

THE ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS IN JOHN WESLEY'S EXPERIENCE AND PREACHING: DEATH ANXIETY AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

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No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Jeremiah 31:34, NRSV

God's desire to forgive is a great consolation to all who feel the depth of their iniquity. Even more comforting is the prominence of this theme in both Old Testament and New Testament.² Scripture consistently reveals a God who forgives the sin of repentant believers, and faithful preachers will amplify this aspect of God's character as we call those under our pastoral care to turn from sin and seek God's gracious forgiveness. We want our people to be reconciled to God. We want them to be free from guilt and shame. We want them to experience eternal life in God's coming new creation. And so, we bid them come to Christ, in whom there is no condemnation (Ro 8:1). Now when it comes to preaching the benefits of divine forgiveness, the saving and eternal importance of receiving God's pardon will be rightly in focus, but we do well to consider the importance of divine forgiveness for the present-day psychological welfare and flourishing of those under our care. For, as we shall see, an experience of being forgiven by God has potential to increase a person's sense of well-being. Notably, however, the experience of divine forgiveness as a topic of interest has not figured prominently in recent studies on forgiveness, though the topics of self-forgiveness and forgiveness of others are now well-established in the field of positive psychology.³ Despite this neglect, a few researchers have

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² See, e.g., Nu 30:5, 8, 12; Dt 21:8; Ps 32:1; Is 33:24; Je 5:1; 33:8; 36:3; 50:20; Ez 16:63; Mt 6:14; 12:31; Lk 1:77; 24:47; Acts 10:43; 13:38; 26:18; Ro 4:7, 8; 11:27; Ja 5:15.

³ Research on the forgiveness of others has developed more quickly than research on self-forgiveness; the study of self-forgiveness has even been called "The stepchild of forgiveness research" by Julie H. Hall and Frank D. Fincham, "Self-Forgiveness: The Stepchild of

sought to fill the gap. To illustrate, recent research indicates that those who experience divine forgiveness tend to have less anxiety with regard to death.⁴ Further, those who feel forgiven by God tend not only to forgive themselves more easily but are more likely to offer forgiveness unconditionally without requiring acts of contrition from those who offend them.⁵ A 2019 study found that persons with low self-forgiveness tend to have fewer depressive symptoms when they have a perception of being forgiven by God.⁶ While much work remains to be done on the psychological impact of experiencing God's forgiveness, these recent studies suggest that such an experience can be important for human flourishing and general happiness. Given the findings of these studies, I would suggest that pastors consider not only the eternal consequences of divine forgiveness but also the dynamics of a present experience of knowing God's forgiveness. Can we be assured of God's forgiveness? How can we know whether such an experience is authentic? How do we shepherd those entrusted to our pastoral care as they seek such an experience?

I suggest that John Wesley stands as one who can help us as we think about these questions. The doctrine of assurance was a distinctive of Wesley's preaching. More than that, Wesley's own experience of assurance of divine forgiveness is well-documented and well-known. By considering his preaching in the context of his experience, we will be in a better position to appreciate his emphasis on the assurance of God's forgiveness. This essay, then, begins with Wesley's ministry prior to his experience of forgiveness. In particular, we'll find that his journey to the Americas and his time in Georgia was crucial in highlighting to Wesley his need for God's forgiveness. This specific need became particularly apparent in the fear of death he experienced in that period. That will enable us to consider the way in which Wesley's account of his experience may resonate with recent studies on death anxiety and divine forgiveness. From there, we turn to Wesley's well-known Aldersgate experience where he received for the first time the assurance of God's forgiveness. Our extended reflection on Wesley's movement from fear to assurance provides essential context for a look at his preaching on assurance which involves what he called (1) the direct witness of the Spirit and (2) the indirect witness of the Spirit. We'll conclude with

Forgiveness Research.," *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 24, no. 5 (2005): 621. Cf. Jesse Couenhoven, "Forgiveness and Restoration: A Theological Exploration," *The Journal of Religion* 90, no. 2 (2010): 166; Frank D. Fincham and Ross W. May, "Self-Forgiveness and Well-Being: Does Divine Forgiveness Matter?" *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 14, no. 6 (2019): 854.

⁴ Neal Krause, "Trust in God, Forgiveness by God, and Death Anxiety," *Omega: Journal of Death & Dying* 72, no. 1 (2015): 20–41.

⁵ Neal Krause and Christopher G. Ellison, "Forgiveness by God, Forgiveness of Others, and Psychological Well-Being in Late Life," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 42, no. 1 (2003): 77–94; Neal Krause, "Religious Involvement and Self-Forgiveness," *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 20, no. 2 (2017): 128–42.

⁶ Fincham and May, "Self-Forgiveness," 857.

a series of pastoral reflections and strategies on how we might fruitfully shepherd people as they seek an experience of God's unmerited forgiveness.

One distinction should be made before proceeding, and that is the distinction between a doctrine of forgiveness and a doctrine of the assurance of forgiveness. I take the former to involve the objective dynamics of how God justifies a sinner and pardons sin — what it means for God *himself* to forgive.⁷ In contrast, the latter turns on the believer's reception and subjective *experience* of forgiveness. Given our interest in the believer's experience of forgiveness and its implications for human well-being, this essay will focus primarily on the question of subjective assurance rather than on the objective character of God's forgiveness itself.

I. THE FEAR OF DEATH AND THE QUESTION OF FAITH

Wesley's later assurance of God's forgiveness will be all the more punctuated if we consider it in light of his earlier experience of the fear of death. The dreadful reality of that fear came all too clear aboard a ship called the *Simmonds* on Wesley's journey from England to Georgia in late 1735 and early 1736. During the journey, the ship weathered several storms that brought Wesley face-to-face with the possibility of his death. That experience produced a deep fear, which he interpreted as a deficiency of his faith. Reflecting on a storm that arose on the evening of January 23, Wesley wrote, "I could not but say to myself, 'How is it that thou hast no faith?' being still unwilling to die."⁸ An even more violent storm arose two days later. Wesley remarked in his journal that,

The winds roared round about us...The ship not only rocked to and fro with the utmost violence, but shook and jarred with so unequal, grating a motion, that one could not but with great difficulty keep one's hold of anything, nor stand a moment without it. Every ten minutes came a shock against the stern or side of the ship, which one would think would dash the planks in pieces.⁹

Seven hours into the storm, Wesley went to visit a group of German Moravians who were also passengers on the *Simmonds*. He had already noticed their mature faith, but their peaceful posture during that storm stood out to him as an indicator of a robust Christianity. As the wind howled and the sea tossed, Wesley found the Moravians singing psalms. He described it this way,

In the midst of the psalm wherewith their service began, the sea broke over, split the main-sail in pieces, covered the ship, and poured in between the decks, as if the great deep had already

⁷ For Wesley and the relationship between pardon and assurance, see Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2013), 177–78.

⁸ John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson, 14 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 1:21.

⁹ Wesley, *Works*, 1:21.

swallowed us up. A terrible screaming began among the English. The Germans calmly sang on. I asked one of them afterwards, "Was you not afraid?" He answered, "I thank God, no." I asked, "But were not your women and children afraid?" He replied, mildly, "No our women and children are not afraid to die."¹⁰

While Wesley did not consider the fear of death to be universally indicative of a spiritual condition, he did in these and other instances interpret his own fear of dying to suggest that he had not yet received divine forgiveness and, consequently, was not ready to stand before God for judgment.¹¹

Recent research has shown that Wesley's experience with regard to unforgiveness in relation to anxiety about death is not exclusive to him. A study published in 2015 found that people who trust God tend to have lower death anxiety because their trust in God means they are more likely to feel forgiven by God.¹² It's not difficult to see why a sense of divine forgiveness may result in lower death anxiety. Those who do not believe they have received God's forgiveness are more likely to expect punishment from God in the afterlife. The belief that punishment awaits after death results in increased death anxiety.¹³ Further, many people deal with tension created by the need to live up to the teaching of their religion and frequent failure to do so. That failure often produces an increased sense of guilt and a lower sense of self-worth. A sense of divine forgiveness resolves the tension by boosting the individual's sense of self-worth which, in turn, lowers death anxiety.¹⁴ While we are not in a position to offer a psychological analysis of Wesley's experience, we note that Wesley's account of his own experience resonates with this research. And it could be helpful to consider that his death anxiety, which resulted from a sense of unforgiveness, may be similar to the experience of some who are under our pastoral care. The question then becomes how we shepherd them through that experience with a view to seeking the assurance that God has reconciled them to him. For Wesley, a sense of divine forgiveness was still more than two years away, though an important initial step in the right direction would come sooner rather than later.

Wesley set foot in Georgia on February 6, 1736, barely two weeks after the harrowing storm described above. Being so impressed with the faith of the Germans, Wesley went the next day to visit August Spangenberg, one of

¹⁰ Wesley, *Works*, 1:22.

¹¹ For other instances where Wesley associated fear of death with lack of faith, see Kenneth J. Collins, *John Wesley: A Theological Journey* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 58. For Wesley's consideration that the fear of death need not necessarily signal a lack of faith, see Collins, *John Wesley*, 59. Cf. Heitzenrater, "The stark reality of death staring him in the face exposed the frailty of Wesley's sense of assurance; the question of salvation now took on a new sense of immediacy and urgency. He was afraid to die, he was unwilling to die, and he was ashamed to admit it" (*Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 65).

¹² Krause, "Trust in God, Forgiveness by God, and Death Anxiety," 38.

¹³ Krause, "Trust in God, Forgiveness by God, and Death Anxiety," 26.

¹⁴ Krause, "Trust in God, Forgiveness by God, and Death Anxiety," 27.

the Moravian pastors, and “asked his advice regarding my own conduct.”¹⁵ Rather than give advice, Spangenberg asked Wesley two questions: “Have you the witness within yourself? Does the Spirit of God bear witness with your spirit, that you are a child of God?” Wesley confessed in his journal that these questions surprised him such that he knew not how to reply. Noticing Wesley’s hesitance, Spangenberg continued, “Do you know Jesus Christ?” This time, after a pause, Wesley managed an answer, “I know he is the Saviour of the world.” But the Moravian pastor was not deterred by Wesley’s attempt to dodge the question. He responded, “True...but do you know he has saved you?” Wesley answered saying, “I hope he has died to save me.” Undeterred, Spangenberg asked again, “Do you know yourself?” This time Wesley managed to answer, “I do.” But his journal entry that day closed with this confession, “I fear they were vain words.”

Wesley’s time on the *Simmonds* and in Georgia was deeply formative and provides essential context for his later experience of divine forgiveness and the way he would come to articulate his doctrine of assurance.¹⁶ While in America, Wesley found that he lacked the assurance of God’s forgiveness through the testimony of the Holy Spirit that he was indeed a child of God. He recognized the way his experience stood in contrast to Spangenberg’s sense of assurance individually and to that of the Moravian community more broadly as he observed them on their voyage from England to Georgia.¹⁷

II. WESLEY’S INITIAL EXPERIENCE OF ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS

Wesley set sail for England in December 1737 aboard a ship called the *Samuel*. That trip afforded him time to reflect on his time in Georgia, and on January 8, 1738, he wrote these words in his journal: “By the most infallible proofs, inward feeling, I am convinced...Of unbelief; having no such faith in Christ as will prevent my heart from being troubled; which it could not be, if I believed in God, and rightly believed also in him.”¹⁸ He further reflected on the extent of his own pride and the way he called on God only in storms and never in calm. And like before, he still connected his death anxiety with his unbelief. Near the end of January, he wrote:

I went to America to convert the Indians; but O! who shall convert me? Who, what is he that will deliver me from this evil heart of unbelief? I have a fair summer religion. I can talk well; nay, and believe myself, while no danger is near: But let death look me in the face, and my spirit is troubled. Nor can I say, “To die is gain!”¹⁹

¹⁵ The encounter is recorded in Wesley’s journal on Saturday, February 7, 1736; see Wesley, *Works*, 1:23.

¹⁶ Collins, *John Wesley*, 58.

¹⁷ Collins, *John Wesley*, 63.

¹⁸ Wesley, *Works*, 1:72.

¹⁹ Wesley, *Works*, 1:74.

As Collins notes, Wesley's time in Georgia was marked by an earnest zeal to be fully devoted to the work of God.²⁰ He eagerly sought to live a model Christian life. He was a priest and a missionary. Nevertheless, something essential was missing.

The turning point for Wesley came later that year on May 24. His Aldersgate experience is well-known and has been the topic of extensive research and reflection.²¹ Wesley described what happened to him this way:

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust Christ, Christ alone for salvation: and an assurance was given me, that he had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death.²²

At least three features of this account are particularly relevant to our interests.²³ First, Wesley employs the specific language of "assurance." This is a gift that Wesley associates with the forgiveness of sin. His sins have been "taken away."²⁴ But it isn't simply knowledge of God's objective act of forgiveness; it is a deep subjective experience. We'll consider more carefully the way Wesley thinks of this assurance below. For now, it's worth noting how this relates to his earlier experience, not least to the relationship between unforgiveness and death anxiety.²⁵ Wesley feared death because he did not have a sense of being reconciled to God. When Spangenberg pressed the question, Wesley had to admit, at least to himself, that he did not know his sin to be forgiven. That has now changed. Wesley not only knows objectively that his sin is forgiven, he has also *experienced* the forgiveness of sin. Second, Wesley's emphatic use of first-person pronouns stands in stark contrast to the way he answered Spangenberg's questions in their first meeting. At that meeting, when the Moravian pastor asked Wesley whether Christ had saved him, Wesley shifted the question from his own salvation to that of the world. Now he enjoys the reality of knowing Christ as *his* savior in a personal way. Jesus is not just the savior of the world; he is the

²⁰ Collins, *John Wesley*, 76.

²¹ See, e.g., Randy Maddox, ed., *Aldersgate Reconsidered* (Nashville: Kingswood, 1990); cf. Kenneth J. Collins and John H. Tyson, *Conversion in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001).

²² Wesley, *Works*, 1:103, emphasis original.

²³ There is much to be said about Wesley's Aldersgate experience that would take us beyond the focus of this essay; for a detailed discussion of Aldersgate, see Collins, *John Wesley*, 77–104.

²⁴ Collins suggests that regeneration is also in view with the language of being "redeemed from the law of sin and death," (*John Wesley*, 90).

²⁵ For the lengthy history of debate over whether Wesley's Aldersgate experience should be interpreted as a conversion experience or as a step in the process of sanctification post-conversion, see Mark K. Olson, *Wesley and Aldersgate: Interpreting Conversion Narratives* (London: Routledge, 2018), 10–23.

savior of John Wesley. He has “saved *me*,” Wesley emphatically declares. Third, Wesley now qualifies his trust in Christ as trust in “Christ *alone*” (emphasis mine). Now before Aldersgate, Wesley would have certainly said that he trusted Christ. The new element seems to be the development that he now trusts Christ *alone*.²⁶ Prior to this point, Wesley “steered the course of his spiritual life by rule and resolution.”²⁷ Before Aldersgate, his was “a works based gospel of moral rectitude.”²⁸ Put another way, as Heitzenrater recognizes about the pre-Aldersgate period, “Wesley’s hope for salvation was grounded in a reliance upon the sincerity of his own desire to lead the Christian life and a trust in God’s promises as he understood them.”²⁹ That is not to say Wesley did not trust Christ in any sense up to this point. It is to say that his trust in Christ was mixed – or diluted, perhaps – with reliance on his own resolve. Yet this left him in a state of ongoing spiritual defeat.³⁰ He now no longer relied on Christ *and* his own effort; Wesley trusted in Christ *alone*.

III. THE ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS IN WESLEY’S PREACHING

Wesley’s doctrine of assurance would become a distinctive mark of his preaching in particular and the early Methodist movement in general. And while his views on assurance would certainly undergo development and clarification, the basic shape of his teaching can be found in several sermons: “The Witness of the Spirit, Discourse 1” (Sermon 10), “The Witness of the Spirit, Discourse II” (Sermon 11), and “The Witness of our Own Spirit” (Sermon 12).³¹ The broad contours of Wesley’s doctrine can be framed in two major categories: the direct witness of the Spirit and the indirect witness of the Spirit.

A. THE DIRECT WITNESS OF THE SPIRIT

Wesley’s understanding of the witness of the Spirit as a ground for assurance of God’s forgiveness depended heavily on Romans 8:16, “It is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of

²⁶ I am indebted to Isaac Hopper for this insight. See further, Isaac Hopper, “Christ Alone for Salvation: The Role of Christ and His Work” (PhD Diss., Manchester, England: University of Manchester, 2017).

²⁷ Collins, *John Wesley*, 81. Hopper makes the point that Wesley’s own approach was manifest in his preaching which focused largely on resisting sin and pursuing virtue; he did preach righteousness as a divine gift, but “the weight of his emphasis rested on the shoulders of the individual, who was expected to strive after holiness in order to make one’s election sure” (“Christ Alone for Salvation,” 68).

²⁸ Hopper, “Christ Alone for Salvation,” 67.

²⁹ Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 48.

³⁰ For Wesley’s practices in striving after holiness before 1738 and the way it undermined any sense of assurance by amplifying his shortcomings, see Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 58–59.

³¹ For the development of Wesley’s doctrine of assurance, see Collins, *John Wesley*, 130–33, 176–77.

God” (NRSV).³² For Wesley, this verse indicates that there is a beautiful and deep interaction between the Holy Spirit and the believer’s spirit. It was crucial for Wesley that the Holy Spirit initiated this interaction. The believer’s spirit cannot instigate this experience; it can only respond to God’s initiative.³³ But what is the witness of the Holy Spirit? How does the Spirit of God bear witness with our spirits that we are forgiven and reconciled children of God? Wesley answered those questions this way in “The Witness of the Spirit, Discourse 1”:

The testimony of the Spirit is an inward impression on the soul, whereby the Spirit of God directly witnesses to my spirit, that I am a child of God; that Jesus Christ hath loved me, and given himself for me; and that all my sins are blotted out, and I, even I, am reconciled to God.³⁴

The internal nature of the witness is crucial. This is what distinguishes the direct witness of the Spirit from the indirect witness. The direct witness is unmediated communication from God’s Spirit to the believer. Wesley saw this interaction as one of “the deep things of God.”³⁵ And he freely admitted that it was a matter of mystery; words were not adequate to articulate the experience of God’s children in this matter. Wesley compared the witness to the sweet calm after a storm at sea subsides. He likened it to “resting in the arms of Jesus.”³⁶ It is a satisfaction that God is reconciled and sin covered.³⁷ The thing to see is that the direct witness of the Spirit communicates a robust sense of God’s love for us, that we are God’s children, and that we have received God’s forgiveness. When the believer comes into this experience, Wesley believed there could be no doubt in their mind that they were indeed a child of God.

We shouldn’t forget that the internal witness is two-directional. Not only does God’s Spirit communicate to us, our spirit witnesses in response. Again, here is Wesley in his own words:

...as to the witness of our own spirit: The soul as intimately and evidently perceives when it loves, and delights, and rejoices in God, as when it loves, and delights in anything on earth. And it can no more doubt, whether it loves, delights, and rejoices or no, than whether it exists or no. If, therefore, this be just reasoning, He that now loves God, that delights and rejoices in him with an humble joy, and holy delight, and an obedient love, is a child of God.³⁸

³² For the sake of clarity, Wesley’s doctrine of assurance relates to present pardon not final perseverance (see Wesley, *Works*, 1:160).

³³ Wesley, *Works*, 5:115–16.

³⁴ Wesley, *Works*, 5:115.

³⁵ Wesley, *Works*, 5:115.

³⁶ Wesley, *Works*, 5:125.

³⁷ Wesley, *Works*, 5:125.

³⁸ Wesley, *Works*, 5:116.

To put it differently, we all know when we love someone or something, and if asked what or in whom we delight, we would be able to answer. When the Holy Spirit graciously and beautifully communicates directly and internally to us that we are children of God, that calls forth a delight in God that we cannot muster apart from the gracious working of the Spirit. For Wesley, that delight is the way our spirit witnesses in response to the witness of the Holy Spirit. And the one who has this witness can be confident in the reality that he or she is a child of God, and that his or her sins are most assuredly pardoned.

The value of this experience for our sense of well-being is easy to see. To feel ourselves loved by God and addressed by his Spirit lends a sense of dignity to our experience. To know God's love despite the fact that we have sinned carries the potential to free believers from the frustration that comes from not meeting God's standards. While we should never neglect to preach the eternal benefits of divine forgiveness, we should also consider the deep value of the doctrine of assurance of forgiveness for flourishing in the present.

B. THE INDIRECT WITNESS OF THE SPIRIT

Along with the internal and direct witness of the Spirit, Wesley also articulated what he called the indirect witness, which he took to be a matter of broad Christian agreement.³⁹ The indirect witness is indirect because it is mediated through scripture which defines the sort of fruit that will emerge in the lives of children of God. The fruit of the Spirit functions as an external and objective standard that can be perceived by our conscience. If we perceive ourselves to have the fruit of the Spirit, then it indicates that the Spirit is at work in us. Here's Wesley: "The word of god says, every one who has the fruit of the Spirit is a child of God; experience, or inward consciousness tells me, that I have the fruit of the Spirit; and hence I rationally conclude, 'Therefore I am a child of God.'"⁴⁰

Wesley considered both the direct witness and the indirect witness to be crucial for true assurance of forgiveness. If only one of the two is present in a person's experience, the potential for error arises. If a person claims to have the direct witness of the Spirit but does not have the indirect witness evidenced by an increasingly fruitful life, then that person could mistake the witness of the Spirit for their own preferences or sensibilities. Wesley insisted that the internal witness would be immediately followed by the fruit of the Spirit. If the fruit is not there, then the person should not presume to have the internal witness. Conversely, if a person can identify some fruit of the Spirit but has no experience of the direct witness of the Spirit, Wesley entertained the possibility that he or she might be deluded. It is possible, he thought, that a person may have a degree of love or peace or self-control

³⁹ Wesley, *Works*, 5:125.

⁴⁰ Wesley, *Works*, 5:125.

prior to their justification, but they should not presume on this.⁴¹ Instead, Wesley commended crying out to God as Father until the direct witness is received. This unmediated communion with the Spirit of God, Wesley insisted, “is the privilege of all the children of God, and without this we can never be assured that we are his children.”⁴²

III. PASTORAL REFLECTIONS AND STRATEGIES

To this point, we’ve seen how Wesley’s fear of death brought his lack of faith into sharp relief. He was not prepared to stand before God, and this discovery produced significant anxiety for the English clergyman. This anxiety was relieved, however, when Wesley came to that now famous meeting on Aldersgate street and, for the first time, experienced forgiveness for sin and an assured sense of God’s love for him. And it is certainly true that this extended journey from fear to forgiveness shaped Wesley’s preaching with regard to the doctrine of assurance. We also saw that Wesley’s experience in the eighteenth century is not all that different from many in the twenty-first century. A sense of divine forgiveness tends to decrease death anxiety and raise our general sense of well-being. Drawing on the way Wesley’s experience and preaching might illumine our own ministries, we conclude with a series of reflections and strategies that might prove helpful to pastors in shepherding people seeking assurance of divine forgiveness.

A. SHEPHERD DON’T PRESUME

A crucial point to be made in terms of pastoral strategy is that the direct witness of the Spirit that assures the believer of God’s forgiveness is not something that can be coaxed, manipulated, or manufactured. It is a gift of God’s grace received through faith. We should never presume that there is some formula for assurance. We can preach assurance. We can exhort people to seek assurance. We describe the experience of people like Wesley. We can invite congregants to testify to their experience for the benefit of the larger congregation. But the experience of knowing one’s sins are forgiven cannot be forced. As we saw above, Wesley sought assurance of divine forgiveness for years before his Aldersgate experience. And that could very well be the case in the present day. The timing of the experience should be a matter of God’s wise and providential care, not of pastoral persuasion.

B. ASK QUESTIONS TO PROMPT INTROSPECTION

Given that the gift of assurance is a matter of divine providence and not a pastoral capacity, pastors may still consider ways to shepherd those who experience anxiety with regard to their status before God and the

⁴¹ Maddox notes that Wesley saw the fruit of the Spirit as real *fruit*, and that, for Wesley, love, joy, and peace are not inherent human dispositions but they emerge through the work of the Holy Spirit. See, Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood, 1994), 132.

⁴² Wesley, *Works*, 5:134.

question of his forgiveness. One point that emerges from Wesley's story is the usefulness of wise pastoral questions. Before Wesley ever experienced the assurance of God's love or made the doctrine of assurance a distinctive of his preaching, he was prompted by a wise pastor to engage in a process of introspection. Spangenberg's questions for Wesley during their time together in Georgia were certainly used by God to bring Wesley along in the process of discovering the futility of his own efforts to make certain his salvation. Likewise, pastors will do well to consider what sort of questions would be appropriate for those presently under their care. Such questions will likely be introspective in nature and will encourage self-examination regarding the individual's relationship to Christ and experience (or inexperience) of divine forgiveness.

C. ANXIETY CAN BE INSTRUMENTAL

It's also worth noting that, while we don't want people to be saddled with long-term anxiety, the experience of some anxiety can function instrumentally in a person's life to produce positive results. Wesley's experience of death anxiety aboard the *Simmonds* in contrast with the peace displayed among the Moravians provoked him to pursue Spangenberg's counsel, which then prompted Wesley to evaluate more carefully his own spiritual condition. The anxiety wasn't a positive experience for Wesley, but it was instrumental in moving him forward toward an experience of knowing himself forgiven, even if that experience didn't come till a later time. As pastors, we will certainly have the impulse to offer comfort to anxious souls, and that is sometimes appropriate. But wise pastors will also be discerning enough to ensure they do not waste a good crisis. Consider if Spangenberg has attempted to soothe Wesley's desolate soul that day in Georgia. Wesley's experience and preaching might have come out rather differently. Instead, however, Spangenberg took the opportunity to amplify Wesley's discomfort in the short term with a view to maximizing his spiritual health in the long term. There is much to be learned there.

IV. A CONCLUDING EXHORTATION

Allow me to conclude with an exhortation to pastors. Preach the doctrine of assurance. Preach it with a view to your congregation's health — both eternal and temporal. The triune God is concerned both with our eternal salvation and with our temporal well-being. That concern is expressed in direct, unmediated, and mysterious testimony to the hearts and minds of the children of God. When this is taken together with the objective and indirect testimony evident in a fruitful life, it carries potential to heighten a believer's sense of well-being and earnestness for Christ and his Church. The benefits of that for the ministry of the local church are manifold. So, let us not in our preaching ignore that gracious work in which God's Spirit speaks in deep ways to his people for his glory and their good.