

TO SPREAD SCRIPTURAL HOLINESS AND TO REFORM THE NATION: THE KINGDOM OF GOD IN THE THOUGHT OF JOHN WESLEY

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Wesleyan scholars have been very effective at articulating the *ordo salutis*, especially over the past two decades. Some would argue *via salutis* is a more apt description of Wesley's soteriological concern. Nonetheless, Wesley's "preoccupation with the conversion and sanctification of men and women" has been well documented.¹ What remains for Wesleyan scholars is to determine if theological expressions of the *ordo/via salutis* are sufficiently comprehensive to address the range of John Wesley's thinking about God's relation to God's creation. Leon Hynson argues for a broader and deeper expression of Wesleyan theology than simply a recapitulation of the salvific process. There is, he writes, an "eschatological envisagement of God's realm" in Wesley's thought.² John argues that the kingdom of God has the ability to function in this capacity.

This article establishes Wesley's understanding of the kingdom of God as a multifaceted concept within Wesley's thought. No single stream of expression will satisfactorily explain the Kingdom for Wesley; rather, John recognized the depth of meanings the Christian scriptures gave to the concept. It could be that the kingdom of God emerges as a primary orienting concern for Wesley's theology.

Wesley and the Kingdom of God

Followers of John Wesley often express his theology as a discontinuity, an either/or option. The Wesleyan genius, rather, rests in the continuity of thought John established as essential to Christian theology. The continuity between law/grace, and faith/works, for example, remains critical to developing Wesley's thought sufficiently. However, Wesleyans often fail to express the strong continuity between personal salvation and social transformation.

The kingdom of God appears in Wesley as a way of balancing both inward and outward responses to the grace of God. As Wesley says, the kingdom of God resides "within us, even 'righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.'"³ This inward kingdom is the Lord reigning in the human heart. It is "heaven already opened in the soul, the first springing up of those rivers of pleasure which flow at God's right hand forevermore."⁴ Likewise, the inward kingdom is the beginning of the Lordship of Christ in the life of the believer.

Surely, these expressions of the kingdom as an internal reality are helpful to the believer, but they are not the only way in which Wesley understood God's ever-increasing dominion. In the period from 1739-1746 Wesley preached from the Sermon on the Mount no fewer than one hundred times. In his development of the themes of the great Sermon Wesley expressed the teachings of Jesus as the "sum of all true religion." Yet, the tenor of Wesley's language broadens his understanding of the kingdom beyond the purely personal terms to become an expression of the community of God's people in social context.

Howard Snyder's analysis of Wesley proves most helpful in this circumstance. Snyder sees Wesley's concept of the kingdom of God as that of a mystical communion. The Kingdom remains both "social

¹ Leon Hynson, "John Wesley's Theology of the Kingdom of God," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 23:1-2 (Spring-Fall 1988), 47.

² *Ibid.*

³ John Wesley, "Sermon on the Mount, I," *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, (34 vols., Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 1:481.

⁴ *Ibid.*

and sacramental with a strong future hope.”⁵ The kingdom of God as mystical communion provides a careful blending of personal and corporate aspects of God’s reign. In other words, for Snyder, the kingdom of God “...is an invisible corporate reality, not bound by space and time, which we experience now in anticipation of a fuller reality to come.”⁶ This view summarizes the way Wesley interprets the Sermon on the Mount. The teachings of the Christ become the concrete expressions of the way into this corporate reality. These teachings serve as a representation of the actual transformation of human existence according to the peace of God. Wesley’s starting point remains that the Sermon on the Mount provides a divine program explaining the comprehensive nature of salvation in light of the teaching, preaching, and healing ministries of Christ (Matt. 4:23). According to Wesley, God’s creation, not theological doctrines, needs to be restored.⁷

Christ’s teaching in the Sermon on the Mount remains for Wesley the indisputable evidence of the continuity between the kingdom now and the kingdom yet to come. Leon Hynson argues, “For Wesley it is a state to be presently enjoyed, especially visible in the context of a society formed on earth. It denotes individuals, but also ‘the whole body of believers.’ Here and now, in our hearts and everywhere “we want Christ in His royal character to reign in our hearts and subdue all things to Himself.”⁸ The essential nature of the already and the not-yet was the same though not in degree. Wherever people call upon the name of the Lord the real presence of the kingdom can be found. In other words, people find the kingdom only in and through the church among men and women, at every stage and place in life.

If the kingdom of God exists as the expression of the Sermon on the Mount lived out in time, then the church must remain the place where this expression is most fully realized. Such a position does not imply a discontinuity between the sacred and the secular. In fact this view implies just the opposite. The kingdom of God remains universal. The kingdom comprehends everything. To Wesley, “the kingdom of God is conceived as a unity with no distinction between spiritual and secular implied.”⁹ Within the kingdom the church must move toward the formation of a new society composed of those in whom Christ’s lordship remains evident. This new society is established as a beacon of hope for those who hunger and thirst after righteousness. The new society is called to be the agent of change for the new creation. God is making everything new in and through the church.¹⁰

The intent of the Sermon on the Mount, according to Wesley must be understood as the moral vision and practice of the new society, the church. Just as the church remains called to focus on worship and liturgy, it is also called to be active in its love of God and neighbor. God’s Spirit provides the primary agent of transformation, as the Spirit works on the hearts and minds of the citizens of the new society to enable them to be salt and light. Through the sacraments and the other means of grace, especially prayer, the Heavenly Kingdom emerges into human existence.¹¹ With its stress on the inward and outward qualities of life in the kingdom the Sermon reminds the people of God they are co-laborers with Christ. So Wesley writes:

This is the original design of the church of Christ. It is a body of men compacted together in order, first, to save each his own soul, then to assist each other in working out their salvation, and afterwards, as far as in them lies, to save all men from present and future misery, to overturn the kingdom of Satan, and set up the kingdom of Christ. And this ought to be the continued care and endeavour of every member of

⁵ Howard Snyder, *Models of the Kingdom: Gospel, Culture and Mission in Biblical and Historical Perspective*, (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1991), 61.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁷ Tore Meistad, *Martin Luther and John Wesley on the Sermon on the Mount*, (Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1999), 93.

⁸ Hynson, 49.

⁹ Meistad, 169.

¹⁰ Hynson, 50.

¹¹ Snyder, *Models of the Kingdom*, 60.

his church. Otherwise he is not worthy to be called a member thereof, as he is not a living member of Christ.¹²

So, the kingdom of God contained for John Wesley a soteriological dimension with both personal and corporate expressions. Lastly, the kingdom of God was also an eschatological reality. This has been suggested in passing when the heavenly kingdom was mentioned earlier, but a fuller treatment of the idea is absolutely necessary.

Increasingly, Wesley's eschatological vision developed two basic trajectories. First, as Randy Maddox pointed out in *Responsible Grace*, Wesley began to be strongly drawn toward the language of the New Creation and away from the focus on a transcendent Heaven.¹³ This kind of emphasis was more consistent with Wesley's conviction of the kingdom of God as expressed as the Kingdom of Grace/Kingdom of Glory. Further, the growing emphasis on the New Creation also demonstrated Wesley's commitment (one which he held throughout much of his ministry life) that salvation and its benefits were progressive in nature and kind. That is, God was actually working toward something in human history. He was working toward the eschatological fulfillment of the kingdom of God in human history.

Wesley consistently advocated in both speculative and clearly biblical ways for what could be termed "providential increases" in the present reign of God.¹⁴ The movement to end slavery, which would only come after Wesley's death, was seen as a movement of God's grace. Political movements which aided in the restoration of human dignity were met by Wesley with affirmation even if the methods of achieving the restoration of human dignity were less than ideal. By the end of his life Wesley was even capable of critiquing the monarchy in how it supported or denied the basic human rights that flow from humanity's creation in the image of God.¹⁵

In this final eschatological expression of the kingdom of God John Wesley demonstrated the surest evidence of the optimism of grace. To repeat Wesley's conviction, "...in general it seems the kingdom of God will not 'come with observation,' but will silently increase wherever it is set up, and spread from heart to heart, from house to house, from town to town, from one kingdom to another."¹⁶ No sign of failure; no sign of retreat; no lack of hopefulness can be found in such a statement. Wesley remained utterly convinced of the priority of the kingdom entering and transforming human history. He was even willing to speculate on the way in which the spread of the kingdom would occur.¹⁷

In the end Wesley became quite hopeful about the providential, grace-empowered spread of the kingdom. John maintained a vision which had sufficient room for all this world had to offer. He took seriously the promise made through the prophet,

They shall all know me, saith the Lord, not from the greatest to the least (this is that wisdom of the world which is foolishness with God) but 'from the least to the greatest,' that the praise may not be of men, but of God. Before the end even the rich shall enter into the kingdom of God. Together with them will enter in the great, the noble, the honourable; yea, the rulers, the princes, the kings of the earth. Last of all the wise and learned, the men of genius, the philosophers, will

¹² John Wesley, "The Reformation of Manners," *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, (34 vols., Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 2:302.

¹³ Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 253.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 240.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ John Wesley, "The General Spread of the Gospel," *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, (34 vols., Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 2:493.

¹⁷ Wesley saw the opportunity for the spread of the Gospel in the new areas of North America. He also speculated on the spread through Europe by way of England to Holland, then to all the Protestants in France, Germany, and Sweden. Finally this ever growing kingdom would encapsulate Sweden, Denmark, Russia, among others. See, "The General Spread of the Gospel," 493-4.

be convinced that they are fools; will be converted and become as little children, and enter into the kingdom of God.¹⁸

The new society has become the New Creation, but not the totality of it. All that God has made will find a new and perfected state in the New Creation. Again, just as the prophet predicted, Wesley argued,

The horrid state of things which at present obtains will soon be at an end. On the new earth no creature will kill or hurt or give pain to any other. The scorpion will have no poisonous sting, the adder no venomous teeth. The lion will have no claws to tear the lamb; no teeth to grind his flesh and bones. Nay, no creature, no beast, bird, or fish, will have any inclination to hurt any other. For cruelty will be far away, and savageness and fierceness be forgotten. So that violence shall be heard no more, neither wasting or destruction seen on the face of the earth. 'The wolf shall dwell with the lamb' (the words may be literally as well as figuratively understood) and the leopard shall lie down with the kid.' 'They shall not hurt or destroy,' from the rising up of the sun to the going down of the same.¹⁹

This New Creation will affect the air, water, and earth. God will bring peace to the inanimate and animate alike. Nothing will be left out of the coming kingdom.

Kingdom of God as Orienting Concern

What one finds in Wesley's doctrine of the kingdom of God is a broad and cohesive focus on the full work of God in this world. Personal and corporate aspects of redemption make up the soteriological concern, while the entire doctrine is covered with eschatological concern. Given the broad appeal of the kingdom of God in Wesley's theology is it possible to use the kingdom as a lens through which to view the shape and scope of other theological doctrines? Some have argued that the best thing to do with Wesley is to recapitulate his arguments as an *ordo salutis*. Others, like Randy Maddox have argued for an orienting concern which holds in tension the soteriological initiative of redemption in the grace of God with the necessary requirement of human response-ability.

Perhaps another orientation in Wesley's theology with a different focal point, namely the kingdom of God, becomes possible. Although this argument remains at an early stage of evaluation, it might be helpful to review questions that help evaluate this possibility, based on the initial evidence. First, does the kingdom maintain a sufficient place in Wesley's writings to warrant such a claim? Certainly, the lengthy and extensive work by Wesley on the Sermon on the Mount and his growing interest in the New Creation toward the end of his life give scholars plenty of room to consider the kingdom as a central concern for Wesley. Second, does an orientation around the kingdom of God offer a fuller and richer expression of the various nuances of Wesley's thinking? It appears reasonable to think of the kingdom as providing a more central role for political theology. However, does this orienting concern provide a suitable focus for the soteriological burden which Wesley's work carries? Here Wesley's own words on the Lord's Prayer seem most suitable as a response,

In order that the name of God may be hallowed, we pray that his kingdom, the kingdom of Christ, may come. This kingdom then comes to a particular person when he 'repents and believes the gospel'; when he is taught of God not only to know himself but to know Jesus Christ and him crucified. As 'this is life eternal, to know the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom he hath sent,' so it is the kingdom of God begun below, set up in the believer's heart. The Lord God omnipotent then reigneth, when he is known through Christ Jesus. He taketh unto

¹⁸ Wesley, "The General Spread of the Gospel," [BE] 2:494.

¹⁹ John Wesley, "The New Creation," *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, (34 vols., Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985) 2:509.

himself his mighty power; that he may subdue all things unto himself. He goeth on in the soul conquering and to conquer, till he hath put all things under his feet, till 'every thought is 'brought into captivity to the obedience of Christ'.

When therefore God shall 'give his Son the heathen for his inheritance, and the utmost parts of the earth for his possession'; when 'all kingdoms shall bow before him, and all nations shall do him service'; when 'the mountain of the Lord's house', the church of Christ, 'shall be established in the top of the mountains'; when 'the fullness of the Gentiles shall come in, and all Israel shall be saved—then shall it be seen that 'the Lord is King, and hath put on glorious apparel', appearing to every soul of man as King of kings, and Lord of lords.²⁰

In order for any concept or theme to be considered an orienting concern for John Wesley's thought there must be a basic soteriological concern that is expressed through it. The Kingdom of God expressed as personal transformation, social transformation and eschatological goal gives appropriate attention to the soteriological thrust of Wesley's theology. Seen through the most mature understandings of the Methodist founder, this holistic concept best expresses God's purposes in the world.

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²⁰ John Wesley, "Sermon on the Mount, VI," *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, (34 vols., Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 1:581-2.

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