WESLEY ON LOVE AS "THE SUM OF ALL"

by

Rem B. Edwards

How seriously do or should we Wesleyans today take John Wesley's proclamation that love is "the sum of all"? The following discussion will explore Wesley's position on this and its ramifications.

Basic Christian Doctrines

John Wesley identified the most fundamental doctrines of Christianity without being a fundamentalist in the modern sense of the term, that is, without holding that every verse in the Bible is *inerrantly* true when all its words are construed *literally*. Despite rare (but often cited) comments to the contrary, Wesley was not typically a practicing fundamentalist.[1]

Wesley often distinguished "essential" Christian beliefs from what he called "opinions"—doctrines that are allowable but only marginally significant. Exactly where to draw the line between the two was never made completely clear. At times, Wesley called even the most essential beliefs of Christian orthodoxy "opinions," that is, "right opinions." He wrote, "*[O]rthodoxy*, or *right opinions*, is at best but a slender *part* of religion, if it can be allowed to be a part at all."[2] His many inventories of "right," "orthodox," "capital," "first," "central," or "essential" Christian "opinions" varied, but there was usually some overlap in content. In "On Living without God," the "capital doctrines" were said to be "the fall of man, justification by faith, and of the atonement made by the death of Christ, and of his righteousness transferred to them."[3] In "The Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity," Wesley identified even more "very first principles" of Christianity: God's "natural and moral attributes," God's providence, the "offices of Christ," the "operations of the Holy Ghost," the new birth, and

---

[1]Rem B. Edwards, "John Wesley's Non-Literal Literalism and Hermeneutics of Love," *Wesleyan Theological Journal,* 51, no. 2 (2016): 26-40. See also Rem B. Edwards, *What Today's Methodists Need to Know about John Wesley* (Lexington, KY: Emeth Press, 2018), chapters 2 and 3.

[2]Wesley, "A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists," *Bicentennial Edition of Works* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984—), 9:254-255.

[3]Wesley, "On Living without God," *Works*, 4:175.

"inward and outward sanctification."[4] An extensive account of Protestant essentials (about which he expected thoughtful Catholics to agree) appeared in "A Letter to a Roman Catholic." Paraphrasing and summarizing a bit, these were: belief in an infinite, good, and fatherly God, God as Creator, Jesus as Savior, Jesus as Divine, the two natures of Christ (human and divine), his virgin birth, his atoning crucifixion, his Resurrection, the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as equals, the church universal, the forgiveness of sins, hell forever for some, and happiness forever for others.[5] Some of Wesley's catalogs of Christian basics included Divine and human love, but many did not. In "Scriptural Christianity," the very "essence of his [the Christian's] faith," was "a divine [evidence or conviction] of the love of God the Father, through the Son of His love, to him a sinner, 'now accepted in the beloved.' "[6] In "A Letter to a Roman Catholic," Wesley affirmed that "a true Protestant [and any real Christian] loves his neighbor (that is every man, friend or enemy, good or bad) as himself, as he loves his own soul, as Christ loved us."[7]

Such beliefs, he thought, were among the central doctrines or "right opinions" of Christian orthodoxy. He never completely clarified the precise contents and boundaries of his notion of "orthodoxy."[8] Yet, Wesley had some if not all of the above in mind when he announced that orthodoxy is "at best but a slender *part* of religion, if it can be allowed to be a part at all."[9]

The Deep and Deepest Essentials of Christian Orthodoxy

As the above incomplete synopses show, Wesley thought that many different doctrines belong to the essentials of Christian orthodoxy. But did he rank any of these beliefs as more basic or fundamental than others? And do we? Some Wesley scholars seem to think so. Consider just one exam-

---

[4]Wesley, "Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity," *Works*, 4:89.

[5]Wesley, "A Letter to a Roman Catholic," sections 6-10, in *John Wesley*, ed. Albert Outler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), 494-496.

[6]Wesley, "Scriptural Christianity," *Works*, 1:161-162.

[7]Wesley, "A Letter to a Roman Catholic," in Outler, 497.

[8]Wesley scholars do not agree among themselves about these precise contents and limits. See Ted A. Campbell, "The Shape of Wesleyan Thought: The Question of John Wesley's "Essential" Christian Doctrines," *The Asbury Theological Journal* 59, nos. 1 and 2 (2004): 27-48.

[9]Wesley, "A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists," *Works*, 9:254-255.

ple. In 1997, Scott J. Jones explained that the Bible was for Wesley the ultimate source of and authority for Christian doctrines, supported by the "interpretive components" of experience, tradition, and reason (the Quadrilateral). The authority of scripture itself was one such doctrine. Jones affirmed, "For Wesley, the wholeness of Scripture is constituted by its doctrinal content, specifically soteriology."[10] (Soteriology is the theory, practice, and process of salvation.) The "content" of "God's way of salvation," Jones wrote, "has three main points: original sin, justification by faith, and sanctification."[11] (Surely the Atonement also belongs here.) Divine and human love were conspicuously absent from this particular list of scriptural basics. To his credit, however, Jones promptly recognized that for Wesley "the general tenor of the whole Bible" was also "the redeeming love of God and the possibility of salvation by faith that God offers people," as well as human "faith working by love."[12] Yet, toward the end of his article, he returned to the seemingly narrower theme that salvation is the deepest motif of the Bible, thereby of Christianity itself. He wrote, "[T]he general message of the Bible must be construed as the way of salvation. Others may argue that the Bible's general theme is something else, and such arguments may be taken seriously. While those who discern other themes may in fact be Christians, it is difficult to imagine that it is Wesleyan to claim any other center for Scripture than a soteriological one. At the heart of the Wesleyan approach to Scripture is the question of salvation, not only for the individual, but "the nation" and the nations."[13]

Of the two, which was indeed *the deepest or most central theme* for Wesley, *soteriology*—(original sin, justification by faith, sanctification, and the Atonement), or *Divine and human love*? Or were they equally fundamental? One theme can be more basic than another in several ways. In the order of knowing, one can presuppose or be logically derived from the other. In the order of becoming, one can exist prior to the other and give rise to the second. In the order of values, one can be axiologically more significant than the other. The main problem here is this. In such ways, did Wesley regard *Divine and human love* as more basic than *soteri-*

---

[10]Scott J. Jones, "The Rule of Scripture" in W. Stephen Gunter, Scott J. Jones, Ted A. Campbell, Rebekah L. Miles, and Randy L. Maddox, *Wesley and the Quadrilateral* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 53.

[11]Ibid., 54.

[12]Ibid., 55.

[13]Ibid., 60.

ology, or the reverse? Both may be such indispensable doctrinal "roots" that Wesley's "think and let think,"[14] which he applied to less central beliefs, does not apply to them. These two roots may be so intertwined logically and practically that they cannot be separated and ranked, but maybe not. Perhaps one goes deeper than the other. If so, we should be able to prioritize them.

Many Wesleyan scholars recognize that soteriology is one central theme of Scripture and thus of Christianity itself, but is it the deepest theme? Gerald R. Cragg said, for example, that Wesley's essentials were those "vital to salvation,"[15] but he did not call soteriology the "most vital." Randy Maddox recognized that Wesley "highlighted" soteriological doctrines, but he promptly added that "such a thematically-controlled reading of Scripture has negative as well as positive possibilities."[16] He recognized that Wesley's "analogy of faith" referred mainly to four soteriological truths, "the corruption of sin, justification by faith, the new birth, and present inward and outward holiness."[17] As Jones acknowledged, other Christian thinkers might emphasize something else besides soteriology as central or most basic. To give one possible example, some reformed theologians might argue that God's sovereignty or omnipotence, i.e., God's absolute power and right to control and predestine everyone and everything, is the most basic of all biblical beliefs. Obviously, Wesleyans would not agree, but we should be as clear as possible about our own priorities.

As widely recognized, some of Wesley's affirmations were at odds with others, and he often changed his mind in light of greater experience and deeper reflection. He can be quoted on both sides of many issues including: Which is most ultimate, soteriology or Divine and human love? Jones made a strong and well documented case for soteriology as the "center for scripture" (and thus of Christianity itself) for Wesley. Wesley himself claimed that he was a "man of one book," and that there was only one thing he wanted to know, "the way to heaven—how to land safely on that happy shore."[18] These count heavily toward soteriological

---

[14]Wesley, "The Character of a Methodist," *Works*, 9:34.

[15]Gerald R. Cragg, "Introduction," Wesley's *Works*, 2:23.

[16]Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 38.

[17]Ibid.

[18]Wesley, "Preface," *Works*, 1:105.

beliefs as rock bottom basics. Yet, neither of these rather extreme exaggerations fits the actual facts of Wesley's own exceptionally broad reading, thinking, curiosity, and serious concerns.

Love as the Deepest of All Christian Basics

Without denying that soteriology was of immense significance to Wesley himself, or that Jones made a strong and well documented case for it as Wesley's "central motif," what follows will be an equally strong and well documented case for thinking that Wesley regarded "something else" as the most significant "general theme" at the "heart of" scripture. In many discussions, Wesley grounded everything, including soteriology, in "God is love" plus the two "greatest" love commandments, as Jesus identified them. I regard these three beliefs as "rock bottom Christianity," though such were not Wesley's own words. He preferred "the sum of all."

According to Wesley, "No Scripture can mean that God is not love, or that his mercy is not over all his works";[19] and *everything* in "the Word of God," should be judged "in proportion to the nearness of its relation to what is there laid down as the sum of all—the love of God and our neighbors."[20] Thus, nothing is more basic than this, and this is more essential than all else. Love is the key to everything in scripture and tradition that we should take seriously; but, as Wesley knew, not everything in the Bible is loving. Some things are very unloving. In "Free Grace," Wesley argued that even though predestination and God loved Jacob but hated Esau are there in the Bible, they flat out contradict "God is love," and they must be rejected as contradictions within the Bible.[21] (Should anything else in the Bible be reject as unloving or logically incoherent?)

Wesley regularly posited the two love commandments as rock bottom Methodism, true religion, and Christianity itself. In defining Methodism, he wrote, "[A] Methodist is one who has 'the love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost given unto him' [Rom. 5:5]; 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."[22] (Of course, there is a lot more to Methodism than that.) Explaining "This alone is religion, truly so called," Wesley singled out the two love commandments as the

---

[19]Wesley, "Free Grace," *Works*, 3:556.

[20]Wesley, "On Laying the Foundations of the New Chapel," *Works*, 3:587-588.

[21]Wesley, "Free Grace," *Works*, 3:552.

[22]Wesley, "The Character of a Methodist," *Works*, 9:35, 37-38.

"two grand branches"[23] of true religion. They are its foundational principles. Christian spirituality consists of believing and living out the first, Christian morality of believing and living out the second. Christianity affirms that "the most acceptable worship of God is to imitate him he worships." This means,

> *Above all* (italics added), remembering that God is love, he [the Christian] is conformed to the same likeness. He is full of love to his neighbor: of universal love, not confined to one sect or party, not restrained to those who agree with him in opinion, or in outward modes of worship, or those who are allied to him by blood or recommended by nearness of place. Neither does he love those only that love him, or that are endeared to him by intimacy of acquaintance. But his love resembles that of him whose mercy is over all his works. . . . For he loves every soul that God has made, every child of man, of whatever place or nation.[24]

Love so universal, comprehensive, and divine in scope or inclusiveness is grounded scripturally in "God is love." More than once Wesley identified *only* the *two* love commandments as "the sum of all"—without explicitly mentioning the third, "God is love," (I John 4:7 and 16). This is because "God is love" is implicit in the command to love God with everything we've got, heart, soul, mind, and strength. The scriptural, logical, ontological, and experiential link between our loving God and the very nature of God himself, Wesley thought, is also right there in the fourth chapter of I John, verse 19, which he often cited. We are inspired and enabled to love God, that is, actually to obey the first love commandment, "*because* He first loved us." Wesley wrote, "We love him, because he first loved us - This is the sum of all religion, the genuine model of Christianity. None can say more: why should any one say less. . . ?"[25] Our very ability to love God, to obey the first commandment, logically, ontologically, axiologically, psychologically, spiritually, and in practice presupposes God's existence, that God is love, and that God loved us first—before we ever knew it, and while we were and are yet sinners. So affirms "the sum of all religion."

---

[23]Wesley, "The Way to the Kingdom," *Works*, 1:221-224.

[24]Wesley, "A Plain Account of Genuine Christianity," in Outler, 184.

[25]Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*, Wesley's comment on I John 4:19. Wesley's Bible commentaries are available online at: http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/john-wesleys-notes-on-the-bible/.

Because God first loved us, human salvation (soteriology) is available *to all* (not just Christians) by God's grace, but love has ontological, logical, and axiological priority over salvation. Wesley often cited John 3:16, "For God so *loved* (italics added) the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." Soteriology itself is derived from God's love. Thus, if the two love commandments plus "God is love" are "the sum of all," then every viable doctrine of Christian orthodoxy must somehow be derived from, express, be logically consistent with, and manifest "God is love." Any proper understanding of and response to God's attributes or perfections, Wesley thought, must be so derived. "[L]ove is God's "reigning attribute," he wrote, "the attribute that sheds an amiable glory on all his other perfections."[26] (Which is why the outrageously unloving doctrine of predestination is wrong!) "God is love" also accounts for when, where, and how God has related historically to human beings both within and without what Wesley called the "Christian dispensation." "God is love" is how we can best understand all of that.

Love with and without Doctrinal Orthodoxy

Even within Christendom people can be "real Christians," Wesley thought, without mentally comprehending, believing, or affirming many, perhaps not even any, of the fundamental doctrines of Christian orthodoxy, previously identified, including Christian soteriology. Wesley did not always restrict "opinions" to marginal, allowable, or optional beliefs. At times *all* beliefs and doctrines were deemed "opinions," including the "right opinions" of Christian orthodoxy. After several decades as an itinerant evangelist and pastor, Wesley eventually came to realize that many very good and loving Christians do not consciously understand or affirm many, if any, orthodox opinions at all; that is, they cannot name or explain them, but they are very loving persons nevertheless; and many individuals with clear and extensive "right opinions" are not good and loving persons. As he put it,

> Whatsoever the generality of people may think, it is certain that opinion is not religion: no, not right opinion; assent to one or to ten thousand truths. There is a wide difference between them: even right opinion is as distant from religion as the east is from

[26]Ibid., Wesley's comment on I John 4:8.

> the west. Persons may be quite right in their opinions, yet have no religion at all. And on the other hand persons may be truly religious who hold many wrong opinions . . . but many of them are now real Christians, loving God and all mankind.[27]

Wesley did not deny that very *orthodox* individuals can be loving persons and good Methodists, but he did think that even within Christendom many very *non-orthodox* individuals are profoundly loving persons, good Methodists, and *real Christians*. True religion, real Christianity, and authentic Methodism, Wesley thought, are not primarily matters of *the head*. They are chiefly matters of *the heart*, of love and all the devotions, tempers, affections, virtues, actions, gifts, beliefs, and practices that constitute and issue from love. Wesley affirmed Christianity, "not as it implies a set of opinions, a system of doctrines, but as it refers to men's hearts and lives."[28] "False religion," he said, "is any religion which does not imply the giving the heart to God. Such is, first, a religion of opinions, or what is commonly called orthodoxy."[29] Methodists "hold right opinions; but they are peculiarly cautious not to rest the weight of Christianity there."[30]

Wesley agreed with James 2:19 that the devils resolutely believe that God is one. He expanded this to mean that the devils actually assent to *all* doctrines in the Bible and the Creeds![31] If you want to find a true believer, go to the Devil! Faith, properly understood, "is not (as some have fondly conceived) a bare assent to the truth of the Bible, of the articles of our Creed, or of all that is contained in the Old and New Testament. The devils believe this, as well as I or thou; and yet they are devils still."[32] Someone can be "as orthodox as the devil,"[33] and still not be a good Christian. What do real Christians have that the devils do not have? Love and the "labours" of love.

---

[27] Wesley, "On the Trinity," *Works*, 2:374, italics added.

[28] Wesley, "Scriptural Christianity," *Works*, 1:161.

[29] Wesley, "The Unity of the Divine Being," *Works*, 4:66.

[30] Wesley, "On Laying the Foundations of the New Chapel," *Works*, 3:588.

[31] Wesley, "Salvation by Faith," *Works*, 1:119-120; Wesley, "The Way to the Kingdom," *Works*, 1:220, 230; Wesley, "The Marks of the New Birth," *Works*, 1:418; Wesley, "The Almost Christian," *Works*, 1:138-139; Wesley, "On Faith," *Works*, 3:497; Wesley, "On the Wedding Garment," *Works*, 4:146.

[32] Wesley, "The Way to the Kingdom," *Works*, 1:230; Wesley, "The Marks of the New Birth," *Works*, 1:418-419.

[33] Wesley, "The Way to the Kingdom," *Works*, 1:220.

Beliefs really are very important, at least some of them—reasonable, true, and loving beliefs—but Christian love itself is even more valuable than Christian beliefs. To avoid blindness, both love and faith must be informed (formed by information); but faith, understood as nothing more than assent to doctrines, is "only the handmaiden of love. As glorious and honorable as it is, it is not the end of the commandment. God hath given this honor to love alone: love is the end of all of the commandments of God."[34] All genuine Christian doctrines, commandments, practices, and institutions are (ideally) judged by, logically consistent with, derived from, express, and manifest God's love for us and God's expectations of us—as expressed in the two love commandments. All of these other things are only means of grace given to support our true ends—knowing and living in love to God, to every person in every nation on earth (including ourselves), and to every creature loved by God, which is every creature God has made.

So, is it possible for someone to become, exist, grow, and flourish as a truly loving person, devoted in love God, to every human being, and to every creature God has made, without *understanding, mentally affirming, or experiencing* the elements of Christian soteriology—"original sin, justification by faith, sanctification" as Jones identified them, plus the Atonement, and even without mentally *grasping* and *undergoing* an intense evangelical "new birth" experience?

After several decades of revivalism, after gaining much pastoral experience of his own, and after receiving many relevant reports from other Methodist pastors, Wesley reluctantly recognized the reality of *gradual* and almost *imperceptible* Christian beginnings and development.[35] So again, are *believing in* and intensely *experiencing* Christian soteriology the only available means to loving God and our neighbors? Experience (supported by love and conscience) probably answers this question better than scripture, reason, or tradition. The least expendable element of traditional soteriology may be sanctification, the process of growing in, living in, and being fulfilled by the grace of love and all else that issues from love—in this world and the next.

But is becoming a Christian the only available way to be or become a loving person? Are the only loving and devoted people in the world those within the "Christian dispensation" who have experienced either gradual or sudden Protestant conversions?

---

[34]Wesley, "The Law Established Through Faith," *Works*, 2:38.

[35]Maddox, *Responsible Grace,* 153-156.

Wesley's Affirmation of Love Alone

In some writings, Wesley seemed to collapse everything, (including the Protestant "order of salvation") into love, Divine and human. We are left wondering how much doctrinal orthodoxy remains, how much is really essential for salvation, Divine acceptance, holy living, and true religion. Can non-Christians be "acceptable" to God? Yes, Wesley emphatically affirmed. He was definitely not a Christian exclusivist. God's love includes all, and so should ours.

But can non-Christians be loving persons? Perhaps. Consider some of his relevant comments. In a 1746 letter, Wesley wrote, "I regard even faith itself not as an end but as a means only. The end of the commandment is love, of every command, of the whole Christian dispensation. Let this love be attained, by whatever means, and I am content; I desire no more. All is well, if we love the Lord our God with all our heart and our neighbor as ourselves."[36] How seriously should we take "by whatever means"? This statement immediately followed Wesley's recognition that Deists and Quakers reject Baptism and the Lord's Supper, so "love is attained, by whatever means" definitely included them. Wesley must have known from experience that Deists, who reject special revelation and are theological Unitarians, and Quakers, who have many heterodox views and practices, can still be loving persons. It may be of some interest that a somewhat younger Thomas Jefferson, a Deist, and John Wesley, an orthodox Christian, were in complete agreement about rock bottom true religion. Jefferson wrote, "That to love God with all thy heart and thy neighbor as thyself, is the sum of all religion."[37]

But did Wesley's "by whatever means," "all is well," and "I desire no more" open salvation's door, soteriology itself, true religion, and God's love and acceptance, to all non-Christians, along with marginal Deists and Quakers, assuming that they live lovingly by the best light they have?

Wesley was convinced that all non-Christians, including all Jews, Muslims, and "heathens," who live up to the "best light" they have, would be completely acceptable to a loving God. He also advised Christians who

---

[36]Wesley, "To John Smith," June 25, 1746, section 9, in the *Works of the Reverend John Wesley*, ed. John Emory, (New York: B. Waugh and T. Mason, for the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1835), 6:637.

[37]Thomas Jefferson, "To Doctor Benjamin Waterhouse, June 26, 1822," in *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson,* ed. Andrew A. Lipscomb and Albert E. Bergh (Washington: The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1903), 15:383.

disagree with one another that they can do no more than live up to the "best light" they have.[38] Good advice, by the way. Much has been published about Wesley's views on the salvation of non-Christians,[39] but here are some relevant quotes, with a few italics added for emphasis.

> I have no authority from the Word of God 'to judge those that are without.' Nor do I conceive that any man living has a right to sentence all the heathen and Mahometan world to damnation. It is far better to leave them to him that made them, and who is "the Father of the spirits of all flesh"; *who is the God of the heathens* as well as the Christians, and who hateth nothing that he hath made.[40]

> "He that believeth not shall be damned" (Mark 16:16) applies only to "them to whom the gospel is preached. Others it does not concern; and we are not required to determine anything touching their final state. How it will please God, the Judge of all, to deal with them we may leave to God himself."[41]

> As for "our modern Jews . . . it is not our part to pass sentence upon them, but to leave them to their own Master."[42]

> But this we know, that he is not the God of the Christians only, but *the God of the heathens also*; that he is "rich in mercy to all that call upon him," *"according to the light they have"*; and that "in every nation he that feareth God and worketh righteousness is accepted of him."[43]

> But in every nation he that feareth God and worketh righteousness – He that, first, reverences God, as great, wise, good, the cause, end, and governor of all things; and secondly, from this

---

[38]Wesley, "Catholic Spirit," *Works*, 2:85, and Wesley, "A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion, Part II," *Works*, 11:203-204.

[39]See Randy Maddox, "Wesley and the Question of Truth or Salvation Through Other Religions," *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, 27 (1992): 7-29; and Philip D. Wingeier-Rayo, "A Wesleyan Theology of Religions: A Re-Reading of John Wesley Through His Encounters with Peoples of Non-Christian Faiths," *Methodist Review*, 10 (2018): 1-22.

[40]Wesley, "On Living without God," *Works*, 4:174.

[41]Wesley, "On Charity," *Works*, 3:295-296.

[42]Wesley, "On Faith: Hebrews 11:6," *Works*, 3:495.

[43]Wesley, "On Charity," *Works*, 3:296. Allusions are to Romans 10:12, 12:6, and Acts 10:35.

> awful regard to him, not only avoids all known evil, but endeavours, a*ccording to the best light he has,* to do all things well; *is accepted of him – Through Christ, though he knows him not.* The assertion is express, and admits of no exception. H*e is in the favour of God, whether enjoying his written word and ordinances or not.*[44]

Wesley fully understood that Jesus was citing his own Jewish scriptures when he called the two love commandments the "first" and "second" greatest of all (Matthew 22:35-40, Mark 12:28-34, and Luke 10:27). That alone should be enough to show that loving persons need not be orthodox Christians. The "greatest" commandments come directly from Judaism. Jesus referenced Deuteronomy 6:5, Leviticus 19:18, and perhaps also loving "strangers" as oneself in Leviticus 19:34. Wesley understood that these "greatest" commandments belonged initially to non-Christian Jews—as they still do, because he commented on these pre-Christian texts in his *Explanatory Notes Upon the Old Testament.* Wesley may or may not have known that Islam also affirms that God is loving, just, merciful, and compassionate, and that it also requires loving God and our neighbors. Many current books and discussions affirm that these rock bottom love affirmations belong to both historical and contemporary Islam.[45] President George W. Bush was right when he said that Islamic terrorists have "hijacked a great religion."[46]

Wesley understood full well that non-Christians do not believe in Christ and do not arrive at "the best light" they have by way of Christian orders, doctrines, or experiences of salvation. He would have been more concerned about their soul-transforming experiences than about their doctrines and opinions. God accepts them, he thought, "Through Christ," even if they never heard of him, and the gospel has never been preached

---

[44]Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament,* comments on Acts 10:35.

[45]For example, hundreds of distinguished contemporary Muslims have affirmed that love of God and of neighbors is as fundamental in Islam as it is in Christianity and Judaism. See *A Common Word between Us and You* (Amman, Jordan: The Royal Ala Al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2012). See also Mahnaz Heydarpoor, "Perspectives on the Concept of Love in Islam," http://www.al-islam.org/perspectives-concept-love-islam-mahnaz-heydarpoor/human-love.

[46]Remarks by President George W. Bush on "U.S. Humanitarian Aid to Afghanistan," October 11, 2002.

to them. Countless modern and ancient "heathens" live or lived by their best light, and "No more, therefore, will be expected of them than the living up to the light they had;" some are even "taught of God, by his inward voice, all the essentials of true religion."[47] Like Christians, they are corrupted by sin and are morally and spiritually enlightened only by degrees. But does their own "light" exemplify degrees of "the sum of all religion"—the *love* of God and neighbors? Not all heathens are loving persons, of course, but neither are all Christians. Perfection in love is always by degrees, by God's grace, by our own cooperative striving, choosing, or "going on," and through diverse but locally effective beliefs, means of grace, practices, and processes. Of course, degrees of difference can be very extensive. Non-Christians might not agree with Wesley that Christians have more light than others,[48] yet he was convinced that others have light enough to be acceptable to God.

As yet unanswered, did Wesley intend to say that their being acceptable means that they are *capable of loving*? What exactly constitutes "the best light" that "heathens" have? This light includes theistic beliefs, reverence, avoiding known evil, endeavoring to do all things well, and confidence in divine rewards and punishments.[49] Regrettably, this inventory of Wesley's makes no *explicit* place for love, so we are still left wondering if he thought that non-Christians are capable of loving. Also, what if some "heathens" (like many compassionate Buddhists) are not doctrinal theists? And are "heathen" standards of "evil," "well," "good," and "righteousness" reliable? By God's universal prevenient grace, Wesley thought, even non-Christians have a natural (universally present) moral conscience that discriminates between good and evil, right and wrong, but even that does not tell us that all people have a natural and universal capacity for loving. The crucial question remains, does their "best light" include unselfish love as well as moral conscience?

Are "heathens" really capable of *loving* God and others? Wesley may have been on both sides of this fence. On the negative side, he wrote, "*[N]one* can love his neighbor as himself, unless he first love God, and none can love God *unless he believe in Christ*, (italics added) unless he have redemption through his blood, and the spirit of God bearing witness

---

[47]Wesley, "On Faith," *Works*, 3:494.

[48]Ibid.

[49]Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*, comments on Acts 10:35; also, Wesley, "Salvation by Faith," *Works*, 1:119.

with his spirit that he is a child of God."[50] The case for the positive side is a bit more difficult to make (though partly made already). Yes, as Wesley affirmed, without knowing or believing in Christ, "heathens" can have redemption "Through Christ." But did he think that such redemption, and/or God's prevenient grace, enables non-Christians to be loving as well as morally conscientious persons?

Being a loving moral person, Wesley thought, is best expressed in living by and acting in accord with the Golden Rule. He acknowledged that many non-Christians have understood and practiced the Golden Rule, as indeed many have.[51] Wesley's own example was the "heathen emperor," Alexander Severus.[52] According to Wesley, the Golden Rule "commends itself, as soon as heard, to every man's conscience and understanding."[53] Here "every man" includes those who know nothing of and have never experienced Christian soteriology. God's prevenient grace gives (some wording of) the Golden Rule to people everywhere as a matter of moral conscience. But does the Golden Rule cover love as well conscience? One complication here is that one need not obey the Golden Rule *because* one loves others as oneself. The Golden Rule can be obeyed in Kantian fashion merely *because* one values rules or laws as such, but not people as such,[54] as ends in themselves. Or, expecting payback, it can be obeyed merely from "long-term egoism," "*quid pro quo*," "the social contract," "reciprocal altruism," but not because one genuinely loves and intensely identifies with others in their definite, concrete, but ever increasing becoming, their richness in good-making properties, and their individuality or uniqueness.

According to Wesley himself, "We may clearly perceive the wide difference there is between Christianity and morality...both the inward experience and outward practice of justice, mercy, and truth," all of which

---

[50]Wesley, "Sermon on the Mount, X," *Works*, 1:662.

[51]See "Golden Rule Chronology" at: https://www.harryhiker.com/chronology.htm

[52]Wesley, "Sermon on the Mount, X," *Works*, 1:660, including note 65.

[53]Ibid., 661.

[54]As Kant explained, "Respect persons as ends in themselves and never merely as means" is nothing more than "respect for the law...of which he gives us an example." Persons have value for Kant only as receptacles for holding or containing the moral law, but not in their concrete existence, temporality, definiteness, richness, and uniqueness. Immanuel Kant, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals* (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1954), 19, n. 3.

can "exist without Christianity." Christians must and do have such morality, but they must have much more—"the whole mind that was in Christ, enabling you to walk as Christ walked" and become new creatures.[55] One problem here is, only mature Christians who have reached "entire sanctification" have the *whole* mind of Christ, that is, complete Christian perfection in love. All *new Christians* are only "babes in Christ,"[56] mere beginners in love and in exercising their spiritual sensitivities. From modest beginnings they grow by degrees in love, affection, compassion, understanding, conscience, grace, and spirituality. They gradually *work out* their salvation over the remaining course of their lifetime, and beyond, so Wesley thought. But can those in "the heathen and Mahometan world," who know nothing of Christ, also have genuine aspects or manifestations of the mind of Christ without understanding it in those terms? This depends on the meaning of "the mind of Christ." Aren't all loving and spiritually sensitive souls or minds Christ-like by degrees, whether or not they are culturally, historically, mentally, or personally connected with Jesus?

Wesley declared, we have "no authority from the Word of God" to judge those who are not "under the Christian dispensation."[57] Such outsiders need not have any knowledge, acceptance, or experience of Christianity's "capital doctrines" in order to "benefit from his death."[58] The powerful redemptive work of Christ, and the boundless love of God, are sufficient to cover, care for, and save them. Having just such outsiders in mind, Wesley wrote,

> I believe the merciful God regards the lives and tempers of men more than their ideas. I believe he respects the goodness of the heart rather than the clearness of the head; and that if the heart of a man be filled (by the grace of God, and the power of his Spirit) with the humble, gentle, patient love of God and man, God will not cast him into everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels because his ideas are not clear, or because his conceptions are confused.[59]

---

[55]Wesley, "On Living without God," *Works*, 4:174.
[56]Wesley, "On Sin in Believers," *Works*, 1:322-322.
[57]Ibid.
[58]Ibid., 175.
[59]Ibid.

Here, Wesley affirmed that persons lacking clear or distinctively Christian beliefs and experiences can indeed be filled "with the humble, gentle, patient love of God and man." Only lovers within the Christian dispensation are required to have specifically Christian beliefs and soteriological experiences,[60] but by God's grace all people everywhere are capable of having morally good and loving hearts by degrees, even without Christian heads. In reality, some do have good hearts, and some don't, just as within Christendom. Sinfulness and seeing through a glass dimly are also universal.

Thus, consciously understanding, believing in, and experiencing Christ and his Atonement do not seem to be necessary for becoming, growing, and persevering as loving persons who partake of "sum of all" true religion. What Wesley would call "daily experience" *shows us today* that there are many loving, compassionate, conscientious, just, reverent, gifted, and devout people all over the world. "By their fruits you shall know them," Wesley often affirmed with Jesus, who did not say, "By their doctrines you shall know them." Daily experience discloses that many loving persons belong to non-Christian religions and many to no "organized religion" at all. From experience, we know that Christians have no monopoly on significant degrees of moral conscience and tempers, spiritual devotion, love, compassion, justice, moral and spiritual gifts and sensitivities, and human hearts. Sadly, many unloving, immoral, and unspiritual people with hard hearts are also found everywhere, including within our own churches.

Wesley's Most Extreme Affirmation of Love Alone

Now consider one of Wesley's strongest affirmations of love, and only love, as "the sum of all."

> Another ground of . . . a thousand mistakes is the not considering deeply that love is the highest gift of God—humble, gentle, patient love; that all visions, revelations, manifestations whatever, are little things compared to love; and that all the gifts above mentioned are either the same with or infinitely inferior to it.
>
> It were well you should be thoroughly sensible of this—the heaven of heavens is love. There is nothing higher in religion—there is, in effect, nothing else; if you look for anything but

[60]Ibid., 174 and Wesley, "On Charity," *Works,* 3:295-296.

> more love, you are looking wide of the mark, you are getting out of the royal way. And when you are asking others, "Have you received this or that blessing?" if you mean anything but more love, you mean wrong; you are leading them out of the way, and putting them upon a false scent. Settle it then in your heart, that from the moment God has saved you from all sin, you are to aim at nothing more, but more of that love described in the thirteenth of Corinthians.[61]

Even if "there is, in effect, nothing else," Wesley cautioned that love as "the sum of all" means far more than having nothing more than intense, inner, sentimental feelings of affection. It also means much more than merely affirming mentally that God accepts us. Wesley repeatedly recognized that Christian love, works, and faith are inseparably united, as in "the *faith* that *works* through *love.*" Properly understood, each of these three terms is an integral part of the very meaning of the other two.[62] When any one of them is separated conceptually and practically from the other two, as did some of the Moravians, it loses its real Christian meaning. Love as "the sum of all," Wesley insisted, "does not supersede either faith or good works."[63]

Authentic Christian beliefs, Wesley assumed, can include only those biblical and traditional doctrines that are formed and informed by "God is love," plus the two great love commandments. Authentic Christian faith deliberately excludes and rejects all beliefs incompatible with Divine and human love. To repeat, Wesley declared that *everything* in "the Word of God," should be judged "in proportion to the nearness of its relation to what is there laid down as the sum of all—the love of God and our neighbors."[64] Nothing in the Bible can say otherwise (even if it does), Wesley insisted. As noted, his own earliest examples of unloving biblical beliefs that say otherwise were God's hating Esau, and St. Paul's predestination.[65] When he sent his "Sunday Service" to the Methodists in America in 1784, Wesley deliberately rejected and omitted fifteen of the Church of England's

---

[61]John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (London: Epworth Press, 1995), 90.

[62]As explained in Edwards, *What Today's Methodists Need to Know about John Wesley,* chapter 5.

[63]Wesley, "Sermon on the Mount, IV," *Works*, 1:542.

[64]Wesley, "On Laying the Foundations of the New Chapel," *Works*, 3:587-588.

[65]Wesley, "Free Grace," *Works*, 3:552.

"Thirty Nine Articles" and modified several others. So much for tradition. He also rejected all of the "imprecatory Psalms," as they have been called; 34 malicious Psalms were completely deleted, and additional vindictive verses were omitted from 58 other Psalms.[66] He pronounced them to be "*highly improper for the mouths of a Christian congregation.*"[67] These unloving "imprecatory Psalms" invoke vengeance, destruction, suffering, horrible evils, and death upon one's enemies or rivals. Wesley's own discerning insights and practices leave us today with an open invitation to "search the Scriptures" for both loving and unloving biblical texts. Some traditional and scriptural beliefs are indeed unloving and unconscionable. *Both love and conscience need to be added to the Wesleyan Quadrilateral as basic Wesleyan hermeneutical principles, yielding a Wesleyan Hexagonal.*[68]

Some of our biblical (and nonbiblical) beliefs do indeed contradict or otherwise interfere with living lovingly and conscientiously. (Isn't this relevant to today's LGBTQ issues? What would be the most loving thing for us to do?) Wesley advised, "Do not spend your time and strength contending for or against such things as of a disputable nature;" instead leave "a thousand disputable points to those who have no better business than to toss the ball of controversy to and fro."[69] Yet, many widely held biblical beliefs are disputable precisely because they are unloving and morally unconscionable, and these require careful reconsideration.

If love is "the sum of all" then Christian *works* as well as *doctrines*, properly understood, can include only deeds required by, consistent with, and expressive of God's love and the two love commandments. All intolerably unloving and unconscionable works done in the name of God, even if required by the Bible, would be excluded—like *putting to death* all people who work on the Sabbath, all practicing male homosexuals, and both the male and female partners involved in adultery.[70] These were not Wesley's own examples,[71] but what else?

---

[66]https://christianity.stackexchange.com/questions/32359/which-psalms-did-wesley-leave-out-in-sunday-service-of-the-methodists-and-why.

[67]Wesley, "Preface" to "The Sunday Service of the Methodists in the United States of America," in *Works of the Rev. John Wesley*, ed. John Emory (1835), 7:581, (italics added).

[68]Edwards, *What Today's Methodists Need to Know about John Wesley*, chapter 3.

[69]Wesley, "On Attending the Church Service," *Works*, 3:478.

[70]Exodus 35:2, Leviticus 20:13 and 20:10.

[71]Sadly, in his *Explanatory Notes Upon the Old Testament*, Wesley raised no objections to any of these incredibly unloving commandments, all of which value rules far more than people.

Wesley's "Catholic Spirit" implicitly recognizes also that many traditional beliefs and scriptural verses, passages, assertions, commands, and practices may actually be completely *irrelevant* to love as "the sum of all." About conspicuously abundant diversity in doctrines and worship practices, Wesley advised, "Keep your opinion, I mine," and "We must both act as each is fully persuaded in his own mind."[72] The critical issue is, "Though we can't all think [or act] alike, may we not love alike? May we not be one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt, we may."[73] (He did not say, "We will.")

Many scriptural beliefs and practices, (and many hotly contested issues in today's biblical criticism), make no real difference to anyone's becoming a more loving person, obeying the love commandments, and loving God and our neighbors. As in Wesley's day, Christians today spend far too much time and effort preaching, teaching, learning, fretting over, being divided by, and rejecting one another over irrelevancies. Can you think of any examples?

Consider this. Wesley did not say so (to my knowledge), but *most verses and surrounding passages* in the Bible are seldom if ever used as texts or topics for sermons of any kind, much less for love-affirming sermons. Too many sermons today teach us who and how to hate, not who and how to love. Ministers "in the field," then and now, always decide selectively which scriptures pertain significantly to themselves and their congregations. During the entire lifetime of every minister, most scriptures and commandments are never used as sermon texts, perhaps because they are irrelevant in practice or contrary to moral and spiritual loving and living. If not that, then why? Yes, life just isn't long enough to cover everything, but for what other reasons? Jewish rabbis say that in the "Old Testament" alone (as we, but not they, call it), there are 613 commandments, not merely 10. How many of these are ever used as sermon topics, preached, taught, or endorsed by our ministers? (What about never charging or paying interest on loans, for example?) And how many additional commandments are there in the New Testament, neglected or not?

Conclusions

If we were now to embrace fully Wesley's view that Divine and human love are truly "the sum of all," would that modify what pastoral ministry

---

[72]Wesley, "Catholic Spirit," *Works*, 2:89.
[73]Ibid., 82.

track students are required to study in our Wesleyan divinity schools? Are our pastoral ministers being trained adequately for changing, forming, nurturing, and being caregivers of more and more loving souls? Does or should their curriculum center primarily on sanctification (moral and spiritual development) applied to themselves and for the sake of their future parishioners? Does or should it focus primarily on the theology, axiology, psychology, homiletics, hermeneutics, and practice of love—which Wesley identified with holiness? And less on what, if anything? What would a course on each of these look like, especially one centering on the homiletics of love? Should our teaching and preaching concentrate more on loving grace and less on rules, more on the moral and spiritual *formation of souls*, and less on dogmas deeply aligned with unloving political, secular, and religious cultures, or less on pleasant (or unpleasant) trivialities that do not nourish human souls, loving souls? Should all of us focus on loving God, people, animals,[74] and "creation care" more than we love dogmas, laws, ideologies, and the inanimate "things of the world"? Rules, doctrines, and worldly material objects were made for people, not people for rules, doctrines, and material things. Should we attend more to knowing, growing, practicing, rejoicing, living, and serving in love, and less on anything that logically contradicts or is irrelevant to such? And should our ministers tell us more than they now do about John Wesley's own profound thinking, devotion, believing, acting, loving, and compassionate living and serving? (During my many decades as a lay Methodist, I have heard very little about Wesley's life and thoughts from our pulpits, especially his thoughts.)

Going slightly deeper, how would Methodism be transformed if we took very seriously Wesley's conviction that nothing more is required of anyone, Christian or not, than love itself, informed by loving beliefs, manifesting loving dispositions, tempers, sensitivities, and values, and expressed in loving actions, gifts, practices, and experiences? If the Bible contains any unloving texts like the numerous vengeful imprecatory Psalms, or unconscionable beliefs and practical requirements—e.g., that we affirm predestination, execute homosexuals and adulterers, require slaves to be absolutely obedient, subordinate women, and forbid women

[74]Concerning Wesley's remarkable views about animals, see Rem B. Edwards, *John Wesley's Values—And Ours* (Lexington, KY: Emeth Press, 2012), 73-82, and Edwards, *What Today's Methodists Need to Know about John Wesley*, 71-78.

to speak in church—should our ministers tell us explicitly that such things contradict and are incompatible with love, and then guide us toward more excellent ways—like those in the "thirteenth of Corinthians," as Wesley called it? Later if not earlier in life, Wesley himself opposed most of these, (but I have found no discussion where he objected to scriptures about executing homosexuals and adulterers).

Would Methodism flourish again in the twenty-first century if we were to concentrate more than we now do on grace, devotional practices, and moral and spiritual gifts, affections, tempers, values, and virtues that constitute thinking, living, repenting, growing, serving, rejoicing, and flourishing in love? This includes love's derivative and expressive sensitivities, devotions, beliefs, gifts, practices, and virtues like those in Wesley's *works of piety and works of mercy*[75]—communal and private worship, heartfelt devotion, repentance, prayer, searching the scriptures, fasting, communion, compassion, justice, kindness, repentance, forgiveness, generosity, humility, gratefulness, truthfulness, honesty, and so on. Should we focus much more deeply than we do now on love itself and its "proper objects"[76]—God, human souls and bodies, and the souls and bodies of "every creature God has made"? And less on what? What is irrelevant, and what are love's improper objects—our idols? What has made the mainline churches, ours included, so irrelevant or repulsive to the lives of so many?

Cannot the "true religion" of love be expressed both outwardly and culturally, as well as inwardly and personally, in an immense variety of enlightened and loving ways, and in many diverse cultures, communities, denominations, congregations, world religions, and other persuasions? In his universal love, mercy, grace, and goodness, hasn't God given effective and acceptable non-Christian sensitivities, beliefs, practices, means of grace, and gifts of love, virtue, service, and holiness to persons of other times, places, nations, religions, and persuasions, that is, to those who do not "think" and "walk" as we do? In the "Catholic Spirit" of John Wesley, and without asking first about their opinions, (as Jehu did not ask Jehonadab in II Kings 10, so Wesley pointed out),[77] may we not say to all who live and love by the best light they have, "If your heart is as my heart, give me your hand"? Even then, the much more difficult matter of loving

[75]Wesley, *Works*, "On Zeal," 3:313-314, "The Scripture Way of Salvation," 2:166.

[76]Wesley, *Works*, "The Great Privilege of Those that are Born of God," 1:433.

[77]Wesley, "Catholic Spirit," *Works*, 2:82.

"all mankind without exception," including our enemies, even "the enemies of God,"[78] would still remain. Perfection in love is a very high standard to meet—in scope, affective depth, understanding, and practice.

[78]Wesley, "The Almost Christian," *Works*, 1:138, 141, "Catholic Spirit," 2:89; "The Reformation of Manners," 2:321; "The Character of a Methodist," *Works*, 9:38.