

# Revival and Staying Alive: Spiritual Respiration in John Wesley's Theology

**Sarah Heaner Lancaster**

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“THY GRACE RESTORE, THY WORK REVIVE.” These words, used as the title of the theme for this Oxford Institute, come from a hymn written for a preacher by Charles Wesley.<sup>1</sup> The hymn recounts the preacher’s desire and prayer to be as zealous now as in the beginning of ministry to bring people to God.

My father was a Methodist preacher in the Southwest Texas conference (which has since become the Rio Texas conference). He mostly served small-town communities in Texas, and every place to which we itinerated he invited an evangelist to come to preach a weeklong revival. Perhaps he arranged these revivals because he, like the preacher that Charles Wesley wrote about, needed them himself, but as a child I came to expect those revivals and I loved them. They meant exciting and joyful music and special activities for children, and my father would get up very early to make doughnuts for the services held on weekday mornings before school and work.

The first revival I remember was when I was six or seven years old. It was the usual practice to end each service with an altar call,

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1 Charles Wesley, *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, vol. 1 (Bristol: Farley, 1749), 300–301, #189. See the website of the Center for Studies in the Wesleyan Tradition, Duke Divinity School, accessed January 22, 2021, [https://divinity.duke.edu/sites/divinity.duke.edu/files/documents/cswt/45\\_Hymns\\_and\\_Sacred\\_Poems\\_%281749%29\\_Vol\\_1.pdf](https://divinity.duke.edu/sites/divinity.duke.edu/files/documents/cswt/45_Hymns_and_Sacred_Poems_%281749%29_Vol_1.pdf).

inviting people to give their lives to Christ and to join the church. I remember this revival because one night as the invitation was given, I felt called to go forward. Because I was so young, my father was surprised to see me walk up, but he treated me as he would any adult, and he received me into membership in the church. (I should say this was before The United Methodist Church worked out the understanding it now has of “baptized member” as distinct from “professing member.”) He did insist as I got older that I go through the confirmation lessons with him, but that night I publicly responded to Christ and joined the church at an early age.

I begin with this personal story because I want to explore the theme of this Institute from the point of view of a child of the church who never left the church but nevertheless benefited from the opportunities to be revived. I will draw from my experiences but not to suggest the same pattern for everyone. Rather, I am trying to use my autobiography only insofar as it opens avenues for me to think through a theological problem. I would add that my viewpoint is inevitably shaped by United Methodist theology, and there may be some differences in theological understandings in other churches represented here. I hope, though, that the questions I am thinking about may be thought-provoking even across those differences. I should also say that in my childhood, revivals usually used language of being born again, which accounts for some of the associations I make in this chapter.

I have puzzled for some time over the internal tension in the theology we have inherited from John Wesley between the practice of acknowledging through infant baptism that God is at work to regenerate us from the beginning of our lives and yet calling people to repentance and new birth as adults. When our lives start with grace, how do we get to the point of needing such “conversion”? Can we maintain a life with God that does not die so thoroughly that it requires dramatic revival to bring it back to life? I cannot say to what extent Wesley was himself aware of or concerned about this tension, but regardless of his own self-consciousness of the problem, he was reflecting theologically in the context of a movement. As Methodism has changed from society to church, though, it needs theology for a church, including theology

for the infant baptism that Wesley gave to us through the materials he himself sent to the newly forming church in North America. Because this region is where I am located, this is the situation I presume for this chapter.

Although Wesley called already-baptized people to new birth, both the Sunday Service and the article “Of Baptism” in the Articles of Religion of the Methodist Episcopal Church link infant baptism to regeneration.<sup>2</sup> We have and use both theological approaches—baptizing infants and calling the baptized to be born again—without always making clear the connection between them.<sup>3</sup> Even if Wesley himself did not work out this tension, our churches have to. As a movement, Methodism sought to spread scriptural holiness across a land that already had churches, calling people to be better Christians within those churches. As churches now, we must continue this mission in a way that is in keeping with our own churchly character. This churchly character includes offering baptism. The tension in Wesley’s theology between the practice of infant baptism and calling the baptized to new birth needs to be worked out. If we think of revival only as the need to be born again, then we are simply taking over theology of a movement without taking into account what it means to be church. It would seem odd, for instance, to simply expect that every baptism, which we understand sacramentally to be an act of God, will necessarily fail and require yet another birth. Failure is, of course, possible and even likely as I will go on to show, but to simply expect it undermines confidence

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2 *John Wesley’s Sunday Service of the Methodists in North America, with an Introduction* by James F. White (Nashville: Quarterly Review United Methodist Publishing House, 1984), 140. *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2016* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016), ¶103.

3 This tension with regard to baptism is especially apparent in ecumenical dialogue. See section III, “Baptism and New Life,” in *Encountering Christ the Saviour: Church and Sacraments* (Lake Junaluska, NC: The World Methodist Council, 2011), <http://worldmethodistcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Encountering-Christ-the-Saviour-Church-and-Sacraments.pdf>.

in the work of God's unfailing grace that baptism signifies.<sup>4</sup> I hope to expand the meaning of revival so that it is not restricted to bringing dead Christians back to life. I want to show how infant baptism can make sense within the theology of salvation we have received from Wesley, and I will use Wesley's image of spiritual respiration to help work through this problem.

In this chapter, I will first explore Wesley's own understanding of spiritual respiration and new birth and then examine why sustaining spiritual respiration is important. Next I will explore some ways that Wesley's reflection on spiritual respiration for a movement may need to be adjusted or expanded to serve churches that baptize infants. Finally, even though there is much to learn directly from Wesley, I will suggest two ways that our own reflection and practice regarding revival and spiritual respiration need to go beyond his own.

## Spiritual Respiration and New Birth

Wesley uses the image of spiritual respiration in connection with the idea of being born again, specifically in two sermons, "The Great Privilege of Those That Are Born of God" and "The New Birth." The revivals I knew about in my childhood often called people to be born again. Wesley speaks of new birth as necessary because of the condition into which we are born as humans. As he understood it, although human beings were created in the image of God, this image was marred by the fall. He is careful to distinguish new birth (the work of God *in us*) from justification (the work of God *for us*). New birth, as the work of God *in us*, is the way God renews our fallen nature and restores us to the moral image of God.<sup>5</sup> New birth brings a real change, taking away

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4 *By Water and the Spirit*, the United Methodist statement on baptism, identifies God's gift of unfailing grace as the defining difference between a sacrament and dedication (30). Gayle Carlton Felton, *By Water and the Spirit* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1998), <https://gbod-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/drint/resources/english/bywaterandthespirit.pdf>.

5 John Wesley, Sermon 19, "The Great Privilege of Those That Are Born of God," §preface 2, in *Sermons*, ed. Albert C. Outler, in *Works* 1:431–32.

the power of sin so that we might become holy in love as God intended us to be.<sup>6</sup> As he describes new birth, Wesley makes use of a comparison with physical birth to convey what happens to us. Before physical birth, we have organs—his examples are eyes, ears, lungs—but they do not function as they are made to do because they are closed off from light, sound, and air. Upon being born, though, those organs are released from confinement in the womb to function properly—seeing, hearing, breathing. Wesley uses these bodily functions to explain what happens in the soul. With new birth, our spiritual senses are released from the power of sin to be able to discern and relate to God in a wholly different way.<sup>7</sup>

Like our physical senses, our renewed spiritual senses function to allow us to see and hear God as we could not before. Like our physical lungs, our reborn soul is able to “breathe” God differently. Although physically an unborn child has been sustained by oxygen even in the womb as the mother’s body mediates access by delivering oxygen through the placenta, at birth the lungs directly fill with the air needed to sustain life. Similarly, although God’s grace has always been around us and has always been inviting us into relationship, with new birth we may deeply take it in and respond.<sup>8</sup> Wesley describes this respiration in the sermon “The New Birth” as God’s breathing grace into us and our breathing back prayer and praise.<sup>9</sup>

This change in the ability to breathe with God is the change that happens in new birth. The spiritual senses or abilities that God gave to us in creation had been closed off by sin, but with new birth they are enabled to function as they were made to do. It is a change from a nonfunctioning spirit (breath) to a functioning one. Wesley thinks of this change as bringing the soul to life.<sup>10</sup>

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Sermon 45, “The New Birth,” §preface 1, §I.1, in *Works* 2:187–88.

6 Wesley, Sermon 45, “New Birth,” §I.1, in *Works* 2:188. Sermon 19, “Great Privilege,” §preface 2, in *Works* 1:431–32.

7 Wesley, Sermon 19, “Great Privilege,” §I.2–10, in *Works* 1:432–35.

8 Wesley, Sermon 19, “Great Privilege,” §I.8, in *Works* 1:434–35.

9 Wesley, Sermon 45, “New Birth,” §II.4, in *Works* 2:192–93.

10 Wesley, Sermon 45, “New Birth,” §II.4, in *Works* 2:192–93.

Wesley calls the change that comes about with new birth a great change; he could even call it a total change because we go from being spiritually dead to being spiritually alive.<sup>11</sup> The idea of a total change refers to the vast difference between death and life, not the total completion of the work of God in us. New birth is the entry to sanctification, not the whole of it.<sup>12</sup> The functioning of these spiritual abilities allows us to keep breathing to stay alive in Christ, but we still need to grow. As Wesley says in the sermon “The Great Privilege of Those Born of God,” “And by this new kind of spiritual respiration, spiritual life is not only sustained but increased day by day, together with spiritual strength and motion and sensation; all the senses of the soul being now awake, and capable of ‘discerning’ spiritual ‘good and evil.’”<sup>13</sup> And in “The New Birth” he says, “As by a kind of spiritual respiration, the life of God in the soul is sustained: and the child of God grows up, till he comes to ‘the full measure of the stature of Christ.’”<sup>14</sup> In the context of Methodist revival, this new birth was distinct from but usually occurring with justification, the powerful experience of knowing oneself to be a pardoned and beloved child of God.

Because in the theology of the Church of England new birth was also associated with baptism, Wesley distinguishes between the sign act and the reality it represents in order to distinguish the sign act in the church from what his movement called people to. The outward sign of water is not identical to the inward renewal that God works in us, but the sign points to what God is doing. With the use of this distinction, Wesley recognizes that the sign and the thing signified do not always go together. He makes this point with reference to what happens in what he calls “riper years,” not in infancy.<sup>15</sup> He did not refute the Church of England’s position that infants are born again at the time of baptism, but the distinction helps to identify and explain two possibilities. First, some who are baptized in their riper years show no evidence of having

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11 Wesley, Sermon 45, “New Birth,” §II.4–5, in *Works* 2:192–94.

12 Wesley, Sermon 45, “New Birth,” §IV.3, in *Works* 2:198.

13 Wesley, Sermon 19, “Great Privilege,” §I.8, in *Works* 1:434–35.

14 Wesley, Sermon 45, “New Birth,” §II.4, in *Works* 2:192–93.

15 Wesley, Sermon 45, “New Birth,” §IV.2, in *Works* 2:197–98.

been inwardly changed at all. They are washed by water, but their spirits are not renewed. Second, because new birth is only the entrance to sanctification, not the whole of it, it is possible to conceive of how God's work in us is progressive. No matter what our age, we have to grow in holiness the way a child grows into an adult. So even when the inward change does accompany the outward sign, God still continues to work in us to bring us to greater holiness.

The second possibility is especially important for thinking about spiritual respiration. In order to grow, we have to keep breathing. The ability and necessity to take air into one's lungs after physical birth is like the ability and necessity to take God into one's soul after spiritual birth. With air and with God, a human life can flourish. Without breathing air, a person eventually will die physically; without breathing God, a person eventually will die spiritually. Spiritual respiration is the kind of intimate fellowship with God that is needed not only daily, but moment by moment. When God is as close as one's own breath, spiritual growth is sustained. When that relationship is neglected, spiritual growth is threatened.

In "The Great Privilege of Those That Are Born of God," Wesley recounts how a small failure to keep firmly attached to God through prayer and through attention to the way God's grace is working in one's life can lead to a sliding away from God, even to the point of committing a grievous outward sin.<sup>16</sup> He names David, Barnabas, and Peter as examples of those who underwent this slide, but David becomes the premiere example. The first step in sliding away from God is negative inward sin, that is, not stirring up the gift of God within you. Think about this step as not breathing God in spiritual respiration—that is, not taking in grace and returning prayer and praise. This failure leads to the second step, positive inward sin—that is, inclining toward some evil desire or temper. When we do not breathe God, we lean away from God and toward something else. What follows from allowing oneself to be drawn in the wrong direction is loss of faith in God. Wesley describes faith as recumbency, a resting or leaning on God, which is obviously weakened when you start resting or leaning on something

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16 Wesley, Sermon 19, "Great Privilege," §II.7, in *Works* 1:438–39.

else.<sup>17</sup> Once that happens, we become capable of committing outward sin, that is, voluntarily breaking a known law of God, such as David did with Bathsheba.<sup>18</sup>

In the way that Wesley outlines what he calls the “progress from grace to sin,” we begin to see how natural birth and spiritual birth are different.<sup>19</sup> They both mark the beginning of a certain kind of “breathing,” but its continuation in each case is quite different. While human beings have control of physical breathing to some extent, involuntary processes assure that we get the oxygen we need even when we are not thinking about it. Such is not the case with spiritual respiration. No involuntary, automatic system takes over to provide for our spiritual lives when we neglect them. It is, of course, possible to develop good spiritual habits that sustain us in times of trouble without conscious thought, but such habits are formed precisely because we have not neglected spiritual respiration in ordinary times. The great change that takes place with new birth allows the possibility of a qualitatively different kind of relationship with God, whom we now know as close to us as our own breath, but it does not guarantee growth in that relationship. As Wesley makes clear, new birth marks the beginning, not the entirety, of sanctification. Depending on new birth without constantly attending to the relationship it makes possible is a serious mistake that leads to the kind of complacency that Wesley encountered everywhere around him (and is all too common still). Those who did become complacent were “dead” Christians; that is, they had stopped breathing God and so had lost the very life that had been made available to them through their baptisms.

What Wesley saw in his time was the clear presence of dead Christians all around. Even if many, according to Anglican theology, had been born again through God’s work in infant baptism with the possibility of breathing God, they may never have willingly taken their first spiritual breath or they had held their breath long enough to fall as David did back into sin. At a gathering such as this one, we do not all

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17 Wesley, Sermon 1, “Salvation by Faith,” §I.5, in *Works* 1:121.

18 Wesley, Sermon 19, “Great Privilege,” §II.1–7, in *Works* 1:438–39.

19 Wesley, Sermon 19, “Great Privilege,” §II.9, in *Works* 1:440.

share the assumption that Wesley had of at least nominal Christianity in the culture around us, but as churches we all face the problem of how to keep baptized Christians breathing God.

## **Sustaining Revived Lives**

To address the problem that he saw in his time and place, Wesley began a movement; he organized societies that were intended to draw people together in the pursuit of holiness. These societies were not churches, but rather were focused opportunities for growth. Since Wesley's own time, Methodists around the world have become churches. Because churches can be prone to institutional staleness and lethargy, many of us today long for the energy and discipline of that early movement. Even as we try to recover that heritage, though, we must also reckon theologically with our current status as churches. This means that the theology Wesley developed for a movement may need to be expanded to account for more than he himself needed to do. I want to use his notion of spiritual respiration to talk not only about revival as resuscitation from death, but also about the means to sustain breathing—a constant turning from death to life that constitutes the ongoing growth of Christians to fulfill the claim God has made on their lives through baptism. Wesley himself desired that the Methodist movement would sustain breathing for those who had been born again by an experience of God's love that had brought them back from death, so I will start with his own understanding of what was possible and necessary after new birth. Why and how do we sustain spiritual respiration once it has started?

As for why, I want to explore how spiritual respiration is vulnerable after we have been born into the air that is God. Wesley understood that being born again came with the privilege of not committing sin, but he also recognized that this privilege could be lost. In his sermon "The Great Privilege," Wesley reflects on the slide from grace to sin in the context of a question the Bible itself presents. He notes that 1 John 3:9 asserts that whosoever is born of God does not commit sin, but he also notes that Paul's account in Galatians (2:12–14) about Peter's

hypocrisy in Antioch with regard to eating with Gentiles indicates that even such a holy person as Peter did commit sin. Wesley's answer is to say that the possibility of sin depends on whether a reborn person "keeps" him- or herself in faith.<sup>20</sup> This language of "keeping" oneself is found throughout Wesley's writings, and it suggests the kind of ongoing process of spiritual respiration I have just described. In other words, the way to prevent sliding into sin is to keep breathing God. If you continue to stir up God's gift in prayer and praise, you will find all the grace and power you need to avoid the steps of sliding into sin.

In *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, Wesley connects this idea of "keeping" yourself to having a "single eye," a phrase he bases on Matthew 6:22–23.<sup>21</sup> To review the slide from grace to sin that I covered earlier, if you neglect spiritual respiration, you take the first step away from grace and toward sin. (Wesley calls this first step "negative inward sin," a failure to stir up God's gift.) After taking that first step, it is very easy to take the second step, "positive inward sin"—which he explains as inclining toward something other than God. If you fail to breathe God, you will not be empowered to avoid further sliding. He describes the further slide into positive inward sin as "giving way to some evil desire or temper."<sup>22</sup> So "keeping" yourself with a "single eye" is constantly keeping yourself focused on the life God gives instead of turning toward death.

The single eye has particular reference to our desires because Wesley uses the metaphor of the eye to talk about the intention of the soul.<sup>23</sup> The nature of new birth is that it renews the image of God in us so that we can gain the mind of Christ.<sup>24</sup> When we have the mind of Christ, we intend what Christ intends. Sanctification is holiness understood

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20 Wesley, Sermon 19, "The Great Privilege," §II.7, in *Works* 1:438–39.

21 Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, ed. and annotated by Randy L. Maddox and Paul W. Chilcote (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 2015), 141. See question 36, his fifth advice.

22 Wesley, Sermon 19, "The Great Privilege," §II.7, in *Works* 1:438–39.

23 Wesley, Sermon 125, "On a Single Eye" §preface 2, in *Works* 4:121. "And what the eye is to the body, the intention is to the soul."

24 Wesley, Sermon 45, "The New Birth," §II.5, in *Works* 2:193–94.

as the “whole mind which was in Jesus Christ.”<sup>25</sup> As we grow, we will gain more and more of the mind of Christ, but in the time of growing, we also will still struggle with the distractions that are around us that may cause us to take our minds and eyes off of God. The importance of “keeping oneself” is crucial for maintaining a single eye—keeping the intention of the soul focused on God in the same way our physical eyes focus on what is in front of us.

In this struggle to avoid distraction that would lead us away from God, three desires are paramount in Wesley’s thinking. He takes these categories from 1 John 2:16, and he lists and explains these desires in a number of places in his works. In “The Unity of the Divine Being,” Wesley names three “rivals of God,” that is, three categories of things that serve as idols to draw us away from worshiping the one, true God, and these three rivals correspond to the three sinful desires he talks about. The rivals are first “objects of sense,” the things that please our bodily senses. Second, “objects of the imagination” are the things that please our fancy. In other words, they satisfy a mental state rather than a physical one. We want them not because they make the body feel good, but rather because they make us feel good internally. Wesley often mentions in this category novelty because it includes things that give you the pleasure you feel when you wear the latest fashion or have the newest gadget. Finally, he names the pride of life, a phrase taken directly and translated literally from 1 John 2:16. Wesley uses this phrase to talk about things that give us status in life, such as honor and wealth.<sup>26</sup> These three idols produce in us three desires. Objects of sense awaken desire of the flesh. Objects of the imagination awaken desire of the eye. The pride of life awakens desire of praise.

When we fail to breathe in grace and breathe out prayer and praise, we are more prone to the attraction of these idols, so we lean on them instead of leaning on God. The organization of the Methodist movement from the beginning showed great concern about helping Methodists “keep” themselves with a single eye. As early as 1738, Wesley drew up “The Rules of the Band Societies,” stating the explicit intention “to

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25 Wesley, Sermon 45, “The New Birth,” §III.1, in *Works* 2:194.

26 Wesley, Sermon 120, “The Unity of the Divine Being,” §12, in *Works* 4:65.

speak, each of us in order, freely and plainly the true state of our souls, with the faults we have committed in thought, word, or deed, and the temptations we have felt since our last meeting.”<sup>27</sup> To be admitted to the band, individuals had to answer questions about their willingness to hear what others had to say about their faults. They were further expected to be open about their own self-understanding, and at each meeting, they were asked the following questions:

1. What known sins have you committed since our last meeting?
2. What temptations have you met with?
3. How were you delivered?
4. What have you thought, said, or done, of which you doubt whether it be sin or not?
5. Have you nothing you desire to keep secret?<sup>28</sup>

These questions serve the purpose of thorough self-examination so that any slide from grace could be caught and corrected.

Wesley found it useful to organize members of the movement according to their struggles. As membership grew, he saw the need “to separate the precious from the vile,” a need that led him to issue tickets as “commendatory letters” for participation.<sup>29</sup> He also began to organize separate groups for believers and penitents who had fallen into sin because of his observation that the prayers and exhortations that would profit one group did not profit the other.<sup>30</sup> Eventually, he also organized a select group of those who were committed to “press after perfection.”<sup>31</sup> So the Methodist movement was designed not only to

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27 Wesley, “The Rules of the Band Societies,” in *The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design*, ed. Rupert E. Davies, in *Works* 9:77.

28 Wesley, “The Rules of the Band Societies,” in *Works* 9:78.

29 Wesley, “A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists,” §IV.1–3, in *Works* 9:265.

30 Wesley, “A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists,” §VII.1, in *Works* 9:268–69.

31 Wesley, “A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists,” §VIII.2, in *Works* 9:269.

bring members to being born again, but also to help members “keep” themselves so they could grow in holiness.

The design of the movement matched the problem Wesley saw in his time and place. He observed that many people around him had been baptized but neglected their baptism. Many people needed spiritual resuscitation after they had let their spiritual lives die from lack of breathing God. His words could be harsh, as they are at the end of “The New Birth.” There he addresses an objection raised about his method that it is uncharitable to call the baptized to be born again. This objection arises because the theology of the Church of England tied new birth to baptism. It seemed unnecessary and presumptuous to call Christians already born again by baptism to be born yet again. The call to be born yet again could seem to call into question the work of God in their baptism. Wesley is firm in his response that even the baptized need to be born again. His answer makes sense in light of spiritual respiration. Every Christian needs the experience of a living relationship with God to be able to live lives of true holiness. Baptism offers that possibility, but it does not guarantee it. Even though God’s work of offering new life through baptism opens us to spiritual respiration, keeping ourselves by breathing God is not automatic. Through baptism we become part of the church as the community with resources to keep ourselves in the way of salvation, but all too often, we neglect those resources and stop breathing God. Wesley’s call to the baptized to be born again does not question God’s work in the sign, but rather it targets our failed response to what God has done.

## **Spiritual Respiration in a Church That Baptizes Children**

In “The New Birth,” Wesley addresses two different situations of baptized Christians who need to be born again. First were baptized persons who engaged in open sin. Second were baptized persons who avoided open sin and even participated fully in the church, but they did not know the relationship with God that spiritual respiration is intended to keep alive. In the case of open sin, Wesley saw an outright denial

of baptism that results in spiritual death. In the second case, of those who think they are saved by their decent lives and church participation, Wesley saw that these outwardly holy practices are not the same as real inward holiness.<sup>32</sup> Those in this second group have mistaken the means for the end; that is, merely performing the practices given to us to strengthen living relationship with God is not itself the living relationship. They may not have denied their baptisms outright, but they have surely stifled the work of God by an attitude that keeps them from breathing deeply enough—their actions have not been true expressions of praise and thanksgiving in response to grace. I think with this second group Wesley may be making a distinction similar to the one he makes for baptism between the sign and the thing signified. Generally, decent lives are not the same as holy lives. There is a reality that is not to be confused with the outward action. Wesley is clear in this sermon that whether baptized or not, people in these situations must be born again; that is, they must be brought into the light and air of God where their spiritual senses can function as they should.

Because the focus of the movement was for people of riper years, Wesley's model for new birth is described in terms experienced by people of riper years. When he writes about the witness of the spirit, he argues that one can know that the witness of one's own spirit is genuine because of the great change from darkness to light. Without such a change, the feeling of being a child of God might be nothing more than presumption, that is, trusting in one's own perceived decency and innocence rather than trusting in God. Wesley was himself suspicious of anyone who claimed to have always been a Christian.<sup>33</sup> Not only was this great change an internal test, it could also be a test for the effectiveness of preaching. In "A Caution Against Bigotry," Wesley argues that no one who is casting out devils should be forbidden from preaching, and proof of casting out devils lies in "a gross, open sinner" breaking off from sin and living a Christian life as a result of the preaching.<sup>34</sup>

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32 Wesley, Sermon 45, "The New Birth," §IV.4, in *Works* 2:199–201.

33 Wesley, Sermon 10, "The Witness of the Spirit (I)," §II.5, in *Works* 1:279.

34 Wesley, Sermon 38, "A Caution Against Bigotry," §III.3, in *Works* 2:73.

Even though he used this great change as a marker of new birth, Wesley did not only look to some past experience of change, but also to present marks of humble joy and fruits of the spirit as ways to distinguish presumption from the genuine work of God.<sup>35</sup> Even in “The New Birth,” where he is so suspicious of what the baptized may claim, he could qualify his call to the baptized to be born again by saying, “if you have not already experienced this inward work of God.”<sup>36</sup> His most pointed assessment for the need for new birth was to ask, “What are you now?”<sup>37</sup> One of Wesley’s great concerns was for people to be fully Christian. His distinction between almost and altogether Christians is familiar, and he spoke often about real, or true, or genuine religion as opposed to religion that falls short of what he knew Christianity to offer. He knew it was important to know what brought life and what did not. As an internal test, the question “What are you now?” is exactly right for assessing one’s own response to God. One way that churches now need to regain the energy and discipline of a movement is to call people to this self-examination, not simply to assume that because the church offers means of grace then people are making effective use of them. If the church wants people to be real Christians, it must hold up the possibility of fullness of life in Christ to them and call them to respond.

We should also acknowledge, though, how potentially harmful it can be to distinguish real Christians from those who are not. Setting litmus tests for who is in and who is out has been all too common and divisive in the history of Christian faith. Because self-examination in the Methodist tradition includes conversation with others including feedback about faults, to some degree external assessment about one’s authentic effort to be holy can and should have an important place. But any external feedback is in service of self-examination, and it must allow that God may work differently according to our circumstance, personality, and more. We need to find a way to be serious about calling people to be fully Christian, which includes calling them

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35 Wesley, Sermon 10, “The Witness of the Spirit (I),” §II.6, in *Works* 1:279–80.

36 Wesley, Sermon 45, “The New Birth,” §IV.4, in *Works* 2:199–201.

37 Wesley, Sermon 18, “The Marks of the New Birth,” §IV.2, in *Works* 1:2.

away from false presumption without being ourselves presumptuous to think that we know more than we can know about what God is doing in their lives.

Wesley's total commitment to calling even baptized Christians to new birth makes a lot of sense considering he was responsible for a movement to provide disciplined conversation and spiritual practices to help people begin or maintain spiritual respiration to keep a single eye on God so they could be holy and happy. The attempt to draw the baptized into this movement was not necessarily a challenge to the theology of baptism in the Church of England. Wesley did not have to question the theology of the Church regarding new birth in baptism to see all around him the need to call people to more than what they had taken their baptisms to mean. Wesley's lifelong reluctance to break with the Church of England as well as his retention of infant baptism in the Articles of Religion and Sunday Service he sent to the newly forming church in North America certainly indicates that even though he could distinguish between the sign and the thing signified, he did not deny the understanding that God was at work in the sign when it came at the beginning of life.<sup>38</sup> As we have become churches in dialogue with other churches, Methodists have had to acknowledge Wesley's ambivalence about the sign as well as his apparent acceptance of what the sign signifies, namely, the work of God to regenerate human lives. The World Methodist Council document titled *Encountering Christ the Saviour: Church and Sacraments* states, "This text does describe regeneration as the true effect of Baptism, while recognizing the pastoral reality which might mean that this effect is not immediate or even inevitable with regard to personal conversion and transformation of life."<sup>39</sup> Because sanctification takes time and spiritual respiration is not involuntary, new birth at any time of life is vulnerable to our neglect, so there is need for practices to cultivate spiritual respiration. In our time, when Methodists have churches that offer the opportunity to

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38 I have said more on this point in "Baptism and Justification: A Methodist Understanding," *Ecclesiology* 4, no. 3 (2008): 1–19.

39 *Encountering Christ the Saviour: Church and Sacrament*, chap. 2, §III, Baptism and New Life, ¶53.

begin breathing God from birth, we should pay attention to sustaining breathing to prevent the spiritual neglect that leads to spiritual death. The means for doing so are present in our tradition as movement. But as churches, we need to think of revival as calling from death to life, not only in a dramatic spiritual crisis but also as keeping souls alive through sustained breathing of the grace we need—a kind of constant conversion from death to life.

I think that in my own life the specific practice called revivals worked in that way. As a six-year-old, surely I disobeyed my parents at times and I did not always have the best temper, but I was hardly what Wesley would call a “gross, open sinner”<sup>40</sup> when I walked forward during the altar call. Nor do I think at that age I presumed I was saved by my church-going. As best as I can remember and interpret my former self, I really did have some sense of wanting a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ. Perhaps the position of baptized children raised in the community of faith has some relation to the way people of riper years who are justified and born again continue to struggle with sin after justification. The comparison is not perfect, I know, largely because of the developmental stages children are still going through to reach adulthood. But what I mean is that the work of God had begun in my life with baptism, and the opportunity to respond to God in that moment of the altar call helped strengthen in me the work of God that had already started in my baptism. The preaching and worship event we called *revival* was not spiritual resuscitation at that point in my life. Rather, it was a boost like going to an oxygen bar. I use this analogy with a great deal of caution. I have never been to an oxygen bar (i.e., a place where you can breathe a higher concentration of oxygen than is available in the normal atmosphere), and there is no scientific confirmation of the health benefits of doing so. I am only trying to suggest the difference between reviving a person who has suffocated and enhancing an already-breathing person. Is it so strange to imagine that churches that offer new life to infants in baptism might be able to help them sustain that life? Notwithstanding Wesley’s own conviction that he had sinned away the washing of his baptism by about the age

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40 Wesley, Sermon 38, “A Caution Against Bigotry,” §III.3, in *Works* 2:73.

of ten, it would be very odd to imagine that God's work to sanctify human life using the church that God has established for that purpose necessarily fails for everyone.<sup>41</sup> Although we do well to call people to serious self-examination, we do not need to take it as a general rule that no one could remain on the path to sanctification after baptism had opened the way to new life. But we do need to think generally that all the baptized need to be called constantly to deeper breathing in their life with God.

We do well to take seriously that Wesley identifies two kinds of repentance along the Scripture way of salvation. The first is the repentance "antecedent" to justification, and the other is repentance "consequent upon" justification.<sup>42</sup> When Wesley made this distinction, he meant that antecedent repentance was repentance before being justified, for instance, the situation of people of riper years who had lost the justification they had received in baptism and needed to be justified again. Consequent repentance indicated the ongoing repentance of the justified until they were fully sanctified. We may find the idea of consequent repentance to be useful to help us think about how to revive baptized Christians, even children. In "The Repentance of Believers," Wesley describes the repentance consequent upon justification as a "kind of self-knowledge—the knowing ourselves to be sinners, yea, guilty, helpless sinners, even though we know we are children of God."<sup>43</sup> Until it pleases God to perfect us in this life in love, this is our situation.<sup>44</sup> So it will be the situation for most of us throughout our lives. As Wesley reminds us, after justification sin remains, although it does not reign.<sup>45</sup> What we need in the period when we grow in sanctification is spiritual respiration, breathing in God's grace and breathing

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41 Wesley reflects on this in his journal entry for May 24, 1738. See *Journals and Diaries*, ed. W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater, in *Works* 18:242–43.

42 Wesley, Sermon 43, "The Scripture Way of Salvation," §III.6, in *Works* 2:164–65.

43 Wesley, Sermon 14, "The Repentance of Believers," §I.1, in *Works* 1:336.

44 Wesley, Sermon 14, "The Repentance of Believers," §I.20, in *Works* 1:346–47.

45 Wesley, Sermon 43, "The Scripture Way of Salvation," §III.6, in *Works* 2:164–65.

out prayer and praise to remind us of our constant need for grace not only to pardon the sin that remains, but also to empower us to resist it. Although Wesley gained this insight as he reflected on a movement primarily of people of riper years, churches that baptize children can make good use of this insight. Claimed by God and regenerated in baptism, children as well as adults need to continue to grow in faith as recumbency on God's grace. All the baptized in the church need to learn from the church how to sustain spiritual respiration. Because it is the church's job to nurture response to the gift of baptism, the church should want to enable people to say that they have always been Christian. I do take Wesley's suspicion of that claim seriously, but I think it should be used primarily to point the church to the continual need for repentance as self-knowledge rather than ruling out the possibility of growing over a lifetime in Christ. We should always be asking, "What am I now?" and we should be mindful of the ways we can and do get distracted by idols and begin to slide from our trust in God.

If we develop in this direction the idea of spiritual respiration that Wesley describes, we may be able to see how someone who has always understood him- or herself to be a Christian and a child of God needs to be revived nonetheless, that is, brought regularly to experiences of God that amplify our spiritual respiration and continue to turn us from death to life. Wesley's question "What are you now?" is ever relevant, and his suspicion of complacency of baptized Christians is justified. What we need to do differently than he did is to approach this problem as churches so we think of revival as our responsibility to call people to make use of the means of grace that we offer and call them to honest self-examination about their spiritual respiration. I am suggesting that when the sign and the thing signified go together in baptism, as Wesley says they ordinarily do (especially for infants), baptism opens up a possibility of spiritual respiration that needs to be tended, and we remain vulnerable to letting our breathing lapse.<sup>46</sup> This vulnerability remains through every stage of life, although I imagine

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46 Wesley states the privileges of being born again "are ordinarily annexed to baptism" in Sermon 18, "The Marks of the New Birth," §preface, 1, in *Works* 1:417.

that we are especially vulnerable during the early time of life when we are still developing physically, mentally, and emotionally. Wesley's own experience, which he described as sinning away the washing of his baptism, is no doubt shared by many people. The objects of sense, objects of imagination, and pride of life might have especially strong power to draw us away from God when our personality and character are still being formed. But that also means that the means of grace given to and used by the church may be especially effective in forming us to lean on God.

As a movement, Methodism found its place and its effectiveness in calling people to lived experience of new birth and then provided means for them to sustain and grow their life with God. We are not simply a movement anymore, and we need to take seriously what it means to be church. As a church we have the same aim—to call people to lived experience of God and provide them with the means for such experience—but now among those means for Methodists to use is the sacrament of baptism in which God offers new life. In this new circumstance as church, we make a claim about the work of God in baptism from the beginning of life. It is our job, then, to make it possible for people to say they have always been Christian, not simply because of baptism, but because they have made good use of the means of grace that the church offers to keep breathing God. But we should also be ready to call back to life all those who have neglected their baptisms to the point of suffocation. We have reason as a church to learn from the way Wesley organized the movement not to wait until respiration fails to call people to deep breathing in God.

## **Some Further Thoughts**

The self-examination practiced among early Methodists is critical for maintaining the breathing we need in order to lean on God as we should. If we do not engage this practice, the churches that came from Methodism will be in constant need of reform and revival from death. So this revival is very important, but churches also have to think about more than the internal lives of individuals when we think about how

Methodists need to be revived from death to life. There are other kinds of death-dealing we need to be aware of. I will mention two, although no doubt others could be mentioned.

First, spiritual respiration as Wesley described it is highly focused on personal salvation. Those of you who do not know well the history of the Oxford Institute may not realize that an entire Institute was devoted in 1977 to sanctification and liberation, precisely to expand Methodist theology beyond personal salvation to the wider scope of sin in oppression, where the stakes for the oppressed are often life and death. Some of the resources from that Institute are available on the Oxford Institute website archives. The need to address lived oppression, especially through systems, is something we need to keep exploring as Methodists. As we think about the slide into sin, we must reflect not only on internal desires and tempers as Wesley identified them, but also on how the systems we live in shape what we desire, as well as how our desires draw us into participation in sinful systems and not just individual sins.

Second, spiritual respiration is motivated by an eschatological vision of human life with God, to have the image of God restored in us. I would also note that the Oxford Institute explored a Methodist understanding of God's eschatological vision in a previous meeting. At least some of the presentations for the theme "The New Creation" at the eleventh Institute held in 2002 reminded us that God's vision for the world includes more than human life. As we contemplate the way spiritual respiration keeps us from starting the slide into sin, we would do well to consider the way that our desires not only draw us away from God, but also lead us into appetites of consumption that affect God's creation. Breathing out thanks to God must include care for the world that God has given us so that we show our gratitude for this gift.

When we ask Wesley's question "What are you now?" I urge us to consider these more expansive ways that sin exerts its death-dealing in our lives so that our spiritual respiration can empower us to live for God in more ways than the earliest Methodists, and even Wesley, may have sought.

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