

**TOWARD A WESLEYAN THEOLOGY OF REVIVAL**  
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*“Give me one divine moment when God acts, and I say that moment is far superior to all the human efforts of man throughout the centuries”*<sup>1</sup> Dennis F. Kinlaw

*Revival depends on grace, and the fruit of revival is holiness. Revival depends on grace because dead people cannot bring themselves back to life. Even Jesus, the eternal Son, does not raise himself from the dead. It is the Spirit who gives him life. There is no true revival without resultant holiness. Trees that have been made alive again are always fruitful. And here is where Wesleyan theology best recommends itself as revival theology.”*<sup>2</sup> Beth Felker Jones

## **Introduction**

One classical definition of theology is “faith seeking understanding.” Knowledge and experience of God, whether individual or corporate, seeks deeper consideration through reflection and study. Anselm writes that believers examine God’s revelation “not for the sake of attaining to faith by means of reason but that they may be gladdened by understanding and meditating on those things that they believe.”<sup>3</sup> Augustine teaches similarly; experience of God incites Christians to apprehend what they believe; what they can hope for; and what they ought to love.<sup>4</sup>

Part of theology’s work accordingly is to find language to express the Christian experience of God; to try to put into words who God is and what God has done, is doing, and will do, while acknowledging the inadequacy of any verbal or visual signs in the face of an incomprehensible reality. The purpose of such language is to instruct people in God’s revelation; to mediate that reality, whereby it becomes a means of divine grace; and to provide necessary correction to misrepresentations of it.

My paper specifically is an exercise in *fides quaerens intellectum* concerning revival in the Wesleyan tradition. Through reflection upon descriptions of revival in early British and American Methodism, I seek to give a theological accounting of revival drawn from distinctive Wesleyan ideas, then articulate a Wesleyan theology of revival with brief implications drawn for today. Hopefully, my work here will help shed light in the evaluation of contemporary renewal movements in Methodism, as well as larger Christianity, and in guiding Methodism as it prays for and seeks spiritual revival.

## **I. DESCRIPTIONS OF REVIVAL IN EARLY BRITISH AND AMERICAN METHODISM**

In his sermon “On Laying the Foundation of the New Chapel near City-Road London,” John Wesley describes the magnitude of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Methodist revival as a clear witness to the

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<sup>1</sup> Robert E. Coleman, *One Divine Moment: The Asbury Revival* (Spire Books, 1970), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Beth Felker Jones, “The Future of Wesleyan Theology is Revival,” in the *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 51.1 (2016), 44.

<sup>3</sup> *St. Anselm: Proslogium; Monologium; An Appendix in Behalf of the Fool by Gaunilon; Cur Deus Homo*, trans. Sidney Norton Deane (La Salle, IL: Open Court Publishing Company, 1951), 178.

<sup>4</sup> Augustine, *Confessions and Enchiridion*, ed. Albert C. Outler (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1955), 338.

direct work of God. No other explanation could account for the *extent* of its impact, virtually reaching every English city, town and village, and dramatically touching people of all ages, sex and stations in life; for the *speed* in which it spread across the country; for the *depth* it penetrated into human souls bringing about in short time the “power of love” to “walk in all the fruits of holiness;” and for the *purity* it maintained from all corrupt mixtures.<sup>5</sup> He argues that no other spiritual movement had its equal in British church history.

The fires of the early Methodist revival crossed the Atlantic Ocean to the fledgling United States and continued to burn in succeeding generations. Wesley’s dramatic picture of revival was echoed by his immediate British and American heirs: Richard Watson (1781-1833), Francis Asbury (1745-1816) and Luther Lee (1800-1889). Together they employed the language of “revival” to identify a specific type of divine work in their midst and described it in the following six ways.<sup>6</sup>

### **A. The Corporate Nature of Revival**

While the word “revival” is used periodically to describe what takes place in isolated individuals, Wesley, Asbury, Watson and Lee employ it most often to recount what happens in gathered communities: Methodist societies and classes, prayer gatherings, corporate worship, camp meetings, and other type of communal assemblies.<sup>7</sup> While they recognize the testimonies of persons who experienced conversion, assurance of salvation and entire sanctification in solitary prayer or private Scripture reading, “revival” is seldom employed in their written accounts of such experiences. Rather, they apply it to the powerful work of God in a community of seekers or believers whose meetings go beyond their appointed time, stretching into late night and early morning hours, or become more frequent or protracted, often leading to some type of daily gathering.<sup>8</sup> While revivals impact individual life, they occur in and affect a company of other people.

As they observed groups experiencing revival, they specifically note the number of awakenings, conversions, and sanctifications taking place. They also track the numerical increase in communities impacted by revival, whether in societies, churches or conferences. Sustained corporate growth became for them a tangible sign of revival and of the genuine movement of God’s Spirit.<sup>9</sup>

### **B. The Social and Spiritual Context of Revival**

In more detailed discussions of revivals, Wesley, Asbury, Watson and Lee provide accounts of the larger social and spiritual context in which they occur. Asbury frequently describes towns

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<sup>5</sup> John Wesley, “On Laying the Foundation of the New chapel near City-Road London,” *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson, (London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1872; Reprint by Baker Book House, 1978), VII: 425-28.

<sup>6</sup> The methodology for my research is simple: locate as many references to the word “revival” in the works of John Wesley, Richard Watson, Francis Asbury, and Luther Lee and read them in context. While other words like “renew” and “renewal” could also be incorporated in and enrich this type of study, for the sake of time and space, I only looked at “revival” because of its direct relevancy.

<sup>7</sup> Francis Asbury, *The Journals and Letters of Francis Asbury In Three Volumes: Volume II, The Journal, 1794-1816*, ed. by Elmer T. Clark et al. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1958), 108.

<sup>8</sup> John Wesley, “Journal,” Jackson, III: 463.

<sup>9</sup> John Wesley, “Journal,” Jackson, IV: 131.

and cities before the outbreak of revival as irreligious, ignorant of the things of God, and profane.<sup>10</sup> Lee cites drunkenness, deception, profanity, Sabbath breaking, sexual immorality, and spousal abuse in towns before the movement of the Spirit.<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, Wesley identifies Deism's role in cultivating fertile ground for the English revival, "whereby nominal Christians could be prepared, first for tolerating, and afterwards, for receiving, real Christianity." Deism's total disregard for "true religion" became the means by which God prepared the country for revival.<sup>12</sup>

While the dreadful social state of humanity forms the backdrop for accounts of revival, believers' hunger and thirst for a genuine movement of God is highlighted as well. These early Methodist leaders testify to a "great travail of souls for a revival of religion" in their midst.<sup>13</sup> They cite instances of gathered Christians praying for "a revival of God's work" and spiritual assurance being given that "the Spirit would fall."<sup>14</sup> Asbury speaks more personally of "agonizing" for a revival among Methodists.<sup>15</sup> Preaching services opened with people "ripe for the height and depth of the Gospel" because of an earnest desire for the move of God.<sup>16</sup>

In the end, however, these early Methodists recognized that God is the only source and cause of revival. True revival is the unmerited work of God, independent of any human effort or cause. Luther Lee accordingly declares revivals as the "free and voluntary outpouring of the Holy Spirit."<sup>17</sup> Desperate people may pray for revival, but only God in divine will and timing brings it.<sup>18</sup>

### C. The Language of Revival

Powerful reports of revival experiences are given by Wesley, Asbury, Watson and Lee. Wesley records accounts where individuals testify, "I never felt the abiding presence of God so exceedingly powerful before."<sup>19</sup> He uses the expressions "shower of blessing," "the power of God coming down,"<sup>20</sup> a "peculiar spirit of seriousness," and the "fire of God" or "flame of God" to give voice to his observation of revivals.<sup>21</sup> Asbury writes that revivals are a "more considerable outpouring of the Spirit," "a time of refreshing" with "windows of heaven being opened," and the "power of God" coming upon people "like a mighty rushing wind."<sup>22</sup> Lee describes them as manifestations of the "power of godliness" that keep the church from falling into a "state of dead formality."<sup>23</sup> Elsewhere he defines revivals as times and places where an

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<sup>10</sup> Francis Asbury, *The Journals and Letters of Francis Asbury In Three Volumes: Volume I, The Journal, 1771-1793*, ed. by Elmer T. Clark et al. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1958), 209. Elsewhere Asbury writes of areas being "notorious for carelessness, profaneness, and immoralities of all kinds. Gaming, swearing, drunkenness, and the like, were their delight, while things sacred were their scorn and contempt." 211.

<sup>11</sup> Luther Lee, *The Revival Manuel* (New York, NY: Wesleyan Methodist Bookroom, 1850), 13-14.

<sup>12</sup> John Wesley, "Of Former Times," Jackson, VII: 182; Francis Asbury, "The Journals of Francis Asbury," vol. 3, 416.

<sup>13</sup> Francis Asbury, "The Journals," Clark, I: 553.

<sup>14</sup> John Wesley, "Journal," Jackson, III: 42; see also Francis Asbury, "The Journals of Francis Asbury," vol. 2, 112.

<sup>15</sup> Francis Asbury, "The Journals" Clark, II: 234.

<sup>16</sup> John Wesley, "Journal," Jackson, III: 460.

<sup>17</sup> Luther Lee, *The Revival Manuel*, 11.

<sup>18</sup> John Wesley, "Letters," Jackson, XII: 311.

<sup>19</sup> John Wesley, "Journal," Jackson, III: 89.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 408.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 355.

<sup>22</sup> Francis Asbury, "The Journals" Clark, I: 211, 213.

<sup>23</sup> Luther Lee, *The Revival Manuel*, iv.

“increased degree of divine influence” exists, leading to an “extraordinary display of divine power in the subjugation of obdurate sinners.”<sup>24</sup>

These manifestations of God’s presence and power in Methodism were interpreted as experiences of “primitive Christianity” and “true religion” where the “plain Gospel of Christ” is declared and the mind of Christ is experienced in extraordinary ways. Revivals are where the love of God is dramatically felt in a community; the Spirit reigns in the midst of God’s people, enabling them to “see, hear, feel and taste the powers of the world to come.”<sup>25</sup> Lee testifies that the Holy Spirit works more intensively in revival, resulting in “greater conviction, greater faith, greater zeal,” penetrating human hearts and minds.<sup>26</sup> Asbury writes that in these times ministers have “such energy” congregations are “pierced to the heart.”<sup>27</sup> Even the most “plain and artless” preachers through the Holy Spirit’s power are “greatly blessed in detecting the hypocrite, razing false foundations, and stirring up believers to press after a present salvation from the remains of sin.”<sup>28</sup> “All the efforts put forth” for the building up of believers including hymns and sacraments become the means of convicting, justifying and sanctifying grace.<sup>29</sup>

So commanding are revival experiences, these early Methodists speak of detractors who come to meetings with the intention of disruption, only to be “quieted” by God.<sup>30</sup> Asbury writes of skeptics seeking ammunition to undermine a revival’s validity, who, after seeing “the anguish of some and the rejoicing of others,” were “trembling with apprehensions of their own danger.”<sup>31</sup> Wesley tells the story of a youth named Ann Hooly, who in opposition to a revival declared, “The Methodist God shall not be my God. I will sooner go to Hell than I will go to heaven in their way.”<sup>32</sup> Within hours she fell under the conviction of the Holy Spirit, repented and found peace with God after three days of prayer.

#### **D. The Work of Revival: Awakening, Conversion, Entire Sanctification**

Wesley, Asbury, Watson and Lee make repeated reference to the divine work of awakening, justification/conversion and entire sanctification in the experience of revival. First, they observed people coming to grips with the extent of their sinfulness and personal guilt through spiritual awakening. Wesley speaks of people who in the midst of Methodist meetings fell down, “crying aloud for mercy,” and “wrestling with God” until they had peace from the weight of their sin.”<sup>33</sup> He writes, “The convictions that seized the unawakened were generally exceedingly sharp; so that their cries drowned every other voice, and no other means could be used than speaking to the distressed, one by one, and encouraging them to lay hold of Christ.”<sup>34</sup> Asbury testifies of “many old stout-hearted sinners” who in class meetings “felt the force of truth, and their eyes were open to discover their guilt and danger.”<sup>35</sup> Often the desire “to flee the wrath to come” would fall

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<sup>24</sup> Luther Lee, *The Revival Manuel*, 10, 13.

<sup>25</sup> John Wesley, “Journal,” Jackson, I: 251; III: 49.

<sup>26</sup> Luther Lee, *The Revival Manuel*, 11.

<sup>27</sup> Francis Asbury, “The Journals” Clark, I: 210.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Luther Lee, *The Revival Manuel*, 10-11.

<sup>30</sup> John Wesley, “Journal,” Jackson, II: 121; see other accounts in Francis Asbury, “The Journals of Francis Asbury,” vol. 1, 442.

<sup>31</sup> Francis Asbury, “The Journals” Clark, I: 213.

<sup>32</sup> John Wesley, “Journal,” Jackson, III: 89.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.; see also Francis Asbury, “The Journals” Clark, I: 217.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 463; Francis Asbury, “The Journals” Clark, I:210; Luther Lee, *The Revival Manuel*, 11.

<sup>35</sup> Francis Asbury, “The Journals” Clark, I: 212.

suddenly and deeply among people.<sup>36</sup> Lee describes people who became strongly convinced of their sin and their disdain for the Word of God, leading to deep and profound repentance, accompanied by sincere turning to Christ for salvation.<sup>37</sup>

Second, these early Methodists noted people who were converted in revival. Once awakened to their sinfulness, combined with genuine sorrow and a turn from sin, seekers experienced at some point a “conscious pardon of sin and peace with God.”<sup>38</sup> Testimonies to sin’s power being broken accompanied the experience of new birth. They recognized in spiritual climates like revival God could do in days what often takes years “since one day is with God as a thousand years.”<sup>39</sup> Wesley, Asbury and Lee write of groups of 18-20 people a day or larger that experienced justifying and regenerating grace, testifying to personal knowledge of divine forgiveness and to new power to walk in obedience to God.<sup>40</sup>

Finally, Wesley describes meetings in which believers “complained of the heavy burden felt from the remains of inbred sin, seeing in clearer light than ever before, the necessity of a deliverance from it.”<sup>41</sup> Once delivered from the guilt and power of sin, they pressed for salvation from sin’s very nature. Wesley bears witness to Christians experiencing entire sanctification within days of justification.<sup>42</sup> Asbury testifies of revivals where believers became “thoroughly sensible that they stood in need of a deeper work in their hearts than they had yet experienced.”<sup>43</sup> Subsequently, he observes that “more and more persons (are) able to testify that the blood of Christ cleanses from all sin.”<sup>44</sup> Elsewhere he declares “many believers are so overwhelmed with love, that they could not doubt but God had enabled them to love him with all their heart.”<sup>45</sup> He further writes about Christians of impeccable character, actively walking in the holiness of (entire) sanctification they received “instantaneously” by faith in the midst of revival years ago.<sup>46</sup>

## E. The Threats to Revival

As Wesley, Asbury, Watson and Lee had opportunities to see the fires of revival wax and wane over the years, they identified threats to its sustenance and lasting impact. One major issue was the lack of spiritual leadership in the aftermath of revival. In one Methodist society, its work was quenched after two years because they lacked shepherds to care for their women and men. Another group’s fire was extinguished because they lacked sound instruction.<sup>47</sup> Wesley believed a revival at Kingswood school was cut short because students lacked instruction and accountability in private prayer.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> John Wesley, “Journal,” Jackson, III: 408.

<sup>37</sup> John Wesley, “Journal,” Jackson, III: 355; Francis Asbury, *The Journals and Letters of Francis Asbury In Three Volumes: Volume III, The Letters*, ed. by Elmer T. Clark et al. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1958), 416-18.

<sup>38</sup> Richard Watson, *A Theological Dictionary*, “Methodists,” 489; Francis Asbury, *The Journals*” Clark, II: 224.

<sup>39</sup> John Wesley, “Journal,” Jackson, III: 89; Francis Asbury, “The Journals” Clark, I: 211, 213, 217.

<sup>40</sup> John Wesley, “Journal,” Jackson, IV: 158; see also Luther Lee, *The Revival Manuel*, 11.

<sup>41</sup> John Wesley, “A Short History of the People Called Methodists,” Jackson, XIII: 408.

<sup>42</sup> John Wesley, “Journal,” Jackson, III: 89.

<sup>43</sup> Francis Asbury, “The Journals” Clark, I: 212.

<sup>44</sup> John Wesley, “Letters,” Jackson, XIII: 89.

<sup>45</sup> Francis Asbury, “The Journals” Clark, I: 213.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

<sup>47</sup> John Wesley, “Journal,” Jackson, IV: 22.

<sup>48</sup> John Wesley, “Journal,” Jackson, III: 474.

Of particular concern on this front to Wesley and Asbury was the spiritual care given to the young.<sup>49</sup> They believed investment in Methodism's children to be key to a revival's long term prospects. Wesley, therefore, instructed societies with more than ten children to provide spiritual instruction and have parents use his "Lessons for Children" to establish them in Christian essentials. This training included theological instruction about God, fall, redemption, the means of grace, and eschatology; and teaching on the basic formation of human desire, understanding, joy and discipline.<sup>50</sup>

Another identified threat was inattention to Christian perfection. Some people in the midst of revival and others after it "undervalued the work of God by calling the work of entire sanctification a 'delusion.'" In response Wesley argued, "Till you press believers to expect full salvation now, you must not look for any revival."<sup>51</sup> Asbury and Lee concurred: the lack of preaching on perfection and the earnest quest for it in societies and churches diminished the lasting impact of revival.<sup>52</sup>

Wesley elsewhere warned that revival will not continue long before being threatened by the very fruit it grows – material wealth produced by personal industry and frugality. These two yield monetary riches which in turn "increase pride, anger and love of the world in all its branches."<sup>53</sup> To combat such threats Wesley exhorted his followers to earn all they can; save all they can; in order to give all they can.<sup>54</sup>

Finally, each of these early Methodist leaders identified the dangers of unrestrained enthusiasm. Asbury recognized that there is always some "wildfire" mixed in the work of God, where decency and order are not observed and "enthusiasm" takes control.<sup>55</sup> Sometimes this led to immorality in groups, such as men and women developing "inordinate affection" for each other, grieving the Holy Spirit and dampening the work of revival in groups.

## **F. The Lasting Fruit of Revival**

Wesley, Asbury, Watson and Lee agreed on the one end of revival: holiness of heart and life. Wesley defines holiness as "simplicity and purity" which has "one design, one desire: entire devotion to God, inwardly and outwardly."<sup>56</sup> Asbury writes that revival must lead not only to an "increase in knowledge of God, but the continual increase of faith, love and holiness."<sup>57</sup>

These early Methodist leaders carefully examined revivals for signs of a true movement of God.<sup>58</sup> Wesley in his sermon "The Duty of Reproving Our Neighbor" argues that genuine revival motivates Christians to confront complacent believers in their "outward sin."<sup>59</sup> Asbury writes of one community frequented by revivals, leading them to be "prudent, active and frugal" people who are "kind to strangers."<sup>60</sup> Elsewhere Asbury highlights the "happy consequences" of

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<sup>49</sup> Francis Asbury, "The Journals" Clark, II: 546.

<sup>50</sup> John Wesley, "," Jackson, VIII: 346.

<sup>51</sup> John Wesley, "Letters," Jackson, XII: 311.

<sup>52</sup> Francis Asbury, "The Letters," Clark, III:417; Luther Lee, *The Revival Manual*, 13-14.

<sup>53</sup> John Wesley, "Letters" Jackson, XIII: 323.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 323.

<sup>55</sup> Francis Asbury, "The Journals" Clark, I: 214-215.

<sup>56</sup> John Wesley, "Letters," Jackson, XII: 332.

<sup>57</sup> Francis Asbury, "The Journals" Clark, I: 210.

<sup>58</sup> Francis Asbury, "The Letters" Clark, III: 415.

<sup>59</sup> John Wesley, "The Duty of Reproving our Neighbor," Jackson, VI:325. Wesley also believes this is essential for the continuance of revival.

<sup>60</sup> Francis Asbury, "The Journals" Clark, I: 623.

revival: pure doctrine, strict discipline, great harmony, love and life.<sup>61</sup> Wesley and Asbury both declare that one product of revival is true conversion of children “over the age of ten” who are “remarkably serious and attentive.”<sup>62</sup>

Perhaps Luther Lee summarizes best the early Methodist perspective on the unmistakable fruit of revival: lasting change in human lives. When the Holy Spirit moves in an “increased degree of divine influence...men come forward and confess their crimes, and make restitution to those whom they had injured; the drunkard, the liar, the profane swearer, the Sabbath breaker and the dishonest are reformed” and conduct “themselves as becometh a profession of godliness.”<sup>63</sup>

## II. A WESLEYAN THEOLOGICAL ACCOUNTING OF REVIVAL

Biblical scholars recognize that “revival” is not strictly a scriptural term.<sup>64</sup> There are however related concepts. The verb ἀνακαινόω is used in the New Testament to describe the “renewing” of the inward person; the human mind; and more importantly for our subject, new birth through the Holy Spirit.<sup>65</sup> Luke uses the noun ἀνάψυξις to describe the time of “refreshing” inaugurated by the work of Jesus Christ.<sup>66</sup> While biblical language is helpful, a “gap” does exist between New Testament speech and the word “revival” as employed by 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Wesleyans.<sup>67</sup>

While not dismissing scriptural foundations, perhaps historical and systematic theology can provide more developed resources in which to reflect upon revival. At this point, there are four crucial theological points essential to a Wesleyan accounting of early British and American Methodist experience of revival.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Francis Asbury, “The Journals” Clark, II: 220.

<sup>62</sup> John Wesley, “Journal,” Jackson, III: 462; IV: 131; See also Francis Asbury, “The Journals” Clark, I: 561.

<sup>63</sup> Luther Lee, *The Revival Manual*, 13-14.

<sup>64</sup> See Max Turner, “Revival in the New Testament” in Andrew Walker and Kristin Aune, *On Revival: A Critical Examination* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2003), 3-21.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>67</sup> See Nigel Scotland, “Toward a Biblical Understanding and Assessment of Revival,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 85.2 (2013), 121-22.

<sup>68</sup> The Wesleyan theologians consulted for this section of the paper include: John Wesley, Richard Watson, Luther Lee, William B. Pope, John Miley, Richard Ralston, H. Orton Wiley, H. Ray Dunning, and Kenneth Grider. Aside from John Wesley, these theologians represent some of the most well-known Wesleyans who have written systematic theologies. Works consulted include H. Ray Dunning in *Grace, Faith, and Holiness: A Wesleyan Systematic Theology* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1988); Kenneth Grider, *A Wesleyan-Holiness Theology* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1994); John Miley, *Systematic Theology* (New York: Eaton and Mains, 1894); Thomas C. Oden, *Classic Christianity: A Systematic Theology* (New York: HarperOne, 2009); Thomas C. Oden, *John Wesley’s Scriptural Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994); William Burt Pope, *A Compendium of Christian Theology* (New York: Phillips & Hunt, 1880); Thomas N. Ralston, *Elements of Divinity*, ed. T. O. Summers, (Nashville: Cokesbury Press, 1924); Richard Watson, *Theological Institutes* (New York: Hunt and Eaton, 1889) and *A Biblical and Theological Dictionary* (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1856); H. Orton Wiley, *Christian Theology* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1943); and H. Orton Wiley and Paul T. Culbertson, *Introduction to Christian Theology* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 1967). While United Methodist theologian Thomas Oden’s *Classical Christianity* is not distinctly Wesleyan, but an attempt to articulate historic Christian consensus, it functions as a backdrop to see how consensual and orthodox much of Wesleyan theology is.

## A. The Free Grace of God

In his insightful theological analysis *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, Presbyterian minister William Sprague observes that “in all ordinary cases in which revival takes place...the sovereignty of God” is its unmistakable mark.<sup>69</sup> Jonathan Edwards in *Thoughts concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England*, a work abridged and published by John Wesley, argues that revivals are a “surprising work of God” and are impossible to build through human efforts.<sup>70</sup>

Far from simply being a Reformed perspective, Wesleyan theology also recognizes the free and sovereign grace of God as revival’s ground and source. There are two crucial points here. First, Kenneth J. Collins has helped to identify and describe “free grace” more fully in John Wesley’s theology. He argues that Wesley’s conception of grace is conjunctive: at times emphasizing a divine-human synergism in which God leads and humanity responds, exemplified by Wesley’s sermon “On Working Out Our Own Salvation,” and at times recognizing the work of God alone, as found in his sermon “Free Grace.”<sup>71</sup> In the latter Wesley defines free grace as “free in all to whom it is given. It does not depend on any power or merit in man; no, not in any degree, neither in whole nor in part. It does not in any wise depend either on the good works or righteousness of the receiver; nor on anything he has done, or anything he is. It does not depend on his endeavors. It does not depend on his good tempers, or good desires, or good purposes and intentions; for all these flow from the free grace of God.”<sup>72</sup>

Major interpreters of Wesley have emphasized the synergistic nature of salvation, with a focus on divine initiative.<sup>73</sup> Few, however, have fully recognized and grasped the significance of free grace in Wesley’s thought. Kenneth Collins writes, “Wesley was not only able to affirm the importance of responding to divine initiatives in the process of redemption, but he could also stress the value of waiting upon the Lord and *receiving* what are the gifts of God alone. That is, believers must receive first before they can respond. And this receiving (whether it be the crucial, qualitatively distinct graces of justification, regeneration, or entire sanctification) is not really a human ‘work’ at all, but is an openness, almost in a passive sense...in order to receive what gifts are given not on the basis of co-operation but on the basis of the merits of Christ alone.”<sup>74</sup> While Wesley recognizes that God often works synergistically, there are times when God operates in monergistic acts.

More specifically, Wesley believed that justifying and sanctifying grace (like glorifying grace) are operations of God’s free grace.<sup>75</sup> They cannot be brought about in any human way. Accordingly, in a letter to Dorothy Furly, Wesley teaches that God moves to justify the sinner

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<sup>69</sup> William B. Sprague, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1978), 93, 105.

<sup>70</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Thoughts concerning the Present revival of Religion in New England*

<sup>71</sup> Kenneth J. Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007), 12.

<sup>72</sup> John Wesley, Sermon 110 “Free Grace,” in *Sermons III*, ed. Albert C. Outler, vol. 3 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), 545.

<sup>73</sup> See William R. Cannon, “Methodism – Our Theology,” *Asbury Seminary Journal* 40, no. 2 (Winter, 1985): 6; and Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 1994), 170.

<sup>74</sup> Kenneth J. Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley*, 15.

<sup>75</sup> John Wesley, “Predestination Calmly Considered,” in *Doctrinal and Controversial Treatises II*, eds. Paul Wesley Chilcote and Kenneth J. Collins, vol. 13 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013), 288, 293-96, 318-20.

and sanctify the believer “when as well as how he pleases.”<sup>76</sup> He testifies in another letter that God’s saving interaction with humanity is “infinitely varied, and cannot be confined to any general rule...He often acts in a manner we cannot account for.”<sup>77</sup> Wesley, in the end, distinguishes his conception of “free grace” from the Reformed tradition by acknowledging its resistibility, if not at the moment it is experienced, then later in its aftereffects.<sup>78</sup>

Because divine grace is the unmerited favor and work of God in humanity, then humanity cannot determine in any moment how God wants to work in humanity. Revival is a free and gracious act of God brought about “when he wills and as he wills.” It is possible for Christians to pray and long for revival, position themselves for it in the means of grace, but it remains a monergistic act of God.

Second, as an act of free grace, revivals often entail decisive work done by God in human lives, often minimized in synergistic accounts of Wesley’s theology or contemporary expressions of Wesleyan thought. Again Kenneth Collins is helpful here. In his article “Recent Trends in Wesley Studies” Collins writes, “More to the point, in a well-developed synergism, as displayed in (Randy Maddox’) *Responsible Grace*, once divine initiative occurs, God repeatedly and consistently acts only in response to ongoing human response. In other words, the decisiveness of God, the sheer gratuity of grace, as well as the sovereignty of divine action in the face of human impotence, may all be minimized if not repudiated.”<sup>79</sup> Spiritual awakening, new birth and entire sanctification are simply the next step in a process of events that preceded and follow after them. They represent changes in humanity of “only a certain degree, and not really different in kind.”<sup>80</sup>

More recently, the impact of an overly myopic synergistic model of soteriology has impacted denominations like the Church of the Nazarene, leading them to consider dropping the decisiveness of conversion and entire sanctification. Mark Quanstrom writes in this regard, “Sanctification (is) understood as a lifelong process instead of an instantaneous work...glorious descriptions of what (is) accomplished by the second work of grace (are) therefore precluded. There (is) no essential difference between an earnest Christian who has not been entirely sanctified and one who has...entire sanctification is simply ‘an experience beyond conversion,’ a part of the process along the way to full salvation.”<sup>81</sup>

Early Methodist revivals in contrast portray decisive acts of God, bringing definitive change in people’s the lives, whether in awakening, conversion or sanctification. They are a mighty work of free grace that gives sight to those who were spiritually blind, shattering even the most recalcitrant heart of sin; that brings life to the spiritually dead, breaking the power of sin; and that sanctifies the human heart of all inbred sin. The repeated testimony of Wesley, Asbury, Watson and Lee in revivals is that of God doing a “*great work in short time*.”<sup>82</sup> Wesley succinctly testifies that God “gives to many in a very short time a closer and deeper communion

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<sup>76</sup> John Telford, ed., *The Letters of John Wesley, A.M.*, 8 vols. (London: Epworth Press, 1931), 4:97.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 255.

<sup>78</sup> John Wesley, “The Question ‘What Is an Arminian?’ Answered by a Lover of Free Grace,” in *Doctrinal and Controversial Treatises II*, 406; John Wesley, “Journal,” Jackson, 427.

<sup>79</sup> Kenneth Collins more detailed and extended discussion of this issue in “Recent Trends in Wesley Studies,” in *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 35.1 (2000), 67-86.

<sup>80</sup> Kenneth Collins, “Recent Trends in Wesley Studies,” 68.

<sup>81</sup> Mark R. Quanstrom, *A Century of Holiness: The Doctrine of Entire Sanctification in the Church of the Nazarene 1905-2004* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2004), 179-80.

<sup>82</sup> Italics mine.

with Himself than others attain in a long course of years.”<sup>83</sup> Only a Wesleyan understanding of free grace can give a theological account for such comments on revival.

## B. The Omnipresence of God

A Wesleyan theology of revival begins with a nuanced understanding of God’s presence. While historic Wesleyans have recognized problems and issues related to the doctrine of divine omnipresence, they have generally followed orthodox understandings.<sup>84</sup> Many classify it as a relative feature of God, seeing it as divine immensity in relationship to creation.<sup>85</sup> God’s presence fills and permeates entirely the created order. Since God’s presence exists in all space, Wesleyans have also connected omnipresence logically with the primary attribute of eternity and see omnipresence as an expression of God inhabitation of time as well. Omnipresence is therefore God’s immensity and eternity relative to creation.

Lest God’s presence be confused with created natures, Wesleyans are careful to distinguish omnipresence from any form of pantheism. God cannot be confused with the created order itself because God transcends the created order, being in no way circumscribed by it, and is distinguishable in nature from creation. While God dwells in all space and time, the divine is “wholly other” than created natures. God presence is never to be confused with creation.<sup>86</sup>

Furthermore, while not always using the philosophical language of simplicity, Wesleyans maintain that God’s presence is in no way divided in creation. Christians must not think of God’s nature as being dispersed or extended through creation, where each time and space in the universe has a “part of God” and the rest of God exists outside of it. Rather, God is fully present everywhere in an undivided personal way. God is therefore fully present in a human person; in any meeting; and in any geographical place at any time. Wherever God is, God is there in whole and not in part. Richard Ralston describes it aptly as “His center is everywhere, and his circumference nowhere.”<sup>87</sup>

The doctrine of divine omnipresence has been the subject of considerable reflection by Wesleyans, particularly in relationship to God’s omnipotence, providence, and omniscience.<sup>88</sup> More specifically, there are two ideas in a Wesleyan treatment of omnipresence, distinctly relevant to understanding theologically early Methodist revival accounts. First, while God is fully present everywhere, God is not everywhere in the same way. There are times and places when God is present in a way different than other times and places.<sup>89</sup> For example, the difference between Heaven and Hell is not that God is present in one and absent in the other; rather it is the way in which God is present in each that distinguishes them. The difference between a Christian

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<sup>83</sup> Telford, Letters, 6:132.

<sup>84</sup> See J. Kenneth Grider, *A Wesleyan-Holiness Theology*, 120-21 and John Miley, *Systematic Theology*, I: 218-19.

<sup>85</sup> See William Burt Pope’s *A Compendium of Christian Theology*, Vol. I (New York: Hunt and Eaton, 1889), 291; H. Orton Wiley, *Christian Theology*, Vol.1 (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 1940), 343-49; John Miley, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1, (New York: Hunt and Eaton, 1892), 214; Luther Lee

<sup>86</sup> William Burt Pope’s *A Compendium of Christian Theology*, Vol. I (New York: Hunt and Eaton, 1889), 291; H. Orton Wiley, *Christian Theology*, Vol.1 (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 1940), 343-49; John Miley, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1, (New York: Hunt and Eaton, 1892), 214.

<sup>87</sup> Richard Ralston, *Elements of Divinity*, 35.

<sup>88</sup> Omnipresence is often given more attention and reflection by Wesleyan theologians than any other relative attribute of God. John Wesley has a significant sermon devoted to the doctrine: “On the Omnipresence of God.”

<sup>89</sup> William Burt Pope’s *A Compendium of Christian Theology*, Vol. I (New York: Hunt and Eaton, 1889), 291; H. Orton Wiley, *Christian Theology*, Vol.1 (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 1940), 343-49; John Miley, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1, (New York: Hunt and Eaton, 1892), 214.

and unbeliever is not that God is present in one and absent in the other, but the way God's presence is manifested in each that distinguishes them. This nuanced understanding of omnipresence provides the theological foundation for such ideas as sacred time and sacred places; Christian worship; and the sacraments, each of which are distinguished by God's way of being present to people in extraordinary ways.

Second, when God's presence is "intensified" or is manifested in a "peculiar" way, humanity often reacts accordingly.<sup>90</sup> When a particular time and place is sanctified by God, humanity responds in ways fitting of that presence: people, even the most recalcitrant, experience the extent, depth and weight of their sinfulness and respond in repentance with their whole nature: physically, mentally and emotionally. They encounter God personally confronting them, not ideas, stories or doctrines about God, but God and they respond in profound repentance and faith, believing that Jesus Christ can do in them an extraordinary work of transformation in short time to make them holy.<sup>91</sup>

Theologically, revival is when God is present in a gathered community in a way that surpasses ordinary time and place, even exceeding the sacred presence of God normally experienced in worship and sacrament, and becomes an unmistakable encounter with God. With this extraordinary manifestation of the divine, there is greater experience of divine power and wisdom at work. Revival is "heaven come to earth" in the sense that God's personal presence more nearly approximates that of heaven, often leading humanity to respond in ways that makes them "be present differently as well" through repentance of sin and increased faith to trust in God.

### **C. The Holy Love of God**

In a Wesleyan understanding of revival, God in holiness directly confronts sinful people, profoundly convicting them of sin; and God in love personally pardons and radically delivers them from sin, cleansing them from unrighteousness. Revival is a communal encounter with a God of holy love who powerfully works to restore humanity's ability to walk in holiness and love, reflecting the very character of God.

Because of human disobedience in the Garden, the moral image of God (holiness, righteousness, love, and relationship to God) is destroyed in humanity.<sup>92</sup> Consequently, people in their 'natural state' are spiritually dead to God, thoroughly sinful, under divine condemnation, helpless to change, ignorant of their present condition, and are incapable of grasping their true predicament in life. If humanity is going to be saved from sin, God must take the initiative. If people are to awaken from their spiritual sleep of death, experience conviction over sin, repent, exercise faith in Christ and be set free from sin, then God must do the work. Humanity has no internal resources with which to move toward God and be saved.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> It should be noted here that revival with its manifest presence of God does not always illicit a positive response from humanity. My focus here is on the overwhelmingly appropriate response of humanity to God's presence, not the inappropriate.

<sup>91</sup> See Luther Lee, *The Revival Manual*, 11.

<sup>92</sup> See John Wesley, 'On the Doctrine of Original Sin – Part II,' Jackson, IX: 261-88. In his treatise Wesley defends propositions on original sin given in responses to questions 22-27 in The Westminster Larger Catechism; 'On Original Sin,' Jackson, VI:60; 'On the Fall of Man, VI: 223-224;

<sup>93</sup> John Wesley, 'Journal,' Jackson, I: 214; 'The Spirit of Bondage and Adoption,' Jackson, V: 99,101, 108-109; see also H. Ray Dunning, *Grace, Faith and Holiness*, 290-96; J. Kenneth Grider, *A Wesleyan-Holiness Theology*, 351-53; Luther Lee, *Elements of Theology*, 110-15; William B. Pope, *A Compendium of Christian Theology*, II: 47-55;

Francis Asbury, following John Wesley, succinctly summarizes the problem of sin as “guilt, power and root.”<sup>94</sup> Revival is one means by which God personally and powerfully addresses sin’s threefold dilemma. First, God awakens people to the guilt of their sin. Through multifaceted communication of the Gospel (preaching, teaching, hymns, corporate prayer, personal counsel, and exhortation) during revivals, the Holy Spirit convicts people of their utter sinfulness before God and imparts knowledge of their spiritual destitution, just condemnation, and threat of “wrath to come.” In these moments the Spirit strongly moves them to repent of their sinful ways and to turn to Christ alone for salvation. This awakening results in people bringing forth “fruit worthy of repentance,” manifested in genuine sorrow over sin and active participation in the divine grace afforded in revival until they find pardon from God. They will not rest until they knew they are absolved of sin’s guilt through faith in Jesus Christ.<sup>95</sup>

Second, revivals are a way God uses to set people free from the power of sin. Because of the Fall every person is subject to the power of sin. They are incapable of walking in obedience to God. Once people are awakened to the guilt of sin, experience deep repentance from it, they are confronted with their inability to keep the law of God. For early Methodist theologians, this predicament is illustrated well by Paul in Romans 7:19, “For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.” Revivals are moments when the awakened experience not only pardon of sin, but spiritual regeneration - new birth, whereby God sets their will free to align with God’s. The righteousness of God is imparted in revivals, liberating humanity from the frustration of desiring the good, but not being empowered to do the good, producing testimonies of incredible joy, peace and happiness.<sup>96</sup>

Finally, revivals are moments when God confronts Christians with the remnants of sin persisting in them, an inward bent and propensity “far gone from original righteousness” and “inclined to evil and that continually.” While empowered by the Spirit to live in obedience to God, Christians are confronted greatly with an internal principle of selfishness and sin, persisting stubbornly in them.

Because of the intensity of the new birth, like those experienced in revival, Wesley argues that new believers may be unable to initially detect the remains of sin. The momentum of their conversions may lead them to think they have been completely set free from outward and inward sin. As times passes, however, they begin to sense the remains of inbred sin in them. While they live in obedience to Christ, their heart is divided and a natural pull toward selfishness and pride persists. Wesley describes this as a natural tendency “to evil...pride, self-will, unbelief; and of sin cleaving to all,” infecting all that people think, say and do.”<sup>97</sup>

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Richard Watson, *Theological Institutes*, ; H. Orton Wiley and Paul T. Culbertson, *Introduction to Christian Theology*, 164-65.

<sup>94</sup> Francis Asbury, “The Journals” Clark, I: 214.

<sup>95</sup> See H. Ray Dunning, *Grace, Faith and Holiness*, 298; J. Kenneth Grider, *A Wesleyan-Holiness Theology*, 361; Luther Lee, *Elements of Theology*, 189-93; William B. Pope, *A Compendium of Christian Theology*, II: 407-17; Richard Watson, *Theological Institutes*, H. Orton Wiley and Paul T. Culbertson, *Introduction to Christian Theology*, 275-82.

<sup>96</sup> See H. Ray Dunning, *Grace, Faith and Holiness*, 448-55; J. Kenneth Grider, *A Wesleyan-Holiness Theology*, 364; Luther Lee, *Elements of Theology*, 193-200; William B. Pope, *A Compendium of Christian Theology*, III:5-13; Richard Watson, *Theological Institutes*, ; H. Orton Wiley and Paul T. Culbertson, *Introduction to Christian Theology*, 288-90.

<sup>97</sup> “Sin in Believers”; see also See H. Ray Dunning, *Grace, Faith and Holiness*, 455-56; J. Kenneth Grider, *A Wesleyan-Holiness Theology*, 387; Luther Lee, *Elements of Theology*, 207-18; William B. Pope, *A Compendium of Christian Theology*, III: 44-61; Richard Watson, *Theological Institutes*, ; H. Orton Wiley and Paul T. Culbertson, *Introduction to Christian Theology*, 320-333.

As believers struggle against their internal sin, they repent of it, but soon realize there is little they can do about it. If they are going to be delivered from sin's "nature," then God has to do it. Revivals are moments in which Christ sets Christians free from this predicament, enabling them to love God with all heart, soul, mind, and strength and sets them free to love others as themselves. In the new birth believers are set free from outward sin, but in entire sanctification they are set free from inward sin. This happens through the restoration of the moral image of God that was destroyed because of the Fall, enabling believers to enjoy true righteousness, holiness, and love in the immediacy of God's presence in their lives.<sup>98</sup>

#### **D. The Sustaining Grace of God**

Fundamentally, "grace" is the unmerited work of God for humanity and in humanity.<sup>99</sup> Grace, more specifically, is the work of the Holy Spirit, communicating to humanity the benefits God the Father has made possible through the Jesus Christ's life, death and resurrection. A Wesleyan theology of revival must finish with the recognition that the Spirit's work in revival can only be sustained and matured through ongoing cooperation with grace and active participation in the means of grace.

First, while the work accomplished by revival is often irresistible in the moment, done as a monergistic act of God, there must be a human response of cooperation at some point. Early Methodists recognized that revivals could be moments "wherein the grace of God acts irresistibly,"<sup>100</sup> yet, as Wesley states, "the grace of God both before and after those moments may be...resisted."<sup>101</sup> The great work of God in awakening, regeneration and sanctification can be thwarted by the very people in whom it happens. Wesley, Watson, Asbury and Lee enumerate concrete ways in which this is done. Humanity must choose to embrace what God has done if revival grace is to be sustained.

Second, the work of revival must be sustained and matured through active participation in the means of grace. Wesleyans believe that Christians must be connected to those places and actions, the divinely appointed means, by which God communicates grace to people (those places and activities where the Holy Spirit chooses to work for humanity and in humanity). Christians must stay connected to these like fruit on a vine or they will wither up and die.

The "means of grace" are those appointed places, events and activities where grace is bestowed or communicated. These include the instituted means of grace, which Wesley lists as prayer, reading the Scriptures, Holy Communion, fasting, and Christian conferencing. They also include the prudential means of grace, which consist of rules ordering Christian life, such as "doing no harm," "doing good," and "attending all the ordinances of God."<sup>102</sup> By participating in these means, Christians position themselves where God is most likely to work to transform their lives and increase their faith in greater and deeper ways. In the aftermath of revival, Christians

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> The unmerited work of God can also be through humanity. Examples of the unmerited work of God "for humanity" includes justification, reconciliation and adoption as children of God; examples of "in humanity" include regeneration and sanctification; examples of "through humanity" includes work humanity does beyond their natural capabilities, becoming instruments in God's use.

<sup>100</sup> John Wesley, "The Question 'What Is an Arminian?'" Answered by a Lover of Free Grace," in *Doctrinal and Controversial Treatises II*, 406.

<sup>101</sup> John Wesley, "Journal," Jackson, 427.

<sup>102</sup> John Wesley, "Minutes of Several Conversations," Jackson, VIII: 322-24.

must not only cooperate with what God has done, but be sustained and grow in grace by active participation in the means of grace. These are imperative for the life of every believer.

### III. A WESLEYAN THEOLOGY OF REVIVAL WITH IMPLICATIONS FOR TODAY

There are problems associated with any attempt to address positively the subject of historical revivals. As has been pointed out by scholars of the history of revival, there is hagiography and myth-making associated with them. Trying to arrive at accurate descriptions of revivals in the past can be fraught with difficulty.<sup>103</sup> Furthermore, “daft practices” and certain “pathologies” are often connected to them, so much so, that many Wesleyans today find them “something of an embarrassment.”<sup>104</sup> Yet, there is something of God here; a mighty, powerful work fueling a worldwide movement still burning nearly 300 years later.

After examining descriptions and reflections on revival by early Methodists and giving a doctrinal account of revival, an attempt is now made to give a Wesleyan theological definition of revival and draw some brief implications for today.

#### A. A Wesleyan Definition of Revival

There have been attempts by Wesleyans to define revival. Charles Goodwin in “Methodist Pentecost: The Wesleyan Holiness Revival of 1758-1763” explains revival as a “great impression made upon a considerable number of people” and this imprint is created by “the preventing grace of God in drawing people to hear the Gospel message of justification by faith” and by “human curiosity fostered by word of mouth throughout a community.”<sup>105</sup> William J. Abraham in *The Logic of Renewal* expresses it as “recovery of the apostolic life and identity of the church, both locally” and universally “and in the remaking of the church, so she reflects her original, God given intention and splendor.”<sup>106</sup> While there is merit in each of these definitions and others offered by scholars, they lack specificity and/or comprehensiveness.<sup>107</sup>

From a Wesleyan theological perspective revival is God’s sovereign act of free grace as an expression of holy love; whereby God’s personal presence is manifested in a community of people beyond the ordinary experiences of life and their sacred and sacramental practices; powerfully confronting their sinfulness, overcoming spiritual blindness as heirs to the Fall, pardoning guilt from personal sin, breaking sin’s power, and setting them free from sin’s very nature so as to love God whole heartedly in short time. This divine act and presence prompts in people deep repentance on physical, spiritual and emotional levels and elicits personal faith to believe God for justification and (entire) sanctification in instantaneous moments. While the experience of divine grace can be irresistible in times of revival, to be sustained and matured,

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<sup>103</sup> William J. Abraham, *The Logic of Renewal* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003), 2.

<sup>104</sup> Beth Felker Jones, “The Future of Wesleyan Theology is Revival,” 46.

<sup>105</sup> Charles H. Goodwin, “Methodist Pentecost: The Wesleyan Holiness Revival of 1758-1763, in the *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, 65.

<sup>106</sup> William J. Abraham, *The Logic of Renewal*, 2.

<sup>107</sup> An example of a definition of revival that has specificity, but lacks comprehensiveness, see Jason Vickers, “American Methodism: A Theological Tradition,” in *The Cambridge Companion to American Methodism*, ed. Jason Vickers (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 36. Here he defines “the terms revival and awakening refer to a religious culture that centered on multiday indoor and outdoor preaching events, personal conversion and testimony, and other movements of the Spirit loosely regulated by church authorities.”

human cooperation must be joined with it and positive reception of further grace must happen through active participation in the means of grace.

Of course Wesleyans are not the only Protestant tradition to experience revival and provide subsequent reflection. This theology of revival distinguishes itself from its counterparts in the Reformed tradition as seen in Jonathan Edwards, not only in its belief that all people are truly candidates for salvation and the resistibility of saving grace, but in its emphasis on the doctrine, message and experience of entire sanctification. It also sets itself apart from streams in its own American Holiness tradition as found in Charles Finney, not just in its rejection of Pelagian approaches to saving and sanctifying faith, but in its affirmation of the free and sovereign grace of God in revival. As such, it provides a unique perspective in which to understand revival in the larger evangelical tradition.

## **B. Brief Implications for Today**

In conclusion, this Wesleyan theology of revival has implications for larger Methodism today. First, true revival is the work of God alone. It is the free and gracious act of God brought about “when he wills and as he wills.” It is not synergistic in its essence. No human design, strategy, or program can bring revival to the church, unless God ordains it to be a vehicle of renewal. Christians can only pray and long for revival; position themselves for it in the means of grace; be faithful to the grace God has already given; and then trust God’s providential hand in providing it. This free grace theology of revival is a necessary corrective to covert and not so hidden Pelagian and Semi-Pelagian tendencies in contemporary Wesleyan circles.

Second, revival happens in physical human communities, not in individual isolation. Contemporary evangelicalism with its focus on a “personal relationship with Jesus” and sometimes Gnostic forms of spirituality, combined with mainstream Western culture’s individualism, has unwittingly fallen into a toxic form of Christianity that focuses upon the individual to the neglect of Christian community.<sup>108</sup> Christians believe they can be followers of Jesus without commitment to and the accountability of other Christians. The manifest presence of God in revival, and the radical change it elicits, happens in gathered Christian groups where the corporate means of grace occur. When revival comes, it comes in and through communities.

Third, a Wesleyan theology of revival reminds the church that God can and does do mighty works of salvation in human hearts. There can be transformation in human lives, not only in “degrees, but in kind.” God can radically change lives in an instantaneous moment, doing a “great work in short time.” Unfortunately, pessimism has settled into mainstream Wesleyanism, even in many of its Holiness and Pentecostal denominations. The dominant paradigm of spiritual transformation is gradual incremental change, where the breaking of sin’s power and deliverance from sin’s nature happen slowly over the lifetime of a believer, if ever at all. While there may be voice given to decisive change, what is believed and experienced is slow transformation. This theology of revival offers a different model in which to conceive of redeeming grace, especially in a culture where people stand in need of drastic spiritual intervention.

Fourth, personal holiness is the heart of revival. While the Wesleyan tradition has had an ongoing concern with systemic and social sin, revival begins by addressing the sinfulness and depravity in the individual person. The fruit of Wesleyan revival - awakening, conversion, and

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<sup>108</sup> Gnostic forms of spirituality can be seen in the following examples: cyber churches and worship services, human interaction and relationships reduced to texting and e-mail, video simulcasting of preaching to multiple venues; churches without “due administration of the sacraments, etc.

entire sanctification – center on the personal realization of one’s depravity and decisive deliverance from it. Social reform in the Wesleyan tradition begins with and arises from this personal reform. In the face of growing cries for social justice in contemporary Wesleyanism, declarations that at times subsume all of God’s work in it, this theology of revival is a “still small voice” reminding Methodism of the foundation of personal transformation.

Finally, while a Wesleyan theology begins with the recognition of free grace as the basis of revival, it ends with the need for human cooperation with that grace and active participation in the means of grace following it. Early Methodist leaders recognized the larger Christian community’s role in bringing individual accountability for such action through appointed leaders, required class meetings and other forms of discipline. They implicitly acknowledged the significance of the third mark of the church: “the community rightly ordered.” If the Wesleyan tradition in God’s providence experiences revival, it will need to once again require high membership commitments, ones that really demand active involvement in the means of grace individually and corporately, and find ways to enact accountability.

Rev. Christopher T. Bounds, Ph.D.  
Professor of Theology  
Asbury University  
Wilmore, KY 40390