Chapter One

The Renewal of the Image of God

Traditionally, the image of God has been identified with those unique abilities or capacities human beings have which set them apart from other creatures. Thus the Deists of Wesley’s day identified the image with reason, and soon after Wesley, the philosopher Immanuel Kant identified the image with conscience. Reason and conscience were viewed as capacities resident within human beings that can provide access to the divine. Wesley, by contrast, sees the image more relationally, not so much as something humans possess as the way they relate to God and live out that relation in the world. Thus in an early sermon he describes human beings as receiving the love of God and then reflecting that love toward all other creatures. Not image as a human capability or inherent possession, but as a living relationship called forth by divine grace. This was the understanding of image found especially in the tradition of the Eastern Fathers, the Greek and Syrian Fathers of the first five centuries of the Christian era, who exercised, as we shall see, an important influence on Wesley’s theology. They used the metaphor of humanity as a “mirror,” called not only to mirror God in their own lives but to reflect the grace which they received into the world, and thus to mediate the life of God to the rest of creation. It follows that the image is understood not as an independent agent operating out of its own, albeit God-given, capacities, but as an agent who must constantly receive from God what it transmits further. It images its Maker in its actions. This is true, as we shall see, even when Wesley is describing the “natural image,” which he defines in terms of reason, will, and freedom. These are viewed not so much as innate capacities but rather as functions which, depending on their relation to God, can be turned toward good or ill.

Therefore, the image of God as Wesley understands it might best be described as a vocation or calling to which human beings are
called, the fulfillment of which constitutes their true destiny. Because it is not innate, the image can be distorted, or forfeited or betrayed. It resides not so much in the creature as in the way the creature lives out his or her relation to the Creator, using whatever gifts and capacities have been received to be in communion with their source and to reflect that source in the world.

The Natural Image

Wesley describes human beings as imaging God in three ways, as the natural image, the political image, and the moral image. The first of these, the natural image, consists of those endowments with which the creature is blessed that make us "capable of God," that is, as spirits able to enter into conscious relationship with God. Just as God is Spirit, so the image of God is spirit. And as spirit the image is endowed with understanding (or reason), will (or volition), and freedom (or liberty).

[A human being] is not mere matter, a clod of earth, a lump of clay, without sense or understanding, but a spirit like his Creator; a being endowed not only with sense and understanding but also with a will exertiing itself in various affections. To crown all the rest, he was endowed with liberty, a power of directing his own affections and actions, a capacity of determining himself, of choosing good or evil.

"Reason" is the term generally used to describe the attribute that separates human beings from other animals. But Wesley finds this misleading. "Set aside that ambiguous term ['reason']," he proposes. "Exchange it for the plain word, 'understanding,' and who can deny that bruters have this? We may as well deny they have sight or hearing." Clearly, Wesley is more modest in what he ascribes to reason than were most Enlightenment thinkers. Gone are the metaphysical and mythological qualities of reason (the "spark of the divine"), replaced instead by functional ones. Yet reason functions in three very important ways: in perception, "conceiving a thing in the mind"; in judgment, comparing perceptions with each other; and in discourse, the "progress of the mind from one judgment to another." Reason thus enables us to grasp on a finite level how things work together, which makes it possible to discern order and relationships, and to make right judgments. His view of reason's operations is based on an empirical model, and he denies to reason the direct intuitive capabilities ascribed to it by Descartes, the Cambridge Platonists, and the Deists. He does not deny that originally human reason may have had direct access through its own intuitive structures to knowledge of the divine. "Probably the human spirit, like the angelical, then [i.e., before the Fall] discerned truth by intuition. Hence [Adam] named every creature as soon as he saw it according to its inmost nature." But humanity no longer has a reason capable of this intuitive access and is reliant instead on inferences from sense data. Nevertheless, the capacities of the mind are necessary to draw conclusions from sense data. And these rational capacities are of inestimable importance to the spiritual creature.

Moreover, reason can be of positive benefit to religious faith. "If you ask, What can reason do in religion? I answer, It can do exceeding much, both with regard to the foundation of it, and the superstructure." Without reason it would be impossible to explain the basic principles of faith as found in the Scriptures and as expressed in the creeds. "Is it not reason (assisted by the Holy Ghost) which enables us to understand what the Holy Scriptures declare concerning the being and attributes of God?" Is it not reason that enables us to understand the nature of our relationship to God and the way of salvation, as well as the implications of faith for life? Therefore it is clear, writes Wesley in a letter to Thomas Rutherford, that "to renounce reason is to renounce religion, that religion and reason go hand in hand, and that all irrational religion is false religion." That for Wesley there are limits to the role of reason in religion goes without saying, but he is concerned to preserve the functional (rather than mythological) contribution of reason.

Two further marks of the natural image are will and freedom. These two go together because Wesley recognizes that the human will has been corrupted by the Fall. Human disobedience has disrupted the relationship between the image and God so that the natural tendency of the human will is to be self-seeking and self-promoting. In other words, the fallen will is in bondage to the forces of sin. Yet if this
bondage is complete and the will lacks any freedom, it cannot be held morally accountable. If God’s judgment is to be just, therefore, a degree of free will is necessary. “A mere machine is not capable of being either acquitted or condemned. Justice cannot punish a stone for falling to the ground.” Without freedom both the will and the understanding would have been entirely useless because the capacity for agency—the ability to initiate and pursue objectives—would not be present. “He that is not free is not an agent, but a patient,” that is, one who passively suffers to occur whatever happens but cannot be responsible for it.

Wesley is convinced that a loving God intervenes to introduce through prevenient grace “a measure of freedom in every man,” which also gives rise to the universal phenomenon of conscience, “that supernatural light which enlightens every man that cometh into the world.” Unlike Kant later, however, Wesley is at pains to say that this free will is not natural—“natural free-will, in the present state of mankind, I do not understand”—but supernatural, a divine gift to restore the fallen creature to responsibility and agency. The divine gift of freedom gives to the conscience sensitivity and to the will the power to choose the good and resist evil.

Thus reason (or understanding), volition (or will), and freedom (or liberty) are primary characteristics of that spiritual being who bears the natural image of God. And in his description of the natural image Wesley comes closest to the traditional notion of the image as capacities which humanity possesses. Yet even here it is evident that these capacities are gifts given to enable human beings to carry out their calling to image and reflect their Creator, gifts that flourish when used in ways consistent with the will of the Giver, but gifts that also are easily distorted when turned to serve the selfish interests of the creature. These capacities are not neutral, therefore, but derive their character from the quality of the relationships in which they are employed.

**The Political Image**

The political image is the second rudimentary way in which humanity reflects its Maker. God endowed this creature with faculties for leadership and management, to be “vicegerent upon earth, the prince and governor of this lower world.” In the words of the psalmist: “Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet: all sheep and oxen, yea, and the beasts of the field; the fowl of the air, and the fish of the sea, and whatsoever passeth through the paths of the seas!” Humanity is thus given a position of privilege and special responsibility with respect to the rest of creation. But Wesley is concerned that this not be understood as constituting an absolute difference between humanity and other creatures. He comments that animals were endowed with a degree of understanding not less than that they are possessed of now. They had also a will, including various passions, which likewise they still enjoy. And they had liberty, a power of choice, a degree of which is still found in every living creature. Other creatures therefore share, though to a lesser degree, in the natural image of God. But to humanity as the political image was given the special responsibility of being “the channel of conveyance” between the Creator and the rest of creation, so that “all the blessings of God flowed through him” to the other creatures. Thus humanity is the image of God insomuch as the benevolence of God is reflected in human actions toward the rest of creation. This role as steward and caretaker of creation presupposes a continuing faithfulness to the order of the Creator. On this basis alone can humanity expect to maintain the order of the world under its management: “As a loving obedience to God was the perfection of men, so a loving obedience to man was the perfection of brutes… How beautiful many of them were [before the Fall] we may conjecture from that which still remains; and that not only in the noblest creatures, but in those of the lowest order.” Wesley’s affection for animals, from his childhood onward, as well as his constant companionship with a faithful steed, are reflected in these passages. As he comments, the place of animals within God’s creation “deserves more attentive consideration than has been usually given it.” In our own time the implications of humanity’s role as the political image have become ever more crucial for our relations not only to other creatures but to the whole environment. And Wesley’s reflections on this will be analyzed further in chapter 6. Yet here again the quality of the image in its political calling is dependent upon the quality of the relationship of the “prince and governor” to the Creator.
The Moral Image

The third characteristic of the image of God is the moral image. This is the chief mark of the human relationship to God, according to Wesley, but also the one most easily distorted. The natural image consists of endowments most of which are retained in humanity, albeit in adulterated form, after the Fall. The political image is one which humanity continues to exercise, albeit in corrupted fashion, reflecting the pride, selfishness, and insecurity of the human condition in a fallen world. But the moral image is neither a capacity within humanity nor a function that can be employed independently of the Creator, because it consists in a relationship in which the creature receives continuously from the Creator and mediates further what is received. “God is love”; accordingly man at his creation was full of love, which was the sole principle of all his tempers, thoughts, words, and actions. God is full of justice, mercy, and truth; so was man as he came from the hands of his Creator.”

Humaniy’s exercise of the moral image depends on receiving from the Source what we cannot give ourselves but can only exhibit as long as we continue to receive and obey. “Obedience” does not consist in obeying rules. Were that the case, our relationship would be with the rules, not the Creator. But obedience is the continuing openness to welcome life from the creative source, to receive love, justice, mercy, and truth from God, and, as the image of God, to exercise and communicate further what we have received. This relationship Wesley terms “spiritual respiration”:

God’s breathing into the soul, and the soul’s breathing back what it first receives from God; a continual action of God upon the soul, the re-action of the soul upon God; an unceasing presence of God, the loving, pardoning God, manifested to the heart, and perceived by faith, and an unceasing return of love, praise, and prayer, offering up all the thoughts of our hearts, all the words of our tongues, all the works of our hands, all our body, soul, and spirit, to be an holy sacrifice, acceptable unto God in Christ Jesus.

To this we are called as the image of God, to take into ourselves continuously that breath of life which comes from the Spirit of God, and continuously to breathe out this same spirit in a life of service to God, our fellow human beings, and all creation. To humanity is given this crucial role as the natural image, the political image, and the moral image, mirroring and reflecting the Creator and mediating divine blessings.

But what has happened? Why does humankind not continue in this role? How have we thrown “not only [ourselves] but likewise the whole creation, which was intimately connected with [us] into disorder, misery, [and] death”? For the analysis of these questions we turn to Wesley’s understanding of the Fall and original sin.

Original Sin and the Human Condition Apart from Grace

Wesley consistently made a distinction between doctrinal “opinions” and the “core of Christian doctrine” or the “marrow of faith.” Doctrinal opinions allowed for various approaches, but what Wesley referred to as the analogy of faith was that “connected chain of scriptural truths” that constitute the very core of Christian teaching, those doctrines essential to the story of salvation. Included in these are the three grand scriptural doctrines—Original Sin, justification by Faith, and Holiness consequent thereon.” These doctrines name the human condition, describe the divine response to it, and spell out the means to renew humanity. Because original sin is the doctrine that delineates the human condition, it serves as the presupposition of the doctrines that ordinarily claimed Wesley’s chief attention, namely, prevenient grace, justification, and sanctification. So important was this doctrine to Wesley that his most extensive polemical essay, some 272 pages, was a response to John Taylor’s The Scripture Doctrine of Original Sin, an interpretation which Wesley felt effectively undercut this essential doctrine. Taylor argued from a Deist perspective that human sin is basically the result of bad habits encouraged by environmental influences that reinforce what Taylor describes as “bad education.” Force of habit then perpetuates this negative education. But sin is not inbred or inherent in human nature. If negative moral influences can be replaced by positive, if reason and willpower can take as their model examples of moral virtue, the human tendency toward sin can be overcome and the forces of evil gradually eliminated. The traditional reading of original sin, Taylor claimed, excuses the present generation from
responsibility. Because it locates the source of evil in the distant past, we are simply the victims of this past; because sin is universal, we can do nothing about it. To insist upon human responsibility Taylor thought it necessary to dismantle the traditional doctrine.

Wesley, no less than Taylor, wanted to emphasize human freedom and responsibility. Yet he was convinced that Taylor's approach could not do justice to the tendency toward evil in the human heart, which was, from Wesley's standpoint, a matter of empirical evidence. Nor could it do justice to the necessity for new creation, being "born from above," if humanity is to be genuinely restored to the image of God. If there is no fundamental problem, then a fundamental solution is not necessary, and the human condition can be repaired by good intentions and honest efforts employing the human resources already available. For Wesley the problem is more deep-seated and requires a more radical solution. What is the situation of humanity? Does the biblical account describe human beings as rational, as rtially as, or even neutral, or as living an existence that is in some sense basically distorted? "Disobedience" is not simply disobeying a rule, as the Genesis story might seem to imply. It is getting out of the way, turning away from that relationship for which humans were created. And when this turn occurs, the relationship in its true sense dies and is replaced by a corrupted relationship marked by human insecurity, anxiety, false pride, and irresponsibility. In describing the Fall, Wesley's real goal is to describe the human condition disclosed by the Genesis story. It is this condition that demands a more radical answer than Deism was able to provide.

This separation from God Adam sustained in the day, the hour, he ate of the forbidden fruit. And of this he gave immediatly proof, presently showing by his behavior that the love of God was extinguished in this soul, which was now "alienated from the life of God." Instead of this he was now under the power of servile fear, so that he fled from the presence of the Lord ... to "hide himself from the Lord God, among the trees of the garden." So had he lost both the knowledge and the love of God, without which the image of God would not subsist.

As a result, our reason, will, and freedom now serve distorted human ends. They are employed to rationalize our self-seeking goals, defend ourselves against our self-induced insecurities, and idealize our bondage. Thus the "natural image" of God in us, though not lost in the sense of being erased, is corrupted, that is, directed toward ends that are contradictory to its original purposes. Freedom is exercised to turn to self rather than God and neighbor, the will is dedicated to our own desires, and the reason is utilized to rationalize and excuse our sins.

Likewise, the "political image," although we retain its capabilities, is also turned toward perverse ends. The governor is corrupt, and the earth suffers from our exploitation. We give little thought to our stewardship but only to ourselves and our present needs and desires, not to the vital needs of future generations. We continue to exercise dominion over our fellow creatures, says Wesley, but the other animals now fear us and we retain our control over them only by coercion and force.

The far greater part of them flee from [man and] studiously avoid his hated presence. The most of the rest set him at open defiance, ya, destroy him if it be in their power. A few only, those we commonly term domestic animals, retain more or less of their original disposition, and (through the mercy of God) love [man] still and pay obedience to him.

If the natural and political images are indeed distorted and corrupted in humans, it is the moral image that is most totally effaced. With the breakdown in the relationship to the Creator, the characteristics of the image are transformed into their opposite. Instead of reflecting God they reflect the very "image of the devil," that is, they have exchanged the relationship with God for a relationship with the forces of evil in the world (cf. Rom. 1:25), with blind ambition, with selfishness and greed, with violence and oppression. Moreover, this is not just a theological judgment, claims Wesley. Empirical evidence backs up the Scriptural account.

How exactly do all things round us, even the face of the whole world, agree with this account? Open your eyes! Look round you! See darkness that may be felt; see ignorance and error; see vice in ten thousand forms; see consciousness of guilt, fear, sorrow, shame, remorse, care, covering the face of the earth! See misery, the daughter of sin. See on every side sickness and pain, inhabitants of every nation under heaven, driving on the poor, helpless sons of men, in every age, to the gates of death ... "In Adam all died." He entitled all his posterity to error, guilt, sorrow, fear, pain, diseases, and death.
This is the human situation the gospel seeks to address, according to Wesley. If this description of the human quandary is not accurate, if human beings do not, as a matter of fact, suffer from conditions which cannot be overcome except by the aid of a source outside themselves, Deism is right, and all that is needed is good examples to imitate and the will to follow them. If what is necessary, however, is not just good intentions and encouragement, not just sterling examples and willpower, but transformation—a new birth and recreation, a restoration of the moral image, and through the moral image the re-introduction of divine love, justice, mercy, and truth into the exercise of the natural and political image—a less thoroughgoing solution will not suffice. “Know your disease! Know your cure!” was the dictum Wesley employed. And this required first a realistic diagnosis.

Deism of course had a stake in a less radical view of the human condition. If the reason is to be relied upon as the chief resource for rectifying the human plight, it cannot be distorted or crippled. Wesley was not inclined to discount reason and its legitimate powers. Indeed, he upbraided those of his followers who vilified reason and counted it of no value.34 But he was equally concerned that a capacity within the human being not be substituted for the necessary intervention of the divine Spirit in the renewal process. What is at stake is the refashioning of the image of God. And humanity cannot of itself restore the moral image or redirect the natural and political image, because it lacks the fundamental relationship on which these are founded. The true image can only be re-established by reconstituting the bond between the image and its source—when God becomes once again Creator and Lifegiver, and humanity becomes once again true creature and genuine image of God.

A new creation! From Wesley’s standpoint, this is the sine qua non. If humanity is to become different from what it is now in its grasping and greedy attempts to produce its own security, what is needed is transcendent resources, partnership with and participation in the divine Spirit, that synergy (working together),35 which is a partnership in which the Creator informs, infuses, and inspires the creature with the original goal of human existence. There is no human future without this kind of covenant partnership with the “Creator and Father of every living thing.”36 There is no restoration of the true image without the God it images. But humanity cannot on its own initiate this relationship. We cannot produce the covenant, for the initiative must come from the other side. A twentieth-century theologian making the same point says: “The final, most profound, yet simplest fact is that you cannot have God without God.”37 And the name for this initiative from the other side is grace.38

These considerations lay behind Wesley’s spirited response to Taylor’s reinterpretation of original sin. Taylor’s views found ready acceptance in many circles in the church. One bishop commented, “I know no book more proper than [Taylor’s] to set the principles of a young clergyman.” From Wesley’s standpoint, however, a benign reading of the human situation effectively undermines a more radical solution. Wesley’s polemical reply to Taylor, titled The Doctrine of Original Sin, According to Scripture, Reason, and Experience, went beyond Taylor’s original appeal to reason and Scripture with an appeal to experience.39 The addition of “experience” was a significant methodological innovation.40 This was Wesley’s explicit introduction of an empirical component into theological argumentation that previously had been dominated by the appeal to three authorities: Scripture, tradition, and reason. Here the influence on Wesley of the philosopher John Locke is seen, for Locke had argued for taking empirical evidence and experience seriously as a source for arriving at judgments. And indeed Wesley begins not with the scriptural account of the Fall but by summoning historical evidence and examples from his own day to demonstrate the universality and persistence of human evil. “Before we attempt to account for any fact, we should be well assured of the fact itself,” he wrote in his introductory chapter, “The Past and Present State of Mankind.” “First, therefore, let us inquire what is the real state of mankind; and, in the Second place, endeavour to account for it.”41 And so he marshals the evidence from history and from the present condition of the race. Everywhere in human experience he finds documentation of the desperate plight of humanity, in the Orient as well as in the West, among Protestant as well as “Popish” nations. No one seems to be exempt from the corruption of sin, whether it be the lawyer or merchant, the politician or judge. And he sees no stronger evidence than the universal practice of resorting to war to settle human disputes.
There is a still greater and more undeniable proof that the very foundations of all things, civil and religious, are utterly out of course in the Christian as well as the heathen world. ... There is war ... between men! War between Christians! I mean, between those that bear the name of Christ, and profess to "walk as he also walked." Now, who can reconcile war, I will not say to religion, but to any degree of reason or common sense.43

In recounting the causes of war, Wesley with no little sarcasm recounts how the British Empire typically has been expanded—and punctures the claim of missionary motives.

Another cause of making war is this: A crew are driven by a storm they know not where; at length they make the land and go ashore; they are entertained with kindness. They give the country a new name; set up a stone or rotten plank for a memorial; murder a dozen of the natives, and bring away a couple by force. Here commences a new right of dominion: Ships are sent, and the natives driven out or destroyed. And this is done to civilize and convert a barbarous and idolatrous people.46

From the causes of war he turns to consider, "calmly and impartially," the thing itself:

Here are forty thousand men gathered together on this plain. What are they going to do? See, there are thirty or forty thousand more at a little distance. And these are going to shoot them through the head or body, to stab them, or split their skulls, and send most of their souls into everlasting fire, as fast as they possibly can. Why so? What harm have they done to them? None at all! They do not so much as know them. But a man, who is King of France, has a quarrel with another, who is King of England. So these Frenchmen are to kill as many of these Englishmen as they can, to prove the King of France is in the right. Now, what an argument is this! What a method of proof! What an amazing way of deciding controversies! What must mankind be, before such a thing as war could ever be known or thought of upon earth? ... If, then, all nations, Pagan, Mahometan, and Christian, do, in fact, make this their last resort, what farther proof do we need of the utter degeneracy of all nations from the plainest principles of reason and virtue? of the absolute want, both of common sense and common humanity, which runs through the whole race of mankind?46

Given the evidence to the contrary, how can we "gravely talk of the 'dignity of our nature' in its present state?" asks Wesley, arguing that "universal misery is at once a consequence and a proof of... universal corruption."44 Not only the Bible and Christian tradition argue for the reality and persistence of sin, but empirical evidence makes the doctrine of original sin undeniable.

Upon completing his treatise, Wesley wrote John Taylor a letter that should forever dispel the notion that Wesley was indifferent to doctrinal issues:

I esteem you as a person of uncommon sense and learning, but your doctrine I cannot esteem, and some time since, I believed it my duty to speak my sentiments at large concerning your doctrine of Original Sin. ... [This] is a controversy de re, i.e., ever there was one in this world; indeed, concerning a thing of the highest importance—nay, all the things that concern our eternal peace. Is Christianity or heathenism! for, take away the scriptural doctrine of Redemption or Justification, and that of the New Birth, the beginning of sanctification, or (which amounts to the same) explain them as you do, suitably to your doctrine of Original Sin, and what is Christianity better than heathenism? wherein, save in rectifying some of our notions, has the religion of St. Paul any pre-eminence over that of Socrates or Epictetus? ... The point is, Are those things that have been believed for many ages throughout the Christian world real, solid truths, or monkish dreams and vain imaginations? ... Either I or you mistake the whole of Christianity from the beginning to the end! Either my scheme or yours is as contrary to the scriptural as the Koran is. Is it mine, or yours? Yours has gone through all England and made numerous converts. I attack it from end to end. Let all England judge whether it can be defended or not.48

Clearly there are some doctrines that are not matters of "opinion" but constitute the narrative that is the "marrow" of the Christian account of salvation. And for Wesley, original sin was one of these doctrines. The other core doctrines he frequently mentioned as also indispensable are justification and sanctification, and to these we now turn, for they are the divine response to human sin.