

HEAVEN OPENED IN THE SOUL

THE RELIGIOUS IMAGINATION OF METHODISTS

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What do Methodists think about what lies beyond the grave? What do we believe about the afterlife? I don't speak for the forty-eight million who call themselves "Methodist," much less the roughly five hundred million more "Wesleyan," "Nazarene," "Holiness," and "Pentecostal" peoples who descend from the Wesleyan/Methodist movement. Moreover, I am only an amateur scholar, a reader of Wesleyan theology, a preacher, an employer of theologians, and an ordained minister deeply immersed in the United Methodist branch of the tradition. Therefore, my contribution will be more journalistic and conversational than academic. From this vantage point, I want to share four insights.

The most important thing to confess is that in my community of United Methodists we do not talk about the afterlife very much. Indeed, in all my travels, the countless sermons and lectures I have heard, and all the late-night discussions I have been a part of, I recall very few

in-depth or detailed speculation about life after this one—no speculation about streets paved with gold or fiery pits. So say most Methodist clergy I have queried since receiving this assignment.

Yet the very night I write these words, this entry appears on the Facebook page of a prominent clergywoman friend: “My dad died last night. Growing up between two brothers, I’ve spent my whole life basking in the light that is born of being a daughter. An only daughter of an amazing Dad. I think it was the love of my parents that made it so easy for me to believe in the love of our God. He often said I went into ministry to get him into heaven. And today in the absence of his voice I am praying that everything I believe about heaven is true.”

Her post is an example of the common contemporary Methodist assumption about the afterlife. In my experience, Methodists seem to believe in the afterlife in the way we believe there will be life found elsewhere in the universe some day and a cure for cancer will be found: we expect so; we hope so. And our hopes are loosely derived from our belief in a wondrous creation and a loving God.

And that leads me to the second insight. Many Methodist doctrinal positions are exercises in what John Wesley called “practical divinity.”¹ They are tethered to a classical Protestant theological superstructure, but the tether is long and flexible. This is due both to the synthetic and experimental nature of John Wesley as a theologian and our belief in the pervasive (we call it prevenient) work of the Holy Spirit. We are more inductive than deductive in our theological reasoning. This isn’t to say that we lack doctrinal norms. Rather, we think the proof is in the eating of the pudding, and we “test the spirits” to see if they are of God for our time and circumstance. Perhaps this is why, although every seminarian studies formal soteriology and eschatology as topics in a course in systematic theology, the specific details of the ultimate consequences of sin and death or of the eternal life in Christ are more likely to be discussed in pastoral care or liturgy courses. And so our professional beliefs on the subject are ad hoc, shaped by the need to console the dying and their loved ones.

And this leads me to the third insight. When it comes to the after-life, much is left to individual contemplation. And today, heaven (or hell, for that matter) exists in the peripheral vision of Methodist religious imagination. It has not always been so. This can be seen by the only entry requirement for the movement set forth by the founder, John Wesley, in the “General Rules of the United Societies.” One needed *only* a “desire to flee from the wrath to come, to be saved from their sins.”² This reads like a doctrinal litmus test. But it is more instructive to observe it presupposes a shared religious sensibility, a deeply embedded supposition about the “undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveler returns.”³ It was assumed everyone had this desire. They could just as well have said, “Everyone is welcome.”

The fourth insight is that in practice, Methodists appear to have what is sometimes called a “realized eschatology.” The term itself arises early in the twentieth-century theological lexicon, but the distinction is much older and concerns the meaning of Jesus’s teaching regarding the kingdom of God. Was he—is he—speaking of something to come at the end of time or something already here, as in “The kingdom of God is at hand” (Mark 1:15 Revised Standard Version)? I will discuss some of the complications of this question later, but at this point it is important to say, for Wesley, salvation is not just a onetime transaction in the present for that time in the future when we enter the kingdom. In his sermon “The Scripture Way of Salvation,”⁴ he says, “It is not something at a distance; it is a present thing; a blessing which, through the free mercy of God, ye are now in possession of.” And in “The Way to the Kingdom,” he uses the wonderfully evocative phrase “Heaven opened in the soul:”

This holiness and happiness, joined in one, are sometimes styled, in the inspired writings, “the kingdom of God,” (as by our Lord in the text,) and sometimes, “the kingdom of heaven.” It is termed “the kingdom of God,” because it is the immediate fruit of God’s reigning in the soul. So soon as ever he takes unto himself his mighty power, and sets up his throne in our hearts, they are instantly filled with this “righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.” It

is called “the kingdom of heaven” because it is (in a degree) heaven opened in the soul. For whosoever they are that experience this, they can aver before angels and men.⁵

“Heaven opened in the soul.” The immanence of God through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, the in-breaking of the kingdom of God, looms large in the Methodist religious imagination. Surely, it accounts for our founding of organizations like the Salvation Army and Goodwill Industries, and for the fact that we have established so many colleges and hospitals and other institutions for human flourishing. We join in the widely used Memorial Acclamation in the Eucharistic rite: “Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.” But “Christ is risen” seems to be our field of focus, which has the effect of moving the afterlife into the background.

However, if we leave it there, we sell our tradition short and impoverish our religious vision, leaving us unprepared to face the existential questions of life and death with anything more than ungrounded platitudes. I will attempt to describe the theology that funded the Methodist understanding of the last things in John Wesley’s time and later in nineteenth-century America. I will conclude by offering a proposition for how we can recover the essence of our tradition in a way that addresses what I believe is the modern version of the “fear of the wrath to come” that underlies our current unarticulated understanding of what lies beyond the grave.

What do Methodists believe, and how do we come to believe it? The precursor for Methodism is, in many respects, Jacobus Arminius (1560–1609), and his name lived on in Methodism for generations as a way to establish a contrast with the descendants of Calvinism. (By the way, many have suggested that Latter-day Saint theology is in this same “Arminian” family). But certainly, the formative period for Methodist theology is the life and work of John Wesley (1703–91) and Charles Wesley (1707–88). What they together developed is less a set of doctrines than a field guide for a movement in the form of sermons, hymns, and rules. Ryan Danker, assistant professor of history of Christianity

and Methodist studies at Wesley Seminary, argues the Wesleys didn't present a full theological system for two reasons: "(1) they were Anglicans and so they did theology (or rather divinity) as Anglicans always did; through prayers, ritual, homilies, and treatises very similar to the way the early church did theology (as opposed to the scholastics and continental systematicians), and (2) because they assumed that Methodism would be built upon the larger catholic structure provided by English Christianity."⁶

Methodism is often referred to as a "religion of the heart," situated in the Pietist stream of Protestantism. However, it is not a "heart" religion at the expense of the "head." The Wesleys did not reject logical reasoning, nor were they impulsive or antinomian. Wesleyanism is an "experiential" faith but in the eighteenth-century sense of that word. It is experimental and empirical. The Wesleys were very much educated men of their time that were fascinated by the early stages of scientific exploration. John's journals indicate that he kept up with discoveries in medicine, chemistry, astronomy, and electricity. In that spirit of curiosity, John Wesley's theology was practical (it had to actually work), and it was speculative—not speculative in the sense of being imaginative but in the sense of building on previous work, examining the evidence, and putting forth hypotheses to advance scientific understanding.

Allow me this analogy. Just as his contemporary Benjamin Franklin made the connection between the power of lightning from the heavens and electrical activity on earth, John was conducting experiments on the power emanating from heaven—the grace of God—and how that power can be experienced. No doubt, had he known of the pervasiveness of electricity, even to the cellular and atomic level, he would have found even more confirmation of his hypothesis that grace is infused in all creation. To use the language of Wesley's Anglican theology, it is "prevenient." He was seeking the experience of grace made known by the love of God in the lives of the people in the movement. This is the way to understand how Wesleyanism is "experiential" and a "heart religion."

The salient feature of the Wesleys' understanding of what lies beyond the grave is their discovery that God's love is readily available, that it has the power to transform, and that the growth and sharing of this love is the essence of a sanctified life. And by logical extension, they believed this boundless and expanding love will triumph at the end of life and the end of time.

What becomes more difficult and rather esoteric to our contemporary ears is John Wesley's understanding of the timeline of the after-life. The questions follow: When will Christ return and where does that event fit relative to his thousand-year (millennial) reign spoken of in Revelation 20:1–6? And what is the experience of the soul during this time? Randy Maddox concludes Wesley began "amillennialist," flirted with premillennialism, and ended up postmillennialist because it fit well with his "progressive eschatology."⁷ Underlying everything else to say about a Methodist understanding of what lies beyond the grave is while in practice we often appear to have a "realized eschatology," our tradition is a "progressive eschatology" because Wesley believed we are living in a dispensation of time when grace is a particularly active and growing presence.

There was nothing inherently new in this concept. Rather, Wesley's contribution is the way he puts classic doctrine together. There are five elements from the received tradition in Wesley's progressive vision of the procession of God's redeeming love. One is a perfunctory acceptance of the ancient cosmology of "three heavens," with the lower two referring to earth and sky and the uppermost being the "immediate residence" of God on a throne accompanied by winged angels and archangels.⁸ A second is the immortality of the soul despite its fall in sin.⁹ A third is an understanding of an intermediate state prior to the general resurrection and final judgment at the end of the story of the old creation that entails a bodily resurrection. What is distinctive is how he winds his way around these concepts like pylons on an obstacle course—focusing on the way God's grace works, practically, in the lives of men and

women—and explicating an existing doctrine of the threefold sequence of the work of grace: prevenience, justifying, and sanctifying.

What course does he follow? Let's begin with the end in mind. The New Creation, as described in a John Wesley sermon by that name, is an ecstatic vision of the general resurrection involving perfected forms of the current created order: no comets, only perfect stars; no thorns or thistles; no storms in land or water; and no danger of harm from animals—to cite only a few examples of perfected creation. As for the experience of the immortal soul, it is a deeply comforting vision of communion with the triune God:

Hence will arise an unmixed state of holiness and happiness far superior to that which Adam enjoyed in Paradise. In how beautiful a manner is this described by the Apostle: "God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: For the former things are done away!" As there will be no more death, and no more pain or sickness preparatory thereto; as there will be no more grieving for, or parting with, friends; so there will be no more sorrow or crying. Nay, but there will be a greater deliverance than all this; for there will be no more sin. And, to crown all, there will be a deep, an intimate, an uninterrupted union with God; a constant communion with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ, through the Spirit; a continual enjoyment of the Three-One God, and of all the creatures in him!¹⁰

In truth, while the details of the vision have scriptural moorings, they are not being proffered as doctrine. They are best understood as useful to the religious imagination, much as C. S. Lewis would later do in the *Chronicles of Narnia*. And as with Lewis, John's vision supports the doctrinal point that a wonderful consummation lies at the end of a progressive eschatology with the love of God as its constant motive. Consider how his brother Charles used the phrase "new creation" in one of his most popular hymns, "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling":

Finish, then, thy new creation; pure and spotless let us be.
Let us see Thy great salvation perfectly restored in Thee;
Changed from glory into glory, till in heaven we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before Thee, Lost in wonder, love, and
praise.¹¹

Granted, this hymn is about the transformation of individuals as “new creations” in life, but it captures the eschatological vision of the experience, to be “lost in wonder, love, and praise.” The Wesleys saw the salvation story of scripture being experienced in the movement as evidence of the love of God. Indeed, they saw the movement of the Holy Spirit among a group of people “desiring to flee the wrath to come,” who experienced this love as an assurance of salvation, which grew into love of God and neighbor. And they understood this movement to be unfolding in history, thus, *progressive* eschatology. They saw Christ working through his Church to recover the lost and foster their growth in grace as a step in the reclamation of the whole of the fallen creation. As such, it had immediate consequences—fruits—in the way this love was expressed in acts of mercy and justice. Later, this important element of their work tends to stand alone as a *realized* eschatology, removed from its place in a comprehensive plan of salvation, but the Wesleys would have rejected this as both unscriptural and impotent.

The driving force of this progressive reclamation project is the Methodist doctrine of “perfection.” At the early Methodist conferences, all the clergy were asked an important question each year: “Do you believe you can attain perfection in love in this life; are you earnestly striving for it?”¹² We are still asked that by the bishop in the service of ordination. To seek “perfection in love” implies a constant striving toward an ideal state. Hear this urging John Wesley provides in his sermon “On Faith,” and notice also the dynamic imperative:

Go on to perfection. Yea, and when ye have attained a measure of perfect love, when God has circumcised your hearts, and enabled you to love him with all your heart and with all your soul, think not of resting there. That is impossible. You cannot stand still;

you must either rise or fall; rise higher or fail lower. Therefore the voice of God to the children of Israel, to the children of God, is, “Go forward!” Forgetting the things that are behind, and reaching forward unto those that are before, press on to the mark, for the prize of your high calling of God in Christ Jesus!¹³

“You must either rise or fall.” It sounds like the second week of a gym membership. Indeed, in contrast to the Calvinists, to some degree, Wesley believed we “work out our own salvation,” described in a sermon by that name.¹⁴ The work of sanctifying grace is interactive, cooperant, and “responsible,” to use Maddox’s term. And so, in addition to those who resist the work of God’s justifying grace, it is possible to fall from grace and join those who suffer the final judgment. But as this passage indicates, even though you may at a moment in your life be justified, the work of grace is not finished, and, to some degree, it is on you—“you must either rise or fall.” This entails even the possibility of losing salvation. He lays this case out in “Predestination Calmly Considered.”¹⁵

In his sermon “Of Hell,” John Wesley describes the awful consequences, the Final Judgment on those who fall from grace or refuse to accept it. Similar to his description of the New Creation, he describes the torment in exquisite detail. Speculative scientist as he is, he even suggests from the example of woven asbestos (which, he says, can be found in the British Museum) how it is the fires of hell can burn and not consume.¹⁶

In this sermon, and elsewhere, Wesley describes the most interesting and illuminating aspect of his understanding of what happens to all souls—saved and damned—beyond the grave. We return to the problem of timing and sequence, and the critical question is about the period in time as we experience it between the death of the individual body and the general resurrection and establishment of the new creation—the “new heaven and new earth” of the book of Revelation. I wonder how the scientist in Wesley would have appropriated new understandings of the relationship between space and time and Heisenberg’s uncertainty

principle, but what Wesley had to choose from were varying theological cosmologies in the received tradition.

The first thing to say is that Wesley had a full-throated defense of the bodily resurrection. As he says in his sermon “On the Resurrection of the Dead,” “The plain notion of a resurrection requires, that the self-same body that died should rise again. Nothing can be said to be raised again, but that very body that died. If God give to our souls at the last day a new body, this cannot be called the resurrection of our body; because that word plainly implies the fresh production of what was before.”¹⁷ And he speculates on the same “practical” questions those before and after have raised about this doctrine:

God can distinguish and keep unmixed from all other bodies the particular dust into which our several bodies are dissolved, and can gather it together and join it again, how far soever dispersed asunder. God is infinite both in knowledge and power. He knoweth the number of the stars, and calleth them all by their names; he can tell the number of the sands on the sea-shore: And is it at all incredible, that He should distinctly know the several particles of dust into which the bodies of men are mouldered, and plainly discern to whom they belong, and the various changes they have undergone? Why should it be thought strange, that He, who at the first formed us, whose eyes saw our substance yet being imperfect, from whom we were not hid when we were made in secret, and curiously wrought in the lowest parts of the earth, should know every part of our bodies, and every particle of dust whereof we were composed?¹⁸

However, Wesley did not believe that these souls simply “sleep” awaiting the new creation. And he did not believe in the Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory because he could not find scriptural warrant for this notion, and frankly it conflicted with his theological project. In his scheme, it was essential that the final judgment as to the disposition of the soul occurred at the death of the physical body—no remediation in purgatory. However, he did still have to consider the problem of this

intermediate period before the new creation. His solution is to appropriate the tradition of “paradise” or “Hades” as the antechamber of heaven, or precisely, two regions—paradise as the antechamber of heaven; Hades as the antechamber of hell.

In “On Hell,”¹⁹ he describes the experience of the damned. They are aware of what they have lost in the sense of the earthly sensations and joys and what they have lost going forward—the possibility of joining with God in heaven. On the other hand, in the other room, Wesley’s description of paradise is characteristic of his entire theological vision. Here, on the “porch of heaven . . . the spirits of just men are made perfect. It is in heaven only that there is the fullness of joy; the pleasures that are at God’s right hand for evermore.”²⁰ As Ken Collins describes it, “Wesley imagines an idyllic picture where all the saints will be ‘conversing with all the wise and holy souls that have lived in all ages and nations . . .’ With this increase in knowledge will also come an advance in happiness and holiness, whereby the saints will be ‘continually ripened for heaven.’”²¹ Here is the penultimate moment in his progressive eschatology. Wesleyan emphasis on sanctification and Christian perfection extended beyond the grave, but now, in the antechamber of paradise, it is occurring without the fear of falling back into sin, a continuation of growth toward perfection in love.

What is most beguiling about this vision is the communal experience. Frank Baker, in his examination of Charles Wesley’s hymns, says that “heaven for Charles Wesley was not simply a place of rest—or even of joy—after death. Heaven was a relationship between God and man, a relationship summed up in the word ‘love.’”²² It is not always clear with Charles (or John, for that matter) when they are talking about “heaven” or “paradise.” But if he accepts John’s timeline, the closing words of his hymn “One Church, Above, Beneath” is singing about paradise and the ancient doctrine of communion of the Saints, those in heaven and on earth:

Come let us join our Friends above
That have obtain’d the prize,

And on the eagle-wings of love
To joy celestial rise;
Let all the Saints terrestrial sing
With those to glory gone,
For all the servants of our King
In earth and Heaven are one.²³

It must be said that Charles through his sermons had a longer impact on the religious imagination of the Methodists than did John through his sermons, letters, rules and other writings. Certainly that is because music and singing penetrates the soul and gives us a sense that we are joining a heavenly choir. But also Charles wrote from a richer life experience. Many have observed that, while John had a failed marriage and no children and was probably not much fun to be around, Charles had the experience of a loving family life, which also entailed great personal grief. The death of his son, for example, produces poetry of great anguish. For generations, parents have sung his hymns with tears in their eyes.

In his more than six thousand hymn texts, many deal with death and the afterlife. And, while to modern ears, they sometimes sound like whistling past the graveyard, in fact, they give voice to the vibrant vision of paradise and the new creation. The text, "On the Corpse of a Believer," for instance: "Ah! Lovely Appearance of Death! No Sight upon Earth is so fair: Not all the gay Pageants that breathe can with a dead Body compare."²⁴

David Hempton observes that much can be learned about foundational Methodist spirituality from their attitude about death. He points out the "Methodist *Arminian Magazine* carried far more accounts of deathbed scenes than its Calvinist rival, *The Gospel Magazine*." As proclamation, prescription and persuasion, Hempton says, "There was no more appropriate place to preach the Methodist message of fleeing from the wrath to come than the attended deathbed."²⁵

As vivid and interesting as the foregoing may be, it must be acknowledged that, over time, much of the details of what John and Charles Wesley taught about the afterlife did not become normative for later

Methodists. What quickly broke down is the map of the territory beyond the grave. It is as if the carefully separated differentiation between paradise and the new creation, heaven and its antechamber, became one piece in the religious imagination of the nineteenth century and became like the clouds in the romantic landscape paintings of John Constable barely a generation later. Wesley Professor of Systematic Theology Kendall Soulen offers one explanation: “Methodists never have had an interest in teaching anything distinctive on this point—he would have hoped he taught in concert with the New Testament and the consensus of patristic thought, and he probably did.”²⁶ Two well-known pieces of John’s biography summarize the essence of his understanding. Often he described himself as “a brand, plucked from the fire,” which has a double meaning referring to his being saved as a child from a burning building and his experience of salvation. And then on his deathbed he said on two occasions, “The best of all is, God is with us.”²⁷

However, the absence of formal explicit teaching did not mean the Methodists stopped imagining the experience beyond the grave—far from it. Before evaluating the contemporary scene, it is important to briefly consider the Methodist religious imagination concerning the afterlife during that momentous period after the death of the Wesleys in America during the first half of the nineteenth century. Methodist preachers were prepared by their polity, their theology, and their spiritual sensibilities to be, along with the Baptists, the primary leaders in the revival, known as the Second Great Awakening. To a significant degree, this was the second wave of Methodism, and it was very much animated by an eschatological religious imagination.

Many have grouped and labeled this profound religious movement along with trends in art and literature such as Romanticism. Today, that word has some disparaging overtones, as though it is only an irrational and sentimental movement. If one does not believe in the active work of the Holy Spirit and a vision about the meaning and future of creation, it was perhaps only “emotional.” But we look on the historical record with

the eyes of faith and see another force at work, a spiritual experience, which includes the emotions.

What looms largest in this formative period of Methodism is the Second Great Awakening, preeminently led by and through women. While this may appear to play to a stereotype, the more logical explanation is, in the words of Isaiah 53:3, women led lives of constant sorrow and were “acquainted with grief.” As many as a third of women in the period died in childbirth, and many mothers regularly cared for their dying children. One thinks of the words of Jesus on the cross to his mother, Mary, “Woman, here is your son” (John 19:26 RSV). And, as women were there when he was crucified, they were also at the tomb as the first evangelists and the primary theologians for the Awakening.

Women were the best and most numerous primary sources for understanding the religious imagination about what could transcend death.²⁸ What was being searched for and found was an inner experience of assurance, the individual awareness that he or she has been saved. Central to that experience is what John Wesley described as “heaven opened in the soul,” and these vivid and ecstatic visions included a strong sense of the communion of the Saints. These were often given voice in Methodist love feasts and class meetings and captured in journals and poems and hymns.²⁹

From these kinds of sources, there are to be found common themes about what heaven is like. There were angels bright and saints in white. And the most important feature is that heaven is engaged in endless worship and the singing of praises. Loved ones are there and also others who have fought the battle and won. “Zion” is used to describe both the church in worship and a foretaste of the final reunion in the heavenly city. There are also vivid pictures of hell to be found, but heaven was foremost in their sight. One interesting example is this verse from Sara Jones, a Methodist from Virginia. Here, she illustrates an interesting feature in many visions of the afterlife. The figure she encounters—though certainly and logically the risen Christ—she refers to as “Jesus.”

Then on wings of angels my Jesus I'll meet
And gaze on my treasure and fall at his feet.

With raptures of joy in glory I'll tell
That Jesus' image my spirit doth fill.³⁰

Those who were even more profoundly acquainted with death and forced to contemplate eternity were African Americans. Eileen Guenther, in her book looking at the spirituals in slave life, says, "Death was always seen as a relief from the degradation and pain of slavery, a viable alternative to freedom. In that sense, death was more desired than feared."³¹ Richard Allen, who later founded the African Methodist Episcopal Church described the company to be found in heaven: "When, therefore, we shall leave this impertinent and unsociable world, and all our good old friends that are gone to Heaven before us shall meet us as soon as we are landed upon the shore of eternity, and with infinite congratulations for our safe arrival, shall conduct us into the company of patriarchs, prophets, apostles and martyrs."³²

The Awakening crossed denominational lines and ultimately created new denominations. Can we identify specifically Methodist understandings of the afterlife in this period? Among other elements, it is clear that they were still practicing a full progressive eschatology. Salvation began with the solitary anxiety of the mourner's bench, and then came the experience of assurance—the in-breaking of the kingdom in the heart—followed by a sanctified life of holiness, and going on to perfection as a foretaste of the eventual reward.

Gradually, the Second Great Awakening waned. The main body of Methodism continued to grow, even as it spawned other new movements. But this second movement of Methodism became institutionalized. And as that happened, references to the afterlife began to recede. Baker describes the process by which Charles's ecstatic vision was toned down. "The subsequent lowering of the spiritual temperature, even within Methodism, made it somewhat difficult after a few generations to sing many of Charles Wesley's greatest hymns without either hypocrisy or at least a faintly uneasy self-consciousness. . . . One example of this debasing of Wesley's spiritual currency is to be seen in

his preoccupation with Heaven.”³³ Baker points out in later use of his hymns, the final verse dealing with heaven is left out.

A hundred years later, what is the current state of final affairs in Methodism? As I indicated at the beginning, heaven and hell are rarely discussed. The fundamental guide for my denomination, The United Methodist Church, is the Book of Discipline, in which very little can be found on the subject of life beyond the grave. Near the beginning, as a kind of preamble, is the section entitled “Basic Christian Affirmations,” which instructs, “We pray and work for the coming of God’s realm and reign to the world and rejoice in the promise of everlasting life that overcomes death and the forces of evil.” Also, the Articles of Religion, as adopted by the Conference of 1808, are enshrined in the Discipline. There, Article 14 rejects the “Romish doctrine” of purgatory.³⁴ The historic creeds are affirmed, particularly the Apostles’ Creed, which affirms, “I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic and apostolic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.” There are several other instances of classic statements of doctrine, but no descriptions of the afterlife, nothing of the experiential religion of early centuries.

Instead, the Book of Discipline is primarily articles of incorporation and bylaws governing the earthly work of the church. And, another normative work for us is *The United Methodist Social Principles*,³⁵ a list of statements adopted by General Conferences. The primacy of this document underscores an earlier point that in practice we have a “realized eschatology,” concerned about how the kingdom of God is being revealed in this life.

In *The United Methodist Book of Worship*, which is recommended for use by clergy as a guide in the conduct of worship and other services, it is instructive that the funeral service is entitled “A Service of Death and Resurrection.” In that liturgy, our hope is directed to the general resurrection, and there are only very faint echoes of the old visions of the communion of Saints and the comforts of being with God, with none of the vivid details.³⁶ The specific understanding of Paradise, which was so

illustrative of the earlier religious imagination, is completely lost today. To be fair, descriptions of the afterlife never had the status of doctrine in eighteenth and nineteenth centuries either. Ted A. Campbell indicates in *Methodist Doctrine: The Essentials* that we “reject the idea of purgatory but beyond that maintain silence on what lies between death and the last judgment.”³⁷ But there is almost nothing left of any quasi-doctrinal superstructure for a coherent progressive eschatology.

On the other hand, in the absence of formal teaching, there is a “folk theology,” informed more by other cultural sources as people fill in the blanks. I recently emailed a lifelong Methodist and asked what her thinking was about life after death. Almost immediately she replied with a very intimate account, which, she said, she has never told anyone in over eighty years, including the ten to fifteen pastors who have known her. My wife, Drema, who specializes in end-of-life care, reports that these privately nurtured hopes are common.

What happened? Did death drift to the periphery of religious imagination because modern medicine extended life and cut rates of the death of mother and child? That’s a common explanation. Others suggest modernity and scientific rationalism have pushed these considerations underground. But it is probably more complicated. My Methodist clergy colleagues in West Africa report that mention of the afterlife is rare there as well despite their experience with war and disease. They explain that African spirituality has its own religious imagination about the temporal presence of the ancestors and the immanence of the spirit world. So, the “afterlife,” isn’t “after,” it is present among us. Indeed, hours before I write this sentence, I sat in a formal, high church memorial service in Boston, and two of the eulogists spoke of the deceased as if he were in the room listening.

Does it matter that Methodists have lost a common, explicit, and theologically grounded religious imagination regarding the afterlife? At the psychological level, we know that long-term well-being depends upon being able to tell your story within a framework of a larger story about your community and the world. And surely that includes an

understanding of the meaning of death as well as life. Currently, as a culture, we seem to have a dark imagination populated by the undead—vampires and zombies—and by the living who have literally forgotten their story, as Alzheimer’s disease has become one of the greatest fears of my generation.

Is there something the Methodist account of a progressive eschatology has to offer? Only if it is true in the way we understand truth. As Wesleyans, we proceed not from doctrine but from experience guided by the text of scripture and the doctrinal traditions of the historic faith. So the question is whether we can discern the Holy Spirit working among us. Then the task of theology is to name that experience, providing a language and story to revivify our religious imagination.

It is useful to see if we can start from the beginning—reboot the way of salvation. In true Methodist fashion, I offer my own experience as testimony by focusing on the entrance requirement to the Methodist Society. Lester Ruth points out that “when they called for people to ‘flee from the wrath to come,’ Methodists did not generally have to convince people that God’s wrath was coming.”³⁸ As I said earlier, this entrance requirement was the equivalent of an open door because that was the form that spiritual longing took in the religious culture of the time. The presenting symptom of a diseased soul was the experience of guilt for sins and fear of eternal damnation. And we understood that experience to be the work of the Holy Spirit. In the words of “Amazing Grace,” incomprehensible for many today, “’Twas grace that taught my heart to fear.” It’s a bit like the way first-time convicted criminals are scared straight.

Candidly, my experience is that very few people “fear the wrath to come.” They do not fear God, and they do not believe in a literal hell. The religious cultural imagination of our time, especially in the Western middle- and upper-class white society, simply doesn’t support the images of eternal torment that have been the rhetorical stock-in-trade of many a revival preacher. Those who seek to evangelize in cultures dominated by religions such as Buddhism or Hinduism report the same

challenge. In these cultures, the Christian faith finds itself in the position of answering a question people are not asking because they don't share the underlying sentiment. A large number of people we would seek to save are not seeking salvation from sin and death as is understood in the classic theological formulation.

Does that mean prevenient grace is not at work anymore? No; I believe I see the Spirit at work just as intensely as in past ages, but in a different form. We live in a time of great fear, anxiety, and existential hopelessness. Science and technology are offering much but also raising existential questions. Genetic engineering and artificial intelligence are causing us to wonder about the uniqueness of the individual soul and the meaning of human existence. Astronomy and physics are raising fundamental questions about the nature of the universe. Meanwhile, the market economy and the gap between the rich and the poor make billions of people feel, literally, worthless.

I have known great fear in the dark night of my soul, and I sense the same lurking dread in many around me. As a child, I was afraid of Dracula and animals with sharp teeth; as an adult, dementia and the death of a child. But I think the true existential fear of my contemporaries is not of a wrathful God or the consequences of our sins. Our worst fear is that there is no God. It is the nightmarish prospect that there is no meaning in the universe or in our lives. And the consequences at the end of mortal life are not a hot orange and red place out of Dante's *Inferno*. It is the cold black emptiness, the nothingness of deep outer space.

Movies are the primary source of our religious imagination today, and they portray this emptiness. Perhaps the most frightening movie villain in my lifetime is Hannibal Lector in *The Silence of the Lambs*.³⁹ The chilling essence of his character is not active malice; it is his emptiness of feeling. Indeed, the real-life horrors of our time are the teenaged mass murderers who stare out at us in news coverage with their blank stares. The director of the film *Gravity*,⁴⁰ featuring an astronaut trapped in her capsule, called it a "monster movie." But, he said, the monster isn't

“gravity”; it is the emptiness of space. The terror was that she would be lost in space. As the story unfolds, she is “found” in a moment of what we could call “prevenient grace” when she cries out to a God she has never prayed to before out of those dark depths. The diseases of emptiness, the absence of meaning and purpose, are the epidemics of drug abuse, depression, and suicide. Certainly, we can see this developing historically in the existential crisis following the illusion-shattering world wars.

There is strong biblical warrant for this understanding of the experience of sin and death. The word *hell* may be translated as “hollow” or dark cave. Matthew speaks of the torment of fire, but he also speaks of it as “outer darkness” (Matthew 22:13 RSV). In Genesis, the time before creation is a world that “was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep” (Genesis 1:2 RSV). Indeed, sin has always been understood as a condition of being without God, with many of the Psalms and the words of the prophets speaking about the torment of alienation from God.

It is said that “seeing is believing.” But it is more the case that believing is a certain way of seeing. Theology is not just a matter of proposing a philosophical framework. Especially for Methodists, theology is an act of naming an experience and, in the naming, helping to enable eyes to see and ears to hear. It is a sacramental process. Wesley would call it a “means of grace.”

So perhaps the way to reenchant the Methodist religious imagination and recover a full sense of our progressive eschatological vision is to begin where Wesley began by welcoming others at the point of their real fear—not of wrath and punishment but emptiness and meaninglessness—and then to offer testimony of the love of God and the experience of assurance that comes with knowing Christ and the sense of mission and joy that comes with the cooperative project of the kingdom of God coming “on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10 RSV). This is a Methodist way of talking about salvation, to ask both what we are saved *from* and what we are saved *for*.

NOTES

1. See Thomas A. Langford, *Practical Divinity: Theology in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983).
2. “The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies,” in *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, ed. John Emory, 3rd American Complete and Standard Edition (New York: Carlton & Lanahan, 1831), 5:191.
3. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, act 3, scene 1.
4. Wesley, “The Scripture Way of Salvation,” in *Works*, 1:384–85.
5. Wesley, “The Way to the Kingdom,” in *Works*, 1:64.
6. Ryan Danker, email interview, February 2016.
7. Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994), 235–39.
8. See Wesley’s sermon “The New Creation,” in *Works*, 2:82.
9. See Kenneth J. Collins, “Eschatology and Glorification: The Triumph of Holy Love,” in *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 2007).
10. Wesley, “The New Creation,” in *Works*, 2:87.
11. United Methodist Church, *The United Methodist Hymnal: Book of United Methodist Worship* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), no. 384.
12. United Methodist Church, *The United Methodist Book of Worship* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1992), 721.
13. Wesley, “On Faith,” *Works*, 2:388.
14. See Wesley, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation,” in *Works*, 2:233–39.
15. See Wesley, “Predestination Calmly Considered,” in *Works*, 6:24–60.
16. Wesley, “Of Hell,” in *Works*, 2:147–54.
17. Wesley, “On the Resurrection of the Dead,” in *Works*, 2:507.
18. Wesley, “On the Resurrection of the Dead,” in *Works*, 2:508.
19. See Wesley, “Of Hell,” in *Works*, 2:147–54.
20. Wesley, “Of Hell,” in *Works*, 2:149.
21. Kenneth J. Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), 320.
22. Frank Baker, introduction to *Representative Verse of Charles Wesley*, ed. Frank Baker (London: Epworth Press, 1962), xvii.
23. Baker, *Representative Verse of Charles Wesley*, 131.

24. Baker, *Representative Verse of Charles Wesley*, 89.
25. David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 65; Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 68.
26. Kendall Soulen, email interview, February 2016.
27. Kenneth J. Collins, *John Wesley: A Theological Journey* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 268.
28. See Hempton, *Methodism*, 30–31.
29. See Lester Ruth, *Early Methodist Life and Spirituality: A Reader* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2005).
30. Ruth, *Early Methodist Life and Spirituality*, 142–43.
31. Eileen Guenther, *In Their Own Words: Slave Life and the Power of Spirituals* (St. Louis: MorningStar Music Publishers, 2016).
32. Ruth, *Early Methodist Life and Spirituality*, 143.
33. Baker, introduction to *Representative Verse of Charles Wesley*, xvii.
34. United Methodist Church, *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1976), 67.
35. See United Methodist Church, *Social Principles of the United Methodist Church, 2013–2016: With Official Text and Teaching Exercises, Plus Our Social Creed* (Nashville, TN: United Methodist Publishing House, 2013).
36. United Methodist Church, *The United Methodist Book of Worship* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1992).
37. Ted A. Campbell, *Methodist Doctrine: The Essentials* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 82.
38. Ruth, *Early Methodist Life and Spirituality*, 137.
39. *The Silence of the Lambs*, directed by Jonathan Demme (Los Angeles: Orion Pictures, 1991).
40. *Gravity*, directed by Alfonso Cuarzon (Burbank, CA: Warner Brothers, 2013).