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***“Revisioning Our “UNITY” through the Methodist Practice of
Connexionalism”***

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An Introduction—A Vision of Unity & Connexion:

The Way of the flame and the Cross is the Way of the Methodist Practice of Connexion



This paper is offered in humility and hope as a work of prayer and theological reflection on the upcoming General Conference of The United Methodist Church. Your pain and struggle over whether to stay together, as you consider the *One Church Model*, or the *Connexional Conference Model*, or to separate as you consider the *Traditional Model*, is why I am writing this paper. The ***purpose of this paper*** is to offer a particular framework for thinking about these particular models. Specifically, this paper intends to argue for the “*One Church Model*” by showcasing Wesley’s trinitarian vision of unitive love that follows the “first principles” of the Gospel to unite us in God’s mission to reconcile all things in creation. If we look through the aperture of the *Methodist Practice of Connexion*, we will see stunning and spectacular images of the future glory of God already at work in the making of a *New Creation* through the Church as an icon of the glory of God. Look through the aperture of the *Methodist Practice of Connexion* and you will see some of the most stunning pictures of the flame and the Cross connecting with the poorest of the poor, with the broken and wounded places of creation, and giving to us a way of peeking around the corner, to see some of the most stunning images of the future glory of New Creation. This paper is not to solve the complex and foreboding question about the ordination and marriage of same sex couples that threatens to split The United Methodist Church. I am aware of the long and arduous pain The UMC has suffered for the last 48 years over this issue, and I can say that I feel your pain and see you in your struggles. In many ways, I am like one of the siblings begging the parents not to split up, no matter how amicable the divorce will be for the family to move forward. As an elder in the Church of the Nazarene and one who is Wesleyan to the marrow of my bones, I stand with the rest of your Wesleyan-Holiness-Methodist family watching—no pressure or judgment is intended here—to see how this will play out. Much to my angst and lament, my Nazarene tradition has yet to enter into the dark night of the soul over the tough issues of homosexuality and the ordination or marriage of same

sex couples. At present, we are merely building up our own walls to keep out the kind of woes that has ensued in other traditions like the Presbyterian, Episcopalian, the Anglican Communion, and now, The United Methodist Church.

The fire of God's love inflames our hearts with the hope of glory to "connect" with other hearts—great and small, human and non-human—in the *Way* of the Cross. Hearts set on fire and sent into the world to connect "all things in creation" into the fellowship of God's love is a most wonderful and sacred gift that flows from the heart of God into every living breathing creature of God. Put differently, there is a joy that is beyond words, when you know in your heart of hearts that the Creator of heaven and earth has sent you into the world to look into the face of another creature to behold the face of God. Such a vision as this is the *Methodist Mission of Connexionalism* that was forged in the flame of God's love to "connect" the poorest of the poor, all the broken and wounded in every nook and cranny of creation, the outcasts, the strangers and refugees in our midst back into the joyous fellowship with the Triune God. This was deemed by John Wesley in his signature sermon, "*Catholic Spirit*,"¹ as the energy of Triune love, the catholic love of God that is poured into our hearts to unite us together in the Church catholic and then send us out into the world in the fellowship of God's mission to reconcile 'all things in creation' back into joyous, unbroken communion and fellowship with God.² The contagious fellowship of the *Methodist Practice of Connexion* flows from the unitive love of the Holy Trinity into the Church of Christ's living Body for the life of the world.

When Context Pulls and Pushes Against Unity

"*Are We Really Better Together?*"³ This is an honest and fair question that the Church of Christ's living Body must ask about its shared life together if it is to faithfully proclaim, give witness to and embody the Good News that is for the life of the world. The Gospel is the Good News that has come to renew the whole world with the hope that God in Christ through the power of the Spirit is bringing to reconcile all things back into the glory of God. This is the catholic love of God that has been poured into our hearts whereby the first thing the Spirit does is to use our energy of love, that contagion of fellowship to 'connect' us one to another in the Body of Christ, and then send us out into the world to connect all things in creation with the joy and fellowship of God's love. That is our mission and that is our joy for the life of the world. In the respiration of the Spirit, we are gathered and connected in the fellowship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and sent out into the world to gather and connect in the power and joy of this fellowship the whole world. This is the hope of New Creation and this is the joy of all creation that through contagion of fellowship and love, all things in creation will enjoy the unity of perfect love. After all, the unitive love of the 'whole Trinity' holds us together. Fellowship and communion in the Church of Christ's living Body is our gift and it is our mission. The unity of

¹ **BE 2:79-95.** *Sermon 39, "Catholic Spirit."*

² **BE 2:510.** *Sermon 64, "The New Creation."* Wesley closes this sermon with the "hope of glory" that God promises in the New Creation: "And to crown all, there will be a deep, an intimate, an uninterrupted union with God; a constant communion with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ, through the Spirit; a continual enjoyment of the Three-One God, and of all the creatures in him!"

³ Robert Renfroe & Walter Fenton, "*Are We Really Better Together? An Evangelical Perspective on the Division in the UMC.*" (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018).

shared fellowship in Christ's living Body is the character and fire of our missional connexion. If we separate from one another will we forfeit or squander our gift of unity, and if we divide from one another will we forget the source and nature of our calling? Perhaps the better question we should be asking ourselves is this: If we no longer "breathe to breathe God's love"⁴ then what will we proclaim to the world? After all, our mission of connexion is bound by the unitive love of God. With every breath that we breathe in Christ's living Body, we breathe God's love together because it is the unitive love of God that breathes us out into the world to connect and reconcile all things in God's creation. Do we breathe together in Christ's Church for the life of the world? The way of the flame and the cross breathes with the fire of the Church's mission of connexion.

Today, perhaps like no other time in our shared Connexion in the Wesleyan communities of faith, we are feeling the pull and push of our different contexts against the "Unity" that we all share in Christ's living Body—the Church catholic. As our different contexts pull and push against our shared connexional unity and mission, the tension is starting to feel as if we are tearing the flesh from our bones. Mark Labberton has expressed the crisis of faith among evangelicals in such way that it opens a window into the looming threat to our shared unity and mission of connexion in the United Methodist Church.

Evangelicalism in America has cracked, split on the shoals of the 2016 presidential election and its aftermath, leaving many wondering whether they want to be in or out of the evangelical tribe. For a movement with a high public profile and much influence in American religion, culture, and politics—perhaps providing determinative support for the election of Donald Trump—it matters when that influence itself is breaking up the evangelical camp. The 2016 election may have been the occasion for this drama, but it isn't the cause. For starters, it needs to be said that the battle afoot has little to do with theology proper. In part, this reveals that the word evangelical has morphed in common usage from being a reference to a set of primary theological commitments into something akin to a passionately defended, theo-political brand. The word evangelical has become a kind of litmus test with which certain gatekeepers draw interpretive lines. Crossing those lines can mean paying a steep and intractable price in the name of theology, but tends to be more about sociology and ideology. Alternatively, to stay within those lines is anathema to people who, because of their faith and social location, find the sectarian biases of white evangelicals especially to be more and more like religiously justified social bigotry and therefore an unsustainable context for their lives and especially for their faith in the good news. In its current mode, evangelicalism contains an amalgam of theological views, partisan political debates, regional power blocks, populist visions, racial biases, and cultural anxieties, all mixed in an ethos of fear. No wonder it can be difficult to know whether one is still evangelical. The impression of many on the evangelical left is that the good news of Jesus Christ has been taken hostage by a highly charged, toxic subculture on the evangelical right that—in the name of God—expresses steely resolve to have its own way in the public square. From the evangelical right, the critique is that Christian America is at war with any and all liberalism—evangelical or otherwise—and is in serious danger of losing its conservative virtues and spiritual practices. The Bible may be quoted in various ways, but arguments on all sides often seem more ideological than biblical.⁵

⁴ John Wesley and Charles Wesley, *The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley*, ed. G. Osborn, vol. 5 (London: Wesleyan-Methodist Conference Office, 1869), 105–106.

⁵ Claiborne, Shane. "Still Evangelical? Insiders Reconsider Political, Social, and Theological Meaning" (pp. 1-4). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition. Special thanks to my friend and colleague Darius Salter for recommending this book to me.

Denominationalism has morphed into an ecclesial apartheid that is driven by our tribal politics. The ethos of our political tribalism has moved deep into our communities of faith, so that now, our denominational diversity is no longer used as a gift of our Connexional Unity. Instead, of using our gifts as a means of grace for the life of the whole world, we have turned inward and have begun to use the gift of Connexional Unity as a means of desecration inside the Temple of God's dwelling. Our ecclesial apartheid is nothing short of the kind of desecration that "severs the very root of holiness" in Christ living Body, thereby, "stabbing Christ in the house of his friends."⁶ This is nothing more than a "breach of love," that will keep us locked in a pattern of division in Christ's Church along our tribal and ecclesial politics. The very gift of shared life together in Christ is being used to pull and push us apart from one another so that we no longer have the energy of God's love to connect the rest of creation back into the joyous communion and fellowship with the Triune God. The narratives of the Gospel, the seal of our belonging to Christ through baptism, and our continued nourishment from Christ at His Table is that which marks us and feeds us in our unity in Christ, and in His mission to connect the whole world into the fellowship of Triune love. But now, we are in a crisis of faith within the Church and the nation where the power of belonging to the right tribe drives our fears and loyalties and keeps us hunkered down and isolated inside our ecclesial bunkers. This is not the *Way* of the flame and the Cross, nor is it the *Way* of the *Methodist Practice of Connexion*.

What is needed in this crisis of faith is a recovery of the "*first principles*" of the Gospel that reveal to us the wisdom of God's love that unites us to God and to one another. Put simply, God loves the whole world and has redeemed it so that we now belong to God and to one another. This is the sheer gift of God alone. God was in Christ through the energy of the Spirit reconciling all things of God's creation. We already belong to God, and nothing will separate us from God's love, nothing! Now that God has poured the energy of catholic love into our hearts, we are united in the catholic love of God and sent out into the world with the power and joy of belonging to God and to one another to *connect* the rest of God's creation back into this joyous communion and fellowship with the Triune Creator. The joy of fellowship with God is the contagious fire of God's love that compels us to *connect* with all the hearts of God's creation, great and small, that breathe with the breath of God.

Our witness in the world is not simply contained in the unity of our orthodoxies, or even by the ordered structures of our communities of faith, but rather, the beauty of our unity is seen through our woundedness that comes from going to all the places of brokenness to offer the contagious fire of God's love. Nothing convinces the world more of the fire of God's love than the woundedness of Christ's Church that suffers for the life of the world. Remember, the ascended Christ is still the wounded Christ. Moreover, we may be "almost as orthodox as the devil,"⁷ says John Wesley, or as brother Charles would echo John's sentiments, we may "stand

⁶ Cf. John Wesley, "*A Blow at the Root; Or, Christ Stabbed in the House of Friends.*" (Jackson, 10:364-369) This is an insightful sermon that depicts in vivid imagery the different ways the primary principles of the "pure Gospel" are undercut and the very root of holiness, all true religion is severed, and Christ is thereby, "stabbed in the house of his friends."

⁷ **BE 1:220.** *Sermon 7, "The Way to the Kingdom."* Wesley writes: "He may assent to all the three creeds—that called the Apostles,' the Nicene, and the Athanasian—and yet 'tis possible he may have no religion at all, no more than a Jew, Turk, or pagan. He may be almost as orthodox as the devil (though indeed not altogether; for every man errs in something, whereas we can't well conceive him to hold any erroneous opinion) and may all the while be as great a stranger as he to the religion of the heart." This is a most stunning insight into Wesley's way of thinking about the Gospel—the pure religion of a "real Christian." The love of God that is poured into our hearts is what

fixed on the Athanasian mound,”⁸ but until the “whole Trinity descends into our faithful hearts”⁹ to unite us into the fellowship of Triune love, we are not yet “real Christians” filled with the energy of catholic love of God to connect all creation into the ecstatic fire of God’s love. The joy of our fellowship with God and one another is the “character of a Methodist,” and from that joy the Methodists are compelled to suffer for the life of the world. Joy and suffering marks the fellowship of the *Methodist Practice of Connexion*.

Sometimes, when the issues are so complex and densely complicated, and intertwined with our social, political and cultural contexts, a simple reset button may be what we need to revision and reimagine what the Spirit is doing in our midst, and where the Spirit is renewing us and sending us in our shared life together. What we urgently need is the wisdom of God’s love that has been revealed in the *Way* of the Gospel. We cannot move forward by transgressing the “*first principles*” of the Gospel and failing to follow the wisdom of Triune love. Complex issues are best sliced with the simplest of answers. Occam’s razor may help us as we traverse through the most preponderant issue(s) that threatens to break up The United Methodist Church. Our koinonia hangs on a delicate thread, as the threat of a “*Mexit*,”¹⁰ a schism, a division, a separation, or even an “untied Methodism”¹¹ is decided in the next General Conference in February 2019. All these ominous “breaches of love” weigh heavy on my heart and stick like a big lump in my throat. I am “*convinced*” by God’s love that the simple and profound common sense “*first principles*” of the Gospel should be our default to help us through the unresolved tension that threatens to breakup The United Methodist Church.

The simple truth of the Gospel is that God in Christ through the Spirit has identified with the victims and the victimizer. From the heart of God’s desire God has relinquished power and reconciled us into the joy of Easter fellowship with God. The One who is the “Saviour of our sinful kind,” is our “friend of misery” who did not regard eternal bliss with God as a place to stay safe so as not to die, but the One who is in “name and nature love” has “emptied Himself of all but love,”¹² and “died to ransom me,” says Charles Wesley. As a result of God’s reconciling

makes us Christian, and this is the mystery of love that pushes against the “certainty” of orthodoxy. Only the deceiver, the devil is without error in Wesley’s mind. How else would the devil be able to fully deceive?

⁸ John Wesley and Charles Wesley, *The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley*, ed. G. Osborn, vol. 7 (London: Wesleyan-Methodist Conference Office, 1870), 315.

⁹ Franz Hildebrandt & Oliver A. Beckerlegge, editors, *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 7, A Collection of Hymns For the Use of the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983), 7:395. **BE 7:395**. Cf. also *The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley, Volume 7*, ed. G. Osborn (London: Wesleyan-Methodist Conference Office, 1869), “Hymns and Prayers to the Trinity,” Hymn 17, Page 312.

¹⁰ William J. Abraham, “*In Defense of Mexit: Disagreement and Disunity in United Methodism*.” The General Board of Higher Education and Ministry (GBHEM) and the Association of United Methodist Theological Schools (AUMTS) co-hosted a theological colloquy on “*The Unity of the Church and Human Sexuality: Toward a Faithful United Methodist Witness*,” in support of the Council of Bishops, on March 10-12, 2017 at the Candler School of Theology.

¹¹ Russell E. Richey, “*Today’s Untied Methodism: Living with/into/beyond Its Two Centuries of Regular Division*.” The General Board of Higher Education and Ministry (GBHEM) and the Association of United Methodist Theological Schools (AUMTS) co-hosted a theological colloquy on “*The Unity of the Church and Human Sexuality: Toward a Faithful United Methodist Witness*,” in support of the Council of Bishops, on March 10-12, 2017 at the Candler School of Theology.

¹² John Wesley and Charles Wesley, *The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley*, ed. G. Osborn, vol. 9 (London: Wesleyan-Methodist Conference Office, 1870), 259. In poetic verse, Charles Wesley reflects on the

love, the Spirit has gathered us into Christ's living Body to be God's new Way of reconciling love. God in Christ through the power of the Spirit shares all the power and authority of heaven and earth to *connect* with the poorest of the poor and offer forgiveness and the friendship of love and belonging. In the mission of *Connexion*, what we do on earth in the name of Christ is ratified in heaven.¹³ Joy and suffering mark the "first principles" of the Gospel that impart to us the wisdom and the power of God's love. This is how we begin to faithfully revision our unity and mission of connexion for the life of the world. The Good News is that the members of Christ's living Church have been united to God in Christ through the Spirit to share in the ministry of incarnate, kenotic, self-emptying reconciling love. The *Way* of the Gospel is the *Way* of the flame and the Cross that marks the *Methodist Practice of Connexion*.

The 'Structure, Order and Pattern' of Triune Connexion

"Almighty God, Father of all mercies, . . . We bless you for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life; but above all for your immeasurable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ; for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory."

"Holy, Holy, Holy, Heaven and Earth are filled with God's Glory"

"Blessed is He who comes in the Name of the Lord"

"By Him, and with Him, and in Him, in the Unity of the Holy Spirit all honor and glory is yours, Almighty Father, now and forever."

While there are many places in John Wesley's theology to flesh out his understanding of our shared unity in the Triune God, and our shared mission of *Connexion* flowing from the unitive love of God into our hearts for the life of the world, I have chosen to begin my focus on the way the prayers and songs of the Church shaped Wesley and may help us to reimagine our unity in Christ's living Body and the fellowship of our mission to reconcile all things in God's creation back into the joyous fellowship and communion with the Triune God.

God is Love—Triune Love. From the Church's prayer of *The General Thanksgiving*, to the *Song of the Sanctus*, to the *Eucharist Prayer of Unity*, that we pray, we sing, and we confess; every nook and cranny of creation belongs to God and God belongs to all the spaces between all the places of creation. From the *Alpha* to the *Omega*, there is no place or space between heaven

Kenosis Hymn: O That I knew the way to find/That Saviour of our sinful kind, /That Friend of misery! /Who left His blissful realms above, / Emptied Himself of all but love, /And died to ransom me! / He bids me seek Him in the word, /I search the records of my Lord, /But cannot find Him there;/I ask, nor yet my suit obtain, /I knock at mercy's door in vain, /And sink in sad despair. /Stirr'd up once more—what can I do/But still the labour lost renew, /The fruitless task repeat:/And if He can Himself deny, /And if I must unpitied die, /I'll perish at His feet!

¹³ Wesley's "Covenant Prayer" captures the heart of the *Methodist Mission of Connexion*: "I am no longer my own, but thine./Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt./Put me to doing, put me to suffering./Let me be employed for thee or laid aside for thee,/exalted for thee or brought low for thee./Let me be full, let me be empty./Let me have all things, let me have nothing./I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal./And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,/thou art mine, and I am thine./So be it./And the covenant which I have made on earth,/let it be ratified in heaven./Amen." (Book of Offices of the British Methodist Church, 1936).

and earth that is not held together by God's love. God is always around us, above us and below us, behind us and before us, between us and always in us, breathing the energy of catholic love through us, and for us, to connect all things of God's creation back into the glorious fellowship of Triune love. From the beginning of creation to the doxological end of *New Creation*, all of God's creation is constantly enlivened with the glory and love of God because all creation belongs to God and God has determined to be forever bound and connected to all of God's creation. These are just a few of the vignettes from the Faith and Liturgy of the Church of England and the Faith of *Primitive Christianity* that formed John Wesley's vision of the Triune Creator and the Church catholic. These sacramental snippets taken from the *Book of Common Prayer*, not only enlighten Wesley's vision of the "all-pervasive presence of God" filling all of heaven and earth with God's glory and love, but these sacramental vignettes push open a window for us to glimpse Wesley's wildest imagination for the life of the world that is brimming with the hope that is God's promise of a *New Creation* in the making. The prevenience of the "whole Trinity" is the spring of hope that motivated Wesley to connect the hope of future glory at the end of God's coming to the means of God's grace that opens our hearts and lives to become by God's grace what God is by nature.¹⁴ The doxological goal of Triune love is perfect love—perfect in joyous unbroken fellowship and communion with the Triune love of God.

John Wesley's sacramental rendering of the "*means of grace and hope of glory*" forged his robust mission of the Church catholic to "*connect*" all creation back into the glory of the Triune Creator. The prevenient grace and "all-pervasive presence" of the "whole Trinity" is the source of hope that inspired Wesley to see all the means of God's grace as *always* connected to the future glory that God has promised at the end of Christ's coming. The prevenience of the "whole Trinity" *always* filling all of heaven and earth with the glory of God makes creation the sacramental place where God's instantiated means of grace are derived and given. God has determined to make God's place of dwelling in all of creation so that when God has "finished" "connecting" and "reconciling" all things of God's creation in the New Creation, God will dwell in all and all will dwell in God. In short, this is the promise of theosis—the deification of all creation in the New Creation. Moreover, God's all-pervasive presence in every nook and cranny of creation is the future glory that God has already begun as a foretaste and promise of heaven. God's abiding presence will lead us step by step to God's promise of future glory. This grace, says Wesley, is "glory begun, . . . both an earnest and a foretaste of eternal glory."¹⁵ The promise of glory is the gift of the promise keeper to abide with us and inhabit us every step along the *Way* to glory. What the promise keeper has promised for all creation in the *New Creation* is the hope of future glory: joyous unbroken fellowship and communion with the Triune Creator.

Remarkably, what materialized from John Wesley's vision of the "hope of glory" was his most inspired "means of grace," offered as an ecumenical gift to the Church of Christ's living Body for the renewal of all creation, namely, the *Methodist Practice of Connexionalism*. The Methodist practice of *connexion* emerges from Wesley's vision of hope for *New Creation* that is born from the hope that burns deep in the hearts of catholic Christians that are gathered and connected in Christ's living Body by the energy of catholic love, the energy of Triune love that is

¹⁴ Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976), 65.

¹⁵ John Wesley, "*Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*," Volume 2, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1981). From **Romans 8:30**, Wesley writes: To be "called by his Gospel and his Spirit: . . . to the heavenly calling, . . . (justification and glorification) "is the method whereby God leads us step by step towards heaven. . . . Indeed, grace, as it is glory begun, is both an earnest and a foretaste of eternal glory."

poured into our hearts. And now, connected by the energy of Triune love, our mission is to *connect* the whole world with the catholic love of God. From the joy of the Triune Creator's mission to speak creation into existence, the joy of God's mission continues to finish God's creation in New Creation. The mission of catholic love for all creation is a mission of Easter joy that is full of the hope of *New Creation*. This hope is the promise of God that is the promise of future glory, that is already burning within our hearts with the desire of God that delights to deliver all creation back into the glory and love of God.¹⁶ This burning desire of God to renew all creation is the burning desire of our mission. This promised hope of New Creation where God will dwell in all and all will dwell in God, is the energy of God's love that sends the Church of Christ's living Body into the world to "*connect*" "all things in creation" into the future glory of Christ's coming: joyous unbroken fellowship and communion with the Holy Trinity.

What makes Wesley's vision of *Connexionalism* so courageously daring is the deliberate way he implemented the category of *future glory* into the means of grace, and then used the inhabited means of God's glory and love to push the Church out into the places of brokenness and darkness to shine light and hope into the world with those very gifts *of* God's instantiated presence. Wesley connected the means of grace to the end of future glory because he envisioned that God was always inhabiting all the connected means to assure us with God's promise and hope that through these gifts *of* God's abiding presence we will reach our doxological end in the hope of glory. In other words, Wesley was always peeking over the horizon to see the future coming of God in the *New Creation*. Through God's abiding presence, by the very presence of Christ lighting our way by the Spirit who raised our Lord from the grave in all of creation, there was "*already*" glimpses of hope and transformation. The descent of the "*whole Trinity*" into our hearts gives us the hope of future resurrection and the means along the path of glory to fulfill God's promise of *New Creation*—perfect love in glorious fellowship and communion with the Triune God.¹⁷

It is also important to remember that it was the Church of England with her prayers and liturgy that helped shape and form John Wesley's most comprehensive depiction of the *Scripture Way of Salvation*. Born from the Church's *Prayer*, Wesley comes to understand from "*The General Thanksgiving*," the soteriologic of the "*means of grace and hope of glory*," as living

¹⁶ John Wesley, "*Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*," Volume 2, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1981). From **Romans 5:5**, Wesley writes: "Hope shameth us not—That is, gives us the highest glorying. We glory in this our hope, because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts—The divine conviction of love to us, and that love to God which is both the earnest and the beginning of heaven. By the Holy Ghost—The efficient cause of all these present blessings, and the earnest of those to come." This verse is one of the most cited verses from Scripture in John Wesley. It serves as a key hermeneutic for how he interprets the *Scripture Way of Salvation* because it is central to his vision of God as Triune love. Put simply, the love of God is poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit who is the efficient cause of all holiness in us. (cf. "*A Letter to a Roman Catholic*," Jackson, 10:82). God is love and the energy of God's love is breathed into us by the Holy Spirit. Love, God's love is the spring of all knowledge, holiness, salvation. Even the faith that God requires of us to participate in God's life and mission for the renewal of all Creation is the faith that is filled with the energy of love.

¹⁷ John Wesley, "*Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*." Cf. Ephesians 2:12. Wesley comments: "*The great promise in both the Jewish and Christian covenant was the Messiah: having no hope, because they had no promise, whereon to ground their hope; and being without God—Wholly ignorant of the true God, and so in effect Atheists. Such in truth are, more or less, all men in all ages, till they know God, by the teaching of his own Spirit, in the world—The wide, vain world, wherein ye wandered up and down, unholy and unhappy.*" (*Emphasis added*) Our "hope of glory" is God's promise. And the promise from the promise keeper is God's promise of New Creation. The hope of glory is the promise of theosis! God will dwell in all that God has glorified and all that God has glorified will dwell in God.

testimony to the connexional union that the Triune God is making for all creation to participate in the “hope of glory,” that is God’s promise of *New Creation*. At the Eucharist, the trinitarian prayer of connexional union—“*By Him, and with Him, and in Him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all honor and glory is yours Almighty Father, now and forever*”—extends the fellowship of the Table, and unites us into the Triune fellowship of God’s mission to be “a sacrament [a Connexion of universal/catholic love] of new and unending life for the world.” Through Christ’s living Body we are nourished and sent out into the world in the fellowship of God’s mission, with all the “*connexional means*” of God’s instantiated presence to participate in the hope and promise of *New Creation*. In this connexional union of catholic love, that is sustained through the constant abiding presence of God’s Triune love, all of heaven and earth are united in the glory of God, so that through all the stages along the *Way* of God’s redeeming grace, we will be renewed back into the image of the Triune God. This was the Church’s song of the *Sanctus*, where “from glory to glory”¹⁸ we are being gathered and united into the *Scripture Way of Salvation*. This *Way* is the path of incarnate love and glory that God in Christ through the Spirit has taken into the world. The *Scripture Way of Salvation* is the *Way* of Christ’s Gospel that paves a path of love and glory to reorder, restructure and re-pattern our ways back into the glory of God. God’s desire is that we should delight in God as God is seized by love for us. By starting with the ontological predicate of Triune love, John Wesley has envisioned from the heart of God’s desire and delight the *Scripture Way of Salvation* as *Trinitarian Doxology*.

The Mission of Connexion in all the Places of Brokenness and Woundedness

The message of Wesley’s vision was clear: the indissoluble union of the whole Trinity in *heaven and on earth* was permanently binding; just as “nothing can separate the Spirit from the Father and the Son,”¹⁹ so not even the total depravity of a heart turned away from God and curved like iron in on itself, can separate the love of the whole Trinity descending into our hearts to *reorder* our *disordered* love back into the fellowship of God’s perfect love, and restore all creation to the glory of God. Nowhere is this connexion of Triune love between *heaven and earth* made clearer than in John Wesley’s short exposition of the *Lord’s Prayer* in Matthew 6:9-13. Wesley contends that when we pray with “the language of our heart(s)” the “patterned” prayer that our Lord has taught us to pray; we will pray with the language of the “whole Trinity,” so that with the singleness of our heart’s desire being the glory of God, we will pray: “*thy kingdom come thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*” Moreover, Wesley exclaims:

“It is observable, that though the doxology, as well as the petitions, of this prayer, is threefold, and is directed to the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, distinctly; yet it is

¹⁸ John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, Third Edition., vol. 10 (London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1872), 499–500. “And “beholding with open face the glory of the Lord,” am I “changed into the same image from glory to glory, by the Spirit of the Lord?” Brethren, is not this our calling, even as we are Christians; but more eminently as we are Ministers of Christ?” Cf. also, **BE 3:84**, Sermon 76, “*On Perfection.*”

¹⁹ John Wesley, “*Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament, 1 John 5:8.*” “Nothing can separate the Spirit from the Father and the Son. . . . these three are one. They are one in essence, in knowledge, in will, and in their testimony.”

the whole [Prayer] fully applicable to every Person, and to the ever-blessed and undivided Trinity.”²⁰

What Wesley had glimpsed in the *Lord's Prayer*, was not only that the energy of God's love was released through the habit of prayer to *reorder* and *reawaken* the desires of our hearts to the glory of God, but this *patterned Way* of praying was the promise and mission of the “undivided Trinity” to heal the “breach in love” that has happened in heaven and on earth. The energy of God's love is breathed into our hearts, and a new *order* of Triune love begins to repair the “breach in love.” With every breath we take in the *Lord's Prayer*—“thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven”—a new *order* of New Creation is breathed into our hearts. As we breathe in (inhale) the breath of New Creation, we begin to live in the mission of God's glory by breathing back (exhale) to God and out into the world the energy of God's love. To pray and breathe in the pattern of our *Lord's Prayer*, was for John Wesley, the patterned *Way* of God's mission to *reorder* our disordered love and heal all our broken connections in heaven and earth. In Wesley's rendering of the *Lord's Prayer*, the “whole Trinity” descends to help us pray for God's new *order* of New Creation. Christ has given to his disciples a prayer that is God's promise to *reorder* our disordered loves by the Spirit filling us with the energy of God's love to live in God's mission for the life of the world. Promise and mission summed up the pattern of the *Lord's Prayer* that formed the soteriologic for John Wesley to hold together the complex unity of brokenness and belonging.²¹

By following closely to the path of God's abiding presence in all the places of brokenness in God's creation, John Wesley managed to traverse the hard contours and trajectories of the Church's teaching on the Fall and original sin. This pathway was the path of God's unbroken connexion of Triune love that constitutes the essence of what it means to be made in the *image* and *after the likeness* of the Triune God. In other words, despite the tear in heaven and earth, the glory of God's perfect love continues to abide and dwell on earth as in heaven. The Fall and all the different turns that the Church took to tease out the doctrine of original sin could not drive God out of the permanent place of God's dwelling. Heaven and earth were permanently connected because God had determined to be irrevocably bound in this covenantal *order* and *connexion* to dwell forever on earth as in heaven. No matter how severe the breach of love between heaven and earth, the darkness of brokenness could not drive out God's glory, nor could the fear of brokenness push out God's love from the creation. Darkness and fear accompany brokenness, but they cannot push out the intense brightness of God's glory and the perfect love of God that heals the breach of love between heaven and earth. This is why Wesley's theological proclivity was to look for the signs of God's heavenly glory in brokenness. Brokenness is a sign

²⁰ John Wesley, “*Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament, Matthew 6:9-13.*” Wesley points to the three parts of the Lord's Prayer: the preface, the petitions, and the conclusion. In the preface, Wesley notes that when we pray to “*Our Father, Who art in heaven,*” that God “Beholding all things, ***both in heaven and earth***; knowing every creature, and all the works of every creature, and every possible event from everlasting to everlasting; the almighty Lord and Ruler of all, superintending and disposing all things: ***In heaven***—Eminently there, ***but not there alone***, seeing alone, seeing ***Thou fillest heaven and earth.***” . . . “*Hallowed be thy name*”—Mayest Thou, O Father, be truly known by all intelligent beings, and with affections suitable to that knowledge! Mayest Thou be duly honoured, loved, feared, by ***all in heaven and in earth, by all angels and all men!*** . . . “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven”—***May all the inhabitants of the earth do thy will as willingly as the holy angels!***”

²¹ Not only did the structure and pattern of the *Lord's Prayer* form the logic and mission of Wesley's *Trinitarian Doxology* this *reordering* of our disordered love(s) would define the “*Character of a Methodist,*” and the “*Methodist Practice of Connexionalism.*”

of the breach of love in heaven and earth, but it is precisely in the broken breaches of love that the glory of God shines, and the unbroken love of God shows us the way home. Repeatedly, Wesley connects brokenness and God's unwavering presence to show us that the brightest pathway back home to God is found in those places of brokenness. To paraphrase a portion of Wesley's exegesis on Hebrews 10:20, Wesley writes: "from the wounds of Christ, the glory of God's presence breaks forth and the way of heaven is opened."²² God's glory shines brightest in the darkness of our brokenness.

What kept Wesley looking for signs of God's presence in the places of brokenness, was a sense that there he could hear most acutely, the piercing sighs of God's longing to restore all of heaven and earth back into God's belonging. Remember, for Wesley, joy and suffering were not antithetical to the nature of Triune love, they were manifestations of God's love. It is the nature of God to suffer over what God delights in because everything that suffers belongs to God. As the Spirit groans deeply to heal the tear in heaven and earth, the whole creation groans for the *Great Physician's cure*. Although the unsettling "breach in love" between *heaven and earth* is immensely greater than our words can voice, or our hearts can imagine, God is not silent to the groans coming from the breach because God is always there. Something terrible is awry in the world, but God is there in all that is not "*right*" in the fallenness of the world. God's fiercest longing (will) reaches into every place of brokenness to *reorder* our disordered love(s) that has caused this "breach of love" between heaven and earth. God's abiding presence in all the places of brokenness remains unbroken. This is the irrevocable connexion of Triune love that binds *heaven and earth*. From the *Lord's Prayer* to the *Spirit's Prayer* in Romans 8:26, Wesley *notes*²³ that the entire creation groans because the Spirit is breathing into every dimension of "heaven on earth" the longing sighs of God's love and providential care to heal the breach. God goes to "every riven thing"²⁴ on earth and in heaven to repair the "breach of love" because "every riven thing belongs to God." Even though the covenantal *order* of God's irrevocable connexion has been turned upside down and inside out, the "whole Trinity" will not be deterred by our break with God's covenantal order. With the Spirit's deepest sighs and longing reverberations on earth and into heaven, God hears the cries of creation's brokenness. And with the intensity of God's

²² John Wesley, "*Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament, Hebrews 10:20.*" Wesley connects brokenness and God's manifested presence: "***so by wounding the body of Christ, the God of heaven was manifested, and the way of heaven opened.***" (***Bold italics added for emphasis***)

²³ John Wesley, "*Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament, Romans 8:26.*" Notice how the energy of God's love—the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life—is the *Way* that Wesley envisions the Triune love of God groaning and longing to heal the tear between heaven and earth. "Nay, not only the universe, not only the children of God, but also the Spirit of God himself, as it were, groaneth, while he helpeth our infirmities or weaknesses. Our understandings are weak, particularly in the things of God; our desires are weak; our prayers are weak. *We know not*—Many times. *What we should pray for*—Much less are we able to pray for it as we ought: *but the Spirit maketh intercession for us*—In our hearts, even as Christ does in heaven. *With groanings*—The matter of which is from ourselves, but the Spirit forms them; and they are frequently inexpressible, even by the faithful themselves."

²⁴ I owe this expression to Christian Wiman, "*Every Riven Thing.*" "God goes, belonging to every riven thing he's made /sing his being simply by being /the thing it is: stone and tree and sky, /man who sees and sings and wonders why /God goes. Belonging, to every riven thing he's made, /means a storm of peace. /Think of the atoms inside the stone. /Think of the man who sits alone/trying to will himself into a stillness where/God goes belonging. To every riven thing he's made/there is given one shade/shaped exactly to the thing itself: under the tree a darker tree; /under the man the only man to see/God goes belonging to every riven thing. He's made/the things that bring him near, /made the mind that makes him go. /A part of what man knows, /apart from what man knows, God goes belonging to every riven thing he's made."

longing to *reorder* God's connexion of Triune love, the love of the Father sends the Son to rip open the heavens and descend on earth to turn everything upside right and outside in.

Wesley envisioned from the sovereign will of God's unalterable covenant and connexion, that the faithful character of Triune love, "sends" the Son in the power of the Spirit to *reorder, repattern, and restructure* all of heaven on earth to share in God's glory and love once again. The promise and mission of God's perfect love is to *reawaken* us to a God that never forgets that we belong to God. In the promise of God's mission, the love of the Father *sends* the Son to tear open the heavens on earth and heal all that we have forgotten in the unbroken connexion of Triune love. As the heavens are torn open, God goes to the brokenness, and from the torn side of Jesus gushes forth the healing tide to bind up all the wounds of brokenness in heaven and earth. Through Christ's broken body and spilled blood, the Spirit pours the energy of God's love into our forgetful hearts and reminds us that we belong to God. Alongside John's prayers of brokenness and belonging, Charles Wesley offers his own poetic resonances, when he prays to God that from the riven side of Jesus, the breach in love between heaven and earth will be filled: "While at Thy foot, a sinner I//Weary, and spent, and dying lie:/Cover'd by Thee, my soul would rest/With pardon and salvation bless'd,/Till through Thy riven side I rise,*/And see Thee fill both earth and skies."²⁵ After all, as the "*whole Trinity descends into our faithful hearts*" we are reminded that the God of heaven on earth has condescended to heal our brokenness and *reorder* our disordered love by the connexional refrain of Triune love: we belong to God and God belongs to us.

Summary

What mattered most to John Wesley, in this *Connexion* of connected fellowship was that "the people called Methodists," and all catholic Christians, live together with the unity of love that Christ had prayed for in the "Great High Priestly Prayer" (John 17). Bound together in the unity of God's love, the contagious mission of that *Connexion* for "all" Christians, is to share the very unity of God's glory and love with the rest of the world, so that they may return back to God, the same unity of love that is between the Father and the Son. Reflecting on Christ's prayer for unity, Wesley is mindful that the same unity of love, that is between Christ and His Father, is what Christ desires and prays, for all the world to receive. The end purpose that God has for all creation is a shared participation in the glory and love of God. And central to God's mission to redeem the whole world, is God's mission to reorder all creation back into the glory and fellowship with the Triune God.²⁶ For this reason, Christ gives that glory to the disciples so that through them the whole world may behold God's glory, and believe, truly believe as "real

²⁵ John Wesley and Charles Wesley, "*The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley*," ed. G. Osborn, vol. 9 (London: Wesleyan-Methodist Conference Office, 1870), 400–401. From Isaiah 32:2 Charles Wesley pens this portion of his poem: "As the shadow of a great rock in a weary land./ETERNAL Rock, project Thy shade,/Extend to me Thy friendly aid./While at Thy foot, a sinner I//Weary, and spent, and dying lie:/Cover'd by Thee, my soul would rest/With pardon and salvation bless'd,/Till through Thy riven side I rise,/And see Thee fill both earth and skies."

²⁶ John Wesley, "*Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*." John 17:3. Even though the immediate subject in the narrative of John's Gospel is between the Father and the Son, Wesley reminds us in John 17:3 that the unity of love that Christ prays for the whole world to know, is the unitive love of the Triune God. Wesley comments on John 17:3, "To know—By loving, holy faith. Thee the only true God—The only Cause and End of all things; not excluding the Son and the Holy Ghost, no more than the Father is excluded from being Lord, . . . "

Christians” believe. The fulfillment of God’s promise that all creation will share in God’s glory is so that all creation will return back to God, God’s love.²⁷ The doxological return of God’s love was central to the Methodist practice of Connexionalism.

The infectious contagion of *koinonia* was at the heart of their Connexion, and thus, the close-knit fellowship of the Church’s *Connexion* kept their doxology and mission tightly intertwined. What Wesley envisioned for the “Methodists” and their practice of Connexion can be summed up with his appropriation of this profoundly fervent motto: “Join hands with God, to make a poor man live!”²⁸ This sentiment captured the “character of a Methodist” with the heart of the *catholic spirit*, that joined the “people called Methodists” to the heart of God’s mission. Gathered into the fellowship of Triune love, their worship became their mission. Sent into the world, in the fellowship of Triune love, their mission became their worship.

Now, with the “whole world as his parish,” John Wesley conceived of the Church’s mission of Connexion as a mission that conspires with the Spirit in the “*hope of glory*.” By virtue of our *Connexion* into the Triune life, the Spirit of the “*Three-One God*”²⁹ gives to the Church, the *catholic spirit*, and stamps upon our hearts the marks of the Holy Trinity so that we may partake in God’s mission of Connexion—a mission to reorder and unite the whole world back into the fellowship of Triune love. To be “*marked*” by the Spirit in this *Way*, is to be “foreordained as transcripts of the Trinity;”³⁰ and in this *Way* of the Spirit’s making, the people of God are gathered and sent in the fellowship of Triune love, with all the “*means of grace*” to share in the “*hope of glory*,” and to participate in this patterned *Way* that God has made “for us and our salvation.”³¹ God’s promise of New Creation is our “*hope of glory*,” that not only goads the Church on, but this glorious hope assures us that through the contagious fellowship of the Church’s “*Connexion*” and mission, “we will become as loving by God’s grace, as God is by nature Triune love.”³² Scripted into the fellowship of Triune love, the Church catholic takes

²⁷ Cf. John Wesley’s *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*, on John 17:21, 22, 26. In verse 21, Wesley writes: “Here Christ prays for the world. Observe the sum of his whole prayer: 1. Receive me into thy own and my glory: 2. Let my apostles share therein. 3. And all the believers: 4. And let all the world believe.” In verse 22, Wesley comments: “The glory which thou hast given me I have given them—The glory of the only begotten shines in all the sons of God. How great is the majesty of Christians!” And John 17:26, Wesley reflects on the end purpose of God’s glory: “I have declared to them thy name—Thy new, best name of love. That the love wherewith thou has loved me—and I—That thou and thy love, and I and my love, may be in them—That they may love me with that love.”

²⁸ **BE** 3:399-414, *Sermon 99*, “*The Reward of Righteousness*.” What may best sum up the “*character of a Methodist*” in John Wesley’s mind was this borrowed phrase: “Join hands with God, to make a poor man live!” (3:413). Wesley uses this quote by George Herbert to say that with Christ as our example of the divine mission of God to care for the poor, the orphaned, the widow, etc., we have been made human partakers of Christ’s divine mission, when Christ says, “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these, ye have done it unto me.” For Wesley, that was for the Methodists, the “*real*” “reward of righteousness.” Cf. also Jackson, *Wesley’s Works*, “*A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists*,” 8:267, where Wesley cites the same quote from George Herbert.

²⁹ **BE** 2:510. Wesley writes: “And to crown all, there will be a deep, an intimate, an uninterrupted union with God; a constant communion with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ, through the Spirit; a continual enjoyment of the Three-One God, and of all the creatures in him!” Cf. also **BE** 2:373-386 *Sermon*, 55 “*On the Trinity*.”

³⁰ **BE** 7:88.

³¹ Cf. Nicene Creed.

³² Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1976), 65.

these “*means of grace*” and uses them to bring the hope of New Creation, the promise of resurrection and restoration for the whole world. This is the Church’s mission of *Connexion*, embodying the promise of New Creation—the “*hope of glory*” for the life of the world.

The soteriologic of the Gospel and Christ’s Way for the Church’s mission of connexion is not a straight forward lock-step logic of cause and effect along linear lines. Wesley’s thinking follows the path of future glory where the fullness of Christ’s resurrection has infused all creation to energize it to follow in the path of love and glory that is driven by hope. This is a hope that is born from the promise of God that gives to the members of Christ’s Body the faith that is the substance of hope, the evidence of a New Creation that is underway through the Church’s connexion and reconciling of all things in creation back into the God of glory. The only way forward for the Church is this path of glory that Christ’s calls the Church to take for the life of the world.

Wesley reasons in this way: In Christ the fullness of God dwells. Even before all things, “Christ is from everlasting to everlasting. . . . All things were and are compacted in him into one system. He is the cement as well as support of the universe.”³³ So now,

“From the whole, he now descends to the most eminent part, the church, He is the head of the church—Universal. The supreme and only head both of influence and of government to the whole body of believers, who is— Absolutely, the eternal, the first-begotten from the dead—From whose resurrection flows all the life, spiritual and eternal, of all his brethren: that in in all things—Whether of nature or grace, He might have the pre-eminence. Who can sound this depth?”³⁴

If we persist in the faith that is filled with the energy of hope and love, we will not be “removed from the hope of the Gospel—The glorious hope of perfect love.”³⁵ As the fullness of God dwells in Christ, so the fullness of Christ dwells and reigns in the Church—in every member of Christ’s living Body—and fills Christ’s Church with the hope of glory. The fullness of God in Christ dwelling and reigning in the Church is the ground of our hope. Moreover, the origin of hope is the same as faith. Hope begins by the dwelling and reigning presence of Christ. Hope is the assurance of God’s promise of glory. This hope is a conviction of love that is awakened to see that which is not yet seen. The hope of glory is a promise that is given to us by the indwelling and abiding presence of the Spirit. In this way, hope begins not as a choice any more than faith begins as a choice. Both are the evidence that the whole Trinity has descended into our faithful hearts to assure us and convince us that we are known and loved by God.³⁶ The conviction of God’s love is the sole basis of our hope of glory! And the energy of God’s love

³³ John Wesley, “*Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament.*” Cf. Colossians 1:17.

³⁴ John Wesley, “*Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament.*” Cf. Colossians 1:18.

³⁵ John Wesley, “*Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament.*” Cf. Colossians 1:23.

³⁶ John Wesley, “*Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament.*” From 1 Corinthians 2:8, Wesley comments on “the God of Glory” that was ascribed to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Wesley writes: “*the Lord of glory*—The giving Christ this august title, peculiar to the great Jehovah, plainly shows him to be the supreme God. In like manner the Father is styled *the Father of glory*, (Eph. 1:17) and the Holy Ghost, *the Spirit of glory*, (1Pet. 4:14.) The application of this title to all three shows that the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, are *the God of glory*: as the only true God is called, Psalm 29:3 and 7:2.”

poured into our hearts makes us “partakers of the power of his resurrection.”³⁷ The substance of our faith is in the coming of God in Christ through the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead, and now works through the hope of glory. What God has promised us in Christ is resurrection—future glory—and that promise is what animates our faith. Faith is filled with the energy of love and that love is the promise of God’s abiding presence filling our faith with the hope of glory.

Conclusion—Grace that Unites us is Future Glory Already Begun

I must practice the faith of connexion to connect the convictions of love and hope that live in my heart for the unity and mission of the Church. Allow me to share a few pivotal turning points that have formed my deepest convictions in service to the unity of Christ’s Church. As the providence of God would have it, my academic work in ecumenism took on its most definitive shape at my first Oxford Institute at Sommerville College in 1997. I wrote a paper on the shared trinitarian sentiments of John Wesley and John Zizioulas in the Wesley Studies Group. From that presentation, ST Kimbrough invited me to become a participant in the *Orthodox and Methodist Consultation* to study commonly shared roots of Wesleyan and Orthodox spirituality. That *Consultation* met for 12 years and that “exchange” forever changed the way I think about the Unity and Mission of the Church for the life of the world. After twelve years of sharing worship, prayers and liturgy, hospitable and open fellowship, warm meals nourished by holy conversation, and a careful and deliberate exchange of our best research and our most creative and challenging ideas, we were all changed, transfigured in a way that has enlarged our vision of connexion. In these gatherings we offered the Spirit’s gifts from each of our respective traditions, and in those *Consultations* my heart was strangely warmed. Truthfully, my faith was enlarged beyond my wildest imagination. I think our greatest collective epiphany came at the end of those 12 years, when an Orthodox Priest stood up in the midst of our assembly facing his bishop and asked, “when will we as the Greek Orthodox Church confess that we cannot be faithful to the Church’s mission without the Methodists?” The Bishop responded with a hearty Amen! In that moment, I realized that this long 12-year practice of *connexion* had renewed everyone with a mingling of narratives, language, liturgy, fellowship and Christian belonging. At first hearing some of my Orthodox friends and their stories of faith and mission, I could barely relate or understand. Their stories of faith and convictions of love and hope came from a world that was so far away that I could hardly connect. But through the hard practices of connexion we were all changed by the happy exchange. The Spirit took the unity that we have in Christ to expand our shared *koinonia* and fellowship. And now, our ways of serving the unity of Christ’s Church by the practice of connecting with the rest of creation carries the shared stories, languages, contagious fellowship and everlasting friendship that was gained through the Consultation that was in many ways the work of connexion. A deeper sense of unity and belonging, with a renewed purpose in the mission of Christ’s Church was enlarged in our practice of connexion—a most happy exchange of gifts and fellowship.

The wisdom of God’s love teaches us that our deepest convictions of love and hope are gifts of the Spirit’s awakening. The Spirit awakens us to assure us, convict us, and convince us of the “hope of glory” that God has promised to us all. And remember, God’s promise is the abiding presence of the promise keeper who keeps awakening us to the future glory that is burning deep in our hearts. As the whole creation groans and yearns for future glory, we are all being convinced, convicted and assured of God’s love and hope at different places of our

³⁷ John Wesley, “*Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament.*” Cf. Colossians 2:13.

journey, especially as we listen attentively to the cries among the poorest of the poor. At this juncture of my faith, my unswerving conviction is this: We “*really do belong together*,” especially if we are to listen faithfully to the wisdom of the Spirit’s awakenings by sharing our convictions of love. If God has something greater than we could ever hope or imagine in the *New Creation*, then what better way to be faithful in our mission of Connexion than by hoping together and sharing our burning convictions of love for the future glory of God that is burning its way through this age and every future age until God is in all and all is in God?

Perhaps John Wesley’s most unheeded and misunderstood aphorism as a “means of grace” will help us here: “*Do no harm*.” We must keep our hearts open and vulnerably connected to one another through God’s grace in our connexion. When we make ourselves open and vulnerable to each other, we make space—*makom*—for the different voices of our holy and not so holy conversations. We extend the same space of fellowship that has been made for us in the fellowship of Triune love. A heart full of hope is a heart convinced of love in the fellowship of love. Convictions of love are full of hope for the future that God is promising. We must be completely open to listen to other hearts convicted in love and so as not to take away or hurt their hope. If the kind of world that God is making for us in the New Creation is one where ‘all things of God’s creation are included in God’s promise of dwelling, then we need to be making space for one another’s convictions of love and hope for a future of God’s making.

Nothing emboldens and empowers us to “*do no harm*” more than when we are awakened together by the Spirit to go together, with joined hearts and hands and voices, to the places of brokenness. Nothing is more winsome and convincing to the world of the unity that we share than the mission that we share together when our hearts and hands and voices are bound together in practice of connexion. Our hearts are made stronger together as we listen together to the Spirit’s groans throughout the world and go to the places where the wounded and broken are already being tended to by Christ. Joy and suffering belong together in our practice of connexion. God’s promise of glory—is our hope—and the fire of God’s love in the power of fellowship with God and one another we go into all the places of brokenness to repair the breach.

The unitive love of God makes no room in Christ’s Church for the practice of schism. Wesley’s classic sermon, “*On Schism*” contends that schism is evil because it lacks love and opens the doors of hell on earth as a prelude to hell eternal:

It is evil in itself. To separate ourselves from a body of living Christians with whom we were before united is a grievous breach of the law of love. It is the nature of love to unite us together, and the greater the love the stricter the union. And while this continues in its strength nothing can divide those whom love has united. It is only when our love grows cold that we can think of separating from our brethren. And this is certainly the case with any who willingly separate from their Christian brethren. The pretences for separation may be innumerable, but want of love is always the real cause; otherwise they would still hold the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.³⁸

³⁸ **BE 3:64.** *Sermon 75, “On Schism.”* Wesley repeats his claim that schism/separation is evil. Wesley writes: “And as such a separation is evil in itself, being a breach of brotherly love, so it brings forth evil fruit; it is naturally productive of the most mischievous consequences. It opens a door to all unkind tempers, both in ourselves and others. It leads directly to a whole train of evil surmisings, to severe and uncharitable judging of each other. It gives occasion to offence, to anger, and resentment, perhaps in ourselves as well as in our brethren; which, if not presently stopped, may issue in bitterness, malice, and a settled hatred; creating a present hell wherever they are found, as a prelude to hell eternal.” (65)

And yet, when the convictions of God's love, those awakenings of the Spirit press in on our hearts with a sense of what is necessary to be faithful in the mission of connexion, and the traditions, societies, or denominations of our Church compromise those convictions of love, then Wesley offers a rare and cautious caveat for separation.³⁹ In other words, wherever and whenever you find yourself in the Spirit's guidance, and your community of faith prevents you in good faith and conscience "to keep the unity in the bonds of peace" and breaks connexion as partakers of his promise by Christ through the Gospel so that you cannot in faith and hope join hearts and hands to connect all things in creation back into the joy of communion and fellowship with the Triune God, then and only then, will you have cause for separation. But even then, "*Do no harm,*" and remember that the grace of God that has already begun in our hearts and mission of connexion is a foretaste of future glory.

Now this ambivalence over schism is where many may think that Wesley has simply kicked the can down to another fork in the road. As we attempt to make sense of Wesley's reasoning for why our divergent convictions lead to schismatic impasse, we must remember that John Wesley never separated from the Church of England. Nevertheless, many may think that Wesley has left us impaled on the horns of a dilemma, especially as we ponder which one of the pending three models that The United Methodist Church will decide on in the General Conference of 2019. What is a "shackled schismatic" to do? Schism on one hand, is evil in itself because it contradicts the order of love, schism on the other hand, is necessary when it contradicts the dictates of conscience and prevents us from following the commandments of Scripture that guide us in the order of love. On the surface of this schismatic jam, we often forget one of Wesley's most basic convictions of catholic love, namely, the catholic spirit keeps connecting us in the order of Triune love to the grace of future glory. Remember, New Creation

³⁹ **BE 3:66-67.** *Sermon 75, "On Schism."* Wesley does make space for when separation may be called for: "But perhaps such persons will say, "We did not do this willingly; we were constrained to separate from that society, because we could not continue therein with a clear conscience; we could not continue without sin. I was not allowed to continue therein without breaking a commandment of God." If this was the case, you could not be blamed for separating from that society. Suppose, for instance, you were a member of the Church of Rome, and you could not remain therein without committing idolatry; without worshipping of idols, whether images, or saints and angels; then it would be your bounden duty to leave that community, totally to separate from it. Suppose you could not remain in the Church of England without doing something which the word of God forbids, or omitting something which the word of God positively commands; if this were the case, (but blessed be God it is not,) you ought to separate from the Church of England. I will make the case my own: I am now, and have been from my youth, a member and a Minister of the Church of England: And I have no desire nor design to separate from it, till my soul separates from my body. Yet if I was not permitted to remain therein without omitting what God requires me to do, it would then become meet and right, and my bounden duty, to separate from it without delay. To be more particular: I know God has committed to me a dispensation of the gospel; yea, and my own salvation depends upon preaching it: "Woe is me if I preach not the gospel." If then I could not remain in the Church without omitting this, without desisting from preaching the gospel I should be under a necessity of separating from it, or losing my own soul. In like manner, if I could not continue united to any smaller society, Church, or body of Christians, without committing sin, without lying and hypocrisy, without preaching to others doctrines which I did not myself believe, I should be under an absolute necessity of separating from that society. And in all these cases the sin of separation, with all the evils consequent upon it, would not lie upon me, but upon those who constrained me to make that separation, by requiring of me such terms of communion as I could not in conscience comply with. But, setting aside this case, suppose the Church or society to which I am now united does not require me to do anything which the Scripture forbids, or to omit anything which the Scripture enjoins, it is then my indispensable duty to continue therein. And if I separate from it without any such necessity, I am justly chargeable (whether I foresaw them or not) with all the evils consequent upon that separation."

is not just God's promise that awaits us in the future but rather, the grace of future glory is *already* being infused in the order of creation with transfiguring glory. This is a vision of an ever-widening circle of Triune love that illumines the order of God's love and determines that the order of God's creation is permanently bound to the order of New Creation. If we are to make room—*makom*—for the different voices in Christ's Church convicted in love and hope, then a hermeneutical shift is required. We must keep the category of future glory before us as we reconsider today, and then tomorrow, the commands of Scripture that are firmly ordered in the creation. As we are being changed "from glory to glory," how do we read the "oracles of God?" What do we do, for example, when the convictions of love, those promptings of the Spirit ask us to envision something that at least on the plain surface of things, 'seems' to clearly contradict the commands of Scripture that is already "ordered" in the creation? And then, what do we do when we find ourselves *connected* to those who are also convicted in love, but they hear the Spirit pushing them from a vision of New Creation that "seems" to contradict the commands of Scripture that are firmly ordered in creation? Perhaps we could see that Peter and Cornelius faced a similar confusion and clash of conviction, as God was preparing them for a sneak peek into God's promise of a New Creation in the making. What do we do with our convictions when the future glory of God breaks forth and transfigures our long-held convictions of what God has ordered? If what God commands is ordered in the beginning of creation but is also ordered in the future glory of God's coming, then what better way to keep the order of love, catholic love in the hope of glory than by staying together, listening to one another in those convictions of the Spirit. And what better way to remain open to the future glory already breaking forth in New Creation than by serving the unity of Christ's Church in the mission of connexion for the life of the world. The end of all creation has been ordered in the beginning of creation to reach its end in the New Creation. So why not stay together in mission in the betwixt of the fullness of God's glory, and keep voicing our different and messy convictions of love and hope, until in the end, all that we know is swallowed up in the Triune love of God?

Shall we really split because our vision of the order of our unity and shared fellowship with God in creation is not fully awakened to the promise of New Creation—theosis? The unity of our Connexion is a gift that comes by the grace of faith, and the unity of our mission is a gift of faith. When we pull away from one another we shrink in faith, a faith full of the energy of catholic love that unites us together in hearts, in hands and voice full of hope for the life of the world. "*Are we really Connexional?*" Without faith we shrink in love and capacity to trust in the unity of fellowship that we share in the Triune love of God and with one another. And without faith we have no hope. When we lose hope, we begin to fragment and pull away from the unity that we have in Christ's Church and ask, "*Are we really better together?*" Surely, there is enough room in our hearts to allow for the Church to stay together, despite our different convictions of love and share together in the mission of glory. Nothing warms the heart more than joining together in joy and suffering together for the life of the world. The *Way* of the flame and the Cross sends the Church into the darkest places of creation to pierce holes of glory into the dark. The glory of heaven and earth shines most brilliantly in a celestial regeneration when the Church is a beacon of light for all the world to see the coming of our Lord. "As by rending the veil in the temple, (says John Wesley,) the holy of holies became visible and accessible, so by wounding the body of Christ, the God of heaven was manifested, and the way to heaven opened."⁴⁰ By the wounds of our *Connexion* may the world see the unity of our love:

⁴⁰ John Wesley, "*Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament.*" Hebrews 10:20.

That universal love sincere/Where is it to be found?/Out of the mouth of most we
hear/The word's unmeaning sound:/But O, how few the saints that know/Their
Saviour's perfect mind,/Whose hearts with charity o'erflow/To all the ransom'd
kind!/If my own party I approve,/And cleave to my own sect,/Holding the few
with partial love,/The many I reject;/My nature's narrowness I feel,/Myself I
blindly seek,/And still a slave in Babel dwell,/A shackled schismatic./O that the
Spirit of our Lord/Might set His prisoners free,/Might speak the sectaries
restored/To glorious liberty!/O that the catholic love Divine/Shed in our hearts
abroad/Might all our jangling parties join,/And swallow up all in God!⁴¹

*“Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty, all of heaven and
earth are filled with God's glory.”*

⁴¹ John Wesley and Charles Wesley, *The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley*, ed. G. Osborn, vol. 10 (London: Wesleyan-Methodist Conference Office, 1871), 368.