

Humanity in God's Image and the Future of Creation:

A Critical Retrieval of John Wesley's 'The General Spread of the Gospel'

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The earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.
(Isaiah 11:9)

That is the biblical text John Wesley chose for the sermon I intend to revisit and re-read with you today, "The General Spread of the Gospel." It is a text brimming with eschatological hope, plucked from an Isaian passage that prophesies about "the root of Jesse" who shall bring about peace, justice, righteousness, faithfulness throughout God's creation – and we are left to wonder what it would take to have such a world, to live in such a world, as this one the prophet envisions. It certainly calls for great *hope* – specifically, a hope in God's good intention (in the poetic words of his brother Charles) to "new-create a World of Grace in all the Image of Thy Love."¹

Yet, Wesley's sermon does not begin in hope; indeed, he opens by lamenting, "In what a condition is the world at present!" "The world at present" was the world as Wesley, by now the 80 year-old leader of the Methodist movement, knew it in the spring of 1783. Rather than the knowledge of God, it was (in his words) "darkness, intellectual darkness, ignorance, with vice and misery attendant upon it"² that covered the face of the earth.

Drawing upon the book *Enquiries touching the Diversities of Languages and Religions Through the Chief Parts of the Earth* by early 17th-century mathematician, logician, and astronomer Edward Brerewood, Wesley was dismayed to learn that at the time of his writing the book, Brerewood estimated that about 17 percent of the world's population were of Christian faith, while roughly 20 percent were Muslim. Everyone else, in Brerewood's accounting, were lumped into the category of "heathen," including even Jews, presumably.

I trust that it will be no great shock if I suggest that we must improve upon Wesley's mode of reflection regarding the variety of religious peoples and traditions on planet Earth. Certainly on this matter he is no model for us. There is no question that his caricatures of the "heathens" ("more savage than lions"), "Mahometans" ("as void of mercy as lions and tigers"),

¹ Charles Wesley, "Hymns . . ."

² John Wesley, "The General . . ."

Orthodox Christianity under Islamic political rule (“total, stupid, barbarous irreligion”)³ and even Roman Catholics are deeply infected by 18th-century British, white, colonial assumptions. I suppose in his mild defense, we may observe that Protestants don’t fare much better under Wesley’s perfectionist scrutiny. “Such is the present state of humanity,” he proclaims, “in all parts of the world! But how astonishing is this, if there is a God in heaven! . . . Surely this is one of the greatest mysteries under heaven!”⁴

Wesley here struggles with the world’s stubborn refusal to be a utopia, the stark facticity of its unanswered questions and unfulfilled hopes – to say nothing of the stark struggle of its creatures to live through hunger, sickness, predation, natural disaster and human violence. This is surely no less true of our world than it was of Wesley’s. The world was then, and is now, full of heartache and mystery, suffering and anguish – the traditional teaching on divine providence left hanging, subject to radical doubt. And Wesley is willing to go there, at least for a moment: “How is it possible to reconcile this with either the wisdom or the goodness of God?”⁵ That is a good question.

But one may suspect that Wesley is unwilling to entertain it very seriously, or at least for very long, in this sermon. What gives ease to his “thoughtful mind under so melancholy a prospect? What but the consideration that things will not always be so; that another scene will soon be opened?”⁶ Wesley longingly appeals to the eschatological vision – the hopeful yearning for a new world, a less troubled and troublesome world, a world in which faith in God is not problematized by ambiguity or diversity or pain, and in which theological difference is overcome by a universally self-evident knowledge of God. He proclaims that God “will arise and maintain his own cause,” such that “the loving knowledge of God, producing uniform, uninterrupted holiness and happiness, shall cover the earth, shall fill every human soul.”⁷ This is indeed a vision of hope!

But Wesley imagines the response: “‘Impossible!’ some will say. ‘Indeed, the greatest of all impossibilities, that we should see a Christian world! Or for that matter, a Christian nation, or city!’”⁸ The passage of two and a quarter centuries only adds greater weight to his imaginary interlocutors’ objection. But Wesley’s initial response is pertinent regardless of the passage of time; he replies,

On one supposition, indeed, not only all impossibility but all difficulty vanishes away. Only suppose the Almighty to act *irresistibly*, and the thing is done; yea, with just the same ease as when ‘God said, Let there be light; and there was light.’⁹

It may be significant that in this one place Wesley uses the traditional term “the Almighty” to refer to God. If “the Almighty” were to become fully manifest as “Almighty,” “to act

³ *Ibid.*,

⁴ *Ibid.*, 488.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

irresistibly,” then the perfect state of affairs presumably could be ushered in – in the blink of an eye, “just like that.” The eschatological dream once more has quickly asserted itself. Wesley compares such power to thoroughly redeem the world with the power of creation, the power of calling light itself to be – that is, the might of the Almighty. What is fascinating, though, is that while Wesley briefly mentions this “supposition” of an irresistible act of God, he seems to do so only to dismiss it immediately:

But then man would be man no longer; his inmost nature would be changed. He would no longer be a moral agent, any more than the sun or the wind, as he would no longer be endued with liberty, a power of choosing or self-determination. Consequently he would no longer be capable of virtue or vice, of reward or punishment.¹⁰

Given this immediate dismissal of apocalyptic might, why did Wesley even mention it? Presumably because of its enduring fascination, its widespread appeal, its popularity among many of his presumed audience; perhaps Wesley felt himself drawn to its scenario even as he deemed this scenario to be theologically unacceptable. Indeed, anthropologically unacceptable: for then the human being would be human no longer; “our inmost nature,” he observed, “would be changed.”

In terms of this conference’s theme, we might state it this way: If God truly has created human beings to function as the divine image in the world, i.e., to “image” or reflect God’s character within creation, *and* if an important aspect of that function is the human capacity for moral agency, do we have good reason to expect our Creator to rescind this vocation for humanity? Do we not believe with Paul that “the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (Rom. 11:29)? As Drew theologian Catherine Keller has commented upon Wesley’s quandary, “If God ultimately overpowers the creation, even for the sake of the creatures’ own ‘restoration,’ would this not violate the human creature’s freedom to ‘react upon’ grace, either resisting or embracing it? . . . Yet, despite his synergism, Wesley seems to have presumed such a final, monergistic, consummation.”¹¹

And that is so. Yet we should appreciate that, in the sermon under consideration, Wesley in the space of a few sentences dismisses the sort of presuppositions about divine power that generally dominate typical eschatological expectations. For Wesley such an irresistible act of God would be a betrayal of creation, an undoing of the divine purpose in creating creatures of agency to begin with. This is reminiscent of Irenaeus, the 2nd-century pastor-theologian who wrote that God redeems us “by persuasion, as it is fitting for God to receive what [God] wishes by gentleness and not by force. So neither was the

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 488-489.

¹¹ Catherine Keller, “Salvation Flows: Eschatology for a Feminist Wesleyanism,” *Quarterly Review* Vol. 23, No. 4 (Winter 2003), 416. Her citation of the phrase “react upon” comes from Wesley’s sermon “The Great Privilege of Those Who are Born of God,” where he speaks of grace as “a continual action of God upon the soul” and the human response of gratitude, obedience and prayer as “the re-action of the soul upon God.”

standard of what is just infringed, nor did the ancient creation of God perish”¹² in God’s redeeming labor in Jesus Christ. To put it simply by splicing Irenaeus with Wesley, were “the Almighty to act *irresistibly*” then in fact “the ancient creation of God [would] perish.” God’s creation would “perish” because it would no longer exercise an existence distinct from its Creator; it would be utterly absorbed by divine power. This would be a tragic reversal of God’s purposes, an undoing of the creative Word, “*Let there be . . .*” More specifically, the “ancient creation” of human beings as the image of God would “perish” because their agency, and thus their responsibility before God and one another, would be entirely annulled.

Wesley proceeds to call an eschatological expectation of irresistible divine power such as this a “clumsy way of cutting the knot which we are not able to untie.”¹³ The knot to which Wesley here alludes is created by the tightly interlaced threads of human identity and destiny, human agency and responsibility, inescapably complex as those are, interwoven always already also with divine presence, purpose and power: the very mystery of divine providence. We cannot untie the knot of divine power and human agency. We may, however, loosen the knot a bit if we understand divine power primarily, /and fundamentally, as the *empowering* of the creature. This is not an *overpowering* that would render the creature (human or otherwise) incapable of living, moving and having actual being – and thus lacking integrity. Rather, divine power is a subtle yet real *sharing* of power, of being, with the creature. I maintain that this notion of divine power not only coheres with the invitational “*Let there be*” encountered repeatedly in Genesis 1, but also with the ultimate revelation given to us in the person, words and works of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Nonetheless, if we are unable finally to untie this knot – and good Wesleyans, it seems to me, ought not simply to be unable, but also unwilling, to untie this knot – then, as Wesley asks, “How can all [human beings] be made holy and happy while they continue *to be* [truly] human beings?”¹⁴ Wesley’s question reminds me of a delightful rabbinic midrash on the story of Nehemiah, found in the Mishnah tractate entitled *Yoma* (69b):

“And they cried with a loud voice to the Lord their God” (Neh. 9:4). What did they cry? “Woe, woe, it is he who has destroyed the sanctuary, burnt the temple, killed all the righteous, driven all Israel into exile, and is still dancing around among us.

This “he” is the *yetzer hara*, often translated “the evil impulse” in rabbinic anthropology, but might be better understood as the *elan vital* of human life. I would associate it with impulses like the thrill of competition, the sex drive, the attraction for excitement, perhaps even the sort of thing we associate with daredevil stunt artists and a crowd’s fascination for their antics. All of

¹² Irenaeus

¹³ Wesley, “General Spread,” 489.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

this, while adding great spice to life, easily veers dangerously and wildly out of control, e.g., blood lust, sexual lust, violence, etc. So the *yetzer hara* is the gift of God for human vitality but is also always threatening to overflow proper boundaries. In this passage of the Talmud, the *yetzer hara* is personified. The people of Israel continue their lament over his destructive presence in their lives:

Surely You have given him to us so that we may receive reward through [being tested by, and resisting,] him. We want neither him nor reward through him!" . . . They ordered a fast of three days and three nights (cf. Neh. 9:1), whereupon he [the *yetzer hara*] surrendered to them. He came forth from the holy of holies like a young fiery lion.

We should note that in this rabbinic reflection the *yetzer hara* is said to have come forth from the holy of holies! I assume this to be a graphic way of instructing us that this bundle of human drives, even as they threaten to explode into destructive behavior, are created by God for the good of creation and in fact exist in close company, as it were, with the Creator. This is quite intriguing.

The prophet [Nehemiah] said to them: "Cast [the *yetzer hara*] into a leaden pot, closing its opening with lead, because lead absorbs the voice," . . . They prayed for mercy and he was handed over to them. [But God] said to them: "Realize that if you kill him, the world goes down." They imprisoned him for three days, then looked in the whole land of Israel for a fresh egg and could not find one. Thereupon they said: "What shall we do now? Shall we kill him? The world would then go down. Shall we beg for half mercy? [i.e., only a half-dose of *yetzer hara*?] They do not grant halves in heaven." [So] they put out his eyes and let him go. That helped, inasmuch as he no more entices men to commit incest.¹⁵

That last line certainly is little more than wishful thinking. Nonetheless, the fundamental point of the rabbis here is that to have a world such as this one that we have – a world of love and passion, of friendship and enjoyment, of laughter and courage, and so many other wonderful modes of experience – is possible only where there are alternative, even contrary possibilities always looming: the possibilities of lust and anger, of hatred and violence, of scapegoating and racism, of abuse and hunger and even just of denial and apathy. "They do not grant halves in heaven."

Wesley was not aware, I am sure, of this rabbinic slice of narrative theology! Accordingly, he insists that "there seems to be a plain, simple way of removing this difficulty without entangling ourselves in any subtle, metaphysical disquisitions."¹⁶ But, perhaps in spite of himself, Wesley has already led us into those disquisitions. Indeed, they are unavoidable. To have appealed to human nature, to agency and responsibility, as Wesley did is to have become entangled in metaphysics. And he is not finished. He proceeds immediately with what sounds

¹⁵ As cited by David Hartman, *A Living Covenant: The Innovative Spirit in Traditional Judaism* [bibliographical info missing—Editor], 214-215.

¹⁶ Wesley, *Ibid.*

like a suspiciously metaphysical proposition: “As God is one, so the work of God is uniform in all ages.”¹⁷

We must interrupt Wesley mid-thought. He is about to appeal to the idea that the way God has labored in the world’s past should give us a good sense for how God shall work in the future, how God shall “soon and very soon” bring about a world “filled with knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.” Ponder anew this line from Wesley: “As God is one, so the work of God is uniform in all ages.” Wesley assumes a consistency, a constancy, a reliability in God’s faithful relation with – and labors within – creation. No doubt for Wesley this uniformity is due not simply to God’s unity (as he suggests) but also to God’s moral nature of sacrificial love revealed in Jesus Christ: God is love, and thus God always, everlastingly acts consistently in love. Interestingly, then, Wesley counsels us *not* to expect a radical change in the manner and mode of God’s creating and redeeming activity in the world. The pattern of divine activity that Wesley detects in human experience, “God’s general manner of working,” is one of gracious assistance, not of force. God enlightens and empowers human understanding and affections, God does not delete or undo them. This gracious synergism between God and human creatures provided Wesley with a model not simply for divine-human interaction, but for the entirety of the God-world relation. After all, “as God is One, so the work of God is uniform in all ages” – including (is it possible?) even the anticipated *age to come*? If Wesley is fundamentally correct in this theological conviction, we need only to expand considerably on his relatively limited awareness of just how many, how wide, and how vast all those “ages” actually have been in our planet’s history, to say nothing of the universe in which our infinitesimal earth-orb spins. I am convinced that this consideration does make a difference, and should make a difference; Wesley assumed a universe of 6,000 relatively uncomplicated years’ worth of history, while most of us likely assume a radically different story of the universe: approximately 15 billion years old and still evolving. God makes time – and makes a lot of it, and makes use of it.

But even from within the constraints of a radically differing cosmology, Wesley still could insist that “God’s general manner of working” is not to labor irresistibly. Here he is reminded of his favorite quotation from the sainted bishop of Hippo, “[God] who made us without ourselves, will not save us without ourselves”; indeed, Wesley calls it “one of the noblest [sayings] Augustine ever uttered,”¹⁸ underscoring as it does Wesley’s own hard-fought synergism.

Further, this would be a rare Wesley sermon indeed if it did not include an appeal to our experience: “May we not then conceive how [God] *will* work on the souls of human beings in times to come by considering how [God] *does* work *now*? And how [God] *has* wrought in times past?”¹⁹ Oddly, Wesley seems to miss the sizable problem his rhetoric has created: he began this sermon by agonizing over the present state of the world, which state presumably has at least something to do with how “God does work now” and “how God has [labored] in times past”!

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ The bibliographic information is missing here [Editor].

¹⁹ p. 489.

Further, an appeal to the metaphysical proposition, “As God is one, so the work of God is uniform in all ages,” would seem to offer little assurance. The lamentable mess in which Wesley found his world would presumably be a function, more or less, of “how God has [labored] in times past.” Even if the mess is largely a result of human sin, frailty or error, the Wesleyan tradition in particular fundamentally recognizes human agency to be grounded in the “pure, unbounded love” of God. It is our infinitely loving Creator’s wisdom and will that has gifted us with this precious, yet dangerous, power.

Undaunted, Wesley continues the appeal to his audience’s Christian experience:

You know how God wrought in *your own* soul when he first enabled you to say, "The life I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me." He did not take away your understanding, but enlightened and strengthened it. He did not destroy any of your affections; rather, they were more vigorous than before. Least of all did he take away your liberty, your power of choosing good or evil; [God] did not *force* you; but being *assisted* by his grace you, like Mary, *chose* the better part.²⁰

This classic depiction of Wesley’s doctrine of prevenient grace underscores the difficulty of walking the tightrope he has woven out of “the knot[s] which we are not able to untie.” If “the work of God is uniform in all ages,” and if “God’s general manner of working” is not by coercion or almighty fiat but rather by enlightening, strengthening and assisting, then Wesley has knotted a difficult tightrope indeed.

We have all undoubtedly heard of what Gordon Rupp famously called Wesley’s “optimism of grace”²¹; surely this sermon – indeed, this juncture in this sermon – is the epitome of such optimism. “Now in the same manner as God *has* converted so many to himself without destroying their liberty, he *can* undoubtedly convert whole nations, or the whole world. And it is as easy for him to convert a world as one individual soul.”²² Why does this simply not sound intuitively true? Is it really the case that God “can undoubtedly convert whole nations, or the whole world,” without violating the structures of human existence and agency? Is there a shred of evidence for this claim of Wesley’s? If God were in fact to act in this way, would it not in fact entail the perishing of “the ancient creation of God”? Would God not deem this a failure?

I do not suppose Wesley considered such questions as these, even though in this sermon he has brought us to their brink. But his optimism of grace wins! – at least on paper. He proceeds to offer a brief and somewhat romanticized account of the beginnings and spread of the Methodist movement throughout “Great Britain and Ireland, [and] in every part of America, from south to north, wherever the word of God came with power.”²³ He then asks: “Is it not then highly probable that God will carry on [t]his work in the same manner as [God] has begun?”²⁴

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Gordon Rupp. [This is the only bibliographic information offered here—Editor].

²² Wesley, "General Spread," 490.

²³ *Ibid.*, 492.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

He acknowledges Martin Luther's musing that "a revival of religion never lasts [more than] a generation."²⁵ but replies that the Methodist revival already has that beat and that "God has [not] wrought so glorious a work to let it sink and die away in a few years. No; I trust this is only the beginning of a far greater work – the dawn of 'the latter day glory.'"²⁶

And thus Wesley begins to imagine how the Methodist revival would spread – "not ' . . . with observation,' but [by] silently increas[ing] wherever it is set up, and spread from heart to heart, from house to house, from town to town, from one kingdom to another" – first among the "Protestant nations in Europe," and then among the Roman Catholics, including "those countries that are [exclusively] popish," and then "gradually diffused" to the Orthodox Christians under Muslim rule.

This thorough renewal of worldwide Christendom in "experimental knowledge and love of God, of inward and outward holiness,"²⁷ would recreate a Christian community like the Jerusalem church described early in Acts: "they will 'continue steadfast in the apostles' doctrine and in the fellowship, and in the breaking of bread, and in prayers,' . . . and 'none of them will say that [any] of the things which he possesses is his own, but they will have all things common.'"²⁸ In this renewed and radical community "there will be no partiality; no 'widows neglected in the daily ministrations,'" no rancor or competitiveness – and thus Wesley envisions a kind of Methodist-infected, universal Christian community where "only love informs the whole."²⁹

Then, and only then, Wesley surmises, will all those Muslims who outnumber Christians on the planet have any reason at all to "give attention to [Christians'] words" of proclamation. Only when Christians actually live together as a distinct polity grounded in grace and love, sharing radically in life's material goods, will the worldwide Muslim community take serious note. Wesley seems to have realized, even if unconsciously and unintentionally, that only that kind of concrete, communal witness could bear weight among the *umma* or worldwide community of Islam. Muslims, understanding themselves profoundly to be such an alternative community around the world, would understandably give no serious heed to a disembodied, individualized, spiritualized gospel message. It would take a people, a polis "doing the will of God on earth as it is done in heaven," even to get the attention of Wesley's "Mahometans" – and rightly so.

And thus the gospel and its new community continues to spread, in Wesley's mind, all around the world till finally "'all Israel' too 'shall be saved.'"³⁰ Writing out of this virtually unbounded optimism of grace, then, Wesley predicted the triumphal spread of the gospel from one nation and people to another as God gradually "renews the face of the earth" until the vision of the Revelator is fulfilled and "the Lord God omnipotent reigneth!" I recall to you Keller's

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 493.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 494.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 495.

³⁰ No bibliographic information given [Editor].

observation that, “despite his synergism, Wesley seems to have presumed such a final, monergistic, consummation.”

Wesley probably would beg to differ; he certainly wanted to hold tightly to “the knot which we are not able to untie.” He wanted to affirm the proposition that God does not nullify human understanding, affections or agency, but instead graciously empowers and assists us. Nonetheless, he can end this sermon by taking a page from the book of Revelation – “Hallelujah! The Lord God omnipotent reigneth!” – confidently assuming that this great eschatological vista is virtually “just around the corner.” Of course we should acknowledge that Wesley’s eschatological fantasy has thus far gone unfulfilled. After the technologically-enhanced horrors of world wars and mass genocides of the past century – not to mention the rather stubborn unwillingness of the other great world religious traditions to lie down and breathe their last in the face of the general spread of the gospel! – we are likely to smile dismissively at Wesley’s naïve optimism. Even as we grant that it is an optimism born of grace it still sounds naïve, does it not? Indeed, historical evidence suggests that Wesley had harbored hopes for his class meetings for those who professed Christian perfection – hopes that they would in fact get this renewal of all creation begun in earnest by living in radical Christian community, reenacting the practices of the church as envisioned in the second chapter of Acts, including the sharing of all material goods in common with one another. For Wesley, apparently, such life together would be the inevitable (and perhaps necessary) expression of sanctified social human existence. His hopes even in this particular regard, of course, also went unfulfilled.

Even so, I wonder, is there any good reason to reject his interpretation of God’s mode of working in the world as evocative and empowering *presence* rather than as *irresistible* victory? Keller, I think, is quite right to insist that “surely no Wesleyan eschatology can well dispense with the new creation.” But I wonder if we shall not have to dispense with the manner and mode of new creation that Wesley projected in this sermon – or at least, perhaps, we should hold Wesley closer to his own insistence regarding the manner of God’s working in the world. Indeed, I have argued in writing, repeatedly, that a Wesleyan-shaped eschatology must keep its attention on what, after all, Wesley believed to be God’s ultimate intention for human existence: that we, and all people, might flourish ever more greatly and deeply in love for God and neighbor. Essentially, this is the meaning and goal of our having been created in God’s image. Holding that conviction with seriousness may well lead us, then, to consider which manner of working best suits the divine telos, *God’s true end* for the world. The new creation is always a creation of greater possibilities for love – and perhaps for love to exist, let alone to grow and thrive, it may require a world such as the one in which we live. We recall the rabbinic wisdom, “They do not grant halves in heaven.”

As I conclude these musings, then, allow me to offer three concluding points that have arisen for me as I reflect upon this somewhat unusual sermon of John Wesley:

- God’s mode of labor in the world is that of the quiet, unassuming persuasion of love, such that God does not undo, devalue or nullify human thought, imagination, creativity, affections or activity; indeed, we confess that the divine wisdom we

encounter in Jesus Christ is “gentle and humble in heart” (Mt. 11:29), inviting us to learn from Jesus how we too might become gentle and humble human beings – and so much more faithfully as the image of God.

- God’s quietly and subtly transforming act in Jesus Christ is intended to create a radical alternative community of human beings whose life together is a concrete, corporeal, communal witness visible to the rest of the world, including people of other religious traditions who also share in distinctive ways of life together. The onus upon the Church is not to convince other people that we are right, but to live together in such a way that we offer compelling testimony to the Lord we love and serve.
- If indeed it is true that “as God is one, so the work of God is uniform in all ages,” then we who confess Christian faith must re-think eschatology in less dramatic apocalyptic ways, and in more mundane, quiet, communal ecclesiological ways, that can in turn be communicated clearly to our congregations. The church, we believe, wherever it is in local congregation, is an eschatological community, a people gathered to live already in, or at least very seriously toward, the age to come. “No Wesleyan eschatology can well dispense with the new creation,” indeed; however, the time is ripe to think “new creation” as occurring at local levels, in particular places where Jesus’ disciples live together in such a way as to reflect and bear witness to God’s gentle reign in this world – perhaps something like a tiny, seemingly insignificant, mustard seed. Perhaps in just such a way God is able, and willing, to gradually “renew the face of the earth.” For there is no evidence at hand to suggest that our Creator is ready to give up on the divine intention, borne witness to in the very opening of our Bibles, to create humanity, male and female, to function as God’s image in creation.