

Christian perfection and the common good?

Wesleyan resources for Public Theology in times of crisis

Abstract: *This article argues that John Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfection, understood as love perfected by grace, constitutes both the theological heart of Wesleyan identity and a mandate for public theology in the present moment. This »grand depositum« entrusted to the people called Methodists is not a private spirituality but a distinctively structured account of salvation as healing, in which grace restores the divine image, perfects love, and necessarily presses outward into social holiness and public witness. Drawing on Wesley's primary sources and relevant Wesleyan scholarship, the article shows that the move from personal sanctification to social engagement is not a secondary application of doctrine but an intrinsic feature of the Wesleyan grammar of grace. It then brings this theological grammar to bear on four overlapping crises that mark contemporary public life, namely, democratic fracture and the misuse of religion, forced migration and the erosion of hospitality, ecological breakdown, and the normalisation of violence. In each case the Wesleyan framework of perfecting love offers not a partisan programme but an orientation, one that protects the vulnerable, pursues fairness, and builds trust across difference. The result is a public theology that is confessionally rooted, translational in practice, and oriented by the conviction that healing justice is the public form of sanctified love.*

1. A distinctive theological inheritance?

Near the end of his life, John Wesley wrote to his fellow Methodists with a characteristic mixture of pastoral urgency and theological precision. He described »Christian perfection« as »the grand depositum which God has lodged with the people called Methodists,« and named its purpose with sober plainness, »for the sake of propagating this chiefly He appeared to have raised us up.«¹ The phrasing

1 Wesley, Letters, vol. 8, 265; cf. Runyon, New Creation, 77.

is striking. The deposit was not a generic commission to do good or to speak into public affairs. It was a specific theological gift, a focus and a mission. Namely, an account of love perfected by grace, love restored to its proper governing function by the healing work of the Spirit. The mandate, Wesley believed, derived from the deposit. To lose the deposit was to lose the mandate. We shall unpack this in the argument that follows.

The *depositum* metaphor itself bears reflection. It echoes Paul's instruction to Timothy to »guard the good deposit« entrusted to him (2Tim 1,14), and across the patristic tradition it acquired connotations of fiducial responsibility for what one had received but did not own. Wesley deploys the metaphor with theological seriousness. The doctrine of Christian perfection is not Wesley's invention. He understood himself to have received it, and to be answerable for its faithful transmission.² The mandate to which a Wesleyan public theology answers is therefore not a free-floating commitment to social betterment. It is a stewardship, owed to a particular theological gift that has demands of its own.

This distinction matters more than it may initially appear. The Wesleyan public vocation is sometimes described, in popular and even in scholarly discourse, as an impulse toward social responsibility that accompanies the tradition's piety, a kind of ethical overflow that follows naturally from sincere religious commitment. That description is not entirely wrong, but it risks mislocating the argument. Wesley's claim was sharper and more precise than that general claim. It is *because* Wesleyan theology holds a particular account of salvation, one in which grace heals, restores, and perfects love in persons and communities, that it has a distinctive contribution to the common good. The connection is not incidental, rather it is intrinsic. A theology shaped by entire sanctification and the perfection of love generates, by its own inner logic, a set of convictions about human dignity, social relations, and public responsibility that other theological accounts don't quite replicate. That is the argument this article aims to unfold.

The context is urgent. Many so-called »late secular« Western societies are witnessing the return of religion to public life. Sadly, it is sometimes in distorted forms as the sanctifier of nationalism, the badge of cultural exclusion, or the alibi for political cynicism. When Christian symbols are deployed to legitimate domination rather than to model love of God and neighbour, the tradition that gave us the doctrine of prevenient grace, of God's love going before *every* human being

2 Cf. Heitzenrater, Wesley, 291; Collins, *Theology*, 297.

regardless of merit or provenance,³ has been betrayed. In such a climate, the question of what Wesleyan theology specifically contributes to public life is not a mere luxury of academic reflection. It is a question about how a particular tradition might serve communities to resist the temptation to baptise whatever cause is at hand, and to offer instead a grammar of healing love, a powerful transformative reality, that is oriented toward justice, peace, wholeness, and the flourishing of all people and all creation.

As the reader can see, this argument is developed from within the Wesleyan tradition. The author was shaped by a particular expression of Wesleyan theology, namely that of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. This in turn is formed by decades of friendships, shared causes, and theological work across many continents and contexts. In Southern Africa, questions of justice, dignity, and reconciliation pressed with an urgency that made the connection between personal holiness and public witness impossible to evade. As I have argued elsewhere, that formation taught me to read Wesley not as a privatising pietist but as a theologian whose entire account of salvation pressed outward into social and public form.⁴ In the late-secular contexts of Europe, I have encountered a different but related hunger, namely, a search for forms of life capable of resisting fragmentation, moral exhaustion, and the erosion of shared practices of care.⁵ In both settings, and in many others, the Wesleyan grammar of perfecting love offered not a ready-made solution but a coherent and demanding way of holding together grace, formation, holiness, and public responsibility. What follows is an attempt to say why I believe this is important, and to bring that grammar to bear on some exemplary fractures that characterise the present moment.

So, let us begin by focussing upon Christian perfection as a theological grammar of public witness, attending to its therapeutic register, its participatory shape, and its ecumenical depth.

3 Cf. Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 143–190.

4 Cf. Forster, *Revival*, 7–10.

5 Cf. Forster / Marchinkowski, *Ordinary*, 4.

2. Christian perfection as a theological grammar of public witness

Wesley was not primarily a systematic theologian or theological ethicist (in the strict contemporary sense of these categorisations), and the failure to grasp this point has produced more confusion in Wesleyan studies than many other interpretive misjudgements. He was, as Randy Maddox has argued, a pragmatic Christian minister, perhaps a kind of practical theologian, whose governing question was not what Christians should believe in the abstract, or even normative what they should do in every situation, but rather, how they might be transformed by grace toward their true end in love.⁶ Albert Outler had captured something of the same insight earlier in his characterisation of Wesley as a »folk theologian,« a description not of Wesley's level of sophistication, which was considerable, but of his consistent orientation toward the formation of actual persons in actual congregations.⁷ The doctrine of Christian perfection cannot be read apart from this practical orientation. It must be read within it.

Perfection, for Wesley, was never a speculative concept to be debated at a safe distance from the demands of ordinary Christian life. It was the *telos* (intention) of a life being healed and re-ordered by grace, the governing aim of the *ordo salutis* (the order of salvation), and the measure of what the gospel actually achieves in persons and communities. As Theodore Runyon has put it in his influential constructive reading, perfection names the present-tense reality of a »transformed spirit.«⁸ »Salvation consists, therefore, not only in reconciliation but in service, not only in an experienced sense of God's reality and presence but in a life lived out of that reality, extending divine transforming power into every aspect of both individual and social existence.«⁹ To extract perfection from Wesley's vision is therefore not to pare away an eccentric appendix. Rather, it is to disable the architecture by which the whole vision holds together.

What Wesley meant by perfection deserves some clarification, because the term has been misread and misunderstood from various perspectives. It does not mean moral flawlessness. Nor does not mean freedom from error, from temptation, or from the limits of creaturely finitude. Wesley himself was explicit on the point. In

6 Cf. Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 17–18.

7 Cf. Outler, *Folk Theologian*, 150–160.

8 Runyon, *New Creation*, 70.

9 Runyon, *New Creation*, 223.

A Plain Account of Christian Perfection, he insists that those perfected in love remain liable to »involuntary transgressions« and to the limitations of »ignorance and mistake,« and that they continue to need the grace of God moment by moment.¹⁰ Perfection names, instead, the maturing of love as the governing disposition of the heart. Kenneth Collins states the matter most clearly for me. The substance of Christian perfection is »principally a matter of the heart and its dispositions« being created »according to the likeness of God in righteousness and true holiness.«¹¹ It is a real change, not merely a forensic declaration. It constitutes a re-ordering of desire, affection, and intention toward God and neighbour rather than only being directed toward the self alone.

The soteriological register in which this change is described is therapeutic rather than juridical. Wesley consistently used the language of healing to characterise what grace does. Sin, for him, was not only guilt requiring acquittal but a disease requiring cure, a disordering of the human person that damages the capacity to love rightly, distorting relationships, and corrupting the communal arrangements by which societies are sustained. Salvation, correspondingly, was not only pardon but restoration. It is God's active work of returning the damaged or malformed creature toward health, wholeness, and right relation. The most influential of Wesley's formulations comes from the sermon »The Scripture Way of Salvation,« where he writes that by salvation he means not merely deliverance from hell or going to heaven but »a present deliverance from sin, a restoration of the soul to its primitive health.«¹² This is no isolated phrase. It runs through the sermons, the letters, the *Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, and the practical instructions for the Methodist societies. As I have argued elsewhere, the formulation describes a grammar of grace, not an exceptional spiritual state.¹³ Jeffrey Hiatt's helpful study of Wesley's missional theology affirms that the language of salvation as healing is not a hermeneutical imposition by recent interpreters but an integrating feature of Wesley's own self-understanding. He writes, »Wesley's conception of salvation incorporated physical, spiritual, social, and ultimately, cosmic healing, and thus informs the healing mission of the church.«¹⁴

¹⁰ Wesley, *Plain Account*, § 19.

¹¹ Collins, *Theology*, 55, 296.

¹² Wesley, *Scripture Way*, 156.

¹³ Cf. Forster, *Salvation as Healing*, 196.

¹⁴ Hiatt, *Salvation as Healing*, 1–2.

This therapeutic register reflects a considered theological account of what grace actually does in human life, and it has its roots in an ecumenical dimension of Wesley's theology that is only now receiving adequate scholarly attention. K. Steve McCormick has noted that while Wesley aligned himself firmly with the Reformation's insistence on justification by grace alone, his fundamental soteriological question was not primarily Luther's, namely, »How can I be pardoned?« but rather its Eastern-inflected counterpart, »How can I be healed?«¹⁵ This shift of question is theologically consequential. The question of pardon terminates in a changed legal status before God. The question of healing reaches into the depths of disordered desire, fractured relationship, and damaged communal life, and asks what it would mean for those things, those relationships, to be genuinely restored. Healing, properly understood, cannot remain private. It must address the conditions in which persons are damaged, which are always partly social, partly institutional, and of course also relational (both in relation to human creation, and also non-human creation).

The influence of Eastern Christian thought on Wesley is now a matter of broad scholarly consensus, though it requires some nuance in its presentation. Randy Maddox's important major study of Wesley and Eastern Orthodoxy showed that an appreciation for the Greek Fathers was a recognisable feature of the Anglican theological culture in which Wesley was formed at Oxford, and that themes of participation, restoration, and *theosis* shaped his soteriology in ways that distinguished it sharply from Reformed alternatives.¹⁶ Maria Fallica's more recent and careful study of Wesley's reception of Pseudo-Macarius offers an important refinement. She argues that Wesley's use of Eastern sources should be understood as a creative appropriation rather than simple genealogical influence. Wesley was not an Orthodox theologian in Anglican clothing, he was a theologian who selectively received Eastern resources and integrated them within a distinctively Wesleyan framework.¹⁷ The claim is thus not that Wesley's theology *is* Eastern, but that it is best read as a genuine synthesis of Eastern and Western theological emphases, in which the Eastern account of salvation as healing and participation supplies an indispensable key to the internal logic of the *ordo salutis*. As I have argued

¹⁵ McCormick, *Theosis*, 43. Forster, *Salvation as Healing*, 203.

¹⁶ Cf. Maddox, *Eastern Orthodoxy*, 29–53.

¹⁷ Cf. Fallica, *Anglo-Syrian Monk*, 492–493.

elsewhere, »Wesley's theology cannot be properly understood unless one takes account of the hybridity of theological sources« that shape it.¹⁸

Some scholars have pressed back against the strength of this claim, worrying that recent Wesleyan retrieval has sometimes overstated the Eastern dimension at the expense of Wesley's deep Anglican Reformed inheritance. The caution is well placed. Wesley remained, in significant respects, a Protestant theologian of the *via media* (the middle way), whose practical concerns and pastoral judgements were shaped as much by the Caroline divines as by Macarius. Yet the careful work of Maddox and Fallica, taken together, suggests that the synthesis claim is not weakened by such caution but rather nuanced and disciplined by it. Wesley's hybridity is not the wholesale borrowing of Eastern doctrine but a genuinely creative theological imagination at work, drawing on what was most deeply useful from multiple streams of Christian thought to address the pastoral and practical question of how grace transforms human life.

What does this synthesis yield? Above all, an account of Christian perfection in which the goal of salvation is the restoration of the *imago Dei*, the renewal of the human person in the likeness of God, understood not as a supernatural addition to an otherwise self-sufficient humanity, but as the recovery of what humanity was made for, and what was damaged by sin. Paul Chilcote's recent study of Charles Wesley's hymns confirms that this grammar of restoration pervades the liturgical and devotional expression of early Methodism. The hymns return repeatedly to the language of recovery and re-creation, »To perfect health restore my soul, / To perfect holiness and love« from the Charles Wesley hymn, *He wills that I should holy be*.¹⁹ What John argued in prose, Charles sang in poetry. Both gave voice to the same important conviction. Salvation in this tradition is not a rescue *from* the world. It is a repair of the person and, through the person, of the relationships and communities in which human life is lived.

This last point opens the doctrinal argument onto public theology. If sin is a social disorder as well as a personal failing, and if salvation is the healing of that disorder, then salvation cannot reach its fullness, its terminus, in the interior of the individual soul. It must press outward into the social and relational conditions in which the disorder was produced. Michael Simants's excellent recent study of the ethical implications of Wesley's doctrine of perfection argues precisely this case. Christian perfection is not the end of ethics but its intensification, because love

¹⁸ Forster, *Plain Account*, 3.

¹⁹ Chilcote, *Perfect Love Restored*, 4.

perfected toward God and neighbour necessarily orders the whole life toward concrete practices of justice, mercy, and truth.²⁰ The *telos* of sanctification is a people formed in holy love, and holy love cannot remain private. It takes visible shape in the world.

This is the theological logic that ties Christian perfection to public theology, and it is worth stating with some intensity, because it is often misconstrued. The argument is not that doctrine has subsequently been »applied« to social questions. The argument is that the doctrine itself, properly understood, already has social and public form. As Maddox has consistently argued, salvation in Wesley's theology encompasses present transformation toward »holiness of heart and life,« and that transformation is personal, communal, and, in the proper sense, social.²¹ To press the doctrine inward against its own grammar is not to preserve its purity but to falsify it. The Wesleyan grammar of grace is, by its own internal logic, oriented from the start toward the healing not only of persons but of the wider world in which those persons are wounded and made whole. As Maddox writes, this »social service« dimension of »holistic salvation found its most formal expression in the *General Rules*, which admonished Methodists 1) to do no harm to others and 2) to do as much good for the bodies and souls of others as they could.«²²

3. Social holiness as the grammar of sanctification and its public form

Few phrases in the Wesleyan heritage are more frequently invoked, and more regularly misread, than »social holiness.« The phrase comes from the preface that the Wesley brothers wrote for the 1739 edition of *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, where they declared that »the Gospel of Christ knows of no religion but social; no holiness but social holiness.«²³ In contemporary Methodist discourse, the phrase is routinely deployed as a synonym for social justice, understood in broadly modern terms as advocacy for the poor and the structurally marginalised. That reading is not false in its moral direction, but it is anachronistic in its historical reference, and the anachronism matters for the integrity of the theological argument we are tracing.

²⁰ Cf. Simants, *Ethics of Perfection*, 112–113.

²¹ Cf. Maddox, *Reclaiming Holistic Salvation*, 47–48. Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 143–190.

²² Maddox, *Reclaiming Holistic Salvation*, 48.

²³ Wesley/Wesley, *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, viii.

As Andrew Thompson has demonstrated through careful historical scholarship, the context of Wesley's phrase is a defence of communal Christian life against the ideal of the solitary religious practitioner. The early eighteenth-century context, with its mystical and quietist currents, made the temptation toward individual spirituality real and urgent. Wesley was arguing that holiness cannot be cultivated in isolation, that it requires the fellowship, worship, accountability, and mutual encouragement of the community.²⁴ »Social holiness« named the *formative ecology* in which holiness is produced and expressed. That is, the class meeting, the band, the society, the shared discipline of singing, prayer, and mutual exhortation. This is not a reduction of holiness to social activism, rather it is a claim about the conditions under which holiness is formed and sustained, and then leads to a life of service, justice, and social restoration.

That historical correction is important, because a public theology built on a misread phrase is built on unstable ground. Yet the correction should not be mistaken for a retreat from public witness. Properly understood, the communal character of holiness makes the public claim stronger, not weaker. Consider the implication. If holiness can only be formed and sustained in community, then the community itself bears responsibility for the social conditions in which such formation is possible or impossible. And if the community is called to embody love of God and neighbour, it cannot remain indifferent to the social arrangements that make such love credible or incredible. As Roger Walton has put it with distinctive economy, works of mercy for Wesley were not charitable additions to the life of faith but means of grace, »encounters with holiness« in which the believer is both formed in holiness and made to meet God in the face of the poor.²⁵

Randy Maddox's now-classic essay on Wesley and the poor pushes the point further. The poor, for Wesley, were not only recipients of sanctified benevolence. Encounter with the poor was itself a means by which believers were sanctified. Visiting the sick, feeding the hungry, and caring for the destitute were not supplements to holiness but conditions of it, channels through which sanctifying grace continued its work. This reading, drawn from Wesley's own sustained pattern of practice and his explicit instructions in sermons such as »On Visiting the Sick,« reframes social engagement entirely. »Wesley recognized that many Christians equate the means of grace solely with activities like bible study, prayer, and wor-

²⁴ Cf. Thompson, *From Societies to Society*, 7–11.

²⁵ Walton, *Social Holiness*, 6.

ship, practices that he grouped together as »works of piety.« As such, in discussions of the works of mercy he frequently emphasized that these too can be means of grace.²⁶ It is no longer an optional ethical practice for those who happen to be so inclined. It belongs to the means of grace and therefore to the very process of salvation. To withdraw from the poor is to withdraw from a means by which grace deepens its work in the believer.

David Field's two complementary studies, the first elaborating Wesley's understanding of holiness, social justice, and mission, and the second examining *Thoughts upon Slavery* (1774) as a test case for the public implications of sanctification's logic, demonstrate the continuity between Wesley's theological convictions and his public reasoning. Field argues that Wesley translated his theological convictions into public arguments accessible to a wider audience while remaining rooted in the grammar of prevenient grace and holy love. »In Wesley's terminology »works of mercy« refers to practical action to meet the physical and spiritual needs of others. Scattered in his writings we find overlapping lists of these works.«²⁷ In keeping with this, his argument against slavery was not a secular political intervention into which religious commitments incidentally entered.

The central dynamic of Wesley's theology was that human beings were created in the moral image of God; the moral image had been destroyed as a consequence of the fall, and God was now at work restoring the moral image in human beings who responded in faith to the gospel. This restoration of the moral image is sanctification. The moral character of God is love and hence God created human beings to be characterised by love.²⁸

The direct application of the claim is that every person bears the image of God, and that love of neighbour, perfected by grace, cannot coexist with the commodification of human lives. The conclusion Field draws, has the force of a doctrinal statement, »that is merely personal piety and morality, and that does not in some way engage structural injustice, cruelty and untruth in solidarity with the excluded, is not scriptural holiness.«²⁹

It is worth pausing on the logic at work here, because it is sometimes resisted. The argument is not that a theology of holiness will automatically generate correct

²⁶ Cf. Maddox, *Visit the Poor*, 60–61, 72.

²⁷ Field, *John Wesley as a Public Theologian*, 183.

²⁸ Cf. Field, *John Wesley as a Public Theologian*, 6.

²⁹ Field, *Holiness*, 189.

political conclusions. Wesley himself held views on poverty, on political order, and on the relations between church and state that would not survive contemporary scrutiny. He was, in many respects, a man of his class and his century. The argument is more modest and more durable. It is that a theology of entire sanctification, properly understood as the perfection of love toward God and neighbour, generates a set of practices and dispositions that necessarily press against social arrangements ordered by domination, exclusion, and contempt for the weak. The social logic of sanctification is *not* a programme, it is a *theological grammar*. It does not determine in advance what the church will say about every political question. But it does determine the posture from which the church approaches those questions, and it makes certain kinds of silence, and certain kinds of accommodation to power, theologically incoherent.

Soon-Won Hong's important study of Wesley's pneumatological ethics grounds this conclusion in the work of the Holy Spirit rather than in moral enthusiasm alone. It is the Spirit who sanctifies, and the Spirit's sanctifying work cannot be separated from the Spirit's movement toward the poor, the marginalised, and those whose humanity is most at risk.³⁰ The argument is theological in the strict sense, not merely ethical. Joerg Rieger's constructive development of this insight in his recent work proposes a movement from charity and service to »deep solidarity,« by which he means a form of engagement with the marginalised that is not benevolence from above but mutual encounter in which the grace of God moves in both directions.³¹ Works of mercy, on this account, are not only »outreach« but also »inreach,« because the encounter with those under greatest pressure becomes itself an encounter with grace.³² Perfect love, fully received, cannot remain comfortable. This is the point where the grammar of sanctification presses most urgently into public life.

What is at stake, finally, in this section of the argument is something simple and demanding. To take seriously Wesley's phrase »no holiness but social holiness« is not to reduce holiness to social action, but neither is it to confine holiness to the inner chamber of personal devotion. It is to recognise that holiness, as Wesley understood it, only exists where love perfected by grace finds embodied form in the relationships, communities, and practices in which sanctified persons are made and sent.

³⁰ Cf. Hong, *Holy Spirit*, 567–589.

³¹ Rieger, *Exploring*, 90.

³² Rieger, *Exploring*, 90–91.

4. Public theology in a Wesleyan key

The preceding section establishes the theological basis for a Wesleyan public theology. What remains is to describe its character, to show what it distinctively contributes, and to propose criteria by which it can guide engagement with the present moment.

Dirk Smit's articulation of public theology offers a useful initial orientation. Public theology, in Smit's account, does not claim a single universalising methodology. It is a diverse, context-sensitive practice, a paradigm, that moves between the particular languages of faith and the shared languages of civil society, translating between registers without dissolving either.³³ It does not speak *at* the public sphere from a position of confident superiority, but speaks *within* and *alongside* it, bearing particular convictions and offering them as a contribution to shared deliberation about the common good. A Wesleyan public theology is well suited to this posture. The Wesleyan Quadrilateral, with its interplay of Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience, models the kind of interdisciplinary openness that complex public questions require. Wesley himself was an avid reader of philosophy, medicine, natural history, and social thought, and his confidence that all truth belongs to God made him a learner as well as a teacher.³⁴

What, specifically, does the Wesleyan grammar contribute? To my mind, three things stand out.

First, it *grounds public engagement in sanctification* rather than in partisan ideology. A public theology rooted in the logic of entire sanctification is not primarily interested in winning political contests. It is interested in the formation of persons and communities in love, and in the translation of that love into patterns of social life ordered by justice, mercy, and truth. Elaine Graham has argued that effective public theology requires praxis, not only proclamation, and that the church's credibility in the public square depends substantially on whether its community embodies the values it espouses.³⁵ For Wesley's followers, this meant that arguments against slavery were backed by the practices of Methodist societies that gathered across social divisions, that gave the poor a voice in their own governance, and that formed people in the habits of honesty, accountability, and mutual care. Words and deeds had to be held together, or the words were worth little.

³³ Cf. Smit, *Does It Matter?*, 77–78.

³⁴ Cf. Heitzenrater, *Wesley*, 178–205.

³⁵ Cf. Graham, *Between a Rock*, 8–9.

Second, the Wesleyan grammar offers what Maddox has aptly named a kind of optimism of grace: the *conviction that transformation is genuinely possible*, for persons, for communities, and for the social arrangements by which human life is ordered. In other words, »salvation must be seen as more than a future hope—it has a present reality.«³⁶ This is not naïvety about the depth of sin or the intractability of structural injustice. Wesley was no romantic. His sermons return repeatedly to the persistence of sin and the limits of human achievement. Yet his confidence in grace, expressed throughout the sermons and reflected in the architecture of his *ordo salutis*, refused to grant sin the final word. In a public culture marked by cynicism, moral exhaustion, and the chronic erosion of hope, such optimism is not a comfort but a provocation. It insists that things can be otherwise, that grace is sufficient for the healing even of fractured societies, and that the church has both the resources and the mandate to labour for that healing. This is beautifully summed up in this prayer that Wesley designated for meetings of societies:

Help us to help each other, Lord, Each other's cross to bear;
 Let each his friendly aid afford, And feel his brother's care.
 Help us to build each other up, Our little stock improve;
 Increase our faith, confirm our hope, And perfect us in love!³⁷

Third, the tradition insists on the *polyphonic character of its public witness*. The Wesleyan heritage is not a monolith. It is a global family of traditions shaped by very different histories, contexts, and forms of suffering and struggle. Felipe Maia's constructive project of decolonising Wesleyan theology has shown that the voices of those who inhabited the grammar of grace under conditions of marginalisation belong to the tradition's theological substance, not merely to its application.³⁸ Mercy Amba Oduyoye's insistence that the flourishing of the whole community, not only of its privileged members, is the measure of authentic holiness, is itself a development of the Wesleyan grammar of perfecting love, enriched by the experience of African women whose humanity has too often been rationed by institutions claiming to embody that love.³⁹ Adam Ployd's reading of Wesley through Oduyoye demonstrates that such polyphonic enrichment does not displace the Wesleyan grammar but extends it, bringing to visibility dimensions of healing, wholeness,

³⁶ Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 144.

³⁷ Wesley, quoted in Maddox, *Visit the Poor*, 209–210.

³⁸ Maia, *Decolonizing Wesleyan Theology*, 18.

³⁹ Oduyoye, *African Women's Theology*, 22.

and social repair that Wesley's own context could not fully anticipate.⁴⁰ As I have argued elsewhere in dialogue with the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, the polyphonic Wesleyan public theology that emerges from such retrievals is not less Wesleyan for being less Eurocentric. It is, arguably, more Wesleyan, because it more fully realises the true scope of perfecting love.⁴¹

Three practical criteria flow from this theological argument. They are not a programme, rather they are tests by which public engagement shaped by perfecting love can be measured and, where necessary, corrected.

The first is the *protection of the vulnerable*. In the Wesleyan tradition, the poor, the sick, the imprisoned, and the excluded are not only objects of compassion but, as Maddox has argued, privileged sites of encounter with grace.⁴² A public theology that begins with those who suffer most is not indulging sentiment, it is following the logic of the *ordo salutis* itself, in which works of mercy are means by which sanctification deepens. Any policy or social arrangement must be tested by its effect on those who bear the greatest burden, what has been called the »preferential option for the poor.«⁴³ This criterion has the further virtue of making theological judgement publicly assessable. One does not need to share Wesleyan theological convictions to recognise that a valid measure of the moral health of a society is to evaluate how it treats the poor and least powerful in its midst.

The second is the *pursuit of fairness*. Love of neighbour, taken seriously, contains a principle of equality. What I desire for myself I must desire for my neighbour. This rules out indifference to gross inequality and structural injustice. The early Methodists who spent decades advocating against debtors' prisons and for access to medicine and education among the poor were not pursuing a political programme in the modern sense. They were following the inner logic of their sanctification.⁴⁴ The same logic applies in any context where social arrangements systematically deprive some persons of the conditions necessary for a fully human life. Fairness, on this account, is not a procedural value alone but a substantive one, demanding attention to outcomes as well as to processes.

The third is the *building of trust across difference*. One of the most urgent and distinctive gifts the Wesleyan tradition can offer to a polarised public life is the practice of »Christian conferencing.« the disciplined habit of speaking truthfully

⁴⁰ Ployd, Wholeness, 5.

⁴¹ Forster, Revival, 7–10.

⁴² Cf. Maddox, Visit the Poor, 3–5.

⁴³ Bonino, Wesley in Latin America, 179. Matt 25,45.

⁴⁴ Cf. Heitzenrater, Wesley, 82–104.

and listening generously across lines of disagreement, sustained by shared commitment to a common good.⁴⁵ Wesley's confidence that grace can knit together those whom sin has set apart, his class meetings drew their members from very different social strata, was not a pious aspiration. It was a »means of grace«, that functioned as a structural feature of the movement he organized.⁴⁶ The translational character of Wesleyan public theology, its willingness to speak the grammar of perfecting love in languages accessible to those who do not share that grammar, is itself a form of bridge-building.

5. Christian perfection in times of crisis

The theme of this issue, *Herausgefordert* (Challenged), names something the present moment requires us to be honest about. Our societies are not merely facing a set of discrete problems awaiting technical solutions. They are manifesting what might be called systemic wounds, namely, deep disorders in the social body that express themselves in multiple, interrelated crises. Four such wounds are prominent enough to warrant attention here. In each case the purpose is not to provide policy prescriptions but to show where the grammar of perfecting love presses its claim most urgently, and what a Wesleyan orientation looks like in practice.

Democratic fracture and the misuse of religion

Democratic institutions in many parts of the world are under severe and sustained strain. What is theologically striking about the present crisis is not only the erosion of institutional trust but the specific way in which religious symbols and language are being appropriated to serve it. Christianity is deployed as a cultural totem, a badge of belonging that confers in-group identity rather than a summons to love of God and neighbour. Wesley would have recognised this as a species of false religion, namely, the form of godliness without its power.⁴⁷ A Wesleyan public theology names this misuse with clarity. When Christian symbols are mobilised to exclude, to demonise, or to sanctify domination, the tradition that gave us the doctrine of

⁴⁵ Cf. Runyon, *New Creation*, 120–135.

⁴⁶ Runyon, *New Creation*, 126.

⁴⁷ Runyon, *New Creation*, 77.

prevenient grace, of God's love going before every human being regardless of their provenance, has been betrayed.

The antidote is not a retreat into pious abstraction but a concrete practice of accountability grounded in sanctification's logic. David Field's analysis of Wesley's public reasoning in *Thoughts upon Slavery* shows that prophetic public argument can be rooted in the grammar of grace without being enclosed within it, that theological conviction can generate publicly legible reasoning without abandoning its theological character.⁴⁸ Truthful speech, in this sense, is a work of mercy. Accountability in public life is a form of the love that sanctification cultivates. A church formed in holy love will resist the temptation to function as the religious wing of any political movement and will insist that authentic Christian witness in public bears the character of Christ, namely, truthful, just, and marked by particular care for the weakest and most sinned against.

Forced migration and the crisis of hospitality

Migration has become one of the defining moral tests of Christian public witness in the present moment. The terms in which it is habitually debated, security, control, numbers, and threat, are precisely the terms that a Wesleyan theology of grace is equipped to interrogate. Prevenient grace is the theological claim that God's love goes before every human being, including the one arriving at the border, including the one whose circumstances we do not share and whose language we do not speak. The World Methodist Council's 2023 consultation in Manila stated with striking directness that the migration crisis is »primarily a crisis of welcoming,« not a crisis of numbers.⁴⁹ That is a theological judgement before it is a political one, and it follows directly from the logic of a soteriology in which every human person bears the image of God and in which encounter with the stranger is potentially an encounter with grace.⁵⁰ The Council's earlier 2019 statement had already reframed the church's vocation in language that bears the marks of perfecting love, namely, that the migrant is not a problem to be solved but a person to be received.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Cf. Field, *John Wesley as a Public Theologian*, 177.

⁴⁹ Cf. Bryson, *Second Consultation on Migration*.

⁵⁰ Cf. Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 143–190.

⁵¹ Cf. Bryson, *God Is On The Move*.

Christine Pohl's careful account of hospitality as a spiritual discipline and a public witness, rather than mere charity, confirms that the practice of welcoming the stranger belongs to the means of grace by which communities are formed in love.⁵² Works of hospitality are not supplements to discipleship; they are forms of it. They are, in Rieger's terms, »inreach« as much as outreach, namely, encounters in which those who offer hospitality are themselves transformed by the grace that moves in the stranger who receives it.⁵³ The Wesleyan tradition's earliest expressions of this conviction included the founding of schools, dispensaries, and societies for the relief of strangers in distress. Such practices are not relics of a more confident age. They are the present-tense form of a theological grammar that refuses to accept the terms in which contemporary debates about migration are usually framed.

Ecological breakdown

The damage being done to the earth's living systems is not an ethical add-on to Christian concern. In Wesleyan perspective, it is a consequence of the same disordering of love that distorts human relations. If sin disorders desire, and healing restores right relation, then the healing of persons cannot be entirely severed from the healing of the world they inhabit and on which they depend. The United Methodist Church's revised Social Principles of 2024 describe the earth as a »community of creation« in which human and non-human life share a common dependency and a common vulnerability. That language is Wesleyan in its grammar, even where it exceeds Wesley's own explicit articulations. Isaac Boaheng's recent constructive study of a Wesleyan-theological response to ecological crisis, written from within the Ghanaian context, demonstrates that the move from personal holiness to ecological holiness is not a modern imposition but a development internal to the logic of sanctification itself.⁵⁴ To love God is to love what God loves. God loves the earth. What might it mean for human persons to love the earth as God loves it, in perfect and perfecting love?

⁵² Cf. Pohl, *Making Room*, 6–8.

⁵³ Rieger, *Exploring*, 90.

⁵⁴ Cf. Boaheng, *Ecological Holiness*, 26–27.

The normalisation of violence

The resort to violence as a means of resolving political conflict has not diminished in the early decades of the twenty-first century. It has intensified in Palestine, in Iran, in the Ukraine, in the Sudan, to name just some current wars, and the church's witness in response has too often been incoherent or complicit. A Wesleyan theology of perfecting love does not dissolve the genuine complexity of questions about the constrained use of force to protect the innocent. The Christian response to war and violence should always be the waging of peace, the de-escalation of conflict, and the safeguarding of the most vulnerable.⁵⁵ The Wesleyan tradition insists that violence can never be the first resort of a community formed in love. In this sense, all killing is fratricide, the killing of a sister or brother, and that the church's peculiar vocation is to model and to form people in the habits of courage, truth-telling, and reconciliation that make durable and just peace possible.⁵⁶

Stanley Hauerwas's claim that the church is called to be a »peaceable people« finds its Wesleyan grounding in the logic of entire sanctification, namely, that a people formed in perfect love will not be easily mobilised for war.⁵⁷ Albert Luthuli, the Methodist lay preacher and Nobel Peace laureate who led the African National Congress during the darkest years of apartheid, embodied this vocation under conditions of extreme pressure. His conviction that »the road to freedom passes by way of the cross«⁵⁸ was not passivity. It was the claim that a people formed in cruciform love will refuse to copy the methods of their oppressors, even while standing against oppression with every non-violent means at their disposal. The practices that make this possible, the habits of resistance, enemy-love, truth-telling, and self-control, are the same practices that Wesley's means of grace were designed to cultivate. Peace, on this Wesleyan account, is not passivity. It is what sanctified courage looks like in public.

What unifies these four crises is not their subject matter but the character of the response they require. In each case the healing that grace enacts in persons and communities is simultaneously the resource the world needs and the form in which the church's witness becomes credible. The grammar of perfecting love does not prescribe in advance what the church will say about every question. But

⁵⁵ Cf. Forster, *Waging Peace*, 193–195.

⁵⁶ Cf. Hauerwas, *War*, 13–15.

⁵⁷ Cf. *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Luthuli, *Let My People Go*, 230.

it does prescribe the posture, namely, putting the vulnerable first, fairness as a non-negotiable criterion, truth-telling as a form of love, and the building of trust as a work of sanctification.⁵⁹

6. A grammar of healing love for fractured times

Near the end of his long ministry, John Wesley named the Achilles' heel of every revival that loses its nerve, namely, a people who have »the form of religion without the power.« The power he had in mind was the power of perfecting love, grace at work in persons and communities to the point where love governs disposition, desire, and public action together.⁶⁰ That risk is no less real in 2026 than in 1790. The temptation to reduce Christianity to an identity, a comfort, or a cultural inheritance is perennial, and its contemporary manifestations are visible and damaging.

This article has argued that a Wesleyan public theology grounded in the grand depositum of Christian perfection resists that reduction with a specific theological argument. Namely, that the healing of persons by grace cannot be severed from the healing of the relationships, communities, and social arrangements in which persons live; that love perfected is love that takes social form; and that the church's public vocation is not an ethical supplement to its worship but its outward and necessary expression. The mandate is not generic. It derives from the deposit. It is *because* Wesleyan theology holds this particular account of salvation as healing, and of Christian perfection as perfecting love, that it makes a contribution to public life that no other account quite replicates.⁶¹

This argument neither claims more than the evidence supports nor concedes more than the tradition requires. The Wesleyan grammar of perfecting love does not deliver a complete political theology or a policy platform. It does not exempt its practitioners from the hard work of contextual analysis, interdisciplinary engagement, and genuine listening to those most affected by the wounds it seeks to address. What it does offer is an theological orientation with political clarity, namely, a set of convictions about what grace does, what holiness looks like, and

⁵⁹ Cf. Forster, *Salvation as Healing*, 203–209.

⁶⁰ Cf. Runyon, *New Creation*, 77; Heitzenrater, *Wesley*, 291.

⁶¹ Cf. Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 143–190; Collins, *Theology*, 287–318; Forster, *Salvation as Healing*, 203–209.

what public life could be if love were perfected in those who inhabit it.⁶² Those convictions, held with intellectual seriousness and personal commitment, are more durable resources for communities navigating crisis than any set of programmatic prescriptions.

The tradition also requires honesty about its own complicity in some of the wounds it is now called to help heal. Methodism carried colonialism alongside the gospel in many parts of the world. Forms of piety that sealed personal holiness from the structures of racial and economic injustice have been far too common. The repentance that belongs to the grammar of perfecting love is not only a private spiritual act. It is a public acknowledgement of the gap between the tradition's best convictions and its actual history, and a commitment to close that gap.⁶³

What the tradition offers, at its best, is a distinctive account of what it means to be human before God and with one another, namely, damaged by sin, healed by grace, formed in community, and sent into public life with the practices, the convictions, and the love that make enduring witness possible. In a culture marked by cynicism, fear, and the erosion of shared moral resources, this is not a small gift. It is, as Wesley believed, a deposit entrusted to a people for the sake of the world.⁶⁴

Mercy Amba Oduyoye's image offers a fitting conclusion. Theology, she writes, is »a story that is told, a song that is sung and a prayer that is uttered in response to experience and expectation.«⁶⁵ Wesleyan spirituality, at its best, is precisely that. Namely, a story of grace still capable of being told truthfully in broken times; a song of love that can be sung amid fragmentation and fatigue; and a prayer that God continues to heal, to sanctify, and to perfect in love, for the sake of the world.

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62 Cf. Simants, *Ethics of Perfection*, 112–113; Field, *Holiness*, 6; Walton, *Social Holiness*, 6.

63 Cf. Maia, *Decolonizing Wesleyan Theology*, 18. Forster, *Revival*, 1–18.

64 Cf. Wesley, *Letters*, vol. 8, 265. Runyon, *New Creation*, 77.

65 Oduyoye, *African Women's Theology*, 22.

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