

WESLEYAN THEOLOGY: A PRACTICAL THEOLOGY
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Introduction

The title of this paper, “Wesleyan Theology: A Practical Theology,” seems to be self-explanatory. It has been argued that Wesleyan theology is by nature practical, and rightly so.¹

From the beginning of the history of doctrine, theology’s primary concern was essentially practical.² The New Testament epistles were written in a pastoral setting by those and to those concerned with shepherding Christian communities. The early Christian communities had to wrestle, on the one hand, with the life application of the gospel in different contexts throughout the Roman empire; and on the other hand – and connected to life application – with defining, defending, and explicating the Christian doctrine to a foreign, and most of the time, hostile environment. Theology, by its very nature is practical.

John Wesley’s theology was practically oriented as well. “When his work is considered as a whole, Wesley’s theological activity is analogous to the early Christian approach to theology per se as a practical endeavour.”³ Franz Hildebrandt argued similarly, “The meaning of ‘practice’ for Wesley is precisely parallel to the meaning of scriptural Christianity. Practice is simply and plainly enforcement of Christianity.”⁴

The argument of this paper is that Wesleyan theology cannot be separated from Wesleyan practice. It is my intention to demonstrate that truth by proposing a theological quintessence of

¹ See especially monographs and journal articles by Franz Hildebrandt, *Christianity According to the Wesleys*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996, originally published by Epworth Press, London, 1956; Thomas A. Langford, *Practical Divinity: Theology in the Wesleyan Tradition*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983; second printing 1984; Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology*. Nashville: Kingswood Books, An Imprint of Abingdon Press, 1994; Theodore Runyan, *The New Creation: John Wesley’s Theology Today*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998; Frank Baker, “Practical Divinity – John Wesley’s Doctrinal Agenda for Methodism” in *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, Volume 22, No. 1, Spring 1987. Pages 7-16; Donald A.D. Thorsen, “Experimental Method in the Practical Theology of John Wesley” in: *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, Volume 24, 1989. Pages 117-141; and Kenneth J. Collins, “A Reconfiguration of Power: The Basic Trajectory in John Wesley’s Practical Theology,” in: *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, Volume 33, No. 1, Spring 1998. Pages 164-184.

² See also the discussion in Randy L. Maddox, “John Wesley: Practical Theologian” in: *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, Volume 23, No. 1 and 2, Spring-Fall 1988. Pages 122-147.

³ *Ibid*, p. 130

⁴ Hildebrandt, p. 31

the Wesleyan tradition, which then will help us discover various principles of practical Wesleyanism.

Theological Quintessence of Wesleyanism

The quintessence of Wesleyan theology is to be found in its soteriological focus, which can be summarized as *renewal in the image of God (Christlikeness)*. H. Ray Dunning argues in the same direction and suggests a “norm” for a Wesleyan systematic theology, which should provide a basis for consistency and coherence. His proposal for such a “norm” is justification by faith and sanctification by faith in the context of prevenient grace.⁵

This “quintessence” and “norm” hold together that which is essential in Wesleyanism. All of salvation is a gift of grace – it is the active work of the Holy Spirit to which the human spirit is called to respond, evoking love as the dominating motive of life.⁶ God’s activity and human response (enabled by prevenient grace) is the essence of the Christian life, the transformation of persons into the image of God in terms of love (Christlikeness) by the work of the Holy Spirit. What Jesus himself called the highest commandment can best express the quintessence: loving God and neighbour.⁷

Holding on to this quintessence will help to avoid sentimental emotionalism and irrelevant piety on the one hand, and stern legalism and righteousness of works on the other. Actually, the quintessence describes the Wesleyan understanding of “synergism.” Apart from faith, apart from a continuing synergistic relation in which God is covenant partner and co-producer of our works, the works remain purely and simply our own doing and our own product, rather than the product of the partnership with God’s Spirit that marks the true image of God. Only synergy, only genuine working together between God and humanity, can renew the world on a sound basis of human participation in, and cooperation with, divine creative grace.⁸ In other words, faith and praxis belong together.

Therefore, in Wesleyan theology there needs to be good theology (orthodoxy), which truly reflects God’s *Heilsgeschichte* in all its soteriological aspects, as well as an emphasis on the daily practice of the covenant relationship between God and humanity (orthopraxis). However,

⁵ H. Ray Dunning, *Grace, Faith, and Holiness: A Wesleyan Systematic Theology*. Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 1988, p. 47

⁶ Langford, pp. 41-42

⁷ Matthew 22:37-39; Mark 12:30-31; Luke 10:27

⁸ Runyan, p. 148

from a Wesleyan perspective, even those two are not sufficient. As both Theodore Runyan and Randy Maddox have pointed out, right belief and right practice, are not enough – not even putting the two together will work. A third factor needs to be taken into account. Maddox and Runyan call it “orthopathy.”⁹ Orthopathy could be defined as deliberate participation in the spiritual reality of the presence of God. It is the genuine experience of the presence of God in our lives as he transforms and renews us in his image. This emphasis helps us to point out that, in Wesleyan theology, participation in the life of God is a vital reality, which has been characteristic of the Wesleyan tradition by its accentuation of Christian experience.¹⁰ Experience, of course, has to be viewed beyond exclusively individualistic ways or in terms of emotional intensity. Christian experience can only be adequately interpreted in its corporate dimension, as we love God and neighbour.

The theological quintessence of Wesleyanism helps us to understand that from a Wesleyan viewpoint “practical” is defined by whatever agrees with right belief (orthodoxy), right practice (orthopraxis), and genuine experience of the presence of God (orthopathy). Practical theology is therefore always concerned with, and focused on, the *renewal in the image of God (Christlikeness)*.

Principles of Practical Wesleyanism

Based on this brief discussion of the theological quintessence of the Wesleyan tradition, I propose that we can draw some conclusions or principles of practical Wesleyanism. These principles should help us avoid a reduction of theological decisions to the criterion of “whatever will work” on the one hand; and, on the other hand, a paralytic immobilization, that might be so concerned with “doing things right” that it fails to get anything done at all.

In this paper I will suggest seven principles of practical Wesleyanism:

1. Transformational

The first principle is that practical Wesleyanism should be inherently transformational.¹¹ Because Wesleyan theology is concerned about *renewal in the image of God (Christlikeness)*, this transformational aspect needs to penetrate all of our practical implementations and all of our decisions. This will certainly help us to avoid the dangers of either uncritically adopting other

⁹ Maddox, “John Wesley: Practical Theologian,” p. 127; Runyan, p. 149

¹⁰ Langford, p. 265

¹¹ Maddox, “John Wesley: Practical Theologian,” p. 134; Runyan, p. 162

theological traditions or focusing primarily on secondary goals. Rather it will focus the efforts of the church on people being reconciled to God, being brought into a right relationship with God (justification), and being changed into what God intended us to become (sanctification). This must be our objective from the very beginning of all evangelism as well as of all church efforts. If we keep this primary objective clear, then we will stay true to the Wesleyan heritage and secondary ramifications will follow (like church numbers, active participation, etc.).

2. Holistic

This leads to the second principle. The efforts of the church need to keep the “whole” human being (person) in mind. Ours is a spiritual task, i.e., we are not just trying to reach the “minds” of people, but also the will and the affections.¹² Christians are not just “church goers” or “tithers” or “Sunday school teachers” or even “ministers” – but first of all persons who are “in Christ.” Wesleyan theology is concerned with “right thinking”, “right doing”, and with “right connection” to the living God, to one’s neighbour, and to the rest of creation. Our faith does have an effect on every aspect of our lives!

3. Incarnational

The incarnation of Christ highlights the fact that God came into “our world” and he met us where we were – God revealed himself to us so that we could understand and respond. As we are preaching Christ to the world, we must do just that – we must help the people to be able to understand the gospel and to accept the offer to be transformed in the image of God. This third principle underscores our theological task in that we must not be so much concerned with formulating timeless definitions of truth but rather with determining context-sensitive embodiments of the Christian gospel.¹³ That is the task of the church in every generation, as well as in every culture and sub-culture in our world.

4. Communal

The fourth principle stresses the fact that the Christian faith – especially from a Wesleyan theological perspective – is always communal. Christian faith is brought into existence by receiving divine mercy and love; therefore, it cannot be contained within the isolated individual. Whatever is received demands further expression; that is the nature of love. God’s love in Jesus

¹² Ibid, p. 134

¹³ Ibid, p. 135

Christ to us wants to flow through us to all the world's creatures, especially those in need and distress.¹⁴

5. Fruitful

One of the essential elements of a covenant relationship – which we are dealing with in the God-human connection – is accountability. As children of God we are engaged in His service, and we are therefore accountable to God. We are accountable for what we have received from him and how we deal with that. In our synergistic relationship, the Holy Spirit wants to produce “fruits of love” in and through our lives. We are called to be fruitful. Fruitfulness is defined in Scripture in both qualitative and quantitative terms.¹⁵

6. Missional

The church not only has a mission, it rather is in mission; and as it fulfils its apostolic responsibility to preach the gospel – through word and life – it finds its mode of being in the world.¹⁶ As we are doing what God has called us to do, we need to be sure about the source and motivation for mission. It is the impartation of the grace of God that is the task for our ministry. This sixth principle will help the church to stay alert so that, as long as we are on earth, “even to the end of the age,” we are “never done,” our task is never fulfilled. We must continually keep going, making “disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all” that Christ has commanded us (Matthew 28:19-20).

7. Eschatological

The last principle I would suggest is that God is building his kingdom. We are co-workers with Christ, but it is God's kingdom. This gives everything we do and all that we are an eschatological dimension. It helps us to understand

- a. We are not building our own kingdom (kingdoms). It is not about us, our local church, our ministry, not even about our denomination. It is about God and His kingdom!
- b. We are living in the “now and not yet”. God is in our midst now, we can experience him here and now! However, we are also keenly aware of the fact that there is “more

¹⁴ Runyan, p. 163. This point, of course, is expressed in Wesley's well-known formulation: “There is no holiness, but social holiness.” (Works 14:321)

¹⁵ Predominant examples are Galatians 5:22-23; John 15:1-11; Matthew 25:14-30; and Luke 19:12-27

¹⁶ Langford, p. 268

to come”. We live in a broken and fallen world, and even the church is affected by this brokenness and fallenness.

- c. Our salvation and our ministry are linked to the divine work of cosmic transformation! God is creating a new heaven and a new earth – and we are part of that. This gives us a goal and direction that includes both personal renewal and a participation in the universal work of God.¹⁷

The eschatological principle helps us to avoid carelessness on the one hand but encourages us to give “our utmost for His highest”. On the other hand, it helps us to avoid striving for “sinless perfection” here on earth (either personal or communal). We are striving for “Christian perfection”, “perfect love”, and a “community of grace and love” that is awaiting its glorification in heaven.

Conclusion

In a time when we are asking questions of “theological faithfulness” to the Wesleyan holiness tradition, when we are concerned with “identity”, and when there is a need to grow and expand – we need to keep in mind our theological heritage and its principles so that we neither become “just another generic evangelical denomination” nor paralyzed and unmovable because we first need to figure out an “airtight system.”

The theological quintessence of our Wesleyan heritage functions like a compass for the practical implications of our faith. God wants to renew us into his image – the image of a loving and holy God. This renewal encompasses our understanding of God (orthodoxy), the practice of our faith (orthopraxy), as well as the spiritual reality of the transforming presence of God in our lives (orthopathy).

The theological quintessence and the principles that flow out of it can help us to “discern the spirits” and stay true to that which God has called us. If we are faithful to who we are, we must neither be afraid about our future nor about our heritage. At its core Wesleyanism exhibits an “optimism of grace”. Therefore, let us continue *to spread scriptural holiness across our lands* and boldly believe with John Wesley: “The best of all is God is with us!”

¹⁷ Runyan, pp. 166-167

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