

Social Holiness for the Sake of the World: John Wesley in Dialogue with N.T. Wright Regarding Sanctification Expressed in Christian Community

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I. Introduction

Crises are not unique to our age, but rising individualism means less and less people have a support network to help them navigate difficult times. The disadvantages of extreme individualism in Western culture have been long observed, but in recent years, loneliness has reached ‘epidemic’ proportions. In 2023, the U.S. Surgeon General issued an advisory on ‘Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation,’¹ following the lead of the World Health Organization’s global concern in 2021.² Gallup data collected from 142 countries indicated nearly one in four people worldwide feel very or fairly lonely as of 2023. Notably, while there has been concern for the elderly feeling isolated for many years, this data reflects young people being slightly more affected than older adults.³ Even societies that historically have been collectivist are being disrupted by the effects of rapid urbanization.⁴ Projections estimate two-thirds of the world will live in urban centers by 2050, an increase from just over half the world’s population today.⁵

Given these trends, does Wesleyan-Methodist public theology have a unique opportunity to offer a connectional faith and glad tidings of corporate salvation in an age of a loneliness crisis? How can an understanding of social holiness and sanctification in Christian community contribute to the life of the world?

The early Methodist movement began in its own age of crisis. Politics (and state religions) were being redefined by revolution, across the Western world. Technology and early stages of the Industrial Revolution were beginning to transform rural and urban life. As people moved to the cities for work, they lost connection with the parish church. Upper class churchmen were unmotivated to incorporate the new urban poor into their communities – but Methodism

¹ Murthy, Vivek H. “Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community,” 2023. <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>

² World Health Organization. 2021. “Social Isolation and Loneliness.” <https://www.who.int/teams/social-determinants-of-health/demographic-change-and-healthy-ageing/social-isolation-and-loneliness>.

³ Maese, Elyn. “Almost a Quarter of the World Feels Lonely.” Gallup.com. October 24, 2023. <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/gallup/512618/almost-quarter-world-feels-lonely.aspx>.

⁴ Tan, Mehmet, and Muhammet Firat. “The Changing Structure of the Tribe in the Process Of Urbanization.” *E-Şarkiyat İlmi Araştırmaları Dergisi/Journal of Oriental Scientific Research*, 14:1 (2022): 20-28, [24].

⁵ United Nations. “68% of the World Population Projected to Live in Urban Areas by 2050, Says UN.” United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. 2018. <https://www.un.org/development/desa/en/news/population/2018-revision-of-world-urbanization-prospects.html>

proclaimed glad tidings of salvation in the fields and outside the mines, in town squares and prisons. Reflecting on John Wesley's ecclesiology and communal practices will provide insight to the Church's role in our own age of crisis.

Wesley's approach centered on corporate practices, rather than articulating a theological understanding of why Christian community is essential. David Field notes, 'John Wesley's practice is a better expression of the community created by God than his theology which has deeply individualistic aspects.'⁶ While Wesley leaned towards individualism in many aspects of his theology, he made several emphatic statements about the need for 'social holiness'⁷ and the impossibilities of solitary religion.⁸ He was clear about the universal need for redemption and renewal: 'Ye know that the great end of religion is, to renew our hearts in the image of God, to repair that total loss of righteousness and true holiness which we sustained by the sin of our first parent.'⁹ He expected Methodists to 'watch over one another in love' via the guidelines for practicing accountability in the 'General Rules'¹⁰ in the context of society, class, and band meetings, as well as participate in the sacraments and corporate means of grace.¹¹

In 1994, Randy Maddox argued 'what is desperately needed by contemporary American Methodism is not a mere replication of Wesley's model of the church, but an appropriation of the practical-theological wisdom embodied in that model.'¹² Over the past 30 years, there has been movement to re-engage the vehicles of sanctification in early Methodist communities – classes and bands.¹³ There is value in this approach, but much more can be done when Wesley's theology and practices are evaluated together, with insights from models that do not have the same individualistic blind spots. Bringing Wesley into dialogue with contemporary scholar N.T. Wright can help accomplish this goal.¹⁴

⁶ Field, David. 'David Field: Response to Wonder, Love & Praise, Part 1,' *United Methodist Insight*. 26 April 2017. <https://um-insight.net/in-the-church/umc-global-nature/david-field-response-to-wonder-love-praise-part-1/>

⁷ Wesley, John. *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (London: Strahan, 1739), Preface §5, viii, Duke Center for Studies in the Wesleyan Tradition, PDF, 2018. <https://divinity.duke.edu/initiatives/cswt/john-wesley>

⁸ Wesley, John in Albert C. Outler (ed.) *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley, Volume 1*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1984, *Sermons* 1:533, *Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount*, Discourse IV, §5. Hereafter *Works*.

⁹ *Works*, 2:185, Sermon 44: *Original Sin*, III.5

¹⁰ *Works*, 9:67, *The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies*, §1

¹¹ *Works*, 1:381, Sermon 16: *Means of Grace*, II.1

¹² Maddox, Randy. 'Social Grace: The Eclipse of the Church as a Means of Grace in American Methodism' in Tim Macquibban (ed.), *Methodism in its Cultural Milieu*, (Oxford: Applied Theology Press, 1994), 131-160, [149-150].

¹³ See David Lowes Watson, 1985, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting: Its Origins and Significance* and Kevin Watson and Scott Kisker, 2017, *The Band Meeting: Rediscovering Relational Discipleship in Transformational Community*

¹⁴ It is important to note that while Wright provides a corrective lens in regards to theology and scholarship, many Wesleyan communities in the Global South have integrated communal practices and theologies that should also be instructive to the Western church. Space constraints prevent fuller dialog, but see Christinah Kwaramba, 'Disciple-making in the Zimbabwe Church' in *Making Disciples in a World Parish*, ed. Paul W. Chilcote, 2011.

N.T. Wright has become well-known for his corporate approach in interpreting Paul, Jesus, and the gospel. He utilizes a historical narrative approach, emphasizing God's faithfulness to his covenant with Israel as the essential context of both the Old and New Testaments. Wright contends that ultimately, 'covenant' should be understood as 'the single-plan-of-the-creator-through-Abraham-and-Israel-for-the-world' which is 'now-fulfilled-in-the-Messiah-Jesus.'¹⁵ Thus salvation goes far beyond the redemption of individuals, instead anticipating 'God's restorative justice for the whole creation.'¹⁶ Through the metanarrative perspective, Wright emphasizes the role of the Church in corporate, not individual, ways, when speaking of how humans are called to participate in God's redemptive work. While Wright is well known for his work on justification, he has also laid the groundwork for a similar understanding of sanctification in community.¹⁷

Ecclesiology and sanctification are key themes for this research. Wright's ecclesiology shares a foundation with Wesley's. Although their ordinations are separated by almost 250 years, both are Church of England priests whose doctrinal standards are based on the 39 Articles of Religion and the Book of Common Prayer. Since Wesley's day, the worldwide Anglican communion has expanded significantly, also expanding the nature of Anglican ecclesiology in practice, but the ecclesial elements have remained largely the same.¹⁸ The offices of bishop, priest, and deacon form the foundation of the ecclesiastic structure, to ensure the right administration of Sacraments and preaching of the Word of God, as directed in Article XIX.¹⁹

There are also many similarities in their approaches to sanctification. While in some ways this is unsurprising, given their common theological heritage, there are significant cultural, historical, and hermeneutical differences between Wesley and Wright. Wesley prioritized corporate practices, yet his theological writings are often individualistic. Wright leans in the opposite direction, offering biblical and historical insights into the corporate nature of the Church and how humans are created, and transformed in Christ, to bear the image of God together, as the people of God. Wright's corporate hermeneutic provides a helpful lens to evaluate Wesley's practices, leading to a theology of sanctification in Christian community. This paper will consider the significance of Wesley's ecclesiology, pneumatology, and Christology in building a foundation for sanctification in Christian community, which is then experienced in social holiness for the sake of the world.

¹⁵ Wright, N.T. *Justification: God's Plan, Paul's Vision*. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, Kindle Edition, 2009), 87, 126.

¹⁶ Wright, N.T. *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, Kindle Edition, 2013), 164-65. Hereafter *PFG*.

¹⁷ Wright, *PFG*, 1096-8.

¹⁸ Avis, Paul D. L., ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Ecclesiology*. Oxford Handbooks. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 253-254.

¹⁹ Avis, *Oxford Handbook*, 256.

II. Theological Foundations for Sanctification in Christian Community

A. Ecclesiology

John Wesley was not the first evangelist of the Evangelical Revival, but he developed methods, such as the societies, classes, and bands, to keep converts connected and pursuing holiness. This methodical approach to connected discipleship is a significant reason why Wesley is remembered for founding a movement, while George Whitefield is remembered as a great orator. Wesley's primary motivation was to reform the existing Church of England, not create a new church. Thus, Albert Outler suggests Wesley had no interest in developing a doctrine of the church for the people called Methodists.²⁰ Wesley's self-reflection on his ecclesiology is limited, but his actions reveal his desire for the people under his care to access the communal, sacramental means of grace, one way or another. He developed intricate systems of societies, classes, and bands, to help those under his care go on to perfection, but he intentionally designed the early Methodist gatherings to be 'liturgically insufficient' so the sacraments would be received within the established Church of England.²¹ He instructed Methodists to attend their local parish to receive communion 'constantly'; personally, he made a habit of communing as often as possible.²² These practices are all communal in nature; ecclesiology and Christian community are essential to Wesley's understanding of Christianity.

However, when the established Church was unable to sufficiently provide the sacraments to the Methodist communities in America, Wesley took drastic action to ensure those communities could receive the grace of God together. David Rainey argues that Wesley's ecclesiology was driven primarily by sacramental theology; any pragmatic concerns were secondary.²³ Wesley was deeply concerned that Methodists in America had no access to the sacraments. He remained convinced that lay persons should not administer the Eucharist, and as the Bishop of London would not ordain any Methodist lay preachers for America, Wesley felt not only justified, but pastorally obligated to take action.²⁴ Decades before in the 1740s, after reading Bishop Edward Stillingfleet and Lord Peter King, he had determined that the church structure of the New Testament and practice of the primitive church allowed for priests to have the same ordination authority as bishops. Wesley wisely discerned that to exercise this right within England would put him at odds with the established Church, and his reform movement did not require ordinations outside of the Church of England's process.²⁵ However, once the American

²⁰ Outler, Albert C. 'Do Methodists Have a Doctrine of the Church?' In *The Doctrine of the Church*, edited by Dow Kirkpatrick, 11–28. (London: Epworth Press, 1964), 12.

²¹ Outler, 'Doctrine of the Church,' 13.

²² Wesley, *Works Vol. 3*, 428.

²³ Rainey, David. 'The Established Church and Evangelical Theology: John Wesley's Ecclesiology.' *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 12:4 (2010): 425.

²⁴ Payne, William. 'Discerning John Wesley's Missional Ecclesiology.' *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 49: 2 (2014): 24–47, [26].

²⁵ Rainey, 'Established Church,' 424.

Methodists no longer had access to the Church of England following their independence, Wesley appointed two previously ordained men as ‘general superintendents,’ intentionally avoiding the word ‘bishop,’ and two lay preachers as ‘elders,’ avoiding the word ‘priest.’²⁶ He sent them to America, along with his rationale, an abridged Articles of Religion, and a revised liturgy:

In America there are no bishops, neither any parish Ministers. There is none, neither to baptize, nor to administer the Lord’s supper. Here, therefore, my scruples are at an end; and I conceive myself at full liberty, as I violate no order and invade no man’s right, by appointing and sending labourers into the harvest.²⁷

Using the precedent of the New Testament terminology and the example of the primitive church, Wesley provided sacramental nourishment for the American church, while insisting on his loyalty to the Church of England. This was in conformity with his lifelong emphasis on developing people who lived with ‘holiness of heart and life’ via the means of grace. His ecclesiology prioritized the development of Christian community and providing the communal, sacramental means of grace to those who could not currently access it over upholding institutional regulations.

Ultimately, Wesley’s ecclesiology is shaped by his mission ‘to reform the nation, particularly the Church; and to spread scriptural holiness over the land.’²⁸ Wesley’s vision was primarily directed at his immediate context: the Church of England in the British Isles. However, as the world changed, Wesley recognized and sought to meet the need for sacramental provision for those pursuing holiness outside the bounds of the Church of England and British rule. His emphasis on the communal means of grace offers insights into his ecclesiology and the priority he placed on both sanctification and mission.

Like Wesley, N.T. Wright has not written systematically on ecclesiology, but reflections on the nature and purpose of the church can be found throughout his corpus. In *Simply Christian*, Wright offers a succinct definition, designed for an audience who might be exploring what Christians believe for the first time. He writes: ‘The church is the single, multiethnic family promised by the creator God to Abraham. It was brought into being through Israel’s Messiah, Jesus; it was energized by God’s Spirit; and it was called to bring the transformative news of God’s rescuing justice to the whole creation.’²⁹ This popular level summary reflects his much longer argument for Paul’s reworking of the Jewish theology of election, redefined around the Messiah Jesus; it also includes themes of sanctification and mission.³⁰

²⁶ Payne, ‘Discerning,’ 32-33.

²⁷ Wesley, John and Thomas Jackson, ed. *The Works of John Wesley, 3rd ed., vol. 13* (London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1872, Logos Digital Edition), 251-252.

²⁸ Wesley, *Works (Jackson)*, 8:299, (Minutes of Several Conversations).

²⁹ Wright, N.T. *Simply Christian* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006, Kindle Edition.) 234.

³⁰ See chapter 10, PFG

Ecclesiology is connected to election redefined around Jesus, because election is at the heart of the story of the Scriptures. Wright is quick to clarify that his use of the term election is not associated with a modern idea of choice in voting systems, or with predestination, as popularized by the Reformers.³¹ ‘The word ‘election’, as applied to Israel, usually carries a further connotation: not simply the divine choice *of* this people, but more specifically the divine choice of this people *for a particular purpose*.’³² Abraham’s family was chosen, not merely for their own sake, but for the sake of the world, so that God could work through them as part of God’s rescue mission to redeem what was broken at the Fall. Election is thus understood as the vehicle through which God accomplishes salvation; ultimately, this is done through the election and fulfilment of Jesus the Messiah on behalf of Israel, to do what fallen Israel could not do.³³ All those in Christ take on the election of the Messiah, with all of its rights and responsibilities.

Thus, ecclesiology is not just a reflection of the beauty of the gospel; it is the visible demonstration of the coming new creation in this present age. The Church is the body of Christ for the life of the world. It is not just an analogy or illustration of what God is doing but ‘*itself part of the reality of the gospel*’ as God reunites ‘the scattered fragments of humanity in the Messiah.’³⁴ The existence of the Church itself is designed to offer the watching world proof of the new creation breaking into the present evil age. Wright argues that those who would consider the ‘horizontal’ nature of ecclesiology as secondary to the ‘vertical’ nature of soteriology have missed the significance of what it means for humanity to be in Christ as he reigns over all things.³⁵ In reflecting on Ephesians 2, Wright notes that the cross not only defeats sin and death, but also reunites fractured humanity; Jew and Gentile form one body of Christ. While the defeat of sin and death is certainly good news for individuals, there is a cosmic and corporate element in redemption that is essential for the full ‘healing of creation.’³⁶

B. Pneumatology

The church exists through the action and indwelling of the Holy Spirit, but there are also sociological components of human community and infrastructures that support the day-to-day existence of local churches. Abraham notes this ‘tension between pneumatology and ecclesiology, between the work of the Holy Spirit and the reality of the church.’³⁷ Whereas Roman Catholic theologians tend to emphasize the institutional qualities of the church, Wesley prioritized pneumatology, as the Spirit gathers ‘a body of believers whose faith unites them to

³¹ Wright, PFG., 774.

³² Ibid., 775, italics original.

³³ Ibid., 775.

³⁴ Wright, *Justification*, 169. Italics original.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 172.

³⁷ Abraham, William J. *Wesley for Armchair Theologians*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005, digital edition.) 107.

Christ, who in turn unites them to every other believer.³⁸ Abraham argues that Wesley used the means of grace as a bridge from a pneumatological community to the church as an institution. Early Methodist practices and communities were designed to supplement a Christian's life in the Church of England, not replace it. Wesley insisted that they continue to receive the sacraments solely through the established Church, so early Methodists experienced the power of the Spirit through both informal communities and the institution. The Spirit not only animates the community of the people of God, but also sustains the institution which nourishes the community. The ongoing existence of the institutional church provides avenues for the sacraments to be received by the people of God.³⁹

In perhaps his most succinct definition of the Church, Wesley wrote 'That by *the church* is meant, a body of living Christians, who are *a habitation of God through the Spirit*.'⁴⁰ For his sermon 'On The Church,' Wesley chose the text Ephesians 4:1-6. He writes of the church universal as comprised of saints – 'the holy persons' – not only in one location, such as Ephesus, but throughout the world. He then notes the specific markers the Apostle Paul indicated in verse 4 which distinguish those within the body of Christ, beginning with "'There is one Spirit" who animates all these, all the living members of the church of God.'⁴¹ He bookends his comments on the remaining qualities listed ('one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all') by emphasizing these are available only to 'all those that have received this Spirit' and who 'have the Spirit of adoption, which "crieth in their hearts, Abba, Father"; which "witnesseth" continually "with their spirits" that they are the children of God.'⁴² Although he championed a methodical approach to discipleship, he prioritized the work of the Spirit above institutionalism in both his descriptions and practice of ecclesiology.

Wesley's pneumatology was essential to his articulation of soteriology, sanctification, and ecclesiology:

'we are convinced that we are not sufficient of ourselves to help ourselves; that without the Spirit of God we can do nothing but add sin to sin; that it is he alone 'who worketh in us' by his almighty power, either 'to will or do' that which is good—it being as impossible for us even to think a good thought without the supernatural assistance of his Spirit as to create ourselves, or to renew our whole souls in righteousness and true holiness.'⁴³

Wesley understood the Spirit to be involved in every facet of salvation, from conviction of sin to restoration of holiness. Maddox argues that he 'placed the Spirit at the centre of his

³⁸ Abraham, *Wesley*, 107.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁴⁰ Wesley, John. *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*, 4th American ed. (New York: J. Soule and T. Mason, 1818, Logos Digital Edition.) 676 (Jude 19).

⁴¹ Wesley, *Works*, Vol. 3, 48-49.

⁴² Wesley, *Works*, Vol. 3, 50.

⁴³ Wesley, John and Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater, eds. *John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology*. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1991, Kindle Edition.) 25.

understanding of Christian life’ as ‘Wesley *equated* the Holy Spirit with God’s gracious empowering Presence restored through Christ.’⁴⁴ Ultimately, the Spirit’s empowering presence works to enable humans to participate in the life of God – to become holy as God is holy. This happens through a ‘process of character formation that is made possible by a restored participation of fallen humanity in the Divine life and power.’⁴⁵ This transformation is not individualistic; it is empowered by the Spirit in the context of Christian community. For Wesley, pneumatology is central because the Spirit empowers human transformation at every stage of the soteriological journey. Wesleyan ecclesiology rests on pneumatology.

Wright would agree. Pneumatology and ecclesiology are closely related; the Church exists through the indwelling of the Spirit. Wright hypothetically wonders if modern resistance to ecclesiology in Paul is related to a weak pneumatology or residual Protestant fear of ‘high’ ecclesiology leading congregants astray. Wright suggests ‘a “low” ecclesiology, a mere individualism with saved individuals getting together from time to time for mutual benefit’ might ‘be a denial of some of the key elements of Paul’s missionary theology’.⁴⁶ Sanctification in Christian community goes beyond individuals sharing space in a building once a week. The communal nature of sanctification should lead to an intentionally missional ecclesiology, empowered by the Spirit.

C. Christology

Wesley’s Christology has clear implications for ecclesiology and Christian community. Wesley insisted it is not enough to only preach the salvific, atoning work of Christ; ‘we must proclaim him in all his offices’:

To preach Christ as a workman that needeth not to be ashamed is to preach him not only as our great ‘High Priest, taken from among men, and ordained for men, in things pertaining to God’; as such, ‘reconciling us to God by his blood’, and ‘ever living to make intercession for us’; but likewise as the Prophet of the Lord, ‘who of God is made unto us wisdom’, who by his word and his Spirit ‘is with us always’, ‘guiding us into all truth’; yea, and as remaining a King for ever; as giving laws to all whom he has bought with his blood; as restoring those to the image of God whom he had first reinstated in his favour; as reigning in all believing hearts until he has ‘subdued all things to himself’; until he hath utterly cast out all sin, and ‘brought in everlasting righteousness.’⁴⁷

Each of these offices has ecclesiological implications. Christ’s priestly office is most closely associated with his atoning and mediating work. As individuals believe in and receive Christ’s atoning work, they are joined to Christ in the Spirit, becoming part of the body of Christ. Tom

⁴⁴ Maddox, Randy L. *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology*. (Nashville, TN.: Kingswood Books, 1994), 119 (italics original).

⁴⁵ Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 122.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 173.

⁴⁷ Wesley, *Sermons Anthology*, ‘The Law Established Through Faith, Discourse II’, I.6, 280-281.

Greggs, in his first volume of *Dogmatic Ecclesiology*, notes several ways the Church is to be the image of Christ, the body of Christ, for the sake of the world. One of these ways is participating in the priesthood of Christ, which is uniquely needed now in the time between Christ's ascension and his return. Gregg notes the communal nature of this calling: 'no one can be priest to themselves, and no priest can be so without engaging in the work of mediation: the priest does not exist for herself but for God and for the other for whom the priest mediates. In this way, the priest is an expression of the heart turned outwards towards God and the other simultaneously.'⁴⁸ The people of God, in both the Old and New Testaments, are given the call to be a 'kingdom of priests', a 'royal priesthood.'⁴⁹ In his notes on Exodus 19, Wesley writes that the Israelites:

were *priests* unto God, so *near* were they to *him*, so much employed in his immediate service, and such intimate communion they had with him. The tendency of the laws given them was to *distinguish* them from *others*, and *engage* them for God as a *holy nation*. Thus all believers are, through Christ, made to our God kings and priests, *Rev. 1:6. a chosen generation, a royal priesthood*, 1 Pet. 2:9.⁵⁰

The Church's calling to be priests and kings reflects how closely Christ's Kingly office is associated with his Priestly role.⁵¹ Where Christ as Priest died as the atoning sacrifice for humanity, Christ as King rose from the dead, securing victory over Satan, sin, and death. He then ascended to rule at the right hand of God until he returns in final victory. In writing his introduction to notes on Ephesians, Wesley declares 'our Lord is the head of the whole church: of angels and spirits, the church triumphant; and of Jews and Gentiles, now equally members of the church militant.'⁵² As King and head of the Church, Christ works in all believers through the Spirit, imputing and implanting righteousness and restoring them in the image of God.⁵³ Wesley uses Christ's prophetic office to demonstrate continuity between the Old and New Testaments, particularly as it relates to the moral Law. Wesley argues that Christ is both the Lawgiver and the fulfilment of the Law, so antinomianism is not an option for those who would truly seek to follow Christ.⁵⁴ The Church participates in Christ's prophetic office by preaching Christ to the world, as well as obeying the commandments and demonstrating holiness of heart and life.⁵⁵

Wright concurs with the connections between Christ and the work of the Church. He ties together his emphasis on covenant with the concept of incorporation: those who believe 'Jesus was Israel's Messiah' are 'in Christ.' Wright draws out two implications from Paul's theology:

⁴⁸ Greggs, Tom. *Dogmatic Ecclesiology: The Priestly Catholicity of the Church*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019, digital edition.) 50.

⁴⁹ Exodus 19:3-6; 1 Peter 2:9.

⁵⁰ Wesley, John. *Explanatory Notes upon the Old Testament, Vol. 1*. (Bristol: William Pine, 1765. Logos Digital Edition.) 262-263.

⁵¹ Deschner, John. *Wesley's Christology: An Interpretation*. (Dallas, TX: Southern Methodist Univ. Press, 1985), 122.

⁵² Wesley, *Explanatory NT*, 504.

⁵³ Wesley, *Works*, The Lord Our Righteousness, II.12

⁵⁴ Hopper, Isaac. "'Christ Alone for Salvation': The Role of Christ and His Work in John Wesley's Theology." (Unpublished thesis, University of Manchester, 2017), 121.

⁵⁵ Hopper, 'Christ Alone,' 105.

First, the vocation and destiny of ancient Israel, the people of Abraham, had been brought to its fulfilment in the Messiah, particularly in his death and resurrection. Second, those who believed the gospel, whether Jew or Greek, were likewise to be seen as incorporated into him and thus defined by him, specifically again by his death and resurrection. The full range of Paul's 'incorporative' language can be thoroughly and satisfactorily explained on this hypothesis: that he regarded the people of God and the Messiah of God as so bound up together that what was true of the one was true of the other.⁵⁶

Those in Christ not only receive the benefits of his accomplishing salvation through the fulfilment of Israel's covenant, but they also receive the same calling – to live as the Messiah lived and indeed, to live as humans were designed to live. When vocation is understood to be an integral part of election, forensic and participatory emphases can be seen as parts of a holistic reality, rather than opposing viewpoints. Forensic terms reflect how people come to be in Christ, and participatory terms reflect how the people of God in Christ are to live, in light of the biblical narrative now revealed in Jesus, who calls his people to be holy as he is holy.

III. Social Holiness for the Sake of the World

A. Social Holiness

Because Christ's priesthood is for the world, not a means of separation from the world, his holiness is relationally focused towards the world. Greggs argues that 'holiness is a gracious outwards-turning':

'Christ's life is orientated in perfect holiness outwards in relation to the Father in the union of the Spirit and outwards in relation to the world, which the Father loves. The twofold nature of this relationality is not something which exists in a competitive relationship, but is an expression of the perfect holiness of the perfect priest, who lives fully and completely towards the Father and towards the world without any sense of tension. This relationality is at the core of holiness for (and not from) the world.'⁵⁷

Because the Church is called to participate in Christ as a royal priesthood, Christian holiness is also communal, relational, and missional. Holiness, then, marks the intersection of ecclesiology and sanctification.

Ban Seok Cho and David Field draw similar conclusions about the intrinsic social and missional components of holiness. Rather than starting with the person of Jesus, however, they begin a survey of holiness in Scripture in the Old Testament. Cho argues that a biblical understanding of holiness must be rooted in the nature and character of God, because God is the source of holiness.⁵⁸ God invites humans to imitate and participate in his holiness, specifically through the

⁵⁶ Ibid., 826.

⁵⁷ Greggs, *Dogmatic Ecclesiology*, 150.

⁵⁸ Cho, Ban Seok. 'The Nature of the Church's Mission in Light of the Biblical Origin of Social Holiness.' *The Asbury Journal* 73:2 (2018): 104-133, [106].

nation of Israel. However, Israel's holiness is always derived from the holiness of God and must be maintained in ongoing relationship with God, for the sake of presenting God's holiness to the world.⁵⁹ Through the Exodus, the Covenant at Sinai, and the giving of the Law, God reveals God's character, and thus God's holiness, as 'profoundly moral and relational.'⁶⁰ God invites Israel in Exodus 19 to obey him and be a 'priestly kingdom and a holy nation,' so that through their holiness, all the nations might see the goodness of God. This is the first mention of holiness in relation to people in the Old Testament, and it is a corporate and missional call. Cho connects Israel's call to the missionary purpose given to Abraham in Genesis 12 and 18: 'God gives Israel the law as an instruction for living a life of righteousness and justice so that God's blessing may reach all nations.'⁶¹ Field concurs: 'Israel's holiness was thus constituted by its relationship both to YHWH and YHWH's land and was to be expressed in a communal lifestyle that promoted justice, respected life, paid careful attention to creation and cared for the land.'⁶² When Israel failed to live in justice and holiness, God raised up prophets, such as Isaiah, who reminded them of their call, referencing YHWH as 'the Holy One of Israel' and warning of judgment if injustice continued.⁶³ In the New Testament, Jesus becomes the new point of reference for holiness, as the one who fulfils the law and reveals the Father.⁶⁴ Field notes that previously, when the 'impure came into contact with the holy it was destroyed', but when Jesus encounters impurity, he brings healing and purification. 'For Jesus holiness is the power of God's transforming love which creates a new community out of those who are despised and rejected, and which is to be embodied by this new community in a lifestyle of self-giving love.'⁶⁵ The Church is sanctified through the crucified Christ, and empowered to express Christ's holiness and love to the world through Spirit-enabled communities.⁶⁶ Ecclesiology and sanctification are integrated and expressed in holiness.

Holiness is not an imitation of the work of God, but transformation into the image of God, as perfectly revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. This transformation involves the total person, not merely a spiritual connection between an individual and God. Holiness also transforms individuals into a local expression of the body of Christ, and all local churches are being transformed into communion with God, as this is the trajectory of the cosmos – the restoration of all things in the New Heaven and New Earth.⁶⁷ Even after ecclesiology and sanctification will be accomplished in the New Creation, holiness will remain essential.

⁵⁹ Cho, 'Nature', 106.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 107.

⁶¹ Ibid., 111.

⁶² Field, David N. 'I Believe in the Holy Earthy Church: Toward an Ecological Reinterpretation of the Holiness of the Church: Christian Faith and the Earth.' *Scriptura: Journal for Contextual Hermeneutics in Southern Africa* 111:1 (2012): 333–47, [337].

⁶³ Field, 'I Believe', 337.

⁶⁴ Cho, 'Nature', 113.

⁶⁵ Field, 'I Believe', 338.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 339.

⁶⁷ Martin, Robert K. 'Toward a Wesleyan Sacramental Ecclesiology.' *Ecclesiology* 9:1 (2013): 19–38, [30].

When God's holiness is expressed in these terms, Wesley's oft-quoted insistence that 'there is no holiness but social holiness'⁶⁸ is more easily understood. While Wesley believed in taking care of the poor, his reference to 'social holiness' cannot be conflated with today's terminology of 'social justice.' This is clear when read in context of Wesley's diatribe against the mystic divines who advocated pursuing holiness in isolation, by fleeing to the desert: 'Directly opposite to this is the gospel of Christ. Solitary religion is not to be found there. 'Holy solitaires' is a phrase no more consistent with the gospel than holy adulterers. The gospel of Christ knows of no religion but social; no holiness but social holiness.'⁶⁹ Wesley was driven by the relational holiness of God to see humans redeemed and transformed into the holy image of God, as they were created to be. By personal experience, but ultimately the Scriptures, Wesley was convinced that sanctification could not take place in isolation. In an early sermon, *The Circumcision of the Heart*, Wesley asserts that holiness, as seen in Scripture, 'directly implies the being cleansed from sin, "from all filthiness both of flesh and spirit", and by consequence the being endued with those virtues which were also in Christ Jesus, the being so "renewed in the image of our mind" as to be "perfect, as our Father in heaven is perfect".'⁷⁰ His use of plural pronouns is significant. Christian community is essential to humans experiencing, receiving, and transmitting the grace of God. Holiness cannot be found outside of relationship; holiness exists only in relationship with the Godhead and God's people, the Church. Social holiness is the result of God's people experiencing the realities of ecclesiology and sanctification. An individual cannot find or create holiness alone; holiness is only social.

Wright's reading of Paul affirms this understanding of social holiness: 'Everything Paul says about behaviour he says in relation to the whole community, that is, the Messiah's people as a whole... Most of Paul's imperatives are plural, and this is not accidental.'⁷¹ This differs not only from a modern Western expectation of ethics, stemming from both the Reformation and the Enlightenment, but also from the ancient pursuit of virtue championed by Plato and Aristotle.⁷² For Paul, sanctification is a 'team sport.' 'When he talks about "love", and seeks to put that into practice in the churches to which he writes, he is talking specifically about something that happens within, and something that transforms, whole communities.'⁷³ For Paul, just as justification was not about individuals alone, but also the means by which the people of God are incorporated into Christ together, sanctification also goes beyond an individual's personal growth in holiness. Sanctification occurs in, and for, Christian community, while looking to the future. Much of Paul's work and writings is dedicated to helping the Church learn to think and act in accordance with New Creation realities in the midst of a still-broken world. Eschatology was

⁶⁸ Wesley, *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, Preface §5, viii

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Wesley, *Works*, *The Circumcision of the Heart*, I.1

⁷¹ Wright, PFG, 1097.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

inaugurated with the resurrection of Jesus, but this new age did not come with an instruction manual. Paul offered a ‘Messiah-shaped and spirit-driven exposition of the call to holiness by means of a transformation of mind, heart and will, and hence of action.’⁷⁴ Wright frames this call as ‘eschatological ethics’, developing the character to rule and reign with Christ in the New Creation, finally fulfilling the human vocation given at creation with the *imago dei*, and again to Israel, to be a kingdom of priests.⁷⁵

B. Sanctification, Virtue, and Social Grace

In *Virtue Reborn*, Wright offers further insight into how sanctification happens, using the framework of virtue, which results from intentionally forming character. ‘Virtue, in this strict sense, is what happens when someone has made a thousand small choices, requiring effort and concentration, to do something which is good and right but which doesn’t “come naturally”—and then, on the thousand and first time, when it really matters, they find that they do what’s required “automatically,” as we say.’⁷⁶ Virtue is about becoming more genuinely human through intentional decisions, habits, and consistent practice over time. Wright contends that ‘renewal of the mind is at the centre of the renewal of the whole human being.’⁷⁷ Thinking well about the goal of the Christian life is foundational to begin making decisions that become habits that become ingrained character.

Christian virtue is oriented towards the *telos* of New Creation, and the restored vocation of humanity to reign with Christ, with the understanding that the people of God are to anticipate the coming Kingdom by how we live now.⁷⁸ Wright summarizes virtue in the context of human vocation in the biblical story:

This is what virtue is all about. The hope is that all those who are “in Christ” and are indwelt by the Spirit will eventually reign in glory over the whole creation, thereby taking up at long last the role commanded for humans in Genesis 1 and Psalm 8 and sharing the inheritance, and the final rescuing work, of the Messiah himself, as in Psalm 2. And if that is the *telos*, the goal, it is to be anticipated in the present by the settled habits of holiness and prayer.⁷⁹

This anticipation of the age to come offers a framework for understanding our *telos*; who we are to become is connected to what we are called to do now. And who we are to become is directly connected to Jesus. ‘The royal, priestly destiny of human beings is reborn only because the ultimate Human, the unique son of man, was himself both king and priest.’⁸⁰ There are natural

⁷⁴ Ibid., 1048.

⁷⁵ Ibid.; Genesis 1:27-28; Exodus 19:3-6.

⁷⁶ Wright, N. T. *Virtue Reborn* (London: SPCK, 2010, Kindle Edition), 20.

⁷⁷ Wright, *Virtue Reborn*, 152.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 67.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 94.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 116.

resonances here with Wesley's Christology and understanding of the *imago dei*, as well as his call to develop rightly ordered tempers and affections, through the power of the Spirit.

While there are common goals of human flourishing between ancient Greece's virtues and the Christian vision of virtue, the *telos* of Christian virtue goes far beyond *eudaimonia* or 'happiness.'⁸¹ Joseph Cunningham argues that Wesley's moral pneumatology is connected to the development of virtue and the Greek tradition of *eudaimonia*. Wesley equated true happiness with holiness; the *telos* of human existence is not merely *eudaimonia* but perfect love.⁸² Wesley believed a key component of humanity's sin problem was sinful affections or 'tempers,' which then fuelled sinful words and actions.⁸³ True holiness would require renewed affections; love of God filling the heart and fuelling love of neighbour. Renewal of the heart would come from practicing the means of grace, which involves both receiving grace from God and exercising grace in habitual action.⁸⁴ The means of grace cannot be practiced in isolation, thus Wesley championed 'social grace' through both corporate church services (*ecclesia*) and smaller groups designed for accountability and growth (*ecclesiolae*).⁸⁵

Maddox identifies four interconnected ways to experience social grace that Wesley intended the Methodist movement to practice. First, Wesley was committed to 'corporate liturgical worship and eucharist.'⁸⁶ His intent was for Methodists to participate in their local Anglican parishes to regularly receive the eucharist, which he viewed as one of the chief means of grace because it incorporated so many of the other means: the Word, prayer, community, sacrament. Second, Wesley championed social grace for 'mutual encouragement and support.'⁸⁷ This was seen at all levels of early Methodist gatherings, perhaps particularly through love feasts. At a deeper level, classes and bands provided 'mutual accountability' as a third expression of social grace. Small groups gathered regularly and intentionally to pursue holiness and watch over one another in love. Ultimately, Methodists practiced social grace so that they could together serve as a gracious redemptive 'presence in the society at large' – the fourth expression of social grace.⁸⁸ The church does not exist for itself, but for those presently outside its boundaries, and the connection between holiness and mission was intricately woven into the fabric of Methodism from its earliest days. Physical needs should be met as an expression of the love of God, even if evangelistic fruit was not a direct result.⁸⁹ Social grace not only encapsulates Wesley's theology

⁸¹ Ibid., 33.

⁸² Cunningham, Joseph W. *John Wesley's Pneumatology: Perceptible Inspiration*. (London: Routledge, 2016, digital edition), 129-130.

⁸³ Wesley, Sermon 44, 'Original Sin', §II.1, *Works*, 2:176.

⁸⁴ Maddox, 'Social Grace', 133-4.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 131.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 133-4.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Wesley, *Works*, Vol 1, §III.7, 545–46, Sermon on the Mount IV': 'whether they will finally be lost or saved, you are expressly commanded to feed the hungry and clothe the naked.'

and practices; it encompasses the significant themes of this research project: ecclesiology, sanctification, holiness, and vocation.

Maddox notes that although this was Wesley's ideal ecclesiology, it was never fully implemented under Wesley's direction, and he documents the steady decline of these four social graces in the context of American Methodism.⁹⁰ He cautions that Wesley's practices should not be transplanted from an 18th century context to the 21st, but encourages appropriation and application of Wesley's theology, particularly in recovering the 'connection between spirit and discipline that Wesley recognized was essential to the continued vitality of Methodism (and which he saw slipping away already in 1786).'⁹¹ Re-engaging the vehicles of classes and bands and exploring the connections between sanctification, virtue, and social grace are ways to begin this process.

Wright affirms the need for grace to frame the conversation about developing virtue. He is clear that humanity cannot earn justification or achieve sanctification. Salvation is the work of God which he offers as a gift. However, Wright sees the need for humans to work in cooperation with God – not to complete the work of salvation, but because that is how humans were designed to function in relationship with God.

Everything I'm going to say about the moral life, about moral effort, about the conscious shaping of our patterns of behavior, takes place simply and solely within the framework of grace—the grace which was embodied in Jesus and his death and resurrection, the grace which is active in the Spirit-filled preaching of the gospel, the grace which continues to be active by the Spirit in the lives of believers. It is simply not the case that God does some of the work of our salvation and we have to do the rest. It is not the case that we begin by being justified by grace through faith and then have to go to work all by ourselves to complete the job by struggling, unaided, to live a holy life.⁹²

Neither justification nor sanctification can be accomplished by human effort; however, God invites humanity into the process of transformation, within a framework of grace. Wesley's articulation of grace is similar, if more personal. For Wesleyans, grace is not only the power of God, but also God's presence at work in our lives. There is a relational component to grace; it is does not function as an object whose quantities might be depleted.⁹³ It is in this vein that the apostle Paul emphatically declared that humanity should not remain in sin to receive more grace.⁹⁴ Wright observes, 'The logic of God's grace goes deeper than the question imagines. And in that logic, we find the notion of virtue reborn—reborn as the means by which we can obey the call to follow Jesus.'⁹⁵ Developing holiness and virtue is process which relies fully on the grace

⁹⁰ Maddox, 'Social Grace', 135-48.

⁹¹ Ibid., 149-50.

⁹² Ibid., 60-61.

⁹³ Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 85.

⁹⁴ Romans 6:1-2

⁹⁵ Wright, *Virtue Reborn*, 62.

of God from start to finish; at the same time, humans can choose whether or not they will develop holiness and virtue. This is one of the reasons why sanctification in Christian community is essential; individual initiative can quickly fade, but an interdependent community offers encouragement and resilience to one another as they pursue holiness together.

C. For the Sake of the World

Wright offers a three-fold framework for why Christian virtue matters for the life of the world. First, the goal of life, indeed, the *telos* of all reality, is New Creation, where resurrected humanity will serve as ‘the renewed world’s rulers and priests.’⁹⁶ Second, this goal is achieved by the work of God, specifically ‘the kingdom-establishing work of Jesus and the Spirit.’ Humans participate in the kingdom through faith, baptism, and living in love.⁹⁷ Finally, humanity’s current reality is framed by anticipating the ultimate reality of new creation ‘through the Spirit-led, habit-forming, truly human practice of faith, hope, and love, sustaining Christians in their calling to worship God and reflect his glory into the world.’⁹⁸ This eschatological focus removes any discussion of Christian behaviour from rules or legalism and places the development of virtue and character within the trajectory of the biblical narrative. This provides a cohesive framework for living, in which present actions are connected to future realities, as well as providing encouragement for perseverance on such a significant trajectory. This also provides a framework for larger ethical questions to rest not merely on rules, but in the context of God’s purposes from creation to new creation.⁹⁹ In summary, Wright proposes that:

thinking of Christian behaviour in terms of virtue, and reframing virtue in terms of the promised new heaven and new earth and the role of humans within it, provides both a framework of meaning for, and a strong impetus toward the path of, the holiness to which Jesus and his first followers would call us.¹⁰⁰

This vision goes beyond ‘Christian living’ and offers implications for the whole world, both in this age and in the age to come. Holiness is not a list of regulations and restrictions; it is a reflection of both God’s gracious character and God’s generous interactions with creation. The call to holiness in Scripture is part of the larger invitation for humanity to represent God’s nature and God’s reign on the earth. This motif is first seen in the creation story, as humans are tasked with filling the earth with the glory of God, just as they knew it in the garden of Eden. But it continues throughout the Old Testament. Holiness also coincides with themes from the Exodus, being set free from the slavery of sin and death to live, not for one’s own sake, but to show the world the freedom that is possible under the reign of God, even before that reign is fully realized. Wright proposes that Paul’s understanding of holiness is formulated to help place people within the context of the story of God:

⁹⁶ Ibid., 66.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 67.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 69.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 69-70.

So the *telos*, the “goal” of being “glorified” over the creation, is to be anticipated in the present by replacing the slave-habits of mind, heart, and body with freedom-habits—habits that both share in God’s freedom themselves and bring that freedom to the world. That is, more or less, what Paul understands by holiness or sanctification, the learning in the present of the habits which anticipate the ultimate future.¹⁰¹

When holiness is presented as part of the trajectory of redemption, humans can place themselves in God’s story. External markers of holiness (which had become synonymous with Jewish culture in the second temple era) are no longer in effect for God’s people, but the New Testament moral standards ‘were if anything intensified.’¹⁰² The story of God gives context to the high standards; the danger of dismissing the call to holiness as arbitrary and legalistic lessens. When holiness is framed in terms of freedom rather than restriction, it truly is an invitation for people to experience God’s gracious character and action in their own lives, and then offer that experience to others through how they themselves now live in light of a transformed way of being.

IV. Conclusion

Although his approach and methodology are different, Wright frequently connects sanctification and ecclesiology, just as Wesley did. They both have high expectations for transformed lives. Wright’s commitment to a covenantal reading of Scripture leads him to prioritize the corporate nature of the people of God, both in justification and sanctification. This has drawn criticism from evangelicals who fear Wright is ignoring the personal elements of salvation. However, this criticism often ignores the corrective lens a communal framework offers. The ‘modern privileging of “individual salvation” over “ecclesiology”’¹⁰³ has had the unintended consequences of implicitly suggesting that justification and sanctification are solely between a person and God, without any context for the necessity of Christian community. When election and justification are understood in the context of the Church and the story of God throughout the Scriptures, it does not diminish the experiential impact of salvation on individuals. Rather, it allows individuals to more fully understand their roles and responsibilities in the Body of Christ and to embrace sanctification in Christian community. This leads to a renewed sense of unity and holiness in the Church, as the body of Christ together seeks to develop the eschatological ethics that will enable Christian communities to demonstrate resurrection life in this present age.

When Wright and Wesley are brought into conversation, both the witness of the Scriptures and the practice of the early Methodists indicate that sanctification in Christian community is non-negotiable for the Christian life. This is good news for an isolated world. God does not ask us to forge faith on our own terms; we are invited into a larger conversation and connection to the people of God that spans time and space. Holiness is both relationally connective and

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 93.

¹⁰² Wright, *PFG*, 1048.

¹⁰³ Wright, *PFG*, 938.

outward-facing; it offers both belonging and purpose. In Christ, humans are connected not only to God and to the people of God, but also to the transformative realities of New Creation, available through the power of the Spirit. The people of God can dream with holy imagination how the world should be and will be one day, and begin to implement those eschatological ethics in the midst of our communities, here and now, for the sake of the world.

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