

Purification of the Heart: Christian Character Formation within a Wesleyan Anthropology

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Christians have always been concerned with moral development, but...the kind of moral development they wish to promote is not equivalent with current theories of moral development. For Christian convictions require that the self be transformed in a manner that befits their conviction that the world is under the lordship of Jesus Christ.

(Hauerwas, 1991, p.151)

In the preceding quote, theological ethicist Stanley Hauerwas diagnoses a persistent obstacle to the formation of Christian character. He argues that conventional models of moral development are too embedded in a modern liberal tradition that does not share the Christian story. Influenced by Enlightenment ideals, modern models of moral character formation attempt to provide universally applicable truths. In the process, they are rendered ineffectual for meaningful Christian application, as their ability to incorporate particular Christian claims about humanity are lost. Consequently, the Christian psychotherapist, who has been trained in modern psychological models of development is often poorly equipped to integrate Christian faith with therapeutic work.

What does “Christian character” mean? What does it look like? And more importantly, how is it developed? Uncertainty about how to answer these questions often present further challenges to the Christian therapist. While many have offered potential answers to these questions, the diversity within the many Christian subtraditions make it difficult to come to a common consensus. Models of change are inevitably grounded within an anthropological perspective. Different ways of understanding the human condition lead to alternative understandings of transformation with differing therapeutic ends. Is the human most

fundamentally a broken sinner? Or a reflection of the *Imago Dei*? One's nuanced answers to these questions will inevitably shape one's imagination of the process of therapeutic change. Various subtraditions within Christianity answer these questions differently, and therefore arrive at divergent understandings of developmental growth.

Consequently, in an attempt to imagine what one means by "the formation of Christian character," it is imperative to decide which "Christian" one is referring to, and to ground one's perspective in that particular theological tradition. Christian psychologists Ron Wright, Paul Jones, and Brad Strawn (2014) have termed this process "tradition-based integration" (p. 37). They argue that there are certainly similarities in Christian understandings of God's character or human nature that can be considered broadly "orthodox" in nature, but there are also many nuances that, when taken into account, significantly alter the process of the integration of psychology and theology. Without attention to these fine-tuned differences in doctrine, particular perspectives on Christian character formation as understood by various denominational subtraditions are lost, leaving the Christian therapist who does not identify with mainstream perspectives on integration to effectively fend for themselves in sorting this process out. Therefore, more work is needed in order to consider how various Christian subtraditions would envision the process of Christian character formation, including where they might resonate with or differ from each other.

Towards this aim, the following paper attempts to detail the process of the formation of Christian character from the perspective of a *Wesleyan theological anthropology*. This paper will discuss (1) John Wesley's perspective of the purification of the heart, (2) his views of the

co-operant nature of the Holy Spirit, and (3) the implications of these perspectives for psychotherapy.

Christian Character as Purification of the Heart

The central question that guided Wesley's spiritual journey could be conceptualized as follows: "How can I be the kind of person that God created me to be, and that I long to be, a person holy in heart and life?" (Maddox, 2004, p. 101). It was not enough for Wesley to know that God's graciously accepts us when we fall short of this goal. God's sustaining work in the world certainly offers forgiveness for when people fail, but more importantly for Wesley, God invites people to become the holy persons they were originally created to be. Wesley was relentless in this aim, desiring that none should settle on their journey of sanctification. He used terms such as 'entire sanctification' and 'Christian perfection' to denote the totality of the purification of heart and life that Wesley saw as the *telos* of the Christian journey. In his attempt to facilitate these ends, Wesley was one of the pioneers of psychology-theology integration, drawing upon an emerging school of psychology to develop a theology that combined the "primacy and prevenience of grace with the expectation of Christian holiness" (Maddox, 2004, p. 102).

In his 18th century context, Wesley's view of holiness was inspired by a number of leading voices. For example, there existed empiricist tendencies of British philosophy that he encountered during his time at Oxford, which held that humans are moved to action only when they have been experientially affected. There were leading voices in the Anglican setting that assumed a kind of Platonic moral psychology where humans have some capacity for self-determination as a result of their ability to reason. In addition, alternative voices within

Anglicanism could be found that adopted an Augustinian view of moral psychology where all human moral actions were a result of deeply entrenched affections, ones that always led to sinful actions until God's gracious implantation of new affections (Maddox, 2004, p. 103). These competing influences took form in Wesley's *moral affectional psychology* (Leffel, 2004; Maddox, 2004).

In order to best understand this perspective and its implications for Christian character, two key concepts of *affections* and *tempers* must be discussed. First, the affections are framed within the list of faculties that make up the natural image of God in man: self-motion, understanding, will, liberty, and happiness (Outler, 1991, p. 16). From this list, Wesley used 'will' as an inclusive term for passions and affections (Outler, 1991, p. 15). These are not merely emotions or feelings, but essential motivating inclinations behind human action that are "awakened and thrive in response to experience of external reality" (Maddox, 2004, p. 103). Wesley's crucial example for this was that our affection of love for God and neighbor is born and then grows out of the experience of God's gracious love toward us (Maddox, 2004, p. 103). Wesley qualifies will with liberty, in the sense that our will provides our inclinations toward certain action, but our liberty manifests in the capacity to refuse to enact a felt inclination (Outler, 1991, p. 16).

Second, Wesley added a language of moral 'tempers' as key motivating influences that guide human behavior. While the affections at times manifest in more transitory states, they can be honed and habituated into enduring characterological dispositions (tempers) (Outler, 1991, p. 224). In the same way, unholy tempers (those which are contrary to the love of God) can also be

habituated and perpetuated by rejecting of God's grace and focusing on evil, selfish thoughts and desires.

Of primary importance to Wesley was that holiness of thoughts, words, and actions spring from these affections (will) and tempers (dispositions). Discussing the result of the renewal of the affections and tempers, Wesley says, "In consequence, they are delivered from evil words and works, from all unholiness of conversation; doing no evil to any child of man, and being zealous of all good works" (Outler, 1991, p. 141). For Wesley, the restoration of holy affections and tempers was the goal of the Christian religion (and the *telos* of the process of sanctification).

Wesley often used the language of 'the renewal of the heart' to describe this process. He states, "Ye know that the great end of religion is, to renew our hearts in the image of God, to repair that total loss of righteousness and true holiness" (Outler, 1991, p. 334). His central guiding concern for Christian character development was not so much *orthodoxy* (right belief) or *orthopraxy* (right actions) but, as some Wesleyan scholars call it, *orthokardia* (right heart), as this was the true measure of the believer, and from which overflowed right actions (Clapper, 2010, p. 68; Strawn & Leffel, 2001, p. 351).

There is a depth to Wesley's anthropology here which draws from the virtue tradition of Aquinas and Aristotle. True Christian character necessarily flows from inner purity of the heart. Accountability groups that shape behavior through social pressure and guilt is clearly not the answer. The goal of the Christian life is to develop the kind of affections and tempers that Christ had, which will naturally result in a holy life. Wesley asks the crucial question for Christian formation, "Are our tempers the same that were in him?" (Outler, 1991, p. 106).

The Co-Operant Spirit

A natural question arises for those seeking to foster the formation of Christian character within the previous perspective—how is this kind of temper-transformation to be accomplished?

For Wesley, this was undoubtedly the work of the Holy Spirit:

It is the Spirit which continually ‘worketh in them, both to will and to do of his good pleasure.’ It is he that sheds the love of God abroad in their hearts, and the love of all mankind; thereby purifying their hearts from the love of the world, from the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life. It is by him they are delivered from anger and pride, from all vile and inordinate affections (Outler, 1991, p. 141).

Although this transformation is brought about by the work of the Spirit, this is not a process which nullifies the work of the individual. Reacting against his Quietist contemporaries who thought it best to merely ‘wait upon the Lord,’ Wesley saw such passivity as toxic to embodiment of vital Christian lives. (Outler, 1991, p. 157)

In this way, Wesley perspective of the role of the Spirit in the process of sanctification holds together the importance of two seemingly contrasting theological holdings. Citing Phillipians 2:12-13, Wesley first argues that “we are to observe that great and important truth which ought never to be out of our remembrance: ‘It is God that worketh in us both to will and to do of his good pleasure’” (Outler, 1991, p. 487). This grace is often referred to as effective grace within Calvinist circles. It is grace that is perfect in action, always bringing about the response that God desires. Regardless of human intention, God’s grace always wins out. It does not fail. It is grace that “removes all imagination of merit from man, and gives God the whole glory of his own work” (Outler, 1991, p. 487). From the very first inclination towards good, as well as the

sustaining power that carries it into maturity, it is God alone who must be given glory. The second notion, however, could be seen as much more in line with Arminian thought. Again, citing Phillipians 2:12-13, Wesley says that we should “work out [our] own salvation with fear and trembling”. This implies a sense of human agency, a responsibility placed on the individual. Wesley explains that we must do this, or “it will be left undone forever” (Outler, 1991, p. 488).

These two theological beliefs and their representative schools of thought could not be more diametrically opposed. However, true to his *both and* as opposed to *either or* form, Wesley holds them in a delicate (and sometimes confusing) balance. He describes two aspects of this paradox, “First, God works; therefore you can work. Secondly, God works, therefore you must work” (Outler, 1991, p. 490). It is God alone who enables our response to him; but God does not force a response, and God will not save us if we do not actively participate in this saving work. Wesleyan theologian Randy Maddox describes it in this way: “Without God’s grace, we *cannot* be saved; while, without our (grace-empowered, but uncoerced) participation, God’s grace *will not save*” (Maddox, 1994, p. 19).

Consequently, it was imperative for Wesley that the renewal of the heart is sought by participating in the healing work of the Spirit through engaging in the means of grace—spiritual disciplines, worship, devotion, sacramental piety, fasting, prayer, etc. These are not merely empty rituals that we have to do if we are to be a “good Christian.” These are divinely instituted habitual practices that form our inner being. They are acts of participation in the healing work of God in the world, transforming our hearts into the likeness of Christ through the restoration of holy affections and tempers. Maddox calls them the “practices through which God’s pardoning

and empowering Presence is truly communicated to us for the healing of our sin-diseased nature, as well as the exercises that co-operantly nurture this healing” (Maddox, 1994, p. 201-202).

Towards a Wesleyan Psychotherapy

Given the Wesleyan emphases of the purification of the heart and the participation in the healing work of the Spirit, two presuppositions must guide the process of Christian character formation in the psychotherapeutic process. First, it must be focused on true healing and transformation at a deep, even unconscious level, such that one’s natural tendencies and dispositions are reformed and one’s will is reshaped. Shallow behavioral modification techniques or merely masking symptoms will not suffice in such a model. Christian perfection for Wesley did not simply mean knowing what to do, or even simply doing what is right, but having the character that is such that what is good and right and loving is naturally desired and accomplished. Simple, short-term solutions will not suffice, but enduring restoration of holy affections and tempers, which will likely result in a tendency toward longer-term, depth-oriented theoretical approaches.

Secondly, the psychotherapeutic process must fundamentally be a participation in the healing work of the Spirit. In this sense, God does not need to be invoked in order to add a certain degree of effectiveness to psychotherapy, which is seen as the primary healing mechanism. Within a Wesleyan model, it is psychotherapy that is ancillary and participatory to the healing work of God through the Spirit. The psychotherapist therefore must humbly engage in psychotherapy as a sacred process—recognizing that they are not the source or mechanism in a healing process that has been and will be occurring outside the confines of the psychotherapy office—and carefully discern how best to facilitate the participation of the client in the healing

trajectories of the Spirit in their particularity. Within this aim, the Christian psychotherapist must take seriously the means of grace, developing practical strategies with their clients in how to engage in these practices more fully in order to participating in the Spirit's work of forming Christian character. In addition to these 'instituted' means of grace Wesley included a number of 'prudential' means of grace—such as systems of mentorship and small groups—ones that were not directly commanded but were certainly influential in participating in God's healing work. Christian psychotherapy must be conducted as one of these prudential means of grace in participation with God's healing work to bring about the deeper formation of Christian character through the purification of the heart.

Benediction

May we all be such whole-heartedly inclined and Spirit-led psychotherapists, faithfully participating in the transforming work of God both in our clients and ourselves to bring about the restoration of Christ-like character—to the glory of God. God, grant us your wisdom, your strength, and your heart, that we might do this well.

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