

**Prelude to a Dialogue:  
A Response to Kenneth Collins**

Randy L. Maddox

I am honored to be taking part in this collegial dialogue with Kenneth Collins over our respective approaches to interpreting John Wesley's soteriology. I consider it particularly fitting that our dialogue should be set in the annual meeting of the Wesleyan Theological Society. It is a sign of the growing respect for and influence of the WTS that work by two long-time members should be at the center of current discussion in broader Wesley Studies circles.

The purpose of a community of scholars like the WTS is to nurture new insights and approaches, and to foster dialogue over the relative adequacy of resulting proposals. While proponents may take lead roles in such dialogue, the crucial discerning role is played by the scholarly community as a whole. In its probing the community helps individual scholars to uncover our presuppositions, clarify our ambiguities, recognize our limitations, and finetune our proposals. Out of such work comes the best hope for progress toward scholarly consensus on the topics under consideration. I know that I have benefitted greatly from the questions and challenges that many of you have posed to my proposals concerning Wesley's characteristic theological convictions and concern.

No one has been more faithful in offering my work such engagement than Ken, and none have developed alternative proposals that are as comprehensive and thoroughly-researched. Ken's numerous publications have rightly earned him a reputation as a leading interpreter of

Wesley's soteriology. Ken and I have dialogued over differences of interpretation on individual issues in the past, and I think we made some progress in understanding one another better. The best example is the question of how Wesley understood the "faith of a servant" in his later years. Ken raised questions about my suggestion that there was evidence the later Wesley saw the "faith of a servant" as saving faith. In the process of our dialogue we both admitted that the evidence was ambiguous. Ken's concern was to insist that not all of the later Wesley's references to "faith of a servant" are positive, a point that he takes to suggest that the few positive references relate to exceptional situations.<sup>1</sup> My concern was to insist that not all of the references were negative (as they had been earlier), a change that I take to apply more broadly than to just a few exceptional cases.<sup>2</sup> We agree that for the later Wesley not every one with the "faith of a servant" was lost, nor was everyone with such faith necessarily saved. While we continue to differ on the specific nuance of the "faith of a servant," we agree on the important point that Wesley always encouraged those with this faith to keep seeking the deeper assurance that characterizes the "faith of a son."

#### **A Basic Difference in Approaches: "Conjunctive" vs. "Perspectival"**

As I understand it, the goal of this dialogue is broader than consideration of such individual matters. Ken and I have been invited to reflect on each other's overall approach to interpreting Wesley, giving particular attention to our sense of the most basic way in which this approach differs from our own. I am aided in my half of this task by Ken's articulate conclusion to his recent book on Wesley's soteriology.<sup>3</sup> He properly stresses how his presentation moves beyond the many predecessors that have highlighted Wesley's similarities to one or another theological tradition. Instead Ken strives to demonstrate that Wesley's soteriology is truly "conjunctive" in nature, presenting a "well-crafted and intentional synthesis" of the many different emphases found in Scripture, and thus within the family of Christian traditions. This is an ambitious goal, and one with which I am deeply sympathetic. My work focuses as well on highlighting

---

<sup>1</sup>Cf. Kenneth J. Collins, *The Scripture Way of Salvation: The Heart of John Wesley's Theology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1997), 141.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 1994), 127, 155.

<sup>3</sup>Collins, *Scripture Way of Salvation*, 205–207.

how Wesley weaves together emphases that are too often isolated or counterposed in Christian debate. But as I have pursued Wesley's distinctive interweaving of these emphases I have come to doubt that it is best captured by the model of an ideally balanced conjunction of divergent elements.

The foundational assumption of a model of conjunction is that the elements being joined do not include fundamental options that either negate or subsume their alternatives. Items of difference are viewed instead as counterbalancing poles of a continuum between which one can gravitate to an ideally-balanced synthesis. This assumption surely fits the focal elements in some classical Christian debates, but it does not fit universally. The reason for this is that in many classical debates the issue at focus is not whether contending elements should be interrelated, it is disagreement over which element should be considered most *fundamental*—providing the overarching emphasis that subsumes the important truths of the other elements into its larger pattern.

If I understand Ken rightly, he considers the focus of the latter debates to be unfortunate, inevitably leading to less than adequate conjunctions of Christian truth. I believe the focus of these debates is instead natural, and indeed commendable. It reflects the deeply human nature of theological reflection. As meaning-seeking beings we inevitably desire some orienting coherence among our various convictions. As finite and socially-located beings, our sense of this coherence concerning divine truths will finally be perspectival in nature. We can—and *should*—continually test and enrich our perspective by ongoing dialogue with others, but we cannot rise above all perspectives to some ideal conjunctive synthesis.

I could no doubt stop here and we could dialogue just about theoretical models of human theological reflection, but that is not the focal purpose of this event. Besides, such dialogues carried on in the abstract usually prove intractable. Test cases are more helpful, and our respective readings of Wesley offer such a test case. While Ken has tried to demonstrate that Wesley's soteriology offers a *conjunctive* synthesis of the range of Christian divergences, I have argued that it embodies a more *perspectival* interweaving.

To develop this point a bit, I contend that some of the most important differences between Eastern and Western Christian soteriology are perspectival in nature. They are not disagreements about affirming one element of Christian truth or another but about which elements are most

fundamental; that is, which provide the thematic background against which the other elements add their distinctive accents. In *Responsible Grace* I offer a reading of Wesley as one who: (1) was raised in the ecumenical richness and ambiguity of eighteenth-century Anglicanism; (2) gravitated toward the Eastern emphases mediated through Anglicanism during his Oxford years, making them most foundational to his soteriology; (3) developed a heightened appreciation for Western distinctives in the events surrounding 1738; (4) moved increasingly over the next decades to integrate these Western distinctives into his foundational Eastern commitments; (5) repeatedly found it difficult to explain this integrated position in Western terms to his Western opponents; and (6) was not always successful in working out the integration himself. In this last regard I sometimes propose refinements of Wesley's statements, suggest further applications of his principles, and point directions that Wesley's heirs might move in fleshing out his "orienting concern."

Obviously there is much here that can be the subject of debate. Even those who agree with my overall interpretive approach can question my proposed refinements, applications, and the like. At a more general level, those who agree that interpreters of Wesley must finally cast either the characteristically Eastern or Western elements of his theological convictions as most foundational to his overall theology can debate my option for the Eastern. And at the most general level we can debate whether such a choice is either necessary or desirable. Whatever our other disagreements, where Ken and I appear to disagree most fundamentally is at this level. In championing Wesley's theology as a conjunctive synthesis he charges that giving primacy in Wesley's theology to the emphases of one theological tradition over another (as I have done) inevitably distorts it.<sup>4</sup>

Ken's charge will be compelling precisely to the degree that he is successful in offering a truly even-handed conjunctive reading of Wesley. For if I am right about the perspectival nature of some of the central Christian debates concerning soteriology, then not only did Wesley have to opt at points for either a foundationally Eastern or Western perspective but interpreters of his theology are faced with the same choice. Finally they must make either the Western emphases in Wesley's theology most fundamental (working Eastern emphases into this larger pattern) or the

---

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 206–207.

Eastern emphases most fundamental (working Western emphases into this larger pattern).

### **The “Western” Perspective of Collin’s Reading of Wesley**

This leads to my basic suggestion that what Ken actually provides in his recent work is the most nuanced reading yet of Wesley from a foundationally Western perspective. He is particularly adept at showing the inadequacy of one-sidedly “Protestant” or “Catholic” readings of Wesley within this larger Western orientation. But it appears to me that he is less even-handed with more characteristically Eastern emphases, tending to subsume them (as I have argued is natural, one way or the other) within the preferred Western commitments. Since this evaluation dissents from Ken’s stated goal, I will devote my remaining comments to some examples that I believe point out the Western orientation of Ken’s reading.

I will not take the time to repeat here the full sketches I offer in *Responsible Grace* of the different emphases concerning human nature, the fundamental human problem, and the central focus of salvation that came to characterize dominant voices in Eastern and Western Christianity.<sup>5</sup> I capsulized these differences there by talking of the West’s “juridical” emphasis in comparison with the East’s “therapeutic” emphasis. Like all short labels, these two have their limitations. What I intended them to convey is that Western Christianity has tended to make the soteriological issues of guilt and forgiveness foundational to all others, while Eastern Christianity has tended to make the issues of spiritual impairment and healing most foundational. But this is a matter of relative emphasis, not of exclusive treatment. Both sets of issues are biblical, and both branches of the church have classically fit the other set within the larger context of their focal emphasis.

This means that the distinction between “Western” and “Eastern” soteriology is not the simple equivalent of the distinction between justification and sanctification. The mainstream of both branches affirm both of these dimensions of salvation. Their difference lays not in the inclusion or exclusion of any dimension of soteriology, but in what serves as the “defining” dimension, casting other items in terms of its concerns and overtones. For the West this defining dimension has been justification,

---

<sup>5</sup>Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 65–67, 73–77, 82–84, 86, 141–43.

bringing a juridical overtone to the various aspects of soteriology; for the East it has been sanctification, bringing a therapeutic overtone to the same.

### ***Example of Cause or Rationale for Depravity***

To see how this plays out, take the question of human depravity after the Fall. Both branches normatively affirm this depravity. Moreover, debates about the extent of our depravity are less centered between branches than within the Western branch. Where the branches do differ is in their sense of the overall cause or rationale for depravity—the West viewing it more as our deserved *punishment* for the unmitigated guilt of the Original Sin, the East viewing it more as an inevitable debilitating *consequence* of our foolish and arrogant withdrawal from an enlivening relationship with God. The impact of this difference is that the East can hardly conceive that we could restore relationship with God without this counteracting significantly our spiritual debilitation, while the West has had to contend through its history with marginal voices that insist justification does little to offset our continuing sentence of depravity (“Christians are not different, just forgiven”).

How does this relate to Wesley, and our respective readings of Wesley? Both Ken and I note that Wesley’s suggestions about the cause of depravity underwent fluctuation. I have highlighted how his concern manifest in these fluctuations parallels that of the Eastern tradition, and argue that the late Wesley settled upon a stance closer to the Eastern therapeutic model than to Western juridical emphases.<sup>6</sup> By contrast Ken’s discussion of this topic includes no mention of the alternative Eastern approach. He emphasizes solely Wesley’s similarities to the Western (Augustinian) model, then naturally—and quite properly—has to stress how Wesley protected against the potential antinomian distortions of this model.<sup>7</sup> This seems less a “conjunctive” reading than a very nuanced placing of Wesley within the mainstream of Western concerns.

### ***Example of the Basic Meaning of “Grace”***

If distinct emphases concerning the cause and rationale of our fundamental human problem (depravity) are one expression of the perspectival

---

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 78–81

<sup>7</sup>See Collins, *Scripture Way of Salvation*, 32–34.

differences of Eastern and Western Christian soteriology, another is found in their distinct emphases about God's grace as the fundamental solution to this problem.

A primary focus on the issue of guilt has inclined the Western church to define grace most eminently as the *unmerited favor* of God manifest in bestowing pardon for our sin (and for many, in imputing an extrinsic holiness that fits us for glory). With this starting point the West has continually had to address the pastoral danger of emphasizing the unmerited nature of our pardon and/or the extrinsic nature of our imputed holiness in such a fashion as to undercut any role for Christian obedience. The main way of protecting against this has been to insist that God also graciously infuses some "power" for holy living in pardoned believers. The exact nature and extent of that power has been subject to much debate. More importantly, the emphasis on power for holy living (or observing the law in Christian life) has repeatedly provoked among Western Christians fears about reverting to works righteousness rather than relying on "grace alone." The most sophisticated resolution of this fear is to call for counterbalancing grace as unmerited favor with grace as power (often seen as a balancing of Protestant and Roman Catholic emphases).

While sympathetic with the goals of this resolution, Eastern Christians find its polar logic puzzling. Their primary focus on the issue of the spiritual debility resulting from our separation from God has inclined them to define grace most eminently as the *healing energy* of God's restored presence in our lives. They fully agree that God's pardoning initiative in restoring this presence is wholly undeserved, but they concentrate attention on the inherent purpose of grace to awaken and nurture loving response. Most importantly, they see no reason to cast this empowering effect over against the "gratuitous" nature of grace. Quite the contrary—the more we are transformed by participating in God's healing presence, the more deeply we realize how weak and undeserving we are in our own right.

Wesley repeatedly conjoins affirmations of grace as unmerited mercy with insistence that grace is also power for holy living.<sup>8</sup> Ken rightly stresses this and presents it as an example of Wesley balancing in a nuanced fashion Protestant and broadly Catholic (Greek and Roman [his

---

<sup>8</sup>The best example is Sermon 12, "The Witness of Our Spirit," §§15–16, *Works* 1:309–10.

addition]) emphases.<sup>9</sup> But I would suggest that his model of Wesley's "balance" remains perspectively Western. To begin with, he operates within the Western assumption of a polar relationship between grace as unmerited favor and grace as power, framing his arguments in terms of the need to bring one or the other pole back into the picture. And his most passionate arguments are characteristically devoted to the danger that discussions of empowering works of grace will fail to keep focal the notion of grace as the unmerited favor of God, rather than to the polar alternative danger.<sup>10</sup> In other words, when pushed he subtly privileges the notion of grace as "unmerited favor" over that of grace as "healing energy."

This in no way questions Ken's stated desire to truly integrate these two (or show that Wesley does so), but it may raise the question of why this proves so difficult. Eastern theologians have long suggested that what actually undermines this desirable goal in Western soteriology is the broad Western tendency to view grace as some created "thing" God bestows rather than as God's very "presence" shared with us. All created gifts will inevitably be partial, while God's restored presence can have truly holistic affect on our lives. Thus, from an Eastern perspective the most crucial question of all about grace is whether it is a "created" or "uncreated" reality. I have argued that Wesley clearly joins the East in seeing grace as fundamentally God's presence restored in the Holy Spirit, not some "thing" given to us, and that this is foundational to Wesley's holistic understanding of salvation.<sup>11</sup> By contrast, Ken never directly engages the debate between the East and West on this issue. By default his discussion retains the "created grace" overtones of the Western Augustinian tradition, even though I see hints of his uncomfortableness with this.

### ***Example of Assumptions about Divine/Human Cooperation***

Another place where the perspectival differences of Eastern and Western Christian soteriology shine through is in their respective levels of comfort with emphasizing human cooperation with divine grace in salvation. It is well known that Eastern Christianity has never been comfortable with a model of unilateral salvation as found in some Western traditions that affirm unconditional election/reprobation. But most in the West have

---

<sup>9</sup>Collins, *Scripture Way of Salvation*, 19–20.

<sup>10</sup>E.g., Kenneth J. Collins, "The New Birth: John Wesley's Doctrine," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 32.1 (1997): 53–68, p. 65.

<sup>11</sup>Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 86, 119–22.



chafed at these models as well, insisting on some role for requisite human cooperation in the process of salvation. The way in which the resulting Western debates have been framed is telling. The concern is always raised that stress on a requisite role for human cooperation in salvation leads to “works-righteousness,” or the human attempt to “merit” our justification. There are two things to note here, both flowing out of the juridical perspective of the West: First, it is assumed that the decisive soteriological question is “Why are we forgiven?” Second, it is assumed that the necessary condition for forgiveness being gratuitous is the absence of all human agency at some crucial point (i.e., divine and human agency are finally cast in polar relation, just as were grace/mercy and grace/power). The strength of these assumptions is such that even those Western traditions (like the Arminian) which stress most the role of human cooperation in salvation take for granted that there must be at least a brief initial moment of Divine unilateral action to preserve the gratuity of salvation.

Once again, the Eastern branch of the Christian family has tended to be puzzled by this way of putting the issues. Their therapeutic perspective casts the issues in a very different light. For them the most decisive soteriological question is “How are we healed?” In this realm the suggestion that expectation of our continual cooperation with the Great Physician’s ministrations might reflect a lack of trust in the gratuity of salvation makes little sense. Rather, any lack of cooperation is more likely to be censured as revealing ingratitude for the indispensable aid the Physician is freely offering. The issue at stake in our cooperation is not whether we can “merit” what we have received, but whether we will live faithfully in the life-giving regimen designed by our Physician—or neglect it to the detriment of our spiritual health.

In terms of these issues Ken reads Wesley as the epitome of the nuanced Western position. While he highlights and defends Wesley’s “synergism,” he consistently stresses that Wesley also affirmed God’s unilateral action at the decisive moments in the *via salutis* on the specific grounds that this insured salvation was a “pure gift.”<sup>12</sup> I concur entirely with Ken on this point about what Wesley actually says. But while Ken heartily endorses Wesley’s affirmation, this is one of those places where I would suggest that Wesley was retaining a Western assumption that is not essential to his more characteristic Eastern perspec-

---

<sup>12</sup>See esp. Collins, *Scripture Way of Salvation*, 44, 73, 154.

tive. Like many in the Eastern tradition, it is not clear to me why unilateral action by God is necessarily more expressive of the “prevenience” of grace to all human response (which is what Wesley wants to maintain) than is ongoing cooperant interaction between God and humanity.<sup>13</sup> In either case we can surely say with Wesley that we are able to “put to work” only what God is already “working” within us.

Let me develop this point in terms of one of the practical embodiments of this theoretical issue: the relative valuation given to instantaneous and more gradual transitions in Christian life. The connection between these two issues is the common (but debatable) assumption that divine unilateral action must be instantaneous—as a necessary correlate of God’s omnipotence and freedom from temporality. On this assumption, it is typically considered crucial from the Western perspective to insist that at least some transitions in Christian life are *theologically* instantaneous (because gratuitous) whether they are experienced that way psychologically or not. There has also been some tendency to privilege psychological models that highlight instantaneous transitions. With its refusal to privilege unilateral action as the sole (or even prime) expression of God’s prevenience, it is logical that the Eastern perspective would also question the assumption that instantaneous transitions are *theologically necessary* in Christian life. But they are not logically impelled to reject the theological possibility or demean psychological experiences of instantaneous transitions, nor do they typically do so. Their insistence is that *all* of God’s salvific work is cooperant—whatever form it might take.

It is not hard to document that Wesley embraced the standard Western assumption that instantaneous transitions are the necessary correlate of the gratuitous nature of salvation.<sup>14</sup> But in debate over these issues he also conceded that he was not so much defending a psychological model of these transitions as a theological evaluation of them.<sup>15</sup> Building on this point, I argued that the mature Wesley was moving toward a more funda-

---

<sup>13</sup>Consider the analogy of the Cosmological Argument for God’s existence, where it has long been recognized throughout the church that God’s role as “First Cause” is more an ontological claim about God’s ongoing relation to all events than a temporal claim about God’s relation to the origination of the universe.

<sup>14</sup>The clearest examples are in the *NT Notes* comment on Acts 5:31; Letter to Charles Wesley (27 January 1767), *Letters* (Telford) 5:39; and Letter to Ann Loxdale (12 July 1782), *Letters* (Telford) 7:129.

<sup>15</sup>Cf. *Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, Pt. I, §I.5, *Works* 11:107.

mentally Eastern view of instantaneous transitions—where they are honored but not viewed as the sole or mandatory expression of God’s gracious prevenient work in our lives.<sup>16</sup> At least implicitly I also suggested that Wesley’s heirs should consider continuing to move in this direction. Ken has vigorously critiqued this reading of Wesley and its implied suggestion.<sup>17</sup> I fully understand his concerns. They are precisely the right concerns to raise from a nuanced, but still fundamentally Western, perspective.

### *Example of Definitions of Salvation*

Let me touch briefly on just one more example. What difference do their alternative perspectives make to how salvation itself is understood in Eastern and Western branches of Christianity? Within their juridical perspective Western Christians make justification the defining “core” of salvation, and often seem to simply equate the two. As one result they typically are very concerned to maintain precise dividing lines between anything that might precede the moment of justification (as not yet “saving”) and anything that follows it (as not “meriting” justification). Within their therapeutic perspective Eastern Christians make the recovery of health the defining “core” of salvation, readily equating the two. By this they intend most immediately the recovery of spiritual health (sanctification or deification), but they insist that God also works salvifically to affect every dimension of human life to some degree in our present circumstances. Thus, they are very willing to talk about degrees of “salvation” which precede (and make possible) one’s responsive trust in God’s offered pardon—a response that is the condition of one’s ultimate or eschatological “salvation.”<sup>18</sup>

It was precisely Wesley’s characteristic definitions of salvation that first suggested to me his foundationally Eastern perspective. To quote what is perhaps the most articulate example:

---

<sup>16</sup>Cf. Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 153–54.

<sup>17</sup>See esp. Kenneth J. Collins, “Real Christianity as the Integrating Theme in Wesley’s Soteriology: The Critique of a Modern Myth,” *Asbury Theological Journal* 51 (1996): 15–43, p. 28; “The New Birth,” 63 n35, & 64–67; and *Scripture Way of Salvation*, 99, 228 n160, & 232 n89.

<sup>18</sup>Let me note in this regard that when I proposed that Wesley treated Prevenient Grace as the most nascent degree of regeneration or salvation (*Responsible Grace*, 159–60) I was working within this holistic conception of salvation. The salvific affect of Prevenient Grace makes possible but in no way guarantees or precludes the necessity of embracing God’s offered pardon and the assurance this brings of eschatological salvation. Cf. Collins, “New Birth,” 27; and *Scripture Way of Salvation*, 40, 237 n79

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, its original purity; a recovery of the divine nature; the renewal of our souls after the image of God in righteousness and true holiness, in justice, mercy, and truth.<sup>19</sup>

Here it seems obvious that Wesley makes healing the defining “core” of salvation and views the role of justification precisely from this vantage. Yet Ken argues at some length that Wesley’s vantage point for viewing the whole scope of salvation is instead justification.<sup>20</sup> While he goes on to protect carefully an essential place for sanctification, the overall effect seems less a “balance” than a casting of Wesley’s therapeutic emphases within a foundationally Western perspective.

### **Conclusion**

Hopefully these are enough examples to suggest why I believe that what Ken actually provides in his recent work is a reading of Wesley from a foundationally Western perspective. As I said earlier, it is the most nuanced such reading yet. And it is clearly a very plausible reading. But finally I do not find it as adequate as a reading that makes the Eastern elements of Wesley’s soteriology most fundamental. Of course my opinion is of limited value in itself. This is an issue for corporate discernment, and I will be content if I have helped stimulate yet further dialogue in the service of this discernment.

---

<sup>19</sup>*Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, Pt. I, §3, *Works* 11:106.

<sup>20</sup>See esp. Collins, *Scripture Way of Salvation*, 108–109.