



Stewardship and Response: John Wesley's Moral-Theological Economics

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Abstract

This article examines Wesley's moral-theological economy as a hermeneutical circle that moves from stewardship to response through the structure of our moral psychology that responds to God's gracious initiative manifest throughout creation. The first part describes Wesley's Economics of Stewardship, followed by Wesley's Moral Psychology of Response and Perfect Love. While the final part, responding to the Poor as Stewards of God's Grace. The conclusion of this article is that stewardship is God's sole proprietor who requires the use of responsibility made possible through God's free initiative and ongoing throughout Creation means establishing a relationship with him, starting with our relationship with the poor. Wesley's wisdom of stewardship is thus embodied in his moral theological dynamics of response as stewards, called to use ourselves wisely in the trust of what has been entrusted to us.

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Introduction

Over the past 25 years or so, a number of theologians have sought to present John Wesley as a “practical theologian.”¹ Such a classification recognizes a confluence of concerns within Wesley's theology. On the one hand, Wesley was a revivalist, a priest in the 18th century Anglican Church, but an itinerant without a local parish. Evidence of his theology is thus apparent in various accounts of his ministry – most notably, that both to and with the poor.² On the other hand, Wesley was an Oxford-educated scholastic, a voracious reader of everything from theology to natural science to the arts, and a prolific writer

¹A few examples are sufficient. For Wesley as a practical theologian, see Randy Maddox's *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994), Thomas A. Langford's *Practical Divinity: Theology in the Wesleyan Tradition, Revised Edition* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), and Kenneth J. Collins's *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007). However, none of these works would have been possible had it not been for Albert C. Outler's scholarship (beginning in the 1960s) that set the course for approaching Wesley as a “practical theologian.” To this effect, see Maddox's “Introduction.” See also Outler's own “Preface” and “Introduction” in his *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964). This publication may be viewed as a precursor of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (1984ff.), of which Outler was a key editor.

²See my selected bibliography for a number of modern accounts of Wesley's “theology of the poor.”

(and publisher/editor, to be sure). Accordingly, Wesley has left behind a substantial body of theology (particularly in his numerous sermons and in his biblical commentary, *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*). However, an appreciation for Wesley as a practical theologian means that these two spheres in which Wesley operated (the pastoral/ministerial and the academic/theological) must not be separated by the modern theological interpreter. More to the point, one may say that the “wealth” of Wesleyan theology exists in the necessary combination of intentional, reasoned, and well-articulated theology with a practical spirituality of service and ministry as a community.³

Consequent to this observation of the contours of Wesley’s practical theology is the topic of the present paper: an approach to Wesley’s economics that accounts for his particular theological emphases. Such an approach begins with Wesley’s fundamental economics of stewardship (particularly evident in his sermons and *Notes* regarding Luke 16); but, as we shall see, the predicate of Wesley’s temporal economics is a fuller understanding of the dynamics of the divine economy. This calls to mind Wesley’s soteriology of grace, response, and perfection in holy love. The thrust thus becomes moral-theological, and that observation draws us into a consideration of Wesley’s moral psychology of responsive habituation in Christian practices and virtues that compose the teleological goal of Wesley’s theology: having the mind of Christ and walking as Christ walked.⁴ As we shall see, the combination of Wesley’s affective responsive moral psychology with the Christological content of the perfection of holy love as the basis for morality cumulatively yields the practical response of ministry to and with the poor. Ultimately, what emerges is Wesley’s moral-theological economics as a hermeneutical circle⁵ that moves from stewardship to response through the very fabric of our moral psychology

³To this effect it will be observed that one of the manifestations of Wesley’s practical theology is the way in which he structured Christian life communally. Accordingly, the Methodists (of which he, his brother [Charles], and a few other Oxford peers, were founders) were structured into various communities: societies, classes, bands, select societies, etc. This polity was part and parcel to Wesley’s theological vision; through the mutual edification and accountability that the Methodist structures afforded, Christians could grow in grace, holiness, and happiness.

⁴As Wesleyan theologian and historian Richard P. Heitzenrater has discussed, “This last phrase, a conflation of Philippians 2:5 and 1 John 2:6, becomes the central image in [Wesley’s] lifelong attempt to define the true Christian; it becomes the most common way of expressing the nature of Christian perfection; it is the most repeated biblical phrase (over fifty references) in his published sermons” (Heitzenrater, “The *Imitatio Christi* and the Great Commandment: Virtue and Obligation in Wesley’s Ministry with the Poor,” in *The Portion of the Poor: Good News to the Poor in the Wesleyan Tradition*, ed. M. Douglas Meeks [Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1995], 58).

⁵This term derives from Miguel A. De La Torre’s *Doing Christian Ethics from the Margins* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004), 57-69. There, he describes the circle in five movements: observing < reflecting < praying < acting < reassessing < observing... and so on. Though it will become apparent that Wesley’s hermeneutical circle differs from De La Torre’s, it should be noted that the models are not mutually exclusive.

responding to God's gracious initiative manifest throughout Creation.

Wesley's Economics of Stewardship

To comprehend Wesley's economics of stewardship, it is first necessary to comprehend Wesley's view of God as Creator, Supporter, Preserver, Author, Redeemer, Governor, and End (i.e., *telos*) of all things. All things are from God and to God all things shall return; in the meantime, God sustains and preserves that which God has created.⁶ By means of his doctrine of Creation, Wesley accepts *de facto* that *all things are God's making*, and thus "we are now indebted to him for all we have" – but we are not debtors in the proper sense as much as we are *stewards*.⁷ The distinction for Wesley is a matter of the manner in which all created things may be used not according to *our* will, but only according to the will of the one to whom it belongs – God. Thus it is that, commenting on Luke 16:12 (and the parable of "The Unjust Manager" in general), Wesley forcefully adds to Jesus' admonition, "None of these temporal things are yours: you are only stewards of them, not proprietors: God is the proprietor of all."⁸ This is no isolated concept, though; indeed, the fundamental economic principle of stewardship runs *throughout* the Wesleyan corpus. It is ubiquitously present in his sermons,⁹ it is a foremost feature of his personal correspondence;¹⁰ it is a point of reflection in his journals;¹¹ and it is a constant theme of

⁶See Wesley's Sermon 77, "Spiritual Worship," especially §§I.1-10, in *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley, Vol. 3*, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), 90-95. Unless otherwise noted, references to John Wesley are taken from this edition of his *Works*; I shall specify which volume and page number in addition to the accepted practice of citing paragraph and section.

⁷Wesley, Sermon 51, "The Good Steward," §I.1, in *Works*, 2:283.

⁸John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament* (1754), Luke 16:12. Hereafter, I will simply refer to this as Wesley's *Notes*, followed by the verse upon which he is commenting.

⁹Among some of the more memorable examples are the following:

- "Nay, may I not do what I will with *my own*?" Here lies the ground of your mistake. It is not your *own*. It cannot be, unless you are Lord of heaven and earth" (Sermon 131, "The Danger of Increasing Riches," §II.17, in *Works*, 4:186).
- "Thou no longer talkest of *thy* goods or *thy* fruits, knowing they are not thine, but God's. The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof; he is the proprietor of heaven and earth" (Sermon 126, "On Worldly Folly," §II.4, in *Works*, 4:136).
- "In order to see the ground and reason of this, consider: when the possessor of heaven and earth brought you into being and placed you in this world, he placed you here not as a proprietor, but a steward. As such he entrusted you for a season with goods of various kinds. But the sole property of these still rests in him, nor can be alienated from him. As you yourself are not your own, but his, such is likewise all that you enjoy. Such is your soul and your body—not your own, but God's. And so is your substance in particular" (Sermon 50, "The Use of Money," §III.2, in *Works*, 2:277).

¹⁰See Wesley's ongoing correspondence with "A Member of the Society," one Miss J. C. March, who was a woman of means and education. Wesley's correspondence with her throughout the 1760s and 1770s

various addresses targeted to his very own Methodists.¹²

In a prefatory comment to what is perhaps Wesley's clearest articulation of his economic ethics – his sermon “The Use of Money” (which advanced a threefold economic rule of **gaining** all you can and **saving** all you can *so that* you will **give** all you can),¹³ Albert Outler makes a powerful observation: “On no other single point, save only faith alone and holy living, is Wesley more insistent, consistent—and out of step with the bourgeois spirit of his age.”¹⁴ Outler's comment reveals two crucial insights when considering Wesley's economics. First, insofar as “faith alone,” “holy living,” and “the use of money” are Wesley's most insistent and consistent topics, we should consider them in light of one another, allowing each topic to reveal something about the character of the others. This leads to the second point: faith, holiness, and money point to the common *telos* in Wesley's moral-theological economics: *love*, which is God¹⁵ – the origination, culmination, and inspiration for all life. Through God's loving initiative of grace, faith is possible; through God's loving initiative of Incarnation and the gift of the Spirit, holiness

continually stresses the need to visit the poor. Accordingly, see “Thirty-seven Letters to a Member of the Society,” in *Works* (Jackson ed.), XII: 273-305. In the last letter of that series (December 10, 1777), Wesley speaks from his own personal experience: having hyperbolically described how *busy* he is day-to-day, “Yet I find time to visit the sick and the poor,” he writes; “and I must do it, if I believe the Bible, if I believe these are the marks whereby the Shepherd of Israel will know and judge his sheep at the great day; therefore, when there is time and opportunity for it, who can doubt but this is matter of absolute duty?” (304).

¹¹It must be borne in mind that, during this era, people such as Wesley would publish their *Journals* for the public; such is the case of Wesley. Thus, in his entry for October 28, 1754, Wesley includes the entire text of a letter he had written to Sir James Lowther, a wealthy man who had written Wesley about giving to the poor. We might imagine that he includes the letter with a particular eye to its publication in his *Journal*; thus, the closing paragraph is particularly important: “(1) As to yourself, you are not the proprietor of any- thing-no, not of one shilling in the world. You are only a steward of what another entrusts you with, to be laid out not according to your will but his. And what would you think of your steward if he laid out what is called your money according to his own will and pleas- ure? (2) Is not God the sole proprietor of all things? And are you not to give an account to him for every part of his goods? And oh, how dreadful an account if you have expended any part of them, not according to his will, but your own!” (in *Works*, 20:495).

¹²See for example Wesley's various addresses regarding *dress* and the Methodists: “Advice to the People Called Methodists, with regard to Dress” (in *Works* [Jackson ed.], XI: 466-477) and “Thoughts Upon Dress” (in *Works* [Jackson ed.], XI: 477-478). The theme of dress also appears alongside further concerns of increasing riches in “Advice to the People called Methodists (1745)” (in *Works*, 9:123-131). Finally, Wesley's “Thoughts on the Present Scarcity of Provisions (1773)” (in *Works* [Jackson ed.], XI: 53-59) may be seen as a polemical essay on the topic of poverty and its relationship to the sociopolitical and economic state of affairs in 18th century England.

¹³See Wesley, Sermon 50, “The Use of Money,” especially §II.6, in *Works*, 2:278-279.

¹⁴Albert C. Outler, “An Introductory Comment” to John Wesley's Sermon 50, “The Use of Money,” in *Works*, 2:265.

¹⁵See Wesley, *Notes*, 1 John 4:8: “This little sentence brought St. John more sweetness, even in the time he was writing it, than the whole world can bring. God is often styled holy, righteous, wise: but not holiness, righteousness, or wisdom in the abstract: as he is said to be love: intimating that this is his darling, his reigning attribute; the attribute that sheds an amiable glory on all his otherperfections.”

is possible; and through God's love dwelling in the hearts and minds of God's followers, charity (in every sense of the word) is possible.

As the above snapshot of Wesley's *via salutis*¹⁶ manifests, Wesley's moral-theological economics stretches beyond the temporal realm to the divine economy itself – as does the principle of stewardship. Expounding upon Luke 16:2, Wesley firmly contends that *nothing* is rightfully “ours” – “our souls, our bodies, our goods, and whatever other talents we have received” are not ours but God's; of utmost importance, Wesley enumerates “the *grace* of God,” which God gives to us “in order to enable us to be faithful and wise stewards,” as the cornerstone upon which all has been given.¹⁷ Consequently, the soteriological synergism of grace that Wesley describes in his later sermon “On Working Our Own Salvation”¹⁸ carries with it *economic* consequences, for stewardship of the grace that God has given is not unlike stewardship of the material goods that God has given; the two bear a striking ontological resemblance because they are both predicated upon the divine *ōv*. In this respect, it has rightly been said that Wesley's is an “evangelical economics”¹⁹ and that economics is at the very heart of Wesley's understanding of the Christian life;²⁰ but, as we have seen, undergirding this is Wesley's thoroughgoing belief that *all things, both existent and possible*, are a gift of God's grace. And as we shall now see, it is precisely that gift of grace – all gifts *as* grace – that potentiates and necessitates our responseability.²¹

¹⁶For an overview of Wesley's soteriology, see his Sermon 43, “The Scripture Way of Salvation,” in *Works*, 2:153-169.

¹⁷Wesley, Sermon 51, “The Good Steward,” §I.2, 8, and §III.12, in *Works*, 2:284, 286, 292. In particular, take note of all the *faculties* Wesley enumerates as *not* “ours,” including sensory perception, the mind and its thoughts, the will and its affections/desires/temper, health and strength, knowledge and education, power and time – even happiness; as these are all rooted in God (§I.2-8), they are to be rendered *back* to God.

¹⁸Employing characteristic brevity, Wesley explicates Philippians 2:12 in the following terms: “For, first, God works: therefore you *can* work. Secondly, God works; therefore you *must* work.” Sermon 85, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation,” §III.2, in *Works*, 3:206.

¹⁹Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., argues this as one of his main theses in *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley's Evangelical Economics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), especially 15 and 22-24. Similarly, see his “Wesley and the Poor: An Agenda for Wesleyans,” in *The Portion of the Poor*, 19-37.

²⁰M. Douglas Meeks strongly contends for Wesley's continuity of the moral, economic, and theological in “Sanctification and Economy: A Wesleyan Perspective on Stewardship,” in *Rethinking Wesley's Theology for Contemporary Methodism*, ed. Randy L. Maddox (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1998), 83-98, especially 85-86.

²¹In *Responsible Grace*, Maddox reads the ongoing dynamic of the initiative of divine grace and the response of human agency – together participating in the realization of the image of God within humanity and the restoration of all Creation – as the orienting concern within Wesley's practical theology.

Wesley's Moral Psychology of Response and Perfect Love

In recent years, Wesleyan theologians have been drawing heavily from other disciplines, especially the social sciences. Foremost on that list is eminent Wesley scholar Randy Maddox, who has robustly and consistently argued Wesley's moral scheme through a lens of "moral psychology" over the past 20 years. Maddox traces Wesley's development through some of the historical categories of moral psychologies²² – beginning with his formative years under his mother's tutelage and his Oxford education, his encounter with the Moravians and their Augustinian moral psychology, and the development of his mature moral psychology.²³ As Maddox argues, Wesley matured into an empiricism-based affectional moral psychology that presents the human affections as responsive in nature – they are shaped and formed into enduring dispositions ("holy tempers").²⁴ By underscoring the affective receptivity and response of moral volition for Wesley (how the will for Wesley, like Aquinas, pertains to the affections) Maddox reveals a synergistic Wesleyan alternative to other moral psychologies of Wesley's era.²⁵ The maturation of Wesley's moral psychology is tantamount to the maturation of Wesley's views on the means of grace, which emphasizes the centrality of these means (as formative disciplines) in forming holy tempers, from which flow holiness of thought, word, and deed through an intentional balance between the rational (Scripture reading, sermon, prayer) and the affective (love feast and Eucharist),²⁶ the personal (prayer, fasting, Scripture) and the communal (class

²²For the most extensive of Maddox's historical accounts, see Randy L. Maddox, "Reconnecting the Means to the End: A Wesleyan Prescription for the Holiness Movement," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 33/2 (Fall 1998): 29-66. In short, Maddox traces Wesley's progression from a Platonic/Augustinian context ("habituated rational control of the passions" [39]) through 18th century empiricism ("affectional moral psychology" [40]), distancing him from moral voluntarism (40), and arriving at a "mature moral psychology [that] comes closest to the habituated virtue model of Aquinas" (41). Maddox also presents a comprehensive matrix for understanding competing moral psychologies in relationship to one another: the rational, integrated/volitional, and passional emphases; the determinist, self-determinist, and indeterminist mode; and the intellectualist, voluntarist, and naturalist (33-34). In each of these roughly overlapping trios, the moral operative in question may be perceived to occur spontaneously, habitually, or decisionistically (i.e., spontaneous rational control vs. habituated rational control vs. decisionistic rational control; etc. - 35-37). Maddox's appendices (65-66) are most helpful here.

²³Randy 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*, ed. Richard Steele (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 2001), 5-12.

²⁴Randy L. Maddox, "Wesleyan Theology and Moral Psychology Precedents for Continuing Engagement," in *Wesleyan Theology and Social Science: The Dance of Practical Divinity and Discovery*, eds. M. Kathryn Armistead, Brad D. Strawn & Ronald W. Wright (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), 10.

²⁵Maddox, "Reconnecting the Means to the End," 40-41.

²⁶Maddox, "Reconnecting the Means to the End," 42.

meeting and society worship).²⁷ Critically, the means of grace correspond to the responsive nature of our affections; accordingly, Wesley's mature moral psychology equally incorporates his mature views on Christian perfection and the use of *all* the means of grace while striking a balance between reason and affections, God's work and our own, freedom of will and habituation, sin and perfection.²⁸

This brief excursus into Wesley's moral psychology is necessary to understand the scope of stewardship and the dynamic of affective response with respect to Wesley's orienting moral vision.

First, as Wesley painstakingly explains in "The Good Steward," all bodies, possessions, powers, and honors (gifts as they are!) shall perish – with one notable exception: "As the soul will retain its understanding and memory, notwithstanding the dissolution of the body, so undoubtedly the *will*, including all the *affections*, will remain in its full vigour."²⁹ The reason for this has to do with our being (re)created in the image of God – specifically, the *moral* image of God, consisting of "righteousness and true holiness" (Eph. 4:24) and love (1 Jn. 4:8, 16). "Accordingly," writes Wesley, "man at his creation was full of love, which was the sole principle of all his tempers, thoughts, words, and actions."³⁰ The chief means by which we are restored to the image of God in which we were created thus returns us to the responsive dynamic underscoring Wesley's soteriology. In a sermon on 1 John 3:9, Wesley describes this process as a type of "spiritual respiration," which

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; a continual action of God upon the soul, the re-action of the soul upon God; an unceasing presence of God, the loving, pardoning God, manifested to the heart, and perceived by faith; and an unceasing return of love, praise, and prayer, offering up all the thoughts of our hearts, all the words of our tongues, all the works of our hands, all our body, soul, and spirit, to be an holy sacrifice, acceptable unto God in Christ Jesus.³¹

These observations on the fundamental responsive element within Wesley's moral

²⁷Maddox, "A Change of Affections," 20.

²⁸This argument runs throughout Maddox's "Wesleyan Theology and Moral Psychology..."

²⁹Wesley, Sermon 51, "The Good Steward," §II.11, in *Works*, 2:291.

³⁰Wesley, Sermon 45, "The New Creation," §I.1., in *Works*, 2:188.

³¹Wesley, Sermon 19, "The Great Privilege of those that are Born of God," §III.2, in *Works*, 1:442. In §I.8, Wesley specifically names this process "spiritual respiration." Also, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* indicates, this is the first time the word "reaction" appeared in the English language (Newton's laws of motion were composed in Latin).

theology – inclusive of his psychology, soteriology, ethics, and economics – consequently points us to a second consideration: the teleological structure of Wesley’s moral vision. Let us recall the epistolary epigraph to the present paper: Christian prudence (as characteristic of Christian virtues in general) seeks its *τέλος* in “holiness [of] every kind, and in the highest degree” through the imitation of Christ, whose character and practices are the befitting inheritance of a true disciple. What must be understood, though, is the multivalence of the term “holiness” for Wesley: it is a Christian’s perfection,³² it is being renewed in the image of God, being filled with love, having the mind of Christ, and walking as Christ walked;³³ it is inseparable from happiness (*εὐδαιμονία*),³⁴ it is the circumcision of the heart (Rom. 2:29), “that habitual disposition of soul [...] being endued with those virtues which were also in Christ Jesus, the being so ‘renewed in the image of our mind’ as to be ‘perfect, as our Father in heaven is perfect’.”³⁵ In a word, the life of virtue, discipleship, and holiness must be understood as the life of grace, response, and growth in Christian character befitting “the mind that was in Christ Jesus.” In fact, our continual response – which is to say, our participation in the habituation of virtue and Christian character – to God’s ubiquitous grace is necessary to our growth in discipleship. God “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, a sacrifice wherewith he is pleased.”³⁶

To sum up, it is the *εὐαγγέλιον* that, through the gratuitous love of God manifest through Christ and made present through the Spirit, we may be renewed according to the image of God and thus partake in the *οἰκονομία καὶ ἀγάπη του θεοῦ*. However, if we were to leave Wesley’s moral theology here – with a singularly pietistic, inwardly experienced, “just-God-and-me” love – we would be misreading Wesley entirely. Inherent to Wesley’s responsive and affective moral

³²Wesley, Sermon 40, “Christian Perfection,” §I.9, in *Works*, 2: 104-105.

³³See Wesley’s well-known tract, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (1777), §27.

³⁴On this point, it may be said that Wesley posits a hendiadys of “holiness and happiness.” In *Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville: Tidings, 1975), Albert Outler asserts that Wesley uses the pairing of “happy” and “holy” 54 times in his sermons, “and the correlation is constant throughout his works and his career” (83-84). Some examples include Sermon 7, “The Way to the Kingdom” (§I.12, in *Works*, 1:224); Sermon 120, “The Unity of Divine Being” (§§9-10, in *Works*, 4:63-64); and Sermons 26, 30, and 33, “Sermon on the Mount VI” (§III.8, in *Works*, 1:581-582), “X” (§20, in *Works*, 1:660), and “XIII” (§II.3, in *Works*, 1:693), respectively. In Sermon 59, “God’s Love to Fallen Man,” §I.10, in *Works*, 2:431, Wesley contends that “there is an inseparable connection between holiness and happiness”; in Sermon 70, “The Case of Reason Impartially Considered,” §II.10, in *Works*, 2:600, Wesley adds “wisdom” to the duo; in Sermon 77, “Spiritual Worship,” §III.6, in *Works*, 3:100, he further adds that the entirety of this holy-happy moral vision is the essence of true religion.

³⁵Wesley, Sermon 17, “The Circumcision of the Heart,” §I.1, in *Works*, 1: 402-403.

³⁶Wesley, Sermon 19, “The Great Privilege...,” §III.3, in *Works*, 1:442.

psychology is the omni-directionality of the “out-breathing” of love:

The necessary fruit of this love of God is the love of our neighbour, of every soul which God hath made; not excepting our enemies, not excepting those who are now “despitefully using and persecuting us”; a love whereby we love every man *as ourselves*—as we love our own souls. Nay, our Lord has expressed it still more strongly, teaching us to “love one another even as he hath loved us.” Accordingly the commandment written in the hearts of all those that love God is no other than this, “As I have loved you, so love ye one another.” Now “herein perceive we the love of God, in that he laid down his life for us. We ought,” then, as the Apostle justly infers, “to lay down our lives for our brethren.” If we feel ourselves ready to do this, then do we truly love our neighbour. [...]

A second fruit then of the love of God (so far as it can be distinguished from it) is universal obedience to him we love, and conformity to his will; obedience to all the commands of God, internal and external; obedience of the heart and of the life, in every temper and in all manner of conversation. And one of the tempers most obviously implied herein is the being “zealous of good works”; the hungering and thirsting to do good, in every possible kind, unto all men; the rejoicing to “spend and be spent for them,” for every child of man, not looking for any recompense in this world, buy only in the resurrection of the just.³⁷

It is no accident that Wesley speaks here with a particularly Johannine and Pauline inflection – both the Fourth Evangelist and the Apostle maintain a consistently *Christological* ethics of imitation.

Thus, Wesley’s particular appeal to the Farewell Discourses of John’s Gospel is an appeal to imitate Christ’s ὑπόδειγμα (Jn. 13:15) of εὐεργετεῖν (Acts 10:38) through our ἀγαθοεργεῖν (1 Tim. 6:18).³⁸ However, as Richard Heitzenrater has very rightly maintained, the emphasis of what I am terming “Wesley’s moral-theological economics” sits squarely with an

³⁷Wesley, Sermon 18, “The Marks of the New Birth,” §III.3, 5, in *Works*, 1: 426-427. This excerpt is but one of Wesley’s innumerable instances of joining together the love of God with the love of neighbor. To be sure, it is difficult to find an instance in his 3,000+ uses of the term “love” in his *Sermons* and *Notes* that does not necessarily join love of God and of neighbor. A few notable examples of the conjunction do stand out, though: Sermon 114, “On the Death of John Fletcher,” §I.3, in *Works*, 3:612-613; Sermon 7, “The Way to the Kingdom,” §II.12, in *Works*, 1:231; Sermon 90, “An Israelite Indeed,” §§1-2, in *Works*, 3: 279- 280; and Sermon 120, “The Unity of the Divine Being,” §16, in *Works*, 4:66-67. In the last two instances, Wesley is sharply criticizing the naturalistic moral philosophy of Frances Hutcheson, who that virtue is equated with benevolence alone and properly exists without any foundation in or reference to God. Wesley denounces this, instead arguing that our benevolence to others rightly comes from our gratitude (our *response!*) to God for God’s gratuitous benevolence incarnate in Christ.

³⁸Wesley goes so far as to treat the Greek of this last reference (1 Tim. 6:18) in Sermon 28, “Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount, Discourse VIII,” §27, in *Works*, 1: 630. Wesley’s definition of ἀγαθοεργεῖν – “to be habitually doing good” – exemplifies the character at the heart of his moral-theological vision. As we have seen, this necessarily includes the good we do to others, especially with the poor.

ethics of virtue out of which certain obligations arise. The key is to understand how Wesley does not resort to Kantian/deontological maxims (note Wesley's language of "maxims" in the epigraph – it is a testimony to the work of God through us, not a "categorical imperative") in order to articulate his theological ethics and economics. Rather, Wesley frames the duty of our good stewardship of God's Good as the out-working of holy dispositions that result from being in right-relationship with God and (consequently, necessarily) with others.³⁹ Put another way, this is to say that, for Wesley, the habituation of virtue, holiness, and perfect love operates within a relational scheme.⁴⁰ Put yet another way, this is the recognition that, for Wesley, the relationships that we have with one another are real means of God's grace.

Responding to the Poor as Stewards of God's Grace

For Wesley, means of God's grace – "outward signs, words, or actions ordained of God, and appointed for this end—to be the ordinary channels whereby he might convey to men preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace"⁴¹ – necessarily includes both works of piety ("inward" practices) and works of mercy ("outward" practices).

Furthermore, he maintains that both works of piety and works of mercy are "in some sense necessary to sanctification"⁴² – holiness, perfection, the mind of Christ – when such practices flow from holy tempers (the foremost of which is love).⁴³ As means of grace, such works are to be understood as "carriers" of God's grace, God's presence, God's gifts. Given what we have already said about the extension of stewardship to God's *grace* in addition to (and not altogether different from) God's *gifts* (material or otherwise), we may here observe that the

³⁹See Heitzenrater, "The *Imitatio Christi* and the Great Commandment," especially 54-57.

⁴⁰Heitzenrater briefly touches upon this theme on 61. A much fuller treatment of the this "relational holiness" is offered by Michael Lodahl and Thomas Jay Oord in *Relational Holiness: Responding to the Call of Love* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2005), which seeks to integrate the metaphysical-relational insights of process theology with Wesleyan theology.

⁴¹Wesley, Sermon 16, "The Means of Grace," §III.1, in *Works*, 1:381.

⁴²Wesley, Sermon 43, "The Scripture Way of Salvation," §III.5, in *Works*, 2:164.

⁴³See Wesley Sermon 92, "On Zeal," §III.9-12, in *Works*, 3:319-321. Here, Wesley creates an image of concentric circles that represent the proper objects of our zeal. At the center is *love*, the quintessence of holiness and happiness and Christian perfection, and the motivation for all that is to follow. Next (one "ring" out) is *holy tempers*, which are the virtues befitting of the mind of Christ as organized and oriented by love. Third is *works of mercy*, the ways in which we extend God's loving grace to others, especially to the poor. Fourth is *works of piety*, the ordinances of God (prayer, sacraments, reading Scripture, etc.). Both the works of mercy and of piety constitute *means of grace*. Fifth is *the church*, as in zeal for the institution of the church. In this "concentric hierarchy," it is most intriguing that Wesley (whom many have pigeon holed as an inwardly-focused Pietist) give priority (albeit just *slightly*) to works of *mercy*.

means of grace are themselves demonstrative of *a* divine economy and *the* Divine Economy alike – from a Wesleyan standpoint, the means of grace present a moral-theological economics inextricably bound with God’s salvific work throughout Creation. The disciple’s responsibility to stewardship within that moral vision is premised upon a real “responseability” made possible through the *gift* and *grace* of God. In other words, Wesley’s moral psychology of response to God’s grace is the grounds of our outward works of mercy.

It is for this very reason that visiting the poor and sick is a non-negotiable for Wesley. In the sermon “On Visiting the Sick” (on Mt. 25:36), an elderly Wesley *again* admonishes the Methodists to be good stewards of God’s grace and gifts by ministering to the poor and sick through visitation. The difficulty that Wesley outlines in the following excerpt directly speaks his affective moral psychology:

One great reason why the rich in general have so little sympathy for the poor is because they so seldom visit them. Hence it is that, according to the common observation, one part of the world does not know what the other suffers. Many of them do not know, because they do not care to know: they keep out of the way of knowing it— and then plead their voluntary ignorance as an excuse for their hardness of heart. “Indeed, sir” (said a person of large substance), “I am a very compassionate man. But to tell you the truth, I do not know anybody in the world that is in want.” How did this come to pass? Why, he took good care to keep out of their way. And if he fell upon any of them unawares, “he passed over on the other side.”⁴⁴

Contact, visitation, relationship – these are necessary components of a Wesleyan solidarity with the poor that cannot but be efficacious in stirring compassion *precisely* “because God has graciously designed this engagement to have an empowering and formative impact on us.”⁴⁵

Thus, in a characteristic journal entry, Wesley records that:

I visited as many as I could of the sick. How much better is it, when it can be done, to *carry* relief to the poor than to *send* it! And that both for our own sake and theirs. For *theirs*, as it is so much more comfortable to them, and as we may then assist them in spirituals as well as temporals. And for *our own*, as it is far more apt to soften our heart and to make us *naturally care* for each other.⁴⁶

⁴⁴Wesley, Sermon 98, “On Visiting the Sick,” §1.3, in *Works*, 3:387-388.

⁴⁵Randy L. Maddox, “Visit the Poor: John Wesley, the Poor, and the Sanctification of Believers,” in *The Poor and the People Called Methodists: 1729-1999*, ed. Richard P. Heitzenrater (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2002), 75. Maddox provides a footnoted reference here to another article that further illuminates the subject – Joerg Rieger, “The Means of Grace, John Wesley, and the Theological Dilemma of the Church Today,” *Quarterly Review* 17 (1997): 377-393.

⁴⁶Wesley, *Journal* (November 24, 1760), in *Works*, 21:290.

But how is it that we are *moved* to “*naturally care* for each other”? A reading of the whole Wesley yields two related responses.

First, Wesley understands the *conscience* as means of moral perception analogous to our physical senses, but different because “it is not [a] *natural* but a supernatural gift of God, above all his natural endowments.”⁴⁷ More revealing, Wesley elsewhere adds that “it is more properly termed ‘preventing [prevenient] grace.’”⁴⁸ By predicating human conscience (a faculty of the moral-psychological) on *prevenient* (i.e., “that which comes before”) grace, Wesley draws up-on the synergism of his soteriology while buttressing a claim to the unabated access to the witness of God’s Spirit. The conscience must then be seen in light of his model of “spiritual respiration” as a primary means of responding to (and thereby relationally increasing) God’s gracious presence and present grace.

Second, when Wesley is discussing the obligation we have to minister to and with the poor, he does not distinguish this from a direct encounter with God. For example, Wesley greatly expands upon Luke 16:2 (“give an account of thy stewardship”), speculating that “The Lord of all will next inquire, ‘How didst thou employ the *worldly goods* which I lodged in thy hands? [...By] restoring the remainder to me, *through the poor, whom I had appointed to receive it*; looking upon thyself as only one of that number of the poor whose wants were to be supplied out of that part of my substance which I had placed in thy hands for this purpose?’”⁴⁹ Elsewhere, Wesley rails against the excesses of apparel (a progressive problem among Methodists) as a direct instance of robbing from the poor *and from God*, the two being undifferentiated.⁵⁰

Wesley *further* pronounces a double curse upon those who, by means of their hoarding, rob from God and from the poor. Thus, “inasmuch as in the general tenor of their lives they are not only robbing God continually, embezzling and wasting their Lord’s goods, and by that very means corrupting their own souls; but also robbing the poor, the hungry, the naked, wronging the widow and the fatherless, and making themselves accountable for all the want, affliction, and distress which they may but do not remove.”⁵¹ Notice here how the list of those who have

⁴⁷Wesley, Sermon 105, “On Conscience,” §I.5, in *Works*, 3: 482.

⁴⁸Wesley, Sermon 85, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation,” §III.4, in *Works*, 3:207.

⁴⁹Wesley, Sermon 51, “The Good Steward,” §III.5, in *Works*, 2:295. Emphasis added.

⁵⁰See Wesley, Sermon 88, “On Dress,” especially §14, in *Works*, 2:254. See also Wesley’s multipart essay, *A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion, Part II*, §III.6, in *Works*, 11:256.

⁵¹Wesley, Sermon 28, “Upon the Lord’s Sermon on the Mount, Discourse VIII,” §25, in *Works*, 1: 628.

been wronged economically emerges directly from *Torah* and its specified provisions for the widow, the orphan, the destitute poor, the stranger in the land. How instructive it is, then, that Wesley notes at Luke 16:17, “Not that the Gospel at all destroys the law!”⁵² Given the economic context of the pericope, Wesley is first and foremost referring to the laws that the people of God *must* provide materially for *all* those in their midst. Rather than abolish the law, Wesley understands that the good news of the Incarnation is that *we can and must fulfill it by having within us the mind of Christ, who embodies and fulfill the law.*

Wesley’s identification of the divine *within* the poor is but another manifestation of the Pauline and Johannine influences of his moral-theological economics. Because Christ emptied himself, humbled himself, and offered himself (Phil. 2:6-8), God has eternally identified with the poor. Another way to put this (and one in which Wesley would certainly agree) is that to see the poor is to see God in the face of Christ. In this way, though “no one has ever seen God, if we love one another” – having the mind of Christ within us, walking as Jesus walked – “God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us” (1 Jn. 4:12).⁵³ Thus, when Wesley comments on 1 John 3:2 that, when God shall appear, “*we shall be like him.* The glory of God penetrating our inmost substance, *for we shall see him as he is—Manifestly without a veil. And that sight will transform us into the same likeness,*”⁵⁴ it must be read in terms of all that been said to this point: the actively merciful love that we extend out of our Christ-like character through ministry to and with the poor, with whom God incarnationally identified, is the present re-presentation of God, the sight of which transforms us into Christ’s likeness *that we may continually “go about doing good”* (Acts 10:38) as stewards of God’s gifts and grace.

Conclusion

As such, the argument has come around full-circle. Every- thing is God’s – all material goods, all forms of life, all persons, all abilities, all gifts and graces. To this must be added that salvation – the fullness of Christ’s loving likeness permeating our every thought, word, and deed – is itself a gift of God. Of all these things, we are but stewards: God is the sole proprietor, but that

⁵²Wesley, *Notes*, Luke 16:17.

⁵³It must be added here that 1 John is one of Wesley’s most-cherished texts.

⁵⁴Wesley, *Notes*, 1 John 3:2. The *italics* is the Authorized Version of the text, whereas the Roman type is Wesley’s “running commentary” there of.

proprietorship entails our responsible use thereof. By corollary, though, our moral responsibility is premised upon our moral responseability that is made possible through God's gratuitous initiative *and* ongoing presence throughout Creation; hence, to be a steward *in* God's Creation is to be in relationship there with, beginning with our relationships with the poor. The wisdom of Wesley's stewardship is thus manifest in the dynamics of his moral theology of response; we, as stewards, are called to employ ourselves prudently *in trust* (for it is but a manifestation of faith working by love – Gal. 5:6) of that with which we have been entrusted. Wesley puts it best in the closing to his sermon "Of the Church," which is characteristically laden with Scripture:

O let your light shine before men! Show them your faith by your works. Let them see by the whole tenor of your conversation that your hope is all laid up above! Let all your words and actions evidence the spirit whereby you are animated! Above all things, let your love abound. Let it extend to every child of man; let it overflow to every child of God. By this let all men know whose disciples ye are, because you love one another.

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