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A Social Justice Context for Wesley's Ethics: Composing a Social Justice Position for the Church of God (Anderson, Indiana)

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A SOCIAL JUSTICE CONTEXT FOR WESLEY'S ETHICS:
COMPOSING A SOCIAL JUSTICE POSITION FOR THE CHURCH OF GOD
(ANDERSON, INDIANA)

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BY
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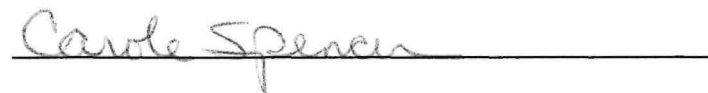
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We, the undersigned, certify that we have read this thesis and approve it as adequate in scope and quality for the degree of Master of Arts in Theological Studies.



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**I would like to thank my wife, Laurie,
and daughters, Kelly, Paige, Carly and Hannah
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INTRODUCTION

In this thesis I will be investigating John Wesley's ethics, both his personal, and social ethics. One of Wesley's most intentional statements on this subject of personal ethics can be found in his General Rules, and a series of public tracts. One concern is that the strong emphasis in his General Rules has an individualistic bent, which places the focus on personal piety. This writer believes, however, that a close look at Wesley's works will show that his strong emphasis on love, as the driving force behind a Christian ethic, prevents it from being a solely personal issue. In fact, when looking at Wesley's social ethics, you find its foundation in his theology of love. This theology points out that God's love alone is the power that regenerates human love.

This thesis will show that Wesley's theology is rooted in his strong emphasis on love. This motif of love permeates every other aspect of his theology. A focus of study will be Wesley's thirteen discourses on the Sermon on the Mount. These discourses, in part, form his "perfect love" theology; which Wesley felt was dynamic in causing moral and social reform. This thesis will conclude with a proposal for a social justice position for the Church of God (Anderson, Indiana.)

Chapter One

WESLEY'S ETHIC

Current State of Scholarly Investigation

Scholars such as Joseph L. Allen and Ronald H. Stone both point to a covenantal ethic as the basis for relationships for our communities, as well as benefitting cross-cultural missions. Stanley J. Grenz points out in his book, *The Moral Quest: Foundation of Christian Ethics* that the Ten Commandments can be summed up in one statement, "Love your neighbor as yourself". This love ethic is dynamic because it characterized God. In the New Testament the "Pauline ethic" assumes that love is at the heart of living in community. Grenz cites Victor Paul Furnish, "It is a matter of choosing to be good for the brother and what will build up the whole community."

But there are some scholars that take issue with Wesley. James Cone, in his book *Black Theology of Liberation* states, "The warm heart and all that stuff," distracts Wesley from addressing social, political, and economic issues. There are a few scholars, (Eschegoyer, Meistad, and J. R. Tyson.) whom address this issue, stating that Wesley's strong emphasis on individual sin is not without his acknowledgment of man's prevalence of sin and distortion and society.

Why Investigate This Problem?

First, I believe the local church can benefit in the area of unity among the believing community. Second, in turn, with a covenantal love motif in hand, the Christian community is better equipped to communicate the gospel message to the ever-changing postmodern community. Third, the reinterpretation of the historical and biblical ethic, interpreted through Wesley's personal and social ethics, will aid the theological community in gaining a new perspective on how to communicate the gospel cross-

culturally. Fourth, this research will clarify some misconceptions of Wesley's true aim in promoting love over his often controversial "Christian perfection" theology, and finally, to exercise practical theology in the writing of a social justice position for the Church of God.

The Poor of Wesley's Day

A worthy place to start in this investigation of Wesley's social ethics is to take a look at the poor of Wesley's day. First, the question needs to be asked, "Who were the poor?" Interestingly, not any one definition prevails; there is no true scientific objective concept of it.¹ Poverty is a term of relative matter; most often it is a term that describes deprivation or a condition that marks the lack of the necessities of life, or perhaps the comforts of life.² The whole question comes down to a matter of definition. Often the poor are those who find themselves at the bottom of the economic ladder, but even this gets complicated by the fact that many with this designation do not consider themselves to be poor.

In the sixteenth century, the English attempted to develop a national policy to help deal with poverty. This move was motivated by a period of poor harvests and extreme hardship, the results of lopsided political policy tainted by the upper classes and the tsunami of industrialization.³ Malnutrition and starvation of catastrophic proportion were reported among the poor. The English developed programs of "poor relief," which were financed by taxation. The relief program served the infirmed, the sick, elderly, widowed,

¹Riis, Thomas. *Aspects of Poverty in Early Modern Europe*. Lemonnier: France, 1981.

²Ibid., 53.

³Wesley D. Tracy, "Economic Policies and Judicial Oppression as Formative Influences of the Theology of John Wesley" (Wesleyan Theological Journal, Volume 27, Number 1-2, Fall and Spring, 1992.) 2.

orphaned, and disabled.⁴ In time, deserving poor expanded beyond those deemed infirmed and disabled to include those who were unemployed and underemployed, experiencing an inability to provide sufficient income for their families or even themselves. Consequently, they were not able to provide the necessities of life.⁵ These concerns were formulated into a three-pronged national strategy to deal with the poor. First, the idle and the able-bodied were put to work, and punished if they refused. The infirmed and the disabled who could not work received cash supplementation. Begging and casual almsgiving were banned.⁶ Putting the able-bodied to work in most cases meant not only furnishing materials and employment, but the training of these people as well, which sadly included children. This way of conducting the program was generated by an overall concern for the economy and parliament's desire for the passing of laws that sufficiently covered the issue of the poor. It is interesting to note that the implementation of these laws did not fall into the hands of the national or local authorities, but instead was placed in the hands of parish officers, churchwardens, overseers of the poor and justices of the peace.⁷ There were some small successes locally, but the system of poor laws generally failed. The failure is attributed to the lack of uniform enforcement.⁸ One of the disturbing arguments was that the poor laws were

⁴Paul Slack, *The English Poor Laws, 1531-1782* (Cambridge: University Press, 1990)5- 6.

⁵Theobald, William, *An Act for the Relief of the Poor* (London: Sweet, 1836) 427-32.

⁶Slack, *Poor Laws*, 9, 47.

⁷Heitznrater, Richard P., *The Poor and People called Methodist* (Nashville: Kingwood Books, 2002)

19.

⁸Ibid., 18.

passed by the rich in an effort to deal with the poor, whom they perceived to be a problem.⁹ Slack points out that these programs were implemented threefold: Christian charity, moral reform, and thorough reform by public authorities. There also seemed to be a religious aspect of redemption for the receiver and the giver of the donation. The moral reform guarded against idleness, dirt, disease, and indiscipline. There was a rising concern for public policy on social and economic matters.¹⁰

There were three basic views that society held regarding the poor. One, held by the rich, that those in society who possessed the means to afford almsgiving felt they would be recognized on “judgment day” for their giving. In turn, the poor were obligated to pray for the almsgiver. Two, held by political office, that the poor were viewed mainly as a problem of public order. Three, held by economists and entrepreneurs, that the able-bodied poor represented a reserve of labor, possibly to keep wages low. With the creation of the workhouse, there was a confluence of political and economic interest. 30-50% of the population were unemployed or underemployed. In some parts of the country the rich had to pay surpluses that helped to soften the financial burden of the poor. As the saying goes, “the rich carried the poor.”¹² This type of caring for the poor, it seems, never allowed the poor to better themselves, it only helped to maintain a life of poverty or at best elevated them to a ‘working poor’ status. Economic fluctuation caused by bad

⁹Riis, Thomas, *Poverty and Urban Development in Early modern England; Aspects of Poverty*, (Florence: LeMonnier, 1981) 16.

¹⁰ Slack, *Poor Laws*, 4-7.

¹¹Riis, Thomas, *Aspects of Poverty in Early Modern Europe* (Lemonnier: Firenze, 1981) 2.

¹²*Ibid.*, 9.

harvests is but a partial explanation of poverty for sixteenth-century English society.¹³ I have to trust that Slack's account is accurate, based on his frequent reference to numerous and notable scholars. His study described the "poor laws" of the sixteenth century, and by the eighteenth century, Slack's assessment of the failure of the "poor laws'" ineffectiveness came to fruition. My eyes were opened up to this grave truth upon reading Wesley D. Tracy's article entitled "Economic Policies and Judicial Oppressions as Formative Influence on the Theology of John Wesley". Tracy's scope of reference was gleaned from newspaper and magazine articles written in the eighteenth century, 200 years after the drafting of the "poor laws" of the sixteenth century, which Slack described. The articles that Tracy researched would have been articles that Wesley himself would have read.¹⁴ A general overview depicts eighteenth-century England's poverty-ridden society. Housing conditions were outrageous. Ten people lived together in unfurnished homes and horse manure polluted the streets. Tracy reports that in the streets of London there were times when the manure was piled fourteen feet high on both sides of the street. Diseases like typhoid, smallpox, dysentery, and cholera ravaged the city. Starvation was a daily occurrence. In larger cities the graveyards maintained "poor holes," which were large common graves left open until the daily flow of corpses of nameless people filled them.¹⁵ Another author by the name of William Henry Fitchett wrote a book, encompassing Wesley and his century. Fitchett brings forth an indictment

¹³Thomas Riis, cite, D. Knowles, *The Religious Orders of English*, III The Tudor Age (Cambridge, 1959) 8.

¹⁴Tracy, Wesley D., *Economic Policies and Judicial Oppression as Formative Influences on the Theology of John Wesley*. (Wesleyan Theological Journal, vol 27, no. 1 and 2, Spring-Fall, 1992) 2.

¹⁵ Ibid., 2.

of the clergy of Wesley's day which brought on a spiritual oppression on the English society differing from Tracy's depressive account. However, the spiritual poverty wielded at the hand of the priests and pastors potentially had an eternal impact. Even though Christianity does not exist in a code of ethics or a far off history, it is a body of truth that must be examined as well as implemented into our lives.¹⁶ The trouble was that these inspired truths seemed to be missing from society when Wesley began his work. The deficit was spawned from a religious community that operated more from human effort than supernatural content. This religion produced no change and provided little inspiration. The Holy Spirit's life-giving blood leaked out. The wound that the church was inflicted with came at the hand of the clergy. They were a useless lot with watered-down teaching which lacked truth and supernatural discernment. They were not convinced themselves of the truth of the biblical message.¹⁷ A Bishop by the name of Butler refused to allow Whitfield and Wesley their desire to preach at his diocese while all around his "cathedral city" lay some of the most degraded, hopeless classes of English society.¹⁸ There were some bright spots, one being William Law's bold stand for complete devotion to God.

As a whole, the church's intended worth had drained away. Public life was corrupt; its clergy discredited, its church frozen, and its theology exhausted of Christian elements.¹⁹

These two discussions concerning eighteenth-century England by Tracy and Fitchett

¹⁶ Fitchett, William Henry, *Wesley and His Century: A Study of Spiritual Forces* (Cincinnati: Jennings and Graham, 1912) 143.

¹⁷ Ibid., 144.

¹⁸ Ibid., 146.

¹⁹ Ibid., 148.

paint a vivid and telling picture of the social environment of Wesley's day. England was in need of fresh wind and fresh fire. Wesley was the man called and trained by God for this great task.

It was from within this socioeconomic environment that John Wesley grew, lived, worked and developed his personal and social ethic. Wesley sensed that the poor of English society needed something more than subsidy and a job; they needed a life transformation. So much of John Wesley's ethic was governed by the notion of the imitation of God. Specifically, his ethic depended on the moral image of God; the mirroring of the love of God to discover and clarify its purpose and keep it in its proper order. This ordered place called for a deep responsibility of those that claimed Jesus as their Savior and Lord. Wesley wrote that obedient children of God should note that it is for the good of the public that we obey the laws of the land. Out of obligation to the laws of God's Kingdom, ministers of God need to be champions for the public good.²⁰ Wesley stated further that Christians need to perform these general duties as our debt to magistrates. This eternal debt is paid properly when we have obeyed the laws of heaven in full, therefore, sufficiently fulfilling the laws toward our neighbor. We are commanded to love one another, summing up, in effect, all of the biblical commandments.²¹

Wesley wrote thirteen discourses, *Upon our Lord's Sermon On The Mount*. The commandment mentioned above is considered by Wesley to be contained in the Sermon on the Mount located in Matthew 5-7. These sermons make up one third of Wesley's

²⁰ Wesley, John, *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*, Romans 13:6.

²¹ Ibid., Romans 13:8.

“Standard Sermons.” For Wesley, the sermons (Wesley’s Sermons set the standard) represented pure religion as presented by God.²² Stone points out that what contemporary interpreters call the way of “orthopraxis,” meaning the way of right conduct for those who choose the way of salvation in Christ, Wesley finds to be contained in the Sermon on the Mount.²³ Wesley’s ethic is firmly grounded in the scriptures, specifically the Sermon on the Mount, which can be trusted to have no error in its moral teaching. (For a thorough discussion of Wesley’s approach to scripture from a historical perspective, read Dr. R. Larry Shelton’s article on Wesley and Scripture in Wesleyan Theological Journal)²⁴ Wesley would, therefore, instruct us to always use scripture to interpret scripture, and when doing so, by the working of the Holy Spirit, the teaching is made plain. In this effort, our central task needs to be finding God’s will. Wesley understood the clearest statement of ethics to be found in the Sermon on the Mount.

Every other aspect of Wesley’s ethic begins with salvation received only by faith in Jesus Christ. One of the first places that we see Wesley’s expression of this concept of faith alone is in his sermon, *The Circumcision of the Heart*, derived from the Romans 2 passage which reads, starting with verse 28, “A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the spirit, not by the

²²Stone. Ronald H., *John Wesley’s Life and Ethic*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, , 2001) 110.

²³Ibid., 110.

²⁴ Shelton, R. Larry, *John Wesley’s Approach to Scripture in Historical Perspective* (Wesleyan Theological Journal, Volume 16, Number 1, Spring, 1981)

witness of the code.”²⁵ Wesley felt that the circumcision of the heart was a “habitual disposition of the soul,” which was a direct correlation with the term ‘holiness’, implying the purification from sin. “Let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence” (2 Cor 7:21) This is in keeping with God’s commandments emphasizing, “Thou shalt love the Lord your God with all your heart and love your neighbor as yourself.” Holiness is having the mind of Christ and walking as Christ walked. Wesley drove home the point of the Matthew 5:28 reference to be “perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect.” He explained that without the presence of God’s spirit we are absolutely helpless to attain true holiness; it is not of ourselves but of God. He writes:

To be more particular, circumcision of heart implies humility, faith, hope, and charity. Humility, a right judgment of ourselves, cleanses our minds from those high conceits of our own perfections, from the undue opinions of our own abilities and attainments which are the genuine fruit of a corrupted nature. This entirely cuts off that vain thought, ‘I am rich, and wise, and have need of nothing;’ and convinces us that we are by nature ‘wretched, and poor, and miserable, and blind, and naked’. It convinces us that in our best estate we are of ourselves all sin and vanity; that confusion, and ignorance, and error, reign over our understanding; that unreasonable, earthly, sensual, devilish passions usurp authority over our will: in a word, that there is no whole part in our soul, that all the foundations of our nature are out of course.²⁶

Without the Holy Spirit, our behavior does nothing but “add sin to sin”.²⁷

Circumcision of the Heart was written in 1733, and over a fifty year span we see

Wesley’s theology mature, moving from moral rectitude, to faith alone, to faith alone

²⁵NIV Thinline Reference Bible, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan,), Rom. 2:28.

²⁶ Wesley, John, *Works, Sermon 17: The Circumcision of the Heart*, I:403.

²⁷Phil. 2:13; also see, Wesley’s sermon 85, *Working Out Our Own Salvation*, III: 199.

working by love.²⁸ We see this love-oriented theology worked out in his sermon, *The Wedding Garment*. Wesley said, “Of course, the wedding garment equals holiness, both holiness of Christ and our personal holiness which in turn saves humanity from the eternal judgment of hell.”²⁹ As a transition into our examination of Wesley’s discourses; *Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount*, we find what I believe to be a summation of what Wesley filled out in more telling detail in the conclusion of his sermon,

The Wedding Garment:

The sum of all is this: the God of love is willing to save all the souls that he has made. This he has proclaimed to them in his Word, together with the terms of salvation revealed by the son of his love, who gave his own life that, they that believe in him might have everlasting life. And for these he has prepared a kingdom from the foundation of the world. But he will not force them to accept of it. He leaves them in the hands of their own counsel. He said: ‘Behold, I set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; choose life that you may live. Choose holiness by my grace, which is the way, the only way, to everlasting life. He cries aloud, be holy, and be happy; happy in this world, and happy in the world to come. ‘Holiness adorns his house forever!’ This is the wedding garment of all that are called to ‘the marriage of the lamb.’ Clothed in this they will not be found naked: ‘they have washed their robes and have made them white in the blood of the lamb. But as to all those who appear in the last day without the wedding garment, the Judge will say: ‘cast them into outer darkness’; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’³⁰

Madeley, March 26, 1790

Wesley believed that the Sermon on the Mount was God’s speech – everything needful of life was contained in this sermon. In fact, he claimed the sermons contained all that was needed to prevent Christians from becoming corrupt. For Wesley they were the

²⁸Wesley, Works, *The Wedding Garment*, IV: 140-148, also see Matt. 22:1-14.

²⁹Stone, *Wesley’s Life and Ethics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press) 111.

³⁰Wesley, Works, *The Wedding Garment*, IV: 148.

definitive source of God's given ethic, intended for all time for whoever would accept it. According to Wesley, the fifth chapter of Matthew contained the authenticity of religion and counted the mistakes of the people. In the sixth chapter, rules of our intentions which guide actions are presented and the seventh chapter cautions against religious mistakes and applies the whole sermon.³¹

Discourse I: Humility

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." It is not possible to know for sure who was in the crowd that day, but Wesley surmised that there were not many rich; instead the earthly poor were gathered. It was given this audience that Jesus took the opportunity to transition between temporal to spiritual matters of the heart. Wesley's interpretation started with the question, "Who are the poor in spirit?" concluding that it was those who truly and humbly accept the forgiveness of sins.³²

Wesley spoke straight to the heart of the matter, no matter one's life circumstances, neither rich nor poor; it is the condition of your heart that counts. Being poor in spirit are the first substantial steps all must take toward true freedom from the eternal consequences of sin.³³ This lowly posture of the heart is true and genuine Christian humility, which flows from the deep love of God, reconciled to us in Jesus Christ.

Wesley interpreted the second beatitude, "Blessed are they that mourn," as a sorrowful state experienced by those who have entered salvation. Falling into a state of sadness, they desire assurance of the presence of God. The idea is that these people will achieve a

³¹Outler, Albert C., *Introductory Notes on Sermon 21-33* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987) IV: 467.

³²Wesley, *Works, Upon Our Lords Sermon on the Mount, I:477.*

³³Ibid., I:482.

new joy with Christ. The Christian who rests in confidence of his salvation and then mourns the world's fallen and sinful state is said to be blessed. Stone points out that Wesley wrote, in his *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*, that the benefits of being poor in spirit were not only realized in God's heavenly kingdom but in this earthly kingdom as well. This was written half a decade before Wesley changed his translation from "blessed" to "happiness", indicating the more present benefit of the word.³⁴

Discourse II: Righteousness

Wesley looked briefly at the blessings of meekness, by keeping the Christian on an even, balanced sense concerning life, while setting our minds right. This discipline draws us to a place of calm resignation to the will of God. Meekness is one Christian virtue that needs to increase within us, and should cause us to treat all humankind with gentleness. Wesley expressed his conviction that the Christian who is increasing in meekness day by day will approach the sinner with love, while rightly hating their sin. Humankind cannot hold on to anger and still be in communion with God. Those who thirst and hunger after righteousness will be satisfied here on this earth from all their longings. This thirsting and hunger produces contentment even in the midst of suffering. Wesley explained that thirsting boils down to love for God and for our neighbor, and that our ongoing fellowship with God purifies our soul. The purifying of ourselves produces deep grieving for those who have yet to hunger after God, and suffering long for those who do not follow God. In addition, Wesley spent a significant amount of time interpreting Paul's account of love, "do no harm, relieve the poor and make wise use of the grace that the

³⁴Stone, *Wesley's Life and Ethics*, 113-114.

church has received.”³⁵

Discourse III: Peacemaker

This sermon concludes with the Beatitude section; the “pure in heart”, the “peacemakers” and those “persecuted for righteousness”. The sermon begins with an examination of the “double love” command to love God and neighbor which naturally flows out of our love of God. Wesley closed out this sermon with God’s call to strive for holiness, “Let us not rest until every love is transcribed into our heart... Let us watch, pray and believe and love... holy as He which has called us to be holy, perfect as our Father which is in heaven is perfect” (Matt.5:48). These beatitudes are best seen through love with a bent toward holiness. The blessing for the pure of heart comes as “apprehension of God and a close relationship with God.”³⁶ Wesley said, “they see him as if they were face to face and talk with him as a man talking to his friend” (Ex. 33:11). On the subject of divorce, Wesley taught that it is not wrong, but that its occurrence is only right as resulting from a spouse’s adultery. Wesley pointed out that it’s right for Christians to take oaths marking their place and time before a magistrate. He explained that both Paul and Jesus were living examples of this.

For Wesley, “Blessed are the peacemakers” refers to persons who, given the opportunity, will do well to all people. “One filled with the love of God for all mankind....”³⁷ A person uses every opportunity, uses every resource, whether it be physical, emotional, spiritual or physical strength available to them for the good of

³⁵Wesley, Works, I:488.

³⁶Stone, *Wesley’s Life and Ethics*, 115.

³⁷Wesley, Works, I:518.

others. If a person is filled with self-love, Wesley considered them to be the complete opposite of peacemaking. Wesley saw that this utter abandonment for others brings its own persecution. Wesley realized that it is seldom that people will “suffer death, or torture, or bondage, or imprisonment,” but they may suffer aspersion or torment because of their peacemaking ways. Wesley did not exhort Christians to go looking for persecution, but understand that it is to be expected.³⁸

Wesley then returned to a prior subject, that of meekness and love. Wesley paralleled Matt.5:43-44, expressing that this love needs to be extended to our enemies. Wesley closed out this sermon by once again calling the reader to look into the liberating gospel message and continue on in maturity and to be perfect as our heavenly father is perfect.³⁹

Discourse IV: Social Religion

The sermon on Mat.5:13-16 exhorts the hearer to be “salt and light” to the world. In doing so, others will recognize this behavior as from the heavenly Father. The sermon speaks directly to the believer’s character as being transformed into the image of God. Wesley refers to Christianity as a “social religion”, meaning that Christianity will not endure without the interaction of other people as well as being exercised in the world. The Christian life is a public life, not one lived out in a “Hermit’s cell.” Christians need to be out in public doing good.

Wesley would advocate times of solitude, but he cautioned that they should not take up all of our time. Wesley said, “Love cannot be hid any more than light; and least of all

³⁸Ibid., I:524.

³⁹Wesley, Works, I:526-27.

when it shines forth in action, when you exercise yourself in the labor of love, in beneficence of every kind.”⁴⁰ Wesley expressed this common theme in his social ethic by stating further, “Let the light which is in your heart shine in all good work, both works of piety and works of mercy.”⁴¹ Wesley calls for a balance between the two, and if needed, put personal piety aside and carry out acts of mercy. This truth appears in the *Book of Discipline of the United Methodist, General Rule*’s, where it states: “put aside works of piety to answer charity’s mighty call.”⁴² Doing no harm, doing good, and finally saying, “attend to all the ordinance of God,” reaffirming the importance of works of piety. I feel it appropriate at this point to reference Joseph L. Allen’s study on *Love and Conflict: Covenantal Model of Christian Ethics*. The question is asked, “Is ‘doing no harm’ an adequate ethical foundation?” I believe, based on my reading of Allen’s work, the answer would be ‘no’. Allen states that Wesley had in mind some serious evils, “the buying and selling of men, women, and children with an intention to enslave them,” returning evil for evil,” and doing to others as we would not they should do unto us.”⁴³

Allen says:

It is a fact of our lives that conflict of interests is always present to some degree in every human relationship. It is always true, to be sure, that some degree of harmony of interests is also present. But the degree of harmony is not such that we ordinarily have the opportunity to “do no harm.” We must usually choose: Whose interest? and to what extent? and, whose to affirm?

⁴⁰Ibid., I:530.

⁴¹Ibid., I:548.

⁴²Book of Discipline of the United Methodist: *The General Rules*.

⁴³ Allen, Joseph L., *Love and Conflict: A Covenantal Model of Christian Ethics* (New York: University Press of America, 1984) 83.

and to what extent?⁴⁴

I agree with Allen on this point that these words, “do no harm,” need more refinement than Wesley saw the need of in his time. We can love ourselves to such an extreme that it becomes a detriment to others. However, we also can place a priority on self and still fulfill obligations that will benefit beyond one’s self. Allen points out that,

“this priority is less than absolute, because of our obligation not to disregard or reject ourselves, not to treat ourselves as worthless in God’s sight. Yet that obligation can be fulfilled in the midst of the utmost sacrifice of our own resources where the needs of others require it.”⁴⁵

Discourse V: Moral Law

Wesley does not part from Matthew’s teaching here. He affirms that Jesus was not an innovator of a new religion, an idea which Wesley abhorred. Outler noted on this point that it is clear that Wesley spoke out against those that were trying “novelty in doctrine.” Wesley would term it a “prima facie” or evidence of error.⁴⁶ In all of these, Wesley’s dominant feelings display his Anglican attitude concerning tradition- as Outler puts it, “Christian Antiquity.”

Wesley concurred that the Old Testament law was burdensome to follow, but it was essential for the moral lives of a people who needed the restraint. When Jesus came, his intent was not to throw it all out, but to bring form to its restraint. Wesley displayed his serious view of the everlasting authority of scripture, and that neither the Old nor the New is superior to the other, but in fact, the Old points to the New.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 84; for further discussion see Allen’s 3rd chap., pp 82-100.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 130.

⁴⁶ Wesley, *Works*, I:550: See also: Sermon 13, *On Sin of Believers*, III:9; Sermon 17, *Circumcision of the Heart*, I: 398.

The law, for instance, requires us to love God, to love our neighbor, to be meek, humble or holy. We feel that we are not sufficient for these things, yea, that “with man this is impossible.” But we see a promise of God to give us that love, and make us humble, meek and holy. We lay hold of this gospel, of this glad tiding, it is done unto us according to our faith, and “the righteousness of the law fulfilled in us” through faith which is in Jesus Christ.⁴⁷

Wesley’s closing resolve to obey God’s laws is not outwardly as the Pharisees did, but, “Let thy religion be the religion of the heart.”

Discourse VI: The Lord’s Prayer

There are two basic areas that Wesley explored- that of prayer and of alms-giving. Wesley expands the list of alms-giving acts to be any good act of charity. As for prayer, Wesley advises not to speak prayers that are meaningless– anything less than pure intention is hypocrisy. Let it be your intention to “commune with God.” Wesley spoke strongly to the concept of one’s intention, whether in acts of mercy or of piety. It should be out of purity of intention that one does these things, not to receive earthly reward. Wesley does point out that there are times when serving the poor is good for others to see, because it may draw them to God.⁴⁸

Wesley’s commentary on *The Lord’s Prayer* is expressive of the Christian life, spelling out an ethic that would benefit any who would follow it. This exposition is of great importance that extends from home to the world, and beyond to heaven. Wesley interprets, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” to mean that those who believe on the name of Jesus Christ are to be active participants. Jesus will return for those who are members of his family, those that love him as he loves them. He

⁴⁷Wesley, Works, I:554.

⁴⁸Wesley, Works, I:574.

wrote of the angels “willingly” doing the will of God, “continually”, and “perfectly”. It is possible, according to Wesley, that we can do the same, with a common conviction as the angelic beings.⁴⁹ “Our trespasses” is translated by Wesley as our debt owed to God.

Wesley made an important connection between asking God’s forgiveness of our trespasses, which He will do so in full, to forgiving others. God will help us overcome if we pray against the power of temptation. If we pray for God’s help to love our neighbor, we will witness God’s will being done.

Discourse VII: Fasting and Charity

Wesley took the opportunity in the beginning of this sermon to make the argument that faith and charity belong together, saying,

Some well-meaning men have seemed to place all religion in attending the prayers of the church, in receiving the Lord’s Supper, in hearing sermons and reading books of piety; neglecting in the meantime the end of all these, the love of God and their neighbor.⁵⁰

It is with this that Wesley felt our whole Christian journey should be filled. Do your fasting in secret. However, use your self-neglect of food to extend to those in need the food you lack. Wesley reminded the reader that these things are commanded by God, so we are obligated to carry them out and enjoy the blessings which He promised. It is noteworthy to highlight how Wesley’s commentary illuminated the Isaiah 58 text of fasting for mere external service, “such a performance may afflict the body, but as for the soul, it profited nothing.”⁵¹ Wesley’s pattern of social ethic rings clear as he closed this

⁴⁹Ibid., 584-85.

⁵³Ibid.,

⁵¹Wesley, Works, I:609.

sermon with, “God Himself expressly and largely declares, ‘Is not this the fast that I have chosen: ...to undo the heavy burden, to let the oppressed go free...deal thy bread to the hungry and care for the poor which are outcast.’”⁵²

Discourse VIII: Anti-wealth

Continuing with a common theme in this discourse, it could be said that Wesley’s theology is singular in its intention. This is clear as Wesley referenced the following; “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”(Matt. 6:21) Wesley expressed a genuine concern for Christians whose intention in business is accumulation of wealth. Wesley speaks strongly that it is impossible to serve riches in this world and serve God also. The only way these two can be served with honor is to treat them both with the same pure intention as with serving God. If our hearts are fixed on God, our bodies will be singularly fixed on serving Him with our riches as well.⁵³

Wesley made an interesting observation about the heathen he had observed in other lands– England, Africa and America – they have no knowledge of this command, but yet they observe it. “But how do the Christians observe what they profess to receive as a command of the Most High God, not at all, not in any degree, no more than if no such command had ever been given to man?”⁵⁴ In an effort to inform the reader how a person can fulfill the command of “not laying up treasure on earth”, it is important to first observe what is considered “treasure on earth”. “Treasure” does not include providing for oneself the necessities of life, staying out of debt, or laying up monies so that when gone,

⁵²Wesley, *Works*, I:611; also see, Isaiah 58:6-11.

⁵³Outler, I:616; also see, William Law, *Works*, IV:33.

⁵⁴Wesley, *Works*, I:617.

one's families will be provided for.⁵⁵

Wesley quoted William Law heavily at the closing of this sermon echoing Law's concern that those who possess riches bring harm to themselves. Wesley cursed the rich for their riches. He contended that they are not only robbing God continually but "robbing the poor, the hungry, the naked; wronging the widow and the fatherless and making themselves accountable for all the want, affliction and distress which they do not remove."⁵⁶ Even though Wesley's rebuke of the rich was strong, his pastor heart challenged the rich of the world to habitually do good, to be good stewards, laying up treasure not in the world as they do now, but instead laying up a foundation in eternity, when they will receive God's adoration.⁵⁷

Discourse IX: Mammon

This sermon follows close to the same theme as those above. It's dangerous to pursue wealth with a single-minded intention, more specifically though, one cannot serve God and money. If God is allowed to be our sole concern of life, we will be committed to God; in the same fashion, if wealth be our sole concern, we will be committed to money. It comes down to whom, or what, you put your trust in. Wesley posed the question, "What is the care of your heart?" Is it anxious or tormented by worry of the unknown? Wesley cautioned the reader not to let these worries "poison the blessing of today," but rather improve today. Wesley's closing exhortation called Christians to give all of

⁵⁵ Ibid., I:618-619.

⁵⁶ Wesley, Works, I:626-29.

⁵⁷ See, Matt. 25:34-36.

themselves over to God and “desire nothing that God may be glorified.”⁵⁸

Discourse X: The Golden Rule

The first point that Wesley pursued is that of misjudging others. Ponder “How is it that God will judge you?” And judge others accordingly. “Endeavor to be humble, serious, gentle, merciful, and pure in heart.”⁵⁹ In the prior sermon, Wesley spoke more on behalf of man’s interior intentions, but now shifts toward that which is outward, those intentions that affect our neighbor. He exhorted, be sensitive about zeal for God, as well as zeal to care for the needs of others. Wesley did not discourage us from being discerning of others, but he was clear that God is our final authority. It is at his hand and purpose that the world will be judged.

Next Wesley turns to what Stone calls “Wesley’s evangelism confidence”.⁶⁰ “Ask and it shall be given you; seek and ye shall find; knock and it shall be opened unto you.” (Matt.7:7-12.) We are to look to God to meet our needs. To neglect this is a hindrance to one’s pursuit of holiness. Wesley exhorted, “Pursue God unexhausted till He opens the door.” Wesley warned that these prayers must come out of love, lest one could bring a curse on oneself. “The golden rule”, for Wesley was to “conform our love toward one another and toward all men.” Wesley explained that if this is understood correctly, “it comprises the whole of that religion which our Lord came to establish upon earth.”⁶¹

⁵⁸Wesley, Works, I:649.

⁵⁹Ibid., I:652.

⁶⁰Stone, *Wesley’s Life and Ethics*, 123.

⁶¹Wesley, Works, I:660-61.

Discourse XI: Hell

This sermon stays close to the text of Matt.7:13-14, and it is interesting how quickly Wesley used the word ‘hell’, replacing Matthew’s use of the word, ‘destruction’. This, no doubt, is a fair interpretation. We have already seen in other places where Wesley spoke of hell as being the penalty of missing God’s intended path of life. “Wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction” (Matt 7:13) and there are many that take this way. The next major theme in the text addresses the calling to “enter in at this straight gate.” Wesley encouraged his readers to practice a life that follows the narrow way. Wesley pointed out that so narrow is the way to heaven, “that nothing unclean, nothing unholy, can enter.”⁶² Wesley restated Matt.5:7-8,10, and expressed that very few find this way. The majority easily find the broad path; the narrow path, however, requires a disciplined life, a life that has, in its path, suffering for Christ’s namesake.

Wesley cited the Psalmist, to “thoroughly thirst for God, continually panting” (Ps. 42:1-2). This life is required if those whose intention to do good to all humankind want to stay on the straight way, lest they fall back on to the broad path toward hell. Wesley swiftly concludes by crying out for his readers to strive for absolute purity.⁶³

Discourse XII: Prophecy

Wesley carried over the theme of the narrow way from the previous sermon. God has commanded his followers to be as watchmen who warn people of the dangers they face. God has sent servants and prophets throughout the generations to illuminate the way of

⁶²Ibid., I:668.

⁶³Wesley, Works, I:673-74.

the narrow path. There are also those that will work just as hard leading people to the broad path toward hell. Wesley pointed out that even those who have been sent to show the narrow path often fall victim to that which they were sent to warn against. Those are false prophets who teach a false way to heaven. An indicator of a false prophet is one who teaches the broad way, a way that many walk in.⁶⁴ Wesley pointed out that those who teach the path of hell, promise love and ease, even using traditional biblical terms, but their intention is something other than bringing glory to God. Interestingly, Wesley did not condemn these false teachers once and for all, but appealed to them to leave their wicked ways, and called Christians to be patient, testing their teaching, exhorting them to God's narrow way, commending, "Thou shalt shine as the stars for ever and ever."⁶⁵

Discourse XIII: Authenticity and Love

Wesley closed out this series of sermons by again pointing out its authenticity that stands through time. Wesley stated that he could put these teachings up against any other scripture and they would yield a proper interpretation. Wesley pointed out that any religion that leads a person to commit to anything other than love of God and love of neighbor is not true righteousness, and compared it to building a house on the sand. In turn, if a person is a follower of the true God, loving Him wholly and loving his neighbor wholly, he has built his house on the eternal rock. The true way of following Jesus is both by faith and good works.

As stated above, there are no new themes in this sermon, but Wesley closed with an impassioned cry to his hearers:

⁶⁴Ibid., I:677.

⁶⁵Ibid., I:686.

In a word: let thy religion be the religion of the heart. Let it lie deep in thy inmost soul, be thou little and base, and mean and vile (beyond what words can express) in thine own eyes; amazed and humbled to the dust by the love of God which is in Christ Jesus. Be serious. Let the whole stream of thy thoughts, words, and actions flow from the deepest conviction that thou stands on the edge of the great gulf, thou and all thy children of men, just ready to drop in, either into everlasting glory or everlasting burnings. Let thy soul be filled with mildness, gentleness, patience, long-suffering towards all men, at the same time that all which is in thee is athirst for God, the living God; longing to awake-up after his likeness, and to be satisfied with it. Be thou a lover of God and of all mankind. In this spirit do and suffer all things. Thus show thy faith by thy works: thus do the will of thy Father which is in heaven. And as sure as thou now walk with God on earth; thou shall also reign with Him in glory.⁶⁶

Wesley's Practical Divinity

Although Wesley's discourses on the Sermon on the Mount may point to personal piety, Wesley's implementation of his personal ethic grew out of his personal practice. Thomas A. Langford points out that Wesley's theology was practical by nature and intention. It was a theology by which Wesley intended to shape a person's life. Wesley took his practice and applied it directly to meeting the needs of the poor. The process by which this takes place does not begin in theory and then move to practice, but it grows through personal engagement in life situations. It is then implemented to help shape how a person engages in life from that point forward. Wesley knew that this was true because he had personally engaged his own life in the carrying out and implementation of those principles he witnessed being worked out.⁶⁷

Wesley's way of practical theology enlightened and developed the method in which he served the poor. In turn, Wesley was convinced of the Christian responsibility to serve the poor, oppose slavery, set up educational institutions to provide affordable literature,

⁶⁶Wesley, Works, I:698.

⁶⁷Langford, Thomas A., *Methodist Theology*, (Petersborough:Epworth Press, 1998), 3-4.

to help in spiritual growth, take up missions work, and to engage in the needs of the working people. Wesley's activity informed his preaching, his service, and his formulation of his theology, that faith and works were inseparable in living out the Christian life.

When looking at the practical ways Wesley addressed social problems, one needs to first look at the social activity of the Oxford "social club" of which Wesley was the leader. In the beginning, there were three theology students, John himself, and his younger brother, Charles. The Oxford group undertook a plan that cost them a great deal of time and money. Their involvement included work in the prisons of Oxford, with poor families, in the workhouses, and in the development of schools for under-privileged children.⁶⁸ In the prisons, the Oxford group shared responsibilities of preaching and pastoral care to the prisoners, and on occasion, provided money for prisoners to find jobs once released. When visiting families in need because of an ill parent, they often provided medicine, clothing and teaching to the children.⁶⁹

The impact of this Oxford group lead by Wesley was the establishment of schools for poor children. Wesley provided teachers and paid them. Children from poor families were given an education that they would not have received otherwise. Wesley undertook many efforts to relieve the poor; some he handled personally, and some he did in cooperation with religious societies.⁷⁰ Wesley received some financial support for his social undertakings in response to his preaching.

⁶⁸Marquardt, Manfred, trans. By John Steely and W. Stephen Gunter, *John Wesley's Social Ethics: Praxis and Principles*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 23.

⁶⁹Ibid., 24.

⁷⁰Ibid., 27.

Conclusion

So much of John Wesley's theology is governed by the notion of imitation of God. Specifically, it depends on the "moral image" of God, which I have stated above. For Wesley one of the chief attributes to be mirrored was that of God's love. As an individual took on God's love he was able to promote God's love for the public good, and possibly for national well-being. Social transformation was possible as individuals believed that Jesus was the Son of God, and that he had died and rose again on behalf of all of humanity. All of humanity, in Wesley's day, were the starving, disease-ridden masses; a people whom Wesley could not ignore. So much so that Wesley's theology actually took form in view of the poor. But Wesley showed himself to be a dedicated philanthropist from his college days for some seventy years to follow. It is said that a person would be hard pressed to find any other person that gave so much of their adult resources as did John Wesley, and throughout his adult life he gave consistent attention to the needy. Wesley believed that it was possible to bring about life transformation in the minds, hearts and souls of people in general, but especially the poor. As noted by Wesley D. Tracy, John Wesley called himself "God's steward for the poor." John Wesley also said that we need to "join hands with God to help the poor." Any other action or effort would be futile without the love of God being the driving force behind it. Wesley's faithful reliance on scripture is quite evident. The law of God requires us to love both God and our neighbor and is sufficient for life, because God has given us the promise that he would love us. As it is stated in the Sermon on the Mount, we need to lay hold of the gospel, and with good intention, apply it to our lives. In turn, we need to be ministers to all people, especially to the poor, for they are the very heart of God. Wesley instructed,

be students of God's word, imitators of his moral image, and make it our life's occupation to serve the needy. In the next chapter, beginning with God and his divine covenant with the people of Israel, I will explore God's covenant, as renewed through his son Jesus Christ and finally brought forward through time by Paul's example recorded in the New Testament.

Chapter Two

BIBLICAL ETHICS

Christianity owes a great deal to the long-suffering history of the Hebrew people and their faith, worship and valuable insights. In no other place is this more true than in the study of ethics. Each generation that follows needs to look closely at how this community lived developmentally within its relationship to God and each other. These ancient moral concepts come forward through time, and we are indebted to them for how they have formed our ethical moorings. It is crucial that we examine the history of Israel and its relationship with God, as a community, who uniquely in their time, followed one God. Based on Wesley's "Quadrilateral", the examination of scripture is of the utmost importance in order to create a sound framework for theology. In this chapter I will examine the scriptural tradition that informed Wesley of God's gracious work through all humanity.

Old Testament Ethics

God is viewed by the Hebrew people as the one and only true God. He is powerful, personal, gracious and faithfully steadfast in his compassion toward the Hebrew people. God's holiness is evidenced in the law, rituals and a continuing need to seek after God in solitude. His justice is seen in the many promises He made and in His rightful judgment over a people who lived through time within the gracious confines of His covenant relationship. This covenant is seen nowhere more clearly than in Ex. 20:2, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of the Egypt, out of the house of slavery."¹

¹ NRSV (New Revised Standard Version), Ex. 20:2.

Within its scriptural context comes an obligation for the Hebrew people to live as a holy people in response to God's faithful deliverance through history. This salvation initiative by God is what prompts man to obey the statutes which God requires of them to follow.

God declares in Lev.18:1-4,

I am the Lord your God, you shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I bring you. You shall not follow their statutes. My ordinances you shall observe and my statutes you shall keep, follow them: I am the Lord your God.

Even though Israel is told to obey God and follow only Him, we know that they continually fell woefully short of their end of the covenant. God, in turn, is faithful in His judgment which often times meant putting a great distance between Himself and the chosen people of Israel. God promised that if the Hebrew people kept His statutes and observed them faithfully He would give them ongoing blessings. As there are rewards for obedience, there are equal penalties for disobedience:

I will place my dwelling in your midst... I will walk among you and will be your guide and you shall be my people. However, if you will not obey me.... I will in turn do this to you: I will bring terror upon you and fever that waste the eyes and cause life to pine away.... I will set my face against you.... and if in spite of this you do not obey me, I will continue to punish you sevenfold for your sin. (Lev. 26:11-18)

Given all this, God's response gleams with grace in verse 40; saying,

But if they confess their iniquities and the iniquities of their ancestors, in that they committed treachery against me.... If then their un-circumcised heart is humbled and they make amends for their iniquity, then I will remember my covenant with Jacob, Isaac and Abraham. (Lev. 26:40-42)

Grenz points out a "Biblical ethic" in this passage which could be used to govern human conduct. A different inclination says the biblical ethic is better understood when looked

at within a context of the biblical narrative.² Even though we may deny that the Old Testament contains a specific system of ethics or a set of ethical principles, it is clear that there are key elements that emerge. One of these key elements is obedience, directly connected to the religious practices of the Hebrew people. They knew that God's will was right based on God's own authority. Ethics, in one sense, is conformity to God's will. In pursuit of what God's will for our lives is, or for the community of believers, we ask the question, "What do I, or we, need to do to live out God's will in our lives?" The answer rings clear, we need to obey God! It is the fundamental aim of the Old Testament to bring human behavior into conformity with the will of God.³ We could also conclude that of high importance is the holiness of God which is displayed in the Hebrew scripture. God's nature of righteousness and total goodness is recorded in the law and subsequent commandments. God is describing how the Hebrew people are to live as God's people; in other words, how to be holy.⁴ The Hebrew scriptures contained an understanding of what it meant to live as God's people in the world. It is important that we keep in mind when we read the Old Testament as a guideline for moral behavior that we remember it is in the framework of Israel's story. We do not find an organized philosophical discussion on morality or a codified theoretical system of ethics. What we have is a written story of the life of Israel.⁵ Birch continues by speaking to the narrative nature of the Old Testament.

² Grenz, Stanley J. *The Moral Quest: Foundations of Christian Ethics* (Downer's Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1977), 96.

³ Kaiser, Walter C., Jr. *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1983), cites James Muilenburg, "Old Testament Ethics", *Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, ed. H. MacQuarrie (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967), 236.

⁴ Ibid., 21.

⁵ Birch, Bruce, *Let Justice Roll Down: The Old Testament Ethics and Christian Life* (Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1991), 40.

The Old Testament is not historical at its core; instead we find storytellers describing life within the context of their surroundings. Historical material is found in 1-2 Kings, and narrative that is grounded in historical events found in 1-2 Samuel. Although these two sets of historical materials found in the Hebrew Scriptures fail to provide detailed historical date. In the Genesis 2-3 narrative is a historical reflection basic to the contextual frame of the writer's life.⁶

An additional element of the Old Testament story is that of its visionary quality; a quality the Hebrew story passes down to us which is embodied in right thinking and our moral responsibility to God and the community of God's people. We are a community of people who strive to live as a holy people, always seeking God's will for our lives, and for the lives of those in our sphere of influence. We know that the Hebrew people failed often to realize God's complete will for their lives as both individuals and as a nation. In this sense the Old Testament is, in effect, a judgment on the Hebrew people as a whole in achieving God's will. However, whether or not the Israelites were able to fulfill God's vision for themselves as a nation, it does not discount God's plan or will for these ancient people's lives. This vision that God laid down for Israel in turn has been projected through time and we can see it displayed in its pure form represented in the Old Testament, regardless of the fact that the Hebrew people failed, or our own inability to fulfill God's will in totality. We can claim this common vision along with this ancient community of faith and in doing so we find a common identity joined with Israel as the people of God.⁷ Just as we cannot look to Israel as our sole example of ethical standard

⁶ Ibid., 40.

⁷ Ibid., 41.

bearers, we should also not expect them to provide a moral standard that transcends time. Contextually, there are many practices that do not bear up to our culture today. For example, possession of slaves in both the Old and New Testaments seemed to be condoned, but this practice, through honest reflection over time of God's loving will showed this practice to be absolutely irresponsible in fulfilling God's call to love others as ourselves.

If we are not able to search the scripture for timeless principles of conduct scattered throughout the Old Testament, then where do we find its value? One valuable path is to look at the Old Testament as a whole, mapping out its central themes that helped form the Hebrew understanding of what it meant for them to be "God's people". Arguably, one of the significant themes in the Old Testament account is that of "God in covenant" (Gen.1:27-30). We see the very foundation of God's covenant with man through his act of creation. In verse 1, "God created" first the heavens and the earth followed by verse 27, "so God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them male and female he created them." He projected his vision for humankind to be fruitful and multiply expanding across the earth which he created, taking over responsibility of it, and looking upon his creation, God declared it to be good.⁸

God's covenant with man came with immediate responsibility - a responsibility that has already been discussed, and a responsibility that humankind failed to fulfill. Even though they failed, God, in his gracious commitment to his created beings saw fit to renew his covenant through Noah. "As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you...I

⁸ NRSV (New Revised Standard Version), Gen 1:27-28.

establish my covenant with you that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the water of a flood and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth” (Gen.9:9-11).

However, the Noahritic covenant pales slightly when placed alongside God’s call upon Abram:

Now the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed (Gen.12:1-3).

The covenant of greater significance that was formed through the people of Israel, one that would bless all people, is God’s covenant with Abram. In God’s divine irony he blessed a fatherless man who later cried out to God asking if his heir would be a slave, resulting from Abram’s wife Sarah being barren, but God assures him that it will be of his “own issue”.⁹ Assuredly, as we read further through to chapter twenty-one, God fulfilled this piece of his covenant by giving the aged Abraham and his wife Sarah their heir from their “own issue”.

The most significant event that marks Israel as God’s covenant people is found in Exodus. No other experience in the Biblical narrative describes better how God’s gracious initiative touches the nation of Israel as a people, set apart. “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery”(Ex. 20:2). This one statement by God is seen often as an introductory statement to describe God’s divine intervention in the lives of the Hebrew people as God’s covenant community. This

⁹ Ibid., Gen. 15:4.

covenant community portrays for us God's loving kindness and mercy.¹⁰

God's Holiness

Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. points to holiness as the central organizing feature of the Old Testament, citing Lev. 11:45 in which God says, "I am the Lord who brought you up out of Egypt to be your God, therefore, be holy because I am holy."¹¹ Holiness, in some instances, is used to designate place, thing, season, and official people in their connective relationship to the worship of God.¹² The predominant Biblical usage is to describe God's character. First, it expresses God's "separateness" from his creation in the sense that he is above it. This usage elevates God, depicting him as transcendent. It is God's central nature of which embodies all the rest of his divine attributes.¹³ It is that which causes believers to acknowledge God's awesome deity. "For I am God, and not man - the Holy One among you"(Hosea 11:9b). Ethically, holiness is the way in which it is most commonly used to denote God's moral perfection. Interestingly, it was common for pagan religions to have similar interpretive views of the concept of holiness, but the distinguishing factor was that of God's living out his holiness in relationship with humankind. In fact, it was this relationship that constituted Israel as a holy people, holy because of God's covenant relationship which he formed with the Hebrew people. Ex.33:10-11 tells us that God spoke to Moses, "face to face, as a man speaks with a

¹⁰ Wenham, Gordon. *Grace and Law in the Old Testament in Law Morality and the Bible*, ed. Bruce Kaye and Gordon Wenham (Downer's Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1978), 10.

¹¹ Kaiser, Walter C., Jr. *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 32-35.

¹² *The New Bible Dictionary*, ed. Douglas, J.D. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1962), 530.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 530.

friend.” As mentioned above, the pagan view differed additionally in the fact that God was viewed as transcendent, never imminent. God desires this relationship that which has no initial requirement of service.¹⁴ It is significant to note that God’s nature of holiness is what marked Israel’s worldview, history, spirituality and purpose.¹⁵ “I am the Lord your God, consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy”(Ex.13:21). God displayed his holiness among the chosen people by the pillar of cloud by day and the fire by night, performing glorious signs and wonders, each of which God intended for the benefit of the people so that they would see him and know that he was near. God called out to the Hebrew people not to follow a list of laws and regulations, but asked for total trust and connection to the covenantal relationship that God connects himself to. The pagan religions cowered in fear of their gods. However, the God of Israel looked for those people who were willing to walk alongside him rather than fear him.¹⁶ Within the context of this relationship, bound by God’s own holiness, comes a responsibility to carry this devotion to God and the holiness of which it implies, into one’s lifestyle. This was made most evident in the worship practices of the Hebrew people, actualizing holiness in everyday life.¹⁷ Finally there is strong moral and ethical implication in addition to that mentioned above. There is an ever-present awestruck quality about Israel’s response to God’s holiness. However, it goes deeper than that because it caused people to seek after him, and his presence affects every area of life. It is out of God’s very essence of holiness

¹⁴ *Baker’s Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Elwell, Walter A. (Grand Rapids: online version, 1984), 515.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 515. Also see Lev 11:44, NIV.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 515.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 516.

that he confronts the Hebrew people with revelations of himself. The attributes of sovereignty, purity, righteousness, steadfast love, and mercy all define and are embodied in God's holy name.¹⁸ Later in this chapter I will cover how these same distinctions are revealed through the life of God's son, Jesus, in dynamic and liberating fashion. I will also revisit the Old Testament concept relating to covenant and its utter transforming influence on God's gracious and steadfast relationship with the Hebrew people. I will discuss how this ancient covenantal relationship with God has been brought forward today through the dynamic preservation of the Biblical narrative.

Jesus and the Moral Life

The Old Testament's ethic of being holy as the Lord God is holy was prepared by faithfulness to the covenant God (Lev. 11:44-46). The center point for the New Testament is God's sacrifice of sending Jesus. Jesus not only articulated the new way of life, but he also embodied it. In order to understand Jesus' ethical teaching, we must place it in the context of his day. How was it that Jesus' teaching differed from that of the leaders of his day? On many levels, Jesus' teaching was in disagreement with the scribes and Pharisees. Ernst Käsemann says, in essence, that Jesus broke through the piety and theology of his contemporaries, and brought God's promise of love in place of mosaic law, his own end went with the Spirit in place of casuistry, and grace in place of good works. It was not the law that Jesus and the Jewish leaders differed on, but on the implementation of the law. These differences were what eventually led to the religious

¹⁸ Ibid., 516.

leaders' plan to kill Jesus.¹⁹ One of the attitudes that Jesus opposed was that of the Jewish nation's bent toward separateness. They had become increasingly "nationalistic". They viewed their election and privilege as the people of God for them alone. Well, Jesus challenged this viewpoint. Another attitude Jesus did not accept was the Jewish assumption that there should be "rewards" for human merit, taking it away from God. Often times it was public affirmation they sought instead of God's.²⁰ Jesus was concerned with more serious matters, which included, for example, the law, justice, mercy, faith and ritual ceremonies. These regulations and casuistry obligations spanned every area of life—washing of hands, paying taxes, and so on, each losing sight of what was truly important. White points out that whenever ritual and ethical ordinances are placed on the same level and enforced with the same degree of authority, the moral sense becomes confused between the really important and the plainly trivial.²¹ It can also produce barbaric punishment that outweighs the offense, such as stoning for adultery. Explanations given for why you pass by someone in need along the roadside becomes justification in an attempt to legitimize countless trivial pursuits. Jesus attempted to illuminate the minds and hearts of the Jewish leaders with radical ideas such as not just the Sabbath observed, but that every day should be devoted to knowing God's heart, or it's what proceeds from the heart of a man, not what the man eats. Jesus took what was previously perceived as right religion and turned it on its head and said it can be boiled down to two commands: Love the Lord your God, and love your neighbor as yourself. The Pharisees could not see

¹⁹ Schuachenburg, Rudolph, *The Moral Teaching of the New Testament*, (New York: The Seabury Press, 1965), 60-65. Also see Webster's definition of "casuistry".

²⁰ White, R.E.O., *Biblical Ethics*, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1979), 59.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 60.

beyond the thousands of requirements that the law insisted on. The ritual could be seen from the outside, for example, by how many times someone washed their hands, but what could not be seen was the condition of that same man's heart. The Ten Commandments could be viewed as a set of rules to govern one's life by, but there was something deeper that went far beyond the outward, having more to do with the inward-driven intention behind one's actions. When Christ looks at the attitudes of the heart, listing lust, hatred, contempt and vengefulness, it was never the individual items on the list he was concerned with, but the character of the person who acted out life in public. Jesus' ethic addresses the dynamic of inward-out, not merely outward performance. If the Pharisees began to look at the inward intention behind their actions, the law they lived by failed. Good fruit is produced from a sound tree. White stated, "To effect that change, and sustain the acceptable inner life from which the outward living will flow, demands a right relationship with God, who sees in secret and knows what a man is within himself."²² Jesus' criteria of the Jewish religion of his day was not to rewrite the law, but to determine what was scribed on the heart of humankind to draw people's minds, hearts and souls back to the will of God. His intention was to draw them back to a life that was not governed by the outward judgment of many, but instead by the concern for their heavenly father and friend of whom the more they knew, the more trust is developed. The more that trust is developed, love is produced, and love moves one's intentions. The intention of a person's heart drives them to obey gladly and freely. This grounding was what Jesus' opponents had lost, and it was the mistaken teachings of the Jewish leaders

²² Ibid., 62.

that Jesus came to rectify.²³

Contrasting Jesus and the Pharisees put simply: The Pharisees felt that pleasing God had to do with outward righteousness; Jesus, in contrast, taught that God was pleased with the penitent, that God accepted those who humbled themselves and cried for mercy. God rejects the proud that claim to have no need for forgiveness. The Biblical parables exemplify this reality. The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector found in Luke 18:6-14 contrasts the Pharisee's supposed pious outward righteousness displayed in his prayer to the penitent, humble cry for mercy of the tax collector. Jesus' teaching went beyond the actions of a person to looking at the heart from which they came. In Luke 10:25-37 Jesus answered the self-preserving question of the lawyer upon hearing that one must love his neighbor as himself, "And who is my neighbor?" As Jesus answered with yet another parable, he helped the lawyer to understand that the question should be "To whom can I be a neighbor?" Jesus taught in this parable that a neighbor is one who extends mercy, and that we should do likewise. Matt. 5:20 speaks against meritoriously gaining favor with God: "I tell you, that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you certainly will not enter the kingdom of heaven." Jesus' concern is for that of character, motivation, and one's heart, or as Grenz puts it, "not mere outward conformity to the law but inward piety marks true obedience to God."²⁴ This aspect of Jesus' inward ethic takes on an outward dimension in Matt. 12:33 when he spoke of good fruit. "Either makes the tree good, and its fruit good, or makes the tree bad, and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit." This outward

²³Ibid., 63.

²⁴Grenz, Stanley, *The Moral Quest: Foundations of Christian Ethics*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1997), 109.

element is a part of a person's inner fiber. It is not only noticeable, but is something that can benefit others. This passage is convicting, and it is made quite clear that Jesus is projecting his deep conviction even more so when he speaks of heaven's judgment over humankind's careless actions. These are produced by a defiant treasure hold with the inner fiber of one's being of character, motivation and heart.

Kingdom Ethic

Jesus preaches a kingdom ethic in his closing remarks on the Sermon on the Mount. Matt. 6:33 is a call to seek after God's heavenly kingdom, not to worry about temporal matters, but to trust God for every need, want or desire. We are to focus on God, first. God's kingdom is a central aspect of the teaching of Jesus, and is a dynamic contribution to his ethical thought. God is sovereign. The finality of his laws, his inaudible will, is all related to a call for absolute moral obligation. God honors both food and right behavior as does God seek well for humankind. This kingdom ethic is good news for all those who have surrendered and understand the essentialness of completely handing oneself over to God's plan. It is equally clear that God will judge bad behavior as well, and these same truths provide warning. But regardless of whether man follows or fails God's will for his life, God is still the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and everlasting king.²⁵ There is a tangible transformation that takes place when a person comes under the rule of God. Jesus' ethical teaching is "simply an exposition of the ethics of the kingdom of God of the way a person inevitably behaves." Jesus embodies the kingdom of God and its rule on earth, exemplifying God's heavenly kingdom. God requires of man complete commitment to his will. Humankind's sinful nature will rule when it is not under God's

²⁵White, R.E.O., *Biblical Ethics*, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1979), 108.

righteous rule. Jesus points to this new, but ancient way. If people will open their mind's eye, and pay close attention, they will hear God's ethical teaching. Luke 12:57 challenges the readers and hearers of God's word by asking the question, "And why do you not judge for yourselves what is right?" The ethic that Jesus taught is tangible and applicable to a person's life. When a person surrenders, he, in essence, has the kingdom ethic dwelling inside him. L.H. Marshall states, "Jesus brings religion and ethics down from the clouds of speculation and theory and bases them on the rock foundation of the innermost experience of man at his best."²⁶ Through Jesus, humankind can truly know God intimately because Jesus brought the kingdom of God to earth and established the beginnings of his earthly kingdom that will be realized in full upon his second coming. Again, seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and God will bless. Again, I want to reiterate the double command of love, because true goodness begins in the heart's response, a willing action toward serving God.

What is the right action of a person who desires to be a citizen of the kingdom? The answer is right action flows from those who love God from their heart and who love others as themselves. Such love is not mere inward affection. Instead, it involves humble service to God and one's neighbor. How does one love his neighbor? One viable test for discussion about love for one's neighbor comes when looking at how a person uses their wealth, whether large or small, in addition to how one manages his possessions. Ethics of the kingdom require serving the needs of the people. Jesus' call to the rich man is to sell all that he possesses and give it to the poor. The result, Jesus says, is the promise of the

²⁶Marshall, L.H., *The Challenge of New Testament Ethics*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1960), 31.

kingdom of heaven and the rewards that come for following Christ's example. Jesus Christ exemplified the kingdom ethic. Jesus' life is the most prominent source for the Christian ethic. It's from him that it receives its content, its shape and its undeniable authority.²⁷ There was nothing that Jesus taught that he himself did not live out in his own life. His followers heard him teach to seek first the kingdom of God, and the will of the heavenly Father. Jesus expressed this ethic in John 6:38 saying, "For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me." His coming to earth, in and of itself was an act of humility, made dynamic by his willing obedience. Jesus taught the disciples to walk in the same ways he did, to have a forgiving spirit and to pray for their enemies; to have a heart for serving others. They were taught to take up their cross rather than put themselves first. Jesus lived his life in this fashion as an example to them. He also exemplified his heavenly Father by the way in which he did not avoid sinners, but sought them out.²⁸ In his day, he revolutionized how humankind was to view sin and sinners. His love for people had no bounds. A diverse group received Jesus attention- children, cripples, the demented, the sorrowful, the suffering, and the social and moral outcasts. Maston points out that the majority of Christ's miracles were healing miracles. He proposed the reason being to show himself as Messiah.²⁹ But his motivating factor ran a bit deeper than that. It was out of a caring heart that he met the needs of hurting people. It was Jesus' unfailing compassion that drew him to those that needed healing. However, there is one event that displays his love and compassion in a much

²⁷Matson, T.B., *Biblical Ethics: A Guide to the Ethical Message of the Scriptures for Genesis through Revelations*, (Mercer University Press, 1979), 173.

²⁸Ibid., 174.

²⁹Ibid., 174.

more dynamic way. His death on the cross was the ultimate display of love and compassion. I John 3:16 reads, “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.” This ethic that is founded in God’s son is for us an invitation to follow after him in our moral and ethical journey. This journey and goal is accomplished only by becoming a member of the family of God. This is the way followers of Jesus Christ are to conduct themselves. God’s ethic for life no longer was far off, he sent his perfect example to walk, talk and breathe his desire for our lives down here on earth. Heaven came down and touched the hearts, souls and minds of humankind. This heavenly touch gives us a place as a member of the family of God. We have the opportunity to be participants in the family of God as his children.

Matthew 18:1-5 has the disciples asking Jesus a question, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” Jesus calls a little child over and explains, “I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like a little child, you will never enter into the kingdom of heaven.” Jesus went on to explain that the person who humbles themselves is the one who is the greatest. This childlike acceptance and faith in Jesus is how a family member is to behave; actively pursuing opportunities to help someone who is often not able to help themselves.³⁰ Both Mark and Luke record this example of Jesus’ compassion for people. A second attribute connoting a member of God’s family is honest dialogue with God. We have the opportunity to tap in to our heavenly Father’s unlimited wealth. The one who Jesus called “Abba,” meaning “Dear Father,” evokes such an emotion from Jesus because he experienced God’s love for him daily. So, in turn, he responded

³⁰ Also see NIV, Mark 10:15, Luke 18:17.

lovingly to the Father. In Matt.7:9-18 Jesus exhorts us to ask, seek and knock, that we may receive. This is God's familial desire, coming out of compassion for his children. "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you." Jesus discussed further God's fatherly display of love towards his children as a love that surpasses that of an earthly father. The gifts that come from heaven are assuredly good gifts. The power and steadfastness of God's love compels us to respond in love to others with the same love God himself gives. In Matson's words:

The disciples of the Lord should walk in the way of the Lord. Just as Jesus came into the world to reveal the father, His disciples are sent to reveal him. He was God's incarnate; the disciples are to be Christ incarnate.³¹

We are acting on behalf of heaven when we give to the poor. To be a follower of Jesus, one must abandon everything, in radical fashion; Jesus' disciples did so. Peter says, "We have left everything to follow you!" As we seek Jesus with self-denial, accompanied by a willingness to take up the cross daily, he will provide the direction, but not always the road map.³²

As we follow Jesus and walk in his way, we need to trust that he has gone before us, continues to lead us and walks alongside us. Jesus said "Go", as well as "I will be with you always." The family ethic, as we have seen, requires radical trust and obedience. A disciple's ethic requires that he or she stay in touch with the heart and will of God. When this is accomplished within, what flows out is good.

The Family of God

We, as followers of Jesus, have a common father. The Christian moral ideal can only

³¹ Maston, *Biblical Ethics*, 163.

³² Ibid., 164.

be accomplished corporately. We, as children of God, need to commune with God, and we need to fellowship with each other as well. At best, the Christian life is a struggle, and when attempted in isolation, will certainly fail. White points out further that most of the Biblical precepts concerning the family of God all portray a family unit. Luke 8:21 expands the earthly family to introduce the heavenly potential saying, my mother and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice.³³ Jesus asks in Mark 3:33, "Who are my mothers and brothers?" The answer is those who seek God's will as Jesus did, setting the example for us. True family resemblance exemplifies the love of others, second only to the love of God. Love God with all one's heart, being number one, and second "love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:37-40.)

Imitation Ethic of Love

A final piece worthy of discussion is found in the New Testament ethic of being imitators of Christ. White says that this is the closest we come to a moral absolute. This ideal of Christ-likeness from generation to generation remains a constant of which stands the test of time.³⁴ Imitation of Christ points to Jesus' response to his heavenly father's will dramatized and exemplified when Jesus washes the disciples' feet, calling each of them to serve one another by his example.

No person is so great that he cannot stoop to take the hand of a fallen brother or sister. This concept runs deeper than a mere pattern of one's conduct. It is devotion at the deepest level of their person.³⁵ Jesus calls on his disciples to imitate him most carefully in

³³ White, *Biblical Ethics*, 74.

³⁴ Ibid., 109.

³⁵ Ibid., 111-112.

the way he lives out love. John 3:34-35 records Jesus' words, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples; if you love one another." The quality of love that the disciples experienced in Jesus' love toward them gave them the perfect example of love toward each other. It was through their personal experience of Christ's love that they were motivated. The disciples did not look back at the person of Jesus with admiration as one does an historical figure, rather with the deep emotional gratitude that came from their personal experience with Jesus.³⁶

The final aspect of imitation of Christ as described in the New Testament lies in the fact that we, as followers of Jesus need not merely pattern our lives after Him, we need to enter into relationship with him. Our desire is to live as Christ would have us to live. That is, to have Christ formed in us.³⁷

Ethics in the Early Church: The Example of Paul

This chapter will investigate Paul's devotion to the above call to be an imitator of Christ's example. Paul was devoted to the carrying on of the New Testament ethic to take the gospel message beyond the scope of Jesus' ministry to the Jews. Paul took up the challenge of taking the gospels' good news to the world. Jesus' ethic drew from the storehouse of Israel and the Old Testament. Jesus' teaching formed the foundation on which the New Testament writers built upon. These disciples of Christ (Paul being one) were members of the new covenant who took on the challenge of taking this news

³⁶Grenz, *The Moral Quest*, 115.

³⁷ Ibid., 116.

beyond the confines of Palestine.³⁸

For Paul, the foundational aspect of the moral life is the salvation phase instituted by God, sending his son, Jesus Christ, to dwell on earth, to die and to be resurrected. This New Testament ethic grew out of God's plan for humankind to be in a covenantal relationship with his son and be an integral part of taking God's saving plan for all of humanity into the far reaches of the world. There was a necessity for God to act redemptively on behalf of humanity because of the human moral failure and sin. Paul explains this dilemma that humans are imprisoned by, describing his own struggle to do good; evil lurks nearby, begging for him to fail (Rom. 7:14-24). Paul's ancestors proved that it was not through human efforts that salvation is granted to humankind. Paul states in Romans 9:16 that, "It's not by man's desire or effort, but by God's mercy" that we receive salvation. God acted out of his own authority and will. God's divine will, according to Paul, was to be in relationship with his created human beings. This radical soteriological act of God on behalf of humanity is a declaration of God's righteousness that exemplifies God's faithfulness to his covenant with the ancient people of Israel. Paul, being a descendant of this ancient people, declares that Israel has, in a sense, become an enemy of the gospel, because they fail to acknowledge Jesus as God's redemptive solution to their sinful plight. They were the earth-bound vehicle that was to display God's sovereign and redemptive power. Even though God is faithful to judge man for his sin, through Jesus Christ, he took upon himself the sins of the world individually. Because of Christ, each person has the opportunity to join in Christ's saving act to live their lives free from the eternal burden of sin. This fact Paul explains in

³⁸ Ibid., 117.

Rom.6:13-14, that we no longer need to live in sin, but instead we can offer ourselves to God as a people who, through Jesus Christ, have been saved from death to life. The death and resurrection of Christ is a definitive vantage point from which Paul's theology takes its course. For Paul, the Christ event is the pivotal event that brings forward in time to the present age God's plan for humanity to live moral lives focused on him. Through Jesus Christ we find our foundation to interpret God's plan for our contemporary setting.

Ethic of Hope

Paul's motivating factor in living the good life now stems from an eschatological hope that lies in every believer's future. This hope in the age to come gives us the hope we need for today. For Paul, beginning with Christ's death and resurrection, the ages stand side by side and this will be the case until the inevitable return of Christ. J. Paul Sampley elevates the Lord's Supper tradition as a believer's proclamation of Christ's death until he comes.³⁹

Although it is a challenge beyond this brief section to trace Paul's christologically based eschatology, it is along these lines that Wolfgang Schrage comes to his conclusion that nearly all cases where Paul speaks of Christian hope, Christ is both the grounding and the hope.⁴⁰ Even though it has already been noted that salvation through Christ is a benefit received through the past, one's salvation is also experienced in the present. Christians are caught between two worlds: One is the place of deliverance from the old self, the other still suffering the pangs waiting with a hope that is driven by the eternal

³⁹Sampley, Paul, *Walking Between the Times: Paul's Moral Reasoning* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 10.

⁴⁰ Schrage, Wolfgang, *The Ethics of the New Testament*, trans. David Green (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 181.

realm, rather than the temporal. Schrage points out that this “futuristic eschatology” has double significance for ethics. While still on this earth we first sense the world’s need for redemption while we are still here; second, the reality that there is a future beyond diverts us from becoming consumed or weighed down by this world holding us captive.⁴¹ Our minds, hearts and souls were set free when Christ died, was resurrected and promised his return.

In the letter to the Romans, Paul makes clear that in light of a believer’s hope for a future glory, that we need to “put on” Christ and behave with Christ-likeness. Rom.13:11-14 displays Paul’s conviction. Believers need to stay alert preparing for Christ’s return, not living as we did before we received Christ. Verses 13-14 say, “Let us behave decently, as in the daytime; not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature. Christ-likeness is Paul’s moral imperative. “Living in Christ” is the fleshing out of a believer’s life. The actions taken and decisions made, telling of how they have taken on Christ.

Paul’s moral imperative focuses on a contrast between the way one’s life is in the present compared to the past. The believer is made aware of the differences in their new life. Life transformation is dynamic, for they now realize that it’s God who caused the change. It’s God’s grace at work. Sampley explains it well, “the life of faith is not merely a realignment or rearrangement of features of one’s previous life before Christ. A life of

⁴¹ Ibid., 182.

faith is in radical contrast to life before faith.”⁴² Count yourself dead to sin - alive to God in Jesus Christ. Rom.6:17-18 puts it another way, “though you used to be slaves to sin ... you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of righteousness.” Gal.4:7 puts it into a social context of the day, “No longer a slave, but a son.”

At the heart of the moral life is being an imitator of Christ (Rom.15:7, 2 Cor.10:1, Eph.5:25). Take on the heart of acceptance, approaching others with gentleness and meekness so they can see Christ in you. Paul brings it close to home in Ephesians saying, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.” To be imitators of Christ, we need to possess the mind of Christ as well as his character.

Conclusion

If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin because anyone who has died has been freed from sin (Rom.6:5-7). Salvation, for Paul, is the key marker that points to God, that is, to God’s divine plan on the cross on behalf of humankind through Christ. The Holy Spirit, being the very Spirit of Christ, dwells within the believer. Each believer has died with, and someday will be raised with, Christ. Paul encourages believers to live this new life with a hope in Christ’s return. This life of hope empowers believers for today, and the future hope compels them to carry on the work of Christ, the work of reaching the lost, the broken, and the physically and spiritually poor.

Paul encourages the Corinthian church to follow his example of Christ. Christians are to be imitators of Christ as Christ was an imitator of God the Father. Grenz puts it this

⁴² Sampley, *Walking Between the Times*, 17.

way, “Every believer’s vocation is ministry, no matter one’s professional occupation.” To foster this desire to serve Christ in ministry comes with the responsibility that each believer be diligent and practice self-discipline.⁴³

Paul’s view encompassed the temporal as well as that of heaven, and this was his motivating factor in living a disciplined and consistent life in Christ. He said, “After I have preached the gospel to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.” Paul’s strong longing to someday dwell in heaven moved him to live his life in such a way as not to hinder his progress in any way. Paul’s main intention was to please Christ; he wanted to hear Christ’s praise. Ideally, Christians live their lives in the way they do because they have given themselves over to Christ as well as God who thankfully reconciled them in Christ. Believers need to live lives worthy of the calling they have received, worthy of God (Col.1:10) and finally, worthy of the Gospel of Christ (Phil.1:27).

⁴³Grenz, *The Moral Quest*, 126.

Chapter Three

ETHICS IN THE COVENANTAL CONTEXT

When we act with any moral action it is not just an action for its own sake. Instead, it involves other selves, or selves to selves. It is relational at the ground level, and fundamentally it causes us to ask, “What kind of person should I be?” When we reflect on our own behavior, it presupposes some model of relationship with other people. How we answer this question forms the worldview from which we operate. Our worldview dramatically affects how we make judgments. It gives us direction and gives us a form from which to make each moral decision. The moral makeup of our worldview provides us with motivation for action that either benefits others, or, depending on the source, is a detriment to society. For this reason our model needs to be adequately representative of a moral life. From the outset of this thesis I have been operating from a Biblical position which forms the Christian confession that Jesus Christ is Lord. The model that this chapter presupposes is indicative of the above confession. This confession fills out a model whose relationships are covenantal. Covenantal relationships involve other people who believe that each person matters. Joseph Allen points out that members of this moral community are not merely looked at as something useful for society. Instead we all participate in moral community as we entrust ourselves to others, and in turn we accept their entrusting. In this community each person takes a responsibility for the others.¹ Allen continues by pointing out that when we adopt this covenantal model we reject some others. One such model is individualistic in nature. Each person is not connected to

¹ Allen, Joseph L., *Love and Conflict: A Covenantal Model of Christian Ethics*. (New York: University Press of America 1984) 15.

any other, but is a collection of separate individuals. The individual makes decisions only on how their actions will benefit themselves, or their intentions are motivated by ulterior motives which in turn benefit only them.²

A second model that covenantal relationships reject is contractual models. The contractual agreement forms a social relationship that is only bound by its bargaining benefits for each of the persons involved.³ Finally, Allen points to the part/whole model where individuals are merely single cogs in a large social machine. Individuals are lost in the bigger whole. This model does not create a community. Instead, single selves provide form and function, but no personal relatedness.⁴

Covenantal Contexts

If these are the concepts that covenantal behavior rejects, what follows in this chapter will be to illuminate those which it embraces. Covenant is by no means solely a Christian phenomenon, but for our purposes, the biblical historical testimony will be our foundation from which we will construct a viewpoint of how covenant is best viewed as God's graceful response in the very act of creation with a desire for relationship. A relationship that was unmerited by humankind was at God's prompting and of his divine will. How did this divine act of creation impact humankind individually and move through the Biblical narrative? How did God covenant with Adam, Abram, Noah, Moses, and David? To each of these people, with all their familiar faults, God chose to extend an offering to be individuals in a covenant relationship with him on a personal level. It's

² Allen, *Love and Conflict*, 17.

³ Ibid., 17.

⁴ Ibid., 17.

interesting to note, each person is called upon to lead a group of people - some small, but for the most part nations of people, who even today are affected. These communities of people were not only related based on their common locality, but they governed, and were governed by, a common set of beliefs, similar interests, and a common hope. In this social setting, driven by God's sovereign intervention, the Hebrew people under the covenant learned to interact with God as individuals. But the greater impact occurred as almighty God ignited the nation to live as His chosen people in the world.

Later, under a new covenant which God established under Jesus Christ, the Christian church represented a people coming together by the power of the Holy Spirit's prompting, forming a community of covenanted individuals with common goals of furthering God's kingdom. This message went out, crossing cultural barriers, and the Church expanded across the known world. Each set of large and small covenanting communities of people experienced the dynamic reconciliation of which God desired and relentlessly pursued of his human creation.

Covenant in an Individual Context

Let us look first at the dynamics of the individual's relationship with God. Walter Brueggemann offers an intriguing outlook concerning the "Covenanted self."⁵ Brueggemann observes that Israel learned to relate to God in a threat and gift manner by a sustained dialectic practice of complaint and praise.⁶ We can look to the Psalms and see a "laboratory" of this praise-complaint model (Ps. 51, 73).⁷ These are just two examples

⁵ Brueggemann, Walter, *The Covenanted Self: Exploration in Law and Covenant* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press).

⁶ Ibid., 7.

⁷ Ibid., 8.

among many others. This model provides a natural environment for being in a covenantal relationship with God. Brueggemann points out that this same relationship is evidenced between a mother and child, a relationship that gains sustaining value in self- giving, as well as self-forgetting ways.⁸ In the flow of the Psalms mentioned above, there is a move from self-assertion to self-abandonment, which is the point that a person covenants oneself over to God. Israel praised, exalted, and magnified God. It was Israel's vocation to get its mind off itself and to glorify God forever.⁹ Covenanting involves self-abandonment, giving self up for others, moving beyond self-concern into the unutterable graciousness and awesomeness of God. Psalms 150 articulates the abandoned state, "Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!" Brueggemann states that a healthy child cannot begin by affirming his or her mother, the child must begin by paying attention to itself, its safety, its joy and the child cannot think of anything else until its needs are significantly displayed.¹⁰

Israel follows a self-asserting model. We see its harsh, demanding, insistent complaints and laments. Israel's address of the covenanting God is the means by which they attract God's attention to their earth bound dilemmas. An example of this can be found in Exodus 2:23-25, where it is written,

After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery and cried out. Out of their slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon Israel and took notice of them.

This self abandonment is the culminating response of individuals on behalf of the nation

⁸ Ibid., 8.

⁹ Ibid., 9.

¹⁰ Winnicott, D. W., *The Maturation Process and the Facilitating Environment* (Madison Conn.: International University Press 1965). 3,7.

or the collective numbers of selves announcing their common plight before God, insisting on his attention.

Even though God must impact people as individuals, these individuals must respond with a faithful relationship with God, out of a trusting and obedient ethic for life lived in God. A life lived with this purpose can be fulfilling, but its full impact is not realized in isolation. Additionally, it was never God's intention for humanity to be isolated, as we saw in our investigation of John Wesley's thirteen discourses on *The Sermon on the Mount*.¹¹ Here we see how Wesley's theology matured, moving from moral rectitude, to the faith alone, to faith alone working by love. This case presupposes the other-oriented self, where we love others as ourselves. Paul develops this in 1 Corinthians 12, when he speaks of the church as a body with many members, many parts forming one body.

"Covenanting many whether Jew, Greek, free or slave... God has arranged them, just as he wanted them to be." Then he writes:

God has combined the members of the body and gives greater honor to the parts that lack it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. (I Cor 12:24-26)

Paul speaks of membership in which all belong to the same sphere, and in turn all are members of one another. It is noteworthy to see that Paul speaks of the body having many parts, (not many bodies), each part helping to take care of the others, but still acting as one body. We do not join the body, we *are* the body. These verses above give an interesting distinction to the less honored or the weaker parts. Brueggemann pointed out that it is natural to assert one's freedom as well as one's right to abandon one's freedom. The demanding work of covenant is to know when to do what. This process requires a

¹¹ See chapter one of this thesis.

thoughtful disciplined practice of negotiation. Paul writes, “Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love as each part does its work (Ephesians 4:15-16). This statement from Ephesians provides us with an insightful call for members of the church to be maturing toward being *knit together in love* with our neighbor. The same delicate matters of relating to God in self-assertion and self-abandonment are equally critical in relating to others in our social sphere. Ephesians mandates that there be growth as the parts of the body are increasingly joined together in trust, loyalty and forgiveness. This is not something that happens automatically, but must be pursued with great care and intentionality.¹² I see no way that our neighbors benefit if each individual is not also tending to self, calling out to God as in Psalms 103, “Praise the Lord, O my soul; all my in-most being, praise his holy name.” It is important that we spiritually examine ourselves, but striving, as we do so, to build up the body.

In this next section I will outline how the church, working through time, has gone to God, the single source of its hope. We have the freedom to assert or to yield for the whole community’s sake, but it only benefits when done in love.¹³

Covenantal Themes in the Bible

In order to get to a working foundation of a covenantal context for the church, I feel we first need to revisit and expand on some concepts we briefly looked at in chapter two of this thesis. We first look at how the covenant concept has been developed from the

¹² Brueggemann, 11.

¹³ Ibid., 12.

time of creation through to the church age and forward to the twenty-first century. Allen points out that there are three main areas, or types, of covenant construction found in the Old Testament. In one they are between parties of unequal status. God initiates each covenant and sets its terms; they are not negotiated. In a second, they are reflections of God's power and grace, there is nothing outside of God's will that dictates its terms. And in a third type, each case contains something new created by God, a new covenant community where none had existed before.¹⁴ The presence of unmerited grace creates a covenant that will in turn benefit the people.

The nature of the covenants God formed with Noah, Abraham and David could be called promissory covenants, because they characteristically are made by God where he performed a self-limiting act through a spoken promise, but there is no mention of any obligation on the part of the chosen group or individual. Genesis 9: 8-17 is God's covenant with Noah. First God blesses and commissions Noah and his sons to "be fruitful and increase in number," giving all creation over to them for their benefit. Then God says to Noah and his sons, "I established my covenant with you." God expands his covenant to include all descendants to come and all living creatures, but promises further that they will never know this type of destruction again. In the final statement of the covenant with Noah, God promises an eternal sign in the rainbow. This is the covenant that God established with Noah and with all life on earth.¹⁵

Genesis 15 and 17 house the narrative concerning the covenant with Abraham. The covenant has additional facets of promise coupled with fulfillment, "I will make of you a

¹⁴ Allen, *Love and Conflict*, 18-19.

¹⁵ NIV, Gen. 9:13.

great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and whom ever curses you I will curse, and all people on earth will be blessed through you.”¹⁶ God comes to Abraham out of His grace and promises that they will be heirs of land, which will include Israel at its greatest reaches. God vows to keep the covenant with Abraham and again at no obligation on the part of Abraham. Throughout Jewish and Hebrew history God displays his dependability and graciousness, for it is freely given and dependable, because of God’s solemn pledge.¹⁷ We see the success of this covenant in the flourishing empires of David and Solomon. It is not only the covenant of Abraham, but of Isaac and Jacob, which provided the grounding for Israel as God’s chosen people. This covenant is what motivated and encouraged the people of Israel in times of exile. The most hope-filled aspect of the covenant of Abraham is that it goes beyond the fact that Israel is the elect people, and that God declares “I will be your God.” This feature is what designates the chosen people to be worshipers of God and people of faith.¹⁸ God’s promise to David is to establish the Davidic line forever on earth, and for Solomon it provides further insurance of a stable rule. It was during this period that Israel’s boundaries were at their broadest expanse. Isaiah 9:6-7 reveals that there is hope for future generations’ fulfillment of God’s earlier covenant with both Abraham and David. In each case the covenant provides a reminder of God’s steadfast love and of hope. The Isaiah account provides the messianic hope in Judaism.

¹⁶ Ibid., 12:2-3.

¹⁷ Allen, 20.

¹⁸ Ibid., 20.

A second area of study is the covenantal context of moral obligation,¹⁹ which is found in the Pentateuch. The obligation of the Hebrew people is tied to the covenant of Mt. Sinai, the Ten Commandments and the subsequent obligations that regulated the lives of this group of people. Moses was the person God chose to convey his will for the people. God used this covenant-making occasion to disclose his plan to Moses and to bring the people together as a nation, commissioning Moses as the man he had chosen to lead them. The Hebrew people needed to understand who God was, as well as what he desired for their lives, and what his relationship to Him was to be. The people accepted the covenant God proposed, which is an essential part of covenant making. God entrusted his will to the Hebrew people, and they, in response, trusted him with their lives. Thomas Ogletree points out that the Sinai Covenant runs deeper than mere political dynamics. It carries a richer notion than our modern understanding of social contract.²⁰ “It embraces the whole complex fabric of the people’s lives, their shared experiences and interactions over time.”²¹ This is not the beginning of Israel’s history but it certainly is a new beginning for them as a nation. Their years spent in captivity and enslavement had rendered them with no national identity or any sense of ownership. This supports Allen’s idea that God initiates each covenant and sets its terms, and they are not negotiable. They reflect God’s power and grace and evidence of God’s sole power, because nothing externally affects God’s will. God created a new covenant community where none

¹⁹ Ogletree, Thomas W., *The Use of the Bible In Christian Ethics* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1983) 49.

²⁰ Ibid., 50.

²¹ Ibid., 50.

existed before. The Sinai covenant breathed new life into post-exilic peoples.²² Ogletree points out that Jeremiah sums up the core essence of God's Sinai covenant, as well as all covenants that follow of which we have already discussed.²³ Thus says the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel... "Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people; and walk in all the ways that I command you, that it may be well with you." (Jer. 7:21, 23) These law covenants make demands on the people and put less emphasis on God's promises. Their deliverance at the hand of God by bringing them out of Egypt, gave Israel a new grounding for a community unburdened, thus giving new shape and meaning to its people. Covenanting with God now meant standing under the requirements of God's will. The first of the Ten Commandments presupposes an absolute commitment, "You shall have no other gods before me." (Ex. 20:3) If this first commandment is denied, then the entire covenant relationship is denied. Deuteronomy 6: 5-8, says, "Love the lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength." The Deuteronomy narrative exhorts that God's covenant should be allowed to permeate one's entire life. Allen points out that obedience to the law is an appropriate response to God as well as to each other.²⁴

Looking at the prophetic literature, we often see an indictment on a people who failed to follow God's requirements. Amos, for example, informs the people of their impending punishment, resulting from their abusive understanding of God's covenant to afford them indulgent behavior. The reality was just the opposite; to be in covenant in Amos'

²² Allen, *Love and Conflict*, 18.

²³ Ogletree, 53.

²⁴ Allen, 24.

understanding, was to be held responsible, not to be indulged (Amos 3:2). In Hosea, God's gracious and steadfast love is displayed when God (like a husband) is willing to renew the covenant even with those that have struck at its very foundation by worshiping other gods.²⁵ However, there seemed to be a sinful flaw in the very character of the chosen people, something that was incurable as indicated by the frank condemnation of the likes of Amos and Micah. Neither their call for obedience nor their reaffirmation of God's great love for them had any effect. Jeremiah's words sum up this seemingly incurable condition, "Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? Neither can you do good who are accustomed to doing evil." (Jeremiah 13:23). However, through the prophet Jeremiah God speaks of forgiveness for those who have broken his covenant. It will no longer be written on stone, but on the minds and hearts of humankind. It is God's very act of forgiveness through Jesus Christ that he will write it on our hearts. God's forgiveness renews the relationship between himself and all humankind, which is the central reality of God's covenant partnership. This sets the people on a new course for their lives. They are no longer the people that they once were.

The New Testament narrative is the reinterpretation of the old covenant through Jesus Christ.²⁶ Through scripture we have seen God renew his covenant. The old covenant was constructed around the institution of works by law mandating a relationship out of obedience. Whereas, in Christ, faith forms the relationship, and its initiation is unmerited.

There is a basic human need for the restoration of fellowship with God. Alienated by the fall, humanity finds itself in need of reconciliation, provided by God through Jesus

²⁵ NIV, Hosea 2:16-20.

²⁶ Allen, 28.

Christ.²⁷ Larry Shelton points out that the central paradigm of this saving relationship is found in the covenant which is represented in the Old Testament, understood and expanded in the lives of the community.²⁸ Therefore the covenantal relationship between God and his people is central to the entire Biblical message of salvation.²⁹ The salvation message is for all people.

Allen describes two types of covenant relationships: inclusive and special covenants.³⁰ Under the inclusive covenant all humanity is included along with all living things. They are all part of God's good creation. This initial concept is reflective of God's covenant with Noah. God, in addition, places humanity with the responsibility of taking care of them. It is God's divine desire that all people would be in covenant relationship with him. Similarly the Christian covenant is to "make disciples of all nations." (Matthew 28:19). It is through Jesus Christ that humankind can know that all people were created to be God's children. This inclusive covenant does not presuppose agreement, so if all members of humanity are members by God's action and divine will; it cannot be legislated out of existence.³¹ Even though people may reject it of God, it still exists. It is, in essence, written on our hearts. It is something that cannot be completely blotted out, even though it may seem that some people have been conditioned to reject it. We saw this in our study of the old covenant in Jeremiah 13: 23 (p. 63).

²⁷ Ch. 12, R. Larry Shelton, *Initial Salvation: The Redemptive Grace of God in Christ.*; Carter, Charles W. ed., *A Contemporary Wesleyan Theology: Biblical, Systematic and Practical* vol 2 (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury Press 1983) 473.

²⁸ Ibid., 473.

²⁹ Ibid., 474.

³⁰ Allen, *Love and Conflict*. 39.

³¹ Allen, 41.

Allen's second covenant category is special covenants, which he defines as "relationships of entrusting and entrustment between two or more parties that rise out of some special historical transaction between the members."³² There are many examples, such as the small intimate relationships of families, or larger and impersonal groups such as nations and states. A social scenario might be: A person might be at the airport with a large amount of luggage and a need to use the restroom. She might ask someone to watch her luggage for a short period of time while she does so. There is no permanency to this relationship, but nonetheless, there is an understanding of mutual trust between the parties. Additional examples with more permanent obligations would be that of marriage, evidenced in the vow "till death do us part," and in one's professional occupation. Allen points out that the Protestant reform doctrine of "vocation," with its belief that we are called by God to perform the duties of our various offices is important, even though our inclusive covenant is still the most fundamental relationship.³³

The core element concerning the inclusive covenant is that God initiated it at creation, whereas special covenants are initiated by human beings because of some unique interaction of "entrusting" or "entrustment." Whether inclusive or special, there are different rights and responsibilities that are reflective of a given community's relationship. The rights that these communities afford their members are at the root of what it means to truly live in society as a human being, and thus belonging to the broader community of the human race. These fundamental rights are not created by human choice; they exist as moral rights owed to every person without discrimination. The

³² Ibid., 41.

³³ Ibid., 43.

grounding element of this discussion has to be that within human society we have the opportunity, whether determined to be obligatory or not, to treat others as ends not merely means and we are obligated to meet the needs of others.³⁴ Again, each of these statements can be rejected. However, as a member of the Christian community it cannot be rejected at any level given the summary statement found in Matthew 22:37-39, Jesus replied:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself.

Living a covenanted life means existing simultaneously between these two types of covenanting relationships. It is one that is all-embracing, initiated by God at creation, which encompasses humankind in totality. Second, we operate within different groups of special natures reflecting distinctive features. The above passage calls the reader to the divine relationship with God and man. Allen points out,

A Christian covenant points beyond the social aspect of our relationships with other persons, to God as the center and grounding of our being, the one by whom the human community is brought into being and is called to reconciliation amidst its unfaithfulness and has the continual hope of becoming one true community.³⁵

The Church as Covenant Community

One such unique community is the Christian church, with love being the central virtue. The church brings together both personal and social attributes. Wesley's love perfection ethic both challenges our thought and shapes our actions. This love ethic, originally taught by Jesus in the Matthew 22 passage, is committed to God in loving

³⁴ Allen, 43.

³⁵ Ibid., 45.

relationship and expressed in turn toward our neighbor. God Himself embodies love, and Christians participate in that love. Our relationship with God should perpetuate God-like behavior. Leon Hynson points out that this life of love is what permeated our affections and intellect, shaping relationships with others, influencing decisions and forging thought patterns that are in conformity to the mind of Christ. Love sets the tone for action and brings forward the realization of the Christian calling.³⁶

Love in the New Testament has social implications. Wesley spoke often of social significance. “The gospel of Christ knows no religion but social; faith working by love is the length and breadth and depth and height of Christian perfection.”³⁷ Wesley also holds this line of thinking in regard to the church when speaking of “koinonia” and community. He contends that the Christian church cannot exist without being involved in the world. The church is not made visible by separating itself from the world, but instead by taking every opportunity to do good to all people.³⁸ A church that is filled with the love of God for all humankind is a light to the whole world. Wesley points out that the social character of the church involves those “called by the gospel, grafted into Christ by baptism, animated by love, united by all kinds of fellowship.”³⁹ He draws his description of the church from Acts 2: 42-47 where the “primitive church” exemplifies for him a true working image for the community of believers covenanted by God through faith and love. It is God’s desire to transform the lives of men, women and children, yet graciously

³⁶ Hynson, Leon O. *To Reform the Nation: Theological Foundations of Wesley’s Ethic* (Grand Rapids: Frances Asbury Press 1984) 95-96.

³⁷ Wesley, John, *Works* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Press 1958-59) XIV:321.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, I: 518.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 518.

he wanted to involve humankind in this transforming work.⁴⁰

The church's life-blood comes from the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. Its foundation stands firm, and from creation was inaugurated by Jesus Christ's redemptive act, both in life and death.⁴¹ Allen points out:

The church is a special covenant that exists through God's grace, in response to God's action in Jesus Christ and has its special calling, the proclamation in word and deed of God's inclusive covenant with its declaration of God's love and its demand for faith in God and love with justice toward all people.⁴²

Paul says, "He has made us competent as ministers of a new love - not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (II Cor.3:6). The new covenant is not stated to be the church, but the Holy Spirit has prompted the relationship with Christ out of which the church was birthed. It is through humankind's relationship with Jesus Christ that the new covenant promise can be fulfilled. (Jer. 31:31-34) Throughout the old covenant, Israel is referred to as "the people of God." In I Peter 2:9-10 we see similar language used - "chosen people", "royal priesthood", "holy nation", "God's own people". Founded in the God of old we are made heirs according to his promise. (Gal. 3:27) Allen aptly points out that as evidenced in scripture, the church can be theologically understood as a covenant community.⁴³

As God entrusted this community of believers with declaring in word and deed, each believer's acceptance of this task forms the relationship upon which the church of Jesus Christ is built. God took a great chance on humankind when he entrusted us with the

⁴⁰ Hynson, 113.

⁴¹ Ibid., 127.

⁴² Allen, 287.

⁴³ Ibid., 289.

fulfillment of the new covenant. God cares a great deal for his people - that is to say, all people. Not all people belong to the “church”, but all people belong to God’s all-embracing covenant, not just those who confess faith in Jesus Christ. The mission of the community of believers through faith in Jesus Christ is to go into the world and proclaim God’s covenant, initiated from creation, that all would come into a relationship with God himself through his Son, Jesus Christ.⁴⁴ Now we know that there is the issue of acceptance, and that the absolute fulfillment of God’s covenant hinges on a person’s acceptance of God’s message. As it was pointed out by Shelton, one of the most fundamental needs of all humanity is to be made whole. We need a healthy spirit in the church to proclaim and accept God’s salvation option.⁴⁵

The basic story of the Bible is one of human rebellion and God’s divine redemption. Early on in the Biblical narrative we see this reality portrayed after man’s fall. “Then the man and his wife heard the sound of God as he was walking in the garden ... and they hid from the Lord, but the Lord God called to man, Where are you?” (Genesis 3:9).

God seeks after all sinners with this same aching question. It is thought by some (who may even believe that there is a God) that God is only omnipotent. They believe he is looking down from above with no real involvement with humanity. But if we refer to the Gen. 3 narrative, we see a much different story. We see, instead, a God who is very much involved, a God who desires relationship with His human creation. He is an immanent God of relationship.⁴⁶ This is why we can say that God is covenantal, because of his

⁴⁴Allen, 293.

⁴⁵ Shelton, 473 (note 29 of this thesis).

⁴⁶ Lodahl, Michael, *“The Story of God” Wesleyan Theology and Biblical Narrative*. (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1994), 90.

divine interest in our cooperation and commitment to partnership with Him. Amazingly, God is not a solo act, although He is certainly capable of it. He invites us to participate in the mission of declaring his redemptive message. God's caring act of creation is what makes covenant relationships possible.⁴⁷

All of the covenants that have been covered in this chapter have been the result of God's steadfast and gracious love for his creation. But God's choice to redeem us does not come without our willing cooperation. This is what Wesley called *prevenient grace* - encouraging, enabling and empowering us to be "fellow laborers with God" (I Cor. 3:9). One of the greatest paradoxes of the Bible is that Almighty God bends low into creation to covenant with human beings, working together toward the reconciliation of humankind.

Conclusion

Jesus Christ, the cornerstone of the Christian Church, in his coming, strengthened God's covenant with humanity because Christ came as a man, a covenant partner, and a faithful son who desires His father's will over his own. (Rom. 5:17-19) It is absolutely crucial that the church and its individual members as the community of faith come to an understanding of God's covenantal activity in the creation of the universe, the creation of humankind in His image, the fall into sin, the covenant calling to Israel, the priests, the prophets and the Kings anointed by God. This is the mission of the church: To tell this story, to reinterpret the Biblical story within its covenantal context and to proclaim it in the face of human disbelief. God has elected all into covenant and seeks humankind's recognition of this reality.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 91.

Chapter Four

SOCIAL JUSTICE POSITION

In this final chapter I will be examining Wesley's social justice model, and highlighting several key emphases. I will offer a proposal concerning the idea that Wesley's social justice theology may have developed as a result of Wesley's choice not to simply write a solely academic theology, given eighteenth-century England's social condition. In the closing section of this thesis, I will write a proposed social justice position for the Church of God (Anderson, Indiana), as informed by the material contained in this thesis.

Wesley's Social Justice Model

Through my study I have seen Wesley focus on several key elements regarding social justice issues. Wesley felt it essential that each person enjoyed their human freedom. He spent a great deal of his time defending his Christian perfection theology, with great passion, rising out of a need to understand the Christian life, lived in love. A predominant theme throughout his teachings on the Sermon on the Mount, as well as his view of the Ten Commandments was this love ethic. When considering these two teachings, Wesley pointed to an ethical guideline which focuses on the life of Jesus, expressing love for God the Father and for all humankind.

Wesley never ceased to be practical in how his message would be received. One reality for Wesley was the dire social conditions of eighteenth-century England, as discussed in chapter one of this thesis. Wesley Tracy's research presents a thorough image of Wesley's day. The transformation of the social condition was endangered by

skewed political constructs, exclusively protecting the rights of the upper class. Wesley fought until his death for human rights, specifically organizing the reform of laws that would secure freedom for slaves. Wesley believed that each person has the universal right to live free. Ronald H. Stone points out that there were times when Wesley wrote essays in which he did not use scripture or theological arguments. Instead, he utilized the social science rhetoric as well as Christian theology that supported natural law theory.¹ Wesley used these secondary methods most often when he was involved in drafting recommendations for social policy.² However, these departures were brief. It was Wesley's normal course to rely heavily on scripture, interpreting it as it applied to eighteenth-century England. Wesley described his methodology as follows:

I want to know one thing, the way to heaven... God himself has condescended to teach the way... He hath written it down in a book.... In his presence I open, I read his book; for this end, to find the way to heaven. Is there a doubt concerning the meaning of what I read? Does anything appear dark or extricate? I lift my heart to the father of lights... I then search and compare parallel passages of scripture... If any doubt remains, I consult those who are experienced in the things of God.³

Wesley looked to scripture, first, for his own edification, and second, for how it applied to the world and its dynamic potential to transform lives. Pastorally, Wesley published a series of tracts entitled the "General Rules," in which he emphasized humankind's responsibility to live out God's purpose for their lives. As mentioned in the proposal for this thesis, Wesley came up against some criticism regarding his publication of the

¹Stone, Ronald, *John Wesley's Life and Ethics*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 207.

²Ibid., 208.

³Wesley, John, *Works 5:3* Cited by Larry R. Shelton, *John Wesley's Approach to Scripture in Historical Perspective*, (Wesleyan Theological Journal, Volume 16, Number 1, Spring, 1981), 24

General Rules. Some said that Wesley's teaching promoted individualism or legalism. Wesley, of course, denied these claims, choosing to point out that they were character-forming disciplines that brought about Christian holiness. Wesley felt that it was possible to be happy in this life, as directly related to one's personal holiness.⁴ Finally, for someone to say that Wesley's theology had an individualistic bent, does not allow for his life of social action. Critics with this viewpoint have not truly studied Wesley. If one tried to put Wesley's "do no harm," or "do good", phrasing to the test by imposing it on the twenty-first century, one would find fault, as I did in citing Joseph Allen's work, *Love and Conflict* on p. 51 of this thesis. But if you look at the eighteenth-century condition of the poor, Wesley was convinced that if personal piety did not move people to works of mercy, they were indeed doing absolute harm to those in need. It is clear that John Wesley and the Methodist people did much to minister to the physical and material needs of others. Both in evangelism and through direct aid, the majority of the Methodist movement's work had a large draw from the lower classes. Manfred Marquardt points out that after twenty years of evangelism Wesley made this entry in his journal:

It is well a few rich and noble are called. Oh that God would increase their number! But I should rejoice (were it the will of God) if it were done by the ministry of others. If I must choose, I should still (as I have done hitherto) preach the gospel to the poor.⁵

Wesley took personal steps to relieve the poor's condition, but he also utilized religious societies, some of which he set up. Wesley, and others associated with him,

⁴Maddox, Randy L., *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology*, (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994), 243.

⁵Marquardt, Manfred, *John Wesley's Social Ethic: Praxis and Principles*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 27.

visited families, factories, workhouses, hospitals and prisons.⁶ This work included works of mercy, simply to relieve the poor's pain. Much of the aid was accomplished through Wesley's institution of the "class meetings." People were encouraged to meet at least once a week for the purpose of sharing and meeting each other's needs. Wesley knew that solely meeting physical needs did not get to the core issue of transforming a person's soul. Yet one of the pressing issues that Wesley faced, beyond providing the necessities of life, was the lack of medical care. Caring for the sick was an absolutely catastrophic condition in Wesley's day. This grave circumstance resulted from the poor's inadequate hygiene and lack of medical care and nutrition. Marquardt points out that the Methodists, as organized as they were, were unable to stay ahead of the storm. Wesley took it upon himself to arrange for medical care at no cost, which afforded many this needed opportunity.⁷ Wesley set up "loan funds" and found jobs, but more extraordinary than all of this was Wesley's effort in altering the negative stigma concerning the poor. Two key assumptions caused this problem: First, was the belief that poverty was "self-incurred," and second, that it was the result of divine judgment, both of which Paul Slack and Wesley Tracy discussed.⁸ Wesley described the eighteenth-century condition this way:

Is it not worse for one, after a hard day's labor, to come back to a poor, cold, dirty, uncomfortable lodging, and to find there not even the food which is needful to repair his wasted strength?... Is it not worse to seek bread day by day and find none? Perhaps to find the comfort also of five or six children for

⁶Ibid., 28.

⁷Ibid., 30.

⁸Ibid., 30.

what he has not to give.⁹

Wesley wanted to ignite compassion in the hearts of those who heard him preach. The fact that troubled Wesley the most was that so many saw the plight of the poor but did not act. Wesley questioned if those who saw what he saw, could turn their backs and not attack the evil as he did. When asked, “What is Christian perfection?” he would quote Jesus directly from Matthew 22:36-40, “You shall love the Lord your God... you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” This two-fold commandment is at the very core of Wesley’s theology. It incorporates both his personal and social dimensions.¹⁰

As we partake in the nature of God, who is love himself, we begin to reach outward from ourselves to others. We are called to act lovingly within our sphere of influence, implying not only those who love us, but all people. Wesley’s confluence of the double command of love is absolute; his proposal is in direct contrast to those theologians that would insist on a Christian’s love being perfected when it is primarily directed toward God. Nothing is more important to Wesley’s social ethic than love:

You should be thoroughly sensible of this.... “The heaven of heavens is love.” There is nothing higher in religion, this is in effect, nothing else, if you look for anything but more love, you are looking wide of the mark, you are getting out of the royal way.¹¹

In Wesley’s July 17, 1748 journal entry, he referred to himself as “God’s steward for the poor.”¹² He seemed to tolerate the wealthy, but his true passion drew him to the poor.

⁹Wesley, John, *Works*, ed. Albert Outler, *Heaviness Through Manifold Temptations*, 2:228 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985) 228.

¹⁰Hynson, Leon O. *To Reform the Nation: Theological Foundations of Wesley’s Ethics*, (Grand Rapids: Asbury Press, 1984) 95.

¹²Wesley, John, *Journal July 1748, Works of John Wesley* (Kansas City: Beacon Press, 1978) See note: “When starvation was imminent there was no hope for finding food, the people ‘took to bed’, thus keeping each other warm, thus preserving life a few hours more.”

Wesley Tracy points out that John Wesley's exposure to situations such as his visits to Northgate Prison, watching a starving family pouncing on a single loaf of bread, or reading that a lay Methodist pastor and his family had "taken to bed" would make it nearly impossible for John Wesley to separate what he was seeing from the writing of his theology.¹³ So he had to write and implement a theology that reinterpreted the biblical narrative so as to meet the needs of the poor.

Wesley's theology came against the doctrine of predestination, which in its day, served well a people that needed to hear its liberating scheme. However, in Wesley's day, as we have seen, it was used to oppress the poor, telling them that their plight was the result of being outside God's favor. Wesley combated this now oppressive doctrine with one of grace. In it we find a doctrine that maintains holiness and love for God, Christ's work on the cross, unmerited salvation by grace alone, and yet expects individuals to be responsible participants in spiritual formation.¹⁴ As the poor climbed out of the depths of poverty, Wesley saw that they needed assurance of God's presence with them. Wesley then wrote a radical doctrine of assurance. Tracy points out that Wesley's doctrine of assurance was not simply a feeling that you would escape hell, but assurance in this earthly struggle that God is present, that God loves us, and that God is on our side.¹⁵ In John 16:33, Jesus affirms this assurance when he says, "I have told you these things so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble, but take heart! I have overcome the world."

¹³Ibid., 11.

¹⁴Ibid., 13.

¹⁵Ibid., 13.

Another oppressive element that permeated English society was the rigid class system, which in many respects stood firmly against Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfection. Wesley said of his doctrine, "It was the medicine of life...the never failing remedy for all the evils of our distorted world, for all the miseries and vices of men."¹⁶ As I cited above, concerning responsible grace, which was strengthened by Wesley's theology, "acts of piety and acts of mercy" are significant. Tracy points out that this doctrine stood midway between "salvation by works" and the "broken reeds" of particular election that made works utterly meaningless. Wesley never elevated works to a "salvifically meritorious" level, however, he deemed it, in some way, necessary.¹⁷

Finally, Wesley observed a society that was completely out of balance, and as he studied God's word, practiced church tradition, and read the likes of William Law, Jeremy Taylor and Thomas a' Kempis, he saw there was much more he could do to better his personal piety. However, something much bigger was at hand. England's situation caused Wesley to allege that God had a better purpose than what he saw in the desperate conditions of the poor of his day. Wesley threw himself at God and trusted His promises, and saw that from the beginning of time, God desired a relationship with all of humankind; no one person was excluded from God's love. This covenantal aspect of God's own doctrine had been lost. Hundreds of thousands of people were made to think they were no longer counted in that number; they were no longer a part of the "all"; they were the forgotten others. Wesley brought this very fact to the consciousness of eighteenth-century England and set out, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to transform the

¹⁶Wesley, John, *Wesley's Works*, cited by Wesley Tracy, Weymouth, op. cit., 217.

¹⁷Tracy, *Economic Policies and Judicial*, 15.

hearts, minds and souls of a spiritually and physically impoverished people. Wesley personally experienced a God who loved us enough to get involved and do something about sin. He entered into human suffering and redeemed broken people. Romans 8:31 sums up how Wesley longed for all humankind to understand “God is for us.” God is for *all* of us.

Social Justice Position for the Church of God, (Anderson, Indiana)

Given all that I have read and reflected on, culminating in the writing of this thesis, I now turn to the practical aspect of this investigation. First, to Wesley’s ethic as he interpreted it from his thirteen discourses of the Lord’s Sermon on the Mount; Second, a look at the biblical ethic as found in the Hebrew scripture, then Jesus’ example and Paul’s interpretive work in spreading the Good News to the broad reaches of his known world; Third, to God’s covenantal response to his human creation, as he bent low into creation and expressed his inexhaustible love to a faithless world through the atoning work of his Son, Jesus Christ. We, as the people of God, have an absolute responsibility to engage ourselves in the Gospel message, assess the social needs of the world around us, and respond in radical fashion, crying out to God as we join with him in the reconciliation of the world to its creator.

How has this thesis informed the writing of a sound social justice position for the Church of God? I come to this point in my writing with many insights on this voluminous subject of social justice. Many views have been reaffirmed, one being that from the beginning of time God has desired a relationship with all of humankind.

Reading the Sermon on the Mount, there is no way to know for certain who was in the crowd that day when Jesus spoke the words that later came to be known as the

Sermon on the Mount. It is suggested by many that the overwhelming majority were the physically poor. However who were the “poor in spirit?” Simply put, they were those who truly and humbly accepted the forgiveness of sin. The social justice position asks the question a bit differently of the church. “Does the church have God’s covenantal attitude in whom they allow into the church body?” Or, another way to put it, “Who is the church willing to touch outside their direct body of believers?” Jesus offered a transforming option for those willing to come to Him “poor in spirit.” To come to that place of humility on our own personal behalf, we need to mourn our own spiritual state, and additionally, we need to be mindful of all those who have not yet abandoned this sinful self. The Christian who rests in confidence of his or her salvation needs to mourn the world’s fallen and sinful state. These, whom have fallen, are whom Jesus calls blessed, and we need to approach them with a meek and gentle spirit as we should approach all humankind. A daily increase of gentleness would allow us to approach the sinner with love, while still hating the sin. However, a need to purify one’s own soul must take priority, producing a deep grieving for those who have yet to hunger after God. We need to relentlessly endure on behalf of those who do not follow Jesus. John Wesley’s examination of the double love command, “Love God, and love your neighbor as yourself, which in turn flows out of one’s love for God.” reveals a love with a bent toward holiness. Matthew 5:48 teaches, “Let us not rest until every love is transcribed into our hearts... let us watch, pray and believe and love... holy as he which has called us to be holy, perfect as our heavenly father is perfect.”

When we see God in such fashion, “as if face to face, as a person talking to a friend,” (Ex. 33:11) one is filled with love for God and for all humankind. This encounter

motivates us to use every opportunity and every resource, whether it be physical, emotional, or spiritual strength available to us for the good of others. The command from our Lord tells us that this love needs to extend even to our enemies. Matthew 5:13-16 calls the church to be “salt and light” to the world. This behavior allows others to recognize the heavenly father in us.

Christianity is a “social religion,” meaning that Christianity will not endure without the interaction of people. Our Christian life needs to be a public life, not one lived out in a “hermit’s cell.” John Wesley said, “Let the light which is in your heart shine in all good work, both in works of piety as well as works of mercy.”¹⁸ He went on to say that there needs to be a balance between the two, but acts of mercy are the priority.¹⁹ We can rest in the promise that God will equip us with this love and will make us humble, meek and holy. Pure intentions should drive these virtues, not the expectation of earthly reward. It should be noted, however, that often times serving the poor needs to be seen by others because it may draw them to God.

Let us be careful of how we manage our wealth, as made clear in the verse that states, “for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also”(Matt. 6:21). The intention in business should not be the accumulation of wealth. We cannot serve riches in this world and serve God at the same time. The only way that these two can be served with honor is to treat both with the same pure intention. If our hearts are singularly fixed on God, it will be natural to serve Him with our riches as well. It is important to note what is meant by “not laying up treasure on earth” and what is considered “treasures on earth.” Treasure

¹⁸Wesley, John, Works, I:530.

¹⁹*Book of Discipline of the United Methodist: The General Rules.*

does not include providing the necessities of life, staying out of debt, or responsibly laying up monies so that one's family will be provided for. We are challenged to habitually do good, and to be good stewards, laying up treasure, not in the world, but in eternity, where we will receive God's adoration. In whom, or in what, will you put your trust? What is the care of your heart? Give all of yourself over to God, desire nothing except that God would be glorified through it.

How is it that God will judge you? Judge others accordingly, endure to be humble, serious, gentle, merciful and pure in your heart. It is noble to be mindful of one's interior intentions, but do not neglect that which is outward, those intentions that affect your neighbor. We need to look to God to provide for our needs as we pursue Him exhaustively until He opens the door, conforming our love toward one another and towards all humankind. Understand this correctly, and you will know the whole of religion which our Lord came to establish upon the earth. We need to be careful to follow God's intended path for our life, because "wide and broad is the path of destruction." Listen for God's call to "enter the straight gate." Many do not find the narrow path, but the broad path is easily found. The narrow path requires a disciplined life, a life that has in it suffering for Christ's name sake, (Matthew 5:7-8, 10 and 7:13-14). Psalms 42:1-2 says, "Thoroughly thirst for God, continually panting." This is required if our intention is to do good to all humankind.

If we strive individually for purity in our intentions of faith and actions, we can stand as watchmen, providing help and guidance to those in need around us. We, as Christians, have a great responsibility to be a guiding light which provides social care in whatever shape it may take. Motivated by this goal, our lives can illuminate a narrow path for the

lost of the world to find God.

Conclusion

I feel strongly that viewing our Christian experience through a covenantal motif best models God's love to a world who seemingly is accustomed to doing evil. However, through the prophet Jeremiah, God has spoken forgiveness for those who have broken His covenant of obedience. Jeremiah 13:23 says it will no longer be written on stone but on the minds and the hearts of all humankind. It is God's very act of forgiveness through Jesus Christ that will write it on our hearts. God's forgiveness renews the relationship between Himself and all humankind, which is the central reality of God's covenant partnership. This commitment to relationship sets people on a new course for their lives. They will no longer be the people they once were.

The Christian church is a unique community whose central virtue is one of love. John Wesley points out that love has a perfecting effect on our ethic, both challenging our thoughts as well as shaping our actions. In Matthew 22, Jesus teaches that the same love ethic that challenges those committed to God in a loving relationship expresses itself, in turn, toward a neighbor. After all, God, himself, embodies love. As Christians, when we participate in this love, we reach beyond ourselves to others. Shouldn't our relationship with God perpetuate God-like behavior?

Love in the New Testament has a social implication. Wesley said that "the Gospel of Christ knows no religion but social; faith working by love is the length, breadth and depth and height of Christian perfection." When speaking of the church as "koinonia" and community, he contends that the church cannot exist without being involved in the

world. The church is not made visible by separating itself from the world.²⁰ A true working image for the community of believers is one covenanted by God through faith and love. It is God's desire to transform the lives of men, women and children, yet paradoxically, He desires to involve humankind in the transforming work. Based on my study, I feel that the mission of the church is to tell the story of God, to reinterpret the biblical narrative within the covenantal context, and to proclaim it in the face of human disbelief, that God has elected all into covenant and seeks humankind's recognition of this reality.

In this vain I would propose the follow declaration to the Church of God as it's Social Justice Position, as it has been informed by the research and writing of the above thesis.

We Hereby Affirm:

- All people were created in God's image, and should therefore be treated with equal dignity and rights.
- That all of creation was created in the image of God and should be protected, preserved and as God intended for all people equally.
- We are obligated not to disregard or reject ourselves, or treat ourselves as worthless in God's sight. However, that obligation can be fulfilled in the midst of the utmost sacrifice of our resources where the needs of others require it.
- We are obligated morally to undo the heavy burden, let the oppressed go free, feed the hungry, and take care of the poor, and that each person would make equal sacrifice toward this end.
- It is impossible to serve riches in this world and serve God equally; the only

²⁰Wesley, John, *Works* (Grands Rapids: Zondervan Press 1958-59) XIV 321.

way to serve them both with equal honor is to treat them with the same pure intention as with serving God.

- We should endeavor to be humble, serious, gentle, merciful, and pure in heart, conforming our love toward one another and toward all humanity. To neglect this is a hindrance to one's pursuit of holiness.
- The condemnation of injustice is part of the church's essential ministry of preaching, not simply in theory, but implemented through personal engagement in life situations.
- In accordance with scripture, the church would make continuing efforts to welcome all persons without regard to race, color, national origin, or gender; to participate fully, and without reservation, in its fellowship and work.
- Our responsibility, as the church, to address the needs of the mentally ill, to seek a fuller, more imaginative and compassionate ministry to this sizable segment of our society.

CONCLUSION

From the outset of the writing of this thesis, it has been my intention to look at four areas of study: John Wesley's social ethics, the Biblical ethic, ethics and the covenantal context, and finally, an unofficial social justice position. I felt it was important to read Wesley's writing, which may seem like an absurdly obvious statement; however, too often when Wesley is criticized for being too individualistic in his theology, those coming out against him fail to thoroughly study his work. In my reading, it became clear rather quickly that Wesley was affected by God's steadfast love for all of humanity. Given Wesley's place in time, he saw firsthand a grave imbalance in the social structure that favored the upper class. The devastating result being that the poor were left to suffer in extreme numbers. Starvation and death were the result.

We know that Wesley was a diligent man as seen in the voluminous contents of his writing. As Wesley observed in his study of the Sermon on the Mount, he comes away determining that God's chief attribute is one of love. We, as his followers, need to imitate his character of love. Our reliance on scripture will afford us the knowledge of a God who longs for his followers to seek him in love and to love our neighbor. We need to respond to the gospel with good intention, applying it to our lives as we minister to all people equally. Be students of God's word, imitators of his moral image, and let it be our life's occupation to serve the needy.

This love ethic, as informed by studying the biblical narrative, provides the direction. However, our task as members of every generation, present and future, needs to be to reinterpret God's word for a generation who needs to hear its message. At the same time remembering that what we read is for our edification first, and foremost. Wesley felt

strongly, as I do now, more than ever, that there is hope found in God's message as displayed in the atoning work of Christ's death and resurrection. We can live our lives with a hope that empowers us to reach the world with its transforming message. As Stanley J. Grenz points out, "every believer's vocation is ministry, no matter one's occupation." Wesley believed that serving Christ in ministry came with a responsibility to be diligent and practice self-discipline. The biblical ethic exhorts the reader to live a life worthy of the calling - worthy of God, and worthy of the gospel of Christ.

As I have stated above, one of the greatest paradoxes of the bible is that almighty God bends low into creation to covenant with human beings, to work together toward the reconciliation of humankind. In my study of ethics in the covenantal context, it's my firm belief that for our day it is crucial for us to reinterpret the biblical narrative in the covenantal context and to proclaim it to an unbelieving world, that God has elected all into covenant and seeks a relationship with each individual. John Wesley pointed out that love has a perfecting effect on our life's ethic in how it challenges our thoughts and moves us to acts of mercy as we are shaped by God.

I believe I have shown that Wesley's theology is much more than just one focused on personal piety. He embraced the bible's message of God's love for his created beings and his steadfast desire to be in a loving relationship with us. Our individual piety should move us to acts of mercy.

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