

A Recall to Wesleyan Theology

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During the eighteenth century, two young men began a movement in England which was to exert extensive influence not only there but in America as well. The Wesley brothers and their Societies have been viewed as decisive factors in the cultural and ethical revolution which swept England. The value and genius of the Wesleyan movement seem to have taken root in American soil until the time of the Revolutionary War. After the fighting, everything which spoke of England in America was negated or forced into submission. Compelled to stand on its own feet, American Methodism floundered in its relationship with its founders.

The evangelical revival of the nineteenth century saw both the growth of The Methodist Church in America and the breaking off of several important new "Methodist" Churches. This growth and change in Wesleyan church structure paralleled several modifications in Wesleyan theology. Among the groups which look to Wesley as leader and founder, and which were widely responsible for and influenced by these changes, were The Methodist Church, The Free Methodist Church, The Wesleyan Methodist Church, and the primary stages of The National Holiness Association. These organizations began to formulate their own theology influenced by the culture of the day. These theologies show some departure from and rearrangement of the thought of John Wesley.

Contemporary theological thought among these same groups seems to draw more importance from the evangelical revival of the nineteenth century than from the Wesleyan thought of the previous century. This substitution of loyalties is difficult to discern, however, because these groups continue to adhere to Wesley as their forefather. But, in fact, several serious deficiencies in contemporary "Wesleyan" thought can be

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demonstrated. This, of course, is not to disclaim the important factors of Wesleyan theology which have been retained. Rather, the intent of this discussion is to point the way toward a rediscovery of some basic emphases of Wesley which have been deleted or forgotten.

1. *The Importance of Tradition and Historical Theology*

Generally, contemporary "Wesleyan" thought reflects a somewhat limited view of Church tradition and history. Particularly among those groups previously mentioned, there exists a hesitancy to ascribe the same degree of importance to non-Wesleyan thought that Wesley himself did. This "Wesleyan" view of the Church's history draws heavily on the personalities of the holiness movement in the last century, then jumps back to Wesley, stopping only briefly in between to look at Asbury. From the Reformation with Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin (with reservations), it seems to be only one small step further back to the Early Church. Such a brief description is, of course, a great oversimplification; but it illustrates the manner in which many contemporary "Wesleyans" treat the history of the Church and the world. One theological seminary for instance, in its 1967-68 curriculum, offered only three courses even remotely concerned with the Church Fathers. These were little-known elective courses: one was a learning tool in Greek studies, the second a philosophy course in representative thought, and the third a survey course in Church History.

Wesley's appreciation for and study of those who preceded him in the work of the Church would never have allowed him to tolerate such a short-sighted treatment of tradition and historical theology. The Patristics, the saints, the minor reformers, and even some persons only slightly connected with the Church were the subjects of Wesley's studies. Of the Church Fathers, he wrote:

. . . I exceedingly reverence them as well as their writings, and esteem them very highly in love. I reverence them, because they were Christians, such Christians as are above described. And I reverence their writings, because they describe true, genuine Christianity, and direct us to the strongest evidence of Christian doctrine.¹

1. "To Dr. Conyers Middleton," *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, ed. John Telford, (London: The Epworth Press, 1931), II 388.

John Wesley understood his mission and thought within a historical framework which placed him in the mainstream of Christian theology.

II. *The Ecclesiology of Wesley*

Until the day of his death, John Wesley was an Anglo-Catholic. Had it not been for the strong anti-English trend which set in upon America following the Revolutionary War, the Methodist Church in America might have enjoyed closer association with the Church of England. Be that as it may, the fact of Wesley's loyalty to the Church of England remains.

As with most of the major reformers, Wesley sought to work within the institution of the Church. Christ's Church had its essential existence both in the people who comprised it and in the physical institution. When confronted with the apparent sinfulness of some clergymen, Wesley defined the objective holiness of the Church in these terms:

. . . the unworthiness of the minister doth not hinder the efficacy of God's ordinance. The reason is plain, because the efficacy is derived, not from him that administers, but from Him that ordains it. He does not, will not suffer His grace to be intercepted, though the messenger will not receive it himself.²

Wesley did not imagine his Societies to be more truly the Church than the cathedral at the center of town. His followers were urged to maintain church attendance and participation in the sacraments. The Societies were always in addition to and not in place of the Church.

Among contemporary "Wesleyans", the Church takes on a different character. The anti-institutional presuppositions of today's "Wesleyan" remake the Church in terms of a voluntary band of believers whose obedience to God makes them the Church as they exist together. Though many would disagree, that "Church" becomes man-centered and man-made. It has little objective existence; that is, existence apart from those who comprise it. This change of view would cause Wesley to have some misgivings about the authenticity of his followers. For him, the Church

2. "On Attending the Church Service," *The Works of John Wesley, A.M.*, 4th ed. (London: John Mason, 1829), VII, 184.

was of God. It began with Christ and His disciples and had never “gone underground” or disappeared. The Church existed for Wesley both as an historical institution and as a body of believers. As an objective creation of God, the contemporary Church is part of an unbroken continuum in history which connects it directly with its charter members.

III. *Wesley's Theology of the Sacraments*

Unlike most of his twentieth century followers, John Wesley possessed a highly refined sacramental theology. As a “High Churchman”, he shared the thought of the Church of England in the eighteenth century. The two sacraments, baptism and the Lord’s Supper, were of primary importance to him and to every believer. To state his views on baptism, he republished a “Short Treatise on Baptism,” written by his father:

Our Church therefore ascribes no greater virtue to baptism than Christ himself has done. Nor does she ascribe it to the outward washing, but to the inward grace, which, added thereto, makes it a sacrament. Herein is a principle of grace infused, which will not be wholly taken away, unless we quench the Holy Spirit of God by long-continued wickedness.³

The sacrament of the Lord’s Supper was of such central importance to him that he communed nearly every day and urged his people to do so at every opportunity. No mere memorial of Christ’s passion, death, and resurrection, the Lord’s Supper was an event in which the penitent could meet God face to face. That same power of Life with which Jesus was so intimately connected was made available to the participant through His Supper. In fact, the living Christ was so “really present” that Wesley saw the Lord’s Supper as an occasion for conversion as well as for the reception of power and strength for the practicing Christian. One need only read the Eucharistic hymns of John and Charles Wesley to catch the spirit of his thinking.

Receiving the bread,
On Jesus we feed;

3. *The Works of the Reverend John Wesley, A.M.*, ed. John Emory, (New York: J. Emory and B. Waugh, 1831), VI, 15.

It doth not appear His manner
of working—
But Jesus is here.⁴

Jesu, dear, redeeming Lord,
Magnify Thy dying word;
In the ordinance appear,
Come, and meet Thy followers here.

In the rite Thou hast enjoined,
Let us now our Saviour find,
Drink the blood for sinners shed,
Taste Thee in the broken bread.⁵

Theologians, ministers, and lay persons within the “Wesleyan-Arminian” movement have radically departed from Wesley at the point of the sacraments. For most “Wesleyans”, the Lord’s Supper is only a “memorial” of Jesus’ passion, death, and resurrection. Christ is no more (and probably less) “really present” at His table than He is anywhere else in His Church. The significance of the sacraments to Wesley has largely been lost among many of his most ardent followers.⁶

IV. *The Class Meeting in Wesleyan Theology*

The genius of the Class Meeting was also the dynamic for the cultural and social revolution which transformed England in the eighteenth century. No other single force could claim such awesome power and astounding results. Wesley’s theology of *koinonia* and the class meeting, which incorporated it, have disappeared from among the rank and file of contemporary “Wesleyans”. An Australian Methodist evangelist and pastor, Gloster S. Udy, has studied the effect of the class meetings on eighteenth century England in his doctoral dissertation.

Thus, in this study there emerges a key to cultural change for England in the eighteenth century. Namely,

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4. *Wesley Hymnbook*, ed. Franz Hildebrandt, (Kansas City: Lillenas Publishing Company, 1963), Hymn 133, stanza 6.
 5. *Ibid.*, Hymn 134, stanzas 1 & 2.
 6. Udy, Gloster S., *Key To Change* (Sydney: Donald F. Pettygrew Pty. Limited, 1962), p. 145.

that the acceptance of primitive Christian value systems by disciplined groups, coupled with experiences of personal transformation, resulted in the production of new social and ethical relationships.⁷

Included in Dr. Udy's dissertation is a plea for the Church to rediscover the importance of the class meetings. Against the forces of de-personalization and de-humanization which are running rampant within our culture, the class meeting seems to offer some degree of hope. It remains to be seen whether any "Wesleyans" will utilize this distinctive instrument, which their forefather employed so effectively.

V. *Conclusion*

Though "Wesleyans" have probed deeply into Wesley's thought in certain areas, they have been guilty of denying or disregarding other pivotal concerns of this great churchman and reformer. Resting heavily on nineteenth century revivalism and the accompanying holiness movement does not necessarily preclude a Wesleyan confessional stance. It appears that a confessional commitment to Wesleyan thought will necessitate a change in theological presuppositions and conclusions for contemporary "Wesleyans". One of two options is available if theological integrity is to be procured:

1. The acknowledgement that present "Wesleyan" circles are not *fully* Wesleyan, and the formulation of a more precise theological terminology to describe their thought; or
2. A thorough-going re-study of Wesleyan thought in order to re-discover and re-employ those central factors of Wesley's theology which have been forgotten or denied.

Obviously, the latter option is the more desirable and the more demanding. But the fruits of such a quest and the subsequent confessional stance will not only be more intelligent, but also more true to Wesley and to his Christ.

7. *Ibid.*