

The Experience of Transformation in Wesley's Theology¹

Rebecca L. Davis

Introduction

Wesleyan theology is known for its emphasis on experience and spiritual transformation, also known as sanctification. John Wesley had a deep conviction that God communicates with humans not only through their minds but also through inward spiritual experience. These experiences, in his view, are essential to spiritual transformation. Radical in his day, Wesley raised the role of experience in his theological method and the Christian life to a place of honor, even of necessity if one is to be “transformed into his [Christ’s] image with ever-increasing glory” (2 Cor 3:18). This article will discuss three aspects of Wesley’s views regarding the relationship between experience and transformation: 1) The role of experience in his theology, 2) his understanding of the word “experience,” and 3) how experience can bring spiritual transformation.

The Role of Experience in Wesleyan Theology

Wesley, the founder of Methodism, is often labeled an “experiential theologian.”² Today’s understanding of what he meant by the word “experience” and how he applied it to his theology is not always adequately understood. Even when reading Wesley’s own words, historical nuances must be teased out to grasp his intended meaning. The following discussion will shed some light on the role of experience in Wesleyan theology, which has been identified as “one of the

¹ Excerpted and adapted from Rebecca L. Davis, “A Tapestry of Grace: Spiritual Transformation and Corporate Worship in the Wesleyan Church of North America” (PhD Diss., University of Aberdeen, 2023)

² Gregory S. Clapper, *John Wesley on Religious Affections: His Views on Experience and Emotion and Their Role in the Christian Life and Theology*, vol. 1, *Pietist and Wesleyan Studies* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1989), 55.

distinctive marks of Methodism.”³ Scholars who have studied Wesley in his historical context provide a historically informed view of what he understood by the word *experience*, as well as various other terms he used in this context. Those who follow Wesleyan theology today can benefit from the knowledge of Wesley’s language of experience to navigate the interaction of human experience with theological understanding while remaining true to their historical foundations.

Experience is a component of what is known as the Wesleyan quadrilateral, which includes Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. According to Randy Maddox, Wesley’s inclusion of experience as a criterion for developing and defending doctrinal positions sets him apart from other theologians of his time. Experience was rarely considered in theological questions.⁴ Although he followed the doctrines of the Church of England, his ideas were different enough that he was often “disinvited” to preach in those churches because of his breaks from their understanding, especially on this issue of experience. He did not formulate a “systematic theology” but rather formulated theological ideas born out of the lived experience of the people to whom he ministered. Consequently, his theology is sometimes referred to as “folk theology.”⁵ Gregory Clapper says,

It is this desire to stay close to concrete reality that made Wesley think long and hard about the relation between felt experience and Christian truth. It is the need for a vision of the gospel which is fully integrated with the very real and concrete life of the heart . . . which should make us at least give another hearing to the theology of John Wesley.⁶

The Wesley brothers, John and Charles, even solicited testimonies of spiritual experiences from people in the early years of the Methodist

³ Winfield H. Bevins, “Pneumatology in John Wesley’s Theological Method,” *The Asbury Theological Journal* 58 (2003): 107.

⁴ Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 1994), 44.

⁵ Albert C. Outler, *John Wesley* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1964), iii.

⁶ Clapper, *John Wesley on Religious Affections*, 1:6.

movement in England. Some of these testimonies, in the form of letters to Charles Wesley, are held at the University of Manchester. According to Manchester's website, the letters were "written in response to the request from the Revival leadership for accounts of conversion for use in sermons and publications."⁷ Wesley's view of human experience, unusual for his time, was that it was "real"—it deserved enough consideration to re-evaluate some of the long-held doctrines of the Church of England and influenced the formulation of his own theological views.

Rob Staples argues that Wesley actually held experience, as provided by the Holy Spirit, to be on an equal footing with Scripture, the written expression of the Word. Staples called this view the "bi-unity" of Word and Spirit, which work together as sources of revelation.⁸ He does not discount Wesley's appeal to tradition or his use of reason but does not agree with the conception of the "quadrilateral" as four equal partners or the idea that Scripture is above the other three. In his view, Scripture as the written Word cannot be held above experience inspired by the same Spirit who inspired that written Word. In Staples' view, this "bi-unity" of Spirit and Word applies both hermeneutically and soteriologically, asserting that the idea corresponds with Wesley's use of Scripture *and* experience as sources of the assurance of justification and sanctification, saying, "I refer to Wesley's doctrine of assurance—the 'witness of the Spirit' to both our adoption and our entire sanctification."⁹ If the two seem to disagree in practice, Wesley would have seen it as a lack of his own understanding, and he would have turned to reason and/or tradition to seek an answer.

Winfield Bevins points out that the other three aspects of the Quadrilateral were common to the theologians of Wesley's day. What

⁷ University of Manchester, "Rapture and Reason," December 21, 2020, <https://www.library.manchester.ac.uk/using-the-library/staff/digitisation-services/projects/rapture-and-reason>.

⁸ Rob L. Staples, "John Wesley's Doctrine of the Holy Spirit: The Place of Sacraments in Wesleyan Spirituality," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 21 (1986): 96.

⁹ Staples, 97.

was missing, he says, “was a spiritual confirmation, or an assurance of salvation within the heart, mind, and soul of the believer.” Wesley, in a break with the highly cognitive theological conversations of the Enlightenment, “saw the need for a reappropriation of Christian experience.”¹⁰ Wesley was an Oxford scholar and a priest in the Church of England, but he was a pastor to the people who joined the Methodist societies. Collins goes so far as to liken Wesley to an abbot in a Benedictine community, calling him “the spiritual director, par excellence, of the Methodist societal infrastructure.”¹¹ Wesley identified the importance of recognizing human experience in relation to spiritual matters based on his study of philosophy and science, as well as his own lived experience and his observation of and conversations with others. Wesley’s desire was that doctrinal and theological truths would be experienced by Christians. He said in his publication “A Plain Account of Genuine Christianity,” “May every real Christian say, ‘I now am assured that these things are so; I experienced them in my own breast. What Christianity (considered as a doctrine) promised is accomplished in my soul.’”¹² In Wesley’s thought, spirituality that would have the ability to change people’s lives could never be merely a matter of mental assent to theological and doctrinal statements; it must be appropriated and even verified on an experiential level.

¹⁰ Bevins, “Pneumatology in John Wesley’s Theological Method,” 107.

¹¹ Kenneth J. Collins, “A Reconfiguration of Power: The Basic Trajectory in John Wesley’s Practical Theology,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 33, no. 1 (1998): 182.

¹² Outler, *John Wesley*, 183–84.

Locating “Experience” in Wesley’s Understanding

Contemporary Understanding of “Experience”

Timothy Crutcher notes that Wesley’s understanding of the word “experience” does not conform to today’s prevalent understanding of that word as a subjective, personal, passive event that happens to a person, nor is “experience” synonymous with feelings. Crutcher says, “We tend to use the word *experience* today with psychological connotations that do not seem to be present in eighteenth-century England. These psychological connotations bias our interpretation of experience toward the private and passive mental synthesis of sensory input into quantifiable events.”¹³ Crutcher does not discount internal experience, but there is more to Wesley’s understanding of the term. Crutcher continues,

Unless we want to import our modern psychological presumptions back into Wesley, there is little need to create a space for separate, internal experience disconnected from experience as objective criterion. . . . For a practical person like Wesley, our notional ideas are ideas about what can be experienced in life and so don’t mean anything *until* they are applied there.¹⁴

For Wesley, then, experience is something that applies to “real life.” It is something that is lived, not only internally but also externally. It is more than religious subjectivism; it is an internal experience that is reflected in the outward life of a person.

In spite of Crutcher’s focus on the application of experience with an “objective criterion,” Jerry Mercer says that “Wesley proclaimed to all that one could actually sense the presence of the God of the universe and thus be intuitively certain of God’s acceptance.”¹⁵ Thus, in this

¹³ Timothy J. Crutcher, *The Crucible of Life: The Role of Experience in John Wesley’s Theological Method*, vol. no. 1, Asbury Theological Seminary Series in World Christian Revitalization Movements. Pietist/Wesleyan Studies (Lexington, KY: Emeth Press, 2010), 77.

¹⁴ Crutcher, *The Crucible of Life*, 174.

¹⁵ Jerry L. Mercer, “Toward a Wesleyan Understanding of Christian Experience,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 20, no. 1 (1985): 79.

sense, “experience” can be something that happens internally, an “intuition.” However, this inward, “personal experience” cannot, in Wesley’s theology, stand alone as “proof” of anything. According to Maddox,

Wesley’s concern was not that the Spirit directly assures him of this (or any other) doctrinal claim, but that the claim “prove true” in his life and the lives of his people over time. The type of experience that he valued for doctrinal decisions was the *wisdom* acquired through living, not immediate spiritual sensations.¹⁶

In addition to outwardly observable evidence, spiritual experience, as Maddox says, must be “subordinate to Scripture. [Wesley’s] typical way of expressing this was that experience ‘confirmed’ Scripture. Actually, something more fundamental was taking place; experience was being used to *test* proposed *interpretations* of Scripture.”¹⁷ These statements suggest a similarly high view of experience to the “bi-unity” view of Staples. A central part of Wesley’s focus on “experience” is the idea of the “inner witness of the Holy Spirit.” Staples points out that Wesley uses the same language regarding understanding and appropriating the truth of Scripture for the assurance of salvation and sanctification. He quotes Wesley saying, “There is no power or profit in reading or hearing the Scriptures apart from the accompanying witness of the Spirit of God.”¹⁸ Rather than subordinating experience to Scripture, Staples equates the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer to the idea of “experience,” and raises the importance of that inspiration to equal the importance of reading or hearing Scripture in Wesley’s thought. Not only did the Holy Spirit inspire the writers of Scripture in the past, he also inspires the readers/hearers of Scripture in the present.¹⁹

Wesley obviously placed a high value on the Holy Spirit’s inner

¹⁶ Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology*, 46.

¹⁷ Maddox, 45–46; emphasis in original.

¹⁸ John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley: Complete and Unabridged*, Third, vol. 10 (Kansas City MO: Beacon Hill Press, 1979), 188.

¹⁹ Staples, “John Wesley’s Doctrine of the Holy Spirit, 99.

communication to the believer, but his understanding of spiritual experience was misunderstood in his time, much as it could be today, as simply a subjective feeling. This misunderstanding led to Wesley being labeled an “enthusiast.”

Enthusiasm

Wesley’s insistence that persons must experience “in their heart” what they believed intellectually about their Christian faith prompted accusations of “enthusiasm” by many of his contemporaries. This word was used differently in eighteenth-century England than it is today, especially as applied to religion. Clapper summarizes the idea of enthusiasm by saying it is an extreme subjectivism, in which “the emphasis is on ‘feeling’ and emotions undisciplined by Biblically informed thinking.”²⁰ James Dunn, in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, has this to say about enthusiasm:

In the English-speaking world, the word [enthusiasm] came to prominence as a technical religious term in the seventeenth century, always used in reference to religious experience, and, for the most part, as a term of denigration. For about two hundred years, the usual usage was to denote ill-regulated religious emotion, or, more specifically, fancied inspiration, the false or deluded claim to have received divine communications or private revelations.²¹

Wesley taught that persons could have an inward conviction that their sins were forgiven and that they were justified before God. In his day, this could be seen as “fancied inspiration” or “private revelation.” Albert Outler says, “It was this idea—of the immediate intuition of God’s pardoning love—which raised the shout of ‘enthusiasm’ against the Methodists.”²² Wesley, in the *London Magazine* of 1760, wrote a response to issues raised by his detractors in the magazine. In response to the question, “If every man be furnished with an inward light, as a private guide and director, must it not supersede the necessity of

²⁰ Clapper, *John Wesley on Religious Affections*, 1:161.

²¹ James D. G. Dunn, in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade, vol. 5 (New York, NY: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1987), 118.

²² Outler, *John Wesley*, 209.

Revelation?” Wesley answered, “The Methodists...allow no inward light but what is subservient to the written word, and to be judged thereby.”²³ This is an example of his balanced view of Spirit and Word, as presented by Staples. Previously, Maddox noted that Wesley expected experience to confirm understanding of Scripture. Here, he expected Scripture to confirm experience.

While it may have seemed clear to the established church of eighteenth-century England that Wesley’s movement promoted enthusiasm, Wesley himself expended much energy on refuting this claim, repeating his assertion that he never taught that personal experience should be claimed as a trustworthy source of religious knowledge apart from Scripture. He did, however, expect that personal experience could act as verification of scriptural understanding, and, to go a step further, he taught that scriptural truth *must* be personally appropriated through a personal, inward experience brought by the Holy Spirit to be effective.

Experimental Religion

Besides the word “experiential,” Wesley also used the word “experimental,” which can be confusing in our twenty-first-century context. Clapper points out that, in eighteenth-century English, “experience” and “experiment” were cognates.²⁴ In Wesley’s thinking, experience or experiment is an outworking of an *a priori* intuition or belief, resulting in spiritual knowledge that is personally appropriated. However, it is not simple to come to a clear distinction between spiritual experience and what Wesley meant by his religion being “experimental.” In the preface to his *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People called Methodists*, he used the phrase “experimental and practical divinity” to describe the theological significance of the collection of hymns. He said,

It [the book] is large enough to contain all the important truths of our most holy religion, whether speculative or practical; yea, to illustrate them all, and to prove them both by Scripture and reason. And this

²³ Outler, *John Wesley*, 209.

²⁴ Clapper, *John Wesley on Religious Affections*, 1:55.

is done in a regular order. The hymns are not carelessly jumbled together, but carefully ranged under proper heads, according to the experience of real Christians. So, this book is in effect a little body of experimental and practical divinity.²⁵

Wesley used this phrase as if everyone who read it would understand what he meant. Perhaps they did. Wesley's love of logic and the milieu of the Enlightenment would lend a scientific bent to this statement. Robert Cushman, although he never actually defines the word "experimental" in Wesley's usage, says this, speaking of holiness: "Does the Spirit of God need to enliven 'a valley of dry bones'? Does 'the *form* of godliness' need to be replaced by the *power* of it? Is this close to scriptural holiness? It would appear so. If it is, it will also be something experienced, and, thus, possibly 'experimental' and so reproducible."²⁶ Here, Cushman hints at his idea of what is meant by "experimental." It is something that is "reproducible."

Wesley's theological project went beyond the internal assurance of salvation, which he recounted as the beginning of his journey. It soon became evident to him that the experience of forgiveness of sin was only part of the story of salvation. Cushman says,

This [experimental and practical] divinity denotes a doctrinal system best described as mapping the way of salvation. It entails a transformation of human existence that properly issues in "holiness of heart and life," or "Christian perfection." Its distinctive thesis is that the truth of Scripture and the "promises" of God to sinful humanity are, in the first case, confirmed and, in the second, claimed only by living experience empowered by the gracious working of the Holy Spirit.²⁷

Observable results, to Wesley, were the outcome of experimental

²⁵ Franz Hildebrandt, ed., *The Works of John Wesley: A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists*, vol. 7 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 74.

²⁶ Robert Earl Cushman, *John Wesley's Experimental Divinity: Studies in Methodist Doctrinal Standards* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1989), 36.

²⁷ Cushman, 10.

religion. These results might at first only be observed by the individual as an “inward experience,” but the results of that inward experience, if true, would become evident to others. The fact that the same types of experiences were claimed by such vast numbers of people during the Wesley revivals served to “prove” his thesis. An important part of the “proof” is that salvation ought to “properly issue in ‘holiness of heart and life,’” as Cushman says. In other words, the result of true salvation should be observable to all and, therefore, an example of “experimental” religion.

Crutcher quotes Wesley’s sermon, “On Living Without God,” in which Wesley said, “Indeed nothing can be more sure than that true Christianity cannot exist without both the inward experience and outward practice of justice, mercy, and truth.”²⁸ Crutcher applies this quote to the question of experience in the sense of observable results by saying,

It would . . . make little sense to treat “justice, mercy, and truth” as if they were subjective emotions. . . . A better explanation would be to see the “inward experience” of these things as taking these external realities to heart, ensuring that one’s encounter with them affects the core of one’s being.²⁹

In this light, Wesley expected that outward practice would confirm or deny that a spiritual intuition or a scriptural understanding gained from an inward experience was, in fact, accurate. It was imperative for him to know if what he taught and what people believed held up to how things worked out in real life for real people.

“Experimental religion” is solidly based on spiritual experience. It includes the combination of cognitive understanding of Scripture and tradition, as confirmed by inward personal experience, with an added element of observable outward behavior that conforms to biblical ideals of holiness. It is “repeatable” in that the same or similar experiences are available, according to Wesley, to all who believe.

²⁸ John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 7 (Kansas City, Beacon Hill Press, 1986), 127, quoted in *Crutcher, the Crucible of Life*, no. 1:80

²⁹ Crutcher, *The Crucible of Life*, no. 1:80

In summary, Wesley's use of the word "experience," when applied to his theology, is something of an umbrella term for internally received spiritual intuition given by the Holy Spirit as well as the resulting external actions and less concrete yet observable changes in attitudes and behavior. The observable results of Wesley's concept of experience will be examined more closely in the following section.

The Experience of Spiritual Transformation

Wesley's Heart-Language

"Experiential" and "experimental" describe in general terms how scriptural claims of complete salvation (including justification, sanctification, and glorification), or, in other words, the claims of the gospel, can be personally appropriated. The results of such experimental faith are transformational to what Wesley termed the "affections" or "tempers" of the heart. Clapper explains Wesley's "heart religion" in this way:

Wesley sees the gospel as something indisputably "objective" that comes from outside of us as "good news. . . . However, if our life is not marked by very specific and complex patterns of heart response to that gospel, we have not really heard or understood the good news. Those patterns of response are what Wesley termed the religious "affections" or "tempers" of the heart.³⁰

The re-ordering of the heart's affections in response to the claims of the gospel, as displayed by outward change, was, for Wesley, evidence that the testimony of a spiritual transformation was actually true.

Clapper focuses on Wesley's use of "heart language" to further explain the experiential aspect of Wesley's vision. In Clapper's words, "To see what was at stake in his various claims about 'experience,' we have to refer to concrete experiences which typically found expression in the language of emotion. This emotion or affection language . . . was

³⁰ Gregory S. Clapper, *Renewal of the Heart Is the Mission of the Church: Wesley's Heart Religion in the Twenty-First Century* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books/Wipf and Stock Pub, 2010), 3.

Wesley's primary mode of expression."³¹ While this statement may seem to be in opposition to Crutcher's claim that logic was *a priori* for Wesley, his "heart language" did not oppose logic, but rather explained in human terms, understandable to his hearers and readers, a reasoned account of what happens inwardly and outwardly to persons when they experience spiritual transformation. Clapper uses the term "concrete experiences," but to be clear, he is discussing both internal spiritual experience and outwardly observable change.

According to Clapper, Wesley uses the word "heart" metaphorically in the same way that we use it today and as we find it in our modern translations of the Bible, as "the essential core of a human being—the 'home' of values, desires, hopes,"³² and also as "the home of the deep and abiding emotions."³³ In Wesley's view, without a change in a person's heart, or, as Clapper expresses it, "*the renewal of the human heart*,"³⁴ there is no true Christianity. Clapper, in fact, coined the term "orthokardia" to illustrate how important he believes this idea is in Wesley's theology. He says, "If we can free our minds from what our intellectual culture has told us about the heart and its emotions, we can once again claim Wesley's vision of Christianity, consisting of not only right belief (orthodoxy) and right action (orthopraxis), but the right heart of orthokardia."³⁵ Wesley's own experience of heart renewal is famously condensed to what is called his "Aldersgate Experience." Following is what he wrote in his journal on Wednesday, May 24th, 1738:

In the evening, I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's Preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my

³¹ Clapper, *John Wesley on Religious Affections*, 1:2.

³² Clapper, *Renewal of the Heart*, 33.

³³ Clapper, 20.

³⁴ Clapper, 27.

³⁵ Gregory S. Clapper, "Orthokardia: John Wesley's Grammar of the Holy Spirit," in *The Spirit, the Affections, and the Christian Tradition*, ed. Dale M. Coulter and Amos Young (University of Notre Dame Press, 2016), 274.

heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death.³⁶

The “heart strangely warmed” phrase has often been used to describe Wesley’s initial salvation experience, although Outler says in his biography of Wesley that many spiritual experiences led to this moment, and Wesley was to have many more experiences to follow. Outler points to this particular experience as a turning point in Wesley’s spiritual journey, saying, “At Aldersgate, he passed from virtual to real faith, from hoping to having.”³⁷ It is not difficult to see, based on his own experience, why Wesley would place such profound importance on the renewal of the heart.

Heart language is one expression of Wesley’s experiential understanding of Christianity. In this light, Crutcher says, “Experience must confirm reasoned and scriptural constructions of theological knowledge for them to have true meaning.”³⁸ There is an abundance of scriptural references to the heart and its central role in the Christian faith. For Wesley, the language of the heart is the only way to adequately describe an inwardly-experienced affirmation of the truth of Scripture, which results in the transformation of a person’s being. In his sermon, “The Marks of the New Birth,” he says, “A third scriptural mark of those who are born of God, and the greatest of all, is love: even ‘the love of God shed abroad in their hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto them’ (Rom. 5:5),” and “The necessary fruit of this love of God is the love of our neighbour, of every soul which God hath made.”³⁹ For Wesley, if Scripture is to be believed, logic or reason demands that this experience of heart renewal is available to human beings, and, in Wesley’s thought, it is at the core of true Christianity.

³⁶ Outler, *John Wesley*, 66; emphasis in original.

³⁷ Outler, 17.

³⁸ Crutcher, *The Crucible of Life*, no. 1:158.

³⁹ John Wesley, Albert Cook Outler, and Richard P. Heitzenrater, *John Wesley’s Sermons: An Anthology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 179.

Affections

For Wesley, a renewed heart is evidenced by “religious affections.”⁴⁰ The word *affection* is used differently in eighteenth-century English than it is commonly used today. An example in the King James Version of the Bible, which would have been in use in Wesley’s time, is Colossians 3:2a, which says, “Set your affection on things above.” In the New King James Version, this verse is translated as “Set your mind on things above.” Today, the word *affection* generally describes a feeling. In the current Cambridge Dictionary, it is defined simply as “a feeling of liking for a person or place.” One synonym is “fondness.”⁴¹ This is not at all how the word should be understood in Wesley’s vocabulary.

According to Clapper, religious affections in Wesley’s teaching are inward dispositions that have been re-ordered to reflect the values found in Scripture representing holiness, evidenced by outward expressions of the resulting state of the heart. Although Wesley does talk about emotions and feelings, they are not the same as the affections. Clapper’s inductive study of Wesley’s use of the word *affections*, and more specifically, *religious affections*, shows them to be an integral part of heart renewal. Wesley considered their transformation to be a response to the gospel that begins as a change of heart and results in concrete action in the world. Clapper says, “In *A Farther Appeal*, Part 1, he [Wesley] states that while we *are* meant to *feel* peace, joy and love, the best proof of being led by the Spirit is not merely a sensation but a ‘thorough change and renovation of mind and heart, and the leading a new and holy life.’”⁴² Similar to Crutcher’s inclusion of the outward result of inward intuition in his discussion of experience, Clapper points to concrete action as the *telos* of the “inner phenomena” of the affections.⁴³ “Theology’s first job,” Clapper says, “is to describe what Christianity

⁴⁰ Gregory S. Clapper, “Wesley’s ‘Main Doctrines’ and Spiritual Formation and Teaching in the Wesleyan Tradition,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 39, no. 2 (2004): 99–100.

⁴¹ Cambridge Dictionary. N.D. “Affection.” Accessed November 2021. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/affection>.

⁴² Clapper, *Renewal of the Heart*, 16; emphasis in original.

⁴³ Clapper, *John Wesley on Religious Affections*, 1:80.

looks like when it is enfolded by describing the affections it engenders."⁴⁴ The concept of religious affections, then, is a way of conceptualizing spiritual experience as it affects the inward dispositions of people.

Although Clapper focuses on the term *affections*, Wesley uses various terminology to describe the idea, including *fruits*, *tempers*, *dispositions*, and *virtues*. Wesley, in describing his vision in the opening paragraphs of "An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion," says the following: "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...spreading virtue and happiness all around it."⁴⁵

Clapper lists several religious affections spoken of most often by Wesley. These are thankfulness or gratitude, faith or trust (in God), hope, fear of God, joy, temperance (synonyms for Wesley were meekness and sobriety), peace, happiness, and holiness. Happiness and holiness are often joined in Wesley's thought, and he saw them as the "fruit of righteousness." Importantly, Clapper also says, "No affection is mentioned by Wesley as often as love."⁴⁶ Wesley said of love, "It is the root of all the rest," when writing on the fruits of the Spirit found in Galatians 5:22-23.⁴⁷ It can be argued that Wesley's entire theological vision revolves around the idea of love as the greatest affection of all. Consequently, if an affection is an inward disposition evidenced by outward expression, and if love is the one affection that is "the root of all the rest," a brief investigation into Wesley's focus on love is appropriate here.

Love, the "Sum of All"

⁴⁴ Clapper, *Renewal of the Heart*, 13.

⁴⁵ John Wesley and Gerald R. Cragg, *The Appeals to Men of Reason and Religion and Certain Related Open Letters*, vol. 11, *The Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 46.

⁴⁶ Clapper, *John Wesley on Religious Affections*, 1:86–88.

⁴⁷ John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* (Kansas City, Mo.: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1981), 697.

In his publication, “An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion,” Wesley called the love of God and neighbor the “sum of all.”⁴⁸ This treatise, the first of two (“A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion” being published later in three parts), was, in essence, a defense of his theological position and of the Methodist movement in general. Wesley’s statement that love is the “sum of all” is in relation to what he taught as necessary to salvation, all of it “undeniably contained in the Word of God.”⁴⁹ In another publication defending his vision, “Farther Thoughts on Christian Perfection,” he says, “The whole law under which we now are, is fulfilled by love. (Romans 13:9-10)” To answer the question about what kind of love he is referring to, he answers, “The loving the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength; and the loving our neighbor, every man, as ourselves, as our own souls.”⁵⁰ This focus on the love of God and neighbor is a recurring theme in Wesley’s writings and is worthy of attention, as it is the result of sanctification, or what I have called spiritual transformation.

Love has been identified as the key to Wesley’s theology, notably in books such as *A Theology of Love*, by Mildred Bangs Wynkoop, and *The Life of God in the Soul*, by David B. McEwan. A thorough treatment of this premise is beyond the scope of this article but will be addressed here for its importance in describing a Wesleyan view of spiritual transformation. The challenge, of course, is identifying what Wesley meant when he spoke of love and conveying that meaning to a contemporary audience, which, again, may have quite different notions of the meaning of the word than did Wesley. This challenge is identified by Wynkoop in 1972 when she says of a contemporary understanding of the word in her context, “Love is a weasel word...Love may mean anything—or nothing.”⁵¹ To understand Wesley’s focus on love, it must

⁴⁸ Wesley and Cragg, *The Appeals to Men of Reason*, 11:277.

⁴⁹ Wesley and Cragg, 11:277.

⁵⁰ John Wesley and Mark K. Olson, *John Wesley’s “A Plain Account of Christian Perfection”: The Annotated Edition* (Fenwick, MI: Alethea In Heart, 2005), 181.

⁵¹ Mildred Bangs Wynkoop, *A Theology of Love: The Dynamic of Wesleyanism*, 2nd ed. (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 2015), 9.

be approached from a biblical perspective rather than a contemporary, culturally Western perspective.

McEwan begins his argument with the words of Jesus, which Wesley himself quoted. In Mark 12:28 when Jesus was asked by a teacher of the law to identify the greatest commandment, Jesus replied, “The most important one...is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself,’ There is no commandment greater than these.” (Mark 12:29-31, NIV) McEwan says,

Surprisingly, he [Jesus] focuses on love and relationship with the one, true God, and then equally with other people. ...The two verses [Deut 6:4-5, Lev 19:18] were very well-known, but Jesus links them interdependently, and together, they clearly place the primary emphasis on loving relationships rather than beliefs, rituals, or practices.⁵²

McEwan agrees with Wynkoop regarding the challenge of understanding the word “love” rightly. He says, “The danger here is to think of ‘love’ and ‘relationship’ as empty terms that we can then fill with our own understanding, and often we simply reduce them to a set of emotions. ...The beginning point in understanding the true nature of love and relationship is the Triune God revealed to us in Christ and in Scripture.”⁵³ To summarize McEwan’s analysis of Wesley’s teaching on love, God’s love is expressed relationally, first within the Triune Godhead, and then with humanity. Stemming from creation, the *imago Dei* given to humans is this relational love, found within the Trinity, that defines the biblical concern for holiness. That is, biblical holiness is not some “abstract quality or standard,” but is defined by the quality of divine love. This relational, holy love, McEwan says, is “inherently transformative, and as we embark on a relationship with him [God] we

⁵² David B. McEwan, *The Life of God in the Soul: The Integration of Love, Holiness and Happiness in the Thought of John Wesley*, Studies in Evangelical History and Thought (Milton Keynes, Bucks: Paternoster, 2015), 2–3.

⁵³ McEwan, 3.

will be increasingly changed into the likeness of Christ.”⁵⁴ In this view, as discussed by Clapper, right action (orthopraxis) flows from a right heart (orthokardia), and a right heart is formed by the experience of a loving relationship with the Triune God. Restoration of the *imago Dei* and the quality of love that implies, i.e., the love that is found within the Trinity, is a recurring theme of Wesleyan theology.

Wynkoop’s focus is on correcting what became a legalistic theology of holiness by displaying how Wesley’s theology is rooted in biblical, Godly love. She says, “When it is said that love is the dynamic of Wesleyanism, something is said by implication about holiness, which is the specific emphasis for which Wesleyanism stands. It says that holiness is dynamic and that the character of holiness is love.”⁵⁵ This love, she says, is “revealed by God in Christ.”⁵⁶ To speak of love as an affection or simply the highest virtue is inadequate. For Wesley, love is both the starting point of spiritual transformation because “God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit” (Romans 5:5, NIV) and the *telos* of spiritual transformation, evidenced by outwardly observable actions that express the love of our neighbors as ourselves.

While approaching the subject from different starting points, McEwan and Wynkoop are both pointing to the same conclusion: Wesley’s entire theological project revolves around love as revealed by God in Christ and acquired by humans through the action of the Holy Spirit. It is based on the relationality of the Trinity and revealed in the transformed lives of believers. Beginning with Romans 5:5 and ending with Mark 12:30-31, it can be summed up in a few words from 1 John 4:19, “We love because he first loved us.” The purpose of Wesley’s experiential religion is wrapped up in these scriptural statements.

Conclusion

⁵⁴ McEwan, 156.

⁵⁵ Wynkoop, *A Theology of Love: The Dynamic of Wesleyanism*, 22.

⁵⁶ Wynkoop, 18.

The experiential and experimental religion that John Wesley envisioned is based on his understanding that the voices of Scripture and spiritual experience are both essential for the Christian life. Central to this idea is that believers can experience both the assurance of salvation as well as spiritual transformation that enables them to fulfill the scriptural call to “be holy.” This spiritual transformation, or sanctification, is expressed, according to Clapper, in Wesley’s “language of the heart.” Wesley summed up his view of what a transformed, holy life looks like in his sermon, “The New Birth,” as follows:

For what is holiness, according to the oracles of God? Not a bare external religion, a round of outward duties, how many soever they be, and how exactly soever performed. No; gospel holiness is no less than the image of God stamped upon the heart. It is no other than the whole mind which was in Christ Jesus. It consists of all heavenly affections and tempers mingled together in one. It implies such a continual, thankful love to him who hath not withheld from us his Son, his only Son, as makes it natural, and in a manner necessary to us, to love every child of man; as fills us with ‘bowels of mercies, kindness, gentleness, long-suffering.’ It is such a love of God as teaches us to be blameless in all manner of conversation; as enables us to present our souls and bodies, all we are and all we have, all our thoughts, words, and actions, a continual sacrifice to God, acceptable through Christ Jesus.⁵⁷

Thus, spiritual transformation, viewed through a Wesleyan lens, is a radical re-ordering of the objects of the heart’s affections. It is orthokardia, based in orthodoxy, resulting in orthopraxis. Immersed in scriptural teaching of holy love and the church’s teaching on the relational love of the Triune God, Wesley found that human beings could personally experience that love, which could transform them from within and enable them to live a holy life. The evidence of the inward transformation of the heart is the transformation of relationships because of the relational love that originates with the Triune God residing in the hearts of humans. It is nothing less than the restoration of the *imago Dei*

⁵⁷ Wesley, Outler, and Heitzenrater, *John Wesley’s Sermons: An Anthology*, 340.

in humankind, including victory over inherited sin. Thus, the ultimate result of an experience of spiritual transformation, or in Wesley's language, "entire sanctification," is a person whose intentions, values, affections, and relationships are engendered and governed by holy love; a love that originates with the Triune God, is shared by God with humans, is returned by humans back to God and shared with others in tangible ways.

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