

**HOLINESS SIMPLICITER:
A WESLEYAN ENGAGEMENT AND PROPOSAL
IN LIGHT OF JOHN WEBSTER'S TRINITARIAN
DOGMATICS OF HOLINESS[†]**

by

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I believe the infinite and eternal Spirit of God, equal with the Father and the Son, to be not only perfectly holy in Himself, but the immediate cause of all holiness in us; enlightening our understandings, rectifying our wills and affections, renewing our natures, uniting our persons to Christ, assuring us of the adoption of sons, leading us in our actions; purifying and sanctifying our souls and bodies, to a full and eternal enjoyment of God.¹

Outside of the constituencies associated with the Wesleyan Theological Society, one could say that holiness is not a topic considered with much frequency in theology proper (i.e., the doctrine of God). For a theme that is often labeled the chief attribute or the very essence of God, one wonders why the paucity of theological reflection on holiness persists. Any number of culprits could be pointed out, including the favoring of love among divine attributes, a latent supersessionism within the doctrine of God, modern-day therapeutic culture, guilt-laden portrayals of soteriology, and others. Nevertheless, too much is at stake to allow this oversight to continue. Holiness is at the heart of a biblically and theologically salutary account of the Christian God and this God's purposes within the creation. Those within the Wesleyan tradition may appreciate this importance more than some, but at stake are matters greater than any particular theological sub-tradition's sensibilities and scope.

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¹"Letter to a Roman Catholic" in John Telford, ed., *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley* (London: Epworth Press, 1931), III, p. 9.

Such a state of affairs makes a work like John Webster's *Holiness* an exceptional volume.² In a very concise manner, similar in style to his "dogmatic sketch" of Holy Scripture,³ Webster grants his readers a "small exercise in dogmatic theology, a *trinitarian dogmatics of holiness*." Within the first two chapters, Webster offers a refreshing and illuminating portrayal of the way theology can be understood as the "exercise of holy reason" (chapter 1) and provides glimpses of what is implied by a trinitarian dogmatics of holiness (chapter 2). He concludes by drawing out the implications of his vision for the church (chapter 3) and the Christian life (chapter 4). Wesleyans should take seriously Webster's proposals since some of the reflections he entertains in *Holiness* are of a species that one rarely finds regarding a topic that is hailed by so many (at least formally) as pivotal for the theological task. Nevertheless, Wesleyans cannot endorse Webster's agenda completely without compromising significant features of how they would envision a trinitarian dogmatics of holiness. An engagement, therefore, is worthwhile in order that congruencies and divergences can be noted for the good of Wesleyan and Reformed believers particularly, but also the church as a whole. Furthermore, this kind of endeavor can help Wesleyans engage the constructive side of a trinitarian dogmatics of holiness in a more concerted way, and the need for such proposals is pressing given the contested coherence and viability of Wesleyan theology generally.

The Nature of the Theological Task

Webster begins his text with a sobering reflection on the holiness of the theological task itself. "We need to understand," he remarks, "that theological thinking *about* holiness is itself an exercise *of* holiness."⁴ Such a gesture points to the theme of holy reasoning, which is at the heart of all dogmatic reflection: "Theology is an aspect of the sanctification of reason, that is, of the process in which reason is put to death and made alive by the terrifying and merciful presence of the holy God."⁵ The point is well taken because Webster is aware of the dangers: Without the sanctifi-

²*Holiness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

³*Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). Webster admits that working through this text led him to the composition of *Holiness*.

⁴*Holiness*, 8.

⁵*Holiness*, 8. Although Webster will have more to say on holy reason in an upcoming work, with *Holiness* he seems to assume reason to be definable in similar ways to Wesley: as a capacity or function of the intellectual life. This view

cation of reason (i.e., its mortification and vivification) before and by the presence of God, theological reflection can become idolatrous; it can delve into correlational or comparative endeavors that analyze phenomenological experiences of the numinous that at their heart can be projectionist without any clear norm or criterion to guide them.

Unlike what modernity would have, reason is not some neutral faculty that can be employed and appealed to by anyone. Archaeologists of knowledge would recognize that reason is context-dependent and that appealing to an account of reason, however universal it portends to be, often serves the covert exercise of power.⁶ In this sense, Webster calls for reason's service only after it has been chastened and transformed by the triune God. In Webster's opinion, reason operates theologically out of a necessary contingency, one that allows for its contribution only after God's Spirit has torn it down and built it back up.

As a product of the Enlightenment period, it is true that John Wesley had a cultural proclivity to regard reason highly. The most telling indication of this sensibility is his oft-repeated claim that faith is always consistent with reason.⁷ His account of reason largely evaluated it as context-independent, for he thought of it as a faculty of the human soul that exerted itself through simple apprehension, judgment, and discourse.⁸

is possible, no doubt, but it is contentious in that it at least initially assumes the viability and coherence of something a-contextually referred to as "reason" that in turn requires sanctification. In other words, the self-standing notion of "reason" itself is problematic given late-modern sensibilities (and Webster is well aware of these as he relates them in chapter 1 of *Confessing God* [London: T & T Clark, 2005]). With its subsequent sanctification, however, Webster does grant reason a context and tradition-based logicity that is not implicitly self-deriving; therefore, perhaps what is needed in a more sustained fashion from Webster is an account of sinful or fallen rationality.

⁶One effort that engages in this kind of work is Alasdair MacIntyre's *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).

⁷See for instance *The Case of Reason Impartially Considered* in Albert C. Outler, ed., *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley, volumes 1-4* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984-1987), II, 593. All subsequent references to Wesley's sermons will be drawn from this edition and indicated by volume and page number alongside the sermon title in italics.

⁸*The Case of Reason Impartially Considered*, II, 590. For surveys, see Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 40-44 and Rebekah H. Miles, "The Instrumental Role of Reason," in W. Stephen Gunter, et. al., eds. *Wesley and the Quadrilateral* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 77-106.

His appeal to reason (usually alongside Scripture) was pivotal for his arguments against enthusiasm as well as antinomianism. In this sense, there is no denying that the sensibilities at play between Webster and Wesley are significantly different, for these are forged not simply from varying theological impulses, but are also indicative of different cultural and philosophical contexts, ones separated by centuries.

And yet, Wesley wished to acknowledge limits to what reason could do. In his estimation reason was dangerously idolized (a remarkable claim from a person in the eighteenth century),⁹ and it could not produce either the theological virtues or happiness. Despite the obvious pressure to pursue the matter in a unilateral way, he was keen to walk a middle path between devaluing and excessively esteeming reason. For instance, Webster's emphasis on the contingency of reason's possibilities finds resonances in Wesley; as the latter noted, "Is it not reason (assisted by the Holy Ghost) which enables us to understand what the Holy Scriptures declare concerning the being and attributes of God?"¹⁰ Also, Wesley remarks to those who would undervalue reason, "Unless you willfully shut your eyes, you cannot but see of what service [reason] is both in laying the foundation of true religion, under the guidance of the Spirit of God, and in raising the whole superstructure."¹¹ Therefore, admittedly two different accounts of reason are at play in Webster and Wesley. For the former, reason has to be reconciled to God since it has sinful proclivities; for the latter, reason requires illumination or awakening because of its limits. And yet both would admit that a pneumatological shaping and work are required for reason to attain its proper and fitting function in apprehending the holy mysteries.

A key departure, however, between these two figures would most likely take place in terms of how and to what degree this pneumatological action is understood within the life of the church. To summarize some of Webster's orienting concerns, a holy theology has a specific context and content (the revelatory presence of the Holy Trinity) as set forth through a particular norm and limit (Holy Scripture) that takes place within a specific modality (prayerful dependence upon the Holy Spirit) among a certain fellowship (the holy people of God) for a distinct purpose (the sanctifying of God's name). In most of these aspects, Webster sets out the preliminaries

⁹*The Circumcision of the Heart*, I, 410.

¹⁰*The Case of Reason Impartially Considered*, II, 592.

¹¹*The Case of Reason Impartially Considered*, II, 599.

associated with his trinitarian dogmatics of holiness in ways Wesleyans would find agreeable, if not helpful and edifying. The one feature of Webster's first chapter that Wesleyans would probably want to press would be the way Webster frames the modality in which a theology of holiness is pursued (namely through a pneumatological conditionedness) and what that would mean for the theologian pursuing the theological task.

If reason is to be reconciled to God, a matter worth pursuing would be: And what is the nature of the transformation required? Webster repeatedly admits the fallen nature of reason and its need to be reconciled to God in order to be put to use for holy ends; however, remarkable in this elaboration is the truncated nature of the transformation itself: it extends to reason *qua* reason. The matter becomes a bit clearer when one reconsiders how Webster defines dogmatics in the first place: "Dogmatics is that delightful activity in which the Church praises God by ordering its *thinking* towards the gospel of Christ."¹² In other words, dogmatics for Webster is an intellectual enterprise and as such requires the sanctification of its operational mechanisms for it to serve the purposes of God.

Webster continues in this section by citing the famous dictum of Barth that the first and basic act of theological work is prayer,¹³ one that Webster acknowledges could sound strange, ludicrous, or overly mythologized and idealized when speaking of "intellectual work," i.e., "rational activities which make up the study of divinity."¹⁴ He goes on to say, "And faced with this suspicion, might it not be less embarrassing to make a much softer claim—about the pious disposition or spiritual virtues of the theologian? But talk of theology as the exercise of holy reason is not just talk of a certain setting of the theologian's affections; in the last analysis, holiness is not a psychological or a religious quantity. Reason is holy because God acts upon reason, arresting its plunge into error and freeing it from its bondage to our corrupt wills and our hostility to God."¹⁵

¹²*Holiness*, 8 (emphasis added).

¹³Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 160. Barth makes a related point early in the *Church Dogmatics*: "We simply confess the mystery which underlies it, and we merely repeat the statement that dogmatics is possible only as an act of faith, when we point to prayer as the attitude without which there can be no dogmatic work" (G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, eds., *Church Dogmatics*, I/1 [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975], 23).

¹⁴*Holiness*, 24-25.

¹⁵*Holiness*, 25.

The Wesleyan emphasis would be quite clear and distinct at this juncture. By defining dogmatics as primarily an intellectual endeavor, Webster points to the need for reason's transformation, but all the while this account of reason presents it in disembodied form; it would seem that *mortificatio et vivificatio* are not simply acts that relate to reason *per se* but more generally to the practitioner of holy reason. The matter is not necessarily reducible to psychological or religious quantities; one need not engage in a kind of holy metrics here for the point to stand nevertheless. Reason can only be considered as a function of human bodies; reason is an operation of human selves in all of their multifunctional capacities. Therefore, if the sanctification of reason is required prolegomenally for the pursuit of a trinitarian dogmatics of holiness, it is difficult to come away from that acknowledgment without attending to the sanctification of the practitioner of holy reason, the circumcision of this one's heart, and to do so intentionally at this prolegomenal stage.¹⁶ A Wesleyan concern would run thus: Do not the affections,¹⁷ the spiritual senses, and the overall spiritual life of the theologian significantly shape the theological task when at stake in this endeavoring is the apprehension of the Holy One of Israel, the one who commands love as the primary disposition to have both in relation to God's very self and one's neighbor?¹⁸

¹⁶Wesley's "heart theology" is not simply the repetition of a pious sensibility; it emerges from a lineage of reflection that recognizes the integrated nature of the intellect, will, and affections. The trajectory would include figures like Augustine and Pascal, as James R. Peters has recently documented in his study *The Logic of the Heart* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009). In Peters' estimation, reason is "radically embedded" in that for it to function properly it has to be "informed by the intuitions of the heart as it is nurtured by historically constituted traditions of belief and practice" (16). In this manner, Peters is navigating a path between the Enlightenment's emphasis on rational autonomy and postmodernity's poetics of self-creation.

¹⁷And of course, the account of the affections operative here is specifically Wesleyan and not the mishmash of psychobabble that is standard fare in our contemporary environs. For a work that documents the transitions of affective language within the Anglophone world, see Thomas Dixon, *From Passions to Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

¹⁸A beautiful section from *The Circumcision of the Heart* is apropos here: "Here then is the sum of the perfect law: this is the true 'circumcision of the heart.' Let the spirit return to God that gave it, with the whole train of its affections. . . . Other sacrifices from us he would not; but the living sacrifice of the heart he hath chosen. Let it be continually offered up to God through Christ, in flames of holy love" (I, 413).

Precisely here do the concerns raised by Wesley's epistemology come to bear, for his emphasis on the spiritual senses, ones that are awakened and vitalized by the Spirit's work, runs crucial. Wesley operates from the assumption that we need to grow sensible to God in order to apprehend the things of God. Without the realization of the work of the Spirit in one's life, the presence of God does not make an impression on one's soul, thereby disabling one from discerning and sensing what God is doing and what God's purposes are.¹⁹ With this new birth, one enters, as it were, into another world²⁰ in which one's eyes of understanding are opened so that one "may properly be said to live."²¹

One would think that Webster would touch on this affective matter more, given his reference to the Barth quote on prayer, but also because he devotes a subsection of this first chapter on the "fear of the Lord." Drawing on the dominant motif across the whole of Christian Scripture, Webster remarks, "Theology is a work in which *holiness is perfected in the fear of God*. The perfection of holiness—that is, its completion or fulfillment—involves the fear of God."²² What does Webster mean by the fear of God? In a sense, he is suggesting that the fear of God be construed as an apophatic mechanism, as a limit to reason's penchant to overextend irreverently its reach: "Reason can only be holy if it resists its own capacity for idolatry, its natural drift towards the profaning of God's name by making common currency of the things of God. A holy theology, therefore, will be properly mistrustful of its own command of its subject-matter; modest; aware that much of what it says and thinks is dust."²³

This apophatic concern is well-taken and justifiable from the biblical witness,²⁴ but again, the very language itself suggests an affective (rather than simply cognitive) register.²⁵ The "fear of the Lord" can extend to the

¹⁹See *The Great Privilege of Those that are Born of God*, I, 434.

²⁰*The Great Privilege of Those that are Born of God*, I, 432.

²¹*The New Birth*, II, p. 193 (emphasis in original).

²²*Holiness*, 27 (emphasis in original).

²³*Holiness*, 28.

²⁴I have made similar arguments in "The Fear of the Lord as Theological Method," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 2 (2008), 147-160.

²⁵It is not that Webster is unaware of the affective dimension of holiness; he mentions in *Confessing God* that "As revealer and reconciler, God's presence converts creatures to holiness, a holiness which embraces not only the moral and affective life but also the life of reason" (4). The deeper matter would be if the affective register is applicable and integral to rationality as a whole.

resistance to forming idols, but such a sensibility runs deeper than simply a circumscription of intellectual functioning. From one important angle, at the heart of idolatry is disordered love, not muddled thinking. If the “fear of the Lord” is a disposition in which holiness is perfected, then one has to wonder: Where and in whom does this perfection take place? Why and how does it do so? Is the fear of God strictly an intellectual disposition or does it run deeper?

All of these concerns point to embodiment: it is not simply the abstract trope of the “fear of God” that is the beginning of a *practical* notion such as “wisdom”; rather, the “fear of God” means nothing without “God-fearers,” instantiations in which this notion is registered and operative because its very nature as a holy disposition means that it can only do conceptual work as it is on display in someone who is inclined in a certain way. Again, the Wesleyan push would be against abstraction and toward embodiment: Holy reason is non-generative apart from its holy practitioner who cultivates and exercises it. If the former requires crucifixion and resurrection by the work of the Holy Spirit, then so does the latter.

The Doctrine of God

When moving to the doctrine of God, Webster is keen to point out how divine attribution is often out of kilter, particularly since the metaphysical features of such endeavoring have a way of highlighting certain attributes more than others as a way of contriving a more generalizable divinity. Therefore, “capacity attributes” have tended to overshadow “character attributes,” and such a move has a way of marginalizing trinitarian dogma from shaping in any significant way the negotiation of the being of God. One can only assume that such endeavoring would tend to minimize the place of holiness among the divine attributes.²⁶ To put the matter bluntly, holiness is often perceived to be unnecessary for those seeking to portray divinity as the ground of all being and the primal cause of all that is rather than the active, self-revealing triune God within the economy of redemption.²⁷

²⁶Colin Gunton was right to point out that holiness defies these categories within divine attribution: “Do we not want to say both that holiness is a form of action and relation to and in the world and that it is something that characterizes the being of God in himself, absolutely; that God is not only holy in his action, especially . . . on the cross of Christ, but that he is eternally the holy one?” (*Act and Being* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003], 24).

²⁷*Holiness*, 35.

Webster wishes to correct this approach by locating divine attribution within the simplicity of God: God is what God does. God does not just act in holy ways, but God is holy (with the subject determining the predicate in an irreversible way within this simple declaration). This strategy helps keep at bay nominalist tendencies, but it also points to the particular identity of God, an idea Webster subsumes under the heading of "God's name." In sum, "holiness is a predicate of the personal being, action and relation of the triune God, of God's concrete execution of his simplicity; it is not a quality in abstraction, but an indicator of God's 'name.'"²⁸ From this basis, Webster moves to consider God's identity by what God does, thereby rendering holiness not simply an attribute of God's essence but of God's character.

In a very real way, holiness problematizes a distinction within divine attribution that has been perpetuated for too long, namely the absolute-relative differentiation. One suspects that this category difference is related to the way the doctrine of God has circulated in terms of "*ad intra-ad extra*," or "immanent-economic." The bifurcation is deeply problematic since it potentially compartmentalizes God's identity because of a metaphysical sensibility. Yes, it is true that God is both transcendent to the world and yet deeply related to it; nevertheless, the recognition of this dialectic through the stratification of divine attributes in one or another category is detrimental for the doctrine of God in the long-run; it makes the God-cosmos distinction unflatteringly decisive for the negotiation of the divine identity.²⁹ God is holy, and as such, "holiness is a mode of God's activity; talk of God's holiness identifies the manner of his relation to us."³⁰ Another way of putting the matter is to say that "an essential condition . . . for making dogmatic sense of God's holiness is to avoid the polarizing of majesty and relation; the divine distance and the divine approach are one movement in God's being and act."³¹

Webster's dogmatic instincts are very helpful for Wesleyans. He takes the opportunity to raise holiness as a divine attribute that problematizes the activity of divine attribution as it has been pursued for some time.

²⁸*Holiness*, 39.

²⁹The contributions of Barth, Krötke, Schwöbel, and Gunton (in addition to Webster) have helped on this particular point within divine attribution; I have tried to extend this logic with my work on divine impassibility.

³⁰*Holiness*, 41.

³¹*Holiness*, 42.

Holiness is not the kind of topic that can easily be categorized or delimited because of prior ontotheological commitments as expressed in a conceptually architectonic scheme. Nevertheless, holiness can reinvigorate the negotiation of the doctrine of God in that it ties God's essence and character in a narratively economic-shaped fashion (namely, as it is on display in God's covenant-establishing and covenant-keeping disposition towards God's people). All of these gestures point to a general weakness within Wesleyan construals of holiness, ones that could be shored up by Webster's reflections.

The Wesleyan fellowship has a penchant to depict holiness within matters soteriological. Such is the case because of the inclination toward the "practical" by its founder. The sub-tradition's inclinations to promote holy living and experiential accoutrements (including assurance and entire sanctification/Christian perfection) all potentially contribute to the de-theologizing of holiness if the latter suggests a de-emphasizing of theology proper, the doctrine of God.³² But whatever Wesleyans want to make of it, the holy life has to be grounded in a dogmatic account of a holy God, and perhaps this underdeveloped relationship within the Wesleyan fellowship has made holiness as a motif within this sub-tradition tenuous with the passing of revivalist fervor. Of course, as a revivalist movement founded by a revivalist preacher, Wesleyanism has been at pains to pursue the dogmatic task in a manner that draws from its heritage. However, the time is ripe to pursue what a dogmatic account of the doctrine of God (which would include as one of its basic concerns the endeavoring of divine attribution) would look like within the Wesleyan fellowship,³³ and perhaps Webster could be a great

³²Wesley did develop his views on the interrelationship between divine attribution and Christian formation. As Maddox remarks, "Wesley became increasingly convinced of the formative (and *deformative*) influence of our understanding of these attributes toward the end of his ministry, publishing several sermons on them" (*Responsible Grace*, 51). Examples would include *The Unity of the Divine Being* and *On the Omnipresence of God*.

³³Many, I am sure, believe this activity is already underway among Wesleyans and Methodists because of their associations with metaphysical currents such as process, open, and relational theologies. Certainly these groups, each in its own distinct way, has contributed working proposals toward this end. Nevertheless, symptomatic of many of these developments and their multiple instantiations has been the penchant for trivializing (and maybe even caricaturing) past metaphysical proposals as a way of creating conceptual space for alternatives. Such a move can only jeopardize the degree to which these working proposals can relate in a sustained way to what is on offer within the Wesleyan corpus, one that is, among many things, simultaneously deeply patristic and Anglican.

ally in such a task given his inclination to emphasize so prominently the holiness of God as he strives to make theology more theological.

Holiness and the Christian Life

Perhaps the most strident parting of ways between Webster and Wesleyans would be in relation to the way holiness plays out in the lives of Christians, both collectively and individually. At the onset of these discussions (beginning with chapter 3), Webster wishes to counter social trinitarian programs that utilize participatory language in some Hegelian-like fashion. Webster wishes to avoid the compromising of God's free majesty,³⁴ and so he finds the coinherence of the work of God and the work of the church potentially problematic. Rather than participation, Webster prefers the language of election because he believes that in this way the integrity of holiness is preserved: "Where the social trinitarian language of participation emphasizes the continuity, even coinherence, of divine and ecclesial action, the language of election draws attention to the way in which the Church has its being in the ever-fresh work of divine grace."³⁵ The church is what it is on the basis of divine gratuity, and because of this reality, Webster believes there is some modicum of wisdom in saying that the "Church's sanctity is an *alien* sanctity, a non-possessable holiness."³⁶ As a summary of the point, he states, "The Church is holy; but it is holy, not by virtue of some ontological participation in the divine holiness, but by virtue of its calling by God, its reception of the divine benefits, and its obedience of faith. Like its unity, its catholicity and its apostolicity, the Church's holiness is that which it is by virtue of its sheer contingency upon the mercy of God."³⁷

The logic of Webster's claims runs as follows: The church's holiness is not something that can be grasped or claimed but rather something that is made possible by divine initiative and gratuity. The language of participation runs certain risks that the language of election does not in terms of recognizing that ongoing dependence. In this sense, the church's holiness is an alien holiness, a *sanctitas passiva*, dependent on the work of God and not on anything inherent to the human condition. Webster here bolsters his

³⁴Another way Webster speaks of God's holy singularity is God's "majestic incomparability" as a result of the divine perfection (*Confessing God*, 116).

³⁵*Holiness*, 56.

³⁶*Holiness*, 56.

³⁷*Holiness*, 57.

claims through repeated reference to the Epistle to the Ephesians as well as to John Calvin, authorities that make sense given that this reading is significantly Reformed. He does consider an “active sanctification,” which is largely adumbrated through the notion of confession. The church confesses and bears witness to the name of God, and as it does so, it practices its alien holiness. Once again, any notion of “active sanctification” need not revert to participatory language in Webster’s estimation since at play here are not so much ontological claims as “soteriology and its fruits.”³⁸

Webster’s trinitarian dogmatics of holiness reaches a point with these reflections where Wesleyans would have some difficulty. Webster assumes a Reformed anthropology throughout his remarks regarding the church’s alien sanctity, but he does not bring it to the fore for scrutiny. This anthropology generates more theological momentum from the fall than creation, and it eclipses participatory language on the ground of an alleged requirement that it could only function logically with a native or “natural” capacity, one that is somehow a-theological because it would be responsive and so self-referentially human. In other words, Webster treads the well-travelled Protestant road that would suggest that human involvement would take away from God’s primordially. In a remark that would only make sense to a certain kind of Protestant sensibility, Webster suggests, “In the Church’s practices of holiness, therefore, its action is wholly oriented towards the action of the Holy Trinity, in electing, gathering and consecrating. The Church’s acts do not realize, complete, continue or in any way extend or embody God’s work, which is perfect, and which alone is properly holy.”³⁹

In his final chapter, dedicated to the “holiness of the Christian,” Webster dissociates himself from non-Reformed positions, ones with which Wesleyans would have some affinity. The characterizations here are brief, but, unfortunately, they require more from Webster for a proper engagement to ensue. For instance, he remarks, “Our thinking about sanctification would be disorderly if we were to suggest that . . . when we move to speak of human holiness we are required to shift to talk of our own agency, perhaps co-operating with God, perhaps rendering God his due in return for the gift of salvation. But, if we are elected to holiness, then we have been extracted from the sphere of human autonomy; the Christian’s holiness does not stem from the Christian’s decision.”⁴⁰ At another

³⁸*Holiness*, 62.

³⁹*Holiness*, 72.

⁴⁰*Holiness*, 79-80.

point, Webster raises the importance of rooting sanctification in justification so that “justification prohibits any conversion of sanctification into ethical self-improvement, as if justification were merely an initial infusion of capacities which are then activated through moral or spiritual exertion.”⁴¹ Finally, when speaking of the presence and work of the Spirit, Webster affirms:

The secret energy of the sanctifying Spirit of God is not another way of talking of our own secret energies, and is not to be conceived as an infused power which stimulates human acts of holiness. To think in such terms would simply be to lose the reference of Christian holiness back to the triune work of grace, and turn sanctification into an acquired sufficiency. The Christian's sanctity is in Christ, in the Spirit, not *in se*; it is always and only an alien sanctity. Sanctification does not signal the birth of self-sufficiency, rather it indicates a “perpetual and inherent lack of self-sufficiency.” Sanctification “in” the Spirit is not the Spirit's immanence in the saint. Quite the opposite: it is a matter of the *externality* of *sanctitas christiana*, the saint being and acting in *another*. “Sanctification in the Spirit” means: it is not I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And “Christ who lives in me” means: by the Spirit's power I am separated from my self-caused self-destruction, and given a new holy self, enclosed by, and wholly referred to, the new Adam in whom I am and in whom I act.⁴²

With such sentiments in regard to the way holiness is appropriated and on display within the economy of salvation, Webster inevitably parts ways with how Wesleyans would be compelled to narrate the matter. Plenty is on offer in Webster for Wesleyans to ponder and utilize in their dogmatic thinking about holiness, but the juncture has arrived for distinct accents to be pointed out, not so much for polemical reasons but for purposes of clarifying the varying emphases that exist across confessional lines, emphases that, when brought to the fore, can be “for the good of the whole.” What follows are constructive suggestions for how a Wesleyan trinitarian dogmatics of holiness would take shape in light of Webster's helpful sketch.

⁴¹*Holiness*, 81.

⁴²*Holiness*, 83-84 (italics in original and quote drawn from G. C. Berkouwer, *Faith and Sanctification* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952], 83).

Working Proposals for a Wesleyan Trinitarian Dogmatics of Holiness

1. **First, Wesleyans generally find the Irenaean-Athanasian exchange principle (“God became human so that humans could become God-like”) compelling.**⁴³ Their inclination to do so rests on their account of divine gratuity. The triune God presences Godself within a fallen and profane world for the purposes of healing and repairing it. This act of healing and repairing is ultimately a gesture of hospitality, one that shares the divine self with that which is alienated from it, in turn beckoning it to fulfill and live into its original purposes. The divine presencing, in other words, alters that which surrounds it in a fearful and wonderful way. Such gestures need not take away from the primordially of God; they do not take away from God’s glory or in some way dignify that which is not-God so that God’s self is cheapened. Quite the contrary: the Wesleyan sensibility is that such gestures of transformative hospitality show all the more that the triune God ekstasically seeks the prodigal child and brings him home in a restorative way.⁴⁴ As Wesley repeats on more than one occasion, this healing is not simply one of identity (what God does *for* us, and so a *relative* change) but of ontology as well (what God does *in* us, and so a *real* change).⁴⁵

Webster’s strategy for maintaining the primordially of God, as God is active within the economy of grace, is through the language of election. By its very logic, the gesture avoids the dangers of assuming the co-extension of the work of God and of God’s people that could include idolatry and projection. The concern is valid, but does it necessarily exclude participatory language? Wesleyans would answer in the negative, but they can do so only because of their assumed conceptual and linguistic conventions related to the way divine grace is prevenient to all that follows in the healing of the world.

⁴³The appeal would be related not only to Wesley’s Anglican heritage (in which participation language plays a role) but also Wesley’s own sensibilities as they developed through his reading of such figures as Macarius and Ephraem Syrus. However, the sensibility and appeal should not be taken as an outright endorsement of the Eastern notion of deification, as Ted Campbell has pointed out (*John Wesley and Christian Antiquity* [Nashville: Kingswood, 1991], 66).

⁴⁴Wesleyans would respond positively to how Webster elsewhere notes the way divine holiness and love mutually condition one another: “God is holy as he loves the creature; his love for his creature is holy love” (*Confessing God*, 120).

⁴⁵*Justification by Faith*, I, 187, *The Great Privilege of Those that are Born of God*, I, 431-432, *The Scripture Way of Salvation*, II, 158, and *The New Birth*, II, 187.

The Wesleyan sensibility is that something is at stake ontologically in these matters, something that the language of election may or may not include. The sensibility is informed from at least two major features of the Wesleyan theo-logic: the Johannine witness and the work of the Holy Spirit. Both are intertwined at key junctures, including the "Farewell Discourse" of John's Gospel (*inter alia*, the promise of the Holy Spirit in John 14 and 16, the "abiding" language of John 15, and the coinherence language of Jesus' prayer over the disciples in John 17). The logic is also expressible through a prominent theme in the Johannine literature, namely the "new birth," which Wesley repeatedly recalls is a work of the Spirit.⁴⁶ The Christian life, then, can and has been understood by Wesleyans and others as participatory in such a fashion that God's majestic incomparability perdures; a growth in the divine similitude need not lead to an absorption or conflation but can be a feature of the Creator-creation dynamic based on the hospitality of the divine gratuity.

2. Second, God seeks out to heal and repair the creation because it is properly, definitively, and exhaustively God's creation. Any good that is in the creation, both pre- and post-fall, is attributable to God's merciful and loving disposition and work toward and within God's creation: "Whatever righteousness may be found in man, this also is the gift of God."⁴⁷ For all the emphasis Webster places on the divine initiative, its infelicitous juxtaposition is a "de-theologized nature." A robust account of creation, however, cannot accommodate such a category.⁴⁸ To recall the Augustinian notion, all that is, in that it *is*, is good, and this goodness is secured theologically via the divine splendor as expressed through the Creator's creation. For this reason, receptivity is the primary disposition of the creation to the Creator, but it is of a kind that is multifaceted in Wesleyan key. This multidimensional receptivity is *en via*, a kind of *reditus* or a "spiritual respiration."⁴⁹ Yes, confession is involved in this process, but so are a number of other liturgical acts, including repentance, sacrifice, praise, proclamation, and so forth, and all of these, as they are practiced

⁴⁶See *The New Birth* (II, 186-201) for the development of this theme, one that largely depends on Nicodemus' encounter with Jesus in John 3.

⁴⁷*Salvation by Faith*, I, 118. The running theme here is of "grace upon grace," one that Wesley draws from John 1:16.

⁴⁸"There is no man, unless he has quenched the Spirit, that is wholly void of the grace of God" (*On Working Out Our Own Salvation*, III, 207).

⁴⁹*The New Birth*, II, 193.

and embodied in doxological mode are, because of the presence and work of the Holy Spirit, characterizing and shaping the ones engaged in them.⁵⁰

It is on the basis of a specific account of a God-graced creation, one that recognizes God's prevenient action in all that is possible within the economy, that divine and human agency are non-competitive for Wesleyans.⁵¹ God and God's creation do not vie for the same space. The divine gratuity is spacious enough for humans to come back to the extended arms of the welcoming parent as a "kind of spiritual re-action" in which the *ruach* of life is rendered back "in unceasing love, and praise, and prayer."⁵²

3. Third, Wesleyans would hold that the way holiness is understood to function within the divine life on display within God's economy has to have corollaries with the manner in which it functions within ecclesial life and the life of individual piety. If the holiness of God is not only tied to God's incomparability but also understandable and relatable as a divine character attribute, one that is on display over time and characterizes the very identity of God as God relates Godself in covenant partnership with God's people, then Wesleyans would find its appropriation (however initially alien) by the created order to be analogously negotiable. As Maddox notes of the Wesleyan perspective, "Every major attribute or action of God [has] implications for understanding what humans are to be and to do."⁵³ What is being envisioned here is not so much a "holiness by works" but a growing conformity to the divine nature that is operative because of the promise inherent to the divine command:⁵⁴ "Be holy as your heavenly Father is holy."⁵⁵

⁵⁰Both Webster and Wesley would recognize features of this doxological mode, but Wesley brings out the formative side of the matter in a more explicit and integral way. My thanks to Randy Maddox for suggesting this compact manner of expression, one on display in a number of his works related to the "practical" nature of theological reflection.

⁵¹The point is a running motif in *On Working Out Our Own Salvation*; one quote brings out the interplay: "For, first, God works; therefore, you *can* work. Secondly, God works; therefore, you *must* work" (III, 206).

⁵²*The Great Privilege of Those that are Born of God*, I, 435-436.

⁵³*Responsible Grace*, 50.

⁵⁴As Albert Outler helpfully notes of the Wesleyan position, "All moral commands in Scripture are also 'covered promises,' since God never commands the impossible and his grace is always efficacious in every faithful will" (see his "Introduction" to Wesley's sermon corpus in I, 58).

⁵⁵Webster can make a complementary claim here: "The 'You shall be holy' which corresponds to 'I am holy' is not simply the indication of a state; it is a life-

Wesley hails this point as culminating in the notion of having the mind of Christ, for humans are beings created in the divine image who are to live into the divine likeness: "Gospel holiness is no less than the image of God stamped upon the heart. It is no other than the whole mind which was in Christ Jesus. It consists of all heavenly affections and tempers mingled together in one."⁵⁶ A distinct anthropology is at work here, one that tends to be quite optimistic in terms of what is possible this side of the resurrection and Pentecost; it recognizes the malleability and growing conformity and maturity available to the believer, given that the call to perfection made throughout the Scriptural testimony is both pressing and demanding in the present *kairos*.

4. Fourth, for Wesleyans holiness is a way of life and theology a spiritual discipline because the life of a Christian is one of following and imitating the life of Jesus. For Wesleyans, to have the "mind of Christ" is to have the "heart of Christ."⁵⁷ This recognition assumes, then, that the call to holiness involves the fullness of the human experience. Mortification and vivification by the Spirit is work undertaken upon the entire self by God's mercy. As rational, desiring animals within time and space, that process implies a Spirit-enabled performance, one that recognizes the radical embeddedness of human selves in which activity is self-shaping and self-characterizing. The "new Adam" has to be appropriated and lived into for the sake of the veracity of confession and witness both to believers and the wider world alike.

The point is available in variegated ways depending on one's "canon within the canon." With the blatant risk of overgeneralizing notwithstanding, one could say in light of the history of biblical interpretation that the Pauline notion of holiness tends to be more passive than active and more centered on what Christ has done for us than on what Christ-followers do out of responsive gratitude and obedience. But if one relates the Pauline corpus with the other major collection of epistles within the New Testament, the Catholic Epistles, one sees the scriptural warrants for Wesley's "both-and" form of reasoning. As my colleague Robert W. Wall has noted:

giving imperative which bids the creature to inhabit and act out of the role to which the creature has been appointed by the Father's purpose" (*Confessing God*, 123).

⁵⁶*The New Birth*, II, 194.

⁵⁷The point is derivable from a number of places within the Wesleyan corpus, including *Scriptural Christianity*, I, 174-175 and *Sermon on the Mount, Discourse I*, I, 481.

From the perspective of the New Testament when taken as a whole witness to God's gospel, if the certain sound of Paul's letters interprets holiness as the singular effect of divine action upon the church, its complement witness in the collection of the Catholic Epistles exhorts this same community to respond actively in holy ways. In other words, the biblical witness to the holy life is more full than an accounting of God's purifying grace upon the sinful heart through faith in Christ alone; it includes a description of the holy life that exchanges those impure practices that might contaminate fellowship with God and one another for those virtues that engage the world with works of mercy and justice.⁵⁸

Humans are called to live into the likeness of Christ and to do so through a form of moral habituation in which growing conformity to the divine character would ensue in an increasingly freely and eudaimonistic way.⁵⁹ In other words, holiness, as understood in one sense within the economy of God's self-revelation and call, is a moral category. As a character attribute on display in God's covenant life and fulfilled and climaxed in the life of Jesus, so holiness is to be a character attribute of God's covenant people as they relate to God, one another, and everything else that is.

Conclusion

John Webster's *Holiness* is an engaging and promising proposal for considering holiness, not so much as phenomenological experience or as a criterion of serious piety but truly as a feature of engaged and focused reflection within Christian dogmatics. It is a proposal that Wesleyans ought to ponder and engage so that they can appreciate the catholicity of their commitments, all the while recognizing their important deviations from and charisms on offer to other constituencies within the church. Hopefully, this essay is only the beginning of an ongoing and fruitful endeavoring not simply related to Wesleyan readings and appropriations of Webster but also in terms of the dogmatic task within Wesleyan and Methodist circles more broadly.

⁵⁸Robert W. Wall, "Practicing Holiness: A New Testament Perspective," in Daniel Castelo, ed., *Holiness as a Liberal Art* (Eugene: Pickwick, forthcoming).

⁵⁹In this regard, as D. Steven Long has helped us see, Wesley's vision of the embodied Christian life is more in line with the category of moral theology than Christian ethics, the former requiring an operative account of God as the *sum-mum bonum* (see *John Wesley's Moral Theology* [Nashville: Kingswood, 2005]). Because of this inclination, Wesley would have more in common with Thomists like Servais Pinckaers than many drawing from Kantian, Troeltschian, and other Protestant-affiliated sources and patterns of thought.