Introduction: Wesley’s Arminian Soteriology

The quarrel between Reformed and Arminian Evangelicals is often seen by the former as a conflict over whether or not salvation is by grace alone. While not discounting salvation by grace alone, Wesleyan Arminians see the disagreement as primarily over how grace works, which tends from the start to accent the transformative and relational nature of this work. This focus is particularly noteworthy in the soteriology of John Wesley, who is generally considered to be one of the most significant among Arminian theologians. “Arminian” is a term he willingly applied to himself. When faced with intense theological criticism from Calvinist friend or foe alike, Wesley founded The Arminian Magazine as a vehicle to clarify what he was and was not teaching about God, grace, and salvation. I have found his insights as compelling today as many did then. My goal, therefore, is to reveal the inner logic of Wesley’s variety of Arminianism, and in the process to suggest how it provides significant resources for negotiating tensions facing Evangelical soteriology, especially in response to postmodern concerns.

Briefly put: what is so striking about Wesley’s theology is his belief in the transforming power of God’s grace. He sees the problem of sin as every bit as debilitating as did Luther and Calvin. But Wesley insists that it is God’s desire not only to forgive sin but also to restore humanity in this life to its condition prior to the fall. It is this emphasis on sanctification and Christian perfection that orients his entire soteriology. In developing his theology, Wesley proclaims a promise of new life and a confidence in God’s power that goes beyond the claims of the Protestant Reformers, while clearly retaining their insistence that salvation is by grace alone.
is to a description of this fundamentally transformative soteriology that we now turn.

**Restoring the Imago Dei: The Heart of Wesley’s Soteriology**

To claim a Protestant doctrine of original sin while at the same time describing the goal of salvation as a kind of *theosis* may seem theologically incoherent to some. Wesley is able to do this because he links grace not only to what God has done in Christ but to the power of the Holy Spirit, which enables humanity to have in their own hearts and lives the love that was in Christ. Wesley’s soteriology shows how God accomplishes this transformation toward Christ’s love in human lives through both gradual and instantaneous transformation. To understand this transformation more clearly we need to examine Wesley’s understanding of the *imago dei*, original sin, and prevenient grace.

Wesley believed we were created in God’s image, and the very heart of that image is love. Commenting on 1 John 4:8, he described love as God’s “reigning attribute, the attribute that sheds an amiable glory on all his other perfections.”¹ Charles Wesley continually used “love divine” as a synonym for God in his hymns. Because love is God’s reigning attribute, love for God and our neighbor is meant to be the reigning attribute of humanity as well.

Wesley identified three aspects of our creation in God’s image: the *natural* image, which includes understanding, the affections, and freedom; the *political* image, which is our capacity to govern creation; and the *moral* image, which is love governing the heart and life.² With the fall into sin the moral image is totally corrupted, and the self replaces God as the object of our love. The affections are disordered and corrupted and the understanding clouded. We now misgovern the creation, utilizing it for selfish and destructive ends. And we no longer possess the freedom to return to God—because our heart is corrupted, we no longer have the ability to know or love God.

The fundamental problem for Wesley is that we no longer have a relationship with God. It was this relationship that gave us the moral image of love; without it we are helpless to return to God on our own volition.