

WESLEYAN THEOLOGY: A HOLISTIC THEOLOGY  
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Revised English Translation

Initially, one needs to ask oneself why it is important to reflect theologically on our task as a church in the fulfillment of God's mission. Subsequently, one must discern two polarized and unproductive possibilities regarding the relationship between theology and mission.

On one hand, it is necessary to avoid surrendering to the extreme of thinking that theological reflection becomes unnecessary and a waste of time when there is too much work to be done. Such an extreme would place an emphasis on the **how**, forgetting the **why** and **to what purpose**. This polarization undermines theological contribution as a resource for evaluating the light of our scriptural task and prevents us from falling into directionless activity.

On the other extreme is theologizing without taking into account the church's urgencies and challenges in the present. Thus we forget that the foundational truth which gives life to our theological reflection links the task of the church and its contribution to the elucidation of the path of obedience in Christian discipleship. That is, theology is reflection for growth on the path of Christian life. Any attempt to think of our faith separated from this truth is futile and sterile, and becomes mere academic speculation without concern for advancing the Task.

Theology becomes holistic when it suggests a direct and specific relationship between theology and mission that transcends the dichotomy of theory and praxis. Maintaining a healthy balance between these entities frees us from falling into dangerous extremes, which would deprive us from the timely advice of the Word in the midst of contemporary challenges. Also, we are aided in achieving missional action.

I have also identified that the elaboration of a theology through a holistic perspective needs to become dialogical with the surrounding reality. A purely scholastic theology cannot help us discern with precision our responsibility in the midst of the world's contemporary challenges; but permanent dialog with the church, that is alive on the frontier of the mission, will give us adequate impetus for rethinking our faith and enriching our missiological practice.

A holistic missional theology fulfills its function of articulating the message of God when it demonstrates belonging in new contexts and challenges, because the fulfillment of mission always needs to become effective in a context with specific socioeconomic, political and religious characteristics. For Escobar, “theology is a reflection of God’s people which accompanies its pilgrimage throughout the world”<sup>1</sup>.

In that sense, our Wesleyan heritage reminds us that the Great Awakening of the 18<sup>th</sup> century was characterized by the presence of at least three foundational elements: an eminently pastoral theology, the centrality of the Christian holiness doctrine and the development of missiological action in response to the pressing needs of the context. In fact, sociopolitical contributions of the Wesleyan movement caused such an impact on the social structures in England that it can be identified as the principal factor that made unnecessary a bloody revolution, like that of the French.

When we reflect on the implications of holistic missional theology from a Wesleyan perspective, we encounter the danger of obviousness, which implies that, as the term “holistic” is fashionable in theological circles, we understand it loses meaning and the richness of its specifications and derivations.

For that matter, in order to avoid the temptation of assuming the meaning of the term, it is necessary to mention several distinct aspects that configure holistic missional theology.

*God’s purpose: to restore everything*

The Christian mission originates at the heart of the Triune God, Creator, Sustainer, Redeemer and Sanctifier; this is the first implication of the *Missio Dei*. Essentially, He is a missionary God. Consequently, it is not appropriate to speak of the church’s mission, much less our own mission, and the church should be understood as an instrument that is found in the service of God’s movement toward the world<sup>2</sup>.

A theology of the mission, understood holistically, has as its starting point the fact that God’s purpose is to reconcile all of creation through Jesus Christ (Eph. 1: 9-10; 2 Cor. 5:19). The apostle Paul demonstrated that God wants to “reconcile all things whether those

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Escobar. *La fe evangélica y las teologías*. (El Paso: Casa Bautista de Publicaciones, 1987), p. 84.

<sup>2</sup> David Bosh. *Misión en transformación. Cambio de paradigma en la teología de la misión*. (Grand Rapids: Libros Desafío, 1991), p. 475-479.

on earth or in heaven” (Col. 1:20). This implies the recognition that God’s supreme purpose is related to his character and that the entire history of salvation should be interpreted in light of that divine intention.

The first chapters of Genesis show the contrast between the perfection of the creative act which is evident in the divine design of a harmonious life, fruitful and abundant in every way and the tragedy of sin that produced harm not only in a spiritual sense but also altered the harmony of the multiple relationships of the person with God, with oneself, and with one’s neighbors and with the Creation.

But the missional God is not paralyzed before the ravages of sin in creation, rather his divine plan is to redeem all of Creation and transform human life in every dimension, in such a way that without national distinctions, culture, race, sex or social condition, Creation enjoys the full life that God has made possible on behalf of Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit<sup>3</sup>.

This mission of God, in which the church is privileged to participate, cannot be reduced to the spiritual, the individual, the sacred, rather is also extended to the physical, the sacred, the secular. Thus, the church’s task should be harmonized with the purpose of God to form a new humanity in Jesus Christ (Eph. 2:13-16) and to become effective in the Power of the Spirit (Acts 1:8; 1 Thes. 1:5).

#### *The nature of the humankind: Imago Dei*

The human being is a unity that can not be divided. This implies that missiologically one cannot give attention to one’s needs and completely overlook life’s other dimensions. Biblically, it is clear that there is no room for the dichotomy between soul and body, private life and social life, sacred and secular; thus, any human need can serve as a point of intersection for God’s grace in people’s lives.

Theologically we assume that man and woman were created in the image of God (Imago Dei) which distinguishes them from the inferior orders in life and, as such, have in themselves the capacities of reflection, free will, willpower, creativity, and an understanding of the holistic being that they are. Genesis testifies that God formed his

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<sup>3</sup> René Padilla y Harold Segura, ed. *Ser, hacer y decir. Bases bíblicas de la misión integral*. (Buenos Aires: Editorial Kairós, 2006). p. 8.

likeness into humankind so that it might reflect his character, be the steward of creation and instigate life (Gen. 1:28).

The Imago Dei has been perverted and corrupted in the fall of humankind, but even so all humankind bears the image of its Creator which can be redeemed through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Stott has written,

Having created them in his own image, he longs that they will discover their true humanness in their relationships with him and between each other. On the one hand, God yearns after his creatures in their lostness... on the other hand, God cares for the poor and the hungry, the alien, the widow and the orphan. He denounces oppression and tyranny, and calls for justice. He tells his people to be the voice of the voiceless and the defender of the powerless, and so to express their love for them. It is neither an accident nor a surprise, therefore, that God's two great commandments are that we love him with all our being and our neighbor as ourselves<sup>4</sup>.

Likewise, humankind is a social being created to live in communion with God and one's neighbor. According to the New Testament, God's plan of redemption transcends the individual sphere and has a communal dimension, that which is formed through a community of faith that lives in plenitude and testifies to the world of God's grace. This plenitude of life has nothing to do with cheap materialistic offers that seek to take advantage of human necessity, rather it has to do with the reencounter with God's original purpose for his Creation and Jesus' promise to his disciples (John 10:10).

*Christian Discipleship: The call to holiness in Jesus' fashion*

The Great Commission that Jesus Christ left to his disciples and, consequently, to His church begins with the affirmation of His universal sovereignty and authority ("All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore..." Mat. 28: 18), which is the foundation for the task that we are called to do. The initial affirmation of His Sovereignty is not accidental but the foundation for the following of Jesus Christ. Because He is Lord of Creation, all of his followers should recognize Him as such and the responsibility of the church, explicitly mentioned in the passage, is to make disciples (28:19) who confess His Sovereignty and live in radical obedience to the light of that proclamation.

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<sup>4</sup> John Stott. *El cristiano contemporáneo. Un llamado urgente a escuchar con los dos oídos*. (Buenos Aires: Editorial Nueva Creación, 1995), p. 328-329.

Students of the New Testament affirm that the declaration “*Jesus is Lord*” (Phil. 2:11) was the core confession of the Christian community during the first centuries, which is especially significant in the context of the Roman Empire where the term was applied in reference to the absolute authority of the emperor, the address of a god. Paul testified to this when he wrote: “...yet for us there is but one God, the father, from whom all things come and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things exist and through whom we live” (1 Cor. 8:6).

The mark of a true Christian disciple is the radical confession of Jesus Christ as Lord of all one’s life and of all creation and one’s commitment to follow Him every day (1 Cor. 1:2; Acts 9:14). In Wesleyan terms, this is the essence of Christian perfection which is referred to as: “...purity of intention, dedication of one’s entire life to God. It is to give God all of our heart, and permit Him to govern our life”<sup>5</sup>. This means that Christian discipleship is not merely a cognitive experience of indoctrination in the rudiments of faith, but rather a lifestyle. Without complete and total sovereignty of Jesus Christ in the life of the believer there can be no holistic mission.

What is the supreme calling in accepting the sovereignty of Jesus Christ into the life of his disciples? Ephesians 4:13 affirms: “until we all reach unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining the whole measure of the fullness of Christ”. This is the goal for every believer and is God’s supreme purpose for His People. Knight has also written,

The divine plan is not only fulfilled through the new pact – by which God’s law of love is written on the hearts of men – but also through the restoration of the divine image, begun in regeneration, continued in entire sanctification and concluding in glorification... Although the final transformation will be in the future, the Holy Spirit works effectively now within the followers of Christ making them like Christ<sup>6</sup>.

For Christians, our only model of life and mission is Jesus of Nazareth through his perfect coherence between his life and his teachings, between his preaching and his attention to multiple human needs. But one who is called to holiness in Jesus’ fashion is

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<sup>5</sup> Juan Wesley. *La Perfección Cristiana*. (Kansas City: Casa Nazarena de Publicaciones, 1978), p. 118.

<sup>6</sup> John A. Knight. *A Su Imagen. El Plan de Dios para restaurar su imagen en los hombres*. (Kansas City: Casa Nazarena de Publicaciones, 1979), p. 166.

not called a lone individualist, of exclusively personal reach; but rather through his lifestyle, Jesus Christ's disciple responds to God's grace, "showing" one's Master and announcing the good news in a holistic way, not only by word, but also through actions.

For Wesleyan theology, a genuinely internalized holiness should manifest itself in an exterior holiness. Internalized holiness implies total surrender to God and placing the centrality of life completely on Him; the exterior is determined by the expression of God's love to one's neighbor, remembering that a neighbor is anyone and all those who are around<sup>7</sup>. The recognized Methodist historian, Gonzalez, has affirmed,

... salvation does not seek merely that people believe, but also that they obey; not only that they accept the justification that God offers, but also that they accept the sanctification that he likewise offers. Being saved is not just raising one's hand one day in church when invited to believe, but it means extending one's hand when called to act<sup>8</sup>.

A disciple of Jesus Christ who confesses him as Lord will naturally be motivated to serve others, in all parts of human life and in every way possible. The Christian disciple finds through insertion into the community the most significant expression for ministry. As Guerrero has pointed out, "ministry... is the demand of the Kingdom of God, by which the gospel is relevant and effective in society"<sup>9</sup>.

*The Church: sign of the Kingdom and agent of transformation*

A holistic theology of mission also includes a definition regarding the role of the church in the world. The metaphors of the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Mat. 5:13-16), show how the people of God fulfill their role only through interaction with the world. Through these metaphors, Jesus wanted to help us didactically find answers to existential questions that have to do with the nature of God's people, like: Who are we? What is our reason for existence as Jesus Christ's church?

Padilla has justly written that,

The questions regarding what the Church is and why the Church exists can only be answered after answering the question relative to who Jesus Christ is. If Jesus Christ is

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<sup>7</sup> Charles Irigoyen. *John Wesley: la santidad de corazón y vida*. (New York: Editora de Recursos en Español-Iglesia Metodista Unida, 1996). p. 26-27.

<sup>8</sup> Justo González. *Juan Wesley: Herencia y promesa*. (Puerto Rico: Publicaciones Puertorriqueñas Editores y Seminario Evangélico de Puerto Rico, 1998), p. 105-106.

<sup>9</sup> Freddy Guerrero. *Misión Integral. Perspectivas, Modelos bíblicos y desafíos*. (Quito: FLET, 1995), p. 145.

Lord of all and over all, the church is Christ's church to the extent that it sees itself as the "community of the King" – Jesus the Christ – and defines the purpose of its existence in terms of testifying, not just by words, by what it is and what it does<sup>10</sup>.

This leads us to understand that all of the church is missionary by nature, disregarding geographical location<sup>11</sup>, and that God's purpose is to create a new humanity, through Jesus Christ and the power of the Spirit, a community that incarnates the values of the Kingdom and testifies to the world in the present. This demand calls us to assume an active role because Christ's church cannot remain impassive, or neutral, before the needs of a world without hope.

As a sign of the Kingdom the church exists in the time marked theologically by the tension between "already" and "not yet". In Jesus Christ the Kingdom of God has burst into history, thus, it is a present reality and a promise yet to be fulfilled. The word Kingdom does not refer to a territorial kingdom in the present or to an eschatological kingdom in the future, but rather to the power of God manifest in Jesus Christ. Through this perspective, living in eschatological tension between the inauguration and the manifestation of the complete Kingdom, the church is called to be an agent of change in society.

According to Wesley, the Christian life of holiness is not only characterized by purity and faithfulness, but also by solidarity<sup>12</sup>. The theological challenge for the church demands the implementation of ministries that are contextually diverse and which meet the diverse human needs and show the perfect love of God. Padilla hit the mark when he said, "the church's mission is multifaceted because it depends on the *missio Dei*: God's mission

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<sup>10</sup> René Padilla y Tetsunao Yamamori, ed. *La iglesia local como agente de transformación. Una ecclesiólogía para la misión integral*. (Buenos Aires: Editorial, 2003), p. 22.

<sup>11</sup> David McKenna has proposed that a contemporary understanding of the term Wesleyan: "the world is my parish" implies that we recognize our need and conviction, we are commissioned by grace, authorized by experience and disciplined by necessity while we follow the Holy Spirit's strategy to reach the world. *Wesleyanos en el siglo XXI*. (Kansas City: Casa Nazarena de Publicaciones, 2000), p. 122.

<sup>12</sup> Justo González, Op. Cit. p. 112-113.

encompasses creation's totality and human life, which is founded in him and depends on him for complete realization”<sup>13</sup>.

This is a pressing reality in Latin America because the past few decades have been saturated with so many changes that have been pivotal for the life and development of our countries<sup>14</sup>. The actual process of globalization has accentuated the social polarization which has existed Latin America for centuries. The social differences have been accentuated and, each time, have shown the gap between incalculable opulence and absolute misery. Political, economic and social instability can be seen even in democracies, along with an increase in unemployment, the growth of illegitimate markets, an increase in demographic problems, heightened poverty levels and the contingency of traditional politics are only a few elements that play into the new Latin American panorama.

In our countries, to mention a few specific instances, one marked difference is the coexistence of rural and urban societies forming a single region. Developmental models have fostered urbanization and the population has migrated from the country to the city, which has surpassed the State's capacities and left serious social problems. In his analysis of this reality, Escobar mentioned that “one of the most serious phenomena in the urban jungle is the precarious condition of abandoned teens and children, victims of familial disintegration, drugs and violence, seedbeds of delinquency”<sup>15</sup>.

In this situation, Christian compassion has constituted an indispensable element for the development of mission. Positively, it has generated, from the evangelical perspective, the gestation of a series of holistic mission projects to meet growing social needs. But, on the other hand, this reality has also become a cultural medium for the propagation of Prosperity Theology, which, taking advantage of harsh necessity and the consumer addiction typical of our generation, has offered a mutilated gospel that has adapted more to egocentric expectations than to the demands of the Kingdom.

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<sup>13</sup> René Padilla y Tetsunao Yamamori, ed. *El proyecto de Dios y las necesidades humanas*. (Buenos Aires: Editorial Kairós, 2000, p. 33.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Arturo Piedra, Sydney Rooy y H. Fernando Bullón. **¿Hacia dónde va el protestantismo? Herencia y perspectivas desde América Latina**. (Buenos Aires: Editorial Kairós, 2003). In his book, Piedra analyses the realities of Latin America and he challenges that the context creates for ministry.

<sup>15</sup> Samuel Escobar. “Entender a la América Latina en el nuevo milenio”. En *Apuntes Pastorales*, Volumen XVII, Número 2 (Costa Rica: Desarrollo Cristiano Internacional, octubre de 1999), p. 13.



What a challenge and opportunity for the Lord's church to serve in these contexts of deep need! In his recent work titled "Ethics and Economy; The legacy of John Wesley in the Latin American church,"<sup>16</sup> Dr. Melendez made a valuable contribution, focusing holistic mission as a Latin American Wesleyan, especially the relationship of ethics and economy. Melendez calls us to return to the centrality of Scripture and recognize that holistic mission is and always will be a medium of holiness for God's people in every corner of the globe for all time.

### *Conclusions*

A holistic theology helps us overcome dichotomies between theory and praxis in the fulfillment of mission. It establishes effectual ministries and it challenges us to respond to the challenges of the context where we have been called to minister.

God's essence is that of a missionary God and his purpose is to reconcile, through Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit, all of creation. Humankind, made as an inseparable unit, is included in his redemptive plan and God's purpose is to holistically meet all of our needs. Jesus Christ's challenge to his disciples is to surrender their lives in recognition of His Sovereignty and live according to His will with daily obedience. Consequently, the church, as a sign of the Kingdom and a community of discipleship and faith, is called to serve as an instrument of God's movement toward the world and as an agent of the transformation of society.

We live in challenging point of this century, but we have a valuable heritage as Wesleyans. Before the contemporary demands that are made on Christ's church, we find a rich opportunity for the practice of Wesleyan theology which suggests a profound and holistic relationship between salvation and holiness, conversion and lifestyle, spirituality and ministry, personal life and communal, church and society, faith and radical obedience.

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<sup>16</sup> Federico Meléndez. *Ética y Economía. El legado de Juan Wesley a la iglesia en América Latina* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Kairós, 2006).

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