OUTLER’S QUADRILATERAL, MORAL PSYCHOLOGY, AND THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION IN THE WESLEYAN TRADITION

by
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Since its original inclusion in the Book of Discipline in 1972, the construct known as the “Quadrilateral” has loomed large in theological reflection in the United Methodist Church (UMC). First articulated by Albert C. Outler, it has been defended as a concept that is Wesleyan and methodological, meaning that it existed as a coherent theological method in John Wesley’s thought. Today it is invoked widely in constructive theological work, in areas from the doctrine of God to Christian ethics. The Quadrilateral does not enjoy universal support, however, and debates both scholarly and ecclesiastical have raged over the claims to its validity for Wesleyan theology. A number of critiques in recent decades have attacked the way sources are framed or the criteria by which those sources are used, arguing that the Quadrilateral is neither authentically Wesleyan nor coherently methodological. Such critiques call the Quadrilateral into question as the Church’s preferred paradigm for the work of theology, and the combined force of these arguments must be considered.

The strongest reason to question the Quadrilateral as “the” manner in which to think about Wesleyan theological reflection is found in an area other than debates internal to the Quadrilateral itself. An historical examination of the way Wesley approached the tasks for which the

Quadrilateral is typically employed reveals that those tasks are much better framed with attention to Wesley’s moral psychology and doctrine of sanctification than through the adjudication of sources and criteria. This essay proceeds by arguing for this view by surveying the arguments for and against the Quadrilateral’s inclusion in the doctrinal section of the UMC’s Book of Discipline and with an alternative proposal for engaging in Wesleyan theological reflection via the restoration of the soul’s faculties in sanctification.

Constructive Theological Reflection in the Book of Discipline

The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church has been described by the Church’s episcopal leadership as both a “book of law” and “book of covenant” that guides and governs the people called Methodists within the UMC. As such, it contains the history, doctrinal standards, organizational structure, and administrative apparatus that together make up the Church’s constitution. From the early days of the UMC’s original predecessor body—the Methodist Episcopal Church—the Book of Discipline has represented the evolving understanding of Methodism’s ministry and mission in the world. A central part of this understanding can be found in the Book of Discipline’s doctrinal section which guides Methodists in such fundamental areas as the doctrine of God, Christology, soteriology, the sacraments, and theological anthropology. Presented in both an historical/linear and contemporary/spatial framework, the Discipline’s doctrinal section is also written with reference to both the Church’s commitment to historical Christianity and its


2I intend “constitution” here in the broad sense, meaning the way in which the Church is conceived as a specific ecclesiastical communion in faithfulness to the Scriptures and tradition of the church catholic, as these are understood by United Methodists. The Church’s Constitution, in the narrow sense of its legal organization under ecclesiastical law, is found within The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, 2008, ¶1-61 (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2008), 21-39. This edition is hereafter cited as Book of Discipline (2008).

3Book of Discipline (2008), ¶101-104; 41-86.
ecumenical understanding as a reforming body within the church catholic.  

The Book of Discipline does not, however, simply give a descriptive account of doctrine. It also ventures into the area of theological method with a section entitled “Our Theological Task.” This section’s introduction states: “While the Church considers its doctrinal affirmations a central feature of its identity and restricts official changes to a constitutional process, the Church encourages serious reflection across the theological spectrum.” The theological reflection to which the Book of Discipline refers is oriented around sources and criteria, which it traces back to John Wesley. The Discipline goes on to describe them by stating, “Wesley believed that the living core of the Christian faith was revealed in Scripture, illumined by tradition, vivified in personal experience, and confirmed by reason.” It further connects the four sources of Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason with the manner of theological work typical of Wesley during his own lifetime, before explaining the way in which the four sources may be used in contemporary theological reflection.

The theological method framed in the “Our Theological Task” section of the Book of Discipline is not specifically named, but it is known in common Methodist parlance as the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral.” Since its original formulation and inclusion in the 1972 edition of the Book of Discipline, the Quadrilateral has had pride of place within United Methodist theological reflection. Even so, neither the formulation nor the use of the

4These historical and ecumenical commitments present in the Book of Discipline (2008) are described first through the quasi-narrative section in §101 entitled, “Our Doctrinal Heritage.” Within that description is an attention to the particularly soteriological focus of Wesleyan theology (45-50) and to The Nature, Design, and General Rules of Our United Societies (72-74). Commitments to both historical fidelity and ecumenical understanding are embodied second in the church’s Articles of Religion and Confession of Faith, both of which are expressions of the church’s rootedness in the Reformation theology of the Anglican tradition (59-71).

5Book of Discipline (2008), §104; 75.

6Ibid., §104; 77. The Discipline also states, “The interaction of these sources and criteria in Wesley’s own theology furnishes a guide for our continuing theological task as United Methodists.”

7Ibid., §104; 78-83.

8This essay is driven by a consideration of the Quadrilateral within the life of the United Methodist Church, but the Quadrilateral’s wider popularity within the denominations that make up the Wesleyan tradition mean that I also write with that wider Wesleyan theological and ecclesial world in mind.


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Quadrilateral is without controversy. Various scholars (with various opinions about its origin and value) have referred to it as the Methodist Quadrilateral, the United Methodist Quadrilateral, the Quadrilateral (upper-case “Q”), and the quadrilateral (lower-case “q”). Where a descriptive modifier is required, the present essay refers to “Outler’s Quadrilateral” in evaluating the history, use, and propriety of the construct in question, because it was, as a matter of fact, first named by prominent twentieth-century Methodist scholar Albert C. Outler. Moreover, Outler himself, together with his vision of a United Methodist theological and ecclesial future following the 1968 formation of the United Methodist Church, stand at the center, and provide the starting point of debate around the Quadrilateral as a conceptual theological method.

Outler’s Quadrilateral: Development, Revision, and Critique

The conceptual development of the Quadrilateral can be connected with the development of modern critical Wesley Studies from the 1960s onward. Colin Williams’ landmark study of Wesley’s theology in 1960 contains a chapter describing the use and interaction of Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience within a “structure of authority” in Wesley’s theology. As Randy Maddox explains, Williams’ project served at the time as both a “much-needed survey of Wesley’s theology” and a “resource for contemporary Methodism.” Williams’ book was also published at the very cusp of the revival of interest in Methodism’s Wesleyan

8The terms used for the Quadrilateral appear in the relevant books and articles published since its inclusion in the 1972 Book of Discipline, largely by those scholars who appear in either the text or footnotes of the present essay.

9Though the term “Outler’s Quadrilateral” is new with this essay, Outler’s role in articulating and defending the concept as both Wesleyan and methodological merits its enduring identification with him.


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Significantly, Williams' analysis of Wesley's use of theological sources also looks remarkably similar to the way the Quadrilateral would eventually be articulated for the United Methodist Church a few years later.

Williams' important work notwithstanding, however, it was Albert Outler who played the largest role in initiating the neo-Wesleyan revival. It was also Outler who would definitively propose and describe the Quadrilateral for the United Methodist Church. He chaired a Theological Study Commission at the behest of the UMC's inaugural General Conference in 1968 that was given the task of reconciling the sets of doctrinal standards held by the two ecclesiastical bodies that had come together to form the UMC: the Methodist Church (with its Articles of Religion) and the Evangelical United Brethren Church (with its Confession of Faith). However, rather than attempt the complicated and politically fraught process of actually rewriting the two sets of doctrinal material into a single new confession, Outler's Commission instead decided to recommend keeping both Articles and Confession in the Book of Discipline while constructing a novel statement on the necessity and parameters of ongoing constructive theological reflection in the life of the Church. That statement, once finished, included the concept the Church came to call the "Wesleyan Quadrilateral." The term itself is Outler's own, with the first significant use of "quadrilateral" appearing in a report he gave on behalf of the Theological Study Commission to the specially

13It is impossible to imagine that the recently published and popular Wesley Study Bible (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009) would have been undertaken were it not for the neo-Wesleyan revival that Williams' careful study helped to inaugurate.

14See, e.g., Maddox, "Reclaiming an Inheritance," in Maddox, ed., Rethinking Wesley's Theology, 224-226.

15A history of the development and interpretation of Outler’s Quadrilateral has yet to be written, though many of the relevant scholarly debates are collected in the essays of Langford's edited volume, Doctrine and Theology in the United Methodist Church. The relevant historical documents that show the substance of the work Outler's Theological Study Commission performed between 1968 and 1972 include: “The Theological Study Commission on Doctrine and Doctrinal Standards: An Interim Report to the General Conference” (an unpublished report delivered to the 1970 General Conference); Outler, “Introduction to the Report of the 1968-72 Theological Study Commission,” in Langford, ed., Doctrine and Theology, 20-25; and the Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, 1972, 39-82.

16"Interim Report of 1970," 4, 8. The Commission’s interim report shows a clear preference for understanding its role as articulating a faithful form of constructive reflection as opposed to formulating a descriptive doctrinal statement. This preference was present in Outler’s oral presentation to the Conference as well as reflected in the news report, “Seminar-Style Conference Examines Theology and Polity,” in Christian Advocate: For Pastors and Church Leaders 14:9 (April 30, 1970), 3. The special called session of General Conference took place on April 20-24, 1970, in St. Louis, Missouri.


18The work done by the COTT is recounted in Richard P. Heitzenrater, "In Search of Continuity and Consensus: The Road to the 1988 Doctrinal Statement,” in Langford, ed., Doctrine and Theology, 93-108. The COTT was chaired by Bishop Earl Hunt. Richard Heitzenrater himself chaired the writing sub-committee that authored the revision passed by the General Conference in 1988. He calls the revisions approved by the General Conference that reshaped the way the Quadrilateral was expressed, “major departures from the approach of the 1972 statement” (97).
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cant revision to the Discipline four years later that sought to clarify the distinction between doctrinal standards and constructive theology, as well as to emphasize the primacy of biblical authority among the sources named in the Quadrilateral.19

The revised form of the Quadrilateral has remained unchanged in the Book of Discipline from 1988 to the present. Criticisms of it did not end with the 1988 revision either, though, and these have continued to question its legitimacy in the academy as well as the church. Such criticisms fall into historical and philosophical categories. Historical arguments, lodged most forcefully by Ted Campbell and Scott J. Jones, contend that our concept of “tradition” was not operative in Wesley’s thought and that any account of Wesley’s use of the Christian past as a source of authority would need to be confined primarily to the early church and to the Reformation-era theology and liturgy of the Church of England.20 Philosophical criticisms have charged that the Quadrilateral’s formulation amounts to a conceptual incoherence due to the pairing of historical realities within the Church (Scripture and tradition) with categories in epistemology (reason and experience). The philosophical angle is pursued strongly by

19 For a comparison between the 1972 and 1988 doctrinal statements, see The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, 1972, ¶¶368-70; 39-82, and The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, 1988, ¶¶66-69 (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1988), 40-49. The 1988 Discipline sharply tones down various statements that had seemed to de rigueur the role of the Articles and Confession as doctrinal standards while privileging ongoing constructive theological formulations. It also downplays affirmations of pluralism and accentuates the primacy of biblical authority.

20 See Campbell, “The ‘Wesleyan Quadrilateral’: The Story of a Modern Methodist Myth,” in Langford, ed., Doctrine and Theology, 159-161, and Scott J. Jones, John Wesley’s Conception and Use of Scripture (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1995), 63-64. Wesley cited individual Patristic sources but was also prone to refer to the “primitive church” as a norm for faith and practice. Within the tradition in the Church of England, he particularly took the Homilies, the 39 Articles of Religion, and the Book of Common Prayer as norms. There are other discernible sources of authority for Wesley within what we would call “tradition” that had an impact on his theology, such as the holy living tradition exemplified in Thomas à Kempis’ Imitation of Christ and Jeremy Taylor’s Rules and Exercises of Holy Living and Dying. However, the two periods cited above are the only two historical categories we can accurately use. Wesley certainly did not see the magisterial tradition of the church, in the Roman Catholic sense, as authoritative and it is there that Campbell and Jones make their most pointed critiques of the way the Quadrilateral is framed.

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William J. Abraham, whose combined arguments amount to the most sustained critique of Outler’s Quadrilateral as a viable model for theological reflection.21 While the historical arguments attack the supposedly “Wesleyan” character of the Quadrilateral as it is framed, the latter philosophical criticisms call into question its status as a defensible methodology.

Outler’s death came in 1989, at a time, unfortunately, when he was barred by the rancor over the Quadrilateral debates. In the aforementioned 1985 essay, he had admitted, “The term ‘quadrilateral’ does not occur in the Wesley corpus—and more than once I have regretted having coined it for contemporary use since it has been so widely misconstrued.”22 And in his last public lecture at Lake Junaluska, NC, in 1989, Outler reflected on the Quadrilateral’s troubled history and his authorial role in it, stating, “If it was a fault, it was a grievous fault and grievously have I suffered from it.”23 One cannot help but regret that his death just

21 Abraham believes the Quadrilateral aspires to be a “theory of knowledge,” and that it is in exactly this epistemological area that it fails. By this line of critique, the Quadrilateral would need to provide an account of revelation, which it does not. For Abraham’s commentary on the Quadrilateral in numerous books and articles over the past three decades, see: Abraham, “The Wesleyan Quadrilateral,” in Theodore Runyon, ed., Wesleyan Theology Today: A Bicentennial Theological Consultation (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1985); Abraham, “On How to Dismantle the Wesleyan Quadrilateral: A Study in the Thought of Albert C. Knudson,” Wesleyan Theological Journal 20:1 (Spring 1985), 34-44; Abraham, Wakening from Doctrinal Amnesia: The Healing of Doctrine in The United Methodist Church (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995); Abraham, “United Methodists at the End of the Mainline,” First Things 84 (June/July 1998) 28-33; Abraham, “What’s Right and What’s Wrong with the Quadrilateral?” (unpublished manuscript provided to me by the author); Abraham, “What Should United Methodists Do with the Quadrilateral?” Quarterly Review 22:1 (Spring 2002), 85-88; Abraham, “The End of Wesleyan Theology,” Wesleyan Theological Journal 40:1 (Spring 2005), 7-25. Only the two earliest of these give a semi-positive account of the place of the Quadrilateral in theological reflection. In “What’s Right and What’s Wrong with the Quadrilateral?” Abraham makes a mea culpa of sorts and admits that his early optimism about the Quadrilateral was unfounded (see 1, n.6).


23 Outler, “Through a Glass Darkly: Our History Speaks To Our Future,” Methodist History 28:3 (January 1990), 86. Methodist History published a transcription of Outler’s actual delivered speech. For the manuscript from which he spoke, see Bob W. Parrott, ed., Albert Outler The Churchman (Anderson, IN: Bristol House, 1995), 452-471.
weeks after the Lake Junaluska address came before time had the chance to heal some of the wounds Outler suffered throughout the 1980s over the Quadrilateral’s reception in the Church. A scholar who gave so much of himself to the Church and who did so much to advance the development of modern critical Wesley Studies surely deserved better.

Criticisms of the Quadrilateral are not undone by whatever regret we might have over Outler’s particular experience, however. And added to the specific critiques of the four components of Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience, there is one more that is perhaps most damning of all: the assertion that the honest and careful use of the Quadrilateral can lead to diametrically opposed conclusions on a single theological question, depending on the person employing it. This critique has been made at different times by such scholars as Thomas Langford, Kathy Rudy, and Stephen Gunter.24 On the one hand, it suggests that the criteria by which the four sources are used is less on guiding Wesleyan standards than it does on contemporary hermeneutical commitments (and also, perhaps, on the idiosyncrasies of the individual using it). On the other, it suggests further questions. If the Church desires an accurate account of Wesleyan theological reflection, is Outler’s Quadrilateral simply the wrong way to go? Should our energies even be focused on an issue — methodology — that has little bearing on the contours of “practical divinity” in the Wesleyan mode? Might we another possibility that offers the Church a better guide to the manner of theological reflection suggested by Wesley’s own example and precept?

Such an inquiry turns us away from arguments internal to the Quadrilateral and toward issues of formation that require attention to John Outler’s Quadrilateral, Moral Psychology...

Wesley’s understanding of moral psychology and its intersection with the doctrine of sanctification.25

Significance of Moral Psychology in the Theological Task

For those interested in a Wesleyan approach to responsible theological or moral reflection, what Outler fails to develop in his accounts of the Quadrilateral is a centrally important point. In his defense of the Quadrilateral written in the midst of the debates over whether to revise it within the UMC, Outler only offers two cursory statements pointing to the skills necessary for the kind of theologizing the Quadrilateral is supposed to facilitate.26 Yet, in Wesley’s own theology, it is clear that ongoing formation (in the sense of practical discipleship) and progress in sanctification (in the sense of a soteriological reality) are requisite conditions for mature theological reflection and/or moral reasoning. Moreover, Wesley’s conception of human depravity, the debilitating effects of sin on body and soul, means that both human thought and action are rendered incapable of discerning the good on their own. Thus, while Scripture and tradition are vital sources of authority for theological reflection, for Wesley we do not have

24 For a recent call to end the overly-heavy focus on questions of methodology in Wesleyan theology, see Jason E. Vickers, “Albert Outler and the Future of Wesleyan Theology: Retrospect and Prospect,” Wesleyan Theological Journal 43:2 (Fall 2008), 56-67. In the following section, my own criticism of the methodological approach to Wesleyan theology is different than Abraham’s in that he sees an incoherent formulation of the components internal to the Quadrilateral, whereas I will argue that methodology is simply the wrong framework entirely.

25 See Outler, “The Wesleyan Quadrilateral—In John Wesley,” in Langford, ed., Doctrine and Theology, 80 and 86. At both points, Outler’s makes only vague suggestions that point toward the need for formation in employing the Quadrilateral. The second of these, in particular, offers an example of Outler’s generally engaging and persuasive rhetorical style that is confusing more than clarifying. He writes, “The ‘quadrilateral’ requires of a theologian no more than what he or she might reasonably be held accountable for: which is to say, a familiarity with Scripture that is both critical and faithful; plus, an acquaintance with the wisdom of the Christian past; plus, a taste for logical analysis as something more than a debater’s weapon; plus, a vital, inward faith that is upheld by the assurance of grace and its prospective triumphs, in this life” (86). But does his use of “theologian” imply that a layperson cannot do theology using the Quadrilateral? If so, does that contradict his earlier statement in the same essay that Wesley’s willingness to alter Anglican customs had the practical effect of “mak[ing] every Methodist man and woman his/her own theologian?” (80).
the inherent ability to read them well or discern the revelation contained within them absent the restoration of the soul’s faculties in sanctification.

Indeed, reason is one of those faculties given by God as the means whereby human beings make sense of their world. But reason is thoroughly compromised by sin and cannot be used well to understand those dimensions of reality concerning God and the things of God without a rehabilitation through grace. Experience, of course, is Wesley’s primary epistemological referent; it is the means whereby we apprehend both natural and supernatural reality (and is thus the grist for reason’s mill). However, the trustworthiness of experience is also debilitated by the effects of sin on the soul. For experience to be received and interpreted rightly, a person must enter into a process of restoration that can only come through a life patterned by participation in those practices known as the means of grace. The best method of Wesleyan theological reflection—if “method” is even an appropriate term to use—turns out to be necessarily viewed through Wesley’s doctrine of salvation and, in particular, through the intersection of soteriology and moral psychology.27

A. The Circumstances of the Fall: “He sinned with his eyes open.”28 Wesley’s understanding of the soul’s constitution is divided into the components of understanding (or reason), will (or tempers and affections), and liberty, a description consistently present in his writing

27 Don Thorsen best represents the attempt to defend the Quadrilateral in the way Outler hoped it would be used. See Thorsen, The Wesleyan Quadrilateral: A Model of Evangelical Theology (Lexington, KY: Emeth Press, 2005). Originally published in 1990. Thorsen recognizes Wesley’s lack of an explicit statement of theological methodology and admits the necessity of a reconstruction. He attempts to overcome the somewhat anachronistic tendency to apply the norms of a theological sub-discipline that postdates Wesley’s life (i.e., systematic theology as conceived since the nineteenth century) by locating Wesley within an “Anglican” approach to theology traced from Richard Hooker (see 11-32). Thorsen is clearly right in characterizing Wesley’s method in the Anglican mold, but that is a different matter than applying a methodology to his work. Therefore, the present essay does not engage Thorsen’s work for historiographical reasons—namely, the view that it is inadvisable to apply a later time period’s “grammar” to an earlier one in which the same concepts were not operative.


from the beginning to the end of his career.29 In its original, pre-lapsarian state, humanity enjoyed these three faculties in their perfection. That is, prior to the fall, Adam’s understanding was such that he saw things according to their own nature. For him, “Light and darkness there were, but no twilight; whenever the shades of ignorance withdrew, in that moment the broader day appeared, the full blaze of knowledge shined. He was equally a stranger to error and doubt; either he saw not at all, or he saw plainly.”30 With such a perfect understanding, Adam “discerned truth by intuition.”31 There was no veil of ignorance or confusion separating Adam’s reason from things-as-they-are.

Coupled with his reason, Adam enjoyed a perfection of the will as well. Treating will as expressive of the affections, Wesley asserts that Adam’s affections were “set right, and duly exercised on their proper objects,” meaning that they existed in an uncorrupted state and in harmony with reason.32 A perfect reason and will are aspects of humanity’s creation in the natural image of God, but Wesley does not see them as the totality of God’s creative work. He also views the doctrine of creatio ad imaginem dei as encompassing a will formed by holy love.33 So not only is Adam created in God’s natural image, he was also created in the moral image of God, which (following 1 John 4:16) Wesley understands as Love.34 The emphasis on creation in conformity to God’s moral attributes is here stressed in the supreme place Wesley gives to the will’s perfection: “Far greater and nobler was his second endowment, namely, a will equally perfect. It could not but be perfect while it followed the dictates of such [a perfect] understanding. His affections were rational, even, and regular—if we may be allowed to say ‘affections,’ for properly speaking he had but

32 Ibid., ¶1.7, in Works 2:475. Commenting on Wesley’s identification of the will as expressive of the totality of the affections, Maddox describes the will as constituting the “motivating dispositions” of a person, which suggests an active rather than static quality (Maddox, Responsible Grace, 69).
34 Wesley, “The End of Christ’s Coming” (1781), ¶1.7, in Works 2:475.
one: man was what God is, Love."35 A perfect will is a will formed by love, allowing Adam to “love, desire, and delight in that which is good."36

The soul’s third constitutive property was that, from a perfect understanding and a perfect will, humanity also enjoyed a perfect liberty or freedom. Here, Wesley links the two faculties of understanding and will in a way that reflects the nature of perfection itself. That is, human action could be directed by reason in a way that was unencumbered by any exterior forces or interior corruptions that would inhibit it. Wesley describes the soul’s liberty as “a power of choosing what was good, and refusing what was not so,”37 or “a power of directing his own affections and actions, a capacity of determining himself, of choosing good or evil.”38 Liberty here is seen less as part of the soul’s substance than as the inherent power derived from the perfection of understanding and will—and a power that completes creation in the divine image: “Without this both the will and the understanding would have been utterly useless. Indeed without liberty man had been so far from being a free agent that he would have been no agent at all.”39

Liberty, then, gives humanity the freedom to participate in the divine image fully. With the will having the ability to freely follow the dictates of understanding, the soul’s constitution obtains a harmony of operations that defines true happiness. Wesley concludes,

The result of all these—an unerring understanding, an uncorrupt will, and perfect freedom—gave the last stroke to the image of God in man, by crowning all these with happiness. Then indeed to live was to enjoy, when every faculty was in its perfection, amidst abundance of objects which infinite wisdom had purposely suited to it, when man’s understanding was satisfied with truth, as his will was with good; when he was at full liberty to enjoy the Creator or the creation.40

37Ibid., ¶4.4, in Works 2:475.
38Wesley, “On the Fall of Man” (1782), ¶1, in Works 2:401.
40Wesley, “The Image of God” (1730), ¶4.4, in Works 4:295. This view is underscored in “The Original, Nature, Properties, and Use of the Law” (1750), where Wesley argues that the will was created in conjunction with understanding and liberty so that humanity might be able to follow the moral law (¶1.1, in Works 2:6).

In the area of moral reasoning, humanity in its original perfection had the full ability to pursue love, not under compulsion but rather by the freedom that is characteristic of God himself.

B. The Effects of the Fall Upon the Soul: “Sin, misery, and corruption.”41 The harmony enjoyed by the soul was subsequently decimated by the Fall, with the rebellion against God’s original intent for human happiness occurring through a perversion of the very liberty human beings enjoyed in their perfection. Adam, Wesley explains, “having this power, a power of choosing good or evil, he chose the latter—he chose evil.”42 Satán’s temptation in the Garden of Eden is, moreover, not understood as a trick ultimately played by God, but instead as the necessary trial implied by perfect liberty; that is, without the temptation to choose evil over good, there would have been no real liberty at all.43 The choice ultimately made—that of rebellion, evil, and idolatry—was a free one made by a free moral agent. As Wesley contends, Adam “sinned with his eyes open.”44

Wesley’s theological anthropology takes into account the effects of rebellion against God’s original intention of harmonious happiness and considers them devastating for both body and soul. The just retribution of God and the curses leveled in Genesis 3:14-19 are experienced bodily through pain, corruption and decay of the physical body, and ultimately death.45 The soul also experiences the effects of sin through the corruption of all of its faculties: understanding, will, and liberty. Understanding “mistook falsehood for truth;” the will “was . . . seized by legions of vile affections;” and liberty “became the slave of vice.”46 Thus, Wesley’s theological anthropology is marked by sin’s devastatingly disordering effects, which leaves the human body subject to decay and moral psychology in a debilitated state. We cannot think rightly, feel rightly, or act rightly. Absent grace, we can only rightly speak of the human condition as “the universal depravity of our nature,”47 a reality Wesley also describes as “the entire depravation of the whole human nature.”48

41The quotation in this section heading comes from Wesley, “The Image of God” (1730), ¶4, in Works 4:293.
42Wesley, “On the Fall of Man” (1782), ¶1, in Works 2:401.
44Wesley, “On the Fall of Man” (1782), ¶1.1, in Works 2:403.
46Wesley, “The Image of God” (1730), ¶2.2-4, in Works 4:298-299.
47Wesley, “Of the Church” (1785), ¶2.2-4, in Works 3:53.
How then, do we translate this image of a sin-broken moral psychology into the arena of theological reflection to which Butler’s Quadrilateral has typically been applied? While resting on a broad (that is to say, catholic) foundation of doctrinal standards as expressed in its Articles of Religion and Confession of Faith, the United Methodist Church urges the faithful within its membership to do “serious reflection across the theological spectrum.” That ongoing work does, indeed, need to be done with reference to appropriate sources and the analytical criteria by which they are adjudicated. But what about the people doing the work? Wesley’s doctrine of sin and its effects on the human condition imply that proper theological reflection cannot proceed without addressing the way in which the disordered soul can be rehabilitated. Certainly, moral reasoning cannot proceed. And if we accept that all constructive theology is a species of moral reasoning, then it follows that no such theological reflection can occur with propriety without the rehabilitation of the internal faculties of the soul that would make it possible.

Graced Healing and Character Formation in Theological Reflection

The previous examination of the impact of sin within Wesley’s theological anthropology considered the matter of depravity in the abstract. We should note, however, that no one is in as hopeless a condition as the abstract illustration would suggest. The path of rehabilitation that allows a person to engage adequately in theological reflection begins, then, with a two-fold recognition. First, the faculty of reason is damaged but not destroyed. Consider that Wesley’s conception of depravity tends to be more concerned with the will than with reason. It is with the will, in particular, that he sees the corrupting effects of sin in a person leading inevitably to such idolatries as pride, self-will, and an inordinate love of the world, all of which bespeak of an enslavement to “sensual appetites” that “have, more or less, the dominion over him.” In the case of reason, Wesley tends not to be as uniformly harsh. While he can speak in one place of human nature as “totally corrupted in all its faculties,” he does not present reason as corrupted in the same way that the will is—even apart from God’s healing work through grace. In “The Case of Reason Impartially Considered” (1781), for instance, Wesley seems to suggest that reason is left somewhat intact despite the effects of the fall. Though he criticizes Enlightenment thinkers who view reason as “the great unerring guide,” his criticism is aimed at the idea that reason can show us too much, not that it is wholly debilitated. Likewise, Wesley states in regard to Adam’s choice, “In that moment he lost the moral image of God, and, in part, the natural.” He is therefore willing to admit that reason has a role to play in the human being’s ability to skillfully navigate day-to-day life in a complex society, even apart from the active reception of God’s grace.

The loss of the moral image of God, which is for Wesley the highest expression of creatio ad imaginem dei, is seen in that sin-damaged reason can no longer freely direct the will toward love. Wesley refers to the loss of liberty in the soul in the way in which the sin-deformed appetites “lead a man captive, they drag him to and fro, in spite of his boasted rea-

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49Book of Discipline (2008), ¶104; 75.
50In a Wesleyan sense, all constructive theology can be seen as a species of moral reasoning because such work entails reflection on a God whose chief attribute is love. The moral image of God is that aspect of God’s character in which we are most fully created as God’s children, according to Wesley. And the condition of holiness, which is the very substance of sanctification in Wesley’s thought, is “no less than the image of God stamped upon the heart.” See Wesley, “The New Birth” (1760), ¶3.1, in Works 2:194. Thus, to engage in reflection about this God is to reflect upon (and even participate in) holy love—a moral exercise.

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53See Wesley, “The Case of Reason Impartially Considered” (1781), ¶3-4, in Works 2:588. In the same sermon, Wesley ventures a definition of the rational faculty of the soul as providing for three main processes: (a) simple apprehension (or comprehending objects); (b) judgment (or drawing distinctions or correlations between different, apprehended things); (c) discourse (or, proceeding rationally from one judgment to another) (Works 2:590).
54Wesley, “On the Fall of Man” (1782), ¶II.6, in Works 2:410. Italics mine.
55Wesley, “The Case of Reason Impartially Considered” (1781), ¶I.3-5, in Works 2:590-591. After listing the specific abilities given by bare reason, Wesley goes on to consider more complex tasks of reason, from agriculture to the arts, and from mathematics to government. This sermon is intended as a critique of what Wesley sees as the Enlightenment over-confidence in reason and so lacks any real treatment of the work of God’s prevenient grace in humanity’s nascent restoration.
And he contends that those who rationally deliberate apart from the Christian revelation have only “the dim light of reason” at their disposal. Thus, while bare reason remains, trustworthy moral reasoning, understood as a deliberative process with a requisite conjunction of reason and will and dependent upon liberty, is rendered impossible.

The second recognition is that the doctrine of universal atonement—in which Wesley adamantly believed—implies that no one is wholly lacking in God’s favor. Therefore, the true beginning of humanity’s restoration comes through God’s prevenient grace. This is that grace which precedes or “comes before” (praeventire) human action and is given by God as free gift. More specifically, it is the power and presence of God working in human beings to begin the restoration of their sin-damaged souls, even without their active reception of it. Wesley’s understanding of prevenient grace is wholly in line with his larger Anglican context; Article X of the 39 Articles speaks of “the grace of God by Christ preventing us, that we may have a good will, and working with us, when we have that good will.” He echoes this aspect of grace when he exhorts, “Go on, in virtue of the grace of God preventing, accompanying, and following you.”

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56 Wesley, “Original Sin” (1759), ¶III.9, in Works 2:180. Wesley elsewhere makes a statement about sin causing humans to sink “lower than the very beasts of the field,” a somewhat oblique point about the relative depravity of the will and reason, in that our partially intact reason fails to keep us from sinning, whereas animals (lacking the naturalis imago dei) act only according to their natures (see Wesley, “The One Thing Needful” (1734), ¶II.2, in Works 4:354).

57 Wesley, “Original Sin” (1759), ¶II, in Works 2:172. Wesley’s evaluation of reason here can be helpfully compared to the view of John Locke’s Essay Concerning Human Understanding, where Locke refers to the understanding as “the most elevated faculty of the soul” but has no sense of reason’s deformity through sin. See Locke, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co., 1996), 1. First published in 1689.


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Wesley sees this prevenient action of God as gifted in a universal sense, exactly because of the universality of Christ’s atonement. Total depravity might seem to suggest that we can think or do nothing good, but prevenient grace counters that by affirming that all people have begun to walk the way of salvation by virtue of God’s prevenient work in their lives. For Wesley, this universal gift explains the phenomenon of conscience, which he regards as “a supernatural gift of God” and a direct consequence of prevenient grace. Conscience allows for the discernment of basic questions of right and wrong, an important first step in moral reasoning, even while the more soteriological function of prevenient grace comes in the way it leads individuals to a sense of conviction and repentance for sin.

The status of reason prior to its restoration by grace, as well as the initial effects of God’s prevenient action, are important to note because they have real consequences for moral psychology. They are not sufficient to allow for our task which is an account of the possibility of moral reasoning inclusive of responsible theological reflection. For that to be possible, the faculties of the soul—reason and will—must be progressively restored by grace, meaning that their deformed nature is healed over time and a degree of liberty manifestly grows between them that allows them to act rightly. The category Wesley uses to describe this renewed state is holiness, which takes us fully into the realm of soteriology. An exhaustive description of the sanctified (and sanctifying) life is not necessary at this point; rather, we need an account of the effect sanctification has on moral psychology—that is, the way that present salvation impacts those dynam...
ics internal to a person that define the possibility of moral reasoning. Put another way, we need to see the process by which Christian character is formed.

Wesley argues that the gift of God’s grace actively working in the soul is required for right thinking and action to be restored. This renewal comes first with justification by faith in Jesus Christ (pardon) and thereafter with the sanctification of the Holy Spirit (progressive healing). The work of Jesus Christ removes the guilt of sin, but this is not the totality of salvation. Salvation continues through the work of God the Holy Spirit, who brings about progressive renewal in both the natural image and moral image of God. Elsewhere, Wesley relates this renewal to the development of “spiritual senses” in the soul that were wholly deadened subsequent to the Fall. The enlightening of both reason and will comes about through the ability to see the good in a way that only those in whom the power of sin has been broken are capable.

Wesley describes this condition of internal, ongoing restoration—properly speaking, holiness of heart—in his early sermon “Circumcision of the Heart” (1733), in a way that remains consistent throughout his life. For Wesley, the circumcision of the heart (Romans 2:29) is:

[T]hat habitual disposition of soul which in the Sacred Writings is termed “holiness,” and which directly implies the being cleansed from sin, “from all filthiness both of flesh and spirit,” and by consequence the being ended with those virtues which were also in Christ Jesus, the being so “renewed in the


66For an engagement with such options, see “The Unity of the Divine Being” (1789), ¶18-20 in *Works* 4:67-69.

67These categories are interpreted differently by Randy Maddox, Kenneth J. Collins, and Gregory S. Clapper. See Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 69-70; Maddox, “A Change of Affections,” in Steele, ed., *“Heart Religion” in the Methodist Tradition*, 3-31; Collins, “John Wesley’s Topography of the Heart: Dispositions, Tempers, and Affections,” *Methodist History* 36:3 (April 1998), 162-175; Clapper, *John Wesley’s Religious Affections* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1989). My analysis is closest to that of Maddox: The will is equivalent to rooted affective dispositions of the soul. Wesley often refers to these as “tempers,” such that the two terms can be seen as synonymous. Tempers describe formed capacities of the will in the way we speak of tempered steel, meaning metal hardened by sustained exposure to high heat. A temper, then, is a capacity of the will that has been molded over time by good or evil forces acting upon it. Affections exist as motivating forces to feeling, thought, or action that arise out of the tempers (and can be characterized as good or evil in accordance with their underlying tempers). Both tempers and the affections to which they give rise are malleable, though the affections are always expressive of their underlying tempers. Tempers are enduring characteristics of the soul, so that the level of their holiness conforms to that of the person in which they reside.
Jesus, are intrinsically and essentially good, and acceptable to God.\(^68\) This is, then, the “religion of the heart” summarized: an inward faith constitutive of a certain disposition of the soul, marked by holy tempers, which give rise to intrinsically good affections. Its fullest homiletical depiction is found in “On Zeal” (1781), where Wesley explicitly places love “upon the throne” in the soul of the Christian, which is surrounded first by holy tempers (including long-suffering, gentleness, meekness, goodness, fidelity, and temperance) and then by the right actions embodied in works of mercy and works of piety.\(^69\) Any tendency to see such qualities in sentimental fashion should be resisted; the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23) are the marks of a graced character and the works flowing from them make up an entire pattern of life.

Love’s restoration as the ruling temper of the soul means, finally, that freedom is again present in the soul and happiness a reality: “Such a love of God is this as engrosses the whole heart, as takes up all the affections, as fills the entire capacity of the soul, and employs the utmost extent of all its faculties.”\(^70\) Wesley is clear that such a restoration will usually only occur over time.\(^71\) But that is simply the manner of a power that acts as a kind of divine medicine, working upon the soul via the love of God, mediated by Christ and known through faith.\(^72\) The graced soul that can seek its happiness in God through restored liberty, ironically, acquires the freedom to submit itself entirely to God. And with the soul’s healing, a return “to virtue, and freedom, and happiness” also precipitates

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\(^69\) Wesley, “On Zeal” (1781), ¶II.5, in Works 3:313. Wesley’s “Letter to Conyers Middleton” undergirds the logical progression from inward holiness (a state of being) to outward holiness (a state of action). See ¶V.I.7-9, in Works (Jackson) 10:68-69.

\(^70\) Wesley, “The Almost Christian” (1741), ¶II.1, in Works 1:137.

\(^71\) See, e.g., “The Scripture Way of Salvation” (1765), where Wesley speaks of the “gradual work of sanctification,” in which “we are more and more dead to sin” and “more and more alive to God” (¶II.8, in Works 2:160). Note also the integral connection between initial (justifying) faith and subsequent (sanctifying) faith over time.


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responsible moral agency—the ability to think, feel, speak, and act for the good.\(^73\) The preceding paragraphs have traced the contours of how moral psychology and sanctification intersect. A thick description of what the soul’s restoration looks like in a human life would require attention to active participation in a communally-rooted discipleship that Wesley describes in terms of the means of grace.\(^74\) These practices, usually grouped in categories of “instituted” and “prudential” means or “works of piety” and “works of mercy,” are all either practices of the Christian community or dependent on that community for individual sustenance.\(^75\) Life patterned by them is both a life-in-community and a life in which sanctification will proceed. Thus, individuals will never find their souls healed and faculties restored apart from membership in the community of faith. Therefore, the work of theology is itself ultimately a communal enterprise. Theological reflection, according to Wesleyan norms, only happens when those engaging in such activity have the concomitant experience of their souls’ restoration via the healing of God’s grace, an experience of life in the body of Christ.\(^76\)

Conclusion

It is, therefore, impossible for an individual, apart from an accounting of the regeneration of the soul through grace, to utilize the compo-

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\(^73\) Wesley, “The Image of God” (1730), ¶II.3, in Works 4:300-301. Wesley insists that grace is not coercive, but rather cooperative and enables moral reasoning “without depriving [anyone] of that liberty which is essential to a moral agent” ("The General Spread of the Gospel" [1783], ¶11, in Works 2:489).


\(^75\) For a description of the means of grace in the categories of instituted and prudential, see Wesley, Large Minutes, in Works (Jackson) 8:322-324. For a description in the categories of works of piety and works of mercy, see Wesley, “The Scriptural Way of Salvation” (1765), ¶II.9-10, in Works 2:166.

\(^76\) The direction to which I am pointing calls for an understanding of theology’s purpose that includes both normative and formative dimensions. While not prominent in modern systematic theology, Randy Maddox argues that it is the conception of theology that both goes back to the early church and is expressed by Wesley’s own theological work. See Maddox, “Formation and Reflection: The Dynamics of Theology in Christian Life,” Quarterly Review 21:1 (Spring 2001), 20-32.
ments of Outler's Quadrilateral for responsible theological reflection. How would one interpret Scripture and tradition well, with a soul debilitated? Could reason ever deliberate effectively in a sustained way when it is at war with unruly passions? And why would experience (even so-called "Christian experience") be a helpful guide when it might be confirming nothing but the vagaries of various lusts, self-loves, and idolatries that are dominant in the sin-ravaged soul? None of this is to suggest that Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience are not the proper sources for constructive theological work. It is, however, to suggest that elevating them, as Albert Outler did, into a construct that claims to exist as a clearly formed (and even self-conscious) method within the mind of John Wesley is a bridge too far. Wesley did not care about theological method in the sense we use the term—that is, as methodology. He cared rather about Christian character.77

Theological reflection requires the use of proper judgment: in the interpretation of Scripture, the discernment of the work of the Holy Spirit, the intellectual exploration of doctrine, the organization of the Church for witness and mission, and the daily moral challenges that confront every Christian believer. That reflection is done well not by manipulating the constituent parts of a methodological construct.78 It is instead done well by those who are together traveling the way of salvation and who demonstrate that character known as holiness of heart and life. The logic of holiness is rooted in the view that the love of God will transform a person so that proper feelings, thoughts, and actions can proceed in human life:

77 Wesley, "The Unity of the Divine Being" (1789), ¶22-25, in Works 4:70-71. Wesley here connects the practice of right speech and right action with the character inculcated by the love of God in the Christian over time.

78 Dissatisfaction with the root image of the Quadrilateral has, on occasion, led to new proposals. See Randy Maddox’s reformulation of a "unilateral rule of Scripture within a trilateral hermeneutic of reason, tradition, and experience" (Maddox, Responsible Grace, 46), an image later pushed further toward a dialogical model where sources are framed in ongoing dialogue as consensus is sought (Maddox, "Honoring the Dialogue: A Wesleyan Guideline for the Debate over Homosexuality," Circuit Rider 22:6 [Nov/Dec 1999], 25). See also the suggestion of rephrasing the Quadrilateral as a "quartet" with different instruments seeking a common harmony in Charles M. Wood and Ellen Blue, Attentive to God: Thinking Theologically in Ministry (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), 10 and 135-136, n.9. These helpful interpretations still represent what I earlier call "arguments internal to the Quadrilateral" and hence do not truly affect the conclusions of this essay.

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"First therefore see that ye love God; next your neighbour, every child of man. From this fountain let every temper, every affection, every passion flow. So shall that 'mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus.' Let all your thoughts, words, and actions spring from this."79 With the rooted dispositions (or tempers) of the soul healed by love, the affections that drive all thought and action are freed and the moral image of God begins to re-emerge.80 Reasoning about God and the things of God can proceed from there, by sustained engagement with the Word of God, all the means of grace, and the life of the community called church.81

Outler's Quadrilateral is at best a convenient term to describe something the Church was already in possession of. At worst, its methodological pretensions are a distraction from the important tasks before the Church that, by the strange life it has taken on, threatens to co-opt the real emphases Wesley attempted to impart to the people called Methodists. In the area of theological reflection, that emphasis is intimately tied to the healing of moral psychology through sanctification. It requires no methodology beholden to norms foreign to Wesley's context. It needs rather the reality of sanctification through grace as it is experienced in individuals living in community, actively "waiting in the means," as Wesley suggests, for their inward renewal.82 With that understanding, the work of theology can proceed apace, no less faithful to recognized sources of authority, but relying on character rather than construct.


80 Thus, Wesley says, "True religion is right tempers toward God and man" (ibid., ¶16, in Works 4:66).

81 Mark L. Horst refers to such an approach to theological reflection, which he believes is characteristic of Wesley, as "an experiment in Christian wholeness." See Horst, "Experimenting with Christian Wholeness: Method in Wesley's Theology," Quarterly Review 7:2 (Summer 1987), 22. Horst also prefers to see Wesley's manner of engaging in theology as a "form of life" rather than the investigation of propositional truths (17-20).