

Holiness: Sin's Anticipated Cure

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I take my purpose in this presentation to be a catalyst for conversation about the subjects of sin and salvation (broadly defined). It is not my intention to attempt to speak the whole, or to reflect some vain attempt to universalize *my* experience or *my* beliefs on the subject.¹ In fact, in distaste of such universalizing tendencies, I am tempted to resign myself to the post-structuralist conclusion that to speak of a “human situation” (which emphasizes commonalities for all people in all times and all places) is inane. And yet, as I say elsewhere, to abandon all “essentialisms” regarding the human being, leaves us practically speechless in the shadow of the theological imperative. Lest we have an hour of silence, I will say something today about sin, but only with an intentional (even “methodological”) humility.

Essential in my own work as a *feminist* theologian, is my embrace of what is known as “strategic essentialism,”² which has been advocated by many as a means of negotiating the

¹ Which is precisely what I believe Augustine did, to the detriment of Western Christianity; he silences a much more fluid, dynamic, and holistic understanding of the sinful human condition in the West. This statement is one of the very foundational aspects of my own hamartiology, and thus I offer it here as a presupposition to all of my assumptions and conclusions. However, as this paper will show, I see new value in wrestling with the positions that Augustine and other Western thinkers have offered, for they emphasize a seriousness regarding sin that should not be overlooked.

²In sum, the debate over essentialism focuses on the fact that affirming a female essence potentially reinstates and reinforces the very abuses feminism intends to fight, and actually makes women collaborators of patriarchy. Thus there have been those determined to eradicate the evils of essentialism from feminist theory; for them any notion of an *ontological* foundation that affirms a “female” nature, and anyone who might hold to such a position, has been relegated to the realm of the contemptible. Teresa De Lauretis points out there are others who believe that debate, fought on such terms, has ceased to be productive. “Many have grown impatient with this word—essentialism—time and again repeated with its reductive ring, its self-righteous tone of superiority, its contempt for ‘them’—those guilty of it.” Teresa De Lauretis, “The Essence of the Triangle or, Taking the Risk of Essentialism Seriously: Feminist Theory in Italy, the U.S., and Britain,” in *The Essential Difference*, eds. Naomi Schor and Elizabeth Weed (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 1. Naomi Schor furthers the description saying “The word essentialism has been endowed within the context of feminism with the power to reduce to silence, to

tension between “feminism” and “post-structuralism.” In all my work, I have taken the “risk of essentialism” and have applied it theologically as a type of *via media* between the extremes of abandoning “woman” as a relevant theological category and of inscribing that category with the mark of stagnant universality. I am drawn to, and motivated by this strategy when defining myself as feminist. But I am equally drawn to a type of strategic essentialism when defining myself as feminist *theologian*. In other words, I affirm that doing “theological anthropology” and “hamartiology” is still relevant, despite the great debate over universal essences. Further, I would like to invoke strategic essentialism to our task here as theologians (feminist or otherwise) investigating the nature of sin as we negotiate the task of making holiness doctrine with valuable historical roots relevant to a very new *Sitz im Leben*. I believe there is nothing as crucial to articulate theologically to the 21st century than viable understandings of sin and salvation; and to communicate, one must be able to make generalizations, if only “strategically.” It is a *humble* essentialism--this attempt to speak theologically about the human situation—because if post-structuralism has offered us

excommunicate, to consign to oblivion. Essentialism in modern-day feminism is anathema.” Naomi Schor, “This Essentialism Which Is Not One: Coming to Grips with Irigaray,” in *The Essential Difference*, 42. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak articulates that “to an extent, we have to look at where the group—the person, the persons, or the movement—is situated when we make claims for or against essentialism. A strategy suits a situation; a strategy is not a theory.” Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak with Ellen Rooney, “In a Word. Interview,” in *The Essential Difference*, 154. Deborah Rhode summarizes the debate on difference: “[F]eminists generally have taken two approaches, both of which remain critical in contemporary debates over difference. One strategy has been to deny the extent or essential nature of differences between men and women. A second approach has been to celebrate difference—to embrace characteristics historically associated with women and demand their equal social recognition. A third, more recent strategy attempts to dislodge difference—to challenge its centrality and its organizing premises and to recast the terms on which gender relations have traditionally been debated,” Deborah L. Rhode, “Theoretical Perspectives on Sexual Difference,” in *Theoretical Perspectives on Sexual Difference*, ed. Deborah L. Rhode (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1990), 3. In sum De Lauretis states, “If ‘woman’ is a fiction . . . and if there are no women as such, then the very issue of women’s oppression would appear to be obsolete and feminism itself would have no reason to exist (which, it may be noted, is a corollary of poststructuralism and the stated position of those who call themselves ‘post-feminists’),” De Lauretis, 10.

anything, it has raised the vital and unavoidable question of diversity. Long dead is the Enlightenment Man who represents us all.³

In a time long before the encroachment of postmodernism and its proclamation of heterogeneity, another theologian advocated for a similar humility in the theological task, but for different reasons. It has been my attempt, even in my feminist critique of traditional theologies, to embody the “catholic spirit” of John Wesley. Wesley’s “catholic spirit” was born out of type of “teleological suspension” of that which is non-essential to salvation, in order to embrace and display the praxis of love. Albert Outler writes, “Wesley’s refusal to define doctrinal standards too narrowly was a matter of principle. . . Wesley’s refusal to provide the Methodist people with a confession for subscription was the conviction of a man who knew his own mind on every vexed question of Christian doctrine, but who had decided that the reduction of doctrine to any particular *form of words* was to misunderstand the very nature of doctrinal statements.”⁴

On sin specifically, it has been stated, “That Wesley regarded human nature as corrupt is too well known to need proof.”⁵ Wesley himself writes, “If therefore, we take away this foundation, that [hu]man[s] [are] by nature foolish and sinful . . . the Christian system falls apart at once.”⁶ According to Wesley, the doctrine of original sin must never be

³I also take great pause proposing a ‘human condition’ in light of the burgeoning research of neurophysiology. There are those born without the capacity to make ethical choices because of malformations in the brain. The primary question that arises out of these ‘exceptions to the rule,’ is the question of responsibility. Do we define sin in such a way that a lack of capacity to understand or control behavior negates the “sinfulness” of such acts? Certainly we attribute any “bodily disorders” as connected to sin, but only in the sense that the world’s fallenness expresses itself randomly. “Who sinned that this man is blind?” From a personal perspective, is my son, who has such “disorders” and “syndromes,” sinning when he cannot will to do otherwise? Certainly, he is a fractured self. But, at least from my perspective, grace and salvation will not restore his wholeness or his ability to will to live ethically. On the other hand, I am not inclined to submit or reduce all theology to science or naturalism. E.g. Glenna Andrews, Ph.D. “Faculty Lecture of the Year” presented at Faculty Award Night, Northwest Nazarene University, April, 2004.

⁴ Albert Outler, “The Wesleyan Quadrilateral in John Wesley” in *WTJ* (Spring, 1985). *Italics mine*.

⁵Umphrey Lee, *John Wesley and Modern Religion* (Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1936), 120.

⁶John Wesley, *The Doctrine of Original Sin*, Preface, ¶4, Works (Jackson), 9:194.

rejected nor neglected as the condition of humanity or as a reality of human experience. This much, at least, is clear. Yet as Robert Chiles has argued, the scholarly assessments of John Wesley's doctrine of original sin differ.⁷ At first glance, this may appear surprising; Wesley did in fact write a lengthy and detailed treatise on the theme, *The Doctrine of Original Sin*. Yet despite the appearance of being a clear and comprehensive treatment of the subject (as it covers historical, sociological, existential, and Scriptural evidence for the doctrine), its rhetorical style—which counters the treatise of his “heretical” opponent almost point by point—distracts from its systematic value and raises the possibility of varied restatements of its less prominent themes. There are multiple and diverse interpretations of the significance of Wesley's doctrine of sin, specifically his view of original sin's consequences—i.e., the extent of human depravity. My own work intentionally disrupts an Augustinian interpretation of Wesley's understanding of sin (in *Singleness of Heart: Gender, Sin, and Holiness in Historical Perspective*)⁸, by examining his understanding of sin as found in his letters to women. And yet, in the catholic spirit, if you will, I agree that what is most vital is Wesley's dependence on a strong hamartiology for his soteriology, even if I disagree with other interpretations of its expression. The point is that we affirm and attempt to express the reality of sin.

I find motivation to speak of sin also because application of correlational theology has long been an “essential” in the way I do theology. Correlation is one of my passions (in its Tillichian and in its more pedestrian sense). I find it another means by which I can speak the ‘truth’ without losing its dynamic character. And this is how I interpret the task of The

⁷See Robert Chiles, *Theological Transitions in American Methodism: 1700-1935* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1965), 121-122.

⁸Diane Leclerc, *Singleness of Heart: Gender, Sin and Holiness in Historical Perspective* (Lanham, M.D.: Scarecrow Press, 2001).

Wesleyan Holiness Study Project—to correlate the truth of “holiness theology” with the emerging postmodern situation. And yet even here, with a boldness about the absolute necessity of the attempt, a humility remains. I wonder, even at my (relatively young?) age, whether or not I have an accurate or even adequate grasp of *the situation* to which I attempt to speak. It may well be that in the time it takes to complete our project, the language that we choose to communicate holiness may *miscommunicate* holiness. All language is metaphorical, certainly all language about sin. And yet, again, to discard any attempt to communicate will necessarily keep the gap unbridged. This is why I am here. I sense, very strongly, that this next generation could in fact be the generation that abandons belief in sanctification. In my inquiries, I have discovered that it has not been miscommunication that fuels their apathy. Rather, it has been silence. “Holiness” and “sanctification” are foreign concepts to my students. While I grew up struggling with my peers to reconcile the abuses of the doctrine with our own existential lives, this generation is not struggling at all, for they have been given nothing with which to struggle. Yes, it may well be that in our efforts here we may not communicate perfectly; we may well miss the mark. But at least we are aiming and shooting. We must speak, lest our doctrine of holiness become a nice, quaint, but antiquated part of our story.

In 1958 (long before *A Theology of Love*), Mildred Bangs Wynkoop penned *An Existential Interpretation of the Doctrine of Holiness* (unpublished). Interestingly, her words there seem prophetic here:

Pardox and tension exist in all living situations. These are not things to be deplored. Creativity can only thrive in tension. The abortive demand for premature intellectual peace is death to thinking. We are not attempting to solve difficulties but to restore them so that in the wholesome contest between doctrine and life, dynamic and productive and sanctified Christian activity may thrive and expand. Perhaps, we had better explain this. Committed as deeply as the author is to that which the doctrine of holiness means to life, there is the most painful concern growing daily in respect of the limited hearing which the doctrine receives. . . . More serious yet is the fact of a growing spiritual indifference

among holiness people. Perhaps others also struggle with the weight of disinterest but, to us, who, filled with the Holy Spirit presumably, ought to be the example of the world's solution to indifference, the lack is of particular seriousness. In a word, the problem seems to resolve itself into a statement such as this: the doctrine of holiness has not made adequate provision for the human element in life, (2-3).

“Existentialism” is a means by which Wynkoop addresses the very problem she sets forth. In a serious attempt to make “adequate provision for the human element in life” and to avoid speaking of the most experiential of all doctrines only in the abstract, I turn today to existentialism myself, where I have found language that, intriguingly, also communicates and resonates with my students. I would suggest that the “needs” of the postmodern for relationality, his or her search for meaning, and the quest for an experientially based spirituality (that has given rise to new liturgical theories), have already found expression in Wesley's emphasis on experiential life and faith, and in Søren Kierkegaard's existential expression of the nature of sin. I'm hopeful that placing them in correlational dialogue will bring edible fruit which in turn correlates to our situation now and in our future.

A Wesleyan-Soteriological Dialogue with Søren Kierkegaard's “Sickness unto Death”

I wholeheartedly affirm Randy Maddox's assessment of Wesley's understanding of sin and his belief that one of the strongest metaphors found in Wesley for salvation is that of healing of a disease. Salvation is “therapeutic.” I, with Maddox, find deep resonances between Wesley and the Eastern Fathers on this point⁹ (which carries over today in

⁹ See Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace*.... For support of the theory of seeing Wesley as more Eastern, e.g., Arthur MacDonald Allchin, “Our Life in Christ, in John Wesley and the Eastern Fathers,” in *We Belong to One Another: Methodist, Anglican and Orthodox*, ed. Arthur MacDonald Allchin (London: Epworth, 1965), 62-78; Paul M. Bassett and William Greathouse, *Exploring Christian Holiness*, Vol. II, *The Historical Development* (Kansas City, Mo.: Beacon Hill Press, 1985); Ted A. Campbell, *John Wesley and Christian Antiquity: Religious Vision and Cultural Changes* (Nashville, Tenn.: Kingswood Books, 1991); Ted A. Campbell, “John Wesley and the Asian Roots of Christianity,” *Asian Journal of Theology* 8 (1994): 281-94; Seung-An Im, “John Wesley's Theological Anthropology: A Dialectic Tension Between the Latin Western Patristic Tradition (Augustine) and the Greek Eastern Patristic Tradition (Gregory of Nyssa)” (Ph.D. dissertation, Drew University, 1994); David C. Ford, “Saint Makarios of Egypt and John Wesley: Variations on the Theme of Sanctification,” *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 33 (1988): 285-312; Luke L. Keefer, “John Wesley: Disciple of Early Christianity,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 19

resonances with nuances with Orthodoxy's theological scheme). This way of conceptualizing sin as disease correlates with Wesley's optimism about (sanctifying) grace, envisioned as a deeply (progressive) cure. The metaphor has great benefits. And yet, this more Eastern perspective can be criticized for being "light" on sin, so to speak, even to the point of interpreting the Fall as a rather understandable consequence of Adam and Eve's immaturity. Similarly, it is possible to so emphasize the potentiality of the restoration of the *imago Dei*, as to under stress the degree of the distortion. In light of this, the hamartiological work of persons such as Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Søren Kierkegaard, Karl Barth, and Reinhold Niebuhr, should not be overlooked. Although the West has too closely connected "forensic" salvation with such views of sin, making them almost inextricable (thus making salvation fractional) it would serve us well to grapple with the depth of human sinfulness offered by such views. In doing this, Wesleyanism's optimism regarding an actual transformation of "nature" can only gain in strength. It is an anxious, fractured self that finds wholeness. As a means of connecting a Western view of sin with a more robust soteriology found in the East, I will place Søren Kierkegaard and Wesleyan theology in dialogue.

One more note before I begin. In recent theology, the "self" has often been seen as a theological "evil" with *community* being its redeemer. If, by self we mean the Enlightenment self, then as stated above, I stand against it as a concept. The problem is, however, that it is only those who now represent this self that can crucify it. For those who

(1984): 23-32; Randy Maddox, "John Wesley and Eastern Orthodoxy: Influences, Convergences and Differences," *Asbury Theological Journal* 45 (1990): 29-53; K. Steve McCormick, "John Wesley's Use of John Chrysostom on the Christian Life: Faith Filled with the Energy of Love" (Ph.D. dissertation, Drew University, 1983); John G. Merritt, "'Dialogue' Within a Tradition: John Wesley and Gregory of Nyssa Discuss Christian Perfection," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 22 (1987): 92-116; Albert C. Outler, "John Wesley's Interests in the Early Fathers of the Church," in *The Wesleyan Theological Heritage: Essays of Albert C. Outler*, eds. Thomas C. Oden and Leicester R. Longden (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1991), 55-74; Mark Anthony Smith, "John Wesley: A Pattern of Monastic Reform" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Kentucky, 1992); and Howard Synder, "John Wesley and Macarius the Egyptian," *Asbury Theological Journal* 45 (1990): 55-59.

have never known the power of selfhood because of any number of oppressions, selfhood is the very sign and symbol of liberation, in even a spiritual sense. I contend that the self and the community should stand in “equilibrium”—as a balanced polarity enabled by the Spirit. We could get stuck here in debate. If only for the sake of going on, allow me to use the concept of the self when talking about sin.

SK on Sin

Humanity is born into an existentially anxious reality, one that is dependent upon its creation even before the need to reference sin. This reality is prototypically found in Eden, but it is in every individual. While Adam is unlike us in that he was the first (the first always being different from his progeny), this difference has a quantitative character rather than qualitative. “[A person] belongs to nature, but not to nature alone, for he [sic] is poised between nature and some other realm, and he is subject to imperatives which neither realm can explain of itself. He is material, yet spiritual; he is determined, yet free; he is derived like the rest of nature from what came before him, and yet, unlike anything else in nature, he alone is responsible for creating himself.”¹⁰ This causes anxiety. But the human is really “anxious about nothing.” Kierkegaard defines anxiety as a disposition that results from the relationship of the synthesis of body and psyche, mediated by the spirit. In this synthesis, the self is aware of the freedom of potentiality; he or she is “able.” But the self is also aware of his or her destiny and fixedness. And awareness of ability *and* limitation causes anxiety. It is the place where the finite touches the infinite, where the temporal touches eternity, where necessity touches freedom. This state of ambiguity gives rise to the temptation to “fall” to

¹⁰ George Prince, *The Narrow Pass: A Study of Kierkegaard's Concept of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1963), 35.

one side of the polarities or the other. This created situation is the human predicament, to which we will return.

But first, simply to remind us, when we try to define a human being, it is not enough to state what is universally human about her or him. Kierkegaard, as it is well known, is equally concerned for the individual as individual. And the individual possesses all that is personal and unrepeatable about him or her. “And this is where our difficulties begin, for although we can define what is human about him... we know next to nothing of how individual selves come about in their infinitely varied and unpredictable idiosyncrasy.”¹¹ Our “true” selves are only potentialities in the structure of our being—potentialities that may or may not become actual in the living out of our lives. We still may be authentic, though not perfected selves; we are always becoming. But it is hard to understand how even this comes about. How does a self, a particular individual, “emerge from a chaos of living material” and reflect its own unique qualities let alone reflect on itself? It is here that SK turns to the synthesizing agent, the spirit. He conceptualizes the self as a highly individualized pattern which has emerged from the synthesis of the ‘soulish’ and the bodily by the spirit. The spirit is what enables the self’s consciousness of itself. The emergence of self-consciousness is derived from and maintained by the will. It is with the will that the predicament of existential anxiety (and its necessary fall) moves forward to actualize sin. And anxiety becomes despair.

Kierkegaard states, “the self cannot of itself attain and remain in equilibrium and rest by itself, but only by relating itself to that Power which constituted the whole relation.”¹² Without this power, sin is an inevitable (but not necessary) movement. In *Sickness Unto*

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² See Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. and ed. Walter Lowrie (Princeton University Press, 1954), 147.

Death, SK extensively elaborates on “despair” as sin. Obviously, despair is not to be equated with sadness or melancholy, or even immobilized hopelessness. There is activity even in the inactivity of “willing not.” Despair is an activity of the will, that emerges from the spirit, when the self fractures toward the bodily or toward the psychic which disrupts the synthesis. Despair then is a lack of equilibrium which expresses itself in one side of the polarity to the neglect of the other.

Kierkegaard elaborates on the forms of the sickness. Specifically, despair can be viewed through the polarities, such as the polarities of Infinitude/Finitude, Possibility/Necessity, and the Eternal/Earthly. Those who sin to the side of infinity, idealize themselves as limitless in their potential and are fantastical. But rather than reaching infinity, these persons are carried out away from themselves, thus preventing them to be able to return to their true selves. Their *hubris*, then, comes before their actualized fall. “Now if possibility outruns necessity, the self runs away from itself, so that it has no necessity whereto it is bound to return. . . Possibility then appears to be the self ever greater and greater, more and more things become possible, because nothing becomes actual.”¹³ This form of despair, SK calls defiance. On the other hand, persons can despair toward finitude, or the earthly. “This form of despair is: despair at not willing to be *oneself*; or still lower, despair at not willing to be *a* self; or lowest of all, despair at willing to be *another* than himself. . . He swings away entirely from the inward direction which is the path he ought to have followed in order to become a true self.”¹⁴

¹³ Ibid, 169.

¹⁴Ibid., 186, 189. Italics mine. Some work has been done on SK’s famous footnote that genders the forms of despair. Trying to be a self by oneself, Kierkegaard names the “manly” form of despair. The opposite despair, the despair of not willing to be a self at all, he names the “womanly” form of despair. Man attempts to overcome the anxiety of selfhood by forcing the poles of infinitude and possibility. Woman, on the other hand, relinquishes herself to the poles of finitude and necessity. Woman, according to Kierkegaard, gives herself away, thus losing her true self. The man, in contrast, defiantly attempts to maintain himself independently and egotistically, despairingly determined to be himself. But again, woman

Kierkegaard calls this form of sin weakness. The point of his lengthy discussion is to claim that while the expressions of despair might differ, the self is fractured, incapable of being its self by itself. The self is itself only by relating to the Power that constituted the self to begin with. In other words, every self stands in need of God.

For those then who despair over willing to be a self by defiantly exerting their supposedly limitlessness, they must will to be a self **related** to the Power. For those who despair over willing to be a self by weakly not willing to be a self at all, they must will to be a **self** related to the Power. The whole point for SK is that sin, whether defiance or cowardice, is disabling. It manifests itself in countless ways.¹⁵ It is impossible to break free of the predicament alone.

The value of this paradigm for an understanding of sin today is that it addresses the situation. Specifically, most of my students come from dysfunctional backgrounds that truly disable their ability to relate to others well or, in some cases, keep them from being empowered to even claim a self. The thirst for meaningful selfhood and a healthy relationality, as well as the need to fill their experiential void, is something I encounter almost daily in my students. Kierkegaard can aid in understanding their predicament. Wesley can aid in providing a hopefulness that their lives can change.

attempts to be rid of herself by losing herself in another. “Defiance” and “weakness” are Kierkegaard’s final labels for the masculine and feminine forms of despair, respectively. See Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 144. Working closely with the Danish text, Sylvia Walsh interprets a key passage in Kierkegaard: “In abandoning or throwing herself altogether into that which she devotes herself, woman tends to have a sense of self only in and through the object of her devotion. When the object is taken away, her self is also lost. Her despair, consequently, lies in not willing to be herself, that is, in not having any separate or independent self-identity,” Sylvia Walsh, “On ‘Feminine’ and ‘Masculine’ Forms of Despair,” in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Sickness Unto Death*, ed., Robert L. Perkins (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1987), 124.

¹⁵ But what of a person who feels no despair, who seems unconscious of the predicament? He writes, “Unawareness is so far from removing despair, or of transforming despair into non-despair, that on the contrary, it may be the most dangerous form of despair,” there is Søren Kierkegaard, *Sickness Unto Death*, 177.

A Wesleyan Response

Prevenient Grace

The problem with any system, even SK's (which he would of course resolutely deny as a system!) is that it is bound to its own presuppositions, presumptions, and theories, and to its own language. It is not my aim here to defend the whole, but to explicate on the valuable for our purposes. What we gain from Kierkegaard is a sense of the depth of sin, and the intricacies of how it affects our entire being, particularly in our ability to relate. Despair, as an intentional act of the will, brings about existential estrangement. "The state of being in sin is worse sin than the particular sin, it is the sin emphatically, and thus understood it is true that the state of remaining in sin is continuation of sin, is a new sin."¹⁶ This continuation then leads to the sin of despairing over one's sin. It can also lead to despairing over the forgiveness of sin. "God offers reconciliation in the forgiveness of sin. Yet the sinner despairs, and despair acquires a still deeper expression."¹⁷ Estrangement fragments the self from itself, it severs our intended relationships with others, but most importantly, it keeps us from God, even if we glimpse God's reconciling call. It is our sin that keeps us believing that anything can conquer sin.

As we have said, Adam and Eve were created with an ontological structure that would lead to anxiety over being itself. It was the presence of God that kept anxiety at bay.¹⁸ But when they gained knowledge of good and evil, a new level of consciousness made them aware of their anxiety. In this anxiety over "nothing" they fell.¹⁹ What

¹⁶ Ibid, 237.

¹⁷ Ibid, 244-45.

¹⁸ In SK's words, in a "dreaming" state.

¹⁹ I would suggest that ironically, it was Eve who sinned defiantly, and Adam who "lost himself" in another, namely Eve. Perhaps the consequences of the Fall were a reversal of this first tendency. Augustine himself contemplates this. "So we cannot believe that Adam was deceived, and supposed the

became “shame” was their attempt to hide from God. They *sought* estrangement out of their shame. And God allowed it, and symbolically removed them from Eden.

According to Kierkegaard, we are born with an anxiety that is quantitatively different from our first parents, and thus born with such a sense of dread that sin becomes actual as we “inevitably” attempt to deal with its weight--by willing to be a self defiantly, or by resisting to be a self at all.²⁰ In this paradigm, the pressing need of explaining transmission fades. Also does the problem of justifying a God who holds us accountable for sin we cannot help to commit (because we are already corrupted at birth). While anxiety is our predisposition, and while this dread accumulates over time, it is possible to read SK as saying we become responsible for sin only as we actualize it through the will.

Long seen as foundational to Wesley’s entire theology, the concept of prevenient grace has largely been assumed rather than explicated. Its significance can be seen when overlaid on Kierkegaard’s concept of despair. Kierkegaard’s ideas help us envision the devastating estrangement experienced by human beings. Wesley’s understanding of prevenient grace helps us envision the potentiality for something different. Fundamental to Kierkegaard’s beliefs on humanity is its inability to rectify the situation in which it finds itself. God is the only means by which a fractured self is given any potentiality for

devil’s word to be truth, and therefore transgressed God’s law, but that he by the drawings of kindred yielded to the woman, the husband to the wife... man could not bear to be severed from his only companion, even though this involved a partnership in sin.” Augustine, *The City of God* (New York: The Modern Library: Random House, 1950), 459. Adam seems to be the one “loving the creature more than the creator.” But his punishment reverses the tendency. This is reinforced by countless patriarchal anthropologies through the centuries. E.g. Hegel’s scheme which places man as the symbol for that which is spiritual, and woman for that which is bodily, or earthly.

²⁰ One of the questions in scholarly debate over SK’s conception of sin is the question of whether anxiety, or dread, is itself sin, or only the precondition that elicits temptation. Or more plainly stated, is there an experiential reality of the “pull” of original sin before sin is personally actualized? Is dread this pull? The problem is that SK seems to state that this preconditional dread breeds a type of dread that is sinful. Dread multiplies. Where does dread become despair? In my analysis, dread is the precondition and the pull of original sin. Despair only arises when the will breaks the synthesis of the spirit that relates the self to the self. This has relevance to the Wesleyan understanding of intentionality.

change. “A self face to face with Christ is a self potentiated by the prodigious concession of God, potentiated by the prodigious emphasis which falls upon it for the fact that God also for the sake of this self let Himself be born, became man, suffered, and died.”²¹ Clearly, Kierkegaard does not believe that we will never actualize any of this God-given potential. And yet, while SK is certainly not Pelagian in his understanding of sin, it is possible to interpret him as quite Pelagian in the quest for salvation. By what means are we saved?

How then can this act come about? It can be performed, [Kierkegaard] says, only by means of a relation to God. This relation is achieved when man’s powers are organized and integrated together in one totalitarian resolve towards God in an act of ‘conscious’ seriousness and deep intent to believe, to choose God as He presents Himself in His ‘unbelievable’ paradoxicalness in the God-Man, together with the life-view and the teaching associated with Him. This calls for an absolute act of will; and the sheer strain of willing-to-believe tenses the will to the breaking-point, heightens self-consciousness, and draws the self into a new synthesis, making it a fully effective basis for all future activity and development. But if a man refuses this supreme task... the self remains a broken system, and is simply developing itself in terms of its own radical weakness. Kierkegaard sadly remarks that a man will only exert such an act of will under extreme pressure, and only when he is brought to that dark frontier where an unavoidable decision must be made.²²

Here we find his understanding of the “leap” into the abyss and of “infinite resignation” which leads to the potential of being a “knight of faith.” But we find no way of explaining in Kierkegaard’s view how these steps of faith are possible except as an act of the human will. It is we who leap toward reconciliation in faith. While we can find in Kierkegaard a Christ who suffered for us, we really do not find the mechanism by which we have faith to begin with, nor to explain how faith overcomes estrangement.

If it is the presence of God that effectively vanquishes despair, is it we who must find our way into that presence, or is there a condescension toward us, even in our existential estrangement? It is here, I believe that the power of the concept (and certainly

²¹ Kierkegaard, *Sickness Unto Death*, 244-45.

²² Price, 40.

the reality) of prevenient grace solves the problem of Kierkegaard's apparent salvation-seeking Pelagianism. It is also a concept that will aid our own holiness people.

We have not understood grace. As much as we talk about being saved by grace through faith, and not by works, our tradition has often fallen toward the side of our own efforts as we misconceive both the nature of holiness and the nature of God. And yet, how do we avoid the dangerous conclusions we seem to reach? How do we avoid our tendency to reduce sin to behaviors we are to avoid (often quite avoidable in our own strength)? How do we avoid our tendency to reduce holiness to our own attempts to live "sinlessly"? And how do we avoid the legalisms that ensue? We must first understand the depth and pervasiveness of sin. But we must also understand the pervasiveness of grace in the world and in our hearts, even before we exercise faith. Prevenient grace can explode our superficiality regarding sin, and the nature of salvation.²³

It has been suggested that the best way to understand prevenient grace is pneumatologically. In other words, this grace is not a "substance" any more than sin is a substance. We are better served to envision prevenient grace as the activity, even presence of the Holy Spirit. Unlike Kierkegaard, and other Western thinkers, Wesleyan theology believes that the sinful predicament into which we are born is not the only factor in our human situation. If we are pulled by an original sin (dread) that has accumulated throughout history, there is a counter-balancing pull toward life and away from self-destruction. I will be bold enough to say that the presence of God, through the gracious activity of the Holy Spirit, *enables* the will, not to save itself, but to move toward God. This is different than SK's conceptualization of the activity of the will (which is

²³ My students struggle to define salvation as anything else than "going to heaven."

simultaneously fallen, yet responsible for the leap). We have *free will* because we have been graced by the very presence of God.²⁴

The concept of prevenient grace is also crucial in our understanding of the *imago Dei*, and in our understanding of “true humanity.” Mildred Bangs Wynkoop and others have defined the image of God as our capacity for loving relationships. H. Ray Dunning elaborates by speaking of our relationships with God, others, ourselves, and the earth.²⁵ If we hold to SK’s scheme, a fractured self is incapable of relating to others without great distortion.²⁶ The Wesleyan concept of prevenient grace allows for the possibility of genuine love for others, even before the concept of *agape* is ever introduced to them. In this way, we can affirm loving acts in the world as coming from the grace of God, even if the loving individual is not a Christian. Important also is our understanding that the *imago Dei* is not obliterated in the Fall.²⁷ It has simply yet to be progressively “actualized” through the (sanctifying) grace of God.

Jesus Christ is both the source and the example of the perfected “image of God.” But in him, we not only see the image of God, we also see perfect humanity, in an even “better” sense than a pre-lapsarian Adam or Eve. I believe this has been neglected in our tradition—the goal of being truly human. In the scheme of SK, in sin(ning) there comes a radical break between true humanity and the human situation.

²⁴ I am tempted to say here something about “God is in the presence of sin” through prevenient grace as a means of countering the unfortunate message conveyed, that is, that when we sin God leaves us for God cannot be present to sin. I will have to flesh this out elsewhere.

²⁵ I agree with his relational “quadrilateral” here, but strongly disagree with his interpretation of the last two. For one, he has missed the potential of speaking of the environmental imperative others have found in Wesleyan thought. See *Grace, Faith, and Holiness* (Kansas City, M.O.: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1988).

²⁶ To the degree that SK envisions the purest form of love as love for a dead person! Only if the person is dead are we free from all self-interest that seeks to use the other for personal gain. See, SK, *Works of Love*, etc.

²⁷ Unlike more Reformed understandings.

[Our] basic condition makes ultimate self-improvement impossible. This is the force of the Greek phrase from Aristotle meaning ‘in terms of possibility’, e.g. as the oak-tree is in the acorn, the chicken in the egg... The self we desire to become *is not even potentially present*, and all efforts to develop it from the existing basis are futile, until the self is in ‘equilibrium.’ Then, and only then, does the self exist ‘in terms of possibility, presents in itself an ideal basis for satisfactory development.... ‘Becoming’ can now take place.²⁸

Thus Kierkegaard believes that it is only after being in a saving relation to the Power that constitutes the self that potentiality is even offered. There is no acorn at all, before “salvation.” It would serve us well to agree with Kierkegaard at this point, for it will help us avoid such problematic language of “human nature” and “depraved nature” and the need to distinguish them. True humanity is not even potentially present in those who actualize despair. But, rather than waiting for salvation for the potentiality to be restored, Wesleyan theology opens up the possibility of true human potential in those who have yet to find equilibrium. Prevenient grace, then, gives us our potential. Our very nature changes in terms of its potentiality immediately from the moment of birth (life). Further, according to Wesley, our potentiality is not simply that of the first humans. Wesley clearly states in his sermon “What is Man?” that our potential is now even greater since Christ came to earth. We can become more than Adam or Eve ever could. While prevenient grace gives us “the acorn,” our potential begins the process of actualization most acutely at the moment of our second birth. It is here that the process that we have called “healing” truly begins. And yet in this scheme, “healing” does not really encompass the scope of the internal change. At this point we will sacrifice one of Wesley’s metaphors for another: that of New Creation.

Saving Grace: New Creations

²⁸ Price, 40. Italics mine.

Pure potentiality begins to be actualized when we are related to the Power that constitutes the self. In the more traditional sense than my use above, prevenient grace (the Holy Spirit) “woos” us toward this relationship with God; it also draws us toward our true selves. To despair at willing to be a self defiantly, and to despair at not willing to be a self, is to existentially know our “nature” as estranged. It is not that we have a human nature and a sinful nature somehow mingling within us, warring against each other until one is “eradicated” from our being. This metaphor simply does not work. But if we take SK’s understanding of existential estrangement seriously, we will see that what needs to happen in us is to be re-created anew. Perhaps the best explanation of Wesley on New Creation comes from Theodore Runyon in *The New Creation: John Wesley’s Theology Today*. In light of this work, I will not attempt a full examination of the breadth of value in this metaphor for salvation (nor do I have time or space). But one passage will be helpful:

Wesley was convinced that when the re-creative Spirit is at work real changes occur. Not only are we granted a new status in Christ through justification but God does not leave us where we were; God inaugurates a new creation, restoring the relation to which we are called, to mirror God in the world... [There is real as well as relative change, says Wesley]. The relative change is that change in the way of being related brought about through our acceptance by God and is absolutely essential to everything that follows. But what follows, the real change, is the beginning of the new creaturehood, the *telos* toward which salvation is directed.²⁹

It is for this reason (the belief in real change beginning at regeneration) that Wesley so highly values the experience of new birth. He complained against those who would minimize its power to change inward and outward sin. To use words applied to Wesley on this point, new birth not only justifies, it is our *initial sanctification* that enables us to progress toward our new *telos*. In Kierkegaard’s words, because we are now in

²⁹ Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley’s Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 71.

relationship with God, we find the evasive equilibrium that keeps the bodily and the psychic balanced by the spirit, or Spirit. And in the presence of God, we keep anxiety at bay, and find ourselves free from the bondage of accumulated dread. Our relations with God, others, ourselves, and the earth move toward not only authentic selfhood, but toward our true selves, as we “come about” in our unique unpredictable idiosyncrasy.³⁰ We *find* ourselves in God. New birth, then, begins a new life to be lived in sanctifying grace.

Sanctifying Grace: Infinite Resignation?

Central to another of Kierkegaard’s primary works, is the story of Abraham and Isaac. Kierkegaard refers to Abraham’s infinite resignation of Isaac.³¹ It is through this resignation that Abraham becomes a true knight of faith (or in some of his other words, where he moves to “Religion B”--a place beyond one’s own ethical attempts at goodness). There are interesting parallels between this idea of resignation and many stories in our holiness past that perhaps still have value. One example is offered.

A daughter, Eliza, was born to Phoebe Palmer on August 28, 1835. Palmer describes her as particularly beautiful and winsome. When the infant was eleven months old, her mother had a type of premonition. This premonition of “not being with her long” came true, but not through some childhood illness; the tragedy was even greater. A crib fire, started through apparent carelessness with a candle by a servant, took the “angel to heaven.” Palmer records that she retired alone that night. “While pacing the room, crying to God, amid the tumult of grief, my mind arrested by a gentle whisper, saying, ‘Your

³⁰ See footnote 11 above.

³¹ It is a fascinating in Kierkegaard to parallel Abraham’s story to that of his own, in the relinquishing of Regina.

Heavenly Father loves you. He would not permit such a trial, without intending that some great good proportionate in magnitude and weight should result.”³²

“Palmer came to understand these losses as more than just random occurrences: they were acts of God which had a purpose.”³³ The fullest spiritual utilization of their meaning, however, was still yet to come. It would be another year before Phoebe Palmer finally reached that “day of days”—her term for her own experience of entire sanctification. There was one last “idol” to be relinquished. Palmer’s interpretation of Eliza’s death obliged her to seek even more diligently the experience of entire sanctification. After several key events, including the sanctification experience of her sister, Sarah Lankford, Palmer reached a day where she determined to fast and pray unceasingly until her struggle was resolved.

Only when she was willing to place on the altar her husband and children did she finally sense that “all on the altar of sacrifice lay” and that entire sanctification was imminent. Thus, “her path to holiness had entailed a gradual weaning of affection, first for her children and then finally for her husband. . . . Sanctification came only when she was able to obey the Christian injunction to reserve her highest love for God.”³⁴ In the theology of the holiness movement, “original sin” is identified as that which prevents complete devotion to God. But in the story of Palmer and others, in a very real way, this Abraham-like infinite resignation (i.e., consecration) enabled true selfhood. In the end, it left women in particular with a radical freedom to become.

³² Richard Wheatley, ed., *The Life and Letters of Mrs. Phoebe Palmer* (New York: Walter C. Palmer, 1876), 31.

³³ Harold Raser, *Phoebe Palmer: Her Life and Thought* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1987), 38.

³⁴ Anne C. Loveland, “Domesticity and Religion in the Antebellum Period: The Career of Phoebe Palmer,” *The Historian* 39 (1977): 438.

Unfortunately, this early idea of consecration was replaced by language of self-crucifixion, which still lingers in our midst! And yet, it is not only that it is antiquated; it is destructive to the whole message of salvation. The self is certainly not to be crucified if we understand “selfhood” as God’s intention for our creation. But if the “self” in the metaphor of crucifixion is intended to represent depravity within us, we once again stumble into the danger of two competing natures. There is no other crucifixion necessary other than the “ram” provided by God. To forget the *life-giving* work of Christ is to minimize the efficacy of grace, to empty the Christian life of love, and to disempower us again back into our estrangements. We lose sight of the *telos* available to those who “see” the presence of God. But for those who have responded to prevenient grace, have become new creations, and have increasingly actualized their created potential through God’s sanctifying work, holiness expressed in love can have an existential reality in their hearts and lives as those who relate to the One who constitutes us all. Wynkoop’s words to end:

Salvation has to do with the whole disrupted relationship. Being a disruption in the sight of God and in the hearts of [people], the central concern is to correct that relationship. Nothing less can be dignified by the term salvation. The alienation must end. Only God can do this. This we know, in Christ the estrangement ended. We must meet God with a single-hearted love. Any duplicity, or mixed motives, make cleansing fellowship impossible. Christ’s sacrifice of Himself on the cross not only made God’s approval of us possible but makes a pure heart also possible. Sin is *in this life* possible of correction. Alienation is ended between God and [us]. The antithesis of loving God is not a *state*, nor is holiness a *state*, but an atmosphere daily, hourly, perhaps even momentarily, maintained in the presence and by the power of the Holy Spirit. This calls for the deepest measure of participation. But the participation is not a strained, unnatural, fear-inspired thing, but the whole person committed to God with abandon. This does not put an impossible burden on the human psyche, nor does it require any particular measure of maturity, ability, or knowledge. But it does ask for growth and nurture and a deepening spiritual sensitivity that never ends.³⁵

³⁵ Wynkoop, *An Existential Interpretation of the Doctrine of Holiness* (unpublished), 254-56; edited.

Questions for consideration:

1. What are other metaphors for sin that would communicate to the postmodern?
2. What are better ways to describe the word “depravity”? Certainly the word depravity has been effective in communicating a more relational view of sin, but does this even communicate?
3. Is the concept of “equilibrium” effective in describing the *telos* of sanctification? What then would a “second experience” contribute to this concept?