

GOOD NEWS

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Forward

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THE SCRIPTURE WAY OF SALVATION



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page 6**

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A photograph of two women sitting on a wooden bench on a beach, looking out at the ocean. The woman on the left is wearing an orange jacket, and the woman on the right is wearing a purple jacket. The ocean is in the background, and the sky is a pale blue. The text is overlaid on the upper half of the image.

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Cover photo: Abdiel Hernandez (Pexels)

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"After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people, and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands."

– Revelation 7:9



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First Word

UNFOLDING SALVATION

This issue of *Good News* is dedicated to the work of God in Christ to make us whole, otherwise known as salvation. It is my hope that the articles contained here will help us to better understand the process, or order, or even way by which God calls each and every one of us to new life in him.

God's saving work has always been at the heart of the Wesleyan revival. The early Methodist leaders weren't launching revivals wherever they went. They were trying to keep up with the outbursts of revival, the restorative work of God. God was at work and they wanted to catch up with what he was doing. And his work involved the salvation of souls. He who created us, loves us, and wants us to live victorious lives. And ever since we turned from him, God has gone out of his way to bring about our restoration.

Just think of Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son. It has many meanings, but one of them is that the parable is a picture of God's constant desire for us to return home, to return to him, even when we've insulted him, squandered our inheritance, and lived self-centered lives. In the parable we learn that when the father, even after all that the son had done, sees him from a distance, he runs to him and takes him into his arms. This is the loving embrace that awaits each of us. This is a picture of salvation.

From the moment of the Fall, when humanity sinned and brought death and corruption into the world, from that very moment, we begin to see God's plan of salvation unfold. Look at the account of the Fall in Genesis, even there we catch small glimpses of God's plan of salvation.

Adam and Eve had broken the covenant that they had with God and the repercussions were disastrous for them and for the creation itself. God responded to their faithlessness by sending them away from the life that they were intended to live, a life that sin made no longer possible. But when God cursed the serpent that had beguiled them he spoke of the "seed" of the woman who will ultimately "bruise" the serpent's head. The church fathers read this as a reference to Christ, born of Mary, the second Adam and the second Eve, from whom and through whom salvation would come.

The plan of salvation unfolds throughout the rest of Scripture. Even after the Fall, God continued to walk with his people, ultimately calling on Abram to become Abraham and Sarai to become Sarah, whose decedents would be a chosen people, a holy people set apart as a beacon of God's work of restoration. He called the people of Israel to be his own so that they might cooperate with his work to bring wholeness and healing to the world.

Only in Christ, though, do we see the work come to fulfillment and completion. Only God incarnate, God *with us*, God as one of us, would the full healing begin, a new creation. Made one of us, he lived and died as one of us, saving us by his full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice on the cross.

Sin entered the world through our disobedience, but Christ's death conquered sin. And the same victory that he won on the cross can be applied to your life and to mine. Sin doesn't have the last word, even on this side of death. Christ's resurrection by the Spirit of God, a new life,

Sin doesn't have the last word, even on this side of death. Christ's resurrection by the Spirit of God, a new life, can also be ours as we receive a share of that ultimate life awaiting the general resurrection when we will be made fully like him.

can also be ours as we receive a share of that ultimate life awaiting the general resurrection when we will be made fully like him.

The beauty of the Wesleyan tradition can be seen in its hope-fullness. Wesleyans have a sure hope that we can experience the saving work of God in our lives now. In fact the word “now” is a very Wesleyan word — and arguably a scriptural one. Once when writing to an early Methodist, Wesley — who was talking about the fullness of salvation — said, “Be a Methodist still! Expect perfection now!” The promise of salvation is not just a promise for a future time, but a promise that can be fulfilled and experienced now. Holy love, the life God intended for us from the beginning, can reign in our hearts now.

We can see this in the words of Charles Wesley in one of his striking hymns,

“O for a heart to praise my God
A heart from sin set free!
A heart that always feels thy blood
So freely spilt for me!”

Salvation is something that we can experience in this life and expect now, but it is also a process. There are certainly moments of great change within that process, but wholeness in Christ is a work that we must dedicate ourselves to, by grace, for our entire lives. We are to grow from grace to grace.

Wesley once talked about the process of salvation by using a house as an analogy, a picture of God's work. He said, “Our main doctrines, which include all the rest, are three, that of

repentance, of faith, and of holiness. The first of these we account, as it were, the porch of religion; the next, the door, the third, religion itself.” Salvation is driven by grace — the power of the Holy Spirit — and faith, our response to God's offer of love.

What we describe as prevenient grace — which means the grace that goes before — is in reality God's desire to be in relationship with all people. He calls to us like one seeking the lost. He is constantly seeking a loving relationship with each and every one of us, even when we're not seeking him. This call or grace awakens us, takes the blinders from our eyes, and we begin to see our present situation, a situation where sin has the upper hand. This is sometimes called an awakening. One of the earliest names of people in the Evangelical Revival was actually “the awakened.” They knew that they needed God, and that only in him could they find true wholeness and peace.

When we are awakened to our need for salvation, seeing the depths of our sin and the mess we have made, we experience the need for God's mercy and we are given a desire for God. And so by grace we turn to him in faith, which can also be understood as trust. Faith is the key, even as grace is the engine. In justifying grace we receive by faith the pardon of God who justifies us, forgives us, placing our trust in what Christ has done for us on the cross. And we're not just seen to be justified, we are justified as the life of God becomes our own.

The Book of Common Prayer describes God as one “whose property [character] is always to have mercy.” He longs to set us free. And once we receive God's pardon, we begin to experience the power of God's cleansing work. The

past is gone and we start anew. This is called the new birth and it is when we first experience the freedom we have in Christ. Its name alone should tell us how vital this is as a new beginning, a new life. It's not just a name, though; it's an actual change. We are born again by the power of God.

New birth is the beginning of the process of sanctification; a process propelled by the means of grace such as prayer, fasting, meditating on Scripture, partaking of Holy Communion, and serving one another in love. A true Christian life should be filled with these opportunities to encounter God's grace. In the process of sanctification, walking hand and hand with Christ, we learn his ways. For a moment, think of it just as you would any relationship. It takes time to get to know another person. But after spending enough time with someone, you know what that person likes, what they think about things, even some of their better, or lesser qualities. Now apply that to Christ. And unlike a relationship with another person like ourselves — even one we love deeply — Christ has no lesser qualities. He is the very embodiment of perfect love, or as Charles Wesley wrote “pure unbounded love.” To walk with him is to walk with God. And no one who spends time with God remains unchanged.

This walk, or process, enables us to experience what Wesley called Christian perfection. Don't be frightened by the word “perfect.” The word is used regularly in Scripture such as in the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus commands us to “be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.” As with any command of Scripture, it is also a promise. God doesn't just give us commands from on high; he gives us the grace to actually live this way. His commandments are promises of his grace.

But what does Scripture mean by “perfect”? Scriptural perfection is not static as though any change would undermine it; it's actually dynamic. It is perfection in love (think of that loving father from the parable again) that breaks the power of sin and enables us to live a life of holy love that looks and sounds and is a life shaped by Christ's own life. The point is to be like Christ, because in him we

see God's vision fulfilled and he wants to see that vision fulfilled in us. Salvation, in so many words, is the freedom to be who God always intended us to be.

The hymns of early Methodism were organized by Wesley in a hymnal to describe this ordering of salvation. The hymnal has a wonderfully long title — very common at the time — *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists*. It was published in 1780 and until the recent publication of *Our Great Redeemer's Praise* in 2024, this hymnal was the only truly pan-Wesleyan hymnal, one that the whole family can use.

My doctoral advisor, David Hempton, has said of the 1780 hymnal: “If one were to choose one single artifact of Methodism somehow to capture its essence, the most defensible choice probably would be the ‘Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists.’”

And the hymnal is organized according to the Scripture way of Salvation taught by the early Methodists. We can see in it sections “for those groaning for full salvation,” for “those backsliding,” for those who are walking with Christ and one another in the early Methodist bands (small groups), and for those who have reached perfection in love.

Poetry has a unique way of communicating the faith. And so I leave you with one of Charles Wesley's hymns from the 1780 collection.

“Saviour of my soul, draw nigh
In mercy haste to me;
At the point of death I lie
And cannot come to thee;
Now thy kind relief afford
The wine and oil of grace pour in;
Good Physician, speak the word
And heal my soul of sin.”

Let us pray for this blessing in our own day, in our churches, our communities, and in our own lives.

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GROWTH IN GRACE



“The mystery of human growth is amazing. Measuring biological growth is a straightforward, understandable process. Gauging spiritual growth? Not so much.” Image: Kampus Produxction (Pexels).

By Stephen Rankin

“But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18).

In our home, affixed to the wall of the entryway from our garage into the kitchen, hangs an oversized yardstick that our son-in-law made for us to measure the heights of all our grandchildren as they grow. As you might imagine, it is full of marks that climb ever higher and higher on the numbered hash marks. Joni, my spouse and family matriarch, marches each grandchild to that board every year as

close to her or his birthday as possible. Each grandchild is as excited as we are to see how much she or he has grown. One grandson, now five inches taller than my smallish 5’9”, towers over me. Those of you who do something similar know the feeling. The mystery of human growth is amazing.

Measuring biological growth is a straightforward, understandable process. Gauging spiritual growth? Not so much. Most Christians recognize the need for growth. Most of us have some general, but probably too vague a notion that God expects us to grow. We know that being a mature

As many scholars of Wesley have pointed out, going on to perfection (or entire sanctification, or being made perfect in love, or several other expressions Wesley used) is the chief reason for the existence of Methodism. It's especially important for us in the Wesleyan tradition to hold fast to this vision.

Christian is obviously better than being an immature one, but do we have any way of making an honest and accurate assessment so that we can tell the difference? Candidly, I think the answers to these questions for most believers is no. We need to remedy this situation.

The author of the book of Hebrews hits this point hard. "For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic elements of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food ... but solid food is for the mature, for those whose faculties have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil. Therefore, let us go on toward perfection..." (Hebrews 5:12-6:1a, NRSV).

According to Albert Outler's introductory note in the new edition of *The Works of John Wesley*, Mr. Wesley preached on Hebrews 6:1, "Let us go on to perfection," more than fifty times in his long ministry. We'll return to the idea of "going on" in relation to growth in a moment, but, first, let's deal with that most intimidating word, "perfection."

Most people, including many in the Wesleyan tradition, struggle with perfection because it seems to point to a flawlessness that no human can reach. True, and Hebrews isn't asking us to hit this mark. Similarly, perfection smacks of perfectionism. Biblical perfection in Christianity is not the perfection we are called to seek. What, then, is it?

It's a call to grow into the fullness of adult, mature discipleship. In other words, to aim at, yes, Christlikeness; that is, to have the mind of Christ and to walk as Christ walked. The Bible doesn't mess around. It doesn't soften this call. It is only possible by God's grace, and God makes this very grace available to us all.

As many scholars of Wesley have pointed out, going on to perfection (or entire sanctification, or being made perfect in love, or several other expressions Wesley used) is the chief reason for the existence of Methodism. It's especially important for us in the Wesleyan tradition to hold fast to this vision.

What is Grace and How Does It Work?

People in the Wesleyan tradition have learned from numerous sources about prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace. We know the words and some perhaps have some basic understanding as to how these different expressions of grace work. If you already know what I'm talking about, then consider this little exposition a refresher. If you don't know, then I hope it inspires you. Either way, may it provoke you to action.

John Wesley, in his sermon, "The Witness of Our Own Spirit," helps us see the needed perspective for growing in grace:

"'By the grace of God' is sometimes to be understood that free love, that unmerited mercy, by which I, a sinner, through the merits of Christ am now reconciled to God. But in this place it rather means that power of God the Holy Ghost which 'worketh in us both to will and to do of his good pleasure.' As soon as ever the grace of God (in the former sense, his pardoning love) is manifested to our soul, the grace of God (in the latter sense, the power of his Spirit) takes place therein. And now we can perform, through God, what to [humanity] was impossible."

Most Christians have a decent grasp on the first part of this description. We know that grace means God's gift, God's unmerited favor in forgiving and adopting us as his children through faith in Christ. But awareness of the second

The Bible is consistently clear regarding God's unmerited favor, and we thank God for it. What if, however, we also grasped further that God's grace is God's action for our full salvation, like the actions of a great coach who has a purpose in our training and a goal for our growth? Who is totally committed to our becoming, so to speak, an outstanding athlete? Who guides and corrects and insists and inspires?

part — the part that Mr. Wesley emphasizes — pales by comparison.

To be sure, the Bible is consistently clear regarding God's unmerited favor, and we thank God for it. What if, however, we also grasped further that God's grace is God's action for our full salvation, like the actions of a great coach who has a purpose in our training and a goal for our growth? Who is totally committed to our becoming, so to speak, an outstanding athlete? Who guides and corrects and insists and inspires? The coach metaphor falls short, of course, because God does more than teach and correct. He also literally provides what a coach cannot. God's very own Spirit supplies the energy, the power, to grow us into Christlikeness. And here I think of another of Mr. Wesley's sermons, "On Working Out Our Own Salvation," based on Philippians 2:12-13. This text reads in part, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you..." As Wesley says in this sermon, because God works in us, we can work. But also, because God works in us, we must work, that is, engage our energies to grow and to serve.

What Does Growth Look Like?

Let's assume that you have committed to this vision of becoming a fully-grown, spiritually mature, on-to-perfection disciple. How do you gauge whether you are actually growing?

Assuming the desire to grow, the process starts with appropriate self-awareness. I stress that word, *appropriate*. The kind of self-awareness we need follows Jesus' first Beatitude in Matthew 5: "Blessed are the poor in spirit..." To recognize our spiritual poverty, our tendency toward self-indul-

gence, therefore our need for grace, is the place to start.

Then, avail yourself of the means of grace. They are indispensable aids to growth. We can call them spiritual disciplines, as many traditions do, but recognizing them as means of grace helps us remember that God supplies the energy we need. Prayer (public and private), searching the scriptures, fasting, receiving the sacrament, meeting together in small groups for mutual edification (watching over one another in love), and serving others in Christ's love all serve as means of God's grace to grow us into mature Christians.

Next, develop a useful way of measuring growth. This process does not need to be overly formal. It simply needs to help you see what is actually happening in your efforts to grow. Make a list of ways that you sense the need to grow. You can modify the list as you give more thought to this work. Keep some notes for future reference. Do this work with trusted fellow travelers. You could start with any of several spiritual maturity assessments available online (do an internet search for "spiritual maturity assessment" and choose one that seems appropriate). A tool like this one gives you some food for thought.

In your assessment, while you consider attitudes, dispositions, and behaviors (in other words, character), don't overlook the critical category of knowledge. For example, one area of serious concern has to do with discerning sound from unsound doctrine. To be sure, mere conceptual knowledge does not make one a mature Christian, but neither does ignorance! Sound doctrine leads you into deeper union with Christ. If you want to grow in grace, do not overlook serious study. Again, if you search online, you can

Spiritual growth is often an up-and-down experience. It's not a straight line. It's not automatic. It takes effort. We hit plateaus. We grow listless. We get tired. A season of difficulty can cause us to doubt. But we press on toward the goal of the upward call of God in Jesus Christ!

find tools for helping you assess doctrinal and scriptural knowledge. Remember, it's just a way to get started, it's not the final judgment.

Christian character flows from the heart and the heart is made up of thoughts, feelings (desires, affections) and actions. So, do the same inventory with character qualities. Consider how, for example, the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5 provides a template. Start with a study of each of the virtues listed there. Again, it's best to do this work with a group committed to the same goal. Think about situations where you feel vulnerable or afraid or frustrated or angry or hurt. Conversely, where might you be a little too comfortable, too self-assured? Think of relationships in which you need to exhibit Christlikeness in your demeanor.

Finally, consider whether or not you regularly give away your time and love to others in service. In what ways do you show that you love your neighbor? Once more, let me cite John Wesley. In his sermon, "On Visiting the Sick," he makes it clear that engaging in this ministry (all Christians, not just pastors) is a means a grace for the visitor every bit as much as the visited.

And, with friends in Christ, stop every six months or year (not too often) and look back. Have I grown? Can I testify to real victory in certain areas of my life? What changes does my small group see in me? Am I gaining ground in feeling the love of God and showing Christ's love toward others?

In getting practical, I want to stress that you need more than a checklist of behaviors. We're good at checking boxes. Did I read my Bible? (Check) Did I attend worship? (Check) Did I tithe this month? (Check) And so on. But checking boxes, merely going through the motions of behaviors does not a mature Christian make. Once more, thinking of these actions as means of grace keeps them in the framework of God's goal of our growing to maturity

Keep in Mind

Finally, a couple of cautions. First, God doesn't walk on and override our agency. We're not little automatons that God manipulates. In *The Faith Once Delivered*, a good resource for growth in grace, you'll find reference to the "cooperant grace, of God and humanity working together with God by grace." God won't run over your desires and prerogatives to get you where he wants you, but you can receive his grace and he will work with you to grow you up.

Second, we don't need to feel strong to be strong in Christ.



It's the same with growth. We don't always feel like we're growing when we're growing. Don't wait around until you feel inspired or somehow adequate to the task. I repeat, you don't have to feel strong to be strong in Christ. In 2 Corinthians 12, Paul testifies about his weakness and what Christ said to his request for healing: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in your weakness." Therefore, Paul could boast, "When I am weak, then I am strong."

Spiritual growth is often an up-and-down experience. It's not a straight line. It's not automatic. It takes effort. We hit plateaus. We grow listless. We get tired. A season of difficulty can cause us to doubt. But we press on toward the goal of the upward call of God in Jesus Christ! We don't settle for anything less than Christlikeness. This is the goal of the Christian life, and, by God's grace, we can arrive at the goal.

Stephen Rankin pastors Arkansas City United Methodist Church in Kansas. He also serves as executive director of Spiritual Maturity Project. He is author of *Aiming at Maturity: the Goal of the Christian Life*.

The grace that awakens



"Our gracious God never forces any one to receive him. But he always extends life to our death, light to our darkness." Photo: Unsplash.

By Bill Ury

A beloved mentor of mine would shake up a room when he would talk about the free grace of God and the sinner's response by saying, "God has a problem!" He would go on to discuss the fact that Jesus would not misuse his love to bribe us or force us to recognize or accept him. How then could we come to any spiritual perception without losing our freedom? Salvation is always pure gift and yet he will not save us without ourselves. How is this paradox dealt with to preserve both God's sovereignty and a real human

responsiveness? The answer begins with prevenient grace.

It changes everything when grace is viewed as the life of God. Grace is much more than an attitude or disposition. Salvation is only possible through the life-giving power of the God of grace. Grace originates in the heart of the Holy One who is Love. This powerful self-giving permeates all of our human existence, even when we have refused it. Our gracious God never forces any one to receive him. But he always extends life to our death, light to our darkness.

It changes everything when grace is viewed as the life of God. Grace is much more than an attitude or disposition. Salvation is only possible through the life-giving power of the God of grace. Grace originates in the heart of the Holy One who is Love.

Our Wesleyan tradition has agreed with the interpretation of sin as originating in Adam and which has affected all of humanity (Romans 5:12). The withering, yet indisputable, conclusion is that we are deprived of the presence of God and totally depraved. This devastating rejection of God touches every area of our lives — body, spirit, will, and mind. John Wesley described our fallen nature as the loss of our Breath, the Spirit. Without the Breath of God, we are devoid of Life. Yet, he comes to dry bones and offers revivifying power. (Wesley, “The Circumcision of the Heart”). Human nature alone, without grace, is a dead nature. Grace issues from the heart of God to offer himself to our self-imposed destruction. He enters every place of our blindness with light. The Wesleys used the phrase, “Wake up, sleeper” to indicate the indefatigable love of God for us in our darkened and deadly state (Ephesians 5:14).

Paul calls human nature apart from saving grace the “natural man” (I Corinthians 2:14). Our nature apart from the Spirit’s presence and work in our hearts is spiritually lifeless. The normal emphasis on John 3:16 often misses what must come before we believe, the eternal love of God and the sending of the Son decided before the foundation of the world. This means that no one is totally “natural.” In our benighted state we are never left abandoned by God, without the choice to either receive him or reject him. Wesley compared us to an unborn child, surrounded by life yet without perception of it (Wesley’s sermon, “The Great Privilege of those that are Born of God”).

So, grace is more than merely divine concern. It is the dynamic life-giving essence of our Creator and Redeemer who will not let us go. The Church has struggled to explain how the grace of God intercepts lifeless hearts without stacking the deck. Our Savior will not save us against

our will. So how does he enable spiritually blind and dead persons a real offer of conviction, confession, and new birth? All of us need to be awakened, given spiritual sight in order to be able to respond to the self-offering of God. This spiritual capacity initiated and enabled by the Holy Spirit brings enough light to an unredeemed person so that any response to grace is truly free (see Herbert McGonigle’s volume, *Sufficient Saving Grace*, 2001).

Some have said that our wills are bound and our fallenness so severe that only sovereign irresistible grace is the solution. In this view, our sinfulness is entrenched to such a level that only supernatural determination and selection of a few for salvation makes sense. The intensity of total depravity requires that salvation only works one way. They advocate “monergism” (*monos* ‘one’ + *ergon* ‘works’) a term to assure that God alone saves without sinful human involvement. On reflection, this view is not totally wrong. For every cell, breath, or thought originates and is sustained by the providential goodness of God. No life, despite its spiritual destruction, is totally divorced from grace. Unless he gives himself, life is impossible.

The Wesleyan tradition rejects the perspective that God alone works in salvation because it is impersonal. As creatures made in the image of God who are enabled to respond as persons before the Fall, we assert that true freedom is central to what it means to be a person. While never delimiting the freedom of God to graciously offer himself we recognize at every point God coming to each person in self-giving love.

In *The Problem of Pain*, C. S. Lewis once reflected that if we were truly totally depraved, we would not know it. God is so good to us that even though we have all gone into a far country he gifts us with the possibility of coming to

The Wesleyan tradition rejects the perspective that God alone works in salvation because it is impersonal. As creatures made in the image of God who are enabled to respond as persons before the Fall, we assert that true freedom is central to what it means to be a person.

ourselves. Everything he ever offers enables personal relationship. The concept of his undeserved engagement with our fallen nature has been called, “synergism” (*sun* ‘together’ + *ergon* ‘works’). We never receive his good grace as inert substances, like rocks. He desires to recreate us into the full image in which we were made. What we de-personalized he can re-personalize. The absolute bondage of sin is countered by the personal love of God who bestows a liberating grace so that we might regain our “native freedom” (Wesley, “One Thing Needful”).

That is why the Bible is full of pictures of grace impacting our stony hearts: light in our darkness, water pouring over our dust, life for our death. No matter how deep our pit, our Savior has gone deeper (Psalms 139:1-12). That astounding fact is brilliantly revealed in the term, “pre-venient” (*pre* ‘before’ + *venire* ‘come’) grace. Our salvation from beginning to end is sustained by God. At no point do we ever command or earn his life in us. Out of his overwhelming love he gives grace to enable the first inkling of response.

At this point many have said “See, grace is irresistible!” Our response is yes. He does offer grace to us whether we know it or not. But salvation is impossible without a personal reception of saving grace. This “coming-before” grace initiates the possibility of relationship without ever coercing our response. Eternal love, God’s essential nature, pours over our lives in countless ways. He gives, calls, invites, and provides without manipulating one false response.

So how does the Scripture reveal to us this grace which precedes?

Recognition of God in creation – Even though our corrupt lives threaten to keep the barriers up in defiance to our Maker, we are inextricably surrounded by the majesty of Creation. The universe reveals the grandeur of

his character traits: beauty, order and goodness (Psalms 145:9; 19:1, Romans 1:19-20, James 1:17). The cosmos is a brilliant portrayal of objective grace. All of us are under the selfless avalanche of loving invitation to know the One who made the stars and formed us for himself.

Conscience – The Creator who spoke the universe into being did so in order that we might have conversation with him. From the glory of the galaxies, God’s gracious self-revelation comes to each of us in the form of our conscience. Each of us has an inner moral capacity when something wrong occurs (Matthew 7:11, Romans 2:15-16). The most anarchic and violent gangs have strict codes for loyalty. He has made us with an indelible sense of the wrongness of lying, abuse, and disrespect. To be immoral is not to be amoral. We are not so depraved that everything goes. Those standards in our conscience point to the Righteous One who made us for righteousness.

Freedom of the Will – To be a person entails freedom. I heard a theologian interviewed who irritably asked why Wesleyans were, as he put it, so in love with freedom. I retorted out loud, because we are created as persons. Without freedom of the will, we are not whole. Sin has shackled our wills to sin. God’s undergirding grace ensures freedom of responsiveness to him. A measure of self-determination is his continued gift (Ezekiel 18:20). Thus, we are given the capacity to hear and respond to him. Scripture itself is proof that God is speaking and empowers us to be able to listen, understand and apply his truth. The Gospel of grace is always personally and restoratively freeing.

Conviction and Believing – Conviction of sin without the preceding grace of the Word who whispers his holiness and mercy does not originate in us. So, the Knower of our hearts has carefully retained a sense of our need for him. Only a fool comes to an insurmountable crisis and refuses to call out to God. Every Christian can testify

to a time when they were dead in sin and a glimmer of hope came into their purview. It was a real choice to trust Christ. The precursory working of grace makes turning to and depending on Jesus possible (Romans 2:4, Acts 5:31, Ephesians 2:8-9, 2 Timothy 2:25-26). At every point of our lives his grace-life enables, prepares, strengthens, and bears us.

The Drawing of the Trinity's Self-Giving - Wesleyanism affirms both the sovereign freedom of God's self-bestowing grace and the enabled and unforced response of persons made in the image of God. Each person of the Trinity is involved in this marvelous dynamic of relational restoration. The Father is "drawing all humanity" to himself (John 6:44, 65). The Son is calling and drawing to himself all who would be saved (John 10:3, 12:32, 15:5). The Spirit enables every aspect of grace before salvation (John 16:8-9).

The Light of God - John describes this prevenient grace in Jesus as "the true light that gives light to everyone" (John 1:9). John Wesley spoke of "the first dawning of grace in the soul" (Wesley, "The Scripture Way of Salvation"). The Love in God seeks to awaken all by the revealed light needed to make possible the recognition that they are made for Another. But that illumination is only the precursor to meeting and receiving the One who is the Light of the World (John 8:12, 9:5). This light luminates both radical sinner and blind, self-righteously secure religionist who is "asleep in darkness" as a "horrid light" and "awful providence" which shakes one out of sleep. This grace "touches the heart" enabling the "the eyes of understanding to be opened" ("The Spirit of Bondage and Adoption).

The apostles affirmed that God "has not left himself without a witness" (Acts 14:17). He is always there before we are. Every conversation, act of ministry or service in Christ's name is established, in what Dr. Dennis Kinlaw called, "the law of the second witness" (*Preaching in the Spirit*). Prevenient grace assures us that the Holy Spirit is working in every person's heart at all times. What joyful freedom it brings to know that the God who is Love precedes, pervades, enables, draws, awakens, convicts, and saves each of us. He asks us to join his prevenient self-bestowal in offering witness to his personalizing grace in every person's life.

Finally, the dynamic of grace as God's self-giving to us means that he has a goal. Prevenient grace has a trajectory which comprises the way of salvation. (Wesley, "Awake, Thou That Sleepest." Dr. Ken Collins succinctly articulates the distinctiveness of the Wesleyan doctrine of prevenient grace in "Introduction to a Wesleyan Theological Orientation" in *Wesley One Volume Commentary*).

In the hymn "And Can It Be, That I Should Gain," Charles Wesley eloquently described this telos or goal-orientation of the Holy One. In the description of a grace which invades our prison-like estate he wrote, "Long my imprisoned spirit lay, fast bound in sin and nature's night" which



is met with grace-filled enabling glory, "Thine eye diffused a quickening ray" and the resultant awakening, "I woke, the dungeon flamed with light." But note, this must be followed with "I rose, went forth and followed Thee." Not only alive but clothed in the righteousness of Christ.

There is in the heart of God the unrelenting desire for each of us to be free of the bondage of sin. But prevenient grace points to much more. He wants us to become his children who bear a strong family likeness to him. Grace is not a transaction or a substance. It is the life of the Holy One which is not satisfied until the one who wholly trusts him is made like him in holiness of heart and life.

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Grace-fueled Discipleship



By Tammie Grimm

Did you know John Wesley never used the word “disciple” to refer to persons who seek to follow Jesus? It’s true. Yes, he did use the word “disciple,” however, it was only in reference to the persons who were companions of Jesus during his earthly ministry and then carried on after Pentecost to help build and grow the church. He simply never used the term “disciple” in reference to himself or any of the “people called Methodist” of his day. Rather, he referred to his contemporaries who were dedicated followers of Christ as either “Methodist” or “Christian.” When pressed to describe what it meant to be a “Methodist” or a “Christian” Wesley turned to scripture and created the turn of phrase by mashing up Philippians 2:5 with I John 2:6 to describe a Christian (or a Methodist) as *one who has the mind that was in Christ so that they walk in the way Christ also walked* (emphasis added). It’s a definition that still tracks today having resonance with contemporary descriptions of a disciple as one who is a follower of Jesus or is a friend to or companion with Jesus.

What is so great about Wesley’s description of a disciple (beyond the realization that he was mashing up verses long before DJ’s thought they were cool by doing it to recording artists) is that his provides nuance, reminding us that a Christian disciple is about engaging in doing things just like Jesus did and that their interior lives (thoughts, feelings, and impulses) were also consistent with Jesus. Actually, Wesley gives priority to Christlike desires and motivations (thinking and being like Jesus) that orders outward behavior. This description of a Christian disciple leaves room for mutual reinforcement between the two, that in doing things like Jesus we can become more like him in character and disposition as well.

Similarly, while Wesley didn’t use the term “spiritual disciplines” or “Christian practices” he didn’t neglect teaching or preaching about them. Instead, he used a term popular in his day, “means of grace,” to describe those everyday actions that persons participate in out of the desire that participation in them will help them grow in faith and Christlike character. And just as Wesley’s description

of a disciple spans the ages, so too, does “means of grace” transcend time. By ascribing the means — whether they be signs, words, actions, or even practices, disciplines, and experiences — to be “of grace,” that is belonging to God, we can understand God often and regularly uses particular activities such as prayer, worshipping together, volunteering at the homeless shelter, etc. to help us grow and mature in Christian faith. Furthermore, we are offered the opportunity to realize that God could use just about any event or circumstance in our lives to convey his love that we might grow in Christlike character if we are so attuned.

Typically, we may call certain things we do as Christians, whether it be prayer, Bible study, worshipping and taking communion with others, volunteering at the local food bank or supporting a Christian missionary a spiritual disciplines or Christian practice. And by that, we mean that we do these things in order that we might grow closer to God. More often than not, our motivations might are not completely pure. We might engage in these actions in order to please others or for any range of selfish reasons. Thankfully, God is patient and wise and does not object to using our mixed motivations for his good! Through our continued and regular participation over extended periods of time, we can begin to understand that we’ve come to love God in newer and deeper ways. These actions become life-giving in ways that we may not have expected. It might be a challenge for many of us to articulate what these actions do within us. Richard Foster offers help when he says that the spiritual disciplines bring us joy as they liberate us from fear and self-absorption.

In considering Wesley’s chosen words and phrases, we discover that our participation in the spiritual disciplines, like our faithful discipleship, is — at some level — divinely inspired. It must be if we are to grow in Christlike character. Our human frailties don’t have staying power on their own. If we are to grow in Christlike character, we need to respond to God’s grace already present in our lives and be responsible with it through loving deed, word and action. Our faithful discipleship depends upon it.

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Justified by Faith: Why the Details Matter — A Lesson from Making Bread



“A quick watch of ‘Bread Week’ on The Great British Baking Show could have saved me a lot of trouble. It turns out, bread-making is more complex than it looks.” Photo: Nadya Spetnitskaya (Unsplash).

By James R. Morrow

How hard could it be? I had just tasted one of the best slices of homemade bread I’d ever eaten. Perfect texture, with a delightful taste (especially when slathered in butter!). I decided right then that I would make bread too.

After all, it’s just flour, water, and yeast ... or so I thought. Hours later, I tasted the most disappointing slice of bread I’d ever eaten.

A quick watch of “Bread Week” on *The Great British Baking Show* could have saved me a lot of trouble. It turns out, bread-making is more complex than it looks. You’ve got

Many of us can remember the first time we truly tasted salvation — an initial encounter with God’s grace that changed everything. That moment matters!

But if we stop there, we risk missing the deeper beauty. Like baking bread, the details and distinct movements of human salvation matter. The more we understand what’s happening beneath the surface — what God has done, is doing, and will do — the richer our experience becomes.

to pay attention to the type of flour, make choices about hydration levels, and don’t forget to activate the yeast! Then there’s rising and proofing times (cue Paul Hollywood declaring, “It’s underproved!”) and the mysterious world of gluten development. Yes, bread is bread, and we can find it almost anywhere. But the details make a huge difference. The more we understand about each part of the process, the greater our enjoyment of the final product.

Salvation is a lot like that.

Many of us can remember the first time we truly tasted salvation — an initial encounter with God’s grace that changed everything. That moment matters! But if we stop there, we risk missing the deeper beauty. Like baking bread, the details and distinct movements of human salvation matter. The more we understand what’s happening beneath the surface — what God has done, is doing, and will do — the richer our experience becomes. Paying attention to what occurs in salvation leads to a richer experience of the whole.

In the Wesleyan tradition, salvation is more than a single moment; it is the entire life of grace — a journey marked by God’s initiative and our continued response. God’s

love meets us before we are aware of God (prevenient grace), pardons us from our sin (justifying grace), and reshapes us in holy love (sanctifying grace). Salvation is God’s work from beginning to end, from rescue to being made perfect in love, from alienation to union.

One of the first major movements in salvation is justification. It isn’t the whole story, but it is a vital part. It is the doorway to experiencing the fullness of salvation. Every subsequent experience of salvation rests on justification. That’s why it’s worth pausing to pay attention to what happens in this moment of grace.

What is Justification?

Simply put, justification is pardon. I like the way that John Wesley puts it in his sermon “On Justification”: “The plain scriptural notion of justification is pardon, the forgiveness of sins.” Justification brings a relative change in our status — from guilty to acquitted, from alienated creation of God to child of God, from lost to welcomed home. It is the work God does for us. (Regeneration and sanctification involve the work that God does in us.)

One way to picture this is through a legal metaphor. In the American legal system, a president or a governor can pardon someone who is awaiting trial or sentencing. That

Justification is possible because, in love, the Father sent the Son, who lived perfectly, gave his life for the world, rose from the dead, and now intercedes for us. And the Holy Spirit awakens our hearts, gives us grace to believe, and applies Christ's saving work to our lives.

pardon nullifies all legal proceedings and releases the person from liability. When we are justified, God pardons us — fully. All of our past sins — whether in thought, word, or deed — are forgiven. All of them. We are washed white as snow. Our record is clean. The punishment is lifted.

The legal metaphor also helps us see how justification restores relationship. A criminal, once pardoned, can live again in good standing with society. Similarly, justification reconciles us to God. Once alienated from God by sin, we are welcomed into a right relationship and restored friendship with God.

Why We Need Justification

Reflecting on justification reminds us just how fallen we were. To be pardoned means that we were once guilty, condemned, and alienated from God. Scripture describes our natural condition as one of spiritual death, separation, and bondage to sin (Romans 3:23; Ephesians 2:1-3). We are not merely wounded or weakened; we are lost and utterly incapable of saving ourselves. This is true for all people, regardless of their status, morality, or religious efforts. Unless God acts, we are lost.

What God Has Done

Thankfully, God has acted. Romans 5:10 reminds us that we are “reconciled to God by the death of his Son.” Justification is possible because, in love, the Father sent the Son, who lived perfectly, gave his life for the world, rose from the dead, and now intercedes for us. And the Holy Spirit awakens our hearts, gives us grace to believe, and applies Christ's saving work to our lives. (Notice how salvation is a Trinitarian thing!)

This is all God's doing, accomplished through God's love, for the sake of sinful humanity. No one deserves it, nor does anyone have the capacity to earn it — even those who have done seemingly good deeds. God justifies the ungodly, and all people prior to salvation qualify for that group.

The Role of Faith

There is only one necessary condition for justification: faith. As Ephesians 2:8 says, we are justified by “grace through faith.” Now, faith is not simply belief that God exists, that Jesus is real, or that forgiveness is a possibility. Wesley preaches that faith is “a sure trust and confidence that God both hath and will forgive our sins, that he hath accepted us again into his favor, for the merits of Christ's death and passion.” In the spirit of Wesley's own faith journey, we are reminded that faith is the conviction that Christ died for us, that our sins are forgiven, and that we, like the young prodigal son, are welcomed back into relationship with the Father.

I want to be clear here so that we don't get tripped up by the YouTube apologists: faith is not a human work. It is only made possible by the grace of God. Without God acting first — by what we refer to as prevenient grace — we would have no capacity for faith. Our capacity for faith is an act of God to which we respond through surrender. God makes faith possible through grace, but God will not force someone to have faith. Justification, like all of salvation, is entirely an act of grace.

Let's Talk About Some Questions

First, what about repentance — isn't that important? Yes! While we can examine the various parts of the journey of salvation, that doesn't mean they can be separated or

Paying attention to the details of salvation — those distinct yet interconnected works of God — doesn't complicate salvation. It enriches it. Justification isn't just a theological concept; it's a powerful work of God. It is a doorway. Through it, we step into the joy of full salvation.

cleanly delineated in real-life experience. Like ingredients in a loaf of bread, they're all baked together. You can marvel at the results of gluten development and proofing, but you can't separate them from the loaf. Wesley reminds us that repentance is a fruit of faith. Although it's often all wrapped up together in experience, justification follows repentance as God's pardoning work.

Second, isn't this just "getting saved?" When people talk about getting saved, they're often describing justification. And they're not wrong. Justification is the moment when we're pardoned, accepted, and set right with God. But that's not all there is! Even in our initial experience of conversion, God is doing distinct but related work in us — namely, regeneration. If justification is the work that God does for us, regeneration begins the work that God does in us.

Wesley puts it this way in his sermon, "The Great Privilege of Those That Are Born of God": justification "is the taking away the guilt," while regeneration takes "away the power of sin." He reminds us that "although they are joined together in a point of time, yet are they of wholly distinct natures."

We don't want to reduce salvation to justification any more than we want to reduce bread to flour, water, and yeast. But neither should we overlook the beauty and power of reflecting on what justification means in the life of salvation.

Why the Details Matter

Paying attention to the details of salvation — those distinct yet interconnected works of God — doesn't complicate salvation. It enriches it. Justification isn't just a theological concept; it's a powerful work of God. It is a doorway. Through it, we step into the joy of full salvation.

When we pause to reflect on that moment — the pardoning mercy, new standing with God, the doorway swinging open to the fullness of salvation — we can celebrate just how deeply we are loved and find assurance that God has pardoned us.

That kind of reflection feeds our faith. It awakens worship, increases our gratitude, and sets our feet on the path of transformation. Justification may be the entryway, but from there, salvation unfolds one grace-filled room after another.



I'm a little better at baking bread these days, and I have a deeper appreciation for every bite of it I take. The details matter. And justification is one worth savoring.

(If you'd like to take a deeper dive into justification, I recommend reading John Wesley's sermon, "Justification by Faith," and grabbing a copy of Seedbed's *The Faith Once Delivered: A Wesleyan Witness to Christian Orthodoxy*.)

James R. Morrow is an elder in the Global Methodist Church and lead pastor of the First Methodist Church of Albany in Albany, GA. Along with First Methodist Church, Jim is passionate about offering Christ from the heart of downtown for an awakening in Southwest Georgia.

Transformational Love of God: Christian Perfection



John Wesley preaching in Ireland, 1789, attributed to Maria Spilsbury (1777–1820). John Wesley's House and The Museum of Methodism.

By Wendy J. Deichmann

For centuries Methodists have enthusiastically sung the hymn, “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling,” the lyrics of which poetically articulate the Wesleyan doctrine of Christian perfection. Composed by Charles Wesley in 1847, this hymn doubles as a teaching primer for a doctrine that is often neglected or misunderstood, even by fervent Methodists. It is simple enough to understand the concept underlying the title. Love divine, God’s love,

surpasses all other loves. After all, to quote well-known Bible verses, “God is love” (1 John 4:8); “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16); and “greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” as Jesus himself has done for us (John 15:13).

Believers can readily agree, then, based upon Scriptural revelation, that God’s “divine love” excels in comparison

with all other loves. It is what we sing in the rest of the hymn that takes us further down the path toward the sometimes perplexing Wesleyan doctrine of Christian perfection. Phrases like: “fix in us thy humble dwelling” (verse 1), “take away our bent to sinning” (verse 2), and “finish, then, thy new creation; pure and spotless let us be” beckon us to wrap our hearts, minds, and voices around the full meaning of Christian perfection. The purpose of this article is to explore and explain this central biblical doctrine as it was understood and taught by both John and Charles Wesley, founders of Methodism.

For John Wesley, the doctrine of Christian perfection was so important that he believed its propagation was the main reason the Holy Spirit had raised up the people called Methodists. He came to this conclusion through

his study of Scripture, when he compared what was written in the Bible about the extent of God’s love and the Holy Spirit’s work within believers, with the less than holy attitudes and behaviors exhibited by many “so-called Christians” of his day. Wesley clarified in great detail his conclusions concerning this doctrine in several widely read publications still available today. These included a lengthy treatise entitled “A Plain Account of Christian Perfection,” “Thoughts on Christian Perfection,” and a sermon entitled, “Christian Perfection.”

In these documents Wesley grappled with promises he found in scripture that were the basis not only for his belief in God’s work of grace in sanctification, but also in entire sanctification, an expression he used interchangeably with Christian perfection. These Biblical promises included for



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In “A Plain Account of Christian Perfection,” Wesley characterized those who are on the path of perfection, as not being perfect in knowledge. Nor are they free from ignorance, mistakes, infirmities, temptations, irregularities, ungracefulness of speech, or other “defects” in this life.

example, “He shall redeem Israel from all his sins” (Psalm 103:8) and “let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God” (2 Corinthians 7:1).

Likewise, Wesley pondered seriously the petition in the Lord’s Prayer, “Deliver us from evil” and Jesus’ prayer for his followers (John 17:20-23): “that they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me and I in thee, that they also may be one in us; I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one.” Similarly in Ephesians 3:16-19, “that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend, with all saints, what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height, and to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge; that ye may be filled with all the fulness of God.” Finally, in 1 Thessalonians 5:23, “The very God of peace sanctify you wholly. And I pray God, your whole spirit, soul, and body, may be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

In Holy Scripture, moreover, Wesley encountered explicit commands about perfection from Jesus himself: “Be ye perfect, as your Father who is in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48) and “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind” (Matthew 22:37). If the heart is full of the love of God as commanded, he concluded, there is no room for sin to reside there. Thus, for Wesley there was no denying that entire sanctification is possible in this life. Based upon his reading of Scripture, it should be expected. In fact, it would be unconscionable to truncate the desired, sanctifying work of God in the believer short of Christian perfection.

When Wesley’s detractors demanded proof in the form of a living example of Christian perfection, he replied that to

identify one or more would be imprudent and unfair as it would only “set a mark for all to shoot at.” Furthermore, it would do no good, he argued, mirroring the words of Jesus in Luke 16:31: “For if they hear not Moses and the Prophets, Christ and his Apostles, neither would they be persuaded though one rose from the dead.”

Wesley began both his treatise and his sermon on perfection by describing what it is not, namely, those very things that many assume that it is. In “A Plain Account of Christian Perfection,” he characterized those who are on the path of perfection, as not being perfect in knowledge. Nor are they free from ignorance, mistakes, infirmities, temptations, irregularities, ungracefulness of speech, or other “defects” in this life.

If Christian perfection is not all these things, what exactly, according to John Wesley, is it? Again, drawing directly from Scripture, he stated simply that it is “The loving God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. This implies, that no wrong temper, none contrary to love, remains in the soul; and that all the thoughts, words, and actions, are governed by pure love.”

But how is this kind of perfection possible in mere humans who are chronically plagued by ignorance, error, and weakness? Only by the perfecting grace of God, Wesley was quick to state. He explained that those characterized by Christian perfection not only need Christ and his forgiveness; but they are keenly aware of their constant need for Christ and his merits. In fact, in Wesley’s thinking Christian perfection is intimately dependent upon one’s relationship with Christ, who “does not give life to the soul separate from, but in and with, himself.” Again, drawing directly from Scripture, Wesley wrote that the words of Jesus are “equally true of all . . . in whatsoever state of grace they are: ‘As the branch

cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me. Without (or separate from) me ye can do nothing.” (John 15:5)

Wesley reminded the reader that it is only through God’s grace that any progress can be made on the path of salvation. In “every state,” Wesley wrote, the believer needs Christ (1) for the gift of grace that Christ gives freely to us, (2) because of the debt of gratitude we always owe to him, (3) because we receive this grace “not only from Christ, but in him,” (4) because we are dependent daily upon his intercession on our behalf,” and (5) even the best of Christians need Christ to atone for our shortcomings and our mistakes in judgment and practice. Even if no wrong was intended, these are deviations from God’s perfect law.

Christian perfection is not dependent upon our own righteousness, then, and it is never our possession. Rather, like the air we breathe and the light by which we see and move, Christian perfection is a gift of God’s unsurpassable love received daily from Christ through his grace, effected through the power of the Holy Spirit.

This brief foray into John Wesley’s teachings about the doctrine of Christian perfection provides a context for understanding the lyrics in the Charles Wesley hymn referenced earlier. It is exactly because of the atoning and sanctifying nature of God’s “all loves excelling” love that the faithful believer moves from praising love divine in the first stanza, to a prayer for finishing then “thy new creation; pure and spotless let us be” in the last stanza.

Magnificent and popular as is this Charles Wesley hymn, even more significant is the doctrine of Christian perfection it expresses. Not only biblical, this particular core doctrine of Wesleyanism is also eminently worshipful, hopeful and practical. It puts the spotlight on the unceasing love of God that is both for us and in us. It teaches about the limitless power of a love strong enough not only to human forgive sin, but also to

change believers’ lives, to cultivate holy relationships, and to propel disciples into the world as witnesses to the good news of Jesus Christ. In other words, when the pure love of God toward us also resides in us, we are already being transformed in our capacity to love others with the same purity of transformational love with which God loves us.

John Wesley believed this doctrine was a gift of God given especially to Methodists in the 18th century to undergird their God-given, audacious mission “to spread scriptural holiness” across the land. But Christian perfection is not solely the preserve of the Methodists. Rather, it is a biblical doctrine that depicts a divine love so powerful and pure that it readily transcends denominational, theological, cultural, and a host of other human-made distinctions and barriers.

Ironically, our own time is characterized by intense, theological squabbling and division over the meaning of holiness. Can it be that the biblical doctrine of Christian perfection, in concert with the work of the Holy Spirit in our midst, has the capacity to help us rediscover the pure love of God for us and in us, the practice of sincere Christian unity beyond denominational lines, and a wonderful season of revival within the body of Christ?



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Yesterday & Today: Church of God in Christ



Church Of God In Christ Holy Convocation in St. Louis in 2019 (COGIC photo).

By John Mark Richardson, Sr.

The Church of God in Christ (COGIC), a Holiness-Pentecostal denomination, has a deep spiritual heritage dating back to over 128 years. It has become one of the largest denominations in the United States and is the largest Holiness-Pentecostal denomination worldwide. It is a rich tapestry woven from the threads of African American faith,

experience, suffering, resilience, hope, and community.

The COGIC was founded by Bishop Charles Harrison Mason, Sr., who was born on September 8, 1866, (although some records have 1864) in Shelby County, Tennessee, just over a year after the end of the Civil War. He was the son of former slaves and worked alongside his parents as sharecroppers throughout his adolescent years.

The family of Bishop Mason faced the pervasive and devastating poverty that afflicted many Black individuals and families and Black communities following the Civil War. Amid this turmoil, Mason's mother fervently prayed for her son, asking that he would be dedicated to God. Her prayers had a profound impact, inspiring the young Charles Mason to not only dedicate himself to God but also to incorporate daily prayer into his life.

Mason grew up during a difficult and challenging era in America, particularly for African Americans. In a nation that had just torn itself apart primarily over the preservation of slavery and Southern states' rights, survival was no easy feat.

The family of Bishop Mason faced the pervasive and devastating poverty that afflicted many Black individuals and families and Black communities following the Civil War. Amid this turmoil, Mason's mother fervently prayed for her son, asking that he would be dedicated to God. Her prayers had a profound impact, inspiring the young Charles Mason to not only dedicate himself to God but also to incorporate daily prayer into his life. He earnestly prayed alongside his mother, asking above all things for God to grant him a religion like the one he had heard about from the old slaves and seen exemplified in their lives. This deep yearning for the God of his forebears became a central theme in his life, shaping his spirituality and purpose.

In 1880, just before his fourteenth birthday, Mason fell gravely ill with chills and fever, leaving his mother in despair over his life. However, in an astounding turn of events, he experienced a miraculous healing on the first Sunday of September that year. Eager to express their gratitude, Mason, along with his mother and siblings, attended church the following Sunday, at the Mt. Olive Baptist Church near Plumerville, Arkansas. An atmosphere of praise and thanksgiving enveloped the congregation as Mason's half-brother, the pastor, baptized him, marking a transformative moment in Mason's life after surviving a near-death experience.

During this moment of celebration, Mason said to his family and the local parishioners, "I believe God has healed me for the express purpose of alerting me to my spiritual duty." From that moment on, Mason acknowledged and felt called into full-time ministry throughout his teenage and young adult years. His gratitude to God for his miraculous healing, his profound love for God, and his yearning to experience God like the saints of old fueled his desire to serve in ministry and live a life pleasing to God.

Mason's Holiness Influencers

This deep sense of purpose and spiritual awakening naturally drew Mason towards the Holiness movement, which was making great strides in America during the 19th Century. This movement emphasized personal piety, sanctification, and a deeper, experiential faith, where adherents sought to experience God's grace and power in transformative ways. Consequently, Mason attended various Holiness meetings and embarked on a quest to explore the Holiness movement further, eager to understand sanctification and embrace the sanctified life.

Mason's readings on holiness and entire sanctification by various writers — John Wesley in particular — helped him establish roots in the Wesleyan tradition. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, championed the notion of personal holiness and social justice. Mason embodied these Wesleyan distinctives, and the Wesleyan Quadrilateral — scripture, tradition, reason, and experience — shaped Mason's theological framework, integrating biblical authority, rich traditions, and vibrant spiritual experiences.



COGIC Holy Convocation, 1938. Courtesy Charles H. Mason & Mother Lizzie Robinson Museum (COGIC Museum).

Additionally, and more importantly, Sister Amanda Berry Smith's Holiness's writings helped shape Mason's beliefs and teachings that would lead to the Church of God in Christ's deeply held beliefs and practices. Amanda Smith (pictured right) was a notable figure in the Holiness movement during the late 19th century. She was an African American evangelist, writer, and one of the first Black women to gain prominence in the Holiness and Pentecostal movements.

Amanda Smith's writings and preaching focused on holiness and empowerment, significantly influencing many, including Bishop Charles H. Mason. Her work highlighted the importance of spiritual transformation and the experience of entire sanctification — a doctrine asserting that believers could attain a second work of grace that cleansed them from sin and empowered them for holy living and service in the present world. This doctrine resonated deeply within the African American church community, particularly for the Church of God in Christ and Bishop Mason, who claimed the grace of divine sanctification after reading Sister Amanda Smith's autobiography.

After immersing himself in the writings of John Wesley, Sister Amanda Smith, and others, and experiencing entire sanctification during prayer, Mason's life was transformed. However, his teachings on holiness and his fervent discussions about spiritual empowerment caused significant fric-

tion with the established order of the Baptist Church. In the 1890s, as he began advocating for sanctification and a more spirited form of worship, he found himself at odds with church authorities. His passionate emphasis on holiness was viewed as radical and contrary to traditional Baptist teachings.



Excommunication, Disputes, and Disfellowship

This escalating tension reached a culmination when Mason was formally excommunicated from the Baptist Church due to his beliefs and teachings regarding holiness. Consequently, this pivotal moment motivated Mason to team up with a former Baptist Pastor, Reverend

Charles Price Jones, who was expelled from his pastorate for preaching holiness. These two incredible leaders collaborated to promote and disseminate the Holiness message more broadly. They did this through preaching, revivals, planting Holiness churches, providing guidance to pastors and churches wanting to embrace the holiness life, publishing

Mason also noted the racial and cultural diversity present at Azusa Street, which broke down barriers between African Americans and Whites, creating a unique space for unity in worship. This experience of inclusiveness informed his later work in establishing COGIC as a vital denomination within the Holiness and Pentecostal movements.

literature, and writing inspired hymns and songs of praise.

This holiness fellowship and movement, led by two influential African Americans, attracted many to their cause. During this time, Bishop Mason (pictured right) received a revelation from God. In 1897, while walking and praying on a street in Little Rock, Arkansas, he heard God speak to him: *“If you choose the name Church of God in Christ [based on 1 Thessalonians 2:14], there will never be a building big enough to hold all the people I will send your way.”*

To this, Bishop Mason replied, “Yes, Lord!”

The collaboration between Mason and Jones was a beautiful but short-lived moment. Mason eventually experienced disfellowship from Reverend Charles Price Jones and others with whom he had served in ministry. After returning from the Azusa Street revival in Los Angeles, California, Mason’s report about the events he witnessed and his personal testimony of baptism in the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues were met with skepticism, criticism, and resistance. However, what Mason experienced at the Azusa Street revival reaffirmed his belief that God had more for His people to experience and receive — a third work of grace: power!

Mason was profoundly impacted by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit during the Azusa Street Revival, which manifested through various signs, including speaking in tongues, healings, and a deep sense of community among diverse groups of people. His reports highlighted the revival’s emphasis on holiness, the power of prayer, miracles, and the importance of evangelism.

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The disfellowship was a painful experience. Mason and Jones were dear friends, and many in the group were close



to Mason. Although Jones and Mason could no longer serve in the ministry together, they continued to respect each other as leaders and loved each other as brothers. Ultimately, Jones would establish a different faction of the Holiness movement, Church of Christ Holiness U.S.A., while Mason continued to promote his distinctive

teachings and practices.

The Formal Establishment of COGIC

By 1907, the seeds had been sown for the formal and legal organization of the COGIC. That year, Mason held a gathering in Memphis, Tennessee, where he officially established the Church of God in Christ as its own denomination.

This organizational meeting laid the groundwork for what would become a significant movement within the American religious landscape. Mason’s leadership was affirmed during this gathering as he was recognized for his theological vision, charismatic personality, and commitment to evange-

lism and spiritual empowerment. The attendees, composed of various clergy and laypersons inspired by Mason's teachings and leadership, were the Church of God in Christ's first General Assembly, and they voted to elect Bishop Charles Harrison Mason as the first Bishop of the COGIC.

The news and outcomes from this meeting attracted a diverse group of adherents to the Church of God in Christ, including many white congregants and preachers impacted directly or indirectly by the Azusa Street Revival, and who resonated with the tenets of Holiness. They embraced the radical inclusivity suggested by Galatians 3:28: "that in Christ, all believers are equal, regardless of their ethnic or social background." As one affirmed, "the color line was washed away by the blood."

An Interracial Denomination

From 1907 to 1914, the COGIC was arguably the largest interracial denomination worldwide. In congregations of the Church of God in Christ, black and white saints worked, worshiped, and evangelized together in an interracial, egalitarian fellowship modeled after the fellowship at Azusa Street. This occurred throughout the South, including Mississippi, Tennessee, Arkansas, Florida, Louisiana, Alabama, and Georgia, during a particularly racially tense time in the United States.

Additionally, because the Church of God in Christ was legally incorporated, they could ordain clergy whose status civil authorities would recognize. Clergy who wished to perform marriages and other ministerial functions that had legal consequences needed this official recognition. Mason also played a crucial role in carrying out the Azusa Revival from its movement phase to its denominational phase. Through Mason's influence, scores of white ministers sought ordination at the hands of Mason. Therefore, large numbers of white ministers obtained ministerial credentials carrying the name of the Church of God in Christ.

Many white brothers and sisters who formed the Assemblies of God had been part of the Church of God in Christ from 1907 to 1914, during which time Bishop Mason ordained about 350 white ministers. In 1914, the Assemblies of God was organized, and in the second week of April that year, Mason traveled to Hot Springs, Arkansas, to attend the organizing meeting of the Assemblies of God. He preached on Thursday night, illustrating the wonders of God by holding up an unusually shaped sweet potato. He sang his spontaneous improvisation of spiritual songs that Daniel Payne in 1879 referred to as "corn field ditties." With Mason were the

"Saints Industrial" singers from Lexington, Mississippi. Mason bid the white leaders a warm farewell and gave his blessing for the white ministers to form their own organization. He also gave them permission to void their Church of God in Christ credentials in order to switch to those of their new denomination.

Bishop Mason's Tenure and Accomplishments

During his tenure as founder and first Bishop of the Church of God in Christ, Bishop Mason led the church through phenomenal growth while championing civil rights and social justice. He actively worked to create a more equitable society, standing against racism and Jim Crow discriminatory practices, all while supporting the United States government in its fight against Nazism and Fascism.

He oversaw the construction of the largest African American church campus of the early 20th century, featuring a sanctuary that seated five thousand worshippers. This historic landmark campus was where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his famous "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech — just a day before he was tragically assassinated.

Above all, Bishop Mason was a holiness preacher, inspiring people to live free from sin. He was also unapologetically Pentecostal, embracing the gifts of the Spirit and advocating for baptism in the Holy Spirit and the fruits of the Spirit.

Following Bishop Mason

Bishop Charles Harrison Mason, Sr., the beloved founder and first Bishop of the Church of God in Christ, died November 17, 1961. He served the denomination he founded for fifty-four years. Since the death of Bishop Mason, seven

leaders have served as Presiding Bishop: Ozro Thurston Jones Sr. (1962–1968); James Oglethorpe Patterson Sr. (1968–1989); Louis Henry Ford (1990–1995); Charles David Owens (1995–2000); Gilbert Earl Patterson (2000–2007); Charles Edward Blake (2007–2021); and John Drew Sheard (2021–present and pictured left).



Bishop Sheard of Detroit, Michigan, serves as COGIC's Presiding Bishop, embodying the spirit of Bishop Mason in his leadership. He has been

Looking ahead, the Church of God in Christ remains steadfast in its mission to spread the Gospel and serve local and global communities. It is poised not only to influence its members but to inspire churches across different denominations, including those within the Wesleyan family, to respond to the ever-changing landscape of faith and social responsibility.

a gracious and kind leader, guiding COGIC into a time of organizational peace, unity, prosperity, and national and international influence. He has coordinated the completion of major building projects, repaired and beautified existing structures, paid off existing debt, and responded to national and global crises and tragedies that have impacted the COGIC family. Bishop Sheard has reformed ministerial education and training for clergy, the COGIC Seminary and University, and has helped transition the COGIC into a more digital and innovative era. Bishop Sheard has also led the church in embracing a multi-faceted approach to ministry, prioritizing spiritual growth and evangelism, while maintaining a strong focus on:

- **Youth and Education.** The COGIC organization offers programs to engage young people in ministry and service, highlighting the importance of active, informed citizenship.

- **Health Initiatives.** Recognizing the critical health disparities in many African American communities, COGIC has implemented various health initiatives to promote wellness, access to care, and health education.

- **Social Justice Activism.** In response to contemporary social issues, COGIC has positioned itself as a leader in the conversation on justice, racism, and equity. This commitment echoes the church's historical roots in the civil rights movement, as COGIC remains dedicated to lifting the voices of the marginalized.

- **Global Outreach.** By establishing missions in 112 nations, COGIC transcends geographical and cultural barriers,

embodying Christ's love in action.

- **Connecting with the Wesleyan Tradition.** The connection between COGIC and the larger Wesleyan family is not



simply historical; it is a living relationship characterized by shared values and missions. As denominations continue to navigate modernity, COGIC stands with the Wesleyan movement with its emphasis on holiness and empowerment.

Embracing Contemporary Challenges

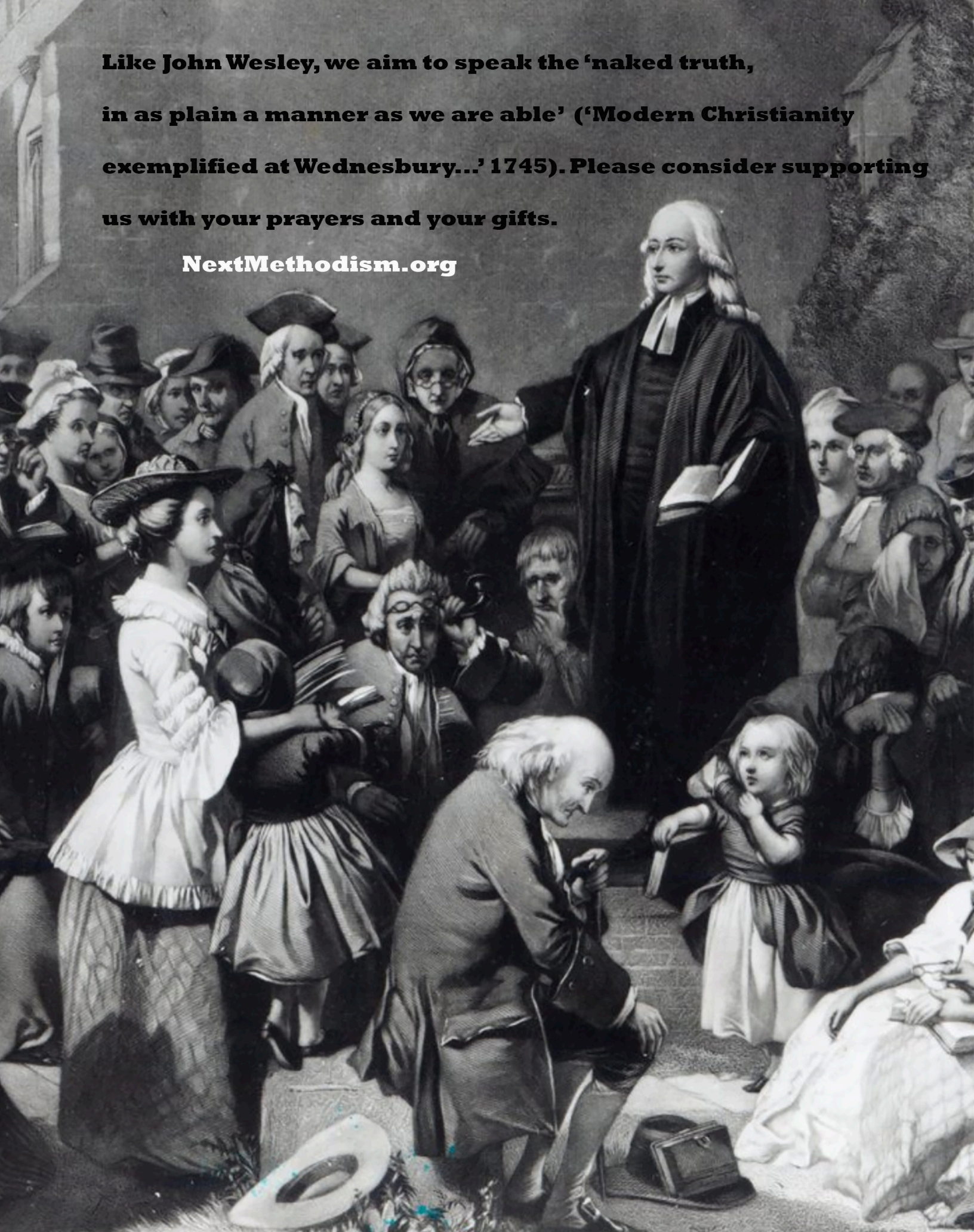
As COGIC embraces its role in today's society, it is also addressing contemporary challenges its congregants and communities face.

Looking ahead, the Church of God in Christ remains steadfast in its mission to spread the Gospel and serve local and global communities. It is poised not only to influence its members but to inspire churches across different denominations, including those within the Wesleyan family, to respond to the ever-changing landscape of faith and social responsibility.

By John Mark Richardson, Sr. (pictured above), Regional Bishop, Church of God in Christ (COGIC), and Executive Director, Wesleyan Holiness Connection.

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in as plain a manner as we are able' ('Modern Christianity
exemplified at Wednesbury...' 1745). Please consider supporting
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