

Installation Lecture (Longer Version)
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Howard A. Snyder
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The World through a Wesleyan Lens

Howard A. Snyder

The invitation to teach at Tyndale Seminary came as a surprise, totally unexpected. But I soon came to feel that God's hand was in it. That conviction has since been confirmed in many ways.

My specific assignment here has to do with Wesleyan theology and practice. This opportunity is made possible through the wise foresight of Bishop Donald Bastian and Mrs. Kathleen Bastian, and through the leadership and participation of the sponsoring denominations (Brethren in Christ, Salvation Army, Church of the Nazarene, and The Wesleyan Church) and the Lorne Park Foundation, currently chaired by the Rev. Lloyd Eyre. I express my appreciation to them, to Bishop Keith Elford, to the members of the Wesley Studies Committee and its denominational representatives, to President Brian Stiller, Dean Janet Clark and the administration of Tyndale Seminary, and to my predecessor in this position, Professor Victor Shepherd.

I note that the Chair of Wesley Studies was created so that "Wesleyanism would become a worthy dialogue-partner alongside Lutheran, Reformed, Baptist, Pentecostal, and other Christian traditions," and that its purpose is "to provide students . . . with an understanding of the life, theology and practices of John and Charles Wesley and of the Methodist movement . . . ; and to provide students of a Wesleyan persuasion special in-

depth instruction in Wesleyan thought and practice” (*The Donald N. and Kathleen G. Bastian Chair of Wesley Studies* brochure). I pledge myself to that vision and purpose. I resonate with Professor Shepherd’s description of John Wesley: “The little man with the large voice and still-larger heart stands at the centre of the grand Christian tradition. The Chair at Tyndale is meant to reinvigorate the Church in Canada by recovering the witness of this evangelist, theologian, saint, friend of all in the Christian ‘family,’ and tireless reliever of human distress of any sort” (*Chair of Wesley Studies Brochure*).

I would express the mission of the Wesley Chair this way: To help students see the world through a Wesleyan lens as they dialogue with other Christian traditions, and in general to enrich our theological discourse at Tyndale University College and Seminary through out interaction with Wesleyan perspectives.

I realize of course that there are “different Wesleys”—quite different interpretations of the Wesleys, their theology, and their contemporary relevance. I personally was raised in the Free Methodist Church and so initially viewed John Wesley primarily through that denominational lens and the lens of the nineteenth-century Holiness Movement. However since my seminary days in the 1960s, I have made the Wesleys themselves—and particularly John Wesley’s life and writings—a primary focus of my own spiritual journey and theological work. When I speak of a “Wesleyan lens,” I mean seeing the gospel and the world the way John Wesley saw them, allowing of course for the dramatic shift in context between eighteenth-century England and twenty-first-century Canada, with its global connections.

What, then, would it mean to see the world through a Wesleyan lens?¹

¹ This lecture is a revised and expanded version of my article, “Seeing the World through a Wesleyan Lens,” *Mosaic* 4:3 (Summer 2007), 5-6, 8.

Perhaps some of you will say: “I see the world biblically. I have a Christian worldview.”

But “Christian” worldviews vary widely. Not all lenses are the same. Some are clearer than others; some distort more than others; some block out part of the biblical vision, filtering out part of the spectrum.

There *is* a particularly *Wesleyan way* of looking at the world and everything in it. My conviction is that the strength of the Wesleyan lens is its *comprehensiveness*, whatever its limitations.

Several aspects of Wesley’s wide-angle way of seeing the world are especially important. *Together* they give us a broad biblical vision of the world—a more comprehensive view than we commonly find today. Wesley no doubt had his blind spots, but his large vision was remarkable.

Several unique advantages elevated John Wesley’s vision beyond that of most figures in Christian history. Wesley was blessed with a well-informed Christian upbringing, especially with a wise mother who helped him think deeply. He had a both/and rather than an either/or mind, both rational and poetic, fascinated by language, alert to metaphor and paradox, yet interested in logic and in scientific discovery (both right-brained and left-brained, we would say today). He was a voracious reader with broad and eclectic tastes. His grounding in the Anglican *via media* of Scripture, reason, and tradition, gave him historical and theological breadth. He studied at Oxford during the rediscovery of early Christian sources. He lived at the height at the Age of Reason, but also at the beginning of new interest in human experience and emotion. He read of the discoveries coming from the “New World” and England’s far-flung empire. He experienced the

Industrial Revolution and experimented with the newly-discovered force of electricity. Through the influence of the Pietist Movement, particularly the Moravian Brethren, his heart was “strangely warmed” by God, igniting a deeper spirituality and a new passion for evangelism and church renewal. Finally, Wesley was physically vigorous and lived a long life (1703 to 1791), his mind alert, inquiring, and deeply devout to his last hours. (Wesley once noted in his journal, when he was sixty-five, “In running down one of the mountains yesterday, I had got a sprain in my thigh. It was rather worse today; but as I rode to Barnard Castle, the sun shone so hot upon it that before I came to the town, it was quite well.”²)

This unusual mix of characteristics is found in no one else in church history. Wesley viewed these advantages as testimony to the active providence of God.

Besides all this, John Wesley was an intriguing personality. Sir Walter Scott told of hearing Wesley speak occasionally when Scott was just a lad. Standing on a chair in Kelso churchyard, Wesley preached to the crowds. Years later Scott said “[Wesley] was a most venerable figure, but his sermons were vastly too colloquial for the taste of [some]. He told many excellent stories.” According to Scott, Wesley said he once tapped a cursing drunken soldier on the shoulder after hearing him say, “God damn me.” The soldier wheeled around angrily, and Wesley told how calmly, “You mean, ‘God bless you.’” Scott says, “In the mode of telling the story [Wesley] failed not to make us sensible how much his patriarchal appearance, and mild, yet bold, rebuke, overawed the soldier, who touched his hat, thanked him, and, I think, came to chapel that evening.”³

² John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, Bicentennial Ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984–), 22:147.

³ Quoted in Nehemiah Curnock, ed., *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.* (London: Epworth Press, 1938), 6:511.

I suggest that Wesley's way of looking at the world, and God's purposes within it, has lasting significance. I highlight especially Wesley's accents on Scripture, the image of God, the gospel for the poor, the wisdom of God in creation, salvation as the renewal of God's image, audacious hope, a renewed church, and the restoration of all things.

I. The Lens of Scripture

John Wesley was, famously, “a man of one book.” Of course he was a man of thousands of books, not to mention newspapers, journals, and pamphlets. But he was clear about biblical authority.

For Wesley, the Bible was the touchstone of authority on all matters of faith and practice. It was in fact *his lens for viewing reality*; his worldview (as we would say today); the revealed, authoritative narrative of what God *had* accomplished, *promised* to accomplish, and *surely would* yet accomplish. This is absolutely key, and we misunderstand Wesley if we fail to grasp this. We may debate Wesley's interpretations on specific points, but his conviction and intent were clear.

Wesley used Scripture in a particular way. The Bible is the *authoritative narrative* of salvation. It is not primarily a compendium of doctrine but the story of creation, sin, and redemption through Jesus Christ.

Wesley said the Bible should be interpreted according to the “analogy of faith” (Rom. 12:6), comparing Scripture with Scripture. This was Wesley's key principle—“the agreement of every part of [Scripture] with every other,” as he put it.⁴ Grasping this overall biblical “agreement” requires, of course, a master narrative—a storyline by which every passage is interpreted. Wesley was increasingly clear throughout his life as to that

⁴ Wesley, Sermon 62, “The End of Christ's Coming,” III.5.

storyline: God in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit is reconciling the world to himself, restoring “all things.”

Wesley’s sermons illustrate this. His 151 published sermons generally don’t exposit Scripture systematically, but typically a third or more of a Wesley sermon is either paraphrase or direct quotation from Scripture.

Seeing the world through a Wesleyan lens means seeing everything—our lives, the church, and God’s kingdom plan—through the authoritative lens of Scripture, interpreted in the light of God’s redemptive work in Jesus Christ.

II. Seeing the Image of God

Viewing the world in a Wesleyan way means seeing the image of God in every person. The Wesleyan vision is marked by this positive note: Every human being, man or woman, is God-imagined.

Wesley saw how defaced the image of God had become in human beings and society because of sin. But for Wesley, sin has neither the first nor the last word. Wesley’s sermons “On the Fall of Man” and “The Mystery of Iniquity” detail the disfiguring effects of sin. But Wesley believed also in “God’s Approbation of His Works” in creation, a “General Deliverance,” and “The New Creation” (to cite some key sermon titles).

The Wesleyan lens starts with good news: A good God created good people in an ecologically balanced creation that God pronounced “very good.” In the Wesleyan telling, the gospel story moves from the good news of creation in God’s image, to the bad news of sin and distortion, to the even better news of redemption and new creation through Jesus Christ by the power of the Spirit.

This is not uniquely Wesleyan, of course. It is biblical and should be true of all faithful Christianity. In the Wesleyan understanding, however, three points are critical:

First, creation in God's image means that all people reflect God's *character* and human *capacity* for goodness, wisdom, creativity, justice, and holy love. This is why bad people can sometimes do good things; why parents, though "evil, know how to give good gifts to [their] children" (Mt. 7:11).

All human beings bear something of the character of God. This is our glory; our potential; the inherent possibility that God's grace grasps when we turn to Jesus Christ and by the Spirit open ourselves to God's transforming power.

Second, this is a social image. God is Trinity, and humankind is compatibly male and female, made for family and community. We don't find our true identity as isolated "individuals" any more than Jesus Christ found his true identity separate from the Father and the Spirit. To be God-imagined is to be social, communal. The person and character of God is Triune. Sociality and community form the nature of personhood—first in God, and hence in humankind.

Third, in Wesley's view the image of God *connects us to*, rather than *separates us from*, the rest of creation. Here the Wesleyan view clashes with much popular Christianity.

It is important to understand Wesley here, because his comprehensive view of salvation hinges upon it. Creation in the image of God means we are both *like* and *unlike* God, and it means we are both *like* and *unlike* the rest of creation. God is infinite; we are not, and we have been marred by sin. Like God's other earthly creatures, we are finite and we exist in a space-time world, this good earth. Like other creatures, we are

dependent on food, water, air, and earth. God made us this way: Interdependent, all sharing the same earth ecology.

Wesley understood this. That's partly why he was so interested in gardens, all earth's creatures, and in how we treat animals.

Wesley saw human beings as reflecting God's image in a primary sense, and *all creation* as reflecting God in a secondary sense. Humans are unique because of their unique capacity to respond to God self-consciously, willingly, and responsibly. Therefore they have a unique calling as *stewards* of all creation. Men and women are "capable of God" (as both Wesleys said) in ways that God's other earthly creatures are not. Yet the horse, the dog, the bird, the tree, the flower, even rocks of the field and pebbles of the seashore reflect the image of God in a more remote sense. They depend upon God for their existence and preservation. Their design, order, intricacy, and interdependence all reveal something of God. All fits into the larger ecology of God's creative and redemptive work.

Like his contemporaries, John Wesley used the ancient idea of a "great chain of being" descending in near-infinite gradation from God to the minutest particle to express this interconnectedness.⁵ But Wesley understood this "chain" biblically, not philosophically. He was clear about God's sovereignty, human uniqueness and sinfulness, and the need for redemption through the blood of Jesus Christ. He saw the whole scheme of salvation, however, in this interconnected way. God will redeem the whole creation, not only the human part of it, because God has vested interest in the whole creation.

⁵ See Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study in the History of Ideas* (1936; reprint, Harper Torchbooks, 1960), and the discussion in Howard A. Snyder with Daniel V. Runyon, *Decoding the Church: Mapping the DNA of Christ's Body* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 109–12.

Seeing the world through a Wesleyan lens, then, means seeing every person and the whole creation as bearing, in appropriate degree, the image of God.

III. Through the Eyes of the Poor

John Wesley once wrote, “I love the poor; in many of them I find pure, genuine grace, unmixed with paint, folly, and affectation.” He said, “If I might choose, I would still, as I have done hitherto, *preach the Gospel to the poor.*” Robert Southey noted that John Wesley’s “course of life led him into a lower sphere of society than that wherein he would otherwise have moved; and he thought himself a gainer by the change.”⁶

Wesley found more openness and genuineness among the poor and what he called “middling people” than among the higher classes. He thought prioritizing ministry to and with the poor was God’s strategy. Commenting on Hebrews 9:11, “for they shall all know me, from the least even to the greatest,” Wesley remarked, “In this order the saving knowledge of God ever did and ever will proceed; not first to the greatest, and then to the least.” Wesley said preaching Good News among the poor was “the greatest miracle of all”—a miracle, because the church will never do this unless empowered by the Spirit and captivated by the character of Christ.⁷ For a church to preach the gospel to the poor is more of a miracle than are physical healings. Of all “signs and wonders” in the church, this is the greatest. It is more miraculous for the church in this way to transcend the “laws” of sociology and social propriety than to transcend the “laws” of physics or physiology in a physical miracle or healing.

⁶ Robert Southey, *The Life of Wesley; and Rise and Progress of Methodism*, Second American Edition (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1847), 1:390.

⁷ John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament* (London: Epworth Press, 1958), 832; 227 (commenting on Lk. 7:22).

Wesley in general simply rejected the distinction people commonly make between material and spiritual poverty. Jesus in his Jubilee proclamation recorded in Luke 4:18-20, is speaking of the poor both “Literally and spiritually,” Wesley said.⁸

Wesley knew that the church is both apostolic and prophetic when it ministers the gospel to and among the poor in fidelity to the words, work, and life of Jesus Christ. Clearly this requires being empowered by the Holy Spirit, the one through whom the Son “made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant,” humbling himself, becoming “obedient to death” (Phil. 2:7-8). This is the christological model for ecclesiology.

Wesley learned that the New Testament teaching on spiritual gifts (*charismata*) has special relevance for the poor. The gifts of the Spirit are good news particularly for the poor, because they reveal that divine empowering doesn’t depend on status, wealth, education, or credentialing, but on mere openness to the operation of the Holy Spirit. This is why “charismatic” movements (sociologically speaking) generally have in the first instance been movements of the poor.

To be Wesleyan means to see the world through the eyes of the poor, and to incarnate Good News among and with the poor.

IV. The Wisdom of God in Creation

Wesley liked the phrase “the wisdom of God in creation” so much that he issued a whole book on the subject, *A Survey of the Wisdom of God in Creation* (abridged from another author). God’s wisdom in creation has practical meaning: Worship, certainly, but also moral instruction and the call to stewardship. Wesley said in one sermon, “God is in all things, and . . . we are to see the Creator in the glass of every creature; . . . we should

⁸ Wesley, *ENNT*, 216 (Luke 4:18-20). In speaking of “the acceptable year of the Lord” Jesus is “Plainly alluding to the year of jubilee, when all, both debtors and servants, were set free.” Compare his comments on Mt. 5:3 and Lk. 6:20.

use and look upon nothing as separate from God, which indeed is a kind of practical atheism; but with a true magnificence of thought survey heaven and earth and all that is therein as contained by God in the hollow of his hand, who by his intimate presence holds them all in being, who pervades and actuates the whole created frame, and is in a true sense the soul of the universe.”⁹

In his *Survey* Wesley wrote, “Life subsisting in millions of different forms, shows the vast diffusion of [God’s] animating power, and death the infinite disproportion between him and every living thing. . . . Even the actions of animals are an eloquent and a pathetic language. . . . Thus it is, that every part of nature directs us to nature’s God.”¹⁰

God’s image in human beings, and more remotely in the whole creation, displays his wisdom in creation and so lays the basis for God’s wisdom in redemption and new creation. It is all of one piece, one story, for Wesley.

Seeing the wisdom God in creation moves us not only to praise but also to care for creation and to understand God’s intent and the breathtaking breadth of redemption. In keeping with the Great Tradition of Christian teaching, Wesley affirmed that what God had created, preserves, and cares for is being redeemed through Jesus Christ whom God has “appointed heir of all things” (Heb. 1:2).

V. Salvation as the Restoration of God’s Image

Jesus Christ is the perfect living, loving image of God, and salvation is the restoration of that image. This was a consistent and insistent theme in Wesley. Through Jesus Christ Christians are “restored to the image of God.”¹¹

⁹ Wesley, Sermon 23, “Upon our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount, Discourse III,” I.11.

¹⁰ John Wesley, *A Compendium of Natural Philosophy, Being a Survey of the Wisdom of God in the Creation*, “A New Edition,” ed. Robert Mudie, 3 vols. (London: Thomas Tegg and Son, 1836), 2:370f.

¹¹ Wesley, Sermon 85, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation,” II.1.

Wesley described “true Christianity” as having the mind of Christ, being renewed after Christ’s image, and walking as Jesus walked. Holiness is practical Christlikeness enabled by the Holy Spirit. Wesley preached justification by faith and the necessity of the new birth. But the goal of salvation is more than justification; it is sanctification—*thorough* transformation into the image and mind of Christ.

So the new birth is entrance into a new, relational way of living. It establishes a new love relationship with God the Trinity; with the Christian family, the church; with our neighbors, near and far; and in fact with all creation. Growth in holiness is growth in Christlikeness, not only individually but together in community as the whole church grows up into the “fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:12–16).

This is hugely practical. Wesley understood that believers can help each other come to know Jesus Christ deeply through the infilling of the Spirit and through life together in Christian community. This is the spring then for redemptive, Christ-like mission in the world. Wesley spoke of “all inward and outward holiness” —loving God with heart, strength, soul, and mind, and our neighbors (near and far) as ourselves.

Since the image of God is social and relational, salvation means the restoration of true community. Wesley called this “social Christianity” or “social holiness.” He meant not primarily social justice but rather that *salvation itself* is social. True faith is social because God is Trinity, because his image in humankind is social, and because God’s plan is the restoration of healthy community, *shalom*, throughout his whole creation.

The image of God uniquely present in humankind but also present more remotely in all creation gives Wesley the theological basis for salvation as the “restitution” (KJV) or “restoration” of all things (cf. Mt. 17:11, Acts 3:21). Salvation through the blood of Jesus Christ, and especially through his resurrection, means that God is creating a new heaven and earth. God is bringing a total restoration of creation that is more glorious and flourishing than the original prototype.

For Wesley, this is a present reality and a present mission, not just a future expectation. Restorative salvation means that men and women can now, by the Spirit, fulfill their original calling as stewards. In “The Good Steward” Wesley wrote, “no character more exactly agrees with the present state of man than that of a *steward*. . . . This appellation is exactly expressive of his situation in the present world, specifying what kind of servant he is to God, and what kind of service his divine master expects of him.”¹²

If salvation means “walking as Jesus walked,” this has immense ethical meaning for our discipleship. God’s people are not only the *recipients* of God’s restoration but also, joined to Jesus by the Spirit in his body, the *agents* of this restoration, this plan of God to “reconcile . . . all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven” (Col. 1:20). Christians are in this sense “coworkers with God” (e.g., 1 Cor. 3:9, 2 Cor. 6:1).

VI. Audacious, Gracious Hope

¹² Wesley, Sermon 51, “The Good Steward,” Par. 2.

John Wesley's understanding of what God is up to in the world is thus audaciously optimistic. Albert Outler spoke of Wesley's "optimism of grace." Commenting on Wesley's sermon "The New Creation," Outler cites Wesley's "unfaltering optimism, . . . an optimism of grace rather than of nature."¹³

Wesleyan theology is saturated with hope, expectancy, optimism of grace and the grace of optimism. This hope is based not on human intelligence or technology but on Jesus' resurrection, God's promise, and the present work of the Spirit.

In Wesley's view, God's "economy" of salvation is rooted in the personal, loving character of God and in the correspondence between the divine nature, human nature, and the created order. In contrast to Augustine and Calvin, Wesley balanced the emphasis on original sin with a dynamic optimism about the possibilities of God's loving grace in human experience and in society.

Perhaps the frequent failure of the church to transform the world through the power of Jesus' gospel is above all a failure of *hope*—a failure really to *believe* that God will keep his promises, and thus a failure to *act* in hope so that God's will may be done on earth as in heaven.

Romans 8:20-21 reminds us that "The creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it *in hope* that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God." If "the creation waits in eager expectation" (Rom. 8:19), so should we. If Satan convinces us the world is hopeless, we become less hopeful in our witness and ministry. Or we reduce hope unbiblically, expecting only the salvation of souls for a disembodied eternity in heaven. We forget God's plan through Jesus Christ "to reconcile

¹³ *Works of John Wesley* (Bicentennial Ed.), 2:500.

to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross” (Col. 1:20).

That divine plan defines our mission. And that mission is irrepressibly one of *hope*—the audacious, gracious hope that comes not from self-confidence or technology or money but from God’s promises.

Here Wesleyan theology clashes sharply with much popular evangelicalism. Optimism of grace gets undermined in two ways: By a discontinuous, disjunctive eschatology that makes too sharp a break between this age and the age to come (the kingdom of God in its fullness), and by a dualistic worldview. Many Christians see life on earth as an inferior, lower plane, and view disembodied spiritual existence on a higher, totally other plane. They see no real link between the two except through prayer and occasional miracles (or through tongues-speaking, if one is Pentecostal or charismatic).

This was not Wesley’s view. It isn’t the biblical view. “All things . . . in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible” (Col. 1:16), things present and things to come (Rom. 8:38, 1 Cor. 3:22), are part of the one world (and one worldview) that the Bible reveals and describes. This one God-created world is the stage upon which God is bringing to fulfillment the great drama of redemption and new creation.

If we don’t *believe*—don’t have the audacious *hope*—that God’s will really can be done on earth as it is in heaven in *all dimensions* of life, society, and culture, we won’t *act* with the audacious hope that God uses as a key means in fulfilling Jesus’ prayer, “may your kingdom come” on earth now. And so we will fail to see, at least in our time and place, the visible realization of God’s “intent . . . that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the

heavenlies” (Eph. 3:10). For lack of faith we fail effectively to be God’s mission in the world.

Seeing the world through a Wesleyan lens, and acting in the world in a Wesleyan way, means living the audacious, gracious hope that we experience through the powerful resurrection of Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:18-23).

VII. A Renewed, Missional Church

Methodists trace their beginnings to John Wesley’s heart-warming experience at Aldersgate on May 24, 1738. But long before Aldersgate, Wesley yearned for the renewal of the church. The question was *how*. Touched by God’s Spirit at Aldersgate, Wesley found the power, and then the vital *methods*, for the renewal he had long envisioned.

Wesley saw the depths into which much of his beloved Church of England had fallen. He longed to see it become vital and missional (as we say today), a church that would transform England and then the world. Wesley’s intent was always church renewal for the sake of mission. He saw Methodism itself a renewal movement. The mission of Methodism was to be God’s instrument for returning the church to the vitality God intended—the vitality of earliest Christianity.

Seeing the world through a Wesleyan lens means a vision for church renewal; a real expectancy for a vital, missional church. In the Wesleyan perspective, virtually no church is beyond hope for renewal. God intends to renew his church—from the local congregation to denominations everywhere; the whole people of God worldwide.

Wesley believed a living church is more than a congregation where people have faith and live pious lives. A renewed church is marked by a potent combination of worship, evangelism, loving discipleship, and a witness of justice and mercy in the world. It is

nurtured by the sacraments as true means of grace. A living church is God's instrument for renewing society. It is a vital community that practices the New Testament "one another" passages, building up one another, encouraging and equipping one another, and growing up into Jesus (Eph. 4:11-16). It is a discipling community that by the Spirit exhibits and practices a range of spiritual gifts through which the church fulfills its mission of justice, mercy, and peace in the world.

Seeing the world through a Wesleyan lens means never giving up on the church. We know that dry bones can live again; that resurrection is possible; that even the deadest-looking tree trunk may still have life deep in its roots. Renewal can come if people return to their first love and center their lives and witness in Jesus Christ and the power of the Spirit.

VIII. The Restoration of All Creation

Seeing the world through a Wesleyan lens means seeing the New Creation that God is bringing through Jesus Christ.

God's promise to "restore everything" was a key element of John Wesley's theology. Wesley's hopeful certainty was based not on a few scattered biblical references but on the whole thrust of the biblical story, beginning to end. His sermons "The New Creation," "The General Deliverance," and "The General Spread of the Gospel" highlight key Scriptures: Romans 8:19-22 on the liberation of the whole creation from its "bondage to decay," Isaiah 11:9 on the earth being full of the knowledge of the Lord, and Revelation 21:5, "Behold, I make all things new." Another favorite Wesley text was 1 John 3:8, "The Son of God was revealed for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil" (NRSV), the text for Sermon 62, "The End of Christ's Coming."

For Wesley, salvation was all about *restoration*. Salvation is *healing* from the disease of sin. God's love in Christ is "the medicine of life, the never-failing remedy, for all the evils of a disordered world, for all the miseries and vices" of men and women.¹⁴ The true "religion of Jesus Christ" is "God's method of *healing a soul*" that is diseased by sin. "Hereby the great Physician of souls applies medicines to heal this sickness, to restore human nature, totally corrupted in all its faculties."¹⁵ Wesley said, "This is the religion we long to see established in the world, a religion of love and joy and peace, having its seat in the heart, . . . but ever showing itself by its fruits, continually springing forth . . . in every kind of beneficence, in spreading virtue and happiness all around it."¹⁶ "According to Scripture," Wesley said, "the Christian religion was designed 'for the healing of the nations.'"¹⁷ As he grew older, Wesley increasingly emphasized salvation as the healing of the whole created order.

Seeing the world through a Wesleyan lens means *seeing* the New Creation *now*, through eyes of faith, based on holy Scripture, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. "Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see" (Heb. 11:1). By the eyes of faith, we see "a new heaven and a new earth." We foresee the fulfillment of the promise, "God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God" (Rev. 21:1-3). By faith we now see, anticipate, and hope for the New Creation, the "reconciliation of all things." And we have now received the Holy Spirit, the anticipatory present experience of the final new creation (Eph. 1:13-14). When we come to know God

¹⁴ Wesley, *An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, in *Works of John Wesley*, Bicentennial Ed., 11:45.

¹⁵ Wesley, Sermon 44, "Original Sin," III.3.

¹⁶ Wesley, *Earnest Appeal*, in *Works of John Wesley*, Bicentennial Ed., 11:46.

¹⁷ Wesley, Sermon 61, "The Mystery of Iniquity," Par. 31 (Rev. 22:2).

through Jesus Christ, we experience the firstfruits of that total restoration that Paul describes in Romans 8, that Isaiah pictures, and that the Book of Revelation shows us so movingly.

Wesley was clear however that the restoration of all things does not come without suffering. Romans 8:17-24 speaks of our “groanings” and “sufferings”; as we wait and work in hope, we are called to “share in [Jesus’] sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.” In fact the whole creation, now in “bondage to decay,” is “groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.” We ourselves “groan inwardly” as we wait for the full liberation, waiting “in eager expectation” together with all creation for the coming restoration of all things. We suffer, but like a mother in labor we suffer in hope. If we suffer for and with Jesus Christ in this hope, the suffering becomes part of the redemption.

This Romans 8 emphasis was not lost on Wesley. He saw suffering as a mystery, but a necessary one in order that God’s glory may be fully revealed. God achieves the world’s redemption through suffering—the suffering of Jesus Christ above all, but we become sharers, partakers, in Jesus’ sufferings—and God weaves those (and eventually all suffering, Wesley believed) into his redemptive, restorative purposes.

In Wesley’s view, true Christianity involves “not only doing but *suffering*”—which is perfectly consistent with happiness. Wesley quoted Chrysostom: “The Christian has his sorrows as well as his joys; but his sorrow is sweeter than joy.” Wesley argued that sufferings, rather than “preventing or lessening our happiness, . . . greatly contribute thereto, and indeed constitute no [small] part of it.” Love itself leads to suffering; Wesley notes that “the love of our neighbour will give rise to sympathizing sorrow: it will lead us

to visit the fatherless and widow in their affliction [Jas. 1:27], to be tenderly concerned for the distressed, and ‘to mix our pitying tear with those who weep.’”¹⁸

Wesley tallies up the “innumerable benefits” that come to us “through the channel of sufferings.” He writes,

“What are termed afflictions in the language of men are in the language of God styled blessings.” Indeed had there been no suffering in the world a considerable part of religion, yea, and in some respects the most excellent part, could have had no place therein; . . . It is by sufferings that our faith is tried, and therefore made more acceptable to God.¹⁹

In his sermon “On Patience” (James 1:4), Wesley defined patience as “a disposition to suffer whatever pleases God, in the manner and for the time that pleases him.” Sufferings are neither to be despised nor made too much of. The patient Christian knows that ultimately “God his Father” is “the Author of all his suffering,” and that God’s motive for allowing us to suffer is love, so that we may be “partakers of his holiness” (Heb. 12:10), experiencing the full the restoration of the image of God.²⁰

Wesley saw suffering however not just as private virtue, or simply as part of compassionate service. Wesley frankly admitted the suffering of all creation—viewing that suffering within the larger framework of the restoration of all things (referring to Romans 8). In a remarkable passage in his sermon “The New Creation” Wesley writes,

How many millions of creatures in the sea, in the air, and on every part of the earth, can now no otherwise preserve their own lives than by taking away the lives of others; by tearing in pieces and devouring their poor, innocent, unresisting fellow-

¹⁸ Wesley, Sermon 84, “The Important Question,” Par. 6. The final quotation is from Alexander Pope.

¹⁹ Wesley, Sermon 59, “God’s Live to Fallen Man,” Par. 37.

²⁰ Wesley, Sermon 83, “On Patience,” Par. 3; cf. *ENNT*, 848 (Heb. 12:10).

creatures! Miserable lot of such innumerable multitudes, who, insignificant as they seem, are the offspring of one common Father, the creatures of the same God of love! . . . But it shall not always be so. He that sitteth upon the throne will soon change the face of all things, and give a demonstrative proof to all his creatures that “his mercy is over all his works” [Ps. 145:9]. The horrid state of things which at present obtains will soon be at an end. On the new earth no creature will kill or hurt or give pain to another. . . . “The wolf shall dwell with the lamb” (the words may be literally as well as figuratively understood) “and the leopard shall lie down with the kid” [Isa. 11:6]. “They shall not hurt or destroy” [Isa. 11:9] from the rising up of the sun to the going down of the same.²¹

Perhaps the most remarkable thing here (bypassing all the scientific questions we might raise) is that Wesley sees this restoration, this new creation, as literal and physical, not exclusively spiritual. Passages such as Isaiah 11 are to be taken “literally as well as figuratively.”

Seeing the world in a Wesleyan way, then, means living in the hope of the restoration of all creation—and understanding that our present sufferings somehow play a necessary part in *our* contribution to the kingdom of God in its fullness.

Conclusion

Our television and computer screens, our billboards and newspapers, our movie theatres and magazines incessantly offer us *ways of viewing the world*. They present a vision of reality. But it is distorted vision; a twisted worldview and a suicidal narrative, “the path that leads to destruction.”

²¹ Wesley, Sermon 64, “The New Creation,” Par. 17.

Seeing the world through a Wesleyan lens gives an expansive, audacious vision. More than a worldview, this is a way of living out God's plan in the world and engaging in the mission of the one who said, "As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you" (John 20:21).

A Wesleyan vision means living in "eager expectation" of God's full salvation, the time of "general restoration," the time when all things are brought to fulfillment and the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is glorified in all things forever. With that vision and expectation, we seek to "live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God" (Col. 1:10). Filled with the Spirit, we become agents of the reality we see through the gift of faith.

If I am Wesleyan, then, I will:

1. *Seek to live and act always in the presence of God and to live a well-ordered, devout and holy life.* I will know this is possible only through being filled with and walking in the Spirit, and that the role of the Spirit is to help me live and act like Jesus Christ, filled with Jesus' passion to glorify God and do the work of the kingdom.

2. *Ground my life in Scripture*—in its daily reading and study, seeking to obey and not just hear the Word. I will understand Scripture through God's revelation in Jesus Christ (and vice versa), and will know and practice the fact that the Bible is not a private devotional book but the book of the church, the Book of the Covenant, to be interpreted and practiced in community.

3. *Practice an optimism of grace,* born of God's promises in Scripture, the resurrected life of Jesus Christ, and the promise of the kingdom of God.

4. *Yearn for the renewal of the church* locally, regionally, and globally, and give practical expression to that yearning by committed involvement in a local Christian community and through using my spiritual gifts and other resources to advance the vitality and mission of the church worldwide.

5. *Have a vision for God's work in the world in all its dimensions*—and especially a vision for the proclamation and demonstration of the Good News of Jesus Christ and his reign to all cities and all earth's peoples. I will see the image of God reflected in all persons and all cultures, even though obscured by sin. My passion will be that "God's will be done on earth as in heaven" in all dimensions of society and among all earth's peoples.

6. *Have a passion for spreading Jesus' Good News among the poor*, building the church among the poor, learning from "the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the alien," and seeking to end unjust oppression, provide for basic human needs everywhere, and work for the just ordering of society, locally and globally. I will be aware of "the danger of increasing riches," not "laying up treasure on earth" beyond prudent personal stewardship so that I don't become a burden to others. I will insist that a chief measure of the authenticity of government is whether it "secures justice for the poor and upholds the cause of the needy" (Psalm 140:12).

7. *I will see "the wisdom of God in creation,"* worshiping God in awe and wonder when I consider all the works of his hand, the intricacies and complexities of earth's ecosystems and of the whole universe. I will seek to understand God's intent for the created order and how that fits into and clarifies for us God's plan of redemption and new creation. I will practice the creation-care stewardship that God has given to humankind,

not merely out of obedience, but because I see the unavoidable connection between human well-being and the well-being of the earth, and because I live in certain hope that “the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God” (Rom. 8:21 TNIV).

This is what I will do and be if I am genuinely a Wesleyan Christian. Of course, this comprehensive way of incarnating the gospel is really not all that *Wesleyan*. As I understand it, it is biblical.

For those of us in the Wesleyan tradition, the goal is to follow John Wesley as he followed Jesus Christ. For *all of us*, the goal is to follow Jesus faithfully in our world, seeking to glorify God above all, and to keep God’s reign absolutely central in our lives (Mt. 6:33).

Perhaps the Apostle Peter’s reference to spiritual gifts in 1 Peter 4:10-11 applies also to the gifts or charisms we share in our different theological traditions: “Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s multicolored grace . . . so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen” (1 Pt. 4:10-11 TNIV, substituting “multicolored” for “in its various forms”).

One day in his travels Wesley came to the city of Salisbury. There he found a nine-year-old Methodist girl, Elizabeth Bushell, who wanted to take the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper along with the other Methodists at the local (Anglican) parish church, but was refused because of her age.

Wesley took the little girl on his knee, talked with her about the meaning of the Lord's Supper, and "then and there administered to her the sacrament of Holy Communion."

Elizabeth Bushell grew up to serve the Lord all her days.²²

I want to see the world, and see people, the way John Wesley did—through the eyes of God's love.

— END —

²² Cited in Curnock, ed., *Journal of the Rev. John Wesley*, 5:291.