As John Wesley contemplated the mediocrity of moral character and the ineffectiveness in social impact of Christians in eighteenth-century England, he became convinced that a central cause was the anemic understanding of salvation assumed so broadly in the church. In response, he focused his renewal efforts on reclaiming an understanding and embodiment of the holistic salvation that he found affirmed in Scripture and the broad Christian tradition. The characteristic doctrinal emphases and distinctive practices of early Methodism were central expressions of these focal efforts, and the resulting spiritual vitality of the movement is well-known.

This vitality is less evident today in the various communities descended from Wesley’s ministry. Both insiders and observers are more likely to speak of mediocrity and ineffectiveness. The only consolation offered is that few other Christian traditions appear to be doing better. Rather than acquiescing in this comparative justification, those who are heirs of Wesley’s renewal movement—like SPU—would do better to ponder whether we have settled for the anemic understanding of salvation that he was challenging. As a backdrop for this reflection, it will be helpful to review briefly the emphases in Wesley’s mature understanding of the salvation that God offers in and through Christ.

Not just forgiveness, spiritual transformation!

The first emphasis shines through in Wesley’s most pointed definition of salvation: “By salvation I mean, not barely (according to the vulgar notion) deliverance from hell, or going to heaven, but a present deliverance from sin, a restoration of the soul to its primitive health … the renewal of our souls after the image of God in righteousness and true holiness, in justice, mercy, and truth” (Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion, Pt. I, §3).

The “vulgar” notion that Wesley is rejecting here reduces salvation to God’s forgiveness of our guilt as sinners, which frees us from future condemnation. While this picks up the theme of Romans 1–3, it omits an equally biblical theme that can be represented by Romans 7–8, where the deepest impact of sin is our spiritual debilitation (“What I want to do, I cannot!”) and God’s gracious gift is the Spirit that enables our spiritual healing. Reflecting the “whole tenor of Scripture,” Wesley encouraged his contemporaries to seek and to enjoy the benefits of truly holistic salvation, where God’s forgiveness is woven into God’s broader gracious purpose of our present spiritual transformation.

Not just for individuals, for society as well!

The second emphasis in Wesley’s understanding of salvation is also hinted at in the definition above. When salvation is focused on forgiveness and “going to heaven” it takes on strong individualistic tones, since these are usually seen as discrete events for each person. By contrast, Wesley insisted that salvation was fundamentally social in nature. In the words of his well-know aphorism: “there is no holiness but social holiness.”

Careful consideration reveals three dimensions in Wesley’s emphasis on the social nature of salvation. The foundational dimension is his conviction that the support and accountability of a community of fellow pilgrims is crucial for growth in Christlikeness. The second dimension is his confidence that the growth nurtured in community will find expression in our lives, moving us not only to avoid doing harm to others but to offer aid to all in need. Wesley also recognized the importance of seeking to transform those political and economic structures that cause human suffering. This third dimension of social salvation is particularly evident in his later years, in tracts like Thoughts on the Present Scarcity of Provisions (1773) and Thoughts upon Slavery (1774). Weaving these dimensions together, Wesley urged his followers to support one another in the pursuit of truly holistic salvation, seeking God’s gracious transformation of our lives and of our various social structures.

Not just for souls, for bodies as well!

The third emphasis in Wesley’s understanding of salvation can be illustrated from his instructions to his assistants about their ministry among the Methodist people. He charged them to leave behind books that could provide ongoing guidance, highlighting in particular two works: 1) his abridgement of Thomas a Kempis’s The Imitation of Christ, which Wesley valued as a guide to spiritual health; and 2) Primitive Physick, a collection of medical advice which Wesley provided as a guide to physical health.

Most Methodists today are unaware of the second volume, and scholars who come across it often dismiss it as a collection of “home remedies.” This seriously misjudges its nature and its centrality to Wesley’s ministry. He read broadly on the topic of medicine throughout his life and gathered most of the remedies in Primitive Physick from prominent medical authors.
of his time. This was as much a use of his scholarly gifts
to provide aids for his people as was his collection of
spiritual writings in the Christian Library. Moreover, in
the preface to this volume (and in other publications)
Wesley added advice for promoting wellness to his
suggestions for treating wounds and illnesses. He was not
simply offering cures but promoting physical flourishing.

In other words, Primitive Physick is one
expression of Wesley’s deep conviction that God the
Great Physician desires to heal soul and body together, to
provide us all with both inward and outward health. While
he allowed that it will be complete only in our resurrected
state, Wesley resisted the tendency to minimize the
physical dimension of this healing work in the present. He
longed for Christians to see that participation in God’s
work of truly holistic salvation involves nurturing not
only our souls but our bodies, and addressing both of
these dimensions in our outreach to others.

Not just for humans, for the whole of creation!

The final emphasis in Wesley’s mature
understanding of salvation is surely the one least familiar
to his present heirs. This emphasis also stood in starkest
contrast to the understanding of salvation of most of his
peers. Although Scripture speaks of our ultimate hope in
terms of the new heavens and new earth, a variety of
philosophical influences had led most Christians by
Wesley’s day to assume that our final state is “heaven
above,” where human spirits dwelling in ethereal bodies
join with all other spiritual beings (no animals!) in
continuous worship of the Ultimate Spiritual Being.
Wesley imbibed this model in his upbringing, and through
the middle of his ministry it was presented as obvious and
unproblematic. But as he continued to probe the biblical
witness to salvation he became convinced that God’s
salvific concern reaches beyond humanity to embrace the
whole creation. This led him to issue late in life
provocative sermons defending the resurrection of
animals (“The General Deliverance,” 1781) and the
inclusion of the very matter of our universe—properly
transformed—in “The New Creation” (1785).

The most significant aspect of Wesley’s
reflection on this cosmic dimension of ultimate salvation
is his sense of its relevance for present Christian life. He
recognized that convictions about God’s ultimate purpose
should serve as guides for what we value now. Thus, he
defended his speculation about God’s future blessings of
animals in “The General Deliverance” on the grounds that
it might provide encouragement for us to imitate now the
God whose “mercy is over all his works.” Lest this be left
in generalities, he frequently exhorted against abusive
treatment of animals. Avoiding such abuse ourselves, and
helping prevent it by others, was one more way that
Wesley believed we can participate in the truly holistic
salvation that God offers in and through Christ.

Continuing Relevance of Wesley’s Agenda

As one comes to appreciate the various emphases
about holistic salvation that Wesley was concerned to
reclaim in his day, it becomes clear that his agenda is far
from completed. To highlight just the first dimension,
popular expositions of genetic and psychological
determinism have convinced most persons today that we
should not hope for significant transformation of our
character—the best we can do is accept the way we are.
Among Christians this acquiescence has taken the form of
reducing salvation implicitly or explicitly to “Christians
are not different, just forgiven.” The need for reclaiming
and defending the biblical affirmation of present spiritual
transformation is still very much with us! Similar
continuing need in the other dimensions of holistic
salvation would be easy to demonstrate.

As we celebrate the 300th anniversary of
Wesley’s birth, we can take pride in the ways in which
SPU reflects Wesley’s emphasis on holistic salvation: a
central goal of our University Foundations courses is to
insure that students are aware of the biblical affirmation of
spiritual transformation and of the rich Christian tradition
of spiritual formation practices; our campus ministry and
faith exploration programs give prominence both to the
supportive role of small groups and to the formative role
of regular participation in service to others; in a variety of
settings students are challenged and trained to become
advocates for those in need; we have a long tradition of
preparing graduates in nursing, wellness, and other
programs who see their care for people’s physical health
as part of their Christian vocation; and we have witnessed
in our midst a small, but committed, band who have
modeled God’s care for the whole creation.

If Seattle Pacific is to be true to our heritage,
however, we cannot rest content with the present positive
expressions. Like Wesley himself, we continue to seek even more faithful ways for SPU to witness to and to embody the holistic salvation that God offers to all. This ongoing mission has implications for the full spectrum of the university. To return to the first dimension of Wesley’s emphasis, there is need not only for teaching but for primary scholarship in fields ranging from psychology to genetics that can help counter the present tendency to despair of the possibility of transformation of our spiritual/moral character. Similarly, we can surely become even better at helping our community—students, staff, and faculty—to appreciate and nurture the various aspects of the social dimension of Christian life, countering the overly individualistic currents in our broader culture. Again, we must do more than just continue our support of programs that train persons to promote physical healing and wellness, we are uniquely situated to help our students and the broader culture appreciate more fully just how integrally connected are physical and spiritual health! But perhaps the greatest challenge that we face in this coming century is to take even more seriously God’s concern for the whole of creation. In the midst of frequent polarization over issues of ecology, development, and justice in our culture, what better place could there be than SPU to articulate a vision of the truly holistic scope of God’s salvific concern, and to develop programs for preparing those who take up the vocation of embodying this concern in our troubled world?