

Luther, Wesley, and Trials of the Spirit
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Both Luther and Wesley had fraught relationships with God. This anxiety—which Luther famously called *anfechtung* and Wesley experienced acutely on an ocean-tossed ship to Georgia—was a catalyst in different ways for both men’s theological development. What constitutes trial or “temptation” before God and in the Christian life? How did this anxiety translate for each of them into ministry with troubled souls? Though Luther and Wesley share a sense of the pastor as “physician of souls,” their diagnoses and treatments differ, starkly in some cases. Why?

Luther’s *anfechtungen* name an enduring unease, whether experienced naturally as human dread before the unknown or triggered in the hearing of scriptural law and gospel. For Wesley, spiritual afflictions find their place in the economy of God where they have an awakening affect in *almost*—and a providential role for *altogether*—Christians. These descriptions of what may variously be called “spiritual trials,” “fears,” “temptations,” or “angst,” uncover a *grundifferenz* in Luther’s and Wesley’s doctrines of God and how they attribute spiritual adversity to divine and satanic forces. Their respective accounts also imply different anthropologies in which spiritual trials can be identified as fixed (Luther) or episodic (Wesley) features that have a formative effect on believers’ self-understanding. While it is impossible to fully separate Luther’s and Wesley’s own reported spiritual anxieties from their pastoral guidance to others, this paper will leave those personal accounts largely to the side in the interests of space and focus. Following an analysis focused on sermons and letters, we will be able to place

Luther and Wesley in conversation with one another on the question of spiritual trials among the cure of souls, asking how their differences can prove instructive in ecumenical reflection on the pastoral task using a “Receptive Ecumenical”¹ approach with the potential to enrich both traditions that reformer and revivalist founded.

The Rustling Leaf: Luther’s *Anfechtung*

*One does not deserve to be called a theologian who sees clearly the invisible things of God understood through things that have been made (Heidelberg Disputation, 19).*² *Anfechtung* was a pre-existing condition that became a formative element in Luther’s theology. Difficult to render precisely in English, the term meant “temptation,” “trials,” or, with more pathos, “agonizing struggle,”³ and Luther used it in reference to his anxiety—even despair—in the face of a God whom he perennially believed had abandoned him. Paul Buehler proposed classifying types of *anfechtungen* in Luther: some were “trials on the left,” meaning temporal ills such as poverty, illness, and “trials on the right” occasioned by lust, honors, or good fortune. “Trials from on high” come from God, and “from below,” the devil.⁴ It was not God’s presence, but God’s agonizing withdrawal

¹ See Paul D. Murray, ed., *Receptive Ecumenism and The Call to Catholic Learning: Exploring a Way for Contemporary Ecumenism* (Oxford University Press, 2008).

² Martin Luther, Heidelberg Disputation, Thesis 19. Translation by Ben Moravitz, *A Theology of the Cross for Pastoral Counseling*, Th.D. thesis, Columbia Theological Seminary (2005): 43. Moravitz discourages use of Harold J. Grimm’s translation of the Disputation’s theses in the American edition of Luther’s Works on grounds of its poor treatment of the Latin text’s rhetorical structure.

³ On the question of definition, see David P. Scaer, “The Concept of *Anfechtung* in Luther’s Thought” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* (47:1): 15-30. Studies of the concept in Luther include Paul Buehler, *Die Anfechtung bei Martin Luther* (Zurich: Zwingli Verlag, 1942); Horst Beintker, *Die Überwindung der Anfechtung bei Luther* (Evang. Verlag-Anst. 1954).

⁴ Paul Buehler, *Die Anfechtung bei Martin Luther*, p. 3ff.

from human experience that created a painful spiritual disposition that led Luther to regular bouts of gloom. Where did such a posture come from and how did it end up a basis for his doctrine of God as hidden and revealed and his theology of the cross (*theologia crucis*)?

Some foundations for *anfechtung* are found in the mysticism Luther imbibed early in his career from Johann Tauler. Rejecting common patterns of successive stages in a mystical ascent, the young Luther begins to couple, for instance, struggle (*gemitus*) and joy (*raptus*), darkness and light, permitting him to describe the life of faith in terms that accounted for his experience, filtered, especially, through the language of the Psalms.⁵ With help from Tauler, Luther came to see faith and trial co-existing in a necessary symbiosis. *Fides et tentatio* fomented one another in an unresolved dialectical tension that could only be cut in eternity, and thus hoped for as a promise, not experienced now.

This painful spiritual condition Luther occasionally described in terms of the “rustling leaf” referenced in Leviticus 26:36.

There is nothing smaller and more ignored than a dry leaf lying on the ground crawled on by worms and unable to protect itself from the dust....But when the moment comes, horse, rider, lance, armor, king, princes, all the strength of the army and all power is frightened by its rustling. Are we not fine people? We have no fear of God's wrath and stand proudly, but yet are terrified and flee before the wrath of an impotent dry leaf. And such rustling of the leaf makes the world too small and becomes our wrathful God, who we otherwise pooh-pooh and defy in heaven and on earth.⁶

⁵ For a fuller account of Luther's relationship to mysticism, see Heiko Oberman, “*Simul Gemitus et Raptus: Luther and Mysticism*” in Steven E. Ozment, *The Reformation in Medieval Perspective* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971): 219-251.

⁶ WA 19.126,16ff.; Gerhard Forde's translation from “Christian Life” in Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson, eds., *Christian Dogmatics, Vol. 2* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984): 418.

The image of the rustling leaf that startles the self-assured is an image he frequently employed in biblical lectures. He used it to suggest Adam and Eve's fearfulness in Genesis 3:8, and in numerous other places.⁷ God's wrath is of no concern as the mighty army marches through the woods, a humanity fearless and self-sufficient while God unknown hides on the ground in the dry leaf, making a charade of human might, ready to convulse them into awareness of their ignorance and weakness. *Anfechtung* strikes! Rustling leaves startle humans living in ignorance of God's supreme majesty. Something is wrong with reality, and in the rustling leaf, the conscience will be drawn deeper into this sense of dread, try as it might to find a way out.

For Luther, this agonizing struggle is inescapably omnipresent. When conscience fails to make sense of temporal reality, its conundrums have to be left, unanswered, at the feet of a God with whom mortals can have no congress and from whom come no answers. Scripture proclaims a God who works chaos as surely as cosmos; “God cannot be God unless He first becomes a devil,” as Luther puts it.⁸ The rustling leaf stirs the conscience from initial unease to dread before the predestining God in naked majesty (“general *anfechtung*”). Then, clothed in the Word, the conscience is simultaneously troubled by the law and assured by the gospel, though even there, it is a gospel resting on Christ’s own *anfechtung* on the cross (“revealed *anfechtung*”).⁹

⁷ LW 1:170-71, 174; 3:8, 264; 6:78; 7:271, 276, 326, 329; 9:267; 10:140; 14:49; 16:12, 230, 272; 18:88; 19:75; 23:147; 24:112, 182, 184; 25:401; 26:148; 31:128; 40:144; 43:261; 45:58; 46:22; 47:18.

⁸ LW 14:31; Gen 22:1; Ex 4:24, Is 45:7, Amos 3:6; Quoted in Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008): 204-05.

⁹ “General” and “Revealed” *anfechtung* are the author’s terms. But see Bayer’s discussion of *Deus absconditus*, *op cit.*, 196-206, and Joshua C. Miller, *Hanging by a*

The thesis from the 1519 Heidelberg Disputation, the origins of Luther's theology of the cross, suggests that scholastic theologians, like mighty armies, march assured of their strength and power. The operations of God and nature are in their possession by mind or might. It takes but a prick to the conscience—a rustling leaf, as it were—to turn their assurance to angst.

Generalized *Anfechtung*

The first, generalized *anfechtung*, is an assault of the hidden God, remote and inaccessible. This absolute being is the inscrutable predestinating God. In fact, so inscrutable that God may easily be mistaken for a demon, or even purposefully wear Satan's mask. "I do not know whether God is the devil or the devil is God,"¹⁰ said Luther. This confusion about God's absolute majesty springs from the subject's uncertainty as to whether the hidden, absolute God is for or against him or her. God may be disguised as a devil, using evil powers to work God's will. The creature before God knows only her experience, the datum of thoughts, feelings, and dispositions she senses before God. This feeling *coram Deo* is but a symptom of *incurvatus in se*, self-preoccupied with fear and doubt. It is just the attempt to climb to God, to get close to God by one's own efforts, whether by cogitation, contemplation, monastic disciplines, or law-keeping, that creates the trouble. All of these means imply a thirst for merit and well-being that presume to pin God down through philosophical argument or practical techniques by which the practitioner might assuage guilt and presume to have made a

Promise: The Hidden God in the Theology of Oswald Bayer (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2015); See also Buehler, 20.

¹⁰ WA TR 5:600.11f.

pact with God, just the notion that Luther found troubling in the thought of a late medieval theologian such as Gabriel Biel. By scholastic accounts, humans govern themselves and societies by reason, and so does God, but from the top of a universal scale. Deriding scholastics, Luther declares: “If they bore their way into heaven with their heads and look around they will find no one, because Christ lies in a crib and in a woman’s lap. So let them fall back down again and break their necks!”¹¹ In breaking this Aristotelian-scholastic chain of being, Luther is left with his anxious fear before the unknown—Augustine’s flight of the alone to the Alone—but without Augustinian serenity and resolution.¹²

Anxiety about whether one is among the elect is a satanic affliction in which the subject engages in the “vain searching” into God’s majesty (as do scholastics and some mystics) resulting in a hatred of God. Luther counsels Barbara Lisskirchen in a letter concerning her anxiety about election, which he attributes to “the wretched devil.” She should turn from God unknowable to God revealed, meditating instead on biblical commands and promises. He views her issue through the lens of his own monastic experience, as he does in letters to other confidants, perhaps as a strategy of identification with them in their respective plights.¹³ In worrying about her eternal state among the elect or damned, the devil asks this woman to peer into the workings of the hidden God, contradicting God’s desire to be loved, trusted, and praised. Luther tells her to say to the devil “Begone! I must now think of God’s commandments. Meanwhile, I shall let him care for me. If you are so clever in these matters, go up to heaven and dispute with God

¹¹ WA 9.406.17-20.

¹² Augustine, *De Vera Religione*, ch. 21.

¹³ Gerhard Ebeling, *Luthers Seelsorge: an seinen Briefen dargestellt* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr: 1997): 334.

himself; he can give you an adequate answer.”¹⁴ She should instead, advised Luther, invert her thinking, now from belief to predestination; if she believes, then she has no need to worry about predestination. That Lisskirchen believes insures she is called, and her call guarantees her predestination.¹⁵ In so doing Luther gives her the advice he was once given by Johann Staupitz, Augustinian vicar general and Luther’s confessor in the monastery. It was through clear assessment of his young charge’s *anfechtung* that Staupitz recognized Luther’s troubles and recommended he look away from an angry God and toward the wounds of Christ for assurance of forgiveness.¹⁶ (FN letter)

In sum, the first type of *anfechtung* racks its victims with self-doubt and spiritual injury though speculation or contemplation. It is often that the devil is the culprit here, tempting, as he did Adam and Eve in the garden, with knowledge beyond human ken. Even if Luther ascribes agency to Satan, he is clear that spiritual trials of this sort can be God’s strange, alien work, in which God wears the mask of Satan. To be sure, this alien work figures in the second type of *anfechtung*, especially where the law is concerned.

Revealed Anfechtung: The Law, The Gospel, and What Makes a Theologian

....But rather, the one who understands the visible and posterior things of God seen clearly through suffering and the cross. (Heidelberg Disputation, Thesis 20).¹⁷

The second sort (“revealed *anfechtung*”) is occasioned by the hidden God who has condescended to be revealed in the Word, hidden again, only this time under God’s

¹⁴ Luther, “Letter to Barbara Lisskirchen,” April 30, 1531, in Theodore Tappert, ed., *Martin Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1955):116.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ WA 1.125; LW 48:65-66.

¹⁷ Moravitz, 43.

opposite: in the “no” of human circumstances, such as the unlikelihood of Abraham and Sarah being parents of a new nation, the reticent Moses, conflicted Jonah, the Canaanite woman, and Jesus himself. He is the *Deus crucifixus*, who appears defeated by sin as *der Angefochtene*, the sufferer, at whose expense sinners are set free.¹⁸

The issue to confront here as in the general state of *anfechtung* is the relationship to God, who as such must be a unity, but a hidden and revealed one. The terms of misidentification switch from the question of God being good or evil to whether God is exacting (in the law) or merciful (in the gospel). God is unknowable in God’s naked majesty, absolute in power. The veil covering this God can never be drawn. This hiddenness-in-absolute is the same God wrapped in swaddling clothes in the manger and covered in wounds and blood on the cross. There the hidden God is revealed under God’s opposite, majesty emptied in disgrace, cosmic infinity in Bethlehem. This is the God with whom we relate in the Word. “The God of the universe sits on Mary’s lap.”¹⁹

Within this story of Israel and the Church, contained in scripture, God confronts the subject with a word of accusation (the law). It is not predestination or the possibility that God is not good that afflicts the hearer in this form; Rather, it is the confrontation with God “up close” that calls my being into question precisely as sinner. God speaks a “No” to Luther as God did to many along the way in the story.

There is a real sense in Luther that as believers battle their sinfulness under the cross, they share in Christ’s sufferings, beating back the Old Adam and Eve within. “The holy Christian people are externally recognized by the holy possession of the sacred

¹⁸ LW 12:123.

¹⁹ Luther’s hymn, *Gelobet seist du, Jesu Christ*: “He whom the world could not inwrap/Yonder lies in Mary’s lap.”

cross. They must endure every misfortune and persecution, all kinds of trials and evil from the devil, the world, and the flesh (as the Lord's Prayer says) by inward sadness, timidity, fear, outward poverty, contempt, illness and weakness; in order to become like their head, Christ.”²⁰ This is an enervating struggle with sin that, alone, one is bound to loose. I am held in suspense as I hear the “no” spoken to me from behind God’s opposite mask. I am crushed from the inside. And yet, after the “no” comes finally a “yes.”

And so, in his church postil sermon for Second Sunday in Lent, on Mt. 15:21-28, Jesus thrills the Canaanite woman with his healing power (his opposition to Satanic forces), but rebuffs her. She sets the example of firmly clinging to the Word “even though God with all his creatures appears different than his Word teaches. But oh, how painful it is to nature and reason, that this woman should strip herself of self and forsake all that she experienced, and cling alone to God’s bare Word, until she experienced the contrary.”²¹ The Canaanite woman is experiencing *anfechtung*, the pain that faith creates in clinging to what is heard against what is seen and felt.

Luther notes how the disciples intervene on the woman’s behalf, trying to persuade Jesus to favor her. They sympathize with her forsaken feeling in the harsh word that “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” If the sermon has shades of autobiography, perhaps Luther had Staupitz in mind when he says “For our last resort, when we feel that God is ungracious or we are in need, is that we go to pious, spiritual persons and there seek counsel and help, and they are willing to help as love demands;

²⁰ LW 41:164; *On the Councils and the Church*.

²¹ Martin Luther, *Sermons of Martin Luther, Vol 2* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988): 150.

and yet, that may amount to nothing, even they may not be heard and our condition becomes only worse.”²²

Christ could be upbraided, Luther says, for forgetting his own promises to hear and answer prayers (Mt. 18:19; Mk. 11:24). This is a case of God against God, the promise to hear and act vs. the stout rejection Jesus delivers in suggesting the woman might as well be a dog. She accepts this name, saying dogs do as she does, namely, they gather crumbs that fall from their master’s table. “Is that not a masterly stroke as a reply? She catches Christ with his own words.”²³ We experience hell in the just judgment against sinners, Luther suggests. The trial of faith ensues, as it searches for the divine yes hidden beneath the no of Christ’s strange passivity toward the woman. Luther notes Jesus does not say to the woman that he will not listen to her, or that she is categorically not an Israelite, or that she is undeniably a dog. Jesus “says neither yes nor no,” that he is only sent to the Israelites, and that it is not good to give the children’s’ bread to the dogs. “[Y]et all these trials of her faith sounded more like no than yes; ay, there is only yes in them, but it is very deep and very concealed, while there appears nothing but no.”²⁴ The experience of grace comes invariably with a visceral feeling of despair.

That a disposition to despair would function theologically for Luther is figured in his quip that “living, or rather dying and being damned make a theologian, not understanding, reading, or speculating,”²⁵ a way of defining his way of theologizing over against the arid syllogistic method of the scholastics. The true theologian is confronted with the hidden, absent God, a strange and alien deity who may not be in the theologian’s

²² Ibid, 151.

²³ 152.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ WA 5:163.28-9.

court and is certainly not under her control. Before this God, in *oratio*, *meditatio*, and *tentatio*, the theologian lived killed and made alive. This dying and being damned takes place in the encounter with the Word in these three “rules.”²⁶ In *oratio* and *meditatio*, the theologian finds reason useless in fitting together scriptural interpretations to make a ladder to heaven.²⁷ To Luther, scholastics and *schwärmer* both sought to control scripture through a regime of Aristotelian logic or marginalization of the text though spiritual ecstasy, respectively. Both for him were false ways of controlling the text.²⁸ Prayerful reading requires release of presumption. The Word is instead the Spirit’s vehicle, which unlocks the theologian’s heart, disarms, and begins to instruct and create receptivity. *Meditatio* displaces, moving the Word’s recipient out of his/herself and into the world the Word creates. Meditation here has nothing to do with coming to terms with the inner self. It is a going out of the self to the external Word, or, a self-knowledge through the Word.²⁹

Third, there is *tentatio*, a “wisdom beyond all wisdom.”³⁰ Here Luther means *anfechtung* as it is shaped by the Word. Using the example of David in Psalm 119, Luther suggests that meditation on scripture incites satanic assault in the form of “all kinds of enemies, amongst princes or tyrants, false spirits and factions.”³¹ In his own case, he attributes the pain of *anfechtung* to “my papists” who have “beaten, opposed, and distressed me so much that is, they have made a fairly good theologian of me which I

²⁶ Bayer, 32.

²⁷ *Op cit.*, WA 9.406.17-20.

²⁸ WA 51:129 ff; LW 21:3. On reason, see also WA 3 (*Tischreden*) No. 2938a.

²⁹ LW 52:46.

³⁰ LW 34:287.

³¹ *Ibid.*

would not have become otherwise.”³² In the case of David and Luther, *tentatio*’s “flesh” (the form in which the satanic assaults come) may be temporal, occasional, as with David’s Absalom tragedy and the empire’s threat to Luther’s life after the Diet of Worms, but its form is spiritual. It is an assault on one’s being caused by confrontation with the Word.³³ *Anfechtung* is not divine retribution for sin but attack on the soul, not this time by a hidden, but by a revealed God. Again, being a theologian is “...about being damned.”³⁴ And it is the Word that does this damning.

The Word, with its accusing force, condemns one’s own speculations about God’s majesty, or one’s own self-assurance. God’s and the subject’s being are simultaneously called into question. The question of divine identity that comes with *anfechtung* is experienced in the uneasy conscience, the law’s accusation, or even the gospel’s promise. In all instances, who is the God causing this agonizing struggle? Or is it the devil? And why? In the case of Abraham, called to sacrifice his son Isaac, his promised heir, it involves a contradiction. God had promised abundant continuity (Genesis 12:1-4) and certain death (Gen. 22:1-2),

Accordingly, Abraham is being more severely tried than Mary when she lost her son at Jerusalem; for even though she, too, thought that she was being punished for not watching over her Son more carefully, she nevertheless still had the sure hope that He was alive. But here God, who had given the son, commands that the son be killed by the father himself. What hope, then, could the father have? He surely could not have been aware of this, that he was only being tried and that God was not speaking in earnest, just as we buoy ourselves up with the thought that God, even though He seems to be angry, nevertheless does not hate us or is casting us aside but sometimes, as Isaiah (28:21) says, does a strange work and stimulates anger, in order to kill the mind of the flesh, which is opposed to

³² *Ibid.*

³³ LW 4:93.

³⁴ *Tischreden*, WA 1:146.

God, as Job says: ‘Even though he slays me, yet will I hope’; for he is sure that God is not really angry.³⁵

God contradicting God creates a temptation, an agonizing trial that besets all believers, who experience this as an assault on the law of non-contradiction when in reality, Luther writes, it is God’s alien work of judgment made necessary by human sin.³⁶

Luther uses Jacob’s wrestling with the angel at Jabbock to expound on this divinely-induced mortification Christians should expect. Temptations are means whereby God wrestles masked as a destroying adversary. “For God leads down to hell and brings back.”³⁷ Yet in the end, the struggle is over, and God’s shunning turns to God’s love.³⁸ Faith accepts, as both Jacob and the Canaanite woman demonstrated, but not before a fight.³⁹

Luther’s writings occasionally suggest that there might be other forms of *anfechtung* that correspond to existence in the world, *coram hominibus*. Here he refers to the ordinary experience of despair, as when he reports bouts of depression or gloom, (*tristitia*) one shortly after marriage and another upon the death of his daughter Magdalena.⁴⁰ There were times of violent illness, too, when Luther betrays despair. About melancholia or despair he often counsels his charges to pray and “tell off” the devil, but does not directly prescribe Bible reading or worship attendance as a remedy.

³⁵ LW 4:94.

³⁶ LW 16:233.

³⁷ LW 6:151.

³⁸ Cf. Wesley on Hebrews 12: 6-7, Those the Lord loves he chasteneth, JW tersely comments “*Whom his father chasteneth not* — When he offends.”

³⁹ Begalke, M. Vernon (1982) “Luther’s *Anfechtungen*: An Important Clue to his Pastoral Theology,” *Consensus* (1982) Vol. 8:3 , Article 1. Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol8/iss3/1>

⁴⁰ *Tischreden* nos. 5490-5502; Cf. Richard Marius, *Martin Luther: The Christian Between God and Death* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1999): 377-78, 439

Satan, not God, is cited as the source for these common emotional maladies. In letters to his wife, anxious about her ailing husband's time away, he cites the catechism and the gospel of John, suggesting their home conversations on the subjects. In the context of Psalm 90:7, Luther wrote: "A person afflicted with a serious disease bans from his mind the thought of disease and looks and hopes for recovery."⁴¹ It is just this hopeful buoyancy that he counsels his charges to have. The best way to deal with such struggles is to absorb the good gifts of earthly life: friends, music, food, conversation, laughter, and sex.⁴²

Experience and the Objective Word

"To deal with God outside Jesus is to deal with the devil."⁴³ And yet, God hidden in majesty and God hidden in revelation are the same being. This is Abraham's God and Mary's God at the foot of the cross, wearing masks and working good and evil, blessedness and disaster, weal and woe. Otherwise God would be effete, struggling to get a handle on the universe, or a mere kitchen idol at human disposal.⁴⁴

When the preached Word removes Luther from God's naked majesty and thus from preoccupation with predestination, philosophical speculation, and from the afflicted conscience, is he freed from *anfechtung*? Is there a happy ending of peace and contentment, fostered by a kind of monastic discipline in the assured presence of God?

⁴¹ LW 13:110.

⁴² Theodore Tappert, ed., *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel, op cit.* See especially To Jerome Weller, 86; Table Talk excerpt, 88; To Jonas von Stockhausen, 90 (suggesting mockery of the devil); To Mrs. Jonas von Stockhausen, 91; To Prince Joachim of Anhalt, 93 (suggesting music) 94; Table Talk, 95 (counseling listeners to avoid loneliness when depressed); To Matthias Weller (counseling music) 97; To Mrs. Martin Luther (citing gospel of John and Small Catechism as consolation) 105.

⁴³ WA 40:3, 337.

⁴⁴ Gerhard Ebeling, *Luther. An Introduction to His Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964): 240.

In a word, no. Neither Luther's affections, nor the force of his experience have changed. What has changed is having been addressed in his spiritual anxiety. The address does not remove it, but instead places it in a grip, so to speak, a dialectical tension with justifying grace in a way that parallels the famous *simul*, except it is *simul justus et tentatium*. Luther articulates how we should always expect spiritual trials to come under, and with, the Word. Satanic assault and divine testing alike, far from disappearing, intensify whenever the Word is preached. This second type of *anfechtung* is described as the invariable outcome of meditation, or study of the Word. So will come ongoing struggle. The parallel for Christians is Christ on the cross. The cross was no an accident of the incarnation but its purpose. Where the Word sounds, the devil bellows, and death threatens.

Luther's experience packed a punch. It was vividly expressed in lively, colorful prose. The reader grasps the pathos in his language of abandonment, brooding fear, and debilitating scrupulosity. This raw religious doubt was about himself, *coram Deo*, but it was as much about his perceptions of the God before whom he stood. This God hidden in majesty might not be in favor of him. The angst was heightened, especially in the monastery, by a penitential system that asked more of him than he could deliver as a penitent, and, even when it required less—as in mere attrition—it found him spiritually bankrupt, unable to muster even an attrite heart. Beyond him stood God in the shadows, a tyrant ready to annihilate him in his spiritual failure.

The difference is, this threat of annihilation coexists with the promise of its final defeat. Luther is able to cleave to the promise of justification in spite of the agonizing struggle raging on in his soul. This makes a theologian according to Luther, and, by his

account, we should add, any believer. Oswald Bayer calls *anfechtung* the believer's experiential "touchstone" ("der Prufstein"), the proof of God's promise, not the proof of human earnestness in seeking it.⁴⁵

The datum of experience is not to be examined for signs of God's hiding here and there. In fact, Luther advised turning from experience altogether, captive to the Word alone. Luther uses the image of a physician addressing a badly injured patient with the admonition to trust the doctor's word against what the patient feels.⁴⁶ Even so, afflictions under the social and individual conditions of humanity never cease, which is why Luther could never countenance what for him were the fanatical *Schwärmerei* or Anabaptists in what he perceived as their attempt to escape from social and political realities by retreating to their own perfected communities. Nor could the individual believer, he insisted, retreat from satanic trial or divine testing. Struggle was never absent, though it was perpetually the flip side of grace. No grace, no struggle, no struggle, no grace.

"I didn't learn my theology all at once" said Luther, "I had to ponder over it ever more deeply, and my spiritual trials were of help to me in this, for one does not learn anything without practice."⁴⁷ As Horst Beintker notes, Luther's pastoral care was aimed at giving his charges a handle on what he himself had struggled to understand in himself, that spiritual trials came as much in encountering God in the cross as in fleeing from that God to a God enshrined in a philosophical construct.⁴⁸ Spiritual agony awaits at every turn.

⁴⁵ Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, *op cit.*, 35-37; *Theology the Lutheran Way* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007):63.

⁴⁶ LW 25:202-03.

⁴⁷ LW 54, Table Talk No. 352, pp. 50-1.

⁴⁸ Horst Beintker, *op cit.*, Vorwort.

John Wesley and Spiritual Afflictions

Turning to Wesley, we find a different approach to the question of divine agency, with anthropological implications for the role of trials in the Christian life. That is, spiritual anxiety, while no less evident a factor in Wesley's experience than Luther's, functions differently for him, based on his different description of God's providential dealings with believers. Wesley suits these descriptions to levels of Christian maturity.⁴⁹ He gives explanation of the different uses of spiritual temptation for these two groups chiefly in two sermons from 1760, which we will examine in turn, in addition to other sermons and a sampling of correspondence with individuals experiencing spiritual trial.

Wesley defined "temptation" in ways familiar to his English-speaking audience—as trials, but also as sins, attractions, diversions, and external threats to a proper body-soul equilibrium. Temptations come about by "weakness, sickness, and disorders of a thousand kinds."⁵⁰ "We know there are such things as nervous disorders. But we know likewise, that what is commonly called nervous lowness is a secret reproof from God; a kind of consciousness that we are not in our place; that we are not as God would have us to be: We are unhinged from our proper center."⁵¹

⁴⁹ See Kenneth J. Collins, "The Motif of Real Christianity in the Writings of John Wesley," *Asbury Theological Journal*, 49:1 (1994):49-62, esp. 52-55, on "The Theme of Real Christianity Developed, 1748-1770. The levels of maturity evinced in these two sermons do not correlate with Wesley's descriptions elsewhere of "faith of a servant" and "faith of a son/child," a distinction that he uses by 1754.

⁵⁰ See sermons: "Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount, Discourse the Sixth" and "On Temptation" *Works of John Wesley*, Bicentennial Edition, Frank Baker, ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984-): 3:158-59. (hereafter WJW). See Letter to Jane Hilton, Dec. 22, 1768: "You mention trials. But this is a general word. Would it not ease your mind to be more particular: Are your trials mostly inward or outward?"

⁵¹ Sermon 84, "The Important Question," *Works* (Jackson edition) 6:502.

The human condition invites these maladies, and believers have no guarantee of escaping them. Even mature Christians—including the entirely sanctified—are susceptible to “lowness” and “heaviness.”⁵² Grace does not obviate nature for Wesley, evident in how closely he ties physical and spiritual infirmities.⁵³ Episodes of these spiritual afflictions are possible for Christians at any stage, but Wesley makes distinctions based on the capacity of believers to recognize and benefit from such trials.

However, spiritual struggles are episodic, occasioned by circumstance or satanic assault, but amenable to God’s providential use in instructing the faithful. Writing to Mrs. Emma Moon:

My Dear Sister,—He that governs all things well for His own glory and for the good of them that love Him sees that it is best for you to be led in a strait and thorny way, and therefore permits it by His adorable providence. And you experimentally find that all these things are for your profit, that you may be a partaker of His holiness. Now, if hereby you attain but one degree more of the mind which was in Christ Jesus, what an immense gainer will you be in that day when the secrets of all hearts shall be revealed! Beside that, there is a reward for bearing as well as for doing His will; so that these light afflictions, which are but for a moment, work out for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory....Look up, and receive a fresh supply of grace!--I am, my dear sister, Your affectionate brother.⁵⁴

Spiritual afflictions in general become more manageable as believers grow in perfect love.⁵⁵ Faith should be expected to conquer doubt and anxiousness, especially as

⁵² Ibid., 3:159-60.

⁵³ Sermon “Christian Perfection,” Albert Outler, ed., *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford, 1964): 255, 257. Letter to Hannah Ball, Nov. 5, 1769. “You must expect various trials. We know nature is variable as the wind. But go on.”

⁵⁴ Letter to Emma Moon, Mar. 2, 1773. *Letters of The Rev. John Wesley*, J. W. Telford ed. (Epworth, 1931), hereafter LJW. See also letter to Philothea Briggs, May 20, 1773; Letter to Hester Ann Roe, Oct. 6, 1776.

⁵⁵ See Letter to Mrs. Mary Jones, Dec. 22, 1748, WJW 26:344, also letters to John Atlay, May 26, 1781, Ann Loxdale, Apr. 15, 1781, and to Miss March, July 5, 1768, where JW

believers mature in sanctifying grace, itself a potent healing force in inner transformation. Never is one *not subject* to temptations, but, conversely, one may find them less daunting as time goes by. God *permits* these conditions; evil in the form of these temptations deepens and strengthens faith.⁵⁶ Wesley provided for the treatment of these spiritual quandaries in his class and band system, where in bands for the newly awakened those with “servant’s faith” could confer with others as they grew in Christian maturity. Select bands and societies provided for those serious believers who had experienced assurance and were intentional in their movement toward sharper spiritual senses and, ultimately, perfect love. Their temptations might remain (even carnal ones),⁵⁷ but could be contained and dealt with as “sanctified affliction.”⁵⁸ Wesley describes God’s relationship to these trials in ways suggestive of his discussions, elsewhere, of divine providence, yielding a different answer to questions about the perception of God’s nature and activity from Luther.

Wesley’s understanding and use of experience (“experimental divinity”) as an authoritative vehicle in theological reflection derived much from his reading of John Locke, whose sensory-based epistemology Wesley modified in describing a “confirming force,” a set of criteria by which reason could confirm God’s actions to be real, in a way which left an imprint on the heart and mind which he described in terms of its sensibility,

writes God is “able to give any degree of holiness, either by pleasure or pain.” LJW 5. In a 1735 letter to his mother, JW complained of Thomas à Kempis’ consolation of afflictions with the promise of heavenly reward. Susanna agrees in her reply. The implication is that there is reasonable hope for earthly benefit from afflictions (an “easy yoke”); in effect, they offer practical strengthening and deepening for discipleship, not simply a “cloud of unknowing.” See WJW 25:163.

⁵⁶ WJW, 3:162.

⁵⁷ See Sermons “Heaviness Through Manifold Temptations” WJW 2:232-33; “Christian Perfection” WJW 2:104.

⁵⁸ “Heaviness,” WJW 2:233.

akin to sense impressions made when a subject, for instance, sees a blue sky or a red rose. Just as sky or flower might create an emotive response, so too can religious sense impressions delivered through the means of grace (preaching, prayer, sacraments, etc.). Love, faith's source and summit, has a palpability to it that need not come in the same form in everyone's experience of it, but which, Wesley thought, surely has a sensory dimension as part of one's knowledge of it. And so would other affections—and afflictions—in the Christian life.⁵⁹

“Trials are to be expected in the Christian life just as all manner of afflictions come by nature in human existence. Less mature believers may get lost in such a “wilderness state” in which they fall into despair.⁶⁰ This wilderness state is spiritual “darkness,” which, Wesley notes, should not be confused with the kind of darkness the mystics invite as a necessary ingredient in the believer's experience. In no case does Wesley think such darkness is necessary or *beneficial* for faith.⁶¹ In fact, it extinguishes faith and should be escaped as quickly as possible. Immature believers on the threshold of faith may easily loose their way in doubts, wandering in a wilderness much like the Israelites.⁶²

Two sermons from 1760, “The Wilderness State” and “Heaviness Through Manifold Temptations” best suggest Wesley's thinking on the subject of spiritual trials. A longer paper would afford space to investigate the Perfection Revival (1759-63) in progress at this time in the life of Methodism, which John (as opposed to Charles)

⁵⁹ Theodore Runyon, “The Importance of Experience for Faith” in Randy L. Maddox., ed., *Aldersgate Reconsidered* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990):103-05.

⁶⁰ Cf. John Bunyan's “slough of despond” in his *Pilgrim's Progress*, though Wesley does not reference it.

⁶¹ See Outler, *John Wesley*, 63 n.18.

⁶² “The Wilderness State,” WJW 2:205.

adamantly supported, all the while disavowing that he has experienced the gift himself. His lack of this experience, along with a revaluation of his own spiritual pilgrimage in his journal and correspondence, lead up to the “depressing letter” of 1766, in which he tells Charles that felt not the wrath of God, fear of hell, and did not love God.⁶³ It may be that this spiritual crisis was already underway as early as 1760, when he preached these sermons, not only to his hearers, but to himself.

In “The Wilderness State,” Wesley uses the metaphor of wilderness as liminality, the time and space following God’s decisive act on behalf of the captive Israelites, but before their arrival in the promised land.⁶⁴ In parallel, most of the initially justified find themselves, says Wesley, subject to wilderness by the world, the flesh, and the devil. This wilderness is the site of declension into maladaptive behaviors; faith, peace, and joy are replaced by three “general causes” of darkness i.e., sin, ignorance, and temptation. Instead of patiently following the path set forth, “The greater part of these wander more or less out of the good way into which he hath brought them. They come as it were into a ‘waste and howling desert,’ where they are variously tempted and tormented.”⁶⁵ Wesley has described an effectual return to the pre-justified state. In short, these are the “backslidden.”

At its root is the loss of faith, along with accompanying gifts of love, joy, and power. In their place are a series of “returns” (reversions) to doubt in place of faith, followed by “servile fear,” chiefly fear of death. Wesley invites self-examination: “Nothing can be more plain, than that the life of God in the soul does not continue, much

⁶³ Letter to Charles Wesley, June 27, 1766, LJW 5.

⁶⁴ Wesley is in line with a pietist and Puritan exegetical tradition in typologizing the wilderness in this way. See Introductory Comment, for both sermons, WJW 2:202-04.

⁶⁵ “The Wilderness State,” WJW 2:205.

less increase, unless we use all opportunities of communing with God, and pouring out our hearts before him.”⁶⁶ Thus is God’s goodness indulged. “Ignorance” he relates to mystical darkness, invoking “the mystic writers of the Romish Church” who teach people, according to Wesley “...that they are not always to walk in luminous faith...walk in the light’ always.⁶⁷ Wesley approaches the matter, beginning with rhetorical questions:

But is not darkness more profitable for the soul than light? Is not the work of God in the heart most swiftly and effectually carried on during a state of inward suffering? Is not a believer more swiftly and thoroughly purified by sorrow than by joy? By anguish and pain and distress and spiritual martyrdoms than by continual peace? So the mystics teach; so it is written in their books—but not in the oracles of God. The Scripture nowhere says that the absence of God best perfects his work in the heart! Rather his presence, and a clear communion with the Father and the Son. A strong consciousness of this will do more in an hour than his absence in an age. Joy in the Holy Ghost will far more effectually purify the soul than the want of that joy; and the peace of God is the best means of refining the soul from the dross of earthly affections. Away then with the idle conceit that the kingdom of God is divided against itself; that the peace of God and joy in the Holy Ghost are obstructive of righteousness; and that ‘we are saved’, not ‘by faith’, but by unbelief; not by hope, but by despair!⁶⁸

Long before his last words, “The best of all is, God is with us!” Wesley was searching for ways of understanding how spiritual trials did not entail divine absence, but presence (perhaps even more intensely so). Problematic in the mystics’ diagnosis was their incentivization to suffer based on God’s having “sent” it.⁶⁹ Wesley gestures in the last line toward his judgment against a mystical valorization of darkness, with its descent into paradox in which despair is hope, unbelief is faith, and so on. Far from being salutary,

⁶⁶ “Wilderness State” WJW 2:205.

⁶⁷ WJW 2:212.

⁶⁸ “The Wilderness State,” WJW 2:219-20.

⁶⁹ See fn. 55, JW’s correspondence with Susanna re: Thomas a Kempis, 1735.

this mystical darkness parallels the barrenness of the desert, and is thus connected with sin, ignorance, and temptation.⁷⁰ Wesley insists no one should seek this sort of lostness.

Temptation arises when the unsuspecting think that a storm is over, when in fact it is only at a lull. Among temptation's occasions Wesley mentions interpersonal strife between those born of the flesh and those born of the Spirit, while internal factors such as anger and bitterness crop up in the heart.⁷¹ Despite the inward struggle they bring, they are not tests sent from God. As he reflected on the petition, "but deliver us from evil,":

Rather, 'from the evil one'; *apo tou ponerou. Ho poneros* is unquestionably the wicked one, emphatically so called, the prince and god of this world, who works with mighty power in the children of disobedience. But all those who are the children of God by faith are delivered out of his hands. He may fight against them; and so he will. But he cannot conquer, unless they betray their own souls. He may torment for a time, but he cannot destroy; for God is on their side, who will not fail...⁷²

Whatever the cure for these three spiritual maladies, it is not "easy talking." Spiritual companions should not indulge the lost, and God's mercy should not be heaped upon the wayward for whom "the cure of spiritual, as of bodily diseases, must be as various as the causes of them."⁷³ Once the diagnosis is made and the cure applied, the subject should expect the "dart" of sin, ignorance, and temptation to smart for some time to come even after it is removed.

While the sinful and ignorant in the wilderness state may deserve strong admonition, it is for the tempted that Wesley reserves moderation. "[T]hese are the

⁷⁰ In fairness to the mystics Wesley critiqued, Ken Collins makes a distinction between their understandings of "darkness" and Wesley's. See Collins, "John Wesley's Assessment of Christian Mysticism," *Lexington Theological Quarterly*, 28: 4 (1993): 299-318.

⁷¹ WJW 2:214, 215.

⁷² WJW 1:588

⁷³ WJW 2: 217.

persons unto whom chiefly we are to apply the great and precious promises.”⁷⁴ The tempted come in for pastoral sensitivity not afforded the (morally) sinful and (mystically) unknowing, who have only themselves to blame for their condition.

In Via: The “Sanctified Afflictions” of God’s Children

If the wilderness state was filled with those who lost faith and its attendant gifts through their own fault, then “heaviness” is a state belonging to sturdy believers, who, unlike their compatriots in the wilderness, have not lost faith, but experience “fiery trial” because of, or in spite of it.⁷⁵ They maintain peace, joy, a sense of God’s love, and power over sin such that they may be simultaneously joyful and sorrowful.⁷⁶ The sermon, “Heaviness Though Manifold Temptations” addresses these matters. Citing the term in I Peter 1:6, he defines it here as a “fiery trial” occasioned by temporal or physical loss, and Wesley lists among manifold temptations bodily disorders, chronic disease (consumption, ague, and nervous disorders specifically), pain, death (especially of a child) empathy for others in spiritual turmoil, empathy for the poor, and misery.⁷⁷ Wesley wants his hearers to cultivate empathy for the existential crisis in which others find themselves.

Whatever their lot, those heavy with temptation to despair will be assaulted by the devil with the familiar questions of theodicy: “[Satan] will suggest that God does not regard, does not govern the earth; or at least that he does not govern it aright, not by the

⁷⁴ WJW 2:220.

⁷⁵ WJW 18:207, 210; 25:439, (see fn 69, p. 156, Maddox *Aldersgate Reconsidered*). An interesting consideration is how JW sought relief from his own “heaviness,” whether doubts about his own faith or otherwise, in serving others...Perhaps he already had such instincts before Bohler famously told him to “preach faith till you have it.” Wesley himself wrote of experiencing “[H]eaviness, because of manifold temptations” in both the days before and after Aldersgate.

⁷⁶ WJW 2:223.

⁷⁷ WJW 2:227-28.

rules of justice and mercy.”⁷⁸ A crisis of faith ensues, centering on the doctrine of God.

Where Luther proposes a hidden God revealed *sub contrario*, Wesley argues differently as he preaches:

It has been frequently supposed that there is another cause (if not darkness, at least) of heaviness, namely, God’s withdrawing himself from the soul because it is his sovereign will. Certainly he will do this if we grieve his Holy Spirit, either by outward or inward sin; either by doing evil or neglecting to do good; by giving way either to pride or anger, to spiritual sloth, to foolish desire or inordinate affection. But that he ever withdraws himself because he will, merely because it is his good pleasure, I absolutely deny: there is no text in all the Bible which gives any color for such a supposition. Nay, it is a supposition contrary not only to many particular texts, but to the whole tenor of Scripture. It is repugnant to the very nature of God; it is utterly beneath his majesty and wisdom (as an eminent writer strongly expresses it) ‘to play bo-peep with his creatures.’ It is inconsistent both with his justice and mercy, and with the sound experience of all his children.⁷⁹

At issue here, as in “Wilderness State,” is a mystical doctrine of divine attributes.

Believing God’s actions to be reasonable, Wesley contends that it is only because of grieving the Spirit that God withdraws. That is, there would be no riddle about divine absence; upon self-examination, believers would know why God seems distant. This is in line with Wesley’s doctrine of God as “Moral Governor” of the universe,⁸⁰ a motif he used in illustrating divine governance of human moral agents. God does not arbitrarily “hide his face” for no discernable reason. Rather, God *permits* the heaviness to occur, as gold tried by fire is purified.⁸¹

Wesley questions mysticism in the sermon by quoting “the words of a late writer, who relates...her own experience.” In effect, the unidentified author reverses groaning

⁷⁸ WJW 2:229.

⁷⁹ WJW 2:229-30.

⁸⁰ WJW, Jackson ed., 10:362; cf. Kenneth J. Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley. Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007): 38.

⁸¹ WJW 2:231.

over sinfulness and justification in Wesley's estimation, implying that Christian life (incidentally, she says, taking place in a metaphorical or actual "desert") amounts to a "forlorn condition, altogether poor, wretched, and miserable."⁸² Self-knowledge generates such heaviness, as though it must follow upon justifying faith. Not one to abide this reversal, Wesley questions her account, asking whether she was in fact justified. While Wesley can agree knowledge of inbred sin and dealings with the *reliquae* of sin continue in the Christian life, he denies these should effect heaviness. What is different for him is that, as self-knowledge grows, so does knowledge of divine love (as opposed to simple conviction about God's otherness, as the mystic expresses it). This love effects peace and joy, not a "forlorn condition" before God. Heaviness is not a *must* in the Christian life, and definitely *not* resignation to mystical darkness about God or the self. However, to the matter raised at the beginning of this section, we may again ask if Wesley may have been directing this homily toward himself in some sense, coming as it did in the midst of the Perfection revival and his own ongoing (re)assessment of his spiritual history.

Implicit in this sermon is a dialectical tension in God's relationship to the afflicted that Wesley scholars have long noted as Protestant and Catholic motifs.⁸³ On the one hand, buoyant in their faith despite their circumstance, they relate to God by faith. Quoting the verses either side of I Peter 1:6 (the sermon's text), Wesley assures the troubled of faith's durative power.⁸⁴ And, in the spirit of Catholic synergism, Wesley

⁸² WJW 2:230.

⁸³ Cf. Albert C. Outler, *Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1975):71; Collins, *op cit.*, *John Wesley: Holy Love*, 6 ff., where it is an "axial theme"

⁸⁴ I Pt 1:5, 7; and Heb. 11:27.

calls upon his hearers to recognize in their heaviness a summons to avoid sin and partake in Christ's sufferings.⁸⁵ Wesley describes God's use of these sufferings in the economy of salvation:

Yet another is, their advance in holiness: holiness of heart, and holiness of conversation; the latter naturally resulting from the former; for a good tree will bring forth good fruit. And all inward holiness is the immediate fruit of the faith that worketh by love. By this the blessed Spirit purifies the heart from pride, self-will, passion; from love of the world, from foolish and hurtful desires, from vile and vain affections. Beside that, *sanctified afflictions* have, through the grace of God, an immediate and direct tendency to holiness. Through the operation of his Spirit, they humble, more and more, and abase the soul before God. They calm and meekens our turbulent spirit, tame the fierceness of our nature, soften our obstinacy and self-will, crucify us to the world, and bring us to expect all our strength from, and to seek all our happiness in, God.⁸⁶

He goes on to proclaim in the sermon: "This, then—to increase our faith—is one gracious end of God's permitting those manifold temptations."⁸⁷

The occasion for temptations is temporal and circumstantial, attributable to social, political, economic, and psychological forces. Such "fiery trials" yield holiness, making growing Christians yet more mature and time-tested, giving them utility in Christian living. As heaviness may be purposeful and trial-like, it is typically short in endurance, at least in light of eternity. Temptations and afflictions are not the only means at God's disposal for the strengthening of faith. "God generally sees good to try 'acceptable men

⁸⁵ "Heaviness" IV.1 (WJW 2:231) quoting I Peter 1:12 ff.

⁸⁶ WJW 2:232-33.

⁸⁷ WJW 2:232. See also JW, letter to Mrs. Susanna Wesley, WJW 25:163, where he complains about Thomas a Kempis' treatment of afflictions; and SW's reply in agreement WJW 25: 166.

in the furnace of affliction' so that manifold temptations and heaviness, more or less, are usually the portion of his dearest children."⁸⁸

And so, on the one hand, manifold temptations are not desultory experiences of the absurd. Nor, on the other, are they pre-ordained punishments of an inscrutable deity. Tying trials so closely to physical and temporal circumstance underscores that they are natural and universally experienced among all sorts and conditions of humanity. Grace does not pre-empt nature, for Wesley. Rather, God is not "hidden" in these experiences, but reveals mercy and steadfast guidance through them, with the providential aim of bringing the sufferer through them to a strengthened faith and more perfect love. In fact, the faithful should anticipate such experiences.⁸⁹

Lady Darcy (Brisbane) Maxwell of Pollock was among Wesley's correspondents whose circumstances he thought fostered "heaviness." Having lost husband and child three years prior, he suggests the following:

I think God has taken unusual pains, so to speak, to make you a Christian, a Christian indeed, not in name...having in you the mind which was in Christ, and walking as Christ also walked. [Christ] has given you affliction upon affliction. He has used every possible means to unhinge your soul from things of earth, that it might fix on him alone. How far the design of his love has succeeded I could not well judge from a short conversation. Your Ladyship will therefore give me leave to inquire, is the heaviness you frequently feel merely owing to weakness of body and the loss of near relations? I will hope it is not. It might, at first spring from these outward pressures. But did not the gracious Spirit of God strike in, and take occasion from these to convince you of sin, of unbelief, of the want of Christ?My dear Lady, be not afraid to know yourself as you are known.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ WJW 2:235.

⁸⁹ Thomas Oden, *John Wesley's Teachings, Vol. 3: Pastoral Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012): 96-97.

⁹⁰ WJW 27:373.

Note how Wesley proceeds in diagnosing the malady while prompting her to think beyond physical-temporal turmoil to spiritual need, illustrating how divine providential economy makes instrumental use of natural circumstance in awakening an *almost* Christian.

In a third, earlier sermon, “Satan’s Devices,” (1750) Wesley consoles those believers experiencing sanctifying grace whose righteousness, peace, and joy have been thwarted by Satan’s “fiery darts.” Instead, they experience fear and despair, discouraged by reminders of their sinfulness and lack of progress in holiness, “...that subtle adversary often damps the joy we should otherwise feel in what we have already attained, by a perverse representation of what we have not attained, and the absolute necessity of attaining it.”⁹¹ Unholiness crops up as a result, and those “going on to perfection” feel despair at not having attained the goal. “We may also expect ‘perfect love’ as not to use that which is already ‘shed abroad in our hearts’.”⁹² Tempted to despair by the unbridgeable gap between God’s holiness and human sinfulness, in effect, Wesley tells his hearers to rejoice in the measure of faith they have and not to despair over not having more. One should trust God for what one has, in gratitude. There are echoes in this sermon of Luther’s quip, “I am baptized!”⁹³ in the face of demonic temptation to despair. One also hears echoes of Wesley’s struggle with the Moravians of over a decade past, who insisted on “full salvation” in an instant and prompted Wesley’s despair at not being able to profess it.

⁹¹ “Satan’s Devices” WJW 2:141.

⁹² WJW 2:146.

⁹³ Quoted in Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil* (New Haven: Yale, 1989), WA VI. No. 6830; 217, 26 ff (*Tischreden*).

Wesley makes an unusual analogy about divine vs. temporal or satanic forces at work in temptation in a 1786 sermon, “On Temptation.” After describing the sources of temptation much as he did in the “Heaviness” sermon, Wesley says:

In that execrable slaughter-house, the Romish Inquisition, (most unfortunately called, The House of Mercy!) it is the custom of those holy butchers, while they are tearing a man's sinews upon the rack, to have the physician of the house standing by. His business is, from time to time, to observe the eyes, the pulse, and other circumstances of the sufferer, and to give notice when the torture has continued so long as it can without putting an end to his life; that it may be preserved long enough for him to undergo the residue of their tortures. But notwithstanding all the physician's care, he is sometimes mistaken; and death puts a period to the sufferings of the patient before his tormentors are aware. We may observe something like this in our own case. In whatever sufferings or temptations we are, our great Physician never departs from us. He is about our bed, and about our path. He observes every symptom of our distress, that it may not rise above our strength. And he cannot be mistaken concerning us. He sees exactly how much we can endure with our present degree of strength. And if this is not sufficient, he can increase it to whatever degree it pleases him. Nothing, therefore, is more certain, than that, in consequence of his wisdom, as well as his justice, mercy, and faithfulness, he never will, he never can, suffer us to be tempted above that we are able: Above the strength which he either hath given already, or will give as soon as we need it.⁹⁴

Keeping in mind the moral attributes of God Wesley elucidated, God may remove troubles, allow nature to take its sometimes violent course, or, stand by in case the temptation exceeds the sufferer's capacity. In his office as physician, Christ moves the believer through trials allowed, observed, or avoided on the way to his and all creation's perfect restoration.⁹⁵ This is sanctified affliction at work.

In sum, Wesley envisions a bright soteriological *telos* where temptation, doubt, and spiritual trial are finally erased in perfect love of God and neighbor. Doubt and

⁹⁴ Sermon, “On Temptation,” WJW 3:163.

⁹⁵ See Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology*, 112. See also JW's sermons on “Self Denial” and “The Mystery of Iniquity.”

temptation are keenly felt by way of spiritual senses that in turn effect “right tempers.” The influx of divine grace upon the soul in gradual and instantaneous events—in ways the believer can feel and narrate—move the spiritual senses toward greater, uninterrupted communion with God. Spiritual trials lessen the further the pilgrim moves along the *via salutis*, to be sure, a winding path of hills and valleys, progress and regress, all in the providential *economia* of a fundamentally gracious God.

Luther and Wesley in Conversation

Now we may bring Luther and Wesley into dialog about their respective approaches to the spiritual trials believers face. Space permits only a preliminary consideration of the points at which they differ, converge, and display consensus in their views on this matter. The ecumenical question remains: is there a *grundifferenz* that should be accounted for that makes their approaches irreconcilable, or, are they amenable to a differentiated consensus that invites a mutually receptive posture among Lutherans and Wesleyans on this issue?

It is not evident that Wesley was familiar with Luther’s own descriptions of *anfechtung*, a term which vanished among the German pietists of intervening generations.⁹⁶ Gone with it were theological descriptions of a hidden and revealed God, replaced by the measurement of Christian experience, the headwaters of modern

⁹⁶ Wesley’s well-known remark about Luther perhaps alludes to Luther’s brooding, but more likely his bitter polemics: “Doubtless he was a man highly favored of God, and a blessed instrument in his hand, but O! what pity that he had no faithful friend! None that would, at all hazards, rebuke him plainly and sharply, for his rough, untractable spirit, and bitter zeal for opinions, so greatly obstructive of the work of God!” WJW 20:285. See also Leo G. Cox, “John Wesley’s View of Martin Luther” *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* 7:3 (1964): 83-90.

theology's "turn to the subject." Neither does Wesley have a precise equivalent in his vocabulary to Luther's *anfechtung* (really, who else does?), which even opens the question of whether we are comparing equivalents when we consider Wesley's discussions of "heaviness," "temptation," "fear," "spiritual afflictions," and so forth. However, as we have seen, Wesley expresses a comparable phenomenon of alienation from God and self by using these terms. The heart of the issue for a comparative reading of the two is whether their formulations converge around 1.) The nature of divine activity in these spiritual trials, and 2.) The place and significance of these trials in the Christian life. If their positions do not converge, is there a basic *grundifferenz* on these questions? Finally, convergence, differentiated consensus, or fundamental difference aside, what could a receptive-ecumenical approach to the question offer the children of both traditions (and any of their brethren in the church catholic listening in) who labor together in the *cura animarum*?

1.) The nature of divine activity in spiritual trials

It was perceptions of God "from below" that jaded God in Luther's eyes. Experience intervened, throwing the classic doctrine of divine simplicity into radical doubt. Could God be satanic? Were God and Satan the same being? Could God be trusted? The God of wrath outside revelation was for Luther unfathomably different from God revealed in Christ. Suffice it to say, if these questions ever entered Wesley's mind, he did not report them. And that is not only a matter of the two men's quite different temperaments, pieties, and cultural sensibilities. Wesley's doctrine of God was shaped

around God as moral governor, which entailed for him that God, by nature, could not dissemble. God's will accorded with reason for him.⁹⁷

For Luther, temptations could be sent by God to test individuals;⁹⁸ Wesley agrees, certainly on the basis of God's testing of the Israelites in the wilderness. The nature of this testing, though, did not involve a change in his *perception* of God's essential goodness and mercy. These were never in doubt for him, and, if they were for his charges, he ascribed the problem to Satan, not God. Wesley tersely comments on James 1:13: "But let no man who is tempted to sin, say, I am tempted of God. God thus tempteth no man."⁹⁹ There is a distinction to be made here between God's punishments, which for both Luther and Wesley could involve God "removing his face," and God's purposeful hiding beneath opposite larvae or masks, as only Luther describes it.

While the modern conscience may have long since stopped trembling at Levitical rustling leaves or Wizard of Oz-like deities, has Luther nonetheless violated God's divine simplicity when he declares he cannot tell whether the hidden God is holy or satanic? The two-part question here is a.) Whether Luther is suggesting that good *and* evil comprise God's nature (clearly violating the orthodox consensus about the irreducible divine simplicity in a quite startling way) or, b.) We are reading one of Luther's many provocative rhetorical quips and should mark it as such. The answer lies in a third option beyond substance and form, namely, that Luther's spiritual trial over God's *larvae*, actually a question about existential perception. In other words, the starkly divided God who occasions his *anfechtung* appears as such because of the troubled conscience before

⁹⁷ See Sermon, "The Original, Nature, and Properties, and Use of the Law," esp. sec. III, WJW 2:4-19.

⁹⁸ Buehler, 7.

⁹⁹ Wesley, *Notes Upon the New Testament*.

God, fearful of damnation. Luther is suggesting humans are naturally incapable of recognizing divine goodness, seeing its precisely opposite in demonic corruption. Perceptions of God cannot be trusted because the conscience is unreliable. It remains for Luther that God indeed *could* be a demon because of God's absolute power (*Dei potentia absoluta*) to be and do anything. This is the *Deus nudus* of brute power. But it is God clothed in the Word, wrapped in humility and suffering, to which I cling, says Luther, against whatever else I may see or what God may choose to be in God's infinity. Perhaps Wesley plays the straight man here, whose orthodoxy, held up next to Luther's hidden God, shows Luther's to be not simply the mysterious, but irrational, deity it finally is. If this constitutes a ground-difference between Luther and Wesley, then it does so between Luther and most classical theology.

The root of the different approaches to the matter of God in trials lay in both men's common rejection of mysticism, but for different reasons. Objectionable to Luther was the ladder of ascent in mysticism through experiential stages, fostered by the ascendant's cooperation, ending in communion, *or worse* (!), union, with God. Scholasticism set up a parallel ladder of intellectual ascent, upon which climbers were sure to "break their necks" on the way up. Both ladders violated the decidedly monergistic God-believer relationship established in justification by grace alone through faith alone. While Luther rejected a mysticism of ascent, he embraced, as we have seen, another derived from Tauler's German variety, in which divine obfuscation and revelation were contrasted. This contrast never ceased to color the Luther's experience of God, and was the basis for his mature thought on divine mystery and disclosure in the sufferings of Christ.

Wesley attacked the mystics he read because he perceived them to be antinomian in what he took to be their rejection of outward commandments or means of grace.¹⁰⁰ Aside from his difficult relationship with William Law over the latter's mystical tendencies,¹⁰¹ and his critique of Guyon and others for the same, his aversion to mysticism was confirmed in his charge against the Moravians. John reported to Charles that Moravians were "mystical, not scriptural," practicing "darkness and closeness...and guile in almost all their words."¹⁰² On this point Moravianism functioned as a proxy in Wesley's mind for Luther, whose Galatians commentary he thought was "tinctured with mysticism." We might complain that Wesley did not appreciate Luther's novel reading of Galatians, but, Wesley may have been right to pick up on the ambiguity in Luther's approach to the hidden God he found implied there. This creates a fundamental difference between Luther and Wesley with implications for their respective views on God's relationship to Christian experience.

Wesley avoided mysticism in his doctrine of divine attributes because he read it as a violation of God's reasonableness and trustworthiness. Divine freedom is expressed in God's moral and governing power over the universe. Therefore, Wesley avoids mysticism's tincture for its confusion of human perception with divine will; God, for him, functions rationally and with purpose toward a *telos*. Providential guidance for the sake of the believer's—and all creation's—renewal, fits the character of a fundamentally gracious God in Wesley's view.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Kenneth J. Collins, "John Wesley's Assessment of Christian Mysticism," *Lexington Theological Quarterly*, 28: 4 (1993): 299-318.

¹⁰¹ WJW 25:540-42, Letter to William Law, May 14, 1738.

¹⁰² WJW 26:56, Letter to Charles Wesley, April 21, 1741.

¹⁰³ Cf. Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley*, 38-42.

2.) The place and significance of these trials in the Christian life.

Experience is a common formative element for Luther and Wesley, even in the sense that they could both be called theologians of experience. While Wesley's use of Christian experience needs little introduction, was not Luther a "Theologian of the Word," about the business of exegeting an objectively delivered gospel for the sake of reforming the church's preaching? Yes, but, as we have seen, experience plays too great a role in the formation of Luther's thought--and thus his reading of scripture--to be ignored.

For both, revelation can at once confirm or contradict experience. There is a parallel here for both men with reason (meaning Luther's "plain reason" unadulterated by Aristotelian philosophy, and Wesley's modified Lockean estimate of reason) that can corroborate revelation and is the indispensable tool for understanding language and thus scripture. Yet, experience is for both more determinative than reason. God's conscience-shaking addresses to humanity ("Adam, where are you?...")¹⁰⁴ creates an existential crisis. As such, the gospel cannot be reduced to rational propositions that stand outside experience, rather, God addresses humanity in the totality of the human condition; the human is not bleached out of the scene of the address. Experience, like the very sin ensconced within it, functions as a necessary *negative* force never absent from the positive counterforce of justifying grace. God speaking in law and gospel simultaneously uncovers sin and absorbs it, an absorption that happens in the *Angefochtene* of Jesus on the cross. Agony, trial, struggle, all vividly experienced, is never apart from grace. Grace is never without agony.

¹⁰⁴ Gen. 3:9.

Wesley's view of experience converges with Luther's in the sense that it is the indispensable factor in a Christian life that is necessarily always in process, engaging simultaneously heart, soul, mind, and strength. However, experience for Wesley confirms the ameliorating power of grace to finally remove the threat of afflictions by assuming them into a positive place in divine providence. Experience and trial are thus never sheer negative forces for Wesley, but are assumed into a divine *economia* reflective of God's essential goodness as moral governor of the universe.

3). Receptive Ecumenism

Paul Murray of Durham University's Centre for Catholic Studies has charted a fresh course for ecumenical rapprochement in "receptive ecumenism," with a concentration on receiving the gifts each tradition has to offer its interlocutors. Not a simple acceptance of the other, this receptivity spurs dialog partners to investigate their own traditions more thoroughly in light of ecumenical convergences or ongoing differences uncovered in their conversations. Thus, Lutherans and Wesleyans are not obliged to accept one another's formulations about, for instance, perfection (which has been an actual topic in their dialogs), or in this case, the cause and nature of spiritual afflictions (not likely to be a dialog topic since it is not a matter of official doctrine, but the opinions of their founders). However, dialog should prompt both partners to critically appreciate the other's formulations (viz., Luther advises putting the best interpretation on a neighbor's actions in his treatment of the eighth commandment in the Small Catechism) while investigating how their own traditions might need renewal or rethinking on this point (*semper reformanda*). In the matter of spiritual trials, Lutheran reflection on Wesley's sensibilities about the healing power of grace in believer's lives might prompt

reflection on how Luther's often-made remark that the justified "begin to make progress"¹⁰⁵ in the Christian life suggests that grace promises an ameliorative inner renewal whereby believers can expect afflictions to become lighter, fewer, and cared for in a community of support (classes and bands), *without* obviating the reality of ongoing suffering and inviting the specter of a *theologia gloria*. From the Wesleyan side, it can be recognized that Luther provides a realism about human exigencies that, under grace, do not leave the baptized to sink in a pool of anxiety, but rather, in taking on the wounds of Christ--which become gift instead of burden in the blessed exchange--they have Christ's real presence in faith as the ground of their assurance.¹⁰⁶ The cross then becomes central not simply to justification, but sanctification as well, a move Wesley might appreciate and see appropriated in his intimate knitting of operant and co-operant grace.

In the end, on this and all subjects, Wesleyans and Lutherans can join together in doing one thing they do very well, namely, sing. Both traditions are capable of singing about spiritual afflictions, as though to lift them to God as blessings in disguise. And so, penned Luther:

Though all the world with devils fill
and threaten to devour us,
we tremble not, we trust God's will:
they cannot overpow'r us.
Though Satan rant and rage,
in fiercest war engage,
this tyrant's doomed to fail;
God's judgment must prevail!
One little word shall triumph.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Theodore Tappert, ed., *Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959): 418. (Luther, Large Catechism). See also numerous references to spiritual progress in his Commentary on Romans (LW 25:8, 51, 59, 62, 117, 222, 225, 433, 478; "Against Hanswurst," LW 41:218.

¹⁰⁶ LW 26:129-30; LW 51:316.

¹⁰⁷ *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, Hymn 505.

Charles Wesley's "Come, O Thou Traveler Unknown" perhaps best catches his brother's sense of what was going on in a spiritual trial. Jacob's wrestling match is spiritual and physical, an existential confrontation with the divine, a gut-wrenching struggle between despair and exultation, in the end, at the mysterious wrestler's identity.

Yield to me now—for I am weak but confident in self-despair!
Speak to my heart, in blessing speak, be conquered by my instant prayer:
speak, or thou never hence shalt move, and tell me if thy name is Love.

'Tis Love! 'tis Love! Thou diedst for me, I hear thy whisper in my heart.
The morning breaks, the shadows flee, pure Universal Love thou art: to
me, to all, thy mercies move— thy nature, and thy name is Love.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸ *United Methodist Hymnal* No. 387. Compare John Wesley, *Notes Upon the Old Testament*, Gen. 32:24-31.