

The Creator, the Creation and Re-creation: Paradise Lost and Regained?

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In a presentation of this nature and topic there are myriad fields of inquiry, methodologies, paradigms and interpretations that could be employed to approach the stated theme. It is impossible to engage everything in so short a time and space. This paper shall only be a general overview of the topic from my training in theology, church history, philosophy and Scripture study. It will seek to suggest the problem or difficulty with our topic, an exclusive Scriptural text for its basis, a methodology applied to a certain genre for interpretation, along with the use of reason to state theological, historical and philosophical paradigms for consideration. This will later include brief surveys in early Christian doctrine, specific Wesleyan-Arminian doctrine, Modern and Enlightenment philosophical inquiry, and theological method. I shall briefly mention the definition of sin, the power of narrative for theology, and the impact of actual differences between sin and infirmities (human flaws). Last, some implications and suggestions will be employed to point us forward in Wesleyan doctrine.

The problem with our present situation within a conference such as this on doctrine, with the medium of theological inquiry and response, and with primary reliance on spoken language with its attendant symbol and meaning (even as it is in teaching and preaching sometimes), is that what is thought, spoken, heard, and interpreted are not always the same. This undoubtedly is due to our attempts to imperfectly outline what we do not yet fully understand by heavenly standards (1 Cor. 13: 9-12). This is both the best and worst of it! Like the old group game “Telephone,” any original message shared in social circles can completely change from the point of origin to its end. However, under what Wesleyans consider the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, divine truth is not only communicated, it is used to transform and redeem the lives of others for eternity! How and where we fall in between these low and lofty implications is a perennial question.

We need look no further than the Wesleyan model for theological inquiry called the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral” for an example of our quandary in addressing our theme here.¹ The Wesleyan Quadrilateral is a paradigm by which we measure evangelical faith in the Wesleyan-Arminian tradition as we seek to do theology (a way of reasoning), and establish doctrine (a formulation of inspired reasoning). It consists of the symbol of a quadrilateral, with Scripture as the primary basis (and longest leg) for doing theology, aided by three other sides of tradition (church history and liturgy), reason (mind and thought), and experience (social-psychological interactions with God and others). This is an excellent model, however it is a highly developed, Enlightenment paradigm as systems go in our stage of theological inquiry. It represents our best attempt at truth in a qualified, faithful, stable effort. It is the epitome of late modern Wesleyan Studies and Theology. If there is no capitulation to post-modernism/post-structuralism in constructive theology (the old ‘systematics’), or no co-opting of historical and biblical studies to post-modern micro-narrative thinking, then it is, and remains our best option and way to proceed to present-day truth, rooted in the best of two millennia of orthodox, catholic, and evangelical Christianity.

However, for our purposes today to go back to the beginning, to Genesis, to a primitive, pre-lapsarian world, millennia before a chosen Hebrew people and all we now know about Judeo-Christian thinking, one may ask: Where was the Wesleyan Quadrilateral? How did or could it function then? There was no church Tradition, let alone a history of a people of God. There was no Scripture, unless one wants to qualify that by the presence of the Word as “Word” at creation, or the prelapsarian law of the Two Trees (and perhaps the pronouncement of suitable companionship for Adam). There was no real Experience factor to speak of, in that Adam was newly created, and existed only in the highest state of perfected innocence (though not necessarily predestined immortality). Reason itself—although it is assumed as the highest quality in man that separates him from all the rest of creation—was only newly exercised by Adam in his work in the Garden as the first scientific mind (botanist, zoologist, etc.) Even here it seems God brought this work to Adam to test him and strengthen his capacity for reasoning, and no small job it was! Yet with such a large task, it seemed that not only was Adam inadequate in space and time (no suitable helper was found for him), it also was true that reasoning itself had yet to expand with his task. As immortal as he yet was, he must still have gotten tired or needed food and rest, because no servant is above his master/creator! He needed to learn the rhythms of a new creation, a new order, a new calendar of seasons, and a newly minted body and mind. The Garden was not unlike a nursery—a place for initial growth under controlled perfected conditions, nursing life and health to its fullest potential, while learning about ideal proportions of nutrients and the effects of pruning, etc. It goes without saying that Adamic perfection was not the perfection of a mature person in the complete sense of the word. The potential was there in the seed, the actuality had yet to blossom!

¹ See the work of Albert Outler, Don Thorsen, et. al. on this paradigm.

So, if we were to consider Adam in his prelapsarian estate, no only are we at a tremendous disadvantage to know his real condition, we could not even hold Adam to our most cherished of theological models. To do so would seem foolish and absurd. After all, we only know about Adam through a true (and relatively short) account in revealed Scripture, which we accept by faith; somewhat through church tradition by commentary and liturgy (*lex credendi, lex orandi* “we believe as we pray”); somewhat through reason (although flawed and now formed again); and not at all through experience (except what accumulated as original sin through which we may be affected, though also delivered). We are as far apart on this as we often quip, “I don’t know you from Adam!”

How then do we attempt to go back and delineate what was God’s original intent for humans, what happened at “the Fall” of humanity from Divine favor and grace, and how might we be redeemed, recognizing correctly both sin and normal human flaws? Only this last one can we truly identify with because it comes out of, and works out through experience, which in itself can be a danger as we shall address later on. Yet without direct experience it is hard for any of us to conceive of what came before our own selves, or what really happened to humanity to put us in the position we are now in today (again, with flawed minds and perceptions). The only way forward is to admit our limitations, acknowledge our desire for knowledge along with our penchant for error, and proceed with caution under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, who will bring all the things of Christ (Son of God and Son of ‘adam’--Lk. 3:21-38) to our remembrance.

There might be a ‘temptation’ at this point to offer a quick and final solution to our predicament. We could easily choose the Apostle Paul as a model remedy to our problem and accept his most plain and applicable Scriptures, or choose all the commentary and prominence given to Pauline literature in church history, or accept all his reasoning and biographical experiences (as we read and mediate on the Word). Indeed, he is the epitome of God’s mercy and grace in the New Testament, and his story has impacted the salvation experience of many of us. He is even the exemplar of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral in Scripture (a Pharisee and scribe), in tradition (a student of Gamaliel), in reason (rabbinical training), and in experience (zealously persecuting and persecuted). The totality of the Pauline corpus and presence in the New Testament attests to this (Phil. 3:4-6, 2 Cor. 11:22-28, Acts 22). In addition, others within our own Wesleyan-Arminian tradition give sufficient weight to him (especially John Fletcher’s *Portrait of St. Paul*). Most things in Paul seem easy enough to read and use concerning man’s corrupted and redeemed natures, but other things are hard to understand (as the Apostle Peter suggested in 2 Peter 3:6-7: ‘Paul was given wisdom by God to write, but the ignorant and unstable distort even this as they do other “Scriptures” to their own destruction—so be on guard against the error of the antinomians or you will fall from a secure position!’) Thus Pauline theology might very well be our answer, but his solutions cannot be laid out here; our purpose is to propose a path whereby all Scripture comes alive in practical divinity for each faith believer. We do not want to set the rule (canon) of what is absolute postlapsarian righteousness (and neither did Paul outside of Christian atonement). So search the Scriptures daily for yourselves you Bereans to see if what Paul says is true (Acts 17:11)!

What we must do is the hardest thing—go back to recapture the nature and essence of primitive/perfect man in the pristine Garden where all was pronounced ‘Good.’ This includes, mind you, a Tree of Life and a Tree of ‘the Knowledge of Good and Evil. And here then is our first difficulty with Creation—what did God do and intend in His original creation? What is the meaning of the potential scenario He created and allowed—the two Trees (an existential and epistemological question) and the presence of evil (an ontological question)? Is God responsible for both the “good” of creation and the “evil” of allowing sin potential existence? Rather than approach this first through some systematic notion of theology and historic Christian doctrine, it is best to attempt to reclaim the biblical narrative on this matter, and once again recover a biblical worldview lacking in our Western and post-modern world. This can be done in two ways—actual biblical exegesis, and emphasis on related genres of poetry and metaphor used by ancient Hebrews as well as more Western forms of Christian literature. I will focus on the structure of the story of creation and sin in Genesis 1-3, and then compare it to the famous interpretation of the same from John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*.

First, I want to set the scene for the biblical account through a reminder of what is at stake in the creation story. This will be done by looking at the work of Simkins and Wolters.² It will help us get beyond our present difficulty with Genesis 1-3 purely as a factual account used by creationism, or the unpleasant alternative of the same as myth (story) or even mythology (which in biblical scholarship makes it sound a lot less like inspired Scripture).

There is a marked difference between a Jewish perspective on creation as narrative (content and poetic metaphor), and a later Greek emphasis on chronology, which influenced a linear understanding of Christian history. It is the difference between a (mid) Eastern mindset of present orientation, and that of a Westernized future

² Ronald A. Simkins, *Nature in the Worldview of Ancient Israel: Creator and Creation*, Hendrickson Publishers, 1994; and Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained; Biblical Basis for Reformational Worldview*, 2nd ed., Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005.

orientation. In other words, eschatology does not drive the theology of the creation story or its meaning. Granted it appears and is relevant, but it is not a time issue as much as a space issue; story and revelation is an appropriation for the present, not just for a Western concept of a future value or goal ('teleos'). It is a fundamental difference between a more Western existential orientation based in the modern idea of progress (or at best redemptive history-*Heilsgeschichte*), and a basic acceptance of theological naturalism. This second approach is a mindset (worldview) that is built on a proximate quality of life in which both past and present only have meaning as they are experienced in the present, especially as a cyclical/repetitive operational mode of living. This of course fits very well with an ancient, agricultural, tribal and decentralized society. In this culture story, symbol and sign provide the paradigm for worldview. Of course this is a very limited and time specific view, quite strange to a Western historical and progressive approach, but it is the only choice for that culture and within that understanding of scripture. Our question is: does it serve a purpose for us to recover a lost sense of a biblical worldview? The answer is yes!

There are all kinds of things going on in the biblical text (a lot of which is missed even in plain English, which is a Western privilege we cannot always afford). There is the literary (and even alliterative) with its choice of genre by the author (we presume Moses). There is the rhetorical, the linguistic, the semiotic (sign) and so on. The creation and fall accounts are factual, and do not preclude many fine examples of inspired biblical truth, though each may differ as to actual timed sequence. However, the accounts also include much of the metaphoric, where the choice of words, story, structure, setting and characters hold definite theological themes of equal importance. For instance, 'adam, which we automatically think of as the personal name for the first male of the species, stands for the generic form for humanity, and is related to 'adamah, meaning dust or ground. Only later is it a personal noun for Adam after the creation of Eve. This changes a fundamental orientation one has even toward the roles of gender, sexuality, marriage, companionship, work, division of labor, etc. These often become sticky issues in our own social setting relative to ancient and authoritative scripture. How would one explain good biblical definitions of gender in a world of relative ethics, without a good biblical worldview uncluttered by a Western penchant for liberalization? This only shows that the account of Creation and the Fall is tied obligatorily to relationship, community, and covenant. In that sense it is 'timeless,' full of divine authority and inspiration. It would not conceive of, necessarily choose, or even consider the idea of the 'openness of God.' This is a relative and recent theological development in Evangelical circles that places emphasis on how God is accepting the moral and ethical development of humans in certain ways that fit God's own design for humanity. It has been loosely based in process theology, which in and of itself does not claim to be orthodox. But this notion of ongoing divine revelation and accommodation is a somewhat controversial issue concerning the immutability of God. Does He himself leave himself 'open' or available to change his mind about his own goal for humanity? In a traditional sense God is either God or he is not. The prospect that there is "potentiality" in God relative to a divine being who is self-actualized, whose essence equals His existence, is distasteful and less than perfect. God is who he is from time immemorial, or rather eternity, because God himself is without beginning and end, and He does not change. One can only imagine how representative theologians in the history of the church, including the Arminian, Methodist and Wesleyan traditions, might view this or oppose it. Constructive theology or not, this does not necessarily help us recover a biblical worldview, and perhaps (again) only a very Western existential concern. One does not know after all if God is responding to humanity in this theory, or if humans are only recognizing their own mutability and change, and positing that in the character of the divine. We do not want to make God in our own image after all!

Now it is possible from the biblical narrative to declare two divine purposes in Genesis as that of creation and re-creation; and especially for humanity we may narrowly refer to these as the *imago Dei* (the image of God) and the *missio Dei* (the mission of God).³ There is a divine unique creation (*ex nihilo*) and a divine order imposed on an earth in chaos. This shows the intelligent design of a supranatural, yet personal Being. But there is also parallel to creation an acknowledgement of a pre-eternal rebellion of a third of the angelic host of heaven. Without explaining this 'un'-god like variable (it is recorded elsewhere and later), the Genesis story assumes the role of an Adversary/Accuser in the biblical drama. How does evil, personified and present, find itself in the midst of a perfect paradise of the Garden of Eden? How does the divine approbation of creation include the possibility of external sabotage? Or is it the vary chaos of earth, the domain of fallen angels, that God brings to order and design? If a lower world is the environ of a defeated and doomed Satan and his demons, there seems to be some parallel spiritual reality which is competing for the very sovereign claims of God over all the universe. Perhaps no other familiar piece of literature so magnificently depicts this as well as Milton's *Paradise Lost*, to which we will turn to as an organizing scheme of the biblical narrative. For now it is enough to acknowledge that what was good about creation, was not the perfection one might expect of a Christian view of heaven. There are two Trees in the Garden, one that provided life, and another that provided knowledge (an awareness of good and evil). There is also an Adversary or an opposing voice to that of divine authority and providence. There is humanity with the potential for

³ See the work of Brian D. Russell on *missio Dei*.

free choice, and community, where more than one human will, affection and intellect is involved. Whereupon, we might think that what happened in Genesis 3 would have been inevitable. After all, how could that many variables in creation hope to preserve what was already ‘good?’ All you could expect would be a decline at some point. However, the one mitigating factor seems to be the curious element we often miss, but scholars have hoped to retrieve. It is obvious that what the inspired account labels as ‘good,’ is not what we would consider (but often mistake as) absolute perfection. Of course God does create nothing else, but in forming humans He made them in His own image, as free moral agents, with will, intellect, and affection, and with the same potential of creative power.⁴ If He had done anything less than that we would be machines or puppets, and the point of fellowship in Genesis 3:8 (a metaphor of the sound of God walking in the Garden) is lost. God creates out of the community of the Trinity and He creates for the community of humans; and just as he loves and fellowships within the Trinity, He expresses the same dynamic in solidarity with his human creations. But this in no way implicates that humans (man-‘adam) be perfect as God is perfect; no new creation is yet perfect in the biblical sense of mature or complete. There is still process and progress that humanity must and does make to learn and internalize what the *imago Dei* is. We are no Athena sprung full-grown from the head of Zeus here!

There are certain themes that resonate in Genesis that are important factors for consideration of the pre- and post-lapsarian state of humanity. The first of course is that humans are made in the image of God. This has nothing to do with physical appearance or gender assignment, or even the ability to assert dominion over the rest of creation for personal satisfaction. It is not actual form, but likeness; it is not self-determination, but life within a divine order; it is not about rule, as it is the ability to control nature in a particular way like God. Second, the trajectory of free will that God has instilled in each human enables one to act with freedom, and control nature/create good by free choice. This is not an exclusionary moral issue, but part of the fabric of our human make-up, affecting all areas of potential human existence. Third, humans are directly tied to, yet distinct from nature; we are connected by God’s design, yet having the potential for mastery over it. And both are dependent upon God. Fourth, this creativity is to be expressed in the relationship with God, in the relationship of marriage and in the procreation of children, all of which produces ‘community’—an inherently divine quality in humans. These relationships are not simply about power, or sexuality, or legacy, but centered in un-violated fellowship and unity; “it is not good for man to be alone.” This makes the pivotal aspect of covenant loom large in the biblical narrative.

The Biblical covenant in Genesis includes the creation where order is brought out of chaos, and when universal ‘law’ is enacted. God gives positive commands to humans to increase, rule, and eat of the earth’s bounty. God provided a garden paradise as a controlled environment, gave humans the work and care of it, aided him in his work, and provided man a suitable helper out of his own flesh. He gave Adam one command in all of it, with two aspects: “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden, “ and “You are not free to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” The “any” tree included the choice of the Tree of Life; even though both trees were in the middle of the Garden, in primary focus and view. Both man and woman existed as naked and unashamed—a metaphor of innocence, purity and wholeness—not a sexual status, but a spiritual one. Subsequently in Genesis, humans go on to violate divine order (3), drift into chaos again through sin (murder, impurity, violence, corruption, idolatry, etc., 4-6), and find themselves judged by God (7-8). Thereupon the creation is destroyed, along with everything in it, by the Flood, and a new earth and a new covenant is established with Noah and his descendents (9). This recapitulation of creation/covenant is an established pattern. In each incident the former is good, but violated, and the latter is divinely ordered, but humans are held to account. As such the biblical narrative is not just a dichotomy of nature (cyclical) and history (linear), or even of space and time, but a dialectic of both the *imago Dei* (divine order-*Gottesoekonomie*) and the *mission Dei* (redemptive story/salvation history-*Heilsgeschichte*).

Simkins shows that in the work of Kearney and Redfield this approach calls for and appropriates an integration of different universal concepts that exist in all human worldviews. These categories are Self, Other, Classification, Relationship, Causality, Time and Space (Fig. 3). Each of these affect the others either directly or indirectly, and allow us to structure world domains (Fig. 4), which also includes the ‘human relationship-to-nature’ difficulty (Fig. 5). This in turn defines what is ultimately the perception of an individual’s worldview based both in one’s physical and social environments (Fig. 2).⁵

It is time that we recover a biblical worldview that is both reasonably sound and divinely inspired. It should be carefully thought and taught, and faithfully followed and proclaimed. It is not simply a theological construct of humanity based on eternal law and justice, which needs only mercy and grace, as our Calvinist brethren would have

⁴ Wesley also used three aspects to describe the *imago Dei* the natural image of God in man as a spiritual being with will, intellect and affection, the political image of God in man as a ruling being, and the moral image of God in man corresponding to righteousness and holiness. See Colin Williams, *John Wesley’s Theology for Today*, Abingdon, 1979, 48-49.

⁵ See handout/powerpoint.

us solely believe. It is also about broken covenant and relationship, which needs healing and restoration. By default law is the paradigm that Calvinists use to introduce and uphold the sovereignty of God for the purposes of creation. Providence is the description of God's ultimate control and care of creation, which they seek to honor. This is an analogy based on power and order. However, this does not adequately describe God's design and purpose for creation and humans from the beginning. Wolters says that there are two laws and two ways of imposing it relative to creation. Law can be expressed in nature (universally valid, general, scientific), and in norms (specifically willed, particular, societal). The first is a 'given,' in the sense of a model or principle. The second is a 'responsibility,' in the sense of how we use a word like "value." This roughly corresponds to general revelation (in nature and order) and special revelation (in scripture and counsel). Subsequently norms only work through exercising conscience and knowledge (actually wisdom). We are designed to conform to God's purpose and order in nature. The difficulty in this singular paradigm is that divine order ends up as the main purpose for creation, which is a correlation of law and cosmos. It does not account for divine relationship(s) in a social creation. The Word in/ at the beginning of creation is not simply law or command, but the relationship of character (goodness), language (covenant), intellect (work), affection (care), and will (creativity). This separates the relationship between God and humans from all else in the creation narrative. The repeated phrase, "This is the account of" that we see throughout Genesis literally means, 'the begetting' or 'generations of' (i.e. historical development). This is used as early as Gen. 2:4. It is a literary device to draw attention to the unique natural, cultural and social legacy of the human story in creation. These are not just myths or nice bedtime stories for children, they are good historical accounts—not evolutionary explanations of human origins, but revelatory symbols of divine activity! Wolters for his part wants to maintain a dialectic in creation for both nature and norm.⁶

From these notions however, one must proceed to address the issue of what happened to humans in their fall from the implicit grace and favor of God in the Garden, and their subsequent estate. Two things are immediately evident—man is mortal; he had to continue to eat to live physically (and presumably from the Tree of Life as well). However, he had to continue to refrain from eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of good and evil as well, not to die physically (and presumably spiritually). There is much 'knowledge' being communicated, learned and appropriated in the Garden before the lapse of humans, but it is not dualistic or dichotomous. It is direct knowledge from God implanted and cultivated in humans. The sequence of the creation narrative shows this progressive accumulation and teleological bent. Thus a personal development must be necessary and posited in Adam (and Eve). They can and will develop; Adamic perfection is not divine perfection, nor does it lack the need to learn and grow. Whatever the time frame of the Fall from covenant and grace, it remains that Adam and Eve fell in the course of their human maturation (i.e. in will, intellect and affections). There is not simply a watershed of law (or its violation) before and after the Fall--that is too conveniently a systematic/constructive point. But the bigger picture is what one might term theological anthropology (not anthropomorphism!). What are the meaning of terms and metaphors used in the biblical narrative? What is the organic whole of the human person and condition? The fall was not just about gaining knowledge or not, something that would reflect on and proceed from the intelligent quality of humans themselves. As creator of both body and mind, God could not be the author of sin, the cause of disobedience, or the reason for evil. The body cannot be implicated as the reason for the sin of the mind or spirit, otherwise our very faith itself is evil, a notion long ago considered heresy for the Christian church. The true core of the issue of sin is the knowledge of Good and Evil, where good is now known not for its essence in God, but something far more sinister—known for its relationship to evil, which is the absence of God! And one does not immediately sense or assume that the power of Life, or the Knowledge of good and evil, essentially resides in the pulp and juice of the fruit of each Tree (and no, the forbidden fruit was not an 'apple' just because in Latin, the words apple and evil are spelled the same). The power of the metaphor in the actual Trees resides in covenant, command and the warnings issued. Eating is not just an action, but an intention towards obedience or disobedience that rests in a free choice of the will. God could and would design no other way for those made in His image. So there is a marked difference between knowledge, intelligence and even wisdom, but it is located on a developmental scale even in God's economy. And there is a difference when a competing force offers the same ends with different means. What does a highly developed intelligent being called Satan look and act like outside the purview of God's permissible will? What knowledge does he symbolize or offer different than divine order and design? What 'wisdom' does he hope convey or imitate, which is purposely at odds with God? In Genesis 3:1 the serpent is pictured as most crafty or ambitious (actually 'naked'). He too possesses language, although we assume not with his own power. An outside, external force has now been introduced to the biblical account. We do not know where it has come from or why it is there, except for its own line of reasoning. God's rationale for covenant and command is disclosed and questioned by this adversarial being. This doubt was all that was needed to trigger self-actualization in humans. One might ask: did the serpent sin? or was that just it's nature? The symbol of the serpent represented

⁶ Wolters, 13-51.

immortality and wisdom in ancient cultures, and it is not hard to see why. As the representation of Satan, it shows a false, but third entity in the Garden that we always underestimate. Although sin is never mentioned in Genesis until 4:7, the applicable terms of desire and mastery are the same elements that are found in Genesis 3. It is interesting that Jewish and Islamic theology does not explain Adam and Eve's choice as sin *per se*, but as a consequence for their own imperfect actions, coming short of God's rule, and requiring expulsion, but no notion of original sin. Only Christianity exhibits a principle of disobedience couched in the term "original" sin, which is an inherited factor in all humans, a natural inclination away from God's order and covenant. And this is fundamentally the description of sin—an alienation from God, from our true self, and from others. It is 'missing the mark' (*hamartia*) that God has established for us humans. To be sure it is disobedience which comes from pride, rebellion and self-centeredness, but that is not original to human character or creation. It is a deprivation of all that is good concerning what God has originally intended us to be! Of course other biblical passages further explain Satan (e.g. Ezk. 28:12-19, Rev. 12 & 20), and still others explain the Fall of humans from divine covenant (Rom. 5 and 1 Cor 15), but it is clear that righteousness stems from both reconciliation and restoration, and leads to a fulfilled *imago Dei* in the resurrection. One Jewish rabbi has said that the depiction of marriage in Genesis 2 is the ultimate human metaphor, "The foundation of everything human."⁷ It brings together God and man, love and community, relationship and growth, unity and uniqueness. There is no place or plan for an external adversary in marriage, but it is because of the very dualism introduced by sin and Satan that humanity and marriages suffer. The very order and focus of creation is reversed to the material over the spiritual, to the creation before the Creator, to ourselves instead of others. The care of and for the Garden has turned to carelessness in and about the Garden. Listening to the serpent feeds the satisfaction of our own desires and impulses, when listening to God would help us fulfill creation's order. Our divine qualities and likeness are disfigured and twisted by sin and its defects. Our potential to create and control like God is marred and misdirected. Marriage is no only the pre-eminent paradigm of how God's order in creation may be fulfilled, it is also a pre-eminent example of how something so right can go so wrong. It is not exclusively a conceptual image or ideal (which is 'good'), but the unique challenge of two individuals who must live and act as one.

Here we must briefly inquire about the nature and definition of sin about which much has been written. I will only deal with the classic Christian conceptions and their implications. W. Norman Pittenger reminds us from theology that sin is multi-faceted. It is disobedience brought on by pride, which leads to rebellion. The Fall of man then presumes a depth of new knowledge (good and evil) and depravity (a perversion or crookedness), known previously in the biblical account only in the serpent (or Satan). But this disobedience is the end result of a series of other human choices, which include self-will, self-indulgence, self-focus (narcissism), and a desire to be god-like (i.e. to dominate, rule and bring others things into subjection). The serpent's temptation in Genesis was not only to know like God, but to function as God—independent, equal and self-actualized. However, the very nature of God that prompted creation (both power and glory) are actual only in God, and creativity is only potential in humans as God has willed and designed it. So the ancient descriptions of sin apply very well to the fallen human condition: *incurvatus in se* ('curved in on self'), *privativus boni* ('deprived of the good'), *vulneratus in naturabilis* ('wounded in the things natural' to humans), and *simulatus per totum* ('affected throughout'). Of course no human is so totally depraved that they are 100% corrupt, have lost all the image of God, and are beyond salvation through God's mercy and grace. At the same time we are not so incompletely whole that no part of our human condition is not affected by sin in all its lurid details. Humans are law-breakers, but we are also sick; we have inherited a propensity to do evil from our original parents, but we were left with such a debilitating disease that we cannot conceive or apply any cure. We need forgiveness, but we also need healing.⁸

Wolters has concluded that humanism really is individualism and views freedom as autonomy—a choice to do what we want or stay where we are. Theism on the other hand accounts for relationship with God, recognizes the place of the creature (servanthood), and is marked by a freedom which is heteronomy (i.e. subjected to God's design). Evil, perversity, corruption, disease, dysfunction, and bondage are all a twisting of God's good order in the act of creation. Sin and creation is and must be kept differentiated at all times by their very make-up (even though they affect each other). Sin and evil is a distortion of good order and not a substance in and of itself, not having it's own created qualities stemming from God. Creation is corrupted by sin, even though God still sustains and commands it. He has his way of imposing his authority and control despite Satan and fallen humans. However, creation is always on a path of decay because of sin, and must find re-creation through Word and Spirit, just as any physical body needs 'recreation' through rest and renewal. Though in decay, creation is not evil; though a domain of competing powers and principalities resides in creation itself, it is not irredeemable. Here one can appropriate Jewish theology because it seeks to sanctify and hallow all of life and creation. We cannot allow the Fall to define

⁷ Michael Shevack, *Adam and Eve: Marriage Secrets from the Garden of Eden*, Paulist Press, 2003, xviii.

⁸ W. Norman Pittenger, *The Christian Understanding of Human Nature*, Westminster Press, 1954, 93-105

creation for us, only recognize its consequences and affects. In that sense redeemed humans are both the testimony and instrument of God's re-creative acts.⁹

Clarity is needed no more than when we apply theological nomenclature in our Christian faith. We must be clear about what we mean and say by such terms as 'world' or 'creation,' 'flesh' and 'spirit,' 'mind' and 'body,' etc. Sometimes these are used as antonyms and get us into trouble because of our own English usage, theological interpretation, or common uses. They sometimes divide in a negative way between sacred and secular, between spiritual and worldly, or between lifestyle and creation order. We have to instead account more for Satan, his kingdom and attempt to rule, and his actions and purpose in opposition to creation order. This is why the sin principle is not solely an internal problem for humans, but a matter to resolve between warring parts in God's original design for us! Sin is after all bondage, a foreign usurpation of a native/natural design in divine order. In the biblical narrative of the Fall, each participant had their justification for the role they played. The serpent introduced doubt and achieved deception. Eve desired the fruit, but excused her eating as being deceived. Adam no doubt ate with Eve to experience solidarity in a misguided attempt at relationship (vs. aloneness), but excused his eating by blaming God for a design flaw in Eve! God does not even accommodate the serpent with a chance at an excuse, but gives immediate consequence. And humans are held responsible for each of their actions, but the sin is the same in each—the same doubt, the same desire, the same delusion of power and privilege. Sin can be reduced to cooperation in an opposing order and kingdom. Satan wants to steal the mandate and blessing of humans for his own realm. Satan continually seeks to control and corrupt human activity, working both with and against humans as it serves his purposes against God. He at once courts and confides in us, while he also deceives and despises us!¹⁰ The power of the narrative is nowhere more powerful than here in Genesis 1-3, something again re-enacted in Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

The subsequent curses from the Fall are not then any reversal of some design flaw in the original creation. They are not to rescind God's natural design, or human qualities and abilities. They do however address the difficulty of human existence away from perfect divine order, and the consequences of fading immortality. The expulsion (alienation) from the Garden was punishment enough for God's standard of justice; He evidently chose deliberately to bar humans from all that was good about the Garden—including the Tree of Life, but also all that would make humans equal and self-determinate. The judgments of God are in addition the personal responsibility each human must endure for disobedience. Humans are never "cursed" in the biblical text, because they are designed 'good.' However, the serpent and the ground are, because both become the vessel of divine wrath: Satan is judged for defeat by Christ, and the ground is judged as the origin of man ('*adamah*'), at once the origin of our own human DNA and its own uncooperative substance. About Satan man can do nothing but resist and war, but with the soil he must contend with something more like himself, and yet now so very opposite God's prescribed order. Between man and woman a new inequality exists that was not evident before the Fall. The idea of mutual flesh and shared community is now severely strained and damaged. The control of nature becomes manifested in relationship(s) when dominion or power is exercised (usually male to female). The race of humans made in the image of God, which was further differentiated between man (*ish*) and woman (*ishsha*), extends from a unity to a duality (husband and wife), exhibiting community. However, what was also male and female (sexual function and quality) becomes also father and Eve (mother of all the 'living'), which is a potential creative aspect of quantity. What was naked, unashamed and assumed in the Garden no longer exists. All humans are now aware of their own vulnerabilities, ashamed at their position in relation to so little of good and so much of evil, and with the need to both hide and cover themselves from God and each other. The promise of the knowledge of good and evil had not freed them to greater community and cooperation, but creative disabilities. Even childbirth and family support would now be difficult, despite Adam having a son in his own image (Gen. 5:3). There is also the problem of the division of labor concerning family life and cultivation between male and female, and the twin harbingers of 'rule' (male) and 'desire' (female). It is no wonder the male consequence of sin has been external extremity (environmental), and the female consequence has been internal difficulty (relational). Each in their own way deals with pain, submission, unfulfilled desire, dependency, and guilt.¹¹

Finally, the biblical narrative promises a measure of immediate (proximate) hope for humans (here we do not include the foreshadow of a future approximate Messiah). The human race would continue—God will not end it all there. God himself provided them clothing by animal skins (sacrificed is presumed). God instilled both fairness and fear in humans, through judgment and wrath as pillars of faith (Ps. 30:5). His 'spirit may not contend with man forever' (Gen. 6:3), but he is also 'slow to anger and abounding in love' (Ex. 34:6). There must be some action on God's part to restore and redeem his own creation. No one else can, will, or would do it! Thus redemption is always

⁹ Wolters, 50-62.

¹⁰ Ibid, 63-68

¹¹ Simkins, 173-206.

a 'return' to something—not an exact return to an original state, but a form of it. It is not an exact place or situation that matters, but an environment that fulfills original order and design. At first salvation merely appears as a re-generation(s), or a reconciliation of relationships, but later it develops into full salvation as redemption ('a buying back'), renewal, and restoration in original holiness (wholeness). And if total depravity means sin corrupts all parts of humans (and creation), then universal atonement in Jesus Christ means grace redeems all of it back to the Creator. This is nowhere more conclusively stated than by Paul in his example of the two Adams. There is something about Christ's assumption of humanity as the sinless Son of God that makes Christians a new divine race (God's people-1 Pe. 2: 9-10). This is the Gospel of the Kingdom as taught by Jesus, as attested to by his miracles, and as conceived and implemented through the purpose of discipleship. There is no going back to Eden—that would be regressive and reactionary. Restoration is not repristination! We are not called to a new primitivism (e.g. Anabaptism), but a purposeful restoration (e.g. the Catholic eschaton). There is an 'already' and 'not yet' idea of the Kingdom between the first and second comings of Christ; the in-between time from inauguration to consummation is the life of the Church, both militant and triumphant. God is providing something better (Heb. 11:40) for us out of the Fall than just moral innocence or physical purity. He is instituting his plan of redemption in divine progression to achieve his will toward the goal of the eschaton. The Kingdom of God is not merely a choice between favorite interpretations; it is not just spiritually within, or politically ahead, or simply socially around us. It comes down to a war between supernatural orders--not cultural wars per se, but kingdom ones. Neither creation or creatures have so fallen from divine providence that they remain beyond divine grace, so no one must err in dismissing the value of either. God is working his plan in salvation history, and we must exercise hope in that same biblical worldview if we will be successful in 'faith active by love' (Wesley). Salvation should bring life out of death, not begin to create a spiritual dimension which already exists in us. We are already made for divine fellowship, "and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee" (Augustine). Grace does not add to creation, but enables healing and completes wholeness. If renewal is being like God in true righteousness and holiness, then everyone must put off the old self, corrupted by evil desires, and put on the new self, re-created to be like Jesus (Eph. 4:20-24).¹²

Paradise Lost (1667) is a great literary example of both poetry and theology. It is purposefully meant to be both narrative and instructive. It teaches the truth of the creation narrative in story form, while 'filling in the gaps' of the scriptural account with reasonable allegory. It expertly and adeptly features three characters in three acts: God, Satan and humans as it relates to the Creation, the Fall and Redemption (or Re-Creation). There is a definite pre-lapsarian and post-lapsarian storyline depicted by two angels, Raphael and Michael, who provide supporting roles as to the maturity and restoration of mankind. The poem's stated purpose is from Book 1, Line 25, written so that the author "may assert Eternal Providence and **justify the ways of God to men**" (bold mine). It literally is an explication of what the Genesis creation narrative means for humanity. In this sense Milton is tremendously successful because of his own ingenious combination of prose and doctrine (not withstanding all the literary and biblical criticism imposed on the author or the text). It remains one of the greatest masterpieces of English literature and Puritan covenant theology. It engages ideas of free will, knowledge per se, mercy and grace, obedience and choice, repentance and restoration, death and sin, and life and victory. Even more it introduces an active personal adversary in Satan, whose story reveals his hate of God and creation. The dialogues of each character call for immediate reaction from the reader (*pathos*) either in solidarity with our first parents, or disappointment at their low spiritual development. The work does not embellish the Genesis account so much as it merely enhances one's awareness of what was at stake in the Garden. It ends with the promise of a Re-creation of the world and humanity through the promise of Christ, even as our first parents move out onto the wide plain of an unknown future. In a subsequent work, *Paradise Regained*, Milton simply focuses on the defeat of Satan by Jesus in the wilderness temptation, with anticipation of the curse of sin removed at the Cross. One temptation exchanged for another between the two epics, and one defeat over against a new victory; two Adams--one from whom sin began, and a new Adam with whom sin ends. The theological method employed (Ramist logic vs. older Aristotelian scholasticism) makes Milton's prose very accessible and intimately familiar. This is 're-creational' theological reading, the kind that Wesley recommended for leisure!

The important them of *Paradise Lost* is the guiding roles of the two angels. Raphael is sent "to supply Adam with a pre-lapsarian equivalent of experience, to give him a past that will allow a valid measurement of his present, but to do so in ways that will not cut Adam off from the future and future growth..."¹³ This is the only way Adam can learn in the immediate sense of his new creative life (although one would assume in the Bible God could do this directly). After the fall Michael's task is "to reinforce Adam's faith to allow him to endure and transcend

¹² Wolters, 69-79.

¹³ Kathleen M. Swaim, *Before and After the Fall: Contrasting Modes in Paradise Lost*, University of Massachusetts Press, 1986, 13.

experience.”¹⁴ Adam has to see the integral relationship between faith and experience, which not only entails hope, but defies past error. Human reason is no less valuable or legitimate after the Fall as before, and human intellect must be integrated with faith for any movement toward Truth. There were limitations on experience before the Fall, just as there are limits on pure reason now. Each must be redeemed and used to constitute belief. The balance between the knowledge of good and evil before and after the Fall has changed. Where once good was experientially known and evil only conceptualized (if at all), now the knowledge of evil is experiential and the knowledge of good has receded to the conceptual.

Before the fall Adam and Eve enjoy a secure and idyllic existence in a state of innocence. Their lives are free and full of affirmation and love of each other and the Creator. They are joyfully responsive to the external world and receptive to the lessons that emerge from it. They are vital, growing, and therefore accumulating wholesome and coherent contacts with an external world. After the fall humanity learns by experiments, testing, proofs. In the postlapsarian world things and events claim for themselves a reality and priority that exclude the options of spirit and intuition and surprise and growth. After the fall experience contrasts chiefly not with innocence but with that other way of knowing, faith. After the fall, if faith can be activated, it will serve some of the same positive ends as innocence before the fall. It will open up future possibilities and make love, affirmation, growth and joy accessible. It will teach the believer to transcend the experiential and the self.¹⁵

After the Fall reason for man is still a matter of exercising choice, but also receiving and applying revelation as well.¹⁶ Scripture—both Word and text—become the occasion by which men begin to call upon the name of the Lord (Gen. 4:26). Whatever God is re-creating he must do so not with hope of man’s own change of mind and heart (reason or experience), but with authoritative revelation (and that passed on generationally as ‘tradition,’ Gen. 4:3-4). Humanity must always be restored by the latter. The prelapsarian intuitive grasp of right reason and its results had given way to a postlapsarian imperception of how reason and experience connect.¹⁷ After the fall God must renew human capacity to know Him rightly and experience Him relationally. Man must be aided to confirm the deity, to refute the adversary and to assess the reality of the world around him.¹⁸ The immediate goal is not holiness or even a return to Adamic innocence, it is simply survival and renewal (re-creation within). The ‘full good’ of approximate perfection was far off and yet to come, though Enoch walked with God (Ge. 5:24) and Noah was a righteous man and blameless in his day (Gen. 6:9). Man gave up perfect freedom (choice) and exchanged it with doubt after the fall--what was certainty and clarity became skepticism and dilemma. And this follows the character of Satan, who now lacks all the attributes of a good God, and is the contradiction of all that is divine. Human experience and reason, at enmity with God and in desperate flight toward Satan, is no sure path for renewal or reconciliation of created order and design.

Throughout church history and theology the nature and destiny of humans has been investigated and debated. In the ancient church this was true between Gnosticism and Asceticism, Platonism (and later Aristotelianism), and Pelagianism and Manichaeism. St. Augustine (d. 430), who was converted to a Platonic form of Christianity under Ambrose of Milan, is an example of a theologian who sought a balance between the free-will libertarianism of the Pelagians, and the deterministic and dualistic materialism of the Manichaeans. Although he opposed both extremes he is most often known for his emphasis on salvation by grace, unaided by any or most other forms of divine assistance to humans (including reason, law, teaching, reward, threat, etc.). His legacy has left a lasting controversy over the relation of grace and nature, and how God operates in humans separate from a divine image in man. While the Church reaffirmed the doctrine of grace and perseverance in Augustine’s day over against heretical tendencies, there were those like Vincent of Lerins who objected. A century later the Synod of Orange qualified that stance to a position more in keeping with mainstream church doctrine; the danger of heresy had passed, and unconditional election with it. The Canons of Orange did not deny grace or the primacy of divine action, but it affirmed the cooperation of man in salvation in the act of prevenient grace (not necessarily out of a “freed will,” made possible only after redemption). Total depravity and original sin were affirmed, and “free” will (vs. bondage) and good works were denied; but mercy, love and faith were all recognized as the gift of God in humans

¹⁴ Ibid, 16.

¹⁵ Swaim, 16.

¹⁶ Ibid, 23.

¹⁷ Ibid, 96.

¹⁸ Ibid, 101.

drawing them to belief and confession. This was more aptly described as a semi-Augustinian position, in contrast to a hard determinism encountered later in hyper-Calvinism (predestination and foreknowledge).¹⁹

This controversy surfaced again in the Protestant Reformation and the Lutheran doctrinal controversies of the mid-1500's between the Philippists (the party of Melancthon) and the Gnesio-Lutherans (the party espousing Martin Luther's radical 'sola gratia/sole fideism'). It produced the same dichotomy of grace and nature. Again, in the early 1600's the strict Genevan Calvinism of Theodore Beza came into conflict with the Remonstrants of the Netherlands, who refuted the doctrinally closed system of the Supralapsarians. This we know as the TULIP acronym of "high" Calvinism (which is only an interpretation of Calvin). Somehow human nature and destiny became inevitably tied to divine sovereignty and justice. Nothing remained for humans except to be saved or damned without choice. As one engaged to refute the Remonstrants, Jacobus Arminius was converted to a free will/free grace position we now know by the acronym ROSE. This was indeed an open doctrinal system with all the parts independently verifiable by Scripture, and not scholastic exercise. And then yet again the controversy reared its head with the Pietists and the Evangelical Church in Germany, and with the Wesley's at Oxford and in the Church of England. From the impetus of the Pietist tradition and Arminian theology (along with the idea of *theosis* in the Eastern Church) John Wesley re-appropriated the principles of evangelical faith and Christian perfection (holiness) for the average believer. He opposed the Calvinists who insisted that individual salvation is tied to divine decree alone, which issues from God's sovereignty and a sense of satisfaction for a transgression of the Law. John Fletcher, Wesley's co-worker and Methodist theologian, also opposed Calvinists, especially in their rejection of law over grace. His *Checks to Antinomianism* is one of the gems of Wesleyan-Arminian theology. Wesley always paid him great complement, and before his untimely death thought of him as his theological heir apparent.

Fletcher and Wesley often used Milton in their writings to illustrate the work of God in humans, and easily flowed in and out of its language when composing theology (see Fletcher's epic poem *Grace and Nature*, and Wesley's compendium of natural philosophy, entitled *A Survey of the Wisdom of God in the Creation*). Fletcher wrote that the seal of the Trinity resides in humans in Life, Thought and Love. This *imago Dei* resides in humans from the creation in the form of breath, intelligence and charity. It is re-created and renewed in humans through regeneration in the image of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. These principles, purified by grace and restored to their natural order, exemplify the new creation of humans.²⁰ He also states that man is not sufficiently wise, free or powerful to regulate himself, that he is not beyond the influence of God, or that God is someone we can ignore because of that influence. Regeneration is a re-establishment of the soul to these three designs of the *imago Dei*. He requires that we replace pride with obedience, and presumption with perfection (maturity).²¹ From constant rest in God's favor (i.e. life and peace) Adam and Eve preferred vain reason and sinful pleasure, from which they experienced shame and death. But Christians seek life and peace anew in the mercy of God in Christ--the new bloom of Calvary --and in Paradise restored. His is the new Tree of Life, the Cross, where both judgment and mercy meet, and where sin is cured and faith is won. That ever-bearing Tree resides now in heaven and provides healing for the nations (316).²²

In his work on natural philosophy, Wesley makes a distinction between sensation and idea, the former being experiential and the latter as conceptual. For instance, we do not know God *per se*, but we can form a notion of him from reason and observation. This does not leave us without knowledge, only a complete understanding of an incomprehensible God.²³ There is also a difference between simple apprehension, judgment and abstraction from low order thinking to higher order. Again, we can extrapolate ideas about God through consideration of the relationship between these three.²⁴ There is also a difference in knowledge that is direct, immediate and intuitive, and comes from sensation and self-consciousness, and that which comes from reasoning and is indirect, mediate and deductive. This second knowledge can be obtained both from syllogism/logic (scientific certainty), or proofs/propositions (moral certainty). The first knowledge relates to experience, but the second knowledge proceeds from both experimentation (intention) and natural religion/revelation (observation). The first knowledge includes only assent of the understanding, while the second a consent of the will and opinion. In all knowledge there are only the options of ignorance, doubt, conjecture, probability, certainty, and necessity. But beyond all these is testimony or revelation, which is divine truth. This is what makes regenerated humans created in and capable of the *imago Dei*. Something in us corresponds to divine reason, and breaks through all the limitations of both direct and indirect knowledge to appropriate divine life within us. All of revelation is prevenient grace showing humans the

¹⁹ J. Patout Burns, *Theological Anthropology*, Fortress Press, 1981, 1-22, 109-128.

²⁰ John Fletcher, *Grace and Nature*, Trans. Miles Martindale, Davies and Co., London, 1810, 52, 57-58.

²¹ *Ibid*, 69-73.

²² *Ibid*, 309-316.

²³ John Wesley, *A Survey of the Wisdom of God in the Creation*, Vol. 5, J. D. Dewick, London, 1809, 151-155.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 164-168.

light of redeemed reason. For example, the doctrine of the Trinity is not either direct or indirect knowledge that one arrives at on one's own. It can be sensed in a way, but it can only truly be a matter of belief from revelation. What is incomprehensible is neither discovered or conceived, it is received as mystery and truth. Yet we may still reason and conject what is probable, certain and necessary if the Trinity were to be what it claims. Both reason and revelation work hand in hand in this regard (as does experience and tradition in some manner) to demonstrate the nature and character of God, but revelation is the only true basis upon which the other forms of knowledge exist.²⁵

Wesley's dialectic of reason and revelation is shown in the pattern of the sermons he preached on the topics of creation, sin and redemption. He arranges them in doublets of #56-"God's Approbation of His Works" (Gen. 1:31) and #57-"On the Fall of Man" (Gen. 3:19); #59-"God's Love to Fallen Man" (Rom. 5:15), and #60-"The General Deliverance" (Rom. 8:19-20); #69-"The Imperfection of Human Knowledge" (1 Cor. 13:9), and #70-"The Case of Reason Impartially Considered" (1 Cor. 5:17); and #13-"On Sin in Believers" (2 Cor. 5:17) and #14-"The Repentance of Believers" (Mk. 1:15). Wesley truly demonstrates his commitment to the Wesleyan Quadrilateral as mentioned earlier, by his work in Scripture, theology, natural philosophy, and practical religion. This is also evident in his description of what sanctification is and is not as it concerns human nature, which we shall refer to momentarily.

In Fletcher's letters to two opponents he mentions the creation and the fall. To Dr. Priestly he says it would only be 'reasonable' for Adam and Eve to conclude that the God who made them, would be the only one who could also restore them. Or that the Word that spoke to them would not also be the promise of deliverance who would one day take humanity upon himself and crush their common Adversary. This hope led to the practice of sacrifice and the worship of God in response to divine authority and anticipation of deliverance.²⁶ To Mr. Toplady, Fletcher said that necessity in sin, unjustly charged to God is prohibitive, otherwise Eve would have not made an excuse or passed on any blame (Adam too), she only would have claimed fulfillment of natural curiosity and perception; that she could not help but eat because that is the way God made her to respond to anything perceived as good and desirable. How then could Eve be condemned by God? Especially if all necessity in creation comes from God's power and wisdom? There would have been no Fall, no sin and no concern or acknowledgement of Satan or evil.²⁷

In his 31st Argument in "An Appeal to a Matter of Fact and Common Sense," Fletcher asserts that since Adam corrupted the origin of human nature in himself, he could do no otherwise than generate a corrupt image of himself in his son, and all heirs of the race. He could not have generated a body without a soul, because it would not have been in his own likeness, but since he did beget this son it was from his own fallen spirit. He was unable to communicate and generate something he was not, nor could he regenerate as God could and does. It thus remains that the principle and affect of original sin is passed, intentionally or not, to all others until Christ. Only then, through that sinless conception and virgin birth was the curse of death and sin broken. Fletcher argues that man was made in the image of God in essential knowledge and holy love, because what rational and emotional creature neither knows or loves his Creator? This is why man was left with both shame and fear after the fall—guilt at sin and dread of judgment. Fletcher proceeds to address four objections to depravity and sin as follows: 1) that God should have foreseen and prevented Adam's fall (contrary to his own free agency and our free choice); 2) that Adam's posterity could not fairly suffer from the consequence of another person's transgression (as if we are exempt from God's pronounced judgment on all); 3) that this depravity is but natural, seeing as how God has created us with moral necessity (instead of moral freedom for which **we** are accountable); and 4) that God contradicts his goodness and justice by creating sinful souls, or by putting sinless souls into sinful bodies (which casts blame on God for the very *imago Dei*, or absence thereof). Fletcher says the willful choice of Adam and Eve, in whom we exist both biologically and representationally, conditions a depravity in us that remains by our obstinate neglect of the good, but which is added to by our own personal choice when we give assent by the free commission of sins that can be avoided. This means that we are not only accountable to God, but that we are without excuse before Him for our own sin. God is not the author of sin or depravity...we ourselves are not faultless, although we may become blameless in Christ!²⁸

To this point this paper has been about the intended ideal and fallen effect of human nature, without reference to deliberate guidelines to the difference between flaws due to the Fall, or simple human limitations that may be labeled mistakes or weaknesses, and which proceed out of imperfect minds and bodies. This is designed this way because no theological paradigm will state the case for human nature emphatically without reference to the whole of divine order and design. This is not a 'how to' manual; what we think and say and do must come from principle and good practice, as well as from the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, both Fletcher and Wesley addressed this very thing when it came to the differentiation of sin and infirmities in the lives of the sanctified (to which we can

²⁵ Wesley, 169-193.

²⁶ John Fletcher, *Checks to Antinomianism*, Vol. 3, New York, Hunt and Eaton, n.d., 507-509.

²⁷ *Ibid*, Vol. 2, 378-379.

²⁸ Fletcher, *Checks*, Vol. 3, 317-324.

only reasonably assume it works or applies). In Section 16 of his “Last Check to Antinomianism,” Fletcher contends for the doctrine of an evangelically sinless (read “blameless”) perfection which is truly Scriptural. It is based on the New Testament admonition to perfection (read “completion” or “maturity”) that we do not sin. This is of course in opposition to all who insist that sin lives in our hearts as long as we live, and that we must continually break God’s law because we sin in thought, word and deed until death (and indeed only death itself liberates us for heaven--a queer thought that the greatest negative produces the greatest positive!). Infirmity is rightly defined as an involuntary word, a wandering thought, or an undesigned mistake due to an imperfect bodily existence on earth. It is not without error, but it is without fault if submitted to divine control. It is not intentional, even if it may be harmful. It may be repented of, but need not involve broken fellowship with God. The punishment (if any) is in the awareness of the disappointment of God, and the need for added grace and strength. Admonition is the remedy rather than judgment. However, willful sin is the act of a voluntary transgression of God’s law. This is intentional and brings judgment and its consequences. It holds both fault and blame because each one is tempted, when by his own evil desire he is dragged away and enticed, and when desire has conceived (and it is already crouching at the door, Gen. 4:7), it gives birth to sin (which desires to have you), and when sin is fully mature it gives birth to (“generates”) death (complete mastery over you). (Ja. 1:14-15) So do not be deceived and do not shift blame to God. Only what is good and perfect comes from above, and God does not change! Man must change through the word of truth and continue in the perfect law that gives freedom (and so also the message of 1 John). Fletcher says that even the liturgy of the Church of England allows forgiveness for “sins, negligences, and ignorances,” a far cry from gross sin and licentiousness! If even God draws distinctions in the Old Testament between sin and infirmity would he not also continue to do so now under the New Covenant of Love?²⁹

An infirmity is a breach of Adam’s law of paradisaical perfection, which our covenant God does not require of us now: and (evangelically speaking) a sin for Christians is a breach of Christ’s evangelical law of Christian perfection...which God requires of all Christian believers. An infirmity...is consistent with pure love to God and man, but a sin is inconsistent with that love. An infirmity is free from guile, and has its root in our animal frame; but a sin is attended with guile, and has its root in our moral frame, springing either from the habitual corruption of our hearts, or from the momentary perversion of our tempers. An infirmity unavoidably results from our unhappy circumstances, and from the necessary infelicities of our present state; but a sin flows from the avoidable and perverse choice of our own will. An infirmity has its foundation in an involuntary want of power; and a sin in a willful abuse of the present light and power we have. The one arises from involuntary ignorance and weakness, and is always attended with a good meaning, a meaning unmixed with any bad design, or wicked prejudice; but the other has its source in voluntary perverseness and presumption, and is always attended with a meaning altogether bad; or at best, with a good meaning founded on wicked prejudices.³⁰

Clearly Fletcher is not only showing us a difference between two sides of the human will based in intention, but that this very God-given design is the way we need to define sin for ourselves--not ‘anything’ that falls short of divine perfection (“the glory of God”), but anything that falls short of God’s plan of perfection for us (“mature, attaining the full measure of the fullness of Christ”). He draws here a distinction between the Christless law of perfect innocence given to Adam before the fall, and the mediatorial, evangelical law of penitential faith begun in promise and fulfilled in Christ. Those who err by thinking the two are the same, or that we are equally accountable to both, miss both faith and obedience that balance the doctrines of divine justice and grace. To that end Fletcher says both Pelagius (no extant writings available) and Augustine were both right in some things, but wrong at their major point of rigid perfectionism and rigid imperfectionism! While Pelagius strove to reclaim an earthly Adamic perfection as in Eden, Augustine made purgatory after death necessary to rid all believers of sin before heaven. So holiness in believers is not Adamic perfection, but neither is it of necessity a sola-fideism of imputed righteousness. God can and does impart his righteousness to us that we may live blameless lives in the present world, without fear of being disqualified for the heavenly prize of the crown of Christ.³¹

In a similar vein Wesley introduced similar distinctions in his *Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (1777). The relevant passages are Sections 12, 15, 19, 25, and 26. Every Wesleyan needs to own, continuously read, and practice this Methodist ‘manual.’ Each of these sections provide plain answers about what perfection (and sin) is and is not. Section 25 is key to understanding Wesley’s view on the Genesis story; he not only provides seven cases where people lack good graces as Christians (infirmities), but also seven areas of advice on how to avoid sin. If one

²⁹ Ibid, Vol. 2, 601f.

³⁰ Fletcher, *Checks*, Vol. 2, 605-606.

³¹ Ibid, 601-607.

reads Section 13 one can also see that Wesley is transparent enough to admit that some of his thoughts on Christian perfection are a work in progress, although not invalid. Here we shall only reference one paragraph in Section 12.

In what sense Christians are not perfect. “They are not perfect in knowledge. they are not free from ignorance, no, nor from mistake. We are no more to expect any living man to be infallible, than to be omniscient. They are not free from infirmities, such as weakness or slowness of understanding, irregular quickness or heaviness of imagination. Such in another kind are impropriety of language, ungracefulness of pronunciation; to which one might add a thousand nameless defects, either in conversation or behavior. From such infirmities as these none are perfectly freed till their spirits return to God; neither can we expect till then to wholly freed from temptation; for ‘the servant is not above his master.’ But neither in this sense is there any absolute perfection on earth. There is no perfection of degrees, none which does not admit of a continual increase.³²

In a recent CNN poll (www.ccn.com/hlnreligiousquestion) most 18-27 year olds in America do not pray, read the Bible or attend worship. More describe themselves as spiritual rather than religious. It is surmised that church buildings “will begin to close like GM franchises.” In another survey from 2003 cited by The Truth Project, only 9% of professing Christians have a biblical worldview. Their opinion is that “post-modernism has blurred the moral lines that were previously defined by Judeo-Christian ideals of truth” (Focus on the Family promotional material, 2010). Clearly there is something that the Christian church lacks in its Christ-appointed (co)mission to make disciples. However, it is more than just a cultural or religious heritage, models of discipleship or devotion, or inspired leadership and sacrifice. It can be reduced to a misuse of the ideal of divine order and salvation history. We are missing the reality of the *imago Dei* in us, and the *mission Dei* in creation, because we are incredulous historians, inadequate biblicists, and inconsistent Methodists! We do not preach, practice or pray what we should about God’s holy name and parenthood, about his kingdom and his will, about his providential care and forgiveness, about his guidance and protection from evil, and about his power and glory which will last forever. Rather, we are quite more attentive to our own existence and experience.

In the West we live in a time of uncertainty marked by a pull away from a cultured Christian norm, and we are leaning toward a scientific naturalism that is based on technology and pluralism, along with a push towards consumerism and globalization.³³ We are in a second to last act of history before a divine re-creation of the cosmos. We are at an opportune moment to re-engage our culture, especially in the secular West, in a manner fitting revealed biblical narrative. This cannot, of course, embrace a world/creation denying view like the ancient Gnostics, or even a world/creation identifying perspective of modern humanism. It can and should embrace a world/creation affirming theology of Christian theism, which does not get side-tracked by creationism per se, but a ‘Creatorism’ that acknowledges God’s story “**in** earth as it is in heaven” (bold mine). We can no longer afford the errors of the past among Christians concerning bad, convenient or otherwise indifferent use of Scripture. Our lack of biblical knowledge and its application has made us a narcissistic and lethargic people. Once again God’s Word must be the leading basis of vigorous theological method, belief and practice. It has more power and authority than we ourselves can hope to add to in our pursuit of truth and the salvation of the world. It can and must be allowed to speak for itself as we proclaim it faithfully by the Holy Spirit.

Now, finally let us return to the Wesleyan Quadrilateral and briefly define carnality and how it functions even in Christians. If as Methodists we live by principle(s), then it is by those same standards we may be judged and proven genuine in Christ. Temptation may not be sin, but when it conceives it leads to carnal flaws in us, which leads to sin and ends in death. Every Christian is tempted. Christians have to deal with carnality because we live in an imperfect body and mind, which often fail us. Sometimes Christians sin because they have not been trained in righteousness to measure up to the image of Christ in us. However, most of life for the saved and sanctified believer is lived at that point between temptation and sin. How should we then live? We must resist and reverse our error that caters to self, and only let divine life occupy the area of our will, intellect and affections. This may be done practically by consulting the paradigm of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. With Scripture we should refuse to be self-interpreting. If we are not centered on the Word we cannot know divine precept or prescription. With Tradition we should not be self-generating. While we cannot ‘pass on’ salvation, we can acknowledge participation in a community of God gathered solely in his name and for his sake. With Reason we cannot be self-determining. Our principles call for us to be faithful disciples who methodically practice discipline and deliberation. With Experience

³² John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, Reprint, Beacon Hill Press, 1966, 23. See also relevant chapters on this theme in Albert Outler, *Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Chap. 2), Leo George Cox, *John Wesley’s conception of Perfection* (Chaps. 2, 5-6), and Colin W. Williams, *John Wesley’s Theology Today* (Chaps. 4, 10).

³³ Michael w. goheen and Craig G. Bartholomew, *Living at the Crossroads: An Introduction to Christian Worldview*, Baker Academic, 2008, 107f.

we should not be self-authenticating. The work of the Spirit in us is as the Paraclete, a counselor, who brings to mind and heart the things of Christ, not our own existential fulfillment. In the end the *incurvatus in se* (the incurved self) is the our largest obstacle in judging between sin and human flaws, and between the *imago Dei* and our own image of ourselves. There is nothing generated in us that does not need regenerating in Christ, including our inclination to evil and sin. In holiness God perfects our hearts in love to do his will, with his mark of ownership on us. However, we still live by grace within redeemed, but imperfect, minds and bodies. We are cautioned by Scripture that no one born of God continues to sin (1 Jo. 3:6-9), and that we must publicly rebuke sin in others (1 Tim. 5:20). But we are also told we should always bear with the failings of the weak (Rom. 15:1) and accept the ones whose faith is weak without passing judgment (Rom. 14:1). This is true because love is the fulfillment of the law.

Wesley, Fletcher, Milton and others have warned us that as useful as something like reason is (even in the Wesleyan Quadrilateral), we must be cautious about trusting any basis for theology or practice that must be redeemed, or that functions within human systems. Scripture alone is an exception to that. Tradition, Reason and Experience must all be sanctified for use by humans. We ought to train them more, try them often, but trust them less than divine revelation to come to our conclusions on doctrine and practice. Notwithstanding petty, outright or besetting sin, the infirmities and flaws of human existence are the biggest challenge to Christian living. Carnality is the temptation to self-actualization outside the order and design of the Creator. To know ourselves as God knows us as new creations in Christ (re-creations), we must be restored to the *imago Dei* by the act of God's *missio Dei* in Christ.

At present Wesleyans are in danger of a dilemma caused by our lack of communicating a proper biblical worldview with all its implications. This will affect both our message and our mandate in Christ. Like other denominations it might even lead to a crisis of identity. Our approach to doctrine could have future disastrous effects, even though it has been a source of blessing in the past. On the one hand we have had a rich theological heritage which is rational, yet practical. On the other hand, we have had a rich social heritage which is experiential, yet assuring. If we err to the rational we become dogmatic, even legalistic (which was a previous, even unpleasant chapter in Wesleyan/holiness history). If we err to the experiential we become iconoclastic, even libertarian (a somewhat more present dilemma in our day). The dangling pendulum of church history, the dialectic of church theology and the dichotomy of philosophy will always keep us swinging in one direction or the other. As Wesleyans we equally despise false knowledge and false piety, which both stem from pride, but at times, we also wrongly value 'doing' over 'being,' and arriving more than the journey of faith. We must practice re-integrating our past theology, with our present reality, with recourse to a future teleology. We can do this by listening to the community of faith (and scholars) from our Christian past, but also by a solid belief in, and practice of, a biblical worldview from revealed Scripture. In this way we avoid the errors of anachronism (which is historical reductionism), antinomianism (which is theological de-constructionism), antilogy (which is philosophical obscurantism), and antipathy (which is reactionary biblicism). May we all come to know God's ideal for human nature in the creation, understand what happened to that design because of the fall of humanity from divine favor, and discern by the Spirit within us how we may live in the full redemption of the Cross of Christ so that we may avoid sin and grow in grace.