



Discipleship of Desire and the Hunger for Justice: Wisdom from Luther and Wesley

ALAN G. PADGETT

As I write these words, we are living through some distressing, dangerous, and fractured times for our society and our world. The stresses of structural impoverishment, racism, hatred, war, accelerated climate change, patriarchy, and other social toxins are heated up to the boiling point in the pressure-cooker of a global pandemic. We who follow Jesus in this world seek to walk in the way of the cross for our hurting neighbors, societies, and planet. Yet in the midst of this complex of crises, does mere “spirituality” still matter? Who cares about the merely personal choice of some outliers in our secular-first age? We need to press forward *now*, many insist, with meaningful change in our society that brings greater justice, real peace, and substantial healing. So, what difference does loving Jesus make in a world that feels like it’s falling apart?

The Christian answer has been much the same for millennia: it matters in any time, at any place, no matter what is happening to us and around us, that we worship, love, and follow God. Following Jesus is quite simply a matter of life and death. If Jesus is all we claim in our faith, then following him in a life filled with worshipping, loving, and obeying the Holy Trinity is the greatest thing we can do

There is often posited a false dichotomy between the inward Christian spiritual life and the Christian’s external calling to engage the world. An examination of Martin Luther and John Wesley belies this artificial division and shows the crucial relation between the two areas of Christian life.

for our planet and our neighbors, and even ourselves. If we are really talking about a God of wisdom, love, and justice, one who is living and active in all the cosmos, one who alone can save us from ourselves, then a life of true discipleship is the most important thing in this or any world. It is because the triune God heals, forgives, saves, indwells, and empowers us that we are keeping physical distance and wearing a mask while we march in the streets to protest racial injustice. Of course, others will join us in the struggle, thank God, including those who deny there is a God. But we who follow Christ in times of crisis are resisting for our neighbors and our world, but not *only* for them. We are doing it first for this same God, and in response to Her powerful call on our life in a love that draws us out of ourselves and into mission.¹ Because we follow *this* God, we are protesting injustice, protecting others, healing the planet, and proclaiming the gospel in deed and word.

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The false division between spirituality, worship, and prayer on the one hand and mission, social action, and evangelization on the other needs to be healed in our heads and in our congregations. The outer journey and the inner journey are one: *ora est labora*, work is a prayer. With some nuance we might claim our work can *sometimes* be a prayer. Let us call such a balanced and inclusive understanding holistic discipleship. By this we mean a discipleship that is not reduced to *either* the individual soul *or* the larger society. This understanding of following Jesus accepts that the inward and the outward path, the temporal and the eternal concern, the soul and the body and the community are in fact all together the subject of God's grace. Just as all of our cares, duties, thoughts, actions, and communities are affected by sin, so all of us are redeemed by grace and called to follow Jesus in this life and the next. Despite our sins and brokenness, God works through those who humbly walk with Him, and not just in one area of our lives but in them all. We can and must seek to build such a holistic sense of discipleship in our communities and in our lives. Here is where a holistic theology of discipleship may come into play as part of this important work of living, proclaiming, and struggling in God's mission to and for the whole earth.² We should not be surprised by this.

¹ God is beyond gender, which is merely a created category applicable to some creatures. At the same time, God is not an inanimate force but a dynamic, personal being. We should avoid "thing" pronouns or language for God that can reduce Him to a mere spiritual force. Mixing the gender of our language for God reminds us of Her transcendence of merely creaturely categories. I will capitalize such pronouns for deity herein to make their use clearer to the reader.

² The significance of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's famous study is hard to overestimate for a theology of discipleship today: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 4, *Discipleship*, ed. Geoffrey Kelly and John

After all, it is God's purpose to redeem the whole world, as well as the whole of ourselves and our communities. The human mind too, and so theology, has a place to play in this divine purpose.

As a Methodist minister and theologian, I have taught theology and ethics for nineteen years at a very Lutheran seminary. I have learned a great deal from my colleagues and students, for which I am deeply grateful. My vocation has meant spending a lot of time with the good Dr. Luther. Over time, as I learned the inner workings of Lutheran thought, I have come to believe that the theology of discipleship we find in Martin Luther and in John Wesley can complement one another. They are often put at odds, and there are good reasons for this. What they say seems contradictory at many points, and I would not deny these differences. Yet a modern synthesis of their spiritual wisdom can assist us in this task of developing a holistic theology of following Jesus. Still, learning from both of them at once can be a bracing experience. I wish to share with you what I have learned as I work through these differences and similarities. I believe their insights and wisdom about following Christ are valuable tools for thinking and living Christian lives in our context, fraught as it is with multiplex challenges.

LUTHER ON FAITH, GOSPEL, AND DISCIPLESHIP

Luther is often thought of as a great reformer, Bible translator, and one of those who shaped the history of German literature and Euro-global culture. These things are true, but as with his namesake Martin Luther King, it is easy to neglect the deep spiritual, biblical, and christocentric roots of his passion and labors. Just because of his biblical faithfulness and evangelic passion, Luther was a powerful contributor to the Christian doctrine of discipleship. This is clear already from his theology of justification by faith and vocation in Christ.

While readers of *Word & World* are unlikely to have such a superficial view of Luther, it's also easy when getting into the complexities of confessional debate to use technical shorthand that needs work to be rightly translated for the larger church and culture. The term *vocation* is one such word. The Christ-centered, biblical, and faith-oriented notion of our callings found in Luther is usually neglected in our context for a secularized version that reduces vocation to a job or profession.³ The rich evangelic sense of the term has thus been stripped off by secularization. Much the same might be said of *faith* or *love* as Luther used these terms. We can begin the work of rethinking these *theologoumena* by grounding all of them in the evangel: the good news of God in Jesus the Messiah.

Godse, trans. Reinhard Krauss and Barbara Green (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003). In this essay we focus on Luther and Wesley.

³ See below for more on vocation. An example of this secularized view can be found in Max Weber's famous lectures on "Science as a Vocation" (1917) and "Politics as a Vocation" (1919), in *The Vocation Lectures*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2004). See Kiara Jorgenson, *The Ecology of Vocation: Recasting Calling in a New Planetary Era* (Lanham, MD: Lexington/Fortress, 2020), 80–90.

Luther's passion for this good news from God was at the very heart of his life and work as a theologian and reformer. It is through faith in Jesus and his work, which is also the work of God, that we are forgiven, freed, and made new again. This is based on the trustworthiness of God and Her promises. We are freed from the grip of condemnation, sin, death, and the devil by means of this faith. It is a radical trust in the gospel of God and the cross of Christ: such is the way we normally put things. But more than our usual teaching, Luther used the term *faith* in a complex and encompassing way. It is a radical trust in God's good news—that is to say, the promise of God in His Word. What's more, for Luther faith is a power in our lives, a motive for Christian praxis, a vehicle for the presence of God, and a divine agent bringing about our forgiveness, resurrection, and new creation on a daily basis. In his influential "Preface to the Letter of St. Paul to the Romans" of 1545, he wrote:

Faith is a work of God in us, which changes us and brings us to birth anew from God (cf. John 1). It kills the old Adam, makes us completely different people in heart, mind, senses and all our powers, and brings the Holy Spirit with it. What a living, creative, active, powerful thing is faith! It is impossible that faith should ever stop doing good.⁴

Even if we recognize this language about faith as figures of speech, the general thrust of Luther's spiritual language about faith turns it to a kind of thing or power, rather than *merely* an attitude such as trust.

It's hard not to want to share at least one more example of Luther's excited encomium of evangelic faith. In his 1520 treatise "The Freedom of a Christian," we find another important example of his eloquent praise of the power of God's Word working through faith. In discussing the third benefit of faith, he developed an extended metaphor of marriage in Ephesians 5 between Christ and "the soul":

The third incomparable benefit of faith is that it unites the soul with Christ as a bride is united with her bridegroom. By this mystery, as the Apostle teaches, Christ and the soul become one flesh [Eph 5:31–32]. And if they are one flesh and there is between them a true marriage—indeed the most perfect of all marriages, since human marriages are but poor examples of this one true marriage—it follows that everything they have they hold in common, the good as well as the evil.⁵

Faith is the work of God and the power that makes Christ present to the life, soul, and body of the believer. By it the "happy exchange" is effected, wherein by a spiritual substitution Christ absorbs and conquers our sin, death, and bondage to Satan, whereas in communion with him we have righteousness, eternal life,

⁴Martin Luther, "Preface to the Letter of St. Paul to the Romans," trans. Andrew Thornton, online at <https://tinyurl.com/t8ttqe7>.

⁵Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut Lehmann, and Christopher Boyd Brown, 75 vols. (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Fortress and Concordia, 1955–), 31:351. Henceforth referred to as *LW*.

and victory over spiritual evil.⁶ With good reason historians of Christian spirituality have interpreted Luther's understanding of our union with God as a "faith mysticism."⁷ But there is a significant difference between Luther's notion of "mysticism," or spiritual union with God, and the traditional understanding of mysticism among the Catholic and Orthodox mystics before his day.

Luther had a very earthy and fleshy conception of this union: it is God who by grace comes down to us; we in faith do not go "up" to God or heaven. As Gerhard Forde points out at length, for Luther we saved sinners do not ascend to God by our spiritual practices and good works. No, it is God who comes down to the sinner, to the earth, breaking into our sinful world to provide salvation.⁸ This analogy is obviously based upon the incarnation, but for Luther also on the cross. This emphasis comes into powerful play in Luther's theology of union with Christ and so also of Christian discipleship. An example of Luther's earthy and bodily understanding of salvation can be seen in his explanation of the phrase "The Word became flesh and made his home (ἐσκήνωσεν) among us" (John 1:14):

The same Word, which became [human], Mary suckled and carried in her arms as any other mother does her child. He came to [people], lived and dwelt among them. Thus it was no ghost but a true [human], "taking the form of a servant," as St. Paul says (Phil. 2:7), "being born in [human] likeness" with regard to seeing, hearing, speaking, eating, drinking, sleeping, and waking, so that all who saw and heard Him were constrained to confess and say that He was a true and natural [human]. He did not withdraw from people, retire into some shelter, escape into the desert, where no one could hear, see, or touch Him. But He appeared publicly, preaching and performing miracles, thereby enabling all the people who were about Him, among whom He moved and lived, to hear and touch Him.⁹

It is not just in the blessed incarnation or the bloody cross that God descends to us, but also *now* in earthly creatures that are mediums of the divine Word: the living voice of the preacher and the visible water, wine, and bread of the sacraments. For Luther, the grace of the Holy Spirit in baptism is not merely an allegory, therefore, but genuine and real, by which one's "actual death and resurrection"

⁶ LW 26:284.

⁷ Bengt R. Hoffman, *Theology of the Heart: The Role of Mysticism in the Theology of Martin Luther*, ed. Pearl Hoffman (Minneapolis: Kirk House, 1998); Daniel L. Brunner, "Luther's Mysticism, Pietism, and Contemplative Spirituality," *Word & World* 40, no. 1 (2020): 20–28. For the broader historical context of heart-pietism and related movements, including Methodism, see Ted Campbell, *Religion of the Heart: A Study of European Religious Life in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991).

⁸ Gerhard Forde, *Where God Meets Man: Luther's Down-to-Earth Approach to the Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972), and his later "The Christian Life," in *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 2, ed. Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), Eleventh Locus.

⁹ LW 22:112. This and other quotations in this essay will be altered for gender inclusiveness.

takes place, “for baptism is not a false sign.”¹⁰ The living Word of the gospel, therefore, even now kills and makes alive: it kills the old Adam (sinful nature) and raises up the new creature in Christ. The earthiness and embodied character of Luther’s understanding of justification, baptism, faith, and union with Christ set him at odds with most Christian spiritual theology before his day.

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In his earthy and embodied theology of discipleship, Luther turns what is often thought of as a change that takes place over time in different stages of Christian life into an ongoing, present, and deeply existential battle between two spiritual principles (or “laws,” as Paul puts it: Rom 7:21–23). I speak of the change from being a sinner, condemned by God, and becoming a saint, who is forgiven and holy through grace because of faith in Christ Jesus. For Luther, this justification by faith, this baptismal grace, is indeed an actual death and resurrection, but it is only partially one:

Neither does sin completely die, nor grace completely rise, until the sinful body that we carry about in this life is destroyed, as the Apostle says in the same passage [Rom 6:6–7]. For as long as we are in the flesh, the desires of the flesh stir and are stirred. For this reason, as soon as we begin to believe, we also begin to die to this world and live to God in the life to come; so that faith is truly a death and a resurrection, that is, it is that spiritual baptism into which we are submerged and from which we rise.¹¹

Luther’s understanding of discipleship is grounded in his famous *simul iustus et peccator*: at once the believer is both sinner and saint.¹² By the grace of God and the new birth of spiritual baptism we are at once both justified by faith and thus righteous before God, and still under the temptations and lure of sin and the

¹⁰ LW 36:68.

¹¹ LW 36:68.

¹² He writes of this paradox: “God does not want to impute the remnant of sin and does not want to punish it or damn us for it. But He wants to cover it and to forgive it, as though it were nothing, not for our sakes or for the sake of our worthiness or works but for the sake of Christ Himself, in whom we believe. Thus a Christian [person] is righteous and a sinner at the same time (*simul iustus et peccator*), holy and profane, an enemy of God and a child of God. None of the sophists will admit this paradox, because they do not understand the true meaning of justification.” LW 26:232–33.

devil. We who are baptized still struggle with sin in our lives—sin is no longer our master, but it's not missing in action. The difference here is that sin no longer has complete dominion over those who are in Christ. By faith in Christ we have been transferred from the kingdom of Satan to the kingdom of God. God is now at work in our lives. The atheist German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach showed himself to be a good student of Lutheran theology when he wrote, "God is the being who acts in me, with me, through me, upon me, for me, is the principle of my salvation, of my good dispositions and actions, consequently my own good principle and nature."¹³

This *simul* paradox is central to Luther's theology of discipleship, but to get a fuller picture we should fill this out with two others: *vocation* and *active righteousness*. Despite antinomian impulses among some Lutherans over the centuries, Luther never taught that Christians should not serve and obey God in this world and do good works. This is a service we do *for the neighbor*—that is, for the good of the world and its peoples—*not* for our own salvation. It is here that vocation takes its proper place, different from justification while, at the same time, justification by faith is its basis. We as baptized believers have a general call to love, devotion, and obedience to Christ, who calls us to walk in the ways of God. Vocation for Luther was no longer just the domain of the "religious"—the monk, nun, or priest—as in previous generations. Now our calling in Christ is a wholehearted obedience to God, who commands all who believe to follow Jesus in the way of the cross. This service to God is also a service and suffering for the neighbor, for society, and, we would add today, for the good of a hurting planet.¹⁴ As Luther wrote,

Above these three institutions and orders [priesthood, marriage, and government] is the common order of Christian love, in which one serves not only the three orders, but also serves every needy person in general with all kinds of benevolent deeds, such as feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, forgiving enemies, praying for all [people] on earth, suffering all kinds of evil on earth, etc. Behold, all of these are called good and holy works. However, none of these orders is a means of salvation. There remains only one way above them all, viz. faith in Jesus Christ.¹⁵

It is faith in Jesus that is foundational to our general calling in Christ to serve the world. To be a Christian disciple is nothing less than to be called to serve and obey God's command, and therefore to serve the neighbor and the world,

¹³ Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Religion*, trans. Mary Anne Evans (London: John Chapman, 1854), 30. Feuerbach here conflates the goodness of creation (human nature) with the goodness of God's grace in redemption (salvation), a mistake that supports his naturalistic analysis of "religion."

¹⁴ See further the important monograph by Gustav Wingren, *Luther on Vocation* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957). See more recently his long article on "Beruf II" in the *Theologische Realencyclopädie*, 36 vols, ed. G. Krauz, G. Müller, et al. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1977–2004), 5:657–671. For the earth as "neighbor," Kiara Jorgenson reclaims a robustly Christian doctrine of vocation for a planet in crisis in *Ecology of Vocation*.

¹⁵ LW 37:365.

motivated not by fear or guilt but by love. Over time, Luther explained, he got used to following Christ and doing good works on the basis of our new birth in the Spirit of Christ:

The grace of God, which Christ has bestowed on me because I believe in Him, now makes the First Commandment a pleasure for me. Some will grow and advance in this respect more than others. Formerly I found that I had no delight in the Law. But now I discover that the Law is precious and good, that it was given to me for my life; and now it is pleasing to me. Formerly it told me what to do; now I am beginning to conform to its requests, so that now I praise, laud, and serve God.¹⁶

We should notice that what is key here, for Luther, is not the mere act of obedience in measurable, behavioral terms. Rather, Luther is dealing with a discipleship of the heart: a transformation of our desires away from fear, guilt, and shame and into the light of praise to and love for God. This transformation then becomes the basis of a new direction in life toward worship and mission, and away from sin and evil. Yet the transformation is a matter of degree, a constant struggle for the believer. Thus, it is not, for Luther, the true foundation of discipleship. Rather, our deepest trust remains in the solid, “alien” work of Christ and the promises of God to forgive and grant eternal life, based on sheer grace and not on our own doing or being.

Luther taught about two types of righteousness. Where most of Latin Christianity and its heirs would speak of growth in sanctification, Luther taught about the difference between a passive, or alien, righteousness and an active, or proper, righteousness.¹⁷ The first is more fundamental and is the basis of our working out the second. Alien righteousness is Christ’s own, therefore external to us, by which the believer is justified, sanctified, and redeemed. Proper righteousness is what we do, but not alone: this active righteousness is based on a faith-full relationship in which Christ is ours, living in and through us. It is proper to our subjectivity rather than alien, but it is also weaker and less sure. Sin is still a daily problem, and justification is needed each day by the disciple. Our sanctification by faith alone is a sheer gift, solid and divine, but our sanctification in thought and deed, our “active righteousness,” is always a matter of degree while we live in this age. Faith and forgiveness remain central to it.¹⁸ It would not be too much of a stretch

¹⁶ LW 22:144.

¹⁷ LW 31:297–325.

¹⁸ “Therefore the afflicted conscience has no remedy against despair and eternal death except to take hold of the promise of grace offered in Christ, that is, this righteousness of faith, this passive or Christian righteousness, which says with confidence: ‘I do not seek active righteousness. I ought to have and perform it; but I declare that even if I did have it and perform it, I cannot trust in it or stand up before the judgment of God on the basis of it. Thus I put myself beyond all active righteousness, all righteousness of my own or of the divine Law, and I embrace only that passive righteousness which is the righteousness of grace, mercy, and the forgiveness of sins.’ In other words, this is the righteousness of Christ and of the Holy Spirit, which we do not perform but receive, which we do not have but accept, when God the Father grants it to us through Jesus Christ.” LW 26:5–6.

to describe Luther's as a "discipleship of baptism" since the grace of God in this sacrament is the same that creates in us a new, spiritual reality, continuing to forgive our wrongdoings and resurrect us to new life in Christ. In the mystery of faith and the "happy exchange," Jesus becomes our spiritual husband, dwelling with us so our desires and behaviors are slowly transformed by grace, and in faith, hope, and love.

For Luther, then, our following Jesus in this world is enabled by and founded upon justification by faith.¹⁹ It involves a transformation that can, over time, make following God's ways a matter of love, praise, and joy. Our goal and motive in this case are both the love of God and the love of neighbor. We are not seeking to make ourselves acceptable to God by good works. And there will always be a struggle to follow God in this world of sin and evil, always some suffering to endure out of love. This active righteousness comes about by the presence of Christ in our lives as we cling to that righteousness and sanctification which is pure gift and based upon the power of faith in the promises of God.

LOVE, DESIRE, AND HOLISTIC DISCIPLESHIP

We pause here in a brief *intermezzo* to return to the theme of a holistic discipleship. Luther puts a powerful emphasis upon our interior walk with God. His concern is to proclaim and to live a gospel of free grace, a focus on love for God and neighbor, and a freedom of the Christian from the terrors of guilt and shame before the holy law of God. To be sure, Luther could teach about ethics, including what we would call social ethics. This can be seen in his theology of government, for example. But his major emphasis is on the inward way of faith and love, and the power of faith in Christ to bring the whole Trinity into the life of the believer. Luther thus takes his place in a long and distinguished tradition of the discipleship of desire, the right ordering our loves.²⁰ I am using *desire* as an expansive term here, and not in a narrow and negative sense. Desire in this larger vision is not simply lust. Rather, it includes things like values, motives, aims, purposes, and emotions of attraction and attachment. Desire is thus fixed within the way of human being in the world (*Dasein* in Heidegger). It would be an essential element of what Heidegger called *Dasein*'s "care" (*Sorge*) toward the world.²¹ Lest the reader think I am being

¹⁹ Marc Kolden makes this argument in "Earthly Vocation as a Corollary of Justification by Faith," in *By Faith Alone: Essays on Justification in Honor of Gerhard O. Forde*, ed. J. A. Burgess and M. Kolden (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 267–88; see further his earlier "Luther on Vocation," *Word & World* 3, no. 4 (1983): 382–90.

²⁰ For another approach to what I am calling the discipleship of desire, see Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay "On the Trinity"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). The tradition goes back to Augustine, the Greek spiritual theologians, and beyond them to the New Testament.

²¹ See Martin Heidegger, "Care as the Being of *Dasein*," in *Being and Time: A Translation of Sein und Zeit*, trans. Joan Stambaugh, rev. ed. (Albany: SUNY Press, 2010 [1927]). Desire in this sense is a mode of the "attunement" (*Stimmung*) of *Dasein* to the world, *Being and Time*, 130–38. But these categories don't overlap completely. *Angst*, which is clearly *not* desire in my sense, is also a mode of *Dasein*'s attunement to the world, according to Heidegger.

too expansive, I should state that neither *faith* nor *fear* in the evangelic sense is a matter of desire. Neither is what Luther would call “the Law” a matter of desire. Yet love and hope are matters of desire, I would say. We hope for what we do not yet have, after all, which surely means that we desire it (among other things, of course). And surely love is central to desire, and perhaps is its fullest, most spiritual manifestation.

If Luther and Wesley are right, then *holistic discipleship must include a discipleship of desire*. We need to rightly order our “loves,” as Jesus teaches us in the Gospels, and the apostles in their epistles. The move from the kingdom of Satan to the reign and realm of God involves, among other things, a reformation of our desires. And this is best done—perhaps *only* done—over time: through prayer and individual rites of devotion, to be sure, but also and crucially through churchly practices and rituals, in community with others, including the public witness to the gospel and resistance to structural evil. But we get ahead of our argument at this point. Let us then move on to act two of our drama. Enter John Wesley, stage right.

WESLEY ON LOVE, CHRISTIAN PERFECTION, AND SOCIAL HOLINESS

John Wesley (1703–1791) was a central leader and voice in the transatlantic Evangelical Revival of the eighteenth century.²² His passion was the renewal of genuine, scriptural Christianity in the midst of his beloved but flawed Church of England. A scholar, priest, evangelist, community organizer, and public leader of a fast-growing movement, he was at the center of things Methodist, working with many others to organize and grow the movement.²³ Equally important leaders were also crucial, like his brother Charles Wesley (1707–1788) and their friend, colleague, priest, and evangelist George Whitefield (1707–1770). Wesley was central to Methodism in its founding, organization, and early decades of growth, and his broad vision and gift for detailed organization and administration kept him there during his many years of active ministry.

With respect to holistic discipleship, Wesley remains a model of a public Christian leader who presented a balanced approach to church renewal and Christian ministry. He brought together many areas that were often divided to the detriment of vital worship and mission. He was an intellectual, an author, and a scholar of Oxford, a don at Lincoln College teaching Greek, who became a street preacher proclaiming the gospel in the language of the people:

²² In American history the Evangelical Revival is also called the first Great Awakening. For the history of Wesley and the rise of the Methodist movement, see Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodist*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2013).

²³ For a brief introduction to Wesley, see Henry H. Knight, III, *John Wesley* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2018), or William J. Abraham, *Wesley for Armchair Theologians* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2005); for a substantial biography see Kenneth J. Collins, *A Real Christian: The Life of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000).

I design plain truth for plain people: Therefore, of set purpose, I abstain from all nice and philosophical speculations; from all perplexed and intricate reasonings; and, as far as possible, from even the show of learning, unless in sometimes citing the original Scripture. I labour to avoid all words which are not easy to be understood, all which are not used in common life.²⁴

Wesley was a high-church Anglican priest with a deep devotion to the sacraments, who also led an evangelical renewal movement to revitalize the Established Church. Methodists eventually organized hundreds of “preaching houses” throughout England and beyond, but Wesley still insisted they attend the Established Church service to participate in the corporate worship of Word and Sacrament. He was passionate about the inner life of faith, grace, and new birth, but also organized serious small groups to transform the people and the community, working for what we would call issues of “social justice” as well as holiness.

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As ethicist Rebecca Miles notes, “Wesley and the early Methodists were passionate about caring for the physical needs of others. They provided clothing to widows and orphans, food to the hungry, housing for the homeless, and medicine for the sick.”²⁵ Wesley was a long-time and vocal critic of slavery, ever since he encountered it as a missionary priest to Georgia. He organized a sugar boycott to undermine part of the economic basis of the evil trade in human flesh. He was strongly critical of accumulating wealth in an age of Adam Smith; amid a growing capitalism and wealth-elite in England, he called such storing up of treasure on earth a moral sin. A constant advocate for the poor, illiterate, and marginalized in English society, he organized his growing movement to provide schools and health clinics for the poor, literacy programs for adults, and food for the hungry. At the level of social policy, for example, he argued for a number of policies to alleviate the plight of the downtrodden and hungry. He complained of the oppression of the poor by the social system, including high rents, high taxes, the extravagance of

²⁴ Preface to his *Sermons on Several Occasions*, in *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, ed. Frank Baker, Richard Heitzenrater, and Randy Maddox, 35 vols. (projected), (Nashville, Abingdon, 1975–), 1:104. Henceforth referred to as *WJW*.

²⁵ Rebecca Miles, “Happiness, Holiness and the Moral Life in John Wesley,” in *The Cambridge Companion to John Wesley*, ed. R. Maddox and J. Vickers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 210. For more on what we moderns call “social ethics” in Wesley’s thought and ministry, see Theodore Jennings, *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley’s Evangelical Economics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), and Manfred Marquardt, *John Wesley’s Social Ethics: Praxis and Principles* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992).

the wealthy, and the monopolizing of farm lands.²⁶ He encouraged and supported laws to make the slave trade illegal: the last of over three thousand letters we have from his pen is an epistle encouraging William Wilberforce (1759–1833) in his crusade to make slavery illegal.²⁷ As Miles puts it, “Holiness was not simply about transforming our own life, or even the lives of other individuals. Wesley and the early Wesleyans sought the transformation of the whole society.”²⁸

Far from focusing only on the individual experience with God, Wesley held that “the Gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness, but social holiness,” meaning that *only in long-term and devoted communities of worship and small groups of earnest discipleship* can we hope to grow in Christ.²⁹ For Wesley and the Methodists, holiness was relational. He called such true discipleship holiness, and the doctrine of Christian Perfection. Indeed, he believed this call to a devout, happy, and sacrificial Christian life was a central reason for God raising up the Methodist movement: “to reform the nation, particularly the Church, and to spread Scriptural holiness over the land.”³⁰

This sounds at once like a contradictory approach to Luther’s. But if we dig down into the details of Wesley’s theology, we will find this more of a shift in language and emphasis. There are some contradictions, and I will return to some of them, but they are less glaring than might first appear. Let’s start with his doctrine of salvation and then focus on Christian perfection. Does this really mean that some believers are no longer sinners? It’s important to understand the logical distinctions Wesley made in order to press his viewpoint over against critics, to understand what he actually taught.

At the heart of Wesley’s theology of discipleship was his understanding of the “way of salvation” (*via salutis*).³¹ This is a divine way, created and sustained by the free grace and love of God from start to finish. This way begins with the

²⁶ See, for example, his “Thoughts on the Present Scarcity of Provisions,” in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson, 14 vols. (London: J. Mason, 1829–1831; rpt. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 11:53–59, online at <https://tinyurl.com/y6qeqlf5k>; Wesley notes that few of his radical policies were likely to be passed into law. See also Sermon 87, “The Danger of Riches,” and Sermon 131, “The Danger of Increasing Riches,” *WJW* 3:228–246 and 4:178–86 respectively.

²⁷ On Wesley as a correspondent, see Ted Campbell, “John Wesley as Diarist and Correspondent,” in *The Cambridge Companion to John Wesley*, 129–34. *WJW* will devote seven volumes to Wesley’s letters, a work still in progress (see below). For now, scholars still rely on the eight-volume collection, *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley*, ed. John Telford (London: Epworth, 1931); for the letter to Wilberforce, see 8:265.

²⁸ Miles, “Happiness, Holiness,” 215. Wesleyans were hardly the first to seek the reformation of society on evangelic principles, of course. The idea that Christians should reform all of society can be traced back through the Church of England’s Puritans to Calvin’s Geneva, at the very least.

²⁹ *WJW* 13:39. Wesley means “social” here in the sense of communal rather than social structures; this is from his preface to a hymnal, after all! Wesley did not originate this emphasis on dedicated small discipleship groups. It can be traced back to the early Lutheran Pietists, at least. See, for example, the classic Philipp J. Spener, *Pia Desideria* (1675; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964).

³⁰ *WJW* 10:845.

³¹ Perhaps the best single place to go for this doctrine, which is found often in his works, is Sermon 43, “The Scripture Way of Salvation,” *WJW* 2:153–69. Arguably, the best single volume on Wesley’s theology remains Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), but see also two important works by Kenneth J. Collins: *John Wesley: A Theological Journey* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), and *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007).

recognition of sin and a true repentance of our wrongdoings. This is not something humans can do on their own, but is an act empowered and led by God the Holy Spirit, through free grace (“prevenient grace,” Wesley called it).³² Wesley had a robust doctrine of sin and could speak powerfully about our inability to come to Christ apart from the work of God in us:

[Our sins] are chains of iron and fetters of brass. They are wounds wherewith the world, the flesh, and the devil have gashed and mangled us all over. They are diseases that drink up our blood and spirits, that bring us down to the chambers of the grave.³³

On their own, mere human effort and freedom apart from the grace of God cannot save us. Only the work of Christ provides salvation for the sinner. Where Wesley differed from Luther is in his view of *sin in the believer*. Wesley allowed greater growth in grace in this life than Luther did. By contrast to the power of sin apart from God, Wesley taught that the Christian believer who is holy need not always sin. In order to accommodate our experience and to respond to his critics, the mature Wesley narrowly defined “sin” as (a) a *voluntary* action, which (b) is *knowingly* willed against the moral law of God. He also accepted as sin “improperly so-called” actions that are contrary to the moral law and are involuntary, or unknown. He was at pains to state that what might seem like sinful actions could be attributed to human infirmities, mistakes, ignorance, and other failings of our mortal human nature.³⁴ He goes on to concede, “Such transgressions you may call ‘sin’ if you please. I do not.”³⁵ Here is a real difference between Luther and Wesley, and indeed between Wesley and most theologians who take the doctrine of sin seriously.

When we turn to the power and importance of faith in Christ, they were one. We learn to trust in God alone through a radical faith in the gospel and the work of Christ. Wesley had a fully evangelic understanding of faith. “Christian faith is then not only an assent to the whole gospel of Christ, but also a full reliance on the blood of Christ, a trust in the merits of his life, death and resurrection.”³⁶ In other words, on this basis we are justified by faith alone, apart from works or merit.³⁷ This might surprise some Lutherans who think Wesleyan theology is a kind of “works righteousness.” It’s true that Wesleyans and Methodists have been tempted by the heresy of legalism, but this is not the heart and soul of our theology. Rather,

³² The term is Catholic and far older than Wesley. On prevenient grace see Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 83–92; Collins, *Theology of John Wesley*, 73–81, and especially W. Brian Shelton, *Prevenient Grace: God’s Provision for Fallen Humanity* (Wilmore, Kentucky: Francis Asbury, 2014).

³³ *WJW* 1:586.

³⁴ *WJW* 13:61–62; see further *WJW* 1:314–34.

³⁵ “Thoughts on Christian Perfection,” Q.6, 62.

³⁶ *WJW* 1:120.

³⁷ The young Wesley came to this doctrine over time. See *WJW* 1:181–99, including the introduction by the editor, Albert Outler.

the heart of Wesley's theology of discipleship is the free and loving grace of God.³⁸ "Love is the sum of Christian sanctification."³⁹ While repentance and justification always continue for the believer, Wesley's strong emphasis was upon not resting on these alone. Christ calls us to fullness in him, to a life filled with love in our hearts, minds, and actions—in short, to holiness. This holiness is founded upon the work of Christ, grounded in our radical trust in the gospel, and empowered and guided by God's presence in us. Holiness is a whole-body transformation that includes also our words and deeds and is fundamentally loving and relational. This transformation is what Wesley called Christian Perfection.

Wesley meant by perfection what the Greek New Testament teaches, not what *perfection* implies in contemporary English. The New Testament does indeed teach that believers should be "perfect" (τέλειος, Matt 5:48; see also Eph 4:13), but the term means "maturity" or "completion" rather than flawless and static perfection. We must translate Wesley's doctrine into contemporary thought: it's about *holy maturity in love*, not an absolute sinless perfection. Wesley assumed that our outward actions flow from our inner life ("tempers"). Christian maturity is about desire and volition rather than merely external behavior, for Wesley: the heart and mind that have the love of God poured into them by the Holy Spirit will desire and choose all things *motivated* and *guided* by that love. Thus, the goal is neither moralism nor legalism; it's holiness and happiness, understood as being filled with the love of God and neighbor, engaged in a communal quest together. Over time, the presence of God in our lives—the grace and guidance of the living Word and the Spirit—transforms us into "patterns to all of true, genuine morality; of justice, mercy and truth."⁴⁰ This is a holistic sense of discipleship, but centered in the discipleship of desire.

While holiness thus understood—as maturity in divine love, lived out in community—does entail individual and social action, the driving force is not "good works." For Wesley, as for Luther, "good works" begin with the transformation of our desires by God in the life of the believer and the community. Luther insisted that we need the church as the place where true worship takes place, and that we are sanctified by faith through the power of the Holy Spirit and Christ, the Word of God.⁴¹ But Wesley had a stronger sense of the importance of going on to holiness of life and heart, and so the need for church community and "holy conversation" in small groups (using "conversation" in its eighteenth-century sense of human interaction of all types). You might say that Wesley believed in inner, active, and communal holiness. His emphasis was not so much on daily repentance and

³⁸ Both Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, and Collins, *Theology of John Wesley*, make divine love and grace the center of their exposition. See also Mildred Wynkoop, *A Theology of Love: The Dynamics of Wesleyanism*, 2nd ed. (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 2015).

³⁹ *WJW* 3:175.

⁴⁰ *WJW* 4:67.

⁴¹ See Martin Luther "The Creed: The Third Article," in his *Small Catechism* at <http://bookofconcord.org/smallcatechism.php#creed>.

justification as it was on sanctification. And since sanctification by grace is mature love through Christ, it is also relational and communal.

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Luther’s and Wesley’s theologies of discipleship do share many points: the priority of God’s grace and love, the foundation of salvation in the work of Christ, the power of faith as radical trust, the real and active presence of God in the life of the church and believer, the importance of the church community for sanctification, and the flow from saving faith to a love for God and neighbor that “naturally” results in good works (as Luther spoke of it). Beyond these areas of shared understanding, Wesley’s emphasis on holiness pushed him and his followers into a holistic, full-bodied, and communal theology of discipleship. In keeping with this holistic understanding of sanctification, Wesley published works on health and healing, including his best-selling *Primitive Physic* (1747). This was not as a side job away from the main task of evangelism, but a vital part of his goal to spread scriptural holiness over the land.⁴²

BEYOND LUTHER AND WESLEY

There is much to learn about Christian discipleship today from the wisdom of both Luther and Wesley. But where they *disagree* is also important. I have found that they often correct each other’s overemphasis in ways that lead to better theological insight than either of them in isolation can provide. I’ll discuss two of these points briefly, both with a focus on discipleship.

First, let us speak of suffering and joy. Luther’s emphasis on a theology of the cross led naturally to a cruciform notion of discipleship.⁴³ *Suffering* was inevitable for the true follower of Christ in this world of evil spirits and human sin. We don’t seek suffering as such, of course, but its reality should be anticipated and lived through by the grace of Christ living with and through us by faith. Wesley, on the other hand, had a constant refrain connecting *holy love* with *happiness*. He did not mean what we mean by the latter term today in my North American context, but something like lasting fulfillment and deep rejoicing that suffering and trials do

⁴²See *WJW* 32:97–266, which contains a critical edition of the *Primitive Physic*, with introduction by the volume editors, James G. Donat and Randy Maddox.

⁴³Bonhoeffer followed this Lutheran theme as thoroughly as any theologian of the twentieth century. See his justly famous *Discipleship*.

not take away.⁴⁴ This is found in the presence of God's love and mercy and in a direct *experience* of the new birth he called "assurance." A better word for this in our time would be *joy*, as in "the joy of the Lord is your strength" (Neh 8:10). Both emphases, suffering and joy, are necessary for a true and realistic conception of the Christian life. Both are needed in a contemporary theology of discipleship. Both occur and should be interpreted and understood theologically, as well as pastorally and in community with others.

Second, consider sin and holiness. Surely Luther is right that believers, in this life, will always struggle with their sinful side. We will always need to repent, therefore, even on a daily basis. Justification by faith is thus never left behind, and saving faith is basic to the human following Jesus in this world. But Wesley is correct also. Real and substantial healing is possible in this life for our bodies, our emotional life, our minds, and our souls, not by human effort alone but by the power of Christ living and acting in us.⁴⁵ There is substantial healing and transformation possible in God for relationships with Her, with the neighbor, within our societies, our nations, and our hurting planet. True discipleship is thus a dynamic struggle between our continuing sin, dethroned as it is by Jesus, and holy love, in our personal and communal walk with God. As Luther or Wesley would say, this is part of a cosmic struggle between Christ and the devil. And because God is God, *progress is possible* by grace. For it is not our sin or evil that is Lord of the disciple, the world, or the cosmos: Jesus is Lord. He is the victor, the ruler, and the savior. He is the Divine One born human to serve and save a sorrowing human race, and despite his own suffering, even because of his crucifixion and resurrection, he will win the day. *Vicit Angus Dei!* If from these heights and depths we turn our focus to *desire*, as both Luther and Wesley would have us do, we can say that there is positive transformation to be made in the discipleship of desire. Our habits and our desires can be transformed—not completely and utterly perfected, but really and substantially transformed *in this life*. Sanctification in Christ is not only an external gift; the Spirit of holiness also transforms the whole person as we grow in Christlikeness.

HOLISTIC DISCIPLESHIP TODAY

The fact of the matter is that a slavish following of either Luther or Wesley is no longer possible, and it never was very wise. Both of them would have us follow Jesus and the truth of God first in our theology. Today our understanding of human existence and nature is much richer and more complex, due to the rise of

⁴⁴Late in his life Wesley answered the old question from the Westminster Catechism, "What is the chief end of [humanity]?" with "[God] made *you*; and he made you to be happy in him; and nothing else can make you happy." He further explained that this consists in the love of God and neighbor—that is, holy love. See *WJW* 4:64. See further Miles, "Holiness, Happiness," and Maddox, *Responsible Grace*.

⁴⁵Wesley often likened salvation to healing, as did early Greek theologians who influenced him. This is the theological reasoning behind his interest in medicine. See Donat and Maddox's introduction to Wesley's *Medical and Health Writings*, *WJW* 32:1–64.

the human sciences. These include not only the social sciences but human biology, medicine, communication science, neuroscience, and other cognitive sciences. Christian theology has also moved along quite a bit since the days of Luther and Wesley (although more slowly than the sciences, as is appropriate for the *scientia* of the eternal God). So, the assumption they both made, for example, that our choices and actions simply flow from our *conscious* inner desires should no longer be accepted. It's a good deal more complex than that, including unconscious and preconscious activity in us that must be acknowledged and incorporated. A holistic theology of discipleship will thus include a discipleship of desire, but ground that in a more modern understanding of the human person in community, the dynamics of human psychology, the structures of societies and nations, and the embeddedness of humanity in the larger ecosystem of a living planet.⁴⁶ We have no space to develop this further but in closing will take up one example.

Most of the history of Christian thought embraced a now-defunct “faculty psychology” or something like it. Reason, feelings, volition, spirituality, and appetites were understood as distinct parts, operations, or “faculties” of the human soul. Modern psychology and cognitive sciences have exploded this perspective on human consciousness. These are not separate but just different ways in which our mind-brain-body complex functions in our environment and given our history and context. Our “heart” is simply the whole person feeling, and our “mind” is simply the whole person thinking. We are deeply shaped by our history and community, our experiences and our bodies, in how we think, what we choose, our desires and our fears: conscious, unconscious, and preconscious ones.

These new truths about us do not undermine the possibility of true discipleship, including the discipleship of desire. Rather, they transform it. We may need to rediscover the importance of a sustained, serious emphasis on *practicing* the Christian faith, including spiritual practices, small groups devoted to spiritual maturity, worship, liturgy, and the sacraments, as well as acts of evangelism and social justice. Serious and loving small groups where truth-telling and deep prayer take place are essential to long-term healing and transformation. Paying attention to what James Smith calls “cultural liturgies” becomes important too, as we all too often *practice* alternative rituals that undermine our quest for Christlikeness.⁴⁷ Because we are fully embodied social and historical beings, the discipleship of desire cannot take place in individual isolation, nor in pure contemplation. It cannot simply be a matter of our conscious willing and thinking alone. Sunday worship and ritual become essential, but not enough. Living out and practicing healthy relationships with God, with others, with the earth, and with ourselves

⁴⁶ For some moves in this direction, see Timothy O'Connor, *Making Disciples: A Handbook of Christian Moral Formation* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1998). On social and developmental cognitive sciences, see Philip Robbins and Murat Aydede, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Situated Cognition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), and Lawrence Shapiro, ed., *The Routledge Handbook of Embodied Cognition* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

⁴⁷ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009).

may be rediscovered as the crucial elements in a transforming, holy love in our lives and our communities. True faith may lead “naturally” to the love, obedience, and worship of God, but it’s a complex and long process. The love, obedience, and worship of God, and the active love of neighbor, also lead to a deeper and more lasting faith. In the ecology of Christian life, the inner journey is undertaken along with the outer journey for the same ends: to live lives pleasing to God. For such Christians, the struggle for a just society is sustained by our continued quest to love and worship Christ in every dimension of life. The inner and the outer journey are one. ⊕

ALAN G. PADGETT is a minister in the United Methodist Church and professor of systematic theology at Luther Seminary, where he serves as coordinator for the Methodist House of Studies. His most recent book is Ecotheology: A Christian Conversation (Eerdmans, 2020), which he co-edited with Kiara Jorgenson.