

A Wesleyan Theology of Cultural Competency

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DOI: 10.7252/Paper. 000038

About the Author

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Introduction

Cultural competence has become an increasingly significant concern in Christian higher education. The Council for Christian Colleges and Universities has adopted two major themes for work over the next several years to emphasize racial harmony and diversity and to equip campuses to be more global in every respect. These themes have taken priority because employers are looking for persons who know how to work for and with people of increasingly diverse racial, ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds (Andringa 2002).

These themes have also gained importance because of the changing demographics in the classroom, and the society in general in North America and elsewhere. Increased numbers of students from non-Caucasian ethnic backgrounds demand educator versatility in knowledge and skills which will help equip students in American classrooms. Persons who come from Black, Hispanic and Asian ethnic backgrounds, although born and raised in North America, often bring cultural capital that is unique to them and their ethnic communities. Linguist Joshua Fishman argues:

Ethnicity has always been experienced as a kinship phenomenon, continuity within the self and within those who share an intergenerational link to common ancestors. Ethnicity is partly experienced as being bone of their bone, flesh of their flesh and blood of their blood. It is crucial that we recognize ethnicity as a tangible, living reality that makes every human a link in an eternal bond from generation to generation – from past ancestors to those in the future (Fishman in Scupin 2003:76).

Ethnicity is a common experience shared by a group of individuals that lends itself to being both particular and universal in time and in place. It is particular in that members of an ethnic group will hold to certain values, beliefs, and norms particular to their group (recognizing that consensus among members of an ethnic group regarding these may not be present). It is universal to the extent that Christians from different ethnic groups across the world share a common experience through the values and beliefs held in regard to their faith.¹

In this paper, theological resources offered by John Wesley will be explored to respond to the need for cultural competency in North America today. I will begin by exploring the meaning of cultural competency and present a working definition of the concept. Toward the end of the paper I will outline possible applications for constructing a Wesleyan theology of cultural competence.

Cultural Competence

This paper will work with the definition student affairs practitioners Pope, Reynolds, and Mueller provide. They define cultural competence as, “the awareness, knowledge, and skills needed to work with others who are culturally different from self in meaningful, relevant and productive ways,” (2004:13). No individual is an exact replica of the other. While there are several characteristics such as personality and gender that make us unique from each other, another is coming from a different cultural and ethnic background. Cultural competence then is one’s ability to engage with someone from another culture. It is said that cultural competence, understanding one’s own culture and other cultures, can lead to more effective action across cultures (Kennedy 2013:5). The ability to engage and relate with one another comes from having an awareness of the differences and similarities amongst cultures, gaining knowledge by experiencing another culture and developing the skills in order to interact effectively.

Pope, Reynolds, and Mueller emphasize that cultural awareness, or the ability to be aware of different values, attitudes, and assumptions, is a significant aspect of cultural competence.

Cultural knowledge consists of the content knowledge about various cultural groups. Cultural skills consist of those behaviors that allow us to effectively apply the cultural awareness and knowledge we have internalized. Central to those skills is the ability to communicate across cultures and understand how culture influences the content as well as the verbal and nonverbal aspects of communication. Without a foundation of cultural awareness and knowledge, it is difficult to make culturally sensitive and appropriate interventions (2004:15).

The above definition and explanation helps us understand what is implied by “they are looking for persons who know how to work for and work with people of increasingly diverse racial, ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds” (Andringa 2002). Employers are looking for people who are able to communicate across cultures while understanding the implications of a person’s cultural context. This concern, of course, is not limited to the employment sector of our society alone. The changing demographics of our societies require us to know how to communicate across cultures.

Student inquiries on addressing persons of different ethnicity, nationality, and race, and comments expressing a preference for one race over another suggest a limited knowledge of the Christian faith, compassion and communication. These questions have partly prompted this paper to explore questions of cultural competence and diversity through Wesleyan Theology.

How does one become culturally competent, equipped with awareness, knowledge, and skills to enable effective interaction in an ever increasing intercultural environment? How does one learn to relate effectively across cultures?

Christian Higher Education

Christian higher education is a place where faith and learning come together, where a purportedly biblical worldview becomes the lens for learning and understanding. Christian colleges and universities continue to be sought out today by students because of the unique dynamic of being able to integrate faith and learning. While there are challenges to this unique dynamic in the twenty-first century, places of Christian higher learning have persisted by finding ways to stay current.

The distinctive of the Christian college is not that it cultivates piety and religious commitment, for this could be done by church sponsored residence houses on secular campuses. Rather the Christian college is distinctive in that the Christian faith can touch the entire range of life and learning to which a liberal arts education exposes students. In principle Christian perspectives are all

redeeming and all transforming, and it is this which gives rise to the idea of integrating faith with learning (Holmes 1975:45).

The Christian faith provides several significant theological tenets for an all-redeeming and all-transforming education that can theoretically free the mind and allow it to capture themes that liberate it from societal statuses and prejudices that confine and limit.

The Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century provided a special impetus to Christian higher education. According to Mayers, Richards, and Webber, the reformers “renewed the biblical concept of humans and operated from the viewpoint of a unified reality (1972:15).” It taught that humans are created in the image of God, while sin and rebellion caused alienation; humanity’s hope lies in God who provides renewal through His grace. The sacred and the secular are realities that both constitute the presence of God. All of life’s activities are to be done unto the glory of God. The significance of the Reformation, therefore,

lies in the groundwork it laid down for a Christian view of the world and life. It called for a religion of the whole person involved in the whole of culture. Its demands were for a world under God, a Christian society, a people informed by a biblical point of view, serving and enjoying God in all of life. The genius of the Reformation – which also drew from other late-medieval developments – lay in the freedom of the individual under God, the world as the arena of humankind’s religious activity, and God at the center of life, giving meaning to history and culture (Mayers, Richards, and Webber 1972:16).

The Protestant Reformation, of course, preceded the development of Wesleyan thought. The Wesleyan quadrilateral of scripture, tradition, reason, and experience, the emphasis on sanctification of the believer, and the call to holy living and social holiness were not only the major motifs of the Wesleyan tradition but proved to be major contributors to Christian Higher Education. Many of the concepts developed in the Reformation also find expression in the themes of Wesleyan thought, particularly the call for a religion of the whole person involved in the whole of culture. “The Wesleyan quadrilateral fostered a sense of theological charity, whereas the emphasis on sanctification and holy living called for higher standards of conduct. Social holiness demanded a concern for the poor and vulnerable

of society,” (Hughes and Adrian 1997:323). The integration of faith and learning continues to be the hallmark of Christian higher education, creating a space for the integration of the whole person and the whole culture.

Christian higher education, then,

is a process of involvement in a community of scholars who investigate the areas of human knowledge and experience from a [purportedly] Christian worldview. From an enlightened reason and regenerated love, students of Christian higher education will align themselves with the on-going responsibility of the Christian in modern society. The outcome will be participation in the social order as a mature Christian who has an active sense of spiritual responsibility for vocation, whatever that may be (Beebe and Kulaga 2003:140-141).

In a recent address former president of the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities, Robert Andringa, said this about the two major themes identified by the Council as its initiatives:

We must be more global in our thinking, praying, planning and actions. With the partnership of affiliate campuses in 15 nations outside of North America, we have a chance to provide enrichment experiences for students beyond the capacity of most secular institutions. We hope to facilitate ideas of how to make our curricula more reflective of the global economy. Certainly God’s kingdom knows no national boundaries, so Christian students need to be prepared to be thoughtful, informed citizens of the world... The second priority theme for Council staff is, again, such a natural for Christ followers—to be intentional and consistent about advancing racial harmony and diversity. The biblical mandate on this issue is without question (Andringa 2002).

While there is a lack of ethnic diversity on many Christian campuses, this is no excuse to developing cultural competence. In surveys, CCCU students have expressed a disappointment in the lack of diversity on their campuses (Andringa 2002). While a critical mass of persons from other ethnic backgrounds will definitely provide a more robust atmosphere

on a college campus regarding issues of diversity, institutions of higher learning that do not have that critical mass can still strive to be more global in their thinking and in their actions, and can advance the cause of racial harmony and diversity through learning more about other cultures and ethnicities.

Wesleyan Resources

In John Wesley one can find themes that lend themselves towards a rich theology of cultural competence. While these themes don't directly address cultural competence per se, they are concerned with humanity and human life. Cultural competence is the awareness, knowledge, and skills needed to work with others who are culturally different from self in meaningful, relevant, and productive ways. John Wesley learned from many who were different from him both culturally and ethnically. While he may not have always agreed with the "other," he was open to listening and understanding his own thought better due to his interactions with persons different from himself. In his sermon on *A Caution Against Bigotry*, Wesley says,

Take care, first, that you do not convict yourself of bigotry by your unreadiness to believe that any man does cast out devils who differs from you...Yea, if it could be supposed that I should see a Jew, a deist or a Turk doing the same, were I to forbid him either directly or indirectly I should be no better than a bigot still. O stand clear of this. 'Tis well we go thus far, but do not stop here. If you will avoid all bigotry, go on. In every instance of this kind, whatever the instrument may be, acknowledge the finger of God. And not only acknowledge but rejoice in his work, and praise his name with thanksgiving. Encourage whomsoever God is pleased to employ, to give himself wholly up thereto. Speak well of him wheresoever you are; defend his character and his mission. Enlarge as far as you can his sphere of action. Show him all kindness in word and in deed. And cease not to cry to God in his behalf, that he may save both himself and them that hear him (Outler and Heitzenrater 1991:297).

Philip Meadows says there is something hospitable, open and inclusive to be found in the theology of John Wesley, something that can make him optimistic about the activity of God in everyone (2000). John Wesley looked for God in every place he went and in everyone he related with, whether on land or on sea. It did not matter that the person was from another ethnic background or from another culture. On the one hand, he was prepared to affirm all those ways of life in and through which he perceived the grace of God at work, and, on the other hand, he criticized all that he perceived to be contrary to the test of holiness, or love for God and neighbor (Meadows 2000). John Wesley understood that God's grace and His gift of salvation were available for all those who believe. Wesley provides a caution in his sermon against racism and being racist. His famous – and perhaps overused – phrase, “I look upon all the world as my parish” is nonetheless suggestive of his global mindedness. His love of God opened him up to the world. He no longer was limited and confined to England but he traveled to the Americas as a missionary, during which he found himself inadequate. He realized that he came to convert, but he himself was not fully converted to God. His limitations became so glaringly difficult for him to live with that his time in Georgia rendered him desiring a deeper and a stronger faith in God, which would both transform him further and equip him for the cause of preaching Christ to others. Wesley was out of his “comfort zone” in America. He was able to see things in himself that he couldn't when in England. Being out of our “comfort zone” is an important part of becoming culturally competent—we are transformed in the process with the right support and resources. The more he understood who God was the more his understanding of humanity and the purpose of humanity changed. He saw humanity as made in the image of God, deserving the grace of God, saved and perfected by God's own love.

1) Image of God

A good place to begin reflection on a theology of cultural competence is with Wesley's understanding of humanity as made in the image of God. Men and women are made in the image of God, and thus we each reflect God. Although Wesley was not without his own ethnocentrism, he still believed that whether one was a Jew, a deist, or a Turk they were to be treated equally if found doing the work of God. He thoroughly cautioned against judging the instrument whatever it may be.

The Protestant Reformation affirmed that humans were created in the image of God, while sin and rebellion caused alienation; humanity's hope lies in God who allows renewal for people through his grace. Wesley maintained the tension between humanity's created and fallen nature; there is no overlooking sin and the alienation, guilt, and judgment that result from it.

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. For Wesley, that is neither the last nor the first word. Sin is the defacing, but not the total loss, of the image of God. In every person, there is something worth saving and something that can be restored. There is capacity for good, for creativity, for self-giving love—even a capacity to make an everlasting contribution to the kingdom of God that only that person can make (Snyder 2011:75).

Dignity and worth of persons is hard to come by. The world does not easily provide such dignity and worth to persons. The poor are left to be poor, the abandoned are left abandoned, the abused are left abused, and the destroyed are left unattended in many instances. The biblical message calls us to assist in restoring the image of God that has been left poor, abandoned, abused and destroyed, regardless of the person's ethnic or racial status; the image of God must be restored. Part of this process of restoration invites us to relate to – and engage with – the other in meaningful, productive and relevant ways, (Pope *et al* 2004). Skills need to be developed in order to know how to work for and work with people of diverse racial, ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds in order to help restore the image of God in them.

What does it mean to be made in the image of God? What image are people being restored to? Christopher Wright states,

Much theological ink has been spilled on trying to pin down exactly what it is about human beings that can be identified as the essence of the image of God in us. Is it our rationality, our moral consciousness, our capacity for relationship, our sense of responsibility to God? Even our upright posture and the expressiveness of the human face have been canvassed as the locus of the image of God in humankind. Since the Bible nowhere defines the term, it is probably futile to attempt to do so very precisely. In any case, we should not so much think of the image of God as an independent “thing” that we somehow possess. God

did not give to human beings the image of God. Rather, it is a dimension of our very creation. The expression, “in our image” is adverbial that is it describes the way God made us, not adjectival that is, as if it simply described a quality we possess. The image of God is not so much something we possess, as what we are. To be human is to be the image of God. It is not an extra feature added to our species; it is definitive of what it means to be human (Wright 2006:421).

So, if the Bible does not define the term for us, are we able to conclude the image we are to restore from understanding who God is and who we are in relation to Him? Genesis 1-3 affirms at least four significant truths about humanity; all human beings are addressable by God, all human beings are accountable to God, all human beings have dignity and equality, and the biblical gospel fits all (Wright 2006:424).

Student comments expressing a preference for one race over another undermine or deny biblical truth that we all embody the image of God. Whether we are Black or Hispanic, White, or Asian, Native American or Pacific Islander we are the image of God. We all in some sense reflect God. We all have similar dignity and equality in the eyes of God. And since institutions of Christian higher learning bring faith and culture together in their learning, we should explicitly and implicitly teach our students the biblical truth that is affirmed right down through the ages, from the Reformation to John Wesley, we are made in God’s image. Wesley says,

Man was made in the image of God....He was, after the likeness of his Creator, endued with *understanding*, a capacity of apprehending whatever objects were brought before it, and of judging concerning them. He was endued with a *will*, exerting itself in various affections and passions; and lastly with *liberty*, or freedom to choice, without which all the rest would have been in vain, and he would have been no more capable of serving his Creator than a piece of earth or marble. He would have been as incapable of vice or virtue as any part of the inanimate creation. In these, in the power of self-motion, understanding, will and liberty, the natural image of God consisted (Outler 1985:439).

that, In his sermon, *The Image of God*, John Wesley further acknowledges

there are those of our age and nation who greedily close with this old objection, and eagerly maintain that they were not made in the image of the living God, but of the beasts that perish; who heartily contend that it was not the divine but the brutal likeness in which they were created, and earnestly assert 'that they themselves are beasts' in a more literal sense. These consequently reject with scorn the account God has given of man, and affirm it to be contrary to reason and (to the account itself), as well as it is to their practice (Outler and Heitzenrater 1991:14).

Societies have often played a significant part in diminishing the image of God in persons by considering one ethnic or racial group to be superior to another. Biblically, however, in our essential humanity we are no less nor more than the other because we are all made in the image of God. The grace of God gives us the opportunity to renew our understanding, the understanding that is distorted and that refuses to acknowledge the image of God in the other. Wesley's theological anthropology constantly returned to the threefold social-historical interpretation of human existence: created in the image of God, fallen by its own volition, restored and reclaimed by God's mercy (Oden 1994:133). The image of God in humans was, as a result of the Fall, distorted but not eliminated.

2) Grace of God

The grace of God makes restoration of fallen men and women possible. Wesley understood grace as prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying.

The threefold distinction describes the way people experience that grace and shows the depth and breadth of God's redemptive initiative. Through prevenient grace people are drawn to God—though most often they resist God's gracious love. If they respond positively, however—receiving God's "awakening"—then preceding grace becomes justifying grace. Justifying grace then is

immediately transformed into sanctifying grace as people continue to open their lives to the work of God's Spirit (Snyder 2011:76).

The grace of God is not determined by the situations we encounter in life but is found in encountering God alone. John Wesley says, "There is no person that is in a state of mere nature...that is wholly void of the grace of God. No person is entirely destitute of what is vulgarly called 'natural conscience.' But this is not natural; it is more properly termed 'preventing grace,'" (Meadows 2000: 101-102). So the grace of God provides hope to all persons everywhere for salvation from sin. As Philip Meadows puts it, "grace has the effect of immediately including all people in God's plan of salvation, not as those standing outside and waiting to get in, but already indwelt by the transforming presence of the Spirit of God, simply by virtue of being human," (102). Any person, anywhere can reach for the grace of God; it is not out of their reach due to God's prior gracious action.

Wesley affirms that some great truths, such as the being and attributes of God, and the difference between moral good and evil, were known, in some measure, to the "heathen" world. The traces of them are to be found in all nations: So that, in some sense, it may be said to every person, *He hath showed thee, O man, what is good: even to do justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with thy God.* With this truth he has, in some measure, enlightened every one that cometh into the world (Meadows 2000: 103-104).

All people everywhere can potentially activate the life of God in them through prevenient and justifying grace. Wesley emphasizes this gift. In fact, as Collins puts it,

the consequence of Wesley's soteriological intentionality as reflected in his practical divinity in general and his order of salvation in particular was to make the graces accessible to all people but especially to the poor, the very least of all. Invited to participate in a class meeting, the downtrodden came to know themselves not through the diminishing scripts prevalent in eighteenth-century British society, whereby they were mistakenly labeled as lazy and shiftless, but through the gospel narrative itself, whereby they were invited to receive the richest love and the most profound graces. The destitute were no longer alienated

but embraced, no longer dispossessed but empowered, no longer forgotten but cherished. Having been forgiven and renewed by God in Christ, having received the witness of the Holy Spirit that they indeed were the beloved of the Lord, the poor were gifted in so many ways that they had not hitherto imagined. Such graces created the bonds of fellowship and care that transcended the divisions of class and hateful pride. The poor thus received a different narrative through which they could come to know themselves in a new way, that is, as nothing less than the beloved of the Lord, as the children of the Most High (Collins 2007:329).

In our societies today we need to invite not only the poor, but also those who are the culturally and ethnically different to partake in “the richest love and most profound graces” as members of the kingdom of God. John Wesley invited the poor; he stepped out of his familiar place into an unfamiliar place and extended a hand of fellowship. Wesley did not shy away from interacting with those who were different from him or from those whom his English society deemed unworthy of interaction. The knowledge he gained from his study of the scriptures regarding humanity and his own experience compelled him to relate to the marginalized or socioeconomically different. The burden to see that others have the same liberty in Christ was so strong that he was moved to act. He was moved from awareness to action.

The grace of God goes before and after, and we are called to participate with God in the redemption of humankind and the restoration of the image of God through His grace. God is already active in all persons, cultures, and societies, even if in hidden ways. As Howard Snyder argues, “non-Christian religions are not in themselves means of grace, but God’s grace to some degree works in them—if in no other way, at least to restrain evil,” (Snyder 2011:77). The grace of God is unmerited and because God is love He extends the gift of grace to each one of us.

3) Saved by God

Salvation is the central theme in Wesley's theology. In Ephesians 2:8 we read, by grace you are saved through faith. Wesley writes in his sermon on *Salvation by Faith*,

If then sinful man finds favor with God, it is grace upon grace. If God vouchsafe still to pour fresh blessing upon us, the greatest of all blessings, salvation—what can we say to these things but thanks be unto God for his unspeakable gift. And thus it is. Herein 'God commendeth his love toward us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died to save us.' By grace then we are saved through faith. Grace is the source, faith the condition of salvation (Outler and Heitzenrater 1991:40).

There is no sin that is beyond the ability of God to forgive. When we are saved we begin to be perfected in God's love. An important part of this process is the transformation that comes as a result of the renewing of our mind (Romans 12:2). As a result, our attitude towards ourselves as well as others must be transformed as well albeit over time. Our biases need to be reconstructed; we need to develop a bias towards the grace of God instead of remaining biased against others and ourselves. "For Wesley, the point of Christ's atonement is that human beings, and by extension their societies and cultures, can be healed from the terrible disease of sin," (Snyder 2011:79). Salvation is a gift for all of God's creation, accessible through faith in Christ Jesus and the work of the Holy Spirit.

Why is being saved important to cultural competence? Cultural competence has to do with interacting with others who are different from us. Persons inevitably take on the stereotypes and biases towards the culturally, ethnically, racially, and socioeconomically different. Regeneration allows us to *begin* the process of having these negative stereotypes and biases transformed. As we have noted in the previous sections under Image of God, and Grace of God, we find the affirmation in Wesleyan thought that we are all made in the image of God, and that the grace of God is available to all. There are no categories of persons who are allotted more

favor than other categories of persons. The grace of God through salvation and sanctification should increase our capacity to relate positively with others.

4) Perfected By God

Perfection is often misunderstood as meaning being without flaws. However, Wesleyan thought teaches that we learn that our flaws are redeemed by the grace of God and we are renewed.

Now let this perfection appear in its native form, and who can speak one word against it? Will any dare to speak against loving the Lord our God with all our heart, and our neighbor as ourselves? Against a renewal of heart, not only in part, but in the whole image of God? Who is he that will open his mouth against being cleansed from all pollution both of flesh and spirit; or against all the mind that was in Christ, and walking in all things as Christ walked? What man, who calls himself a Christian, has the hardiness to object to the devoting, not in part, but all our soul, body, and substance to God? What serious man would oppose the giving God all our heart, and the having one desire ruling all our tempers? I say again, let this Christian perfection appear in its own shape, and who will fight against it (Wesley 1966:118).

The complete giving of our heart and mind to Christ is significant in the scriptures and in Wesleyan thought. Wesley insists on the complete giving of our heart and mind to Christ in order to gain from Christ his virtues. For Wesley, Christian Perfection means we are becoming more like Christ, we more and more embody the attitudes of Christ. Our sinful and fallen nature is overcome by the life of Christ in us. The indwelling Holy Spirit, working in part through the Christian community, guides us and directs us as we daily strive to overcome our sinful selves. The goal of God's work in us is Christian perfection, or the maturing and perfecting of Christian character, so that we may perfectly love God and neighbor.

It is clear from his writings that by Christian perfection Wesley meant the Spirit-given ability to love God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind and our neighbors as ourselves. Wesley repeatedly emphasized this. “The central issue is the work of the Spirit in transforming us personally and communally into the image of Christ; of forming in us the character of Christ,” (Snyder 2011:81). This was a central Wesleyan emphasis. The power of the life of Christ in us is such that it transforms us. It transforms our mind, and it transforms our hearts. It transforms our mind in the sense that it changes our way of thinking and it transforms our heart in the sense that it transforms our actions.

Wesley’s sermon on *Christian Perfection* outlines what Christian perfection is and what it is not. Christian perfection is being holy as Christ is holy. This holiness transforms us and transforms our behaviors. When students attend places of Christian higher education that exemplify such teachings and such a life, they learn to see themselves as part of a greater narrative, a greater reality that helps them understand and see life from a perspective they may have not heard or understood before. As a result of this renewing of their mind, their lives can be set on a trajectory of freedom to attain greater understanding of the grander truth, the truth that we are all made in the image of God.

Implications of Wesleyan Theology for Cultural Competence

The aim of this paper has been to explore Wesleyan theology to identify a few key themes that provide sources for developing a Wesleyan theology of cultural competence. The themes addressed in this paper are Wesley’s understanding of the image of God, the grace of God, the salvation of God, and Christian perfection. These four aspects of Wesley’s theology provide a broad framework to begin developing a Wesleyan theology of cultural competence. As we have seen through Wesleyan thought, it is incumbent upon us to enter lives and communities which may be different from our own in order to share the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

While Wesley may not have dealt with the need for cultural competence as we have come to understand it today, it is important to recognize that his theology lays the foundation for the need to develop such competence. “What was it that people on the social margins found so compelling in the Methodist movement that offered no immediate release from entrenched positions of subordination (Hempton 2005:131)?” Many have emphasized the spiritual and cosmological syntheses of evangelical enthusiasm while others have maintained the social utility of the faith, offering personal assurance and communal identity to those in sore need of both,” (Hempton 2005). Just as in Wesley’s day, many of today’s societies are marked by sociocultural divisions, which often lead to conflict. We tend to judge others (to borrow from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.) either by the color of their skin rather than the content of their character—or, as I have argued here, by the image of God – however distorted – that they possess. Our interactions with others should be based on the understanding gained through scripture, which Wesley emphasized in his theology. Our interactions with others should be based on the premise that we are created in the image of God, and the truth that the grace of God transforms us by his grace into his holy character.

1) Image of God: Understanding the concept helps to see every person in the image of God

The problem in intercultural encounters is that we often place a higher value on our own cultural beliefs and practices, viewing other ways of understanding the world as inferior or, more commonly, wrong. Anthropologists refer to this attitude as ethnocentrism, and it is part of our “natural state” as individuals brought up in particular societies and cultures; thus, it has to be unlearned. We must graduate from looking simply at external differences to internal differences, from physical features to values

and beliefs that determine our interactions with one another. We can begin by recognizing that everyone, despite his or her physical or cultural differences, is created in the image of God.

2. Grace: The gift of God for everyone

The grace of God is unmerited favor. No one can earn it. It is given. The gift of this grace of God is not bound to one ethnic or cultural community. There is no boundary to this gift as it is freely given to all of us, and we must extend the same gift of grace to others from different ethnicities and cultures. There is a line in a familiar Christian song that says, “Freely, freely, you have received, freely, freely give. Go in My name, and because you believe, Others will know that I live,” (*United Methodist Hymnal* 1989: 389). Grace does not belong to us; it belongs to God and hence it is a gift we must not withhold from others. But it is not enough to simply share it; we want to share it effectively. To do this we must have the cultural competency skills to present the Gospel in such a way that it makes sense to the culturally different other.

3. Salvation of God: Transforms Our Understanding

John Wesley once said, “I who went to America to convert others, was never myself converted to God,” (Owens 2001: 34). He later had a heart-warming experience that transformed his life. Before this transformational experience he had the requisite knowledge, but this knowledge needed to be experienced and felt. When John Wesley felt the touch of God he was moved to action with understanding towards others. When we experience the love of God that transforms our understanding and moves us from our limited knowledge and limited abilities, we can then engage with awareness with others. When we see ourselves with our weaknesses, we recognize our insufficiency. We understand the need for Jesus Christ and it is through him and through Christian community that our self-image is restored. When we recognize that we are not better than a Jew, deist or a Turk we learn to engage others who are different from us

with understanding. We do this because the grace of God has gone before us and continues to be with us and is even there long after we have left the scene.

4. Christian Perfection: Christ-like nature in our behavior

We are never without God. In Matthew 28:20 we read the words, “and lo I am with you always.” God never leaves us. He is always with us through the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives, working in us, preparing us to do his good will, to practice justice, mercy, and truth. When we love God with all of our minds and with all of our hearts we are with God and God is with us. And when we are with God we are able to share God and that which is God’s specifically, love and grace with others. We are able to walk in love and grace. We are more willing to take the time to understand and to be present with people. This helps us as we grow in cultural competence, developing the necessary awareness, knowledge and skills for working with others. Working with people from different cultures can be demanding because there are so many different meanings associated with different cultural elements. As we are perfected into God’s holy character we develop the fruit of the Spirit, which is, love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law, says Galatians 5:22-23. As God continues to transform us and our attitudes and behaviors, we relate with understanding and appreciation of the other.

Conclusion

As the character of God grows within us we can grow in our cultural competence. While one may argue that we can be culturally competent without God, I wonder if we can truly be competent in the way Reynolds, Mueller, and Pope have defined cultural competence – “the awareness, knowledge, and skills needed to work with others who are culturally different from self in meaningful, relevant and productive ways,” (2004: 13). Through what has been addressed in this paper we find some key aspects of Wesleyan theology that are necessary resources for

developing a framework for cultural competence in order to work with others in a meaningful, relevant, and productive way as the character of God develops within us.

Notes

1. This is not to diminish the fact that local theologies and local expressions of worship are critical in the contextualization of the Gospel.

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