World Wesleyan Leadership, II

by Bishop Finis A. Crutchfield

Introduction of Bishop Finis A. Crutchfield
by President David L. McKenna

World and Wesleyan cannot be separated. What we heard this morning from Bishop Festo Kivengere about “world” is really the natural beginning and the connector for a discussion of our historical distinctive, and particularly as we heard Bishop Festo say, “bringing it into pace with the speeding of time.” No one can bring world and Wesleyan together, I believe, better than Bishop Crutchfield. He is a person who is here today representing our vital relationship with the United Methodist Church. He is a man who stands out in front in contemporary issues as the president of the board of Council of Bishops of the United Methodist Church. He is a man who to me has taken a stand sometimes at odds but always with grace for the Good News and the non-negotiable Gospel of Jesus Christ. Who better then, can address us on the subject “Wesleyan” in our “World Wesleyan Leadership” series? I present to you with a great deal of pleasure and honor, Bishop Finis Crutchfield.

Bishop Crutchfield's Lecture —
World WESLEYAN Leadership

Dr. McKenna, colleagues in Christ, what a sacred privilege to be a part of this celebration on this campus and in this setting. Asbury Seminary has poured its faith into the life of the church for a long time and the entire Christian community, indeed the Wesleyan community especially, throughout the world has been the richer for it. I want to predict here that under the leadership of your distinguished new president, Dr. David Loren McKenna, the best days are ahead. Asbury Seminary has a unique role in the life of the total Christian community and we are sure that you will be equal to the challenge of that role. As president of the Council of Bishops of the United Methodist Church, today I salute Dr. McKenna and would assure him of our prayerful support and also of my personal
unqualified support.

I've been asked to say a word or two about Wesleyan leadership. We are in a unique position in the history of our world. We're living in times very similar to the times in which John and Charles Wesley appeared. In their day, there was the terrific dislocation in the economic, industrial, and political world caused by the shift in the industrial revolution, and you know some of the economic dislocations of our time. Perhaps a Wesleyan emphasis is highly relevant just now, much more so than ever in the last 200 years. That emphasis in the mid-eighteenth century restored an understanding of human dignity and value in a time when machines and oppressive social structures were de-emphasizing the worth of human beings. The Wesleyan revival created a climate in which the primacy of the human spirit and the welfare of human beings became a matter of principal concern. A recent article in BBC's Listener by a learned Englishman said, "Mr. John Wesley was the greatest social reformer in the history of our nation. Though, of course, becoming that was not his chief interest." And I thought he encapsulated it in one good word. In these moments we can catch only a few accents from Wesley that may be useful now. Let us mention four. Two of them are stylistic and two are doctrinal.

The First Accent — Connection

One of the distinctives of the Wesleyan tradition is related to that word, connection. We cannot understand any of the Methodisms of our world until we understand the origin of the word connection and the meaning for those who first used it so freely. Early in Wesley's ministry we hear the question asked a preacher, "Are you in connection with Mr. Wesley?" meaning, do you preach his standards of faith? It is doubtful that the word connectionalism was ever used in Wesley's day. It may have been, but some of us who've searched the materials are unable to find the word. As a matter of fact, John Wesley was not interested in any ism or any new ecclesiastical arrangement. He accepted and never quite relinquished the doctrine of the church that was Anglican. He said he was not intending to start a new system, though, of course, he was smart enough to know that when you ordain preachers, send out missionaries, hold unregulated communion services, baptize people, tell people how to preach, and assign pastors to build churches, you must be starting something. But still, it was not his primary intention to start a new ism or a new
church. The organizational life that he developed and designed was to further the vision of scriptural holiness, and to Wesley, organization itself was secondary in importance. How we need him again. Theoretically, he had no basic problems with the organization of the Church of England, but he was deeply concerned with how that church lived out its life. For Wesley, connectionalism, if there was such a thing, was not an ecclesiastical framework but a community of holy purpose.

Now, if it's not truly an ecclesiastical framework, what really is it? To boil it down, those in connection with Mr. Wesley were those who preached the Gospel within the general framework of his thought: scriptural holiness, entire sanctification, and perfection, inner assurance and inner witness, joy and growth in grace from a pardonning God, and faith which confers a Christ-like mind and Christian social responsibility. Those who did not preach in this framework were simply severed from the connection.

Witness the celebrated cases of Mr. Thomas Maxfield and Rev. George Bell in Wesley's day who tried to claim perfection in deeds rather than in love, and who claimed to have the power to discern the future. They were severed from the connection. The connection was based on preaching the Gospel. The connection was not that of a covenant church.

Now, I know that's a very attractive idea today, especially to United Methodists, but this is not the connection of John Wesley. It was the connection of preachers who believed that certain ideas and doctrines had to be raised up in order to restore faith and to restore the primitive church. The connection was through Mr. Wesley himself, and generally he ruled who was in and who was out. Somebody said if he'd lived ten more years, we'd have had a pope. But suffice it to say, there was no doctrinal pluralism in the Wesleyan connection.

The same became true when Methodism came to America. Bishop Asbury, for whom this great seminary is named, had no strong theories about total church in total agreement with everybody supporting everybody else who happened to claim to be inside the covenant. In Asbury's day the connection was held together solely through the office of the bishop. In those days there were no denomination-wide programs, but there was a connection. There were no boards and agencies. The first board in the Wesleyan movement in America is our own splendid Board of Publication. But
we had a connectional life long before we ever even had that board and the connection was through the bishop who sent the preachers to ride the connection. The circuits were called the connection and the path that they rode was the connection and they had to go preach the essence of the Gospel. That was the connectional life of the church to Methodists.

What was the essence of the gospel they preached as they rode the connection? Go back to the first American disciplines; the one in English for the Methodist church and the one in German for the Evangelical church. The exact wording translated out of the German discipline is, “What may we reasonably believe to be God’s design in raising up preachers called Methodists?” Answer: to reform the continent and to spread scriptural holiness over the land. Those who preached scriptural holiness were in the connection and whatever connectionalism existed was a commonality of Gospel interpretation judged by and held together through the office of Bishop Asbury. In 1781 Asbury said that in addition to the New Testament these circuit riders were to be aware of the sermons of John Wesley, his notes on the New Testament, the amended articles of religion and the Wesleyan minutes. They were normative. Connectionalism has only to do with faith and gospel and only secondarily with ecclesiastical structures, even with Asbury. The focus of all connectional endeavor, from the mid-eighteenth century until 1808 when the first restrictive rule was written, was those singular emphases of faith and gospel which the Christian community had either neglected or forgotten but were then being raised up in an evangelical Wesleyan revival. When we talk about connectionalism today we must remember it against its background. It was a background of doctrinal preaching and not a structure. That’s the first accent.

The Second Accent — Evangelism

For our purposes we can only say that evangelism with Wesley was highly intentional and that’s a massive understatement in itself. It was urgent. It took priority, and it was well organized. Systematically, forcefully, evangelism, the call for response to God through Christ’s saving grace, was no mere incidental thing and could not be left to chance. It came first and it was urgent.

But today we’ve become wary of evangelism. We who are the sons and daughters of Otterbein and Wesley are frightened at evangelism, church extension, gospel proclamation, growth in the Christian
community, and sharing the message. Sometimes we act proud if our numbers decline and we suggest smugly that this is an indication of purifying the church. Now while Wesley would not want half-heartedness in church membership or a false emphasis on numbers, he was interested in multitudes of souls and the numbers representing those souls.

Today we’re frightened of evangelism, I think, for several reasons. First, many of us are totally turned off at what passes for evangelism on TV. We abhor the cheapening of moments of commitment coming to the whole nation by way of a camera. We deplore the commercialization of an old revival idea that was a good one and I think in a way rightly so. True, we’re all allergic to gimmicks. And that has been tried by the church and the disastrous results are evident for all to see. We want no more gimmickries in this sacred business of evangelism. That’s rightly a source of real fear.

Third, we’re not interested in cheap grace or in surface conversions. That turns us off because some people have made evangelism just too easy. Fourth, the principal thing is that most of us, both clergy and laity, are given so much to do we just have no time for evangelism. I find, among my preachers in my conferences, it’s a time problem. They get so many piles of materials from so many sources telling them what to do, it would fill up the top of a desk stack by stack. If they do half of these good things, then they have no time left for going out and sharing the gospel or building up the Christian community. The art of being a preacher today is the art of knowing what to throw in the wastebasket. In other words, there are some urgent priorities and we cannot let programmatic endeavors, however worthy they may be (and I’m not against them), simply cut off the strength that comes from this central thing — there’s a time problem.

There’s a fifth reason why I think many of us are wary about evangelism, and it’s a valid one. Spiritually speaking, we are afraid to do much organizing for something in which the Holy Spirit is involved. And yet, we organize for everything else where we invoke the work of the Holy Spirit. We’re intentional about everything else, especially the budget. The call of Wesley today is to be intentional and urgent about evangelism, and about decisions for Christ, and the Christian nurture that follows those decisions. There are ways to do this among intelligent and reasonable people without resorting to gimmicks, commercialism, shabby tricks or outworn nineteenth
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century methodology and without organizing the spirit out of it. It can be done and some are doing it.

An important element in this accent on evangelism emphasized by Wesley, and so relevant to the world's need now, is the confidence and the sure hope of Christ's ultimate victory. That's part of the Good News. In the eleventh chapter of the Book of Revelation to John, the elder, and beginning with the fourteenth verse, it says, "The seventh angel sounded and there were great voices in heaven saying, 'The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord and His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever,' and the four and twenty elders which sat before God fell on their faces and worshipped, saying, 'We give Thee thanks O God because You've taken Your great power and You've now begun to reign.'" This little episode in Revelation occurs right in the middle of the most terrifying and bloody section of the whole book. The woes, the tribulations, the martyrdoms are all being recited, but it is as though John who writes this knows his readers couldn't stand anymore of this without the sustaining belief that all of it has some purpose. All of it has a great God-appointed climax and a consummation because God is going to reign, and so there's an interruption in this bloody drama. The curtain quickly opens on a new stage and we're just given a little glimpse of the way things are going to turn out in the end. Before he can pile in any more tribulations or woes and before any of these are completed, the ultimate victory of Christ is presented. And here it's said with finality: "The kingdoms of this world are to become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ, and He will reign forever and ever." The Wesleys emphasized that. Now the reader of the Book of the Revelation can endure the rest because he knows in the end all is well.

We're passing through a period of upheaval in which every value we've cherished has been flaunted, denied, or questioned; every article of faith that we've affirmed has either been opposed or ignored. Hedonism is the dominant religion in this country today and hedonism and communism are twin religions (they both leave God out). Yet, the time is coming when according to the will of God, the victory of Christ's way, His purity and His love will be complete and final, and that's our confidence and our word of hope in this particular time of distress through which we are passing.

How is this human story on this planet going to wind up? Christians have an answer for that and Wesleyan Christians have a
clear one: belief that in another mighty act of God, Christ’s ways, Christ’s values, and Christ’s truth will reign everywhere. We don’t mean by that that any other religion shall surrender its values, its useful insights, or its unique relationships to God. Whatever may be conserved from all other religions or whatever of dross that needs to be shed from our own, it is our faith that all the love, all the compassion, all the selflessness of Jesus Christ will be universal at the final moment of history. And whether you believe this comes as a result of something gradual or as a single mighty act of God is left to your choice. But all history must come to terms with what Jesus taught, what He believed and what He died for. In this sense, Christ is coming again. Not in some millennial drama on a white horse; this is a poetic way simply to affirm His victory in apocalyptic imagery. Our faith is that God in Christ is not to be defeated, and when that victory comes we can say He has come again. Standing at the end of humankind’s long and torturous travail is the shining victory of Jesus Christ. His Kingdom is coming on earth just as it is in heaven. Jesus’ prayer to that effect is going to be answered.

God forbid, but we may have to endure the horror of nuclear war. We hope not. But still, standing at the end of the long story of humanity is God’s word and Jesus embodied that word. Whatever else, He will be around. In Jesus we see the full embodiment and the clear expression of what God is all about in this old world. In Him we see the full, complete, decisive, definitive picture of what God is doing in His broken creation. And we’re witnesses to that, every one of us; we’re to stand up for that truth and present it to our confused, despairing, broken age. The resurrection of Jesus Christ confirms what we long have suspected and have believed and sensed: Jesus is indeed the archetype of all humanity and in Him we have the foretaste of victory for every human spirit and for society. Jesus’ enemies spat upon Him, tortured Him, lied about Him, rejected Him totally, killed Him and then God said you can’t do that to this Man. You can’t destroy this. You can kill Him, but He’s a part of My plan. My seal of approval’s on Him. It’s on this One and the stamp of My image is right on Him, and I’m going to bring Him back. On the third day those women went down to the tomb and they found that the stone was rolled away. Then it was known that He is alive and loose in this world, that He goes everywhere and He’s here now, pleading, challenging, loving, offering Himself again and again. Asbury graduates and graduates of all these other seminaries will go on
responding, believing, witnessing until the words of Peter are heard, "The morning breaks, the darkness fails, and the shadows flee away forever."

I believe in the shining victory of the resurrected Christ. He's coming on earth as He is in heaven. It strengthens every one of us to know that we're on the side of victory, especially in this day when every one of us is afraid of the horror of what may happen next in our world with all its frightful nuclear inventions. Mr. Wesley believed that ultimately the will and the purpose of God could not be thwarted or defeated. Ultimately, Christ's will will be made known on earth and with the Book of Revelation, the kingdoms of this earth are going to become the kingdoms of our Lord and His Christ and He will reign forever and ever. That's a part of evangelism — one component that you and I in this age as Wesleyans may proclaim with clarity.

The Third Accent — Christian Perfection

Frank Baker has said that this is the chief contribution that Wesleyans make to the whole Church of Jesus Christ, and it is one that so many others have hesitated to make even though it's plainly stated in the New Testament. Jesus said, "Be ye perfect," or in another version, "you shall be perfect." One of John's epistles reads, "Now we are the sons of God, and it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when He appears we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is." Now these and other Scriptures plainly speak of Christian perfection and the process that leads to it.

This New Testament teaching frightens us. We really don't like it because if there's any one thing we all abhor, it is pretense or hypocrisy. Claiming any kind of perfection sounds like the most grievous presumption. Furthermore, we're all so sinful and so vulnerable ourselves, and the world in which we live has come to regard pretension to sanctity as one of the most offensive and the least tolerable sins. We just don't want to claim anything that has to do with the word perfection. Too, the disparity between what some say and what those same people do adds weight to our caution. Hence, the doctrine of perfection is avoided — but it's there — all through the New Testament.

Wesley had several alternative names for Christian perfection. They're almost used interchangeably, though there are shades of meaning between them. They are: entire sanctification, scriptural
holiness, perfect love. What did our spiritual forebears mean by this doctrine? We have to say first that they never regarded perfection or holiness as a plateau of Christian experience. It was never an achievement. You never arrived at being a totally perfect person in deeds, at least. It was always a becoming, a process, a daily living with enabling grace. The state of holiness was not a fixed state, but a condition of ever enriching goals. The perfect life is the growing life, the life of love; the life of far horizons and lofty goals; the life of eager and greater dependence upon God; the life lived constantly in the stream of His grace; the life that eagerly seeks the mind of Christ. Defining perfection and holiness for Wesley would be done in terms of development, process, movement, and Christ-possession, not static achievement.

In "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection," a sermon by Wesley, he takes care to say what perfection is not, and that's helpful. There we need his insistence on our creaturely limitations. Those who are in holiness are not perfect in knowledge. They are not free from ignorance nor from mistakes. We are no more to expect any living man to be infallible than to be omniscient. They are not free from infirmities such as weakness, or slowness of understanding, irregular quickness, or heaviness of imagination. Other kinds are impropriety of language, ungracefulness of pronunciation to which one might add a thousand nameless defects either in conversation or behavior. From such infirmities as these none will be perfectly free until their spirits return to God. Neither can we expect them then to be wholly free from temptation, Wesley says.

What then does the doctrine really mean? Well, Wesley takes it all out of the order of merit and out of the framework of the moral law. The Christian who is perfect is free from sin, not according to the objective standard of justice, but according to the measure of the personal relationship to Christ who gives him love. This perfect relationship with Christ is marked by the spirit of love. A perfect, unbroken, conscious dependence upon Christ is really the perfection that true holiness bespeaks, even in the midst of our weaknesses and mistakes, even in the midst of our errors and shortcomings, even in the midst of our creaturely limitations. This dependence upon Christ is the true holiness of which Wesley speaks. Dependence upon Christ brings love and love brings loving relationships and this is the basis of every other kind of perfection.

It's one of the curious ironies of modern culture that out of the very
moment when a reasonable type of Christianity is called for and desired, when the possibilities of perfection are so inviting to so many of us, along comes secular social study in the form of psychology and social economics and they reveal together the labyrinthine depths of the unconscious and the endless possibilities which are hidden there. Freud did this, and Marx of course. Each of these men in his own day discovered the unconscious dishonesties that dog human action and corrupt human ideas, even though the mind is intent on virtue. Now what does a Wesleyan say to that? I think Wesley would say that our conscious, moment-by-moment dependence upon Christ will free us from the unconscious dishonesties imbedded deep in our psyche or self. Wesley would say that what you of yourself would not know to do, Christ would do for you if you’re depending upon Him. Wesley would say that it is done through an enabling grace far beyond the ability of your self to conjure up, invent, or develop. Perfection, in loving motive and loving relationships, rests on simple dependence upon Christ.

Christian perfection or holy living follows and depends upon justification. It is best thought of not as a finished state, but as a living relationship in which God continually furnishes the gifts by which Christians are enabled to move to the finish of the course upon which they’ve started. Wesley is able to interpret salvation as a process, one that begins with justification but that continues thereafter until the regenerate person grows in grace towards sanctification. Justification comes first. Sanctification, or being made perfect, follows. Justification is what God does for us. Sanctification is what God does in us. Justification is what God does through His Son. Sanctification is the work He does in us by His Spirit. Justification is the threshold of faith. Sanctification is the fullness of faith. Christians live with God and therefore go on to perfection. This is God’s method. First, the sinner is pardoned. Then he knows God is a graceful and merciful God. Then God’s laws are written on his heart. He is God’s and God is his and love begins to reign and Christ is over all. This is to be the holy and perfect person — one who lives in Christ and in whom Christ lives with perfect Christly love despite all the errors, the mistakes, and the creaturely limitations. To be sanctified throughout is to have a heart so all flaming to the love of God as to continually offer up every word and work to Him as a spiritual sacrifice. Holiness. Perfection. Sanctification. This state is a gift open to those of faith who have a conscious dependency upon Christ.
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The faith exercised in it provides an enabling grace and so one becomes holy even in the midst of his mistakes, his infirmities, his errors, and all the rest.

When young preachers come into our conference, young men and women, and they come to that time when they're to be ordained at the chancel, there's the old standard Wesleyan question that as bishop I have to ask: “Are you going on to perfection?” I always add something to it. I usually say, “If you’re not, where are you going?” The truth of the matter is he’s going one way or the other. I think of that old song that the Wesleyans picked up and love so much: “Finish Then Thy New Creation.” Finish it. It's not complete yet. It's a process.

Finish then Thy new creation.
Pure and spotless let us be.
Let us see Thy great salvation,
perfectly restored in Thee.
Changed from glory into glory,
til in heaven we take our place.
Til we cast our crowns before Thee,
lost in wonder, love, and grace.

Mr. Wesley taught perfection, but the interesting and the curious and the beautiful thing is, he never himself claimed to have enough faith to have received it. In all the writings of Wesley, he never said, “I've attained holiness or true perfection.”

This leads us to an appended item in this accent of Methodism, one in which we deal only briefly, and that is Wesley’s statement, “There’s no holiness apart from social holiness.” For Wesley, holiness consisted in right relationships springing from love and enabling grace. Therefore, the ideal of perfect love must be expressed over the whole realm of human life. Our Methodist movement has probably had a greater social emphasis than any Protestant movement. That is the reason. Our social awareness gets us into all kinds of trouble and makes us vulnerable to many types of people who exploit our church and our idealism for whatever ends, but we keep on taking the risks because, you see, holiness and perfection cannot exist in a vacuum. It's a movement, a process, a becoming that must express itself in continuing right and loving relationships in society. And this takes us right out into the society of the world in which we live with all its problems, and it takes us out there with a social conscience. (I for one
would never surrender this). I would insist that when the church enters the field of social problems and social effort, the church must not enter that field on the side of Christ’s enemies. Some today derive their social concerns from secular roots and ideological interests rather than from the basic spiritual foundation of holy living and the grace of loving relationships. But to the Methodist, to the Wesleyan, all social service, all social concern, all social philosophy, comes from the perfect vision of the holy life and from the loving relationships that flow therefrom. The foundation of social action is to be found in faith and regeneration. We are not to develop and launch great programs without concern for the individual spiritual health of a person affected by these programs.

The Fourth Accent — the Inner Witness of the Spirit

In the book of Romans we read: “His Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God.” Wesley preached it, Fanny Crosby later captured it all in a few memorable words. “Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine. Oh what a foretaste of glory divine.” Assurance is not the assurance that we’re worthy. It’s assurance that we’re forgiven and accepted as God’s children. You have to guard against certain dangers when you get into this field, and Wesley himself had to guard against these dangers. If one is genuinely repentant and believes in Christ and earnestly desires salvation, what is there to assure him that he’s not grasping at a mere shadow, that he’s not being deceived by his own wishful thinking or his hopes? The Scriptures tell us that we may know that we are children of God and that the Spirit does not deceive us. Wesley tells us that two inferences can be drawn from this teaching, and the first is this: Let no one rest in any supposed testimony of the Spirit which is separate from its truth. If you want to know whether or not the Spirit is working through you, then you test it against peace: does it bring peace? Longsuffering: is it patient? Is it gentle? Is it meek? Does it have fidelity and all the tests of the presence of the Spirit that we find in the Epistles? You can test the validity of what you feel inside if it brings these virtues. You have to judge it subjectively. Then you can know that it’s the Spirit. The second is this: Let no one rest in any supposed fruit of the Spirit without the witness. A person may display certain moral virtues, but he may also hear the divine voice within his soul and know by experience that he is a child of God. You can really know.
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To be sure, many fanatics have laid claim to a knowledge of God which they did not possess. It is true that many may have mistaken the voices of their own imaginations and the whisperings of their own diseased brains for the witness of the Spirit, and so have deluded themselves into thinking that they were the children of God when they were really doing the works of the devil. Their mistakes, however, present no valid reason for repudiating the Christian teaching of direct assurance. There is a way to steer a middle course to keep a sufficient distance from the errors of fanaticism and at the same time to hold fast to the conviction of the witness of God’s Spirit. Wesley describes what he calls the test of the Holy Ghost as an “inward impression on the soul whereby the Spirit of God directly witnesses to my spirit that I am a child of God, that Jesus Christ has loved me and given Himself for me, and that my sins are blotted out and that I am reconciled to God.”

How do you and I really know? Other than these ways that have been mentioned, I think that when we rejoice to obey, we know. When the doing of God’s will is fun, when it brings delight in the midst of negative circumstances, we can know. We can know deep down with assurance that Christ is there moving. Assurance is not an assurance that we’re worthy. It’s assurance that we’re forgiven, that we belong to Him and that He’s dwelling within us and guiding. Anyone of us may have that assurance, but assurance itself is not necessary to salvation, and many may be saved and not know it, but the knowledge is available and that’s the point. Wesley did not consider assurance necessary, apparently, to salvation, but he believed it to be a gift of God that all believers may receive. This whole idea that God may come within us through the Spirit and give us the assurance that we are doing our portion of an eternal purpose, fulfilling a will, gives us a great human dignity. It gives some standing in this world for ourselves and one another and before God. It says that the Author and Creator of all of this marvelous majesty really cherishes us. He can really change us. He can really use us. The hope that that doctrine brings is something our age really needs. It says that you can get on the right track and you can know.

An old man, John Wesley, dying alone in a room, leaving behind a set of silver spoons, a thumbworn Bible, and a Methodist church, could look up and could say with his last words, “Best of all, God is with us.” He knew. You can know.