



Institutional Heritage Resource Series

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A. Context of Our Institutional Heritage

1. **God's River System** – Imagine a great river system that runs through a desert. Like every river, it is always moving, it is always changing, and it is always bringing life where it flows. This is the river of God in the world. The river of God has many streams that flow into it causing God's work in the world to be diverse and full.

This river has a purpose in the streets of broken cities, ivory towers of the academy, cubicles of everyday working people, poor and affluent neighborhoods alike. It flows through sanctuaries and board rooms of churches, as well as executive suites around the world. There is no crevice of human life where this river may not have effect. The people of God are those who have chosen to let go of their self-reliance on the banks and immerse themselves in its flow. They become the diverse reflection of God in all the desert places of the world. As a result, lives are restored, systems are redeemed, and all of creation is being made new.

2. **Different Not Better** – The river of God is not unlike other rivers. It has many streams or tributaries that make up the whole river system. Each stream flows into the river adding to its depth, breadth, and movement. Each of these streams is unique. One is not better than the other, but each is different. Some flow rapidly through rocky terrain of conflict and struggle with white-water rapids. Others meander through meadows of cultural acceptance and integration in quiet peacefulness. Some have twists and curves responding to the events and changing human needs. Others are rather straight. Some run in the glare of the bright sun while others flow under the shade of canopied trees. Together, they form the wholeness and diversity of God's river – the Church. Each is different, not better.

As we walk along the river, we come upon some of these streams feeding the larger river. One might be called the "Renewal in Mainline denominations." Perhaps there is another stream called the "New Reformation Movement," and still another called the "Charismatic Catholic" stream. We may see another, "The Gospel Coalition," or "The Orthodox churches." Many streams make up the web of God's river system in the world; and among them, we come to one that is called the "Wesleyan Holiness" stream in which our institution was birthed, formed, and thrives.

3. **Wesleyan Holiness Stream** – The Wesleyan Holiness stream of the church is rich with history, deep thinking, and powerful manifestations of God's work in bringing relevant change to people and culture. We trace our heritage from the early church to the Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Methodist movements. More recently, our Wesleyan theology found expression in an emphasis on righteous living and social engagement in the Holiness movement. At times our stream became distracted and somewhat misguided in legalism. The denominations in the Holiness movement were founded by people who were in love with Jesus and full of the passion of God's Holy Spirit. That passion for heart purity caused behaviors to change. As a result, they launched initiatives that made a difference in the cultural issues of their day. Catherine and William Booth's heart for righteousness overflowed to reach the streets of London; Roberts, Scott and others were driven to engage the political and cultural issues of slavery and discrimination, while raising the standard of personal holiness; Fox, Bresee, Warner, Palmer, McPherson and others were consumed by the need for inner piety and full salvation through Jesus.

Our institution is saturated with the ongoing influence of this stream that reaches out to engage all people with compassion, grace, and humility so that Jesus Christ will be reflected, and God's river will bring life.

B. Framework of Our Institutional Heritage

A framework is embedded in the very label that describes the Wesleyan Holiness stream within God's river in the world. Our institution is significantly formed by this framework.

1. **Wesleyan** – Shaped by a Wesleyan theological framework, this stream leans into the mission of bringing the hope of God's salvation into the real circumstances of life. The essential unity of the church is more important than unanimity or uniformity. Integration, wholeness, curiosity, mission, justice, and hospitality flavor everything we do. These features find their way relationally into our thinking and that informs our practice. Our Wesleyan theological roots provide both anchor to the historic church as well as nimble practicality. This is driven by a passion to bring the Kingdom into culture and make a difference now. The good news is more than a future hope of being removed from a decaying world. Rather it is the hope of the Kingdom in this present darkness as well as the future to come. It balances a commitment to both right thinking and right living, individually and collectively.

Salvation is more than the idea of eternity in heaven. It is the restoration of God's image in people and a new creation. This hopeful emphasis on a new creation is both intensely personal and social in nature. Christ is the singular means to salvation. This framework is characterized by grace that compensates for the inadequacy of our human aberrations and deficiencies. It urges people and systems toward wholeness in Christ. We pursue the restoration of God's holy image that was imprinted when we were created. And so, holiness is the antidote to our selfishness that caused separation and brokenness in us.

2. **Holiness** – Our Holiness heritage is a Spirit filled manifestation of the Wesleyan theological framework. It emphasizes both personal transformation and social engagement. We are not set apart in isolation. The hope of God's wholeness can restore each human heart as well as influence the systems and structures of culture. Heart purity in reflecting God's holy nature is the source of compelling action to confront collective and individual injustice. We are compelled to engage in the real struggles of our culture with compassion and advocacy.

Holiness has been misunderstood to mean prescribed behaviors that ultimately resulted in legalism. In reality, holiness is a descriptor of God's very nature. We seek to call all people to full surrender to God's influence. The result is that (a) God's holy nature will be reflected in their lives – they become holy as He is holy; and (b) God's priority will become theirs – reconciling and restoring people and systems.

This has led to historic activism in advocating for justice so that slaves would be free; women would be fully empowered; pews would be free; laws would be fair, among others. As cultural issues change, Holiness compels people to the forefront of championing the justice and love of God in practical ways. We are not shy about getting involved in the functions and issues of our day in order to reflect Christ well and represent God's holistic mission of restoring creation.

C. Characteristics of Our Institutional Heritage

Each stream of the Church tends to have a tilt or characteristics that make it different than others, not necessarily better. Understanding that tilt can greatly help when it comes time to represent or to apply the richness of that heritage to everyday situations. Three particular characteristics reflect the general tilt of the Wesleyan Holiness stream that is home to our institution.

1. **Centered more than Bounded** – When driving your car around a long curve, if you fix your eyes on the outside edge you may find yourself drifting toward it. It requires effort to stay away from the edge. If you look at the inside edge, you find yourself drawn to stay close. In remaining focused upon the center, the perils of the edge will take care of themselves. It doesn't mean they don't exist, it's just that fixing your eyes on the center will keep you from violating the boundary. We attempt to secure ourselves to the anchored center of our Christian orthodoxy and heritage. In so doing we use less effort to define the restrictions or boundaries. These boundaries may take the form of theological, political, or social issues. A centered-set approach will result in some ambiguity and even messy, gray areas of theology, politics, and social issues. More bounded-set streams may define a position precisely. Passionate attraction to the centered holiness of God grows to overpower the fear of violating the boundaries of the edge.
2. **Relational more than Propositional** – If you are confronted with a propositional statement, you may rely mostly on your analytical skills to test the proposition. You begin with doubt and then examine it, try it, study it, and test it to see if it is in fact true. Conversely, when you meet new people, you may rely upon relational skills to know them. You begin with desire to know them and then you talk, ask, and spend time with them. You even share about yourself as a way to bond with them relationally. We relate differently to a person than we do to a proposition or doctrine. We will always see people more as image bearers than as representing a doctrinal, social, or political position. So we will tend to relate to them even if they think differently about important matters. This does not threaten the solidarity with which we anchor ourselves to the center points of our relationship with Jesus Christ and God's word. But it may affect how we express the principles that describe us.
3. **Descriptive more than Prescriptive** – When you write in your journal, you are usually describing what went on in your life and how you were affected. When you prescribe a course of behavior or expectations for thinking, you are setting targets to achieve through concerted effort. Wesley wrote a journal. He experienced God in God's time and way, then he wrote about it forming his understanding of God as a result. Calvin wrote *Institutes of Religion*. He reflected and considered the truth about God and set it out as systems of thought which may guide our Christian path. When we anchor ourselves to a centered relationship with Christ and God's word, experiences that confront us all become possibilities to experience and see God at work. This is a lifelong journey of discovery and becoming whole. There may be uncertainty along the way, but we trust in the assurances that the principles of God and the purposes of God's word will not fail.

These characteristics represent a tilt, not a categorical extreme. Embracing the Kingdom, especially in the heritage of the Wesleyan Holiness stream, means that there are elements of both ends of the spectrum. But the tilt is more to one than the other. Defining the degree of that balance is always in flux and contributes to life-giving conversations. Although this may keep us from committing to documents that attempt to define positions, we are able to engage with peaceful confidence because we remain deeply anchored and rooted as Christ-centered, Bible-believing Christians in love with God.

D. Emphases of Our Institutional Heritage

The Church is called by Jesus Christ to bring the Kingdom of heaven to earth. Throughout history we have explored and lived with many nuances, emphases, and distinctives that represent the fullness of this living gift of God. Our institution was birthed and exists in the Wesleyan Holiness stream of the Church. This stream values the full expression of the Church with its many differences. We see the Church as one house of God with many rooms, each representing the different experiences, priorities, and emphases of God with people. Our own stream also tends to emphasize particular themes that contribute to the larger river of God in the world. The following five are particularly helpful in deepening our identity and engagement.

1. **Centrality of Christ** – Because we tend to be more centered than bounded in our expression of Christian faith, identifying the central references of our orthodoxy is important. The person of Jesus Christ and his divinity is central. Christ represents the embodiment of personal holiness and he is the example of the social holiness we preach. He is the head of the Church and is singularly the means of being reconciled to God in salvation. Of course we share these and countless other truths about Christ with many other streams of the Church.
2. **Primacy of Scripture** – Wesley was a man of one book. We share this commitment to the primacy of Scripture as a central emphasis of our Christian identity. We accept that the truth of God is found in sources beyond Scripture, including reason, tradition, and experience. But all truth from any source is held in submission to the Scriptures in matters of faith and life. We do not shy away from fully examining the Scriptures and viewing them through the lens of where, to whom, and when they were written. We apply principles derived from Scripture faithfully in harmony with the Holy Spirit who inspires both the Scriptures and the readers
3. **Unity of the Church** – We recognize many differences within the broad universal Church. This centers on understanding the Church as the means by which God brings the Kingdom of heaven to earth now. Embracing the diversity of church traditions is not simply a hope that everyone will agree. Rather, our commitment to differences within the Church compels us to kindness and grace as well as love and justice in relating to others – including those with whom we may have sharp differences
4. **Grace in Relationships** – Being the recipients of grace ourselves, we offer grace in all circumstances. This is motivated by a commitment to the restoration of God’s image in all people. Grace, as a gift of God, woos our soul to God even before we choose to follow Jesus. It provides the context for receiving the gift of salvation, and it continues to offer opportunity to live out that salvation daily in becoming holy as God is holy. But this grace is not offered by God without cost. Christ makes it possible. Because he did, each of us has the possibility not to sin.
5. **Transformation of Life** – People and communities of people have the ability to choose the condition that will characterize their life and systems. God’s holy nature is available to us. It provides the hopeful possibility for a person to move beyond sin into righteousness, and for communities to become agents of wholeness in reflecting God’s holy nature. This hope of transformation moves us to engage with the passion of making a positive difference in the present.

E. Evidences of Our Institutional Heritage

Within the broad river of God that brings the life of the Kingdom to the world, many streams make unique contributions formed by special emphases and stories of God with us. Each stream is different, not better. Our institution traces its spiritual and theological identity to a robust lineage of influences that enlivens our mission through *engaging* with relevant cultural issues while remaining deeply *anchored* in Scripture and the essentials of Christian faith. This Wesleyan Holiness stream emphasizes a) centrality of Christ, b) primacy of Scripture, c) unity of the church, d) grace in relationships, and e) transformation of lives and communities. This stream has given birth to various denominations, schools, and organizations including our institution. As we embrace our dynamic heritage, we are able to be more confident in fulfilling our missional reach and reflect Christian faith as culture changes around us. The influence of this heritage has at times been hidden or forgotten. However, recent social and political issues demand a coherent, meaningful Christian response that can best be shaped from the richness of our heritage. Following are phrases that may describe the evidence of this heritage finding its way into the expression of our lives and our institution:

1. **Transformed Character** – Transformation implies the possibility of optional conditions that may describe a life. *The holiness stream calls people to willfully surrender a selfish will in favor of God's.* As Christ surrendered, so we follow suit allowing the righteous character of God to be increasingly manifested in us. We become holy as He is holy. God is wholly other, therefore His otherness will begin to create differences that distinguish a surrendered person from the surrounding worldly culture. So, we find that increasingly we are in this world, yet not of it. But, if this is the only descriptor we emphasize, then we may fall prey to becoming sectarian – so set apart from the world that we become irrelevant. In its extreme, sectarianism will lead to legalism as it becomes a source of pride.
 - a. Theological basis: Otherness of God
 - b. Scriptural reference: Romans 12:1ff
 - c. Isolated focus results in: Sectarian legalism

2. **Responsible Engagement** – Engagement is endemic to God and God's work. This impulse to engage the world counter-balances the tendency to being segregated, sectarian, set apart from the world. Engagement, however, is not simply in reaction to another's plea. God did not wait for humanity to ask for help. He took responsibility to initiate engagement as He saw our fallen condition due to separation caused by selfishness. *People on the way of reflecting God's holiness will likewise find internal compulsion to take responsibility for the hurt and brokenness of others.* They initiate engagement in compassion and advocacy. They reach out to them in ways that are culturally meaningful. Disconnected from a transformed character, however, this engagement easily falls prey to mere social action like any secular social organization that seeks civil good.
 - a. Theological basis: Incarnation
 - b. Scriptural reference: Mark 10:21
 - c. Isolated focus results in: Social Activism

3. **Healthy Relationships** – Even the church is replete with evidence of unhealthy relationships resulting in splits, tension, intractability, gossip, and many other forms of relational breaks resulting from selfishness trying to overpower another. Mutual submission is the clear evidence of health in relationships. It is most evident in the Trinity where selflessness gives way to the other. The Father submits to the Son, the Son submits to the Spirit, the Son submits to the Father, and so forth as complete mutuality among diverse persons yields health and wholeness.

People who walk in God's holiness will become increasingly characterized by this disposition of mutuality which yields health in relationships that may otherwise become divisive. But if seeking health in relationships is the only focus of holiness, the tendency will be to a relativism achieved by negotiating consensus among various people.

- a. Theological basis: Mutuality
- b. Scriptural reference: Ephesians 5:21
- c. Isolated focus results in: Relativism

4. **Wise Decisions** – It is not uncommon to hear someone say they are waiting to know what God's will is for a choice to be made. In fact, God may be waiting for that person to make a decision based upon Christian character and thoughtful communion with the Spirit. Those walking in God's holy nature will increasingly make decisions that are informed and reflect the Holy Spirit that is forming God's nature in them daily. We possess the agency of choice given by God. The holy life is a daily exercise of choices that exhibit God's righteous nature through our surrender. *People on the way of holiness practice daily choices that tilt the soul to God.* They embrace and offer the hopeful grace that grants the option not to sin. An over dependence upon free will as the means to holiness, however, may result in rationalized faith that can justify selfish desires.

- a. Theological basis: Free will
- b. Scriptural reference: Joshua 24:15
- c. Isolated focus results in: Rationalization

5. **Integrated Life** – God is complete apart from creation. In pursuing a greater measure of God in us, we discover the fullness of our own humanity. The path of integrating the dimensions of our being is a journey toward wholeness. Being created in God's image, *we see people with the hope and capacity for wholeness under the present constraints of our fallen nature.* Jesus' own command to love God with heart, soul, mind, and strength guides us in an integrated life that results in wholeness and fulfillment in our devotion to reflecting God's holiness. In isolation, though, this pursuit often results in a misguided desire for self-actualization as a human endeavor toward a human end.

- a. Theological basis: Completeness of God
- b. Scriptural reference: Mark 12:30
- c. Isolated focus results in: Priority on self-actualization

6. **Purposeful Hearts** – Behavior often shows the purpose of one's heart. However, even loving behavior can be initiated by a desire for self-promotion or it may result as a reaction to conditions or performance of another person. Often, loving acts are done out of guilt, or even in response to the actions of others. However, when the performance of the other changes – when it is not so good, or does not elicit the same feelings – our love may cease to drive behaviors. God's love, on the other hand, is not tied to our performance. Though we failed, missed the mark, and fell short, God was motivated by love to reach and engage us through prophets, priests, kings, the law, and finally through His Son and His Holy Spirit. This same *motivating love becomes the purpose that increasingly drives the hearts and actions of people who are pursuing God's holy nature.* With this heart as our motive, we do not require proper performance or behavior before reaching in love and extending grace that offers the hope of a relationship and access to Christ. However, when love is the sole focus of the Christian walk, it often results in a loose generalization that includes everyone in universalism.

- a. Theological basis: Love of God
- b. Scriptural reference: I John 4:7
- c. Isolated focus results in: Universalism

7. **Servant Leadership** – The ultimate servant leader was Jesus Christ. Throughout his life, he exhibited a variety of leadership styles, yet one inner nature. Before any activity of leadership, Jesus was formed as a servant – not of people or circumstances, but as a servant of God. By emptying himself of his rights and humbling his will to the will of His Father, Jesus voluntarily became a servant. As with any servant, He volitionally allowed the nature and priority of His Father to shape and form His own. Out of that nature and in alignment with those priorities, then, he engaged in ministry to people. People on the way of becoming Christ-like increasingly exhibit the nature of God, their master, who is holy. They increasingly live out the priorities of their master in acts of reconciliation. Without the other descriptors of the holy life, however, an emphasis on this one alone may result in simply pursuing a style of leadership activity.
 - a. Theological basis: Mind of Christ
 - b. Scriptural reference: Philippians 2:5-8
 - c. Isolated focus results in: Style of leadership

8. **Meaningful Work** – For centuries Christians assumed that God only “calls” to the ministry or spiritual vocations. However, everyone has a vocation, which is the call of their creator to live into the unique abilities, passions, and fit where they will find fulfillment. Those who walk daily in reflecting God’s holy nature will discover that their work is a fulfillment of God’s invitation to thrive. They apply themselves to work for which they are specially suited and in which they will find vigor and life. They grow to understand that their work is a result of God’s call. They also recognize that their work has value not so much because of what it contributes, but because of the One who called them to it. Work is an expression of their obedience and devotion to the Caller. Only focusing on work as the basis of pursuing the holy life will result in the error of confusing work as the primary expression and fulfillment of our faith. Personal character and spiritual mission will be lost in favor of simply doing well at the office.
 - a. Theological basis: Call of God-vocation
 - b. Scriptural reference: Exodus 3:7-10
 - c. Isolated focus results in: Work is our faith

9. **Curious Thinking** – Because all truth is God’s truth, and because all of creation bears witness to God’s nature, the pursuit of truth and understanding allows greater discovery in knowing God. People in a holiness stream have a growing appetite to know God. They also increasingly see all things as evidence of God. Because of their desire to know God, curiosity grows and impels them to know, to search, to discover, and to think. Research is a vital part of pursuing God. Discovery is evidence of a hunger for God. Curiosity increases as humility grows in the face of realizing our own deficiency in pursuing a holy God. Too much of an emphasis on thinking as the sign of God’s holiness, however, may cause a worldview to emerge that allows for any and all paths of rational thinking to end up at the heart of God. This pluralism undermines the singularity of Jesus in our journey.
 - a. Theological basis: Mystery of God
 - b. Scriptural reference: Job 38:1-7
 - c. Isolated focus results in: Pluralism

10. **Restored Self** – The imago Dei is the principle description of how humanity was created. Yet using our free will and a sense of individuality, we made a selfish choice resulting in separation. The effect of that selfishness is that the image of God in us became warped and broken. People who are giving in to God’s nature realize that salvation is more than the reparation of an offense. It is the restoration of God’s image in us by means of Jesus. While that restoration certainly involves the justifying act of relying upon Jesus, it is more. It is a daily journey of being restored. Through

repentance, confession, regeneration, and sanctification, we are being restored to again reflect God's holy nature in greater fashion. Though never perfect, our love for God and our reflection of God grows more focused and clearer with daily release of self-achievement and a greater reflection of God in us. An over-emphasis on restoring self as a measure of holy living, however, can result in a purely psychological exercise in self-help.

- a. Theological basis: Image of God
- b. Scriptural reference: Genesis 1:26-28
- c. Isolated focus results in: Self-help

These are not *prescriptive* standards to which Christians aspire. Rather they are *descriptions* resulting from the *centered* commitment to self-surrender so that the holy nature of God will be reflected in greater measure. They are not *bounded* doctrinal *propositions*, rather they are limited evidences of a growing *relationship* of proximity with God through Jesus. One descriptor is not more important than another. Narrow vision on one or a few will result in the loss of breadth and depth of God's holy influence. As a whole, these provide a description of how daily surrender of selfishness may find expression in selfless reflection of God who increasingly transforms us to be holy as He is holy.