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# The Movement of the Spirit: A Constructive Comparison of Divine Grace in the Theologies of Paul Tillich and John Wesley

## Abstract

This work is a constructive comparison of the ways in which the operations of divine grace resonate in the theologies of John Wesley and Paul Tillich. The primary questions which initially motivated this project: First, how does Tillich's concept of theonomy intersect Wesley's conceptions of the activity of grace? Second, how would those intersections serve to provide a renewed (or clarified) understanding of Wesley's framework of grace? How does Tillich's concept of theonomy, and his method of correlation, inform Wesley's understanding of the activity of grace in human culture? How might gleaned from this comparison inform the work of faith communities?

In this work, I argue that the framing of the operative and co-operative work of divine grace in the theological frameworks of Wesley and Tillich resonate deeply, and that those resonances should elicit specific responses from faith communities today. This project examines key conceptual roots of divine grace in the theology of Augustine, with particular attention to the shifts in his understanding of the human need for grace, the locus of the activity of grace, and the resulting effects of grace. We then move to an exploration of various influences on the theological frameworks of both Wesley and Tillich, from childhood, extending through their education, and into their professional lives and ministries. Here, we examine their understanding of the human condition, the effects of divine grace, and their ecclesiologies.

We then examine the resonances between the ways that Wesley and Tillich conceptualize the restorative activity of the divine, along with their emerging openness to pluralism, emphasis on community, and call to justice.

Finally, we consider specific implications for faith communities today - whether formally organized or loosely connected - with particular attention to five key emphases which emerge from our study: the recovery of Tillich's Protestant principle, restoration of individuals, recovery of the center, recovery of a prophetic voice, and aspects of Tillich's creative justice which can be lived out in transformative ways.

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A Dissertation

Presented to

the Faculty of the University of Denver and the Iliff School of Theology Joint PhD Program

University of Denver

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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by

Thomas A. Barlow, Jr

August 2019

Advisor: Dr. Theodore M. Vial, Jr.

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Author: Thomas A. Barlow, Jr.

Title: THE MOVEMENT OF THE SPIRIT: A CONSTRUCTIVE COMPARISON OF DIVINE GRACE IN THE THEOLOGIES OF PAUL TILLICH AND JOHN WESLEY

Advisor: Dr. Theodore M. Vial, Jr.

Degree Date: August 2019

## ABSTRACT

This work is a constructive comparison of the ways in which the operations of divine grace resonate in the theologies of John Wesley and Paul Tillich. The primary questions which initially motivated this project: First, how does Tillich's concept of theonomy intersect Wesley's conceptions of the activity of grace? Second, how would those intersections serve to provide a renewed (or clarified) understanding of Wesley's framework of grace? How does Tillich's concept of theonomy, and his method of correlation, inform Wesley's understanding of the activity of grace in human culture? How might gleaned from this comparison inform the work of faith communities?

In this work, I argue that the framing of the operative and co-operative work of divine grace in the theological frameworks of Wesley and Tillich resonate deeply, and that those resonances should elicit specific responses from faith communities today. This project examines key conceptual roots of divine grace in the theology of Augustine, with particular attention to the shifts in his understanding of the human need for grace, the locus of the activity of grace, and the resulting effects of grace. We then move to an exploration of various influences on the theological frameworks of both Wesley and Tillich, from childhood, extending through their education, and into their professional lives and ministries. Here, we examine their understanding of the human condition, the effects of divine grace, and their ecclesiologies.

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Finally, we consider specific implications for faith communities today—whether formally organized or loosely connected—with particular attention to five key emphases which emerge from our study: the recovery of Tillich’s Protestant principle, restoration of individuals, recovery of the center, recovery of a prophetic voice, and aspects of Tillich’s creative justice which can be lived out in transformative ways.

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## CHAPTER ONE: WESLEY MEETS TILlich

*If God 'worketh in you' then 'work out your own salvation' salvation begins with what is usually termed (and very properly) 'preventing grace,' including the first wish to please God, the first dawn of light concerning his will. — John Wesley<sup>1</sup>*

*I keep the term 'theonomy.' At this point the word is used for the state of culture under the impact of the Spiritual Presence. — Paul Tillich<sup>2</sup>*

In the writings and sermons of John Wesley, we see an overarching emphasis on grace—an active, transforming divine power which enables individuals to respond to God's call to relationship despite the deep brokenness of the divine/human connection. For Wesley, this work of the Holy Spirit becomes the framework of his entire theology.

In the writings and sermons of Paul Tillich is a similar concept which, although often overlooked in academic works on Tillich's thought, frames a similar activity of the Spiritual Presence. Tillich, acquiring and redefining the word *theonomy*, provides an image of grace which drives his *method of correlation*.

### **Thesis and Scope**

The thesis of this dissertation is that John Wesley's conception of the operative nature of grace—particularly the way in which he describes the activity of preventing

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<sup>1</sup> John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley. Vol. 3: Sermons III: 71-114*, ed. Albert Cook Outler, vol. 3, The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), 203.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume 3: Life and the Spirit, History and the Kingdom of God* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), 249.

(now referred to as prevenient) grace, but also the broader activity of Wesley's grace—is clearly visible in Paul Tillich's concept of theonomy. An examination of the range of similarities that we identify will inform not only the theologies of faith communities within the Wesleyan tradition, but also the praxis of ministry as those faith communities seek to engage culture. Both Wesley and Tillich identify the operative and co-operative natures of grace (albeit not using those specific terms), and both emphasize the communal contexts in which grace can be emphasized and experienced. Both the operative and co-operative activities of divine grace, lived out in intentional communities, must elicit five significant responses from faith communities: first, recovery of the self-critical nature of Tillich's Protestant principle in the church; second, a clear emphasis on the acceptance and restoration of each individual who seeks to participate in the life of that community; third, recovery of the faith community as a reuniting center in the midst of a deeply polarized culture; fourth, recovery of the prophetic voice of the Church in culture; and, fifth, utilizing the powerful potential of these communities as loci of love, power, and justice.

Tillich's method of correlation, which posits that religion offers answers to the existential anxieties of life, benefits from constructive comparison with the deeply pastoral, practical, and embodied faith of Wesley. This examination connects the understanding of both the activity and the availability of grace in the thought of Wesley with the more recent theological framework of Tillich. Exploring this intersection provides insights into the role of faith communities in a divided society, as those communities should, when living authentically, be grace-focused groups seeking to live

into the theonomous activity of the Holy Spirit and called to advocate for justice as they also speak prophetically.

While this project is not intended as an historical review, we will examine some key transitions in Augustine's understanding of the divine grace, as well as the personal histories of Tillich and Wesley. While it is not doctrinal, it is helpful to think about some shifts in, and development of, relevant doctrines. In these two areas, our work is not exhaustive, but is focused on specific topics under consideration.

### **Wesley**

Wesley's understanding of the universal availability of divine grace, and his understanding of the ways in which that grace is made manifest in the lives of humans, is a central theme in his theology. Grace, for Wesley, is actively working in and through the world to enable individuals to respond in faith, and to enter into relationship with God. Put in modern terms, grace is working *operatively* to restore the brokenness of Creation, as well as *co-operatively* within individuals who begin to recognize that working, with the goal of reuniting fallen humanity with its divine, creative source. Historically, that theme carried forward into the various faith traditions which arose from his work.

More recently, however, the operative/co-operative natures of divine grace have received less emphasis in many churches, and, in some instances the universality of divine grace has been questioned. An odd yet deeply problematic example of this ignorance of the distinctive Wesleyan theology of grace occurred during the United Methodist Church's 2012 General Conference, when a petition was considered which stated that "God's grace is available to all." While the petition was submitted as part of a heated debate over human sexuality, the fact that a petition with such problematic

wording was passed with only 56% approval attracted the attention of Wesleyan scholars.<sup>3</sup>

Born at the beginning of the eighteenth century, John Wesley's active ministry life functionally began during and after his initial experiences at Christ Church, Oxford. The son of a village priest in the Church of England, born into a family which placed a high value on education, young John dove into his Oxford studies with vigor, displaying an openness to a variety of Christian thought and practice which would deeply inform his later theology. After ordination as a priest, and with some time spent in parish ministry, he would later return to Oxford and engage with a small group that his brother Charles had founded—variously referred to as the Holy Club and, pejoratively at first, the Methodists. As we will see, time spent with this group would provide further transformation, serving to create a foundation for his future ministry work. Many of the practices discovered in this formative time would echo throughout his life, combining with highly-disciplined approaches to learning from his childhood, and creating a focus on spiritual growth which would result in a powerful renewal movement within the Church of England and beyond. This was a movement which invited the faithful to experience God in a new way, intentionally participating in groups focused on discipleship, seeking to experience God's grace, and allowing the Holy Spirit to draw them ever more fully into lives of holiness which connect to—and reflect—divine love.

Wesley's emphasis on holiness was never separated from his focus on practical theology, also termed "practical divinity," a term that Wesley himself used (somewhat

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<sup>3</sup> "Preamble to UMC Social Principles (20544-CA-159)," The United Methodist Church - umc.org, May 1, 2012, <http://calms2012.umc.org/Menu.aspx?type=Petition&mode=Single&number=544>.

interchangeably with “experimental divinity”).<sup>4</sup> For Wesley, theology (itself a term he never appeared to have used) was always practical, always about the actual, and never about the abstract. Practical divinity was focused on the lives of real people who, in Wesley’s view, needed to notice the activity of God’s grace and their experiences resulting from it and, in the process, be transformed. Wesley’s era pre-dated the academy as we know it today, and his primary theological record is contained in his sermons, with additional writings which addressed specific issues and doctrinal controversies.

Wesley was also keenly aware of societal issues in eighteenth-century England. The kind of faith that Wesley affirmed was a faith that reached out to the downtrodden and marginalized. Further, the lived faith that he emphasized must—if possible—show fruits of authenticity. Those fruits did not have salvific effects in and of themselves, but they demonstrated that the transformation was real. From his Oxford days onward, those who were known as Methodists were busy confronting real-life needs: supporting the poor, comforting the grieving, visiting the imprisoned, praying with the infirm.

Wesley’s brother Charles, a prolific hymnist, included these lyrics in his *Why Will You Die, O House of Israel?*

He, who all your lives hath strove,  
Wooed you to embrace his love.  
Will you not the grace receive?<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> John Wesley et al., *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists*, vol. 7, The Oxford Edition of the Works of John Wesley (Oxford; New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 1983), 74.

<sup>5</sup> Wesley et al., 7:87.

This concept of the grace of God “wooing” individuals into relationship with the divine is one that has resonated with clergy, scholars, and laity alike.<sup>6</sup> Wesley’s understanding of God provides us an image of the divine reaching out to us, seeking to offer sufficient restoration of our broken selves so that we might be free to respond to the divine offer of life-giving relationship. For those who accept the offer, grace continues its work, bringing forgiveness, ongoing growth, and opportunities to bring an embodied message of divine love to a fractured world.

### **Tillich**

Tillich’s story is different, yet remarkably similar in some key areas. His understanding of God as the ground of being tainted the inspirational nature of his sermons for some of his readers; yet, what is often missed is his driving passion for reuniting estranged humanity with the divine—activity which is based in divine love.<sup>7</sup>

Tillich was born nearly two hundred years after Wesley, in a very different context. The academy was much more defined, and the world more complex. Wesley lived to see significant colonial activity in America; Tillich lived to see two World Wars, serving the in the trenches of the first, and to see the rise of new technologies which threatened the survival of the planet. He too was the son of clergy and experienced a

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<sup>6</sup> I am indebted to Dr. Ken Collins for bringing this to my attention, in lectures, personal conversations, and his books. For a mention of the concept in his formal writings, see: Kenneth J Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 123.

<sup>7</sup> In some conversations, I have encountered friends and colleagues who are convinced that Tillich is, at heart, a pantheist—a charge that is sometimes made in passing in less-informed writings about him as well. In this work, we will not spend time refuting that charge, as that is not the focus of the project; however, it is worth stating that reading him as a pantheist requires a definition of pantheism which seems rather odd, as Tillich’s understanding of the divine includes a divine will which is rooted in divine love.



Lutheran upbringing. He too had a passion for learning, voraciously reading philosophers on his own, then going on to study at Berlin, Tübingen, and Halle.

Tillich's educational experiences deeply influenced his willingness to look beyond the essentials of orthodoxy, an openness which was the result of his university studies. His wartime experiences nearly broke him, destroying the naïve view of the world that youth often possess, and awakening him to the dangers of unbridled nationalism. Tillich's view of life from that point on would usually be described as existentialist, a term he resisted using for himself.

Tillich's work would, in many measures, become the standard for academic study in the field of religion. Yet, like Wesley, his theological aims were always practical, focused on the actual, not the abstract. He did write a thorough systematic theology, but he also wrote for the layperson—some of his writings became best-sellers—and his theological project was intentionally apologetic in tone. Like Wesley, important components of his theology were provided in the form of sermons, many of which resonated deeply with those listening from the pews.

### **Overview**

In this work, we will explore the resonances between Wesley and Tillich in terms of their understanding of the availability and activity of divine grace. While our primary task is not doctrinal in nature, it is helpful to examine some shifts in early Christianity regarding the operations of grace, which is the focus of chapter two. Specifically, we will trace changes in the ways that Augustine conceived of divine grace, beginning with his immature writings which placed significant emphasis on human abilities, essentially ignoring any need for divine support. Later, he viewed grace as working around those

who were responding to it; during the Pelagian controversies, he shifted the locus of grace to from the environment to soul of the individual. In both Wesley and Tillich, there are elements of both; Wesley, as we will later see, recognizes a strict inner restoration with some external influences, while Tillich also allows for both, conceptualizing the latter under the rubric of theonomy.

In chapter three, we move into an in-depth examination of the various ways that Wesley was influenced in his thought and practice. These range from his earliest days as the child of an Anglican priest, through his time with the Oxford Methodists, to his failed and deeply humbling missionary venture in America, his life-altering Aldersgate experience, and onward to the radical transformations that were visible afterward. Wesley would focus on inward transformation as well as outward relationship and responsibility, with a focus on disciplines intended to open the individual to the realities of grace. Many of these disciplines were designed for communal involvement, a theme which will reoccur in later chapters.

In chapter four, we will explore Paul Tillich's formation, with an emphasis on the influences on his thought and theology. Tillich's conception of estrangement, and his identification of the theonomous work of the Spiritual Presence which seeks to draw individuals back into reunion with the divine ground, provides a helpful context for thinking about the challenges of existence. Like Wesley, Tillich sees significant potential within the Spiritual Community, whether latent or manifest, for the healing work of God.

In chapter five, we will bring the two into conversation, seeking to find areas of resonance between their theological and practical approaches to faith. Although they lived in radically different eras, both signaled openness to pluralism (particularly in their

mature writings), both emphasized restoration of the individual, and both saw that faith communities have the potential to create space for transformation and participation in efforts directed toward justice. From a theological standpoint, this is the central discussion of this dissertation. Wesley's understanding of working of divine grace, present in both operative and co-operative forms, clearly contains elements of Tillich's later work on divine grace and, in particular, the theonomous work of the Spiritual Presence. While discussions of grace in Wesley or Tillich are not innovative in and of themselves, this comparison of the two, with an eye toward identifying and constructing a helpful engagement of the two, has not been done before. This is unfortunate, although it provides the opportunity for the current project, which allows us to gain important insights into the ways in which faith communities can live more faithfully and usefully as places where divine grace can work, and can be experienced by those participating in the life of the community.

Finally, chapter six examines the lived experiences of faith communities in light of our discoveries throughout the project, with a particular focus on ways in which those communities might support the faith lives of participants, and intentionally speak into the challenges of the world today. From the standpoint of useful practices for faith communities, this is the central component of this work. In working through the comparison of Wesley and Tillich's thought, the places of resonance between them provide important guidance for the work of faith communities.

## CHAPTER TWO: AUGUSTINE AND THE ACTIVITY OF DIVINE GRACE

*Lord, grant me to know and understand which is first, to call upon you or to praise you, and which is first, to know you or to call upon you? But how does one who does not know you call upon you? For one who does not know you might call upon another instead of you. Or must you be called upon so that you may be known? — Saint Augustine<sup>8</sup>*

The Christian concept of divine grace, rooted in sacred texts, was explored from theological standpoints early in the life of the Christian church. As was common, descriptions of grace that were eventually deemed to be orthodox underwent shifts that were triggered by contrasting descriptions later identified as heretical.

In this chapter, we will briefly examine the development of Augustine's understanding of grace, which is of specific interest in our conversation due to his shifting understanding of where and how grace works in the process of salvation. The immature Augustine viewed humans as being sufficiently autonomous so that each individual might attain a relationship with God on one's own. As his understanding progressed, he recognized the necessity of divine activity in light of the limitations of human autonomy, first assuming that God's actions empowered the human will. Later, he recognized that divine grace prepares the believer in a way that precedes faith, using language of prevenience which would later be employed by John Wesley.

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<sup>8</sup> Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. Ryan, John K (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1960), 43. (1.1.1).

## Defining Two Concepts and Clarifying the Task

At the outset, we acknowledge two limitations in this entire discussion, and we do so in terms of defining key concepts that will be used through the rest of the document.

First, we are often seeking to identify *where* divine grace works; that is, the locus/loci of the activity of divine grace. In some instances, grace works *around* an individual; in other cases, *within*. In still others, it is understood to work *both* around and within. These are general conceptual categories which are helpful when we try to unravel the operative and co-operative activities of divine grace (see below), but they may be slippery. We will handle them as best we can.

Second, we are seeking to understand, to some degree, *how* divine grace works. The general understanding is that grace is effected by the Holy Spirit (although that terminology changes when we examine Tillich), an understanding that is shared by all of the sources we examine here. As we will see, it variously restores, justifies, regenerates, sanctifies—there are many different terms, and we are not seeking to catalog all of them in this project. Further, there is a key difference in terms of the *how*; while we are discussing how divine grace works in general terms, we do not presume to identify *precisely how* it influences the individual—there, we acknowledge divine mystery and move along. Our task here is not to create a deep exploration of theological anthropology.

Finally, when we speak of the activity of divine grace, we will often identify that activity as being either operative or co-operative. This is not a matter of initiative; as we discuss divine (or God's) grace, it will be clear that the grace flows from divine sources. It is, however, a matter of response (and, at least to some degree, awareness) on the part of the individual. As we are framing divine grace, we describe it as working operatively

when it is working ahead of human awareness and response, and co-operatively when it is working with human response, or in environments where intentional space is being created, by individuals or groups, for grace to be made manifest.

### **Augustine**

Augustine’s understanding of divine grace underwent several shifts during his life, visible in his writings which—in most instances—were made explicitly in response to claims made by others.<sup>9</sup> J. Patout Burns notes that “Augustine’s doctrine evolved largely by working out the logic of his assumptions under the pressure of events and the demands of controversy.”<sup>10</sup> Utilizing what he describes as a “genetic” analysis, Burns quite effectively traces the developments of Augustine’s view as they were shaped by specific contexts in and to which Augustine was speaking. As one would expect, the views are visible in transitory ways in writings which lead up to each of three primary shifts in his thought. First, early writings produced during his time in Cassiciacum in Italy made visible the shaking-off of the effects of Manichean materialism, where he left behind the “visible, temporal, corporeal world to take refuge in the newly discovered spiritual realm.”<sup>11</sup> He dealt with his immature understanding of God as something to be

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<sup>9</sup> For much of this chapter, I am indebted Dr. Sandra Dixon and her oversight of a rather large project of mine in 2013. The project itself resulted in a complex concept map (informally called *The Great Cloud of Writings*) that seeks to identify and cross-index the changes in Augustine’s thought over time. Here, we will offer a profoundly insufficient overview of that work. To a large degree, the concept map was indexed to the work of J. Patout Burns, *The Development of Augustine’s Doctrine of Operative Grace* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1980). In the background of that project, 104 of Augustine’s primary writings were indexed into an interactive timeline, with some crude classifications by general topic, which is available online at “Timeline – Augustine’s Writings | Practical Theology,” accessed April 26, 2019, <http://www.tabarlow.com/augustines-writings/>. To view a low-resolution image of the concept map, see <http://www.tabarlow.com/augustine-concept-map/>.

<sup>10</sup> Burns, *The Development of Augustine’s Doctrine of Operative Grace*, 13.

<sup>11</sup> Burns, 18.

possessed, progressing to a sense of divine action supporting those who first seek God. Second, during his responses to the Donatists, he clarified where the efficacy of the actions of divine grace is generated, ensuring that the power of sacramental grace is not located in the faith life of clergy. Finally, Augustine's firm doctrines of grace are visible in the Pelagian controversies. Here, there is a decisive move from external workings of grace to an interior illumination which precedes the spiritual growth of the faithful.

### Early Augustine

Augustine's earliest writings, during his Italian period, focused on the human spirit rather than divine action, and assumed that the individual had significant autonomy. Here, his Manichean roots are visible as "he believed that the spirit can free itself from bodily concerns and operate independently of sensation... he assumed that the divine truth is available to all who seek it."<sup>12</sup> This was the time period when Augustine's emphasis was on the fulfilled, happy life—that is, on beatitude, "the state of mind in which one desires only those things which can be possessed simply by willing them and which cannot be lost unwillingly."<sup>13</sup> In *De beata vita (The Happy Life)*, dated 386, after a prolonged discussion regarding the obtaining of things which bring happiness, Augustine settles on the concept that "whoever possesses God is happy."<sup>14</sup> Similarly, in *De moribus ecclesiae catholicae et de moribus Manichaeorum (On the Catholic and the Manichaean*

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<sup>12</sup> Burns, 19.

<sup>13</sup> Burns, 19.

<sup>14</sup> Augustine et al., *The Happy Life: Answer to Skeptics ; Divine Providence and the Problem of Evil ; Soliloquies* (New York: Cima Pub. Co., 1948), 59 (11), <http://muse.jhu.edu/books/9780813211053/>.

*Ways of Life*, dated to 387/389), “that which is best for man is both loved and possessed,” and living happily requires that we “possess our supreme good.”<sup>15</sup>

Burns summarizes Augustine’s framing of two key concepts:

Beatitude is characterized as a state of mind in which one desires only those things which can be possessed simply by willing them and which cannot be lost unwillingly. Misery, on the other hand, consists in relinquishing one’s autonomy by desiring something whose possession cannot be effected by willing alone.<sup>16</sup>

In the same time period, Augustine wrote *De animae quantitate* (*On Magnitude of the Soul*, dated 387/388), where he offered a process whereby the individual would move from a place of immaturity to a new place of illumination where they contemplate God. Here, in the “first degree,” the soul is our “only care,” which “gives life to this mortal and earthy [sic] body.”<sup>17</sup> The terminus of the process is the “seventh degree,” wherein we may arrive “by God’s Power and Wisdom to that highest Cause, or Supreme Author, or Supreme Principle of all things, or whatever other name you would deem worthy of so great a Reality.”<sup>18</sup>

As John McMahon summarizes, Augustine’s

levels of the soul’s power are: Animation, Sensation, Art, Virtue, Tranquility, Approach and Contemplation. The first three reveal the soul’s power in the body; the next two, its power in itself; the last two, its power

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<sup>15</sup> Augustine, Donald Arthur Gallagher, and Idella J Gallagher, *The Catholic and Manichaeian Ways of Life* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 6 (3,5; 6,10).

<sup>16</sup> Burns, *The Development of Augustine’s Doctrine of Operative Grace*, 19.

<sup>17</sup> Augustine, *The Immortality of the Soul, The Magnitude of the Soul, On Music, The Advantage of Believing, On Faith in Things Unseen*, trans. Ludwig Schopp et al., *Fathers of the Church*, v. 4 (Washington, D.C: Catholic University of America Press, 2002), 136 (33,70).

<sup>18</sup> Augustine, 142-143 (33,76).



before God. The soul thus passes through three stages: matter, spirit, and God.<sup>19</sup>

Augustine's early salvific process was focused on attaining the highest human potential, which would lead to communion with God. Reaching the place of contemplation of the divine was the goal; along the way, his sevenfold process takes the individual through the anxieties of life (which are overcome as one ascends the degrees), largely depended on the soul's own potential, along with "that assistance which God provides through human society."<sup>20</sup> Interaction with the world and the things of the senses have a teaching impact on the soul: "it comes to know and seek what suits the nature of its body; it rejects and shuns what is unsuited."<sup>21</sup> Through this process of maturation, the soul begins to recognize its own power and worth; by the fourth degree, it "dares to rank itself not only before its own body [and] the whole material world itself, and it dares to think that the good of the world is not its good."<sup>22</sup> "Providence and Justice of God" are guiding the process to the extent that "death cannot possibly come unjustly to anyone," so there is some divine interaction with the world, but the individual soul is transcending the physical world under its own power.<sup>23</sup>

After his move to Africa, his writings began to display a different understanding of human autonomy, recognizing the need for divine action. As he had pondered the

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<sup>19</sup> Augustine, 54.

<sup>20</sup> Burns, *The Development of Augustine's Doctrine of Operative Grace*, 21.

<sup>21</sup> Augustine, *The Immortality of the Soul, The Magnitude of the Soul, On Music, The Advantage of Believing, On Faith in Things Unseen*, 138 (33,71).

<sup>22</sup> Augustine, 139-140 (33,73).

<sup>23</sup> Augustine, 140 (33,73). Augustine does allow that "the person who inflicts the death be unjust."

realities of sin and “carnal custom,” he understood that “since the mind blocked by the darkness of carnal custom cannot perceive spiritual truth, humanity needs an authoritative teaching and example to direct the cleansing of the soul.”<sup>24</sup> In *De vera religione* (*The True Religion*, dated 389/391), he is clear that the “carnal senses” (sight, hearing, etc.) do not offer all that is needed, but are necessary elements of the less-mature elements of learning.<sup>25</sup> Here, there is an increasing reliance on divine grace and divine love as exhibited and taught through the gospel narratives life of Christ, a teaching method which “fulfils the rule of all rational discipline. For as it teaches partly quite openly and partly by similitudes in word, deed and sacrament, it is adapted to the complete instruction and exercise of the soul.”<sup>26</sup> Visible also is a move away from a view of grace that is universally available.

The African period included influences from Pauline studies, which drew Augustine to write (particularly in 394 and 395) about a fourfold division of the history of humanity: “before the law, under the law, under grace, in peace.”<sup>27</sup> Here, the law is “the first grace God bestows upon a person.”<sup>28</sup> Burns: “before the law the spirit follows flesh; under the law it struggles against the flesh and is overcome; under grace it fights

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<sup>24</sup> Burns, *The Development of Augustine’s Doctrine of Operative Grace*, 27.

<sup>25</sup> Augustine, *Augustine: Earlier Writings*, trans. John H. S. Burleigh (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 247 (24,45).

<sup>26</sup> Augustine, 240 (17,33).

<sup>27</sup> Burns, *The Development of Augustine’s Doctrine of Operative Grace*, 31.

<sup>28</sup> Burns, 32.

and wins; in peace it has no opposition.”<sup>29</sup> In this schema, Augustine limited the Holy Spirit’s role to empowering the human will; grace here is operative, but only in a limited way, and “given only to those who not only desire good but choose to strengthen that desire and seek divine assistance to make it effective.”<sup>30</sup> The grace of charity is present and working, but does not violate the freedom of the human. It may, however, have material impacts, including some kind of correction, which are not understood by those who are not of the faith: “tribulation, when it befalls a servant of God to test or correct him, seems sometimes futile to those with less understanding.”<sup>31</sup> In *De diversis quaestionibus ad Simplicianum* (*To Simplicianus: On Different Questions*, dated 396), this is framed as *congruous vocation*, “which has God supply the appropriate motives to individuals having a prior disposition to convert.”<sup>32</sup> This incorporates both human freedom and a sense of non-coercive divine action, as “the person who wills good needs the assistance of the Holy Spirit to be able to perform it.”<sup>33</sup> This is, for Burns, a matter of enhancing the spiritual freedom of the individual without violating autonomy.

### The Donatist Controversy

The Donatists spurred deeper reflection regarding Augustine’s understanding of the ways in which grace operates. Their twofold claim was that “membership in the

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<sup>29</sup> Burns, 35.

<sup>30</sup> Burns, 36.

<sup>31</sup> Augustine, *Augustine on Romans: Propositions from the Epistle to the Romans, Unfinished Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Lands, Paula Frederiksen (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982), 27 (54,3).

<sup>32</sup> James Wetzel, *Augustine and the Limits of Virtue* (Cambridge [England]; New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 188.

<sup>33</sup> Burns, *The Development of Augustine’s Doctrine of Operative Grace*, 43.

church is necessary for salvation, and only a bishop untainted by apostasy, the sin against the faith, can confer saving faith and forgive sins.”<sup>34</sup> Effectively, the Donatists located the efficacy of the ministry (including the validity of the sacraments) in the spiritual lives of the clergy, rather than in the sacred institution of the church.

Augustine agreed that membership in the church is the only path to salvation but differed on the claim that the power of the sacraments was influenced by the virtue of the priest or bishop. In this controversy, Augustine also reconsidered the locus of charity, moving it from the individual to the individual’s participation in the church; in other words, in this new schema, charity “is used to define the true church, the Kingdom of Christ, which exists within the visible Catholic communion.”<sup>35</sup> In this context, charity is the power which allows sacraments to have salvific effect. Charity also undergirds the unity of the church itself, so that those—such as the Donatists and later the Pelagians—who were schismatic were quite clearly outside of the Catholic connection, as were any within the church who did evil.<sup>36</sup>

### The Pelagian Controversy

The controversies with the Pelagians initially began in 412, when Caelistius was tried for heresy around six specific propositions, summarized by Burns:

These statements manifest the nature of the conflict which was to eventuate. First, Adam was created mortal and would have died whether or not he had sinned. Second, Adam’s sin harmed only himself, not the entire human race. Third, children now are born in that state in which Adam was originally created. Fourth, the sin and death of Adam did not

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<sup>34</sup> Burns, 56.

<sup>35</sup> Burns, 59.

<sup>36</sup> Burns, 64–65.

affect all, nor does the resurrection of Christ extend to all. Fifth, the law, as well as the gospel, leads to the Kingdom of Heaven. Sixth, even before Christ some persons lived without any sin.<sup>37</sup>

Pelagius placed significant power in the individual, who had the “power of self-improvement” innately given, and he was concerned about “the way in which Augustine’s masterpiece, the *Confessions*, seemed to merely popularize the tendency towards a languid piety.”<sup>38</sup> For Pelagius, individual effort could achieve perfection, albeit through deep sacrifice. He and his followers

still thought of the Christian church as though it were a small group in a pagan world. They were concerned to give a good example: the “sacrifice of praise,” that is such an intimate matter for Augustine, means for the Pelagians the praise of pagan public opinion that would be gained by the Christian church as an institution made up of perfect men.<sup>39</sup>

For Pelagius, those who lived as ordinary people were pagans; they needed to pull away from the world and create space for their own improvement and effort. Brown sums it up nicely: “Pelagius wanted every Christian to be a monk.” This emphasis on personal piety, as we will see later, resulted accusations of Pelagianism being directed toward John Wesley’s movement.

Augustine’s involvement in the controversy informally began in 413, leading to formal participation in 414 or 415. His engagement with the issues actually defined Pelagianism as a distinct set of doctrines: “Pelagianism as we know it, that consistent body of ideas of momentous consequences, had come into existence; but in the mind of

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<sup>37</sup> Burns, 91.

<sup>38</sup> Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*, A new edition with an epilogue. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 343.

<sup>39</sup> Brown, 348.

Augustine, not Pelagius.”<sup>40</sup> In response to a request from a person named Hilarius (identified by Burns as Bishop of Syracuse, and identified in an older translation by Wilfrid Parsons as a Sicilian layperson; it seems likely that Burns is correct), Augustine was clear on several issues. First, no one is without sin; anyone who claims to be “deceive themselves and the truth is not in them.”<sup>41</sup> Augustine also noted here two classes of sins, some of which are unavoidable:

if anyone, helped by the mercy and grace of God, refrains from those sins which are called crimes, and does not fail to wash away the sins which are inseparable from this life by the practice of works of mercy and pious prayers, he will deserved to depart from this life without sin. However, as long as he lives here, he will have some sins, but as these have not been lacking, so the remedies by which they are washed away have been at hand.<sup>42</sup>

In this letter, Augustine is also clear that any who “claim that man’s free will is enough to enable him to carry out the commandments of the Lord” are “altogether alien to the grace of God.”<sup>43</sup> Apart from the gracious work of God through Christ and the Holy Spirit, no one can be saved. Further, he protects the freedom of the human will, which “is not destroyed by being helped, it is rather helped because it is not destroyed.”<sup>44</sup>

Clear here is the absolute necessity of the salvific effects of grace: “as it is impossible to find a man carnally born outside Adam's line, so no man is found

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<sup>40</sup> Brown, 346. Italics Brown’s.

<sup>41</sup> Augustine and Wilfrid Parsons, *Saint Augustine: Letters III (131-164)*, vol. 20, The Fathers of the Church (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 319 (157), <http://public.eblib.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=3134844>.

<sup>42</sup> Augustine and Parsons, 20:320 (157).

<sup>43</sup> Augustine and Parsons, 20:321 (157).

<sup>44</sup> Augustine and Parsons, 20:325 (157).

spiritually reborn outside the grace of Christ.”<sup>45</sup> Also visible is justification: “on the one hand, judgment leads from one offense to condemnation, but, on the other, grace leads from many offenses unto justification”<sup>46</sup> After quoting extensively from Paul’s Letter to the Romans regarding Christ as the reverse of Adam (in whom all die, while “in Christ all shall be made alive”), Augustine also emphasizes orthodoxy, warning Hilarius away from following the false teachers: “If you wish to live for Christ and in Christ, you must not agree with anyone who contradicts these words of the Apostle and this same interpretation.”<sup>47</sup>

The Pelagian controversies were by no means over; Augustine continued to speak into the doctrinal concerns for several years. Burns identifies a significant change by the year 418, where the divine will no longer works through “manipulation of the environment of choice,” but now has “direct influence on the [human] will itself through an interior grace.”<sup>48</sup>

The concept of grace preparing the faithful, which introduces the general concept of prevenient grace, is visible in *De gestis Pelagii* (*On the Proceedings of Pelagius*, dated 417): “Therefore, although faith obtains for us the grace to do good works, yet certainly we do not merit by any faith that we should have faith itself; rather, in giving faith to us, in which we follow the Lord, his mercy has gone before us.”<sup>49</sup> Here and subsequently,

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<sup>45</sup> Augustine and Parsons, 20:327 (157).

<sup>46</sup> Augustine and Parsons, 20:328 (157).

<sup>47</sup> Augustine and Parsons, 20:337-338 (157).

<sup>48</sup> Burns, *The Development of Augustine’s Doctrine of Operative Grace*, 9.

<sup>49</sup> Augustine, *Four Anti-Pelagian Writings*, trans. Mourant, John A. and Collinge, William J., vol. 86, *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1992), 147 [34]. For a

Augustine, referring to Psalm 59:10, employs the terminology *miser cordia ejus praeveniet me*.<sup>50</sup> This explicit reference to the prevenient work of grace, preceding those who follow Christ, also offers the initial phrasing which would later dominate John Wesley’s framework of the activity of divine grace, even though Augustine and Wesley understood the effects of prevenient grace in ways which were quite different. Augustine understood that grace functioned preveniently in those who were called to faith, thereby helping to ensure salvation for those predestined to be saved; Wesley’s view was that prevenient grace was operative—in a noncoercive way—in every person, and those who responded would have the opportunity of salvation.

By the time Augustine wrote *De gratia Christi et de peccato originali* (*On the Grace of Christ and Original Sin*, dated 418), he was clear that grace was the cause of human action and will, and that salvation itself was based on the “action of the Father rather than an autonomous human decision.”<sup>51</sup> Importantly, this does not “exclude human decision,” but does mean that the decisions are not autonomously made. Here, Augustine’s move away from congruous vocation is complete; Burns:

The congruous vocation worked by the adaptation of environmental means, especially knowledge, to the prior dispositions of an individual. By contrast, the new doctrine of effective teaching interprets the divine working of faith through the bestowing of new dispositions and the giving of the willing itself.<sup>52</sup>

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helpful overview of divine grace in Augustine, see Phillip Cary, John Doody, and Kim Paffenroth, *Augustine and Philosophy*. (Lexington Books, 2012), 81ff.

<sup>50</sup> See also *Epistulae* 186:10 and 194:9; *De Natura et Gratia* 31(35)). The Psalm wording is “The God of my mercy shall prevent me” (KJV); in the Vulgate, *praevenire*.

<sup>51</sup> Burns, *The Development of Augustine’s Doctrine of Operative Grace*, 143.

<sup>52</sup> Burns, 145.



Burns notes a clear movement involving the work of interior illumination, initially placed in the Word of God, to the Holy Spirit in *De peccatorum meritis et remissione et de baptismo parvulorum* (*On the Merits and Forgiveness of Sins and Infant Baptism*, 412): “for the first time, Augustine spoke of an operation of the Spirit prior to and in preparation for the indwelling of divine love.”<sup>53</sup> In 422, his *Enchiridion ad Laurentium* (*Enchiridion on Faith, Hope & Love*) showed a clear understanding that divine mercy “goes before the unwilling to make him willing; it follows the willing to make his will effectual.”<sup>54</sup>

### Conclusion

Augustine’s understanding of the activity of divine grace, formed and clarified by personal experience and reflection as well as the need to respond to questions regarding heretical beliefs, would flow into later frameworks of the activity of grace. His immature framing of God as something to be possessed, or communion with God as something to be attained, failed to account for the Christ event and the need for divine assistance, elevating the capabilities of the human spirit. Over time, he recognized that divine grace is absolutely necessary for salvation, which itself cannot be achieved through personal effort.

In the Donatist controversies, he was forced to contemplate the locus of the power of grace—particularly in terms of the efficacy of the sacraments—and recognized that the activity of grace could not be dependent upon the individual (even if one of his

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<sup>53</sup> Burns, 149–50.

<sup>54</sup> Augustine and Thomas S Hibbs, *The Enchiridion on Faith, Hope and Love*, trans. J.B. Shaw (Washington, D.C.; Lanham, MD: Regnery Publishing, 1996), 40 (32).

goals was to localize the effectiveness of divine grace in the institution of the Church). By the end of the Pelagian controversies, he had recognized the necessity of divine grace working within the individual, providing illumination and guidance, and had stated his mature understanding that individuals are unable to achieve salvation outside of the work of Christ and the presence of the Holy Spirit.

It is important to note that Augustine's understanding of the activity of grace includes a predestined elect; the frameworks of Wesley and Tillich, which we will explore shortly, did not (in Wesley's case, he railed against that idea). Therefore, we cannot extend the comparisons too far; Augustine provided framing for guiding work of the Holy Spirit's salvific activity, but the ways in which he envisioned that guidance were functionally different from what we will see in Wesley.

### CHAPTER THREE: WESLEY - THE HOLY SPIRIT AND GRACE

*There is only one condition previously required in those who desire admission into these societies, 'a desire to flee from the wrath to come, to be saved from their sins.'*

*But wherever this is really fixed in the soul it will be shown by its fruits.*

*It is therefore expected of all who continue therein that they should continue to evidence their desire of salvation,*

*First, By doing no harm, by avoiding evil of every kind—especially that which is most commonly practised.*

*Secondly, By doing good, by being in every kind merciful after their power, as they have opportunity doing good of every possible sort and as far as is possible to all men.*

*Thirdly, By attending upon all the ordinances of God. – John Wesley<sup>55</sup>*

John Wesley brought multiple theological threads together in innovative ways, always with an eye toward the ways in which divine grace offers restoration of the human spirit—which, in turn, creates the possibility of deeper relationship with God. Wesley's path toward this framing of grace was somewhat circuitous, influenced by a variety of other traditions. In important ways, the clarity with which he ultimately addressed his theological framework came about as he challenged other frameworks (particularly Catholicism and Calvinism), as well as instances which challenged and illumined his own understanding of faith.

Various factors in his early years impacted his theology and his approach to ministry, which was always focused on the practical aspects of lived faith with a

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<sup>55</sup> John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley. Vol. 9: The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design*, ed. Rupert E. Davies, vol. 9, The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 70–73.

particular emphasis on the intentionality that can be provided by faith communities, and the individual actions that each individual might undertake to both experience and respond to grace within the framework of those communities. Here, we will examine Wesley's early years, with attention to those experiences which shaped his theology. This is not intended to be a comprehensive biography; we will focus on specific events and influences which clearly left their marks on his life and thought. We will also flesh out his understanding of the dynamic nature of divine grace, the ways in which he understood grace to become more intentionally available to individuals (particularly through participation in faith communities), his continued emphasis on personal holiness, and his thoughts on the nature and function of doctrine.

In terms of his own church, Wesley spoke into a religious situation where faith had become dry and intellectually-based. His experiences provided a rich foundation for urging the faithful to understand their faith lives in new ways. He also engaged in more than one area of doctrinal controversy, most importantly refuting Calvinism, a dominant theology of his day (both in England and America) which conveyed a starkly limited view of the activity and efficacy of divine grace.

### **Wesley's Formative Years**

From his early childhood, through his time at Oxford, and past his disastrous mission venture to America, John Wesley was repeatedly exposed to traditions and praxis-focused actions which emphasized individual reception of, and response to, God's grace. These influences contributed to his deep passion for intentional growth, as well as his emphasis on the powerful transformations made possible by a faith that moved beyond the intellect, affecting the heart of the individual.

## Childhood

John Wesley was born in Epworth, Lincolnshire, England on June 17, 1703, the fifteenth of at least eighteen children.<sup>56</sup> Wesley's father, Samuel, was a Priest in the Church of England, assigned as the Rector of the Epworth parish. One might think that this explains young John's path to the priesthood; that may be true—indeed, he was not the only future minister in that gaggle of children—but there are several unique aspects to his lineage which contributed to a life of rather exceptional individualism which are worth examining.

Samuel and his wife, Susanna, were, as one senior Wesley scholar states, “not what one would normally expect to find in a remote rural parish.” Susanna was a strong, intelligent woman who—despite the fact that university-level learning was not available to women at the time—valued education and demanded that her children be as educated as possible. As Ken Collins notes, Susanna was also a strict disciplinarian who “believed that conquering the will of her children was the only foundation for a religious education. When this was done properly, the child could then be governed by the reason and piety of its parents until its own understanding came to fruition.”<sup>57</sup> The deep sense of discipline

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<sup>56</sup> This abbreviated account of Wesley's life and influence cannot do justice to the primary or secondary literature, and is by necessity focused on relevant experiences which shaped his life and his pneumatology. See the *Works of John Wesley* (particularly his letters and some autobiographical material) for primary accounts from his point of view), as well as the excellent works of Outler, Collins, Tomkins, and others: Albert C Outler, ed., *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1980); Kenneth J Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007); Stephen Tomkins, *John Wesley: A Biography* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2003).

<sup>57</sup> Kenneth J. Collins, “Wesley's Life and Ministry,” in *The Cambridge Companion to John Wesley*, ed. Randy L. Maddox, and Jason E. Vickers (Cambridge UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 43.

that Susanna instilled in her children would be a powerful influence on John throughout his life. At the same time, however, Richard Heitzenrater notes that

Susanna Wesley is traditionally given much of the credit for raising and nurturing her sons Charles and John in such a fashion that the Methodist movement might seem a natural outgrowth of the devotional life and thought of the Epworth rectory. That view tends to overlook the fact that, for all their differences, Samuel and Susanna held very similar theological and political views and were of a mind in the methods of raising their children.<sup>58</sup>

Samuel was himself the son of an Anglican Priest, John Westley (1636-1678), who was a Dissenter, going so far as to be jailed for refusal to use the *Book of Common Prayer*. Samuel would become an Oxford-educated Divine, a writer, and a poet who tended toward a scholarly life, rather than the simple pursuits of a village Rector.<sup>59</sup> His approach to poetry was somewhat unexpected for a clergyman; his first book of poetry, entitled *Maggots, or, Poems on Several Subjects, Never Before Handled by a Schollar* [sic] was published in 1685, and opens with the rather jolly line “IN the first place, pray take notice this is addressed only to those that buy the Book, for such as only borrow't, my good Friend the Bookseller and I will ha' nothing to do with 'em...”<sup>60</sup> The first poem, unsurprisingly, is entitled *On a Maggot*, and goes on for four pages.

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<sup>58</sup> Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 26.

<sup>59</sup> Heitzenrater, 26.

<sup>60</sup> Samuel Wesley, “Maggots, or, Poems on Several Subjects, Never Before Handled by a Schollar [Sic],” Early English Books Online, 1685, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A65464.0001.001/1:6.1?rgn=div2;view=toc>. Samuel may have been somewhat eccentric, but it is important to note that he was also a published author; just after his death, his son John would present his commentary on the book of Job to the Queen of England.

More germane to the topic of Wesley's theological development, however, is a particular grouping of factors which influenced both Samuel and Susanna's understanding of Christianity, doctrine, and faith. Like Samuel, Susanna was the child of a clergyman; in her case, however, the theological background was Presbyterian, as her father was a prominent Puritan. He variously served as a chaplain in the parliamentary navy and a vicar, ultimately being removed from his vicarage at the Restoration; afterwards, he formed a Nonconformist congregation near St. Giles, Cripplegate.

Both came from family backgrounds which involved a rejection of the 1662 *Act of Uniformity* (and, therefore, were considered Nonconformists). However, each would later convert to the "Established Church," becoming zealous Tories and leaving their Dissenting days behind.<sup>61</sup> Samuel pursued studies at Exeter College, Oxford, graduating in 1688; he and Susanna married in 1688, and Samuel was ordained in the Church of England by 1689. Their marriage would last forty-six years until his death in 1735, forty of which would be spent as Rector of the Epworth parish.<sup>62</sup> The move from the Nonconformist life to full support of the Established Church was fairly decisive; Samuel's written attacks on a prominent Dissenter, Samuel Palmer, even landed him in prison 1705.<sup>63</sup>

While both were former Nonconformists, they retained some degree of focus on the faith lives of Anglican churchgoers beyond the typical expectations of participation in

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<sup>61</sup> Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 27.

<sup>62</sup> Susanna Wesley, *Susanna Wesley: The Complete Writings*, ed. Charles Wallace Jr., ProQuest Ebook (Cary: Oxford University Press, Incorporated., n.d.), 5, accessed March 29, 2019.

<sup>63</sup> Outler, *John Wesley*, 5. Also see Susanna Wesley, xiii.

worship. Both had been involved with the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK), a renewal movement within the Church of England that focused on individual piety and social outreach. As Ronald Stone notes, the rise of such societies in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century was, to a significant extent, a response to the decline of the ecclesiastical courts, which had been serving as a coercive force pushing individuals toward the state church.<sup>64</sup> The societies also provided a focus on personal pietism that ran counter to the emerging cultural norm, which simply assumed that the faith lives of individuals were expressed by attending the state church—if, indeed, they even chose to do so at all. In the SPCK, and in the numerous small individual societies that were created in cities and villages, participants were nurtured toward a healthy faith live in the context of community, overseen by a “Spiritual Guide” (ideally “a pious and learned divine of the Church”).<sup>65</sup> J. Wickham Legg, writing in 1914 on the history of these societies, provides a helpful summary of the nature and work of these groups; here, he is quoting earlier work by John Chamberlayne’s account from 1708:

Those that compose these *Societies*, are all Members of the *Church of England*, and in all matters of Doubt and Difficulty, oblige themselves to consult the *Established Ministry*. They receive the Holy Sacrament at least once a Month, and take all convenient opportunities of attending the Service of God in Public; have set up Public Prayers in many Churches of the City, procured the Administration of the Sacrament every Holy-Day, and maintain Lectures upon the Holy Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper almost every Lords Day Evening, on some one or more Churches.

They industriously apply themselves to the relieving poor Families and Orphans, setting Prisoners at Liberty, solliciting Charities for the pious

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<sup>64</sup> Ronald H. Stone, *John Wesley’s Life & Ethics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 168.

<sup>65</sup> John Wickham Legg, *English Church Life from the Restoration to the Tractarian Movement Considered in Some of Its Neglected or Forgotten Features* (New York, Bombay, and Calcutta: Longmans, Green and Company, 1914), 292, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=coo1.ark:/13960/t74t75z7w;view=1up;seq=11>.



Education of poor Children, Visiting and Comforting those that are Sick and in Pain, and Reclaiming the Vicious and Dissolute; in promoting *Christian Conference*, Decency in God's Worship, *Family Religion*, and the Catechizing of young and ignorant People. They have been instrumental in bringing several *Quakers* and Enthusiastical Persons to Baptism, and a sober Mind, *Reconciling* several *Dissenters* to the Communion of the Church of *England*, and preserving many unsteady and wavering Persons from *Popery*.<sup>66</sup>

Samuel Wesley founded such a society in Epworth, and John himself would later become a member of the SPCK. Much of what is described in these early societies will later become central to the patterns that John Wesley used for the Methodist movement.

The Epworth years were notable in John Wesley's formation for other reasons as well, including the famed fire at the Epworth parsonage (likely an arson perpetrated by Samuel's detractors in the parish) when young John was six years old. In her journals and letters, we find this epistle from Susanna to Samuel Wesley, Jr. (the eldest son, who was away at school) where she recalls the frightening night:

Your father carried sister Emly, Suky, and Patty into the garden; then, missing Jacky [John], he ran back into the house to see if he could save him. He heard him miserably crying out in the nursery and attempted several times to get upstairs, but was beat back by the flame; then he thought him lost and commended his soul to God and went to look after the rest. The child climbed up to the window and called out to them in the yard; they got up to the casement and pulled him out just as the roof fell into the chamber. Harry [a servant] broke the glass of the parlour window and threw out your sister Molly and Hetty, and so by God's great mercy we all escaped.<sup>67</sup>

While this event became something of a legend among the early Methodists (and is still an active Wesley meme today), it was a very real crisis for the family, and it

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<sup>66</sup> Legg, 292. All formatting and spelling in original.

<sup>67</sup> Wesley, *Susanna Wesley: The Complete Writings*, 65–66.

contributed to the sense that young John was set apart for a divine purpose.<sup>68</sup> Young “Jacky” was already a favored child of Susanna; this episode made the existing bond even tighter. At the same time, the family lost everything; Charles Wallace, the editor of Susanna’s journals, notes that this necessitated

the dispersal of the children until money could be scraped up for the construction of a new rectory... Among the losses of the fire were the rector’s library and writings; the Epworth parish registers; the manuscripts left to Susanna by her father, Samuel Annesley; and her own manuscripts.<sup>69</sup>

As already noted, Susanna placed a high value on the children’s education; in the aftermath of the fire, she started the process of creating educational materials once again. Charles Wallace notes that Susanna provided lasting guidance to her children in powerful ways:

Evidence that she energetically continued in this calling may be found in later correspondence with her sons, even as they undertook an Oxford education and pursued their own priestly vocations, and in the longer moral and theological treatises she directed to her daughters, who in that era could not even aspire to university training.<sup>70</sup>

Later, the mature John Wesley reflected on this event occasionally, although perhaps not as much as some of his biographers wished; in his journal entry for Friday, February 9, 1750, the day after a series of small earthquakes had hit the London area, he was apparently in a reflective mood. Looking back on what he thought was the fortieth anniversary of that event:

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<sup>68</sup> Outler, *John Wesley*, 6.

<sup>69</sup> Wesley, *Susanna Wesley : The Complete Writings*, 64.

<sup>70</sup> Wesley, 64.

We had a comfortable watch-night at the chapel. About eleven o'clock it came into my mind that this was the very day and hour in which, forty years ago, I was taken out of the flames. I stopped and gave a short account of that wonderful providence. The voice of praise and thanksgiving went up on high, and great was our rejoicing before the Lord.<sup>71</sup>

Even if he did not quite make this episode the hallmark of his faith life, John did include a reference to the parsonage blaze in the inscription he wrote for his tombstone during a bout of illness he feared he would not survive in 1753, describing himself as “a brand plucked out of the burning.”<sup>72</sup> His expectation of impending death was premature, as he died in 1791, and these words were not included on his tomb.

### Education

Beginning in 1714, John's education continued at the Charterhouse in London, and he matriculated at Oxford in 1720. Five years later, he encountered classic writings which deeply influenced his faith life. Outler identifies this period as “a conversion if there ever was one.”<sup>73</sup>

In the year 1725, being in the twenty-third year of my age, I met with Bishop Taylor's *Rule and Exercises of Holy Living and Dying*. In reading several parts of this book, I was exceedingly affected; that part in particular which relates to *purity of intention*. Instantly I resolved to dedicate *all my life* to God, *all my thoughts*, and words, and actions; being thoroughly convinced, there was no medium; but that *every part* of my life

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<sup>71</sup> John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley. Vol. 20: Journal and Diaries III (1743-1754)*, ed. Richard P. Heitzenrater and W. Reginald Ward, vol. 20, The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 320–21. Other evidence indicates that his recollection of the date was wrong, as the event had occurred forty-one years earlier.

<sup>72</sup> Wesley, 20:482.

<sup>73</sup> Outler, *John Wesley*, 7.

(not *some* only) must either be a sacrifice to God, or myself, that is, in effect, to the devil.<sup>74</sup>

Taylor's guidance (written in the mid-1600's), which so deeply affected young John, included a strong focus on the care of one's time, a call to intentionality of where time is spent, exhortations to devote the entirety of one's life to religion, and much more which resonated with John's earlier experiences of the SPCK in Epworth.<sup>75</sup> Happily, this depth of intentionality would also later result in Wesley's devotion to keeping a fairly detailed journal from the time he embarked on his missionary journey to the American colonies in 1735 until his death. Wesley reflected on this particular area of impact in the preface to the first published volume of his *Journal*: "I began to take a more exact account than I had done before of the manner wherein I spent my time, writing down how I had employed every hour."<sup>76</sup> Around this time, his status at Oxford became more secure, as he was elected Fellow of Lincoln College in 1726, a role which provided a loosened leash in terms of his academic work. His tasks included lecturing on Greek, a skill which would become more useful as time went on.

Over the next few years, Wesley would encounter other writings from Thomas à Kempis (*The Christian's Pattern, or The Imitation of Christ*), and William Law (*A Practical Treatise on Christian Perfection*, published in 1726, and *A Serious Call to a*

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<sup>74</sup> John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley. Vol. 13: Doctrinal and Controversial Treatises II*, ed. Paul Wesley Chilcote and Kenneth J Collins, Bicentennial, vol. 13, The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013), 136. Italics Wesley's.

<sup>75</sup> Jeremy Taylor, *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Living* (New York; Evanston, IL: Harper & Row, 1970), 11–15.

<sup>76</sup> John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley. Vol. 18: Journal and Diaries I (1735-1738)*, ed. Albert Cook Outler, vol. 18, The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988), 121.

*Devout and Holy Life*, 1729). Both authors had a significant impact on Wesley's understanding of the nature of religion. Reflecting on Law's writings, Wesley wrote that they

convinced me, more than ever, of the absolute impossibility of being *half a Christian*; and I determined, through his grace, (the absolute necessity of which I was deeply sensible of;) to be *all-devoted* to God, to give him all my soul, my body, and my substance.<sup>77</sup>

Wesley's formal entry into a clergy status with the Church of England occurred during this time. Ordained as a Deacon in 1725, he continued toward working toward the Priesthood, receiving that ordination in 1728.

Later, as he looked back on that time period, he saw that his understanding of the depth and nature of Scripture had shifted in 1733:

I began not only to read, but to *study*, the Bible, as the one, the only standard of truth, and the only model of pure religion. Hence I saw, in a clearer and clearer light, the indispensable necessity of having "the mind which was in Christ," and of "walking as Christ also walked"; even of having, not *some part* only, but *all* the mind which was in him; and of walking as he walked, not only in *many* or in *most* respects, but in *all* things. And this was the light, wherein at this time I generally considered religion, as an *uniform* following of Christ, an *entire* inward and outward conformity to our Master. Nor was I afraid of anything more, than of *bending* this rule to the experience of myself; or of other men; of allowing myself in any *the least* disconformity to our grand Exemplar.<sup>78</sup>

The powerful changes that were occurring in Wesley's understanding of faith were visible in the early version of his classic sermon *The Circumcision of the Heart*, preached first in St. Mary's Church at Oxford on January 1, 1733. While minor changes

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<sup>77</sup> Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley. Vol. 13: Doctrinal and Controversial Treatises II*, 13:137. All italics in original.

<sup>78</sup> Wesley, 13:137–38. All italics in original.

would occur through the years, Wesley himself considered this to be a definitive explication of his understanding of personal holiness.<sup>79</sup> This early delivery of his emphatic theology garnered mixed reviews, even being described as “enthusiastic” by one in attendance that day, an indicator of some of the later responses that Wesley’s thought would receive.<sup>80</sup>

Twice, Wesley left Oxford to assist his father’s work in the parishes at Epworth and Wroot, a smaller rectory that had been added to Samuel’s charge around 1724.<sup>81</sup> After doing so in 1729, Wesley returned to Oxford in November to find that his brother Charles had formed a small group which “agreed to spend three or four evenings in a week together.”<sup>82</sup> John assumed leadership of the group, which came to be known by a number of pejorative names among the undergraduates: “The Holy Club, The Reforming Club, Bible Moths, Methodists, Supererogation Men, Enthusiasts.”<sup>83</sup>

Initially, they agreed to read together, variously reading “something in divinity” or “the Greek or Latin classics.” Within a few months, they had started visiting prisoners; then checking in on the sick. In 1732, a new member exposed the group to the “fasts of the ancient Church,” as their interest in disciplined living grew. Over time, others would

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<sup>79</sup> Wesley, 13:139.

<sup>80</sup> Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley: Bicentennial Edition*, I, Sermons 1-33:400; Wilson, *The Diaries of Thomas Wilson, D.D.: 1731-37 and 1750*, 87. Wilson knew both John and Charles by this time, having shared meals with them at least as early as September 30, 1732; his diaries indicate other interactions as well, some nondescript, and at least one somewhat tense. In the case of John Wesley’s sermon, he wrote “Wesley of Lincoln preached at St. Mary’s about Circumcision of the Heart. Enthusiastick” [sic]. For some other interactions, see pages 72, 77, and 79.

<sup>81</sup> Wesley, *Susanna Wesley: The Complete Writings*, xiii.

<sup>82</sup> Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley. Vol. 9: The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design*, 9:427.

<sup>83</sup> Outler, *John Wesley*, 8.

join in, with Wesley reporting around fifteen participants by 1735, when he briefly left to deal with his father's death.<sup>84</sup>

Habits of this small group of Oxford Methodists echoed elements of the societies, such as the SPCK, which nurtured Christians in their faith lives, while at the same time becoming a key model for future Methodist communities at both the lay and clergy levels. The very existence of the Oxford Methodists reflected, to a significant degree, a sense that others within the Church of England were failing to fully live into the realities of Christian living; this would continue to be a driving motivation for Wesley throughout his life.

While the patterns of the SPCK undoubtedly contributed to the form of the Holy Club, the content was also influenced by some correspondence from Susanna Wesley, addressed to both John and Charles. Much of her advice pushed toward moderation of some of their more ascetic activities, which may have been sufficiently extreme that participants' health suffered.<sup>85</sup> Susanna was generally supportive, while also critical of some of the more extreme practices of the group, including those which potentially affected their well-being. In her writings, the depth of her relationships with both Charles and, in particular, John (whom she continued to refer to as "Jacky") was very clear.

Coming from a childhood environment where disciplined living was emphasized, education was highly valued, and some degree of controversial rebelliousness was

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<sup>84</sup> John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley: Jackson Edition*, ed. Thomas Jackson, Electronic, vol. 9: Letters, Essays (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 427.

<sup>85</sup> Wesley, *Susanna Wesley: The Complete Writings*, 144ff. In one instance, one of the original members of the Holy Club, William Morgan, died; his death was, as Charles Wallace notes, "attributed to the ascetic excesses of Oxford Methodist discipline."

present (think Samuel's *Maggots*), the young John had been exposed to a remarkable breadth of thought. As Wesley continued to mature, his approaches to life and ministry were passionate, strong-willed, and, as we will see, sometimes naïve. Albert Outler summarizes John Wesley's personality: "hard-driving, yet also sensitive; intense, yet also patient; detached, yet also charming; self-disciplined, yet also emotional; opinionated, yet also curious; open to counsel, yet impervious to pressure; brusque with bad faith, yet also tolerant of contrary opinions."<sup>86</sup> These traits are visible in his journals and letters, where he balanced his apologetic goals (which are generally focused on his own theological stances, not on Christianity writ large) with firm yet gentle disagreements with others.

#### Failed Mission, New Insights

Members of the Holy Club, including John's brother Charles, would become a core part of the group that sailed to Savannah, Georgia in 1735. Wesley wrote to a friend, John Burton, on October 10 (four days prior to his departure), about the reasons that he agreed to embark on this venture.

My chief motive, to which all the rest are subordinate, is the hope of saving my own soul. I hope to learn the true sense of the gospel of Christ by preaching it to the heathens. They have no comments to construe away from the text, no vain philosophy to corrupt it, no luxurious, sensual, covetous, ambitious expounders to soften its unpleasing truths, to reconcile earthly-mindedness and faith, the Spirit of Christ and the spirit of the world. They have no part, no interest to serve, and are therefore fit to receive the gospel in its simplicity. They are as little children, humble, willing to learn, and eager to do the will of God. And consequently they shall know of every doctrine I preach, whether it be of God. From these, therefore, I hope to learn the purity of that faith which was once delivered

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<sup>86</sup> Outler, *John Wesley*, 5.



to the saints, the genuine sense and full extent of those laws which none can understand who mind earthly things.<sup>87</sup>

It is interesting that, even as he and his Holy Club colleagues expended a great deal of effort to dwell in scripture, spend time fasting, and intentionally reach out to those in need (not to mention the prayers, sacraments, and rituals involved in his priestly duties), Wesley felt that there were earthly influences preventing him from fully grasping the message of Christ. That he would seek to travel to a distant, unknown environment with the hope of discovering essential truths suggests a sense of restlessness with his faith life, even as it was steeped in both academia and church life. It seems that he felt something was lacking. In this period, Wesley also seems to reflect elements of the immature theology of the early Augustine, assuming that personal effort—and perhaps even personal willing—could achieve some sort of salvific relationship with God. While he did not frame the faith journey in the same way that Augustine proposed multiple degrees of illumination, the deliberate, methodical approaches that Wesley undertook were seemingly intended to achieve liberation from the limitations of common human existence and gain favor with God.

In terms of his stated goal of saving his own soul and learning the purity of the Christian faith in his travels, Wesley's missionary venture was a total failure, over which much ink has since been spilled. The brothers had arrived in America on February 8, 1736; Charles, who had encountered health issues, sailed for England on August 16 of that same year. John followed just over a year later, leaving Georgia on December 2,

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<sup>87</sup> John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley. Vol. 25: Letters I, 1721-1739*, ed. Frank Baker and Richard P. Heitzenrater, Bicentennial, vol. 25, The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 439.

1737, then sailing back to London twenty days later. After just twenty-two months in America, he returned in failure, leaving behind broken expectations, irritated congregants, several legal charges, and at least one scandal.<sup>88</sup> While John's missionary efforts in America did not bear the fruit he expected, the experience likely served as the catalyst he needed, if not in the ways that he anticipated.

On his voyage to America, he had encountered the Moravian Christians. In order to communicate with them, he started studying German on the third day of the voyage; similarly, some of the Moravian leaders began studying English.<sup>89</sup> The stories of violent weather during the trip are well-known, thanks to Wesley's habit of journal-keeping. He repeatedly dealt with guilt from being "unwilling to die" (that is, afraid of what seemed to him to be impending death).<sup>90</sup> He also recorded his encounter with the Moravians, who were essentially holding worship services in the midst of the worst storm of the voyage:

In the midst of the psalm wherewith their serve began the sea broke over, split the mainsail in pieces, covered the ship, and poured in between the decks, as if the great deep had already swallowed us up. A terrible screaming began among the English. The Germans calmly sung on. I asked one of them afterwards, "Was you not afraid?" He answered, "I thank God, no." I asked "But were not your women and children afraid?" He replied mildly, "No, our women and children are not afraid to die."<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Outler, *John Wesley*, 11–13. These brief pages in Outler's classic work offer a brief summary of the events in Georgia.

<sup>89</sup> Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley. Vol. 18: Journal and Diaries I (1735-1738)*, 18:137.

<sup>90</sup> Wesley, 18:141–43.

<sup>91</sup> Wesley, 18:143.

This episode led to further conversations with the Moravians, and those conversations would become the foundation of Wesley's doctrine of Christian Assurance, a critical part of his theological framework.

Further, his theology was clearly following some trajectories that were unique—most likely related to his insistence on holiness of life and personal piety; his focus on intentional, disciplined living; and some liturgical innovations which apparently involved revising the *Book of Common Prayer* (this last element is significant—whereas Wesley's parents were no longer Nonconformists, John himself was clearly somewhat less committed to the forms dictated by the Church of England).<sup>92</sup> In a *Journal* entry from June 22, 1736, John recorded a conversation with William Horton, a congregant and local leader with whom there had previously been some conflict, who admonished John on his preaching to this congregation of Protestants: “But as for you, they can't tell what religion you are of. They never heard of such a religion before. They don't know what to make of it.”<sup>93</sup> These charges seem quite appropriate, given that Wesley continued to push back against the dry faith of the common Anglican, even before his upcoming transformation to a new understanding of the very nature of faith itself.

It is fair to say that the failure of the Georgia mission was devastating for Wesley. At the same time, he knew that he had been somewhat transformed by the experience. On the return trip to England, the ship encountered more storms; this time, his experience was different: “I was at first afraid, but cried to God and was strengthened. Before ten I

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<sup>92</sup> Outler, *John Wesley*, 12.

<sup>93</sup> Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley. Vol. 18: Journal and Diaries I (1735-1738)*, 18:162.

lay down, I bless God, without fear.”<sup>94</sup> His frustration with the failed trip was evident, though, in a lament that he recorded as the ship approached Europe on January 24, 1738:

I went to America, to convert the Indians; but oh! who shall convert me?  
who, what is he that will deliver me from this evil heart of mischief? I  
have a fair summer religion. I can talk well; nay, and believe myself, while  
no danger is near; but let death look me in the face, and my spirit is  
troubled. Nor can I say, "To die is gain!"<sup>95</sup>

Despite the failure, his ministry work progressed. His relationships with Moravian Christians continued in England, and Wesley travelled to Germany to meet with leaders of Moravian communities there. Their influence on him would continue to grow over time, and his participation in their meetings, combined with the devastation of his failed mission to Georgia provided the opportunity for his famed “heart strangely warmed” experience at age 35 in a chapel on Aldersgate street in London on May 24, 1738. “I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation, and an assurance was given me that he had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death.”<sup>96</sup> Visible here are the elements of assurance that flowed out of his interactions with the Moravians, as well as the shift from an intellectually-based religion to a faith which flowed out of both head and heart. This also marks a decisive shift in Wesley’s understanding of the need for, and effects of, divine grace; just as Augustine realized later in life (and addressed in his writings during the Pelagian Controversy), God’s grace is absolutely necessary for salvation.

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<sup>94</sup> Wesley, 18:210.

<sup>95</sup> Wesley, 18:211.

<sup>96</sup> Wesley, 18:250.

If one asks the question of what Wesley argued against during his life, the dominant answer is that he targeted the dry, head-based faith of the average Christian. This theme is visible throughout his life, but it comes into particular focus following his Aldersgate experience, when he had finally made a transition from intellectually-focused, self-dependent moves toward a relationship with God to a grace-based relationship which depended on divine initiative. In his 1741 sermon *The Almost Christian*, he identifies the traits of those who are acting as though they have faith, yet have not quite discovered the core elements of a living faith. Those misleading traits include acting justly as they have been taught to do, speaking in truth, providing assistance to one another, living temperately and, in general,

having a form of godliness, of that of that godliness which is prescribed in the gospel of Christ—the having the *outside* of a real Christian. Accordingly the “almost Christian” does nothing which the Gospel forbids.<sup>97</sup>

The shift that Wesley urged was an inward transformation of the individual, based on that which he had experienced himself in the Aldersgate moments. To actually be a Christian is to experience the love of God, to truly love one’s neighbor, and to discover the “right and true Christian faith,” which means “not only to believe that Holy Scripture and the articles of our faith are true, but also to have a sure trust and confidence to be saved from everlasting damnation by Christ.” This is a faith which purifies the heart, and

fills it with a love stronger than death both to God and to all mankind—love that doth the works of God, glorying to spend and to be spent for all men, and that endureth with joy, not only the reproach of Christ, the being mocked, despised, and hated of all men, but whatsoever the wisdom of God permits the malice of men or devils to inflict; whosoever has this

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<sup>97</sup> John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley. Vol. 1: Sermons I: 1-33*, ed. Albert Cook Outler, vol. 1, The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 132. Italics his.

faith, thus “working by love,” is not *almost* only, but *altogether*, a Christian.<sup>98</sup>

In 1766, Wesley would sum up the “Character of a Methodist” in words that encapsulated his balance of heart- and head-based faith since at least 1742:

A Methodist is one who has "the love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost given unto him"; one who "loves the Lord his God with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his mind, and with all his strength. God is the joy of his heart, and the desire of his soul; which is constantly crying out, "Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee! My God and my all! Thou art the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever!"<sup>99</sup>

### **Wesley and the Human Condition**

Wesley’s experiences with divine grace transformed his life, both fulfilling and altering the message he shared in his work as a pastor, writer, and overseer of a new faith tradition. While his theology focused on divine grace, he was also deeply aware of the brokenness of humanity which necessitated that God’s grace be active and restorative. As we have already noted, he took issue with Calvinist doctrine, passionately sharing the message that divine grace, and a saving relationship with God, is available to all of humanity. This call to relationship was, at its core, a call to restoration of the image of God within the individual, which was effected by the gracious actions of the Holy Spirit.

### **The Problems of Depravity and Sin**

Wesley gave primacy to the authority of Christian scripture and took seriously the narratives within that corpus. At the same time, he was not bound to readings which contradicted reason. In an early sermon, *The Love of God* (1733), he offers that “if the

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<sup>98</sup> Wesley, 1:139. Italics his.

<sup>99</sup> Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley. Vol. 13: Doctrinal and Controversial Treatises II*, 13:142.

literal sense of these Scriptures was absurd, and apparently contradictory to reason, then we should be obliged not interpret to them according to the letter, but to look out for a looser meaning.”<sup>100</sup> In context, this passage refers to the breadth of the commandments to love God; however, given Wesley’s emphasis on learning, openness to science, and balanced use of reason throughout his works, it is fair to view his understanding of the authority of scripture through an essential hermeneutic of reason. Scott Jones points also to Wesley’s late sermon *Of the Church* (1785), where Wesley once again addresses the question: “It is a stated rule in interpreting Scripture never to depart from the plain, literal sense, unless it implies an absurdity.”<sup>101</sup> The degree of absurdity is a driving question here; ultimately, Jones identifies two scenarios where reason can supercede scripture: “first, matters of fact to which experience and natural science testify can supercede the literal sense of Scripture. Second, where the Scripture appears to contradict itself...”<sup>102</sup>

Since Wesley took seriously the content of the Scriptural narrative, he took seriously the core messages as well, including the Genesis narrative of the Fall. Whether that needed to be taken as an historic event or an allegory would be, for Wesley, beside the point; in his sermon *Original Sin* (preached at least as early as 1751, focused on Genesis 6:5), he refutes any suggestions that humanity is anything other than fully fallen. As he looks at the world of his day, he compares the depravity of his day to the state of

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<sup>100</sup> John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley. Vol. 4: Sermons IV: 115-151*, ed. Albert Cook Outler, vol. 4, The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), 337.

<sup>101</sup> Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley. Vol. 3: Sermons III: 71-114*, 3:50.

<sup>102</sup> Scott J. Jones, *John Wesley’s Conception and Use of Scripture* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1995), 80. For the pointer to the 1785 sermon, see p. 79.

humanity before the Flood; that is, so evil that the world deserves another massive cleansing. This is but one writing where Wesley deploys the concept of “natural man,” a term which describes the present state of humanity: blind to its own fallenness, without knowledge of God, without love of God, and prone to following false idols.<sup>103</sup>

To understand Wesley’s conception of the Fall, it is necessary first to identify the ways that he understood humanity to have been created in God’s “image.” This is not a simplistic view of an anthropomorphic deity cloning itself. In his sermon *The New Birth*, Wesley identified three specific aspects of the created human which captured the essence of that divine image. First, the “*natural image*, a picture of his own immortality, a spiritual being endowed with understanding, and various affections.”<sup>104</sup> Wesley’s understanding of this is made somewhat clearer in his sermon *On the Fall of Man*. In the order of the creation narrative, everything was performing as intended, but

there was still wanting a creature of a higher rank, capable of wisdom and holiness. *Natus homo est*. ‘So God created man in his own image; in the image of God created he him!’ Mark the emphatic repetition! God did not make him mere matter, a piece of senseless, unintelligent clay, but a spirit like himself (although clothed with a material vehicle). As such he was endowed with understanding, with a will, including various affections, and with liberty, a power of using them in a right or wrong manner, of choosing good or evil.<sup>105</sup>

Second, the “*political image*, the governor of the lower world, having ‘dominion over the fishes of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all of

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<sup>103</sup> John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley. Vol. 2: Sermons II: 34-70*, ed. Albert Cook Outler, vol. 2, The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 176.

<sup>104</sup> Wesley, 2:188. Italics in original.

<sup>105</sup> Wesley, 2:409. The enclosed quote references Genesis 1:27. The Latin translates to “Man was born.”



the earth.”<sup>106</sup> While there are caretaker aspects inherent in the political image, this is more of a corruption of the created order; that is, there were intended roles for living beings in Creation, and the human act of disobedience has thrown those roles into disarray. The impact is not just on humanity, but on the whole of Creation.<sup>107</sup>

Finally, “chiefly in his *moral image*, which, according to the Apostle, is ‘righteousness and true holiness.’”<sup>108</sup> As Collins notes, “Adam’s change in his relationship to God, which was now a perverted one, affected the tempers of his heart, the seat of holiness and love, tempers that together constituted his basic orientation, his predisposition, toward all thought and action.”<sup>109</sup> This particular aspect of the *imago Dei* also sets humanity apart from the rest of the created order; no other created being has this component. This is also the component which creates the potential for sin; our moral center “represents the possibility of either humanity’s glorification or its debasement.”<sup>110</sup>

Even as humanity was made in the image of God, humanity was at the same time “not made immutable”; that is, humanity had free will and was not forced to abide by God’s direction, nor remain fully within the strictures of the created image(s). In

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<sup>106</sup> Wesley, 2:188. The contained quote references Genesis 1:26. Italics in original.

<sup>107</sup> Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley*, 54. Collins offers a helpful framing of this impact.

<sup>108</sup> Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley. Vol. 2: Sermons II: 34-70*, 2:188. The enclosed quote references Ephesians 4:24. Italics in original.

<sup>109</sup> Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley*, 63.

<sup>110</sup> Collins, 56.

Wesley's understanding, to create humanity any other way would have been "inconsistent with the state of trial in which God was placing" them.<sup>111</sup>

In the Fall, Wesley understood that the human spirit was corrupted fully:

By this wilful act of disobedience to his Creator, this flat rebellion against his sovereign, he openly declared that he would no longer have God to rule over him; that he would be governed by his own will, and not the will of that which created him, and that he would not seek his happiness in God, by in the world, in the works of his hands... in that day he did die: he died to God, the most dreadful of all deaths.<sup>112</sup>

It is fair to say that Wesley would agree with Calvin that humans are born in a state of total depravity; a state which, for him, prevents any kind of human response to—or awareness of—the presence of the divine. For Wesley, this is the key issue that must be addressed by any theological framework.

Ye know that the great end of religion is to renew our hearts in the image of God, to repair that total loss of righteousness and true holiness which we sustained by the sin of our first parent. Ye know that all religion which does not answer this end, all that stops short of this, the renewal of our soul in the image of God after the likeness of him that created it, is no other than a poor farce, and a mere mockery of God, to the destruction of our own soul.<sup>113</sup>

Wesley's doctrine of original sin is central to his theological framework; in a journal entry from 1764, he lists it as the first of three essentials for clergy who carry the message: "I. Original sin. II. Justification by faith. III. Holiness of heart and life—provided their life be answerable to their doctrine."<sup>114</sup> In 1757, Wesley composed a

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<sup>111</sup> Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley. Vol. 2: Sermons II: 34-70*, 2:189.

<sup>112</sup> Wesley, 2:189.

<sup>113</sup> Wesley, 2:185.

<sup>114</sup> John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley. Vol. 21: Journal and Diaries IV (1755-1765)*, ed. Richard P. Heitzenrater and W. Reginald Ward, vol. 21, The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley

lengthy (321 pages in the *Bicentennial* edition of his *Works*) response to a publication attacking the classical doctrine which had been published by John Taylor, a Dissenter who, like Wesley, was an Arminian.<sup>115</sup> Wesley particularly addressed what he perceived to be a naïve and overly optimistic view of (fallen) human nature, which placed a great deal of emphasis on the power of human reason to effect the human response to the operation of God’s grace. In his Introduction to Wesley’s treatise, Maddox notes that Taylor defines “being born of the Spirit” as “being born ‘into the right use and application of the natural powers, in a life of righteousness, godliness, and sobriety.’”<sup>116</sup> Put another way, God re-enables the God-given sense of reason in the individual, and reason takes it from there (hence the “rationalist” Arminian view).

As with Augustine answering the Pelagians, Taylor’s writings provided Wesley an opportunity to expound (at significant length) on specific elements of his theology which he considered to be of critical importance. Wesley’s treatise was entitled “The Doctrine of Original Sin According to Scripture, Reason, *and* Experience,” with a clear emphasis on the word “and” (hence the nonstandard way that I have shared the title here). As Maddox notes, Taylor relied on reason; Wesley felt he was ignoring the clear experiential evidence for the depths of human depravity (as we have already noted,

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(Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 456. I am indebted to Ken Collins for bringing this lesser-known list of emphases to light.

<sup>115</sup> John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley. Vol. 12: Doctrinal and Controversial Treatises I*, ed. Randy L Maddox, vol. 12, The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2012), 155ff. Wesley’s writing itself is titled *The Doctrine of Original Sin: According to Scripture, Reason, and Experience*, and is prefaced by an excellent introduction in the Bicentennial edition by Randy Maddox. It is also worth noting that Wesley was an evangelical Arminian; Taylor a rationalist.

<sup>116</sup> Wesley, 12:143.

Wesley likened the world of his day to the pre-Flood depravity of the Noah narrative in Genesis).<sup>117</sup> In addition, Taylor's position suggests that grace does specifically re-enable or restore the reason of the individual; Wesley sees the entire process as grace-enabled, with co-operative activity if the individual chooses to respond.

### The Wesleyan Answer

Wesley's answer to the human dilemma flows from multiple theological traditions, including those which we examined in Chapter 2; his focus was on the activity of divine grace, working operatively and, to a degree, co-operatively as well. The essence of this grace was so foundational to his theology that he offers a definition in the opening sentences of the sermon, *Salvation by Faith*, which he would place at the beginning of his collected sermons (the *Standard Sermons*): God's

free, undeserved favour, favour undeserved, man having no claim to the least of his mercies. It was free grace that 'formed man of the dust of the ground and breathed into him a living soul', and stamped on the soul the image of God, and 'put all things under his feet'. The same free grace continues to us, at this day, life and breath, and all things. For there is nothing we are, or have, or do, which can deserve the least thing at God's hand.<sup>118</sup>

Grace, then, is not simply divine tolerance, nor a one-time-favour (even if undeserved). It is constant, deeply imprinted, and actively life-sustaining. Although it is one grace—divine grace, God's grace—it takes different forms based upon the state of the individual.

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<sup>117</sup> Wesley, 12:151.

<sup>118</sup> Wesley, *Sermons I*, 1:117–18. Contained in this quote are references to Genesis 32:10, 2:7, 1:27; Psalm 8:6; and Acts 17:25. As Albert Outler observes in the editor's footnotes to this sermon, the "metaphor from Genesis 1:27 is the basic one in Wesley's anthropology," reappearing in many of his sermons. See *Sermons I*, 1:117n5.

## Prevenient Grace

In the sermon entitled *On Working Out Our Own Salvation*, Wesley allows that all of humanity is “dead in sin by *nature*,” but makes it clear that, through the activity of the Spirit, no one is “wholly devoid of the grace of God.”<sup>119</sup> The presence of divine grace in the hearts of humanity is understood to restore enough of the natural image of God that humans can respond to God’s invitation to relationship. Returning to Wesley’s concept of the natural man as a fallen, fully depraved being—by the actions of divine grace, no human has ever existed in that state. His intent here was not to minimize fallenness, but to emphasize both the power and the critical importance of divine grace. This element of Wesley’s theology set him distinctly apart from Calvinism, against which Wesley preached and wrote on multiple occasions.

Wesley, following not only Arminius but Augustine as well (albeit somewhat differently in the case of Augustine), referred to this restorative activity as *preventing grace*.<sup>120</sup> Augustine understood that divine grace worked in advance of the realization of faith in those who were predestined to have faith (and, therefore, predestined for salvation). Further, Augustine saw that this preceding work of grace was irresistible in its effects; those who were predestined for salvation would be saved, period.

Wesley’s understanding of this preparatory activity of grace (now referred to by the term *prevenient grace*) became a cornerstone of Wesleyan theology and has

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<sup>119</sup> Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley. Vol. 3: Sermons III: 71-114*, 3:207. Emphasis his.

<sup>120</sup> This term may be somewhat confusing in that it reflects an archaic use of the word *preventing*. Here, the term essentially means ‘going before,’ and one (admittedly simplistic) understanding would be that this is the activity of God’s grace that draws people toward relationship. In more conservative circles within the Wesleyan traditions, it is often described as the ‘grace that goes before salvation,’ whereas in more liberal circles, the emphasis is not on salvation, but relationship.

continued to inform the practical theology of the various faith groups that emerged from Wesley's life and work, offering a distinctive theological response to real human issues. Prevenient grace is the work of the spirit working operatively, in the life of every human, without exception (*contra* Augustine); indeed, for Wesley, the work of prevenient grace is, in an important way, irresistible, even if the outcomes of that work (i.e. "salvation") are dependent on the response of each individual. In his *Salvation* sermon, Wesley makes it clear that preventing grace is present in and for all; "Every man has a greater or less measure of this, which waiteth not for the call of man." This manifestation of divine grace is evident in both "good desires" and "conscience," such that "no man sins because he has not grace, but because he does not use the grace which he hath."<sup>121</sup> Preventing grace, then, is operative in nature, yet non-coercive; it is present, but can be ignored.

Returning to Wesley's treatise *Original Sin*, we find that he makes one important statement about the nature of the restoration that takes place. "'The new man,' or the principle of true religion in the heart, is created by God after his moral image, in that righteousness and true holiness wherein man was first created."<sup>122</sup> The prevenient restoration that provides the opportunity for human response to God's gracious offer of relationship is centralized in the natural image; in that process, some freedom of the will is restored as well. This is divine grace wooing the individual into relationship with God; working non-coercively, but working nonetheless.

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<sup>121</sup> Wesley, *Sermons* 3, 3:207.

<sup>122</sup> Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley. Vol. 12: Doctrinal and Controversial Treatises I*, 12:343.

## Justifying Grace

Prevenience is not the only working of divine grace, however. Wesley's Aldersgate experience provided the foundation for him to identify and unpack the differences between justification and sanctification, two aspects of grace that he had generally conflated prior to that time.<sup>123</sup> Wesley first preached his sermon *Justification by Faith* on May 28, 1738, just four days after his Aldersgate moment—a clear sign of the rapid pace of theological re-framing that was taking place.<sup>124</sup> Here, he is clear that justification and sanctification are two distinct operations.

Justification is a divine pardoning—a change in an individual's standing before God—which does not directly result in a change in the individual. For Wesley, justification does not indicate that we are cleared of our past sins, or that God is deceived about our true state; rather, forgiveness is given, and it is as if the individual had never sinned. Justification is the mark of faith on the part of the individual, which, for Wesley, is the “*only condition* of justification.”<sup>125</sup> Importantly, this view presses back against doctrines which placed justification after sanctification; that is, the individual must become righteous in order to be justified. The latter had been Wesley's immature approach, visible in his expressed desires for the outcome of the missionary work in

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<sup>123</sup> Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley*, 169.

<sup>124</sup> John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley. Vol. 1: Sermons I: 1-33*, ed. Albert Cook Outler, vol. 1, The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 181ff. While Wesley's theology remains remarkably consistent throughout his life in most elements, there are both gradual and momentary changes visible. For this reason, I follow Maddox in terms of thinking of the “early” (1733-1738), “middle” (1738, just following Aldersgate, through 1765), and “late” (1765-1791) Wesleys. For a short overview of this, see Randy L Maddox, “Reading Wesley as a Theologian,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 30, no. 1 (1995): 23.

<sup>125</sup> Wesley, 1:196. Emphasis Wesley's.

America—namely, to save his own soul. His early approach to salvation was based, as Wesley would later realize, on works rather than faith, a confusion which ended following Aldersgate.

### **Sanctifying Grace**

Justification is not the end of the story for Wesley, but rather the beginning of a new path of sanctification. As he notes in his sermon *The Witness of Our Own Spirit*, “As soon as ever the grace of God in the former sense, His pardoning love, is manifested to our souls, the grace of God in the latter sense, the power of His Spirit, takes place therein.”<sup>126</sup> Here, provided by the Holy Spirit, grace clearly works co-operatively, as additional restoration of the *imago Dei* takes place over time. While the Wesleyan process of salvation can be subdivided into many steps or phases (including convicting, regenerating, and more), the essential elements generally identified are three: prevenient grace (working operatively), justifying faith (which is an act of grace, and can also be fairly called justifying grace; this can fairly be viewed as operative in nature, although it comes at a point of repentance on the part of the individual, so there is an element of cooperation as well), and sanctifying grace (working co-operatively, as the individual now has some degree of awareness of God, and is participating—to some degree—in the process of growing in faith). The entire process is one of deepening holiness, which must result in visible fruits of faith. This understanding, paired with Wesley’s continuing emphasis on practices which invite the activity of divine grace, would result in

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<sup>126</sup> Wesley, 1:309.



accusations of Pelagianism, a misunderstanding of the initiating role of the Holy Spirit working preveniently (and such charges are still made occasionally today).

That there are two slightly different conceptions of prevenient grace visible in Wesley's writings. The first use is "narrow," referring to the activities of grace which precede justification and sanctification. The second is the "broader" use, which "views *all* grace as prevenient in that it emphasizes the *prior* activity of God as well as human response in every measure of grace whether it be convicting, justifying, regenerating, or entirely sanctifying."<sup>127</sup>

Whereas our focus here has been on Wesley's understanding of the effects of divine grace on the individual, Wesley also emphasized the value of the communal aspects of faith.

### **Wesley's Ecclesiology**

Throughout his ministry, Wesley remained firmly rooted in the Anglican traditions and the Anglican Church itself. What his movement offered was an intentional approach to the faith life of each individual, but that intentionality was best lived out in communal contexts, where grace could be welcomed, shared, and experienced. For him, "Church" was itself a somewhat slippery concept, but the framework that communally-shared faith provided was key to his lived theology.

As one would expect, Wesley addressed his views of the Church in multiple locations across his writings. From the early days of the Oxford Holy Club onward, the Methodist movement was regularly critiqued by others, ranging from the hierarchy of

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<sup>127</sup> Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley*, 75. Emphases his. In this view of two conceptions of prevenient grace, Collins is following Outler.

Oxford University to leaders of the Church of England. In response, Wesley variously responded by taking his preaching into the open fields, authoring sermons or articles explaining the Methodist ways, and engaging in direct dialog with critics. Even amid criticism, he found welcoming audiences among the commonfolk, lessening the impact of detractors. However, as Cragg notes, “Since Wesley had found a wider audience in the fields, his critics sought a wider audience through the press,” initiating a campaign of “pamphlet abuse.”<sup>128</sup> In 1743, he took the step of responding in kind in a key writing entitled *An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, and that response included a specific examination of just what was meant by the term “Church,” as he responded to those who accused the Methodists of a variety of misdeed, from being Papists to undermining the Church of England.

As any Anglican priest would, Wesley started his definition of the Church by loosely quoting from Article XIX the *Thirty-Nine Articles*:

A visible Church (as our Article defines it) is ‘a company of faithful (or believing) people: *coetus credentium*.’ This is the essence of a Church, and the properties thereof are (as they are described in the words that follow), ‘that the pure word of God be preached therein, and the sacraments administered’ ... A provincial or national church, according to our Article, is the true believers of that province or nation. If these are dispersed up and down they are only a part of the invisible church of Christ. But if they are visibly joined by assembling together to hear his word and partake of his supper, they are then a visible church, such as the Church of England, or France, of any other.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley. Vol. 11: The Appeals to Men of Reason and Religion and Certain Related Open Letters*, ed. Gerald R. Cragg, vol. 11, The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989). In particular, the Introduction to *An Earnest Appeal*, p 37ff.

<sup>129</sup> Wesley, 11:77.

It was not until 1785 that Wesley produced a textual summation of his ecclesiology; fittingly, it was in the form of his sermon entitled *Of the Church*. This sermon was written in the wake of Wesley's ordinations of Thomas Coke, Richard Whatcoat, and Thomas Vasey for their ministry work in America, as well as the creation of the *Deed of Declaration* (which placed all Methodist chapels into the trust of Wesley), all of which created the appearance of a pending move toward separation from the Church of England.<sup>130</sup> Wesley denied this, noting in his *Journal* on September 4, 1785 "finding a report had been spread abroad that I was just going to leave the church, to satisfy those who were grieved concerning it, I openly declared in the evening that I had now no more thought of separating from the church than I had forty years ago."<sup>131</sup> Cragg notes that "one is bound to be impressed by Wesley's totally unselfconscious assumption that, even after all he had done that would inevitably lead to separation, he was, and always had been, a devoted and loyal Anglican."<sup>132</sup> At the same time, Wesley was quite sensitive to the accusations, if not the appearance of his action; *Of the Church*, with its calm, apologetic tone, was completed in September of 1785 and then printed in the first issue of the *Arminian Magazine* in 1786, ensuring a sizeable readership.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley. Vol. 3: Sermons III: 71-114*, 3:45.

<sup>131</sup> John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley. Vol. 23: Journal and Diaries VI (1776-1786)*, ed. Richard P. Heitzenrater and W. Reginald Ward, vol. 23, The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 377.

<sup>132</sup> Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley. Vol. 11: The Appeals to Men of Reason and Religion and Certain Related Open Letters*, 11:45.

<sup>133</sup> Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley. Vol. 3: Sermons III: 71-114*, 3:45.

Wesley remained an Anglican priest until the time of his death. While it is certainly possible to assume that his position regarding his non-separation from the Church of England was based on a naïve lack of self-reflection, the reasons likely lie within his understanding of the nature of “Church” itself.

Indeed, he saw that, while the Church is “a matter of daily conversation,” few understand what the term means: “a more ambiguous word than this, the ‘church,’ is scarce to be found in the English language.” He subsequently identified two broad uses of the term: first, a building; second, a “body of people united together in the service of God.” The first use he discarded; the second he expounded upon, quite clear that the size of the united body was immaterial—it could involve three people, or three thousand, and still qualify for the term.<sup>134</sup> Weaving together concepts from a variety of New Testament passages, Wesley answers the question

What is the Church? The catholic or universal church is all the persons in the universe whom God hath so called out of the world as to entitle them to the preceding character; as to be ‘one body,’ united by ‘one spirit,’ having ‘one faith, one hope, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in them all.’<sup>135</sup>

It is in this one-ness that the distinctions regarding national, local, or even house churches break down. For him, the

Church of England is that ‘body’ of men in England in whom ‘there is one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith,’ which have ‘one baptism,’ and ‘one God and Father of all.’ This and this alone is the Church of England, according to the doctrine of the Apostle [Paul].<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Wesley, 3:46.

<sup>135</sup> Wesley, 3:59.

<sup>136</sup> Wesley, 3:52.

That is the key doctrine with which Wesley concerned himself; he considered the words of Article XIX to exceed the words of the Apostle, and states that

I dare not exclude from the church catholic all those congregations in which unscriptural doctrines which cannot be affirmed to be the ‘pure word of God’ are sometimes, yea, frequently preached. Neither all those congregations in which the sacraments are not ‘duly administered.’ Certainly if these things are so the Church of Rome is not so much as a part of the catholic church... Whoever they are that have ‘one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one God and Father of all,’ I can easily bear with their holding wrong opinions, yea, and superstitious modes of worship. Nor would I on these accounts scruple still to include them within the pale of the catholic church. Neither would I have any objection to receive them, if they desired it, as members of the Church of England.<sup>137</sup>

Beyond Wesley’s willingness to live with pluralism (which is clear in other sermons as well, notably Sermon 39, *Catholic Spirit*, and Sermon 7, *The Way to the Kingdom*), the sermon we are examining here (*Of the Church*) also focuses on two other attributes of the Church, namely the ability to “walk worthy of the vocation wherewith we are called,” and to “endeavour,’ with all possibly diligence... ‘to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.’”<sup>138</sup> Both the pneumatological and Christological foundations of all that occurs within a church (or the Church) cannot be overstated: for Wesley, the activity of the Holy Spirit enables unity, provides the basis for community, and animates the body of believers; the church promotes holiness because “Christ the

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<sup>137</sup> John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley. Vol. 3: Sermons III: 71-114*, ed. Albert Cook Outler, vol. 3, The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), 52. Elsewhere, Wesley also makes it clear that there are boundaries beyond which one is no longer within the tradition; see *Sermons* 2, 2:93ff.

<sup>138</sup> Wesley, 3:53–55.

head of it is holy”; the church demonstrates its authenticity by all its “words and actions,” which “evidence the spirit by which” it is animated.<sup>139</sup>

Wesley’s experience with pre-Methodist societies (such as the SPCK), the Holy Club, and the later Methodists societies should make it abundantly clear that, while some degree of organization was needed, faith communities did not need to be formal churches in order to be effective. Indeed, his intent from the earliest days of the Oxford Methodists can be viewed as a focus on a movement (perhaps one focused on revival) within the existing ecclesial structures of the Church of England; so it remained until practical considerations involving early Methodists in America forced the creation of a new denomination and, with it, the core of a new faith tradition.

Within the small groups of early Methodism, and continuing from that point onward, an intentional focus within Wesleyan traditions has been on exploring ways to open individuals to the realities of divine grace, working in whatever way is appropriate for each; hence, these communities serve as spaces (physical, relational, or both) where individuals are specifically invited to participate in the co-operative work of divine grace. Wesley understood these “means of grace” to be central to the faith experience, as well as the process of maturing individuals in the faith. As we will see in the next chapter, Tillich’s “Spiritual Community” possesses similar traits. In Chapter Five, we will explore the ways in which those two concepts interrelate.

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<sup>139</sup> Wesley, 3:55–57.

## Wesley the Non-Systematician

When conversation turns to academic study of John Wesley, and the contribution of Wesleyan theology to the academy, issues quickly surface regarding the perceived academic credibility of Wesley himself. Like Tillich, he communicated a significant amount of his thought through sermons; unlike Tillich, Wesley never wrote a systematic account of his theology. Over the decades, several attempts have been made to do just that on his behalf—attempts which, perhaps, are intended to “fill the gap” in Wesley’s theological corpus.

As we will see in the next chapter, it is clear that Wesley’s standing as an academician is quite different from Paul Tillich’s. To a significant degree, this is less a matter of ability than it is of timing. None other than the grand Dean of Wesleyan studies, Albert Outler, addressed this in 1977; more recently, Randy Maddox has picked up that torch and carried it further. Outler identifies the problem:

It is a commonplace that the history of Christian thought has been mostly concerned with the influence of theologians’ theologian, those whose learning and speculative gifts marked off new stages of doctrinal development. By contrast, most of the folk-theologians whom we can identify (those not already sunk into history’s limbo) have seen as their special task the simplification of the great issues (typically controversial) on behalf of the common people.<sup>140</sup>

In Outler’s view, Wesley is not a “theologians’ theologian,” but is certainly a “folk-theologian”; that is, his “self-chosen constituency was the poor and the laboring classes; his self-chosen role was as *their* pastor, spiritual director, and theologian.”<sup>141</sup> The

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<sup>140</sup> Albert C Outler, “John Wesley: Folk-Theologian,” *Theology Today* 34, no. 2 (July 1977): 150.

<sup>141</sup> Outler, 151. Italics his.

question of whether Wesley might have been a theologians' theologian had he chosen to be is, in Outler's view, "bootless."<sup>142</sup> Still,

Short doctrinal summaries are scattered throughout his writings, and these give ample evidence that his thought was consciously organized around a stable core of basic coordinated motifs. But there is no extended development of his system, and for the simple reason that there never seemed to be a *practical* need for such a thing.<sup>143</sup>

Wesley was an Oxford Don and a thoroughly-trained Anglican Divine who was committed to a life of learning and would require the same of those who preached in Methodist societies; Outler notes that Wesley's "own recorded bibliography runs to more than fourteen hundred different authors, with nearly three thousand separate items from them."<sup>144</sup> As well-read as he was, his intention was made clear in the Preface to his *Sermons on Several Occasions* in 1746:

I design plain truth for plain people. Therefore, of set purpose, I abstain from all nice and philosophical speculations; from all perplexed and intricate reasonings; and, as far as possible, from even the show of learning, unless in sometimes citing the original Scripture. I labour to avoid all words which are not easy to be understood, all which are not used in common life; and, in particular, those kinds of technical terms that so frequently occur in Bodies of Divinity; those modes of speaking which men of reading are intimately acquainted with, but which to common people are an unknown tongue.<sup>145</sup>

While this is true in his sermons (although much of the language he uses would leave current congregations deeply confused), his other writings (including his pamphlets

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<sup>142</sup> Outler, 150.

<sup>143</sup> Outler, *John Wesley*, 27. Italics Outler's.

<sup>144</sup> Outler, "John Wesley: Folk-Theologian," 152.

<sup>145</sup> John Wesley, *Sermons on Several Occasions* (Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Kindle Edition., n.d.), l. Loc. 546-554.



and, notably, his various Doctrinal and Controversial Treatises), often do read like academic works, albeit from another age; this of course, brings us back to the issue of timing.

To read Wesley's original words in light of the modern academy and its expectations is a category error. Maddox:

Wesley's theological activity could only be appropriately understood and assessed in terms of the approach to theology as a practical discipline (*scientia practica*) which characterized the pre-university Christian setting and remained influential in eighteenth-century Anglicanism.<sup>146</sup>

Maddox goes on to point out that "a central aspect of Wesley's model is that theological activity is integrally related to the *praxis* of the Christian community."<sup>147</sup> For his time, Wesley was theologian; further, as we have seen in previous chapters, his emphases echo Tillich's theological emphases.

... Wesley is best read as a theologian who was fundamentally committed to the therapeutic view of Christian life, who struggled to express this view in the terms of the dominant stream of his Western Christian setting, and who sought to integrate some of the central convictions of this setting into his more basic therapeutic viewpoint.<sup>148</sup>

### Conclusion

Wesley's conceptions of the operative and co-operative activities of divine grace were formed by several influences, both external and internal. His upbringing provided the foundation for disciplined, intentional study and critical thought, and instilled in him a sense of the importance of faith. His formal education, and his pursuit of Holy Orders in

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<sup>146</sup> Randy L Maddox, "Reading Wesley as a Theologian," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 30, no. 1 (1995): 18.

<sup>147</sup> Maddox, 18. Italics his.

<sup>148</sup> Maddox, 16.

the Anglican Church, provided the framework for a robust theology, which he was able to articulate and, when necessary, defend. At the same time, his initial understandings were radically transformed by later experiences, as well as the wisdom which came with age. Following his Aldersgate experience in 1738, Wesley's uniting of the head and the heart created a theological tradition that continues to this day.

All the while, he was able to maintain a focus on the relational aspects of faith as well. From the earliest Oxford Methodists to the later societies, Wesley maintained an emphasis on the need for communal engagement, even in the midst of diversity of thought. The ways in which he saw that the community could support growth in and through divine grace will be a focus in Chapter 5.

## CHAPTER FOUR: TILLICH – THE ACTIVITY OF THE SPIRITUAL PRESENCE

*First, read my sermons!* – Paul Tillich<sup>149</sup>

Portions of Tillich’s work are widely known, while others remain underappreciated (and, in some cases, underexamined). His self-perception focused on a life lived in what he described as boundary situations starting in his youth. The experiences of his formative years provided him with insights into nationalist naiveté, profound loss, as well as the horrors and limits of existence; in turn, these experiences triggered and informed a life of deep reflection.

Visible in his work—particularly his mature writings—is a strong desire to build a theological framework which engaged the uncertainties and anxieties of lived existence, along with a focus on revealing the ways in which the divine is present in, and interacts with, the world. His focus on the relevance of the Christian message, combined with his assertions that theology is an essentially apologetic task, placed him in a unique position to be, as Walter Leibrecht suggests, “the theologian for Everyman in the predicament of

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<sup>149</sup> Erdmann Sturm, “‘First, Read My Sermons!’ Tillich as Preacher,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Paul Tillich*, ed. Russell Re Manning (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 105. Sturm utilizes the quote as part of the title of his contribution to that edited work. In conversation with Tillich scholars Russell Re Manning and Christian Danz, this is a widely known quotation without any known citation, but is believed to be accurately attributed to Tillich.

his existence.”<sup>150</sup> How Tillich arrived in such a position, and how he developed and deployed his thought, is our focus in this chapter.

Here, we will first examine Tillich’s early years, with a specific focus on experiences which deeply informed his theology. While this chapter is not intended to provide a comprehensive biography (there are many of those available, often in autobiographical introductions to a variety of monographs and edited collections), one can see the results of Tillich’s early years in his mature theological writings. We will also explore key concepts of that mature theology as they pertain to our exploration of divine grace, most notably his use of the term theonomy to describe the activity of the Spiritual Presence.

Significantly, Tillich encountered the world in powerful ways in his childhood, youth, and early adulthood. From early on, he sensed the rich history and meaning of the medieval cities in which he lived, as well as a deep appreciation for the presence of the holy. This would lead to an early interest in philosophy, which, in turn, formed within him a unique perspective on life which saw all of existence grounded in the divine. This would ultimately provide the foundation of his theology which itself merged classical theological concepts with deeply philosophical ones, and ultimately guided him as he navigated the existential challenges of life. As we will see, theology was, for Tillich, about lived experience, not abstract concepts; further, it was focused on the divine working to reunite being with its ground, and to overcome the estrangement of our broken existence.

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<sup>150</sup> Walter Leibrecht, “The Life and Mind of Paul Tillich,” in *Religion and Culture: Essays in Honor of Paul Tillich* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), 10.

## Tillich's Formative Years

Tillich's upbringing as the child of a Lutheran pastor, growing up in the midst of towns which had not lost their medieval character and churches which instilled a sense of awe, created a deep sense of connectedness to both nature and the holy. He came to see himself as a person who inhabited spaces—literally and metaphorically—which were themselves boundaries between various lived realities. Challenged and broken as he witnessed the horrors of World War I, his personal experiences of the deep pains of existence would alter his previously simplistic understanding of the nature of God and his own faith. In the midst of all of this, he continued to shape a theology which focused on the divine effort to bring healing to an estranged world.

### Childhood

Tillich was born in 1876 in Starzeddel, in the German province of Brandenburg, the eldest of three children; he was a sickly infant, nearly dying before completing even one day of life. His father, Johannes Oskar Tillich, was a Lutheran pastor (from a line of pastors, monks, and university professors) who would later take a position in the hierarchy of the German Church.<sup>151</sup> His mother, Wilhelmina Mathilde (née Dürselen), as one biographer offers, “was the power behind the throne”—while Tillich’s “father fussed, fumed, and assumed the tones of the strong one, it is very clear that he did not have the final say.”<sup>152</sup> Tillich, for his part, was far closer to his mother than his father; from Rollo

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<sup>151</sup> Wilhelm Pauck and Marion Pauck, *Paul Tillich: His Life and Thought* (London: Collins, 1977), 1. For an interesting, extended discussion of the Tillich/Tielich lineage (including another ancestor named Paulus who did not survive infancy), see the Pauck’s extended discussion, pp 2-3.

<sup>152</sup> Rollo May, *Paulus: Tillich as Spiritual Teacher* (Dallas, TX: Saybrook, 1988), 37.

May: “not only did he worship her, but he possessed her so far as a child can.”<sup>153</sup> Ever the psychologist, May takes the position that Tillich’s focus on his mother went deeper, and lasted longer, than the norm for children; this resulted in some degree of repression of his own sexual drives as a child—and the shift of his childhood energy from “sex to knowledge,” pressing him to pursue a life of intellectualism quite early on.<sup>154</sup>

The young Tillich also developed a strong tendency toward romanticism, which was “linked to a prevailing sense of history, stemming from his life as a boy in towns still medieval in character. History was a living reality, not dull facts divorced from present experience.”<sup>155</sup> Layered upon this romanticism was something else that would inform his later work:

The beautiful Gothic church in Schönfliess, in which his father was a successful pastor for fourteen years, contained more than mere romantic, historical appeal. Tillich’s religious upbringing in this church, in a pastor’s home, and in a Lutheran elementary school gave him a sense of the holy which was determinative for his later method in theology and philosophy, by which he began with man’s experience of the holy and then moved to the divine, not the other way around.<sup>156</sup>

This sense of the holy, combined with the deep, aesthetic connection to nature that is common among the Germanic cultures, created a sense of “almost mystical

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<sup>153</sup> May, 38.

<sup>154</sup> Rollo May, *Paulus: Tillich as Spiritual Teacher* (Dallas, TX: Saybrook, 1988), 38–39. This seems likely to also have impacted his adult life, where his sexual appetites (and resulting dalliances) became somewhat notorious.

<sup>155</sup> L. Gordon Tait, *The Promise of Tillich, The Promise of Theology* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1971), 12.

<sup>156</sup> Tait, 13.

attachment to the earth, field, forest, weather, and, in particular, the sea.”<sup>157</sup> Tillich himself would reflect on this as well:

Romanticism means not only a special relation to nature; it means also a special relation to history. To grow up in towns in which every stone is witness of a period of many centuries past produces a feeling for history, not as a matter of knowledge but as a living reality in which the past participates in the present.<sup>158</sup>

While the family still lived in Schönfliess, Tillich was sent to Königsberg-Neumark to begin his *Gymnasium* studies in preparation for the university, there discovering the loneliness of living in a boardinghouse, “assuaged only by reading the Bible given him on his first birthday, his most prized possession”.<sup>159</sup> The family moved to Berlin in 1900, where Tillich’s father took a post within the Lutheran hierarchy, and Paul joined them there, once again attending *Gymnasium*. His grades were “adequate,” but he seemed particularly interested in languages, later utilizing his Greek and Latin skills in his writings and sermons.<sup>160</sup>

Tillich’s close relationship with his mother came to an end upon her untimely death when Tillich was just seventeen years old. At the time, Tillich wrote a poem expressing his feelings of loss; some of the concepts contained within it are echoed in his later, mature writings:

Am I then I? who tells me that I am!  
Who tells me what I am, what I shall become?

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<sup>157</sup> Tait, 12.

<sup>158</sup> Paul Tillich, *My Search for Absolutes* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1967), 27.

<sup>159</sup> Pauck and Pauck, *Paul Tillich*, 10.

<sup>160</sup> Pauck and Pauck, 10.

What is the world's and what life's meaning?  
What is being and passing away on earth?

O abyss without ground, dark depth of madness!  
Would that I had never gazed upon you and were sleeping like a child!<sup>161</sup>

Tillich had already discovered philosophy by the time he started his formal theological studies, studying Kant, Fichte, Schleiermacher, Hegel, Schelling (who would later become the focus of Tillich's doctoral work), and Kierkegaard. His university studies began in 1904, first at the University of Berlin, then Tübingen, and finally Halle. It was there that he encountered Martin Kähler, a professor who would have a profound impact on Tillich's thought. First, Kähler "understood the problem of doubt, putting it within the context of justification by grace through faith; that is, the acceptance and forgiveness of a person in spite of his sin."<sup>162</sup> This was freeing for Tillich, as doubt would now become normative rather than oppressive, part of a lived dialectic that informs the work of theology. In the very first pages of his *Systematic*, Tillich states that "every theologian is committed *and* alienated; he is always in faith *and* in doubt; he is inside *and* outside of the theological circle."<sup>163</sup>

Kähler also introduced Tillich to the notion that the "historical Jesus" need not be separated from the "Christ of faith," and that one could examine issues of faith with a

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<sup>161</sup> Rollo May, *Paulus: Tillich as Spiritual Teacher* (Dallas, TX: Saybrook, 1988), 41. Capitalization in the original. The German original: *Bin ich denn ich, wer sagt mir, dass ich bin! Wer sagt mir, was ich bin, was ich soll werden Was ist der Welten, was des Lebens Sinn? Was ist das Sein und das Vergehn auf Erden? O Abgrund ohne Grund, des Wahnsinns finstre Tiefe! Ach das ich nimmer Dich geschaut und kindlich schlief!*

<sup>162</sup> Tait, *The Promise of Tillich*, 14.

<sup>163</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume 1* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951), 10. Italics his.



critical eye while remaining faithful—a notion which would later inform a dominant area of his thought, which he named the Protestant principle.<sup>164</sup> Tillich would remember this as a time when he and his classmates sat with

great theologians to whom we listened and with whom we wrestled intellectually in seminars and personal discussions. One thing we learned above all was that Protestant theology is by no means obsolete but that it can, without losing its Christian foundations, incorporate strictly scientific methods, a critical philosophy, a realistic understanding of men and society, and powerful ethical principles and motives.<sup>165</sup>

Following his educational work and the awarding of his *Licentiate* in early 1912, Tillich passed his board examinations and was ordained as a minister of the Evangelical Church of the Prussian Union in August of that year. He took a position as an assistant preacher in the *Moabit* neighborhood of Berlin, an area where workers lived, where he came face-to-face with the necessity of communicating concepts of faith with a variety of audiences. The intelligentsia were not the only ones who needed to hear the Christian message, and those who were struggling to eke out an existence might not speak quite the same language:

While teaching a confirmation class, he discovered for example that the word “faith” no longer had meaning. And he realized, perhaps for the first time, not only that a question implies an answer, but that an answer always presupposes a question, and that the human question and the Christian answer are inevitably related and must always move in concert.<sup>166</sup>

These experiences cemented his approach to theology: for Tillich, at its core, theology is an apologetic task. Again, he addressed this in the early pages of his

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<sup>164</sup> Tait, *The Promise of Tillich*, 15.

<sup>165</sup> Tillich, *My Search for Absolutes*, 36.

<sup>166</sup> Pauck and Pauck, *Paul Tillich*, 37.

*Systematic*, writing that “it is the task of apologetic theology to prove that the Christian claim also has validity from the point of view of those outside the theological circle.”<sup>167</sup>

Even as he was serving in the pastorate, Tillich had been negotiating a faculty position at Halle, which required additional study and writing, all in parallel with his ministry work. Other positions were opened as well, and Tillich even discovered his first romantic relationship, marrying Grethi Wever in September of 1914.<sup>168</sup> However, as he would describe it himself, his “period of preparation” was coming to an end, as war loomed. On October 1, 1914, Tillich volunteered for the military.

#### Tillich’s Wartime Experiences

Fittingly for someone in Tillich’s *sitz im Leben*, his exposure to classical philosophical concepts produced a young and eager German idealist, one who believed, in ways similar to the immature thought of Augustine, that “man could master the essence of his being by cognitive means.”<sup>169</sup> This philosophical framework disintegrated during his wartime experiences; indeed, it may be difficult for us to fully appreciate the powerful changes that occurred in Tillich’s thinking that resulted from his service as a

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<sup>167</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume 1*, 15.

<sup>168</sup> The couple would eventually have a child that died in infancy. Grethi “scoffed at the idea of monogamy,” eventually giving birth to a child by Tillich’s friend Richard Wegener in 1919. The marriage ended in divorce. See Pauck and Pauck, *Paul Tillich*, 80, for reflections on that relationship. While our biographical sketch here is focused on those elements of Tillich’s life that clearly impacted his theology and ministry, it seems unfair to leave him hanging here in the despair of divorce. He would remarry in 1924, cementing a relationship with Hannah Werner which was complex from the beginning, and would become only moreso as time went on. In Tillich circles, the well-known (and well-documented) dalliances on both sides are often defended in various ways; for our purposes, these defenses and debates are unhelpful. In those same circles, it is generally understood that the need to defend and debate is an American novelty; German Tillich scholars are usually fairly mystified that the topic has received as much attention as it has.

<sup>169</sup> May, *Paulus*, 1988, 18.

military chaplain in World War I. When the conflict started, “young men signed up to fight in a spirit of nearly ecstatic joy, exalted by nationalistic fervor. Tillich was no exception.”<sup>170</sup> In Tillich’s own words: “When the German soldiers went into the First World War most of them shared the popular belief in a nice God who would make everything work out for the best. Actually, everything worked out for the worst, for the nation and almost everyone in it.”<sup>171</sup>

While he remained rooted in religious faith, his wartime experiences “utterly transformed” him. Indeed, two of his biographers (writing jointly) identify the war years as representing “*the* turning point in Paul Tillich’s life—the first, last, and only one.”<sup>172</sup> The existential crises he faced in his wartime experiences were profound; during a lengthy period of fighting—not the first he had endured—he collapsed from exhaustion and stress, and was hospitalized. Around this time, he wrote to a friend that

I have constantly the most immediate and very strong feeling that I am no longer alive. Therefore I don’t take life seriously. To find someone, to become joyful, to recognize God, all these things are things of life. But life itself is not dependable ground. It isn’t only that *I* might die any day, but rather that that everyone dies, *really* dies, you too, - and then the suffering of mankind – I am an utter eschatologist – not that I have childish fantasies of the death of the world, but rather that I am experiencing the actual death of this our time. I preach almost exclusively “the end.”<sup>173</sup>

In the process of dealing with his experiences, this German patriot with nationalistic passions became instead a believer in Religious socialism; a young man

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<sup>170</sup> Pauck and Pauck, *Paul Tillich*, 40.

<sup>171</sup> Paul Tillich, *The New Being* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 52.

<sup>172</sup> Pauck and Pauck, *Paul Tillich*, 41. Italics theirs.

<sup>173</sup> Pauck and Pauck, 51. The Paucks are quoting a letter from Tillich to his friend Maria Klein, dated November 27, 1916. Italics are in the original quotation.

brought up in strict Lutheran fashion became a “cultural pessimist” and a “wild man.”<sup>174</sup> Even as he served in the trenches, literally as “grave-digger as well as pastor,”<sup>175</sup> he continued to find ways to study; indeed, the letter quoted above also tells us that “now and then I overcome all the suffering by...working on a system of the sciences.”<sup>176</sup> He grappled with his own calling as a philosopher, one which “seemed a ‘terrible curse’ on the one hand, and on the other, inevitable.”<sup>177</sup> The simplistic concept of God of his pre-war youth “crumbled on the battlefield,”<sup>178</sup> to be replaced by something more complex, a theology which demanded consideration of those who were facing existential struggles and crises:

From then on he could no longer separate truth from the human being who acts on it; right and wrong were no longer decided purely at ethereal heights of thought; the living, pulsing, committing, suffering and loving human being must always be taken into account.<sup>179</sup>

By his own account, Tillich’s shift from idealism to existentialism occurred in the midst of battle-torn Marne, France. His dear friend Rollo May recalls that “his fellow officers were brought in on stretchers, chopped to pieces by gunfire, wounded or dead.

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<sup>174</sup> Pauck and Pauck, 41.

<sup>175</sup> Pauck and Pauck, 45.

<sup>176</sup> Pauck and Pauck, 51.

<sup>177</sup> Pauck and Pauck, 53.

<sup>178</sup> Pauck and Pauck, 53.

<sup>179</sup> May, *Paulus*, 1988, 18.

That night ‘absolutely transformed me,’ he used to say. ‘All my friends were among these dying and dead. That night I became an existentialist.’”<sup>180</sup>

His experiences during the First World War also deeply informed his understanding of the nature of nationalism. He felt

anger at the society that had permitted such a world conflict to occur... he had beheld the contrast between the gains of war profiteers and the losses of the mass of the people... Tillich fully comprehended the consequences of nationalism – they were to be seen all around him... he knew that he wanted to be a partner in rebuilding Western civilization.<sup>181</sup>

Tillich became aware that “the apparent unity of Germany was a myth and that, in reality, the nation was split into conflicting classes, the workers regarding the church as consistently favoring the ruling class.”<sup>182</sup>

Tillich’s connection with the Religious Socialism movement was a clear response to the horrors of war, as well as his disheartening realizations regarding class struggles. However, even this new movement proved to be problematic, as it focused on an expected inbreaking of the eternal into the temporal – a “time of *kairos*” for which the movement would pave the way. This was never realized. Instead, other movements took hold: Communism, Fascism, and Nazism, and Tillich’s interest in Religious Socialism faded.<sup>183</sup> His interest in the struggles of the classes lead him, perhaps inevitably, to Karl Marx, whom Tillich then regarded as “one of the leading modern teachers of the truth

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<sup>180</sup> Rollo May, *Paulus: Reminiscences of a Friendship*, 1st ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 18.

<sup>181</sup> Pauck and Pauck, *Paul Tillich*, 56.

<sup>182</sup> Tait, *The Promise of Tillich*, 15.

<sup>183</sup> Tait, 15.

about human existence.”<sup>184</sup> For Tillich, Marx was dealing with profound theological concepts regarding human existence (under the limits of the temporal—as opposed to essence, the eternal). To call Tillich a Marxist would be problematic, as Tillich tended to approach complex concepts in a dialectical manner, rather than embracing any one particular ideology or theology: “The Yes was based on the prophetic, humanistic and realistic elements in Marx’s passionate style and profound thought, the No on the calculating, materialistic, and resentful elements in Marx’s analysis, polemics, and propaganda.”<sup>185</sup> Tillich may have been profoundly disillusioned in many ways, but elements of his deep faith prevented him from becoming overly cynical.

#### Tillich and the Boundaries

Tillich understood himself to occupy space—and to reflect deeply—in a variety of boundary situations, a reality which seems to spring from his childhood. His father was from Brandenburg in eastern Germany, his mother from the Rhineland in the west.

He bore in his blood the contrast between eastern and western Germany, which he saw as a tension between his father and mother. There is still alive, he writes of his father’s origin, ‘in eastern Germany an inclination toward meditation tinged with melancholy, a heightened consciousness of duty and personal sin, a strong regard for authority and feudal traditions. Western Germany is characterized by a zest for life, love of the concrete, mobility, rationality, and democracy.’<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> Tait, 16.

<sup>185</sup> Charles W Kegley and Robert W. Bretall, eds., *The Theology of Paul Tillich* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1964), 13. The words quoted are Tillich’s own, from the autobiographical introduction.

<sup>186</sup> Rollo May, *Paulus: Tillich as Spiritual Teacher* (Dallas, TX: Saybrook, 1988), 44. For the contained quote, see Tillich, *On the Boundary*, 14.

This sense of liminal living permeated his thought, and he wrote of it extensively, focusing one monograph, *On the Boundary*, entirely on the various boundaries in which he understood himself to dwell. He embraced the duality of living both as a philosopher and as a theologian, allowing his thoughts to be “shaped by philosophical concepts as well as by religious reality.”<sup>187</sup> His early *System of the Sciences* was an attempt, in his words, to “win a place for theology within the totality of human knowledge,” an endeavor that deepened his appreciation for both.<sup>188</sup> Knowledge, for him, was theonomous in nature (that is, grounded in some degree to the activity of the divine spirit—a topic to which we will return shortly); theology focuses on that theonomous base.<sup>189</sup>

This boundary-dwelling informed other key areas of his life and work, as he enumerated in *On the Boundary*, including theory/praxis, church/society, religion/culture, and native/alien. The ways in which all of these intersections impacted his thought is visible throughout his career, from the ways in which he communicated his thought (academic writings and popular sermons), to the ways in which he inserted himself into national dialogues, to the moments when he departed from descriptive analysis and dove into prescriptive polemics about faith and religion.

#### Tillich in America

Tillich’s flight from Germany in 1933 landed him in a variety of new roles and relationships, placed him as an alien in a new land, and demanded that he navigate a

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<sup>187</sup> Paul Tillich, *On the Boundary: An Autobiographical Sketch* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1966), 53.

<sup>188</sup> Tillich, 55.

<sup>189</sup> Tillich, 56.

different intellectual landscape. As Tillich strove to communicate the substance of the Christian message in America, he found that the languages of theology and philosophy were not always helpful.

At Union and elsewhere the mixed audience of laymen and students reinforced Tillich's resolve to communicate in language understandable to everyone... In the Tillichian vocabulary *sin* became separation, *grace* reunion, *God* the Ground and aim of Being and *faith* ultimate concern. People in the pew hearing that sin was not a single immoral act but a universal state of separation in which man found himself alienated from himself, from others, and from God, felt relieved and illuminated. Hearing that grace was not a virtue or a state of perfection but a state of reunion with that from which they had become separated, they felt comforted.<sup>190</sup>

Tillich possessed both depth and breadth of knowledge of various classical and European philosophies such that, as Rollo May marveled, "he never seemed at loss in disputation. He argued from *within* each system, often understanding its meaning better than those defending it."<sup>191</sup> His experiences translating the Christian message to the poor workers in Berlin further equipped him to engage in complex discussions while using understandable language, even as he needed to become proficient in a foreign tongue—English—to do so.

His move to America would eventually spur him to return to the copious notes he had written both before and during World War I, fashioning them into the published *Systematic Theology* trilogy. Tillich's *method of correlation*, which we will explore more

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<sup>190</sup> Pauck and Pauck, *Paul Tillich*, 229. Italics theirs.

<sup>191</sup> May, *Paulus*, 1988, 19. Italics his.



fully in a later section, was also developed in response to the theological and religious situations he encountered in the United States.<sup>192</sup>

### **Tillich and the Human Condition**

The unique combination of factors which influenced Tillich's upbringing and early career formed in him a theology which took seriously the challenges of existence; at the same time, that theology did not relieve humanity of its responsibilities in those challenges. If humanity exists in a condition of separation from God, there are existential reasons for that separation, and there are both human and divine responses as well. It is here that we begin to examine the divine workings of grace which, for Tillich, create the possibility of bridging the existential gap, and the ways in which communities can be central to that healing activity. As with both the mature Augustine and the mature Wesley, Tillich recognized the critical nature of divine initiative in enabling individuals to discover authentic relationships with God and with one another.

#### Estrangement, Sin, and the Essence of Salvation

With many classical theologians, Tillich's view of humanity's situation is bleak; against them, he interprets the divine response—that is, the ultimate resolution—somewhat differently.

It is not an exaggeration to say that today man experiences his present situation in terms of disruption, conflict, self-destruction, meaninglessness, and despair in all realms of life... The question arising out of this experience is not, as the Reformation, the question of a merciful God and the forgiveness of sins; or is it, as in the early Greek church, the

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<sup>192</sup> Pauck and Pauck, *Paul Tillich*, 234.

question of finitude, of death and error; nor is it the question of the personal religious life or of the Christianization of culture and society.<sup>193</sup>

The very question of God, however, reflects an awareness of God—an awareness that reflects an awareness of the infinite despite our finitude; a knowledge that we are somehow “excluded from an infinity which nevertheless belongs to” us.<sup>194</sup>

Understanding Tillich’s conception of the depth of this estrangement is critical if one desires to understand both his theological system and the urgency with which he desired to share his thoughts with others. “The state of existence is the state of estrangement. Man is estranged from the ground of his being, from other beings, and from himself. The transition from essence to existence results in personal guilt and universal tragedy.”<sup>195</sup> Estrangement, while never explicitly identified in the Bible, is implied in the various narratives of the challenges humans face; it is visible within the symbols of the Fall and the divine response to it; it is visible in the Cain and Abel narrative; it is visible in the Babel story; it is visible in the Pauline writings.<sup>196</sup> Estrangement lies at the heart of—and is expressed through—unbelief, misdirected desire (concupiscence), and hubris.<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume 1*, 49.

<sup>194</sup> Tillich, 206.

<sup>195</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume 2: Existence and the Christ* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), 44–45.

<sup>196</sup> Tillich, 45.

<sup>197</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume 2: Existence and the Christ* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), 47. Here, Tillich invokes the Augsburg Confession's wording regarding the sin of the human: “without faith in God and with concupiscence” (*sine fide erga deum et cum concupiscentia*).

The element of hubris is helpful for thinking about the redemptive aspects of Tillich's theology: in hubris, the individual "is outside the divine center to which his own center essentially belongs. He is the center of himself and of his world."<sup>198</sup> Here, a core piece of the brokenness of humanity shines forth; whereas our very essence calls for us to be linked to the ground of being, in our estrangement, we identify with that ground while failing to seek, nor honor, that link to our ground. Thus, we strive to deify ourselves, living with the legacy of the divine, but living as if we are divine ourselves, and failing to understand that the infinite ground of being is quite different from the finite state of the human; this, in turn, leads to self-destruction. Tillich:

If man does not acknowledge this situation—the fact that he is excluded from the infinity of the gods—he falls into hubris. He elevates himself beyond the limits of his finite being and provokes the divine wrath which destroys him... The word *hubris* cannot be adequately translated, although the reality to which it points is described not only in Greek tragedy but also in the Old Testament. It is most distinctly expressed in the serpent's promise to Eve that eating from the tree of knowledge will make man equal to God. *Hubris* is the self-elevation of man into the sphere of the divine... *Hubris* is not one form of sin beside others. It is sin in its total form, namely, the other side of unbelief or man's turning away from the divine center to which he belongs. It is turning toward one's self as the center of one's self and one's world.<sup>199</sup>

If sin is described in the Tillichian understanding of estrangement, then what constitutes salvation? Tillich examines several historical attempts at self-salvation, including legalism, various forms of asceticism, mysticism, doctrinism, and sacramentalism; in his view, all of these are inadequate and therefore fail, the result of "a theology which identifies religion with the human attempt at self-salvation"—which is,

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<sup>198</sup> Tillich, 49.

<sup>199</sup> Tillich, 50. Italics his.

really, another example of the human tendency towards self-deification. All of these attempts contain some element of hubris; in asceticism and mysticism, we draw away to dwell on the divine, as if ceasing to participate in human society will lift us up, missing Tillich's point that the divine is working through that society, and calling us to work there too. In doctrinism and sacramentalism, we place too much emphasis on the human understanding of the divine and the rules of living and worship, missing Tillich's emphasis on participation and embodied faith. If we are centered on the self, no amount of lifting ourselves up will accomplish the task of re-centering with the divine.

Like Wesley, Tillich took seriously the idea of justification as a critically-necessary act of divine grace. For Tillich,

the symbol of justification... points to the unconditional validity of the structure of justice but at the same time to the divine act in which love conquers the immanent consequences of the violation of justice. The ontological unity of love and justice is manifest in final revelation as the justification of the sinner. The divine love in relation to the unjust creature is grace.<sup>200</sup>

While the forgiveness offered through justification provides a new beginning for the individual, the ultimate answer to estrangement lies within the "New Being," a "reality in which the self-estrangement of our existence is overcome, a reality of reconciliation and reunion, of creativity, meaning, and hope."<sup>201</sup> In our finite existence, this takes place in the Christ event, where a "universal expectation of a new reality" became an inbreaking reality in the world.<sup>202</sup> This is not really an expected messianic

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<sup>200</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume 1*, 284–85.

<sup>201</sup> Tillich, 49.

<sup>202</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume 2: Existence and the Christ*, 88.

arrival, which is too easily tied to a particular group of people. In order to be a universal event (which Tillich believes the Christ event to be), Christianity must “unite the horizontal direction of the expectation of the New Being with the vertical one”; that is, the arrival of the Christ combines the historically-rooted expectations with a transcendental connection, providing linkage between the finite and the infinite, the conditioned and the unconditional, the estranged humanity and the ground of being.<sup>203</sup> Jesus the Christ, as the New Being, becomes the “bridge between essence and existence”; put another way, essence actually appears within existence.<sup>204</sup> Recall that, early in his life, Tillich’s hopes for a *Kairos* event were tied to the Religious Socialism movement which failed him; here, he identifies the New Being as a *Kairos* event.<sup>205</sup>

The metaphor of *bridge*, however, begs the next question: just how does this impact the individual? Tillich understood the Christ event to be a decisive moment in history, after which existence is different. From that point onward, existence and essence are driving toward reunification, guided by the Spiritual Presence. For the individual, this means acceptance of the Christ as the New Being, and participation in that revelation. “Participation in the universal Logos is dependent on participation in the Logos actualized in a historical personality,” which is the Christ.<sup>206</sup> Further, the Christ is encountered in the community of the New Being, which yet contains something of the

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<sup>203</sup> Tillich, 89.

<sup>204</sup> Bernard Martin, *The Existentialist Theology of Paul Tillich* (New York: Bookman Associates, 1963), 177.

<sup>205</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume 1*, 136.

<sup>206</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume 2: Existence and the Christ*, 112.

reality and impact (supported by the Spiritual Presence) of the New Being. “The power which has created and preserved the community of the New Being is not an abstract statement about its appearance; it is the picture of him in whom it has appeared.”<sup>207</sup> This is continually attested by the transformations which occur in and through that community, which itself becomes the ontological presence of the bridge between the finite and the infinite (as far as the community can under the conditions of existence, and based upon the authenticity with which it acts—as we will see later, formal organization as a church does not necessarily imply faithfulness to the messages contained in the New Being).

### Morality and Relational Community

As a theologian who was deeply concerned about the relationships between individuals and community, and between the church and the given cultural/world situation, Tillich was quite interested in the fullness of human existence. This fullness implied participation in community, as well as an emphasis on morality.

Not one simply to accept the philosophical or theological frameworks of others, Tillich stated his own understanding of the moral imperative, which focused on the role of the individual in relationship with others, and in community. Morality is a choice between responding in ways which move one toward a deeper relationship with the community, or which “surrender to the disintegrating forces which tend to control the personal center and to destroy its unity.”<sup>208</sup> Here is where the potential of human

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<sup>207</sup> Tillich, 114.

<sup>208</sup> Paul Tillich, *Morality and Beyond*, Religious Perspectives 9 (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 19.

existence could be discovered and dwelt within. “The moral act establishes man as a person, and as a bearer of the [human] spirit.” Tillich’s moral imperative is unconditional, and it gives “ultimate seriousness both to culture and to religion.”<sup>209</sup> This imperative, for Tillich, is “the command to become what one potentially is, a *person* within a community of persons.”<sup>210</sup> As with the nature of estrangement discussed earlier, there is a duality to the possible human responses; one can “respond ‘responsibly’”, but one can also “act *against* the moral demand.”<sup>211</sup>

### Lived Risk and Ultimate Concern

Rollo May, one of those who were fortunate not only to hear Tillich’s lectures but to also have the opportunity know him personally and to publish written reflections on their relationship, reflected on the ways that Tillich’s

thought always demands of readers or listeners no ivory-towered agreements but decisions and risk. He once told us in a class discussion of his great sense of shock when, early in his career, he asked himself this question: ‘Why is there *something*? Why not *nothing*?’ It had come to him as he read Lessing, and it disturbed him profoundly. If you take this question seriously you are pushed to the very roots of existence. The question calls for reflection in the ultimate sense; to ask it is to find yourself at the basis of being... [Tillich] knew it for a question which must be lived out rather than thought out.<sup>212</sup>

Tillich is famous for his phrase “ultimate concern” – that which, for a given individual, occupies our attention in a fashion which rises above the other concerns of existence. This defines the theologian, as the “one criterion” that identifies a theologian is

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<sup>209</sup> Tillich, 18.

<sup>210</sup> Tillich, 19. Italics Tillich’s.

<sup>211</sup> Tillich, 19. Italics Tillich’s.

<sup>212</sup> May, *Paulus*, 1988, 18–19. Italics in original.

that “the content of the theological circle” is the theologian’s ultimate concern. This is not about certitude of the message, but is a matter of “being ultimately concerned with the Christian message even if he is sometimes inclined to attack and reject it.”<sup>213</sup>

Whether one is a theologian or not, Tillich sees religion as an all-encompassing state, as James Luther Adams explains in the introduction to *What is Religion?*, a collection of early Tillich writings posthumously published:

[I]n Tillich’s view, authentic religion “does not allow a person to be *also* ‘religious.’” It does not allow religion to be one concern alongside others. One way in which this spatialization of the religion appears is in the effort to assign the religious function to some other function of the human spirit, for example, to the practical (ethical) function, or to feeling, or to intellect (Kant, Schleiermacher [misinterpreted], Hegel). Corresponding to these forms of spatialization is the spatialization of the divine itself: God is understood to be one being alongside other beings, “the Unconditional standing alongside the conditioned.”<sup>214</sup>

Tillich’s essential point is this: the religious sense is an all-encompassing one, directed toward the individual’s ultimate concern, which informs the breadth and depth of the existence of the religious person. The religious belief drives the individual to be involved in religious activity, to join in the mythical content of “cultic” acts, and to seek a sacrificial dedication of the self to the divine (a sacrifice which Tillich defines as “dedication of the conditioned to the Unconditioned”).<sup>215</sup> Such a dedication creates space

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<sup>213</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume 1*, 10.

<sup>214</sup> Paul Tillich, *What Is Religion?*, ed. James Luther Adams (New York, Evanston, and London: Harper & Row, 1969), 13. Italics by Adams; similarly, the bracketed comment regarding Schleiermacher was placed by Adams as well without comment. This collection of writings (often translated into English for the first time) is particularly helpful in that it presents Tillich’s early thoughts, written as he dealt with the aftermath of World War I, as he initially engaged the writings of Barth, Troeltsch, and others, and before any softening of his presentation. The quoted material contained within this excerpt is from pages 126-127 of the same volume.

<sup>215</sup> Tillich, 110.



for encounter with the Holy, that which is simultaneously “destructive and demanding of sacrifice” and “fulfilling and life-bestowing.”<sup>216</sup>

### **Tillich as Systematician, Preacher, and Practical Theologian**

Tillich’s mastery of the breadth of both philosophy and history placed him a unique position to weave together multiple threads into a comprehensive system. At the same time, he was particularly concerned about finding ways to make that system understandable and useful to others, including non-academics. His desire to see faith lived out in community, and the potential of communities as loci of divine grace in and through the theonomous working of the Spiritual Presence, drove him to seek effective ways to speak into the real-world situations of his day. His awareness of those situations—which involved existential challenges at individual, community, national, and global levels—led him to urge the Church to speak with a prophetic voice as well, with a constant self-awareness and self-critique, which he framed as the Protestant principle.

#### Early Systematizing Work

Tillich was deeply concerned about the interrelatedness of thought, as was made evident in his first major monograph *Das System der Wissenschaften nach Gegenständen und Methoden*, first published in 1923 (and dedicated to the memory of Ernst Troeltsch).<sup>217</sup> Again, this publication offers a view into Tillich’s early thought; helpfully, an English translation was published posthumously in 1981 as *The System of the*

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<sup>216</sup> Paul Tillich, *What Is Religion?*, ed. James Luther Adams (New York, Evanston, and London: Harper & Row, 1969), 111. Tillich’s thought here (and, really, throughout his work) echoes Otto, to whom he explicitly refers elsewhere in the same publication; see p. 134.

<sup>217</sup> Paul Tillich, *Das System Der Wissenschaften Nach Gegenständen Und Methoden* (Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1923).

*Sciences*. In the preface, Tillich states “I became convinced that a system of the sciences is not only the goal but also the starting point of all knowledge [for] every science stands in the service of the one truth, and it perishes if it loses connection with the whole.”<sup>218</sup> This was a foundational belief—and the work itself a foundational effort—in Tillich’s thought. Paul Wiebe, the translator of *The System of the Sciences*, emphasizes that

Tillich does not construct his system for purely philosophical reasons. He is primarily a theologian. His motive for formulating a scheme is to find a place for theology within the total framework of the sciences so that he will have a foundation for theological work.<sup>219</sup>

As such, this early *System* is a breathtaking attempt to encompass the essential aspects of existence, from thought (including logic and mathematics), to being (physical sciences, biology, psychology, sociology, technology), to spirit (human-ness, meaning, philosophy, and, of course, theology)—all in just over two hundred pages of text. Here, again, the early Tillich is grappling with theonomy, and the relationship of the conditioned with the Unconditioned.

#### Conveying the Message: Theology Preached

As is clear from the quotation which opens this chapter, Tillich felt that the core concepts of his theology were well-presented in his sermons. While there remains no specific source to cite, it is well-known in the world of Tillich scholarship that his emphatic advice to anyone who wanted to know about his theology was “first, read my sermons!” He was keenly interested in communicating the Christian message effectively,

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<sup>218</sup> Paul Tillich, *The System of the Sciences According to Objects and Methods*, trans. Paul Wiebe (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1981), 17.

<sup>219</sup> Tillich, 23.

and was willing to adapt the means of that communication to a given audience across both capacity and era: “It is my hope to show that the Christian message—be it expressed in abstract theology or concrete preaching—is relevant for our time if it uses the language of our time.”<sup>220</sup>

His sermons were relevant to the human situation, informed not only by his desire to make theology understandable, but also his conviction that the core task of theology itself was apologetic in nature.<sup>221</sup> Indeed, his students at Union Seminary had pushed for him to begin publishing the sermons he had preached there, advising him “that through my sermons the practical or, more exactly, the existential implications of my theology are more clearly manifest.”<sup>222</sup> Wilhelm and Marion Pauck wrote that “the most important ingredient of Tillich’s effectiveness as a preacher was the plain fact that he almost always preached to himself, and therefore to everyman.”<sup>223</sup> Tillich himself reflected on the dual burden and fulfillment inherent in the tasks of teaching and preaching in his introduction to Kegley and Bretall’s 1952 work *The Theology of Paul Tillich*:

Looking back at more than forty years of public speaking, I must confess that from the first to the last address this activity has given me the greatest anxiety and the greatest happiness. I have always walked up to a desk or pulpit with fear and trembling, but the contact with the audience gives me

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<sup>220</sup> Paul Tillich, *The Eternal Now* (New York: Scribner, 1963), 9.

<sup>221</sup> Tillich’s sermons are collected in three specific volumes published in his lifetime: *The Shaking of the Foundations* (1948), *The New Being* (1955), and *The Eternal Now* (1963). Other extant sermons may be found in edited collections such as Franklin H. Littell’s *Sermons to Intellectuals* (1963).

<sup>222</sup> Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1948), iii.

<sup>223</sup> Pauck and Pauck, *Paul Tillich*, 230.

a pervasive sense of joy, the joy of a creative communion, of giving and taking, even if the audience is not vocal.<sup>224</sup>

### Theology as a Practical Endeavor

As noted previously, Tillich begins his *Systematic* with the statement “Theology, as a function of the Christian church, must serve the needs of the church. A theological system is supposed to satisfy two basic needs: the statement of the truth of the Christian message and the interpretation of this truth for every new generation.”<sup>225</sup> For Tillich, the academic aim of theology is entirely practical; after all, theology itself exists in service to the church, whose existence is critical to the work of the Christ, and which—whether latent or manifest—is tasked with embodying the Protestant principle and the Catholic substance, and providing some degree of connection for those who have been grasped by the Spiritual Presence. Theological discourse that provides no such service is pointless. To that end, his *Systematic Theology* continually points back to the need for theology to be made understandable.

Further, Tillich’s method of correlation, a concept which he developed “in direct response to the situation he found in America,” posits that all existential anxieties are answered by faith, and that the Spiritual Presence is continually working toward a restoration of relationship between humanity and God, an instance of divine initiative which clearly echoes Augustine’s narrower understanding of the activity of grace, as well as Wesley’s universal view of prevenient grace. Whereas Tillich’s emigration to America was forced by circumstances, rather than a transition made by choice, it ultimately

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<sup>224</sup> Kegley and Bretall, *The Theology of Paul Tillich*, 15.

<sup>225</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume 1*, 3.

triggered the teaching, and then the recording, of his system. What had started as an outlined set of propositions written in the aftermath of World War II became detailed academic lectures, which became the early drafts of his Systematic Theology: "...his assistant John Dillenberger write down *verbatim* everything Tillich said in his lectures on the subject, using a self-taught shorthand. Then immediately after class Dillenberger dictated what he had written to an efficient typist."<sup>226</sup> He was writing into an American theological *milieu* which "he considered at first too empirical and later too much concerned with linguistic analysis, not sufficiently systematic."<sup>227</sup> Tillich's project was, to a significant degree, intended to be a corrective to the theological situation he encountered in his new home country.

Indeed, a focus on the present situation—whatever that is from one time to another—is a recurring theme in Tillich's work and life. From his early work onward, this concept drives his thought; an early work which was fully directed at the topic was his 1932 book *Die religiöse Lage der Gegenwart*, translated into English by H. Richard Niebuhr, and published in 1956 as *The Religious Situation*. In Niebuhr's preface, he notes that this "is not a book about the religion of the churches but an effort to interpret the whole contemporary situation from the point of view of one who constantly inquires what fundamental faith is expressed in the forms which civilization takes."<sup>228</sup>

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<sup>226</sup> Pauck and Pauck, *Paul Tillich*, 235.

<sup>227</sup> Pauck and Pauck, 234.

<sup>228</sup> Paul Tillich, *The Religious Situation*, trans. H. Richard Niebuhr (New York: Meridian Books, 1956), 7.

Tillich's on-going inquiry into the "religious situation of the present day" is, as he points out, immediately problematized; "how is it possible to speak of the present when the present is a nothing, a boundary between past and future, a line without any breadth, on which nothing can stand and about which, therefore, nothing can be said?"<sup>229</sup> Tillich's answer is threefold: "the present is the past, the present is the future, and the present is eternity." First, the present is the direct result of that which has gone before; it is a

wave which has been raised by the waves of all the past...the individual event has received its content from and is borne along by the infinity of other things, by the past...to understand the present means to apprehend its affirmations and denials of the past, near and remote.<sup>230</sup>

At the same time, "the present is the future. To live in the present is to live in tension toward the future; every present is essentially a transition out of the past into the future."<sup>231</sup> Tillich invokes images of pregnancy and birth, calling for a mindfulness of the ways in which the *now* may shape the *next*, whatever that might be.

And that *next* is to be viewed with an eye toward the eternal. Here, Tillich invokes the ultimate importance of life, which, as always, is focused on "an unconditioned meaning, an unconditioned depth, an unconditioned reality" – that is, true ultimacies of existence, unaffected by the conditions and limitations of existence.<sup>232</sup> The "religious

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<sup>229</sup> Tillich, 31–32.

<sup>230</sup> Tillich, 32–33.

<sup>231</sup> Tillich, 33.

<sup>232</sup> Tillich, 35.

situation” is always a question about “the situation of a period in all its relations and phenomena, about its essential meaning, about the eternal which is present in a time.”<sup>233</sup>

### Theology as Prophetic Voice

It is worth keeping in mind that the original text of *The Religious Situation* was written early in Tillich’s career (1932), and it bears the marks of a thinker who has already experienced the tragedies of the World War I trenches, yet who is also continuing, quite often, to think and write in the abstract. Yet, even here, as he addresses the then-present situation in the churches, he notes real-world conflicts between religion and capitalism, and he recognizes the dangers of religion slipping into idealism (elsewhere in his writings, he warns of religion becoming transformed into morality, based upon the moral relativism of Pelagian thought<sup>234</sup>). In that time, his call was to unite the priestly role (brought to the fore by the deep realities of divine revelation) with the prophetic witness (revealed and required by the judgment of the “unconditionally transcendent God”), and for theology to actively work toward the fulfillment of both roles.<sup>235</sup> In this way, the movement of religion is intentionally supported by the academic work of the theologian.

The prophetic role is transcendent, too:

History is universal history in prophetism. The limitations of space, the boundaries between nations are negated. In Abraham all nations shall be

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<sup>233</sup> Tillich, 37.

<sup>234</sup> Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought*, ed. Carl E. Braaten, A Touchstone Book (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), 125.

<sup>235</sup> Tillich, *The Religious Situation*, 215–18. In this section of Tillich’s final chapter, he lays out the essential task of the Protestant Church, which he views as uniquely positioned to speak into the existential challenges raised by the world situation. He describes the union of the priestly and prophetic spirits, visible and active in movements within Protestant theology, as “belief-ful realism.”

blessed, all nations shall adore on Mountain Zion, the suffering of the elected nation has saving power for all nations. This leads to the ultimate point in the struggle between time and space. Prophetic monotheism is the monotheism of justice. God is one God because justice is one.<sup>236</sup>

The drive for justice is a drive to prophetic speech and action. Tillich himself would live into the prophetic role—or, at least, he would attempt to. His only published diary, entitled *My Travel Diary: 1936—Between Two Worlds*, resulted from his travels in Europe. In 1936, following his flight from the Nazi regime in 1933, yet still ahead of the full realization of the horrors of Nazism, he traveled, quite literally, around Germany (never able to enter it), meeting with academics, artists, and others, lecturing to groups and participating in what amounted to local salons. In his conversations and speeches, his goal was to warn about the emptiness of Hitler's promises. His diary reflects everything from relatively carefree evenings dancing and drinking, to nights of existential dread, to conversations about the inevitability of war, and to the ongoing question of whether he would ever be able to visit any of the locales again (he would, spending months traveling there in 1948<sup>237</sup>). This is a remarkable opportunity to see Tillich's theological emphases being lived out. From Jerald Brauer's *Introduction*:

Paul Tillich was an unusual theologian in the way he theologized. Not only did he exhibit a highly creative, subtle, and profound theological analysis of life, he also went about his theologizing in a most extraordinary manner. It is not enough to say his theology was existential, though it undoubtedly was. Tillich's theology was a piece with his life and grew out of it. That was one point of his overwhelming appeal to modern men. He agonized over his tensions and problems as a modern man, thus he caught the imagination of modern men. He stood in the middle of the modern predicament and shared its frustrations, fears, and creativity.

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<sup>236</sup> Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, ed. Robert C. Kimball (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), 37–38.

<sup>237</sup> Pauck and Pauck, *Paul Tillich*, 210ff.



Tillich's theology was not an abstract creation forged out of the interplay of logic and concepts. It found its point of departure in his own existence — his own being. To read his diary is to understand better how he theologized.<sup>238</sup>

Tillich's fears of war were, as we noted earlier, fully realized. But his prophetic witness, now directed to the German people themselves, continued in a series of 112 short addresses written by Tillich and broadcast over Voice of America shortwave frequencies from March 1942 through May 1944. This powerful medium allowed Tillich to speak directly (through an unknown narrator) to specific issues, offering correctives which undermined Nazi propaganda, and informing the listeners of many atrocities of which they were likely unaware.<sup>239</sup> Each broadcast began with *meine deutschen Freunde* ("my German friends"), and systematically deconstructed the common narratives of the day, beginning with "The Question of the Jewish People" (wherein Tillich quotes an unidentified "major theologian" as having recently written "anti-Semitism is a transgression against the Holy Spirit."<sup>240</sup>) As the Paucks—who were in direct conversation with Tillich as they drafted their book—noted, in the anticipated aftermath of World War II, Tillich "hoped for a rebirth, a renewal, of the whole world; he hoped that, just as after World War I it had been possible to expect renewal because the time

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<sup>238</sup> Paul Tillich, *My Travel Diary: 1936 - Between Two Worlds*, ed. Jerald C. Brauer (New York; Evanston; London: Harper & Row, 1970), 10–11.

<sup>239</sup> Pauck and Pauck, *Paul Tillich*, 199.

<sup>240</sup> Paul Tillich, *Against the Third Reich: Paul Tillich's Wartime Addresses to Nazi Germany*, ed. Ronald H Stone and Matthew Lon Weaver, trans. Matthew Lon Weaver (Louisville: Westminster John Knox press, 1998), 16.

was ripe for it (*kairos*), a new *kairos* would come for the revival of justice in the world.”<sup>241</sup>

For Tillich, there was no question that theological thinking and prophetic voice/action were deeply interrelated, and praxis could never be separated from theology (and vice versa). If theology is deeply tied to praxis, it must also be communicable; that is, the language of theology cannot be so sophisticated that it cannot be understood. For a philosopher-theologian such as Tillich, this was, of course, quite challenging. His move to America also became the catalyst for examining and reconsidering the ways in which he utilized language. His intention with theology was always kerygmatic, and his concern that

the meaning of Christian symbols had become increasingly opaque during his lifetime, coupled with his personal inability to accept the split between a faith unacceptable to culture and a culture unacceptable to faith, prompted him to interpret the articles of faith through cultural expression.<sup>242</sup>

He would attempt to reduce this opacity through a series of books beginning with *The Protestant Era* in 1948.<sup>243</sup> His 1950 work *The Courage to Be* would become a best-seller, despite a somewhat dense introductory chapter which traced the evolution of the term “courage” from Plato to Nietzsche.<sup>244</sup>

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<sup>241</sup> Pauck and Pauck, *Paul Tillich*, 199.

<sup>242</sup> Pauck and Pauck, 235.

<sup>243</sup> Pauck and Pauck, 221ff. This book contains a wealth of insight into Tillich's growing popularity with numerous audiences.

<sup>244</sup> Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 1–31. See also Pauck and Pauck, 225.

Tillich's intent was to engage the real-world issues of humanity, both on individual levels and in larger contexts. His focus always was about ultimate concern; "we can say that religion is being concerned about that which is and should be our ultimate concern. This means that faith is the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, and God is the name for the content of the concern." This, for Tillich, means that "we are pointing to an existential, not a theoretical, understanding of religion."<sup>245</sup> Once again, Tillich nudges the conversation away from theory and into the existential realm.

### Theology and Theonomy

Contained within the theology of Paul Tillich is a concept he refers to as *theonomy*—the state of living "in the fulness [sic] of the Kingdom of God."<sup>246</sup> While the meaning of theonomy as Tillich deploys it is complex (the term is described across Tillich's entire *Systematic Theology* and addressed in other works as well), theonomy functionally provides space for the reunion of *being* with the *Ground of Being* (which is commonly described by the symbol *God*).

One critical point needs to be made clear at the outset: Tillich's use of the term *theonomy* is radically different from other uses, most notably its use in Reformed Theology. While both seek to honor the literal meaning of the term (God's law), Tillich is decidedly not suggesting the formation of a theocracy, or the reformulation of secular

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<sup>245</sup> Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, 40.

<sup>246</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume 1*, 54.

laws to fit Biblical models, nor the “subjection of a culture to divine laws, imposed from outside and mediated by a church.”<sup>247</sup>

The importance of Tillich’s use of the term theonomy, and the concepts contained within that term, all too often remain unnoticed by all but the most intentional readers of his works. This is not to suggest that the concept is totally ignored; indeed, one edited volume, published in 1984 and entitled *Theonomy and Autonomy*, offers many helpful insights into the concept.<sup>248</sup> Similarly, several articles address various aspects of theonomy, particularly with an eye toward its use in more recent situations, including Thomas Altizer’s work, published in 1963, Charles Sabatino’s more recent article in 1984, and others.<sup>249</sup> Theonomy has gained some attention, too, around questions of environmentalism and justice, among other topics.<sup>250</sup> All of these writings across the decades merit attention and speak to the potential of this key Tillichian concept; however, our task here is focused on a particular set of resonances between Tillich and Wesley, and how those resonances inform the lives of faith communities.

The concept of theonomy can be somewhat challenging to engage, and Tillich’s use of the word is innovative; in appropriating the term for his use, he does not intend to

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<sup>247</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume 3: Life and the Spirit, History and the Kingdom of God*, 249–50.

<sup>248</sup> John Jesse Carey, ed., *Theonomy and Autonomy: Studies in Paul Tillich’s Engagement with Modern Culture* (Macon, GA: Mercer, 1984).

<sup>249</sup> Thomas J. J. Altizer, “A Theonomy in Our Time?,” *The Christian Scholar* 46, no. 4 (Winter 1963): 356–62; Charles J. Sabatino, “An Interpretation of the Significance of Theonomy Within Tillich’s Theology,” *Encounter* 45, no. 1 (Winter 1984): 23–38.

<sup>250</sup> Michael Drummy, “Theonomy and Biology: Tillich’s Ontology of Love as the Basis for an Environmental Ethic,” *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture & Ecology* 4, no. 1 (2000): 68–81; Peter Slater, “The Relevance of Tillich’s Concept of Creative Justice in the New Millennium,” in *Religion in the New Millennium: Theology in the Spirit of Paul Tillich*, ed. Raymond F. Bulman and Frederick J. Parrella (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2001), 45–53.

speak of a divine law imposed on humanity. Rather, he deploys the word to indicate activity of the Spiritual Presence working in and through culture, as well as history and nature. Despite this being a somewhat lesser-known aspect of his thought, it is central to his theology, and, later, will become central to his Systematic work. In his work *The Life and Mind of Paul Tillich*, Walter Leibrecht identifies the critical nature of this component of Tillich's theology:

*Tillich's call to theonomy is his greatest challenge to modern thought. His is a vision of culture in which ultimate concern informs the whole web of life and thought and for which the ultimate is an ever-present horizon. With this idea of theonomy, Tillich overcomes the easy deification of culture by liberal theology and yet makes religion relevant to culture in a profound way. Religion is understood by Tillich as the root of culture, and culture as the efflorescence of religion.*<sup>251</sup>

### **Theonomy – Initial Considerations**

Tillich's early (1923) *System of the Sciences* provides a helpful understanding of the essence of theonomy, defined as "a turning toward the Unconditioned for the sake of the Unconditioned." Theonomy "employs conditioned forms in order to grasp the Unconditioned in them."<sup>252</sup> While this definition is from his early writings, Tillich's use of the term does not change significantly throughout his career; thankfully, though, he does find other ways to explain what he is attempting to communicate when he uses it.

Later in his career, the term is often defined at the outset of a given writing; in the *Author's Introduction* to his 1948 work *The Protestant Era*, Tillich defines a theonomous culture as "a culture in which the ultimate meaning of existence shined through all finite

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<sup>251</sup> Leibrecht, "The Life and Mind of Paul Tillich," 17. Italics his.

<sup>252</sup> Tillich, *The System of the Sciences According to Objects and Methods*, 203.

forms and action; the culture is transparent, and its creations are vessels of a spiritual content.”<sup>253</sup> Two points should be kept in mind here. First, Tillich’s focus on history begins to come to the fore; to a degree, he ties theonomy to historical periods: “the early and high Middle Ages received a valuation that they never had received in classical Protestantism. I called them ‘theonomous’ periods, in contrast to the heteronomy of the later Middle Ages and the self-complacent autonomy of modern humanism.”<sup>254</sup> We will return to the dynamics of theonomy-heteronomy-autonomy shortly.

Second, if theonomy is more present or less present in various cultural periods, it stands to reason that it is also more present or less present in specific groups within a given culture (or, perhaps, cultures within cultures). This is a key point in Tillich’s ecclesiology which we will explore more fully in a following section.

Returning to the theonomy-heteronomy-autonomy framework, it is important to understand that the dominant dynamic which emerges in a given period or situation is directly related to the “conditions of existence,” which informs the “structural elements of reason.” The internal conflict of reason drives cultures toward a “quest for revelation.”<sup>255</sup>

### **Autonomy**

Individuals may obey the rational self (*autonomy*), which is constrained by the limits of existence. Tillich’s use of this term is made clear: “Autonomy does not mean the

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<sup>253</sup> Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), xvi.

<sup>254</sup> Tillich, xvi.

<sup>255</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume 1*, 83.

freedom of the individual to be a law unto himself,” but is rather the “obedience of the individual to the law of reason, which he finds in himself as a rational being.”<sup>256</sup> This is the “law of subjective-objective reason; it is the law implied in the *logos* structure of mind and reality,” and it is “obedience to its own essential structure, the law of reason which is the law of nature within mind and reality, and which is divine law, rooted in the ground of being itself.”<sup>257</sup>

### **Heteronomy**

Conversely, *heteronomy* is an external law, which “issues commands from ‘outside’ on how reason should grasp and shape reality”; this is usually expressed in terms of “myth and cult,” although it may also be expressed through political power. To a degree, heteronomy stands against autonomy (but, again, perhaps not as one would suspect). In the first volume of his *Systematic*, Tillich explains that

heteronomy imposes a strange (*heteros*) law (*nomos*) on one or all of the functions of reason. It issues commands from “outside” on how reason should grasp and shape reality. But this “outside” is not merely outside. It represents, at the same time, an element in reason itself, namely, the depth of reason. This makes the fight between autonomy and heteronomy dangerous and tragic. It is, finally, a conflict in reason itself.<sup>258</sup>

Heteronomy can involve an external authority, often based in myth and/or cult, as “these are the direct and intentional expressions of the depth of reason.”<sup>259</sup> The strange laws which impact reason here are embedded in narratives and/or rituals which press the

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<sup>256</sup> Tillich, 83–84.

<sup>257</sup> Tillich, 84.

<sup>258</sup> Tillich, 84.

<sup>259</sup> Tillich, 84.

individual to act against the *logos*-based autonomy that would ideally rule the day. Therefore, the logical remedy would be a critical framework within which one might evaluate the heteronomous leanings. Tillich specifically provides that in his theology: “What I have called the ‘Protestant principle’ is, as I believe, the main weapon against every system of heteronomy.”<sup>260</sup> Heteronomous systems are inherently dangerous, as they are prone to corruption. At the same time, heteronomy itself, when appropriately united with its own depth, can be a theonomous element.

### **Theonomy – Further Clarifications**

It is important to understand that Tillich does not see autonomy, heteronomy, and theonomy as fully separated under any conditions; indeed, they work in a constant ebb and flow as reason seeks to reunite with its depth. Both autonomy and heteronomy are “rooted in theonomy, and each goes astray when their theonomous unity is broken,” coming into conflict with each other. In a complex semi-contrast to both (yet containing both), theonomy is “autonomous reason reunited with its own depth”; that is, the sought-after reunion of being and Ground of Being.”<sup>261</sup>

In *The Protestant Era*, Tillich offers a summary paragraph which helps to define the dynamics of this framework:

The words ‘autonomy,’ ‘heteronomy,’ and ‘theonomy’ answer the question of the *nomos* or the law of life in three different ways: Autonomy asserts that man as the bearer of universal reason is the course and measure of culture and religion—that he is his own law. Heteronomy asserts that man, being unable to act according to universal reason, must be subjected to a law, strange and superior to him. Theonomy asserts that the superior law is, at the same time, the innermost law of man himself,

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<sup>260</sup> Tillich, *My Search for Absolutes*, 33.

<sup>261</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume 1*, 84–85.



rooted in the divine ground which is man's own ground: the law of love transcends man, although it is, at the same time, his own.<sup>262</sup>

This understanding—which is stated more clearly here than perhaps anywhere else in Tillich's writing—also extends to the relationship between religion and culture. An autonomous culture results from “the attempt to create the forms of personal and social life without any reference to something ultimate and unconditional, following only the demands of theoretical and practical rationality.”<sup>263</sup>

In the third volume of his *Systematic Theology*, he explores the potential of theonomy more fully, describing it as “the state of culture under the impact of the Spiritual Presence.”<sup>264</sup> However, he consistently maintains that theonomy never fully obtains under the “conditions of existence,” although communities of faith, such as the church, provide the conditions where it might exist in relative fullness.<sup>265</sup>

Foundational to Tillich's system is the distinction between “what is” and “what ought to be”—that is, the distinction between existence and essence.<sup>266</sup> Life is constantly ambiguous, engaging with the positive and negative elements of being in three spheres: the moral, the cultural, and the religious. In those spheres, life is continuously confronting the essence/existence dichotomy, seeking to integrate, self-create, and

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<sup>262</sup> Tillich, *The Protestant Era*, 56–57.

<sup>263</sup> Tillich, 57.

<sup>264</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume 3: Life and the Spirit, History and the Kingdom of God*, 249.

<sup>265</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume 1*, 85.

<sup>266</sup> Frederick J. Parrella, “Tillich's Theology of the Concrete Spirit,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Paul Tillich*, ed. Russell Re Manning (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 76–77.

transcend through its encounters with the inherent ambiguities within each.<sup>267</sup> In all three spheres, the questions posed by those ambiguities may be fully addressed only by the presence and activity of the Spiritual Presence, the “aspect of God ecstatically present in the human spirit and implicitly in everything which constitutes the dimension of the spirit ...[these] have a *fundamentum in re*, a foundation in reality, however much the subjective side of man’s experience may contribute.”<sup>268</sup> Indeed, for Tillich, the task of theology—particularly a “constructive theology of culture” such as his—is to “apply these principles to the concrete problems of our cultural existence.”<sup>269</sup>

Much of Tillich’s framework centers, usually implicitly, on the essence/existence dichotomy, and the limits of existence under which we live. Therefore, a central component of the overall ambiguities of the church and the world involves the fact that “the world which is opposed by the church is not simply not-church but has in itself elements of the Spiritual Community in its latency which work toward a theonomous culture.”<sup>270</sup>

### The Protestant Principle

Central to Tillich’s theology is his concept of the “Protestant principle,” which takes seriously “the problem of Protestantism, its meaning and its historical significance.” Going beyond the historical facticity of Protestantism, Tillich sees in it a “special

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<sup>267</sup> Parrella, 77–79; this is more fully explored in Volume III of Tillich’s Systematic.

<sup>268</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume 3: Life and the Spirit, History and the Kingdom of God*, 283.

<sup>269</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume 1*, 149.

<sup>270</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume 3: Life and the Spirit, History and the Kingdom of God*, 216.

historical embodiment of a universally significant principle [one that] is effective in all periods of history [and] indicated in the great religions of mankind”<sup>271</sup> The “principle is eternal and a permanent criterion of everything temporal.”<sup>272</sup>

Before we examine the contents of the concept, it is worth noting that Tillich’s interest in it began early in his theological career. Tillich recalls discovering the power of the Protestant principle in his early theology classes, particularly those taught by Martin Kähler. “The task of theology is mediation, mediation between the eternal criterion of truth as it is manifest in the picture of Jesus as the Christ and the changing experiences of individuals and groups, their varying questions and their categories of perceiving reality.” This mediation must deliberately focus, in an ongoing way, on the essence of theology, which is contained in the word itself: a mediation “between the mystery, which is *theos*, and the understanding, which is *logos*.”<sup>273</sup> One might be tempted to describe this in dialectical terms; indeed, Tillich would like to do so, but feels that the term dialectic no longer functions well, due to the use of the term “dialectical theology” being “applied to a theology that is strongly opposed to any kind of dialectics and mediation and that constantly repeats ‘Yes’ to its own and the ‘No’ to any other position.” This has “resulted in the cheap and clumsy way of dividing all theologians into naturalists or supernaturalists, or into liberals and orthodox.”<sup>274</sup> These divisions are obsolete and

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<sup>271</sup> Tillich, *The Protestant Era*, xi.

<sup>272</sup> Tillich, xii.

<sup>273</sup> Tillich, xiii. Italics his.

<sup>274</sup> Tillich, xiii–xiv. This is, of course, directed at the dialectical theology of Karl Barth. Tillich goes on to say that such “divisions are completely obsolete in the actual work which is done today by everyone who

useless when it comes to the real work of the mediating theologian (a mantle which he is quite happy to accept).

Tillich's Protestant principle is related to, and to a large extent derives from, the autonomy-heteronomy-theonomy dynamic we examined in the previous section, as well as Tillich's determined emphasis on the reality of the human situation; further, it focuses on the element of self-criticism. As an example, the human of today tends toward both autonomy and an anxiety-inducing insecurity, no longer possessing "a world view in the sense of a body of assured convictions about God, the world, and himself."<sup>275</sup> This creates the possibility of self-surrender of autonomy in favor of heteronomy, where doctrines are simply accepted, convictions simply held, and the core elements of a life of faith simply handed over to those who possess expertise in the area.

In such a situation the Catholic church is naturally in a favored position, for it alone is consistently heteronomous. It alone has unbroken tradition and authority. Consequently, the Catholic church has a great attraction for the man of our day; and it also has a strong sense of triumph in the face of his broken autonomy.<sup>276</sup>

Tillich never suggests that the Catholic church does not have a "genuine substance," although his statement that "it is encased within an ever hardening crust" discloses his view of that substance.<sup>277</sup> For him, such surrender to heteronomy is really an evasion of the realities of lived existence:

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takes the mediating or dialectical task seriously. Therefore, I would not be ashamed to be called a 'theologian of mediation,' which, for me, would simply mean: a 'theo-logian.'"

<sup>275</sup> Tillich, 192.

<sup>276</sup> Tillich, 194.

<sup>277</sup> Tillich, 194.

The Protestant element in Protestantism is the radical proclamation of the human border-situation and the protest against all attempts, through religious expedients, to evade it, even though this evasion be accomplished with the aid of all the richness and depth and breadth of mystical and sacramental piety.”<sup>278</sup>

Tillich is clear that the Protestant principle has not always been perfectly present in Protestantism itself. Forms of the principle are visible across the history of Protestantism, but, while the principle itself is atemporal and eternal, the concrete historical forms are perishable.<sup>279</sup> These historical expressions may be subject to a variety of distortions, the most common of which is “intellectualistic,” where faith is treated as “an act of knowledge that has a low degree of evidence,” which can create dangerous situations where faith contradicts that which is known (perhaps scientifically) to be actual.<sup>280</sup> Alternatively, the “voluntaristic” distortion holds that individuals can will themselves into belief; indeed, “no command to believe and no will to believe can create faith” – faith is a matter of ultimate concern, and, as such, is already given.<sup>281</sup> Finally, the “emotionalistic” distortion sees faith as an emotion; whereas faith can give way to emotions and emotional experiences, faith is not simply an emotion—faith runs more deeply than an emotion.<sup>282</sup> Tillich appeals to Schleiermacher here, who “has described religion [Tillich here is equating faith and religion for this portion of the conversation] as

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<sup>278</sup> Tillich, 196.

<sup>279</sup> Oswald Bayer, “Tillich as Systematic Theologian,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Paul Tillich*, ed. Russell Re Manning (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 26. This section by Bayer is quite helpful in thinking about the essence of the Protestant Principle.

<sup>280</sup> Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Perennial, 2001), 37–38.

<sup>281</sup> Tillich, 43–44.

<sup>282</sup> Tillich, 44–46.

the feeling of unconditional dependence.”<sup>283</sup> Schleiermacher sees this as one of two elements, the other being a “God-consciousness.”<sup>284</sup>

When properly present and appropriately active, the Protestant principle serves as a principle of self-criticism which allows the church continually to point beyond itself (as noted earlier, it must point simultaneously to the Ground of Being and to the ultimate end, the Kingdom of God). The content of the symbol “Protestant” involves “the radical proclamation of the human border-situation and the protest against all attempts, through religious expedients, to evade it, even though this evasion be accomplished with the aid of all the richness and depth and breadth of mystical and sacramental piety.”<sup>285</sup>

James Luther Adams, in his postscript to the 1948 edition of *The Protestant Era*, provides some helpful contextualization of the need for (and, perhaps, the direction of) the principle of self-criticism. In doing so, Adams first notes the experience of the Roman Catholic church, which “first helped to shape the culture of the Middle Ages and then became fettered in the ‘Babylonish captivity’ of the waning Middle Ages and of a petrified Counter Reformation.”

Protestantism has helped to form the Protestant era and then, in differing ways in its different forms and countries, has to a large extent become bound in a new Babylonish captivity within capitalist culture. It languishes (all too comfortably) in this prison, or, to change the figure from a Reformation to a biblical one, it is largely a prostituted, a “kept” religion. It has lost its relatedness to the ultimate ground and aim, and thus it has

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<sup>283</sup> Tillich, 45.

<sup>284</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith: A New Translation and Critical Edition*, ed. Terrence N. Tice and Catherine L. Kelsey, trans. Edwina G. Lawler (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 194-195 (§33.2), also 382–83, §62.2 for the extended conversation regarding the God-consciousness element.

<sup>285</sup> Tillich, *The Protestant Era*, 196.

lost much of its original prophetic power. Its God has become domesticated; it is a bourgeois god.<sup>286</sup>

This is Protestantism tamed and contained within consumerist culture, a religion which accommodates rather than transforms. Adams' words, written decades ago, certainly ring true today, as we live in a culture where Christianity too often bends toward the powerful, offering false comfort to those who oppress, rather than hope to those who are the subjects of oppression.

The Protestant principle, where it is effective in enabling the theonomic activity of the Spiritual Presence, leads to authentic re-establishment of the Church as a Spiritual Community, called to step into the brokenness of the world as an agent of healing, and to create space for restoration of individuals through the work of the Spiritual Presence.

Walter Leibrecht explains:

in theonomy, both the ultimacy of the divine, as the crisis of the finite, and the appearance of the New Being in history, as the healing and transformation and fulfillment of the finite, are taken seriously. Here is a vision which might help us to overcome the jungle of denominational antagonism and make the Church again a uniting power, reconciling the broken world with God by overcoming its splits and separations, yet doing this from within reality and never by the authoritarian means of ecclesiastical or political heteronomy.<sup>287</sup>

The Protestant principle serves as a check against an overly mystical or sacramental understanding of reality which fails to acknowledge the realities of existence, allowing us to ignore the realities of existence. For Tillich, "Protestantism brings people

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<sup>286</sup> Tillich, 284.

<sup>287</sup> Leibrecht, "The Life and Mind of Paul Tillich," 17.

to face the boundary-situation.” When operating properly, the Protestant principle is both “critical and creative,” a challenging subject to which we will return in Chapter 6.<sup>288</sup>

In this context, Tillich’s “border-situation” derives from the existence of the hard limit(s) of human existence and possibility, the place where “human existence is confronted by an ultimate threat.” One might assume that Tillich refers here to death, but his view is from a different location; this is an issue of “spiritual cleavage” which “is not eliminated with the cessation of bodily existence.” Death itself is not a boundary-situation for Tillich, and, it is possible to carry the despair of life into death. This despair is based in the fact that the existence of each individual is not identical with that individual’s “vital existence,” and each individual is free to accept or reject that vital existence on a moment-to-moment basis.<sup>289</sup> That is, human existence is marked and burdened by the ability to accept or reject who and what we really are; this is the border-situation (alternately referred to as the “boundary situation”) that Tillich identifies.

Further, humanity will always need the Protestant principle, since the “expression of human freedom can take a perverted direction toward self-destruction,” and the principle can offer protection against “the demonic assertion that one’s experience and tradition constitute ultimate truth.”<sup>290</sup> Again, when operating properly, the Protestant

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<sup>288</sup> Matthew Lon Weaver, “Religious Internationalism: The Ethics of War and Peace in the Thought of Paul Tillich” (University of Pittsburgh, 2006), 82.

<sup>289</sup> Tillich, *The Protestant Era*, 197.

<sup>290</sup> Donald W. Musser and Joseph L. Price, *Tillich, Abingdon Pillars of Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), 56. For additional reflection on Tillich’s use of the term “demonic,” see below.



principle guards against the naïve certitude of both dogma and doctrine, reminding us of the space for doubt and uncertainty.

### **Tillich's Ecclesiology**

Tillich understood and emphasized the role of the Church, as the Spiritual Community, in creating space for the activity of the Spiritual Presence. At the same time, his understanding of what might comprise a Spiritual Community was broad, extending far beyond the frameworks of organized religion. Various kinds of communities can be theonomous in nature, providing opportunities to experience the Holy, to participate in it, and to be drawn toward a reunion with God.

### **The Spiritual Community**

For Tillich, pneumatology, Christology, and theonomy all intersect in the Spiritual Community. In the second volume of his *Systematic*, Tillich makes it clear that the Church is integral to the work of the Christ: “the Christ is not the Christ without the church.”<sup>291</sup> A similar claim is made in the third volume, albeit with a more individual focus, which quickly turns to the collective: “the Christ would not be the Christ without those who receive him as the Christ.” In that portion of his writing, Tillich pivots away from the use of the term “church,” which is itself part of the “ambiguities of religion,” in

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<sup>291</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume 2: Existence and the Christ* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), 180. I am indebted to Laura Thelander for making this phrase a central focus of her article “Retrieving Paul Tillich’s Ecclesiology for the Church Today” (*Theology Today* 69, no. 2, 2012: 143 & *passim*) although her work also serves as a reminder that, again, the concept of theonomy receives too little scholarly attention; in the entire article, the word is never mentioned, despite the fact that Tillich’s ecclesiology is, at its core, all about theonomy.

favor of the phrase “Spiritual Community,” which is authentically centered on the New Being, which alone can “conquer” those ambiguities.<sup>292</sup>

For Tillich, the Spiritual Community is best understood under the rubric of the Pentecost story (the historicity of which is not of concern for him). Within the Pentecost narrative, Tillich identifies five key elements. First, the Spiritual Community is unified by an ecstatic character; that is, it exists under the unifying call of the Spiritual Presence. Second, it was nearly destroyed by the death of the Christ, and survived only after the followers of the Christ, “fugitives who had dispersed in Galilee,” were grasped by the Spiritual Presence, which “re-established their faith.” Third, it is marked by “self-surrendering love,” “a love which expresses itself immediately in mutual service, especially toward those who are in need, including strangers who have joined the original group.” Fourth, under the power of the Spiritual Presence, there was a uniting of “different individuals, nationalities, and traditions” who then gathered for the “sacramental meal.” Finally, “the creation of universality” in those who were in the grasp of the Spiritual Presence; it “was impossible that they should not give the message of what had happened to them to everybody, because the New Being would not be the New Being were not mankind as a whole and even the universe itself included in it.”<sup>293</sup>

Even Tillich slips back and forth between the term “Spiritual Community” and the term “Church,” despite his insistence that the two are not coterminous (which is true, but some attention must be given to teasing out precisely how they interact). A prime

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<sup>292</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume 3: Life and the Spirit, History and the Kingdom of God*, 149.

<sup>293</sup> Tillich, 151–52.

example of this involves his use of the terms “latent church” and “manifest church,” which are defined immediately following his deployment of the Pentecost model to define the Spiritual Community.<sup>294</sup> His latent/manifest model is, however, an important part of our discussion.

“The Spiritual Community is determined by the appearance of Jesus as the Christ, but it is not identical with the Christian churches.” It is possible for a Christian church to be something other than a Spiritual Community, and it is possible for a Spiritual Community to be something other than a church; the difference is determined by the authentic revelation of the Christ or New Being in the midst of the body.

Tillich’s latent and manifest modes of church are, first, not the same as the classic invisible and visible church, although these may overlap. “It is the Spiritual Community that is latent before an encounter with the central revelation and manifest after such an encounter.” The central revelation is the Christ event, and the encounter has a double meaning: “the world-historical event, the ‘basic Kairos,’ which established the center of history once and for all, [and] the continually recurring and derivative kairoi in which a religious cultural group has an existential encounter with the central event.”<sup>295</sup> This framework is clearly driven by Tillich’s encounters with groups that operate outside of the institutional church, but who “show the power of the New Being in an impressive way.”

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<sup>294</sup> Tillich, 152.

<sup>295</sup> Tillich, 153.

Gilkey sums up Tillich's ecclesiology well:

the church is 'a true church' when it embodies both the Protestant principle (the principle of self-criticism and so of 'pointing beyond itself' to the divine source of its grace and power) and the Catholic substance (the principle of the presence through the media of dependent revelation of divine power, divine truth, and divine grace).<sup>296</sup>

Tillich's history with democratic socialism, and the pseudo-religious nature of the German culture of his youth, made him particularly sensitive to the dangers of mixing nationalism with religion: "the Church is always in danger of identifying herself with a national Church, or of leaving injustice, the will-to-power, national and racial arrogance unchallenged. The Church is always in danger of losing its prophetic spirit."<sup>297</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Tillich's understanding of the activity of divine grace appears to have formed relatively early in his life. As with Wesley, his upbringing likely had an impact; however, his exposure to German idealism as a youth, followed by the face-to-face confrontations with tragedy in the early loss of his mother, then the existential crises of World War I, challenged his idealistic views. His shift to existentialism in the trenches of battle brought to the fore his education in a wide variety of philosophical frameworks, and his willingness to dwell in boundary situations—without necessarily resolving issues, but straddling different environments, both ontological and theoretical—provided him with a view into the fragmentations of existence.

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<sup>296</sup> Langdon Gilkey, *Gilkey on Tillich* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2000), 142.

<sup>297</sup> Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, 39.

All of this informed his overall theological approach, the systematizing of which was driven by the radical change in his environment when he fled the growing Nazi presence in Germany. His newfound home forced him to think and communicate differently, yet he continued to think and speak from a decisively Christian (quasi-existentialist) foundation. His emphasis on the situation—whatever that meant from one time and place to another—drew toward a flexibility and complexity of thought that made theology accessible to many protestants who had simply dwelt in “church” without a real sense of what that could mean.

Finally, his understanding of the dynamics of the activity of the Spiritual Presence working theonomously in the world, the potential of the Spiritual Community (both latent and manifest) in creating space for divine grace to be made manifest, the recognition of ultimate concern, and the universal need for reunification with the ground of being, provide an intriguing and helpful foundation for thinking about the presence of the divine in the world.

## CHAPTER FIVE: WESLEY AND TILlich IN CONVERSATION

*The essential unity of morality, culture, and religion is destroyed under the conditions of existence. However, an unambiguous, though fragmentary, reunion is possible under the impact of the divine Spirit.* – Paul Tillich<sup>298</sup>

*The catholic or universal Church is, all the persons in the universe whom God hath so called out of the world as to entitle them to the preceding character; as to be ‘one body,’ united by ‘one spirit;’ having ‘one faith, one hope, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in them all.’* – John Wesley<sup>299</sup>

We have explored the ways in which Wesley and Tillich formed their understandings of divine grace, which were largely informed by complex interactions of their personal histories, theological influences, and studied reflection. Both were focused on the ways in which the Holy Spirit/Spiritual Presence works in the lives of individuals, both as individuals and as participants in faith communities. In some ways, Tillich’s thoughts extend those of Wesley; in others, Wesley’s extend those of Tillich.

In this chapter, we will first examine their overall theological approaches. We will examine resonances visible in their theologies, with particular emphases on divine grace, pneumatology, and ecclesiology. We will also explore the ways in which two significant practical aspects of their thought interact: Wesley’s focus on the means by which individuals and communities can open themselves to the presence of the Spirit (the means

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<sup>298</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume 3: Life and the Spirit, History and the Kingdom of God*, 266.

<sup>299</sup> Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley. Vol. 3: Sermons III: 71-114*, 3:50.

of grace), and Tillich's framework wherein the ambiguities of life find answers in the Christian message (the method of correlation). Even though both were firmly rooted in the Christian tradition, they recognized that their frameworks of divine grace led to a broad, pluralistic understanding of the value of religious traditions; if God's presence is everywhere creating the possibility of relationship, then other religions contain the possibility of reunification as well. Further, both emphasized the grace-based divine activity which draws individuals toward a reunion with God, and both saw the critical role of community in creating space for experiencing and participating in such activity. Those communities, however, needed to be open to a continuing internal conversation and critique regarding their authenticity and their work.

Both also perceived their work to be deeply pastoral; Wesley never wavered from his identity as a clergyman in the Church of England, and Tillich understood himself to be an answering theologian, following a model he identified in the Biblical accounts of the Apostle Paul's ministry. Each was deeply concerned about issues of social justice and the ways that communities could speak into unjust situations. Grace, for both, was based in the deeply transformative work of God; and, for both, it was meant to send the faithful out into the world on behalf of God.

### **Theological Approaches: Shared Foci, Differing Language**

#### Pluralism & Inclusivism

We have already examined Wesley's non-systematic approach to theology and placed him—in a positive light—in the status of folk-theologian. Tillich, however, stands in a much different location than Wesley. In 1989, during a presentation to the American Academy of Religion's Program Committee, J.Z. Smith (casually, according to Smith)

referred to Tillich as “the unacknowledged theoretician of our entire enterprise.” Tillich’s stature in this role stood in opposition to “the shifting evaluations and strategic deployments of Durkheim, Weber, Geertz, Lévi-Strauss, Turner, and Douglas.” Smith considered his view of Tillich to be unremarkable and was surprised that his comments had been given much attention; indeed, he would later write that Tillich’s influence “should be largely unacknowledged.”<sup>300</sup> In his later reflections on the casual comment, Smith looks to Walter Capps’ work in 1995, which suggests that

one can make a strong case for the contention that the academic study of religion gained sufficient intellectual stature to enter the world of the state or public university within the United States and Canada in the late 1950s and 1960s largely because of the Tillichian conceptualization of the theological enterprise.<sup>301</sup>

Smith’s position as an historian places him in a helpful position to evaluate the ways in which religious studies have evolved through time, which he does with an eye toward several core Tillichian concepts: ultimate concern, religious symbols, and existential concerns/culture (i.e. the situation). All are present, Smith writes, in the “enterprise”; that said, they are sometimes less prevalent in the conversation (particularly over time—for example, the idea of ultimate concern is less present now than it was in the 1960s), and the concepts as deployed today may or may not actually align with Tillich’s thought. So, to a degree: yes, Tillich’s thought lurks around many corners of religious studies; at the same time, it does so incompletely and, sometimes,

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<sup>300</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, “Tillich(s) Remains,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78, no. 4 (December 2010): 1140.

<sup>301</sup> Walter H. Capps, *Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline*, Kindle Edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), Locations 4734-4735.



problematically. J.Z. Smith noted that the fact that Tillich's impact is unacknowledged is appropriate, and that it should remain so—even though Smith was placed in the position of needing to acknowledge it. Further, Smith was justifiably concerned that the entire enterprise would be rooted in a “Protestant Christian ‘apologetic’ theological project.”<sup>302</sup> That said, Tillich might be intrigued to know of Capps' claims, given that Tillich's first major work was his *System of the Sciences*, the intent of which was to explicitly place theology in the realm of academic concerns, classified as “sciences of the spirit”; Capps appears to think that Tillich's effort was successful.<sup>303</sup>

At the same time, it is important to note that the next sentence in Capps' work, excluded from Smith's quotation, gets to the heart of another area of interest for Tillich—one that is less focused on the academy:

Tillich approached Christian belief in a manner that allowed Christians to develop an openness to religions other than their own, and to approach the devotees of those religions as being something far more than candidates for conversion or proselytization.<sup>304</sup>

Capps did emphasize “ultimate concern” as Tillich's *sine qua non*, which is arguably true, but, as Capps notes, the later Tillich also recognized something new, represented in a 1965 lecture *The Significance of the History of Religions for the Systematic Theologian*.<sup>305</sup> As Tillich notes in that lecture, just the fact that he had

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<sup>302</sup> Smith, “Tillich('s) Remains,” 1140.

<sup>303</sup> Tillich, *The System of the Sciences According to Objects and Methods*, 137ff.

<sup>304</sup> Capps, *Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline*, Location 4735-4737.

<sup>305</sup> Capps, Locations 4740-4745. While I appreciate Capps' contribution (via Smith), I am less convinced of his suggestion that ultimate concern is Tillich's *sine qua non*. Across Tillich's work is the motif of estrangement/reunion which seems to me as an essential theme, and would itself contain the concept of ultimate concern.

accepted the topic meant that, first, “he has separated himself from a theology which rejects all religions other than that of which he is a theologian,” and, second he has to some degree at least, accepted the concept of a “theology without theos, also called a theology of the secular.”<sup>306</sup>

Capps focuses on Tillich’s acknowledgement that “revelatory experiences are universally human [and] there are revealing and saving powers in all religions. God has not left himself unwitnessed.”<sup>307</sup> This is the first of a series of presuppositions which Tillich offers in the space of a few pages. Tillich is also clear that “revelation is received by man in terms of his finite situation,” which also means that the revelation is “always in a distorted form”; this means that there is space for criticism regarding the revelations themselves. Those criticisms take three forms: mystical, prophetic, and secular. At the same time, he allows that there “*may* be a central event in the history of religions which unites the positive results of those critical developments,” making space for the potential of a theology that has “universalistic significance.” Finally, reflecting the view that Tillich had long emphasized by that point,

The history of religions in its essential nature does not exist alongside the history of culture. The sacred does not lie beside the secular, but it is its depths. The sacred is the creative ground and at the same time a critical judgement of the secular. But the religious can be this only if it is at the same time a judgment on itself, a judgement which must use the secular as a tool of one’s own religious self-criticism.<sup>308</sup>

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<sup>306</sup> Paul Tillich, *The Future of Religions*, ed. Jerald C. Brauer (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 80.

<sup>307</sup> Tillich, 81.

<sup>308</sup> Tillich, 81–82.

Visible in these passages is a significant departure from Tillich's youthful certainty that Christianity is the assumed container of ultimate truth—although still present is the potential for a central uniting event (unstated in those passages would be Tillich's continued assumption that the New Being would be that event). Also visible is a clear awareness of, and receptivity to, the existence of a variety of faith traditions which have the potential—even in their inherent distortions—to stand as valid as others. This awareness does not mean that Tillich ceased to ground himself in the Christian tradition, but it is clear that his theological framework allowed for non-Christian paths to the divine.

Intriguingly, the later Wesley signals a similar openness, although not in such explicit terms. Wesley offered a tantalizing line in a sermon entitled "On Faith," first published in 1788 (one of two sermons with that title, both based on passages from Hebrews, but quite different in content). Here, Wesley essentially ranks the various non-Christian faiths with which he has some familiarity; in one significant yet brief passage, it is clear that he has read some writings of Islamic authors, and regards at least one as containing "all the principles of pure religion and undefiled."<sup>309</sup> Indeed, this sermon overall, according to Albert Outler, the editor of that volume, "comes closer to an explicit statement of his vision of universal saving grace than anything else in the Wesley corpus."<sup>310</sup> Outler may be taking that vision a little too far; if nothing else, Wesley's

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<sup>309</sup> Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley. Vol. 3: Sermons III: 71-114*, 3:495. This is a challenging sermon to read, due to the contemporary language Wesley uses to describe adherents of other religions, who are often labeled "heathens," and my students have often struggled with it when I have assigned it to them. At the same time, it is remarkable reading, given the cultural context within which it was written.

<sup>310</sup> Wesley, 3:491.

continued pastoral emphasis on personal salvation suggests that he never made it to the point of universalism.

Wesley's framing of the activity of divine grace—in particular, his insistence that the restorative actions of prevenient grace are present in everyone, and that those actions “waiteth not for the call of man”—portray an understanding of divine grace that certainly points toward an inclusive view of salvation which emphasizes an emerging relationship with the divine at an individual level.<sup>311</sup> Tillich's framing of the activity of grace—working both in the human heart, and through nature and history—inevitably leads in that same direction.

That both Wesley and Tillich would arrive at a place of broad inclusivism is unsurprising given their theological stances. Both emphasize the operations of divine grace working toward restoration of human brokenness and the reunification of the individual with the divine, even if the terminology they employ to describe those goals is different. Both see divine grace as working universally; that is, it is present in or around every individual, creating the possibility of restored relationship with God. While both clearly allow for the rejection of that grace, one also sees similarities in the ways in which it works. Both see grace working restoratively within each person, and both see grace working through the world to create possibilities for seeing the reality of the divine.

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<sup>311</sup> Wesley, 3:207. This particular sentence, from Wesley's sermon *On Working Out Our Own Salvation* (first preached in 1732, later published with the same sentiment in 1785 - a sermon, then, which spans from the early Wesley to the late) has led many scholars to describe Wesley's conception of prevenient grace as irresistible in its presence and activity, although not its ultimate effect. Therefore, when Wesley and Calvin are compared, saving grace is irresistible for the elect in Calvin, while prevenient grace is (in a sense) irresistible for Wesley.

This also means that both Wesley and Tillich were destined, inevitably, to grapple with the challenges of the validity of non-Christian religions. Wesley framed the presence and activity of grace as based in divine initiative which is—in significant ways—irresistible. Tillich views the divine as the Ground of Being. Both of these concepts push them toward some useful accounting of other faiths, as both suggest some sort of universal presence and activity of the divine.

Even if it was inevitable that they did so, neither Wesley nor Tillich were particularly successful at engaging non-Christian religions; both remained primarily focused on the Euro-centric/American (Christian) religious frameworks. Both, however, recorded encounters with non-Christocentric religious beliefs, Tillich's largely with Buddhism, and Wesley's, to a smaller extent with Islam. Tillich's exposure was largely later in life, made possible by a trip to Japan in 1960, with other journeys around the same time to Greece, Egypt, and Israel.<sup>312</sup>

The visit to Japan particularly influenced his thought, and became the basis for the 1961 Bampton Lectures at Columbia University; in turn, those lectures (as is common) were published, giving us *Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions*.<sup>313</sup> As promising as the title sounds, Thomas Altizer offered this critique in his review of the work: "Despite the fact that Tillich has travelled to Japan, he is no more ready now than he ever was to write of the relation of Christianity to the non-Christian, and the reader will not find in this book an encounter of Christianity with the world religions." This is a

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<sup>312</sup> Pauck and Pauck, *Paul Tillich*, 258.

<sup>313</sup> Paul Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963).

valid critique, although even Altizer allows that “Tillich may yet supply the ground for such an encounter by means of his understanding of faith and history.”<sup>314</sup> In Tillich’s final lecture, *The Significance of the History of Religions for the Systematic Theologian*, he had clearly started working toward an overarching understanding of an underlying typology of the “Religion of the Concrete Spirit” that crosses that boundaries of faith traditions. This approach took into account three specific elements: “the experience of the holy within the finite,” “a critical movement against the demonization of the sacramental,” and the element of “ought to be.” The experiential element seeks out and honors the “Holy here and now which can be seen, heard, dealt with, in spite of its mysterious character” – those places and moments when the divine is made visible. The “critical movement” guards against the human tendency to make the holy into “an object which can be handled.” Finally, the “ought to be” offers both ethical and prophetic potential related to justice (specifically, in this nascent framework, the “denial of justice in the name of holiness”).<sup>315</sup>

Mircea Eliade saw the seeds of a potentially rich engagement in Tillich’s thought, as he reflected on their experiences as they jointly led seminars on the *History of Religion and Systematic Theology* at the University of Chicago in 1964; here, he writes after Tillich’s death:

We will never know what would have been the result of Paul Tillich’s encounter with primitive and oriental religions. But it is highly significant

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<sup>314</sup> Altizer, “A Theonomy in Our Time?,” 357.

<sup>315</sup> Tillich, *The Future of Religions*, 86–88.

that he surmised the decisive role of such confrontations, not only for the Christian theologian, but also for the world at large.<sup>316</sup>

Both Wesley and Tillich were just beginning truly to engage non-Christian religions toward the end of their lives. While this timing is unfortunate, the insights of both Altizer and Eliade are correct; Tillich's theological framework provides a foundation for recognizing the activity of divine grace in other faith traditions, as well as the broader culture overall, whether religious or not.

Further, both Tillich and Wesley understood the nature of the divine—and the nature of divine grace—in ways that invite deep reflection in terms of the intersections offered in pluralistic (and even non-religious) space. For Tillich, the Spiritual Presence might be particularly present and moving in the Spiritual Community, but it is present and moving—to some degree—everywhere. For Wesley, prevenient grace is at work in and around each individual, drawing them ever forward—from wherever they are on the path—toward a deeper relationship with God. For those who are conscious of the divine, both Tillich and Wesley see opportunities for individual participation; for those who are unaware of the divine, both see a drawing power working within and around individuals to bring them to a place of awareness.

#### Tillich and Antitheological Evangelicalism

Returning once again to the very first pages of his *Systematic*, where Tillich explains the purpose of his systematizing project, we are reminded of his view that the purpose of theology is to 1) state the truth of the Christian message, and 2) to interpret that truth for each generation. “Theology moves back and forth between two poles, the

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<sup>316</sup> Tillich, 35.

eternal truth of its foundation and the temporal situation in which the eternal truth must be received.”<sup>317</sup> In Tillich’s view, few attempts at systematizing theology are able to keep these demands in balance; either the truth is lost, or the system is unable to speak to the present situation, or some combination of the two. American fundamentalism (which Tillich equates with “European theological orthodoxy”) can combine with an “antitheological bias” (his example is the “biblicist-evangelical form” of religion) with the result that the “theological truth of yesterday is defended as an unchangeable message against the theological truth of today.”<sup>318</sup> Fundamentalism speaks out of the past, missing the present situation; therefore, it attempts to elevate the finite to the level of the infinite; so, for Tillich, fundamentalism and biblicist-evangelicalism tends toward the demonic.

The antitheological bias that Tillich references was visible in his day and is even more evident today. This becomes a game of competing bases of authority. Stenger, drawing on work from Stephens and Giberson, notes that the leader who is “anointed by God” may—particularly if often quoting scripture—hold more authority than leaders with solid educational training.<sup>319</sup>

For many conservative people of faith, the educated authorities, such as psychologists, biologists and physicists, historians, and liberal humanists ignored religion, teach humanist rather than godly values and question the authority of all dead white males.<sup>320</sup>

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<sup>317</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume 1*, 3.

<sup>318</sup> Tillich, 3–4.

<sup>319</sup> Stenger, Mary Ann, “The Missing Center: Implications for American Religion” (Last Lecture, University of Louisville, April 2012), 4.

<sup>320</sup> Stenger, Mary Ann, 5.



For Tillich, of course, this is the mistake of speaking from the past, and ignoring the present situation.

“Evangelicalism tends to be anti-elitist, sometimes in ways that are admirable and authentically democratic. Humble evangelical preachers led a movement that emphasized conversion and charisma and had little time for the life of the mind.” In many of these instances, the sense that an individual is “anointed” to ministry has nothing to do with any other credentials:

Anointing, though it brings great authority, is typically unrelated to intellectual credibility. A winsome preacher who can quote the Bible and tell heartwarming stories of God’s blessings may possess more authority on global warming for believers than an informed climatologist with 100 publications and a doctorate from Harvard.<sup>321</sup>

Conversely, other faith groups—such as those which emerge from the Wesleyan tradition—set strong educational requirements for ordained/licensed leaders and may also require additional education as time goes on. This focus on education reflects John Wesley’s passion for learning, and his requirements for a well-read body of clergy.

#### Shared Pastoral Focus

In Chapter 3, following Outler (and Maddox), we described Wesley as a “folk-theologian,” noting that his “self-chosen constituency was the poor and the laboring classes; his self-chosen role was as *their* pastor, spiritual director, and theologian.”<sup>322</sup>

Wesley was deeply aware of the needs of the common folk in his care, and later under the

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<sup>321</sup> Randall J. Stephens and Karl Giberson, *The Anointed: Evangelical Truth in a Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 8.

<sup>322</sup> Outler, “John Wesley: Folk-Theologian,” 151. Italics his.

care of those he installed to lead societies and, eventually, the new Methodist denomination born in America.

As we have seen, Wesley invited individuals to delve deeply into their faiths, going beyond the head-focused faith that he recognized as prevalent in the Anglican churches of his day. His focus was a faith that united head and heart, calling each person into an ever-deepening relationship with the divine which was made evident in their daily lives. Among his theological concerns was the dominant theology of Calvin, which created an exclusive faith community and preached a theology of not only salvation but damnation as well, where the individual had no freedom of response.

While Tillich was a pastor—and, as we have seen, spent time offering pastoral support in the midst of war—it would not be quite accurate to identify him as a pastor in his later life.

However, Tillich himself offers a helpful classification for his own work: that of the *answering theologian*. This is the role of the individual who understands the task of theology as an apologetic one (and, therefore, as “answering theology”). This form of theology, described in the first pages of the first volume of his *Systematic*, “answers the questions implied in the ‘situation’ in the power of the eternal message and with means provided by the situation whose questions it answers.”<sup>323</sup> For Tillich, this is the central role of the theologian, and is the third element of the nature of the theologian described in his sermon *The Theologian*, located near the end of *The Eternal Now*, the first published

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<sup>323</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume 1*, 6.

collection of his sermons (the first two elements are believing and self-surrendering).<sup>324</sup> Tait notes that there is a danger to this approach: “namely, that the message gets distorted when fitted to prior questions.”<sup>325</sup> For Tillich, this is worth the risk, as it deploys the symbols of the day as tools to answer the transcendent and eternal questions—hence, the symbols are relevant to the situation.

Tillich saw the prototypical answering theologian in the life of the Apostle Paul, who demonstrated this role in his conversations with the Athenians in Acts 17. There, Tillich identifies three tasks; first, the fact that the Athenians worship an “unknown god” indicates that they possess some knowledge of the divine, even in their “religious ignorance.” The first task is to help the Athenians understand that they themselves are “within God” (Tillich’s conception of God as the ground of being is quite visible here).<sup>326</sup> The second task is to demonstrate that the Athenians are replacing the true divine with images of their own creation; that is, the answering theologian must “discover the false gods in the individual soul and in society.”<sup>327</sup> Those idols are fully separate from God; there is “no synthesis possible” between the idols and God.<sup>328</sup>

Finally, Paul introduces the Athenians to the New Being, present in Jesus the Christ, in whom “the Logos of theology is manifest.” Tillich’s closing words in this sermon are worth including here:

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<sup>324</sup> Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations*, 118ff.

<sup>325</sup> Tait, *The Promise of Tillich*, 18.

<sup>326</sup> Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations*, 127.

<sup>327</sup> Tillich, 128.

<sup>328</sup> Tillich, 129.

We are only theologians when we interpret this paradox, this stumbling-block for idealism and realism, for the weak and the strong, for both pagans and Jews. As theologians, we must interpret that paradox, and not throw paradoxical phrases at the minds of the people. We must not preserve or produce artificial stumbling-blocks, miracle-stories, legends, myths, and other sophisticated paradoxical talk. We must not distort, by ecclesiastical and theological arrogance, that great cosmic paradox that there is victory over death within the world of death itself. We must not impose the heavy burden of wrong stumbling-blocks upon those who ask us questions. But neither must we empty the true paradox of its power. For true theological existence is the witnessing to Him Whose yoke is easy and Whose burden is light, to Him Who is the true paradox.<sup>329</sup>

In these words, we see Tillich the academician making clear his pastoral and apologetic goals. The task of the theologian is to present the paradoxes of the divine in such a way that individuals are invited to participate in the process of exploring and, to a degree, dwelling in the paradoxes themselves. Tillich's foundational project is to both frame the nature of our estrangement from the ground of being, and to facilitate our reunion.

Wesley would not have understood his role as that of theologian; it does not seem that he used the words theology or theologian in his writings. However, he certainly saw his role—in the context of his day—as one that involved answering the various challenges present in the world.

### **The Reality of Sin and the Mystery of Grace**

Sin, variously described, was a central concept in the theological frameworks of both Wesley and Tillich. This concept symbolizes the brokenness of the human-divine relationship, and this brokenness is the existential issue which necessitates the divine activity which we understand as grace. As both a historian and a theologian, Tillich was

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<sup>329</sup> Tillich, 129.

well aware of Wesley's framework of grace, and both saw the divine initiative which enabled the response of each individual to a restored relationship with God.

### Sin as Estrangement – Grace as Restoration

To understand Tillich's conception of grace, we first recall his understanding of sin, which is based in (but not coterminous with) separation. "To be in the state of sin is to be in the state of separation," and this is a threefold separation: separation of "individual lives, separation of a man from himself, and separation of all men from the Ground of being."<sup>330</sup> This extracts the concepts of sinful acts from the "state" of sin, and—to a greater or lesser degree—we know that we are separated:

We know that we are estranged from something to which we really belong, and with which we *should* be united. We know that the fate of separation is not merely a natural event like a flash of sudden lightning, but that it is an experience in which we actively participate, in which our whole personality is involved, and that, as fate, it is also *guilt*. Separation which is fate and guilt constitutes the meaning of the word "sin."<sup>331</sup>

For Tillich, sin and grace exist in a mutual embrace: "We do not even have a knowledge of sin unless we have also experienced the unity of life, which is grace. And conversely, we could not grasp the meaning of grace without having experienced the separation of life, which is sin."<sup>332</sup>

Importantly, Tillich did not see grace as simple divine toleration;

for some people, grace is the willingness of a divine king and father to forgive over and over again the foolishness of his subjects and children. We must reject such a concept of grace; for it is merely childish destruction of human dignity. For others, grace is a magic power in the

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<sup>330</sup> Tillich, 154–55.

<sup>331</sup> Tillich, 155. Italics his.

<sup>332</sup> Tillich, 155.

dark places of the soul, but a power without any significance for practical life, a quickly vanishing and useless idea. For others, grace is the benevolence that we may find beside the cruelty and destructiveness of life.<sup>333</sup>

None of these conceptions of grace satisfy Tillich, although he does concede that precisely what constitutes grace is somewhat mysterious. Whatever it is, though, it is active:

In grace something is overcome; grace occurs ‘in spite of’ something; grace occurs in spite of separation and estrangement. Grace is the *reunion* of life with life, the *reconciliation* of the self with itself. Grace is the acceptance of that which is rejected. Grace transforms fate into a meaningful destiny; it changes guilt into confidence and courage.<sup>334</sup>

Tillich’s quasi-existentialism is clear in this area; “the state of our whole life is estrangement from others and ourselves, because we are estranged from the Ground of our being, because we are estranged from the origin and aim of our life.” We are living in a state of alienation; our essence and our existence are dissonant.

Tillich’s framing of the nature of sin served his answering theologian task well, as it was both accessible and—to some degree—comforting. Reflecting on the responses of those who heard Tillich speak about sin and grace, the Paucks emphasized Tillich’s ability to share profound theological truths in ways which offered hope::

People in the pew hearing that sin was not a single immoral act but a universal state of separation in which man found himself alienated from himself, from others, and from God, felt relieved and illuminated. Hearing that grace was not a virtue or a state of perfection but a state of reunion with that from which they had become separated, they felt comforted. Hearing that God was not a “being beside others” but the “Ground of Being” or “Being Itself,” they may have felt somewhat confused—not

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<sup>333</sup> Tillich, 155–56.

<sup>334</sup> Tillich, 156. Italics his.

always able to follow Tillich's use of abstractions—but were stimulated in their quest for understanding.<sup>335</sup>

Wesley understood sin in ways which foreshadow Tillich's estrangement, even if the terminology is different. Tillich understood sin as separation which yearns for unity; Wesley understood sin as a corruption of the human spirit which results in the desire of individuals to rule over themselves, guided by self-will. In turn, this leads to corruption of the *imago Dei* and separation from the divine will; it is this separation that is the focus of the operations of prevenient grace in its narrow sense.

Tillich also sees the *imago Dei* as corrupt; in his thought, this relates to the corruption of the divine logos within the human: "Man is the image of God because his *logos* is analogous to the divine *logos*, so that the divine *logos* can appear as a man without destroying the humanity of man." Put another way, the pure state of the human allows for the "ontological elements are complete and united on a creaturely basis," just as they are—albeit fully and uncorrupted—in the ground of being, which we identify as God.<sup>336</sup>

For Tillich, divine grace is tied to the unity of life, which provides insight into the locus of the activity of grace. He explicitly rejects the Roman Catholic doctrine, which he describes as "supranatural substance," in favor of the Protestant understanding, where the essence of grace is "forgiveness received in the center of one's personality" (visible here

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<sup>335</sup> Pauck and Pauck, *Paul Tillich*, 229.

<sup>336</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume 1*, 259.

is his focus on justification, a topic which we will examine shortly).<sup>337</sup> Later, he describes grace as that which “qualifies all relations between God and man in such a way that they are freely inaugurated by God and in no way dependent on anything the creature does or desires.”<sup>338</sup> Put simply, “sin is estrangement; grace is reconciliation.”<sup>339</sup> It is, for the Protestant, centered on “forgiveness received in the center of one’s personality.”<sup>340</sup>

Wesley and Tillich both clearly recognize the divine initiative present in God’s restorative and inviting work, which echoes Augustine’s mature realizations of the critical nature of grace in enabling humans to respond to the reality of the divine. At the same time, Augustine limited the effects of saving grace to those who were predestined to be part of the elect; Wesley and Tillich see the effects of this operative grace as available universally.

Grace is also the very source of faith, as Tillich himself points out in *The Protestant Era*: “either faith is itself a creation of grace (of the divine Spirit), or it is a human action of subjection to a report about grace”; for Tillich, it is the former, not the latter.<sup>341</sup> It is “the infusion of love...the power which overcomes estrangement.”<sup>342</sup> Siegfried offers a powerful summation of Tillich’s conception of divine grace, as

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<sup>337</sup> Tillich, 258. An extended critique of the Catholic doctrines involving supranaturalism is visible in the majority of this volume. Both implicit and explicit critiques of Catholicism are visible throughout his theological works (less so his popular writings and sermons).

<sup>338</sup> Tillich, 285.

<sup>339</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume 2: Existence and the Christ*, 57.

<sup>340</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume 1*, 258.

<sup>341</sup> Tillich, *The Protestant Era*, 210.

<sup>342</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume 2: Existence and the Christ*, 49.



the *prius* of action and thought, the unity of regeneration, judgment, and justification, the idea of the Kairos as a divine manifestation out of which political and social transformation follow... Grace appears at the boundary line of existence in the moment in which man is delivered to nothingness and despair.<sup>343</sup>

Tillich rarely suggests a locus for the activity of divine grace, explicitly or metaphorically. However, bearing in mind his understanding of God as the very ground of being, to understand grace as a permeating power is reasonable. The locus, then, is wherever it needs to be in the moment; with Tillich's interest in history, and his focus on culture (not to mention his Germanic relationship with nature), Tillich saw that grace works through multiple channels to draw the individual toward reconciliation.

Tillich identifies two distinct forms of divine grace, and then offers a third form as well (which particularly resonates with Wesley). The first form is "simple and direct," offering "participation in being to every thing that is," and providing "participation to every individual being."<sup>344</sup> This is the driving force of the divine, working to reunite being with its ground. This does not abrogate freedom; the activity is not coercive. It somehow goes beyond what the creature can accomplish given the situation in which it lives; "Grace does not destroy essential freedom; but it does what freedom under the conditions of existence cannot do, namely, it reunites the estranged."<sup>345</sup>

The second form provides a paradox in that it crosses a gap between being and the ground of being, giving "fulfillment to that which is separated from the source of

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<sup>343</sup> Theodor Siegfried, "Tillich's Theology for the German Situation," in *The Theology of Paul Tillich*, ed. Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1964), 80.

<sup>344</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume 1*, 285.

<sup>345</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume 2: Existence and the Christ*, 79.

fulfillment,” providing acceptance to “that which is unacceptable.”<sup>346</sup> Again, note the element of forgiveness here, related to Tillich’s (and Wesley’s) emphasis on justification. This was a recurring theme in his writings and sermons, and is central in his popular book *The Courage to Be*, which traces existential anxiety through the history of thought and theology, and urges the reader to “accept the forgiveness of sins, not as an abstract assertion but as the fundamental experience in the encounter with God.”<sup>347</sup> That it does so in the frame of an exploration of the history of anxiety is remarkable; that it became a best seller, described as a “masterpiece,” ensured that his message (largely framed as forgiveness rather than justification) was carried far and wide.<sup>348</sup>

The third form of grace serves to mediate the first two, while also uniting specific elements of both. This Tillich refers to, initially, as “providential grace,” which belongs both to “creative grace” and “saving grace.” This is necessary since “the purpose of God’s directing or providential creativity is fulfillment of the creature in spite of resistance.” Tillich specifically identifies this third, mediating form of grace using its classical name: prevenient grace (*gratia praeveniens*). This form of grace “prepares for the acceptance of saving grace through the processes of nature and history.”<sup>349</sup> Tillich here frames the operative activity of prevenient grace in two helpful ways: first, grace works through nature, which Tillich uses in a common form as that which is present in

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<sup>346</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume 1*, 285.

<sup>347</sup> Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, 165.

<sup>348</sup> Pauck and Pauck, *Paul Tillich*, 225.

<sup>349</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume 1*, 285.

the world—the whole of the physical world. History is the unfolding events in the world and, in particular, the events in the life of the individual. In the first volume of his *Systematic*, Tillich identifies those nature and history as two of the three elements which shape an individual's "destiny"; the third element is "myself," which freely participates with the other two in shaping significant aspects of the individual's future.<sup>350</sup> If grace is working operatively through nature and history, it is then present to every individual, and it is up to each individual to freely respond or not (or, using our language, to begin to cooperate with the divine grace which is present everywhere).

Tillich also recognizes that the reunification of individuals with the divine ground is a reunification (if only partial, under the conditions of existence) of existence with essence. Essence is "that from which being has 'fallen,' the true and undistorted nature" of the being/individual; indeed, the difference between essence and existence is "the distinction between the created and actual world."<sup>351</sup>

Wesley's understanding of the operations of grace are framed differently than Tillich's—in fairness, Tillich had a different set of foundations from which to build—but the core concepts are remarkably similar. Humans were created in the likeness of God, but have fallen, resulting in separation which the Holy Spirit works to remedy. Tillich's framework echoes Wesley here with different language; for Wesley, this is the loss or corruption of the image(s) of God as we noted previously. For Tillich, it is the separation of essence from existence. Both trace this separation to the narrative of fallen humanity.

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<sup>350</sup> Tillich, 184.

<sup>351</sup> Tillich, 202–4.

Through the restorative actions of grace, individuals may have the ability to respond to God's invitation to restoration, which offers some degree of reunion. Wesley described the initial aspect of this restorative work as the restoration of the natural image of God within the individual; in our terminology, we describe this as a work of operative grace. Precisely how this occurs is not addressed; at the same time, this mysterious work is absolutely crucial for Wesley, as it provides the basis for a free response on the part of the individual. It is the natural image of God in the human which responds to God's gracious offer of relationship.

Wesley, like Tillich, emphasized the need for justification, understanding that as the beginning of a new phase of reconciliation and growth. Wesley did not emphasize grace as being present in the moments of despair (Tillich's boundary line of existence, as noted by Siegfried), although that was precisely his experience at Aldersgate. Justification allows for the forgiveness of the sins which result from the fallen nature of the individual, and it is this gracious act (which does not take place in the individual, but in God's view of the individual) which allows for a new beginning, where grace begins to work co-operatively with the individual's movement along a trajectory of faith (whatever that may look like).

Wesley did not frame his understanding of the breadth of grace as participation in quite the way that Tillich did; at the same time, it is clear from his writings and sermons that he saw grace permeating the world. His emphasis on prevenient grace went farther than Tillich's in terms of a named, identifiable operation (and, as we will see in the next section, Wesley prescribes specific actions which allow the individual to welcome divine grace and incorporate it in intentional ways), although it is named and visible in both.

For Tillich, this entire process is the result of the theonomous working of the Spiritual Presence, seeking to bring restoration and reunification of being with its divine ground. This framing is helpful for us, as it incorporates both the Wesleyan and Tillichian perspectives of the divine work of reunion. Tillich sees this work as taking place through nature and history—essentially, all that is around us, and all that the individual (and the world) has experienced. Wesley’s writings identify both the narrow and broad descriptions of prevenient grace, the first working to bring the individual to repentance which leads to justification, and the second working around everyone, drawing them to a deeper relationship with God. Indeed, for Wesley, sanctifying grace (which is more fully co-operative in nature) would continue Tillich’s theonomous work of the Spiritual Presence; all of this is rooted in divine grace, seeking to reunite humanity with God.

Both Wesley and Tillich recognized the relational aspects of co-operative grace as well. Grace may be recognized in connections with others, and in connections that are made with the world through communities. It is in these relationships that grace can be made visible, more fully co-operated with, and have profound potential for transformation. Each, then, focused to some extent on the potential of what Tillich referred to as the Spiritual Community to intentionally offer space for the work of the Spirit to be active, working both operatively and co-operatively.

### **The Role of Community**

We have already identified that Tillich is more of a pastoral figure than many academicians. He and Wesley describe similar understandings of the corruption of the *imago Dei*, and the resulting need for divine grace. Further, both he and Wesley focus on

community-centered praxis, emphasizing the potential for divine action within and through relationships.

### Wesley's Means of Grace and Rules for Community

For Wesley, the community provided a centered space for sharing and growing in faith. We have previously noted that the early Methodist societies were intended to enhance the faith lives of those who were already participating in the ministries of the Church of England, in ways similar to the SPCK groups of his youth. While these early Methodist renewal groups would eventually become the seed of more than one faith tradition—all with some degree of focus on Wesleyan theology—the emphasis on intentional growth remained. Wesley understood this growth to be the result of ongoing interaction with divine grace, as each individual cooperates with the inner work done by the Holy Spirit. In the ideal community—perhaps a society following the Wesleyan model—mutual support, methodical living, and relational accountability all serve to create opportunities for this cooperation.

However, Wesley also clearly envisioned that the means of grace would facilitate this growth, particularly when made part of a disciplined life. These are intentional actions, some of them ritualized, others primarily focused on personal behaviors and commitments, which—while having no salvific power in and of themselves—create opportunities for the believer to encounter divine grace, and to mature in their faith.<sup>352</sup>

Wesley defined the means of grace as “outward signs, words, or actions, ordained of

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<sup>352</sup> Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley. Vol. 1: Sermons I: 1-33*, 1:378ff. For an explicit refutation of the suggestion that this constitutes “salvation by works,” see p. 391.

God, and appointed for this end, to be the ordinary channels whereby he might convey to men, preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace.”<sup>353</sup>

While the means of grace involve both individual and communal actions, both types are supported by the presence of a community which emphasizes the practices. Wesley himself notes that these practices are not innovative; the term “has been generally used in the Christian church for many ages,” but also identifies that they too often become empty motions, as “some began to mistake the means for the end, and to place religion rather in doing those outward works, than in a heart renewed after the image of God.”<sup>354</sup>

In his initial sermon entitled *The Means of Grace* (ca. 1740s, specific date indeterminate), Wesley includes the sacraments of the Anglican tradition, Baptism and the Eucharist, as well as prayer; reading, discussing, or meditating on Scripture. Later (at least by 1763), an enumerated listing would be provided as part of the *Large Minutes*, where the means are classified as either Instituted or Prudential. The Instituted means include:

prayer: private, family, public; consisting of deprecation, petition, intercession, thanksgiving;...searching the Scripture, by (1) Reading: *constantly*, some part of every day, and at all vacant hours; regularly, all the New Testament (at least);...carefully, with the *Notes, seriously, deliberately*, with much prayer preceding, accompanying, and following; *fruitfully*, immediately practicing what you learn there...(2) Meditating [on the Scripture readings]...(3) Hearing [what the Scripture says, presumably].<sup>355</sup>

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<sup>353</sup> Wesley, 1:381.

<sup>354</sup> Wesley, 1:378.

<sup>355</sup> John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley. Vol 10: The Methodist Societies, The Minutes of Conference*, ed. Henry D. Rack, The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley 10 (Nashville: Abingdon Press,

Other Instituted means included fasting, a means discovered during Wesley's Oxford days; the Lord's Supper, taken "at every opportunity"; and Christian Conferencing (focused on mutual accountability), which was to be undertaken despite "how difficult and important it is to order our conversation right," and always to be "*in grace... seasoned with salt... [intended to] minister grace to the hearers,*" preceded and followed by prayer.<sup>356</sup>

The Prudential means referred to the commitment of each individual to participate in common Christian life, "avoiding evil... doing good... growing in grace," with explicit reference to attending all meetings of the society, as well as the class or band (a smaller subgroup of the societies).

Further, participants were to deny themselves every "useless pleasure of sense," to be "temperate in all things" and to set a proper example to others (largely, but not solely, directed at clergy). The directions went so far as to recommend following a healthy diet, avoid eating too late (and, apparently, avoiding meat at suppertime), not overindulging at meals, drinking plenty of water, and laying off of alcohol.<sup>357</sup> The Minutes finishes the list of means with this:

3. Wherein do you "take up your cross" daily? Do you cheerfully "bear your cross" (whatever is grievous to nature) as a gift of God, and labour to profit thereby? 4. Do you endeavour to set God always before you? To see his eye continually fixed upon you? Never can you use these means but a

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2011), 855–56. *Notes* refers to Wesley's published notes on the Bible, which were supplied to each society. All italics in original.

<sup>356</sup> Wesley, 856–57. Italics in original.

<sup>357</sup> Wesley, 857–58.



blessing will ensue. And the more you use them, the more will you grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>358</sup>

The means of grace for Wesley were a central component of his focus on Christian community. Over time, they have been further interpreted and enumerated in other ways, usually with emphasis on separated works of piety and works of mercy, each then broken down into individual and communal practices.<sup>359</sup>

Echoes of the SPCK are clearly present in these guidelines, as are elements of Jeremy Taylor's *Rule and Exercises of Holy Living* (at meals, "be severe in your judgment concerning your proportions, and let no occasion make you enlarge far beyond your ordinary").<sup>360</sup> The powerful impact of young Wesley's experiences—both at Epworth and, later, with the Oxford Methodists—continued to be visible as he helped others consider how best to shape Christian community, and how to faithfully live within it at the individual level.

#### Tillich's Method of Correlation in the Theonomous Community

The actions Wesley emphasizes—particularly those which encourage individuals to engage in Christian community—foster participation in groups which are likely to be, in Tillich's view, (at least somewhat) theonomous in nature. Tillich's conception of the Spiritual Community is framed quite differently from Wesley's tightly-focused groups, although, as with Wesley, the community is not coterminous with formal church

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<sup>358</sup> Wesley, 858.

<sup>359</sup> United Methodist Communications, "The Wesleyan Means of Grace," The United Methodist Church, accessed April 16, 2019, <http://www.umc.org/how-we-serve/the-wesleyan-means-of-grace>.

<sup>360</sup> Taylor, *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Living*, 37.

structures. And, while Wesley anticipated that individuals would also be participating in formal church services in addition to the societies, Tillich's understanding of the latent church, examined in Chapter 4, allows for faith expressions which do not fit the classic image of a church (and, as we have seen, that understanding was expanding late in his life).

Tillich's *Systematic* project was born of his life in America, a response to the situation he discovered here. As we have seen, his arrival in his new homeland prompted a different, renewed approach to sharing his theology.<sup>361</sup> Even as he worked from notes dating back as far as his profound transformations following World War II, the true focus on systematizing his thought came once he was in a position of explaining his system to a new audience. And, while the "structure of the theological system follows from the method of correlation," that method—the backbone of his *Systematic* volumes—was also key to his understanding of the role of the church, be it latent or manifest.<sup>362</sup> As already noted,

*the task of theology is mediation, mediation between the eternal criterion of truth as it is manifest in the picture of Jesus as the Christ and the changing experiences of individuals and groups, their varying questions and their categories of perceiving reality.*<sup>363</sup>

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<sup>361</sup> See the section entitled *The Tillichian Approach to Theology* in Chapter Four of this volume for a description of this process.

<sup>362</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume 1*, 66.

<sup>363</sup> Tillich, *The Protestant Era*, xiii. Emphasis his.

Embedded within that task is the role of the faith community as well, serving as the locus of interpretation and growth, and actively seeking to help individuals find answers to the anxieties of life.

According to Tillich, the authentic Spiritual Community is theonomous in nature; that is, there is the potential for the reunification of being with its ground (for which we use the symbol “God”). The very term Spiritual Community “points to the personal-communal character in which the New Being appears.”<sup>364</sup> This is not a matter of applying external laws to individuals; it is a matter of calling them to authentic being, as the community, under the impact of the Spiritual Presence, enables Tillich’s moral imperative to be lived out more fully. As we have already seen, this imperative is “the command to become what one potentially is, a *person* within a community of persons.”<sup>365</sup> Elsewhere, he defines it as “the demand to become what one is essentially and therefore potentially. It is the power of man’s being, given to him by nature, which he shall actualize in time and space.”<sup>366</sup>

In terms of motivating power, within the Spiritual Community the motivation comes not from the law, but from grace, as “the person becomes aware of his infinite value or, ontologically expressed, of his belonging to the transcendent union of unambiguous life which is the Divine Life.”<sup>367</sup> Grace abounds; forgiveness/justification is

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<sup>364</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume 3: Life and the Spirit, History and the Kingdom of God*, 159.

<sup>365</sup> Tillich, *Morality and Beyond*, 19. Italics Tillich’s. See the earlier discussion in Chapter Four of this paper.

<sup>366</sup> Tillich, 20.

<sup>367</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume 3: Life and the Spirit, History and the Kingdom of God*, 159.

encountered and experienced; and a sense of belonging can be discovered and embraced by the individual. Within the Spiritual Community under the impact of the Spiritual Presence, the moral imperative may be lived out because of the possibilities presented by the very being of the community:

The moral act, the act of personal self-constitution in the encounter with other persons, is based on participation in the transcendent union. The participation makes the moral act possible. By its Spiritual impact, the preceding transcendent union creates the actual union of the centered person with itself, the encountered world, and the ground of self and world.<sup>368</sup>

Even here, Tillich is clear that the unity is incomplete, limited by the conditions of existence. Still, the Spiritual Community provides an ontological space where theonomy can be expressed, even if the form of it is incomplete or partially hidden:

This description of the Spiritual Community shows it to be both as manifest and hidden as the New Being in all its expressions. It is as manifest and as hidden as the central manifestation of the New Being in Jesus as the Christ; it is as manifest and as hidden as the Spiritual Presence which creates the New Being in the history of mankind and, indirectly, in the universe as a whole. This is the reason for the use of the term “Spiritual Community,” for everything Spiritual is manifest in hiddenness. It is open only to faith as the state of being grasped by the Spiritual Presence... Only Spirit discerns Spirit.<sup>369</sup>

For Tillich, the entire *Systematic* project was framed around the method of correlation; the same is true of the Spiritual Community. In the relationships within the community, the existential questions can be asked and, under the power of the Spiritual Presence, answers and discoveries are made possible, even if only fragmentarily so. In the theonomous space of the Spiritual Community, the fundamental goals of the method

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<sup>368</sup> Tillich, 159. Capitalization his.

<sup>369</sup> Tillich, 161.

of correlation can be accomplished, as it is designed to explain “the contents of the Christian faith through existential questions and theological answers in mutual interdependence.”<sup>370</sup>

### **The Ambiguities of Life and the Limits of Existence**

Both Wesley and Tillich were deeply aware of the challenges faced by individuals, and both were insistent that faith should offer answers to those challenges; indeed, faith must offer real solutions, not just abstract promises. Tillich’s language, and the ways in which he framed these challenges, benefitted from a number of influences unknown to Wesley; yet both wound up with similar emphases on lived faith which is expressed through justice-directed action by those who claimed commitment to faith.

#### Tillich: Existence, Essence, and the Potential of the Boundary

Tillich is commonly classified as an existentialist, although this is a slippery label for him. Tillich regularly utilized existentialist concepts in his work, even including himself in the broad category of “existentialist” in some writings.<sup>371</sup> Elsewhere, he explicitly rejected the label, even as he accepted the “existentialist element” in his “own thought.”<sup>372</sup> Here, we will explore some aspects of his thought in this area, to which I refer, for lack of a more specific term, as quasi-existentialist.

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<sup>370</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume 1*, 60.

<sup>371</sup> Paul Tillich, “Relation of Metaphysics and Theology,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 10, no. 1 (September 1956): 63. In this article, Tillich includes his own theology in the “present-day Protestant theology” which is “existentialist,” even if problematic and worthy of critique.

<sup>372</sup> Paul Tillich, “Existentialism, Psychotherapy, and the Nature of Man,” *Pastoral Psychology* 11, no. 5 (June 1960): 10. Here, Tillich speaks of his own thought “in which the existentialist element has a definite place, although I would not call myself an existentialist.”

Tillich is clear that theology must deal effectively with questions of being, particularly in terms of the questions of essence and existence. For Tillich, that is the whole point:

A complete discussion of the relation of essence to existence is identical with the entire theological system. The distinction between essence and existence, which religiously speaking is the distinction between the created and the actual world, is the backbone of the whole body of theological thought. It must be elaborated in every part of the theological system.<sup>373</sup>

While he does explicitly tend to issues of essence and existence throughout his *Systematic*, he is always concerned with the ways in which the discussion impacts the individual/community in the real world: “Essential as well as existential elements are always abstractions from the concrete actuality of being, namely, ‘Life...’ For the sake of analysis, however, abstractions are necessary, even if they have a strongly negative sound.”<sup>374</sup> However, his tendency is to draw the conversation quickly back from the abstract to the actual; his intent is to provide guidance back to the concrete, and to envision the potential of the reunification of the estranged.

As we noted previously, Tillich understood himself to operate at a variety of boundaries, which were for him places of creative potential.<sup>375</sup> This understanding set him apart from others in terms of both the centered-ness of the faith community and the decentered-ness of the boundary areas. A helpful example here is Dietrich Bonhoeffer,

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<sup>373</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume 1*, 204.

<sup>374</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume 2: Existence and the Christ*, 28.

<sup>375</sup> Tillich, *On the Boundary: An Autobiographical Sketch*, 13 ff. Tillich uses this language about himself in many places, but this text focuses on his self-perceived person existence in multiple spaces of tension.

for whom the boundary is a place of powerlessness: “The church stands, not at the boundaries where human powers give out, but in the middle of the village.”<sup>376</sup> For Bonhoeffer, the church may be physically central, but God can be pushed to the boundary, and therefore have diminished influence. For Tillich, the opposite is true—the boundary is a space of potentiality, a place where creativity lives.<sup>377</sup> Indeed, in the opening words of *On the Boundary*, first published as part of *The Interpretation of History* in 1936, then republished posthumously in 1966, Tillich reflected on his own writing from his earlier *Religiöse Verwirklichung* (*Religious Realization*, written in 1930):

I wrote, “The boundary is the best place for acquiring knowledge.” When I was asked to give an account of the way my ideas have developed in my life, I thought that the concept of the boundary might be the fitting symbol for the whole of my personal and intellectual development. At almost every point, I have had to stand between alternative possibilities of existence, to be completely at home in neither and to take no definitive stand against either. Since thinking presupposed receptivity to new possibilities, this position is fruitful for thought; but it is difficult and dangerous in life, which again and again demands decisions and thus the exclusion of alternatives. This disposition and its tension have determined both my destiny and my work.<sup>378</sup>

Mark Kline Taylor, in the introduction to *Paul Tillich: Theologian of the Boundaries*, clarifies what Tillich likely intended by his use of the symbolic term “boundary:”

I have chosen to characterize Tillich as “of” these boundaries rather than “on” them, in part because the latter often can suggest staying uninvolved

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<sup>376</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Princeton, N.J., 1970), 282.

<sup>377</sup> I am indebted to my colleague Matthew Lon Weaver (North American Paul Tillich Society) for suggesting this difference.

<sup>378</sup> Tillich, *On the Boundary: An Autobiographical Sketch*, 13.

on a boundary line or with a foot in each camp... [Tillich] was engaged with the boundaries and stood *in* them to speak to others who may or may not have shared his kind of experience.”<sup>379</sup>

Whereas Tillich is clear in several writings that his boundary experiences were deeply formative, Taylor’s point is valid, and it brings a helpful nuance to Tillich’s work overall. Tillich often dwelt in the liminal space, not feeling it necessary to choose one side or the other. To choose too often means selecting a definitive placement, and the realities of life are too ambiguous to make such a choice.

Tillich’s theological approach invites the theologian and the pastor to dwell in ambiguities as well; to sit with the existential uncertainties that so often dominate embodied being, looking all the while for the moments where the estranged might be reunited. From those spaces, Tillich calls for understanding and compassion. At its base, his theology continues to be focused on reunification through the presence of the Spiritual Presence, driven by divine love.

#### Justice

Tillich’s work included deep reflection on the concept of justice, addressed in volume III of the *Systematic* (1963) and explored in detail as (described as “creative justice”) in *Love, Power, and Justice* (1954). Tillich grounds the concept of justice in divine love, and the commonality of being.

For Tillich, the fullness of humanity in the individual requires recognition of the other:

The other person is a stranger, but a stranger only in disguise. Actually he is an estranged part of one’s self. Therefore one’s own humanity can be

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<sup>379</sup> Paul Tillich, *Paul Tillich: Theologian of the Boundaries*, ed. Mark L Taylor (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 13. Italics Taylor’s.



realized only in reunion with him—a reunion which is also decisive for the realization of his humanity... The stranger who is an estranged part of one's self has ceased to be a stranger when he is experienced as coming from the same ground as one's self.<sup>380</sup>

Although these reunions may be fragmentary under the limits of existence, the impact of the Spiritual Presence provides the opportunity for those momentary events.

The realization of shared ground provides space for shared experience and welcoming:

The churches, in so far as they represent the Spiritual Community, are transformed from religious communities with demonic exclusiveness into a holy community with universal inclusiveness, without losing their identity.<sup>381</sup>

That transformation is not limited to the Spiritual Community, but indirectly impacts the secular communities as well; after all, individuals participate in both. And, as the impacts spread, one of the dominant ambiguities of existence may be overcome:

The other is the direct effect the Spirit has on the understanding and actualizing of the idea of justice. The ambiguity of cohesion and rejection is conquered by the creation of more embracing unities through which those who are rejected by the unavoidable exclusiveness of any concrete group are included in a larger group—finally in mankind.<sup>382</sup>

The potential for creation of justice has other possibilities as well. Under the impact of the Spiritual Presence (note that this impact, repeatedly offered by Tillich, suggests significant elements of authenticity), the Spiritual Community can recognize the “ultimate equality of everyone who is called” to participate in it.<sup>383</sup> And, once again, what happens in the Spiritual Community may be imperfect and fragmentary, but it still leaks

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<sup>380</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume 3: Life and the Spirit, History and the Kingdom of God*, 261.

<sup>381</sup> Tillich, 262.

<sup>382</sup> Tillich, 262.

<sup>383</sup> Tillich, 262–63.

out into the broader community. In *The Shaking of the Foundations*, Tillich identifies two orders of being: “the human, political, historical order, and the divine, eternal order.”<sup>384</sup>

In the Spiritual Community under the impact of the Spiritual Presence, the fullness of the latter has the opportunity to break into the former; in the momentary, fragmentary unifications of the two, new possibilities emerge.

Tillich’s focus on justice and the Wesleyan heritage of social justice clearly intersect. We have already noted that Wesley was exposed to societal needs early in his life, and that the Oxford Methodists were actively involved in outreach in the name of justice. Wesley was unafraid to speak into injustices he witnessed in his day, and the communities that have emerged from his work continue to focus on social justice issues. Like Tillich, Wesley is always more concerned about the actual than the abstract.

Tillich’s intent was to speak not only to the church, but to the broader culture as well, including those who derided religion. This may bring to mind Schleiermacher’s 1799 addresses to religion’s “cultured despisers,” a comparison that is not lost on Tillich scholars:

Perhaps the other side of Tillich that is so fascinating, intriguing, and informative to the modern intellectual is the religious concern he brings to everything he touches. He does not force the religious dimension into life; he exposes it at its depth in all of life. For him religion is the substance of culture, just as culture is the form of religion. Thus he does not feel compelled to intrude religion into his analysis of life; it arises of necessity and naturally if one adequately analyzes and interprets the depth of life. A sensitive modern intellectual is open to and appreciative of this kind of theological analysis. It speaks to his situation and to his point of view just as Schleiermacher spoke a word to the cultured despisers in his generation. When Tillich confronts the modern intellectual with the religious dimension as it is encountered ultimately and at depth, he is prepared to

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<sup>384</sup> Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations*, 18.

listen and, in most instances, to respond with appreciation and understanding.<sup>385</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Both Wesley and Tillich were deeply concerned about the ways in which the divine could be made known to individuals. Whether we speak of Wesley's focus on divine grace, made possible by the Holy Spirit, or Tillich's theonomous communities under the impact of the Spiritual Presence, it is clear that both recognized the need for faith development within the relationships made possible in community.

Wesley understood that grace works in and around individuals, drawing them (non-coercively) into relationship with God. His deployment of the means of grace as a set of intentional tools for doing so (both individually and in community) frames a helpful, always methodical, approach to living. Tillich recognizes the powerful presence of grace as well, again focusing on the restoration of the individual, the call to community, and the potential for reunion (even if fragmentarily) in the midst of estrangement.

What remains for us is to consider some specific ways in which the theological and practical frameworks of both might be useful to faith communities in their lived experiences today.

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<sup>385</sup> Jerald C. Brauer, "Preface to In Memoriam, Paul Tillich 1886-1965," *The Journal of Religion* XLVI, no. 1, Part II (January 1966): 90.

## CHAPTER SIX: IMPLICATIONS FOR FAITH COMMUNITIES

*Again and again, people say 'I do not like organized religion.'  
The Church is not organized religion. It is not hierarchical authority.  
It is not a social organization. It is all of this, of course, but it is primarily a group of  
people who express a new reality by which they have been grasped.  
Only this is what the Church really means. - Tillich<sup>386</sup>*

Thus far, we have explored key aspects of the ways in which both Wesley and Tillich understood the nature of divine grace, with reflection on various aspects of their thought and practice, including their ecclesiologies, formative years, overall approach to theology, and their lasting influence. In Chapter 5, we developed key areas of synthesis between Wesley and Tillich.

As we have seen, while their approaches to theology differed, there were also significant similarities: both were concerned with the ways in which individuals and communities lived out their faith, both were concerned with the ways in which those communities interact with the broader culture (even if that specific term was alien to Wesley), and both emphasized activity that enhanced the potential for justice. Both called for the use of reason in faith, and saw the value of internal critiques of the dominant doctrines and the ways in which they were expressed; here, Tillich's Protestant principle is of vital importance. Both saw the role of these communities in creating intentional

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<sup>386</sup> Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, 212.

space for restoration of individuals, and both understood the potential of faith communities as centering points for lived faith. Further, they understood that, in community, there are unique opportunities to speak into the challenges of the present situation (whatever that might be) with a coherent, prophetic voice, and to act in the interest of justice. In these ways, both therefore emphasized not only the intentional creation of space for grace to be made available and to be shared, but for grace to be expressed in ways that might have profound impacts on the brokenness of estranged existence.

### **The Lived Experiences of Faith Communities**

Wesley and Tillich each saw the clear value of shared faith lives in some sort of community, and both understood the value of doctrine as a grounding which informs communal living. At the same time, they understood the dangers of doctrine which creates barriers to authentic faith, and each was more than willing to offer critiques of problematic beliefs. As grace is made available, so too are the realities of brokenness and injustice to which these communities must speak and respond in action.

#### Doctrine and Christian Living

Tillich and Wesley shared in common a deep concern for the ways in which Christians live out their faith—particularly in terms of how they interact with the world. Both had some degree of focus on doctrinal essentials. In Wesley’s case, that focus tended to be on the ways in which doctrine could be corrupted, as in his attack on Calvinism.<sup>387</sup> The core of his concern in that instance, and throughout his sermons and

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<sup>387</sup> John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley. Vol. 3: Sermons III: 71-114*, ed. Albert Cook Outler, vol. 3, The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), 542ff. This sermon (“Free Grace”) seems to be the most oft-cited refutation of Calvinism; for a more complete view of

writings, was that false teachings such as these would “destroy the comfort of religion, the happiness of Christianity.”<sup>388</sup> This is a prime example of his sensitivity to issues that would separate people from the message of hope; here, he challenges the ideas of predestination since, if that doctrine is true, “our preaching is in vain, as your hearing is also vain.”<sup>389</sup> Doctrine that damaged the core of the message—that is, which violated the realities that grace is available to all, and that grace works in restorative and transformational ways—would, in Wesley’s view, injure the potential of bringing people comfort and hope, and close them off to the reality of dynamic, life-changing divine grace. The “early Wesley,” noted in Chapter Three, did tend toward a take-it-or-leave-it approach to faith, heavily dominated by his Euro-centric worldview; by the end his life, the “late Wesley” was deeply concerned about the ability of faith communities to engage with those who needed to hear the message, and was clearly moving toward a deeper engagement with pluralistic beliefs (movement which, in his day, would only go so far).

Beyond just conveying the message of grace, Wesley emphasized the need for community, which he saw as the locus for sharing the message, growing in faith, and—perhaps most importantly—experiencing the activity of divine grace through specific rituals, activities, and ways of being in the world. Through the means of grace, the faithful could intentionally open themselves to the dynamic operations of grace. Doctrine

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his thoughts, see also “Serious Thoughts Upon Perseverance” and “Predestination Calmly Considered” in *The Works of John Wesley. Vol. 13: Controversial and Doctrinal Treatises II*, ed. Paul Wesley Chilcote and Kenneth J> Collins, vol. 13, The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013), 239ff and 261ff. These are by no means the only places in his work where he addresses this doctrine, which he considers “blasphemy.”

<sup>388</sup> Wesley, 3:549.

<sup>389</sup> Wesley, 3:548.

that suggested that opening oneself to the operations of grace was unnecessary damaged the ability of leaders to build effective faith communities.

It is helpful to also note that Wesley's intent was not to create a significant new faith tradition, but to create space within the existing Anglican Church for individuals to gather, study, celebrate, and serve together (a new denominational entity was only created for pragmatic reasons, as America became a nation distinct from England).

For Tillich, concerns about religious doctrine were part of his boundary experience; from his early days onward, he noted a "sense of alienation accompanied my increasing criticism of the doctrines and institutions of the Church."<sup>390</sup> Tillich was also focused on his sense that the very nature of existence involves deep "estrangement of man from his true being."<sup>391</sup>

Tillich saw that humans exist in a particular situation—or, really, a massive constellation of situations—both as a society and as individuals. The situation(s) press toward cultural realities and norms; the cultural realities and norms inform the symbols and rituals used by religion; those symbols and rituals are either more or less effective at creating space for the spiritual community to gather and thrive. Doctrines that push individuals away from joining with the spiritual community impede the effectiveness of theonomy, since the spiritual community is the most likely place where theonomy is more fully present. Indeed, for Tillich, the "presupposition of [spiritual community or] the cultus is grace." Revelation continues, in some sense and to some degree, through the

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<sup>390</sup> Tillich, *On the Boundary: An Autobiographical Sketch*, 59.

<sup>391</sup> Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, 42.

theonomous activity of the faith community, and this is so because of the activity of grace.<sup>392</sup> If estrangement is the nature of existence, then those communal spaces that open up the possibility of theonomy being more fully present are critical to reuniting being with its depth, even if that reunification is inevitably limited by the conditions of existence.

Further, we need to be cognizant of the fact that Tillich was clear that the church itself was not necessarily a formal, sanctioned religious community. It might well be a gathering of those who are outside of organized religion—hence, Tillich’s “latent church”— whether they are “indifferent” or even “hostile” to

overt expressions of religion. Even here, such groups can be part of the Spiritual Community; indeed, the latency itself can provide powerful potential for action, in some instances surpassing those groups that profess to be participating in the spiritual community, yet are demonizing the religions they claim.<sup>393</sup>

Both were also deeply suspicious of the idea of orthodoxy. Tillich, as we have already noted, indicted the concept as “intellectual pharisaism.”<sup>394</sup> Wesley was similarly unimpressed by orthodoxy, saying that even as a person might “not only espouse right opinions, but zealously defend them against all opposers” yet be a complete stranger “to the religion of the heart.”<sup>395</sup> For both, the question was really not about orthodox belief, but about whether faith was impacting the life of the individual, and being expressed in

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<sup>392</sup> Tillich, *What Is Religion?*, 114. This is not meant to suggest that Revelation is ongoing in any heretical sense (Tillich is not a Montanist), but that the Spiritual Presence is given room to inform the actions of the community, and the faith lives of individuals.

<sup>393</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume 3: Life and the Spirit, History and the Kingdom of God*, 153.

<sup>394</sup> Tillich, *On the Boundary: An Autobiographical Sketch*, 51.

<sup>395</sup> Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley. Vol. 1: Sermons I: 1-33*, 1:220–21.



their lives and in community. Wesley's focus on individual holiness was a driving force in his understanding of the ways in which communities must engage the world, as was expressed in his famous words "the Gospel of Christ knows of no religion but Social, no holiness but Social Holiness."<sup>396</sup>

### Expressed Faith in and through Community

Both were also deeply concerned about the ways in which faith communities interact with society. Here, we propose five specific movements within those communities that would authentically respond to the realities of operative grace while simultaneously creating space for operative grace to be more fully present and effective. These movements seek to echo the formation, theologies, and practices of both Wesley and Tillich. They are: recovery of Tillich's Protestant principle, a focus on restoration (at more than one level), recovery of a center, recovery of the prophetic voice, and intentional focus on Tillich's creative justice. Here, we will explore each of these movements in turn.

#### **Recovery of Tillich's *Protestant Principle***

Key to Tillich's theology was his Protestant principle, which enables religion to interact effectively with culture. Theonomy is made possible by the presence of the Protestant principle, which, in turn, contains the spirit of the Reformation. This principle contains the critical element of self-criticism, it emphasizes grace, and it inherently calls for prophetic responses to any individual or group that claims "divine dignity for its

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<sup>396</sup> John Wesley and Charles Wesley, *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, Fourth (Bristol, England; Philadelphia: Felix Farley, 1743), v, <https://archive.org/details/hymnsandsacredpo00wesliala/page/iv>.

moral perfection, for its sacramental power, for its sanctity, or for its truth or doctrine.”<sup>397</sup>

This also creates a dynamic wherein “the church in its essence, or true being, protests against the church in its existence.”<sup>398</sup> When operating effectively, the Protestant principle not only enables the church to act, it directs the church to an on-going task of self-reflection and self-criticism.

In *Gilkey on Tillich*, Langdon Gilkey’s sweeping overview of Tillich’s thought, the “mature system” that Tillich developed toward the end of his life provided a clear and helpful ecclesiology. Grounded in the New Being,

...the church is a “true church” when it embodies both the Protestant principle (the principle of self-criticism and so of “pointing beyond itself” to the divine source of its grace and power) and the Catholic substance (the principle of the presence through the media of dependent revelation of divine power, divine truth, and divine grace).<sup>399</sup>

The self-reflective nature of the Protestant principle creates space for a new authenticity for the church as well as individual faith communities (and individuals within them), as it calls for constant re-evaluation of theological and doctrinal interpretation. This does not necessarily mean that theology and doctrine need be left behind, nor does it mean that the faith must become syncretistic. It does mean, however, that a core message of the Protestant principle—related to the element of self-criticism, here focusing on the reality that “the sacred sphere is not nearer to the Ultimate than the secular sphere”—serves to prevent the sacred from being improperly privileged over the

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<sup>397</sup> Paul Tillich, “Protestantism in the Present World-Situation,” *American Journal of Sociology* 43, no. 2 (September 1937): 240.

<sup>398</sup> Paul Tillich, *The Irrelevance and Relevance of the Christian Message*, ed. Durwood Foster (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1996), 49.

<sup>399</sup> Gilkey, *Gilkey on Tillich*, 142.

secular, or the secular being ignored, at the peril of the relevance of the message.<sup>400</sup> The message can remain relevant, yet the internal space for critique and reflection is always there, and always working. The Protestant principle, when it is authentically present and active, avoids the human creation of a bourgeois god which serves only the needs of broken culture.<sup>401</sup>

In this area, Wesley's formation was similar, and his approach echoes the same kinds of criticisms of Christendom, even if he does not express it in quite the same terms as Tillich. Wesley, as we saw in Chapter 3, pressed back against the formulaic approaches to faith of the Anglican Church (not to mention the Roman Catholic Church), continually critiquing expressions of faith that failed to engage adequately the individual and their faith life, or which aligned themselves too closely with worldly concerns. He was concerned, first and foremost, with creating communities that allowed individuals to grow in faith, and to ensure that the faith engaged both the head and the heart; put another way, his criticism of the Anglican church—very early on, and based in his earliest formative teachings—was that it had become an empty faith, one which was all about the intellect, and not about the spirit.

Tillich, too, saw the need for faith communities to be spaces of equality and justice, seeing them as spaces where individuals might discover justice and equality. What occurs within those faith communities flows into the secular community as well,

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<sup>400</sup> Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions*, 47.

<sup>401</sup> Tillich, *The Protestant Era*, 284.

altering the ways that individuals as individuals, and individuals coming together in community, might impact the world.

Wesley was similarly concerned with the ways in which the church interacted with society, with intentional emphasis on both helping

individuals gain a new identity and consciousness of worth, and to provide a starting point within and beyond the classes themselves...he prompted others to recognize social problems as early as possible and to investigate them all the way to their underlying causes, while he made it clear that analyses alone do not signify a solution until the necessary practical consequence are drawn from them.<sup>402</sup>

There can be little question that both Tillich and Wesley would be deeply concerned about the present 'situation' (to borrow a term from Tillich) in the United States, where there is a visible rise of nationalism. While Tillich's youth involved a deep forays into German Nationalism, he later identified this as a dangerous naïveté, into which he would later speak in his pre-World War II writings, speeches, and travels (as well as the wartime Voice of America broadcasts into Germany, which he wrote).

Tillich framed one key critique of nationalism around the concept of paganism: "Paganism can be defined as the elevation of a special space to ultimate value and dignity. Paganism has a god who is bound to one place beside and against other places. Therefore, paganism is necessarily polytheistic."<sup>403</sup> Nationalism elevates the conditioned (the space of the country, the values and heritage, the color of skin, the heritage of those who are counted as opposed to those who are not, or some other thing(s) that are

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<sup>402</sup> Manfred Marquardt, *John Wesley's Social Ethics: Praxis and Principles* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 137.

<sup>403</sup> Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, 31.

inappropriate) to the level of the unconditioned—or, at least, it attempts to—and, in doing so, necessarily pushes back against the very idea of monotheism. Polytheism is, for Tillich, a “daily reality” in modern nationalistic countries.<sup>404</sup>

The Protestant principle, when present and functioning, provides an internal check against the corruption of religion by nationalism (or other corrupting influences). At the same time, as it is based in the activity of grace, so it should also intentionally create space for grace to operate.

Political power and religious faith are uncomfortable bedfellows, as we see on a regular basis in modern American society. Nationalistic movements, by their nature, align with religious paradigms that support nationalism, and feed the fear that underlie both. American Evangelicalism has been increasingly complicit in the cultural fear-mongering, and evangelical leaders have often turned a blind eye toward the Othering that has become common in our society.

Ken Collins, in a departure from his Wesleyan scholarship, examines the roots of these corrupting influences in his 2012 work *Power, Politics, and the Fragmentation of American Evangelicalism*. While the book itself has an evangelical bent (for example, Collins refers to the “modern liberal democratic state” as a “veritable Babylon”), he helpfully traces the displacement of religion from public life, and the problematic marriage of conservative evangelicalism with political power.<sup>405</sup> His is, to a large degree,

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<sup>404</sup> Tillich, 33.

<sup>405</sup> Kenneth J. Collins, *Power, Politics, and the Fragmentation of Evangelicalism: From the Scopes Trial to the Obama Administration* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 252.

a critique from the inside of the evangelical tent; it is also, after just a few years, somewhat dated in light of the remarkable evangelical acceptance of Trumpism.

Collins notes that, following the “displacement” of the cultural power of religion over the past decades due to the rise of liberalism, religion itself has been reduced to a status where religion, “if it has any voice at all, is simply *instrumental* to something greater.”<sup>406</sup> This shift triggered a response where “conservative evangelicals, some of who looked to the Christian right for leadership, took up the only power left to them at the national level (or so it was claimed), that is, *political power*.”<sup>407</sup> In his view, the Christian left responded in kind, and the results have created significant distortion of the Christian message, and the perception of the church in society:

The grasping after political power on the part of the evangelical left and right for the sake, among other things, of a greater public voice has unfortunately hurt both movements... Each is composed of people, for instance, who are more kind, gracious, caring and more respectful of human dignity and freedom than what could be assumed from their political posture. In other words, the politics of the evangelical left and right is like a mask that is offered those beyond the church; it is a public expression that invariably distorts not only their own image but that of Jesus Christ as well.<sup>408</sup>

This, of course, is a key area where Tillich’s warnings about nationalism, and his identification of the Protestant principle and its inherent internal critique and correction, comes into play. For both Wesley and Tillich, the church must interact with its context, and speak into the current situations; however, for both, the church is also seen as an

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<sup>406</sup> Collins, 251. Italics his.

<sup>407</sup> Collins, 252. Italics his.

<sup>408</sup> Collins, 254.

embodied spiritual community that has the potential to offer correctives when the messages of religion become distorted.

### **Restoration**

Both Wesley and Tillich were focused on restoration of the individual, of communities through the individual, and—to the degree possible under the conditions of existence—the world itself. Both saw that this restoration was grounded in the operative nature of divine grace. For Wesley, this restoration occurred through the operations of divine grace working within the hearts of the faithful, although he was also quite specific that there were some effects of grace evident in every single person who has ever lived (see Chapter 3). For Tillich, this restoration was the result of the theonomous activity of the spiritual presence, which worked through individuals, and, to a greater or lesser extent, through culture (although it is necessary to be clear about what he intended by “culture,” and how that was understood to be efficacious; see Chapter 4).

To a degree, then, both had teleological and/or eschatological expectations and hopes for restored existence. The question for faith communities is this: in what ways can opportunities be intentionally crafted to allow for restoration at all levels?

Certainly, for Tillich, a first step would be a focus on acceptance, with clarity regarding the very core of the Christian message, which, for him, is the New Being. Indeed, Tillich’s message is very specific regarding the initial step of acceptance:

We, the ministers and teachers of Christianity, do not call you to Christianity but rather to the New Being to which Christianity should be a witness and nothing else, not confusing itself with that New Being. Forget all Christian doctrines; forget your own certainties in your own doubts, when you hear the call of Jesus. Forget all Christian morals, your achievements and your failures, when you come to Him. Nothing is demanded of you—no idea of God, and no goodness in yourselves, not

your being religious, not your being Christian, not your being wise, and not your being moral. But what is demanded is only your being open and willing to accept what is given to you, the New Being, the being of love and justice and truth as it is manifest in Him Whose yoke is easy and Whose burden is light.<sup>409</sup>

Tillich's call to accept what is offered is clear; the task for the faith community is to ensure that the offer is made, and that it is made in such a way that all of the threats named in the above quote are disarmed. Put another way, faith communities must communicate unwavering acceptance of the individual as an individual, wherever they are in life, and whatever challenges they face.

The second phase of this acceptance is echoed in Tillich's sermons in both *The Shaking of the Foundations* and *The Courage to Be*:

You are accepted. *You are accepted*, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. *Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!*<sup>410</sup>

The task of the faith community, then, is to create an atmosphere where acceptance is a dominant theme, both in terms of what is offered and in terms of what is expected of individuals.

Through such acceptance, individuals become part of a community that allows them to mature in faith, and to share the burdens of life. The process of maturation is what sets the dynamics of grace in the faith community apart from the view of grace as simple toleration (see Chapters 1 and 5). Within the authentic spiritual community, the

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<sup>409</sup> Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations*, 102. Capitalizations his.

<sup>410</sup> Tillich, 162. Italics his.



potential for growth and restoration is (at least in theory) higher than without. Here, the challenges of existence can be identified in mutuality, explored, and—potentially—answered. Tillich’s method of correlation posits that all existential anxieties are answered by faith, and that the Spiritual Presence is continually working toward a restoration of relationship between humanity and God.

Tillich’s insistence on the apologetic nature of theology is important here. Tillich is clear that a key part of the apologetic task is to reach those who dwell in humanistic frameworks, and to “proclaim the gospel in a language that is comprehensible to a non-ecclesiastical humanism.”<sup>411</sup>

It is not permissible to designate as “unchurched” those who have become alienated from organized denominations and traditional creeds. In living among these groups for half a generation I learned how much of the latent Church there is within them. I encountered the experience of the finite character of human existence, the quest for the eternal and unconditioned, an absolute devotion to justice and love, a hope that lies beyond any Utopia, an appreciation of Christian values and a very sensitive recognition of the ideological misuse of Christianity in its interpenetration of Church and State.<sup>412</sup>

This is where we see that Tillich’s “latent church” is “a truer church than the organized denominations, if only because its members did not presume to possess the truth.” At the same time, however, the latent church “has neither the religious nor the organizational weaponry necessary” to resist the non-Christian attacks from without; only the organized (“manifest”) church can do that. To further complicate matters, the use of those “weapons” by the “manifest Church threatens to deepen the chasm between Church

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<sup>411</sup> Tillich, *On the Boundary: An Autobiographical Sketch*, 64.

<sup>412</sup> Tillich, 67.

and Society.”<sup>413</sup> Faith communities must seek to find balance in their message, their interactions with culture, and their core theologies, always with an eye toward the Protestant principle.

### **Recovery of the (a) Center**

The rise of nationalism, to which I referred above, is an important element of the present situation in the United States and elsewhere. As such, it both demonstrates and exacerbates societal divisions, laying bare the deeply polarized culture in which we now live. This is, of course only one of the “isms” that exist (racism, sexism, come to mind) and it stands alongside the various forms of othering and oppression that we are witnessing (i.e. xenophobia, homophobia).

As we contemplate these polarizations and think about Tillich’s framing of nationalism as a strike against monotheism (indeed, as a form of polytheism), we are struck by the clear de-centering that is occurring in American culture. The metaphor of the Arunta’s broken pole, described in Eliade’s classic *The Sacred and the Profane*, comes to mind (at the outset, let me stress that this is a resonant metaphor, and nothing more). In this story, a particular Arunta tribe (the Achipa) have been given a sacred pole by a divine being, which they carry with them during their wanderings. The pole serves as the centralizing symbol for their tribe, and orients their presence and movement. Its presence “allows them, while being continually on the move, to be always in ‘their

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<sup>413</sup> Tillich, 67.

world' and, at the same time, in communication" with the divine being who gifted it to them. It is the organizing symbol that separates their existence from chaos.<sup>414</sup>

The report that Eliade shares, which has since been identified as apocryphal at best, is that "once, when the pole was broken, the entire clan were in consternation; the wandered about aimlessly for a time, and finally lay down on the ground together and waited for death to overtake them."<sup>415</sup> While it may be difficult to pin down precisely what that pole is in our present society, the image of aimless wandering, followed by resignedly waiting for an end to come, begs the question: at the present, how is our society centered? Ours is a time of pluralism(s)—sources of authority differ; beliefs matter more than facts, which are often denied outright. Could the church, checked by an operating Protestant principle, and serving as a locus of restoration, also intentionally (and strategically) serve as a re-centering point in culture?

As noted earlier, Tillich was always focused on the present situation, and it may be difficult to think of constructive engagement of pluralistic thought—religious, political, or otherwise—in our present, highly-polarized situation. As Stenger notes, "we hear about the extremes on two sides, leaving many of us with a sense that we belong to neither."<sup>416</sup> Stenger also notes the concept of a "missing center," and her thesis is that

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<sup>414</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1959), 32–33.

<sup>415</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1959), 33. Eliade attributes this story to Spencer & Gillen, *The Arunta*, a 1926 publication.

<sup>416</sup> Stenger, Mary Ann, "The Missing Center: Implications for American Religion," 1. It is helpful to place this paper in context, both in terms of timing and in terms of purpose. This was delivered in April 2012 at the University of Louisville, as Dr. Stenger's "last lecture" prior to retirement. She has continued to work in this specific area more recently as well.

“the polarization within religion and between religion and secular stems quite directly from our American context—what some refer to as our democratic impulse.”<sup>417</sup> In her work, the polarization has been building for decades; the major factor was the freedoms (particularly sexual) in the 1960s, which resulted in “a strong conservative religious reaction, both evangelical and fundamentalist, and that has produced a reaction against that conservatism, with increasing numbers disavowing religion.”<sup>418</sup>

While Dr. Stenger wrote those words in 2012, the reactionary, polarized environment she describes has only worsened in the intervening years. This is visible in more recent events, up to and including the fresh debates over sexual identity and sexual orientation within the United Methodist Church in February of 2019.

The vilifying of the Other (for whatever reasons) provides specific targets for our fear. Fear itself is for Tillich a state that is specific; it has a “definite object...which can be faced, analyzed, attacked, endured. One can act upon it, and in acting upon it participate in it—even if in the form of struggle.”<sup>419</sup> One would think that this struggle could be a heroic act, one that protects the narratives that facilitate the Othering that occurs in the process of becoming more deeply polarized.

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<sup>417</sup> Stenger, Mary Ann, 2.

<sup>418</sup> Stenger, Mary Ann, 3.

<sup>419</sup> Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, 36. Stenger points to a different section of the same writing from Tillich, from page 37: “Fear is being afraid of something, a pain, the rejection by a person or a group, the loss of something or somebody, the moment of dying.” For our purposes, the sense that fear has an object is helpful, however.

Stenger's work also serves to uncover an important point that is relevant for both Wesley and Tillich. Drawing on the work of Stephens and Giberson,<sup>420</sup> Stenger draws an interesting conclusion (which may or may not seem obvious when one ponders it): "the mantle of authority comes from the ability to preach rather than lecture," which she admits is "depressing because it is accurate" while also taking "it as a challenge to us academics to find more ways to take our knowledge to a broader public outside the university."<sup>421</sup> This, of course, speaks to the popularity of Wesley, who was—as we have noted in Chapter 5—best understood as a folk-theologian who also preached, and Tillich, who reworked the essential messages he was trying to bring to the academic world in such a way that they could be preached as sermons.

A driving question, then, could be "how does the/a church position itself to speak into a polarized society in a way that provides space for a new center?" Based on what we have discussed so far, four answers come to mind.

First, by understanding that, as Stenger points out (standing in a long line of theorists who would agree), we have a "tendency to think in terms of dualisms or binaries."<sup>422</sup> Concepts that call us to think in non-binary frameworks tend to create fear, and push us toward the Othering that further exacerbates the polarization we have described. And, as Stenger offers, "such polarization leaves the center missing."<sup>423</sup> This

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<sup>420</sup> Stephens and Giberson, *The Anointed: Evangelical Truth in a Secular Age*.

<sup>421</sup> Stenger, Mary Ann, "The Missing Center: Implications for American Religion," 11.

<sup>422</sup> Stenger, Mary Ann, 12.

<sup>423</sup> Stenger, Mary Ann, 13.

means that faith communities, in order to reduce the level of polarization in society, should understand the binary nature of American paradigms, and seek to deconstruct binary frameworks at every opportunity (or, at least, strive to not feed into those paradigms).

Second, the church can actively seek to celebrate the expressions of identity and being that differentiate individuals and groups. In this celebration of varied identities and differences, the tendency to focus on binaries, and thus the tendency to other the Other, might be overcome. Here, the church finds the opportunity to serve as a centering point that is open to new viewpoints and a wider understanding of what faith can look like.

Third, faith communities of all types should be clear on the values that inform their message and ministry, including the theological distinctives that set them apart from other faith communities. Here, we are particularly thinking of the issues surrounding the operative nature of grace as discussed in the first chapter of this dissertation, but the same is true of other issues of doctrine or praxis as well.

Returning to the metaphor of Eliade's pole, we ask: do we symbolically lie down and die when our center is challenged or broken? What is the axis mundi today? How do faith communities serve to create existential centers that are healthy and helpful, both for individuals and for society?

In previous chapters, we discussed both Tillich's self-identification as a theologian of the boundaries, and the potential power of boundary-thinking (as opposed, in an example we examined, to Bonhoeffer's push toward the church being in center of the village). This begs the question of where the existential center of the church should be; does it belong in the center of culture, or at boundaries where there is always new

space for creativity and potential? For Tillich, the answer seems quite clear: the center should, paradoxically, be at the boundary. One would assume that the boundaried center would then, over time, become too comfortably centered once again; at that point, perhaps it is time to re-locate once again to the new boundary, seeking to find fresh space for creative ministry and faith.

### **Recovery of the Prophetic Voice of the Church in Culture**

The faith community in which the Protestant principle is present and effective is called to speak into the challenges and brokenness of the world. Tillich noted this throughout his writings, and he embodied (as we have seen) in his efforts to respond to the growing Nazi threat before and during World War II. Wesley embodied this as well, crafting a new faith movement which, in addition to being a restorative movement within the Church of England, sought to bring justice to injustice, reaching out to the marginalized and desperate in his time.

Tillich references this kind of speaking in his historical overview of Christianity, where he describes the vertical and horizontal natures of prophecy. Speaking of Kierkegaard's era in Denmark, "there was a sophisticated theology of mediation, [such that] the prophetic voice could hardly be heard any more. Kierkegaard became the prophetic voice."<sup>424</sup> Well-known for his critiques of Christendom, Kierkegaard (even when writing pseudonymously) cut through the trappings of ineffective, problematic faith expressions.

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<sup>424</sup> Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought*, 474.

To understand the ways in which Tillich envisions the prophetic task, it is helpful to understand what he wrote about Kierkegaard:

the prophet always speaks from the vertical dimension and does not care about what happens in the horizontal dimension. But then Kierkegaard became a part of the horizontal... Thus he was taken into culture just as the prophets of Israel who, after they had spoken their paradoxical, prophetic word out of the vertical, became religious reformers... So out of the vertical there comes a new horizontal line, that is, a new cultural actualization of the prophetic word.<sup>425</sup>

This kind of restoration of the prophetic role—particularly with the actualization of the prophetic message in Tillich’s horizontal—is a consistent drumbeat in Tillich’s work. Tillich (in a lesser-known series of lectures), specifically identified the need for Protestantism to recover elements of the prophetic tradition, stepping out from a focus on spiritualism (which itself becomes an inward turn) and prophetically speaking against the idolatries of the age.<sup>426</sup>

In *The Shaking of the Foundations*, he traces the meaning of the idea of truth, saying that “the Greek word for truth means: making manifest the hidden.” In the Gospel of John, Tillich sees a reframing of how truth is explicated: “‘Doing the truth,’ ‘being of the truth,’ ‘the truth has become,’ ‘I am the truth’—all these combinations of words indicate that truth in Christianity is something which *happens*, something which is bound to a special place, to a special time, to a special person.”<sup>427</sup> This idea of ‘doing truth’ is resonant with his other writings regarding prophetic speech; speaking of Isaiah 40, Tillich

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<sup>425</sup> Tillich, 474.

<sup>426</sup> Paul Tillich, “The Recovery of the Prophetic Tradition in the Reformation,” in *The Ground of Being: Neglected Essays of Paul Tillich*, ed. Robert M Price (n.p.: Mindvendor Publications, 2015), 201–53.

<sup>427</sup> Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations*, 116. Italics his.



clarifies that the prophetic words speak to the reality that “the human situation is one of finiteness...in spite of his realistic knowledge of human nature and destiny the prophet gave comfort and consolation and hope to the exiled nation,” words which, for Tillich are “significant for us” in our continue existential exile today.<sup>428</sup> For Tillich, there is, critically, a transcendent element to what he calls “prophetism,” namely: “history is universal history... limitations of time and space are negated.”<sup>429</sup> What the prophetic voice speaks to are universal truths, even if the settings into which those truths are spoken are specific to the given situation.

Similarly, recent Wesley scholar Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore calls for “retrieving and reinterpreting the living Wesleyan tradition of prophecy,”<sup>430</sup> While Wesley may not have written extensively about the prophetic role of the church, he continually practiced the task. It is omnipresent in Wesley’s practical work; as Howard Snyder notes, Wesley “held together the evangelistic and the prophetic dimensions of the Gospel. There was no split between personal salvation and social engagement.”<sup>431</sup>

Both Tillich and Wesley recognized and emphasized the prophetic role of the Church. The resonances of Wesley and Tillich, writing in different eras, constitute clarion calls for communities of faith (groups in which, for Tillich, theonomy might be at its fullest) to speak into the divided societies in which we live. The task of faith communities

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<sup>428</sup> Tillich, 16–17.

<sup>429</sup> Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, 37.

<sup>430</sup> Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore, “Prophetic Grace: A Wesleyan Heritage of Repairing the World,” in *A Living Tradition: Critical Recovery and Reconstruction of Wesleyan Heritage*, ed. Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore, Kingswood Books (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2013), 203ff.

<sup>431</sup> Howard Snyder, “Wesley’s Concept of the Church,” *The Asbury Journal* 33, no. 1 (1978): 46.

must include speaking prophetically—particularly in the interests of those with little or no voice—as well as seeking to identify and enable creative justice in the current situation(s) in which we live.

### **The Potential of Tillich’s *Creative Justice***

Tillich’s work on creative justice has garnered recent attention, including work by Peter Slater calling for “principled theonomous political action” in recent cultural and societal conflicts.<sup>432</sup> Here, Tillich and the Wesleyan heritage of social justice clearly intersect, demanding in-the-world responses from communities of faith.

Tillich grounds love, power, and justice in the ground of being itself, that is, in God. In their created nature, the three are united; under the conditions of existence, they have become estranged from one another. As God is made manifest in existence, they can “become one in human existence.”<sup>433</sup> Under the limits of existence, they will do so imperfectly, one assumes, but the end goal for the faithful is to enable as much progress in this area as possible. The key to this, for Tillich, is love, which is itself the creative element in justice.<sup>434</sup>

As the physical spaces within which theonomy is most likely to be active, faith communities carry the burden of seeking to demand that space be created for justice.

Communities can facilitate this through Tillich’s “three functions of creative justice,

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<sup>432</sup> Peter Slater, “Tillich on Spiritual Presence and Principled Theonomous Political Action” (November 17, 2017).

<sup>433</sup> Paul Tillich, *Love, Power, and Justice: Ontological Analyses and Ethical Applications* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 108.

<sup>434</sup> Tillich, 83.

namely, listening, giving, forgiving.”<sup>435</sup> All three call for an authentic community, in which the Spiritual Presence is working, in order to be fully expressed.

### **Listening**

“In order to know what is just in a person-to-person encounter, love listens. It is its first task to listen.”<sup>436</sup> The broken, the hurting—all of those who are dealing with the existential anxieties of life—must first be heard. Faith communities can intentionally create space for the conversations to happen, and, from a macro level, ensure that the community is able to authentically listen, free from unnecessary distractions and worldly agendas.

### **Giving**

“Giving is an expression of creative justice if it serves the purpose of reuniting love.”<sup>437</sup> This is not the giving of a thing, nor is it necessarily a sacrificial act (although it might be); this is simply a matter of authentic relationship. “It belongs to the right of everyone whom we encounter to demand something from us, at least that even in the most impersonal relations the other one is acknowledged as a person.”<sup>438</sup> This resonates with the ‘sacred worth’ recognition that is currently a focus in many churches, although the present use of the term may sometimes be less-than-authentic.

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<sup>435</sup> Tillich, 84.

<sup>436</sup> Tillich, 84.

<sup>437</sup> Tillich, 85.

<sup>438</sup> Tillich, 85.

## **Forgiving**

Tillich ties this function to justification: “forgiving love is the only way of fulfilling the intrinsic claim in every being, namely its claim to be reaccepted into the unity to which it belongs.” This is true even in those situations where “he be accepted who is unacceptable in terms of proportional justice.”<sup>439</sup> Here, the foundation of grace is revealed: the theonomous community accepts all, including the most broken and the least deserving. Grace abounds; in that grace, there is space for the Spiritual Presence to engage, and for healing to begin.

### **The Spiritual Community**

The task of the Spiritual Community, then, is to watch for opportunities to hear the pains and challenges, engage authentically in relationship with those who suffer under them, and ensure that the message of forgiveness is dominant in their midst.

## **Conclusion**

Both Tillich and Wesley were deeply concerned about the ways in which individuals encountered the divine. Both identified the critical role of healthy, authentic faith communities in the process of those encounters, and both saw the limitations and dangers of individuals trying to live authentic faith lives on their own.

Within authentic, healthy communities—whether formal or informal, latent or manifest—individuals could find respite, relationship, and restoration. It is in those groups that grace can be more fully made manifest, and where faith can be explored free

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<sup>439</sup> Tillich, 86.

of the distractions of the outside situation(s). Pains and challenges can be shared, mutual relationships can be built, and forgiveness can be spoken and experienced.

In those groups, ideas can be shared and discussed, critiques can be offered, and the Spirit is given the opportunity to remind individuals of their ultimate concerns, which are not bound up with the desires for power and self-elevation so often emphasized in a broken world. In those groups, a new center can be found in the midst of a de-centered, fragmented world. In those groups, individuals can be reminded of the depth and breadth of divine love which knows no boundaries, and sees no *isms*.

At the same time, it is from those groups that individuals can then more fully engage the situations of the world; on the whole, a healthy faith community can have a greater impact than an individual, as the capacities of many come together with a common cause. It is from those groups that the prophetic voice can be raised in unison, pushing back against exclusion and injustice.

It is, in short, within and from these groups that powerful transformation can be understood, framed, and engaged—for the individual, the community, and the world.

*“But now my last word. What does this mean for our relationship to the religion of which one is a theologian? Such a theology remains rooted in its experiential basis. Without this, no theology at all is possible. But it tries to formulate the basic experiences which are universally valid in universally valid statements. The universality of a religious statement does not lie in an all-embracing abstraction which would destroy religion as such, but it lies in the depths of every concrete religion. Above all it lies in the openness to spiritual freedom both from one’s own foundation and for one’s own foundation.”*

– Paul Tillich’s final public words, delivered at the end of his lecture *The Significance of the History of Religions* on October 12th, 1965. Early the next morning, he suffered a major heart attack from which he would never recover.  
He died on October 22nd.<sup>440</sup>

*“From this short sketch of Methodism (so called), any man of understanding may easily discern, that it is only plain, Scriptural religion, guarded by a few prudential regulations. The essence of it is holiness of heart and life; the circumstantial all point to this. And as long as they are joined together in the people called Methodists, no weapon formed against them shall prosper. But if even the circumstantial parts are despised, the essential will soon be lost. And if ever the essential parts should evaporate, what remains will be dung and dross.*

*How, then, is it possible that Methodism, that is, the religion of the heart, though it flourishes now as a green bay tree, should continue in this state? For the Methodists in every place grow diligent and frugal; consequently, they increase in goods. Hence they proportionably increase in pride, in anger, in the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, and the pride of life.*

*So, although the form of religion remains, the spirit is swiftly vanishing away.”*

– John Wesley, in his 1787 article *Thoughts Upon Methodism*, published in the *Arminian Magazine*<sup>441</sup>

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<sup>440</sup> Tillich, *The Future of Religions*, 94.

<sup>441</sup> Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley. Vol. 9: The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design*, 9:529–30.

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