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**NURTURING THE NEW CREATION:
REFLECTIONS ON A WESLEYAN TRAJECTORY**
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Nature, the world, has no value, no interest for Christians.
The Christian thinks only of himself and the salvation of
his soul.¹

When Ludwig Feuerbach issued this dismissive characterization of Christian teaching in the mid-nineteenth century, he spoke for a growing group of “cultured despisers” of traditional Christian soteriology and eschatology. Feuerbach argued that preoccupation with a mythical heaven above led Christians to neglect both human culture and the natural world below. Moreover, the purely spiritual nature of this posited heavenly existence, he contended, inclined Christians toward a self-contradictory denial of the body with its physical needs and desires.²

Feuerbach’s ability to buttress his characterizations with a number of quotations from traditional Christian teachers made it impossible for theologians to ignore his charge. Indeed, it became a standard foil for main-stream Christian treatments of eschatology in the twentieth century.³ Many of these have acquiesced to the claim that the model of future eternal life in Christian scripture and tradition was a human construct which encouraged disregard for the present human situation, and turned their

¹Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 287.

²Cf. *ibid*, 287–92, 308–17.

³For helpful surveys of discussions of eschatology in the twentieth century see Brian Hebblethwaite, *The Christian Hope* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 131–98; and Christoph Schwöbel, “Last Things first? The Century of Eschatology in Retrospect,” in *The Future as God’s Gift*, edited by David Fergusson & Marcel Sarot (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000), 217–41.

efforts to creating “demythologized” models of Christian hope that confined its concern to present human welfare. But over the last few decades there have been a growing number of nuanced reaffirmations of Christian hope for God’s final victory. Central to these reaffirmations has been an insistence on the positive implications of this *eschatological* hope for present human societies and—in recent years—for the whole creation.

The goal of this essay is to explore how characteristic emphases of John Wesley might be related to the resurgent interest in the eschatological affirmation of new creation. At first glance the chances for a positive relationship would seem bleak. There are passages in Wesley’s writings that Feuerbach could easily cite as evidence for his charge. For example, in an early sermon he takes it for granted that “we all agree in calling life a burden . . . [and that] death is not only a haven, but an entrance into a far more desirable country.” And one of his last sermons was devoted to the theme that human life in this world is a protracted *illusion* when compared with the wonderful and terrible *realities* of life after death.⁴ John closed this sermon with one of Charles Wesley’s hymns:

Vanish then this world of shadows!
Pass the former things away!
Lord, appear! appear to glad us,
With the dawn of endless day!
O conclude this mortal story!
Throw this universe aside;
Come, eternal King of glory,
Now descend and take thy bride!⁵

While recognizing these strands in Wesley’s work, in recent years scholars have begun to stress how central the theme of new creation is to his mature theological convictions.⁶ I share this conviction, and believe that careful consideration of Wesley’s conception of God’s work of new creation offers insights for our own engagement with this theme. This is not to suggest that he can save us the work of contemporary reflection by handing over a stable and fully adequate model. Indeed, consideration of his comments on new creation cannot go far without recognizing significant changes in his conception of this work over the course of his life. But this is where the most instructive insights are to be found, for these changes were not haphazard in nature.

⁴See Sermon 133, “Death and Deliverance,” §4, *Works* 4:208; and Sermon 124, “Human Life a Dream,” *Works* 4:109–19.

⁵*Hymns for the Year 1756*, p. 22; quoted in *Works* 4:119.

⁶See particularly Theodore H. Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley’s Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998).

I hope to demonstrate that the revisions and clarifications in Wesley's conception of new creation can be traced as an ongoing *trajectory* of his search for a biblically and experientially more adequate alternative to certain emphases in his inherited soteriology and eschatology. This trajectory emerged, and will be first sketched, in the developments leading to Wesley's mature understanding of the new birth and sanctification. Then we will follow the broadening focus of his later years, as he brings the convictions of this trajectory to bear on the socioeconomic and the cosmic dimension of God's work of new creation. I will conclude by considering how we might best honor our Wesleyan heritage by continuing development of this trajectory.

The Dimensions of *New Creation* in the Witness of Scripture

Recent theological discussion of the new creation has emphasized primarily the present socioeconomic and ecological implications of eschatology, precisely because it has been framed as a counter to the caricature of Feuerbach. By contrast, the most frequent use of "new creation" and its cognates in Wesley's writings is in relation to the spiritual transformation of new birth and sanctification. This is not an accident, or an idiosyncratic use; it reflects one of the most explicit New Testament uses of the phrase, in 2 Corinthians 5:17–20 (NRSV):

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

Perhaps the strongest biblical invocation of the theme of new creation that emphasizes God's transformation of human social relationships is Isaiah 65:17–25 (NRSV):

For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth;
the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.
But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating;
for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight.
I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people;
no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress.

No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days,
or an old person who does not live out a lifetime;
for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth,
and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed.
They shall build houses and inhabit them;
they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.
They shall not build and another inhabit;
they shall not plant and another eat;
for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be,
and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.
They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity;
for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord—and their descendants as well.
Before they call I will answer,
while they are yet speaking I will hear.
The wolf and the lamb shall feed together,
the lion shall eat straw like the ox;
but the serpent—its food shall be dust!
They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.

And while there are hints of God's concern for the whole creation in the Isaiah passage, the text that is generally taken as affirming most strongly that God's new creation will involve the entire natural order—including human bodies—is Romans 8:18–23:

I consider the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.

Recognition of the various dimensions scripture ascribes to God's work of new creation has led Greg Beale, a New Testament scholar, to argue recently that the theme of new creation should be seen as the controlling conception for all of eschatology, and the integrative center of all the major theological ideas of the New Testament.⁷ Wesley could easily agree, and would particularly emphasize how this theme integrally connects soteriology and eschatology. As such, this tracing of the trajectory in his consideration of the theme of new creation will begin with the dimension highlighting the spiritual transformation of those reconciled to God.

⁷Greg K. Beale, "The Eschatological Conception of New Testament Theology," in *Eschatology In Bible and Theology*, edited by Kent E. Brower & Mark W. Elliott (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 11–52.

New Creation: the Spiritual Dimension

In Wesley's Anglican context, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, the most common assumed focus of God's salvific work was individual human *souls* and the dominant connotation of salvation was *deliverance*. An earlier process of detemporalizing Christian hope had culminated in the broad acceptance of the assumption—given lasting literary expression by Dante—that the core Christian hope concerned whether or not at death our soul would be delivered from the troubles of this probationary world and allowed to ascend into the “rest” of the timeless and ethereal heavenly realm.⁸

The overtones of this general model come through clearly in Wesley's earliest sermons, particularly the first (manuscript) sermon after his ordination titled “Death and Deliverance.”⁹ But equally striking in these early sermons is Wesley's concern to tie the prospect of any future deliverance to the expectation of Christian obedience in this life. Consider a 1730 sermon:

Who indeed shall recover us from the body of death? Who shall restore our native immortality? We answer with the Apostle, ‘I thank God, Jesus Christ our Lord!’ ‘As in Adam all died, so in Christ shall all be made alive!’ —all who accept of the means which he hath prepared, who walk by the rules which he hath given them. All these shall by dying conquer the first death, and shall never taste the second. The seeds of spiritual death they shall gradually expel, before this earthly tabernacle is dissolved, that this too, when it has been taken down and thoroughly purged, may be rebuilt ‘eternal in the heavens’.¹⁰

Notice that the thankfulness addressed to God in this passage is for Christ's provision of the rules and disciplines of the new covenant; there is no stress on the importance of God's *new creation* that Paul highlighted in 2 Corinthians 5:17.

The apparent assumption is that our *original* creation conveyed the main resources we need to embrace Christ's rules and thus expel the seeds of spiritual death. Indeed, Wesley had been trained up in a long-standing model of the moral life that identified the key resource for effective moral living as our human rationality. While Christian forms of this model might stress the need for revelation of truths that strengthen the

⁸For a good history of the ascendancy of this model, see Colleen McDannell & Bernhard Lang, *Heaven: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).

⁹Sermon 133, “Death and Deliverance,” *Works* 4:206–14.

¹⁰Sermon 141, “The Image of God,” §III, *Works* 4:299.

control of our reason over the morally disorienting effects of the human passions and affections, they did not typically see a need for any new provision of rational capacities per se.¹¹

Affirming Its Present Availability

Central to Wesley's spiritual journey leading up to Aldersgate was his disillusionment with this inherited model of the moral life. He came to recognize by hard experience that rational persuasion of "the beauty and advantage of virtue and the deformity and ill effect of vice alone cannot resist, much less overcome and heal, one irregular appetite or passion."¹² This made him a ripe candidate for exposure to an alternative model of the moral life, classically articulated by Augustine. This model judged reason to be more the slave than the master of human passions and affections, and stressed how these passions and affections had been distorted by the Fall. Accordingly, it insisted that there is no hope for authentic Christian living unless there is first a *new creation* of truly Christian affections in the person, for the affections are the springs from which all outward living flows.

Wesley's deeper encounter with the Augustinian stream of spirituality in early 1738, via a group of English Moravians, was marked by the emergence in his preaching of an insistence that Christians should manifest being new creations, specifically invoking 2 Corinthians 5:17.¹³ Then, at Aldersgate, he found "heavenly, healing light" breaking in upon his soul and enabling him to love God and neighbor in a distinctively new way, as he experienced a personal assurance of God's loving acceptance.¹⁴ The empowering impact of this experience became the lens through which Wesley appropriated the theme of new creation in his mature thought.

Wesley's appropriation of this theme was aided by his embrace of the empiricist swing in eighteenth-century British philosophy. For empiricism, truth is experienced receptively by the human intellect, rather than

¹¹For more discussion of the following summary of Wesley's "moral psychology" see Randy L. Maddox, "A Change of Affections: The Development, Dynamics, and Dethronement of John Wesley's 'Heart Religion,'" in *"Heart Religion" in the Methodist Tradition and Related Movements*, edited by Richard B. Steele (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 2001), 3–31.

¹²Sermon 62, "The End of Christ's Coming," §§1–3, *Works* 2:472–73.

¹³Cf. *Journal* entries for 4 February 1738 (*Works* 18:223), 17 March 1738 (*Works* 18:231) and 26 March 1738 (*Works* 18:232). There is some hint that Wesley was making this point in a judgmental manner, given the negative reaction he records.

¹⁴See Sermon 9, "Spirit of Bondage and Adoption," §III.1–3, *Works* 1:260–61; and Sermon 77, "Spiritual Worship," §II.5, *Works* 3:96–97.

preexistent within it or imposed by reason upon human experience. In terms of the dynamics of human willing this philosophical conviction led to the parallel insistence that we are *moved* to action only as we are experientially *affected*. To use an example, they held that rational persuasion of the rightness of loving others is not sufficient of itself to move us to do so; we are ultimately inclined and enabled to love others only as we experience being loved ourselves. Wesley's embrace of this conviction is reflected in his insistence that it is only in response to experiencing God's gracious love for us, shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit, that our capacity for truly loving God and others is called into being.¹⁵

This spiritual renewal made possible by the experience of God's love became a crucial dimension of *new creation* in Wesley's mature thought. And his strong affirmation of the *present availability* of this new provision marked the beginning of a trajectory in Wesley's theological development. Drawing on Hebrews 6:5, he was soon describing this renewing experience of God's love as a present taste of "the powers of the world to come."¹⁶ And he was insisting that the salvation promised in scripture involves "not barely (according to the vulgar notion) deliverance from hell, or going to heaven, but a *present* deliverance from sin, a restoration of the soul to its primitive health ... the renewal of our souls after the image of God in righteousness and true holiness, in justice, mercy, and truth."¹⁷

Recognizing Its Processive Character

As soon as Wesley affirmed the present availability of this provision of new creation, he was forced to clarify its character. In 2 Corinthians 5:17 Paul speaks of *everything* old passing away, and *everything* becoming new. Did he mean that this complete transformation takes place instantaneously? The English Moravians thought so, and they led Wesley to expect that one who experienced new creation would be instantaneously free from all sin, fear, and doubt.

This expectation placed Wesley in a bind when he was forced to admit to himself shortly after Aldersgate that his "wound was not fully healed."¹⁸ On the terms of the English Moravians, this would imply that

¹⁵This point permeates Wesley's post-Aldersgate works. For some examples: *Character of a Methodist*, §13, *Works* 9:39; *Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, §61, *Works* 11:70; and Sermon 120, "The Unity of the Divine Being," §17, *Works* 4:67.

¹⁶Sermon 7 (1746), "The Way to the Kingdom," §I.10, *Works* 1:223. See also Sermon 77, "Spiritual Worship," §II.5, *Works* 3:96.

¹⁷*Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, Pt. I, §3, *Works* 11:106 (emphasis added).

¹⁸See *Journal* (6 June 1738), *Works* 18:254.

there had been no new creation at all. But Wesley could not deny that his sense of God's loving acceptance that evening had effected a significant, if incomplete, spiritual renewal in his life.¹⁹ While it took some time, Wesley's reflection on his own journey, the advice of others (including some German Moravians), and his involvement in the revival, convinced him of the need to distinguish clearly between the new birth and sanctification proper—the first being the empowerment that is spawned by our sense of God's loving acceptance, including the power to resist sin; the second being the gradual renewal of our moral inclinations into Christ-likeness that this empowerment makes possible.²⁰ In other words, Wesley's continuing trajectory included the hard-won recognition that God's gift of our new creation does not typically bring full transformation instantaneously, but *nurtures this transformation over time*.

One way to trace this growing recognition is to watch Wesley's appeals to 2 Corinthians 5:17 in describing the transformation that takes place when we respond to God's pardoning love. In the early 1740s, in the face of strong criticism of his new emphasis on this dimension of the new creation, Wesley continued to invoke this verse to defend the dramatic nature of the change that accompanies our initial response to God.²¹ But by mid-decade such appeals fade from both his *Journal* references and his published sermons. One likely reason is growing discomfort with how this verse can suggest that our new creation is instantaneously complete. This suspicion is strengthened by noting when Wesley takes up the text again. In the early 1760s two of his followers, Thomas Maxfield and George Bell, began to champion a two-stage model of Christian conversion. This model held that: 1) the merely justified were not yet new creatures at all, 2) they would become new creatures only if they subsequently received the "baptism of the Holy Spirit," and 3) in this event they would be instantaneously transformed into angelic perfection—because in a new creature *everything* old has passed away, *everything* has become new.²² Wesley responded with a sharp letter to Maxfield that insisted the newly justified are *truly* new creatures even though they are not yet *fully* new creatures, and that rejected the possibility of angelic perfection for any Christian in this life. Then, to counter the influence of

¹⁹Note particularly his extended reflection later that year on the ways in which he could affirm that he was, or was not yet, a "new creature" in *Journal* (14 Oct. 1738), *Works* 19:16–19. See also *Journal* (16 Dec. 1738), *Works* 19:27–28; and *Journal* (4 Jan. 1739), *Works* 19:29–31.

²⁰For a masterful study of these transitions see Richard Heitzenrater, "Great Expectations: Aldersgate and the Evidences of Genuine Christianity," in *Mirror and Memory* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1989), 106–49.

²¹E.g., *Journal* (1 January 1741), *Works* 19:176; *Journal* (2 May 1741), *Works* 19:192; and Sermon 40, "Christian Perfection," §II.17, *Works* 2:114.

²²For more discussion of the claims of Maxfield and Bell see W. Stephen Gunter, *The Limits of 'Love Divine'* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1989), 215–21.

Maxfield on the movement, Wesley published both this letter and a sermon titled “On Sin in Believers.”²³ While he took 2 Corinthians 5:17 as the text for this sermon, his point was to insist that the new creation it promises is not a single instantaneous event. In the new birth we are truly, but only *partly* renewed. New Christians soon realize that unholy habits and inclinations remain in their character. These pass away, being replaced by holy habits and inclinations, only as we subsequently grow in grace. Moreover, Wesley warns in this sermon, we should never expect to reach a stage in this life where there is no room for yet further nurturing of our “new creation.”

Another reflection of this trajectory is the mature Wesley’s growing recognition that, as mortal creatures, we typically experience the work of God in our lives in progressive *degrees*. Almost immediately after Aldersgate he was defending the reality of degrees of faith and degrees of assurance, and soon he was assuming that there are degrees of the regenerating impact of God’s grace in our lives.²⁴ But what is most important for our topic is that he came to equate our degree of transformation in Christ-likeness with the degree of our present participation in God’s eschatological saving work.²⁵ It is this connection that led Clarence Bence to speak of Wesley’s *processive* eschatology.²⁶ Bence’s point is not just that Wesley believed eschatological salvation had a present dimension, but that Wesley emphasized how this dimension is subject to ongoing realization. He refused to be content with any particular attainment, there was always a new goal calling us forward to further transformation. Indeed, Wesley even showed some support for the possibility that the redeemed will continue to develop through all eternity.²⁷

Emphasizing Its Cooperant Dynamics

Convictions about the temporal nature of spiritual renewal are closely related to one’s assumptions about the relative roles of divine and human

²³The letter is reprinted in *Journal* (29 Oct 1762), *Works* 21:394–95. Wesley considered the sermon so crucial he inserted it into subsequent editions of his first volume of sermons: Sermon 13, “On Sin in Believers,” *Works* 1:317–34; see esp. §IV.2 (326).

²⁴See *The Principles of a Methodist*, §29 (*Works* 9:64), where Wesley quotes approvingly a summary of his position as distinguishing between two degrees of regeneration. Cf. discussion of Wesley’s affirmation of degrees of faith, assurance, and regeneration in Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994), 126, 155.

²⁵Cf. Sermon 77, “Spiritual Worship,” §II.6, *Works* 3:96: “As our knowledge and our love of him increase by the same degrees, and in the same proportion, the kingdom of an inward heaven must necessarily increase also.”

²⁶Clarence Bence, “Processive Eschatology: A Wesleyan Alternative,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 14.1 (1979): 45–59.

²⁷See *Farther Thoughts Upon Christian Perfection*, Q. 29, *Works* (Jackson) 11:426.

agency in salvation. It is well known that Wesley's sense of these latter dynamics was also impacted by Aldersgate, then further nuanced as his mature perspective took form. Albert Outler has well described the overall process as a spiraling transition "from a gospel of moral rectitude, to the gospel of faith alone, to the gospel of 'faith working by love'."²⁸

Since there is little need to demonstrate this basic development, I would draw attention to Wesley's mature account of its human dynamics. We noted already his adoption of an "affectional moral psychology," with its emphasis that our ability to love, for example, is dependent upon our experiencing being loved. I need to add now that while he believed the affections are responsive, he did not consider them purely transitory. Rather, he was convinced that they are progressively strengthened and shaped into enduring dispositions through their engagement. Thereby we are progressively more inclined and enabled to act in similar fashion. "Tempers" was Wesley's common designation for these formed dispositions.²⁹ Enduring sinful dispositions were "unholy tempers," while "holy tempers" encompassed the range of virtues that are awakened by our experience of love and dispose us to responsive acts of love to God and others. On these terms, the essential goal of the spiritual dimension of the *new creation* is the recovery of holy tempers.³⁰

But how does this recovery take place? How did Wesley assume that our sin-debilitated affections are re-empowered and the distortions of their patterning influence reshaped? He was quite clear that we cannot accomplish this through our human efforts alone. He felt so strongly about this that in one of his most extended descriptions of the dynamics of the Christian life he may have coined the word "re-act" to make his point:

The life of God in the soul of a believer ... immediately and necessarily implies the continual inspiration of God's Holy Spirit: God's breathing into the soul, and the soul's breathing back what it first receives from God [But] God does not continue to act upon the soul unless the soul re-acts upon God. ... He first loves us, and manifests himself unto us ... He will not continue to breathe into our soul unless our soul breathes toward him again; unless our love, and prayer, and thanksgiving return to him.³¹

²⁸Introduction to Sermon 127, "The Wedding Garment," *Works* 4:139.

²⁹See Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 69–70; and Kenneth J. Collins, "John Wesley's Topography of the Heart," *Methodist History* 36 (1998): 162–75.

³⁰Cf. *Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, Pt. I, §3, *Works* 11:106; and Sermon 91, "On Charity," §III.12, *Works* 3:306.

³¹Sermon 19, "The Great Privilege of Those that are Born of God," §III.2–3, *Works* 1:442. This is cited as a pioneer use of "react" in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2nd ed., 1989) 13:256.

Notice in this passage how closely Wesley ties the affirmation that grace is *responsive* to the insistence that it is also *responsible*—it is only as we re-act, that God acts more fully in transforming our lives. This tie reflects Wesley’s equally strong commitment to the integrity of the human response in salvation. The strongest defense of this commitment is his sermon “On Working Out Our Own Salvation,” based on Philippians 2:12–13. In this sermon Wesley repeatedly underlines the primacy of God’s gracious initiative in the whole process of salvation: It is only because God is already at work in us, empowering and inclining us, that we can work out our salvation. But he also rejects any suggestion that our working is an inevitable result of God’s grace: If we do not responsively put God’s gracious empowerment to work, its saving potential will be thwarted.³²

A key expression of this character of God’s “responsible grace,” for Wesley, is that God does not typically infuse holy tempers unilaterally or instantaneously complete. Rather, God awakens in believers the “seeds” of the various virtues. These seeds then take on mature strength and shape as we “grow in grace.”³³ And Wesley was particularly concerned to convince his followers that the “means of grace” are the key context within which this growth is nurtured. Importantly, Wesley understood the means of grace to serve both as avenues by which *God nurtures* and empowers us and as formative disciplines by which *we nurture* and shape our character into Christ-likeness. This led him to devote much of his pastoral-theological attention to developing a well-balanced set of the means of grace for his Methodist people.³⁴ In this effort we see an emphasis on cooperant dynamics firmly woven into his theological trajectory: we are called to nurture the new creation that God is actively nurturing within us.

Transition: Probing Its Wholistic Scope

The elements in the trajectory of Wesley’s reflection on the spiritual dimension of the new creation that we have been tracing were a fairly stable part of his soteriology by 1765. Indeed, his sermon on “The Scripture Way of Salvation,” published that year, is broadly taken as the most representative

³²Sermon 85, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation,” *Works* 3:199–209.

³³E.g., Ms Minutes (2 August 1745), Q. 1, in *John Wesley*, 152. See Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 178–79 for discussion of two passages where Wesley argues that holy tempers can be implanted in a fully mature state.

³⁴Cf. Henry H. Knight III, *The Presence of God in the Christian Life: John Wesley and the Means of Grace* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1992); and Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, Chapter 8.

overview of his mature soteriology.³⁵ The emerging characteristic woven into the trajectory of his considerations of new creation in the years following this classic sermon was a broadening focus toward more explicit probing of first the socioeconomic and then the cosmic dimensions ascribed to the new creation in scripture. This change of focus was in no way a depreciation of the spiritual dimension on Wesley's part; rather, it reflected his appreciation for—and desire to participate in—the wholistic scope of God's redemptive work.

Some central aspects of Wesley's understanding of the spiritual dimension of new creation facilitated the transition to more focal attention on the socioeconomic dimension. Of particular importance was his long-standing appreciation of the social nature of Christian life. Wesley insisted that while this life is deeply personal, it is not pursued effectively as solitary individuals. One of his best known assertions is that “The gospel of Christ knows no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness.”³⁶ While later Methodists have often taken this to be a call to political activism, Wesley was more concerned in this case with the dynamics of spiritual formation. As he elaborated elsewhere, “I mean not only that [holiness] cannot subsist so well, but that it cannot subsist at all without society, without living and conversing with [others].”³⁷

On these terms, it was natural for Wesley to define the present earthly expression of the Kingdom of God as involving more than just individuals who respond to God, highlighting the necessity for “a society to be formed, which [is] to subsist first on earth, and afterwards with God in glory.”³⁸ In a real sense, he considered the most crucial expression of God's present work of new creation to be its embodiment in a community of persons committed to one another and to the world around them. This is why he devoted so much effort to creating structures that could nourish his Methodist people with “social grace,” providing both the support and the accountability necessary for their spiritual journeys.³⁹

Among other impacts, life in such a supportive community helps sensitize us to a further aspect of the cooperant dynamics of God's work of new creation. Not only do we have a role to play in our own new creation but, as Paul reminded us in 2 Corinthians 5:17, we are called to share in God's reconciling work in the lives of others. Wesley placed particular emphasis on this responsibility, as evidenced by his idealistic description of the role of Anglican clergy:

³⁵Sermon 43, “The Scripture Way of Salvation,” *Works* 2:155–69

³⁶*Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1739), Preface, §§4–5, *Works* (Jackson) 14: 321.

³⁷Sermon 24, “Sermon on the Mount IV,” §I.1, *Works* 1: 533–34.

³⁸*NT Notes*, Matthew 3:2. See also Leon Hynson, “John Wesley's Theology of the Kingdom of God,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 23 (1988): 46–57.

³⁹Note the image of being nourished by “social grace” in a hymn sung at love feasts, *Hymns*, #507, st. 1, *Works* 7: 698.

O who is able to describe such a messenger of God faithfully executing his high office, *working together with God*, with the great Author both of the old and of the new creation! See his Lord, the eternal Son of God, going forth on that work of omnipotence, and creating heaven and earth by the breath of his mouth! See the servant whom he delighteth to honour, fulfilling the counsel of his will, and *in his name speaking the word whereby is raised a new spiritual creation*.⁴⁰

While emphasis on clergy as coworkers in God's ministry of new creation was common in Wesley's day, the same cannot be said for his growing encouragement of lay men and women to join in this cooperant work of "speaking the word"! Add to this the range of lay involvement as coworkers in God's transformation of human lives built into the multi-leveled spiritual formation structures that Wesley set up.⁴¹ In all of these settings Methodist members were challenged to recognize that participation in God's new creation involves more than just a concern for their individual spiritual lives.

Just as their mutual support benefited one another, Wesley believed that it would benefit society at large. This belief is evident in one of his earliest apologetic responses to the question of what type of "religion" the Methodists were seeking to promote:

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, in the inmost soul, but ever showing itself by its fruits, continually springing forth, not only in all innocence ... but likewise in every kind of beneficence, in spreading virtue and happiness all around it.⁴²

Given this assumption that authentic spiritual transformation expresses itself in benevolent actions in the larger society, it was almost inevitable that the trajectory in Wesley's convictions about the spiritual dimension of God's work of new creation would push him to ponder whether he was appreciating sufficiently the present availability of the socioeconomic dimension of this work.

New Creation: The Socioeconomic Dimension

As Isaiah 65 makes clear, the socioeconomic dimension of God's work of new creation involves more than just encouraging voluntary acts of

⁴⁰*An Address to the Clergy*, §I.3, *Works* (Jackson) 10:488 (emphasis added).

⁴¹See the insightful discussion of these structures in Thomas Albin, "'Inwardly Persuaded': Religion of the Heart in Early British Methodism," in *Heart Religion*, ed, Steele, 33–66.

⁴²*An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, §4, *Works* 11:46.

benevolence. God's expressed concern is to transform the current unjust and violent realities in human societies that force so many adults to labor in vain and guarantee so many children are born for calamity. How does this latter concern come through in Wesley's understanding of new creation? Did he see it as central to God's present salvific work? And did he consider advocacy for change in social and economic structures to be an integral aspect of our cooperation in God's work of new creation?

Several studies have effectively challenged any notion that Wesley was only concerned with "spiritual" matters, highlighting his political activism in tracts like *Thoughts on the Present Scarcity of Provisions* (1773) and *Thoughts upon Slavery* (1774).⁴³ But they have to admit that examples of such advocacy for change in current socioeconomic structures are largely confined to the last two decades of his work. Moreover, even in this period political advocacy was hardly his dominant concern. Wesley published many more sermons in his last years encouraging his Methodist followers to share their resources voluntarily with others in need than he did tracts calling for the political reform of social and economic structures.

What accounts for the relative rareness of emphasis on socioeconomic reform in Wesley's earlier years, or its emergence in his later years? Many have assigned the initial absence primarily to conservative political commitments which they believe Wesley inherited, commitments that would lead him to distrust all revolutionary agendas.⁴⁴ Some have emphasized as well Wesley's bourgeois status within the eighteenth-century British economic spectrum, contending that this fostered a social pessimism.⁴⁵ And one could make a case that Wesley rarely addressed the larger political arena, especially prior to the 1770s, because of how small and politically insignificant his movement was within the culture at large. While all of these factors likely played a role, I want to consider the impact as well of the trajectory we have been tracing in Wesley's convictions about God's work of new creation, and specifically how this trajectory was carried on in his changing stance on the various models of the "millennium."

Excursus on Millennial Models

The topic of the millennium is typically ignored by professional theologians today, outside of a sub-group of evangelical theologians. Indeed,

⁴³A good example is Theodore W. Jennings Jr., *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley's Evangelical Economics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990).

⁴⁴A quick survey of alternative identifications of Wesley's underlying political philosophy can be found in Theodore R. Weber, *Politics in the Order of Salvation: Transforming Wesleyan Political Ethics* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2001), 28–32.

⁴⁵E.g., Charles Villa-Vicencio, "Towards a Liberating Wesleyan Social Ethic for South Africa Today," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 68 (1989): 92–102; see 99.

partly because of the flamboyance of this sub-group, most others seem to place debate over alternative models of the millennium in the same category as debate over the date of Christ's second coming—namely, as irrelevant to present life, impossible to determine, and presumptuous even to attempt.

This reactionary dismissal has had unfortunate results. To begin with, it makes it difficult to discern the convictions of earlier theologians about the relationship of God's Rule to present socioeconomic realities, because these convictions are typically embedded in explicit or assumed millennial models. Moreover, as Richard Bauckham and Trevor Hart note, it is precisely those earlier writers who are most overtly millenarian (hence most easily dismissed) that have served in many respects as "the guardian of the more immanent and this-worldly aspects of the Christian eschatological hope."⁴⁶ The loss of their voice helped promote the type of other-worldly Christian hope that Feuerbach rightly critiqued.

In this light, Jürgen Moltmann's nearly unprecedented decision to make consideration of millenarianism central to a contemporary mainline treatment of eschatology is very much in keeping with his goal of highlighting the socio-political and ecological dimensions of God's work of new creation.⁴⁷ At the same time, it is not too surprising that his exposition reveals lack of clarity about the models that have been prominent.⁴⁸

The example of Moltmann demonstrates that even if our interest in Wesley's convictions about the socioeconomic dimension of God's work of new creation is driven by the question of its contemporary relevance, we still need to pay attention to his engagement with the various millennial models of his time. And we need to probe this engagement with a sufficient awareness of the models to be able to discern what they reveal about his convictions. Thus, as a prelude to tracing Wesley's engagement, I will sketch the origins of millennial models and the main variants.

The notion of the millennium is not uniquely Christian. It emerged in pre-Christian Judaism as a way of handling the alternative models of the future hope offered in Isaiah (long life in this world) and Daniel (eternal life in a reconstituted world). As an option to forcing a choice between these two models, it was proposed that Isaiah was describing a still-future thousand year golden age in this world, while Daniel was describing the final state after this age. Within Judaism this left three basic options:

⁴⁶Richard Bauckham & Trevor Hart, *Hope Against Hope* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 137; cf. 132–39.

⁴⁷See Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 131–202; his thesis is on p. 192.

⁴⁸Cf. Richard Bauckham, "Must Christian Eschatology be Millenarian? A Response to Jürgen Moltmann," in *Eschatology in Bible and Theology*, edited by Brower & Elliott, 263–77.

affirming Isaiah's vision of shalom in this world as the ultimate hope, affirming instead Daniel's vision of shalom coming fully only in a future world, or combining these with the millennium as an intermediate expression of the final hope.

In light of Christ's resurrection, the Christian choice was reduced to whether or not one saw a need for the intermediate expression of the millennium prior to God's creation of the new heavens and new earth. More accurately, that was the choice conveyed by the Hebraic roots of our faith. The Hellenistic culture that profoundly shaped early Christianity introduced further options. In particular, dominant currents in Greek philosophy, particularly the Platonic tradition, portrayed earthly existence as inherently defective and the ultimate human hope as release at the moment of death from this earthly setting into the realm of purely spiritual reality. The millennial models that emerged in early Christianity reflect the tensions of trying to integrate these two strands of our tradition. But the point that I will emphasize is that they also reflect the changing social location of Christians, and thus changing perspectives on the relation of Christian hope to the present state of affairs.⁴⁹

Irenaeus is representative of early Christians who endorsed the notion of the millennium as an intermediate expression of our final hope. When probing his affirmations it becomes clear that, in addition to honoring scriptural warrant, his sense of the need for the millennium was the counterpart of his conviction that God's Rule was finding little expression in the present socioeconomic situation (with Christianity marginal and persecuted) or in the lives of most Christians. As such, the purpose of the millennium for Irenaeus was to fulfill the promises of God's triumphant Rule in the present creation and to provide time for the additional spiritual growth that most believers needed before they would be ready to enter God's glorious presence. Since Irenaeus assumed that it would take the presence of the glorified ruling Christ to initiate the millennium, this general model became known as *premillennialism* (i.e., Christ returns *before* the millennium).

Some other early Christians, particularly those more drawn to the Hellenistic model, were uncomfortable with Irenaeus's assumption that deceased believers remain in a state of "sleep" in the grave until resurrected for the millennium. They argued that believers enter directly into

⁴⁹For an argument that socioeconomic factors are heavily determinative of millennial views, see Stanley Gundry, "Hermeneutics or Zeitgeist as the Determining Factor in the History of Eschatologies," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 20 (1977):45–55. Two helpful surveys of the various positions summarized below are Charles E. Hill, *Regnum Caelorum: Patterns of Future Hope in Early Christianity*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Clarendon, 2002); and Brian E. Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church: A Handbook of Patristic Eschatology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

God's heavenly presence (paradise) at death, where they participate consciously in God's eternal rule. This being the case, they saw no need for a future earthly millennial reign of Christ, an option that became known as *amillennialism*. Augustine gave this model its enduring form, and offers insight into its socioeconomic implications. The key point is that, in contrast with Irenaeus, Augustine framed his eschatology after Christianity's establishment as the religion of the Roman Empire. While he was careful not to equate God's present Rule univocally with either the empire or the church, he was bound to connect the new situation of the church with the promises about this Rule. Indeed, to talk about a future, more adequate, earthly Rule of God in this new context would constitute a challenge to the legitimacy of the Roman Empire—which is why belief in a millennial kingdom was condemned at the Council of Ephesus (431 CE).

The blend of elements in Augustine came to dominate Christian eschatology, particularly in the medieval West. The internal tendencies of this blend became ever more evident in the process. When deceased believers enter immediately into God's eternal Rule in paradise, the role of a future resurrection becomes increasingly moot. When heaven is epitomized in static and ethereal terms, the biblical notion of the new heavens and new earth fades from view. And, when the earthly expression of the God's present Rule is closely correlated with existing structures and reality, the *status quo* is underwritten. Overall, there was a tendency for the Bible's temporal hope of God's future vindication of the righteous and restoration of creation to be exchanged for that (neo-Platonic) model of the timeless transcendental relationship of Heaven, earthly life, and Hell depicted by Dante.

The Reformation raised some questions about the now standard amillennial model, but the Lutheran, Reformed, and Anglican traditions ultimately reaffirmed the model, at least wherever they achieved status as the established church now giving appropriate expression to God's present Rule. Those who suffered at their hands, namely the Anabaptists and others who rejected the very notion of established religion, were the key exception. They reclaimed premillennialism with its longing for a future time when God would dramatically vindicate the righteous and establish an earthly reign of true Christianity.

The significant new development took place among those Reformed communities located in settings where they were a political minority and their reformist agenda was stymied, such as the Puritans in early seventeenth-century England. Connecting their reformist impulse to their confidence in the sovereignty of God, influential Puritans developed the biblical mention of a "latter-day glory" into an optimistic variety of millennialism. They argued that the final period of this present earthly age (which they discerned as imminent) would witness the incursion of the full rule of God

through the power of the Spirit and the correlated faithful efforts of believers.⁵⁰ It is important to recognize the uniqueness of this position. While they retained the amillennial assumption that deceased believers enjoy a conscious awareness of God's Rule in paradise, they did not allow this to deflect concern from attaining a fuller expression of that Rule in this world. Likewise, while they looked forward to that fuller expression of God's Rule, they did not assume that it must be preceded by the return of Christ and the resurrection of the saints. In other words, they introduced shortly before Wesley's time the position now known as *postmillennialism*.

Affirming Its Present Availability

Since the Anglican reformation carried over the transcendental model of eschatology, its amillennial assumptions dominated Wesley's formal schooling. The unquestioned presence of these assumptions remains evident for some time in his writings.

The sermon expositing the Lord's Prayer in his 1748 series on the Sermon on the Mount provides a good example. When explaining the petition "Thy Kingdom come" he makes a distinction between two aspects of the Kingdom of God: one aspect is the "Kingdom of Glory," its eternal fullness in God's Presence; the other aspect is the "Kingdom of Grace," its present expression. He then focuses on how this petition is fulfilled for individuals when we repent and believe the gospel, thereby receiving the Kingdom of Grace; though he allows that the petition can be used in a secondary sense to pray for the "everlasting kingdom, the kingdom of glory in heaven, which is the continuation and perfection of the kingdom of grace on earth." Drawing this together, he paraphrases the intent of the petition as a desire that "the kingdom of grace come quickly, and swallow up all the kingdoms of earth; that all [persons], receiving [Christ] for their king ... may be filled with righteousness and peace and joy, with holiness and happiness, till they are removed hence into his heavenly kingdom, there to reign with him for ever and ever."⁵¹ The key thing to note is that at this point Wesley's emphasis concerning any present expression of the Kingdom of God is focused on the spiritual dimension of life. There is no emphasis on a socioeconomic expression, either at the moment or in some anticipated millennial age on earth.

But what should we make of this absence? It does correlate to Wesley's relative lack of concern for socioeconomic reform agendas at the time. But

⁵⁰See Peter Toon, "The Latter Day Glory," in *Puritan Eschatology*, ed. P. Toon (London: James Clarke, 1970), 23–41.

⁵¹Cf. Sermon 26, "Sermon on the Mount VI," §III.8–10, *Works* 1:581–84; quotations on 582.

it also suggests that Wesley was not embracing the tendency of many amillennialists to defend a specific church or nation as the fully adequate present embodiment of the Kingdom of God. In fact, another sermon in his series on the Sermon on the Mount concludes with Wesley's long satirical critique of the many "Christian kingdoms" and "Christian churches" of his day that were busy condemning and oppressing one another. He closes the critique with an exhortation to "hope against hope" that God may yet teach the inhabitants of the earth true righteousness, and to be faithful first-fruits of this righteousness until God calls us "up into the region of love, there to reign with him for ever and ever!"⁵²

This "hope against hope" soon created in Wesley himself openness to entertaining alternative models of the millennium. This became explicit in his 1755 comments on Revelation 20 in *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*. Wesley relied heavily upon Johann Bengel for these comments, and reproduced Bengel's peculiar solution to debates about Revelation 20—a proposal that there would be *two* millenniums, one before and one after Christ's return. Despite its mediating intentions, this proposal actually adopts the fundamental aspect of postmillennialism: the expectation of a future greater expression of the God's Rule on this earth, when a flourishing church effects a period of peace and righteousness without requiring a direct intervention of Christ. Notably, Wesley also drew upon the works of Daniel Whitby, John Gyse, and Philip Doddridge for the *Notes*, all convinced postmillennialists.

Within months of completing the *Notes*, Wesley received a letter from John Fletcher (the first contact from this key future associate) encouraging him to consider the alternative of premillennialism.⁵³ This marked the beginning of some intense interest in, and occasional debate over, the various millennial models among the Wesleyan Methodists.⁵⁴ Through this time one can spot mild postmillennial language creeping into Wesley's sermons, but he could also send an appreciative letter to Thomas Hartley for his premillennial defense of the soon approach of Christ's glorious reign on earth with his saints.⁵⁵ And, in his 1765 *Explanatory Notes upon the*

⁵²Sermon 22, "Sermon on the Mount II," §III.18, *Works* 1:507–509.

⁵³Cf. John Fletcher to John Wesley (29 November 1755), *Arminian Magazine* 16 (1793): 370–76, 409–16; excerpted in *Works* 26:613–16. Wesley would have been familiar with the general model of premillennialism from at least his own student days, when he read William Whiston's *New Theory of the Earth* (London: Roberts, 1691), see 327–50; Wesley records reading this 22 August 1725 in his Oxford diary.

⁵⁴Cf. Kenneth G. C. Newport, "Methodists and the Millennium," in *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 78 (1996): 103–22; reprinted in Newport, *Apocalypse and Millennium: Studies in Biblical Exegesis* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 91–118.

⁵⁵Letter to Thomas Hartley (27 March 1764), *Letters* (Telford) 4:234. The book he had read was Thomas Hartley, *Paradise Restored* (London: Richardson, 1764).

Old Testament, he could add a comment that a passage in Isaiah 60 promising there would be no more violence in the land “will be fulfilled during the thousand years wherein Christ shall reign upon earth.”

It is important to notice that what was drawing Wesley’s attention about premillennialism was its affirmation that the present socioeconomic expression of God’s Rule is *not* all that we could hope for in this earthly setting. On this score premillennialism and postmillennialism were in full agreement, and Wesley’s shared interest in these two reflected his dissatisfaction with the tendency of amillennialism to encourage acquiescence to the status quo. In other words, his move toward these options reflected a widening influence of the trajectory identified in his convictions about the spiritual dimension of new creation; now Wesley was seeking the most helpful way to affirm the *present availability* of God’s new creation of the socioeconomic dimension of life.

Recognizing Its Processive Character

Premillennialism and postmillennialism share the conviction that the righteous social conditions portrayed in texts like Isaiah 65 are God’s intention for this present earthly setting, not mere ideals or enticing previews of the fundamentally different existence in the new heavens and new earth. They also both look for God to create these conditions in the not-too-distant future. But their assumptions about the *character* of this creative work of God are quite different.⁵⁶

Premillennialists in the early church and in Wesley’s day typically assumed the transition from the current absence of God’s intended justice and peace in our midst to the future situation of the full presence of that justice and peace would be dramatic, likely instantaneous, and effected in essentially a unilateral manner by divine power. The glorified Christ would descend, subdue the ungodly, and usher the deserving into the millennial reign. Thus, while they affirmed that the socioeconomic new creation described in Isaiah 65 is for this present world, they did not assume that it was currently present in any significant degree. Nor did they tend to view our current human political activity concerning social and economic issues to be facilitating the transition to this new creation.

Postmillennialists developed their position in specific contrast with premillennialism. They insisted that God’s work of socioeconomic new creation was already underway, proceeding by gradual degrees toward

⁵⁶Gundry, “Hermeneutics or Zeitgeist,” is helpful in tracing these differences. See also a book focusing on twentieth century representatives of the different groups: Stanley J. Grenz, *The Millennial Maze* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992).

its full realization, and required no dramatic return of Christ to usher in this culmination. The premillennialists' doubts about these points, they suggested, reflected an undervaluation of the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit at work in individual Christian lives, in the church, and (for some, at least) in reformist social-economic movements in the world.

Given these differences, the trajectory we have been tracing would lead us to expect that when Wesley's attention shifted from the inadequacies of his inherited eschatology to comparing the alternatives of pre- and post-millennialism, he would be drawn toward the latter. This was indeed the case. In the last decade of his life he issued three major sermons that echo the Puritan idea of a "latter day glory" in describing how the Methodist movement, through its cultivated responsiveness to the work of the Spirit, was contributing to the "silent increase" of the Kingdom of God in the world. The eventual outcome of this increase was identified as an era of peace that fulfilled the promise in Isaiah 65 that "they shall not hurt or destroy in my holy mountain." And there was no mention of the return of Christ until this era of peace culminates.⁵⁷

Methodists today, over two centuries after these sermons were published, may rightly twinge at their undue optimism and triumphalist tone. But we also need to recognize that they reflect Wesley's sense of the "already/not yet" tension of New Testament eschatology.⁵⁸ On the one hand, he was rejecting the premillennial suggestion that God's promise to create anew the fallen socioeconomic realities of present life applies only to a privileged period at the end of the Christian dispensation. On the other hand, he was avoiding the common amillennial suggestion that God's renewal of socioeconomic realities was essentially completed at some earlier transition in the Christian dispensation, so there is little remaining need for (and should be little expectation of) further transformation in this age. In these late sermons Wesley presents God's work of new creation of the socioeconomic dimension of life as truly *already* present, but *not yet* nearly as complete as God intends for the Christian age. He preserves this tension by bringing into this dimension the emphasis on the *processive character* of God's renewing work that we noted earlier in the spiritual dimension.

⁵⁷See Sermon 63 (1783), "The General Spread of the Gospel," §§13–27, *Works* 2:490–99; Sermon 66 (1787), "The Signs of the Times," *Works* 2:522–33; and Sermon 102 (1787), "Of Former Times," *Works* 3:442–53. The image of "latter-day glory" can be seen in §16 (493), §II.1 (525), and §23 (453) respectively. The reference to Isaiah 65 is in Sermon 63, §26 (498).

⁵⁸A presentation that clearly recognizes this dynamic is Ben Witherington III, "Living in the Reign: The Dominion of God in the Wesleyan Tradition," in *The Wesleyan Tradition: A Paradigm for Renewal*, edited by Paul Chilcote (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 52–65.

Emphasizing Its Cooperant Dynamics

The third element of the trajectory we traced in Wesley's reflection on the spiritual dimension of new creation was his emphasis on its cooperant dynamics. This conviction was surely also involved in his eventual option for postmillennialism over premillennialism. Recall that premillennialists tended to view the socioeconomic dimension of new creation as established in a fairly unilateral manner by the glorified Christ. Since the work of the Spirit is typically described in terms of empowering and guiding, postmillennialists more naturally viewed the dynamics of this dimension of God's new creation as cooperant in nature: the Spirit's presence and work is the foundation of the possibility of this renewal, but we must responsively participate in nurturing the new socioeconomic conditions and structures. Wesley's particular appreciation of this point is evident when he devotes a concluding section of one postmillennial sermon to the argument that a key sign of the authenticity of the current Methodist renewal movement is that it is not trying to renew the world by force, but through the Spirit by the faith that works by love.⁵⁹

These late sermons also evidence Wesley's characteristic emphases about how we can best cooperate in God's nurturing of new socioeconomic realities. His broadest emphasis is on the church's mission of evangelism. Central to this emphasis is his conviction that transformed action in the world is grounded in transformed lives. As those already experiencing God's inner renewing work, Christians should seek to meet the social and economic needs of others. But we should not limit ourselves to concern for external welfare; like God, we should long that others experience as well the new creation of the spiritual dimension of their lives.⁶⁰ Part of the benefit of this renewal is that they then will be more likely to engage in beneficent care for others around them.

As noted earlier, there was some increased emphasis in Wesley's later years on types of cooperation reaching beyond evangelism and voluntary benevolence, particularly his own public advocacy of certain political reforms of social and economic structures. But this must be judged one of those places where the trajectory established in relation to the spiritual dimension of new creation was truncated in the socioeconomic dimension. Wesley went out of his way to affirm that all persons, not just Anglican clergy, should be allowed—and expected—to provide corporate support and accountability for the spiritual renewal of others. In marked

⁵⁹See Sermon 66, "The Signs of the Times," §II. 8, *Works* 2:529–30.

⁶⁰This point is laid out clearly in Kenneth J. Collins, "The Soteriological Orientation of John Wesley's Ministry to the Poor," *Asbury Theological Journal* 50 (1995): 75–92 (slightly revised reprint in *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 36.2 [2001]: 7–36).

contrast, he repeatedly rejected the claim that all persons should participate in the political processes that govern social and economic structures. While this reflected the political philosophy in which he was schooled, Theodore Weber has made a convincing case that it also reveals Wesley's failure to extend consistently his theological convictions about human nature (particularly our bearing of the "political" Image of God) and soteriology (particularly the emphasis on sanctification) to the socioeconomic dimension of new creation.⁶¹

New Creation: The Cosmic Dimension

If the socioeconomic dimension was the most evident beneficiary of Wesley's widening consideration of God's work of new creation in the 1770s, it was his increased emphasis on the cosmic dimension that gained notoriety in the 1780s. Specifically, the elderly Wesley issued strong affirmations of the inclusion of both animals and the physical world in God's new creation. Most of his contemporaries considered these affirmations idiosyncratic and wrong-headed.

Why would Wesley's contemporaries consider his affirmations so odd, given such biblical warrant as Isaiah 65 and Romans 8? Their reaction reflects the fact that the images of the restored paradisiacal garden bequeathed to Christianity from our Hebraic roots stood in direct tension with themes prominent in the Hellenistic roots of our tradition.

Those most likely to argue for the necessity of a renewed earth in the early church were premillennialists like Irenaeus; but for them this was a claim about the penultimate state of this world, not the ultimate expression of God's deliverance. Confining Isaiah's imagery to this age, premillennialists proved as prone as amillennialists to embrace the more "refined" notions of Greco-Roman culture when portraying the ultimate state.⁶² By the time of the early church these cultural notions were shaped by three key neo-Platonic assumptions. The first assumption was that temporality per se is imperfect, so any ideal state would be located "above" this temporal world in an Eternal Now, not in some awaited future. The second assumption was that matter was inherently imperfect, so only indivisible souls could exist in the ideal state of the Eternal Now. And the third assumption was that "soul" was found only in rational beings (vigorously rejecting Aristotle's notion of vegetative and animal "souls"), hence no non-human animals or plants—let alone the physical earth—were candidates for this ideal state.

⁶¹Cf. Theodore Weber, *Politics in the Order of Salvation: Transforming Wesleyan Political Ethics* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2001).

⁶²For more information on the following sketch, see McDannell & Lang, *Heaven*.

Saint Augustine can again represent the nuanced incorporation of these neo-Platonic assumptions into Christian teachings. He self-consciously revised the strong dualism of his earlier Manichean beliefs after becoming a Christian, eventually allowing that we would have some type of ethereal bodies in the afterlife. But he viewed this afterlife as timeless, and could see no place for animals, plants, or physical matter in such a setting. This led him to argue that the “creature” groaning for redemption in Romans 8 is actually the unregenerate nature of human beings, and to contend that the entrance of humans alone into eternal blessing was sufficient to fulfill scriptural promises, since humans are microcosms of creation (incorporating the physical, the living, the animal, and the rational).⁶³ Aquinas would echo these arguments, making it the standard Roman Catholic view in Wesley’s day.

The emphasis on the literal meaning of scripture in the Reformation led some like Luther to reaffirm animal salvation, drawing on Isaiah and Romans 8. Calvin’s cautious response was more typical. He allowed that there would be a renewed earth, but resurrected humans (in ethereal bodies) will not live on it, they will merely contemplate it from their heavenly setting. He then cautioned against useless debate over why God would do such a seemingly needless thing. This cautious affirmation of biblical imagery could not withstand the strong spirit/matter dualism introduced by Descartes. With “science” now reducing animals to material machines, scriptural interpretation that defended a literal notion of animals, or anything physical, participating in final salvation became rare across the spectrum of Western Christianity.⁶⁴

What was shared across most of the spectrum, excepting Anabaptists and a few others, was the assumption that the souls of the redeemed enter the timeless eternity of God’s presence at the moment of our death, and there enjoy a richer experience of life than we did here below, since we are no longer weighed down by our mortal body. This assumption runs back at least as far as Augustine, which makes it surprising how long Christians held on to the importance of the future reunification of the soul with the body at the general resurrection. They not only continued to affirm the resurrection of the body through the medieval period, they typically portrayed this event as reclaiming the very body placed in the grave (or its regathered parts when necessary)!⁶⁵ Of course, this reclaimed body

⁶³See the survey of the history of the interpretation of Romans 8:17–20 in Alan Rudrum, “Henry Vaughn, The Liberation of Creatures, and Seventeenth-Century English Calvinism,” *Seventeenth Century* 4 (1989): 34–54; esp. 37–45.

⁶⁴For a discussion of the degree to which Eastern Orthodoxy held on to more of a hope for the salvation of the whole creation, see Stanley S. Harakas, “The Earth Is The Lord’s: Orthodox Theology And The Environment,” *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 44 (1999): 149–62.

⁶⁵This topic is covered with fascinating detail in Carolyn Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

was then usually assumed to be transformed into a more refined ethereal form of matter, fit for the heavenly realm in which it would reside from this point on. Only with the growing influence of Cartesian dualism did significant numbers begin to assume that the afterlife would remain eternally a disembodied existence.

Affirming Its Future Reality

This means that Wesley was raised in a setting that broadly assumed our final state is “heaven above,” where human spirits dwelling in ethereal bodies join with all other spiritual beings (no animals!) in continuous worship of the Ultimate Spiritual Being. He imbibed this model in his upbringing, and through the middle of his ministry it was presented as obvious and unproblematic. Consider, for example, this well-known portion of the preface to his first volume of *Sermons*:

I am a spirit come from God and returning to God; just hovering over the great gulf, till a few moments hence I am no more seen—I drop into an unchangeable eternity! I want to know one thing, the way to heaven—how to land safe on that happy shore. God himself has condescended to teach the way: for this very end he came from heaven.⁶⁶

The absence of any sense of an eschatological new heavens and earth in quotations like this from his earlier years make the growing interest that Wesley shows in this cosmic dimension of God’s new creation in the last decades of his life quite striking. In this case, Wesley’s starting point within the pattern of the trajectory we have been tracing was slightly modified. He was not contesting positions that confined this dimension of God’s renewing work solely to the future, rather he was faced with defending the very notion that God’s work of new creation would include the whole cosmos.

When did Wesley begin to focus on God’s salvific intent for the physical creation itself? This is likely the element that most drew his attention to premillennialism in the mid 1760s. In particular, the opening section of Thomas Hartley’s *Paradise Restored*, which he read in 1764, was devoted to exegetical arguments that the millennial period must include all of creation, not just humanity.⁶⁷ A couple of years later Wesley reread Thomas Burnet’s *Theory of the Earth*, which had pioneered the eighteenth-century

⁶⁶*Sermons* (1746), Preface, §5, *Works* 1:105. Note also the comment that the “world to come” is so styled, not because it does not exist, but it is not yet visible, in *NT Notes*, Eph. 1:21.

⁶⁷Cf. Hartley, *Paradise Restored*, 1–73 (esp. p. 38).

enterprise of trying to explain the scriptural accounts of creation, the flood, the conflagration, and the new heavens and new earth in terms of modern science. Wesley expressed specific satisfaction with Burnet's defense of the plausibility of restored paradisiacal conditions on the earth.⁶⁸ But Burnet too was a premillennialist, and he took the language of the new heavens and new earth in the Book of Revelation to refer to the millennium, not to the final state of all things. Thus he presented the restored paradise as a temporary situation and was unsure what the state of the earth would be after that—though he speculated that it might be changed into a sun or a fixed star.

In other words, the good news for the physical cosmos in premillennialism was rather limited, lasting only a thousand years. Wesley would not remain content with this limitation. In the same year that he reread Burnet, he made reference to *A Discourse on the Conflagration and Renovation of the World* by James Knight, in which Knight contended that

as the heavens shall be dissolved, the elements melt, and the earth be burnt up; so the power of God will display itself again, in reforming and improving them with fresh occasions of perfection and beauty, *which will never give way to a second change*. ... The earth will pour forth its richest stores from its inmost bosom; and the air inspire *immortality* and joy in *every* creature.⁶⁹

Wesley's embrace of Knight's emphasis on the permanence of the future new creation is shown by his inclusion of the discourse, slightly abridged, in volume 20 of his own *Works* (1773).

This embrace is also congruent with the emergence in Wesley's writings at this time of the traditional distinction between three heavens. His point in recalling this distinction was to emphasize that only the third heaven is an unchanging reality, being the immediate residence of God. Wesley continued to allow that the saints ascend into this heaven at death. But now he added that their residence in the third heaven is only temporary, while they await the recreation of the (other two) heavens and the earth and their reunification with their resurrected bodies.⁷⁰

⁶⁸Thomas Burnet, *The Theory of the Earth*, 2 vols. (London: Walter Kettilby, 1684–90). Burnet had been Master of Charterhouse about a decade before Wesley entered as a student, so he likely knew this work quite early. He records reading it in his Oxford diary in July 1734. For his positive comments on Burnet's account of the new heavens and new earth when he reread it in 1770 see *Journal* (17 January 1770), *Works* 22:213–14.

⁶⁹James Knight. *A Discourse on the Conflagration and Renovation of the World* (London: J. Cox, 1736), republished by Wesley as "An Extract of Two Discourses on the Conflagration and Renovation of the World," *Works* (Pine) 20:290–320.; quotation on p. 308 (emphasis added). Wesley cites Knight in his Letter to Richard Locke (14 September 1770), *Letters* (Telford) 5:199.

⁷⁰See Letter to Mary Bishop (17 April 1776), *Letters* (Telford) 5:213–14; and Sermon 64 (1785), "The New Creation," §§5–6, *Works* 2:502. The other two heavens would be the sub-lunar (i.e., the earth's atmosphere) and the celestial (the realm of the stars and other planets).

As this change in the use of “heaven” reflects, in his later years Wesley decisively shifted the focus of his ultimate hope from “heaven above” to the future new creation. Indeed, the new creation became one of the most prominent themes of his late sermons. These sermons leave no doubt that the new creation will be a physical place, though each of its basic elements will be dramatically improved over present conditions.⁷¹

There is also no doubt that Wesley had become convinced that the range of animals would be present in this renewed creation. He had actually shown sympathy for the minority view that animals have souls for some time, apparently devoting one of the required lectures in his Oxford degree program to this topic.⁷² He offered a guarded reaffirmation of this point in 1775.⁷³ Then in 1781 he issued a bold affirmation of final salvation for animals in his sermon “The General Deliverance,” which took Romans 8:19–22 as its text.⁷⁴ While not unprecedented, this sermon was unusual for its time and is often cited today as a pioneer effort at reaffirming the doctrine of animal salvation in the Western church.⁷⁵ Wesley reinforced the sermon two years later by placing in the *Arminian Magazine* an extended extract of John Hildrop’s spirited defense of animal salvation, which contested the alternative comments of such notables as John Locke. In the preface to his extract Wesley noted that some might think that this issue was an ingenious trifle, but he considered it central to our confession of the wisdom and goodness of God. As Hildrop had argued, to allow that God did not redeem all that God created and called good would mean that God had not truly overcome the work of Satan.⁷⁶

For more on Wesley’s views concerning the intermediate state and resurrection, see Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 248–50.

⁷¹See in particular Sermon 64, “The New Creation,” *Works* 2:500–510.

⁷²One of Wesley’s “Wall lectures,” delivered in February 1727, was titled *de anima brutou*. While we do not have a copy, it seems likely it was on the question of whether animals have souls, since his Oxford diary records discussing this topic on several occasions in the prior year, and one of the books he extracted (on 11 December 1726) in preparation for the lecture was Humphrey Ditton, *A Discourse Concerning the Resurrection of Christ with an appendix concerning ... the nature of human souls and of the brutes* (London: J. Darby, 1712).

⁷³See Sermon 55, “On the Trinity,” §11, *Works* 2:382.

⁷⁴Sermon 60, “The General Deliverance,” *Works* 2:437–50.

⁷⁵See the positive reference to this sermon in Andrew Linzey, *Christianity and the Rights of Animals* (London: SPCK, 1987), 36. For a sketch of seventeenth century precedents in Britain of affirming animal salvation, see Philip C. Almond, *Adam and Eve in Seventeenth-Century Thought* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 110–18.

⁷⁶Cf. John Hildrop, *Free Thoughts upon the Brute Creation; or, an examination of Father Bougeant’s philosophical amusement*, 2 vols. (London: R. Minors, 1742–43). Hildrop’s first volume summarizes critiques of animal salvation. The second is his response, and Wesley’s extract includes nearly all of the second volume: see *Arminian Magazine* 6 (1783): 33–36, 90–92, 141–44, 202–204, 259–61, 315–17, 370–72, 424–27, 487–89, 538–40, 596–98, 654–57. Hildrop’s reference to Satan is on p. 598. The preface (p. 33) is reprinted in *Works* (Jackson) 14:290.

Speculating about Its Processive Character

The connection of the issue of animal salvation to affirmation of God's goodness lies behind what is surely the most unusual element in Wesley's elderly reflections on the cosmic dimension of new creation. He had long doubted the adequacy of a theodicy that justified God's goodness in permitting the possibility of the fall by noting that God would eventually restore things to their pre-fallen condition. In Wesley's view, a truly loving God would only permit the present evil in the world if an *even better* outcome might be achieved by allowing this possibility than without it. On these terms, he believed that God would not just restore of fallen creation to its original state, God would recreate it with greater capacities and blessings than it had at first.⁷⁷

What all might this entail? Wesley's own speculation was framed in terms of the notion of the Chain of Being. This was a model running all the way back to Aristotle, which arranged the various types of "being" in a hierarchal progression of relative excellence of abilities. For example, fish were higher in the chain than plants, dogs were higher than fish, humans were higher than dogs, and celestial beings were higher than humans. Probably drawing on the work of Charles Bonnet, a prominent Swiss naturalist, Wesley proposed in his sermon "The General Deliverance" that as compensation for the evil they experienced in this life God would move the various animals higher up the Chain of Being in the next life—granting them greater abilities, including perhaps even the ability to relate to God as humans do now!⁷⁸ A few years later Wesley republished a translated tract of Bonnet that focused this proposal on human destiny, calling it "one of the most sensible tracts I have ever read." In this tract Bonnet not only proposes that humans will be moved up the Chain of Being in the next life, having far greater powers, but that we will thereby be capable of endless continuing growth and development.⁷⁹ Since humans are already capable of great growth in this life, this leaves the intriguing hint that the elderly Wesley may have come to assume that animals will be capable of ongoing growth in the next life as well!

⁷⁷Cf. Sermon 59, "God's Love to Fallen Man," *Works* 2:423–35; and Sermon 63, "The General Spread of the Gospel," §27, *Works* 2:499.

⁷⁸See Sermon 60, "General Deliverance," §III.6–7, *Works* 2:448. Bonnet presents a model of animals moving up the Chain of Being in the future life in *La Palingénésie philosophique; or Idées sur l'état passé et sur l'état futur des etres vivans* (2nd edition. Munster: Philip Henry Perrenon, 1770), Parts 1–5 (1:187–97) and 14 (2:62–84). Volume 2 of this work, signed with Wesley's initials and dated as obtained in 1772, is in the collection at Wesley's House, London.

⁷⁹The tract was a translation of the last section of *La Palingénésie*, by an unidentified translator, issued as *Conjectures Concerning the Nature of Future Happiness* (York: J. Todd, 1785). Wesley's republication—slightly abridged, with his preface and a few notes—was issued with the same title (Dublin: Dugdale, 1787).

With his endorsement of Bonnet, one is tempted to say that Wesley finally exchanged the *static rest* of the medieval heaven for the endlessly *processive life* of the new creation.

Sensing Its Present Impingement and Cooperant Dynamics

Whatever we make of his speculation about the future, the most significant aspect of Wesley's reflection on the cosmic dimension of the new creation is his sense of its relevance for present Christian life. He clearly assumed that "final things" are also *ultimate things*; that is, that our convictions about God's ultimate purpose should provide guidance for what we value in the present. Thus, he defended his speculation about God's future blessings of animals in "The General Deliverance" on the grounds that it might provide further encouragement for us to imitate now the God whose "mercy is over all his works."⁸⁰ Lest this be left in generalities, he frequently exhorted against abusive treatment of animals.⁸¹ Avoiding such abuse ourselves, and helping prevent it by others, was one way he made clear in which we can cooperantly allow God's work of cosmic new creation to impinge upon the present.

Though it was present for a longer period in his ministry, one might also consider in this regard Wesley's emphasis on health care. In the preface to *Primitive Physick*, his healthcare guide geared to the resources of the poor, Wesley invokes the traditional belief that the presence of disease and death in our world is a result of the fall. Allowing that ultimate renewal of our body must await the resurrection, Wesley then insists that our loving God was not willing to wait until that point to offer saving help. So God placed a range of cures in nature around us, and ensured that physical exercise would both preserve and restore a significant degree of well being. If we will cooperantly appropriate these gifts, we can at least soften the pains of this present age while we await the fullness of God's new creation.⁸² Here again we see his conviction of the present impingement of God's future cosmic new creation.

Conclusion: Developing the Trajectory

It is time to bring this lengthy survey to an end. I have gone into such detail in hopes of demonstrating that there truly was a trajectory in Wesley's

⁸⁰Sermon 60, "General Deliverance," §III.10, *Works* 2:449.

⁸¹See Runyon, *New Creation*, 202–205 for a convenient collection of such exhortations.

⁸²See *Primitive Physick*, Preface, *Works* (Jackson) 14:307–18.

reflections on God's work of new creation. I am not trying to suggest that Wesley was self-conscious of this trajectory, carefully managing it, only that the developments that we have noticed are not unconnected. They reflect Wesley's solidifying convictions about how God engages humanity and the whole of creation in salvific transformation. As such, his mature emphasis on new creation—including the specific stress on its present availability, processive character, and cooperant dynamics—is a central thread of the Wesleyan/Methodist traditions.

But traditions are dynamic in nature. Confessions and practices that are simply mimicked over the ages tend to degenerate into "traditionalism." They must be handed down in ways that allow appropriate contextualization, thoughtful enrichment, and—when necessary—reform. How might Wesley's present descendants best contextualize and develop the trajectory we have been bequeathed? Let me make just a few suggestions, organized by the dimensions of new creation.

Perhaps the most pressing challenge we face in relation to the spiritual dimension of God's work of new creation is the same one that Wesley faced: how do we convince ourselves and others that such transformation of life is truly possible, and then how best do we nurture it? In the North American context, at least, most persons either see little need for any transformation in their lives or, more commonly, sense the need but are convinced that significant transformation is impossible. Popular expositions of genetic determinism, psychological determinism, cultural determinism, and the like have convinced them that the best they can do is accept the way they are. Among Christians this acquiescence takes the form of reducing salvation implicitly or explicitly to "Christians are not different, just forgiven." In this context we need to find winsome and convincing ways of holding up Wesley's much richer, and more biblical, model of salvation. Like Wesley, we also need to do the hard work of engaging contemporary work in psychology, neurology, sociobiology, educational theory, and so on, seeking both to benefit from the insights of these fields and to highlight misconceptions in many popular expositions of their implications.⁸³ And we need to provide in our churches a balanced set of the means of grace like he so carefully constructed for early Methodists.

There are obviously a range of practical issues, with unique aspects in various contexts, which we should be engaging in the socioeconomic

⁸³One example of such engagement is the recent founding of the Society for the Study of Psychology and Wesleyan Theology. For more details on this group, see their website: <http://www.ptloma.edu/wesleyan/SPWT/statementofpurposePsy.htm>. For historical background on this general area, see Randy L. Maddox, "Psychology and Wesleyan Theology: Historical Perspectives on a Renewed Engagement," in *Companions and Apprentices*, edited by Maxine Walker (San Diego: Point Loma Press, 1999), 21–31.

dimension of new creation, just as Wesley engaged the issues of hunger and slavery in his context. As a support for this important work, I would suggest that the preceding survey places a couple of more theoretical issues on the agenda of Wesley's current descendants as well. First, we saw how he was drawn to postmillennialism in seeking to uphold the already/not yet tension of biblical eschatology. This model proved effective at preserving in Methodism for some time Wesley's conviction that the socioeconomic dimension of new creation should not be left as only a future hope. But in many contexts today neither this model, nor millennialism in general, makes much sense any longer. This poses the challenge of articulating images that can cultivate within these communities the biblical conviction that God not only intends to bring socioeconomic salvation, but is already at work nurturing this new creation now.⁸⁴ These images will need to be articulated in a way that can help counter as well the more subtle challenge to the biblical affirmation of new creation that is posed in some contexts by the socially pessimistic form of premillennialism currently being marketed as the biblical vision in the best-selling *Left Behind* series of rapture novels. The second issue that emerged in the survey for Wesley's current heirs to address is Theodore Weber's recognition of the need to develop more fully than Wesley did himself the theological grounding for our cooperative participation in God's new creation of present social and economic realities.

There is a clear conviction among contemporary theologians that we must recover a deeper appreciation for the biblical affirmation of the cosmos, both as God's good creation and as the object of God's renewing work.⁸⁵ While there are many ramifications that would flow from this recovery, the agenda receiving the most attention at present is clarifying how Christian faith can help undergird proper care for animals and for the ecosystems of our world. In light of the preceding survey, it should be no surprise that many of Wesley's descendants resonate with this agenda. There have even been some efforts to probe distinctively Wesleyan contributions to the agenda.⁸⁶ But much work remains to be done in this area, as well as in such questions as how we counter the long-standing tendency to exclude the physical dimension of reality, including our bodies, from God's salvific work.

⁸⁴See in this regard the alternative to millenarianism offered by Richard Bauckham in "Must Christian Eschatology be Millenarian?" and (with Trevor Hart) in *Hope Against Hope*.

⁸⁵Cf. Elizabeth Johnson, "Turn to the Heavens and the Earth: Retrieval of the Cosmos in Theology," *Catholic Theological Society of America Proceedings* 51 (1996): 1–14; and Schwöbel, "Last Things first? 235–36.

⁸⁶See particularly John Harrod, "Wesleyan Reflections on Ecology," in *Windows on Wesley*, edited by Philip Meadows (Oxford: Applied Theology Press, 1997), 129–52; and Michael Lodahl, "'The Whole Creation Groans': Is there a Distinctively Wesleyan Contribution to an Environmental Ethic?" *CTNS Bulletin* 18.2 (1998): 10–19.

As we in the Wesleyan/Methodist traditions engage these various agendas we may find ourselves praying in the words of Charles Wesley's classic hymn (though with a broader scope than he had in mind) that the One who is truly "Love divine, all loves excelling" would indeed "Finish then thy new creation."⁸⁷ And we may offer ourselves to help nurture what God is already actively nurturing.

⁸⁷*Collection of Hymns*, #374, *Works* 7: 545–46.