

From Eden to New Jerusalem: Toward a Wesleyan Perspective on Spiritual Transformation

Abson Prédéstin Joseph

Questions regarding and reflections upon a proper understanding of human nature have occupied people's attention for a long time. More recently, studies in neurosciences have led to new proposals vis-à-vis how human nature can be understood, and recent discussions have emerged about the implications of such issues for theology, missions, and counseling, among other things.ⁱ This Doctrinal Symposium is a fitting and necessary endeavor as it offers us an opportunity to grapple with some of these issues within the context and from the perspective of the Wesleyan Church, and to discuss their implications for ministry, scholarship, and holy living.

The following question has been put forward: "Viewed from the perspective of creation, carnality, and consecration, what was human nature intended to be, what happened to this ideal, and can people be transformed—spiritually, psychologically, sexually and socially?" More specifically, mine is the task to wrestle with the questions: "*Can people be transformed spiritually? How does grace relate to the spiritual effects of the Fall?*" In this paper, my aim is to conduct a brief study of selected biblical texts in order to put forward some proposals and initiate a conversation on these issues. A Wesleyan perspective on these matters needs to be rooted above of all in an adequate understanding of how the Bible treats these concepts.

I. What was human nature intended to be?

In seeking to answer this question one has to go first to the creation account in Genesis in order to see how the biblical text presents the issue. There, the starting point is Genesis 1:26-30 that narrates, among other things, the account of the creation of humanity on the sixth day.

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." Gen 1:26-28ⁱⁱ

We gather from this text that human nature is described primarily in relation to God's own nature. The principal idea is that humanity is created in God's image, according to his likeness. Genesis 1:27 seems to work exegetically; i.e., it serves to explain further what the narrator said in 1:26. There the concept of dominion is repeated but two things are added which expand on the idea of humanity's resemblance of God. It follows, then that human nature is defined, first, in terms of co-regency with God over creation. Humanity finds the essence of their being partly in a relationship through which they rule with God over the created order. The psalmist paints this picture adequately in Psalm 8.

What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas. (Ps 8:4-8 [8:5-9MT]).ⁱⁱⁱ

Second, human nature is portrayed in terms of intrinsic interpersonal relationship. This is underscored later in Gen 2:18 where God is reported as saying; "It is not good that the man should be alone, I will make him a helper as his partner." Whereas here the word *adam* is used to describe the *man* as opposed to the *woman* whose creation is being narrated in this passage (Gen 2:18-24), I suggest that by describing *adam* first as male and female (Gen 1:27), the narrator is seeking to impress upon the reader that this is how *adam* should primarily be understood from the perspective of creation. Further, the term rendered helper (*'ezer*) conveys the idea of someone who intervenes actively on behalf of another to provide deliverance, protection, and support (e.g., Job 29:12; Ps 30:10 [30:11MT]; 54:4 [54:6MT]; 89:19 [89:20MT]). The idea is that the woman will participate actively as a partner with the man in this endeavor. This intrinsic relationship mirrors the plurality and relationship that exists in the Godhead, evidenced through the use of the word *elohim* and the language of "let us" that is used in the creation narrative.

Third, humanity is understood in terms of their being agents of pro-creation. This is seen not simply in the blessing to "be fruitful and multiply" because the same is pronounced on the animals (Gen 1:22), but primarily in the

language that is used to describe Adam and Eve's pro-creation of Cain. In Gen 4:1, Eve is reported saying; "I have *produced* a man^{iv} with the help of the Lord." The word *qanah* that is translated *produced* by the NRSV is used elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible to speak of God's act of creation (e.g. Ps 104:24). It can also mean "to get", "to acquire";^v and is used in context where the one who makes the acquisition acts also as 'kinsman redeemer'— one who cares, protects, and provides for another. For example, it is used to describe God's redemption of Israel (Exod 15:16; Ps 74:2); and Boaz' acquisition of Naomi's inheritance for the sake of perpetuating the family's name (Ruth 4:5, 9). The French translation, Louis Segond, renders *qanah* "to form" which corresponds with what is said of God's creation of humanity in Gen 2:7.

Our understanding of what human nature was intended to be is further aided by the narrator's retelling of the creation process from a slightly different perspective in Gen 2:4b-24. Genesis 2:7-8 read,

Then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed.

Fourth, the narrative describes humanity as being connected to the rest of creation by their constitution— "*from the dust of the ground.*" God's creation of Adam is explained in a language that is reminiscent of a potter who is fashioning a clay vessel. And one gets a sense that special care has been taken in fashioning him. Yet, unlike the rest of creation, God said of Adam that "it is not good..." (Gen 2:18). It is worthy to note that this pronouncement was directed to Adam's lack of companionship, and not his constitution. At the sight of Eve, Adam rejoices in the fact that finally there is another who is physically like him—"bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (Gen 2:23).

Fifth, the narrative further describes human nature in relation to God and highlights humanity's dependence on God. Adam's being depends on the life-giving power of the *neshamah* (breath) God breathed into his nostrils. This creates a transcendent bond between humanity and God. For example, in Job 27:3, the speaker identifies his *breath* of life (*neshamah*) with the *spirit* of God. Further, the image of God, is to be found in the overall picture of the relationship that exists between God and humanity; a relationship designed to be nurtured within a sacred space, Eden. From this perspective, human nature is defined not only by their dependence on God but also by the ability to share sacred space with God, and to be in his presence.

Finally, I propose that human nature is defined in the creation account in terms a vocation endowed by God. This vocation is expressed in part in Gen 2:15-17.

The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die."

This vocation is twofold and is intended to be carried out within the context of the sacred space the Creator shares with his creation. The first aspect has to do with care, preservation, and stewardship of the sacred space. The second aspect of the vocation is obedience. This is perhaps the most defining element in the relationship between God and humanity. By placing some limitations on their actions, God offers human beings an alternative which includes the possibility of disobedience and loss of relationship.

In sum, human nature is described in relation to God, created in his image, according to his likeness. As such humanity was intended to be co-regent with God over creation, to live in relationship and partnership with one another and with God, and to carry on the work of creation both through protection and care of the created order, and the ability to pro-create other human beings. Further, although created in God's image, human beings are not divine. God places some limits on their actions that have direct implications on this defining relationship, and endows them with a vocation of obedience to God and stewardship of creation.

II. What happened to this ideal?

Faced with the alternatives of obedience and fellowship or disobedience and alienation, humanity chooses the latter. Genesis 3:1-7 portray humanity in a deliberation process during which the veracity of God's word and his intention for placing limitations on their actions come into question. The decisions and events that follow will drastically change the relationship between the two parties.

But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

The narrative portrays human beings acting and setting themselves in opposition to the divine word. At the core of this are: (1) the desire to procure for themselves what God forbade them to partake in; (2) the lack of satisfaction with and desire to be more than who they already are in relation to God. It is a shift toward self-sufficiency. The phrase, “and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves” describes an unfortunate reality of a new status quo: humanity no longer waits on God to supply their need.

Several changes can be noted as a result of the disobedience that took place:

- (1) Human beings are now unwilling, unable, and/or reluctant to stand in God’s presence because of fear. “I was afraid... and I hid myself” is a shocking concession from one whose vocation was partly to rule over the rest of creation. Something happened to Adam and Eve that caused them to understand that they were no longer worthy to fellowship with God as they used to.
- (2) The relationship between Adam and Eve is marred as a result. A relationship defined by partnership and intrinsic unity will now witness one party ruling it over the other (Gen 3:16). The upsetting of interpersonal relationships is further evidenced in Gen 4:8 with Cain killing his brother Abel. These have bearing on our understanding of the spiritual condition humanity, because Cain’s actions came also as result of his failure to heed to the divine word.
- (3) The relationship between humanity and the rest of creation is also flawed. The ground is cursed because of humanity’s actions. Fruit (Gen 1:29) gives way to thorns and thistles (Gen 2:18). The unsettling of the relationship between God and humanity calls into question humanity’s ability to fulfill their role as co-regent with God.
- (4) Death. Humanity’s quest for self-sufficiency leads to death because human beings cannot exist apart from God.
- (5) Loss of Eden. The sacred space that God shared with humanity is no longer available. The vocation with which God endowed humanity with is still in effect, but it will now be carried out outside of Eden.

In the midst of this situation one notices four ways in which God manifests his grace to humanity. First, God manifests his grace by searching for humanity. “Where are you?” is an indication that God still cares. It is also an invitation to humanity. By asking the question, God is inviting human beings to engage with him in a deliberation that will result ultimately in the undoing of the ill effects of the infamous conversation that brought about the fall of humanity. This grace is on display in Gen 4:6 where God asks Cain, “Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen?” The conversation that ensued allowed God to advise Cain on the proper course of action to take. The same can be said about the question “Where is your brother Abel?” in Gen 4:9. This is as much about Cain as it is about Abel. It is an invitation for Cain to make things right with God, because his actions against Abel unsettled his relationship with God. While disobedience causes humanity to hide from God, grace leads God to search for humanity.

Second, God manifests his grace through providing for humanity. Adam and Eve’s quest for autonomy and self-sufficiency left them confronted with the inability to appropriately care for themselves without God’s help. For example, the fact that God made garments to clothe them (Gen 3:21) highlights in part the inadequacy of the loincloths they made for themselves (Gen 3:7). God’s help and provision is also evident and acknowledged at the birth of Cain (Gen 4:1). Most importantly, the language of Gen 3:15, loaded with meaning, anticipates God’s greatest provision to humanity—the Messiah who will reverse the effects of the disobedience of Adam and Eve. While the desire for self-sufficiency led to humanity’s demise, God manifests his grace through continued provision and care.

Third, God manifests his grace through his protection of humanity. It appears that God drove Adam and Eve out of Eden for their own good. The expulsion occurs to prevent man from going back and partaking in the tree of life and live forever (Gen 3:22). It is possible for “live forever” to be understood as “live forever in their fallen state.” In this case, the expulsion becomes part of God’s larger plan of redemption. In fact, according to Revelation, when humanity’s redemption is complete, the righteous will have the right to the tree of life (Rev 22:14). God’s grace is also manifest in his protection of Cain after he killed his brother, Abel (Gen 4:15-16).

Fourth, God manifests his grace to humanity by not withdrawing his presence. To be sure some things have changed. Humanity cannot enter God’s presence uninvited as they no longer share the same sacred space. But as the story of redemption unfolds, time and time again God will take initiatives to bring humanity back to the place where it is possible to fellowship with him. With the incarnation, God takes on human nature and dwells with humanity. His abiding presence is by far the highest expression of his grace. In his life, Jesus Christ demonstrates how to live a life of obedience and submission to God. He lived a Spirit-filled life and fulfilled humanity’s vocation by overcoming where Adam and Eve failed (Matt 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-12). Through his obedient death and subsequent resurrection by God, he has brought humanity back to their rightful place and has become the perfect example for people who want to live in submission and obedience to God (e.g., Rom 5:12-21; Phil 2:5-11; Heb 2:5-9; 1 Pet 3:18-22).

III. Can people be transformed spiritually?

For people to enjoy fellowship with God, a change must take place in their dispositions/tendencies which affects how they view themselves in relation to God. They need to be transformed spiritually. As the Genesis narrative unfolds, it becomes evident that the tendencies and actions that cost humanity their place in Eden continue to surface outside of Eden.

The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. Gen (6:5-6)

Human beings are still driven by a desire to be like God, to be self-sufficient. However, one notices a ray of hope: "To Seth also a son was born, and he named him Enosh. At that time people began to invoke the name of the Lord" (4:26). To "invoke" carries the idea of "calling for help." Together with Gen 4:1, where Eve acknowledges God's help, this forms an inclusio that suggests that humanity has started a journey back to wholeness. In the midst of acts of wickedness and continued disobedience, one will encounter people who demonstrate dependence on God, and live in obedience to his word.

The Old Testament uses the metaphor "to walk with God" to describe people who enjoyed fellowship with God in their lives, and by implication/necessity, experienced spiritual transformation. For example: "Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him" (Gen 5:24). "Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation; Noah walked with God" (Gen 6:9). In introducing the covenant with Abram, God said, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you" (Gen 17:1-2). The covenant includes the promise of a land which anticipates shared sacred space with God. In addition, God is inviting Abraham and his descendants to commit to a life of obedience to his word, dependence on his care, and consecration to him. None of that is and will be possible without the people experiencing spiritual transformation. At Sinai, God gave Abraham's descendants the Ten Commandments and other ordinances that provide guidance on how to live righteously before God and toward their neighbors (Exod 20-24). Although they all pledged to live under the divine word, their story as a nation is one of constant struggle to live up to that promise. This prompts God to speak of a time of renewal for Israel.

I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. Ezek 36:25-26

Elsewhere, God speaks of making a new covenant with Israel; a covenant that is unlike the one made at Sinai. There too the focus is on inward transformation that will enable Israel to live up to its calling as the people of God.

But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more. Jer 31:33-24

We gather from these that (1) spiritual transformation is not only possible but is also necessary in order to live in obedience to God and enjoy fellowship with God; (2) spiritual transformation is initiated and brought about by God himself.

In the New Testament, the need and call for spiritual transformation constitutes the hallmark of the ministry of John the Baptist. "Repent, for the kingdom of God has come near" (Matt 3:2; Mark 1:15). "To repent" is to have a change of heart for the better.^{vi} Jesus opens his ministry with the same message (Matt 4:17). In his teachings recorded in Matt 5-7, one gathers that this call to spiritual transformation is in continuity with what God required of his people in the Old Testament (5:17-20). Further, this "change of heart" entails righteousness that is lived out in a person's dealings with other people and is an outworking of his/her dispositions toward God. The bottom line is to "be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt 5:48).

The apostle Paul, in Rom 12:1-2, issues a call to spiritual transformation to his audience:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God-- what is good and acceptable and perfect.

There spiritual transformation is described as (1) non-conformity to the world, and (2) renewal of the mind, of one's attitude. This transformation is necessary for discerning the will of God. Spiritual transformation calls for a reconsideration of one's alliances, a change in behavior and tendencies. It is important to note that spiritual transformation for Paul is *embodied spiritual transformation*. It affects the whole person. This is a call to self-sacrifice in order to live a life of consecration and obedience to God. It is an appeal to live a life of moral purity and complete surrender to God. There is also a communal element evident in that presentation of the *bodies as a living sacrifice*. It is a move from plurality to unity that allows persons to live in harmony with one another (Rom 12:3-15:13). Finally, this transformation is the product of thoughtful and deliberate consideration. The word *logiken*, rendered *spiritual* by the NRSV is better understood as "reasonable." It conveys the idea of something that has been carefully thought through.^{vii}

Spiritual transformation can also be understood as 'new birth'. In his discussion with Nicodemus, Jesus emphasized the need to be "born from above," "born of water and Spirit" as the requirement to enter the kingdom of heaven (John 3:1-10). New birth implies new identity, new allegiance, and new dispositions. While writing to a suffering audience, the author of 1 Peter offers a similar injunction. There Peter uses the concept of "new birth" to speak of the spiritual transformation that God has brought about in the lives of the audience and the ensuing implications.

Blessed be God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who in accordance with his great lovingkindness has caused us to be born again into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, into an inheritance that is subject to decay, that cannot be defiled, and that is unfading, which has been kept in heaven for you, who through faithfulness are being protected by the power of God for a salvation ready to be revealed at the last time. (1 Pet 1:3-6; my translation)

Peter's language is pregnant with meaning. *Lovingkindness* is covenant language that is reminiscent of God's mighty work of redemption on behalf of Israel. The same can be said for *inheritance*, which recalls the land given to Abraham and his descendants as part of the covenant God made with them. In an exodus-like fashion, Jesus' resurrection from the dead is the means through which God brought about 'new birth' for Peter and his audience. This "new birth" ushers in a new set of realities that span across time. Here spiritual transformation has both present and eschatological implications. Presently, those who have experienced new birth are being protected by God. At the same time, their inheritance is being kept in heaven as they await a future salvation. Later in the same chapter, Peter brings together exodus language, hope of future salvation, and the process of spiritual transformation as a basis for a call to holy conduct.

Therefore, having girded the loins of your understanding by being self-controlled, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed. As obedient children no longer conforming to the passions you had during your time of ignorance, rather (conforming) after the image of the holy one who called you, you yourselves must become holy in all your conduct, because it is written: "You will be holy because I am holy." (1 Pet 1:13-16; my translation).

Peter parses spiritual transformation as a process of abandoning former lustful tendencies and behaviors and regaining the image of God. It involves holy living that is a reflection of the holiness of God, and patterned after the life Jesus (2:21-25). There is a very close connection between spiritual transformation and the eschatological salvation/grace that the audience will partake in when Jesus is revealed. In a sense the former prepares a person for the latter. Spiritual transformation is the process through which a person returns/conforms to the image of God, which affects present behavior and tendencies. It also has eschatological implications as it is the requirement for entrance into the kingdom of God, the New Jerusalem.

Then I looked, and there was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion! And with him were one hundred forty-four thousand who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads... It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins; these follow the Lamb wherever he goes. They have been redeemed from humankind as first fruits for God and the Lamb, and in their mouth no lie was found; they are blameless. (Rev 14:1, 4-5).

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." (Rev 21:3-4)

IV. From Eden to New Jerusalem

“From Eden to New Jerusalem” sums up the journey that humanity has travelled from the loss to regaining the image and likeness of God. God created human beings after his likeness, made them co-regent over creation, shared sacred space with them, gave them a vocation, and set some limitations which called for obedience and partnership, but opened the way for disobedience and alienation. Humanity’s quest to be more than what God intended them to be led to the disruption of the relationship that defined their true identity. This resulted in the loss of shared space, alienation, and flawed intrinsic-relationship, and wickedness as the heart and thoughts of human beings developed a tendency for evil. God showed his grace by providing a way for this relationship to be restored. This grace is manifest through God’s abiding presence, his protection, and search of humanity, his choice of a people through which the plan of redemption will be carried out. The highest expression of God’s grace is the incarnation. In the incarnation, God resumed the practice of sharing space with humanity. In addition, through his spirit-filled life and obedience unto death, Jesus Christ demonstrated what true humanity is like and restored humanity to their rightful place. Through his life and teachings he points humanity back to the ideal, to what God requires of each person who desires to share sacred space with him. To attain this ideal, human beings need to have a change of heart that will cause them to once again live in obedience and submission to God’s will. This change is possible as God himself promises to bring it about. It is also necessary as it is the only way through which people can once again see themselves in relation to God, and recover their true identity.

ⁱ E.g., Joel B. Green, ed. *What About the Soul: Neuroscience and Christian Anthropology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004). See also, Joel B. Green, *Body, Soul, and Human Life: The Nature of Humanity in the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic: 2008).

ⁱⁱ Unless otherwise noted, all citations in English will be from the New Revised Standard Version.

ⁱⁱⁱ MT stands for Masoretic Text; i.e., the Hebrew Bible.

^{iv} The Hebrew word used here is *'ish* emphasizing sexual distinction. See Francis Brown, et. al., *Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1979), p. 35; hereafter, *BDB*.

^v See, *BDB*, p. 888.

^{vi} Gerhard Kittel, and G. Friedrich, ed. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1964-76), 4:975

^{vii} Walter Bauer, et. al. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), p. 598.