The Wesleyan Message Today: in the Life of the Church and Nation

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An important factor in any study of the Bible or of theology these days is that of contemporary relevance. It may be granted that perfect love is in the New Testament, but does it meet today's needs; is it relevant? How does it stand with reference to the paramount issues of the day? Several years ago the president of the Greater Boston Association of Ministers, when addressing a youth group defined religion as "the life of God in the soul of man." This definition is an unconscious tribute to Wesley and the early Methodist revival, for of perhaps no other religious movement in history would such a definition be more appropriate. The same thought is echoed in Wesley's hymn, "Love divine, all loves excelling." That the vitality of the Wesleyan insights is still valid today is witnessed by numerous doctoral studies that are being pursued along this line. It is also manifest in the vigor which accompanies those that are proclaiming this way of salvation.

Historical Orientation

The enduring influence of John and Charles Wesley's thought on theology was more important than they themselves realized. Neither of them was a theologian in the proper sense of the term. They were concerned with theology and insisted upon its accuracy and importance, but they were not specialists in the formulation of doctrine. Nevertheless,

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their doctrinal emphases have been so widely accepted that they are taken for granted in many areas of the Christian church today. In other sections of the church, as in Japan, there is a renewed interest in both Wesleyan theology and the dynamic of early Methodism. This is witnessed, for example, in the emergence of the Wesley Translation Society under the leadership of Dr. Watanabe. There is an increasing awareness in Japan among thoughtful religious leaders that Japan today needs something comparable to the Wesleyan movement of the eighteenth century, especially in the direction of church renewal.

Wesley was correctly termed a "theologian of experience" (George B. Cell) in the succession of Paul, Augustine, and Luther. A Japanese theologian (Noro) has called Wesley an "Existential theologian," seeking, no doubt, to bring him "up to date." This is true in the sense that for Wesley Christian experience was one criterion of sound doctrine. As Wesley put it, it was "Scripture, reason, and experience" by which he tested the soundness of any theological position.

Wesley was heir to the Catholic or medieval emphasis upon divine *love,* the Reformed emphasis on *faith,* and the Arminian emphasis upon free *grace.* He was sympathetic with the Anglicans in their insistence upon the means of grace and with the Pietists in their emphasis on the importance of personal assurance. The latter Wesley no doubt learned from the United Brethren when they asked him, while in Georgia, "Have you faith in Christ?" Wesley's answer at that time was in the category of a hope, rather than assurance. Even Wesley himself said, "I fear they were vain words."

The Wesleyan Theological Emphasis

His Doctrine of God. What was Wesley's emphasis upon the doctrine of God? In times when Wesley was most tempted to doubt, when he was at the lowest ebb spiritually, there were two elements in his creed which he never abandoned. One was that there is a God, and second, He has revealed Himself. While Luther stressed God as Judge, and Calvin stressed Him as Sovereign Lord, Wesley stressed God as Loving Redeemer. While some Wesleyan students think that his doctrine of God was not rich enough, it would seem that in his emphasis upon God's love and holiness, Wesley was not deficient. This emphasis was apparent from his early years, at least from the time when he preached his great sermon on free grace. This was an emphasis upon God's love which brings us to the Gospel of Luke with its parable of the Great Supper and of the Prodigal Son, to John 3:16, and to Revelation 22:17. To the unbiased, surely this

emphasis upon the out-going love of God which seeks to re-create every person in the image of God's Son would seem to be rich indeed.

Wesley and Christology. Contemporary theological trends continue to stress the thought of Karl Barth and Paul Tillich, both of whom emphasized Christologies rather than theologies. While the Reformation stressed *Christ for us* in imputed righteousness, Wesley stressed *Christ in us,* an imparted righteousness. As John Deschner has noted (*Wesley's Christology,* Southern Methodist University Press, 1960), Christ's divinity is stressed by Wesley more than His humanity. In Wesley's mind Christ's kingly offices place the believer's sanctification in a cosmic context. For Wesley, Christ was sole ground for his justification, as when he says, "I did trust in Christ alone for salvation." Did Wesley, as his critics say, think more of his own perfection than of Christ's? The answer lies in Wesley's testimony toward the end of life, "I, the chief of sinners am, but Jesus died for me." Did Wesley by-pass Christ while stressing the importance of the Spirit's work? The answer is no. While some of his followers may be doing that, this is not true of the Wesleys. Indeed, it may be questioned whether the early Methodists adequately stressed the work of the Holy Spirit in sanctification, but theirs was not a deficiency with reference to the importance of Christ in the believer's life and thought. Wesley was more inclined to emphasize the work than the person of Christ. This was no doubt due to his practical concern in evangelism. He was less interested in matters of Christology than he was of soteriology.

The Doctrine of the Spirit. With reference to the doctrine of the Holy Spirit Wesley made a distinct contribution. In Lutheran theology the Holy Spirit was given through the sacraments, much the same as in Catholicism. Hence, the importance of the Eucharist as the real Presence. In Calvin the emphasis was upon the witness of the Spirit in the written Word. For this reason those in the Reformed tradition place great emphasis upon the words written in the Bible, because it is there that the Spirit bears His witness. With the Quakers, the emphasis was upon the direct witness of the Spirit, with a corresponding less emphasis upon the written Word. This is seen in George Fox's emphasis upon the inner Light, and is reflected in Barclay's *Theses.* Wesley held a mediating position between the Calvinists and the Quakers. Wesley did stress the witness of the Spirit, but it was in connection with the written Word. The witness of the Spirit for Wesley was not so much to the veracity of the written Word as to the reality of the individual's state of grace as in Romans, "The Spirit beareth witness with our spirit that we are the sons of God" (Romans 8:16). Great stress could well have been placed upon the power of the Spirit in effective service and upon the purifying work of the Spirit in

entire sanctification. Nevertheless, it is in this Wesleyan tradition that today's greatest emphasis lies upon the work of the Spirit, especially in the Acts of the Apostles. Those in this tradition have shown relatively little concern with spiritual gifts as seen in Paul's letter to the Corinthians, chapters 12 and 14. In this respect modern Wesleyans seem to be following the Pauline emphasis, in which the gifts of the Spirit are given less emphasis than the graces of the Spirit.

The Doctrine of Revelation in Wesleyan Theology

Scripture. Although Wesley was truly, as he said of himself, *homo unius libri,* (a man of one book), at the same time, he was an omnivorous reader. Habits of reading acquired in student days remained throughout his busy life. Unlike some of his preachers later, he was no man to disparage secular learning.

The "Word of God." To the Lutherans the word of God is that portion of the Bible in which God speaks redemptively. For them, therefore, there was a canon within the canon; that is, a word of God enshrined in the Bible itself which is the word of God par excellence. The Lutherans did not equate the word of God with the Bible as such. To the modern fundamentalist the word of God and the Bible are identical. The typical fundamentalist stresses the literalness of the word and each of the words. The important thing for him is the "word of God written." To the neo-orthodox, much like Luther himself, the word of God is that portion of the Bible which "speaks to man's condition." Thus, there is a subjective factor which is determinative of what is divine revelation. For them not all the Bible is true, and even those portions that are true are not really the Word of God unless they evoke an awakening response in the reader. Since they point out with some degree of plausibility, that the Word of God is not really authoritative unless one accepts it, they go on to draw the erroneous conclusion that the validity of the Word is dependent on man's response, after the false analogy that a sound must be heard before it can be a sound. To Wesley, and neo-evangelicals generally, the Bible is uniquely authoritative and relevant. It is the unique and final revelation of God. It has been stated that in the modern evangelical movement those who insist upon an infallible Bible, or rather the infallibility of the original autographs, have been subverted by the Calvinists. It is true that Wesley in his commentary on Matthew's genealogy acknowledges that the writer may have used erroneous sources, and that the Spirit of God would not necessarily have pointed out errors in the sources used (Wesley, *Explanatory Notes* on Matthew 1:1). As Wesley put it, "The evangelists . . . act only as historians . . . as they stood in those public and allowed

records. Therefore, they were to take them as they found them. Nor was it needful that they should correct the mistakes, if there were any." Elsewhere, however, Wesley said, "If there is one mistake in the Bible, there may as well be a thousand, and it could not have come from the God of truth." As McGiffert points out, the debating of the authority and accuracy of the Bible was intolerable to early Methodists. Without hesitation they affirmed the full accuracy, authority, and relevance of the Scriptures.

Reason in Interpreting the Scriptures. The hermeneutical principles used by Wesley and his successors is an important factor in evaluating their contribution to the contemporary scene. Wesley himself wrote *An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion.* This was his bid to challenge the sophisticated people of his generation. He pointed out in this treatise that there are two kinds of reason, natural and divine; that natural reason reveals nature, while spiritual illumination is essential to a knowledge of God (cf. I Cor. 2:1-16). Wesley stressed that the Spirit of God is the medium of divine revelation. In other words, the "natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit." For this, he must have had a special revelation; unaided reason is not enough. This is at variance with the spirit of his age, at least of those that said "Christianity is as old as creation" and that natural religion is enough. Yet John Wesley scorned placing any premium upon ignorance. Instead, he urged study. He himself taught logic. He exemplifies close analytical reasoning in his sermons and essays. Wesley scorned sophistry and all attempts at affectation. He sought instead the simplicity of the First Epistle of John. As Hildebrand points out, "He would stand no Deism, no nonsense, and no 'dialectical' theology of the twentieth century type" (F. Hildebrand, *Christianity According to the Wesleys,* London, 1956). Wesley scorned the current admiration for Jacob Boehme as, in the eyes of his contemporaries, "above the Apostles" —saying of Boehme, "He quite spoils the taste, which can relish nothing so well as high, obscure, unintelligible jargon" (*Works,* IX, 514). If Wesley spoke thus about his contemporaries, what would he have said of the dialectical theologians of the twentieth century? Wesley would have abhorred the "death of God" theologians as much as he scorned David Hume, whom he considered "worse than a Turk or an infidel."

Experience. Wesley tested his interpretation of Scripture not only on reason but by experience. On one occasion he wrote that unless his doctrines were experienced by people he would question their validity. On another occasion, however, he said that if this doctrine is Scriptural it does not matter whether anybody else has experienced it or not. The factor of experience played an important part throughout Wesley's life,

and he remained open to the evidence from this source. In this he had a precedent in the New Testament, where the apostles formulated their doctrine of Gentile inclusion on the basis of Peter's experience at the house of Cornelius and that of Paul and Barnabas in preaching to the Gentiles. With Wesley, this emphasis on experience began when as he was en route to Georgia, he found German believers who seemed to have more of the grace of God than he and other Englishmen. He also evidenced this in Georgia and back in London, where at least he had his own personal experience of assurance of saving grace. After this he pursued the subject among the Pietists at Herrnhut, Germany. Its influence was most decisive during the London revival in 1762. At this time there were some five hundred witnesses in London alone who professed having had a second definite work of grace, resulting in the love of God filling their lives. Wesley closely examined and cross-examined these witnesses and assured himself that they were not misguided fanatics, but were sincerely and candidly reporting a *fait accompli.* This was probably the most important single factor in his emphasis upon the second work of grace and the availability of perfect love instantaneously on the basis of faith. In this respect Wesley was like a modern psychiatrist, critically testing, classifying, evaluating with scientific detachment. He gives one the impression that if these testimonies had not met the criteria of authenticity he would have repudiated the whole matter.

Conference. Another method used by Wesley in the exegesis of the Scriptures was Christian conference. He was convinced there was value in conferring with other spiritually-minded brethren. As the early Christians had the Jerusalem conference to settle a doctrinal matter, so the earliest gatherings of Methodist ministers were for the purpose of hammering out debated doctrinal points. The *Minutes of Several Conversations* reflect the theological concern and quest of these first dialogues. The conclusions reached then were the result not only of one individual's experience and interpretation, but of checking with that of his brethren. They studied, prayed, and talked until there was some consensus. This is another respect in which the early Methodists followed the precedent of the early Christians and set a precedent for our contemporary appreciation of the importance of discussion, dialogue, conference.

Anthropology (The Doctrine of Man)

Freedom. Man has freedom and hence moral responsibility. For Augustine and Luther the emphasis was upon the bondage of the will. To them man is "dead." His depravity is so total that he cannot even will to do the will of God. Augustine's contemporary, Pelagius, and Erasmus

later, stated that man is not a "dead" man but a "well" man. He has freedom of the will; there is no total depravity. While the Augustinians stressed grace at the risk of man's responsibility, Pelagius and Erasmus stressed man's responsibility with the risk of minimizing divine grace. To Arminius and Wesley, man is "sick." His is a limited freedom. The key word is synergism—man and God working together. Man's depravity is total in extent but not total in degree; not total to the extent that he cannot even will to do the will of God.

Sin. Wesley has been criticized by some modern Wesleyans for having a view of sin which was materialistic. It has been said by such scholars as Sugden, Flew, Sangster, Lee, and McConnell that Wesley considered the elimination of sin as comparable to the extration of a bad tooth. They say this in rejection of the concept of eradication as cleansing. This is not a true picture of Wesley's doctrine of sin. Wesley did not think of sin as materialistic, as anything inherent in the flesh. He thought of it as purely a spiritual concept and as centered in the will. His sermon on "Sin in Believers" makes this plain.

Wesley would not agree with Karl Barth that sin is "an ontological impossibility." He would not have committed himself to the Barthian notion of universal salvation. For Wesley, as in the Bible, sin is rebellion. He accepted a moral dualism of the universe in which it was possible for a man to rebel against God and to remain rebellious. Thus Wesley was more Biblical than Barth. Wesley would have agreed with some of Bultmann's emphasis; namely, the necessity for an existential decision. Wesley would not be satisfied with speculation or a rethinking of theology. What he demanded was commitment. As for himself, no sooner did he see the light than he followed through by acting upon it. Thus he was both a theoretician and an activist.

Most of the differences in the Wesleyan view of sanctification are derivative from the doctrine of sin, as Richard Taylor and others have stated effectively (e.g., R. S. Taylor, *A Right Conception of Sin*). This is the chief difference between Wesleyans and other evangelicals. For the reformers, especially for Calvin, sin was any "want of conformity to the perfect will of God." This would include infirmities of flesh and mind as well as defects of love. For Wesley the emphasis was upon disobedience; it was any defect of motive or of love, not a defect of knowledge or of strength. Like those in the reformed tradition, Wesley recognized that sin was two-fold in its nature. For actual transgressions, pardon was needed to remove guilt; for a sinful condition, purity was needed to deal with the source from which acts proceed. This, it was believed, would cure the double-minded man from his instability.

The Doctrine of Salvation

Justification. Like the other reformers, Wesley insisted that justification comes by faith; unlike them, however, he stressed its availability to all men, not to the elect only. He believed that it was not faith alone but faith evidenced by works. On this issue he parted company with the Quietists and also with the Moravians.

Sanctification. As already noted, sanctification in Wesleyan thought was separation from the common and unclean and dedication unto God. It had the facets of being implicit, actual, and entire. He validated it by Scriptural exegesis, by its reasonableness, and by the way it actually worked. In retrospect, this emphasis upon entire sanctification is seen to be the most distinctive feature in Wesleyan theology.

Assurance. In Wesley's day, the doctrine of the witness of the Spirit to one's own standing with God, was regarded as fanatical. The Bishop of London described Wesley's doctrine of the witness of the Spirit as "a very horrid thing." It was regarded as spiritual arrogance to claim God's favor or endorsement. Those who testified to being well pleasing to God were suspected of being unbalanced fanatics. Wesley defended this practice both in word and in his writings. He encouraged the writing and publication of testimonies to full salvation. This witnessing was on the street corners, in class meetings, and on the printed page. Among evangelicals today it is a doctrine that is well accepted and no longer an object of controversy.

Social Concern

In the New Testament, as in the Old, there is seldom a mention of the importance of loving God without including also loving one's neighbor as one's self. This means a concern, not only for his eternal welfare, but his temporal well being in addition. The early Methodists, illuminated and motivated by the Spirit of God, adopted similar attitudes and practices at a time when social consciousness as such was not well developed. The eighteenth century witnessed penal institutions which were devoid of the attitude of showing justice and mercy or rehabilitating the criminal. Frugality and greater prosperity were a by-product of the evangelical awakening. The effects of this movement are to be seen throughout the world. Recently on "The Lutheran Hour," a gospel broadcast on radio, a sermon was preached warning against the misuse of money, against the delusion that money and what it can buy constitute the most important aspects of life. Wesley's sermon on the use of money forms a parallel to this. This warning is perhaps even more relevant than in Wesley's day

because wealth has increased, and secularism is an increasingly accepted way of life. In his sermon Wesley urged that we earn all we can without hurting ourselves or our mind or our neighbor. He next urged that we save all we can, that we be frugal and disciplined in our use of money, that nothing should be spent for self-indulgence, gratification of the appetites, or ministering to pride, "keeping up with the Joneses," or pampering children with useless gadgets. He rather exhorted to be good stewards and to give all one can to the work of God. This admonition, not against the use of money, but against its misuse, can bear stress today. To this end Wesley urged simplicity as well as neatness in appearance. The multiplication of wealth and leisure in the twentieth century makes these admonitions even more important than when first uttered.

Civil Liberties

Wesley was concerned with the rights of the individual, with civil rights. Wesley, on February 12, 1772, joined in the denunciation of slavery as "that execrable sum of all villainies. His most powerful contribution to the anti-slavery movement was his *Thoughts on Slavery,* a pamphlet of fifty-three pages published in 1774. "No more severe arraignment of slavery was ever written" (D. D. Thompson, *John Wesley As A Social Reformer,* New York, 1898, p. 47). Some regard it as influential as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in arousing popular condemnation of the slave trade. The last letter that Wesley wrote only four days before his death, was upon the subject of slavery. It was addressed to William Wilburforce, the leader of the movement for the emancipation of slaves in the West Indies. In it Wesley characterized American slavery as "the vilest that ever saw the sun." He addressed Wilburforce as "an Athanasius contra mundum," urging him to go on in the name of God. Wesley's influence was great, and his stand on this subject was like a bugle blast in arousing the people.

Wesley was also quick to recognize and utilize science in the relief of human suffering. He set up, for example, a public clinic in which he had installed a "medical machine," a pioneering attempt to bring relief to the people. Few men knew better than did Wesley the ills of the society in which he lived and labored. The Hulsean lecturer for 1895 said, "The man who did most to reform the social life of England in the last century was John Wesley. His appeal was direct; it was an appeal to the individual; his aim was to reach the heart and conscience of each man" (Thompson, *op. cit.* p. 24). Wesley was clear and emphatic in urging his followers to refrain from slovenliness, laziness, filthiness, tobacco, snuff, and alcohol. He was especially stern with drunkards. He appealed to the smugglers to

change their occupation. He preached as well as practiced visiting the poor, relieving the sick, attending to the orphans and widows; so much so that Samuel Johnson complained that he could not get Wesley to engage in conversation for more than an hour before he had to run off to help some poor person. The indirect results of the Wesleyan revival included the formation of the British and Foreign Bible Society, the Religious Tract Society, the London Missionary Society, and even the Church Missionary Society owes much to his impetus. Later, William Booth and his Salvation Army, a direct result of British Methodism, concentrated on the total needs of the "inner city."

The Contemporary Scene

Although John Wesley abhorred the institution of slavery, his contemporary George Whitefield not only approved it but became a slaveholder. At the time of his death he possessed seventy-five slaves on his orphanage house plantations. Whitefield tended to justify this by the necessity of relieving the white people of drudgery and adding to their prosperity. He also justified it on the basis that it might provide an opportunity to preach the gospel and give the Negroes a hope of life everlasting. This, he said, "swallows up all temporal inconveniences whatsoever" (*Letter to John Wesley from Bristol,* March 22, 1751). The modern holiness movement appears to have been more in the tradition of Whitefield than of Wesley with reference to its attitude toward slavery and civil rights. With the exception of a few feeble protests, the modern holiness movement and the contemporary evangelicals are by and large rather indifferent to the needs of minorities and their civic rights. If Wesley were here today, he would be very articulate in demanding that love for one's neighbor expresses itself in invitations to fellowship and to worship on the same basis. He would call for the abolition of discrimination in renting, in education, and in public accommodations. He would be calling for equality of opportunity without respect to ancestral origin. Since he was a conservative with great respect for law and order, it is questionable whether he would approve civil rights demonstrations, even to support a good cause; but he would be an eloquent and articulate witness, whether in sermon or editorial or possibly in a march. He would doubtless urge his preachers, by precept and example, to make it clear that no one would be excluded from their congregations or homes or fellowship on the basis of race alone.

The Ecumenical Movement

As an evangelical seeking to live according to the New Testament, Wesley could be as uncompromising as St. Paul in matters of doctrine. For this reason he split with the Moravians on the issue of means of grace. At the same time he is author of a sermon entitled, "On Having a Catholic Spirit," in which he said differences of opinion would not keep him from having fellowship with others who are like-minded with him. Today he would doubtless be prominent in the ecumenical movement, urging unity if not union, but unity on the basis of Christ and not simply for union as an end in itself. He would be alert to the importance of unity in order to make witnessing effective. Because Wesley was in the Pietist tradition, which places the stress not upon precision in doctrine but in vital transformed living, Wesley would feel at home among others like-minded, notwithstanding differences of background. Latitude in area of opinions, unity in doctrinal essentials, and liberty in church polity are the essential ingredients in a true ecumenicity which is greatly needed today. Wesley would have little sympathy with splinter groups who separate in order to preserve their own vested interests or leadership opportunities. He would have scant sympathy for a parochial point of view which considers self-preservation more important than evangelical witness to the world. He would certainly rebuke predatory practices by which some groups grow by feeding on other sister churches. In this area it is important to do unto others as we would have others do unto us, and at the same time seek, in the unity of the Spirit, that measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.

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