

WHAT IS THE CHURCH? TOWARD A WESLEYAN ECCLESIOLOGY

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At the very beginning of discussions centred on the ideas of ‘One Lord, One faith, One Baptism: Unity and Diversity in our Wesleyan Theological Tradition’ it seems appropriate to grapple with the question: ‘What is the Church?’ and to attempt to move towards an understanding of ecclesiology that can truly claim to be Wesleyan. Only on the basis of such an ecclesiological analysis can the International Church of the Nazarene intentionally develop and shape her ministry, pedagogy, and missiology in a way that is true to her roots, that makes best use and sense of her historical resources, and thus provide the best hope for the future. Such an analysis however, must be careful to make several distinctions. First, the question of *any* ecclesiology is too broad to be fully or easily determined, and the “nature, form and function of the Christian Church” (Snyder, 1996, 67) are all encompassed within any true understanding of ecclesiology. Second, Wesley is slippery(!), and the various Wesleyan ecclesiological trajectories, though related through the Wesley gene-pool, are not necessarily all co-equal inheritors of Wesley’s fullest understanding of the Church. It is the understanding of this paper that in this setting, our shared assumptions are at least as follows: a) we are inheritors of Wesleyan theology, b) being Wesleyan is positive, c) we have different understandings of church, Wesley, and Wesleyanism which are culturally and educationally formed, d) we share a vocabulary which will enable us to be in genuine conversation despite our differences. It is a further assumption of the paper that there is much we can learn from a re-examination of some aspects of Wesleyan ecclesiology.

In this paper I will broadly sketch a **generalised** overview of a particular version of Wesleyan ecclesiology. The hope is that this may lead us toward a more fully-fledged understanding of a Wesleyan Ecclesiology that we may appropriate. This is not for the faint-hearted; for ruthless self-examination is at the heart of Wesleyan thinking. The entire movement to which we are heirs was based upon an initial radical *internal* reformation, (*re*) invigoration and *loyal* challenge of and to an institution which had shifted from a revolutionary movement herself to one tied to polity and practice that had much to do with the established order, and the maintaining of a relatively normative/comfortable way of Christian life and understanding.

Wesley himself¹ was heavily influenced by pragmatic considerations in the light of his cultural context and both Wesley and his heirs were unashamedly willing to offer a healthy critique of the *status quo*, and in that spirit we will explore the question before us.

What is the Church?

According to Wesley, the Church is “the whole body of true believers”, and, “the church of Christ is one church” (BCE, vol. 9, 333). His ecumenism made him reject a sectarian understanding of church; he was clear that his people ought to avoid “that miserable bigotry which makes many so unready to believe that there is any work of God but among themselves.” (BCE, vol.9, 266) Yet, he also was adamant that there was a need for ‘witnesses of pure religion’ (BCE, vol. 9, 335), and for people’s hearts to be quickened. Of course, it was his express intention that the people called Methodists remain within the Church of England, and our presence here would suggest that we have departed from that. But, if we accept our existence as heirs to Wesley, as living and faithful witnesses, we too may see ourselves as “necessarily connected with Christ’s earthly body” and incorporated in “this essential connectedness of Christ with the church and the members of the church with one another” (Marquardt, in Maddox, 1998, 107).

For the sake of this paper, then, the Church will be defined theologically as a means of grace, a pro-existence,² loving, alive, dynamic community of believers, living in the world, and pouring herself out kenotically for the sake of the world, in and through Christ. But what then would enable us to move towards a specifically Wesleyan ecclesiology?

Wesleyan Ecclesiology

In order to explore this two main aspects will be considered. The first is that of theological and doctrinal matters which emerged in Wesley’s own thinking and have been subsequently developed by his heirs. The second, symbiotically related, yet distinct, is the embodiment of such doctrines in praxis. It seems that Wesleyan ecclesiology potentially encompasses a broad spectrum of *ways/forms* of being church, and that many *forms* of the Church will develop in relation to the contexts (both geographical and philosophical) in which

¹ Wesley never ceased to be a faithful Anglican¹ churchman and drew his own ecclesiology from a mixture of his Church of England heritage, a wide reading of patristic and pietistic texts, and Moravian influences.

² In the sense that the church is **for** creation, on every scale, and supports life in human and other forms (following Marquardt, op cit).

they are earthed. Notwithstanding, however, the differences in praxis, it is the inner coherence of Wesleyan theology and doctrine that shapes each expression of congregation, college or suchlike. Thus, to be able to claim to be Wesleyan at all in theology and praxis (bearing this inner coherence), there must be at least some of the following features, and moreover, without a critical mass of these features one may not be recognisably Wesleyan.

1. Theological emphases

- a) Scripture: The central role of scripture is critical. The personal and pietistic use of scripture is, however, matched by public and communal reading of scripture that has been shaped by tradition, reason and experience. Such readings of scripture seek to be both locally contextual and dependent upon agreed interpretations of scripture. The importance of scholarly engagement and dissemination of knowledge to the church is vital, for the danger of fundamentalist readings of the text is ever-present. The primacy of corporate understanding, of disciplined public and personal reading, of critical Christological and soteriological emphases (both especially prominent in Wesleyan readings of Scripture) being used as interpretative keys are all significant. Critical to such a reading of Scripture is an awareness of the text as vitally related to ethics and Christian practice.
- b) Sacrament: The central role of the Sacraments (according to Article XIX of the Thirty-Nine Articles the ‘Sacraments of the gospel’ are baptism and the Lord’s Supper), and the grace-bearing nature of the Sacraments are vital components within a Wesleyan ecclesiology. Closely related to its Anglican ancestry but emphatically Arminian is an emphasis on grace, held in dynamic tension with the reality of judgement on those who do not realise the serious nature of the sacraments. For Wesley himself, communicating as frequently as possible was vital for believers, and regularly partaking of communion was a significant marker of membership in the body of Christ. Sharing in communion may also be a means of converting grace, thus the open table is a Wesleyan trait. Baptism, infant or/and adult is a further area where a Wesleyan church reveals herself as sacramental, emphasising that both prevenient grace and the ongoing grace of God are powerfully at work. The central role of the community in baptismal rites of passage is upheld, and the baptismal candidates themselves join the community of the baptised, proclaiming renunciation of sin, and arising into new life.

- c) Tradition: The importance of the tradition of the Church within the Wesleyan movement has been noted and creedal formularies continue to serve as guarantors of orthodoxy. An awareness and dependence on Western fathers (to a much lesser degree Eastern) has been emphasised in many places,³ and a high regard and respect of the tradition of the protestant movement in a broad sense has been intrinsic to Wesleyan movements. A willingness to engage in ecumenical dialogue, however, has also marked some branches of the Wesleyan movement. Drawing on Wesley's heritage as a proponent of the *via media*, willing to find common ground for dialogue between traditions, the Wesleyan ability to supersede unnecessary division in order to be engaged in conversation is vital.⁴
- d) Scriptural Holiness/Christian Perfection: The faithful, gathering in congregations, forming a community of believers, growing into and in holiness, listening to the 'pure word of God' being preached (always with an under-girding of careful theology and corporate accountability), partaking of the Sacraments and moving forward in faith is essential to the Wesleyan understanding of church.⁵ The aspect of church as a voluntary community of committed 'believers' (over and against an understanding of church as either national or ethnic) who are moving towards scriptural holiness / Christian perfection / sanctification is a crucial aspect of the church's theological positioning.⁶
- e) Global Vision: The Wesleyan vision for the world, the 'Empire of the Spirit' (Hempton, 2006) was broad in scope: the known expanses of the world were places where the Spirit was at work. Thus, entering into God's purposes for all of creation, and assisting the Spirit by spreading far and wide the message of 'full salvation', 'Scriptural holiness' as part of the purpose and function, and indeed the *raison d'être* for the Wesleyans were part of the tapestry of the movement. The vision of the Wesleyans entailed availing themselves pragmatically of a wide variety of ideas in response to the needs they encountered. From discipleship, hymnody, travel, itinerancy, preaching and so on, they continually developed

³ See for example Randy Maddox in *Responsible Grace*, Nashville, Kingswood, 1994.

⁴ Note, of course, that Wesley was also willing to engage in firm and determined debate over issues that he considered reprehensible, such as predestination, quietism, Calvinist doctrines of election, etc.

⁵ See for example Snyder, *The Radical Wesley*, and Wesley's own writings, BCE, Vol. 1-4 for examples of this.

⁶ This is of course related to associated discussions of entire sanctification, scriptural perfection, etc. Such a discussion, however, merits a much longer paper.

creative solutions in order to minister to people. Wesleyan pragmatism meant that some issues that are considered problematic today (the association of missions with colonialism, for example) are only being considered as part of current cultural post-colonial analysis. For much of Wesleyan history, questions of form were subsumed by questions of function.⁷ The clear danger of pragmatism lies in this tendency. Not every way of functioning is equally valid for a church. In the Wesleyan example, the gradual acquiescence of the church(es) in the trend away from integrated worship, or female leadership, in actual fact contravened the inner coherence of egalitarian theology that is part of the very ‘DNA’ of the Wesleyan movement.

- f) *Social Justice*: Developing naturally from a clear Scriptural imperative and arising in the Eighteenth century context, the needs of poor people impressed upon Wesley concomitant demands for action. The earliest Wesleyans followed suit, developing a wide range of innovative and creative instruments for responding to the vast array of needs. Such ‘compassionate ministry’ was seen as inherent to the Wesleyan movement and, crucially, intrinsic to what the church *is*, and led to clear guidelines relating to money, housing, luxury, time and practices of life for clergy and lay members of Wesleyan churches. This included an understanding of humanity as *imago dei*, and sin as both personal and societal. Such understandings led to strong emphases being placed on justice, care for the poor, deliberate engagement on personal and corporate levels with issues of poverty and poor people, and over time, to considerations of intervention in issues of injustice of global magnitude.

Keen interest in times past in what would now be deemed geopolitics, and engagement in such critical global issues of the day meant that radical-edged-Wesleyan churches were, at one point, seen as natural enclaves for the poor, the freed slave, the working class radical, and females (see footnote 7).

⁷ So, for example, in the beginning Methodist churches allowed women to be active participants at all levels of local leadership and they were engaged in the anti-slavery movement. Later, splits occurred regarding both issues, with female leadership being quashed, and multi-cultural worship was rejected in some places. In both of these examples, however, the ‘form’ (women or other races leading/worshipping) is also substantive, and fundamentally changes the nature of the church. So it is important to note, then, that it is not just that function is determining form (‘we need more leaders so we’ll use women’); it is determining substance too.

- g) Prevenient Grace: The active nature of the grace of God at work within all creation and on behalf of all people, drawing people towards God, the agent of transformation within the life of the world, is a vital component in the theologically Wesleyan ecclesia. The expectation of God's working in, and beyond human expectation and the necessary joining in with this working in both works of mercy and acts of piety is inherently Wesleyan.
- h) Experience: The willingness to value personal experience of the working of the Spirit and the openness to fresh expressions of faith was part of the Wesleyan movement's inception. Personal experience, however, was always subsumed within the broader categories of orthodoxy, and closely questioned for veracity of experiences being borne out in the daily life of the believer.
- i) Wesleyan and Arminian: Although this paper has asked for a Wesleyan Ecclesiology, one area that must be noted, and either embraced or reconsidered is the Arminian question. Wesley was (almost always) at his most harsh when considering Calvinism. Although he tacitly acknowledged Calvin's understanding of sanctification, he was not willing to budge on the issues relating to universal atonement, personal salvation, free-will, and the possibility of cooperation with God. It seems that those churches hoping to be truly Wesleyan would reaffirm their position as Arminian, and recognise this as a vital theological position, determinative of critical aspects of ecclesiology in relation to the world.

2. *Practical emphases*

The second area of exploration, organically related to Wesleyan theology is that of praxis. Theological positions for Wesley (and many of his heirs) always were enacted. The symbiosis of academic theological thinking and orthodoxy was borne out in practice - and *vice versa*. The practical outworking of divinity was a result of (and measured within a rubric of) orthodox thinking. Thus, the following features of Wesleyan orthopraxis will only be considered such when carefully considered within the larger schema of Wesleyan theological positions.

i. Corporate worship:

a. Singing & praying - the joyful cacophony of Wesley's own Methodists, and the on-going mythic proportions of the singing associated with Wesleyan movements is well known. More important, however, is the didactic rationale for the hymnody. The Wesleyans **sang** their theology. Likewise, praying extemporaneously, loudly, and fervently marked Wesleyan gatherings.

- b.* Preaching – the central role of communicating the good news, the importance of the ‘sermon’ for edification and exhortation was a feature of both Wesley and the Wesleys. The pulpit formed people, and pulpit-theology shaped lay-theology.
- c.* Eucharist – the place of the Eucharist as a converting sacrament, and a nurturing and confirming sacrament meant that it gradually became a central aspect of early Wesleyanism. (Alongside the Eucharist were other rituals, such as love feasts [quarterly] and watchnight and covenant services [annually]).
- d.* Liturgy - the role of liturgical practices of confession, declarations of forgiveness, creedal reaffirmations, prayers and benediction were vital practices of the Wesleyan churches. Initially based on the *Book of Common Prayer*, various adaptations were made and some in the Wesleyan family became predominantly low church in their liturgical practices.
- e.* Scripture reading –the public reading of Scripture was a central practice in Wesleyan churches, and elevated the importance of Scripture in the lives of the hearers.
- ii. *Accountability*: Accountability and intimacy of shared confession was woven into the expression of discipleship. The priority of keeping short accounts, and regularly examining one’s own life was intrinsic to membership and primarily occurred in bands and classes. High hopes of perfection/holiness were matched by high expectations of honesty and visible manifestations of the Spirit’s work in the life of the believer. The overall demand placed on disciples, however, was that they should never cease from striving to perfection, in the understanding that God would enable this movement in the believer’s life.
- iii. *Inclusion*: The inclusion of the ‘outcasts’ of society, poor people, women, children, and other disenfranchised groups was very much a feature of most Wesleyan practice. That each of these groups was expected to be full participants in the life of the church, and that each person regardless of his/her societal position was expected to be transformed by the Spirit was a mark of the egalitarian ministry of the Spirit within the Wesleyan movement (at least initially).
- iv. *Creative engagement with culture*: Engaging with new cultural understandings as a deliberate strategy and appropriating cultural forms of music/technology/organisation etc., for the purposes of ‘sharing the gospel’, communicating with the masses, or enabling people to develop belief characterised Wesleyan praxis. From gender-based clubs, to reading groups, educational support and development, new forms of congregating and creative ways

of meeting the needs of the wider world, ‘experimentation’ and innovation were in-built features of Wesleyan churches whose mission to the world was their primary focus. Such experimentation/innovation was always, it is important to note, for the sake of the mission, and both thought-through and in keeping with the orthodox rubric of the church.

- v. *Experience and experiment*: The willingness of the Wesleyan movements to engage at the level of personal experience, and also to allow experience to shape the church was a compelling (and potentially hazardous) trait. The mitigation of sound theological training of leaders and then the congregation was considered vital in areas where experimentation/experience were drawn upon. Thus ‘experience’ was never without checks and balances, and ‘experimentation’ was always within fixed (and orthodox) boundaries.
- vi. *International in Scope*: The outworking of the Wesleyan understanding of prevenient grace and soteriology as being for the entire world led to a characteristic bent towards missions. The idea of ‘going forth’ and of the global parish were endemic within Wesleyanism. The creative energy committed to accessing unfamiliar territories and preaching, teaching and caring for peoples within them led to a sense of mission within the whole of the movement.
- vii. *Engaged with creation*: Closely linked to the global vision for God’s restoration of humanity, was the understanding of the restoration of the whole world. The need for re-creation, and the reality of humankind as stewards of creation were latent threads within early Wesleyanism. Later considerations of Wesley’s thinking have persuasively seen a logical trajectory from Wesley’s eighteenth century views to a new reality within Wesleyan praxis which is both concerned for ecology and active in engaging with ecological issues at both a personal and corporate level.
- viii. *Education*: The importance of sound learning, breadth of understanding, deep engagement in study, rigorous and robust debate, awareness of history and classics, a firm and clear grasp on a wide range of pertinent issues, reading, and the ability to articulate understanding to all manner of people is a trait within Wesleyan praxis. At points this was both an end in itself (education for all) and a means to an end (enabling Biblical literacy); however, the importance of education was stressed for all people, not only clergy. The significance of having well-read and informed lay-people, able to articulate a reason for the faith that they held was stressed. The benefit of such for all of society was noted.

- ix. Holiness, social justice & engagement with the poor: Emerging from a theological perspective that considers social justice to be part of the very nature of God, the praxis of the church is to be alongside the poor, advocates for justice, and enactors of counter-cultural realities with poor people at the heart of their vision. The out-working of holiness makes global, societal and real demands upon the people called Wesleyan. Planting trees in Haiti, worshipping in communities of mixed ethnicity in the USA, working alongside people of another caste in India, caring for, and housing, asylum seekers in England, educating people in relation to AIDS and so on, are expressions of both personal and corporate holiness in praxis.
- x. Holiness, personal faith & engagement with the poor: Enabling the community to live out holiness as part of their personal faith will involve significant challenges to personal holiness. Such challenges will echo and correspond to the cultures that the church is within. From the issue of being tea-total, to buying luxuries, from joining anti-slavery movements, to (not?) buying SUVs, personal holiness and corporate holiness are inter-related, and one *ipso facto* has an impact on the other. That the scriptural emphasis of holiness is both personal and corporate is undisputed, *how* that works out in praxis is vital. In each local setting, by each Christian who is part of a community, personal holiness will always be accountable to the community, as the community strives together to be holy. There is no such thing as individual holiness.

From a Wesleyan perspective, personal faith is intimately related to an imperative of being alongside poor people. In Wesley's view, and later developments initially followed this, active engagement on behalf of alongside and with the poor was not to be left to a hierarchy, professional visitors/ pastors, or an organisation. Rather each person must somehow serve others less fortunate than themselves. In so doing they were truly holy, and being perfected. Wesley referred to the responsibility to care for 'the poor' of society as an extraordinary means of grace **to the giver**, and was adamant that his followers could only claim to be Christians insofar as they engaged in such activities.⁸

- xi. Organisational vs. institutional pragmatism: Interestingly, the founder of all 'Wesleyanisms' was unafraid to change and shape organisations in order to enhance them and correspond them to his understanding of the *missio dei*. Wesley ruthlessly and

⁸ See MA thesis, Deirdre Brower.

pragmatically adapted, adopted, and reinvigorated various elements of functional organisation. At points, this seemed radical, possibly unwise, at other points, he proved to be far-sighted. He was careful to enable his organisation to be dynamic and responsive, he surrounded himself with others whom he respected, and to whom he subjected his ideas, and continually asked pragmatically functional questions: is this seemingly good to the Holy Spirit?

I am of course aware that these two mirrored sections seem repetitive, but that is exactly the point – praxis and theology are interwoven in the Wesleyan schema. What we *do* (or don't do) and who we *are* always reflects what we *believe* and how we *think*.

In addition to these various elements of praxis, there are some further issues that demand consideration. Wesleyan thinking was, for the greater part of her history, aware of a dynamic possibility of progression in understanding, unafraid to ask and allow questions, engaged in fresh thinking and enabling new practices to evolve – yet embracing them as Wesleyan. The safeguards were in place – conforming to scripture and the historical creedal faith of the church, keeping tradition as a significant factor – and yet the inclusive and optimistic nature of the Wesleyan movement enabled a wide and diverse range of views to be held that were nonetheless recognisable as Wesleyan. A further aspect of Wesleyan ecclesiology is thus the church as an organic, evolving movement. The holding together of a wide variety of people, drawn from various sectors, from multiple nations, with similar theological ancestry being worked out in pragmatic, contextualised, dynamic ways and yet still being a part of a Wesleyan church, with the ability to teach, minister, and carry out God's mission, seems to be part of the Wesleyan genius. There is space here for the radical and the traditional, for they are in conversation with each other.

Conclusion

It is, thus, imperative when considering the possibility of moving towards a Wesleyan ecclesiology for the twenty-first century, and beyond, that we permit Wesleyan thinking to be both dynamic and deeply orthodox. As the church re-examines herself, in so doing she will reveal that she is indeed unafraid to ask difficult questions. Our theology and praxis must continue to be symbiotically related and our forms and function must be related to our ecclesiology, which in turn will shape our participation in God's mission. Our thinking will be both innovative and future thinking, and yet deeply reverential towards the ancient truths we

claim to be part of. Such a church will be creative, innovative, imaginative, able to borrow, ‘redeem,’ and engage with our world on holy terms. Such a church will be a challenge, possibly an affront, to cultural norms that surround us. This Wesleyan church, in the process of being transformed, will find herself newly relevant, with an organisation, institutions and local congregations shaped and reshaped, invigorated and reinvigorated, formed and re-formed, and fit for twenty-first century challenges. Distinctive, imaginative, yet a part of the wider body of Christ, she will take guarded, sanctified risks, and continue on the pilgrimage of allowing God to form her, being true to a core vision and understanding of what it means to be a Wesleyan Church.

This brief survey of the core components of Wesleyan ecclesiology might suggest that we consider our own need to be reshaped, reinvigorated, and reformed if we seek to be a truly Wesleyan church in our diverse world.

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