

The Ethics of Perfection: Exploring the Ethical Implications of Wesley's Doctrine of Perfection

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journals.sagepub.com/home/sce**Michael D. Simants** 

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Abstract

If one were to prioritise the most important contributions of John Wesley, within that list would be the contribution of his Doctrine of Christian Perfection. The development of this doctrine was a life-long project for Wesley, who always held the core belief that the telos of perfection was love for God and one's neighbour. Wesley's Doctrine of Christian Perfection found its most comprehensive outline in his 1743 manuscript, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*. This article will argue that Wesley's ethics, as found in his teaching and the work of the Methodist movement, are built on the view that the life of the Christian should be a journey of an ever-growing love for God and love for neighbour. This article will explore *Thoughts upon Slavery* as a critical text in the Wesley corpus to see how the Doctrine of Christian Perfection influenced Wesley's thoughts on slavery. Finally, this article offers a way of doing Wesleyan ethics today. Wesleyan ethics are communally understood in that all holiness is social holiness, and Wesleyan ethics have as their primary concern Wesley's charge to do no harm, do good, and stay in love with God.

Keywords

Doctrine of Christian Perfection, John Wesley, slavery, James Cone, Wesleyan ethics, social holiness

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Introduction

‘Why are there thousands ... starving, perishing for want ...?’¹ This is the question posed by John Wesley in his 1773 pamphlet, *Thoughts upon the Present Scarcity of Provisions*. Wesley argues the situation results from ‘poor government policy, economic management, and societal choices’.² He offers a three-pronged remedy to the problem, calling for job creation to help the underemployed or unemployed, an increase in taxation (especially on the sale of horses to France) aimed at discharging half the national debt, and abolishing unnecessary pensions such as those for retired gentry and independently wealthy businessmen. However, Graham Maddox reminds us that Wesley was not an economist, and his three-point plan holds flaws and drawbacks that he might not have considered.³ Yet, Wesley’s theology inherently emphasises ‘concern for the physical welfare of people’, illustrating that it ‘was not directed solely at the hereafter’.⁴

I offer *Scarcity of Provisions* as an introduction to Wesley’s keen interest in social, political, and economic issues. These interests fuelled a broad range of Methodist work to improve the socio-economic conditions of late eighteenth-century England. They formed a foundation for Methodist involvement in social, economic, and political issues that continue today.

Wesley did not only condemn the King for diverting grain to distillers, Parliament for its institution of Poor Tax laws, or the wealthy’s desire to live more luxurious lives, but he also deeply understood the necessity of solutions that went beyond speech. Through his sermons, pamphlets, and letters, Wesley was outspoken about the stewardship of resources, the condition of prisons and workhouses, care for the sick, and slavery.⁵ He offered solutions that the Methodist societies carried out.

The Wesleyan Hermeneutic

The heart of Methodism’s concern with systemic injustice lies in what Mildred Bangs Wynkoop calls ‘The Wesleyan Hermeneutic’.⁶ Wynkoop argues that Wesley’s Doctrine of Christian Perfection was his primary hermeneutic for reading Scripture and forming doctrine.

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1. John Wesley, ‘Thoughts upon the Present Scarcity of Provisions (1773)’, in Graham Maddox (ed.), *Political Writings of John Wesley* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1998), pp. 107–13 (p. 107).
 2. Richard P. Heitzenrater, ‘The Poor and the People Called Methodists’, in idem (ed.), *The Poor and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 2002), pp. 15–38 (p. 32).
 3. Wesley, ‘Scarcity of Provisions’, p. 107 n. 1.
 4. Wesley, ‘Scarcity of Provisions’, p. 107 n. 1.
 5. Heitzenrater, ‘The Poor and the People Called Methodists’, pp. 32–33.
 6. Mildred Bangs Wynkoop, ‘A Hermeneutical Approach to John Wesley’, *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 6.1 (1971), pp. 13–22; Mildred Bangs Wynkoop, *A Theology of Love: The Dynamic of Wesleyanism*, 2nd edn (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 2015).

Wynkoop claims that Wesley was disinterested in love as a rational exercise or in love that deadened the vivification of doctrine by personal experience.⁷ Instead, in Wesley's view, love is animated by a 'wholesome give-and-take', creating freedom and standing against oppression.⁸ Wynkoop argues the Wesleyan Hermeneutic is necessary for solving 'theological and religious problems' because, more than any other theological argument, it makes 'better sense out of the gospel'.⁹

Wesley's Doctrine of Christian Perfection

We can use the terms 'Wesleyan Hermeneutic', the 'Doctrine of Holiness', or the 'Doctrine of Christian Perfection' synonymously to mean love for God and love for neighbour.¹⁰ Wesley saw the continual increase in love for God and neighbour as the *telos* of the Christian life and the reason for his interest in addressing social, economic, and political injustices.¹¹ Even though Wesley wrote and taught throughout his life on the Doctrine of Christian Perfection, his most concise rendering is the 1766 pamphlet, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*.¹²

Summarising A Plain Account of Christian Perfection

Wesley begins this work by chronicling the evolution of his understanding of Christian Perfection. His New Year's 1733 sermon, *The Circumcision of the Heart*, is the first place he formally equates holiness and love. He calls love the fulfilment of the law and argues that all commandments can be summarised

in this one word, LOVE. In this is perfection, and glory, and happiness! The royal law of heaven and earth is this, 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength.' The one perfect good shall be your one ultimate end.¹³

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7. Wynkoop, *Theology of Love*, p. 23; General Conference, 'Our Theological Task', in *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 2016* (Nashville, TN: United Methodist Publishing House, 2016), pp. 80–91 (p. 82).
 8. Wynkoop, *Theology of Love*, p. 23.
 9. Wynkoop, *Theology of Love*, p. 23.
 10. John R. Tyson, *The Way of the Wesleys: A Short Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), p. 91.
 11. Ryan Nicholas Danker, 'Early Methodist Societies as an Embodied Politic: Intentionality and Community as a Wesleyan Political Vision', in Ryan Nicholas Danker (ed.), *Exploring a Wesleyan Political Theology* (Nashville, TN: Wesley's Foundry Books, 2019), pp. 47–68 (p. 47).
 12. John Wesley, 'A Plain Account of Christian Perfection (1766)', in Paul Wesley Chilcote and Kenneth J. Collins (eds.), *The Works of John Wesley: Doctrinal and Controversial Treatises II*, The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley, 13 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2013), pp. 132–91.
 13. I cite Wesley's sermons using Albert Outler's numbering in *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* using the designation JW-O##. JW-O17 §I.11.30-5; he makes a similar argument in JW-O24.

Wesley then moves to his 1742 pamphlet, *The Character of a Methodist*, in which he describes the 'perfect Christian' as the

one who loves the Lord his God with all his heart, with all his soul, with all his mind, and with all his strength. God is the joy of his heart, and the desire of his soul ... Perfect love having now cast out fear, he rejoices evermore.¹⁴

And loving God, he 'loves his neighbour as himself'; he loves every man as his own soul. He loves his enemies; yea, and the enemies of God.¹⁵

In the 1759 pamphlet, *Thoughts on Christian Perfection*, Wesley again defines Christian Perfection as

pure love, filling the heart, and governing all the words and actions. If your idea includes anything more or anything else, it is not scriptural; and then, no wonder that a spiritually perfect Christian does not come up to it.¹⁶

These passages illustrate Wesley's view that the whole output of the Christian life should express one's love for God and neighbour. This is a love that extends into every area of one's life and work, whether that work is vocational ministry, business, academia, government, mining, or begging. No Christian is exempt from the pursuit of Perfection.

Wesley's Christian Perfection Applied as Ethics within the Broader Wesleyan Corpus

Wesley wrote several sermons, pamphlets, and letters where Christian Perfection is the catalyst for ethical action. It would be worth exploring a broader range of Wesley's oeuvre, but this article will focus on one of the most significant social, political, and economic issues of Wesley's day: the question of slavery.

Thoughts upon Slavery

Wesley contributed three critical pieces and a handful of minor works to this issue. The most significant contribution in this part of the Wesleyan corpus is his 1774 article *Thoughts upon Slavery*.

While Wesley claimed to be a man of one book, in *Thoughts upon Slavery*, he, interestingly, limits the explicit use of Scripture in his arguments against slavery.¹⁷ Instead, he

14. John Wesley, *The Character of a Methodist*, 1st edn (Bristol: Felix Farley, 1742), para. 11.

15. Wesley, *Character of a Methodist*, para. 12.

16. John Wesley, 'Thoughts on Christian Perfection (1760)', in Paul Wesley Chilcote and Kenneth J. Collins (eds.), *The Works of John Wesley: Doctrinal and Controversial Treatises II*, The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley, 13 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2013), pp. 54–80 (p. 73 lines 6–10).

17. John Wesley, 'Thoughts upon Slavery', in Thomas Jackson (ed.), *The Works of John Wesley: Thoughts, Addresses, Prayers, and Letters*, The Works of John Wesley, 14 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), pp. xi, 59–79 (sec. IV.1).

deliberately emphasises the ‘natural rights of justice, life, liberty, and happiness’, a standard rationale in the eighteenth century.¹⁸ David Field calls the piece ‘nascent public theology’ that frames the argument ‘in the non-religious language of natural rights and liberty’.¹⁹ This non-religious language is deeply rooted in core Wesleyan ‘theological commitments’.²⁰ These commitments, which Field identifies and to which we will later return, serve as a good summation of Wesleyan theological anthropology:

1. God is love.
2. God has created humanity *imago Dei*.
3. Humanity turned itself away from God.
4. God remains present and active in humanity through prevenient grace.
5. Christ reveals God’s moral requirements.
6. God will judge humanity with justice.

Thoughts upon Slavery posits that slavery is ‘inherently unjust, cruel and immoral’.²¹ Leon Hynson explains that even though Wesley unmistakably longs for the eradication of slavery, he is a realist who recognises that eradication will take time and legal wrangling; therefore, Wesley argues that ‘slavery must vanish from the earth’, but in the interim, slavery must be reformed to eliminate the ‘brutalizing treatment’ of the enslaved.²² I am unconvinced by this reading of *Thoughts*. While Wesley is indeed a realist and understands the political process, when we read *Thoughts* alongside Wesley’s other statements on slavery, it becomes clear that he is interested not in its reform but only in its elimination.

Wesley builds *Thoughts upon Slavery* on earlier work from the American Quaker abolitionist Anthony Benezet. Wesley spends the first section of his work summarising, without attribution, Benezet’s explanation of the history and conditions of the slave trade. In the last section of *Thoughts*, Wesley presents clear arguments against the slave trade, saying that ‘slavery is irreconcilable with justice and mercy’, which, alongside truth, he sees as summarising God’s ‘moral character’.²³ Wesley further cites the common siblinghood of all humanity as a reason to take an anti-slavery position. He ends the piece with a prayer that evokes Acts 17:26, which says God has created ‘all nations of the world’ as ‘part of the same family’.²⁴

The second significant piece is a letter of encouragement that Wesley wrote to William Wilberforce on 24 February 1791, just days before Wesley’s death. In this short letter, Wesley charges Wilberforce to

18. Leon O. Hynson, ‘Wesley’s *Thoughts upon Slavery*: A Declaration of Human Rights’, *Methodist History* 33.1 (1994), pp. 46–53 (p. 46).

19. David N. Field, ‘Imaging the God of Justice and Mercy: Theological Allusions in John Wesley’s *Thoughts upon Slavery*’, *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 47.1 (2021), pp. 1–20 (p. 2), <https://doi.org/10.25159/2412-4265/8466>.

20. Field, ‘Imaging the God of Justice and Mercy’, p. 2.

21. Field, ‘Imaging the God of Justice and Mercy’, p. 4.

22. Hynson, ‘Wesley’s *Thoughts upon Slavery*’, p. 51.

23. Field, ‘Imaging the God of Justice and Mercy’, p. 8.

24. Field, ‘Imaging the God of Justice and Mercy’, p. 9.

Go on, in the name of God and in the power of His might, till even American slavery (the vilest that ever saw the sun) shall vanish away before it.²⁵

John Telford tells us that Wesley wrote the letter following his reading of a tract by Gustavus Vasa, an African born in 1745, kidnapped, and sold into slavery in Barbados.²⁶ In 1757, Vasa was sent to England, where he later wrote a tract telling his story. The tract angered Wesley, specifically in that, legally, 'the *oath* of a black against a white' had no validity, leaving the black man with 'no redress'.²⁷ While the more significant concern for Wesley was rooted in his view of humanity as *imago Dei*, in this letter, he articulates the issue as one of justice. The white man had recourse when a crime was committed against him that the black man simply did not have.

Finally, Wesley's journal reveals that on 6 March 1788, he preached against slavery in Bristol, a leading centre of the British slave trade. While the text of the sermon is non-extant, the sermon caused quite an uproar. Wesley tells the story in his journal:

The house from end to end was filled with high and low, rich and poor. ... About the middle of the discourse ... a vehement noise arose ... and shot like lightning through the whole congregation. The terror and confusion were inexpressible. You might have imagined, it was a city taken by storm. The people rushed upon each other with the utmost violence, the benches were broken in pieces, and nine-tenths of the congregation appeared struck with some panic. In about six minutes the storm ceased, almost as suddenly as it rose, and, all being calm, I went on without the least interruption.²⁸

There are a handful of other letters in which Wesley discusses slavery or the slave trade, including two letters written to the *Society for the Abolition of Slavery*. Wesley also briefly mentions slavery in his 1776 pamphlet *A Seasonable Address to the More Serious Part of the Inhabitants of Great Britain*. Apart from two journal entries from his time in Georgia and South Carolina, Wesley's written correspondence about slavery follows the 1774 publication of *Thoughts upon Slavery*. Yet, it is evident through the corpus that Wesley is, from the beginning, staunchly opposed to slavery and the slave trade. Wesley centres his opposition primarily on the treatment of blacks, which Wesley refers to as defaming the God-given dignity inherent within humanity. Wesley also sees the actions of those involved in the slave trade (from the boat captains to the slave owners) as defaming their God-given dignity.

In these various pieces, Wesley carefully builds his argument against slavery using a Lockean-influenced view of natural law and liberty.²⁹ Hynson argues that Wesley pushes this view further to create a 'theonomous ethic' built on 'divine command or

25. John Wesley, 'To William Wilberforce, 24 February 1791', in *The Letters of John Wesley*, 8 vols. (London: Epworth Press, 1960), pp. viii, 264–65.

26. See Telford's introduction to Wesley, 'Letter: 24 February 1791', p. viii.

27. Wesley, 'Letter: 24 February 1791', p. viii (emphasis original).

28. John Wesley, '3 March 1788', in Nehemiah Curnock (ed.), *The Journal of John Wesley*, 8 vols. (London: Epworth Press, 1916), pp. vii, 359–60.

29. Field, 'Imaging the God of Justice and Mercy', pp. 15–16.

expectation'.³⁰ For Wesley, any justification for slavery opposes humanity's God-given liberty, dignity, and moral and natural law. Wesley sees the moral law as rooted in and leading to a more profound love for God and neighbour. Wesley calls God a 'great ocean of love' and says that the moral law comprises of 'one word—Imitate the God of love'.³¹

Perhaps there is space for a brief critique of Wesley on slavery. Wesley clearly says in a 1790 letter to Henry Moore that he would 'do anything that is in [his] power' to eradicate slavery.³² In another letter from 1787, he says that Methodists in America 'have already emancipated several hundred of the poor' enslaved people 'and are setting more at liberty every day, as fast as they can do it with any tolerable convenience'.³³ As we have seen, Wesley was clear that there was no place in a Christian world for slavery. Yet, he comes to the explicit critique of slavery late in his career. Other than brief comments in his journal from his time in Georgia and South Carolina and his agreement with Governor Oglethorpe and the trustees of the Georgia colony on disallowing the slave trade in the colony, Wesley is quiet on the issue.

James Cone notices this and offers strong critique in his books *Black Theology and Black Power* and *A Black Theology of Liberation*. In the latter, Cone writes that Wesley:

Did little to make Christianity a religion for the politically oppressed Wesley ... said little about slaveholding and did even less. We are told that Wesley's Methodism prevented a revolution in England, but I am not sure whether we should praise or condemn him on that account. The stance of the white Methodist Church in America, with its vacillation on slavery and colonization, is consistent with Wesley's less than passionate approach to the issues.³⁴

In a footnote to the passage, Cone acknowledges the references to slavery in the Wesleyan corpus but quickly adds that 'one does not get the impression that slavery was one of the burning theological issues on Wesley's mind'. Cone does allow Wesley some leeway, offering that 'perhaps later followers' had 'distorted the real Wesley' with an evangelical preoccupation with an individualised faith.³⁵ Cone concludes his critique by saying, 'the Wesley who has come down to us seems very white and quite British, and that galls blacks who know that Englishmen were the scoundrels who perfected the slave trade'.³⁶

30. Hynson, 'Wesley's *Thoughts upon Slavery*', p. 50.

31. JW-036 §II.3.26. See also Field, 'Imaging the God of Justice and Mercy', pp. 14–15.

32. John Wesley, 'To Henry Moore, 14 March 1790', in John Telford (ed.), *The Letters of John Wesley*, 8 vols. (London: Epworth Press, 1960), pp. viii, 207.

33. John Wesley, 'To Samuel Hoare, 18 August 1787', in John Telford (ed.), *The Letters of John Wesley*, 8 vols. (London: Epworth Press, 1960), pp. viii, 275.

34. James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 50th anniversary edn (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2020), pp. 35–36.

35. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, p. 36 n. 12.

36. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, p. 36 n. 12; Jagessar shares this critique. See Michael Jagessar, 'Review Article: Critical Reflections on John Wesley, *Thoughts Upon Slavery*', *Black Theology* 5.2 (2007), pp. 250–55 (p. 255), <https://doi.org/10.1558/blth2007v5i2.250>.

Michael Jagessar offers other important critiques of Wesley on the question of slavery. First, he points out that Wesley's statements on slavery never directly address the 'two significant institutions' of 'the Church and the Government'.³⁷ Jagessar's point is important. Wesley communicates directly with those, like Wilberforce and the Society for the Abolition of Slavery, involved in the abolition movement but does not directly address his statements to the church or government. However, it could be argued that *Thoughts upon Slavery* accomplishes, in some manner, this task. Jagessar's second core critique is a broader one around Wesley's linguistic choices in using words like 'heathen' and 'primitive' to describe non-white persons.³⁸ I wonder, though, if reading modern linguistic sensitivities back onto an earlier linguistic norm is an entirely fair critique.

Even with Wesley's ahead-of-his-time stance on slavery, for Cone and other liberation theologians, Wesley never went far enough on the issue. I agree with Cone that Wesley could have been outspoken on slavery before and more forcefully after 1774, the publication of *Thoughts upon Slavery*. This would align with Wesley's words and actions on other significant issues like workers' rights, education, health, and poverty.

Living Wesleyan Ethics in Today's World

We now turn our attention to thinking about Wesleyan ethics in today's world. At the heart of Wesleyan theology is the community of faith—the church. Contrary to another of Cone's critiques, Wesley's theology is not 'primarily "personal"'.³⁹ Wesley sees holiness, defined as loving God and others, as 'social holiness' requiring individual and communal commitments to the good of the broader society. In his sermon on Matthew's salt and light discourse, Wesley argues that 'Christianity is essentially a social religion' and to 'turn it into a solitary religion' is 'to destroy it'.⁴⁰ The Christian is part of a community formed by the shared story of God and God's work in the world.⁴¹ The Christian life starkly

37. Jagessar, 'Review Article: Critical Reflections on John Wesley', p. 250.

38. Jagessar, 'Review Article: Critical Reflections on John Wesley', p. 252.

39. Cone argues that 'for Wesley, Christianity seems to be primarily "personal" ... not political'. See Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, p. 36 n. 12.

40. JW-O24 §I.1.

41. These thoughts are rooted in several sources including (but not exclusive to) Tom Greggs, *Dogmatic Ecclesiology: The Priestly Catholicity of the Church*, Dogmatic Ecclesiology, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), I; Stanley Hauerwas, 'The Servant Community: Christian Social Ethics', in John Berkman and Michael G. Cartwright (eds.), *The Hauerwas Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), pp. 371–91; Stanley Hauerwas, 'The Church in a Divided World: The Interpretative Power of the Christian Story', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 8.1 (1980), pp. 55–82, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40017736> (accessed 12 November 2020); Stanley Hauerwas and William H Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony*, 25th anniversary edn (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2014); John B. Thomson, *The Ecclesiology of Stanley Hauerwas: A Christian Theology of Liberation*, Ashgate New Critical Thinking in Religion, Theology and Biblical Studies (London: Routledge, 2017).

contrasts the world within which we ‘live, move, and exist’⁴² because the story of our faith is a love story rooted in the biblical poetry and narrative of Creation and Fall.

Creation as an Act of Love

Genesis 1 paints a vivid picture of *creatio ex nihilo*. God creates the cosmos of Genesis not in violence but through the breath of love, speaking life and light to all. These are the same core themes that John picks up in the prologue to his Gospel,⁴³ which remind the church of its rootedness in soil breathed into by a loving God, watered by a stream of waters hovered over by the Spirit, and called to grow in imitation of Christ. The creation poem becomes the first hint that something much larger and more loving is going on than what our natural senses alone would be willing and able to tell us.

The story climaxes with God’s forming humanity ‘in God’s own image’.⁴⁴ Contrary to other creation myths, *creatio ex nihilo* is not an act of violence. Instead, God bends down in the ‘topsoil of the fertile land’ to form humanity with God’s own loving hands in an act of ‘perfectly free’ and ‘fully sufficient’ prevenient love.⁴⁵ Only then does God declare creation as ‘supremely good’.⁴⁶

Humanity created as *imago Dei* provides an all-encompassing framework for the church’s understanding of the Christian life and call.⁴⁷ Wesley’s recognition of the image of God as the ‘beauty of holiness’ within renewed humanity empowers a more profound ministry of God’s love to one another.⁴⁸ It points toward growth and participation in life with God, expressed in the ‘Spirit of finished holiness’.⁴⁹

Reshaping our imagination into a vision of a cosmos resultant from divine love leads to a reshaped imagination that must find an outlet in practice.⁵⁰ A world created in love

42. Joseph L. Mangina, ‘Bearing the Marks of Jesus: The Church in the Economy of Salvation in Barth and Hauerwas’, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 52.3 (2009), pp. 269–305 (p. 288), <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930600050225>. Also Acts 17:28 (CEB).

43. See also Ian Galloway, *Called to Be Friends: Unlocking the Heart of John’s Gospel* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2021), pp. 185–88.

44. Gen. 1:27 (CEB).

45. Gen. 2:7 (CEB); Medi Ann Volpe, ‘Living the Mystery: Doctrine, Intellectual Disability, and Christian Imagination’, *Journal of Moral Theology* 6.2 (2017), pp. 87–102 (p. 96).

46. Gen. 1:31 (CEB). See also JW-O45 §I.1.

47. David Carter, ‘Orthodox Influences on Methodism’, *The Ecumenical Review* 73.1 (2021), pp. 86–110 (p. 106), <https://doi.org/10.1111/erev.12583>.

48. JW-O24 para. 1.

49. Carter, ‘Orthodox Influences on Methodism’, p. 106; Charles Wesley, ‘O Come and Dwell in Me’, in *The United Methodist Hymnal: Book of United Methodist Worship* (Nashville, TN: United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), p. 388; Ford argues that scholars should not neglect Charles’s ideas regarding holiness, sanctification, and theosis as they often press further than those of his brother John. See Coleman M. Ford, ‘“A Pure Dwelling Place for the Holy Spirit”: John Wesley’s Reception of the Homilies of Macarius’, *The Expository Times* 130.4 (2019), pp. 157–66, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0014524618787342>.

50. Medi Ann Volpe, *Rethinking Christian Identity*, Challenges in Contemporary Theology (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), p. 114.

with no semblance of violence requires a loving response. Any move toward violence moves away from God's perfect vision for God's 'supremely good' creation.⁵¹ However, because of the Fall, the unstoried world reads its environment through a hermeneutic of violence. Humans use one another to satisfy their own desires and see creation as something to be used, abused, possessed, and overtaken.⁵² Only a community dedicated to love can affirm the world as belonging to God, who is not interested in ruling creation 'through violence and coercion'.⁵³ Creation groans for the church to present Christ as the balm for the healing of 'the sin-sick soul'.⁵⁴

Wesley argued that the outflow of perfecting love is obedience to the call of God, saying that the one who wholeheartedly loves God will also serve God with their whole being.⁵⁵ The more one grows in love for God and matures in the divine life, the more love one will show others.⁵⁶ Bearing 'witness to the whole of human nature' as God's 'supremely good' creation expresses this obedience.⁵⁷ 'Believe in hope', Wesley proclaims, because the Prince of Peace has come to restore us to love. God fills the 'heart with such love' that we will be ready to lay our life down for others and 'swallow up every unkind and unholy temper'.⁵⁸

For Wesley, the telos of the Christian life is Christian perfection, defined as loving God with our whole heart, soul, and mind and loving our neighbour as ourselves.⁵⁹ Perhaps if we use St Basil's definition of sin as the misuse of power,⁶⁰ we could argue that the one who wholly loves God and neighbour could, in effect, be striving toward sinlessness since the outworking of that love would be the use of their power only for the good of all. Loving neighbour as self means that our use of power will reflect that love. Wesley argues that when 'the love of God [fills] *all the heart*, there can be no sin there'.⁶¹

51. Gen. 1:31 (CEB).

52. Stavros S. Fotiou, 'Archbishop Anastasios: Mission in Christ's Way', *One in Christ* 46.2 (2012), pp. 233–45 (235–36).

53. Stanley Hauerwas, 'A Pacifist Response to *In Defense of Creation*', *The Asbury Theological Journal* 41.2 (1986), pp. 5–14; Stanley Hauerwas, 'Living the Proclaimed Reign of God: A Sermon on the Sermon on the Mount', *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 47.2 (1993), pp. 152–58, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002096430004700205>; Stanley Hauerwas, 'Pacifism: Some Philosophical Considerations', *Faith and Philosophy* 2.2 (1985), pp. 99–104 (p. 102), <https://doi.org/10.5840/faithphil19852222>.

54. Rom. 8:22 (CEB); William Farley Smith, 'There Is a Balm in Gilead', in *The United Methodist Hymnal: Book of United Methodist Worship* (Nashville, TN: United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), p. 375.

55. Wesley, *Character of a Methodist*, para. 13.

56. JW-O22 §III.1.

57. Fotiou, 'Archbishop Anastasios', p. 237.

58. JW-O22 §III.18.

59. Wesley, 'Thoughts on Christian Perfection', sec. Q1.

60. St Basil the Great and Anna M. Silva, 'The Rule of Basil', in *The Rule of St Basil in Latin and English: A Revised Critical Edition* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013), pp. 137–240 (sec. Q.2 R.1.7–8).

61. Wesley, 'Plain Account (1766)', sec. 17 (emphasis original).

Wesley's response to slavery indicates the liberative nature of his theology. Wesleyan ethics then challenge us to exhibit the love of God made alive in the renewal of the *imago Dei*. By participating in the life and love of God, the community grows in their love for God and neighbour. The Spirit then sends these sacramentally storied people into the world to love, serve and obey God, and to love all humanity as they would love themselves.⁶² They become a people whose affections are rightly formed to live a life showing forth their love of God and love of neighbour by 'doing all manner of good'.⁶³ The community living lives of holiness will respond by, in, and through love to the deep needs of a 'supremely good' creation that has found itself 'subjected to frustration' and hoping for freedom 'from slavery and decay' to be brought 'into the glorious freedom of God's children'.⁶⁴

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63. John Wesley, 'Earnest Appeal (1743)', sec. 99.

64. Rom. 8:20–21 (CEB).