, every human being. And each person who *feels* his sin forgiven is happy. In other verses Wesley explains more in depth what it means to “retrieve” the image of God that has been lost, but in stanza one the person who has been created anew has a change of demeanor. “Devilish pride, and brutal passion” are removed from his/her heart. The new creation is a present possession, yet only completed in the article of death when one is translated to Paradise and lives in God’s glorious presence.

The well known passage from 2 Corinthians 5:17 (“Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new”) prompts the following poems from Wesley which emphasize the personal dimension of God’s salvation.

Thrice acceptable word,
I long to prove it true!
Take me into thyself, O Lord,
By making me anew;
Me for thy mercy sake
Out of myself remove,
Partaker of thy nature make,
Thy holiness and love.⁴

Hasten the joyful day
Which shall my sins consume,
When old things shall be past away,
And all things new become;
Th’original offence
Out of my heart erase,
Enter thyself and drive it hence,
And take up all the place.⁵

Becoming a new creation involves movement: out of oneself and being taken into the Divine Self. In the first poem Wesley avers that in being made new one becomes a partaker of the divine nature. In this process of *theosis* one takes on the dimensions of God’s nature, namely, holiness and love. In the second poem he emphasizes this divine/human movement or interaction, as he

4 *Short Hymns* 2:300, Hymn #577.

5 *Short Hymns* 2:301, Hymn #578.

pleads for God to “Enter thyself and drive it [th’original offence] hence, / And take up all the place.” As a new creation there is room in one’s heart only for God.

In a poem from *Hymns of Petition and Thanksgiving for the Promise of the Father* (*Hymns for Whitsunday or Pentecost*)⁶ Wesley explores the actual transformation of the individual who is created new. In speaking of the power of the third person of the Holy Trinity, namely, the Holy Spirit, Charles Wesley declares: “Thou [the Holy Spirit] dost the creature new produce.” In the succeeding stanzas he illuminates the nature of being made new.

1. Spirit of power, ’tis thine alone
To finish what thyself begun,
And crown thy work with full success,
To them that groan beneath their sin,
Thou bring’st the sweet refreshment in,
The everlasting righteousness.
2. Thou dost by thine almighty grace
Again the abject sinner raise,
Again our fleshly souls refine,
Spirit of Spirit born, we love,
And only seek the things above,
And live on earth the life divine.
3. Thou dost the vital seed infuse,
Thou dost the creature new produce
In all its glorious parts compleat,
The subjects of thy kingdom here
Thou makest, e’er the Judge appear,
For all thy heavenly kingdom meet.
4. Thou that revealing Spirit art
Who dost the hearing ear impart,
The clear illuminated sight,
Spirit of Wisdom from on high,
Of knowledge that shall never die,
Of holy, true, eternal light.
5. Thou art the end of doubtful care,
The antidote of sad despair
We feel in that sweet power of thine,
Thro’ thee, who lift’st the fallen up,

⁶ (Bristol: Felix Farley, 1746), pp. 33-34, Hymn #30.

We rise, rejoice, abound in hope,
And bless thine Energy Divine.

6. Author of never-failing peace
Whene'er we languish in distress,

O'erwelm'd with sin and misery,
Thy presence brings us sure relief,
To gladness turns our every grief;
and joy in God is joy in thee.

7. Spirit of meek and godly fear,
The children taught of thee revere
And do their heavenly Father's will,
Pierc'd with an humble filial awe
They love to keep his blessed law,
And all his kind commands fulfil.

8. Spirit of pure and holy love,
We feel thee streaming from above,
In calm unutterable peace,
The love by thee diffus'd abroad
United our happy hearts to God,
And seals our everlasting bliss.

Those who are born of the Spirit “live on earth the life divine.” What does the mean for the nature of the newly created creatures of God? The Spirit prepares them for their encounter with their heavenly Judge. How?

In stanza 4 Wesley makes clear that the Spirit of Wisdom imparts “knowledge that will never die” to those who are created new. “Clear illuminated sight” and unimpaired hearing come from God’s own wisdom. Such knowledge is eternal light to those whom God creates anew. In any case, Wesley is saying that there is no salvation without illumination and enlightenment. This is not surprising for either Charles or John Wesley, both of whom understood reason to be a vital part of the awareness of creation and God’s living presence. The human mind as a gift of God is enriched through the light of the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. The newly created

are people of enlightenment whose wisdom is expanded and enriched by God's new creation of them, and who bear responsibility for the stewardship of knowledge and reason.

In stanza 5 Wesley affirms that the Spirit imparts healing. The Spirit is "the end of doubtful care, / The antidote of sad despair." Those who are created new experience the power of the Spirit to heal the human spirit. "We feel . . . that sweet power of thine." The Spirit raises the fallen and imbues them with hope. As a result of such an experience those who have fallen "rise, rejoice in hope, / And bless the Energy Divine." Here Charles Wesley unequivocally uses the language of the Eastern Orthodox churches in speaking of the "Energy Divine."

Stanza 6 avers that the Spirit is the "Author of never-failing peace" and those who are newly created do not languish in distress, sin, and misery but find in the Spirit's presence relief and grief turned into joy. The newly made creature of God, as one who experiences God's never-failing peace" is a person of peace.

In stanza 7 we learn that the persons who are created anew through the power of the Spirit become meek persons of godly fear. They love to keep God's law and are "pierc'd with an humble filial awe."

Charles Wesley concludes where he almost always does with an emphasis on "pure and holy love." Those have been created anew in Jesus Christ *feel* the Spirit "streaming from above, / In calm unutterable peace." This is expressed in a very specific way. When diffused abroad through newly created persons, God's love unites their happy hearts to God and seals their eternal happiness.

Hence, the newly created person is a person of enlightened knowledge, healed by Divine Energy, a person of peace, godly fear, humility, holy love, and united to God for eternity.

Eschatology

Charles Wesley did not perceive of new creation, individual and/or corporate, as a mere temporal process which would be completed this side of the grave, contrary to some opinion. Rather being created anew, which is implicit in becoming holy or moving toward perfection, is a

gradual process. One is always moving toward the goal of being made perfect in holiness, being made perfect in love.

By faith we know, the world was made
Formless at first and void:
We know, the universe decay'd
Shall be by fire destroy'd:

But soon the co-eternal Son
We shall in glory view,
Jehovah sitting on his throne,
Creating all things new.⁷

The Scriptures tell the story of God's ongoing creative process. It is an eschatological hope.

Those who have been made new in Christ shall soon view God's co-eternal Son in glory:

"Jehovah sitting on his throne, / Creating all things new." The creative process continues in glory beyond all destruction within and of the universe.

Wesley speaks emphatically of the gradualness of this process in yet another poem based on a Genesis text (2:1, "Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them.")

Who madest thus the earth and skies,
A world, a six days' work of thine,
Thou bidst the new creation rise,
Nobler effect of grace divine!
We might spring up at thy command,
For glory in an instant meet;
But by thy will at last we stand
In gradual holiness compleat.⁸

The Creator of earth and skies, of the universe, is also the New-Creator, the One who bids "the new creation rise as the result of God's grace. But the new creation is not an instantaneous occurrence. It is a beginning and a becoming. One will stand only "at last" by God's will in complete holiness.

It is important to observe that this viewpoint is one of the main reasons why Charles

⁷ *Short Hymns* 1:3, Hymn #1, based on Genesis 1:1, "In the beginning God created the heave and the earth."

⁸ *Short Hymns* 1:5, Hymn #7.

Wesley, as he states in the Preface, wrote *Short Hymns*. He wanted to correct misleading ideas about instantaneous perfection and holiness. Perfection and holiness are the Christian's pilgrimage. Those who have been made new in Christ are involved in the ongoing creative process of becoming holy, becoming perfect in love. Wesley turns to this eschatological theme time and again through the two volumes. New creation rises, yes, and the moment of its experience may be instantaneous, but its fulfillment in perfect love and holiness is gradual, a lifelong process.

When Wesley says "at last we stand," he clearly means the article of death. He is confident

that the dead in Christ shall rise at the sound of the trumpet and the "old creation" shall once and for all be left behind!

I bow me to my God's decree,
I own the sentence just,
(The sentence of mortality)
And dust return to dust:
Yet quicken'd by the trumpet's sound,
This dust again shall rise,
Beyond the old creation bound,
And shine above the skies.⁹

Finally, we turn to a poem of Charles Wesley based on Galatians 6:15, "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature."

1. For names the Christian world contend,
For modes and forms, in vain,
Who do not, Lord, on thee depend,
Who are not born again:
'Till thou redeem us from our fall,
'Till thou thy Spirit impart,
Baptiz'd, or unbaptiz'd, we all
Are heathens still in heart.
2. To save my soul from endless woe
No outward things avail,
Unless thy pard'ning love I know,

⁹ *Short Hymns* 1:11, Hymn #28, based on Genesis 3:19, "In the seat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return."

I sink unchang'd to hell:
O might I feel th'atoning blood,
And call the Saviour mine,
Created after God, renew'd
In holiness divine.

3. Now, Saviour, now the work begin
Of thy creating grace,
Forgive, and make the sinner clean
From all unrighteousness;

Pronounce us perfected in love,
Completely sanctified,
And to our place prepar'd above
Receive thy happy bride.¹⁰

Charles Wesley understands new creation as being intimately associated with holiness. The last two lines of stanza 2 are unmistakably clear: “Created after God, renew'd / In holiness divine.” To be created anew in Christ means to become holy, as God is holy. In stanza 3 he pleads with the Savior that he will begin the work of “creating grace.” This involves the forgiveness of sins and the *feeling* of the atoning blood of Christ, as mentioned in stanza 2. But what do lines 5 and 6 of stanza 3 mean? Can Wesley possibly mean that the Savior will indeed declare “us” perfected in love and completely sanctified in this life? One might think so, if lines 7 and 8 were not there, for the conjunction “and” binds lines 5 and 6 to lines 7 and 8 and, hence, the pronouncement of perfection in love and complete sanctification come when the cleansed sinners are received into the place prepared above for them. Thus, again Charles means the article of death.

Charles Wesley's holistic soteriology and eschatology of fulfilled love provide vital underpinnings for a contemporary ecumenical theology of mission and evangelism. A view which sees human redemption as superior at all costs, even to the raping of the earth of its resources and human beings of their dignity, is unscriptural and has no place in the future of Christianity. Indeed respect for all human beings and all of creation are affirmed throughout the biblical interpretation of Charles Wesley. While he calls all human beings to accountability in

¹⁰ *Short Hymns* 2:310-311, Hymn #603.

responding to God's incarnate and redemptive love for them in Jesus Christ, and clearly sees no salvation outside the realm of Christ and the church, he never shrinks from the biblical understanding of creation—all creation issues from God by grace, all creation is being created new by God's grace. As a part of the new creation, Christians are a part of the individual and corporate process of all being made new and they bear responsibility for the stewardship of the new creation process. Furthermore, Wesley is unequivocally clear that God's saving grace begins in creation. It is affirmed and sealed at the cross of Calvary, but it does not begin there. Therefore Christian theology begins in creation not at Calvary, a vital reality for an ecumenical theology of mission and evangelism. One works and moves mutually toward the redemption of all creation.

Charles Wesley's eschatology of fulfilled love is likewise of crucial ecumenical importance.

God's goal for creation, according to Scripture and according to Wesley's interpretation, is: "And new-create a world of grace / in all the image of thy love." As Christians assume God's nature, they also become a part of this gradual process. They affirm God's reality in the world as they, in the image of God's love, become instruments of the new-creation of a world of grace. It is not necessary to reiterate the dimensions of the transformed demeanor of Christians which Wesley has articulated and have been noted above. For Charles Wesley, if the church in mission which seeks to evangelize through the proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ, and acts of piety and acts of mercy, is not imaging God's love and creating anew a world of grace, it has completely missed the point of its existence. It is from the imaging of God's love and creating anew a world of grace that an ecclesiology must emerge and under which all governance, policies, beliefs, and practices of the church must be judged. That which does not image God's love and create anew a world of grace is foreign to the church of Jesus Christ and has no place within it.

Charles Wesley's theology of new creation, which has only been partially explored here, is

forward looking and is as timely now as it was in the eighteenth century. If taken seriously, it will call the church to a new look at itself across denominational lines and to seek new ways of mutually imaging God's love and of creating anew a world of grace.