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## *Wesley's Trinitarian Ordo Salutis*



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### INTRODUCTION

One of the curious facts evident to anyone who spends even a brief amount of time examining the secondary literature on John Wesley (the founder of Methodism) and his theology is how little has been written on Wesley's doctrine of the Trinity, save for a spate of recent articles.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, there is scant discussion of the Trinity in many books devoted to Wesley's theology.

This dearth of attention to the Trinity is especially clear in the area of Wesley's soteriology, his understanding of the *ordo salutis* (order of salvation). A classic example of this is *The Scripture Way of Salvation: The Heart of John Wesley's Theology*, a significant work by one of the premier contemporary experts on Wesley's theology.<sup>2</sup> There is no chapter, and not even a subsection of a chapter, that deals with the Trinitarian deep-structure of Wesley's understanding of salvation.<sup>3</sup> In fact, there is no reference to the Trinity in the index and hardly any mention of the Trinity anywhere in the book despite the fact that Wesley understood the *ordo* in Trinitarian terms.

Another example is Randy Maddox's book, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology*.<sup>4</sup> Maddox's study is outstanding, possibly the best summary of Wesley's theology to

come into print in the past twenty years. Maddox's discussion of Wesley on the Trinity is as brief (barely three pages) as his placement of that discussion is curious. While there is a chapter on "The God of Responsible Grace," Maddox situates his treatment of the doctrine of the Trinity in a final subsection of his chapter on the Holy Spirit. Wesley's significant emphasis on the Holy Spirit is the occasion for a discussion of the Trinity since Maddox correctly wants to emphasize the Trinitarian balance found in Wesley's theology.

What is particularly ironic is that, while Maddox acknowledges that the Trinity "served implicitly [though this is not strong enough] as . . . a grammar of responsible grace,"<sup>5</sup> Maddox does not develop how Wesley's understanding of the Trinity influences the form and material content of responsible grace throughout the *ordo salutis*.<sup>6</sup> The chapters dealing with the various dimensions of Wesley's *ordo salutis* simply do not address the way the Trinity bears upon each and every aspect of Wesley's understanding of salvation. Thus Maddox's seminal insight into the crucial character of the Trinity in Wesley's understanding of the "Trinity as the grammar of responsible grace" remains undeveloped.

Does Wesley understand the entire fabric of our salvation, the *ordo salutis* from beginning to end, in Trinitarian terms? If so, what does a Trinitarian *ordo salutis* look like? And does it have something fundamental to contribute to our understanding of salvation? The answers to all three of these questions are "yes," as will be clear by the end of this essay.

In the first section of the essay we will summarize the standard explication of Wesley's understanding of the *ordo salutis* along the lines of that found in the works of Collins and Maddox. Then we will turn our attention to the Trinitarian dimension of Wesley's *ordo salutis* and how it transposes the entire pattern of salvation into something far more theologically and spiritually vibrant and relational than what we find in the standard expositions. The essay will conclude with some recommendations about the importance of recapturing an evangelical, doxological, and Trinitarian understanding of the pattern of salvation in the church today.

## THE TRADITIONAL READING OF WESLEY'S *ORDO SALUTIS*

In the preface to his *Sermons on Several Occasions*, John Wesley states the mission and goal of his vocation as a Christian pastor: "I want to know one thing—the way to heaven; how to land safe on that happy shore."<sup>7</sup> In light of this self-attested preoccupation with salvation, it is no wonder that many subsequent Wesleyan scholars have looked to Wesley's order of salvation as the key insight and exposition of his theological views.

Much attention has been given to the Arminian tendencies in Wesleyan theology; however, Methodist scholars such as Kenneth Collins are continuing to demonstrate that at his core, John Wesley is a theologian of grace. The order of salvation presented in Wesley's writings is, therefore, aptly outlined as a grace-filled and grace-empowered process. It entails at least five different categories of grace (Wesley affirms that all grace is from God and is not different in kind, although it does differ in function). These categories are: prevenient grace, convincing grace, justifying grace, sanctifying grace, and perfecting grace. This section of the essay will explore the standard understanding of Wesley's order of salvation as delineated by these categories of grace.

### 1. PREVENIENT GRACE

From the first, Wesley asserts the inability of humanity to initiate the process of salvation. It is God, and not humanity, who sets the plan for salvation in motion with the first step of the *ordo salutis*, called by Wesley and others "prevenient grace." Because of Wesley's view of universal atonement, Christ's crucifixion and resurrection have opened the movement of the Spirit to all people. Therefore, God's grace extends immediately at birth to all people through the power of the Holy Spirit. Wesley affirms the doctrine of original sin and the fall of humanity; however, his theory of prevenient grace allows him to affirm total depravity only as an abstract reality as opposed to an observable one. Because God empowers and restores aspects of fallen humanity at birth by his grace, God

redeems humanity from certain deleterious effects of the fall. Therefore, because of the crucifixion and resurrection, people exist not merely in their natural, fallen state but within the sphere of God's gracious influence through the gift of the prevenient grace of God empowering them from their birth. God is already immediately at work in the lives of each and every individual prior to any action on the part of that individual.

This is part of the theological ground for the profound optimism of early Methodism. Because God's prevenient grace is always already at work restoring a sense of conscience in every human being, restoring an element of freedom to every human being, drawing every person back into relationship with God, Wesley and the early Methodists could not but regard every person with hope—no matter how despicable that person may appear, because God's prevenient grace is already at work in that person's life, even if they are resisting the very grace of God that longs to save them.

Kenneth Collins, in his interpretation of Wesley, notes five specific effects of this initial grace on fallen humanity.

(1) Its activity accounts for the basic knowledge of God seen in humanity: "All people have at least some understanding of God, however clouded or scant this knowledge may be."<sup>8</sup>

(2) Prevenient grace also reinstates knowledge of "God's holy law." Collins quotes from Wesley: "And yet God did not despise the work of his own hands . . . he in some measure re-inscribed the law on the heart of his dark, sinful creature."<sup>9</sup> Therefore, humanity knows right from wrong, because God's grace is active in the lives of people from birth.

(3) Not only does grace provide knowledge of right and wrong, it also engages one's conscience so that human beings feel a sense of guilt when their actions are not in accord with the law of God. Collins notes that Wesley "closely identifies the operations of conscience with prevenient grace."<sup>10</sup> This third action of prevenient grace paves the way for God's next activity in convicting grace, or grace that convicts.

(4) Perhaps the most well-known effect of prevenient grace, according to Wesley, is that it restores a certain measure

of free will that empowers persons to turn to God when they experience God's gracious initiative. It is this aspect of prevenient grace that separates Methodism from Arminianism. Subsequent aspects of Wesley's theology are strongly infused with the need for graciously-restored human free will to choose the way of God and work towards sanctification and perfection, but these arguments depend ultimately on this fourth effect of prevenient grace—namely, that only by the grace of God has humanity's ability to choose good been restored.

(5) The fifth result of the action of prevenient grace, according to Collins' understanding of John Wesley's *ordo salutis*, is a restraint of human wickedness. Since grace from birth gives people a limited knowledge of God, reinstates knowledge of God's law, acts as a conscience in people's lives, and supernaturally restores free will, this all combines to check human evil. In this regard, Wesley sees prevenient grace functioning similarly to Luther's orders of creation and preservation. Of the five areas of the action of prevenient grace, this is the area least developed by Wesley.<sup>11</sup>

By observing the reality of these five results in the lives of all people, Wesley concludes that God's grace begins its work as prevenient grace that goes before any action by human beings. It is active in every person's life from the moment of their birth, allowing individuals to respond to God, to seek a relationship with their Creator. In this way prevenient grace prepares the individual for the next step of God's continuing activity in one's life—convincing grace.

## 2. CONVICTING GRACE

Convincing, also known as convicting, grace is a fairly self-explanatory step in the order of salvation. At this point, the Holy Spirit moves from urging individuals to do good and enabling them to seek that which is righteous, to directly acting upon the human heart, revealing the reality of fallen humanity in the presence of the holy God. It is this stage that awakens sinners to their sinfulness and the resulting judgment that their depravity requires. Without this step, which

may in some individuals take longer than in others, true conviction of sin and the realization of the need for forgiveness will not occur. Only God can convict of sin and bring an individual to repentance. It is convicting grace that accomplishes this.

Wesley highlights preaching as the most common conduit of convicting grace. Prevenient grace may urge the person to attend the worship service, but it is convicting grace that cuts to the quick and applies the sermon to the soul of the individual. Thus Wesley encourages the preaching of the law *and* the gospel in every sermon, especially the initial sermons in a given location, so that the Spirit of God may work to convict sinners of their state before God, the all-consuming fire. He says, "I think, the right method of preaching is this: At our first beginning to preach at any place, after a general declaration of the love of God to sinners . . . to preach the law, in the strongest . . . manner possible; only intermixing the gospel here and there." Through this method the preacher hopes to create an opportunity for listeners to experience the convicting grace of God in preparation for their forgiveness facilitated by God's justifying grace.

It is interesting to note that Wesley places convicting grace necessarily before justifying grace. The question naturally arises: Is repentance, and even more so "works meet for repentance," necessary for one to be justified before God? Wesley answers with a meandering labyrinth in which repentance and works of repentance are only somewhat necessary. He states, "they are not necessary in the *same sense* with faith, nor in the *same degree*."<sup>12</sup> Wesley therefore maintains the doctrine of *sola fide* without giving up the necessity for the human response to the gracious activity of God.

### 3. JUSTIFYING GRACE

Justification is the point at which the individual becomes a Christian properly so-called. It is at this stage that the Holy Spirit confronts individuals with the truth of the gospel. The reality of Jesus and his sacrifice shines in one's heart and she realizes, as John Wesley did at Aldersgate, that Christ died for

her. In this moment, she is justified; she is pardoned of her sins and becomes regenerated, or "born again."<sup>13</sup>

Christian assurance follows right on the heels of justification by faith. In his earlier sermons, letters, and other documents, Wesley suggests that, as he learned from the Moravians, true justification is accompanied by some measure of assurance that rids one of doubt and fear, because the Holy Spirit witnesses to one's Spirit that he is a child of God.

By the middle of his career, Wesley had witnessed too many instances of those who produced good works, or the fruit of justification, yet who still had not experienced the witness of the Holy Spirit to their spirits that they were children of God. Wesley amended his doctrine of assurance to allow for two levels of Christian assurance. The first level included those who had the faith of a servant, the second those with the faith of a child of God. In the first group were those who have some kind of faith, but lacked the full measure of assurance that characterizes children of God, whereas those in the second group enjoy the witness of the Holy Spirit with their spirit, and thus also full assurance. While Wesley allowed that the faith of a servant is the mark of a person in real relation with God, only the faith of a son or daughter represents the normal Christian life and experience.

By the end of his life, Wesley had continued to clarify his doctrine of assurance along the lines already established. He gained more respect for those with the faith of a servant as he termed it, and began to recognize that Christians are responsible for the light and grace that they have been given. He continued, however, to maintain that although full assurance is not necessary for salvation, it is the right and privilege of every Christian; all Christians should therefore seek for the witness of the Spirit in their lives.<sup>14</sup>

Assurance is merely the accompaniment to the beginning of the Christian life: namely, justification. Wesley defines justification itself as the forgiveness of sins,<sup>15</sup> and it is the most important effect of the action of God's justifying grace in one's life. When the Holy Spirit—through grace—confronts an individual with the truth of the gospel of God's love on the

cross in Jesus Christ, the individual must make a decision. Human response is always preceded by God's gracious activity and prompting.

The appropriate human response is justifying faith. In his sermon, "Salvation by Faith," Wesley reminds his listeners that it is not just any faith that effects justification. Through a series of arguments in the mode of *via negativa*, or arguing from what justifying faith is not, Wesley narrows down his definition of faith to incorporate both assent to the realities that Christianity claims and trust in those claims. He writes, "Christian faith is then not only an assent to the whole gospel of Christ, but also a full reliance on the blood of Christ, a trust in the merits of his life, death, and resurrection; a recumbency upon him as our atonement and our life, as *given for us*, and *living in us*."<sup>16</sup> It is this faith in Christ's atoning work that justifies humanity before God, a justification that Wesley defines as pardon.

The previous quote also alludes to another distinction Wesley was fond of making that is important to a classical understanding of his *ordo salutis*, that being the distinction between justification and sanctification. It is to sanctification that we now turn.

#### 4. SANCTIFYING GRACE

Sanctification was an extremely important part of the *ordo salutis* for Wesley, because he was concerned with those who were (like he also was for so long) only almost Christians in their faith without living that faith in their daily lives. They are, as the book of Revelation states it, lukewarm in their faith. This lukewarm faith is without works, and thus it is dead; if there is no fruit, there is no evidence of true faith. Sanctification, therefore, becomes an integral and necessary aspect of salvation; as Wesley states, "God worketh in you; therefore you *must* work."<sup>17</sup>

Sanctification refers to the "process of cleansing, of purifying human hearts so that the divine glory shines through," and it is "nothing less than the very substance of salvation."<sup>18</sup> This process begins at the moment of justification, but unlike

justification, which happens all at once, sanctification continues throughout the Christian life, culminating in entire sanctification, or Christian perfection. It includes such experiences as continued conviction; "evangelical repentance," which is repentance that takes place after justification, and by which one is cleansed of those sins committed subsequent to regeneration;<sup>19</sup> and works meet for repentance, or good works, such as helping the poor, engaging in spiritual disciplines, and the like.

One can think of these final steps in the order of salvation, of sanctification, and Christian perfection as the spiritual and moral culmination of the Christian faith. It is in part for his emphasis on the importance of human agency in the *ordo salutis* (though a human agency always and everywhere grounded in and responsive to divine agency), such as works meet for repentance, that Wesley was charged with Pelagianism. Some felt Wesley placed so much emphasis on the importance of human agency in "good works" manifesting one's salvation that he compromised salvation by grace through faith. However, Wesley sees all these experiences of sanctification, especially good works, as necessary for salvation only if there is time enough to do them, and always as a *response to grace* and *grounded upon grace*. There is no independent human agency in Wesley's *ordo salutis*. In this way he maintains that they are not necessary in the same sense as faith, nor in the same degree, for only faith is absolutely necessary for sanctification and for salvation.

#### 5. PERFECTING GRACE

The final step for every Christian is perfection defined by Wesley as "giving God all our heart; it is one desire and design ruling all our tempers. It is the devoting not a part, but all our soul, body and substance to God."<sup>20</sup> It is toward this goal that all Christians move; it is this end to which they strive. Christian perfection, or holiness, as Wesley also termed it, was a blessing that God wanted to give every Christian, and so early Methodism encouraged every Christian to live their lives seeking to attain this stage. In this *telos*, one is so full of the love of

God, for God and for others, that the love of God directs every word, thought, and action. One can be free from *conscious* sin, from breaking a known law of God, though Wesley never proclaimed and forthrightly rejected the phrase "sinless perfection."

Perhaps knowing that this would be the most controversial aspect of Methodism, Wesley offers in his treatise, "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection," exactly what he means by this term. His definition, as outlined in this tract, states that a perfected Christian: (1) "is so far perfect, as not to commit sin" (defined here in very narrow terms of a conscious transgression of a known law of God); and (2) is "freed from evil thoughts and evil tempers."<sup>21</sup> Wesley acknowledges and affirms, however, that human beings are still contaminated by original sin, and thus perfection does not create "freedom from ignorance, mistake, temptation, [or] a thousand infirmities necessarily connected with flesh and blood."<sup>22</sup> Christian perfection in this life is simply the love of God so filling a person's heart that it crowds out evil and thus God's love frees that person for perfect love for God and neighbor.

It is imperative to note that this, as with all the steps of the *ordo salutis*, including justification, is not a permanent state for any Christian. Individuals are always subject to backsliding, thus Christians must always be on their guard and growing in grace throughout their lives. Wesley makes it a point to state that every Christian, even perfect ones, "are indispensably obliged, as often as they have opportunity, 'to eat bread and drink wine in remembrance of Him' and to 'search the Scriptures'; by fasting, as well as temperance, to 'keep their bodies under, and bring them into subjection,' and, above all, to pour out their souls in prayer."<sup>23</sup> The sacraments and other ordinances never become optional, nor does the need for Christ, for it is through Christ and God's ordinances that God has promised to act and to pour out God's grace.

Because Wesley was serious about Christians moving through this *ordo salutis* to attain this ultimate goal of Christian perfection, he devised the Methodist structure of classes

and bands by which Christians held fellow Christians accountable for continued growth or possible backsliding. Even the bands and select bands (smaller groups of Christians all at the same level in their Christian walk) testify to Wesley's absolute, single-minded focus on the necessity for Christian growth and his conviction that only through accountability, Christian community, and corporate worship could one achieve this goal of perfection, holiness, or the mind that was in Christ Jesus. Wesley led his followers not only by outlining his understanding of God's grace and the necessary human responses to that grace as one grew in the Christian life, but also by facilitating that growth through continued teaching and a structure in which Christians would continue to encounter the Holy Spirit and the grace of God offered through that Spirit.

#### WESLEY'S TRINITARIAN UNDERSTANDING OF THE *ORDO SALUTIS*

##### 1. INDICATIONS OF A TRINITARIAN *ORDO SALUTIS*

We are now in a position to look at Wesley's mature Trinitarian conceptualization of the pattern of grace, or order of salvation, and see how this Trinitarian perspective deepens and transposes the standard explication of the *ordo salutis* we just examined. Wesley actually provides substantive indications at various points in his publications that he sees the *ordo salutis* in Trinitarian terms. Consider, for example, his sermon, "On the Trinity."

Wesley opens his sermon with a concern that remained consistent throughout his career:

There are ten thousand mistakes which may consist with real religion; with regard to which every candid, considerate man<sup>24</sup> will think and let think. But there are some truths more important than others. It seems there are some which are of deep importance. . . . Surely there are some which it nearly concerns us to know, as having a close connection with vital religion. And doubtless we may rank among these that contained in the words



above cited: "There are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one."<sup>25</sup>

Wesley argues here that the Trinity is bound up with the center of vital Christian faith. He cannot conceive how someone can be a Christian without being Trinitarian.

Wesley goes on to state his intent explicitly: "the thing which I here particularly mean is this: the knowledge of the Three-One God is interwoven with all true Christian faith, with all vital religion." Wesley here asserts that every encounter with the grace of God is an encounter with the presence and activity of the Trinitarian persons. Consider his explication of this point:

I know not how anyone can be a Christian believer till "he hath" (as St. John speaks) "the witness in himself"; till "the Spirit of God witnesses with his spirit that he is a child of God"—that is, in effect, till God the Holy Ghost witnesses that God the Father has accepted him through the merits of God the Son—and having this witness he honours the Son and the blessed Spirit "even as he honours the Father." Not that every Christian believer *advert*s to this; perhaps at first not one in twenty; but if you ask any of them a few questions you will easily find it is implied in what he believes. Therefore I do not see how it is possible for any to have vital religion who denies that these three are one.<sup>26</sup>

Thus Wesley maintains that Christian faith is intrinsically and aboriginally Trinitarian at the fundamental level of our evangelical and doxological participation in the gospel. Whenever we encounter the gospel, it is the activity of all three persons of the Trinity that is the ultimate source and active agency. Our evangelical and doxological participation in the gospel is finally grounded in the pattern of God the Father's reconciling activity through the incarnate Son, Jesus Christ, and his life, death, and resurrection, a reconciliation realized in Christians through the person and activity of the

Holy Spirit ("The Holy Ghost witnesses that God the Father has accepted him through the merits of God the Son").

Furthermore, Wesley argues that it is a Trinitarian activity in which every Christian participates and relives at the evangelical and doxological level ("The Spirit of God witnesses with his Spirit that he is a child of God"), even when a person is not consciously aware of it ("Not every Christian believer *advert*s to this"). The gospel itself, as well as our participation in it, are finally rooted in the patterned activity of the economic Trinity.<sup>27</sup> If so, then must not this Trinitarian pattern of grace extend throughout the *ordo salutis*, from prevenient grace to perfecting grace? Does Wesley ever indicate that this Trinitarian pattern of grace does extend through the order of salvation from beginning to end? We find just this point in his famous "Letter to a Roman Catholic."

Here Wesley points toward a Trinitarian understanding of the entire *ordo salutis*. He asserts that "the infinite and eternal Spirit of God, equal with the Father and the Son, perfectly holy, is the immediate cause of all holiness in us," implying that the Father and the Son are also involved in working out holiness in our lives in their own unique ways. Indeed, Wesley extends this Trinitarian activity throughout the *ordo salutis*: "enlightening our understandings, rectifying our wills and affections, renewing our natures, uniting our persons to Christ, purifying and sanctifying our bodies to a full and eternal enjoyment of God."<sup>28</sup> So there are places in Wesley's publications where he indicates that the entire *ordo salutis* must be conceptualized in Trinitarian terms.

## 2. PREVENIENT GRACE

The Trinitarian fabric of Wesley's *ordo salutis* begins with prevenient grace, the grace that flows from the love of God the Father through Jesus Christ in his life, death, and resurrection, and in the fellowship of the Spirit to all people everywhere in the world from the moment of birth. For Wesley, no human being is simply in a state of nature. Everyone is already embraced by God's prevenient grace.

Does Wesley understand prevenient grace in Trinitarian

terms? Consider what he says in his sermon, "The Scripture Way of Salvation":

[Salvation] will include all that is wrought in the soul by what is frequently termed "natural conscience," but more properly "preventing grace"; all the "drawings" of "the Father," the desires after God, which if we yield to them, increase more and more; all that the "light" wherewith the Son of God "enlighteneth everyone that cometh into the world," *showing every man "to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with his God"*; all the *convictions* which his Spirit from time to time works in every child of man.<sup>29</sup>

Wesley's quotation reveals that prevenient grace is not some spiritual substance separable from God, but actually the triune God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—always working together in a pattern of co-activity in which the respective dimensions of each person's activity, the Father drawing, the Son enlightening, the Spirit convicting, coinhere and interpenetrate the activities of the other two. Thus prevenient grace is intensely personalized in Wesley's Trinitarian perspective.

Thus grace is not merely God's favor, nor is it some kind of spiritual substance mediated to us through the church. In Wesley's perspective, grace is the *personal* activity of the *triune God* on our behalf. Grace is always christocentric and Trinitarian. It is centered in the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, but it always involves all three Trinitarian persons, not only throughout Jesus Christ's life, death, and resurrection but also throughout the order of salvation. Grace is always and everywhere about the love of God the Father that comes to us through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

### 3. CONVICTING GRACE

As people begin to respond to this prevenient grace, most often the one grace of God in Christ takes the form of convicting grace, which brings even greater self-knowledge and further exposes human brokenness and sin that pervades all

human life in a fallen world. Convicting grace shows us our need for the love of God the Father, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the fellowship of the Spirit. Wesley describes it this way: "salvation begins with what is usually termed . . . 'preventing grace' . . . Salvation is carried on by 'convicting grace,' usually in Scripture termed 'repentance,' which brings a larger measure of self-knowledge, a farther deliverance from the heart of stone."<sup>30</sup>

When Wesley discusses repentance, and he does so repeatedly throughout his sermons, he often speaks of it in relation to the first and third persons of the Trinity. However, Jesus Christ in his prophetic office is also crucial to Wesley's understanding of convicting grace, or repentance, as he makes clear in his "Letter to a Roman Catholic," where Wesley speaks of Christ as "*prophet*, revealing to us the whole will of God."<sup>31</sup>

In his sermon titled, "The Spirit of Bondage and of Adoption," Wesley presents perhaps his clearest expression of his Trinitarian understanding of repentance:

By some awful providence, or by his Word applied with the demonstration of his Spirit, God touches the heart of him that lay asleep in darkness and in the shadow of death. . . . Horrid light breaks upon his soul [recall what we read earlier that Christ is the true light that enlightens everyone]. . . . The inward, spiritual meaning of the law of God now begins to glare upon him. . . . God speaks in a thunder, "He that hateth his brother is a murderer"; he that saith to his brother, "Thou fool," is obnoxious to hellfire.<sup>32</sup>

Notice that God the Father speaks his Word through the Holy Spirit. God speaks in a thunder via this demonstration of the Spirit through the mouth of Jesus Christ, "He that hates his brother is a murderer. He that says, 'you fool,' is in danger of hellfire." These are Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:21–22 (see also 1 John 3:15). It is important to note that in thirteen, or one-fourth, of his Standard Sermons, Wesley expounds the spiritual meaning of the way of God provided by Christ in his Sermon on the Mount,

thereby accentuating Christ's prophetic office and turning the Sermon on the Mount into the great tract of Scripture for convicting people of sin, as well as guiding the early Methodists in discerning God's will for their lives.

In fact, the only initial qualification necessary to be a Methodist was the desire to "flee the wrath to come," to be convicted of sin, and to seek God's grace. So one could be an early Methodist without being a person who had already come to faith in Christ. Early Methodism was a tremendously open, seeker-friendly movement. The Methodist Societies (roughly analogous to a congregation) and the small-group class meetings were open to anyone who was seeking God, because if you were a seeker it could only mean that God's convicting grace was already at work in your life.

Yet if you were a seeker, and convicting grace was at work in your life, if the Spirit in the light of Jesus Christ and his teachings was convicting you that your life was not what it could and should be and that what you really needed was assurance that you were forgiven and a child of your heavenly Father, the early Methodists continued to encourage, nurture, and help you until you encountered the justifying and regenerating grace of God and therein found your way back to God. It is no coincidence that many early Methodists encountered the living and loving triune God through the justifying grace of God in Christ mediated to us by the Holy Spirit in those class meetings.

#### 4. JUSTIFYING AND REGENERATING GRACE

After convicting grace come justifying and regenerating grace. Here Wesley stands arm in arm with the Protestant Reformers affirming that we are restored to a right relationship with God the Father through what Christ has done for us in his life, death, and resurrection, mediated to us freely and ungrudgingly through the regenerating activity of the Spirit. So for Wesley, as for the Reformers, justification and regeneration are the beginning of the process of sanctification: they occur simultaneously and are really two sides of a single reality in which we are forgiven and restored to God's favor, as

well as changed at the center of our being, indwelt by the Spirit of God as a deposit guaranteeing what is to come, and set free for faith and new life in Christ. Justification refers to God's pardon, or forgiveness, of our sins and our guilt because of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. Regeneration is another word for new birth, for the resultant spiritual change, because the Spirit of God now dwells in our hearts.

There are a few passages where Wesley can say things like, "The one [justification] implies what God *does for us* through his Son; the other [sanctification] what he *works in us* by his Spirit."<sup>33</sup> Well-meaning Methodists have developed inadequate serial accounts of the Trinity in relation to the economy of salvation because of passages like this, appropriating justification to Christ and sanctification to the Spirit. This can easily lead to the notion of three ages; the Old Testament becomes the age of the Father, the earthly life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the age of the Son, and from Pentecost on we have the age of the Spirit. We even find this kind of talk in John Fletcher, who was an early theological defender of Methodism and close friend of Wesley.

This kind of talk is, however, extremely problematic and dangerous. Indeed, it can be closer to tri-theism than Trinitarian faith. How could the three persons, who are never separate, whose being and activity are always in communion with each other, ever act in this kind of serial manner? Furthermore, this is uncharacteristic of how Wesley speaks of justification and sanctification and uncharacteristic of his most careful reflection on the activity of the Trinity in relation to the order of salvation. Indeed, in the statement just cited, Wesley's primary point has to do with the differences between justification and sanctification and not with the activity of the divine persons involved. Wesley was quite clear: "The quaint device of styling them three offices [Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier] rather than persons gives up the whole doctrine [of the Trinity]."<sup>34</sup>

#### 5. ASSURANCE: THE WITNESS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Wesley's most characteristic way of speaking about justification and regeneration is to link them together, along with

the witness of the Spirit, or Wesley's doctrine of assurance. We already saw this in Wesley's sermon, "On the Trinity," where he says, "I know not how anyone can be a Christian . . . till God the Holy Ghost witnesses that God the Father has accepted him through the merits of God the Son—and having this witness he honours the Son and the Blessed Spirit even as he honours the Father."<sup>35</sup>

Here is Wesley's even more characteristic description of a person coming to faith, as one

who has found "grace," or favour in the sight of God, even the Father [justification], and who has the "grace," or power of the holy Ghost, reigning in his heart [regeneration]; who has received in the language of the Apostle, "the Spirit of adoption, whereby he now cries, Abba Father" [assurance]. . . . Heavenly, healing light now breaks upon his soul. . . . He sees "the light of the glorious love of God, in the face of Jesus Christ. . . ." He hath the divine "evidence of things not seen" [one of Wesley's definitions of faith] . . . particularly of the love of God, of his pardoning love to him that believes in Jesus.<sup>36</sup>

Here justification, regeneration, and assurance are closely linked and defined in Trinitarian terms.

Furthermore, Wesley has a profound participatory and christocentric definition of all grace:

Christ does not give life to the soul separate from, but in and with, himself. Hence his words are equally true of all people, in whatever state of grace they are: "As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine, no more can ye except ye abide in me. . . ." *Whatever grace we receive, it is a free gift from him. . . . We have this grace not from Christ but in him* [emphasis mine].<sup>37</sup>

In the quotation from the previous paragraph, Wesley defines grace as the power of the Holy Spirit. Here he says that all grace is a gift from Christ that we only receive in union with him.

When one examines the whole tapestry of texts in Wesley's sermons dealing with grace, the only conclusion that makes sense is that Wesley has a profoundly Trinitarian and participatory understanding of grace in which all grace comes to us from the love of the Father through Jesus Christ and his life, death, resurrection, and ascension, and is mediated to us by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. This is true of all forms of grace, even justification, which is thus inseparable from regeneration, for both are mediated to us by the Spirit who renews our natures, uniting our persons to Christ, as Wesley states in his "Letter to a Roman Catholic." In other words, all grace is both Trinitarian and participatory: grace involves the presence and activity of all three Trinitarian persons and entails union and communion in the Spirit with Christ and through Christ with the God the Father.

Wesley believed that this encounter with the justifying and regenerating grace of God normally includes conscious awareness of forgiveness and assurance of salvation, for the Spirit of God witnesses with our spirit that we are children of God. Nearly all of the quotations from Wesley cited herein refer to the witness of the Spirit and conceive of it in Trinitarian terms. It is that deep inner sense impressed upon each of our hearts and minds by the Spirit of God, that Christ died for our sins—even each of our very own, that we are accepted by God the Father, and that we now are adopted children of God. So even Christian assurance, this profound sense that you are forgiven and are a beloved child of God, comes to expression in Trinitarian categories in various places in Wesley's publications.

## 6. SANCTIFYING GRACE

In Wesley's understanding of the order of salvation, the Trinitarian pattern of grace we have examined thus far is, in one sense, a preparation for the next dimension of the *ordo salutis*, sanctification. Indeed, Wesley can say of religion that convicting grace is the porch, justifying and regenerating grace the door, but sanctifying grace is the house of religion itself. Would it not be a terrible thing if all God did was forgive us

and then leave us to ever fall back into sin again and again and again until Christ takes us home? In Wesley's view, this would be a rather inadequate and frustrating kind of salvation.

So in Wesley's view of the *ordo salutis*, as soon as we encounter the justifying and regenerating grace of God, the one grace of God begins to work in us in still another way called sanctification. Sanctifying grace transforms our motives, reshapes our intentions, reorients our affections, and thereby moves us to love God and neighbor in gratitude, thanksgiving, and praise for the transforming grace of God.

Wesley is absolutely clear that sanctifying grace flows always, and only, from God the Father through Christ in the Spirit to us, and we simply receive it once again and ever anew with open hearts in simple childlike faith, just as with our forgiveness. We are not stepping back into a revised form of earning our salvation, for we make no progress in the Christian life apart from grace and faith, living out our lives in gratitude for what the triune God has done, is doing, and will continue to do in and through us.

Consider Wesley's characteristically Trinitarian manner of expressing sanctifying grace:

And "where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty"; liberty not only from guilt and fear, but from sin, from that heaviest of all yokes. . . . He [the Christian] not only strives, but likewise prevails; he not only fights, but conquers also. "Henceforth he doth not serve sin. . . . Sin doth not now reign, even in his mortal body. . . ." Thus "having peace with God, through our Lord Jesus Christ," "rejoicing in hope of the glory of God," and having power over all sin, over every evil desire and temper, and word and work, he is a living witness of the "glorious liberty of the sons of God. . . ." It is this Spirit which continually "worketh in them, both to will and to do of his good pleasure." It is he that sheds the love of God abroad in their hearts, and the love of all mankind; thereby purifying their hearts from the love of the world. . . . It is by him they are delivered from anger and pride, from all vile and inordinate affections. In consequence,

they are delivered from evil words and works, from all unholiness of conversation; doing no evil to any child of man, and being zealous of all good works.<sup>38</sup>

The Trinitarian character of sanctifying grace could not be more evident. Rightly so, for it is only the triune God of grace who is capable of setting us free from evil desires and tempers, from vile and inordinate affections and the rest. The activity of the triune God is the ultimate source of Wesley's confidence when it comes to progress in Christian faith and life, rather than an overly optimistic anthropology, as is often the case in American Methodism.

Wesley elsewhere describes sanctification this way: "We are inwardly renewed by the power of God. We feel the 'love of God shed abroad in our heart by the Holy Ghost' . . . producing love to all mankind, and more especially to the children of God; expelling the love of the world. . . ." <sup>39</sup> In fact, one of Wesley's most common shorthand summaries of Christianity is "the faith that worketh love." Here, again, we see the profoundly personal, relational, participatory, and Trinitarian manner in which Wesley thinks out the *ordo salutis*.

## 7. CHRISTIAN PERFECTION

So confident was Wesley in the grace of God that comes to us through Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit, that he affirmed an even further stage of Christian life, that of Christian perfection. If there is any doctrine in early Methodism that has fallen on hard times in the United Methodist Church today, it is Wesley's concept of Christian perfection. It is not within the scope of this essay to delve deeply into all the subtleties of Wesley's view, but he did believe that Christians can become so profoundly aware of and transformed by the love of God through the grace of Christ in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, that they can do everything out of love for God and for neighbor. Christian perfection is not something Christians create in their own lives but is always first and foremost what the triune God does in and through us.

It should come as no surprise that Wesley even understands

Christian perfection in Trinitarian terms: "Constant communion with God the Father and Son *fills* their [Christians'] hearts with *humble love*. Now this is what I always did, and do now mean by [Christian] 'perfection.'"<sup>40</sup> In his sermon on the beatitudes dealing with purity of heart, another phrase for Christian perfection, Wesley says that God will bless the pure in heart "with the clearest communications of his Spirit, the most intimate 'fellowship with the Father and with the Son.'"<sup>41</sup> Thus Wesley even understands Christian perfection in radically Trinitarian terms: in the *koinonia* or communion of the Spirit we may enjoy constant communion with the Father and the Son, who together fill our hearts with humble love for God and neighbor.

In light of the Trinitarian source, content, and goal of Wesley's *ordo salutis*, the Wesley brothers can refer to Christians as "transcripts of the Trinity." Consider the following hymn written by John Wesley's brother, Charles Wesley:

*Hail Father, Son, and Spirit, great  
Before the birth of time,  
Enthroned in everlasting state  
JEHOVAH ELOHIM!  
Thy powerful, wise and loving mind  
Did our creation plan,  
And all the glorious Persons join'd  
To form thy fav'rite man.  
Again Thou didst, in council met,  
Thy ruin'd work restore,  
Establish'd in our first estate  
To forfeit it no more.  
And when we rise in love renew'd,  
Our souls resemble Thee  
An image of the Triune God,  
To all eterinty.<sup>42</sup>*

In light of this, it is no coincidence that, in his letters to various Methodist laypersons, Wesley asks them if they have "a clear sense of the presence of the ever-blessed Trinity."<sup>43</sup> If

Christians are to be transcripts of the Trinity, if the triune God is both the source—the active divine agency involving all three Trinitarian persons—and the goal of the *ordo salutis*, then Wesley's questioning the state of these Methodist laypersons' souls in explicitly Trinitarian terms is completely understandable, because he thinks that all true Christian faith, all vital religion, has its origin, its divine agency, and its *telos* in the three-one God.

Since the goal of all grace is faith expressing itself through love, if we are to become transcripts of the Trinity expressing the love of God the Father through Christ in the power of the Spirit toward both God and neighbor, Wesley realized therefore that every Christian needs to be involved in ministry. To deny the laity the opportunity to be in ministry for God to others is to bottle up the Trinitarian grace and love of God, and to frustrate its intention, by preventing it from finding its natural expression in concrete acts of love and service toward others in ministry.

To be an early Methodist was to be on the royal road of salvation, a salvation free for all and free in all, a salvation that left no part of your life untouched. It was always first and foremost about the triune God and the triune God's grace at work in your life. Yet that grace unfolds according to a pattern. This order of salvation created not only a wonderful road map of the Christian life for the early Methodists but a profound sense as well of what they could expect from God in the course of their lives as Christians. There is much variation to it, but the Wesleyan order of salvation enabled the early Methodists to know something about where they were at in their Christian lives as well as what might be the next step in their pilgrimage.

It is a pattern of grace that is Trinitarian from beginning to end, because it is the triune God who has taken up our cause, for this three-one God who so loves us does not want to be God without us. This gave early Methodism a decidedly Trinitarian orientation that kept their focus on (1) the triune God, (2) the transformative power of this triune God manifest in the unfolding pattern of grace in the *ordo salutis*, and (3) the

pattern and form of life, discipline, and ministry that embodies this Trinitarian vision of salvation in love of God and neighbor.

This Trinitarian orientation is quite different from, and an important corrective to, the standard explication of the *ordo salutis*, which tends toward an anthropocentric focus on the effects of grace in human life. Such a focus on the effects of grace in our lives can all too easily degenerate into a "What's in it for me?" attitude to the *ordo salutis*.

The question we cannot help but ask is, What about today? Do we have something operative in our churches like the Trinitarian *ordo salutis* Wesley provided the early Methodists? Do we think and speak about all our relations with God in Trinitarian terms, at least something like what we find in Wesley's work? Is our orientation as Christians and as congregations evangelical, participatory, and Trinitarian?

We are not suggesting that we simply repeat Wesley, but do we not need something like Wesley's Trinitarian order of salvation to serve as a map for Christian faith, life, and ministry for congregations and Christians today? Without such what will happen to the church? And what happens to individual Christians? Do we leave them wandering in the wilderness of some sort of vague spiritual journey, not knowing where or how to find their way to the promised land of the fullness of salvation offered to us by the triune God in the gospel? Or even worse, what about those immersed in Western (especially American) consumer-oriented culture who come to church asking, "What is in it for me?" We do not believe that congregations will embody the kind of vibrant and transformative Christian faith and life we find in early Methodism without recapturing something like Wesley's Trinitarian understanding of the *ordo salutis*. The reason is quite simple: Wesley had a firm grasp of the central Trinitarian verities of the apostolic faith that have always been the ultimate source of renewal, reformation, and revival in the church throughout history. Thinking out the *ordo salutis* in Trinitarian categories is one of Wesley's great gifts to the church universal.

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### Notes

1. There have been several articles written on Wesley's doctrine of the Trinity in recent years, most notably by Geoffrey Wainwright in his article, "Why Wesley Was a Trinitarian," in *The Drew Gateway* 59, no. 2 (Spring 1990): 26–43; and reprinted in Geoffrey Wainwright, *Methodists in Dialogue* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1995), 261–74. Also see Seng-Kong Tan's article, "The Doctrine of the Trinity in John Wesley's Prose and Poetic Works," *Journal for Christian Theological Research* 7 (2002) <http://www.luthersem.edu/ctrf/JCTR/Vol07/Seng-Kong.pdf>. Tan's article has a bibliography listing other recent publications on Wesley's doctrine of the Trinity.
2. Kenneth J. Collins, *The Scripture Way of Salvation: The Heart of John Wesley's Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997).
3. We are aware of the various criticisms against using *ordo salutis* to designate Wesley's soteriology, but I find them unconvincing.
4. Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994). We have learned much from Maddox's various publications on the intellectual history of American Methodism. He is a ground-breaking scholar in this area.
5. Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 139–40.

6. See, for example, Maddox's account of Christian perfection, which is insufficiently Trinitarian, in *Responsible Grace*, 179–91.
7. John Wesley, "The Preface" in *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, vol. 1, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 105.
8. Collins, *Scripture Way*, 41.
9. John Wesley, "The Original, Nature, Properties, and Use of the Law," as quoted in Collins, *Scripture Way*, 41.
10. Collins, *Scripture Way*, 41.
11. For further discussion of all five of these "effects of prevenient grace," see Collins, *Scripture Way*, 40–43.
12. John Wesley, "The Scripture Way of Salvation," in vol. 2 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 163.
13. The question arises: Is there a direct correlation between regeneration and baptism? According to Collins, in "baptism, whether it be that of adults or infants, is not to be identified or equated with the new birth; the two works remain essentially distinct for Wesley. Nevertheless, it must be immediately added, these works may be associated with or they may accompany one another" (*The Scripture Way*, 127).
14. For a further discussion of the doctrine of assurance in Wesley's various stages, see chapter 5 in Collins, *Scripture Way*, 131–52.
15. John Wesley, "Justification by Faith," *Bicentennial Edition*, 1:189, and other sermons.
16. John Wesley, "Salvation by Faith," *Bicentennial Edition*, 1:121.
17. John Wesley, "On Working Out Our Own Salvation," vol. 3, *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), 208.
18. Collins, *Scripture Way*, 153.
19. Collins, *Scripture Way*, 156.
20. John Wesley, "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection," as quoted in Collins, *Scripture Way*, 176.
21. John Wesley, *Christian Perfection*, ed. Thomas S. Kepler (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1954), 22.
22. John Wesley, *Christian Perfection*, 33.
23. John Wesley, *Christian Perfection*, 34.
24. Wesley lived in an era prior to an awareness of the need for inclusive language for humanity. Though we have not altered Wesley's original wording, we nevertheless affirm the need for such inclusive language.
25. John Wesley, *Bicentennial Edition*, 2:376.
26. John Wesley, *Bicentennial Edition*, 2:385–86.
27. Economic Trinity is an important term and refers to the presence and

- patterned Trinitarian activity of God for our salvation in history, in Israel, preeminently in Jesus Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and also in our lives as Christians throughout history until Jesus returns at the end of time. The Ontological Trinity refers to God's own Trinitarian life. God has always been Trinitarian even before he created the universe and all of us. In fact, the love that ever flows between the Father, the Son, and the Spirit from all eternity is the ultimate source of all of creation; that love is the *raison d'être*, the reason for being of the universe and all of us, and also our ultimate *telos*, or goal. The love between the persons of the Trinity, the love that God is as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is so superabundant, so passionate, so other-directed, that God created an entire universe simply out of sheer love in order to be able to shower the love that God is on that universe. Indeed, God created all of us, every human being, each of us simply out of the love that the persons of the Trinity share, in order to shower that love on us; fellowship or communion with the love of the triune God is our ultimate destiny.
28. John Wesley, *Bicentennial Edition*, 2:495.
  29. John Wesley, *Bicentennial Edition*, 1:141.
  30. John Wesley, *Bicentennial Edition*, 3:204.
  31. Albert C. Outler, ed., *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 494.
  32. John Wesley, *Bicentennial Edition*, 1:255.
  33. John Wesley, *Bicentennial Edition*, 187.
  34. John Telford, ed., *The Letters of John Wesley* (London: Epworth Press, 1931), 270.
  35. John Wesley, *Bicentennial Edition*, 2:285–86.
  36. John Wesley, *Bicentennial Edition*, 1:260–61.
  37. Outler, *John Wesley*, 285–86.
  38. John Wesley, *Bicentennial Edition*, 1:262–63.
  39. John Wesley, *Bicentennial Edition*, 2:158.
  40. *The Bicentennial Edition Works of John Wesley*, eds. R. P. Heitzenrater and W. R. Ward, vol. 21 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 245.
  41. John Wesley, *Bicentennial Edition*, 1:513.
  42. Charles Wesley, Hymn no. LXXXVII, *Hymns on the Trinity*, reprint ed. (Madison, New Jersey: Charles Wesley Society, 1998), 58.
  43. See John Wesley's letter to Jane Bisson, dated December 1787, in vol. 13 of *The Works of John Wesley*, 3d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), 107. We know of at least seven of Wesley's letters where he asks this same point in various ways.