

Some Implications of Wesleyan Theology for Christian Education

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The term 'Wesleyan theology' is used here in the time honored sense. By it is meant doctrines propounded in such volumes as Wakefield's abridgement of *Watson's Institutes* in which are presented without distortion beliefs which were basic in the Wesleyan revival and which are in the main subscribed to by contemporary Wesleyans.

Wesleyan theology maintains the genuineness, integrity and authority of the Holy Scriptures; the doctrine of the Triune God with His several attributes, the Sonship and Person of Christ, the personality and deity of the Holy Ghost; the decrees of God; creation; divine providence; doctrines respecting man: his primitive state, the fall and its effects, man's moral responsibility; the remedial dispensation with the doctrine of the atonement and its extent; the doctrine of election; justification, regeneration, adoption and sanctification; the possibility of total apostasy; the moral law and Christianity; the church and institutions of Christianity; eschatology; future rewards and punishments.

Certain of these doctrines have a direct and unique bearing upon contemporary problems in Christian education. That theology is alive in Christian education is indicated by the type of books appearing in the field from Chave's *A Functional Approach to Religious Education*, Harner's *The Educational Work of the Church* and Smith's *Faith and Nurture* to Smart's *The Teaching Ministry of the Church*, Waterink's *Basic Concepts in Christian Pedagogy*, Schisler's *Christian Teaching in the Churches* and Wyckoff's *The Task of Christian Education*.

Among Wesleyan influences upon Christian education are: (1) the Wesleyan view of the Bible; (2) the Wesleyan emphasis upon catechismic Christian experience with the assurance by the Holy Spirit of salvation; (3) the Arminian view of the doctrines of election and free grace; (4) the doctrine of the moral law as not abrogated but passing over into the covenant of grace; (5) the doctrine of man and his moral responsibility; (6) the child and evangelism and nurture; (7) Wesley's own application of doctrine to practice in education.

(1) The Wesleyan doctrine of the Bible as authority is of great contemporary significance for the question of authority is at the heart of educational theory and practice in this our day. The problem of authority is a serious one not only from the standpoint of the spiritual state of our people, but from the standpoint of mental health. In a recent article in *Newsweek* on mental health in America appeared a quotation from Dr. Karl Menninger concerning the importance of this problem: "The truth of the matter is," he says, "that most Americans today exist without purpose and without significance. They have no articulate philosophy; they do not live within any frame of reference."¹

A literate generation in this confusing age finds itself in jeopardy much as did an illiterate generation in the time of the Wesleys. The Bible as a frame of reference in that day led England out of threatened chaos. Wesleyanism contending for the Bible as basic curriculum material for all age groups, proffers a frame of reference which has historically brought peace to heart and mind.

For the resolution of moral confusion it proffers an authoritative New Testament code of ethics; for doubt, fear and uncertainty it proposes the love of God which will come with its abiding, comforting presence into the surrendered life.

In Wesleyan theology the Christian teacher is not a blind guide groping with the blind but one who has learned by both training and experience to speak with assurance and power. As the physician or legal counselor comforts with the assurance of authority, likewise the Christian teacher does not throw futility back upon itself, but speaks in the name of the Master in terms of authority.

The Wesleyan approach to education, though authoritative, recognizes areas of independent thought and action made possible through the integration of personality around ultimate revealed truth.

The acceptance of the authoritative written word by Wesleyans implies intelligent recognition of the place of verbalism in education.

(2) At no time, however, has the Wesleyan position been that persons may be saved by processes of education whether "pupil centered" or authoritarian. Wesley said:

Let it be carefully remembered all this time, that God, not man, is the

¹ *Newsweek* for October 24, 1955, "The Mind—Science's Search for a Guide to Sanity."

physician of souls; that it is He, and none else who giveth medicine to heal our natural sickness; that all the help which is done upon earth he doeth it himself; that none of all the children of men is able to bring a clean thing out of an unclean.²

In his sermon "On Family Religion," he maintained the same position:

We may inquire, first, what is it to serve the Lord, not as a Jew but as a Christian? . . . The first thing implied in this service is faith; believing on the name of the Son of God. We cannot perform an acceptable service to God till we believe on Jesus Christ whom he hath sent. Here the spiritual worship of God begins. As soon as any one has the witness in himself, as soon as he can say, "The life that I now live I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" he is able to truly serve the Lord.³

It is the Wesleyan belief that emotion has to do with the making of character; that nobility of character is forged in hot fires.

Paul Voelker in his notable studies as a pioneer in the field of the psychology of character was motivated in his studies by childhood experiences such as when his Wesleyan mother conditioned him against the use of a bad word by her horrified reaction to its use. Voelker in his studies helped to make "conditioning" an everyday term in the study of personality. Long before Voelker, however, Wesleyanism centered religion in the heart but evaluated religious experience in terms of "what saith the Lord?" While in practice, other religious educators seem to largely identify religion with the intellect alone, Wesleyans identify it also with the emotions and the will. Repentance in Wesleyan terms means godly sorrow for sin and turning away from it. Sorrow is emotion and turning away from sin is an act of the will. By mere intellectual processes of education the mind may be enlightened concerning human responsibility, but "with the heart man believeth unto righteousness."

The Holy Spirit both warns the sinner and woos him; and the Wesleyan teacher knows that salvation cannot be wrought nor assurance brought by any mere words of man, whether they be emotional or didactic.

While some teachers stress Christian "experiences" rather than "conversion" the Wesleyan teacher is concerned with abiding Christian experience and the "inner witness" as its assurance. This

² Wesley, John, *Sermons on Several Occasions*, "On the Education of Children," Vol. 1, Lane and Sanford, New York, N. Y. p. 309.

³ Wesley, John, *Sermons on Several Occasions*, "On Family Religion."

means a sense of urgency, of concern, of compassion for the pupil that he may come to the experience of salvation. It is the Wesleyan view that individuals do not become Christians by gradual processes of which they themselves are not even aware but by an instantaneous work of grace. That this view is not held by all religious educators, even in the conservative tradition, is fully recognized.

Jan Waterink while naming regeneration as needful to the Christian life, says of the ultimate aim in education: "Is it not then correct to say that the goal of education should be to form the child into the man of God? Certainly, that is correct,"⁴ and James D. Smart says of teaching:

What, then, is teaching? Teaching essentially (but not exclusively) addresses itself to the situation of the man who has repented and turned to God and to the situation of children of believers who through the influence of their parents have in them a measure of faith, even though they have also in them a large measure of unbelief. There have been Christian sects that have set such an exclusive emphasis upon repentance and faith that they have abandoned the work of teaching. Children before conversion were regarded as so completely unbelievers that they were incapable of understanding anything of Christian truth. All attempts to instruct them would necessarily be wasted. And when they or others were converted they were immediately by God's converting act transplanted into a state of grace in which instruction was superfluous. Such an order and such a viewpoint are unbiblical. God has established a function of teaching in his church as well as a function of preaching, that his work of grace may take place, not just at one decisive moment in a man's life, but throughout the whole of it if possible from earliest infancy to most advanced years.⁵

Nevin C. Harner has said of Christian education that it is a "reverent attempt to discover the divinely ordained process by which individuals grow toward Christ-likeness and to work with that process."⁶

There is also the well known claim of Horace Bushnell that a child may from the moment of birth be reared in such a way that he need never to know himself to be a sinner.

Ernest Chave limits the religious life of the individual to processes of the physical organism only.

⁴ Waterink, Jan, *Basic Concepts in Christian Pedagogy*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1954, p. 38.

⁵ Smart, James D., *The Teaching Ministry of the Church*, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1954. p. 20.

⁶ Harner, Nevin C., *The Educational Work for the Church*, Abingdon-Cokesberg, Nashville, Tenn., 1939. p. 20.

There were many churchmen in Wesley's day who accepted the teaching of instantaneous conversion against a background of non-acceptance of it, however, as many are doing in our day.

(3) *Although there were Calvinist leaders in the Wesleyan revival, notably Whitefield, Wesleyan doctrine is Arminian.*

Arminianism implies for Christian education a much heavier burden than does Calvinism. In Calvinism, the individual having once responded to the effectual call is eternally secure; he cannot fall away and be lost. Wesleyan theology, however, holds to the doctrine of regeneration as an experience in which a sinner is transformed into a Christian who may if he is not faithful fall away and be lost. For Christian education this means that conversion and sanctification do not insure against the possibility of falling from grace. So for Wesleyans teaching involves more than encouraging growth in grace, wonderful and important as that is; it means more than preparation for service and better churchmanship. It is indispensable to salvation itself. In Wesleyanism "Feed my sheep" is vitally related to evangelism. Since the Wesleyan emphasis is upon the emotions and the will as well as the intellect, some Wesleyan enthusiasts have tended to regard revivalism as the evangelistic work of the church and Christian education as a sort of prosaic addendum to such efforts or even in opposition to them. Instead, revivalism is the source and fountain head of Christian education as is attested to by the teaching and practice of the Wesleys themselves.

(4) *The far reaching social implications of Wesleyanism were evidenced in the great revival.* Changed lives and attitudes in a decadent social milieu were insisted upon as evidences of the attainment of Christian character. According to Wesleyan doctrine being a Christian connoted being a good man, and a good man influenced his environment. For him the moral law was not abrogated but passed over into the covenant of grace, and was restated in the Sermon on the Mount. Wesleyan theology blessed the world in an age suffering for lack of decent men by impressing upon men morality and decency as a result of both the regenerating and restraining power of the Holy Spirit. Since the Holy Spirit regenerates men and restrains unregenerated men both salvation and morality are stressed in a Sunday school of the Wesleyan tradition. It is believed that salvation is infinitely the higher good but that good morals even in the prudential sense are also a blessing. Christian education

is held to be not only indispensable to evangelism but basic to a livable, decent culture. Christianity is both a spiritual state and a social influence. And while it is true that morality and good works do not save people, Christian education may improve the environment into which children are born and live. The Wesleyan theologian is not antinomian, so with great earnestness he teaches the common virtues to the just and the unjust alike.

Wesleyan theology is missionary in its outlook, beginning at Jerusalem. If men love their neighbors in the fear of God, the missionary spirit germinates. The Wesleyan passion for goodness maintains a growing edge. It is not confined to words but expresses itself in Christian benevolence for individual needs and worthy causes. So Christian service and the sharing of one's means finds a place in the subject matter of Wesleyan teaching.

(5) *Wesleyan theology maintains that all men are born sinful.* They are judged in terms of moral responsibility as regards the life to come but the nature of every human being must be supernaturally changed or regenerated for him to be saved. In infants dying before the age of accountability is reached, regeneration takes place with no volitional attitude on their part. But if moral responsibility is attained and they commit sin, they are judged according to the deeds done in the body and are condemned accordingly. Hence, all children reaching the age of accountability are to be converted, for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.

(6) *Questions inherent in the doctrine of regeneration have to do with the nature of man and the status of children in relation to the Kingdom of God.* Wesleyan teaching is that men are born with a bent to sin; that they are totally depraved in the sense of utter inability to save themselves. Depravity is not merely a matter of deprivation but is a spiritual disease corrupting the nature of man. Wesley used the term "disease" frequently in his sermon "On the Education of Children."

J. W. Prince in his well documented work *Wesley on Christian Education*, says that at the age of fifty John Wesley published as his own under the title "A Treatise on Baptism" a sermon by his father, Samuel Wesley, on the subject "Short Discourse on Baptism." In this sermon the baptismal regeneration of infants is projected. But according to Prince:

There is no evidence to show that Wesley ever put the foregoing theory into practice. The evidence points to another theory altogether according to

which the aims of the revival method and religious education are the same. It is the theory that conversion is universally necessary for children as well as adults.⁷

And again, concerning Wesley's school, Kingswood, Prince says:

Inasmuch as the students of this school (Kingswood) were to be drawn largely from Methodist homes, and, in part at least, from preachers' homes, it is to be expected that they would be baptized. Yet Wesley encouraged the experience of the new birth in these children not only during his own frequent meetings with them, but also through their masters. The *Journal* records also that he preached on education in other places—Bristol, Manchester, London—using this same sermon. There is no reason for believing that in these places he refrained from stimulating children to regeneration. On the contrary, according to the *Journal*, wherever he met children his chief desire was to cultivate in them a sense of their sinful nature and a desire for a cure, by talks on their natural state, and on the first principles of religion, namely, repentance and faith. All the evidence points to the fact that he labored as strenuously to bring children into the instantaneous experience of religion as he advised parents to train them up in religion.⁸

The Wesleyan emphasis upon Christian joy, upon the "inner witness," are aspects of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. In relation to the sentiments and the will, motivation and attitudes are important. But so is teaching in its intellectual aspects. When the Sunday school movement was but three years old Wesley said, "Who knows but some of these schools may become nurseries for Christians?" and three years later in a letter to a friend, he said of the Sunday school, "It seems these will be one great means of reviving religion throughout the nation. I wonder Satan has not sent some able champion against them." The Wesleyan movement arose among the under-privileged and illiterate, but its scholarly leader strove against ignorance with all his might demanding the organization of classes everywhere and the individual instruction of children by Methodist preachers in every society and center. Methodist preachers were required to read books.

(7) *It is no strange thing that Wesleyanism has been in the vanguard of Christian educational thought and practice, for John Wesley's interest in education for children and adults was more than academic, and was greatly in advance of his time. But particularly did his heart go out to childhood that they might be saved and nur-*

⁷ Prince, John W., *Wesley on Christian Education*, Methodist Book Concern, New York, 1926, p. 98.

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 97.

tured in the gospel. He insisted that children sing and selected from the hymns of his brother Charles forty-four which he published as *Hymns for Children*. Pestalozzi, the Swiss educational innovator, quite removed geographically and otherwise from John Wesley, in his theory of "harmonious development" proposed and introduced singing as a means of developing the moral and aesthetic powers of pupils and led the children of his school into the out-of-doors that they might learn from nature. Pestalozzi was a naturalist advocating universal education. But here we have John Wesley an Anglican priest advocating within the framework of orthodoxy the enduring similar ideas used by such an innovator as Pestalozzi, in regard to singing, lessons from nature, and universal education.

Wesley favored universal education and recognized in the Sunday school an approach to the problem. He said in teaching about God teachers should interest children first in the sun and its work in causing flowers and trees and grass to grow and then point to God as the power behind the sun, causing it to shine and giving it its warmth.⁹ The teacher is to say to the children:

He loves you: he loves to do you good. He loves to make you happy. Should you not then love him? You love me because I love you and do you good. But it is God that makes me love you. Therefore, you should love him.¹⁰

He tells of Fletcher speaking to a group of inattentive children when a robin flew into the house, whereupon Fletcher took the robin as his text and spoke to the children successfully "on the harmlessness of that little creature and the tender care of the Creator."¹¹

One day Wesley preached to a group of five hundred fifty Methodist Sunday school children using no word of more than two syllables from the text "Come, ye children, hearken unto me and I will teach you the fear of the Lord." He said that children are to be taught not only early and plainly, but frequently. Recognizing individual differences he cautioned teachers to "be patient with the dull and the perverse."¹²

His *Instructions to all Parents and Schoolmasters* includes the principles of pupil participation and the socialized recitation.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 123.

¹⁰ *Ibid*.

¹¹ *Ibid*.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 124.

Above all, let them not read or say one line without understanding and minding what they say. Try them over and over; stop them short, almost in every sentence, and ask them, "What was it you said last? Read it again. What do you mean by that?" so that if it be possible, they may pass by nothing until it has taken some hold upon them. By this means they will learn to *think* as they learn to *read*. They will grow wiser and better every day.¹³

In this consideration of the implications of Wesleyan theology for contemporary Christian education attention has been given to the nature of man prior to regeneration.

The Wesleyan emphasis upon cataclysmic Christian experience and the "inner witness" involves a vital, life centered educational approach, pupil centered to a degree not otherwise possible.

The Wesleyan movement being of necessity so largely a lay movement coming out of the white heat of a great revival has had to adjust its sights to the bearing of nurture upon salvation in the Arminian tradition.

It is phenomenal that a great revival movement among adults, a movement not based upon a theory of "growing from birth" in the Kingdom of God or into it should have so furthered and promoted the coming of a new day for childhood both in and out of the church.

Susannah Wesley put the world in her debt by her influence upon her sons in their early training who in turn have put the world in their debt by their emphasis upon Christian education.

The Holy Spirit as the Great Teacher laying hold through the mind and heart of John Wesley upon music, the beauties and wonders of nature, pupil participation in instruction on an informal basis, and meeting individual differences, gave to the church a claim to a wholesome and constructive influence upon educational progress in modern times.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 126.