A queer and Methodist theology of holiness: strategies for queering Wesley's teaching

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submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Leeds

School of Philosophy, Religion and the History of Science

January 2024

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Acknowledgements

It would certainly not have been possible to complete this thesis without the support and encouragement of very many people, for all of whom I am very thankful. In particular, I would like to thank:

Profs Adriaan van Klinken, Rachel Muers and Johanna Stiebert who have supervised the project and made countless insightful and helpful suggestions. Every time I left a supervision with more faith in my ability to complete the PhD than I arrived with and for that, and much more, I am truly grateful.

The Methodist Church, which provided funding towards the fees as well as allowing a month of study leave to complete the work.

Dr Debbie Herring, the Revd Dr Nicola Price-Tebbutt and Dr Medi Volpe who offered references for me and encouraged my application.

The Revd Dr Martin Wellings who kindly reviewed and offered comments on a draft of chapter 2.

Dr David and Viv Kershaw who very kindly and generously allowed me the use of their flat on my visits to Leeds.

My family and friends for all their support: especially my mother, Prof Diane Rowland, who proof-read the manuscript, the Revd Jenny Pathmarajah for her constant interest and encouragement and the Revd David Goodall for the pints and conversations on my trips to Leeds.

Lastly my husband, the Revd Sam McBratney, without whom I could never have contemplated the possibility of queer holiness and none of this would have been written. I dedicate this thesis to you with all my love.

Abstract

This project explores a queer theology of holiness with reference to Methodist and Wesleyan tradition and understanding. Methodist and Wesleyan writing on holiness has a long history in both the church and the academy but the literature does not engage significantly with queer concerns or identities. Meanwhile, queer theology has only engaged in a limited way with questions of holiness, which has often been experienced and seen as a repressive category, restraining queer bodies, lives and identities rather than contributing to our flourishing. In other words, the discourse of holiness is often used against LGBT+ people but has not yet been re/claimed for queer theology.

This thesis examines approaches to queering texts and traditions that have been used by queer theologians, characterising them as a palette of 'colours of queering', and uses them to create different methodological approaches for queer readings of the texts under consideration. These various approaches to queering are then applied to texts from John Wesley's *Plain Account of Christian Perfection*.

Building on this, a queer theology of holiness is proposed, with a discussion of queer Christian perfection, transformation and sin from a queer perspective. These findings demonstrate that holiness and queerness need not be seen as opposed to one another and, when considered together, provide new possibilities for queer engagement with 'scriptural holiness'. These possibilities offer transformative potential for LGBT+ inclusion in the Methodist (and other) churches as well as offering queer ways of approaching Wesley's teaching.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements 1
Abstract 2
Table of Contents 3
1. Introduction 5
1.1 Wesleyan Sources 10
1.2 Reading Wesley Queerly 11
1.3 Research Questions 13
1.4 Subsequent Chapters 14
2. Methodism, Holiness and LGBT+ people 18
2.1 Introduction 18
2.2 Wesley's Order of Salvation 19
2.3 The Nature of Holiness in Wesley's Teaching 22
2.4 Academic Discussion of Holiness in Methodist and Wesleyan Traditions 28
2.5 Holiness in Contemporary Methodist Discipleship 38
2.6 Holiness and LGBT+ people 39
2.7 Conclusions 44
3. Queering Texts and Traditions of Holiness 46
3.1 Introduction 46
3.2 Origins of Queer Theology 46
3.3 Methods and Styles and Ingredients: Some Colours of Queering's Rainbow 51
3.3 Queering Holiness 66
3.4 (How) Can You Queer Wesley? 70
3.5 Methods in this Project 75
4. The Circumcision of the Heart 77
4.1 Introduction and Methodology 77
4.2 Reading the Sermon 81
4.3 Threads of a Queer Theology of Holiness 107
5. The Character of a Methodist and Christian Perfection 110
5.1 Introduction and Methodology 110
5.2 Reading the Texts 112
5.3 Claiming Identity: Queer and Methodist 132
6. Methodist Conferencing 134

6.1 Introduction and Methodology 134
6.2 Text and Context 136
6.3 An Autoethnography of the Methodist Conference and a Queer Activist 146
6.4 Unity and Holiness 150
6.5 Concluding Reflections 154
7. Themes in a Queer Theology of Holiness 155
7.1 Introduction 155
7.2 Queer Christian Perfection 155
7.3 Transformation 163
7.4 Sin 170
7.5 A Queer Theology of Holiness and LGBT+ Inclusion in the Methodist Church in Great Britain 175
7.6 Concluding Reflections 178
8. Conclusion 179
8.1 The Project as a Whole 179
8.2 Summary of the Thesis 180
8.3 Contribution 187
8.4 Further Work 188
8.5 Concluding Remarks 189
Appendix: A Story of Me and the Conference 191
Bibliography 197

1. Introduction

This project seeks to read the teaching of John Wesley, founder of Methodism, in a queer way in order to construct a queer theology of holiness. It might, in many ways, seem strange, when there are so many ways in which queer accounts of holiness could be constructed, that I have chosen this one. I do so as a gay Methodist minister and an activist within that context for greater LGBT+ inclusion. At one level then, this project is the academic version of my own faith story and quest to reconcile my faith and my sexuality: I have been inspired by Wesley since first visiting his birthplace at Epworth in Lincolnshire as a young boy. At another, it is an activist effort to re/claim the theological resources of my tradition to further the participation and flourishing of LGBT+ people in the life of the Methodist Church in Britain and beyond. At a third, it seeks to offer something into the wider landscape of queer theology where engagement with questions of holiness as a concept has been relatively limited so far. Methodist theology still looks to Wesley and to his teaching as one of its most significant sources, and within that corpus the theme of holiness is one of the most prominent. Furthermore, as we will see, changes in church teaching or policy to include LGBT+ people are claimed by some as being directly in opposition to the pursuit of holiness: participating in campaigning for changes to the Methodist Church's practice on marriage I have encountered these claims. This project is partly inspired by them and seeks to confront them. A queer theology of holiness drawn from Wesley's teaching then aims to be a response to all these things: a personal theological reflection from within the tradition, an activist challenge to ideas that holiness necessarily excludes LGBT+ people and a contribution to queer theology more widely.

The ministry of John Wesley (1703-91), a priest of the Church of England, gave rise to the now worldwide Wesleyan and Methodist family (which exists as several denominations[1]) and a theological tradition that has gone on to inform other streams within Christianity including the Salvation Army, Nazarenes and

[1] The World Methodist Council includes 80 member denominations, describing themselves as Methodist, Wesleyan, Uniting or United churches (World Methodist Council, 2019).

Pentecostalism. Both his methods and teaching were challenging for the church and society of his day and he was in many ways a controversial figure. At the heart of his practice and teaching was the challenge to pursue ‘that holiness without which no [one] shall see the Lord’ (Hebrews 12:14; cited in his sermon *Upon our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount X* (Wesley, 1984, p. 151)). Traditions in which Wesley holds an honoured place continue to put emphasis on the importance of holiness and draw on his writings to do that. For Wesley, holiness takes its place within the overall scheme of salvation: the believer recognises their sin, is justified before God and becomes a recipient of the new birth and then begins the process of sanctification. Mildred Bangs Wynkoop argues that ‘at the heart of Wesley’s contribution was the reinstatement of sanctification into theology as a viable element, clearly distinguished from justification but integral to it’ (Wynkoop, 2015, p. 25). Holiness is then not the preserve of the few but the call of all Christians. There were no limits on what was imagined possible: the goal for Wesley’s followers was ‘entire sanctification’ or ‘Christian perfection’.

As discussed in chapter 3, Christian theology – especially around topics such as holiness – has long been seen and experienced as exclusive of LGBT+ people and used in ways which contribute to stigmatisation and marginalisation (Comstock, 1996, xiii; Greenough, 2020b, p. 127). In more recent years, theologians and activists have sought to find ways in which Christian theology and practice can be made more inclusive of LGBT+ people and to seek the queering of it. Significant work has been done on more inclusive approaches to scripture and to Christian doctrine, but in my perception as I conceived this project, little had been said about holiness, especially within the Wesleyan paradigm of my own tradition. To the contrary, in the rhetoric I often encountered in the course of my own ministry and activism within the church, holiness seemed to be set against LGBT+ inclusion. One such argument, put forward by Methodist Evangelicals Together (MET), suggested that allowing for same-sex marriage in church would represent a rejection of Methodism’s vocation to spread scriptural holiness:

> In the light of the Scriptural witness and given its continuing commitment to SO 011A,[2] MET continues to affirm the decision of 1993 Methodist Conference meeting in Derby which 'reaffirms the traditional teaching of the Church on human sexuality; namely chastity for all outside marriage and fidelity within it.' MET realises that this is an unpopular view in modern Western society but believes that the followers of Jesus Christ are called to be counter-cultural in many matters of personal and social ethics and that Methodism's mission to 'spread Scriptural Holiness through the land' is ill-served by diluting, or denying the demands of the Gospel. (Methodist Evangelicals Together, 2017, p. 8)

When I began work on this thesis, British Methodism's official position (agreed in Derby in 1993 as referenced in the quote above) 'reaffirm[ed] the traditional teaching of the Church' but 'celebrat[ed] the participation and ministry of lesbians and gay men' (Methodist Church, 1993). With others, I have been involved in campaigning work to seek to make the Methodist Church in Britain a more inclusive place for LGBT+ people, particularly by seeking changes to its approach to marriage. During the time of the project, significant changes have been achieved: in particular, in permitting same-sex marriages in the Methodist Church (Methodist Church, 2021a) and in a ban on conversion therapy (Methodist Church, 2021b). Around the world, other Methodist churches (along with other churches more generally) also need to engage with these and other related questions. How a church's practice and discipline might relate to the Wesleyan theological inheritance is a critical issue which has resonance far beyond British Methodism.

I write as an ordained Methodist minister, a Methodist all my life. I have a deep love for the Wesleyan tradition and its theological language and style. I come to this project therefore very much as an insider, engaged in seeking to understand and re/appropriate my own tradition. That is firstly in a way which makes space for me, a gay man navigating the tensions of that in the context of Methodist belonging, especially as one who is ordained. Secondly, I do so as someone committed to making space for others within the tradition and offering ways in which they too can love it and flourish within it. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003, pp.

[2] This refers to the Methodist Church's Standing Order 011A which concerns marriage and at the time confined it to being only between one man and one woman.

123-51) set out a contrast between *paranoid* and *reparative* approaches to reading found in queer studies and Susannah Cornwall (2015) explored that in relation to queer theologies. By contrast to more confrontational approaches, reparative reading comes from a place within a tradition and seeks ways to invest positively in it. As Cornwall (2015, p. 23) puts it:

> Reparative reading does not repeat the bad news of which we are all well aware, but tries instead to build a more sustaining relationship with the world and its objects. What does this mean for queer Christians? It may mean continuing to be in relationship with things, people and institutions that have hurt us. It may mean subversively and counter-intuitively affirming the goodness of such phenomena as prayer, liturgy and religious ritual even when prayer, liturgy and religious ritual have been wielded as weapons against queer people.

Growing up as a Methodist was a largely positive experience for me. As one who didn't fit in in many contexts – I wasn't sporty or popular or 'cool' – the church was a place of belonging and acceptance. I was heavily involved, especially in church music, and so a key part of this belonging was being able to contribute something to the wider community and being recognised for it. The church loved me and I loved the church. However, the dominant memory for me in terms of any question of LGBT+ people is one of silence, with one notable exception when a preacher declared the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement a contradiction in terms. I absorbed a conservative theology on matters of sexuality without even realising it. The Methodist Church had a major debate in its Conference in 1993 on the topic of 'human sexuality' (Methodist Church, 1993) but as a young Methodist I knew nothing about it until some 10 years later. In the meantime, having kissed another man for the first time when at University, I took myself to the college chapel the next morning to pray for forgiveness. Meanwhile, Methodism was still a place where I felt I belonged and in these years I discovered more of the power of Wesleyan theology with its emphasis on grace: prevenient, justifying and sanctifying. I felt called to ordained ministry while at University and that became my passion and the key commitment of my life. I put questions of sexuality on the back burner but in the future these two things would have to confront each other and the preacher's 'contradiction' be accepted or overcome. Looking back, I

sometimes wonder how my life might have been different if I had known in 1993 that there were Methodists who believed in the participation and ministry of LGBT+ people in the life of the church.

This thesis is, at one level, a deeply personal quest to reconcile that contradiction and to find ways to articulate and understand the interaction of the Wesleyan passion for holiness with the reality of queer life and being. It is my attempt to answer an autobiographical question and perhaps in so doing to offer something that speaks to others too. Since coming out five years into my ministry, I have become an activist for LGBT+ people within the Methodist Church and have played my part in campaigns to enable LGBT+ people to marry in church and against conversion therapy. One of my key motivations has been the challenge to try and be the person you needed when you were younger. In a sense, this thesis aims to be the theology I needed when I was younger and, in fact, the theology I am still needing to discover now. Queer theology is a first-person theology (Althaus-Reid, 2003, p. 8) and I discuss the use of experience as queer method below (p. 54). The project as a whole has a deep 'first-person-ness' and connection to my own (continuing) story. To make my own story overt at the outset is itself part of the queer method of this research.

To summarise then, in this thesis, I am seeking to affirm the goodness of the Wesleyan inheritance of the theology of holiness while re-shaping approaches to it in the light of a queer reading. I seek to make a theological contribution to questions that British Methodism and other church traditions face and to offer positive theology that supports queer activism in the church rather than simply critiquing theologies and approaches that lead to exclusion. I will therefore explore approaches to reading Wesley's teaching on holiness from a queer perspective and offer constructive proposals as to the elements of a queer theology of holiness emerging from such readings. I aim to set out an unashamedly positive approach to queer engagement with growth in holiness. Alongside the activist work mentioned above, I believe such theological engagement is critical in advancing the work of LGBT+ inclusion in Methodism and other Christian traditions.

1.1 Wesleyan Sources

As discussed in more detail in chapter 2, Wesley's teaching on holiness is spread throughout his writings and a strong theme in all of his life. It is not possible even in the space of a thesis to consider it all and much less to consider how it all might be read queerly. I have therefore chosen to focus on *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection, as believed and taught by the Rev. Mr. John Wesley, from the year 1725 to 1765* (Wesley, 2013, pp. 136-191) hereafter *Plain Account*. Christian perfection was the most challenging of Wesley's claims about holiness and included the ideas that Christians might attain perfection in this life and be fully saved from sin (Wesley, 2013, p.187). He also referred to it as 'entire sanctification' (Wesley, 2013, p. 160) and it represented the ultimate aim for all Christian discipleship in his account.

This teaching was controversial both within and beyond the early Methodist movement and generated much opposition and difficulty for Wesley. It was claimed by his opponents that he was inconsistent in his accounts. Wesley wrote *Plain Account* – a short book or a long tract – as a response to these criticisms and controversies. In it he aims to lay out clearly what he means – and does not mean – by Christian perfection and to argue that his teaching on this matter has been consistent throughout his life. He constructs the text as a narrative from the early stages of his ministry through to the time of writing and quotes long sections from texts he published previously in order to demonstrate the consistency he claims. It is therefore a mixed text: his words at the time of writing together with his earlier work.

Plain Account was written relatively late in Wesley's ministry and published in 1766. Wesley's teaching on perfection was by this point the cause of much debate and dissension, as Paul Chilcote and Kenneth Collins (the editors) note in their introductory comment to the text in the Bicentennial Edition of his Works:[3]

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[3] The Bicentennial edition is the most commonly used scholarly version of Wesley's works and all references to them in this thesis will be to that edition.

> Over the next couple of years [after 1763 (MR)] it became clear to Wesley that he needed to prepare another treatise on Christian perfection, this time more for apologetic purposes than for pastoral. Debate among Methodists and beyond had spread from whether one agreed with Wesley's stance to whether he had changed his stance in recent publications, and whether there were inconsistencies in his various accounts of Christian perfection. (Chilcote and Collins in Wesley, 2013, p. 132)

His purpose in writing is, as they observe, apologetic. In order to respond to the allegations that are current, the approach he takes in writing is to give a narrative of the development of his understanding of holiness. He begins with his own conviction at the age of 23 of the need for a serious commitment to holiness and then cites extensively from significant texts that he published through the years. The texts that he chooses for these long citations therefore represent examples chosen by Wesley himself to illustrate what his teaching on holiness was. *Plain Account* brings them together and both summarises and defends his teaching. It therefore represents a good summary source to use in a project like this which seeks to engage with Wesley's overall teaching on holiness and perfection: I am using the very texts that Wesley chose to illustrate and defend his teaching on holiness. The key texts therefore that this thesis will engage with are, as cited in *Plain Account*, the sermon on *The Circumcision of the Heart* (Wesley, 1984, pp. 401-414), the tract *The Character of a Methodist* (Wesley, 1989, pp. 32-46), the sermon on *Christian Perfection* (Wesley, 1985, pp. 99-124) and the minutes of the first Methodist conferences (from 1744) (Wesley, 2011, pp. 120 ff.). The thesis will engage with these texts individually in respective chapters and consider how each might be read in a queer way. It will then explore, in chapter 7, the overall account that the queer readings of them offers.

1.2 Reading Wesley Queerly

One of the most significant challenges of this project has been how a process of queer reading can work for eighteenth-century religious texts such as Wesley's. As Keegan Osinski (2021, p. 12) pointed out, finding the queer in Wesley's sermons is challenging. The same can be said for other texts within Wesley's writings. They almost never deal directly with questions of sex and gender, and frequently there

is no obvious starting point for a queer reading. Furthermore, Wesley's writings are not just any texts, but ones which have an important place in the Methodist tradition of which I am part, and my desire is to hold them as holy texts and to queer them, at the same time. Particularly in terms of a reparative approach, this is important and appropriate. Thus this exploration of a queer theology of holiness seeks to bring together queerness and holiness from the first instant of thinking about the texts. This is both a creative opportunity and a significant challenge. While finding suitable methods is critical and challenging, queer reading is versatile and freeing: it is not formulaic and does not prescribe one particular way of approaching things. We may find the queer within the text, behind the text or the text may encounter the queer in the very act of queer reading. Within this thesis, I use all of these. Building on what Judith Halberstam (1998, p. 13) describes as the scavenger nature of queer methodology, I have deliberately and creatively adopted a range of methods and used them together to show how texts such as these might be queered. I describe these approaches as 'lenses' and use two or three for each text. The emergent themes of a queer theology of holiness are drawn briefly together at the end of each chapter and then in chapter 7, I construct a broader synthesis and set out an emerging queer theology of holiness that arises from these readings. I refer to this as a queer theology of holiness primarily for methodological reasons: it is theology that has emerged from a process of queer readings of these texts. I have decided to avoid the language of 'queer holiness' because ultimately I do not think this is about a different category of holiness, for holiness is indivisible and to categorise holiness would be profoundly unqueer. What it does seek to do, instead, is to offer new approaches and ways of speaking and understanding the life of holiness from a queer perspective.

The question of how to use the terminology of queer and LGBT+ in the context of this project in ways that are both appropriate to the contexts I am considering and consistent is not simple. Queer approaches reject an essentialism of identity (Cheng in Thatcher, 2015) while ecclesiastical discourse often makes use of the idea that LGBT+ people have a God-given identity which is not chosen by the

person. For example, the Methodist Church's EDI toolkit (Methodist Church, 2021d) affirms, 'LGBT+ people […] experience their sexual orientation as an authentic and integral part of their identity.' In terms of referring to people, some would very much claim the language of queer while others continue to find that a troublesome term. To seek to be consistent therefore I have decided as a rule to use the language of queer to speak of theology, method, approach and so on – which is explored in detail in chapter 3 – and LGBT+ to speak of the people involved, unless the context requires otherwise or I am quoting another writer. This tension in choice of terminology also reflects a tension in the project which straddles both a resistance to the essentialism of identity that comes from the queer approaches it employs as well as an activist recognition that the concept of identity can nevertheless be productive.[4] It is my hope that the queer exploration of holiness in this project will help develop thinking around the inclusion and flourishing of LGBT+ people in the Methodist Church and other churches.

1.3 Research Questions

This research aims to develop strategies for reading the identified Wesley texts in a queer way and to explore the theology that emerges in so doing. In the light of the context set above, the relevance of this work for the ongoing questions about LGBT+ inclusion in the Methodist Church in Great Britain can then be examined. This can be expressed in the following research question:

> In the light of current debates about the status of LGBT+ people in the Methodist Church in Britain, what are the strategies for, and what is the potential of, a queer reading of Wesley's *Plain Account* and the texts which it comprises to generate a queer theology of holiness?
>
> a) What are the strategies for queering these Wesley texts?
>
> b) What contributions do these strategies and the resultant readings make to the development of a queer theology of holiness?
>
> c) What is the relevance of such a theology for current debates about LGBT+ people in the Methodist Church in Great Britain?

[4] This is developed further in section 3.3.1, p. 50 and in the broader discussion of identity in section 5.2.5, p. 122.

The outcomes of this research also offers ways that other Wesley and indeed historic religious texts could be read from a queer perspective opening possibilities for re/claiming other traditions of teaching and theology. The contribution I seek to make is then not simply about the theology of holiness itself, or the specific texts under consideration, but is also methodological and has potential for exploring other texts and theological topics that are part of the tradition of different Christian denominations.

1.4 Subsequent Chapters

Chapter 2 will explore Methodist and Wesleyan teaching on holiness and the interaction of this with Methodism's consideration of questions relating to LGBT+ people. It will examine concepts of sin, holiness, sanctification and perfection and offer accounts of them rooted in Wesley's writings and scholarly writings about them. It will examine the place of holiness in contemporary Methodist discipleship and consider the significance of this for LGBT+ people, also exploring the ways in which holiness is part of Methodism's formal documents and decisions that relate to LGBT+ people.

Chapter 3 engages with the literature on queer theology and hermeneutics to set out a framework for queer reading and for understanding the products of such a process. The significant scholarship in queer theology on processes of queer reading has been on the queer interpretation of the Bible and so this chapter draws extensively on those materials. It offers a description of the process of queering in terms of the colours of queering: a way of recognising that queer reading has occurred by the kind of results that it generates. The chapter goes on to pose questions about queering 'radically straight' texts and the challenges that this presents.

Chapter 4 considers Wesley's sermon on the *Circumcision of the Heart.* It explores this using three different lenses by which the text can be read. Biographical context analysis sets the text in its original context and seeks to understand it by reference to the wider circumstances of Wesley's life at the time. A dialogical reading sets the

Wesley text alongside a present-day queer text and explores the interaction of the two and the insights that generates. Lastly a theological analysis considers how the text relates to key concerns of queer theology. Emerging from this are claims that a theology of holiness in the terms Wesley articulates must embrace LGBT+ people and that such a theology implies their renewal in the full potential of their creation, in all its queerness. The chapter also outlines initial elements of an approach to sin that this queer theology of holiness will require.

Chapter 5 explores Wesley's tract *The Character of a Methodist* (hereafter *Character*), written in response to a significant rising tide of national anti-Methodist sentiment. It also draws on the sermon on *Christian Perfection* (also used by Wesley in *Plain Account*) and notes the tract *The Principles of a Methodist* as these were all written at approximately the same time and address broadly the same subject-matter. The lenses of biographical context analysis and dialogical reading are used again. A third lens focuses on the particular question of the reclaiming of the word Methodist – originally pejorative – and explores that process alongside the reclaiming of the word queer. The movement has by now fully 'come out' and faces allegations of disrupting the proper order of society, damaging the church, corrupting young people and going against the laws of nature, which sound all too familiar from a queer perspective. Wesley's teaching on holiness and perfection is disruptive and I argue that this 'methodising' approach is akin to what we now call queering. His zeal for holiness is transformative for both church and world and not in ways that would be expected.

Chapter 6 examines the minutes of the early Methodist conferences, which were written by Wesley to reflect the approach that he wanted them to communicate. These are examined using two lenses: the historic context and a dialogue with an autoethnographic account of my experience as an activist within Methodist Conference today. I argue that the teaching the early minutes contain is not fundamentally different from that found in the other texts but that the shift to a different kind of writing is significant. Wesley has a notion of social holiness – that holiness is corporately expressed and discovered in community and in relation to

the other – and I argue that the early Conferences are an example of this, in their method as much as their recorded teaching. From this I explore understandings of unity, activism, solidarity and holiness and argue that they are closely intertwined. In this understanding, holiness leads to, and is formed by, a network of relationship and action which has the potential to transform us and those around us.

Chapter 7 draws the insights of the previous three chapters together and offers themes in a queer theology of holiness: queer Christian perfection, transformation and sin. I share with Wesley an understanding of sin as affecting all of humanity but frame it as the denial of the dignity of others or of oneself. This denial of dignity requires transformation on both the individual and the collective level to lead towards queer Christian perfection in which queer bodies reveal the queer body of Christ. The holiness of Christ's body – individually and spiritually as well as corporately in the sense of the church – is thus revealed in queer Christians and in queer communities. This understanding of holiness is rooted in the Wesleyan account of it, and indeed the Wesleyan account of perfection as a fullness of love for God and for neighbour.

Chapter 8 identifies the overall conclusions of the thesis, noting the strategies for queer reading the thesis has set out and the strands of a queer theology of holiness that result from them. The thesis will conclude that the methods it has employed are effective approaches for reading these Wesley texts queerly. The theology that emerges from these readings allows for decisions such as those referred to above on marriage and conversion therapy to be situated in the theological context of the tradition. It offers ways for them to be understood theologically in a context which allows for the Christian discipleship of queer people and not simply as legal changes that permit (or forbid) certain practices in accordance with societal pressures. In distinction to the quote from the statement by Methodist Evangelicals Together cited above, this offers an understanding in which these decisions can be seen as part and parcel of Methodism's pursuit of scriptural holiness and not as an obstacle to it. In the light of this, I consider the impact of

this work for ongoing questions and campaigns for the inclusion of LGBT+ people in the Methodist Church in Britain and make suggestions for areas of further work.

2. Methodism, Holiness and LGBT+ people

2.1 Introduction

One of Methodism's significant emphases since its early beginnings, has been an emphasis on holiness. It has held on to Wesley's (2011, p. 845) belief that's God's purpose for Methodism was to 'spread scriptural holiness over the land'[5] and in the many different Methodist denominations (and their offspring) holiness has been and continues to be a significant theme. In a Wesleyan scheme of Christianity, holiness is not the preserve of the few but an expected result of faith for all Christians. The pattern and degree of this emphasis and the practices associated with it have varied considerably through time and in different geographical contexts but it is without doubt a key emphasis of both Wesley's theology and practice. Its significance as a theme is one of the reasons I chose to explore a queer theology of holiness: the quest for holiness is significant for me as a gay Methodist as I set out in the introduction. In particular, as I observed, there is a discourse that sets holiness against LGBT+ inclusion, as in the statement from *Methodist Evangelicals Together* that I quoted above (p. 7). From a United Methodist context in the United States, Morgan Guyton (2019, para. 1) observes similarly, 'I think it would be fair and accurate to say that conservative United Methodists cannot accept the legitimacy of gay marriage because of their understanding of holiness.' I think it is also significant for Methodists doing theology relating to gender and sexuality as ultimately questions of holiness cannot be explored separately from the people to which they relate nor outside the context of them/us as Christian disciples. Before beginning to consider how this theology might be queered, it is necessary to set it out from the original sources and to review some of the ways in which it has been understood and interpreted in the church and the academy.

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[5] The *Deed of Union*, originally agreed in 1933, is the foundation document of the Methodist Church of Great Britain as it exists today. This purpose is written into its doctrinal clause (Methodist Church, 2023, p. 213).

For British Methodism, at least, Wesley's writings remain important doctrinal sources, especially the 'Forty-four sermons' and the *Notes on the New Testament* as they are declared by the doctrinal clause of the Deed of Union (Methodist Church, 2023, p. 213) to be where the 'evangelical doctrines to which the preachers of the Methodist Church are pledged' are to be found.[6] While as set out in the introduction, this project will focus on the *Plain Account of Christian Perfection* and the texts Wesley used in it,[7] I take the opportunity here to set a broader context of his teaching and writing, giving his overall order of salvation as well as the place of sanctification, holiness and perfection within it. Following that, I consider other studies of Wesley's theology and its implications socially and politically before moving to the question of the relationship between this theology and Methodist approaches to LGBT+ people.

2.2 Wesley's Order of Salvation

Wesley taught an order of salvation (*ordo salutis*) beginning with the belief that people are naturally sinners and unable to enjoy God's favour by their own merits. God's grace is operative in their lives before they know it – called *prevenient grace*[8] – and it is this which enables them to develop faith and trust in God. By justification, people are restored to right relationship with God and from that comes the 'new birth' which is the beginning of a process of sanctification, in principle leading to Christian perfection, or entire sanctification.

For Wesley, there is nothing that the sinner can do to address their situation: alone they are utterly helpless. He makes the test rather drastic:

> …here is the *shibboleth*: Is man [*sic*] by nature filled with all manner of evil? Is he void of all good? Is he wholly fallen? Is his soul totally corrupted? Or, to come back to the text, is 'every imagination of the thoughts of his heart only

[6] The Deed of Union refers to 'the first four volumes of [Wesley's] sermons' a phrase which itself dates back to Wesley and whose meaning has been debated but is now generally taken to mean the set known as the forty-four. For a discussion of this see Outler in Wesley (1984, pp. 43-5).
[7] Two of the texts referenced in *Plain Account* and considered in this thesis are part of the forty-four sermons: the sermon on the *Circumcision of the Heart* and the sermon on *Christian Perfection*.
[8] Wesley used the term 'preventing grace' but it is usually termed prevenient now. In quotations I preserve the original.

> evil continually?' Allow this, and you are so far a Christian. (Wesley, 1985, pp. 183-4)

In his sermon on *Salvation by Faith*, he makes the point equally strongly:

> Wherewithal then shall a sinful man atone for any the least of his sins? With his own works? No. Were they ever so many or holy, they are not his own but God's. […] And his heart is altogether corrupt and abominable, being 'come short of the glory of God', the glorious righteousness at first impressed on his soul, after the image of his great Creator. Therefore, having nothing, neither righteousness nor works, to plead, his 'mouth is utterly stopped before God'. (Wesley, 1984, p. 118)

This teaching comes across as severe: for example, to say that someone's heart is entirely corrupt and devoid of goodness seems an extreme claim. Surely everyone has some propensity to good and some to bad? However, the severity of this teaching was somewhat moderated by his teaching that the prevenient grace of God works in people's lives before they know of it and it is this grace which enables them to turn towards God. In this sense, any propensity for goodness that we have is the result of God's grace at work, whether or not we can realise or acknowledge it. In the sermon on *Working out our own salvation*, he says:

> Salvation begins with what is usually termed (and very properly) 'preventing grace'; including the first wish to please God, the first dawn of light concerning his will, and the first slight, transient conviction of having sinned against him. All these imply some tendency toward life, some degree of salvation, the beginning of a deliverance from a blind, unfeeling heart, quite insensible of God and the things of God. (Wesley, 1986, pp. 203-4)

In my view, Wesley's teaching is concerned that every element and action leading to salvation be seen, on the one hand, as God's work and not as human agency while, as we shall see, on the other as also requiring the cooperation and participation of humanity.

It is grace which brings people to the point of justification and *justifying grace* is what enables them to enter into a relationship with God. The nature of justification was a significant issue at the Reformation and continued to be a subject of debate in the eighteenth century. In the sermon on *Justification by Faith*, Wesley (1984, p. 182-99) dismisses various positions and asserts that justification is 'pardon, the forgiveness of sins.' Justification is of the ungodly and can have no prerequisite of

holiness or obedience contrary to the teaching of those who held to the necessity of ‘works meet for repentance’ (Wesley, 1984, p. 191). All that is required for justification is faith:

> Faith therefore is the necessary condition of justification. Yea, and the only necessary condition thereof. This is the second point carefully to be observed: that the very moment God giveth faith (for ‘it is the gift of God’) to the ‘ungodly’, ‘that worketh not’, that ‘faith is counted to him for righteousness’. (Wesley, 1984, p. 196)

For Wesley, then justification is in some ways a narrow concept: all that comes before this is a matter of prevenient grace and all that comes after is a question of sanctification. It is the ungodly who can be justified and faith is its only condition. In the sermon on *Justification by Faith*, Wesley says that, as created, humanity was as holy as God. Love was a clear feature of this holiness, which Wesley describes as including a complete love for God and as having ‘the entire law of love […] written in his [*sic*] heart’ (Wesley, 1984, p. 184). As a result of disobedience to God, humanity lost this holiness resulting in the state of sin mentioned above. Wesley says that to be justified is not itself to be made just and righteous which is a fruit of sanctification (although this follows, at least to a degree, immediately on justification) but is pardon and the forgiveness of sins (Wesley, 1984, p. 187).

Closely associated with justification is the notion of the New Birth which marks the beginning of a believer’s new life. The New Birth, which Wesley (1985, pp. 187-201) explains in the eponymous sermon, can be seen as the beginning of holiness in a person’s life: from this point a person may be said to be holy although this holiness is expected to increase as they mature. In other words, this is the beginning of a journey not its end. *Sanctifying grace* operates in a person’s life to make them holy, increasing their love of God and neighbour. It is necessary for the person to co-operate in this process and a significant aspect of this is through making use of the means of grace. Wesley recognised a wide range of means of grace but most significant among them were prayer, ‘searching the scriptures’ (which, in Wesley’s explanation ‘implies reading, hearing and meditating thereon’)

and the Lord's Supper (Wesley, 1984, p. 381). Wesley saw this as a process which continued throughout life. As David Chapman (2004, p. 21) puts it:

> Wesley insisted that grace is not merely *imputed* to the notional account of sinners (a metaphor borrowed by Calvin from accounting). Rather, through participation in the means of grace, including Holy Communion, grace is actually *imparted* to sinners so that they grow spiritually towards entire sanctification.

Wesley saw no limit on the extent of sanctification that was possible and *Entire Sanctification* or *Christian Perfection* was the aim for all. The concept was contested and controversial. Wesley himself varied as to how he described it, but it marks the destination in this life of Wesley's order of salvation. Several authors give detailed expositions of Wesley's overall theology and the order (or way) of salvation, including Colin Williams (1960), Theodore Runyon (1998), Randy Maddox (1994) and Kenneth Collins (2007). William McDonald (2011, pp. 52-9) has a very helpful summary which he uses in order to make comparisons with Luther's teaching.

2.3 The Nature of Holiness in Wesley's Teaching

Having outlined the process by which Wesley teaches that believers may become holy, I turn to the question of what this holiness actually is. How is it understood? How is it distinguished from anything else? In order to do this, I am again drawing on the sermons to set a wider context for Wesley's teaching, before considering the *Plain Account of Christian Perfection* which gives the principal sources for this project.

Wesley teaches all God's blessings come by grace and holiness is among these blessings (Wesley, 1984, pp. 117-8). Atonement for sin cannot be by works, however numerous or holy. Salvation or justification by faith is not opposed to 'holiness and good works'. To the contrary, faith is the root of all good works and holiness. This faith is faith in Christ and God through Christ, rather than being identified as a particular standard of belief (although clearly it is not unrelated to belief). Wesley is clear that this is an all-embracing commitment. In the sermon on the *Almost Christian*, Wesley (1984, pp. 131-41) argues that motivation is a

determining factor in being truly Christian: being altogether Christian is about love of God, love of neighbour and faith, each of which supports the others. Throughout his corpus this becomes the key marker of Christianity and indeed of holiness: to be holy is ultimately not more nor less than a full love for God and neighbour. In the sermon on *Scriptural Christianity*, Wesley (1984, pp. 159-80) expands on this in terms of the fruits of the Spirit[9] which every Christian should expect (as opposed to the gifts of the Spirit,[10] which Wesley argues that God gives much more sparingly). For him, this is simply a fuller expression of what love for God and neighbour realised in a believer looks like.

In the sermon on the *Way to the Kingdom* (Wesley, 1984, pp. 218-32), the two great commandments (of love of God and of neighbour) are used again as definitive of righteousness,[11] which in this context is being used as essentially synonymous with holiness. True religion implies happiness as well as holiness and the combination of these two is what the kingdom of God looks like in a person. Happiness in this sense is a consequence of holiness and is described by Wesley, in scriptural terms, as ‘righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost’ (Wesley, 1984, p. 224). The consequence of belief is again explained here in terms of the fruits of the Spirit which can be seen as a description of holiness. Similarly, in the sermon on the *First Fruits of the Spirit* (Wesley, 1984, pp. 234-47), those who ‘walk after the Spirit’ love God and their neighbour and are led by God into every holy desire. The consequence of this is that every thought in their heart is ‘holiness unto the Lord’ and it leads to holiness of life.

Recognising that for Wesley the New Birth marks the beginning of holiness, it is worth considering how he describes that. In the sermon on *The Marks of the New Birth* (Wesley, 1984, pp. 417-30), although noting that the new birth is not defined

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[9] Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, from Galatians 5:22-23.
[10] Prophecy, working miracles, speaking in tongues and so on.
[11] Wesley’s use of the term righteousness has inconsistencies. For example, in the sermon on *Justification by Faith* (Wesley 1984, p. 187) he says justification is not ‘being made just and righteous’ while in the sermon on *The Righteousness of Faith* (Wesley 1984, p. 206) he says the righteousness of faith is the ‘condition of justification’, that is the state of justification. For the purposes of this study, I will use the language of holiness and clarify righteousness where it occurs.

as such in Scripture, Wesley nevertheless identifies its marks as Faith, Hope and Love. This is presumably following St Paul, although curiously despite copious scriptural references 1 Corinthians 13:13[12] is not itself cited. Faith is the foundation of them all, according to Wesley, but the greatest of these is love and he again relates this to the greatest commandments as identified by Jesus Christ to be loving God and loving neighbour. For Wesley, obedience to the commandment to love God implies obedience to all the other things that God has commanded (although it might reasonably be noted that that raises a question as to what those things are, Wesley leaving it simply in the terms of all God's commands). From this the simplest account of a holy person is one who loves God with all their heart and mind and strength and loves their neighbour as themselves. As with the commandments of God, neighbour remains here a broad and unspecific concept.

In the sermon on the *Means of Grace*, Wesley (1984, pp. 376-97) notes that means (e.g. prayer, reading scripture, the Eucharist) are commanded, significant and a matter of obedience of which believers should avail themselves. They are not essential; strictly nothing is. Their purpose is the renewal of the soul in righteousness and holiness. A tension emerges in this consideration between the all-pervading significance of the two commandments to love God and to love one's neighbour as being definitive of holiness alongside Wesley's simultaneous claims of a duty to keep all God's commandments and the insistence that strictly nothing is essential.

Perhaps one of the most significant texts is the sermon on the *Witness of the Spirit.* Wesley (1984, pp. 269-84) describes holiness as something to which our own spirit witnesses (or testifies), in other words an inner conviction and experience of the holiness that God has given us. Here again, Wesley roots this in the great commandments. This is linked to the Spirit of God's testimony that we are children of God (cf. Romans 8:16[13] which is the text on which the sermon is based) and

[12] 1 Corinthians 13:13 reads 'And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.' (NRSV)

[13] Romans 8:16 reads 'It is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God.' (NRSV)

indeed that testimony must precede it. For Wesley here, the order is actually the Spirit's witness to us that God loves us, whereby we are enabled to love God and our neighbour, which is the beginning of holiness. This can be seen as a different way of expressing Wesley's order of salvation, by putting the Spirit's witness as the first step, an expression of prevenient grace, and then seeing justification and sanctification as emerging from that witness. God's love for us will lead to our love for God which is the root of our sanctification. Wesley is clear that we cannot be aware of being holy until we are (one might regard this as a truism, although presumably the case of someone unholy nevertheless believing they are holy might be a counterpart to consider) and so our own spirit's testimony of own holiness is the last thing. The evidence of the Spirit of God's testimony is that the believer loves, delights and rejoices in God. Further breadth is given to the image in the third of the series on the Sermon on the Mount where Wesley (1984, pp. 510-30) gives a broad understanding of eirene (peace; in the context of 'blessed are the peacemakers') as 'all manner of good; every blessing that relates to the soul or the body, to time or eternity' (1984, p. 517). He uses this as an example of inward holiness being shown in a person's actions arguing that a peace-maker is one who takes every opportunity of doing good to others.

As I have observed, there are many references which indicate that Wesley's primary reference in describing and understanding holiness is to the two great commandments. In addition to that, however, is a parallel issue regarding the relationship of holiness and sin. In the sermon on *The Circumcision of the Heart* (to which we will return in chapter 4), Wesley (1984, pp. 401-14) identifies holiness as a 'habitual disposition of the soul' which implies both being cleansed of sin and, *by consequence*, being endued with those virtues which were in Christ Jesus. This implies a full love of God and of neighbour, although not to the exclusion of taking pleasure in other things as well: '[God] has inseparably annexed pleasure to the use of those creatures which are necessary to sustain the life He has given us' (1984, p. 408). Perhaps strikingly, for Wesley those who are holy do not sin, although there are some important caveats to this, in particular his limiting of the

definition of sin to intentional outward action and a dynamic understanding of holiness which would allow that someone's holiness could decline to a point where they were once more able to sin. This is because for Wesley sin is essentially a breach of love for God and/or neighbour. It is not within his theology for someone to reach a stage of holiness in this life where sin would be a permanent impossibility.

Wesley (1984, pp. 431-43) elaborates on these themes in the sermon on *The Great Privilege of those that are born of God*, in which he sets out a definition of outward sin: 'an actual, voluntary transgression of the law; of the revealed written law of God; of any commandment of God, acknowledged to be such at the time that it is transgressed' (1984, p. 436). A holy person cannot commit outward sin but is nevertheless still susceptible to temptation and yielding to this temptation may lead to a loss of holiness to the point where actual sin is possible. Wesley describes this process quite systematically but seems to expect that it would be followed by future repentance and return to holiness. The possibility of sinless perfection was and is potentially a controversial aspect of Wesley's thinking, but in my view once this sense that it is never a permanent condition is understood the theology becomes both more acceptable and less striking. At one level, does it tell us anything more than that we have good days and bad days?

Although much of this consideration is about the individual, for Wesley the significance of love for neighbour means that holiness can never be simply an individual matter. To the contrary, in the *Preface* to the 1739 edition of *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (Wesley, 2013, pp. 36-40), he takes the opportunity to argue that there is no such thing as solitary religion. In what is now a famous dictum, he claims 'the gospel of Christ knows of no religion but social; no holiness but social holiness' (Wesley, 2013, p. 39). He expands on this using 1 John 4:21[14] for support and sees this expression of Christian fellowship as intrinsic to his understanding of holiness.

[14] 'The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.' (NRSV)

In his *Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, Wesley (2013, pp. 136-91) refers back to his sermon on *The Circumcision of the Heart*, citing what he said in that sermon about holiness as a 'habitual disposition of soul' which implies both cleansing from sin and being endued with virtue. It is in the sense of holiness that he understands perfection, and he goes on to define the ways in which he does and does not use the word perfection. Perfection for him does not imply perfection of knowledge, freedom from weakness or from things that society might regard as imperfections.[15] Making mistakes and experiencing temptations are still very much possibilities. Even with these limitations, he also acknowledges that there are 'few, if any, *indisputable* examples' (Wesley, 2013, p. 163) of people who have reached perfection. He deals with many queries and potential objections, and summarises his position in a series of propositions:

1) There is such a thing as *perfection*; for it is again and again mentioned in Scripture.
2) It is not so early as justification; for justified persons are to 'go on to perfection'.
3) It is not so late as death; for St Paul speaks of living men [*sic,* and following instances] that were perfect.
4) It is not *absolute*. Absolute perfection belongs not to man – no, nor to angels; but to God alone.
5) It does not make a man *infallible* – none is infallible while he remains in the body.
6) Is it *sinless*? It is not worth while to contend for a term. It is *salvation from sin*.
7) It is *perfect love*. This is the *essence* of it. Its *properties*, or inseparable fruits, are 'rejoicing evermore', 'praying without ceasing', and 'in everything giving thanks'.
8) It is *improvable*. It is so far from lying in an indivisible point, from being incapable of increase, that one perfected in love may grow in grace far swifter than he did before.

[15] Probably evidencing his time and culture, he uses the examples of 'impropriety of language' and 'ungracefulness of pronunciation.' However the question of perfection/holiness in relation to social acceptability could be explored further.

9) It is *amissible*, capable of being lost; of which we have numerous instances. But we were not thoroughly convinced of this till five or six years ago.

10) It is constantly preceded and followed by a *gradual* work. (Wesley, 2013, p. 187; emphasis original)

He also considers the question of whether Christian perfection is achieved instantaneously and concludes that the instant when the change occurs must exist, even if it is not perceived.

Point 6 on sinlessness hints at the controversy that surrounded the relationship between sin and perfection. In any examination of this, Wesley's definition of sin as a 'voluntary transgression of a known law' must be considered but even that did not allow him to escape the controversy.

To summarise, holiness in Wesley's understanding is a work of grace in the life of the believer and the consequence of God's love for them. The believer's own response of love for God and neighbour is the actual fact of holiness in them, and the perfection of this love excludes sin (which is a denial of love for God and/or neighbour). This holiness can both grow and decline over the course of a believer's life.

2.4 Academic Discussion of Holiness in Methodist and Wesleyan Traditions

One of the most significant studies of Wesley's theology of sanctification is Harald Lindström's *Wesley and Sanctification* (1950), in which Lindström notes that 'comparatively few [books] have subjected [Wesley's] theological position to close scrutiny' (Lindström, 1950, p. 1). He says that for Wesley much of this is a matter of 'experimental' religion, i.e. it is theology that emerges from his own reflections on the experience of Christian discipleship. He notes Henry Bett's interpretation of Wesley's writing that even an interpretation of scripture, to be recognised must concur with the believer's experience of God. However, for Lindström the place of experience in Wesley needs also to be balanced with other factors, including the Bible as final authority as well as reason and the writings of the Fathers (Lindström, 1950, p. 4-5). He notes that 'sanctification itself is rarely presented in its full range'

(Lindström, 1950, p. 15) in Wesley's writing and may sometimes mean Christian Perfection while at other times referring to gradual growth in holiness in the believer's life. Arguing that other writers don't pay enough attention to the links between different parts of Wesley's thought, Lindström aims 'to provide such a systematic-theological analysis of the function and significance of sanctification in Wesley's conception of salvation' (Lindström, 1950, p. 16).

For our purposes, three key issues can be highlighted, namely the significance of love; the question of development and change in Wesley's thought on the matter of sanctification and perfection; and the relationship between the gradual and instantaneous accounts of sanctification. Lindström (1950, p. 16) argues that in Wesley, sanctification requires consideration of love 'since love was regarded by Wesley as the very essence of sanctification.' He situates Wesley's view of love against the background of William Law and sets out a teleological understanding of the work of love in the believer's life: 'Sanctification is regarded as the object of atonement and justification. God's love in atonement and justification aims at the establishment of the law of love in the human heart' (Lindström, 1950, p. 173). This marks a change from the 'natural' state of humanity, in which, as observed in the primary texts above, the believer cannot love God. The initiative in love is therefore from God, and the believer's love for God and their neighbour is a consequence of God's love for the believer. The believer's love for God in turn leads to their desire to love God and their neighbour, thus fulfilling the law, to which obedience becomes an act of love rather than a legal duty (Lindström, 1950, p. 178). Sanctification is a matter of real change and Lindström concludes:

> The Christian, as in William Law and the mystics, is above all a pilgrim, his life on earth a journey, the destination, Heaven. And the path he must travel to reach his goal is the path of sanctification, of real, empirical change in man [*sic*]. (Lindström, 1950, p. 218)

The second key issue is on the question of development (or not) in Wesley's thought. As we noted above, one of Wesley's key claims in *Plain Account* is that his position on perfection has been consistent and constant throughout his life. Lindström (1950, p. 128) notes the same thing: 'Wesley considered himself that his

idea of perfection had not changed since its formulation in 1725.' He argues that it is important in interpreting Wesley to allow for development, but equally not to overplay things. He concedes that 'after 1738[16] [Wesley's views] underwent certain alterations' (Lindström, 1950, p. 16) but that there is a broad consistency to the direction of Wesley's theology. Lindström recognises that the years 1741 and 1770 have been indicated as particularly significant in the development of Wesley's outlook but argues that when considered carefully neither year represents a new phase in Wesley's thought and its principles remain unchanged. The key change of 1738 is less about the nature of perfection but its attainability: 'with the new vision of 1738, however, perfection came to be regarded as something that could and should be realized in this life' (Lindström, 1950, p. 132).

In interpreting Wesley, Lindström criticises an over-emphasis on revivalism and conversion and on instantaneous justification and sanctification; instead, he emphasises the significance of sanctification as a gradual process. He argues that 'gradual development' is 'a most prominent element in his conception of salvation, and indeed in his thought generally' (Lindström, 1950, p. 105) and goes on to claim that 'it is this combination of the gradual and the instantaneous that particularly distinguishes Wesley's conception of the process of salvation' (Lindström, 1950, p. 121).

A consideration which makes allowance for both the instant and the gradual implies a process of multiple stages: justification and the New Birth are argued to be instantaneous while sanctification which follows is then a matter of gradual development (Lindström, 1950, p. 116). A further instantaneous development follows:

> After a gradual development in sanctification the Christian life will attain fruition in complete sanctification or Christian perfection. This is thought to supervene in a moment, bestowed on man [*sic*] by sanctifying faith. As

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[16] 24 May 1738 was the date of Wesley's 'warmed heart' experience, often called his conversion. The characterisation and significance of this is debated in Wesleyan scholarship more generally. See, for example, Rack (2002, pp. 145-7).

> compared with justification and new birth, complete sanctification constitutes a higher stage in the new life. (Lindström, 1950, pp. 117-8)

The believer is still subject to sin post-justification although growth in holiness will make the believer both more aware of their own sin and of their inability to deal with it without the grace of God. The progression of sanctification here is towards the complete removal of sin (in the narrow sense of ‘a voluntary transgression of a known law’ as described above, p. 26):

> When a Christian has been freed by the New Birth from the power of sin, he is freed from the root of sin as well by complete sanctification. Thus all sin is washed away. There still remains, however, some imperfection, which is inseparable from human life. (Lindström, 1950, p. 118)

This is what Lindström calls the negative way of defining Christian perfection – as in the removal of sin – but the positive one, which Wesley prefers, is that it means perfect love. The believer can not only achieve justification and entire sanctification but can also be aware of that, through the witness and fruits of the Spirit. Entire sanctification is not a static destination but a state for further growth: ‘It is impossible for the Christian, even if fully sanctified, to stand still’ (Lindström, 1950, p. 118). Albert Outler recognises this dynamic sense of perfection as one of the key reasons for the misunderstanding of Wesley’s teaching:

> Somehow, [Wesley] could never grasp the fact that people formed by the traditions of Latin Christianity were bound to understand ‘perfection’ as *perfectus* (perfected) – i.e., as a finished state of completed growth, *ne plus ultra*! For him, certainly since his own discoveries of the early fathers, ‘perfection’ meant ‘perfecting’ (*teleiosis*), with further horizons of love and of participation in God always opening up *beyond* any level of spiritual progress. (Outler, 1996, p. 122)

Theodore Runyon (1998, p. 91) argues that it is more complicated than this and that Wesley himself must share the blame for its misunderstanding. Thomas Noble (2013, p. 95) considers the paradoxical sense of ‘imperfect perfection’ and argues that Wesley was fully aware of the tensions of the position. He concludes that Christian perfection in the Wesleyan sense might be better understood as ‘*degrees of “perfecting”*’ highlighting the understanding explicit in Wesley that growth and

development is a continued process both before and after the attainment of Christian perfection.

Noble's (2013, p. 95) suggestion of 'degrees of perfecting' is very helpful in trying to conceptualise Christian perfection in a way that is both faithful to Wesley while attending to some of the problems of his account. Alongside this, Lindström's caution should be kept in mind: 'the perfection he taught was attainable in this life was not absolute perfection. It was perfection subject to the limitations of human life' (Lindström, 1950, p. 145).

For Lindström, if we are to understand Wesley's teaching we must connect the whole process of salvation and sanctification to his idea of Christian perfection as neither can make sense in isolation. This is the foundation of his criticism of isolating entire sanctification as an instantaneous 'second blessing' aside from the overall process of sanctification. He summarises the meaning of perfection in Wesley saying: 'Perfection in Wesley was given the primary meanings of purity of intention, the imitation of Christ, and love to God and our neighbour. Even after 1738 these are still characteristic features' (Lindström, 1950, p. 129). He also notes Wesley's rejection of hermitic approaches to holiness and his affirmation that human fellowship is part of holiness: what is generally called social holiness as mentioned above (p. 26).

The idea of a relational understanding of holiness was taken up by the Nazarene[17] theologian Mildred Bangs Wynkoop (2015) in her groundbreaking study *A Theology of Love* first published in 1972. Her central thesis is that 'love is the dynamic of Wesleyanism' (2015, p. 27) and the work as a whole explores the breadth of his theology. It seeks to address a 'credibility gap' between the absolutes of holiness theology as expressed in her Nazarene tradition, which emphasised a distinct experience of entire sanctification, and the reality of human experience (2015, p. 45). She argues that this gap emerges because of three particular ways of thinking, namely, a platonic concept of (divine) soul and (evil) body; a substantive view of sin

[17] The Church of the Nazarene is a Wesleyan holiness church that began in the United States in the 19th century.

as a 'thing' that can be removed and a 'magical' view of salvation separate from any human involvement. As a response to this she proposes a Hebrew/Christian concept of humans as a unity, affected in total by sin and needing salvation in total; sin as a 'malfunction,' 'rebellion' and as 'wrong relation to God' and a 'moral' concept of salvation in which the full participation of the subject is needed at every step (Wynkoop, 2015, pp. 54-5). This leads to a relational account of both sin and holiness which gives a reinvigorated way of understanding Wesley's overall teaching. She argues for an overall hermeneutic for Wesley of 'love to God and man [*sic*], in the biblical sense of love' (Wynkoop, 2015, p. 273).

Wynkoop explores Christian perfection in this light, including a thorough re-examination of the Biblical material and with particular concern for her own (Wesleyan-holiness) tradition's emphasis on the need for entire sanctification as a specific instantaneous experience of 'second blessing'. She seeks to hold together what she sees as the Biblical and Wesleyan teaching of perfection (including that it is attainable in this life and that it is part of a process of continuing improvement) while avoiding an account that is divorced from the ordinary reality of Christian believers. Holiness is, in this understanding, rooted and human:

> Holiness is the element in Christian faith which prevents theology from becoming a mere intellectual exercise. Holiness is life. As the incarnation of Christ is God's answer to speculation about God, so holiness is the answer to theological abstraction relative to salvation. (Wynkoop, 2015, p. 216)

She contrasts perfection with perfectionism, arguing that the latter implies a static state which when considered in a religious context is significantly problematised by 'the obvious imperfections and changeableness of human life' (Wynkoop, 2015, p. 280-1). She concludes that Christian perfection is of the heart and is in fact a guard against perfectionism as it is purely rooted in relation to God and in obedience that arises from love. Love is for Wynkoop the ultimate test of holiness and at root is a practical question:

> Love is enlarged by use. That takes time and practice. It changes the whole perspective of the values of life. It mellows, beautifies, and enriches the personality. Where love is lost, holiness is lost. Love is the adhesive power in human relations. It *must* increase or be forfeited. The *test of holiness is love*. It

> is a very practical and objective test and the test that must often be applied to holiness profession. The deepening of love is an effective check on one's own testimony. It reveal progress in holiness – or signs of its absence. (Wynkoop, 2015, p. 384; emphasis original)

Thomas Noble, in an introductory note to the 2015 edition, recognises the challenging nature of Wynkoop's work:

> [A theology of love] did not present a fully rounded re-expression of the Wesleyan understanding of Christian holiness. It was rather a provocative exercise in rethinking. […] Although her theology appeared to some to be provocative, destructive, and revolutionary […] in fact her "revolution" was a conservative one. She was taking us back […] to the daring, adventurous, and deeper constructive thinking of Wesley himself. (Noble in Wynkoop, 2015, p. 8)

I agree with Noble that her revolution was conservative in the sense of returning to the sources and having a deep concern for a faithful reading of both scripture and of Wesley. Its conclusions were particularly radical in the context of the Wesleyan Holiness tradition in which she was writing with its strong emphasis on an instantaneous and separate experience of entire sanctification.

Glen O'Brien (2018) draws on Wynkoop, arguing that 'her special contribution to the Wesleyan tradition was to appropriate Wesley in light of the category of "persons-in-relation"' (O'Brien, 2018, p. 72). He seeks to situate her work in an explicitly Trinitarian context, in particular ruling out theologies that see sanctification as the exclusive work of the Holy Spirit. He argues that 'an experience of sanctifying grace should be seen not as an individual "baptism of the Spirit" so much as a communion between the Triune God and a person-in-relation' (O'Brien, 2018, pp. 75-6). Following Wynkoop, he sees both sin and holiness as relational categories and that sanctifying grace is experienced through 'an "ecstatic" love for God and neighbour' (O'Brien, 2018, p. 64).

Noble's (2013) work, *Holy Trinity: Holy People: The theology of Christian Perfecting* engages in a detailed study of the Wesleyan tradition of holiness theology in its original context and sets out its significance for today. Noble writes from a Nazarene perspective. His book seeks to ground the theology more broadly in the doctrines of the Trinity and the Atonement than might have been done previously

and certainly more so than is explicit in the corpus of Wesley's writings themselves. He notes that although teaching on Christian perfection is often said to be a Wesleyan distinctive, it is actually strongly related to other theological traditions including in the early Church and the Reformers. He argues that this theology has been neglected and, in situating it in relation to a broader scheme of Christian theology, he aims to redress that neglect.

Wesley did not develop his theology of holiness in isolation and the overall debate between him and others could be a detailed study of its own. Robert Fraser's (1988) doctoral study explores divergence and difference between Wesley and other key figures on the question of perfection. The position as between John and his brother Charles Wesley (also an Anglican priest and a key figure in the early Methodist movement) is itself significant and Julie Lunn (2019) highlights areas of difference between Charles and John 'regarding sanctification; timing, whether sanctification is gradual or instantaneous; sin and sinlessness; suffering and sanctification; and sanctification and the language of mysticism' (Lunn, 2019, p. 31). She argues that a significant further area is how they use the concept of resignation and goes on to make that the focus of her study of Charles' hymns. John Tyson (1986) makes a detailed study of Charles' theology of sanctification including consideration of *Plain Account* and the debate between him and his brother, identifying similar areas to Lunn. On the debate between the brothers, Tyson concludes:

> Charles's hymns seemed to solidify his distinctive approach to the doctrine of perfection and to distinguish his perspective from brother John's. Although the controversy certainly affected the tone of Charles's hymns, his emphasis upon an unqualified conception of perfection that was diligently pursued along all the stages of life's way, and finally realized 'in the article of death,' had been characteristic of Charles almost from the beginning of his ministry. Although Charles's brother argued that to 'set perfection so high' was to effectually renounce it, the younger Wesley found in this undimmed ideal a perfection that produced deep humility, love, and a tenacious faith to fight against all sin in this life in preparation for the life to come. (Tyson, 1986, pp. 300-1)

Wesley's theology of holiness also has implications beyond discipleship itself. Theodore Weber (2001) explores Wesley's political thought, highlighting the challenge of Wesley's belief in a 'hierarchical, top-down concept of political authority and its consequent exclusion of people from the political process' (Weber, 2001, p. 391). In order to construct a Wesleyan political language that has place for the people, Weber proposes bringing Wesley's political thought into dialogue with his order of salvation, arguing that the two 'are not integrated' in Wesley's own thinking and that the God of politics and the God of the *ordo salutis* need to be unified (Weber, 2001, p. 392). He suggests that doing this 'will serve the broader purposes of Wesleyan theological development by requiring attention to the *whole* image of God in place of the exclusive attention usually given to the moral image' (Weber, 2001, p. 392). Significantly for our purposes, Weber argues that sanctification has consequences for the recovery of the political image of God (i.e. God as ruler) in humanity:

> With the political image fully in view, one cannot reduce the political implications of sanctification to positive changes in personal attitudes and behavior, however important they may be. […] One thinks in terms of transforming power from predominance of force into predominance of consent, thereby encouraging the growth of community and authenticating the lines of authority. One thinks also of moving beyond the rhetoric of human rights, and even their articulation into charters and protocols, to their solid embodiment in laws, customs and practice. These proposals move beyond what John Wesley thought politically. However, they incorporate the wisdom of his organic constitutionalism and explore the social meaning of his teaching on sanctification – but only when sanctification involves the recovery of the political image of God, and not the moral image only. (Weber, 2001, pp. 413-4)

In this way, the theology of holiness can be seen to have important implications for society and for people collectively not simply individually, and in societal terms not just ecclesiastical ones. This allows us to broaden the concept of social holiness and to begin to root theologies of structural change and the resistance of structural sin and oppression in a Wesleyan context.

An example of this kind of dynamic is given by Dion Forster (2008) in his exploration of the role of Christian Perfection in the Methodist Church of Southern

Africa's (MCSA) response to apartheid. For Forster, holiness must be understood as both personal and social in this context. He cites the minutes of the 1958 MCSA Conference which affirmed strongly that the MCSA should be 'one and undivided' (Forster, 2008, p. 9), that is that there should be no racial division within the MCSA. This marked a significantly different position from, for example, the Dutch Reformed Church which did segregate itself on racial lines, in accordance with the apartheid policies of the nation. Forster argues that the context of this apartheid-resisting statement 'was fundamentally linked to the Southern African Methodist understanding of Christian perfection, that is, what it means to live as God intended; in other words, to strive for perfect holiness despite government pressures from without and personal prejudices from within' (Forster, 2008, p. 9). Forster links this to an understanding of social holiness in which perfect love for one another within the church (and the country more broadly) was the path of justice. In chapter 7, we will consider the question of unity and justice in the church in the context of debates relating to LGBT+ people. Forster's work illustrates how Wesleyan theology may be relevant for such considerations.

In *Bid our Jarring Conflicts Cease*, David Field (2017) considers Wesleyan theological resources as they relate to church unity and theological diversity, against the background of the debates in the United Methodist Church (based in the USA) about same-sex marriage and the ordination of LGBT+ clergy and the possibility of schism within that church. Field's consideration is begins with an examination of Wesley's theology of holiness and how it might offer possibilities for churches with 'diverse and even contradictory theological perspectives' (2017, p. 1). While noting that Wesley has many ways of speaking about holiness, he argues that the core of it in Wesley is love of God and of neighbour. Such love must apply as much to theological opponents as to anyone else. For Field, a consideration of Wesley's theology of holiness shows that diversity and disagreement have both constructive and destructive potential, and Wesley's openness to people with different views is rooted in his theology of holiness. This does not make him indifferent to the realities of different theological views nor

reluctant to put forward the one which he believes is right. However, a commitment to mutual growth in holiness provides a context within which such diverse convictions can be addressed.

2.5 Holiness in Contemporary Methodist Discipleship

The most recent ecclesiological statement of the Methodist Church in Great Britain was *Called to Love and Praise* (Methodist Church, 1999) adopted by the Conference in 1999. It recognises Wesley's emphasis on holiness and also the ambiguity of that position, noting 'he taught holiness both as the ultimate goal of Christian living, and also as an experience possible now' (Methodist Church, 1999, p. 41). Holiness is characterised by perfect love for God and thereby for neighbour and it cites both Wesley's *A Plain Account of Genuine Christianity* and *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* in support. As might be expected for a Methodist ecclesiological document, it recognises the link between holiness and Christian fellowship and cites Wesley's comments about 'social holiness'.

In her 2005 work, Angela Shier-Jones reflected on the theme of 'Growth in Grace and Holiness'[18] which she described as part of the 'Methodist understanding of the doctrine of Christian Perfection' (Shier-Jones, 2005, p. 246). She highlighted the tensions that traditional Methodist treatment of the subject can raise, particularly its propensity for being seen as a version of salvation by works. She asserts:

> A theology of responsible grace – and especially of the efficacy of the means of grace and of the ability of the individual to grow in grace and holiness – remains a dominant characteristic of the Methodist *kerygma.* It is proclaimed by the structure and discipline of the Church as well as by its worship and practice. (Shier-Jones, 2005, p. 249)

Alongside this she notes that Methodist membership commits people to engagement with the means of grace, including Holy Communion but she observes that Methodist engagement with disciplines of prayer and private devotion is very slightly less than in other Christian traditions. She suggests that 'the personal and

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[18] British Methodist Hymn Books – in many ways compendiums of doctrine – are ordered not alphabetically nor by season of the year but by theological theme/category. It should be noted that this title is a hymn book section.

corporate discipline that was once characteristic of Methodism's 'methodical' and determined pursuit of holiness is absent' (Shier-Jones, 2005, p. 251) and goes on to make the rather bold claim that 'the desire to grow in holiness is no longer a characteristic of the Methodist people.'

In recent years, British Methodism has re-emphasised discipleship and its associated practices as a central aspect of what it is to be Methodist. It could be argued that this re-emphasis began with the Revd Dr Martyn Atkins' (2011, p. 2) report to the Conference which introduced the phrase 'A Discipleship Movement Shaped for Mission' as a key aspiration for Methodist identity. There have been other projects and initiatives since then, most recently the introduction of *A Methodist Way of Life* (Methodist Church, 2021c). This again attempts to reassert the practice of the means of grace and a more intentional approach to growth in holiness. Declining numbers in membership and attending worship are a source of constant concern and reassertions like those of *A Methodist Way of Life* are often claimed to be the way of overcoming this.

Methodist theologies of holiness have provided a basis for finding common ground with other Christian traditions. The Methodist-Roman Catholic International Commission took holiness as the theme in its report of 2016 *The Call to Holiness: From Glory to Glory* (Bolen & Chapman, 2016). This took an anthropological approach beginning with the creation of humanity for relationship with God and with others. It affirms the priority of grace and like the teaching of Wesley considers justifying and sanctifying grace and the importance of a universal call to holiness. Although noting areas of disagreement, the report finds significant common ground between Methodism and Catholicism.

2.6 Holiness and LGBT+ people

Specific treatments of holiness in the context of LGBT+ people are relatively rare. The most significant text for this study is Keegan Osinski's (2021) *Queering Wesley, Queering the Church* in which she offers queer reflections on ten of Wesley's sermons. In her reflection on the sermon *On Perfection* (Wesley, 1986, pp. 71-87),

taking up Wynkoop's resistance of moralistic accounts of perfectionism, Osinski emphasises perfection as 'an orientation of the heart, provided by grace, toward love.' She argues 'if, having been cleansed from sin by the Spirit, the orientation of one's heart is toward love, and one's action is the outpouring of this love, then there can be no sin here' [i.e. in 'homosexual activity'] (Osinski, 2021, p. 42). Exploring a parallel between Wesley's objectors who resisted his articulation of holiness and perfection, she challenges those who deny the holiness of LGBT+ people and notes the sermon's claim that the body itself cannot be sinful. Thus the labelling of LGBT+ bodies as sinful is rejected.

Elizabeth Edman's (2016) *Queer Virtue*, which I will consider in more detail in chapter 5, explores queer lives as having much to teach Christianity about virtue. The understanding she offers of virtue has important resonances for a Wesleyan understanding of holiness. Charlie Bell's (2022) *Queer Holiness* makes a passionate argument for the inclusion of LGBT+ people in the Church of England but, despite the title, does not really engage with questions of holiness. The (US) Episcopal Church's study guide (Adams et al., 2011) on human sexuality posed the question as to how sexual expression can be combined with Christian holiness and suggested that the virtues of a relationship might be more significant than its sexual expression.

Donovan Ackley (2006) highlights divergent Methodist and Wesleyan responses to questions of sex and gender, noting in particular differences between those who are most concerned for scriptural primacy and those who 'hold the elements in more of a balance' (2006, p. 212). This affects how these people approach the interpretation of the order of creation, the nature of the *imago Dei*, and the theological significance to be accorded to sexuality and gender. Most of these arguments are familiar, but some are striking in their boldness, especially, 'Though originally blessed, perhaps sexuality and gender are the very aspects of human nature not made in God's likeness' (2006, p. 212). This suggestion rests on the fact that sexuality and gender may be shared with other creatures, not claimed to be made in God's likeness.

Ackley was reticent in this paper to come down in favour of the scriptural primacy side or the balanced approach, although the argument is made that the redemption of sexuality and gender would lead to more gender equality and the overcoming of gender-based violence. The paper seems content to accept (or at least not to challenge) the assumption that same-sex relationships are sinful, and presumably therefore by implication the redemption of sexuality and gender on this model would eliminate them (and the desire for them?). Some time after the publication of this paper, Ackley (2021a) came out as transgender and later as intersex. In his book, *Sex and Sacrament*, Ackley (2021b) shares some of the journey of his transition and the challenges of the academic context in which his earlier work was done. He argues strongly that loving relationships are gifts of God irrespective of the gender and sexuality of the partners and resists the essentialisation of gender and sexuality. Ackley (2021b, p. 288) concludes, 'queer covenant relationships are sacramental when those who enter them live their love as blessed by God for the sake of blessing others.'

In *The Queer God*, Marcella Althaus-Reid (2003), who trained as a Methodist Minister in Argentina before embarking on a highly significant academic career, includes a full chapter on queer holiness. I will consider this in the next chapter as part of the consideration of methods of queering theologies of holiness and queer theologies of holiness themselves.

In the light of a probable impending formal split in the United Methodist Church (UMC, based in the USA), a group of scholars met at Candler School of Theology in Atlanta, GA to discuss the unity of the UMC in the light of human sexuality and published a book of the papers given (General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, 2018). As would be expected the focus is therefore on unity, but the book does touch on holiness. In particular, Kevin Watson (2018) argues that for the church to be united it must have a shared vision of holiness and that therefore any model of 'agreeing to disagree' regarding marriage will make the church's pursuit of holiness untenable. He argues that texts such as the sermon on the Catholic

spirit which are often invoked in favour of such approaches are misconstrued by doing that and do not apply to disagreements within a denomination.

In the same collection, Catherine Kelsey (2018) explores the question of sin and uses the historic example of the massacre of Cheyenne and Arapahoe women and children at Sand Creek in 1864. Methodists in Denver celebrated this seeing it as God delivering the land into their hands in the same way scripture recounted God delivering land to the Hebrews by the defeat and slaughter of the peoples who had previously made their home there. By contrast, Methodists on the East Coast of the United States condemned it, equally able to find scriptural support for their view in the commandment not to kill. Kelsey argues that there was not in 19th century American Methodism a clear understanding of what constituted sin and divergent approaches owed as much to so-called 'common sense' and culture, even if ostensibly scripturally justified, as to any theological consideration. She identifies the key problem for the church not as being the lack of a single view but the lack of the ability to live with multiple views. At one level, this conclusion is attractive, but it does raise the question of whether it ought ever to have been acceptable to live with a view that supported the massacre of innocent people. If sin is ultimately a relative concept, does everything become acceptable? Is there anything enduring that transcends culture and context? Clearly loving God and loving one's neighbour has deep ethical implications but determining them with precision is not without its difficulties.

In British Methodism, some of our formal theology on questions of gender and sexuality has considered questions of holiness. For example, in the document on the theological underpinning of the Church's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) toolkit the importance of Methodism's Arminian heritage is recognised:

> The Methodist Church, drawing on its Arminian heritage, emphasises the universality of God's grace, freely offered to all peoples irrespective of their condition. Within Methodism all are welcome in the broadest sense. The emphasis is on God's grace for all, without any exceptions; and on transformational possibilities in personal and relational life for all, beyond what can be expected or predicted. (Methodist Church, 2018, p. 5)

It recognises the importance of holiness in the Wesleyan theological tradition and declares that this is not an 'otherworldly characteristic' but is about being Christlike and is defined as 'perfect love'. However, it does not interrogate in what ways this might apply specifically to any strands of EDI, for example sexuality or gender identity.

The Conference report *God in Love Unites Us* (Methodist Church, 2019) which proposed, *inter alia*, allowing the celebration of same-sex marriages in Methodist Churches and by Methodist ministers and other authorised people, includes holiness as one aspect of its consideration. It builds its argument on a theological structure that begins with the creation of humanity in God's image for relationship with God and with one another. This approach bears a close similarity to the opening chapter of the international Methodist-Roman Catholic report *The Call to Holiness* (Bolen and Chapman, 2016). In the light of an understanding of holiness as perfection in love for God and neighbour, *God in Love Unites Us* is implicitly situated in a theological approach of Wesleyan holiness. The report explores patterns of good relating and in regard to good sexual relating suggests:

> In this regard, the Task Group has reflected on two key terms, 'chastity' and 'fidelity'. The root of the concept ***chastity*** is in purity, which we would understand in terms of the dynamic of holiness. Just as the love of God means that it is God's nature to be loving, and the righteousness of God means that it is God's nature to work to make things 'right', so the holiness of God means that it is God's nature to seek to make people holy. That holiness is dynamic. As God makes people holy, their lives are opened up to be transformed so that they live in holy ways. What that means in practice may vary according to circumstances. At times, it may appropriately involve sexual abstinence, both for those who are married and for those who are not. At all times, it involves one person being open to another person and putting their interests before her or his own. For a Christian, it also involves being open to God, and putting God's interests before one's own. (Methodist Church, 2019, para 2.4.2; emphasis original)

It does not seem to me that this is clear about what it means in terms of holiness and sex. At one level it seems reluctant to declare sex holy; at another it seems worried about saying it is not. Further reflection on what it means for holiness to be 'dynamic' may well be helpful which could usefully be related back to the

Wesleyan understandings discussed above (see page 25). In summary, although its overall theological context may be about holiness, the implications of that are not really drawn out.

In these debates and discussions, sometimes the Wesleyan commitment to holiness has been presented in opposition to LGBT+ inclusion: LGBT+ people are faced with a choice between being holy or being LGBT+. As previously noted (p. 7), Methodist Evangelicals Together's (2017) statement early in the process which led to *God in Love Unites Us* argued that any change to the Church's position on marriage and relationships would amount to a denial of its commitment to scriptural holiness. Similarly, in a report prepared for the emerging Global Methodist Church (arising out of the divisions of the United Methodist Church), Debra Baty et al. (2021) argued that 'sexual holiness' requires chastity or heterosexual marriage.

2.7 Conclusions

John Wesley's teaching on holiness is, at one level, easily summarised as growth in love for God and for neighbour. Such growth has no limit so that a perfection in such love can be reached. This perfection is itself an improvable state and is better understood as a state of *perfecting*. I accept the argument of Wynkoop (and others) that this holiness should be understood relationally and that that also requires a relational understanding of sin. Holiness is the work of God in a person's life but it requires the person's participation and cooperation. Wesley is clear that holiness arises in the context of relationship (broadly understood) and this means that holiness can never be a simply individual matter. This understanding of social holiness is crucial to the overall understanding of holiness in Wesley.

This theology of holiness has implications for how Methodists understand the nature of church and society more generally and more specifically for how Methodists should respond to questions that arise about the place of LGBT+ people in the church. There have been some attempts to engage with this up to now but the formal ecclesiastical engagement with it has been limited. The only

queer theological engagement with Wesley's understanding of holiness is in Osinski and she herself hopes that her work will be 'a springboard for conversations towards a robust queer Wesleyan theology' (Osinski, 2021, p. 131). In summary, there is both the possibility and the need for a queer theological approach to Wesley's teaching on holiness, for both the church and the academy. It is my aim in this thesis to contribute to that.

3. Queering Texts and Traditions of Holiness

3.1 Introduction

In order to develop a queer theological approach to exploring Wesley's teaching on holiness, it is necessary to study origins, methods and examples of queer theology, as well as the range of understandings of the nature of queer theology. In particular, in considering the question of queer readings of Wesley's writing, there are different possible approaches to queering and what a queer reading might involve. Queering often takes a scavenger approach to its methods (Halberstam, 1998, p. 13) and so this chapter will aim to illustrate the range on offer. As I observed in the introduction, one of the major challenges of this project has been to find appropriate methodological approaches for reading the Wesley texts, which do not always lend themselves to methods that are used, for example, for the queer reading of scripture. Furthermore, a single approach would clearly not work for all the texts under consideration, at least not on its own. The scavenger nature of queer methodology, and the queer resistance of the absolute, in fact favours resisting a uniformity of approach, and so there is a queer advantage to what is also a practical reality. I explore the challenges of queer methods for reading Wesley in section 3.4 below and, although there has been very little scholarly queer attention on Wesley so far, I also discuss the key examples. I outline the flexible approach I will take for reading and interpreting the Wesley texts in the subsequent chapters of the thesis, which involves approaching each text using a variety of methodological 'lenses' allowing different queer views of each text to be taken.

3.2 Origins of Queer Theology

Queer theology emerged in the 1990s following earlier gay and lesbian theologies, but also seeking to go beyond these by drawing upon methodologies from a variety of sources but especially feminist, contextual and post-structuralist approaches. Queer theology is a *queering* theology – it uses all that is at its disposal, certainly including but by no means limited to queer experience, to engage with scripture,

doctrine and practice and to transform them. Chris Greenough (2020b, p. 34) describes queering as using ‘a queer lens to reinterpret texts and contexts.’

Within Western Christian theology in the mid 20th century, attention began to be paid to pastoral ministry with gay and lesbian people[19] and to scriptural interpretations that did not exclude homosexuality. Gary Comstock (1996, p. 4) highlights some key texts for this history, notably the Revd Harry Emerson Fosdick’s *On Being a Real Person* (Fosdick, 1943) which sought a pastoral engagement with homosexuality although still considering it as a problem or threat. Comstock describes Derrick Sherwin Bailey’s *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition* (Bailey, 1955) as ‘groundbreaking’, being ‘the first scholarly work to challenge traditional interpretations of allegedly antihomosexual biblical passages’ (Comstock, 1996, pp. 4-5). He traces several significant publications in which inherited Christian attitudes to homosexuality were called into question and reappraised. Gay and lesbian theologies found inspiration from the approaches and methods of liberation theology, alongside feminist theology as Greenough (2020b, pp. 9-11) describes.

Elizabeth Stuart (2003, p. 79) argues that Robert Goss’ (1993) book *Jesus acted up* represents the ‘transition from gay and lesbian theology to queer theology’ although she considers it not a ‘through-going queer theology’ but a significant foundation for it. For Stuart, queer theology has marked differences from gay and lesbian theology and represents more a discontinuity from it than a continuity. For her, a key aspect of queer theology, as opposed to gay/lesbian theology, is its deconstruction of categories of gender and sexuality, by drawing on queer theory which ‘questions the very notion of sexual identity’ (Stuart, 2003, p. 89). Queer theology places strong emphasis on the importance of questioning concepts and categories and this underlies much of what follows. It has drawn liberally on these methods in its engagement with the Christian tradition. Greenough (2020b, p. 33-34) argues that queer theology is not simply a theology of (sexual) identity (and is

[19] While a broader description would be appropriate today, in recounting the history I do not want to be anachronistic about what was being considered.

therefore not equivalent to lesbian and gay theology) but 'disrupt[s] "normal" or "natural" readings of Christianity.'

Some writers have aimed to survey queer theology and there are significant texts, both introductory and more detailed, including *Radical Love* (Cheng, 2011), *Queer Theologies: the basics* (Greenough, 2020b) and *Controversies in Queer Theology* (Cornwall, 2011). The *Oxford Handbook of Theology, Sexuality and Gender* (Thatcher, 2015), gives a detailed and thorough account of theologies of sexuality and gender and their interaction and relation to scripture, tradition, reason and experience as well as faith traditions beyond Christianity. Building from Tillich, it uses as its overall approach the 'method of correlation' in which the proclamation of the gospel 'answers' or 'responds' to the questions raised by the consideration and study of particular human needs and contexts. As queer theology has developed, attention has turned from defensive approaches seeking to legitimise LGBT+ people's place in Christianity to different areas: broader Biblical study (i.e. beyond the 'clobber texts'[20]), theologising queer experience, queer saints and so on. Patrick Cheng (2011, p. 27-28) identifies four strands of queer theology's evolution: apologetic theology, liberation theology, relational theology and queer theology itself, focusing in turn on defence of the community, God's preferential option for the marginalised (in this case LGBT+ people), discovering God in the erotic and a fuller deconstruction of inherited essentialist notions and binaries. By contrast to Stuart, Cheng's account suggests a continuum in the development from gay and lesbian theology towards queer theology. I prefer thinking of a continuum as I think the evolution Cheng outlines is true to the history of queer theology's development, and from a practical perspective, the earlier material still has something to offer us. In the scavenger spirit, I am prepared to use whatever is useful. Quite properly for a queer endeavour, there is no limit to what queer theology might turn its gaze towards – it does not have to be limited to (non-normative) sexualities.

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[20] The 'clobber texts' are those verses of scripture commonly cited against LGBT+ people and usually listed as Genesis 19, Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, Deuteronomy 23:13, Romans 1:26-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9, 1 Timothy 1:10, 2 Peter 1:10 and Jude 7. See, for example, Goss (1993, p. 91).

Some writers have produced broad works of queer theology, for example *The Queer God* (Althaus-Reid, 2003) and *Queering Christ* (Goss, 2002). Queer people have always been part of the church and of religious communities and highlighting this can queer normative accounts of theology and church history or tradition. Kathleen Talvacchia *et al.*'s (2015) work pays close attention to ways in which this has occurred and provides many opportunities for queering notions such as celibacy in the early Church, marriage, and sin and grace.

Queer doctrinal engagement is a significant theme for this project. In the collection *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body* (Loughlin, 2007) a wide range of authors come together to set out a landscape of Queer Theology, exploring queer lives, church, origins, tradition, modernity and orthodoxy. Andy Buechel (2015) in *That we might become God* seeks to reclaim and reappropriate the church's doctrinal and sacramental tradition and Ivy Helman (2011) argues for the importance of a queer systematics. Some authors (for example Lowe (2010) and Blackwell (2019)) have engaged with queering particular doctrines or doctrinal traditions in order to construct new versions. *Sexual Disorientations* (Brintnall, K.L. et al., 2018) explores theological questions relating to time, memory and futurity, while *Unlocking Orthodoxies for Inclusive Theologies* (Shore-Goss and Goh, 2020) argues for 'alternative orthodoxies' giving queer approaches to engaging with the Christian doctrinal tradition. My own project sits at the intersection between queering doctrine (i.e. queering the doctrine of sanctification as it is presented by Wesley) and the queering of historical figures/communities as it explores the queering of Wesley and the early Methodists as the community within which the doctrinal articulations under consideration arose.

Some have claimed that Christian theology has an inherent queerness as Linn Tonstad (2018, p. 128) notes: 'the claim that Christianity is, in some sense, queer – or even inherently queer – is made with increasing frequency by scholars and church people.' Buechel (2015, p. 13) states '*all good theology has always been queer*, even if this way of describing it is new' (emphasis original) while Brintnall (2017) critiques this perspective as denying too many ways in which the church and

Christian tradition has been profoundly un-queer. It would certainly be helpful were Buechel to define how he understands 'good': as it is, we are left with the tautologous implication that good theology is queer and queer theology is good. I do not think Christianity as a whole can be claimed as queer, but I would certainly claim that there is no part of it off-limits to the queer gaze, and there is plenty of queerness to discover within it. I do not underestimate how challenging it may be to queer some parts of Christian theology. In this thesis, I will argue that the early Methodist movement can be seen as a queer antecedent: not as an inherent thing but from its experiences and nature.

Queer Biblical Studies is a significant area in its own right and highlights a range of approaches to queering the biblical text and its use. These approaches are significant in this project because they deal with texts. There are, of course, important differences between Wesley texts and the biblical text, but I have found reflecting on how the biblical text can be approached helpful in imagining approaches for this project. There are broad works of queer biblical scholarship such as *The Queer Bible Commentary* (Guest et al., 2006), *Take Back the Word* (Goss and West, 2000) and *Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible* (Stone, 2001). Other works more focused on specific texts or issues include *Practicing Safer Texts* (Stone, 2005), which compares the treatment of texts relating to food with those on sexuality, Anthony Heacock's (2011) examination of Jonathan and David and Stuart Macwilliam's (2011) study of the prophetic marriage metaphor. The 2011 collection *Bible Trouble* (Hornsby and Stone, 2011) draws together queer treatments of several biblical texts and themes. David Tabb Stewart (2017) surveys the range of LGBT and queer hermeneutics and the Hebrew Bible. He recognises an historical shift from early queer approaches (c. 1970-90), which sought to defend the community against criticism and to create space for queer-affirming interpretations, to more recent approaches which are broader and bring a wider set of concerns, experiences and bodies to the interrogation of the text.

3.3 Methods and Styles and Ingredients: Some Colours of Queering's Rainbow

Each book or article in queer theology brings a variety of approaches to queering the texts and traditions it encounters. I have examined a wide variety of approaches in queer theology by which others have queered texts and traditions. How is and has this been done? What are its essential components? In the context of my project, what approach might I take? Queer theology's general resistance to categorisation and boundaries means that the answers to these questions will be broad and varied rather than simple and precise.

Some framework is needed to appreciate this range, but it should be recognised that any categorisation is essentially arbitrary. I have therefore chosen to talk about them as colours in a queer rainbow: scientifically, we cannot identify the precise point at which one colour becomes the next as the transition is continuous. Pushing the metaphor further, colours can be mixed and changed and there are infinitely many shades available. Colour is also to an extent subjective: what I see may not be the same as what you see. Where I have listed many of these examples is, in some sense, arbitrary – they are illustrative rather than definitive – and all these works are colourful not monochrome. In fact, each reference could be analysed to demonstrate the different hues it employs to paint its picture, although, as with a work of art, a simple list of the colours it employs is likely to miss the significance of the whole! Nevertheless, I have found that drawing attention to the specificity of some of these colours is helpful in appreciating the breadth of approaches that queer theologies offer to a project such as this.

These colours do not so much represent methods that can be applied straightforwardly to a text but highlight some of the results that can be achieved by different methods of queering. By the same token, the emergence of these colours in a reading of a text points to the potential queerness of the reading. In the subsequent chapters, I will use different methods – which I term 'lenses' – to approach the texts, attentive to the colours that each lens may bring out in the text

under consideration. I will explain each lens and its use in the first chapter in which it is used.

3.3.1 Disturbing/disrupting/transgressing boundaries: sex/gender/sexuality/identity

The process of queering deliberately seeks to disturb and disrupt apparent certainties of identity, boundary, category and so on. As soon as one is identified it can be subverted and transformed. For example, Nicholas Laccetti exploring the theology of BDSM says, 'Queer theology emphasizes transgression as a theological method and category: Christian doctrines queer normative boundaries and thus undermine the structures of power that work to oppress sexual minorities and other marginalised people' (Laccetti, 2015, p. 150). Similarly, David Tabb Stewart (2017, p. 296) observes that queer reading 'resists (hetero)normativity and questions boundaries and categories – it is "norm-critical"'. Rebecca Alpert (2006, p. 66) argues for the importance of dissent to the functioning of society as a whole and sees that this can be part of the contribution of queer people. As someone who used to be minister of a church opposite a gay bar, I found Tamar Kamionkowski's observation on the process of queering interesting: 'I sometimes feel like I'm traveling between the synagogue and gay bars – unlikely to find a lot of the same people and somewhat closeted in each location' (Kamionkowski, 2011, p. 131). I wasn't closeted in either location, but it felt like the gap was much further than the geography would suggest and, in some ways, both locations were disruptive to a simple account of my own identity: it sometimes felt awkward to be seen in the gay bar by church members passing. People meeting me there could be surprised to discover that I was a minister. There were also many chances to cross this boundary from leading 'Big Queer Carols' in the bar to hosting Pride services in church. For Marcella Althaus-Reid 'disruption is our diaspora' and 'disruptive practices of love and sexuality have made of the Queer community a continuum' (2003, p. 9): thus disruption goes to the very essence of what it is to be queer. Ellen Armour summarises it well, saying:

> …for all these authors, to 'queer' is to complicate, to disrupt, to disturb all kinds of orthodoxies, including, at least, these two (often intertwined in current debate): those that take our current sex/gender regime as natural and

> God-given and those that posit 'the Bible' as a flat, transparent window into the divine mind. (Armour, 2011, p. 2)

To create space for marginalised communities and disrupt established boundaries and categorisations, Ashon Crawley (2017) uses traditions and practices of Blackpentecostalism to reassess and reimagine accepted ways of understanding identity. Following Althaus-Reid, he seeks to write *against* theology: it is not sufficient simply to reimagine theology but the disruption required implies almost a complete opposition or at least a moving fully beyond the limits of theological traditions. Keegan Osinski (2021, p. 129) in her concluding reflection on her collection of queer reflections on Wesley's sermons, *Queering Wesley, Queering the Church*, remarks that 'to read Wesley queerly is to read *with* Wesley *against* Wesley', a feature to which I will return in section 3.4 below (p. 70).

It should be noted that queering's compulsive requirement to subvert identity categories creates tension with some other LGBT+ approaches which rely more on identity as a foundation of their argument. Susannah Cornwall (2011, pp. 67-8) highlights queer theologies' resistance to absolutising identities and yet as she notes, 'queer theologies have not yet found a way to negotiate a resistance to prescriptive identity which does not also seem to risk erasing special protection for those who have felt themselves to be excluded by "mainstream theologies"'. There continues then in contexts of exclusion to be some use and validity for arguments which use identity even while that itself would call for deconstruction. Such approaches can themselves be disruptive and an example of this colour of queering. As explained in the introduction (p. 12), within this project I am using the language of LGBT+ for people and queer for method, theology, approach and so on and as I acknowledged there is tension in this choice because of queering's subversion of identity categories.

Key aspects of the disrupting colour of queering are:

-Attention to and deconstruction of categories and boundaries

-Seeing transgression of assumed norms as a desirable aim in itself

-Holding nothing sacred

3.3.2 Experience

The use of experience is one of the strongest colours of queering. It embraces both the articulation of queer experience and the questioning of the often normative place of heterosexual experience. To expose existing texts and traditions to queer experience creates a tension which can reshape them. Queer theology is not new in using experience as a theological source: as a basic component of human life, experience becomes part (more or less explicitly) of all manner of theology. In a project which focuses on Wesley, it must be noted that the use of experience is a key aspect of his own theology, which has generated much discussion of its own: see, for example, Colin Williams (1960, pp. 32-8), Albert Outler (1985, pp. 10-1) and Randy Maddox (1994, pp. 44-6). Although criticised for its dangers of over-simplification and of being misconstrued, the 'Wesleyan quadrilateral' of scripture,[21] reason, experience and tradition does underline experience's significance alongside the more 'traditional' sources. Pamela Lightsey in her book *Our Lives Matter*, subtitled 'A Womanist Queer Theology', argues that, in a theological context, 'queering […] uses as its framework queer theory and as its resources, scripture, reason, experience and tradition' (2015, p. 27). While the use of experience itself may not be new, there is something significant in using what might otherwise be regarded as 'non-normative' experience. In doing this, queer theology follows the example of the liberation theologies in which the experience and lives of marginalised communities become central sources for beginning and concluding theology. Marcella Althaus-Reid writes queer theology informed by a liberationist approach, rooted in her Latin American context. For example, Althaus-Reid (2003, p. 2) says 'By theological queering, we mean the deliberate questioning of heterosexual experience and thinking […] It also requires us to come clean about our experiences, which in some way or other always seem destined to fall outside the normative sexual ideology of theology.' She argues alongside Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick that queer theology is a first-person theology (Althaus-Reid, 2003, p. 8).

[21] For a discussion of the development of the quadrilateral and its critique see Ted Campbell (1991).

It therefore not only *permits* but *requires* the use of the theologian's experience as well as that of others.

One of the most significant examples of the use of experience as a form of queering is Robert Goss' work in both *Jesus Acted Up* (1993) and *Queering Christ* (2002). Goss begins his work by sharing the story of his vocation and sexuality and speaks of finding God in his experience. His experience is a key source for his theology throughout the book, used to challenge accepted norms and to construct new understandings. He is explicitly activist (a theme to which I will return in section 3.3.6, p. 62) in orientation, using his experience as a catalyst to action and change.

More recent queer interpretation interrogates the text from within, as David Tabb Stewart (2017, p. 290) notes, highlighting the approach of the 'interpreter within the text'. This conscious placing of the interpreter implies that their experience will be a significant factor in the reading. It also raises the question as to who can engage in the task of queer interpretation? Is queer experience necessary and what would constitute it, if so? Tabb Stewart sees two possibilities (identity/location vs standpoint/opposition) and agrees with Ken Stone that it can be both. Indeed, for him this is a boundary to be blurred. By contrast, Chris Greenough (2019) argues that doing queer theology is more about its approaches (or anti-approaches) and methods (or anti-methods) than about the identity of the person doing it. In considering this opposition, queer theology's resistance to absolutised identity categories means that insisting on certain identities for queer researchers must be problematic. The methods of queer theology are necessary but perhaps not sufficient. Alongside this is queer theology's first-person-ness (Althaus-Reid, 2003, p. 8): it is necessary for the researcher to have skin in the game, in whatever way, they must be implicated and involved.

While the extent to which they constitute queer theology as opposed to lesbian and gay theology might be debated, I feel it important to note the significance to theology of research into LGBT+ Christians' experience. These experiences can provide important insights to the contemporary queer theologian that may go

beyond the original researcher's reflections or conclusions. One example of this is Jeffrey Heskins' (2005) exploration of holiness through the experience of gay and lesbian Anglican clergy, discussed further below (p. 68). In *Undoing Theology,* Greenough (2018) argues for the importance of sexual story-telling in forming theology, yet at the same time recognises that experience itself must be subject to the deconstruction and critique queer methods bring. Other notable examples would include Gary Comstock's (1996) *Unrepentant, Self-Affirming, Practicing* which draws on several surveys on the lives of LGB people, Peter Sweasey's (1997) *From Queer to Eternity* which explores the spirituality of LGB people with a variety of backgrounds and approaches to faith and Bronwyn Fielder and Douglas Ezzy's (2018) *Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Christians: queer Christians, authentic selves* which interviewed LGBT+ people and explored their theological understanding and religious practice.

To summarise, the experience colour of queering has the following key features:

-It situates the researcher's own experience and acknowledges their place in the task of interpretation. It may explicitly use that experience as a key aspect of the task of interpretation.

-It pays attention to the wider experience and story of queer communities. This may include needing to attend to the variety of queer communities in different contexts. It explores what resonates with queer communities and how their/our experience may reinterpret a given text or tradition.

3.3.3 Insertion/entry/making space

LGBT+ people have often experienced exclusion in a variety of ways. Queering by insertion is the active work of re-entry into spaces that may have been, or seemed to be, off-limits to LGBT+ people. Obvious among these is scripture, but it applies too to church communities, to doctrinal formulations and more. Queering these things opens them up and creates space for LGBT+ people to enter. At one level, this could be a description of all of queer theology, but it is worth highlighting as a specific methodological approach. It is particularly visible in queer Biblical Studies

and works such as *Take back the Word* (Goss and West, 2000) and the *Queer Bible Commentary* (Guest et al., 2006) have it as one of their explicit aims.

This colour of queering represents a particular approach to texts, in which questions can be asked about how the text has been received in queer exclusive ways and how it might be received differently. For example '[Guest] admits that she is deliberately interrogating the text with her own agenda – but as the essay continues, *one discovers that the agenda is not just to break down heteronormative structures but to create a place for herself within biblical readings'* (Kamionkowski, 2011, p. 134) discussing Guest (2011). Tabb Stewart (2017, p. 293) notes that 'queer interpreters have also taken up the ancient technique of *midrash*-making' by developing and expanding upon the stories of scripture.

Queer theory destabilises identities, as Sean Burke (2011) demonstrates by examining the account of the Ethiopian Eunuch. He uses the insights of queer theory to recognise that the eunuch's gender and sexual identity cannot be absolutised even if it could be definitively known. This ambiguity opens up the space for queering other characters and aspects of the book of Acts. Having queered characters in the narrative, there are then figures in which contemporary queer people can see an echo of themselves – there is in other words, space for them/us in the text.

Once queering has opened a space, it seeks to keep it open: 'The queer propensity for making room for the one-not-yet-thought-of insures a widening circle' (Tabb Stewart, 2017, p. 308). The queer commitment to not absolutising identities means that an opening up that simply expands the list of those who can be included does not go far enough – it needs to leave the door permanently open. This begins to imply a structural transformation that creates a culture that is open to the development of identities in ways that are not limited or restrictive.

The insertion colour of queering has the following key features:

-It interrogates the way a text or tradition has been understood and received and who has been included or excluded by that reception history.

-It seeks to re-interpret the text to overcome that exclusion

-It recognises that queer identities are not fixed or a closed list, and leaves space for further opening up.

3.3.4 Uncovering/exposing/outing

In what we can regard as the corollary of queering by insertion, this colour of queering seeks to expose the texts and traditions it examines. LGBT+ people and queer concerns are already there and can be revealed. Any text that is about communities of people is in some sense about LGBT+ people, even if it doesn't realise that. Queering can call to its aid many methods of historical, textual, linguistic, cultural and other disciplines to be used in this uncovering. At its strongest, this colour of queering can be 'outing' – pro/claiming the queer identity of historical figures and understanding their life and work in that light. For example, some writers claim to out St Paul (Goss, 2002, p. 211-2). It may also be simply noticing what others do not: 'Because LGBT readers ask different questions of the Bible they make observations about sexual behaviors overlooked by others' (Tabb Stewart, 2017, p. 291). Ultimately this is a task of truth-telling and an insistence upon honesty in place of the convenient fictions of tradition and custom. Heacock's (2011) exploration of Jonathan and David's relationship is an excellent example of this kind of queering. He is unconstrained by expected interpretations and uses the full range of Biblical critical skills to enquire into the topic. Ultimately he concludes that we cannot know the precise nature of Jonathan and David's relationship. As with many historical examples, it is impossible now to know the exact nature of people's identity, activity and relationships but even to pose the question can put the history in a significantly different light. This itself uncovers a new realm of possibilities.

Uncovering is an approach which can enable a new appreciation and understanding of historic texts and figures. For example, Virginia Burrus (2007) reads Gregory of Nyssa from a queer perspective and seeks to uncover the queerness of his theology. She highlights the ways in which his theology is already

queer (for example, by destabilising binaries such as a hierarchy between active and passive sexual roles) and draws attention to the queerness of his asceticism. However, this is a different kind of claim than the suggestion that St Paul is gay. None of St Paul, St Gregory of Nyssa or the early Methodists can be straightforwardly claimed as LGBT+ but there is nevertheless value in appreciating the ways queerness can be seen in their approach and experience and the ways in which it can give us new insights into their lives and writing. For the purposes of this project, I think queerness certainly involves resistance to the normative and going beyond its limits, but it is also something more than that. In particular, I think the transgression of normative boundaries has to be related to something of actual lives and bodies and not simply conceptual frameworks.

The key features of the uncovering colour of queering are:

-Exploring the background and origins of a text or tradition (including its translation where appropriate)

-Identifying actual or potential non-normative or transgressive features

-Reassessing the interpretation of the text or tradition in the light of those highlighted features

3.3.5 Play: role reversal, telling (new) stories, subverting seriousness, innuendo

Queering is a playful activity, upending seriousness, telling new stories and using camp and innuendo to subvert authority, structures and boundaries. Tabb Stewart notes that it 'resists academic norms by making room for playfulness and humor, both 'camp' and 'drag', and eschews a single definition of queer' (Tabb Stewart, 2017, p. 296). Greenough (2020b, p. 147) highlights the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence as an example of parody but one which 'leads to serious activism'.

Camp is an important example of this colour of queering. Camp is not simply a tool of humour but provides ways of dealing with terror, pain and destruction by subverting oppressive structures of power. Elizabeth Stuart (2000) asserts that it is a necessity for queer reading of scripture. Stuart situates camp reading as a reader-

response method: indeed, for her, queer readings are all matters of reader response. She accepts the hermeneutic argument that meaning is produced in the interaction of text and reader and recognises that this is particularly important for queer communities who bring a particular experience of life to that interaction. The reading so generated is an example of 'the "truest" form of reader-response criticism, … that reflects the theological relationship between readers and the biblical text' (Stuart, 2000, p.30). As observed in the previous chapter, responses to Wesley texts are an important aspect of this study and although in many ways these texts often seem highly serious, we will see that there are parts of them that can be taken humorously and even with a degree of camp and this sheds new light on these texts.

The idea of interpretive community is key to Stuart's approach and she recognises this has particular importance for queer communities who must read against dominant traditions of interpretation:

> [Queer reading] means to read texts in an interpretive community and tradition that has not only in Judith Fetterley's phrase 'immasculated women,' that is, assumed that the reader is male and taught women to read as males, in other words assumed the universality of male experience, but also de-queered readers teaching us to read as people who accept the universality of heterosexual experience. (Stuart, 2000, p.30)

Throughout this project, I will be reading against the background of particular interpretive traditions that may lie heavily upon me. Camp reading provides an ability to laugh at texts that had previously been experienced and used in oppressive ways. Stuart uses as her example Ephesians 5:21-33 about the meaning and nature of the marriage relationship. She describes how this text which caused her to wince or become angry was transformed by an unexpected interpretation which allowed her to laugh.

The *Queer Bible Commentary* (Guest et al., 2006) includes two pieces which make use of camp methods. Roland Boer explores Chronicles and Mona West examines Esther using some camp approaches. Boer quotes Creekmur and Doty (1995, p. 3) who suggest that 'camp has the ability to "queer" straight culture by asserting

there is queerness at the core of mainstream culture even though that culture tirelessly insists that its images, ideologies, and readings were always only about heterosexuality.' In the context of attempting to queer Wesley texts this is a particularly important ability.

Key aspects of the play colour of queering include:

-Humour/parody

Being ready to laugh at, with and in spite of the text. The more innuendo laden, eyebrow-raising and pomposity-puncturing the better. This humour reshapes the way that both performer and audience experience the text and understand its meaning. It can bring it down to an ordinary – or base – level and create connections with contemporary queer experience as well as disempowering oppressive dynamics in the text.

-Being attentive to the text as a performance

This will mean imagining (or even experiencing) the text as something spoken or performed rather than simply read. Playful reading requires a reaction to an experience – it is an example of a reader-response method. The text can be engaged with as a performance by a reader or actor as well as a performance by its author. Indeed, it may be worth considering both a performance by the original author as well as subsequent performances which might take unexpected or parodic directions. Which elements of the performance(s) are humorous, playful or camp, or have that potential?

-Camp readings

Camp represents a practice deeply rooted in the queer community and the different authors have discussed dynamics of ownership relating to that. As Stuart says camp is a way in which the queer community can re/claim or re/appropriate texts that might seem oppressive, distant or alien. It finds its fullest meaning in response to a community's experience of the text in a humorous or parodic way –

as Elizabeth Stuart (2000, p. 31) imagines in hoping for laughter-filled responses to the reading of Romans 1:26-27 in a cathedral for example.

3.3.6 Activism/justice/politics

As I have studied literature relating to queering, I have been struck by the place of language of defence and offence and the extent to which the queer endeavour is a struggle or even a battle. As observed above, early gay and lesbian biblical studies and theology focused on defending the community. Other approaches take an intentionally hostile aim at oppressive structures and theologies. This approach to queering (as in the slogan 'not gay as in happy but queer as in fuck you') recognises that queer liberation is not simply a paper exercise and involves real struggle and concerns real lives.

Queering texts and traditions is not simply an activity aimed at generating academic or theological interest but is committed to the transformation of injustice and of human society (and its institutions, e.g. churches). Robert Goss in *Queering Christ* (Goss, 2002) engages in both defensive and offensive strategies. For example, in the section on queering the Bible, chapter 9 is devoted to dealing with the 'clobber texts' in a way which seems to give the community means for its defence. In chapter 10 which follows, he then develops a much stronger offensive strategy to 'overthrow heterotextuality', although even this includes strategies to 'deflect textual violence'.

Queer activism may begin as pastoral concern for queer communities but a fully queer approach goes beyond this. As Althaus Reid and Isherwood (2004, p. 6) assert, 'Queer theology is, then, a sexual theology with a difference, a passion for the marginalized.' Rebecca Alpert (2006) explores the book of Exodus with a great emphasis on the theme of liberation and the place of the commandment not to oppress the stranger, with which many LGBT+ people can strongly identify. Tabb Stewart (2017, p. 302) commenting on Alpert's (2006) piece notes that she 'does not directly address the straight reader – there is a sort of pastoral concern here for the LGBT community along with her hermeneutical argument'. However, while

it is true to say that Alpert's primary audience are translesbigay people (in her words), her concern is not simply pastoral and her hermeneutical argument about the journey from hiddenness to liberation is transformative for the LGBT+ community and beyond. Greenough (2020a) argues for a queer activist approach to the teaching of Biblical Studies and against objections of academic convention, method and respectability that might be made against it. He offers practical means which educators could use to queer their teaching. Robyn Henderson-Espinoza (2019) uses queer methods in creating an activist theology which aims to motivate radical social change.

I mentioned the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence above when considering the play colour of queering but they indisputably belong here as well. Melissa Wilcox's book recounts and analyses what they call 'this unusual approach to activism' (2018, p. 2). This activist approach engages profoundly with the religious tradition and teaching of Roman Catholicism and through both imitation and parody critiques it and reimagines it. This is not simply to create humour but in order to work towards real goals for example in queer acceptance and sexual health.

This activist approach requires attention to concerns, identities and issues beyond simply queer ones, or perhaps better it declares that all concerns of justice are properly queer concerns. Oppressive structures of racism, colonialism, sexism and other forms of discrimination all call for queering and transformation and queer theology, particularly in its activist colour, must be intersectional and resist the limits of white, male and cis: see, for example, Alpert (2006, p. 76), Greenough (2020b, p. 88-9), Ladin (2018), Robinson-Brown (2021) and Talvacchia *et al* (2015, p. 3).

The activist colour of queering is focused on:

-Real life structures and phenomena of marginalisation by which queer and other communities are prevented from fully flourishing

-Practical ways in which these might be identified, exposed and overcome

-Amplifying the most marginalised voices and communities

3.3.7 Re/appropriating, imagining, claiming, constructing

Queer theology refuses to accept that the resources and texts of human traditions are not available to queer people as they are to others. To queer texts and traditions that have been taken away from queer people is to re/appropriate, re/imagine, re/claim and re/construct them, discovering (again) the use that they can have for queer people. The compilation of queer readings of scripture, *Take back the Word,* (Goss and West, 2000) is a key example: starting right from the title.

Although not identified as a work of queer theology, the compilation by Misha Cherniak *et al.* (2016) on Orthodoxy and LGBT inclusion is a significant example of this colour of queering. Orthodoxy might commonly be imagined as far off limits for LGBT+ people (and the pronouncements of some hierarchs would confirm that) yet here, LGBT+ people and allies claim the tradition, its texts and theology as theirs as much as any other Orthodox Christian's. Specific aspects of Christian doctrine and teaching can be reconstructed and indeed to do this with a theology of holiness is the aim of this project. JDR Mechelke's (2019) construction of a kinky doctrine of sin is an example of this approach. He critiques Lowe's (2010) queer account of sin and draws Gustavo Gutiérrez into conversation to supply what he sees as lacking. Constructing a kinky doctrine of sin is, he says, 'a queering action' (Mechelke, 2019, p. 24). He transforms the internalised oppression within himself from an upbringing in a homophobic church tradition to reveal how processes of subjection and denial of human dignity are the truly sinful ones. A key aim of the paper is the construction of a doctrine which is of use to kinky people – the doctrine is not to be abandoned but reclaimed in a useable form. Lowe's work on which he draws similarly highlights the need for a queer approach to sin, recognising in particular the effect of sinful structures on queer people. Refusing the binary of maintaining an inherited theology unaltered or setting theological heritage entirely aside, Lowe instead urges the queering of Christian doctrine to 'articulate the story of God's love in Jesus Christ in a way that extends the ever-widening circle of welcome to all persons' (Lowe, 2010, p. 85).

Key aspects of this colour of queering include:

-Asserting that texts, theologies, traditions etc. belong as much to queer people as to anyone else

-Re/interpreting and re/expressing them so as to better serve the needs of queer communities

3.3.8 Desire

Queering may be unashamedly motivated by desire: desire for God, desire for life, desire for sex, desire for insight. Some Christian theology has seen desire as something to be overcome, a negative emotion related to temptation and sin. Many queer accounts see something much more powerful in desire and encourage a reinterpretation of this tradition. For example, Christopher Hinkle (2007) highlights that there are strains in Christian tradition in which erotic and romantic desire have been closely linked to desire for God. Hinkle's essay on St John of the Cross is one such example in which he resists an allegorical tradition of interpretation which would spiritualise those links. Rather, he 'invites contemporary queer Christians … to explore the resonances of their own sexual and spiritual desires' (Hinkle, 2007, p. 189). Similarly, Robert Goss (2002) writes passionately about erotic attraction and devotion to the person of Jesus which forms the basis of much of his theology. His desire for God and for other men is core to the way he engages with the theological tradition of Catholicism (in which he was raised), and he sees these as mutually reinforcing rather than in tension.

Desire can be expressed through narrative and James Martin's (2000) Easter love story illustrates a profound sense of queer desire for the risen Christ, who is himself queered by the story and the writer's desire. The use of narrative as a vehicle for reflection on desire is a powerful method in theological reflection on these themes, especially in the context of unexpected stories or those that might be challenging to mainstream narratives. It allows a story of queer experience to be brought directly into a theological narrative and to re-form it.

Desire is not limited to the unconscious or involuntary and may be deliberate and sought out. Timothy Koch's (2001) account of cruising as methodology is unashamed in its use of desire to encounter the scriptures. He rejects approaches ('The Pissing Contest', 'Jesus is my trump card' and 'I can fit the glass slipper too') that are overly concerned with the criticism of others in favour of an approach which is attentive to his needs as a gay man. This, he says, 'involves being open to possibility, paying attention to what catches your own eye, pursuing your curiosity, following up on any promising signals, and simply "taking it from there"' (Koch, 2001, p. 175).

The desire colour of queering takes seriously desire as a human and especially a queer experience. It recognises the individuality of desire and especially sexual desire and resists a culture in which desire may be seen as a source of shame. To summarise the desire colour of queering has these key features:

-It understands human desire, and especially sexual desire to be akin to desire for God or the other.

-It is open to the possibility therefore that one 'kind' of desire can reveal something about the other.

-It recognises that queer interpretation should be about queer interests and not driven by other factors.

3.3 Queering Holiness

Queer theology has given relatively little attention to the topic of holiness. Conceptually a queer theology of holiness marks a significantly different set of ideas to conventional or ordinary theologies of holiness. Some of the most important existing work in this area is that of Marcella Althaus-Reid (2003) in *The Queer God.* She is clear that queer holiness cannot simply be a modification or 'duplication', to use her word, of existing practices and works of holiness. Working from a liberationist and Latin American perspective, she critiques colonial approaches which have created and sustained structures of oppression. Queer holiness must fully reject these oppressive structures and will be a holiness 'of the

other'. Rather than suppressing difference, queer holiness discovers another narrative of holiness precisely in the differences and in features and traditions that dominant narratives have sought to suppress. In the light of her own Methodist background, it is significant that Althaus-Reid chooses to consider holiness and indeed highlights queer strategies of social holiness. For her, such strategies are opposed to a hegemonic global capitalism which imposes conformity (in sexual and gender terms as well as more generally) and 'distort[s] people's vocations for social holiness' (2003, p. 149). As discussed in chapter 2 above (p. 26), social holiness is also an important theme in Wesley's theology of holiness.

Keegan Osinski argues that her queer reading of Wesley's sermons articulates a 'new reading of holiness', which 'build[s] out Wesleyan holiness with factors that exist within the queer experience' (Osinski, 2021, p. 9). She concludes:

> The heart of Wesleyan holiness is perfect love of God and neighbor. There is nothing inherent in LGBTQ+ life that precludes either of these things, and in fact there are ways that queer experience provides unique insight and guidance towards these goals. (Osinski, 2021, p. 11)

We will consider Osinski further in the next section. An alternative approach to holiness for LGBT+ people would be much more conventional: how might space be created for us/them within existing understandings and theologies? What ethics, particularly on sexual matters, would such theologies imply? Eugene Rogers (2004) writing in *Christian Century* argues in favour of Christian recognition of same-sex marriage on the grounds that this may provide a path of holiness to same-sex couples, drawing on one of the traditional purposes of marriage as a remedy for sin. Indeed, he expresses the concern that it may be immoral not to affirm same-sex marriage, as this denies same-sex couples this 'remedy'. His account is essentially the kind of 'duplication' that Althaus-Reid would want to resist. He preserves the existing paradigm of holiness as regards human relationships and wishes to extend it slightly to include same-sex relationships. In my view, this would be a very limited approach to queering the theology of holiness, if it could even be called that at all. In particular for LGBT+ people, but I would argue in general, the measure of holiness is not found in conforming to an externally

imposed paradigm. Rather, as I will argue, holiness is to be understood as a relational category.

Writing against the background of the (Anglican) Lambeth Conference's failure to agree what might constitute 'holy living' for gay and lesbian couples, Jeffrey Heskins (2005) uses a pastoral theology approach to the experience of same-sex couples where one or both partners are Anglican clergy to explore how they understand holiness in the context of their relationships. While this is not a work of queer theology as such, in many ways it is striking for the ordinariness of its conclusions,[22] in which couples discover something about holiness in the ordinary reality of their life together. Inasmuch as this pattern of holiness has been obscured or even denied and declared evil, this work shares with Althaus-Reid a discovery of the holiness of the other.

Although I am not primarily aiming for this to be a project about sex, a queer theology of holiness must whole-heartedly include sex and sexuality within its embrace. For example, Jane Grovijahn (2008) explores an understanding of sex and sexuality as holiness. She roots her exploration in a theology of creation and incarnation which sees sex as a graced activity and one which builds human relating and community. These relationships must be of justice as well as of love because both of those things are interwoven into each other. She considers many angles, including both spirituality and bodyliness of sexuality, as well as revelation and sacramentality. Sexual minorities therefore participate in the life of God and the goodness of creation just as much as other people do and therefore their relating – especially their sexual relating – reveals God's holiness.

The queer theologies of holiness that this project explores must be integrally related to queer lives and to lives of faith. Elizabeth Edman (2016), a lesbian Episcopal priest, in her work on queer virtue drew parallels between the nature of queer lives and Christian lives and discovered important commonalities,

[22] My own activist experience is that there is great power in the ordinary and apparently unremarkable, even subversively so. The queer potential of the ordinary would be worth exploring further.

particularly around public proclamation and ownership of an identity and then living in accordance with it. This involves work for justice and solidarity with all who are marginalised. For her there is no tension between queerness and Christianity; rather because of this, true Christianity is in fact queer, a point which relates to my earlier discussion of 'inherent queerness' (p. 49). I don't think that what she means by 'virtue' is quite what I mean by 'holiness' but the concepts do overlap. For her virtue is about living a good life – one which is justice-seeking, ethical and faithful to oneself – whereas I would root holiness as such in the working of grace in a person's life. Virtue might well then be a consequence of holiness. Brian Bromberger (2017, p. 72) reviewing her work considers this a fresh approach to 'reconcil[ing] sexuality with Christianity' and hopes that others will take it further. I will return to Edman's work in more detail in chapter 5, in dialogue with Wesley's tract, *The Character of a Methodist*.

With the exception of Rogers, I think each of these authors has something to offer into the construction of the aim of this project. Althaus-Reid's work sets a firm target as to the purpose and functioning of a queer theology of holiness that might make it worthy of its name. Edman and Heskins give me the opportunity to root this in the reality of a contemporary and cultural experience that relates in a number of ways to my own context and background in British Methodism. The multiple dimensions that Grovijahn considers in her paper echo with the breadth I aim for in this theology of holiness. In some ways like Edman, I am trying as a queer person to find a way of speaking of holiness from within and to my own tradition. As the first chapter demonstrated, holiness is a basic component of a Wesleyan understanding of Christian discipleship and the process of justification, sanctification and perfection must be applicable to queer people if we are to be truly able to own our own place within the Methodist tradition. In this I agree with Osinski's view of the possibilities and potential within the Wesleyan tradition for liberative and fruitful queer theology. I approach this from an assumption that the purpose of this process is about human flourishing, and so a queer re-imagining of

it is not about constraining LGBT+ people or communities to a pre-determined structure but is also about opening ways for our liberation.

As I have explained above, although there is relatively little queer theology on the topic of holiness, the broad corpus of queer theology provides an array of methods to use as I engage with formational texts of the Methodist tradition on holiness in order to seek to make my own contribution to that question. The key interaction of this project is the methods of queer theology with the concept of holiness. Different colours of queering will highlight different aspects of the texts studied and a text may yield a variety of different insights. Out of this engagement, I will seek to construct a queer theology of holiness. I hope that it will offer to LGBT+ Methodists and to others, not mere repetitions of what has come before but new ways of understanding the interpenetration of the divine life with our own.

3.4 (How) Can You Queer Wesley?

Henry Abelove is an American scholar of literature, history and queer studies and was one of the editors of the groundbreaking work *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (Abelove et al., 1993). His book *The Evangelist of Desire: John Wesley and the Methodists* (Abelove, 1990) sought to enquire as to how John Wesley came to attract so many devoted followers and argued that a number of factors were relevant including deference, love and sexuality. It is not a theological work, nor is it identified by Abelove as an attempt at queering the history of Wesley and the Methodists. Nevertheless, in my view, it represents the first queer scholarly attempt to engage with Wesley. The work is, in a number of ways, quite speculative and on the whole poses questions and opens possibility rather than giving definitive answers or concrete proofs. It attracted significant critical comment from the established community of historical Wesleyan scholarship,[23] although historian Deborah Valenze (1992) called it an 'ingenious analysis' which would mean that 'one's perception will never again be the same.' The value of Abelove's work to me is that it offers questions that might otherwise be unasked

[23] See, for example, Heitzenrater (1992) and Green, V. H. H. (1995).

and creates the possibility of a different – and certainly disruptive – reading of Wesley and of his life. Given this, it is perhaps hardly surprising that traditional Wesleyan studies did not give it an entirely warm reception.

Keegan Osinski's (2021) *Queering Wesley, Queering the Church* offers queer reflections on ten Wesley sermons and is, I think, the first queer theological book engaging directly with Wesley's work as its main focus. She observes:

> In a moment where the influence, involvement, and even existence of LGBTQ+ Christians in the Wesleyan tradition are in question and in jeopardy, a reading of John Wesley that takes seriously his work and legacy as well as the concerns and experiences and queer people is sorely needed. (2021, p. 1)

Osinski writes from a North American context and declares 'as of this writing, no Wesleyan denomination is unequivocally open and affirming in its polity' (Osinski, 2021, p. 3). While the British context from which I write has important differences to the North American one,[24] I agree with her entirely as to the importance and need for queer theological engagement with Wesley. She notes 'little formal or scholarly work has been done to construct a queer Wesleyan theology' (Osinski, 2021, p. 5).

Osinski gives relatively little attention to questions of methodology. She defines 'queer reading' in this way:

> I define 'queer reading' as an attempt to queer – that is, disrupt and interrogate the sex, gender, and sexuality norms of – a given text. To read queerly is to look at a text from different angles and through different eyes, to see what's missing or what takes up too much space, to explore all the possibilities of what the text could be saying, and to tease out what might be hiding closeted within the text. (Osinski, 2021, p. 3)

The queer readings she offers are essentially her own theological reflection and analysis – as a queer Wesleyan – on each sermon, drawing in other theological work. The ten sermons are chosen as those that attracted her attention, the result

[24] In particular, the different polity positions regarding LGBT+ people in the Methodist Church in Britain as compared with the United Methodist Church which in its Book of Discipline 'considers [the practice of homosexuality] incompatible with Christian teaching' (United Methodist Church, 2016, p. 113). The position of the Methodist Church in Britain was discussed in the Introduction (p. 7).

of ‘the unexpected mystery of queer attraction’ (Osinski, 2021, p. 12). In her conclusion, she identifies that this process is ‘to read *with* Wesley *against* Wesley’ (Osinski, 2021, p. 129). This is because she argues that ‘the spirit of Wesley’s work’ lends itself to such a reading even though ‘John Wesley himself [did not have] any liberatory sense of sexuality or premonitions of gender-bent holiness’ (Osinski, 2021, p. 6-7).

Taking Osinski’s definition of queering above gives an insight into why Wesley texts – or at least the ones considered in this project – are hard to queer. The texts generally do not make explicit their sex, gender and sexuality norms which remain firmly in the background. They seldom offer obvious queer possibilities. Nevertheless as I have explained above, their reception contributes to sex, gender and sexuality norms within the life of the Methodist Church (and other churches) today. In that sense, they are ripe for queering but the challenge – which this project seeks to address – is to find effective and productive ways of doing that.

As I described in the Introduction, I am focusing in this thesis on the texts that Wesley used in writing *Plain Account.* Having outlined Wesleyan theologies of holiness more generally in the previous chapter, the key question for this chapter is, ‘how might these texts on holiness be queered?’ Some of them are sermons but I will also be considering a tract and the minutes of the early Conferences. These texts give a variety of purpose and genre. The queer theological reflection approach that Osinski used is clearly one way in which such texts may be queered but it will be necessary to be more methodologically overt than she was. The overall contribution of this thesis then is not simply in queer readings and constructive theology done from those readings but in offering strategies by which Wesley (and potentially other key Christian figures) might be read queerly. For such approaches to be queer they cannot be formulaic and themselves purport to construct norms for reading. My approach will therefore be multifaceted and approach the texts in a number of ways. This will be inevitably incomplete: there will of course be other ways in which they could still be approached. Others who

may engage with these questions will add more, discard things and reshape the whole.

As explained in the previous chapter, I come to this project as a Methodist minister, a religious leader in a tradition in which a purpose 'to spread scriptural holiness through the land' (Methodist Church, 2023, p. 213) is a stated part of our communal identity and a core purpose for our existence. The writings of John Wesley (and to a lesser extent Charles Wesley) are key to this theological and doctrinal heritage and continue to be a significant source for our collective self-understanding and theological reflection. Within this, John Wesley's *Notes on the New Testament* and the 'first four volumes of his sermons' are formally identified as being doctrinal sources for the Methodist Church in Great Britain. Those preparing for ministries as Local (Lay) Preachers or for ordination have to engage with the sermons and be able to have some sense of their meaning in a contemporary context.

My experience, as discussed in the previous chapter, has been that 'scriptural holiness' is often used in opposition to work for LGBT+ participation or inclusion in the life of Methodism (in Britain and elsewhere) and my aim in this work is to seek to overcome that division. My dream, my desire perhaps, is for a queer theology of holiness in which that binary choice is problematised and the lives, identities and ministries of LGBT+ people (and others who defy established norms) can be understood to be as much a locus of scriptural holiness as those of anyone else.

To do this I will be aiming to use the theological approach of queering, in its broad and varied forms which I have described above, to try to re-engage and re-interpret historic and significant texts of my tradition. This might be seen to be a challenging task in any event, but in the context of a theological approach which actively seeks to disrupt and destabilise and which does not allow things to be declared sacred and somehow off-limits, I feel it creates a tension in my very self: do I preserve a tradition I have known and loved? What would I be prepared to overthrow in order to achieve my purpose? Can someone with the commitments I have made to ministry in a particular context do theology like this? As I explained

in the Introduction, this project aims to be reparative and to offer positive approaches to the tradition. As a theology arising from activist concerns, it also aims to support growing inclusion for LGBT+ people in the life of the Methodist Church and churches and to be able to speak to that broad context. It is not therefore a radically transgressive queer theology. One way of terming this might be that this is a 'vanilla' queer theology which very much operates in the ordinary realities of life. For queer flourishing there is as much importance in asserting the ordinariness of queer lives as our difference and all of that is needed for queer theology. At the same time, such ordinariness can be the site of as radical disruption as more apparently extraordinary queerness. When my husband and I were married, the service had much in common with many church weddings: there were flowers, we sang hymns, the Bible was read, there was cake and so on. Nevertheless, it was, in the words of one social media commenter, 'a travesty of spiritual and moral proportions.' Transgression is in the eye of the beholder and if we are not to establish only some kinds of transgression as queer then there is space for queering through the ordinary and vanilla just as much as through the kinky and bold.

In some of the examples I have cited above, it is comparatively easy to see how the process of queering has engaged with the material that the author has used. Particular 'queer' features may be apparent in the text or tradition which can be analysed and brought to the forefront. However, many of the texts with which this project will have to deal will be on apparently abstract theological themes – say, justification by faith for example. Both the apparently conceptual style of such theological formulations and their reception history in a heteronormative context give me an internalised resistance to trying to queer them which I hope to overcome. Because of this, I am choosing to name these kinds of texts and traditions as 'radically straight'. We have received them as straight, been taught to treat them that way and to do anything other begins to feel iconoclastic. Osinski (2021, p. 12) remarks that 'to find what's queer in John Wesley's self-consciously chaste and decidedly unsexual sermons from a time and place so far from our

current understandings of gender and sexuality was quite the adventure' and I think that in saying so she is identifying with similar challenges to the ones that I have found in this project.

3.5 Methods in this Project

It might be tempting to see categories as above or the summaries of queer approaches in the various texts as definitive of queering. This is a temptation to be resisted and alongside such descriptions and in tension with them, I keep in mind cautions such as Greenough's (2019, p. 35) that queering produces antinormative knowledge and uses antinormative methods:

> The production of antinormative knowledge allows the researcher to escape the lethal repetition of conventional knowledge production. In queer studies, the straight scholar does not use normative theories, modes of analysis or tools, but they wriggle out of the tightly fitted straight-jacket, bursting at the seams.[25]

The above offers something of a palate of queering methods from which I will draw but makes no claim to be definitive. The aim of queering may be towards a particular goal or destination and its readiness to scavenge what it needs means that it is prepared to try something for size and see if it works. For example, I would characterise Kamionkowski's (2011, p. 133) reflections on Stone's piece in the same book as an example of this:

> Rather than taking a document from the ancient Near East, [Stone] asserts that the knowledge we gain from *Paris Is Burning* can be applied to a biblical text – not because there is a direct line of influence but simply because the application of the model from the film 'works' on the Saul-David narratives.

The approach of this project is to bring exactly this kind of approach to reading Wesley, by seeking models which 'work' to produce an anti-normative and liberative reading for the flourishing of LGBT+ people in Methodist (and other) churches.

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[25] This, of course, applies equally to the queer researcher but the context of Greenough's comment is the question of his article as to whether researchers in queer studies must identify as queer.

The colours of queering set out here aim to give some sense of the breadth of the approaches that queer theology offers. It needs to be understood that queering is not a single process but a collection of multi-layered processes of transformation and reconstruction. Identifying these different colours enables the reader of the text to consider a variety of starting points with a text and to experiment in order to see what yields useful insights. Colours of queering may be noticed in the text itself, in the method or experience of reading the text and/or in resulting interpretations. Identifying these colours is in no way exhaustive: just as in art, one could never claim to have described every colour that could be imagined or created or used. Queering lets nothing escape its passion for transformation, not even (perhaps especially not) itself. We can paint in these colours but the act of painting implies the creation of new colours and unexpected mixing and running together. If we only paint in the same colours all the time, our work becomes boring and unimaginative. Queering allows us to paint anything into new, bold and exciting colours and to observe the beauty, surprise and transformation of the result. And then paint over it again.

In order to engage with the texts I study, I will employ a variety of methodological lenses. These lenses are informed by the colours of queering I have set out here. This methodological approach is in the spirit of the scavenger nature of queer theology (cf Halberstam (1998, p. 13)) and also takes inspiration from Timothy Koch's (2001, p. 175) approach of cruising the scriptures: in which colour and through which lens does this text catch my eye and invite me on? In each chapter, I will begin by setting out the lenses I use, identifying the colours of queering that inspire them and giving some rationale for the selection.

The overall process is then that the colours of queering described here help to inform the choice of lenses. The use of the lens generates a queer reading of the text. In each chapter, I briefly outline the insights that have emerged from that particular text in terms of their use for constructing a queer theology of holiness, before drawing all the insights together more fully in a later chapter.

4. The Circumcision of the Heart

4.1 Introduction and Methodology

The first text which I will examine in this project is John Wesley's sermon on the *Circumcision of the Heart* which is described by the editor of the Bicentennial Edition of Wesley's Works, Albert Outler, as a 'landmark sermon in more ways than one' (Outler in Wesley, 1984, p. 398). This is both because it is the earliest sermon Wesley included in his own publication *Sermons on Several Occasions* and because it is one of the most 'careful and complete statements of [Wesley's] doctrine on holiness' (Outler in Wesley, 1984, p. 398). In a 1765 letter from Wesley to John Newton, he said it contains 'all that I now teach concerning salvation from *all sin*, and loving God with an undivided heart' (Wesley, 1984, p. 398; emphasis original). As described in section 3.5 above (p. 75), I will use a variety of lenses to engage with this text, and these are set out below. In the light of the readings of the text with these different lenses, I then draw out some threads of a queer theology of holiness which involve a holistic understanding of holiness of body, mind and spirit, some implications of a queer theological approach to sin to which I will return in chapter 7 as well as the relation of holiness to liberation and the overcoming of repression and discrimination.

4.1.1 Lens 1: Biographical context analysis

With this method, I will research the context of Wesley's life at the time of the preparation, delivery (where relevant) and dissemination of the text, paying particular attention to what he was working on at the time, matters in his personal life and controversies in which he was engaged. It is commonly recognised that all theology arises from its context (see, for example, Stephen Bevans' (2002, pp. 3-15) discussion of the importance of context for theology). This applies as much to Wesley's theology as any other. However, my experience in many church contexts is that Wesley texts – particularly his sermons – are often read in a detached and almost a-contextual way. In Methodist formation for lay and ordained ministries, candidates must reflect on a chosen Wesley sermon and this practice encourages

treating them almost as quasi-scriptural texts. In scholarly terms, Wesley is of course read more carefully than that. However, Linn Tonstad (2018, p. 76) picking up Marcella Althaus-Reid's (2000, p. 120) observation wonders what would have happened if Karl Barth had 'told the truth about how boring and unsatisfying he found marriage, as he sat in his office or vacationed with Charlotte von Kirschbaum (not his wife) while writing […] *Church Dogmatics*' and the relation of that to his conclusions about the subordination of women to men. We can and should wonder similarly as we read Wesley. This lens therefore seeks to highlight biographical and contextual concerns to set the theology of the text under consideration in its context. Considering the sermon in relation to the wider circumstances of Wesley's life reveals a much more nuanced set of issues and opens possibilities for readings which, as I will demonstrate, are anti-normative and offer possibilities for queer liberation. In terms of the colours of queering I identified previously, this is in the spirit of queering as uncovering (3.3.4, p. 58) and draws on queering through experience (3.3.2, p. 54). Even though Wesley doesn't explicitly reference his own experiences as an influence on his theology, this lens reveals the ways in which they nevertheless are. Surprisingly, there are also aspects of play and innuendo to be discovered, revealing the play colour of queering (3.3.5, p. 59).

The analysis arising from these considerations will seek to relate these wider questions of context to the text itself and highlight ways in which the text relates to these unacknowledged realities and situations. This analysis brings to the fore questions of sex and sexuality, as well as broader issues of conforming or not to the expectations of society, Church and University. From this I consider what the insights of these readings are in considering Wesley's teaching about holiness and for my own construction of a queer theology of holiness.

4.1.2 Lens 2: Theological analysis

This lens brings a theological analysis of the text, using a queer theological lens and exploring key theological concepts which emerge in the study of the text, such as identity, creation and sin. Keegan Osinski (2021, p. 3) 'define[s] a "queer reading"

as an attempt to queer – that is, disrupt and interrogate the sex, gender, and sexuality norms of – a given text.' As Chris Greenough (2020b, p. 34) puts it:

> Queer theologies disrupt any 'normal' or 'natural' readings of Christianity, … [remove] binary thinking and presumptions … and interrogate institutional hierarchies and what have been considered as sources of authority in theology.

While recognising that queer theology cannot be merely apologetic (Tonstad, 2018, p. 47), in terms of church discourse, my view is that apologetic strategies are still very much needed: for better or for worse, there are still many battles to be fought and won and the basic case for LGBT+ inclusion still has to be made and re-made, in what can often be an exhausting process. This analysis will draw on Osinski's own queer reflection on this sermon as well as queer exegesis of Romans 2:29 on which the sermon is based. It will seek to disrupt and interrogate the sex, gender and sexuality norms of the sermon – implicit as they are – and seek readings which can be used to support LGBT+ inclusion in church communities.

In terms of the colours of queering, this could involve many of the colours including, insertion/entry, disturbing/disrupting and re/appropriating, imagining, claiming, constructing.

4.1.3 Lens 3: Dialogical reading

The dialogical reading lens involves setting the Wesley text alongside a contemporary queer text. This is a related approach to that taken by Ken Stone (2011) in his exploration of reading biblical texts alongside films. The texts are compared and contrasted as means of bringing a particular queer narrative, experience or perspective to the interpretation of the Wesley text. This allows for exploring ways in which the Wesley text can speak to queer experience and for queer experience to illuminate things in the Wesley text that might not otherwise be apparent. Stone recognises that simply reading the Bible alongside film will not necessarily result in a reading that is 'useful to call queer' (2011, p. 94). For him 'the question to be asked is whether one's reading undermines or complicates the ease with which biblical interpretation undergirds normative configurations of sex,

gender and identity' (2011, p. 94). A particular strength of this lens is in overcoming some of the difficulties of reading Wesley queerly:[26] the dialogue between queer texts and Wesley gives an opportunity for producing unexpected readings which challenge normative readings in the sense that Stone gives as criteria. In choosing partner texts, I have sought something which in some way has a related theme or context to the Wesley text under consideration. In addition, I have sought a text I feel has potential for this kind of reading. This is a similar process to Osinski's way of choosing which Wesley sermons she reflected on, which she describes as the 'unexpected mystery of queer attraction' (Osinski, 2021, p. 12) where the 'sparkle of treasure' or 'jolt of attention' gives the justification to 'run with' the 'potentiality,' 'curiosity' or 'desire' thereby found. This approach might also be said to be similar to Timothy Koch's 'Cruising the Scriptures' (Koch, 2001, p. 175). For this sermon, I have chosen Pádraig Ó Tuama's (2020) *Let my people* from the *Book of Queer Prophets*, as – like Wesley's sermon – this too deals with themes of identity and liberation, but from an explicitly queer perspective.

In terms of the colours of queering, this method represents the use in particular of the experience colour. However, depending on the nature of the text that is set alongside the Wesley text, it may also bring in other colours: for example, if a text by or about a queer activist were used it might bring elements of that colour to the consideration. It is important to recognise that this is not simply about reading the other text into the Wesley text, whereby it would be entirely unsurprising to discover the same elements. Rather, it is a genuine dialogue in which the themes of the queer text can challenge the preconceived readings that might be brought to Wesley and the text being read can be considered in a different way. It also gives me, as the researcher, another voice to attend to in this study, so that reflections arising from this can then produce a queer reading of the Wesley text.

[26] These difficulties were discussed in section 3.4 above (p. 67). Briefly, Wesley's texts do not make clear their sex, gender and sexuality norms and seldom offer obvious queer possibilities.

4.2 Reading the Sermon

John Wesley preached this sermon before the University of Oxford on 1 January 1733, the feast of the Circumcision of Christ, taking as his text part of Romans 2:29:

> Circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter. (KJV)[27]

Wesley (1984, pp. 401-414) describes the 'circumcision of the heart' as the defining feature of the Christian. The circumcision of the heart is a matter not simply of actions or achievements but of identity. The fact that he uses as comparisons baptism, which is so critical to identification as a Christian,[28] and (physical) circumcision, critical in Jewish identity, highlights this emphasis on identity. In doing that, he expects opposition and argues, perhaps polemically, that he is simply preaching what the Scriptures teach. Indeed, he claims not to be offering anything new but to be preaching what has always been the call of Christians.

For Wesley, the circumcision of the heart begins with an awareness of the Christian's own unworthiness and depravity. People cannot but displease God and have no ability of their own to help themselves. Their natures are so completely corrupted by original sin that there is nothing they can do to escape their predicament. The first stage of the circumcision of the heart lies in recognising this. The second step rests in faith – particularly faith in Christ and in all that he has done, described by Wesley as follows:

> An unshaken assent to all that God hath revealed in Scripture, and in particular to these important truths, 'Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners;' he 'bare our sins in his own body on the tree'; 'he is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world;' but likewise the revelation of Christ in our hearts: a divine evidence or conviction of his love, his free unmerited love to me a sinner… (Wesley, 1984, p. 405)

It is significant to note the two-fold emphasis here on both Christ's overcoming of sin and on Christ's love for the person. For Wesley, Christ and his Spirit both inspire

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[27] Wesley routinely used the King James Bible. He could read Greek and made corrections in his own copy when he thought it warranted. The NRSV renders the same text as 'real circumcision is a matter of the heart—it is spiritual and not literal.'

[28] At least, as understood in the context of the Church of England in which Wesley was a clergyman. I am making no judgement about Christian traditions which do not practise baptism.

and perfect faith and good works. This faith is not simply intellectual assent but is an active faith which will cause visible changes in the Christian's life and inspire them to make change in the world around them. For Wesley, faith and good works are inescapably linked: practical action being the inevitable consequence of any real faith. It would be as natural for him to feed and clothe those who needed it as to preach to them.

The third step is that of hope. This is the hope inspired in the believer by their realisation that God loves them and has accepted them. This is the 'testimony of their own spirit with the Spirit which witnesses in their hearts, that they are the children of God' (Wesley, 1984, p. 406). It is as much a present hope as an eternal hope: both in the now and the not yet. This hope gives the believer the ability to navigate the troubles and difficulties of the world, confident that somehow God's purposes will ultimately be realised both in their own life and in general. In the strength of this faith and hope, the believer is enabled to face the hardships and difficulties of life. Wesley casts these principally in terms of temptations, in particular 'the lusts that before possessed and defiled [the soul]: from uncleanness, and envy, and malice, and wrath, from every passion and temper that is "after the flesh"' (Wesley, 1984, p. 407). There is a sense that there is a cycle to this: it begins with a recognition of the believer's unworthiness and the conquest of that will both be a continuing requirement, and a consequence of, the circumcision of the heart.

The final element, without which the circumcision of the heart is incomplete, is love. In this sermon, Wesley uses this interchangeably with the word 'charity'. Love is the fulfilment of the law and it is the purpose of all the commandments. To love God is not in tension with loving our neighbour; rather, loving God implies loving our neighbour. The love of God and neighbour is, for Wesley, the ultimate mark of holiness. Loving God does not exclude taking pleasure in earthly things: on the contrary, it allows us to take pleasure in the good things that God has created (e.g. food). Wesley explicitly rejects the notion that the only thing in which humanity can take pleasure is God and he affirms that earthly pleasures, being created by

God, are good, otherwise God would be made responsible for sin. However, as we will see, he very much does not apply this view to sexual pleasure.

The second part of the sermon essentially treats the same themes as above but in the negative: no one can be said to possess the circumcision of the heart without those things. Taken together, they are, in the terms of this sermon, both the necessary and sufficient conditions of holiness. This sermon takes up holiness as Wesley's key theme and can be seen as a manifesto for his work, a defence against those who would criticise him and even, in some places, an attack on his opponents.

4.2.1 Lens 1: Biographical context analysis

John Wesley first came to Oxford as an undergraduate in 1720, was ordained deacon there in 1725 and then elected a Fellow of Lincoln College in 1726, before ordination as a priest in 1728. He spent a reasonable amount of time away from Oxford after his diaconal ordination, mostly in Epworth including serving as curate at Wroot nearby. He visited his brother Charles in Oxford in the summer of 1729 and they began meetings of the group that would become the 'Holy Club'. He returned fully to Oxford as a tutor in November 1729 having been summoned by the Master of Lincoln College. He preached this sermon in January 1733 before ultimately leaving Oxford for Georgia in 1735 (Rack, 2002, pp. 69, 72). There are three areas of relevant interest from his life at this time that I suggest have a bearing on this sermon. These are (1) attitudes to the Holy Club in Oxford; (2) Wesley's own struggle with sexual expression; and (3) a controversy over the early Methodists' advocacy for a man accused of homosexuality. I will examine each in turn.

Attitudes to the Holy Club

Henry Rack (2002, p. 61ff) highlights some authors who paint a very unflattering picture of a university culture in Oxford in the early 18th century in which students and academics alike are more devoted to the social and recreational than to any variety of scholarship. He himself, citing 'more recent scholarship,' considers this

judgement too harsh. To situate an account of the University in the context of its role in the society of the day, he quotes L.G. Mitchell's history of the University, which identifies its purpose as providing 'a body of traditional learning on which the religious orthodoxy, political and social order were thought to depend' and summarises, saying, 'the university was to pass on received wisdom and maintain the established order in church and state' (Rack, 2002, p. 61). Rack concludes:

> A university characterized politically by a firm Toryism, with Jacobite overtones; its religion firmly rooted in the ideals of seventeenth-century High Church divines; its scholarship, traditional rather than innovative was in many ways an appropriate and indeed congenial setting for the sons of Epworth Rectory.' (Rack, 2002, p. 68)

Against this background, John Wesley, with his brother Charles, drew together a group of students who sought to devote themselves to a strict pattern of prayer, study of the scriptures, attendance at Holy Communion (weekly in a time when that was highly unusual) and good works. They laid particular emphasis on visiting prisoners, the poor and the ill, and on charitable work with them. As a group, they stood out enough to earn a wide range of nicknames, as Frank Baker (1970, p. 25) points out:

> The first [nickname] seems to have been 'Sacramentarians', gradually supplanted by 'Methodists' and then 'The Holy Club'. Other names arising at least as early as 1732 were 'The Godly Club' and 'The Reforming Club', 'Enthusiasts', and 'Supererogation Men'. Wesley himself later recorded also the derogatory titles of 'Bible moths' and 'Bible bigots' but the contemporary evidence for these (eminently suitable) names is not clear.

The writer of an open letter attributed to William Law[29] (1733) claims to have thoroughly investigated the group and found them blameless. Describing his process of investigation, he began by hearing from their critics and then sought to hear from their friends. However, 'so strong were the prejudices against them, and so general, that I found it no easy matter to meet with any one that would own the name' (Law, 1733, p. 2). A particular example was the accusation that their

[29] The text itself is anonymous but it is catalogued in the British Library with a note attributing it to William Law, a prominent priest and scholar. He is most famous for his 1729 book *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*. However, the letter also bears some resemblance to Wesley's own letter of 1733 to Richard Morgan, Sr.

practices of fasting contributed to or caused the death of William Morgan, one of the members of their group who 'in 1731 became both physically and mentally ill' (Baker in Wesley, 1980, p. 335), subsequently dying in Dublin (where his father lived) on 26th August 1732. Wesley was concerned to defend himself (and the others) and wrote to Morgan's father on 19th October 1732 (shortly before he would begin preparation of this sermon) setting out the activities of the Holy Club and refuting the suggestion they contributed to Morgan's illness. Richard Morgan, Sr must have been convinced by this (or some related factors), as in 1733 he entrusted his second son (Richard Jr) to Wesley's tutelage (Baker in Wesley, 1980, p. 335). These examples highlight the way in which the Holy Club was perceived at the time: as extreme and potentially dangerous, such that most people wanted not to be associated with them. The Holy Club thus shared the stigmatisation so many queer communities have experienced: deviant, dangerous to young people, to be avoided. In particular, Law's difficulty in finding anyone who would identify as a Methodist points to the reluctance of the participants to 'come out' in the face of the attitudes of the wider University, church and even nation.

This contrast to the surrounding culture of the University inspired two responses in Wesley which are relevant in analysing the sermon and these two responses are perhaps in tension with one another. The first response is to defend his own practice, and by extension, that of the Holy Club as in keeping with practices of the University and more generally of the Church of England. The second is a desire to assert a distinctive position and hold these methods up as important reforms to what was then common and customary. Similarly, we can see a similar tension in queer theology between apologetic strategies and transformational/transgressive strategies. This is drawn out, for example, by Linn Tonstad (2018) who identifies many apologetic strategies queer theologians have used to seek acceptance in mainstream religious spaces before going on to argue that these strategies are theologically inadequate and queer theology must move beyond them to that which is new and distinctive. Despite this there is something important both in Wesley and for queer theology in the both/and of this: the reality of the world is

that the defence is needed but ultimately a defensive approach must also be transcended.

Sexual expression

Throughout this time, Wesley increasingly found his religious life in tension with other aspects of life, in particular social and relational life. A key issue for Wesley was the question of romantic and sexual relationships. For a man in his twenties this might well be seen as entirely unremarkable. Even from the records still available, there were clearly a number of women for whom Wesley felt attraction and with whom he engaged in some form of relationship. Moreover, it might reasonably be supposed there were others of whom records are not available (Rack, 2002, p. 79). According to Rack,

> Wesley appears to have been struggling between love of God and love of woman in a meditation on 3 July 1726 when he wrote that: 'As we would willingly suffer a little pain or forego some pleasure for one we really love, so if we sincerely love God we should readily do this for him… Christ therefore puts the matter on the right issue where he says If you love me keep my commandments … Begin in small things first: Never [in cypher] touch Kitty's hand again.' In August he resolved 'never to touch any woman's breasts again.' (Rack, 2002, p. 79)

What Rack describes as 'love of woman' points more, I would argue, to Wesley's sense of himself as someone with sexual desire. He could not reconcile this with his desire to serve God and consequently convinced himself to seek to avoid such desire wherever possible. In 1726, Wesley's sister Hetty became pregnant out of wedlock by a plumber who was known as a drunk; she was compelled to be married to him and subsequently lost her baby (Rack, 2002, p. 80). The family was split in its response to this, with Wesley advocating a sympathetic response and their father 'implacably hostile', including as Cecil Willson (1931) reports insisting on the marriage against Hetty's own will. Wesley's preaching of a sermon on charity and forgiveness, squarely aimed at his father, did nothing to help the situation. Wesley's own struggles at this time may have made him more sympathetic to Hetty's tragedy, demonstrating the possibility of tempering principle with humanity.

A letter in *Fog's Weekly Journal*, published on 9th December 1732 claimed that Wesley took 'no small liberty in indulging his appetites,' a clear sexual innuendo. With or without justification, Wesley became the subject of tabloid gossip, an object of ridicule and derision. Alleging sexual indiscretion is an easy allegation for a detractor to make but in the context of the wider circumstances I have outlined above it strikes more strongly. Wesley sought to refrain from further sexual contact and Rack concludes that by the time of leaving Oxford, Wesley had determined that celibacy was most fitted for a holy life and would later believe marriage to be incompatible with perfection (Rack, 2002, p. 81). However, this did not stop him in due course from marrying.

Controversy regarding homosexuality

Peter Forsaith (2020) recounts the situation of the early Methodists' advocacy for Thomas Blair, a young man imprisoned and awaiting trial on charges of sodomy.[30] Vivian Green (1961, pp. 172, 184-5) notes the case, although he does not identify the charge, despite giving more general consideration earlier in his book to same-sex sexual activity at the time in the University of Oxford. Clayton, a leading member of the Holy Club, described Blair being 'mightily persecuted' by the other prisoners – he was being victimised on account of the charge against him – and the early Methodists sought to help Blair with his defence. Clayton, having examined all the evidence, was convinced of Blair's innocence. It appears that Wesley shared this belief, because the two of them went through all the evidence together and travelled to Thame (25 miles from Oxford) where the trial was to take place, to represent him. It is clear, therefore, that they were willing to invest considerable time and effort in the case, as well as to stake their personal reputations on it. Henry Abelove (1990, pp. 66-7) claims because of this that 'the Methodists had shown a quick and unconventional sympathy with same-sex eroticism'. However, Forsaith (2020, p. 74) notes that Abelove's work is 'justifiably criticised for its infidelity to well-established sources' and Green (1995) reviewing it suggests 'it is

[30] While 'sodomy' is not language I would generally choose, I use it in the discussion of this case as the relevant historical term.

surely fanciful to assume that Wesley's interest in the case of the Oxford homosexual Blair had anything to do with a fear that the Methodists might be indulging in "sodomitical practices"'. Richard Heitzenrater (1992) suggests that Abelove's book 'reads like a gossip column'. Abelove's claim about the Methodists' sympathy with same-sex eroticism clearly goes further than the historical evidence makes possible and my view is that Wesley and Clayton were more concerned to oppose apparent injustice than to defend same-sex activity.

Despite their help, Blair was nevertheless convicted and fined. When Wesley spoke later to the Vice-Chancellor of the University, he again raised the case with him. Forsaith notes that while 'the concern of Wesley and the other Oxford Methodists […] was primarily to prove Blair innocent […] they were also concerned that he be provided humane treatment.' Public opinion however was united in seeing Blair as guilty and Forsaith concludes that 'this public stance seems to have tipped the balance between the Methodists being tolerated and being castigated' (Forsaith, 2020, pp. 65-6). I agree with Forsaith that claiming early Methodist support or sympathy for homosexuality from this example goes beyond the evidence. However, it is also important not to understate the significance of their advocacy for Blair, especially given the cost at which it came. Wesley and Clayton continued to advocate for Blair even after his conviction and as a result they and the early Methodists shared the stigma that attached to it. This stigma, being motivated by reaction to the sexual activity of which Blair was accused, would now be called homophobic, whether or not the alleged sexual activity actually took place. Taken with the wider controversy surrounding the early Methodists, this added to the stigma they faced, being now linked to a convicted sodomite.

Setting the sermon against this background

It was therefore against a background in which Wesley and the Methodists were regarded as eccentric and perhaps extreme and in which public opinion had been outraged by their advocacy for an alleged homosexual that Wesley began his preparation for this sermon in November 1732. An ongoing inner turmoil about his own sexual desire and his attempts to reject it were also part of his thought as he

prepared to write on holiness: I do not think it too strong to characterise this a sense of sex as shameful. The letter in *Fog's Weekly Journal* published on December 9th (Anon., 1732, pp. 1-2) referred to 'this Sect called Methodists' and alleged various things including that ''tis certain that their Founder took formerly no small liberty in indulging his appetites' and 'dangerous fanaticism' and that 'they follow the pattern of Origen[31] who performed "a particular Operation on himself … if they knew how to make a proper Incision they would quickly follow him"'. Forsaith notes the potential parallel between the suggestion of self-castration and circumcision:

> A few weeks after the Fog's Weekly Journal letter Wesley was due to take his turn, as a College Fellow, in preaching the University sermon. On 1 January 1733, the feast of the Circumcision of Our Lord, in St Mary's Church he preached on 'The Circumcision of the Heart.' Intentionally or otherwise he used the metaphor of genital mutilation with a different spin. In replying to accusations of devious and dubious practices, he maintained that what matters is an inward attitude of heart and soul and a clear conscience before God—very Puritan sentiments. (Forsaith, 2020, p. 68)

As Forsaith says, the date is significant, and the *Book of Common Prayer* collect for that day provides a particular context to Wesley's chosen title:

> Almighty God, who madest thy blessed Son to be circumcised, and obedient to the law for man: Grant us the true circumcision of the Spirit; that, our hearts, and all our members, being mortified from all worldly and carnal lusts, we may in all things obey thy blessed will; through the same thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (Church of England, 1968)

In 1748 Wesley published his second volume of *Sermons on Several Occasions* and included this sermon. By the time of this publication Methodism was a defined movement with preachers around the country, some societies set up and the first meeting of the Conference having taken place in 1744. Wesley's departure from Oxford for Georgia in 1735 was according to Rack (2002, p. 104) a suggestion that 'the Oxford system had come to be seen at last as spiritually bankrupt.' Equally, the opposition and ridicule the early Methodists faced would have made the University an unconducive place for Wesley and his companions and, in my view, that is also a

[31] Origen is claimed to have castrated himself in a rejection of sexual desire, though there is scholarly debate as to the historicity of this.

relevant factor in Wesley's decision to leave. To the extent to which this sermon was aimed to respond or even overcome public ridicule and condemnation of the early Methodists, it clearly didn't win the argument on the first hearing. Nevertheless, it is significant that Wesley later returns to it as a resource for the emerging movement of Methodism and in due course includes it as the first cited text in *Plain Account*.

The audience for this sermon would have been primarily the University community of Oxford, while at the same time it is seeking to respond to the broader controversy generated by the *Fog's Weekly Journal* letter which would have been read well beyond Oxford. It takes on particular significance in the context of the culture of the University as described above. I would call attention in that context to considerations about the way it functions in terms of Wesley's own ministry and theological career, his standing in the University and the nature of the early Methodist movement. Whatever the results of that attention, this is indisputably a significant text, both for Methodism and for understanding the development of Wesley's own self-understanding, relationships with others and relationship with God.

So what?

In this sermon, Wesley sets out a vision of holiness – which he argues is simply a normal part of Christianity – rooted in the plain teaching of scripture. As he sees it, this is entirely in keeping with the University's role in upholding the established religion and morality but, as the public face of a group beset by controversy, it is a harder assertion for him to make. This sermon becomes then not simply an exposition of doctrine, but the defence of that early community of Methodists: of why, in the face of controversy and criticism, they should not be regarded as extreme or dangerous, but by contrast, as faithful Christians. Their calling to holiness is, at one level, no different to anyone else who claims to seek to follow the teaching of scripture. However, the key difference is that their practice and advocacy of it is way beyond the prevailing culture around them. For Wesley then,

this preaching of holiness was at one level a defence of this community and a re/claiming of the early Methodists' place as faithful Christians.

The statement in the sermon (Wesley, 1984, p. 413) that the circumcision of the heart implies cutting off the lusts of the flesh is put in a significantly more interesting light by the background described above of his struggles regarding his own sexual nature. His use of the Christian's duty of keeping all the commandments of God as a reason to refrain from relationships with women is striking both as an interpretation of what the commandments of God are and in terms of how he perceives his own actions. That he cites the duty to keep all of God's commandments as a key part of the circumcision of the heart emphasises the weight this has for him: he sees a binary choice: obey God or be able to have sexual relationships. It should be noted here that this is exactly the choice that traditional accounts of Christian theology put to LGBT+ people, while no one would seriously suggest adopting the suggestion of abstinence from sexual relationships as a general case for straight people. For Wesley here, holiness requires nothing less than the direction of one's whole being towards God. That then, in his interpretation, rules out the commitments and 'distraction' that a relationship would involve.

Wesley is writing in other words from a sex-negative perspective: it is at best a distraction and at worst wicked. Using Osinski's (2021, p. 129) notion of reading with Wesley against Wesley (i.e. using theology he offers but being prepared to take it to conclusions he did not or would not have contemplated), his principle of holiness being all-embracing ('body, soul and spirit') can be relevantly applied here. Furthermore, Wesley's teaching in the sermon that holiness doesn't forbid the taking of pleasure in anything other than God and indeed that it is good to take pleasure in the things God has created is also relevant. Wesley's specific example is food and as Ken Stone (2005) has shown it is instructive to compare approaches to ethical questions relating to food and those relating to sex, particularly given contemporary Christian hermeneutics in which injunctions regarding food are readily relativised while those relating to sex may be seen as more absolute.

Stone's aim in his work is to '"defamiliarize", and hence critique, our tendencies […] to treat food and sex in radically different ways' (2005, p. 18). While I am as certain as I can be that Wesley would not even have considered sex in connection with this part of the sermon, the logic of Wesley's words applies to sex just as easily as to food. The sermon then gives us building blocks for a more sex-positive approach than Wesley's own. To believe in the goodness of pleasure and in a holiness which is truly of body, soul and spirit allows us to reject sex-negativity.

Wesley concludes that the key sign of holiness is love for God and neighbour, and that in fact one implies the other. The case of Blair (as one example) and his care for Hetty demonstrate that for Wesley and the early Methodists this was a concern to be lived out in practical ways, no matter the opinions of others. Holiness is then not a path of respectability or what is socially acceptable. Holiness indeed can disrupt such expectations because of its concern for those in need and at the margins of society. Holiness is not a path to success in conventional or earthly terms. Wesley writes from within a stigmatised community and in doing takes the both/and of highlighting its continuity with known and established tradition and custom while also asserting its discontinuity and distinctiveness. This is related to the contemporary task of queer theology in both its apologetic and transgressive/transformational forms: it takes the inheritance of Christian theology and ecclesiastical tradition and claims a right for LGBT+ people to take their/our place in it while at the same time it transforms or transgresses it to create something new and different. This is my aim in this thesis in terms of a theology of holiness. Ultimately, the consequence of the stigma the early Methodist community faced for Wesley was that he felt he had to leave Oxford, which is also a queer experience: to be forced from a place of belonging because you no longer fit.

Lastly, we return to the title of the sermon and insinuations of Fog's correspondent. The letter essentially says Wesley and the Methodists should cut off their own penises but that they are not capable of it. But the letter writer is not brave enough to say that explicitly and can only do it by allusion to Origen, the

innuendo having to do the work for him. Wesley knew of this jibe and chose to respond through the medium of a sermon. One view might be simply to say that Wesley de-sexualises this by spiritualising it and seeks to disempower it by so doing. However, I prefer a different view: the gutter performance of the tabloid rag is answered by the apparently seraphic performance of the University preacher. Does Wesley descend to its level? Is his sermon an attempt at saying: 'Chop off my dick? I wouldn't know anything about that; I'll just circumcise my heart'? This is a subversive performance of innocence to disempower the insult. Wesley's performance betrays his own inclination to play and innuendo and he uses these deftly to respond to the insults thrown at him and the Methodists. In this he becomes an ancestor of countless queer performers whose humour repels the stigmatising joke.

4.2.2 Lens 2: Theological analysis

The Image of God

At the outset of the sermon, Wesley makes an overall statement that the circumcision of the heart is of a mind and spirit renewed after the image of him who created it (1984, p. 402). Although Wesley does not explicitly cite Genesis 1:26-7,[32] he clearly has it in mind. Within queer theology, the notion of the diversity of humanity's sexuality and gender as part of the divine intention in creation has been the subject of much consideration. Patrick Cheng (2011, p. 62) argues that the doctrine of creation by which God created all things *ex nihilo* and saw that they were good can be seen as an outpouring of God's radical love. The creativity of queer community then reflects this radical love and LGBT+ people are part of the goodness of God's creation. Jarel Robinson-Brown, writing from a Black British queer perspective, similarly argues that humanity has its being from God in the beginning:

> We are not only connected to one another but we find our 'home', our origin, in the Trinitarian life of God. As God's children we are made in God's image,

[32] Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness… So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.' (NRSV)

> and we are part of God's life – because God existed before us as that love from which all that is loved flows. (Robinson-Brown, 2021, p. 48)

However, experience demonstrates that this theological claim has not been reflected in the reality of life: 'As Black LGBTQ+ Christians, we experience the world and the Church in a way that communicates to us the degree to which the image of God within us remains ignored and forgotten' (Robinson-Brown, 2021, p. 49). Robinson-Brown goes on to argue that this injustice is not ignored or forgotten by God and that this represents a challenge to the church.

Michael Carden (2006, pp. 26-7) writing on *Genesis/Bereshit* in the *Queer Bible Commentary* argues that there is much ambiguity surrounding the account of humanity being created in God's image. He quotes Eilberg-Schwartz (1991) who raises questions as to the (potential) bodiliness of God and the gender (if any) of God and given the link to the command to reproduce, whether this means God should be seen as having genitals (and if so which). Carden argues from Jewish and Christian tradition that the proto-human should be seen as androgynous such that a broad spectrum of gender (and by extension sexuality) can be recognised in humanity and seen as part of the divine image. Theologians considering trans and intersex lives have given considerable attention to Genesis 1:27 especially because of the problematic possibility of reading it as requiring a binary understanding of gender. For example, Joy Ladin (2018) argues that trans theology takes us to a broader understanding of the nature of God and leads to a focus on what in humanity truly reflects God's image – which goes beyond sex and gender, bodies and binaries. Stephanie Budwey (2018) interviewed intersex German Christians for their reflection on the nature of God's image and the meaning of being created in it. Some of her participants reported being made to feel like 'monsters' for being neither clearly male or female. She highlights the importance of images of God that 'embrace the multiplicity of creation' because it is critical that the image of God can represent all human beings.

These approaches to the interpretation of the Genesis text allow a reshaping of Wesley's statement that the circumcision of the heart is a mind and spirit renewed

after the image of the one who created it, which makes it a reality for LGBT+ people. Taking these approaches, the circumcision of the heart can embrace all human beings. So the renewal of that image then does not imply the erasure of the diversity of gender and sexuality among humanity but rather its flourishing. To be renewed in God's image is to be renewed in the potential of one's own creation, in all the fullness of that, queerness as much as anything else. In saying that, for many people there are many ways in which they/we may not feel that they/we have reached the fullness of their/our being and such renewal is potentially both exciting and liberating. In this understanding, God is queer too – as Marcella Althaus-Reid (2003) argued boldly in *The Queer God* and as Anika Jensen et al. (2021, p. 152) recognised – and queerness is then part of the image of God in humanity. To reach the 'circumcision of the heart' – or holiness – as an LGBT+ person is to reach the fullness of queer potential. This includes both the realities of embodied and sexual life as well the worlds of spiritual possibility and especially the intersections of those.

Circumcision

Keegan Osinski (2021, p. 25) in her reflection on this sermon argues that being circumcised is 'in some way, to be made queer'. Circumcision in this sense she argues marks an 'alteration' of the sexual organ from the natural to 'something other than natural' and which allows a ways of being which is 'super-natural'. 'It is an anti-normative act following an anti-normative code.' Similarly Thomas Hanks (2006, p. 587) also argues that in Romans, for Paul, circumcision is an act 'against nature' and points to God's ability to go beyond nature. He cites Elizabeth Stuart's (2003, p. 96) claim that:

> Paul's use of this phrase [i.e. contrary to nature] in Romans 11:24 is shocking considering his previous use of the phrase earlier in this letter to describe, not homosexual people, but Gentiles who characteristically engage in same-sex activity […] Paul is making the outrageous claim that God stands in solidarity with these Gentiles; God like them acts against, or more accurately in excess of, nature.

Drawing on Genesis 17 and Joshua 4, Osinski argues that the practice of circumcision created a distinct community of God's people which was in some sense queer, 'marked by the difference of their genitals.' She highlights antisemitic tropes related to circumcision which draw on gender and sexual non-conformity and the nature of both Jewish and queer communities as stigmatised. For Osinski, to circumcise the heart is queerer still as it removes the gendered requirement of a penis and is a possibility – or indeed a necessity – for all who would follow God. However, it might equally be argued that moving from penis to heart spiritualises and de-sexualises the image such that it simply becomes another language for a spiritual relationship with God. Rather than seeing it in this way, I prefer to think of Paul and Wesley after him, re/appropriating and re/claiming this language so as to create an image of circumcision which points to the creation and continuance of a non-normative community, defined by their relation to God, and which at its root requires an understanding of humanity which embraces both gender and sexuality.[33]

Filthiness

As he begins to explain his concept in more detail, Wesley makes the assertion that holiness includes being cleansed of all filthiness of flesh and spirit, which he equates to sin. The Book of Common Prayer collect for the feast of the Circumcision of Christ[34] includes a petition for delivery from 'carnal and worldly lusts.' Just as his image of holiness is a bodily one, so is his image of sin. While at one level, this might seem concerning for those seeking to promote LGBT+ inclusive theologies because so often the language of sin and flesh in Western Christianity is seen as referring to issues of sex and sexuality, I find here a potential

[33] It should be noted here that Romans 2 is not the only New Testament text which deals with the question of circumcision. For example, another significant passage is in Galatians 5, where Paul argues that his listeners/readers must not allow themselves to be circumcised, because to do so will signal seeking justification by the law rather than through Christ. In this context, there is no reclaiming of the practice as an image. Thomas Bohache (2000, p. 235) argues that this means '[queer Christians] do not have to circumcise the foreskins of our sexual orientation in order to be acceptable to Almighty God.' Rather, this teaching should be seen as granting freedom to be who we are.
[34] Quoted in full on p. 91 above.

for a more holistic approach in which body and spirit are not separated. Holiness and sin are then, quite rightly, both bodily and spiritual questions. The ruling metaphor of this sermon in circumcision gives us an image which is, as discussed above, both bodily and spiritual.

One approach to this would be to reject assumptions as to what counts as filthy. For example, in his essay *In Search of Queer Theology Lost*, Mark Jordan (2018, p. 298) describes a 'yearning' for 'another language, another itinerary of beauties' which arises from rejecting the judgments of society about what is 'shameful, filthy, diseased, or demonic.' He describes his habit of turning to 'camp' in the array of queer approaches which he says is 'one way to make beauty from what others call ugly.' Within the context of activism in church institutions for LGBT+ inclusion, there continues to be the need to make the case that LGBT+ people should not be regarded as 'filthy' by default. While noting the 'miraculous' work of early gay theology in 'taking […] a dominant discourse that constructed people with same-sex desire as a species of person, sick, perverse and dangerous, and the transforming of it into something positive', Elizabeth Stuart (2003, p. 19), rightly critiqued a simple response of 'gay is good' because of the danger it involves of making queer sexualities simply as acceptable and domesticated as heterosexuality.

A different approach then is to re/claim filthiness. Linn Tonstad (2016, p. 125) argues that 'a queer theology cannot, or should not, be about moving homosexual relationships from the category of the illicit to the category of the licit, leaving everything else unchanged.' Rather sexuality, like every other part of human life, is enmeshed in sin. What is needed is an approach of 'solidarity among sinners' which then avoids a simplistic traversing of the boundary between 'good' and 'bad', allowing oneself to be good while still leaving the possibility of consigning the 'other' to the bad. Marcella Althaus-Reid's entire work is in one sense the reclaiming of what some might call filthiness: hence the very name *Indecent Theology* (Althaus-Reid, 2000). For example, her description of 'kenotic divine

processes' does not hold this back even from God, arguing that in this 'the proper God [gives] way to the Indecent or Queer God (Althaus-Reid, 2003, p. 38).'

Because of the activist commitments that led me to this work, I am acutely aware, that as I write this, there is still the need in the context of ecclesiastical activism to assert the goodness – holiness, if you like – of the queer and of LGBT+ people. This is true in Britain and across the world. I therefore cannot reject the first approach, even while acknowledging the force of the critique that can be made against it. But I adopt Chris Greenough's (2020a, p. 108) aspiration that my – and others' – work might become irrelevant because it has made change. To move beyond that, Tonstad's approach is extremely helpful, particularly in a Wesleyan theological context in which the communal is at least as important as the individual. In this we might reshape the collect's request that we might not so much be delivered from 'carnal and worldly lusts' but from normative reactions to them and from the assumption that they belong to certain classes of people and not to others.

Sin

Queer theology needs a doctrine of sin. Patrick Cheng in *From Sin to Amazing Grace* asserts 'I believe that now, more than ever, it is critical for LGBT people to address the issues of sin and grace head-on' (2012, xii). Mary Lowe (2010, p. 71) writing from a queer, Lutheran, perspective notes that 'for Lutherans in particular, confessing one's sins is an important step in justification…' and goes on to state 'a doctrine of sin is needed that provides a space for *all* persons for confession and reconciliation regardless of their sex, desire, or gender.' This is true also for many other Christians. At its simplest, LGBT+ people, like anyone else, are not without sin and the opportunity for us/them to confess and be forgiven is still an important part of Christianity. Within Wesley's teaching, including in this sermon, this is just as true and points to the same need.

However a queer doctrine of sin that ended there would be completely inadequate. Homo-, bi- and transphobia (and other queerphobias) have caused, and continue to cause, physical, emotional and spiritual harm to LGBT+ people.

Such harm can be properly named as sinful. Queer theology needs to be able to name that and respond to it. A queer theological account of sin is then not just about an LGBT+ inclusive approach to confession and forgiveness but a naming and rebuking of current and historic practices which are injurious to LGBT+ people. These will also overlap: we can be complicit or active in structures and practices of harm as well as being those who suffer from them. This is seen, for example in racism or transphobia within LGBT+ communities.

Wesley identifies key marks of holiness as humility, faith, hope and charity. Humility implies having a ‘right judgment of ourselves’ (Wesley, 1984, p. 403). He identifies this with being free of an over inflated sense of self and pride: in other words, it will result in cutting one’s self-perception down to size. However, as Osinski notes, ‘for queer people, being told they are sinful and helpless is nothing new’ (2021, p. 29). Queer theology is not the first to recognise that an emphasis on pride as sin can be troublesome in particular contexts. Alistair McFadyen (2000, p. 138) considering feminist approaches to sin noted that ‘feminist theologians agree that pride accurately names the stereotypical sin of men’ (perhaps cis-straight men) while ‘any act of women’s resistance to oppression, victimisation or abuse is […] likely to be construed as the sort of self-assertiveness and self-concern which counts as pride.’ In queering this sermon, then, the queer need to re/discover pride and self-worth becomes more significant than the issues Wesley was seeking to address. The queer experience of stigmatisation is significant and persistent. Martin Andersen *et al* (2022, p. 852) offer a definition that ‘there is stigma if and only if there is labelling, negative stereotyping, linguistic separation, and power asymmetry,’ all of which are present in queer experience. In the terms of this sermon, the effect of such stigma is to have a negative judgement of yourself imposed by society and/or (and perhaps consequently) internalised. The circumcision of that is the liberation of holiness and the filthiness of spirit lies not in sex but in the stain of stigma. My queer reading would say that having a right judgement of oneself is to discover your value and worth and power, rejecting false narratives and internalised queerphobia, leaving aside any false humility and

tendencies to beat yourself up. Mis/appropriating Irenaeus, the glory of God is a human being fully alive. In my queer response to Wesley's text, I would highlight self-worth more than humility. Osinski makes similar points:

> Instead of the straight, cisgender male sin of pride that must be remedied with holy humility, the LGBTQ+ conception of sin might be a different kind of wrong judgement of self, which must be remedied by a kind of holy pride. If, as Wesley says, humility is having a 'right judgement of oneself,' for queer folk 'humility' in the holiness sense, may actually look a lot like 'pride.' (Osinski, 2021, p. 30)

To make a brief foray into my own experience at this point, I have often struggled with the question of identity labels. How do I describe my sexuality? When I first came out, I struggled with calling myself gay. At one level, to use a label seemed to simplify something that I did not feel able to describe; at another, it also described many people I admired and didn't feel able to set myself alongside. Reflecting back, my question was essentially, am I worthy to be gay? Can I stand alongside those who have engaged in this struggle? As I now engage with queer theology and look at queering key texts, I notice a similar set of reactions. How queer am I? I look at people who are amazingly transgressive, disruptive, and fabulous in their refusal to conform to normative expectations and wonder whether anything I do might be worthy of that title. I have come to terms with gay, and perhaps I am learning to be queer. I wonder what it is with all that to have 'a right judgement of [myself]' and perhaps a right judgement of oneself will always be a work in progress.

Faith

Wesley sees faith as a second key component of the circumcision of the heart. He says:

> It must be such a faith as is 'mighty through God, to the pulling down of strongholds', to the overturning all the prejudices of corrupt reason, all the false maxims revered among men [*sic*], all evil customs and habits, all that 'wisdom of the world' which 'is foolishness with God'. (Wesley, 1984, p. 404-5)

As I explore below in the dialogical reading, this resonates with many stories of queer activism and the struggle for queer liberation and liberative, queer faith can

be related to this description of faith by Wesley. In exploring theologically how this text can challenge norms of sex, gender and sexuality, this description is an important foundation. It builds on the assumption that there are established power-bases and structures which faith will transform. It works from the proposition that humanity has prejudice and false notions that do people harm and describes conventional – or normative – wisdom as foolishness to the divine. Similarly, for Osinski (2021, p. 27), Wesley's identification of the circumcision of the heart as foolishness with the world is another pointer to it being queer. This offers a transforming and queering approach to faith which can deconstruct and reconstruct things that would otherwise be taken for granted. In activist terms, it opens the possibility of recognising that the contemporary queer approaches to theology can re/appropriate elements of Wesley's mission and methods.

For Wesley, faith makes all things possible: the significance of this not being that the believer is somehow omnipotent(!), but that the kind of faith and trust in God that was previously impossible to a sinful person is now possible and the believer can thereby understand their purpose and identity. This leads to 'the revelation of Christ in our hearts: a divine evidence or conviction of his love, his free, unmerited love' (Wesley, 1984, p. 405). This faith enables believers to cease 'obey[ing] sin with the desires thereof' and instead give themselves entirely to God. This could be a troublesome text for queer reflection because of how often queer love has been equated with sin. However, given an appropriate queer theological approach to sin – as initially outlined above and to which I will return later in chapter 7 – this idea of the revelation of Christ in a person's heart and the knowledge of his free and unmerited love gives a starting point for a positive account of queer faith. Faith in this sense is re/claimed and becomes part of the response to exclusion and discrimination not a source of it.

Hope

The next thing for Wesley about the circumcision of the heart is hope, in particular 'the testimony of their own spirit with the Spirit which witnesses in their hearts that they are children of God' (Wesley, 1984, p. 406). The theological theme of

assurance holds a key place in Methodist theology as a possibility, though not a guarantee for any Christian.[35] Wesley's description of this is staunchly positive – this hope is what enables the Christian to navigate the challenges of life and to achieve good things, coming at last to heaven. Queer reflection here might start with thoughts about identity and the validity of identity, which would draw on the conversation of section 3.3.1 above (p. 52).

At a first level, to claim LGBT+ people as children of God is an unremarkable step – surely everyone is a child of God? – yet at another, with the ongoing reality of Christian queerphobia, it continues, at least in some contexts, to be a contested claim. Wesley's use of 'child of God' here is more specific, signalling the actuality of a relationship with God, not just the fact of having been created by God or being loved by God. To claim the primacy of an LGBT+ person's experience of relationship with God (i.e. in Wesley's terms, the testimony of their spirit with God's spirit) is a radical and significant step which supremely privileges their/our agency to speak of the experience of the divine presence in their/our own lives. To take this thought to its full conclusion is to deny the ability of others to contradict that testimony – i.e. no critic has the ability to claim the LGBT+ person's experience is not of God or that they/we are not Christians – which then removes the ability of others to police the boundaries of religious belonging on these grounds.[36]

Love

Finally, Wesley identifies charity or love as a key element of the circumcision of the heart. Love, he says, is the fulfilling of the law. As in other places in his work, fullness of love for God and neighbour (actually, brother in this text) is the fullest expression of how he understands holiness. A holiness of body, soul and spirit brings joy to our whole selves.

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[35] For a summary of the development of Wesley's thought on assurance, see Randy Maddox (1994, pp. 124-7).

[36] Questions of such boundaries do arise in connection with, for example, safeguarding procedures but I am not addressing those here.

4.2.3 Lens 3: Dialogical reading

As explained above, I have chosen to set this sermon alongside Pádraig Ó Tuama's piece 'Let my people' in *The Book of Queer Prophets* (Ó Tuama, 2020, p. 13). Ó Tuama, an Irish poet and theologian, tells of growing up as a Catholic in Ireland against a background of 1980s TV advertisements about the danger of HIV/AIDS and little mention of homosexuality in church except occasionally in the context of sin, 'not because there was any permissiveness, but because it was the unspeakable.' Having made Protestant friends at the age of 15, he encountered ideas of homosexuality as 'demonic possession or a deep-seated psychological disorder.' Ó Tuama describes making great efforts to avoid being gay and that he also avoided masturbation: perhaps it might be suggested that he sought to suppress completely his own self as a sexual person. Joining a missionary organisation at the age of 18, he was asked to declare any involvement with 'alcoholism, drug addiction, occultism and homosexuality' and in this organisation faced three exorcisms and so-called Reparative Therapy. This 'therapy' sought to find blame for his homosexuality – including assigning this to his mother and father – until Ó Tuama 'realised that [the therapist] was making everything up' and left.

Despite all of this, Ó Tuama tells of having found a love for the Bible, which he encounters as 'less a manual for keeping out of hell and more a library for the living' (Ó Tuama, 2020, p. 15). As he elaborates,

> Whatever the future, it [the Bible] told stories of people who had the courage to live now: these people survived genocides; they gave God new names when the old names stopped working; they changed; they survived; they made rituals to mark the horror that had broken them. One of them called God a 'deceiving stream', but still wept in prayers. In this vast landscape of language there was an argument about what God meant, and that argument welcomed all kinds of people. (Ó Tuama, 2020, p. 15)

In discovering for himself a hermeneutic of scripture-as-poetry, Ó Tuama found that the text of scripture 'opened up'. Throughout his account he uses the phrase 'Let my people go' from Exodus as a message of liberation to his own experience. He describes the experience of leaving 'reparative therapy' as like an excommunication and even having left still describes great trouble in himself in

coming to a place of acceptance. He describes going to confession during this time and being sexually assaulted by the priest: 'The confession wasn't a confession – it was a curse: live in fear of your own sexuality and you, too, might turn out a sorry fucked-up man' (Ó Tuama, 2020, p. 20).

For Ó Tuama, the story of the Exodus is one of a hated people rejecting the situation of their oppression and moving to a new future of freedom. In this freedom, they discover blessing and life. This is the parallel he sets to his own experience – and by extension that of queer people more generally – in overcoming and rejecting religious and societal oppression and discrimination.

Dialogue between the queer text and the sermon

Both Wesley's sermon on the circumcision of the heart and Ó Tuama's telling of his own experience begin with strong accounts of sin. Ó Tuama's describes learning that 'sin was like a blight on your soul' and the only referent for homosexuality in the context of the church and celebrations of mass was as a sin. As observed above, however, it was mostly unmentioned and unmentionable. For Wesley recognition of one's own sin is the starting point of the journey of holiness. The sermon declares that holiness implies 'being cleansed from sin, "from all filthiness both of flesh and spirit"' (Wesley, 1984, p. 402). The word 'filthiness' is interesting and I would suggest that in a current 21st century context filthiness in the context of sin would often be heard as meaning or at least implying sexual sin. Contemporary conservative Christian discourse against homosexuality (or LGBT+ people more generally) often employs similar language: see, for example, Barber (2014) or Bartlett (2014).

The beginning of Ó Tuama's journey to freedom is in discovering the ways in which he is not sinful. This contrasts with Wesley whose sermon begins from the universality of sin. Ó Tuama acknowledges: 'I have plenty of devils, but not the gay kind' (Ó Tuama, 2020, p. 14). Christian discourse which singles out homosexuality, or alleged sexual sin more generally, above other sins means that while, as I have claimed, a queer theological approach to sin is certainly needed, it is necessary to

be very clear about how that category is used and understood. Conservative organisations such as *Evangelical Alliance* essentially make a distinction between orientation and behaviour as in their publication *Biblical and Pastoral responses to homosexuality* (Evangelical Alliance, 2012). This is problematic as in my view it is reductive of both: orientation cannot be made abstract from actual relationships or interactions, or at least their potentiality, and circumscribing forbidden behaviours quickly descends to the absurd (e.g. what counts as sex? Is kissing ok? Where is the line?). For the LGBT+ person, I suggest, as Ó Tuama experienced, starting with a recognition of one's own sin inevitably forces theology into that paradigm whether it is intended or not. So I would reject Wesley's starting point of the acknowledgement of human depravity and begin instead with the renewal of the image of God. A queer theology of holiness needs to include (while also going beyond) a recognition of the ways in which the queer person is *not* sinful, while also going beyond that to consider queer accounts of sin. I will return to this point in chapter 7.

There is an interesting parallel between the context of Wesley's life in the period up to and including the preaching of the sermon on the circumcision of the heart in which he was consciously choosing to reject sexual and romantic relationships feeling that this was necessary truly to serve God, and Ó Tuama's description of avoiding all kinds of sexual activity because of the requirements of the organisation he served and the religious context in which he lived and grew up. Ó Tuama describes this struggle and, as I suggested, we see in Wesley's story at this point a similar struggle. Stealing Wesley's words about faith overcoming the 'prejudices of corrupt reason' is to reject this imposed shame and to seek a path of queer faith which is unashamed. The queer theology of holiness I am constructing does not claim to be a theology of sex but nor will it be hung up about it: as above, holiness is of the whole of life, and that includes sex.[37] Furthermore, in a queer theology,

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[37] In saying this, I am not saying that everyone must be sexually active but that sex is a feature of life. Not everyone will have every experience, but all experiences are in principle relevant theologically.

sex highlights intimacy, vulnerability, passion, relationality which give particular shape to the understanding of holiness.

A second key component of the circumcision of the heart for Wesley is faith. He says:

> It must be such a faith as is 'mighty through God, to the pulling down of strongholds', to the overturning all the prejudices of corrupt reason, all the false maxims revered among men, all evil customs and habits, all that 'wisdom of the world' which 'is foolishness with God.' (Wesley, 1984, p. 404-5)

This description resonates with many stories of queer activism and the struggle for queer liberation. A strong example of this is Ó Tuama's use of the Exodus motif 'Let my people go,' which was already a key text for many liberation movements, including that of enslaved African-American people in the United States (see, for example, Hopkins (1999, pp. 42-3)). Ó Tuama's discovery of how he could use the Bible poetically as a means of his own liberation can be seen as an example of faith 'pulling down strongholds' and the strongholds he describes were certainly mighty. He faced many prejudices and in this found a way to overcome them. In this encounter between a queer text and a Wesley sermon, a queer approach to faith is discovered. The example of liberation which, like other oppressed people before him, Ó Tuama discovered in his reading of scripture offers a new way to look at faith as Wesley presents it.

Wesley's description of hope is the believer's discovery and acceptance that they are children of God. Ó Tuama doesn't use this language in this piece, but the parallel he draws between God's people being oppressed in Egypt and the liberation of LGBT+ people gives a clear implication that in this LGBT+ people are God's people. Ó Tuama's story is, in a sense, a description of discovering himself to be a child of God. A queer theology of holiness then will be rooted in this discovery and self-discovery – both by the LGBT+ person themselves and the community more generally – that LGBT+ people are children of God. Similarly, the identification of the children of God with the marginalised and oppressed who escape their captors and discover freedom suggests that the children of God are queer.

In Wesley's account, faith and hope as enable the believer to face the challenges of life. For LGBT+ communities there remain many challenges: particularly for those who engage with religious communities. The strongholds of patriarchy and heteronormativity have stood (and still stand) strong and there are many 'prejudices of corrupt reason' still to be engaged with. I find it in some ways astonishing that any kind of faith has persisted among LGBT+ people – from one perspective, might we not be better advised to start again? Yet LGBT+ people have found inspiration in all manner of places to pull down strongholds. This is a strong sign of queer faith. And for LGBT+ people who have a religious, spiritual or faith commitment it may well be the case that we have found some of that inspiration in the stories, practices, and teachings of our faith. In that, this kind of queer faith has a strong resonance with the kind of faith Wesley envisaged – a faith which is expressed in action, and which causes changes in the world around us.

Love is the crowning feature of Wesley's theology of holiness: perfection in holiness is perfection of love for God and for neighbour. I would argue that Ó Tuama's poetic conclusion in effect does something similar: letting there be love as the final abstract noun of a long sequence before a final focus on people and repeat of the motif 'let my people go' places love as the key component of this liberation. In the combination of liberation and love, there is a key foundation for a queer theology of holiness, emerging from reading this Wesley text in dialogue with Ó Tuama's piece.

> …Let there be freedom. Let there be integrity. Let there be truth. Let there be
> love. Let there be people. Let my people
> go.
>
> (Ó Tuama, 2020, p. 22; formatting original)

4.3 Threads of a Queer Theology of Holiness

Many threads emerge out of these different approaches to considering Wesley's sermon on the circumcision of the heart. It begins with the renewal of the person in the image of God, in all of its potential for the fullness of their humanity. In this the LGBT+ person's experience has primary place: the true witness being the

'testimony of their spirit with God's spirit'. A queer theology of holiness must deal with sin, individual and corporate and of which LGBT+ people are victims as well as sin which they/we may commit. Wesley's sermon is a defence of a ridiculed and stigmatised group and represents a resistance to injustice. Alongside this sermon, I have set Ó Tuama's piece *Let my people* in which he describes his own experience of growing up gay in an oppressive religious environment and his journey to liberation. These two, very different, texts together highlight some key features which I suggest can become components of a queer theology of holiness.

Drawing all of this together, I suggest that even on the basis of a simple reading of Wesley's text, a theology of holiness that embraces queer people is a possibility, because he argues it is open to all. A queer theology of holiness however goes further than this simple defensive approach and re/claims and re/constructs the theology that is presented. A queer theology of holiness from this sermon asserts the value of each person because holiness renews them in the full potential of their creation, in all its queerness. Holiness in this understanding is a matter of body, soul and spirit and is a fullness for the entire person, not simply one part of them or of life. It creates an impetus to the liberation of the marginalised and to the assertion of their full humanity. It is discovered in a faith that leads to the overthrowing of oppression and an assurance of God's love in the heart, for which the person's own experience is primary.

While Wesley's theology begins with sin, a starting point which I have rejected, I have also argued that a queer theology holiness needs an approach to sin. As a first step in the queer conceptualisation of sin, it can be observed that each of the features above has an antithesis. The exclusion of queer people is not holy. Holiness is not the devaluing of them/us, or the separation of body, soul, and spirit. It is not the maintenance of oppression or the denial of the full humanity of the marginalised. It is not found in a claim that any are beyond the love of God. Insofar as these negative perceptions of self and others occur, I suggest that within a queer theology of holiness they can properly be regarded as sin and as what such

holiness seeks to drive out. I will return to the question of sin in more detail in chapter 7.

For Wesley the fullest expression of holiness was in the perfection of love for God and for neighbour, in a sense of love which was to an extent circumscribed. In a queer theology of holiness, there are no such limits and to discover the perfection of love is to discover the perfection of holiness.

5. The Character of a Methodist and Christian Perfection

5.1 Introduction and Methodology

By around 1740, Methodism was becoming a movement present across England. It was more widely known than in the days of the Holy Club at Oxford and becoming more prominent, and consequently acquired an equivalently broad set of detractors. The two texts under consideration in this chapter come from this period. Wesley both defends the movement and seeks to clarify what it is saying and what it is not: against both simple misunderstanding and wilful misrepresentation.

The Character of a Methodist (Wesley, 1989, pp. 30-46) – which I will refer to as *Character* – is a tract produced by Wesley in answer to critics of the movement. Such criticism was directed at the movement in general, at George Whitefield, a fellow preacher and Anglican priest as well as at Wesley himself. The tract's central, somewhat polemic, claim is that a Methodist is nothing more and nothing less than a faithful Christian. It was published in 1742 and Wesley says in *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* that it was 'the first tract I ever wrote expressly on the subject' (Wesley, 2013, p. 142). Rupert Davies (the editor) identifies three purposes in writing the tract:

> First, he wished to demonstrate that Methodism is just genuine Christianity, not some newfangled theory. […] Second, he wished to put into more scriptural terms the description of a perfect Christian he had found in the *Stromateis* (or Miscellanies) of Clement of Alexandria (150-215). […] [Clement] speaks of true 'gnosis' as being, not the acquisition of wisdom, but the knowledge of God in the heart through faith. […] Third, he wishes to give the proper meaning to the term 'Methodist', which, he points out, was not one that the Methodists had assumed, but one that had been thrust upon them in Oxford at the time of the Holy Club. (Davies in Wesley, 1989, p. 31)

At a similar time, Wesley also produced his sermon on *Christian Perfection* (Wesley, 1985, pp. 99-124). Apart from the use of Philippians 3:12, which opens *Character* and is the text for the sermon (and printed at its opening), neither refers to the other. The date of the two documents is not entirely clear: Wesley dates *Character* to 1739 (Wesley, 2013, p. 141-2) although it was not published until

1742 and the publication of the sermon was in 1741, but it is unknown where, when or even if it was actually preached. Albert Outler (in Wesley, 1985, p. 97) notes that although the title page declares it was 'preached by John Wesley' there is no record of a place or date. Outler cites an unofficial meeting between Wesley and Bishop Edmund Gibson (Bishop of London) at Whitehall in late 1740, in which the bishop enquired after Wesley's doctrine of perfection. On Wesley's account, the bishop was entirely satisfied by his response and encouraged him to preach it openly, hence the writing of the sermon.

There is a third text from this period entitled *The Principles of a Methodist* (hereafter *Principles)* (Wesley, 1989, pp. 47-66) which is a direct response to a pamphlet published by Josiah Tucker,[38] an action Wesley himself acknowledges is unusual for him (Wesley, 1989, p. 48). These three texts are significant evidence of the development of Wesley's teaching on holiness and of how he and the wider movement around him engaged with the church and society, particularly in the face of opposition. Speaking broadly, the theological arc of these three publications is similar. However, *Character* and the sermon are fairly general treatments while *Principles* answers specific objections. These objections mostly relate to justification by faith, although *Principles* does also consider sinless perfection. However, given the bulk of that consideration is by quoting extensively from the sermon on *Christian Perfection*, I do not intend to consider the content of *Principles* further at this stage.

In *Plain Account,* Wesley says that he avoided using the language of Christian Perfection in the tract to avoid controversy (Wesley, 2013, p. 142), which seems reasonable until it is observed that he published a sermon with that very title at about the same time. However, the existence of the roughly contemporaneous sermon sheds light both upon the theology at work in *Character* and on the

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[38] Rupert Davies (in Wesley, 1989, p. 47) notes 'Josiah Tucker (1712-99) was a formidable opponent. He was an undergraduate at Oxford during the heyday of the Holy Club and after ordination had become Vicar of All Saints, Bristol, and Chaplain to the Bishop of Bristol (Joseph Butler), who had picked him out as a man of distinct promise for the future.'

controversies and audiences at play: what is Wesley saying and embodying and to whom?

Similarly to my approach in the previous chapter, I will use different lenses to approach these texts. The first of two of these are similar: biographical context analysis and a dialogical reading with a contemporary queer text (see p. 77 and p. 79 above). I will not therefore set out these methodologies in detail again here. For a queer text, I have chosen Elizabeth Edman's book *Queer Virtue* because, like *Character*, it engages with questions of identity and authenticity in Christianity in the face of challenge.

The third lens here is different and arises from queer history. The term queer, like the term Methodist, began as a pejorative and was reclaimed as an explicitly activist move. In this third lens, I suggest *Character* begins a reclaiming of the name Methodist in a way that can be seen as a kind of antecedent to the much later reclaiming of queer. Exploring these two processes of reclamation gives insights into the queering nature of the early Methodist movement.

5.2 Reading the Texts

5.2.1 The Character of a Methodist

Wesley's introduction to this tract claims an uncertainty among many as to what the term Methodist in fact signified: that is, what the 'principles' and 'practice' of those referred to by that term were. Wesley, echoing language used about the early Christians in Acts 28:22,[39] says it is a 'SECT which is everywhere spoken against' (Wesley, 1989, p. 32). Wesley therefore draws his own analogies of persecution in describing early Methodist experience. He claims that it is general belief that he is best placed to define the term *Methodist* and notes that it was originally given 'by way of reproach' (Wesley, 1989, p. 32). He would be pleased if it were not used again. However, given that it is likely that is going to be used, he wants to give it some positive content.

[39] Acts 28:22 reads: 'But we desire to hear of thee what thou thinkest: for as concerning this sect, we know that every where it is spoken against.' (KJV)

Character rejects defining Methodism in doctrinal terms*,* except in the broadest sense (e.g. the divine inspiration of Scripture and the divinity of Christ) (Wesley, 1989, pp. 33-4). It explicitly rejects a definition by the use of particular forms of language or of 'actions, customs or usages' or that the essence of Methodism is to lay particular stress on one aspect of religion. Polemically and rather rhetorically, Wesley gives this description:

> A Methodist is one who has 'the love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost given unto him'; one who 'loves the Lord his God with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his mind, and with all his strength.' God is the joy of his heart, and the desire of his soul, which is constantly crying out, 'Whom have I in heaven but thee? And there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee!' My God and my all! Thou art the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever! (Wesley, 1989, p. 35)

Wesley's description continues in highly idealised terms: Methodists are 'always happy', 'rejoice evermore', give thanks in everything, pray without ceasing and so on. I would suggest interpreting it as an aspirational description but for the statement that: 'By consequence, whatsoever he doth, it is all to the glory of God. In all his employments of every kind he not only *aims* at this […] but actually *attains* it' (Wesley, 1989, p. 39; emphasis original). Even so, I would suggest that this is a continued polemic against his detractors and the detractors of Whitefield and of Methodists more generally. Wesley's response is that Methodists are simply good Christians, that disagreements on doctrinal matters are of no relevance and any detractor who claims themself to be a faithful Christian should have no disagreement with them. This robust attitude is continued appending the hymn 'Soldiers of Christ arise' with its references to 'Legions of wily fiends' and a conclusion of Christ descending to bring the 'conquerors' home.

5.2.2 The Sermon on Christian Perfection

By contrast to *Character*, the sermon on Christian Perfection (Wesley, 1985, pp. 99-124) is much calmer and more nuanced. It considers ways in which Christians are and are not perfect and very much has the character – as might be expected – of a teaching document. That said, it still has polemic aspects. The lack of information about where and when it was preached suggests that this may have been a text

always intended for publication: with Wesley's propensity for recording things, if he had preached it, there would surely be evidence of that.

The sermon opens with the assertion that there is barely any expression in Scripture that has caused more offence than Philippians 3:12[40] which is the text on which Wesley is preaching. From a queer perspective in 21st century Britain, there are other scriptural texts that cause more offence. At the same time, the question of Christian perfection is now all but a curiosity: beyond particular circles of interest, it is almost an unknown concept. However, for Wesley, 'preach[ing] perfection' was a cause of scandal and likely to attract condemnation: to be 'accounted worse than a heathen man [*sic*] or publican' (Wesley, 1985, p. 99). In other words, he is describing an experience of being stigmatised.

Wesley notes that some suggest not talking about 'Christian perfection' because of the offence it causes: again, not an unfamiliar suggestion for those used to church conversations about sexuality. The World Council of Churches' study guide on 'sexuality and human relations' (Smith, 1990, p. 2) noted the difficulty of conversations about sexuality and the consequent tendency for some churches to avoid, ignore or bury the topic. For Wesley, ignoring Christian perfection is not an acceptable approach because the concept is scriptural in his view and he therefore sees himself as having no authority to set it aside. The correct approach, by contrast, is to explain its meaning and he recognises that the meaning is nuanced, citing the Philippians text whose author on the one hand notes that they are not perfect while also speaking of themself and others as perfect. Wesley therefore proceeds to examine 'in what sense Christians are *not*, and […] in what sense they *are,* perfect' (Wesley, 1985, p. 100). Christians are not perfect in knowledge, both in the sense of ordinary daily knowledge and especially in the knowledge of God, who cannot be fully understood. No one can be free from ignorance or mistake, even Christians, as to the interpretation of Scripture. Wesley maintains that 'the children of God do not mistake as to the things essential to salvation […] [b]ut in

[40] 'Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect.' (KJV)

things unessential to salvation they do err, and that frequently' (Wesley, 1985, p. 102).

Christians are not free from 'infirmity' although Wesley is concerned to avoid this being used as an excuse for bad habits or behaviour that could be addressed and applies it to 'inward or outward imperfections which are not of a moral nature' and from which he says everyone suffers to a greater or lesser extent (Wesley, 1985, p. 103). Similarly, Christian perfection does not imply freedom from temptation. Wesley asserts that perfection is holiness and holiness is perfection. Furthermore, any state of perfection can always be increased further: thinking about it as holiness makes this more intuitive to understand, rather than the word perfection which has a connotation of finality. As discussed previously in chapter 2 (p. 31), for this reason Thomas Noble (2013, p. 95) suggests that speaking of 'degrees of perfecting' is truer to Wesley's meaning.

Wesley asserts that Christians, being 'born of God', do not commit sin. This is the most difficult assertion of his understanding of Christian perfection and he himself struggles to give an adequate account of it. He uses the category of 'outward sin' by which he meant 'a [deliberate] violation of a known law of God' (1984, p. 315) so that both ignorance and weakness would be defences. This creates a considerably narrower category of sin than many other descriptions would do.[41] He also resists, *contra* unnamed objectors, the suggestion that Christians must, of necessity, commit sin. But he seems to miss, or conveniently ignore, that there is considerable middle ground between those two positions. His challenge 'if therefore you would prove that the Apostle's words, "He that is born of God sinneth not," are not to be understood according to their plain, natural, obvious meaning, it is from the New Testament you are to bring your proofs' (Wesley, 1985, p. 111). He again ignores that he himself needs a particular interpretation and meaning for 'sin' to make his argument consistent. It is one thing to assert the

[41] For example, the current official Methodist catechism describes sin as 'the condition of estrangement from God which affects the whole human race. Sins are specific actions, words or thoughts which arise from our sinful and condition and deny the presence, power and purpose of God' (Methodist Church, 2000, p. 4).

possibility of sinlessness in general, another to defend that by a restricted definition of sin and still another to suggest that Christians inevitably and inescapably sin, no matter how advanced the work of grace in their lives.

Despite the earlier nuance as to inward and outward sin, Wesley goes on to assert that the New Testament in general and the letters of John in particular require the conclusion that 'a Christian is so far perfect as not to commit sin' (1985, p. 116). Reading this alongside *Character* makes it very clear that Wesley has lofty aspirations for Methodists in terms of both faith and character. For Wesley, freedom from outward sin is simply the starting point and freedom from all sin must be maintained as the (at least potentially attainable in this life) endpoint of sanctification. Any attempt to deviate from this or to imply that sin is inescapable is for Wesley to dilute the promises of God.

At one level then, as Wesley claims that Methodists are simply those who love God and love their neighbour, he is saying nothing distinctive or new. Yet at the same time, the teaching he sets out in the sermon and hints at in *Character* is distinctive and, by his own admission, controversial.

It is important to recognise that there are two distinct aspects to this controversy. The one might be seen in the encounter of Wesley with the Bishop of London: a doctrinal and scriptural debate about how the categories of salvation, sin, holiness and perfection ought to be understood. The other is more public: who are the Methodists? These are not unrelated but as we will see, the second of these is a much broader controversy in which doctrinal questions are at most a minor part. Similarly, contemporary church debates about LGBT+ inclusion may present as doctrinal disputes, but they are in fact much wider and the doctrinal questions may in fact be only a superficial part of the debate, as Linn Tonstad observes:

> Most Christians come to queer theology (if they do so at all!), looking for apologetic strategies. Given that many Christians argue that Christian sexual morality prohibits any sexual expression between persons of the same sex, and any genital sexual expression outside of marriage, and that some Christians argue that the sex assigned children at birth is God-ordained, and so denied only at the risk of damnation, the search for theological and biblical

> interpretive strategies for responding to such claims is understandable. Yet arguments on both sides of the case are often *ex post facto* (after the fact). The arguments that one finds convincing are the arguments for the view one has come to have – for reasons other than argument! (Tonstad, 2018, p. 16)

In the exploration of these texts, we will see that there are many factors at play governing attitudes to the early Methodists just as the same is true of LGBT+ people within Christianity today. The doctrinal dispute may be simply one part of it, or, even, just a foil which disguises the true reality.

5.2.3 Lens 1: Biographical context analysis

The context in Wesley's life is now significantly different from the context when he preached the sermon on the *Circumcision of the Heart*. Wesley has travelled to and returned from Georgia, an experience which was overall not a great success. Travelling to America, Wesley encountered Moravian Christians and was greatly impressed by their faith evidenced as the boat travelled through a severe storm. On returning from America, he had key conversations with Spangenburg and Bohler about the importance of personal faith and became more and more anxious as to whether he himself possessed such faith. Bohler's famous advice to him at this time of 'Preach faith until you have it and then because you have it you will preach faith' (Bohler in Wesley, 1938, p. 442) clearly made an impression and has become frequently quoted in Methodism since.

Responding to a request from George Whitefield, Wesley began itinerant preaching and societies began to be formed (known at this point as the 'United Societies') around the country and in 1738 had his famous Aldersgate experience where he describes his heart being strangely warmed. He became able to claim the personal faith whose possible absence had previously troubled him so much. Others have considered that nature of this in more detail than I need to,[42] and the full significance of it is a matter of debate: for some it is pivotal to his entire ministry, others argue that it should be seen as one event among many in the development of the person Wesley was to become. Nevertheless, in my view, by

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[42] See, for example, Tabraham (1995, pp. 28-30), Munsey Turner (2002, pp. 27-9) or Maddox (1994, pp. 144-5).

this period Wesley is inhabiting the disciplined approach he sought for in his early Oxford days coupled with a more pragmatic and emotional experience of religion.

Whitefield and in due course Wesley attracted significant crowds to their open-air preaching and became prominent in public terms. Part of the reaction to this was the production of a significant quantity of anti-Methodist articles and pamphlets. Richard Green (1902) in *Anti-Methodist Publications* presents a chronology of all known such publications. After the 1732 letter in *Fog's Weekly Journal* (discussed above, p. 88), 4 publications are listed in 1738, then 87 in 1739, 23 in 1740, 23 in 1741 and 14 in 1742, (Green, R., 1902, pp. 3-39) clearly showing that 1739 was a key year for significant public opposition to the emerging movement. Most of these refer to George Whitefield or to Methodists or Methodism in general. A small number refer to Wesley himself. Some of the documents are theological challenges and accusations of self-contradiction or departure from the teaching of the Church of England while others aim to lampoon the new movement. In my view, it is this volume of public criticism that lies behind Wesley's comment that he has 'yield[ed] at last to the continued importunity both of friends and enemies, and do now give the clearest account I can […] of the *principles* and *practice* whereby those who are called 'Methodists' are distinguished from other men [*sic*]' (Wesley, 1989, p. 32; emphasis original).

To begin the consideration, I have taken two examples of anti-Methodist publications from this period. The *Mock Preacher* (Anon., 1739) is described as a 'satyrico-comical-allegorical farce' and Green (1902, p. 9) considers it 'a coarse, vulgar, filthy production', although in my assessment that is rather an exaggerated view of it. As its title suggest it aims to satirise a Methodist preacher (and as the play develops explicitly names him as Methodist), most likely George Whitefield in my view due to his greater prominence in 1739. It suggests reasonably plainly that the preacher seeks to collect money from the poor ostensibly to support the building of an orphanage in Georgia while in fact using it to enrich himself. Preaching about money is lampooned – the love of money is the root of evil so the preacher does a service to his hearers by taking their money away from them.

Henry Abelove's (1990, p. 7) description of Wesley's appearance and style as a gentleman may give a context to this lampooning. It also insinuates that the preacher attracts women in particular, causing them to neglect their husbands and points towards institutional (church/state) action against open-air preaching. Of particular relevance to the theological conversation here is the Mock Preacher's defence that he 'very closely adhere[s] to every Text of Scripture which serves my Purpose; and in this I follow the *Method* observed by Christians of all Denominations' (Anon., 1739, p. 9) (emphasis original). Even the theological argument Wesley makes finds its way into this satirical treatment.

As a contrasting example, the anonymous piece *Doctrines and Divisions of the Methodists* (Anon., 1741) published in *The Gentleman's Magazine* makes a case against Whitefield and Wesley on a range of grounds. It advises those attending Methodist meetings that they run the danger of 'utterly ruining themselves and Families in this World,' and notes in fairly dismissive terms that it is the poor who attend them. It criticises 'silly Women' [*sic*] who leave their children alone to attend. It describes places set up with spinning wheels which enable young people who have left home to earn money, considering this to encourage undutifulness and the abandonment of their masters' business. These appear to be early Methodist communities and are described as having worship and prayer as well as work. The tract claims that both Wesley and Whitefield like to assert their own fame and goes on to criticise them on the grounds that they disagree on key points such as predestination and Christian perfection and suggests that if they themselves cannot agree, why should others accept anything they say? All in all, the overall tone is to cast the Methodists as a group with which respectable people should have nothing to do and to give an apparently reasonable argument for rejecting their claims.

As observed above, few of the pamphlets refer directly to Wesley and I think it is therefore interesting to pose the question as to why he enters the fray by writing *Character*. At one level, it might be sufficient to accept his own given reason that it is in response to the requests of others. Tabraham (1995, p. 42) argues that it was

the organisational genius of Wesley (despite Whitefield's greater charisma as a preacher) that allowed Methodism to flourish: perhaps Wesley saw the risk to the movement as a whole of relentless negative publicity. But I think in reality, Wesley cannot resist the argument: he is driven to respond and ultimately believes his case to be better than that of his opponents. On this view, his citing of the encouragement of his friends and enemies that he should respond has a character of 'protesting too much'.

Wesley's decision to write *Character* is an activist and political move. He is motivated to defend the Methodist movement from the stigma that it faces and to assert its goodness and worth. The public criticism of Methodism – especially in examples such as the play cited above – is harsh and 'in your face'. Far from having dissipated, the tropes from his Oxford days are writ large. The Methodists are deviant, dangerous to women, corruptors of children and a risk to society at large. Their 'character' in the popular imagination is as comic as it is repulsive. In more respectable circles, the attitude may be more measured but his teaching his viewed at best with suspicion. He presents new ideas which strike at the root of established ways of understanding things. In response to this array of opposition, he is no less strident. Indeed, there is an element of the drama queen as despite most of the anti-Methodism publications and polemic being directed at Whitefield or more generally, Wesley inserts himself into the very middle of the controversy. If all publicity is good publicity, Wesley will certainly take the limelight. As with his response to the controversies in Oxford, he adopts a tone of innocence: Methodists are simply faithful Christians; in fact, better Christians than all those who would oppose them.

It is worth noticing that Wesley's resistance to a doctrinal definition of Methodism and the openness of the definition he does offer, creates a relatively unstable category of what it is to be Methodist. He does not essentialise Methodist identity. Just as queer theory resists absolutising gender or sexuality labels, Wesley is in this a queer ancestor – if a distant one – offering a label with fuzzy edges that people may, or may not, choose to identify with.

Whether in the respectable response of the sermon, or the broader and more polemic response of *Character*, Wesley owns the stigma and scandal of the early Methodist movement. The question might reasonably be asked, 'How can you be a preacher of holiness beset by scandal?' In reality, if your holiness may change the world, nothing is more likely. The pursuit of holiness is an activity that gets you 'othered' because it leads to people and lives that look and are different. Holiness in this understanding is then, almost by definition, the holiness of the other in Althaus Reid's (2003, p. 154) terms. The non-normative patterns of the early Methodists earned them a range of responses that look startingly familiar to those familiar with the realities of contemporary queerphobia. To say one thing is like another is not to say that they are the same, but for LGBT+ Methodists, and possibly Christians more broadly, I suggest there is queer ancestry to discover in our forebears, whose experience, and ways of responding to that experience, may not be so far from our own.

5.2.4 Lens 2: Dialogical reading

Elizabeth Edman's (2016) book, *Queer Virtue*, in a sense also responds to a broader church and society which includes opposition and hostility. In the Author's Note, she acknowledges Christian homophobia as being one of the factors that led her to write the book. She argues that rather than being a challenge to Christianity, queer people[43] can make a significant contribution to Christianity which makes it more faithfully itself. Her book is not only a response to hostility: that may be a factor in her starting point, but she gives a positive account of the value of queer faith and community. Edman argues that queer virtue has much in common with the true essence of Christianity and that in her experience in many cases queer communities have much more visibly and actively embodied these virtues than many Christian communities with which she has been familiar. While not seeking to impose or require Christianity from all queer people, Edman argues that Christianity has inherently queer qualities and the paths of Christian and queer

[43] Edman mostly uses the language of 'queer people' (and occasionally LGBTQ people) so I am using that in discussing her work.

virtue are closely aligned. Alongside this, and as mentioned earlier (p. 49), it should be noted that other queer theologians would resist an identification of Christianity as inherently queer (see, for example, Tonstad (2018, pp. 128-9)). Similarly to the approach that Wesley takes in defending early Methodists, for Edman LGBT+ Christians are simply faithful Christians, perhaps even exemplary Christians, and the defence of them – inasmuch as one should be needed – is exactly that.

I will explore the ways in which Wesley's argument and Edman's are similar and different. At the outset, I note that they are texts in very different styles and not only because of the difference of time and place. Wesley's text, as discussed above, is obviously polemic and the key audience are his detractors and those who have encouraged him to respond to them. It is a text in which he deliberately takes the offensive, and the contrast highlighted above with the sermon on Christian Perfection illustrates this. Although Edman says that she 'offers the ideas in this book for consideration by [the] full global communities [of Western Christianity]' (Edman, 2016, xii) the tone of the book seems much more aimed at LGBT+ Christians and allies to give ways to ground a positive queer Christian theology and discipleship. It is very definitely not a polemic text, nor does it attempt to be. There is though, I argue, in both, a claiming of the concept of authentic Christianity for the people and communities on whose behalf they are writing. I will therefore bring these two texts into dialogue because of their common features of (1) responding to hostility (2) giving a positive account of their own community and (3) attempting to claim the ground of Christianity itself for their own argument.

Edman (2016, p. 27) gives an outline of the path of queer virtue:

> One discerns an identity;
>
> One risks telling oneself and others about that identity;
>
> One engages with others, touches others, to explore that identity;
>
> One confronts and is confronted by scandal;
>
> One lives out one's identity with and through community, looking to the margins to see who is not yet included.

She goes on to note that 'queer experience cannot be systematized' (Edman, 2016, p. 27) and while defending the use of the imagery of a path asserts that it is not rigid and should not be regarded as a step-by-step process. Edman recognises parallels between this path and the path of Christianity and uses this to claim an inherent queerness of the Christian tradition. She goes on to explore aspects of queer virtue which arise from this path and to examine their relation to the wider Christian tradition. These are identity, risk, touch, scandal, adoption, pride, coming out, authenticity and hospitality. Her reflection on these themes draws on her own experience as well as theological reflection and builds to give a positive account of queer virtue which is transformative potentially for both the church and the world.

Character does not set out any comparable path, although I would draw attention to the steps to the circumcision of the heart that I have discussed previously, a path that at face value is quite contrasted to Edman's. That path begins with sin and its primary engagement is between the believer and God; Edman's begins with identity and explores that in community. However, the path set out in the *Circumcision of the Heart* begins of itself to form a Methodist identity: it is the manifesto of the early Methodist movement which Wesley stands up for in that sermon and the identity which is he is now drawn to defend in producing *Character.* In Edman's terms, Wesley – and those with him – have discerned an identity and have begun to tell others. In the emergence of the early Methodist work and the beginning of the formation of societies and classes they are engaging with others. This interaction leads to the need for a deeper exploration of that identity and there is certainly scandal attached to it, whether deserved or not. I read *Character* then as an example of the early Methodists' steps along the path of queer virtue as Edman would much later outline it. I am not attempting to summarise the entire book but I will draw attention to particular aspects which are relevant in considering it alongside *Character*.

Edman highlights the queer value of scandal and the way in which LGBT+ people have owned and exulted in their/our scandalous nature. 'We as a people have long been able to find amusement in the notion that we are somehow shocking,

scandalous' (Edman, 2016, p. 80). She goes on to argue that the Christian tradition is itself scandalous, 'from the inherent shock value of God becoming a defenseless baby, to the cosmic joke by which Rome's most shameful instrument of torture becomes a mechanism for salvation' (Edman, 2016, p. 82). Wesley's experience is one of becoming a scandal: in the events of his early days in Oxford, in the experiences of ministry in Georgia (particularly his ill-fated relationship with Sophy Hopkey and its breakup[44]) as well as the widespread public reaction which led to his writing of *Character*. He was certainly not without blame in these incidents but nor was he entirely at fault. It is too much to say that Wesley exulted in his scandalous nature, but he did not shy away from it. It can certainly be said that he was more than prepared to be a person of controversy and even to be deliberately adversarial insofar as it advanced his purposes.

Edman explores the precarious place of religious leaders using the example of Peter being scandalised by Jesus' own declarations about his fate and Jesus' corresponding identification of Peter as himself becoming a stumbling block (i.e. scandal). Edman recognises that 'you are not above being scandalized by the very message you proclaim' (Edman, 2016, p. 83). She summarises the relation of scandal to queer identity and in doing so makes it a significant building block of her notion of queer virtue.

> To claim queer identity is to sail into the headwind of scandal – knowingly, deliberately. It is very hard to do so and to maintain a posture of integrity. […] The strength of the LGBTQ movement, at our best, is precisely that we stand together, that we look directly into the scandal imposed by others and declare it null and void. (Edman, 2016, p. 88)

Despite the vulnerability of being publicly identified with scandal, for Edman this becomes a source of strength for queer people and the power of being declared scandalous becomes inverted. Wesley's engagement with scandal is in similar terms: he sails into the headwind of it and the way in which he situates himself in

[44] Wesley had had an infatuation with Hopkey but she married someone else. Wesley reacted badly, ultimately finding reason to exclude her from Holy Communion. Coupled with broader complaints about him in Georgia, Wesley was compelled to leave. For a fuller account and discussion see Rack (2002, pp. 126-32).

the middle of the scandal about the identity of the Methodists (rather than leaving it to Whitefield) is an example of just this. Increasingly as his ministry develops, he is less constrained by the established norms and more driven by what he thinks is the right thing to do: a posture of integrity in Edman's terms. His claiming of basic Christianity as the fundamental identity of the early Methodists is, I argue, to look at the scandal imposed on the movement by others – whether by way of parody or ecclesiastical condemnation – and declare it null and void. Wesley's very response in *Character* takes this exact approach: your challenge is empty because we are what you should be.

In her consideration of adoption, Edman explores queer community and family structures. Edman argues that queer community is highly ethical:

> For queer people, community is the crucible of our ethical lives. Precisely because we need each other so much, we set high standards for our behavior vis-à-vis ourselves and one another. Deliberation about the most pressing ethical issues that a queer person confronts is often informed not just by how the ethical decision affects that person or the people closest to that person, but also by how it affects the community and other queer people more broadly. (Edman, 2016, p. 96)

Edman highlights Paul's use of adoption to signify the Christian believer's relationship to God and uses this to reflect on the nature of chosen relationship/kinship within queer community. These insights are then brought back to the question of Christian community itself and Edman asks searching questions of the nature of Christian community and the ways in which Christians are or are not accountable to each other. She promotes a vision which she roots in Paul of a community whose members vigorously challenge one another and have real accountability to each other: 'an ethic of honesty, accountability, and hard love' (Edman, 2016, p. 100).

Character sets, at one level, a relatively low bar for Methodist identity: in one sense anyone who identified as Christian could claim Methodism. At another level, it sets an almost unattainable standard: with a Methodist having in Wesley's terms *actually attained* the high standards of life he sets out, it could be questioned whether in that sense anyone was a Methodist at all. As his teaching develops, the

question of attainability in connection with holiness and indeed perfection becomes more significant for him. Ultimately, throughout Wesley's teaching this is a work of God rather than a heroic effort of the believer so within *Character* he is trying to hold together a high bar in terms of outcomes with the truth that this is open to all. This kind of community is for Edman fundamentally different from others: it is 'fundamentally queer, charged with renouncing false binaries, characterized by horizontal identity: a community in which people know their deep need of God and of one another' (Edman, 2016, p. 103). The second part of this could almost be a Wesleyan statement and his new societies in many ways are characterised by a mutual commitment and a shared sense of need of God.

Edman's chapter on pride draws a distinction between healthy and unhealthy pride. For Edman queer pride (the healthy kind) is 'demands and depends upon relationship' and 'involves a reciprocal dynamic in which one's sense of self-worth feeds and is fed by relationships with others' (Edman, 2016, p. 111-2). This is similar to the reshaped notion of pride that I discussed in the previous chapter (see p. 99). Edman recognises, as many authors do, the pivotal status of coming out for queer people. If the sermon on the *Circumcision of the Heart* represents something of Methodism's self-discovery – coming out to oneself – perhaps *Character* represents a broader coming out: a public claiming of identity and a readiness to assert it in the face of challenge. For Edman there are definite parallels between the experience of coming out and of identifying as a Christian and similar dynamics can be recognised in the challenges Wesley faced and in his assertion of the Methodist identity in *Character.*

Edman (2016, p. 165) summarises her book as an exploration of both queerness and Christianity as follows:

> Discernment of identity leads individuals and communities to:
>
> Risk the proclamation of that identity;
>
> Touch others, despite risk to oneself;
>
> Navigate the inevitable scandal;

> Participate in communities that demand integrity within ourselves, require justice in our dealings with one another, and looks to the margins to address individual/communal/global degradation and suffering.

I argue that this process is akin to the process by which Methodism emerged in the ministry of Wesley (and others) and to the extent to which Edman's outline is a true representation of queer virtue then what emerged as the early Methodist movement was also, in some sense, queer. The journey of Wesley's ministry to this point has led to the emergence of this new identity of 'Methodist' and although Wesley is initially reluctant to 'come out' as Methodist, in *Character* he claims the name and imbues it with his own meaning. The way this identity is described there opens space for others to claim that identity too and points toward the creation of Methodist community. These communities embrace the working poor and people thought 'unrespectable' and they create scandal which Wesley must navigate. Nevertheless, he is committed to participating in these emergent communities which demand integrity and justice and are at the margins of his own society.

Wesley's '*methodising'* of the Christianity of his day can be seen in some ways as akin to Edman's later description of the queering of Christianity. By methodising, I mean the way in which he takes the existing and inherited faith and practice of the church of his day and disrupts and transforms it. It is true to say that his teaching on holiness is, in one sense, not new: it has foundations and precedent in the scriptures and in earlier Christian tradition. The transformation and re-emphasis of holiness is as much about how he does it and the community that that forms as about the doctrinal content itself. The practices both of queering Christian theology and of methodising can be seen to represent a rediscovery of fundamental aspects of Christianity and the assertion that they are embodied in a place where the normative expectation would be that they would not be found. In this sense Wesley's Methodism is an ancestral embodiment of contemporary queer Christianities, which in a similar way disrupt and transform the faith they have inherited in ways which are not just about doctrine and teaching but about the nature of queer Christian life.

5.2.5 Lens 3: Reclaiming Methodist; reclaiming queer?

The use by Wesley of the word Methodist in *Character* is one of the first times (if not the first) that Wesley, without much caveat applies the word Methodist to the groups with which he is working. Although he would 'still rejoice […] if the very name might never be mentioned more' (1989, p. 33) he seems to have accepted its existence. Although the word is not yet used as an official designation – the Methodist groupings at this point are formally known as the 'United Societies' – Wesley is in *Character* taking hold of the term and investing it with his own meaning.

I argue that this amounts to a reclaiming of the word Methodist, which began pejoratively during Wesley's time at Oxford, and continued against Whitefield in his preaching and ministry and against the societies which Wesley was beginning to form. Having previously essentially ignored it or distanced himself from it (e.g. using phrases such as 'the people called Methodist'[45]), this represents a significant new approach to the term. While, as I argued in connection with the sermon on the *Circumcision of the Heart,* Wesley has previously used the approach of claiming his theology is nothing more or less than faithful Christianity, he now makes a similar move with respect to the name Methodist. As discussed above, in *Character* he takes the word Methodist and argues that its true meaning implies no more, and no less, than faithful Christianity. So his – and Whitefield's – detractors should aspire to be Methodists rather than argue against them, at least according to Wesley's argument.

The term *queer* similarly began as a pejorative and its use since then has not been uncontroversial. It has over time been reclaimed, although not entirely, and its use remains problematic for some.[46] In exploring Wesley's reclaiming of Methodist in *Character*, the process at work has both commonalities and differences with the later reclaiming of queer. These further serve to highlight the ways in which the

[45] Contemporary Methodism still uses on occasion this as a formal title.
[46] Erin Rand's (2014) *Reclaiming Queer* explores the history of this in detail in both academic and activist contexts.

early Methodist movement can be seen as a queer antecedent: a movement that in its way challenged authoritarian structures and expectations and reframed the aspirations and identities of its members.

While the reclaiming of queer cannot be assigned to a single point or place in time, the emergence of Queer Nation in the United States is a particularly significant development in that process. Queer Nation's activism, which began in the summer of 1990 at New York Gay Pride, arose out of HIV/AIDS activism and also embraced a broader range of concerns. Susan Stryker (2004) notes, 'a signal accomplishment of the group was to reclaim a set of positive associations for an old epithet, "queer," and to assert that queer people had a right to take up cultural space—right here, right now—with no apologies and no arguments' (Stryker, 2004, p. 1).

Queer Nation's transgressive practices are also noted by Robert Goss (1993, p. 39), who recognises that in its name Queer Nation has reclaimed queer, 'taking homophobic power away from it' and 'transform[ing it] from a word coined against gay men and lesbians into an empowering, postmodern word of social rebellion and political dissidence.'

Allan Bérubé and Jeffrey Escoffier (1991), writing on the emergence of Queer Nation, explore the meaning both of queer and of the title queer nation. They declare 'queer is meant to be confrontational – opposed to gay assimilationists and straight oppressors while inclusive of people who have been marginalized by anyone in power.'[47] They highlight the tensions in the name 'queer nation', noting that queer signifies 'difference' while nation signifies 'sameness.' Queer nationals embody an identity which is unstable and in flux:

> Queer Nationals are torn between affirming a new identity – 'I am queer' – and rejecting restrictive identities – 'I reject your categories,' between rejecting assimilation – 'I don't need your approval, just get out of my face' – and wanting to be recognized by mainstream society – 'We queers are gonna get in your face.' (Bérubé and Escoffier, 1991, p. 14)

[47] Interestingly, the letters page of the same edition has several letters complaining about the bold editorial stance of OUT/Look and fearing its consequences for perceptions of lesbian and gay people among straight society.

Alexander Chee (1991, p. 17) continues this theme, noting 'the operant dream is of a community in diversity, queerly ourselves.' He recognises both its oppressive force and its potential once reclaimed:

> If I tell them I am queer, they give me room. Politically, I can think of little better. Fifteen years later, I still don't care if they accept me or not; I do not want to be one of them. They only need to give me room. (Chee, 1991, p. 19)

One of the facets of using queer rather than any other identifier is its potential to embrace a broader range of identities, as Goss (1993, p. 39) points out:

> Queer is also a coalition word that gay men and lesbians can use together to designate their political action. *Queer* has become an empowering symbol for living sexual differences within a homophobic society. It has become a socially constructed and inclusionary term for gay men and lesbians and people of color who believe that the words *gay* and *lesbian* are 'white' political labels. It has been adopted by bisexual, transexual and transgenderal [*sic*] members of Queer Nation.

However, alongside this rather aspirational description it is also worth noting that the interviews conducted by Steve Cosson (1991) highlight the tensions that continued to be present, particularly as to how inclusive the emerging queer activist community was of people of colour and genders other than male.

The 1990s reclaiming of queer begins therefore to create a possibility of new identity and community in which diversity of sexuality and gender is key but not of itself determinative. It marks, at its best, an activist community committed to challenging and overcoming oppression and discrimination and to rejecting heteronormative constructions of life and relationships. The use of the word queer to do this does not simply provide a title for it but is an act, in itself, of the activist work it describes. The use of the term queer as a marker of identity and as a stigmatising slur continues to the present day. For example, Meredith Worthen (2023, p. 5) explored reclamation and stigma connected with queer identification and concluded that 'currently, "queer" should be understood as both reclaimed and stigmatized.' Wesley's reclaiming of Methodist is, like the reclaiming of queer, a move which seeks to disempower his opponents and critics. He is not content to allow them to define it or to control its use and thus maintain the pejorative. In this

way, the early Methodist movement is akin to those who first reclaimed the term queer: owning and claiming the very term used to marginalise and oppress them. However, the content of the two terms is significantly different. As I have discussed above, queer is deliberately used to point to difference, and even as its use attempts to form an activist community across division, its unstable nature and refusal to be tightly defined makes a significant aspect of it the subversion and disruption of the status quo. It intends to respond to offence by itself going on the offensive.

By contrast, Wesley's reclaiming of Methodist is at one level more innocuous, at least on its face: he seeks to describe it in as *inoffensive* a way as possible: what can there possibly be here that anyone could reasonably disagree with? Rather than, as with queer, owning a sense of transgression and proclaiming it, Wesley seeks to rise above it and returns to his central claim that his project is simply faithful Christianity. However, that approach is itself a subversive one. The preaching of the early Methodists, the formation of new societies, the tension with the established authorities of the church all challenge the *status quo* and in claiming the name of the Methodist which is attached to these things, Wesley certainly doesn't distance himself from them. Indeed, given he writes this at a time when arguably most of the opprobrium is directed towards Whitefield, he is positioning himself firmly in the firing line. In this sense, he has commonality with the reclaiming of queer: although Wesley does not perceive himself as transgressive, he is labelled in that way by others. By owning that label and connecting it to the fundamentals of an emerging Methodist identity, itself rooted in true Christianity as Wesley would perceive that, he is content for the sake of his work to accept the pejorative sense that is directed at him. This acceptance enables him to subvert opprobrium and to advance his work, just as the reclaiming of queer allowed the subversion of its offence and the advance of queer activism. The two processes therefore have similarities and can be said to be akin to each other, although they are of course not identical.

5.3 Claiming Identity: Queer and Methodist

By around 1740, Wesley and the Methodists have fully 'come out'. They are no longer a small group in Oxford but a movement making an impression across the country. While as has been shown, the Oxford period certainly faced opposition, by this time it is much broader and there is a far greater volume of it. The tropes used are not unique to the Methodists and similar ones are seen used against other groups who experience prejudice and are regarded as 'other'. From a queer perspective, the allegations of disrupting the proper order of society, damaging the church, corrupting young people and going against the laws of nature sound all too familiar. The movement is both condemned as dangerous and made a figure of fun. Its leaders must be in it to enrich themselves or for some other nefarious reason. The Methodists are an 'othered' community, stigmatised because of their variance from the norm. They are in this sense queer ancestors.

Against this background, Wesley seeks to assert a Methodist identity. If anything the opposition seems to convince him more of the righteousness of his cause and does not seem to deter him. His teaching and writing acknowledge his opponents and he is content to seek to refute them both by argument and by rhetoric. In doing this he presents himself as the key figure of the movement and is ready to wear the name of Methodist even though he himself does not favour the term. His argument in *Character* seeks to disempower his opponents and shift the argument to the question of what it means to be truly Christian, to which Wesley has a broad approach. He is reluctant to define it doctrinally on anything but the most key points while at the same time refusing to countenance anything other than a total commitment.

Wesley's approach to faith, church and society is disruptive. His teaching challenges the church, his social action is considered threatening to the social order and the patterns of life of the movement all transform the current norm. This 'methodising' of the society and church he knew is, I argue, akin to queering. The response he received further serves to support this view: its characterisation of early Methodism as dangerous to society, the family and children is an effort to

reassert its norm. In the terms of the colours of queering that I have previously set out there are, for example colours of re/claiming and re/appropriating, activism/justice/politics as well as play and subversion in the way Wesley is prepared to use rhetoric and to satirise his opponents.

Wesley's trajectory to his point has been driven by his yearning for holiness , which he pursues with a remarkable zeal. That this brings him to a 'methodising' path that is akin to queering says something striking about what it means to seek holiness. In this understanding, holiness is not discovered in conformity to existing patterns, conventions or traditions. Acting in accordance with it attracts ridicule and opposition and is said to be a danger to church and society. This approach to holiness is then also at the root of the queer theology of holiness I am constructing in this thesis. It will not simply create a slightly modified set of holiness rules but calls for a transformation of church, world and life in general.

6. Methodist Conferencing

6.1 Introduction and Methodology

This chapter considers another of the substantive sources cited by John Wesley in *Plain Account*, namely his printed accounts of the early Conferences. These were published some time after the meetings to which they refer and very much represent Wesley's edited version of what took place. The participants themselves agreed to confidentiality about their discussions and the evidence as to the actual conversation is limited. In a sense then, these 'minutes' represent another genre for Wesley to promulgate his teaching, alongside his sermons and tracts. In working with these texts, the concept of unity emerged as a key factor. It is also, of course, important in considering a theology of holiness: unity is a creedal mark of the Church alongside holiness. Unity, in the sense in which I will use it, is not simply a static unity, but is unity in the context and for the purpose of transformation. This sense of unity in the context of transformation is a key focus for the discussion in this chapter.

To consider these texts I will use two lenses, the first by setting the historic context as I have done in earlier chapters. The second takes a different approach by using an autoethnographic reflection (found in the Appendix on page 191) on being part of a group of activists working to enable all couples to be married in Methodist Churches and my participation in the Methodist Conference and its decisions on these matters. This use of autoethnography draws on the experience colour of queering (p. 54) and as an autoethnography of activism also brings in the activist colour (p. 62). In this reflection unity is also a critical question: the necessary unity among activists in running a successful campaign, questions of unity in a denomination faced with the possibility of significant change and whether a church which consciously adopts a policy allowing for contradictory approaches is indeed united.

The use of autoethnography as a method is described by Heather Walton (2014, p. 9) who argues that it is a 'very creative resource for theological reflection.' She

outlines three approaches to it: telling evocative stories, analytic autoethnography and performance autoethnography, though notes that theological writers need not be too worried about keeping strictly within any of these. The approach I have taken combines elements of telling evocative stories and analytic autoethnography. I tell a story which is significant both for me personally and for this project and in the context of that telling engage in some reflective theological analysis.

Walton argues that 'the focus in autoethnography is on the analysis and communication of those experiences that have shaped the researcher' (2014, p. 3). A significant reason for me choosing the research topic of this thesis was my activism within the Methodist Church for greater participation of LGBT+ people, especially with regard to all couples being able to marry in church. This theological enquiry sits alongside and in conversation with that more practical work. In this chapter I bring my own experience as a queer activist and in particular my engagement with the Methodist Conference to the Wesley text. An autoethnographic approach allows me to place that personal investment, and the significance of the project, explicitly into the foreground in this chapter. In some ways, this is a more unexpected dialogue than the dialogues with queer texts in my previous two chapters because the texts are so different: the minutes of the early Conferences summarise theological points in a series of short questions and answers while an autoethnographic account is far more personal and discursive. The Methodist Conference today is a very different body to the early Conferences that Wesley knew and my personal account is not at all like the questions and answers of the early minutes. The immediate theological questions are different. Nevertheless, I think it appropriate both because of the importance of my activist work in choosing this topic and because both consider the Methodist Conference, despite it having changed significantly over that time. Furthermore, autoethnography is an established method in queer studies and provides an important dimension to my overall project: as will be seen the method is found to be productive in this context. The use of this method underlines the 'first-

personness' of the project and points to the way I myself have skin in the game (p. 55).

I argue that the struggle for justice and greater participation for LGBT+ people is a holy struggle which, while different in many ways from the struggles and challenges of early Methodism, has a spirit in common with it. This spirit is the transformative power of the pursuit of holiness, a concept which will be explored further through this chapter.

6.2 Text and Context

The excerpts of the minutes of the Conferences which Wesley cites in *Plain Account* do not record teaching which is significantly different for my purposes from what he had already said in other contexts, including those texts already examined in this thesis. However, they do represent a significant departure from the earlier texts in their genre and function. In this section, I am going to examine them with that in mind and particularly in terms of the question of unity both within and beyond the early Methodist movement. This theme is significant both because it is a key question for the early Methodist movement at this point and because the connections between unity and holiness are important for the overall theology of this thesis.

In dealing with the Minutes, I rely particularly on Henry Rack's essay in the Bicentennial Edition of Wesley's works, which draws significantly on the primary texts as well as the work of earlier scholars including Nehemiah Curnock and Frank Baker. Reviewing Rack's work, Andrew Thompson (2013, p. 195) recognises its highly significant place in studies of the early Conferences: while earlier material was 'the tip of the iceberg', 'Dr. Henry Rack has given us the rest of the iceberg.'

In his introduction to the records of the early Conferences, Rack recounts Wesley's efforts to form alliances with other groups and societies (e.g. Calvinists and Moravians), none of which came to substantial fruition and concludes that Wesley holding his own conference for those working with him was essentially the only remaining option. David Jones (2003) by contrast sets out a detailed account of

conversations and meetings in the run up to this time, with a lot of 'jockeying for position' among early revival leaders, including Wesley. A key point in this development was a meeting in February 1743 convened by Whitefield. Although the Moravians did not participate, there was substantial convergence:

> The Calvinists and the Wesleyans went ahead without [the Moravians] and agreed on a number of points of mutual interest, including deciding on some new rules about the use of lay preachers, restating their resolution not to leave the Church of England unless forced to do so and agreeing to seek the protection of the authorities when confronted with extreme mob violence. (Jones, 2003, p. 91)

Wesley wrote what Jones (2003, p. 91) describes as a discussion document on outstanding points of controversy ('unconditional election, irresistible grace and the final perseverance of the saints') but nothing further was done. Jones also concludes that this marks the end of any possibility of a broad coalition between the different revivalist groups. However much a broad unity of this kind might have been desirable – to Wesley or any of the other leaders – it was not attainable at this stage.

At the same time, Wesley faced significant opposition from within the Church of England. Wesley's 1743 publication *An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion* sought to defend Methodism as 'playing a valuable part in society' and to defend it against charges of 'undermining the Church of England' (Baker, 1970, p. 88). Although *Earnest Appeal* had some success, Baker (1970, p. 91) notes that it 'also rallied some noteworthy churchmen [*sic*] to the ranks of the opposition,' that the then Archbishop of York circulated a letter warning his clergy against the Methodists and that the Bishop of London issued an anonymous 24 page pamphlet attacking them.

Against the background of the challenging beginnings in Oxford, a troublesome time in the American Colonies and growing opposition in church and society, it would seem reasonable that Wesley wanted to secure a broader coalition. He was not alone in that. The difficulty – or even failure – in achieving this perhaps marks the early Wesleyan movement as embattled in yet another way: opposed by the

Established Church and respectable society and not really received by other revivalist groups. In response therefore, he needed to secure a stronger sense of authority and unity within Methodism itself: to explain and defend its teaching, to support its members and to allow its work to continue and to grow.

In 1739, John and Charles Wesley had published a book of *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, some of which he cites in *Plain Account*. In its preface is his famous dictum that 'The gospel of Christ knows of no religion but social; no holiness but social holiness' (Wesley, 2013, p. 39). This is social as opposed to solitary. For Wesley the holiness of which he is speaking has to be corporate: its very definition is in the love of God and neighbour, and that must be both an inner reality and a practical duty. His desire for a Conference is therefore a critical example of a corporate context in which this is explored and enacted. The very nature of his teaching means that he cannot hold it alone but must hold it with others. Even if the Conference he can ultimately convene is only of his own preachers, it is still essential to his understanding of this social holiness.

So it was that in 1744, John Wesley first convened a Methodist Conference although it was at this stage a very different gathering from the one that exists today, which consists of about 300 people and holds supreme doctrinal, legislative and governing authority. Davies and Rupp (1965, p. 230-231) note its initial meeting consisted of only six clergy with the swift addition of four lay people, following the Conference's agreement that this was allowable. Rack records the same thing (Rack in Wesley, 2011, p. 24) while Doughty (1944, p. 13) argues persuasively that given the lay preachers were admitted immediately they must have been waiting outside and that therefore their inclusion was always Wesley's intention.

Wesley insisted that the Conference was to advise him and that authority remained in his hands, although he seems to expect that the Conference would assume that authority following his death. In a letter of 18th January 1780 to a preacher complaining about the expulsion of a fellow preacher, Wesley asserts this position strongly:

> For above six years after my return to England there was no such thing [as the Conference]. I then desired some of the preachers to meet me, in order to advise, not control me. And you may observe they had no power at all but what I exercised through them. I chose to exercise the power which God had given me in this manner, both to avoid ostentation and gently to habituate the people to obey them when I should be taken from their head. But as long as I remain with them the fundamental rule of Methodism remains inviolate. As long as any preacher join with me he is to be directed by me in his work. (Wesley quoted in Doughty, 1944, p. 18)

Clearly in Wesley's time then the question of unity is closely connected to his own authority: to be united with Wesley as one of his preachers is to be under his authority. Wesley's foundation of the Conference therefore laid the foundation for it to become a focus of unity for the Methodist movement by exercising the authority that he exercised in his life when he could no longer do that.

The composition and size of subsequent Conferences was ultimately a matter for Wesley and did vary, but the broad principles remained the same (Rack in Wesley, 2011, p. 24 ff.). Particularly relevant for this work are those from 1744-47 and 1759 which Wesley cites in *Plain Account*. As Rack shows, Wesley was not reticent in imposing his view and using the Conferences as a means to maintain order, even while some preachers protested that matters were not decided by majority vote (Rack in Wesley, 2011, p. 67).

> To be sure, the early Conferences were gatherings for a very small body of people who needed to define their most basic beliefs and practice. Relatively free discussion and allowance for conscientious objections and simple uncertainty would have been quite natural and appropriate to what really was a process of 'conferring'. In fact, however, we do not know how prevalent free debate and disagreement existed even at this stage. Wesley also used the Conference from the beginning as a means to keep dissent or recalcitrance from appearing among the preachers. (Rack in Wesley, 2011, p. 64)

The early Conferences had a rule of confidentiality, with the expectation that those present not discuss them elsewhere. While records were made of the early Conferences, nothing was published until the 'Doctrinal' and 'Disciplinary' minutes were issued as pamphlets in 1749 (Rack in Wesley, 2011, p. 104-5). Some copies of the early manuscript records are still available but many have been lost. From 1765, the minutes of the Conference were published (known as the Penny

Minutes) and titled *Minutes of Some Late Conversations between Rev. Mr. Wesley and Others.* This title itself gives a distinct impression of the nature of the document and a clear sense of authority residing more with Wesley than with the Conference itself. The Conference at this time is then clearly advisory: the key thing will be what Wesley ultimately publishes about the matter in hand. However, these published minutes will nevertheless be seen to carry the authority of the Conference as a key group of people, albeit with their content entirely in Wesley's control. There is, in a sense, a mutual reinforcing of authority: in Wesley's lifetime, the Conference serves to underline his teaching and control of the movement and, at the same time, Wesley's use of it in this way positions the Conference as a body to which the Methodist people will look after his death for leadership and governance. From the beginning therefore, the Conference is an important expression of the unity of the Methodist movement and people.

The agenda of the Conference was also largely determined by Wesley himself.

> The 1744 Conference agenda and Minutes crisply stated the design of the meeting at the outset: 'To consider before God: 1. What to teach. 2. How to teach. 3. What to do? i.e., doctrine, discipline, and practice.' Doctrine was dealt with as a very large and detailed section of the first four Conferences, up to and including 1747. Those years included widespread criticism, from within and without the evangelical camp, of Methodism's stance on the doctrines of salvation. (Rack in Wesley, 2011, p. 29-30)

This overall design can be seen to be intensely practical and ultimately aimed at ensuring that the Methodist preachers are able to fulfil their function in a consistent and coordinated way. A significant part of this early doctrinal consideration concerned the doctrines of salvation and holiness, which for Wesley and the early Methodists were closely related. In a sense, they were part of the same thing because justification and the new birth were seen necessarily to be the beginning of sanctification. Their account of holiness needed to be both defensible to the world at large and coherent enough that this early movement could unite around it. In the face of the multiple oppositions that existed, this was not an easy task. It appears that that was, at least for a time, achieved and Rack notes that

'after 1747, doctrinal questions figure only occasionally and spasmodically in the Conference discussions' (Rack in Wesley, 2011, p. 30).

The published minutes follow a question and answer style. This is reflective of the agendas which were composed of questions. A number of possible reasons for this style have been suggested:

> The specific origin of [the question and answer format] is not clear, but Wesley used such an approach for self-examination at Oxford, as Professor Heitzenrater has pointed out. Professor Baker suggests that Wesley was conditioned to Socratic models of questioning in the college disputations at Oxford. (Rack in Wesley, 2011, p. 29)

The Heitzenrater observation referenced is:

> Minutes of these discussions were organized in the fashion of Wesley's notes in the front of his Oxford diaries: brief questions with cryptic answers, often carefully outlined in numbered paragraphs. His penchant for logic and his training in writing scholastic *geneses* were being put to good use. (Heitzenrater, 2012, p. 146)

The resemblance of the format to catechisms is also strongly apparent and Wesley would certainly have been familiar with this, as a catechism in this style appears in the *Book of Common Prayer* (Church of England, 1968, pp. 289-96). It is important to recognise that the 'Minutes' are not simply records of the conversation but represent Wesley's considered responses to the questions. They may well have had practical value for early Methodist preachers and others responding to those who raised objections: in effect, as a 'Frequently Asked Questions' for early Methodist preachers.

In *Plain Account*, John Wesley uses the published Minutes as one of his key sources and reproduces relevant portions from them relating to Christian Perfection from several Conferences, beginning with the 1744 Conference. Generally speaking, substantive questions come up repeatedly at the Conference because they are controversial or have become problematic for some reason.[48] This may be because

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[48] More recent examples would include sexuality and relationships (considered by the Conference in at least 1979, 1993, 2005, 2006, 2014, 2016, 2018, 2019 and 2021) and the celebration of Holy Communion online (considered by the Conference in 2015, 2018, 2020 (from the floor) and 2021).

of internal dynamics, or those of broader society. As has already been seen in earlier parts of the thesis, the early Methodist teaching about perfection and holiness certainly attracted controversy and therefore it is entirely unsurprising that as a theme it dominated the early conferences. The repeated consideration of Christian Perfection (and more broadly the theology of salvation and sanctification) shows the level of challenge that they faced. This challenge needed a clear and strong response.

On the second morning they 'seriously considered the doctrine of sanctification or perfection' (Wesley, 2013, p. 159). Wesley recounts three questions and answers:

> *Q.* What is it to be *sanctified*?
> *A.* To be renewed in the image of God, 'in righteousness and true holiness.'
> *Q.* What is implied in being a *perfect Christian*?
> *A.* The loving God with all our heart, and mind, and soul, Deut. 6:5
> *Q.* Does this imply that *all inward sin* is taken away?
> *A.* Undoubtedly; or how can we be said to be 'saved from all our uncleannesses'? Ezek. 36:29. (Wesley, 2013, p. 159; emphasis original)

These three questions and answers seem deceptively simple. My assessment is that they represent a continuation of the argument that Wesley has used previously that he is simply preaching Christianity as the scriptures describe it. The use of direct quotes from scripture in the answers highlights this. The key point on which Wesley is challenged is the definition of perfection, in particular whether perfection is sinless.

Sanctification and Christian perfection were considered again in the subsequent year, at the Conference beginning on 1 August 1745.

> *Q.* When does inward sanctification begin?
> *A.* In the moment we are justified. Yet sin remains in him [*sic*], yea, the seed of sin, till he is *sanctified throughout*. From that time a believer gradually dies to sin, and grows in grace.
> *Q.* Is this ordinarily [not] given till a little before death?
> *A.* It is not to those who expect it no sooner.
> *Q.* But may we expect it sooner?
> *A.* Why not? For although we grant 1) that the generality of believers who we have hitherto known were not so sanctified till near death, 2) that few of those to whom St. Paul wrote his epistles were so at that time, nor 3) he himself at the time of his writing his former epistles, yet all this does not

> prove that we may not be so *today.*
> *Q.* In what manner should we preach sanctification?
> *A.* Scarce at all to those who are not pressing forward. To those who are, always by way of promise – always *drawing* rather than *driving*. (Wesley, 2013, p. 159-160; emphasis original)

The issues are more precise here: when sanctification begins and when entire sanctification might be expected. The question about preaching is both significant and practical and relates to the overall aim of the Conference agenda as outlined above. The answer in many ways raises several more questions: if preaching of entire sanctification was only to be to a select group, why did Wesley publish sermons, tracts and other documents explaining this teaching? At one level, the controversy that I have illustrated gave him no option and at another it was clearly important in that if it were to be preached to any group, it was preached accurately. In responding to controversy, both avoiding unnecessary dispute (so not preaching it to groups unlikely to be receptive) and ensuring unity on the key points were good measures to take.

Some who disagreed with Wesley accepted entire sanctification as a theoretical possibility but held that if it were achieved it would only be when a person was very near death. In practical terms therefore, the proposition would make little difference. The questions of the 1745 Conference seem to imply a certain tentativeness to their thought, which may have been intended to make their position seem more acceptable. However, in the context of what Wesley has written and preached already, he was clearly not tentative in his own view.

Wesley reports that the third Conference (1746) considered again the minutes of the two preceding Conferences and agreed not to change anything. The fourth Conference began on 16 June 1747 with 'several persons […] present who did not believe the doctrine of perfection' (Wesley, 2013, p. 160). While the earlier Conferences state the teaching simply and with Wesley's characteristic brevity, the minutes of this Conference record a much fuller account and defence of the teaching, citing numerous scriptural examples. They are explicitly cast in terms of the position of Wesley and the early Methodists and those who disagree with

them. Clearly the earlier Conferences had not succeeded in achieving unanimity on the questions of Christian perfection and more was required. The questions and answers of this Conference examine the key point of difference which was whether believers can expect to be saved from all sin before death and aim to justify Wesley's position by reference to scripture. They support Wesley's contention that he is preaching the faith as he believes he finds it in scripture. Wesley concludes that this shows that his teaching and that of his brother (i.e. Charles) and the other Methodists was consistent through this time and claims not to remember a single dissenting voice in the Conference. Recalling that he also says there were several people present who did not believe the doctrine of perfection, and noting the preachers who complained that matters were not determined by vote, I surmise that dissenting voices were hastily silenced and certainly did not find much place in the published Minutes. Although unity is not mentioned as such, it is clearly of utmost importance to Wesley to maintain at least the appearance of unity on these points and ideally unity in fact.

In 1759, the Conference again considered the question, according to Wesley, 'perceiving some danger that a diversity of sentiments should insensibly steal in among us' (Wesley, 2013, p. 167). Clearly, the unity of the Methodists on this teaching was very important to Wesley. Following this Conference, Wesley published *Thoughts on Christian Perfection* (Wesley, 2013, pp. 54-80), again aiming to set out his teaching as to what it is and is not.

Conclusion on the Conferences material

The early Methodists were strongly motivated by their task and largely undeterred from it by the opposition that they faced. They had strong confidence in their teaching, due in no small part to Wesley's personal authority and the unity he inspired among his preachers. Although a broader unity with other revivalist groups proved not to be possible, the Conference began, under Wesley during his life, to provide some focus for the unity of Methodists. This provided a context in which the ongoing transformative work of Methodism could continue.

The Conference over these years gave Wesley another means by which he could disseminate his teaching on Christian perfection (and indeed salvation and sanctification more broadly) and defend it against opponents. As has been seen, it is open to question what the conversation in the Conference itself actually included, but its existence gave him the possibility of publishing its minutes albeit that their content was written and determined by him. The importance Wesley places on the Minutes of the Conference as a sign of this can be seen by his heavy reliance on the material in *Plain Account* and its use as evidence for his consistency on these matters.

Wesley's teaching on perfection and holiness was a significant factor in the tensions early Methodism faced. Jones (2003, p. 82) highlights the preaching of Christian perfection as a way in which Wesley 'carve[d] out his own distinct identity.' The conversations that Wesley had with other preachers in the Conference demonstrate a need to build and maintain a common position and to strengthen the early Methodist community's cohesion around this teaching. While rooted in the texts of scripture, this teaching is also transformative: as we have seen before Wesley's 'methodising' approach is both in continuity and discontinuity with what has come before. In pragmatic terms, there is evidence of a concern to state the case clearly and to preserve a party line. This is not simply about the teaching itself, but about his place as the leader of the movement and the preservation and promotion of its unity. The convening of the Conference allows him to solidify his authority and in further disseminating and supporting this teaching, he is able to secure his own position too.

While these Conferences did not explicitly consider the question of unity – and indeed allowed participants considerable latitude for their own consciences – the consideration I have outlined demonstrates that the building and maintaining of consensus on the teaching of Christian perfection was a key priority. Wesley felt it important to preserve unity on Christian perfection among his Methodist movement and preventing a 'diversity of sentiments' was the reason for returning to it at the 1759 Conference. Christian perfection is such a key element of the

identity of his movement and of his authority within it (it is, for example, one of the important differences between him and other revivalist leaders) that, in my view, for Wesley preserving unity on it was essential. Further, this unity enabled him to promote and support the unity of his emerging movement as against other revivalist movements. Wesley's social understanding of holiness means that the Conferences are not just fora to discuss holiness but are themselves (potential) examples of it and its outworking.

6.3 An Autoethnography of the Methodist Conference and a Queer Activist

My autoethnographic account[49] also concerns the Methodist Conference. Nearly 300 years after Wesley's first Conferences, the form and experience of the Conference is quite different but at its heart is still the aim for the Methodist people, in a representative way, to confer about matters of significance, and often also of controversy. Both accounts concern important matters that have resonance far beyond the Conference itself. For Methodists there is a significance to the continuity of gathering in Conference annually, since 1744 and setting these alongside each other invites that resonance to emerge.

The subject matter of these two texts is significantly different as is their style. The minutes of the early Conferences are deliberately impersonal: short answers to short questions. An autoethnography is, of its nature, personal: one person's account of a set of experiences. However, setting them together allows the questions of unity in the two contexts to challenge and inform each other. In both cases, the topic was of such significance that it kept returning to the Conference – for Christian perfection, 1744-47 and 1759 and for matters relating to sexuality in 1979, 1990, 1993, 2005, 2006, 2014, 2016, 2018, 2019 and 2021. As I observed previously, the Conference does not return repeatedly to matters that are uncontroversial. In terms of both issues, the question then arising out of unity is its purpose: in neither case is there unity simply for its own sake. For the early Methodists, as was outlined above, unity was key to their emerging movement. In

[49] The autoethnographic account is in the Appendix (p. 183) and quoted in this section when necessary.

connection with the later Conferences and questions relating to sexuality, the unity of an emerging activist group was key to achieving change.

I recounted the sense of stagnation that led us to seek to draw together a new group of activists:

> This state of affairs was in many ways very uncomfortable for LGBT+ Methodists. While many things were possible, it was a case of toleration. There were many who didn't feel comfortable to be out or only to be out in particular contexts – especially those in more senior positions of leadership – and at the local level, these decisions were often unheard of. It was not unusual to find Methodists who didn't know there were LGBT+ Methodists and certainly not LGBT+ Methodist ministers. (Appendix, p. 192)

In response to this, my then partner (now husband), Sam, and I, with others, started a new campaigning group, Dignity and Worth (Appendix, p. 192), aiming to bring change for LGBT+ people in the Methodist Church. Some of the key issues for decision, particularly on marriage, lay in the power of the Methodist Conference. While marriage was practically important for many couples, it was also symbolically important, particularly against the ambiguous position of LGBT+ Methodists dating from the 1993 Conference (see page 7 above). Thus a decision in favour of same-sex marriage by the Conference would be important even for those who would have no intention of ever marrying.

The creation of Dignity and Worth facilitated a developing unity among those in favour of change and in the 2018 Conference, we could capitalise on that to make ourselves clearly visible:

> We made ourselves very visible in the Conference, giving out free rainbow bags and lanyards to members of the Conference and it was hard to look in any direction and not see a rainbow. The whole Conference felt very different as a result: although we had always been there, LGBT+ folks and supporters were now very visible. (Appendix, p.193)

In the early Conferences, the agenda was clearly set by Wesley although circumstances will have dictated what he felt they needed to confer about. Although there is scant detail about the nature of debate, the outcome as recorded in the minutes was very much determined by him. By the later conferences, while much of the agenda is centrally determined, the members themselves have

significant ability to bring things for consideration. In the absence of questions about marriage being brought officially, I was able to bring them to the floor and make them a subject of debate.

> I drafted a motion that would essentially write the 'mixed economy' directly into Methodist Standing Orders. We collected the necessary signatures and submitted it. We also submitted a second (in the event the first wasn't passed) inviting the Conference to require a mixed economy to be one of the options presented to it in a future report. (Appendix, p. 193)

Although this motion did not ultimately succeed, the debate which accompanied it gave rise to a changed atmosphere in the Conferences that followed – 'from "Should we do this?" to "How should we do this?"' (Appendix, p.195) and this was highly significant in the decisions that would finally be made in 2021. The unity and visibility of our emerging activist movement made this transformation imaginable in a way that it had not been before. It could be seen as a queering action in terms of the colours of queering that I have previously outlined in that it was disruptive (Appendix, p.194), sought to re/claim power for LGBT+ people and to make space.

The mixed economy approach – giving freedom of conscience to ministers and churches on marriage – which that motion proposed and was ultimately brought forward in a similar form in the official report in 2019 itself raises questions of unity. At one level, this might be thought to contrast with the approach of Wesley in the early Conferences, who returned to the topic of perfection out of the fear that a diversity of sentiments should be found among the Methodist preachers (and perhaps by extension the Methodist people). On the other hand, it could be said to be exactly in the spirit of *Character* in which it is declared that a Methodist is not defined by their opinions on anything. Nevertheless, the decision of the Conference to adopt a 'contradictory convictions' position in which it is officially recognised that different views and practices on the question of marriage exist and should be allowed within Methodism draws on both of these positions. It creates a point around which common ground can be formed, namely that marriage is not a first-order doctrinal issue for us (not being mentioned in the doctrinal standards). On the other hand, it also makes clear that different views and practices should be

respected as they are not definitive of Methodism: consonant with the outline of what it is to be Methodist that Wesley set out in *Character*. This position may be seen as a pragmatic means for preserving an institutional unity, while losing or compromising on a theological unity. Whether it is to be seen as a step forward for unity or a step back depends very much on how unity is to be understood, a question to which I will return below. For some opposed to the change, it necessarily splits the church and represents an abandonment of any claim to pursue holiness: see, for example, Methodist Evangelicals Together's (2017) statement and their Chair, David Hull's (2021) publication *The Runaway Train* that sought to persuade the Conference not to make any changes to our discipline on marriage.

In assessing this charge, it should be put back into the context of conferring itself. As discussed above, for Wesley the understanding of holiness as perfection of love for God and for neighbour was a social understanding: it could not be achieved alone but in relationship with others. His creation of the Conference as a place of discerning was not simply practical but an expression of this communal life of holiness. Though the pattern of conferring may have changed, and the issues are different, at its heart remains the community of the people called Methodist coming together in relationship. From a perspective of social holiness, the decisions to create a mixed economy regarding marriage can be seen to further the holiness of the Methodist people, not to abandon it.

Wesley's teaching on holiness ultimately concerns the transformation of individuals (by becoming more holy: in the sense of a growth in love of God and neighbour) and the teaching itself is arguably transformative for the early Methodist movement and the wider church and society around it. In terms of activity relating to LGBT+ participation in the Methodist Church, the key question becomes not about the transformation of Christian teaching – although that is a factor – nor yet about the transformation of society but about changing the Methodist Church itself. In this, the existence of a 'diversity of sentiments' is a reality of the situation and could not be avoided, even if that were desirable.

However, in fact the raising of that diversity of sentiments to an official level (by it being enacted in the decisions of the Conference) gives – within the institution – an authority to the pro-LGBT+ position far beyond anything that it had before. The Conference – and by extension the Methodist Church as a whole – becomes in this both a gathering to be transformed and the agent of that transformation. As I observed, the decisions have led people to much freer about their own views and are creating a much more open conversation within Methodism:

> One thing I have already noticed is that the overall process has brought many people's perspectives to the surface. LGBT+ people and allies are less reluctant to be open about their position and opponents cannot hide behind the institutional policy. My perception is that there is much open support for LGBT+ people in Methodism, both locally and institutionally than there was before the decisions. (Appendix, p.196)

At the end of the day, what the Methodist Church says may or may not be important to any given LGBT+ person and it is up to LGBT+ people how they/we want to live our lives. But in a society and on a world and ecumenical stage in which queerphobia is still very much present, the decisions of the Conference made a statement in the public sphere that is important. Wesley's teaching was about the transformation of individuals through a growth in holiness marked by love of God and love of neighbour. For me, the decisions the Conference took on marriage are an expression of this kind of holiness: marked both in their aim and in the way they were carried out by that holiness.

6.4 Unity and Holiness

The teaching recorded in the minutes of the early Conferences does not differ significantly in substance from that which Wesley offered in other forms and which I have examined in earlier chapters. However, the establishment of a Conference – which quickly became a permanent feature of Methodism – represented a significant development in the life of the movement. Through the Conference, Wesley could underline his own authority and promote the unity of the connexion. While he is clear that the authority belongs to him and not the Conference, he also expects that after his death the Conference will have that authority itself.

Nevertheless, in seeking the advice of others and in publishing the minutes of these gatherings, he is seeking to assert a wider basis for the authority he exercises. The Conference is not just a means of debating holiness (or any other theological point) but is actually in itself an expression of social holiness.

Unity is one of the creedal marks of the church, as is holiness. John Macquarrie (1977, p. 402) notes that '[unity] is such an inclusive concept that it can hardly be separated from the other three marks of the Church.' He argues that the church's basic unity is founded on Jesus Christ and confessing that Jesus is Lord and uses the metaphor of the Body of Christ to note that there must be an understanding of 'diversity in unity'. This must be held in tension: 'A unity that flattens out all diversity falls far below that free kind of unity which we saw to be at once the glory and the risk of creation. […] But if there is a unity that swallows up freedom, there is also a diversity that breaks up unity rather than contributing to it' (Macquarrie, 1977, p. 403).

From the perspective of a consideration of the ecumenical movement, Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen (2002, p. 79 ff.) considers the question of the 'Church as One'. He argues that the unity of the church 'is given from God' and situates this in the context of the creedal marks of the church. Looking across the breadth of traditions, he recognises different understandings of what the unity of the church means and sets out a quasi-spectrum from more overall and institutional approaches in the Orthodox and Catholic traditions through to more spiritual, local and individual approaches in Reformed and Free Church traditions.

Jon Sobrino considers the question of unity (which for him too is inseparable from the other marks of the church) and states clearly that, 'there is only one church because there is only one God, only one Christ, and only one Spirit,' while recognising that the church must have capacity to extend to different places and cultures, concluding that 'the true church is inherently both universal and local.' He proposes three models for considering unity: uniformity, pluriformity and solidarity (Sobrino and Pico, 1985, p. 15). He considers that uniformity is problematic in that it excludes the possibility of difference between churches and consequent

relationship within that difference. Pluriformity, while an improvement, does not require any necessary relationship between local churches, who can simply be disparate under that model. He therefore proposes that the solidarity model is to be preferred and argues that this begins with local churches and builds from there through expressing catholicity as ‘co-responsibility between local churches’, describing this as ‘bearing with one another in faith.’ This ‘should not be understood in a formal and abstract sense but as practiced in the concrete’ (Sobrino and Pico, 1985, p. 15). ‘Unity in history is based on incarnating [faith in God] and on doing so together, “bearing with one another in faith”’ (Sobrino and Pico, 1985, p. 17).

Using a central notion of the ‘solidarity of others,’ Anselm Min (2004) reimagines pneumatology in terms of the ‘Spirit of solidarity’ and explores the body of Christ as an image of solidarity in this sense. Min identifies four dimensions of the body of Christ: bodily, Christological, ecclesiological and Trinitarian (Min, 2004, p. 144). For present purposes, the most significant of these senses is the ecclesiological although in terms of an eventual queer theology of holiness, it will also be necessary to return to the bodily sense. Within the ecclesiological sense, Min identifies four dimensions, ‘ecclesiastical, eschatological, solidaristic and eucharistic’ (Min, 2004, p. 146). Recognising Moltmann’s claim that ‘the church is not limited to those who follow Christ with an explicit faith’, Min (2004, p. 147) argues that Matthew 25’s identification of Christ with the ‘hungry, thirsty, strange, naked, sick, and imprisoned,’ means that the church’s solidarity must embrace all excluded others. For Min, the bodily metaphor gives a context within which the particularity of individuals is maintained and even celebrated because, and such that, it promotes the flourishing of the whole: ‘As a master metaphor of solidarity, the body preserves otherness but also transcends it in the togetherness of life, suffering and joy’ (Min, 2004, p. 148). Min concludes, ‘The body of Christ is not the formal unity of those reduced to the same but the solidarity of others, the oneness of those who are different’ (Min, 2004, p. 148).

In this light, and alongside Wesley's understanding as perfection of love for God and neighbour, unity can be understood not as unity in an institution or even in a theological position (although that may, as was discussed above, be necessary for other reasons in particular contexts) but primarily as expressing relationship – solidarity – within the one body. I call this relational unity: recognising that unity remains important in the theology of holiness which I am seeking to construct, that it exists at multiple levels and in multiple relationships and it is informed by concepts of solidarity as well as more traditional accounts of unity in ecclesiology. This notion of unity – similarly to Min's account of solidarity – also leads us to question with whom we are not yet in relationship or solidarity and to draw the circle more widely. The social holiness to which Wesley was committed and the liberative action to which queer activism challenges us both take us beyond closed communities.

The struggle for justice and greater participation for LGBT+ people in the Methodist Church (in common with similar efforts in other contexts) is a holy struggle which, while different from the struggles and challenges of early Methodism, resembles it in important ways. At the heart of this is the transformative power of the pursuit of holiness: the relentless seeking to love God and one's neighbour more. It demands a love for one another within and beyond the church, a practical unity of activists who work for change and a willingness to continue, as far as possible, in relationship even with those who take theological positions that are difficult or even offensive for us.

My own involvement in this struggle has changed who I am and my exercise of ministry. I now know what it is to have a degree of controversy about me and Sam and we have borne the cost of that in the processes of Methodism. While I take a degree of pride in what we (with others) achieved, I also feel a deep sense of weariness and cynicism about how many obstacles were put in the way (the consequence of concerns for institutional unity) and how much is still to be done.

Wesley and the early Methodists recognised that the work of a grace in a believer would make them more holy. This was a holiness rooted in the realities of love for

God and neighbour and not a sense of other-worldly sanctity. Wesley's religion was famously practical and his account of holiness was no exception. The pursuit of justice is a holy task: in doing what you believe and feel convicted is right before God you are on the same kind of road as Wesley and his early preachers.

6.5 Concluding Reflections

Wesley's creation of the Methodist Conference was a decision which would shape the Methodist movement for generations to come. While its early gatherings were small, and completely controlled by Wesley, it offered a wider forum within which Wesley could seek support in his leadership of the Methodist people and underline his authority. As a gathering of the early Methodist preachers, it was not simply a forum in which topics could be discussed but, in itself, an expression of the social holiness which they preached. Following Wesley's death, the Conference became Methodism's supreme earthly authority, a role which continues to this day.

The Methodist Conference has changed considerably since the days of Wesley but it remains a focus of unity for the Methodist people. Rather than a precise doctrinal unity or a simply institutional unity, this unity is best understood as a relational unity. Through the Conference, and by extension the Methodist connexion more generally, the Methodist people commit to a common life and express their solidarity with one another. In this way, the unity focussed in and by the Conference is itself an expression of social holiness: the Methodist people, in relationship with each other, seek to grow in love for God, for each other and for all their neighbours. This relational unity provides by which communities can work for justice and transformation, changing both themselves and the churches and nations in which they exist.

Ultimately, unity, activism, solidarity and holiness are, I argue, closely intertwined and lead to a network of relationship and action which has the potential to transform us and those around us. When this is motivated by the love of God and neighbour then this transformation is the process of becoming more holy.

7. Themes in a Queer Theology of Holiness

7.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will draw on the material laid out so far and bring it into conversation with other queer theological writers in order to explore the facets of a queer theology of holiness. To do this, I have identified some key themes around which to form the consideration in this chapter. The themes I have chosen are perfection, transformation and sin. These correspond to significant elements in a Wesleyan order of salvation from justification through sanctification to entire holiness as well as each raising important points for queer theology.

In each case these themes have two significant dimensions, although those dimensions are not independent: namely the individual and the collective. So I consider sin in the collective sense as well as the individual and the chapter's account of transformation likewise considers the transformation of the church and the world as well as of the individual. Indeed, in this queer theology of holiness such processes cannot be seen independently of each other but are woven together and mutually necessary. I set out an understanding of holiness in which queer bodies, individually and collectively, reveal the queer body of Christ, showing that far from being in opposition to each other holiness and queerness have a powerful interaction.

7.2 Queer Christian Perfection

Inspired by Wesley's account of Christian perfection, I explore a concept of 'queer Christian perfection'. In this term, I am seeking to link both to Wesley's concept and to the broader exploration of queer accounts of holiness constructed using the resources that I have identified in earlier chapters of the thesis. The fact that Wesley claimed perfection as a possibility for all Christians, and indeed claimed it to be incumbent on all Christians to be striving for it, leads to the inescapable consequence that it must be a possibility for LGBT+ Christians (Wesley, 1985, p. 106). While this may take Wesley beyond where his own experience, knowledge

and probably views would have allowed, in the light of the case of Blair where Wesley and the early Methodists advocated in court for a young man accused of sodomy (see pp. 87ff above) and his readiness to allow women to preach despite his own natural reservations (see, for example, Rack, 2002, p. 244), any reader of Wesley should be wary of assuming that were he faced with this explicit question his approach would not be equally radical. However, my aim here is not to put words into Wesley's mouth but to recognise that the theology he articulates gives ample scope for contemporary queer Christian engagement as to what a queer theology of holiness emerging from his writing might look like. Osinski considering sermon 76 *On Perfection*[50] has a comparable aim, '…we will apply his same argument to the perfection achievable by LGBTQ+ persons specifically, given their particular experiences, concerns, challenges, and opponents' (2021, p. 39).

Wesley argues from scripture to say there is such a thing as perfection and that therefore Christians must attend to it and expect it. This perfection is perfection in love of God and neighbour, which is holiness. The driving force of pursuing this topic in my thesis was the antithesis I perceived often laid onto holiness and queerness as if they are mutually exclusive. The introduction to Methodist Evangelicals Together's 2017 statement to the British Methodist Church's working party on marriage and relationships illustrates this point, arguing that a 'social justice' argument in favour of change needed to be countered with a 'call to holiness':

> We recognise that for many the offering of same-sex marriage is an issue of social justice. We would want to temper that call for social justice with a call to holiness, recognising and proclaiming the Biblical moral view for marriage and family life. (Methodist Evangelicals Together, 2017, p. 3)

Morgan Guyton (2019) suggests that it is, in fact, holiness that is the key obstacle for conservative American Methodists in affirming any change in teaching regarding LGBT+ people. Osinski recognises a similar problem:

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[50] I refer to Sermon 40 'Christian Perfection' in this thesis as Wesley cites it in *Plain Account* and does not cite Sermon 76. However, the argument is broadly consistent and Osinski's reflections apply just as appropriately to these other texts.

> Just as, in the context of this sermon and its delivery, Wesley encountered people who denied the possibility of a person attaining any measure of perfection, many people today deny the possibility of LGBTQ+ persons being Christian, much less attaining perfection in their own right. (Osinski, 2021, p. 39)

To advance the concept of queer Christian perfection is to seek the union rather than the antithesis of queerness and holiness. LGBT+ people may or may not believe in God or find religion and faith helpful, and the history of religious queerphobia makes that a nuanced picture, but for those who do, unless it is said that being queer necessarily implies a failure to love God, then it must be acknowledged that LGBT+ people can and some do love God. Osinski recognises that some do label LGBT+ people as intrinsically sinful:

> By labeling LGBTQ+ bodies primarily by their sexual proclivities or activities rather than by the indwelling of the image of God within them queer bodies are wrongfully marked as inherently sinful. (Osinski, 2021, p. 44)

However, I would want to resist this apparent dichotomy: there need be no shame in queer people's 'sexual proclivities or activities' and the indwelling image of God is not in spite of those things or to cover them up. Osinski goes on to quote Pamela Lightsey who similarly seeks a movement to regarding 'bodies fashioned as good' rather than characterised 'only in terms of sexual acts' (Osinski, 2021, p. 44). At risk of a theological cliché, a queer theology of holiness needs both/and. We will return to this question further on.

Similarly, the claim that LGBT+ people can love their neighbours should be an uncontroversial proposition. For some, the sense of the intrinsic sin of LGBT+ people discussed above may seem to override any claim of virtue and a queer loving relationship may be the exact opposite of loving one's neighbour because of its claimed sinfulness. However, the argument as to why LGBT+ loving relationships are not sinful has been well set out by Robert Goss (2002, pp. 185-203) and Daniel Helminiak (1994), among many others. Leaving aside the question of loving or sexual relationships, it would be a bold claim to say that LGBT+ people could not love their neighbours in the ordinary sense.

At the simplest then, unless one adopts a theology in which the (claimed) sinfulness of queer being and queer loving overrides any other concern, then one must admit, within Wesley's framework that Christian perfection is at the very least a possibility that can be admitted for LGBT+ people. However, my aim here is not an account that simply does not exclude LGBT+ people but one which positively embraces and celebrates queerness, fully and unashamedly. While I affirm Wesley's proposition that perfection is a possibility for all, and LGBT+ people like any other group that has historically faced marginalisation or exclusion must be recognised as part of 'all' for all to have any meaning, I need to go further.

Why is loving God and neighbour the mark of holiness? At the simplest level, because it is obedience to the commandments Christ identifies as the greatest. Going further, it is a pattern of life which follows the path of Christ and therefore reveals Christ to the world. In my exploration of the colours of queering earlier in the thesis (p. 58), I identified uncovering/exposing/outing as one of those colours. The incarnate Christ is not simply an idea or spiritual force but a person and therefore one way to queer Christ is for Christ to be uncovered or revealed. In revealing Christ to the world by following this path of holiness, queer Christians thus queer Christ. Queer Christians in their body reveal the queer body of Christ to the world. Thus, loving God and neighbour is an incarnational practice of the body of Christ that, as I argue below, allows for embracing and celebrating queerness.

To develop this understanding, we need to explore the ways in which Christ's body is queer and then the ways in which queer Christians in their lives reveal Christ's body in theirs. Many authors have explored the queerness of Christ's body, in a variety of ways. Anselm Min's account of the solidarity of others in the body of Christ identifies four dimensions and begins with the bodily, arguing that 'the body is also the basis of the totality of human existence, its naturality, sexuality, sociality, historicity and even spirituality and transcendence' (Min, 2004, p. 144) and that all of this is embraced by Paul's exhortation that Christians present their bodies 'as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable' (Romans 12:1). Christ's body is a sign of solidarity with others both because of his earthly ministry of preaching,

healing, eating and drinking alongside the poor and marginalised – all physical, bodily actions – and because of the sufferings inflicted on the body of Christ in his passion and cross.

Christ's body can be understood using the notion of sacramental flesh, as Elizabeth Stuart (2007) argues. She investigates the relationship between the bodies of Christians and that of Christ and their ultimate transformation in the realisation of the eschatological vision. She uses Graham Ward's argument as to how the body of Christ destabilises gender as well as his reflections on the implications of critical events of Christ's life (the incarnation, the transfiguration, the institution of the Eucharist, the resurrection and the ascension) to argue that 'the body of Christ is queer.'

> That body is made available to Christians through the sacraments, the very possibility of which, as Ward notes, is grounded in the queer nature of the body of Christ. Not only is this body available to Christians, they are caught up in it, constituted by it and incorporated into it, sharing in its sacramental flesh. (Stuart, 2007, p. 66)

Although Wesley had a relatively high view of the Eucharist, he placed very little significance on baptism and as a priest of the Church of England in the 18th century did not acknowledge any other sacraments.[51] Nevertheless, the strong emphasis he places on the work of God's grace in the believer's life as the root of holiness and perfection means that a sacramental understanding of his theology is not inappropriate even if it is not always referencing specific sacraments themselves. The sanctification of the outward and visible by the inward and spiritual grace of God[52] is very much in keeping with his thinking. It is entirely in keeping with Wesley's theology to say that the body of Christ is made available to Christians through the grace of God and, in a similar way to what Stuart argues from Ward, the availability of that grace is grounded in the queer nature of the body of Christ.

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[51] See, for example, the preface he produced for his brother Charles' collections of Hymns on the Lord's Supper (Rattenbury, 2006, pp. 157-73) and sermon no. 101 *The Duty of Constant Communion* (Wesley, 1986, pp. 427-39). While he acknowledged baptismal regeneration, for him many had 'sinned away' the grace of their baptism by a relatively early age.

[52] The Catechism of the *Book of Common Prayer* with which Wesley would have been very familiar describes a sacrament as 'an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace' (Church of England, 1968, p. 294).

As will be seen, that incorporation into the body of Christ is critical for the approach I am setting out too.

Building from Ward's (2000, pp. 97-116) later account of the displaced body of Jesus Christ, Andy Buechel (2015, p. 18) identifies multiple senses in which the body of Christ is experienced and understood. He argues that 'the way that best makes sense of this reality today, of these multiple meanings and presences of the same body, is to think of it as queer' (Buechel, 2015, p. 18). For Buechel this is because the body of Christ rejects 'solid conceptions and figurations of gender [and] sexual orientation' and so-called 'common-sense' notions of bodies and identities. He concludes 'the body of Jesus Christ reveals the fluidity of bodies, standing in solidarity with all those bodies that find themselves marked as queer today' (Buechel, 2015, p. 19). He highlights how Ward's treatment shows that the body of Christ is 'elastic' and 'expands to include all other bodies' (Buechel, 2015, p. 25).

The body of Christ is then seen to be queer in its own destabilisation of sex and gender and because of its multiple significances in the events of the Biblical text. It is not queer in an isolated way, but through the concept of the solidarity of others, it embraces all other bodies – both because of Christ's ministry among the most marginalised – and because in its transcendence of sex and gender its elasticity allows it to be a sign for any queer people who would embrace it. The love of God and neighbour which Christ commanded and embodied in his ministry then becomes a possibility for all who are in relationship with him. In this way, their bodies reveal this queer body of Christ and the queer body of Christ becomes the pattern for the holiness of these queer bodies. When they reveal the body of Christ as fully as they can, they demonstrate queer Christian perfection. This is not in spite of being queer but in and through it. Osinski imagines the ways in which queer loving relationships are part of this dynamic:

> Queer love in particular challenges these unjust structures [i.e. 'patriarchal domination, capitalist rule, and racist oppression'] because it is doubly resistant. Unproductive, unafraid, unfazed by the restrictive demands of how, for example, romantic relationships should work for the reproduction of our

> oppressive society, queer love lets *love* make the calls, and so embodies the *ethos* of Wesleyan perfection. (Osinski, 2021, p. 41)

Queer lives can then reveal the fullness of love for God and neighbour in all areas of life, including loving and sexual relationships. This revealing is a living into the full potential of their creation, as identified in chapter 4 above. LGBT+ people are created by God, for love, and there is to be no restriction of the full potential of that creation and its ability to reveal Christ.

Wesley had to give a number of caveats to his concept of Christian perfection, including that it is not absolute and that it is a state which can be improved (Wesley, 2013, p. 187). So too I recognise limits for this concept of queer Christian perfection. One particular individual body can never fully reveal Christ and there is always more to discover. This highlights for us the need to understand this in a collective and not simply individual way. We can therefore move to the corporate and recognise with Sara Rosenau that 'Church is a body of bodies, a body of ecclesial persons gracefully recognizing one another, in continual becoming together' (Rosenau, 2020, p. 39). As each of these bodies reveals more fully the body of Christ, they together reveal the body of Christ, the Church. The Church is then incomplete insofar as particular bodies are excluded or prevented from reaching their potential.

Within a Wesleyan understanding, this then links to social holiness. Wesley argues that one cannot be Christian alone: continuing along the line I have set out, corporate holiness is then built on the recognition of one another as revealing the body of Christ. The queer Christian perfection of the church is achieved when each recognises the other as, and complements each other in, this revelation. Hugo Córdova Quero argues that the embodiment of God in creation requires this kind of recognition:

> If the doctrine of the incarnation implies not only the relationality of the divine with the creation but also the embodiment of God into the creation, then God is the God of lesbians, polyamorous, transgender, and intersex people as well as of gays, cross-dressers, bisexuals, and non-conformist heterosexual individuals. (Córdova Quero, 2020, p. 157)

The concept of perfection might for us – as it was for Wesley and others at his time – be seen as problematic. Despite my efforts to describe it as a dynamic state, it may be seen to imply some fixed and static destination to be achieved or not. To speak of perfection may be to create a new set of artificially imposed expectations in place of those against which I have been arguing. It could be argued that queer Christian perfection is essentially a self-defeating concept, since to be queer is often seen as to transgress and to disrupt and in its nature is the opposite of perfection. Jack Halberstam, for example, writes of the Queer Art of Failure, describing the way in which queer people fail to conform to the norms of society and to its 'orderly and predictable adulthoods' (Halberstam, 2011, p. 3). For Halberstam, queerness 'offers the promise of failure as a way of life' (Halberstam, 2011, p. 186). Failure is, on the face of it, antithetical to perfection. However, both are subjective and it must be recognised in whose eyes failure or perfection are seen. Halberstam's move is powerful and clear in re/claiming failure as an aspiration and badge of honour rather than a condemnation. It is though essentially failure in the eyes of others. To speak of queer Christian perfection is to reject the starting point of the predictable and conventional by which LGBT+ people are failures and to begin from the place where queer people were always divinely beloved, filled with potential from the moment of their creation and icons to reveal Christ in the world. In refusing to conform to the 'orderly and predictable', queerness may fail in the terms of cis-heteronomative society (and be justly proud of so doing) while discovering a perfection in the recognition of the full queerness of the body of Christ, which is open to anyone.

So why perfection? To speak of perfection is ultimately to reject any sense of queer as second-class and to move beyond acceptance, toleration, even inclusion – being queer and queerness can be seen as inspiration, role-model, in fact fully a locus of the work of God.

7.3 Transformation

Having set out a concept of queer Christian perfection, we move to consider the concept of transformation. In the classic Wesleyan way of salvation, the work of grace in the justified believer's life leads to a growth in holiness, ultimately 'going on to perfection.' By analogy, I will consider a queer approach to transformation: moving towards queer Christian perfection, recognising, as set out above, that this embraces the individual, the church and the world. I observed in chapter 4 (p. 99) that LGBT+ people are stigmatised: unholy in being, desire and action and argued that transformation allowed a movement from having wrongful judgements of oneself imposed and/or internalised to the liberation of holiness. Now having identified the goal of that transformation as queer Christian perfection, where queer bodies fully reveal the queer body of Christ, this trajectory can be completed in that their stigmatisation ultimately gives way to the perfection of queer bodies as a site of divine revelation.

That holiness is a path of change is not new or unique to a queer consideration: as has been seen through the previous chapters of this thesis, a Wesleyan understanding of holiness is about a journey of change and growth rather than a static state to be obtained or recognised. Even perfection – whether in Wesley's original or as I have set it out above – is in this scheme an *improvable* state. The work of grace in a believer's life enables them to grow in love for God and for neighbour and this is what Wesley describes as growth in holiness. Jeffrey Heskins, studying gay and lesbian clergy's approaches to holiness, claims:

> The life of holiness is nothing if it is not about growing to full maturity. This understanding has been part of the Christian perspective since the foundation of the earliest Pauline churches. The Corinthians, we are told, are to be fed with milk and not solid food, because Paul deems them spiritually to be infants, squabbling among themselves and in disarray (1 Corinthians 3). However, to grow in holiness is *to grow*, and this seems to be a principal concern of the apostle as he cares for the young and rather difficult church in Corinth. (Heskins, 2005, p. 186)

However, accounts of repentance, change and transformation have often been used against queer people and communities. For example, in a video released by

the Church of England Evangelical Council to oppose any change in the Church of England's discipline on these questions, Bishop Rennis Ponniah says:

> Our gospel is a gospel of redemption. Sinners redeemed from their sin, forgiven of their guilt, a new life begins. And it's a gospel of recreation. So our gospel is about how Christ frees us and then remakes us to fulfil divine intentions. And those divine intentions cover the area of sexuality and marriage. It's part of the corpus of belief. (Church of England Evangelical Council, 2022)

The nature of this 'recreation' and 'remaking' is not spelt out but it clearly does not include any provision for queerness in itself. To speak from a Christian perspective about the possibility of change and transformation for queer people is to enter problematic territory where much of the discourse has been around change in terms of ultimately denying queerness itself. In the limit, this leads to so-called conversion therapy which seeks to bring about a deliberate change in sexuality or gender identity, promotes a more loosely-defined anti-queer transformation or the adoption of necessarily celibate lifestyles and/or an insistence on sex assigned at birth.[53] Inclusive Christian theologies in responding to this have laid great emphasis on themes such as 'God loves you just as you are' (see, for example, Inclusion in the Church, 2023; Ericksen, 2019). This statement must be acknowledged as an important starting point and a counter to theologies that would imply or even actually claim that God does not love LGBT+ people. However, if queer theological reflection does not develop beyond this then its engagement both with the realities of life in which change and transformation happens and with the depth of the Christian theological tradition is very limited. In developing this concept of transformation as part of a queer theology of holiness, it is important to re/claim transformation in a queer-positive sense. Lowe asserts that 'a radical turning toward God is the work of the Holy Spirit, and although it may not fit in a theoretical framework, it is necessary in a theological one' (Lowe, 2010, p. 79). I

[53] For example, *His Way Out Ministries* (Lee, 2022) offers guidance on praying for the removal of same-sex attraction and the *True Freedom Trust* seeks to support 'Christians who struggle with same-sex attractions or gender identity' to uphold 'traditional biblical teaching' (True Freedom Trust, 2022).

therefore believe a queer account of transformation is necessary for a queer theology of holiness and indeed for a full-blown queer Christianity.

Coming out can be for many the beginning of this process of re/discovery and transformation. Rosenau takes up the example:

> Here Sara Ahmed's point is helpful as she describes becoming a lesbian as a process of 'becoming reoriented,' turning away from compulsory heterosexuality. Becoming reoriented is also to be disoriented in one's self and with the world as it was before. Yet this disorienting state, which connects with Butler's opacity, also opens us possibilities of new futures. (Rosenau, 2020, p. 37)

Exploring the sermon on the *Circumcision of the Heart* in chapter 4 above, I noted Wesley's description of humility as having a right judgement of oneself. One aspect of this transformation then addresses the question of 'self-judgement'. I argued previously that a queer approach to this needed to be about overcoming the experience of being taught to undervalue oneself and re/discovering pride and self-worth. Coupled with the Wesleyan claim about the significance of the testimony of God's spirit with their own spirit and the consequence of that for privileging the LGBT+ person's experience provides a starting point for considering transformation which is both positive and constructive. Furthermore, Wesley's overall statement of the circumcision of the heart as implying a 'mind and spirit renewed after the image of him who created it' (Wesley, 1984, p. 402) invokes Genesis 1:26 and the divine intention and pattern in creation.

While Wesley speaks of the renewal of mind and spirit, we must also speak of the body. The concept of queer Christian perfection I have set out above is focused on the revelation of the body of Christ and a queer theological consideration in a more general sense must include consideration of the body. In considering queer bodies as sites of revealing Christ's body, we must consider the theology of the incarnation: the belief that Jesus Christ is both fully human and fully divine. This doctrine implies a powerful theology of the sanctification of bodies: if Christ had a human body then a body can, at least in principle, be entirely holy. The more radical effects of this proposition have been avoided for much of Christian history.

For example, in his chapter on *God's Body*, Mark Jordan explores Christian traditions that have placed great emphasis on the humanity of Jesus' body while shying away from its sexual reality, arguing 'Christian traditions have wanted to hide on Jesus' body the organs of male sex at the same time that they have wanted to insist upon his male gender' (Jordan, 2007, p. 285). Hugo Córdova Quero makes a similar point about the significance of the incarnation as a doctrine at the same time as the reticence of traditional Christianity to deal with the full implications of that:

> When venturing deeper into spiritual territory, it is essential to note that Christianity has bodies and human dignity at the core of the doctrine of the incarnation, one of the central *dogmas* – a term that means 'ordinance of beliefs' – of this religion. However, the map of religious territory has been void of any marker that does not point toward a pseudo-spiritualized depiction of faith. The consequence: queer believers have been written out of that cartography. (Córdova Quero, 2020, p. 155)

Some go even further and assert that the affirmation of Christ as fully human demands the recognition of Christ's body as a sexual body. For example, Robert Goss argues: 'the scandal of the incarnation is not that God became flesh but that God became human and actively sexual' (Goss, 2002, p. 119). James Martin's (2000, p. 219) Easter love story imagines the Emmaus account from a gay man's perspective saying 'It is a story about resurrection and the naked vulnerability of Jesus in sexual giving and receiving.' I do not think it is possible historically speaking to answer the question as to whether Christ's body itself was actively sexual – although I think if we accept that it was fully human we must admit that the possibility is there. Even dealing with that possibility is challenging enough, when, so often, sexual activity has been long taught to be shameful and disordered and such views have been thoroughly internalised for so many in Christian contexts.

Wesley's statement of the circumcision of the heart spoke of the renewal of mind and spirit, and this queer account of transformation to holiness includes body, mind and spirit to embrace the whole person. Thus in queer transformation there is set out an account of queer Christians moving from disorientation – in Ahmed and Rosenau's terms – to an orientation of a right image of oneself as a site of the

revelation of Christ's body. Far from being transformed away from queerness, this transformation may be about becoming more queer: in body, mind and spirit. In a sense, this is my own journey (as I alluded to on p. 100 above) which, in some ways, is expressed in this thesis. At the same time, it is important to recognise as Chris Greenough (2018, p. 62) argues, that once an 'established model of queer' is created then it is no longer queer: any sense of becoming must also be unbecoming. This transformation then is multi-faceted and varied: a different story for each person who experiences it.

This transformation is not simply about the individual but is also corporate. Daniel Helminiak recognises that queer communities have in fact a distinctive role to play in imaging this transformation at work:

> The essence of Christian belief is that authentic human growth on earth is ultimately the result of God's own love, the Holy Spirit poured out among us, so that in Christ humans become like God; they are deified. Loving one another as coequal and codetermined, yet inviolably distinct people beyond gender limitations, humans grow into trinitarian life. Precisely because of these four distinctive aspects of the lesbian and gay [*sic*] community, life within this community is a growing participation in God's own life, the completion of Christ's work among us, and the Holy Spirit's mission to us. Thus, the gay community has the possibility and, thus, the vocation of offering our world a model of ideal Christian life in practice. (Helminiak, 2006, p. 140)

This transformation takes place in community and because of that implies a transformation of those communities too. Against a Wesleyan background in which an understanding of social holiness is significant, there are again important links to be made. This understanding of transformation and of the holiness which is its consequence will be both communal and relational. From there it then implies working for the transformation of the world and the overcoming of its oppression.

The interaction of individual and communal transformation is well explained using Rosenau's concept of 'graceful recognition,' which begins with a recognition of the importance of LGBT+ people's experience of recognition by queer communities, drawn from Judith Butler's concept of the nature of the self in relation to the other. Rosenau argues:

> We can apply Butler's concept of recognition to ecclesiology to understand how the self becomes and is recognized in Christian community. The self in Christian community is always plastic, continually formed in relationship to being in Christ and oriented God-ward. Grace is the primary gift that Christians receive from God that enables the plasticity of the self. Here I connect grace with recognition. The church community extends God's grace to the other by both recognizing the other and continuing to hold open an account of the other. The self does not come to the community fully formed, rather the question of "Who are you?" remains open as the self continues to become in community. By holding open an account of queer Christians, the church community gives life to the queer Christian by extending God's grace to her. (Rosenau, 2020, p. 37)

In chapter 6, I noted the significance of social holiness for understanding the nature of Methodism and the early Conferences, and the concept of unity within ecclesiology. We can now extend that understanding using this idea of 'graceful recognition' from Rosenau. Graceful recognition allows the realisation and development of the self but requires the other members of the community in order for this to be realised. Social holiness makes a similar claim for holiness: individuals are called to grow in holiness but require the wider community for that to happen. This corresponds to the theme of relational unity that emerged from the consideration of the Conferences material in the previous chapter: a unity founded on solidarity, and which engenders social holiness. A strand of a queer theology of holiness can then be discovered in this intersection: in solidarity with one another and more broadly with all humanity, queer communities can offer a bolder statement of social holiness in which the recognition and transformation of the individual is made possible by their participation in a broader queer community which offers recognition and affirmation. Such a community has the potential then to engage further and to transform the world around it.

The community's self-recognition and ensuing identity is also relevant to this process. Earlier in the thesis, I considered the re/claiming of the terms Methodist and queer, noting that the reclaiming of queer pointed to an 'activist community committed to challenging and overcoming oppression and discrimination and to rejecting heteronormative constructions of life and relationships' (p. 130). As I noted, the original use of the term Methodist was also pejorative and reclaimed by

Wesley essentially in an act of resistance against those who would condemn the early Methodist movement. Both of these activist moves speak to how a community recognises and identifies itself. Rosenau gives a positive account of this community recognition:

> I describe graceful recognition as a process of communal relationality whereby the community recognizes others both within and outside their community by holding open an account of the other, thus extending God's gift of grace to the other. But the opposite is also true, the other holds open an account of the community, and the community is transformed by this gift of grace. (Rosenau, 2020, p. 35)

We cannot ignore however that for queer communities, as for early Methodists, recognition outside their communities may also bring opposition and rejection: it is not all a simple narrative of relationship and growth. Adversity, however, may also be a catalyst for transformation as it sets before the community the urgency and necessity of change in the wider world. Wesley's account of faith in the sermon on the *Circumcision of the Heart* describes it as 'mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds' (1984, p. 404). In theological terms, following Rosenau, this may be about holding open the possibility of the gift of God's grace to transform even opposition, rejection and hatred: using queer faith to pull down their strongholds. This also resonates with Edman's (2016, p. 165) description of the path of queer virtue which requires that we 'participate in communities that demand integrity within ourselves, require justice in our dealings with one another, and look to the margins to address individual/communal/global degradation and suffering.'

Helminiak rightly notes such accounts of growth are not limited to queer communities:

> What is true here of the gay community must also be said of all Christians and all people of goodwill. All are called to love all others, male or female, gay or straight, as equals, respectful of individuality, growing in both human and divine life by means of interrelationship. 'There are no more distinctions between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female' (Galatians 3:28). This is ancient Christian teaching, so these themes are not unique to the gay community. The real issue is not sex acts or sexual orientation, but humanity and its potential for genuine love. (Helminiak, 2006, p. 141)

A full understanding of holiness as love of God and neighbour is not a gentle nice-to-have but a fundamental overthrowing of the way of the world. This transformation is a queering, methodising, and ultimately renewing of creation and humanity that the fullness of its wonder and queerness might be recognised and celebrated.

7.4 Sin

We began our study of Wesley's theology of holiness with the recognition in the sermon on the circumcision of the heart that all start from a position of sinfulness. As I argued previously (see p. 108 above), a queer theology of holiness also needs a doctrine of sin and having spoken both of queer Christian perfection and of transformation, we must deal with what the obstacles are to queer bodies revealing the body of Christ and from what queer Christians need to be transformed. These considerations will give us the outline of a queer approach to sin in the context of this approach to holiness. For this I suggest that we think of sin as the denial of the dignity of another or of ourselves. This understanding draws on the theology put forward by JDR Mechelke (2019) who uses the concept in his kinky theology of sin and himself draws on the work of Gustavo Gutiérrez (2015) for the concept of the denial of dignity. Understanding sin in this way, allows for sin to be individual or communal and immediately suggests that queerphobia and other forms of discrimination are sinful, as is violence, physical, emotional or sexual. While I discussed some of the difficulties with the concept of pride as the key sin above (p. 99) in connection with the sermon on *The Circumcision of the Heart*, Alistair McFadyen's (2000, p. 136) explanation of pride as 'an over-powering form of self-assertion which oppresses others' allows it to be re-shaped in relational terms. To assert oneself in such a way as to oppress another is to deny their dignity. The failure to recognise one's neighbour's dignity is the failure of the most basic level of loving them and hence the God in whose image they are made. Denying someone's agency – over their life and loves, over naming their identity and presentation and so on – is similarly to deny their dignity. Ultimately, to deny

their dignity is to deny the foundation on which they might be those in whom the body of Christ is revealed.

Patrick Cheng in Radical Love sets out a concept of sin as the 'rejection of radical love' (2011, p. 73) in which the essential element of sin is 'our opposition to what God has done for us in Jesus Christ' and 'the refusal to be lifted up and to take our rightful place as people who are made in the image and likeness of God'. The concept I have set out is parallel to this in that it applies similar thinking in terms of other people. To deny their dignity is to deny their 'rightful place as people who are made in the image and likeness of God.' To conceive sin in terms of the denial of the dignity of the other does not conceive of sin in terms of forbidden acts but as a relational concept. I call sin denial of dignity because it is that that is destructive of relationship and by contrast to be in loving relationship (whether sexual/erotic or otherwise) with someone is to honour their dignity as a person. If we include within the notion of denial of dignity the denial of one's own dignity – which many LGBT+ people do experience through the effects of internalised queerphobia and stigma – then the concept I have set out can be seen as an expansion of Cheng's account.

In the sermon on the *Circumcision of the Heart,* Wesley claims that recognising the complete corruption of our natures by sin is the necessary first step in the path of holiness. This is also a consistent position in his other writing and speaking and consonant with much of historic Christianity. In considering a perspective inclusive of LGBT+ people, one might be reluctant to speak of sin because the root of the exclusion of LGBT+ people in Christian tradition is found in the identification of queerness as sinful in and of itself. The identification of queerness with a person's nature gives an almost irresistible synergy with the language of 'corrupt nature' that Wesley uses in the sermon and makes this move both tempting and hard to resist. Indeed, resisting it can be seen to be resisting not simply the identification of the queer with the corrupt, but the very concept of sin in Christian theology as a whole. As Lowe (2010, p. 74) puts it:

> Dominant Christian teachings assume that the sin of same-sex relations is a part of the autonomous essence of the person. Therefore LGBTQI persons have been seen as sinful in their enduring nature in a way that straight 'sinners' have not.

Rosenau (2020, p. 45) makes a similar point about the relation of queer Christians and conventional accounts of sin:

> One invitation of queer Christians is to be together in sin. From the standpoint of the heteronormative church, queer Christians are understood as having failed church or failed at Christian life because of their sin of deviant sexuality or gender identity. Queer Christians are only deemed acceptable as Christians if they confess this sin and pledge to live a life that rejects their queer identity. Queer failure might introduce a yes to this no, in asserting that all Christians have failed at Christian life through universal sin.

The sting in the tail here which Rosenau identifies is that a conventional account of sin that nevertheless *de facto* singles out LGBT+ people has failed by its own standards. If the natures of all are sinful, then why should one particular set of sinful natures be any more of concern than any others? That can give a defensive move, but we need to go much further than that. In particular, the danger of this position is that it concedes the corruption of queer nature *per se* which invites attempts to change or even 'cure' it. In creating the queer reading of the *Circumcision of the Heart*, I read it in dialogue with Pádraig Ó Tuama's piece in the Book of Queer Prophets. He has a powerful account of an attempted exorcism performed on him: the so-called sin of his homosexuality being attributed to the demonic. This is just one example of practices termed 'conversion therapy' which seek to change sexuality or gender identity because another is seen to be preferred. In a world where concepts of uncleanness are often used against queer people, Wesley's language of the clean and unclean (e.g. 'cleansed from all sin', 'from all filthiness both of flesh and spirit') may lend itself to queerphobic discourse, especially because so many accounts proceed from an explicit or implicit revulsion towards queer people and their sexuality and sexual practice. For a queer theology of holiness, while there may be all manner of ways in which LGBT+ people sin (like anyone else), queerness itself needs to be seen as part of the inherent

goodness of the person with which they were created and part of the potentiality of their sanctification.

Let us then take a step back to some of the Wesley texts and return to the *Circumcision of the Heart* to explore a concept of sin as the denial of someone's dignity in more detail. Wesley describes sin as meaning that 'all the foundations of our nature are out of course' (Wesley, 1984, p. 403). For Wesley, this is suggesting that our capacity to bear the image of God has been corrupted and requires restoration. The goodness of our original creation has been lost. Wesley is not here aiming at suggesting that the natures of some are more corrupt than others but that all humanity has lost its vital relationship with God. While his words may be read onto queer lives in the kind of way mentioned above that Lowe critiqued, this is not faithful to his intention. Rather, evil and injustice have as their consequence a complete disordering of life that affects all people. Though Wesley doesn't take the leap in this sermon, such disordering implies a disordering of society and the world not simply an isolated individual disordering of life. LGBT+ people, with others alike, know through their own lives and observations that the world is not ordered as it could (and even should) be. Simply within queer experience, discrimination and queerphobic violence stand as two clear examples of this disordering.

Lowe describes sin as discourse (i.e. a kind of system or culture in which we are enmeshed, but not such as to abrogate of our own responsibility for our complicity) and gives homophobia as an example of such a discourse. For Lowe, 'a thoroughly relational doctrine of sin emerges […] in which sin exists in the relational nature of the person, is seen in human participation in distorting discourses, and understood primarily in terms of sinful subject positions' (Lowe, 2010, p. 72). In this way, sin is understood less as an absolute of someone's nature and more in terms of how they are positioned and relate to others and to the world at large. For Lowe, discourse approach gives a way of thinking about sin as something in which humanity is enmeshed without having to make that inherent to being or identity or something which is somehow inherited. The concept of

'denial of dignity' builds on these advantages, especially a relational approach. It invites us to consider the ways in which humanity becomes entrapped in practices, cultures and approaches which deny the dignity of others or themselves and are therefore, in these terms, sinful. This gives a way to reframe the way Wesley speaks of sin while retaining the sense so critical to his argument of the way humanity becomes entrapped in it and that it, at least potentially, touches all of life.

As with transformation and queer Christian perfection, this concept of sin has both individual and collective forms. We have spoken of holiness corporately – and the importance of social holiness – and we need therefore to speak of sin corporately. In fact, the identification of sin as a relational category means that the distinction between the individual and the collective is less stark. When sin is conceived as a collection of forbidden acts then the only collective notion of sin can be of multiple people who have committed one or more forbidden acts. When sin is conceived relationally as the denial of the dignity of others (or indeed oneself) then it can operate at multiple levels. It may be perpetrated by individuals, groups or societies and be directed towards individuals, groups or societies. Homophobia for example can function in all these ways and can be embodied in the attitudes and acts of an individual as much as an institution.

Sin denies people's dignity and is hence overcome in treating people – not just LGBT+ people – with dignity and respecting their agency. If we return here to the example of Blair (the young man accused of sodomy discussed in chapter 4), Wesley and the early Methodists' representation of him in court and insistence on the importance of him receiving a fair trial, can be seen as an early example of this kind of approach. They treat Blair as someone whose dignity has been (and is being) denied and seek, as far as they can, to restore it to him. The particular stigmatised nature of the allegations against him set this apart from a more general concern that the accused receives a fair trial and Wesley raising his case again with the Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University following conviction shows that their concern did not end at a guilty verdict. The construction of sin as the denial of

the dignity of another is thus shown to be a productive way of reframing sin for queer theology.

In constructing this queer theology of holiness, we can then take an understanding of sin which recognises that the world is disordered on both an individual and systemic level. This disorder is however, not intrinsic or of our natures, but a disorder of relationship and in the subjugation of others through the denial of their dignity – or in Wesley's terms all the ways in which humanity, individually and collectively fails to love God and love their neighbour.

7.5 A Queer Theology of Holiness and LGBT+ Inclusion in the Methodist Church in Great Britain

The third limb of the research question for this thesis (p. 13) is 'What is the relevance of such a theology for current debates about LGBT+ people in the Methodist Church in Great Britain?' At the time I began work on this thesis, the most significant of the 'current debates' was whether the practice of marriage could be widened to include same-sex couples. The decisions of the Methodist Conference in 2021 (as a result of the report *God in Love Unites Us* (Methodist Church, 2019)) brought a conclusion to that debate, at least at the national level. Local Methodist Churches can now choose whether or not they allow same-sex marriages in their buildings and ministers (and others) can choose whether they will officiate at such services. Some churches have already made their decisions, others have yet to do so. In my view, the Methodist Church is, as I write, still adjusting to this new situation. It could be questioned what the 'current debates about LGBT+ people in the Methodist Church in Britain' now are: there is not one dominant debate as there was in 2019 but that is not to say that there are not questions and issues.

Within *God in Love Unites Us* itself, a key element of the argument in favour of changes to our approach to marriage was setting out a concept of 'good relating' (Methodist Church, 2019, §2.1-2.2). The articulation of this in the report was relatively limited and the concept will need to be developed more thoroughly to

provide a basis for contemporary Methodist teaching about relationships. The relational understanding of holiness that I have set out in this chapter gives a framework within which that could be done and a means by which the decisions that have been taken can be set more clearly within a Wesleyan theological context. As I noted above (p. 43), although *God in Love Unites Us* (Methodist Church, 2019) is implicitly situated in a theological approach of Wesleyan holiness, that is not made explicit, and further reflection and development is still needed. The relevance then of the theology that I have set out is in enabling such decisions to be seen as consonant with, and part of, the ongoing and living Wesleyan tradition that the Methodist Church has inherited. In a sense it allows them to be understood as an example of *methodising* (in the sense I outlined in chapter 5 above, p. 127): taking what we have inherited and yet transforming it.

Reporting to the Conference of 2022 (i.e. the year after major decisions had been taken about marriage and relationships), the Faith and Order Committee identified several areas relating to human relationships which could be explored further. These were: The Family, Singleness, [the theology of] Marriage, Cohabitation, Childlessness, Gender Identity, Polygamy and Polyamory and Healthy sexual expression (Methodist Church, 2022, pp. 2-5). At that stage, it was only agreed to take forward further work relating to Singleness (which is due to be reported to the Conference of 2024). These areas are not limited to LGBT+ people, but many have a significant bearing on how LGBT+ people relate to the Methodist Church. A queer theology of holiness as I have set out in this chapter offers resources to considerations such as these; its relational approach allows for a conversation which is not limited to the traditional binary of acceptable or unacceptable forms of life. In this way, it opens the path for an approach which is not simply the 'colonial path of duplication' in Marcella Althaus-Reid's terms (2003, p. 154), but has the possibility of a fundamentally different approach, which is nevertheless still Wesleyan. In this approach, rather than a question of acceptability, the themes of Queer Christian Perfection, Transformation and Sin, set out in the preceding sections, allow the questions to become how the bodies of those involved reveal

the body of Christ, how their relationality and solidarity bring transformative growth and how their lives build up their own dignity and that of others.

The 2021 Methodist Conference also passed a strategy for Justice, Dignity and Solidarity (JDS). This strategy aims:

> ● for the rich diversity of people within the Methodist Church to be recognised as a cause for thanksgiving, celebration and praise;
> ● to eradicate all discrimination and coercive control within the Methodist Church, and for all people to be treated justly and with dignity across the breadth of the Methodist Church;
> ● for a paradigm shift (a profound change) in the culture, practices and attitudes of the Methodist Church so that all Methodists are able to be full participants in the Church's life. (Methodist Church, 2021e)

The diversity with which the JDS strategy is concerned encompasses not only gender and sexuality but of course many other strands as well. The report setting out this strategy is quite rightly practically focused but it includes as an appendix the earlier 'theological underpinning' that accompanied the Methodist Church's EDI toolkit (Methodist Church, 2021e, p. 782; Methodist Church, 2018). The paradigm shift which the strategy seeks will need much support, including theological support. Again, the queer theology of holiness offered here allows for the possibility of rooting this paradigm shift in the broader Wesleyan tradition: the JDS strategy being then another methodising move which continues our tradition while transforming it.

In the introduction (p. 8), I said that this would be a project of reparative reading. Ultimately the relevance of this theology for debates and conversation about LGBT+ people in the life of the Methodist Church in Britain is to offer the possibility

of re/claiming the tradition, transforming it, and re/appropriating it as a means of liberation for LGBT+ Methodists, Christians and any others for whom it has value.

7.6 Concluding Reflections

Building on my engagement through this thesis with the texts on which Wesley draws to write *Plain Account*, I have set out some key concepts for a queer theology of holiness in the Wesleyan tradition. This shares with Wesley an understanding of sin as affecting all of humanity but frames it as the denial of the dignity of others or of oneself. This denial of dignity requires transformation on both the individual and the collective level to lead towards queer Christian perfection in which queer bodies reveal the queer body of Christ. The holiness of Christ's body – individually and spiritually as well as corporately in the sense of the church – is thus revealed in queer Christians and in queer communities. This understanding of holiness is rooted in the Wesleyan account of it, and indeed the Wesleyan account of perfection as a fullness of love for God and for neighbour. As a result, it provides possibilities for rooting recent decisions and policies of the Methodist Church in Britain within a Wesleyan framework while continuing to hold out the need and potential for transformation.

8. Conclusion

8.1 The Project as a Whole

In deciding to explore a queer theology of holiness for my PhD research, I was inspired by the apparent dichotomy I had experienced as an LGBT+ activist within the Methodist Church between changes that would promote the greater inclusion and participation of LGBT+ people and the claim that such changes would conflict with a Christian pursuit of holiness. Instinctively, I felt this to be problematic and this thesis is one of the ways I have sought to respond to that. I think this is a question raised in a range of ecclesiastical debates on these matters. For example, The Episcopal Church's (broadly affirming) study guide is entitled *Christian Holiness and Human Sexuality* (Adams et al., 2011) while the Church of England Evangelical Council's St Matthias Day statement (Church of England Evangelical Council, 2012) cites 'God's grace and call to holiness' as a reason to resist any change. Within a Methodist context, however, it takes particular significance because of Methodism's historic vocation to 'spread scriptural holiness through the land' (Methodist Church, 2023, p. 213). Methodism came into being through the work and ministry of John Wesley (and his brother Charles) and holiness is a particular emphasis in his theology. This gives the foundation for Methodism's own emphasis on holiness. I therefore chose to explore this topic by seeking queer ways to read Wesley's teaching and writing. In order to produce a justifiable selection of texts that would be manageable within the context of a PhD, I chose to use the sources which Wesley used (and quoted from extensively) to write *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (Wesley, 2013, pp. 136-191). This was published in 1766 (relatively late in his ministry) and was Wesley's attempt to summarise and defend his teaching regarding Christian perfection (to which growth in holiness leads). The key texts for this project are therefore the Sermon on *The Circumcision of the Heart* (Wesley, 1984, pp. 401-14; considered in chapter 4), the tract *The Character of a Methodist* (Wesley, 1989, pp. 32-46) and the sermon on *Christian Perfection* (Wesley, 1985, pp. 99-124; both considered in chapter 5) and the minutes of the early Methodist Conferences (Wesley, 2011, pp. 120-209, 287-8; considered in

chapter 6). A variety of approaches are used for queer reading of the text and from this I offer a queer theology of holiness with consideration of queer Christian perfection, transformation, and a queered account of sin. This theology weaves together the Wesleyan theological inheritance with the concerns, passions and methods of queer theology and thus offers a way of re/claiming holiness in the face of an LGBT+ exclusive dichotomy.

8.2 Summary of the Thesis

The thesis begins with consideration of the relevant literature and methods. As the topic draws both on Wesleyan and Methodist theologies of holiness (in terms of the academic study of Wesley as well as the current position and practice of the Methodist Church) and on queer theology and methods of reading, two chapters (2 and 3) are devoted to surveying this literature and identifying the relevant questions and issues for the research.

Chapter 2's study of Wesleyan theologies of holiness recounts the background to the emphasis on holiness in Methodism and outlines Wesley's '*Order of Salvation'*. For Wesley, people are, of themselves, sinners and unable to receive God's favour. *Prevenient grace* is the work of God in a person's life before they know it, in order to enable a response to God. *Justification* restores a right relationship with God and is simultaneous with the *New Birth* which marks the beginning of growth in holiness (*sanctification*). This process potentially leads to *Entire Sanctification* otherwise known as *Christian Perfection*. Such perfection is a dynamic state not a static one, is continually improvable and can be lost (and indeed regained). From the work of Harold Lindström (1950), I draw the insight that Christian perfection must be viewed integrally with the whole process of salvation and not separately from it, as well as his affirmation of the place of social holiness: that is, that holiness is dependent upon relationships with others and is not found in isolation. Mildred Bangs Wynkoop's (2015) major study *A Theology of Love* took up this relational understanding of holiness and re-emphasised love as definitive of holiness in a Wesleyan context. Holiness is relevant to how Methodists understand

the church and their engagement with society and in this context is also relevant to debates about the place of LGBT+ people.

Exploring methodologies for queer reading, in chapter 3, I recognise the wide diversity of approaches available and characterise these as ‘colours of queering’. I use the language of colours because the approaches cannot be neatly categorised and the metaphor of colour offers images such as one blending into the next, mixing, and so on. Most works are ‘colourful’ and to identify a particular colour within them is by no means to exclude the presence of others. The colours identified are:

- Disturbing/disrupting/transgressing boundaries: sex/gender/sexuality/identity
- Experience
- Insertion/entry/making space
- Uncovering/exposing/outing
- Play: role reversal, telling (new) stories, subverting seriousness, innuendo
- Activism/justice/politics
- Re/appropriating, imagining, claiming, constructing
- Desire

Rather than being specific methods that can be directly applied, these colours highlight the results of queer reading and their emergence points to the potential queerness of that reading. They also inspire the selection of methodological ‘lenses’ by which the texts under consideration in subsequent chapters are approached.

There is relatively little queer consideration of holiness and almost no queer scholarly consideration of Wesley. Keegan Osinski’s (2021) *Queering Wesley, Queering the Church*, which offers queer reflections on ten of Wesley’s sermons is the only published piece I know of which offers a queer scholarly approach to

Wesley. Henry Abelove's (1990) *The Evangelist of Desire* is, I argue, in fact an early example (although not explicitly identified as such) of queering the history of Wesley and the Methodists. There is therefore ample space in the literature for queer study of Wesley. The most significant queer writing on holiness is probably Marcella Althaus-Reid (2003) in *The Queer God*. For her queer holiness rejects the structures of colonialist oppression and is the holiness 'of the other'. Elizabeth Edman's (2016) work on *Queer virtue* also offers insights into holiness and was explored in detail in Chapter 5.

The sermon on the *Circumcision of the Heart* was considered in chapter 4 and explored using three methodological lenses: biographical context analysis (in which Wesley's life at the time of the production of the text is examined in dialogue with it), theological analysis (using a queer theological approach to examine key concepts in the text) and dialogical reading (where the text is read in dialogue with a contemporary queer text, in this case Pádraig Ó Tuama's (2020) *Let My People*). From these readings, threads of a queer theology of holiness are drawn. Such a queer theology of holiness asserts the value of each person and holiness renews them in the potential of their creation. Holiness is a matter of body, soul and spirit and fullness for the person as a whole. It leads to the liberation of the marginalised and the assertion of their humanity. The chapter identifies that a queer theology of holiness needs a theology of sin, to which the thesis returns later.

The *Character of a Methodist* and the sermon on *Christian Perfection* were considered in chapter 5 and again explored using three methodological lenses: biographical context analysis and dialogical reading again combined with a third lens inspired by queer history, namely an exploration of the reclaiming of the word queer. These readings highlight issues of identity and the nature of being an 'othered' community. I describe Wesley's theological approach as 'methodising' and argue that this is akin to queering, with both continuity and discontinuity with what has come before. Holiness in this understanding is not found in conformity to existing patterns, conventions or traditions and is likely to attract ridicule and opposition. Holiness calls for the transformation of church and society.

The minutes of the early Conferences formed the study of chapter 6. The methodological lenses used here were biographical context analysis and autoethnography, in which I set the accounts of early Conferences alongside my own experience as an activist for LGBT+ inclusion within the Methodist Conference. These readings highlighted issues of unity and solidarity and I posited a concept of 'relational unity' which is related to social holiness. Alongside this is the nature of the pursuit of justice and its relation to holiness. I argue that unity, activism, solidarity, and holiness are intertwined and have the potential for transformation. When inspired by the love of God and the love of neighbour, this leads to growth in holiness.

For the seventh chapter, I drew these considerations together to offer 'Themes in a Queer Theology of Holiness', drawing out three particular aspects: queer Christian perfection, transformation and sin. I set out an understanding of queer Christian perfection whereby queer Christian bodies are seen to reveal the (queer) body of Christ. As each reveals the body of Christ, so together they reveal the body of Christ, the Church. The queer Christian perfection of the Church is discovered and grows as its members recognise one another, individually and corporately, as revealing the body of Christ. This requires a process of transformation, in which stigma is overcome and queer bodies move from being sites of rejection to sites of revelation. In discussing this, it is necessary to acknowledge the ways in which discourses of transformation have been used harmfully towards LGBT+ people, especially in terms of 'conversion therapy.' However, a positive account of transformation is critical: a process of queering and methodising in which ultimately all of creation, including humanity itself, is renewed. Lastly, a queer theology of holiness requires an account of sin. I offer an approach in which sin is understood as the denial of the dignity of another. At the simplest, this is the denial of another's ability to reveal the body of Christ. But such denial can be individual and corporate and rooted in the systems and processes of church and society as much as in the relationships of individuals. Ultimately – and perhaps classically – sin is that which obstructs growth in holiness.

Research questions and responses

The research questions were specified on page 13 as follows:

> In the light of current debates about the status of LGBT+ people in the Methodist Church in Britain, what are the strategies for, and what is the potential of, a queer reading of Wesley's *Plain Account* and the texts which it comprises to generate a queer theology of holiness?
>
> a) What are the strategies for queering these Wesley texts?
>
> b) What contributions do these strategies and the resultant readings make to the development of a queer theology of holiness?
>
> c) What is the relevance of such a theology for current debates about LGBT+ people in the Methodist Church in Britain?

I have set out and demonstrated five different possible strategies ('lenses') for queering these Wesley texts as explained in the summary of the thesis above and in the respective chapters. Biographical context analysis situates the text explicitly in the context of the realities of actual lives. This approach is not simply paying attention to the broad historic context but is closely focused on the experience of the people involved in the text, especially in its production. Situating the text in this way, gives the opportunity to discover ways in which those lives engage or not with what might be thought of as the 'norm'. In so doing, it opens the question as to how the texts support normative or anti-normative approaches and gives the opportunity for seeing the text in a different way and thus queering it. I used this strategy with each of the texts considered in this thesis and, as the chapters have demonstrated, it was productive with each one. The importance of this strategy can be seen in its place as one of the methodological lynchpins of this thesis. This approach will work well for other Wesley texts and may well be of significance for considering the queering of other historical figures, including but not limited to Christian leaders.

A queer theological analysis interrogated the text in the light of concerns and questions that queer theological writing may raise. It allows less for a queer reading of the text than for the text to be challenged or confronted with contemporary queer questions that it maybe does not contemplate. This gives the

possibility of unexpected readings and also the opportunity to engage with the way the text (or the theology within it) is received and used, and the consequences of that. This is a useful approach alongside the others. It has a high degree of subjectivity as the concerns brought to the text are essentially dependent upon the researcher. Subjectivity is certainly not a bad thing but the resulting reading is then more a response to the text than a queering of the text itself.

Dialogical reading allows for a specific but different voice to be brought to the process of queering the Wesley texts. This expands the conversation from one between the researcher and the Wesley text to include a third partner, with the specifics of their concerns and experience as expressed in the dialogue text. This approach was used twice in the thesis, with two quite different partner texts. Pádraig Ó Tuama's *Let My People* is a theologically reflective, personal account of his own life and experience while Elizabeth Edman's *Queer Virtue* is theological book setting out a particular understanding and approach to its topic. The diversity of these texts illustrates the breadth of this approach. It is necessary to select the text carefully and appropriately: it needs something in common with the target text, for example in terms of experience or theme, but it also needs to be able to contrast with it. In the dialogue and tension there is the opportunity for the emergence of unexpected readings and latent queerness in the text under consideration can be revealed.

The use of queer history to explore the reclaiming of the name 'Methodist' and the reclaiming of 'queer' was a highly specific lens which arose from the particular circumstances of the text under consideration. However, the general principle here is about attention to queer history and to explore echoes, resemblances and commonalities. Such creativity is an important feature of these queer strategies: it is necessary to be attentive to the texts under consideration and alert to possibilities. Some approaches – as in the previous two – may be more general while others are more specific. In other cases, however, other relevant commonalities might be identified and could themselves produce productive queer readings.

Autoethnography is a well-established method in queer studies and I felt it therefore important to include it as one of the strategies used in the thesis. As well as the explicit use of it as a lens in chapter 6, there is an extent to which the whole project is autoethnographic as I outlined in the introduction (p. 7). In this way, I respond to the injunction in the discussion of the Experience colour of queering that queering *requires* the use of the theologian's experience (p. 55). I found this a more challenging approach to use with the specific texts (relating to the Conference) as the contexts are so different and the forms diverge. Nevertheless, it enabled the identification of important themes arising from the material, facilitating a queer approach to a rather dry text.

Queer approaches cannot be hegemonic about method: there is no correct or universal strategy for a project of this kind. The use of multiple approaches is itself an important part of the response to this research question. Future projects might use these strategies, others or combinations of them. The use of these strategies generated a set of insights into a queer theology of holiness which it was then possible to construct, as demonstrated in chapter 7 and summarised in section 8.1 above.

The debates about LGBT+ people in the Methodist Church in Britain have moved on since I began the project. The position on marriage is now settled as far as connexional policy goes and local churches and ministers have the freedom to make their own decisions. However, as I set out in section 7.5 (beginning on page 175 above) there is a wider set of ongoing work into which this queer theology of holiness with its relational approach can speak. The queer theology of holiness which I have set out gives ways in which decisions already taken and work still to be done can be set within the Wesleyan theological context and can themselves be expressions of methodising: both disrupting and transforming the tradition we have inherited.

8.3 Contribution

The contribution of this thesis is principally found in three aspects. Firstly, there is, as observed above, very little queer scholarly engagement with Wesley's writing. Keegan Osinski's book is the only published work of which I am aware and as I noted she gives relatively little attention to methodological questions. This thesis gives sustained and detailed attention to methodologies by which Wesley texts can be queered and thus makes a significant contribution to the emerging field of queer Wesley studies. While both Osinski and I consider the sermon on the *Circumcision of the Heart*, this thesis has the first queer scholarly engagement with the other Wesley texts considered. Furthermore, it offers methodologies that can provide at least a starting point for queer scholarly engagement with other Wesley texts. As debates about LGBT+ people continue to rage in Methodist and Wesleyan churches around the world (as well as more broadly across Christianity), a queer approach to Wesley is much needed and this thesis makes a significant contribution. This contribution is both in its specific reading of texts and the constructive theology arising from that as well as in the methodological approaches it offers which will enable queer engagement with more of Wesley's writing.

One of the challenges of this project was in discovering appropriate methodologies for queering these religious texts and how to characterise them without becoming unqueerly prescriptive or imposing artificial characterisations. There is a significant body of literature about queering scripture and although there are examples of queering other (non-scriptural) religious texts, it was a challenge to find starting points for engaging with the texts under consideration in this project. The methodological work that I have done in this thesis makes a contribution to methodology for queer reading of religious texts. The description set out in chapter 3 above (p. 46) of the colours of queering provides an approach to this which offers possibilities for queer reading of religious texts which at the same time is inherently open to development and growth. This contribution can help in enabling

queer readings of other significant religious figures and to support reparative reading projects similar to this one for other traditions in Christianity (and beyond).

Thirdly, in outlining a queer theology of holiness, the thesis makes a contribution to the literature of queer theology more generally. As mentioned above (p. 66), queer theology has not given much attention to holiness and this thesis therefore addresses that area. The reflections of chapter 7 have value and significance beyond simply being the product of a queer reading of Wesley but make a contribution to queer theology in their own right. Across the Christian Churches, the dichotomy of queerness and holiness which was part of my inspiration for this project, continues to arise in response to decisions and debates about the place of LGBT+ people in Christian Churches. For example, in the final days of my studies, the Vatican issued its document *Fiducia Supplicans*: On the Pastoral Meaning of Blessings, which allowed for 'the possibility of blessing couples in irregular situations and same-sex couples' (Fernandez and Matteo, 2023), albeit with a number of provisos. Cardinal Sarah responding to this condemned it for 'claiming to bless homosexual unions as if they were legitimate, in conformity with the nature created by God, *as if they could lead to holiness and human happiness*' (Sarah in Lambert, 2024, emphasis mine). As long as this dichotomy continues to be asserted, there will be a need for a queer theology of holiness and this thesis makes a significant contribution to that.

8.4 Further Work

Osinski hoped that her work would inspire further conversations towards queer Wesleyan theology. The Wesleyan tradition is broad and covers a great many theological topics and there is plenty of scope for queer approaches to all of it. I hope with Osinski that the conversations continue. More specifically in terms of this work, there is room to study in more detail how the theology I outline here might be related to decisions the Methodist Church has made on marriage and conversion therapy or to other decisions it might make in the future. The Methodist Church aspires to be an 'inclusive church' and there is more work to do

to understand how theology such as that set out here might be related to the practice of ministry.

In terms of further developing a queer Wesleyan theology of holiness, I think there is particular potential in bringing Wynkoop's work into dialogue with Tonstad's (2016, p. 123) 'sodomitical theology'. Wynkoop's emphasis on a relational approach to holiness and her articulation of the significance of love of God and neighbour as a hermeneutic for Wesley, alongside the place of universal sin in Tonstad's work – which is also a key part of Wesley's thought, albeit in a rather different way – give significant creative possibilities.

The approaches to queering texts in this thesis are not exhaustive. The task of queering Wesley texts was challenging. Further work on how such texts could be queered would certainly be useful, especially for those for whom such texts hold an honoured place, for example because they are of doctrinal significance.

I think there is also more to be said about the nature of queering itself. I have wrestled through this project with the question of whether and how queering should be transgressive and what that means in the context of a project like this. In particular, in the context of a reparative reading of significant religious figure, what are the bounds of what readings can be called queer? My true concern is not about developing a theology that is as 'radically transgressive' as can be imagined, but about the possibility of theologies and ecclesiastical policies that promote the inclusion of LGBT+ people in the life of the Methodist Church, and the Church more broadly, as part of the body of Christ. This resonates with some queer theological approaches which focus on creating a 'place at the table' (Shore-Goss et al., 2013), while others may perceive this project as not 'indecent' enough (Althaus-Reid, 2000). Ultimately, different queer theological approaches may be right for different situations and to address different concerns.

8.5 Concluding Remarks

In beginning this thesis, I was inspired by an apparent dichotomy I felt presented to me between the affirmation of LGBT+ people and Christian holiness. It is perhaps

an overreaction to respond by writing a PhD thesis but what I have found and written is an emphatic repudiation of that dichotomy. The Wesleyan theological inheritance has much to offer to the queer Methodist and indeed the queer Christian more generally and of which this project can, of necessity, only scratch the surface.

In the first term of my studies, I attended a service on All Saints' Day (1 November 2019) in which the preacher addressed holiness. His words struck me then and have stayed with me throughout the project and the thesis is, in a way, an answer to them:

> We are called to be made holy in the very circumstances of our lives.

Appendix: A Story of Me and the Conference

I was brought up within the Methodist Church, regularly attending Sunday worship, Sunday School, youth clubs etc. My family on my mother's side have been Methodists for generations and so there's a sense that it's 'in my blood.' Church played a big part in my life growing up and while I found fitting in in school difficult, church was always a place I felt at home. While at University as undergraduate, I felt called to ordained ministry and began conversations with my then minister about it. Although I knew, deep down, it was 'an issue', I had not come to terms in any sense with my sexuality at this point, not even to the extent of really having admitted it to myself. I had read some material from the True Freedom Trust that gave me enough to think that I could be the master of it and decide who I was and what I wanted my life to be.

My first engagement with Methodism beyond the local was then as part of the processes of selection for training towards ordination. This resulted in me being sent to the Urban Theology Unit in Sheffield for Foundation Training and to undertake an MA in theology. UTU was founded out of 1960s Methodism and rooted in liberation theology and community organising. One of the sessions we had – and I didn't realise at the time how unusual this was – was on how to make change through the Conference and what its formal processes are. This was a formative time for me theologically and gave me a framework I still broadly work within coupling Methodism – in particular studies of Wesley – with a liberationist commitment to the marginalised and to the transformation of systems of injustice.

My engagement with the Conference itself in this time was limited to having to study its reports and being aware of friends who were members. There were controversies about reshaping training and potential closure of some colleges. Apart from taking part once in the morning worship of Conference and attending an ordination, the first time I actually went to Conference was 2011 when I myself was ordained. As an ordinand you have the privilege of staying at Conference throughout its meeting at connexional expense, so I did. From here, I began to learn in detail about the processes of the Conference and how it works.

In the year before I was ordained, I'd made some significant moves in understanding my own sexuality and had had a brief involvement – relationship is probably too strong a word – which I had broken off before leaving for my ordination retreat. This had all been quiet and hidden and I carried a good deal of fear and anxiety about it. I concluded that I was better to be single and celibate because anything else interfered too much with my ministry. But this was also just a new way of avoiding the question. Increasingly, I was theologically taking an affirming position as regards other LGBT+ people but could not apply that to myself.

I was elected a member of the Conference in 2012. This was not particularly significant for anything I did in the Conference itself, but I properly met my now husband (Sam) at that Conference and our relationship started soon after. He and I, with others, started Dignity and Worth, a charity working for the greater participation of LGBT+ people in the Methodist Church and which has been a significant part of making the decisions of the 2021 Conference about marriage possible. Dignity and Worth advocated (and still does) a 'mixed economy' where those who felt it right should be able to celebrate same-sex marriages and those opposed should not have to.

Sam had been for many years a member of working parties on marriage and relationships and there were significant decisions in that time. In particular, in 2014 it was agreed that nothing prevented a Methodist minister or member being in a same-sex marriage (a similar decision to an earlier resolution regarding civil partnerships but a notably different decision to that of the Church of England) and it became possible for services of prayer and thanksgiving following same-sex marriage or civil partnership to take place on Methodist premises. But progress on actually being able to hold same sex marriages in Methodist Churches looked very far off and there was much institutional inertia. Sam was eventually dropped from the working party and an attempt to stop that failed. This state of affairs was in many ways very uncomfortable for LGBT+ Methodists. While many things were possible, it was a case of toleration. There were many who didn't feel comfortable to be out or only to be out in particular contexts – especially those in more senior

positions of leadership – and at the local level, these decisions were often unheard of. It was not unusual to find Methodists who didn't know there were LGBT+ Methodists and certainly not LGBT+ Methodist ministers.

In 2018, the working party was due to bring a new draft Statement (i.e. with the potential to become a formal teaching document) to the Conference on Marriage. This was to include consideration of the definition of marriage and could potentially open the way to same-sex marriages in Methodist Churches. For many LGBT+ Methodists this felt very urgent and lots of us were getting frustrated at how long things took and how rarely the Conference was invited to consider making a substantive decision. In preparation, we in Dignity and Worth had encouraged many people who wanted to support LGBT+ Methodists to seek election to the 2018 Conference and many were elected.

Around Easter 2018, the news began to leak out that the group had not been able to complete its work and would be asking the Conference to allow it to bring the draft a year later. Given that there would be no draft, there was no practical way for the Conference to say no to this request. The feeling I had had inside me for a while that if nothing substantial was forthcoming we should move from the floor came to the surface again.

We made ourselves very visible in the Conference, giving out free rainbow bags and lanyards to members of the Conference and it was hard to look in any direction and not see a rainbow. I take an amused pride in the description of it in *The Runaway Train* which came out to oppose potential change at the 2021 Conference:

> Everywhere I looked, there were images of rainbows: posters, banners, tablecloths, shoe laces, lanyards, bracelets, shopping bags, leaflets. The Methodist Conference's exhibition area and a significant number of its representatives were emblazoned with an image that is supposed to symbolise the love and faithfulness of God and yet has been commandeered by a secular political lobbying movement. (Hull, 2021, p. 7)

I drafted a motion that would essentially write the 'mixed economy' directly into Methodist Standing Orders. We collected the necessary signatures and submitted it. We also submitted a second (in the event the first wasn't passed) inviting the

Conference to require a mixed economy to be one of the options presented to it in a future report.

The first one caused a great deal of institutional panic and considerable obstacles were put in its way, attempting (it seemed to me) to avoid it even being debated by the Conference. Senior figures told me they believed it wouldn't be debated while others were anecdotally quite taken by the idea of 'just doing it'. Numerous objections were raised to the style of drafting, its publication to the Conference was delayed until the last possible moment and considerable pressure was put on me personally (as its proposer) not to proceed. But I was determined to have it considered and procedurally I knew I had that right. In many ways, I felt it was flying a kite but that it was important to make the point that we, as a Conference, had the power to change this and delay was itself a decision. We did not have to be bound by a sense of inevitability or there being no alternative.

The Conference debated the motion and there was a huge outpouring of passionate and emotional speeches from LGBT+ members present as well as allies. A very prominent conservative spoke in favour of a mixed economy approach, suggesting that marriage need not be considered a first order issue. Sat at the front of the hall in the seat for those proposing business, it felt, remarkably, like we might just get it, which I had never expected. Then the Chair of Chairs (the most senior Chair of District, akin in some ways to a Bishop) rose to move that the vote be not put, a procedural motion meaning that the Conference would express no view on the motion. She proposed that, exceptionally, in the name of all of the Chairs and of a few other senior leaders. That was carried but the backlash against the Chairs for it was significant. Our second 'direction of travel' motion was carried. The working party brought a surprising additional report, suggesting that we change from producing a Statement to producing a Report and Resolutions: a simpler and quicker process with less potential for becoming bogged down. This was also agreed. Though we had not made any immediate change, the impact of the 2018 Conference was tangible. Dignity and Worth was a movement to be reckoned with, the Chairs could probably not make the same move again and it could be seen by all that waiting for an institutionally sanctioned way forward was

not the only option. A report was due to the 2019 Conference with resolutions to be considered as ‘provisional legislation’ which would be referred to the Districts and then confirmed or not in 2020.

The working party brought forward its report *God in love unites us* to the 2019 Conference, which proposed a mixed economy model broadly on the lines that the motion I had moved in 2018 did. The remarkable thing to me when I arrived at Conference in 2019 was that the atmosphere seemed to have changed from ‘Should we do this?’ to ‘How should we do this?’ The Conference spent the best part of two days debating it, first in general terms and then on the specific resolutions. With one or two exceptions, the contributions were graceful and respectful and the atmosphere one of care and discernment. It was agreed that the votes be taken by secret ballot, which was done on paper. The wait after casting each vote while the ballots were counted made the pace oddly slow. When the vote came on the key resolution about same sex marriage, the counting seemed to take for ever. I was sure it must either have been lost or was very close and was having to be recounted. When the Chair of the Business Committee – who I knew to be sympathetic to our cause – came to the tribune to announce the result he looked very serious and I thought it really was lost. Quite to the contrary the vote had been carried by an enormous margin – beyond anything I would have ever dreamed of.

Debates and votes in the District Synods around the country were largely interrupted by the Covid 19 pandemic. One or two had voted before the lockdown came in, but most could not meet and the Conference of 2020 had to meet on Zoom instead of in person – the first time since 1744 that British Methodists had not gathered annually in Conference, in person at least. The decision was taken that the resolutions could not be reconsidered in that context. While this was incredibly frustrating and I felt quite angry about it, there wasn’t any reasonable objection to it that I could see and while I could see some ways of possibly getting the question to a vote, any such strategy seemed doomed to failure. There was nothing for it but to wait for 2021.

Through the autumn and spring of 2021, districts began to take their votes on the resolutions, mostly meeting in electronic form. Bar one, all of them passed the resolutions and in most cases with substantial majorities. We collected the data as the votes happened and the picture became clearer and clearer of the level of support across Methodism. I think this was not necessarily support for same sex marriage as such, but support for the mixed economy concept – that it's ok for Methodists to have different views on this and to act in accordance with them and that we can have love and respect for one another despite that. The intemperate arguments put forward in publications like *The Runaway Train* (Hull, 2021) actually served to strengthen this position with a reaction of 'I'm not sure what I think but I don't think like that' being not uncommon. The 2021 Conference passed the resolutions with substantial majorities, although there were attempts to stop the whole thing in its tracks. It felt a good thing to me that those who were opposed were heard and had full opportunity to make their case. As I write, we are getting news of local churches taking the votes about whether to proceed with registration of their building (in England and Wales) for same sex marriages or just generally to permit them (in Scotland and other jurisdictions). One thing I have already noticed is that the overall process has brought many people's perspectives to the surface. LGBT+ people and allies are less reluctant to be open about their position and opponents cannot hide behind the institutional policy. My perception is that there is much more open support for LGBT+ people in Methodism, both locally and institutionally than there was before the decisions.

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