

JOHN WESLEY, ETHNODOXOLOGIST: ENGAGING MISSIONALLY
WITH THE ETHNODOXOLOGY CONVERSATION

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Preface: A Vignette

When I was growing up, my father was a district superintendent (like a bishop) in Southeast Africa. My family would visit different churches in the area every Sunday, and we would be treated with enthusiastic African worship—voices, harmonies, drums, and *chichiketi* (a flat shaker, made from straw and seeds). Typically, the whole congregation would sing a few songs, then smaller groups would do a special song. Sometimes they would imitate Western choirs, standing in horizontal lines; sometimes they'd form an inward-looking circle, with their backs to the rest of the congregation. This used to annoy my father, who used to try to reorganize them into forward-facing rows—until he learned the circles were more culturally appropriate, and made it easier to coordinate the complex aspects of their performance. Singing was always paired with dancing—it was more like “sing-dancing.” Across ethnic and socio-economic divides, despite the different languages and genres, this transparent joy in sing-dancing was a constant.

Back then, my father had received little cross-cultural training, and would readily tell you he wishes he had known more about contextualization. But even so, he was sensitive and informed enough to avoid the battles which had consumed so many African churches. Although he never condemned a pastor for being hesitant to use drums in worship, he nonetheless enthusiastically encouraged the practice whenever possible. God can use peoples' own culture in worship, he taught me.

This lesson was ingrained in me—to condemn cultural art forms in worship was to be blind to obvious beauty. You can you imagine my shock, then, when I discovered that all over the world, the battle continued. Hadn't we settled this already? I remembered how, on one trip with my father into the Bush, I'd confessed to an assembly of village churches that I didn't have their passion in worship. At that time, I'd said that I needed to learn *from* them. Who would dare obstruct such conducive worship of God?

As a cross-cultural worker in Mongolia, I found myself alone in my passion for using Mongolian forms of music, storytelling, and poetic blessings/prayers in the church. I was aware that other organizations had made use of ethnomusicology (and other forms of ethnographic study) in their mission efforts, but in both my context and my denomination, I found myself both reinventing the wheel and pushing it on my own. And yet, my memories of watching faithful African worship *happen*, of seeing the joy and energy on everyone's faces as they sang-danced African songs (and watching it dissipate when we sang Western ones), convinced me that it was a goal worth chasing. And so it was that I came to study ethnodoxology.

Introduction

Defined as “the interdisciplinary study of how Christians in every culture engage with God and the world through their own artistic expressions” (“What Is Ethnodoxology?” n.d.), ethnodoxology is an interdenominational, missional community of practitioners and its parallel academic field. It exists to facilitate the contextualization of worship and outreach, which has been recognized by many successful mission organizations as a cutting-edge practice that is vital

to the future of the Church. This paper will examine the field from the perspective of Wesleyan-Arminian theology, making the case for why Wesleyan denominations should: 1) participate to a greater degree in the active conversations, networking, trainings, and ministry opportunities that define ethnodoxology, and 2) make sustained, intentional use of ethnodoxology part of our official cross-cultural mission structures.

As a member of a Wesleyan-Holiness group who is a practitioner of (and pursuing an advanced degree in) the discipline, it is my sincere belief that the aims of ethnodoxology line up very naturally with many of the key tenets of our theological tradition. And yet, perplexingly, we are mostly absent from it. To demonstrate why both Wesleyan groups and ethnodoxology itself would be enriched by our presence, I will: 1) define and explain the practice of ethnodoxology and contextualized worship, 2) examine some of the key Wesleyan-Arminian theological concepts related to the discipline, and 3) point out the conceptual correlations between the two which demand our attention.

Defining Ethnodoxology

Ethnodoxology can be considered as either 1) a general activity, or 2) a specific discipline encompassing both an academic field and a network of practitioners. The term is frequently invoked to refer to the first, though the second may be more technically correct.

First, ethnodoxology can be shorthand for the practice of creating contextualized worship—understanding that this term goes beyond just a worship *service* to include how one lives their life before God. In general, it tends to refer to using local cultural art and communication forms to create worship arts, liturgy, and devotional practices, especially those created by non-Western cultural groups in contrast to imported, Westernized worship forms. However, contextualized worship for specific sub-cultural groups is also needed within the broader Western cultural context. My vignette at the beginning of this essay, then, could be considered an example of ethnodoxology at work.

Second, ethnodoxology refers to a specific, emerging field of research and practice, moderated by certain mission-minded organizations and facilitated by an increasingly numerous and dedicated network of both academics and practitioners. As a discipline, it seeks to integrate the deepest insights from ethnographic artistic studies, translation studies, and performance studies with the best practices from missiology and worship studies. It is multi-disciplinary by design, and intentionally includes both practitioners and scholars. This creates a potent combination of theoretical insight presented alongside an increasingly vast library of freely accessible resources—a deep well of valuable experiences from hundreds of specific applications. In this way, it intentionally provides a means for practitioners to inform each other’s ministries, and to help prepare and include the next generation of ethnodoxologists from the very beginning.¹

The field emerged relatively recently from the various ministries of missionaries and local Christian leaders, who began to network with each other, write articles about their

¹ To learn more about the methodology and theory of this discipline, please see “Why Local Arts are Central to Mission” (Schrag 2007) and “The Great Misconception” (Harris 2013) for helpful overviews, as well as (Dye 2009; Petersen 2017; Schrag 2013)

ministries, and establish dedicated branches of their organizations related to these tasks.² It began as “Christian Ethnomusicology,” but eventually broadened to include other academic disciplines and forms of artistic expression. Missiologist David Hall coined the term “ethnodoxology” to describe the increasingly well-defined shape of this phenomenon,³ a shared practice of deeply researching a culture (generally via ethnographic methods) and applying those insights to facilitate the creation of new, contextual forms of worship. One practitioner explained it as such:

Ethnodoxology is the worldwide practice and study of arts facilitation that encourages the grass-roots, local composition and production of artistry that is culturally relevant, biblically sound, and emotionally resonant, for use in the body of Christ for worship, discipleship, evangelism, and other extensions of God’s love in the world” (GEN, n.d.).

Clearly, ethnodoxology wasn’t the brainchild of a single person, but rather the organic coming together of streams of thought and practice. Still, there are a few groups which have certainly played key roles shaping of the discipline. Wycliffe Bible Translators, SIL International, OM Arts, and Heart Sounds International (the last two of which have now merged to form Inspiro Arts Alliance) were some of the most influential early mission organizations, along with Artists in Christian Testimony, Pioneers, World Venture, and many others. The educational institutions of GIAL (“The Graduate Institute of Applied Linguistics,” which has now become Dallas International University), Daystar University, Fuller Theological Seminary, Wheaton University, Southwestern Baptist Seminary, Payap University, and Calvin College, among others, were instrumental in providing space for the development of the field with their missiology departments. Some denominations have also either participated directly, or created liturgical devices which intersected with it, such as the United Methodists, the Southern Baptist Convention, and some branches of Catholicism.

It is especially important to note the heavy influence of Wycliffe, SIL, and GIAL. These organizations are largely based on the ministries surrounding the field of linguistics: translation, developing orthography, literacy projects, encouraging the use of and engagement with scripture, and so on. These organizations intentionally focus on indigenous peoples and marginalized ethnic minorities; although their ministries began primarily with translations of scripture, the social, cultural, and economic ramifications of their work increasingly drew them into ministries of community development. These two factors (linguistics methodology and assisting marginalized groups) have done much to shape the current form of the ethnodoxology discussion. The arts-based workers associated with these groups developed specific methodologies, which eventually solidified to form its own academic field, known variously as “World Arts” or “Ethno-Arts”—a form of applied ethnographic arts research. For many of its practitioners, ethnodoxology is essentially World Arts applied to Christian worship praxis.

Eventually, a sizeable network of practitioners, the Global Ethnodoxology Network (formerly the International Council of Ethnodoxologists), formed in order to connect members to resources, training, and—most importantly—each other. GEN organizes an associated global

² For a more detailed history of the discipline see (Portugal 2016; Harris 2013, 85–87; Schrag 2013, K.L. 203-231, 280-301; “What Is Ethnodoxology?” n.d.; McDow 2016).

³ Hall’s original definition: “Ethnodoxology is the theological and practical study of how and why people of diverse cultures praise and glorify the true and living God as revealed in the Bible” (GEN, n.d.).

conference called the Global Commission on Arts and Music in Mission (GCAMM),⁴ which brings together practitioners of contextualized worship and other arts-based ministries, facilitating connectivity and the exchange of ideas. To this end, it also has a peer-reviewed, academic online journal, entitled Global Forum on Arts and Christian Faith.⁵ Lastly, it recruits and trains instructors to disseminate awareness of, knowledge for, and best practices related to the discipline, such as “Arts for a Better Future” (a general course introducing their World Arts methodology) and “Introduction to Ethnodoxology.”

Defining Contextual Worship

In short, contextual worship is practicing Christian worship in a way that emphasizes how our various human cultural contexts are both valuable and critically influential. Culture represents a mode of human existence established by God which is impossible to jettison, and which we ignore to our own peril. We are deeply formed by it, and it is a crucial means by which we interact with each other and with God. Our customs, languages, histories, and arts are an important part of us, providing the deepest opportunities to connect us with the God who gave us this creative, cultural capacity.

If we take this reality seriously, then our worship practices are necessarily crafted to speak within and towards our cultural context—we *contextualize* them. This means crafting our prayers, devotional practices, worship arts, scriptural study and storytelling, etc., in a way that speaks deeply to and for people in that context. This two-directional aspect is a critical part of the process: critiques of contextual worship suggest we merely adjust our worship practices to make them more palatable to local communities. This is wrong. Proper contextual worship understands and takes into account cultural ways of thinking, acting, and communicating not only to provide a natural, un-obstructed way of relating to God, but also a deeply-felt and impossible-to-deny challenge to our cultural norms. (Atkins 2012) To truly transform cultures in a Christ-like way, we must employ cultural ways of thinking and being. Otherwise, we risk destroying the aspects of culture that are beautiful and good, and leaving its most destructive and ugly attributes unchallenged.⁶

One of the most powerful methods of accomplishing this is to “redeem” local cultural forms (from artistry, communication, religion, etc) by reorienting them to focus on God. Mozambiquan “song-dance” is an example of this; communal song-dance forms were part of their social fabric long before Christian worship was introduced. However, the creation of entirely new forms of worship practices may be just as powerful, effective, and redemptive. The vital element is not the form itself, but how deeply it is connected to the cultural identity of those using it.

Relevant Wesleyan Theological Concepts

It will be simpler to show the parallels between Wesleyan thought and the practice of ethnodoxology if we first highlight some of Wesley’s core theological tenets. I will elucidate the

⁴ Their website is located here: <https://gcommhome.org/>

⁵ Please see: <https://artsandchristianfaith.org/index.php/journal>

⁶ “Transforming Worldview Through Song” (Atkins 2012) is a good example of this principle in action.

four most significant to the discussion: 1) prevenient grace, 2) the means of grace, 3) holy love and the *Imago Dei*, 4) true worship and the *Missio Dei*.

Prevenient Grace

Prevenient grace describes “the grace of God that goes *before*.” Wesleyans believe that scripture clearly depicts God’s desire to redeem all of humanity. At the same time, the Fall and the corruption of sin is so destructive that it destroys our ability to respond adequately to God’s offer of saving grace. In fact, if it were not for His self-revelation, we could no longer even discern who God is. Perhaps we could sense a divine existence, but without really *knowing* God’s identity or character. And though aspects of the *Imago Dei* (“the image of God”) remain in us, we have no power to restore this image on our own (Shelton 2020).

However, God’s desire to rescue us, His Mission to restore the *Imago Dei* and to renew all of creation, and his uncontainable Holy love prompt God-initiated acts of grace on our behalf. The first of these we term “prevenient grace.” Through the Spirit, God has already gone into all the world, and is working in the hearts of all humanity to draw them back to Himself. This work of grace restores our ability to respond freely to God’s offer of grace—the revelation of Himself in Christ. Because of God’s own grace, we may choose to accept or reject Him (Crutcher 2014, K.L. 2397). But prevenient grace accomplishes more than this “enabling” function. It is also “transformative;” God is already active in the hearts and minds of all people to begin to point them to Himself. In the midst of a broken world, God finds ways to speak to every heart; glimpses of His love provoke our curiosity (unless we choose to crush it) and the beginnings of a desire for God (Shelton 2020).

This grace is universal; it’s offered to everyone. Similar to the Reformed theology of “common grace,” this means that humans are capable of doing real good—grace-activated vestiges of the *Imago Dei* and the beauty of creation. Altruism, artistry, exploration of God’s created order—all of these speak to the grace of God active in the world. Unlike common grace, however, Wesleyans maintain that by beginning the transformation of the heart, such grace is a part of God’s saving activity.⁷

In all these ways, Wesleyans believe that Mission is never done in utter darkness, but that God is already at work in a place or people well before we arrive. This is crucial—we do not *bring God* anywhere; He’s already present. Nor do we start His work from scratch; rather, we must locate and discern where His saving efforts are already ongoing, and participate in them. To those with the eyes to see, the created order is already saturated with God’s action. This has immense implications for the practice of Ethnodoxology, and its pursuit of redeeming cultural art forms and devotional practices for the worship of the true God (Blevins 1998, 118).

The Means of Grace

The “means of grace” form the core of Wesleyan spiritual practice. Simply put, these are the “means by which” God’s grace is enabled to come to us. Wesley often describes them as the “channels” through which God’s grace flows into our lives and beings. These are not religious practices for their own sake (Wesley would see this as superstition or dead religion), nor do they

⁷ Of course, as an Arminian, Wesley is adamant that Prevenient grace does not accomplish salvation on its own, and entails neither universalism nor irresistible grace (Shelton 2020).

somehow compel God to act in our favor. Practicing them without a genuine devotion to Christ and a desire to embody his Holy love will accomplish nothing (Blevins 1997, 71–72). Even so, when undertaken with the proper orientation of the heart, they are a very real, active way for God’s grace to permeate and transform us.

Wesley organizes these means into several categories:

- **The Instituted Means of Grace:** Wesley’s first category describes the ordinances which were explicitly established and enacted by Christ (Johnson 2016, 64). These include Communion, prayer, Scripture, fasting, and Christian conference.⁸ These means are the most reliable, accessible ways we have to be shaped by God’s grace—for a Christian to neglect any one of them would be most unwise (Blevins 2016).
- **The Prudential Means of Grace:** So-termed after “prudence” (“wisdom”), the prudential means of grace are practices which the community has confirmed to be beneficial for helping us grow in holiness. These are not explicitly ordained by Christ but are nonetheless reliable ways of experiencing his grace. Some examples of these would be reading classic theological and devotional literature (such as the Church Fathers), visiting the sick, participating in organized “class, band, and society” meetings, prayer meetings, vigil services (e.g. the “watch night feast”), and more (Blevins 1997, 78–80). Because the Body could clearly discern the Spirit accomplishing transforming work in the community through these, establishing them as praxis was considered only prudent. But they were also wise in a larger sense. Wesley understood their beneficial effects as stemming from God’s Wisdom—that is, the good “structure” which God has woven throughout the created order. The prudential means “work” because they are “the way things work,” in the truest possible sense (Blevins 2020).
- **The General or Transforming Means:** This category is more about what these *do* than what they *are*. The most characteristic means are termed the “works of mercy.” These are the “compassionate ministry” actions of the Church on behalf of the poor, the sick, and the oppressed. Social action was of the utmost importance to Wesley, who didn’t bother separating the works’ so-called “physical” and “spiritual” ramifications; for him, no one could claim to have Holy love if they were not already practicing them. We can see, then, that these means are “transforming” in two senses: they transform the world around us,⁹ yes, but by participating in them *we* are also transformed more and more into the full image of God (Blevins 2016).

This theology of the “means” stems from Wesley’s views on God’s action in and through the created order. Wesley does not see “spiritual” action as somehow in opposition to the “physical.” Rather, he sees both “spheres” as “united through God’s interaction with his creation,” and as “God acts through natural means, so we must use these means if we are to be the beneficiaries of divine grace” (Lowery 2004, 9). To be sure, God still “transcends his creation,” but “he still

⁸ In general, Wesley seems to be referring to groups that meet for spiritual edification outside of official corporate worship, but some scholars interpret corporate worship to be in this category as well (Johnson 2016, 314–16).

⁹ Including the legacy of Methodist social action—the schools and hospitals, abolitionists and peacemakers (Wingeier-Rayo 2018, 15; Sigler 2018, 175)—which wouldn’t have existed without their participation in Christ’s Holy love.

chooses to be immanently active in it” (9), as the incarnation itself makes absolutely clear. The means of grace, then, reflect that the created order is yet one more medium of God’s active grace—free for us to receive or reject.

Holy Love and the Imago Dei

The creation of humanity in the *Imago Dei* (“image of God”) is the cornerstone of the Wesleyan doctrine of salvation. For Wesley, sanctification is the central aspect of our salvation, and thus forms the “backdrop” for understanding most of his theology (Tracy 1998, 35). To have salvation is to be remade, not for own’s own sake, but for the sake of God and others. To attain salvation is to be drawn up into the *Holy love* of God, and to be remade in the image of His loving, redemptive heart.

This concept of “Holy love” is the driving force behind all of Wesley’s practical theology. For him, love is the chief attribute of God; it encompasses all of the motivations, goals, and processes of His work in and for creation.¹⁰ The self-giving, other-enabling, creative, and redemptive actions of God all derive from this. In fact, to ascribe “love” to God as though it were merely one characteristic would be incorrect—rather, God *is* love, by virtue of His Trinitarian nature (Dongell 2014, 10–15). The manifestation of this Holy love is the end goal of all creation and redemption; sharing in it was the very reason we were formed (Crutcher 2014, K.L. 1831).

Ultimately, all “true religion” can be summarized as seeking, entering into, being filled with, and being remade by this Holy love; it animates our sanctification and the restoration of the *Imago Dei* in us (Dongell 2014, 13; Burdon 1997, 313). As Holy love is being poured into our being, the presence of sin is being “forced out;” there’s no room for both, so as one increases the other must decrease (Dongell 2014, 20). Wesley’s strong emphasis on social action and the “works of mercy” was also inextricably linked to this, as one cannot enter into the perfect love of God while at the same time neglecting others. It blurs the line between loving God and loving others (Maddox 2001, 41).

True worship and the Missio Dei

In Wesleyan thought, worship is less of a discrete category, and more a method of *being*: “true religion” or “heart Christianity” (the antonym of Christian nominalism) itself is “the method of worshiping God which has been revealed to us by Jesus Christ” (“A Wesleyan Theology Of Worship” n.d.). From this perspective, worship means “living into” the full implications/potential of our salvation and identity as God’s “have been saved, are being saved, and will be saved” people. It’s much more than corporate worship services or private devotions; it’s allowing ourselves to be remade in God’s image, to “work out our salvation,” through committing all of our thoughts, words, actions, lifestyles, vocations, and relationships to God (“A Wesleyan Theology Of Worship” n.d.; Burdon 1997, 313). It’s “enacted soteriology,” and through “true worship” we “[enter] into the very glory of God as it is expressed in Heaven on Earth” (Blevins 2020).

¹⁰ God does, of course, have other attributes: wisdom, justice, power, and authority. But because love is His essential nature, the center of His being (and therefore everything He does and creates), his other attributes are understood/interpreted through this one.

The *Missio Dei* (the “mission of God”) and worship, therefore, are intertwined. Mission requires worship, in which it is rooted, empowered, and sustained via the means (e.g. liturgy and sacrament); meanwhile, worship that doesn’t shape the Church for Mission is impotent (Tracy 1998, 33–34; Maddix 2019, 41–42). They can be seen as inseparable elements of the same reality, a sacred “rhythm,” as all God’s activity works towards reconciliation and renewal (Maddix 2019, 42). One can’t truly encounter the love of God without being drawn into Mission “of every kind” (Dongell 2014, 20).

Thus, one of the main functions of worship is giving us opportunities to encounter and experience Holy love, so it can be enabled in our own lives. Christian love—in any tradition—is often fundamentally misunderstood. *Our* Holy love is not self-generated but received from *God*. Unfortunately, when told to love, Christians often perceive an instruction to merely “work harder,” then feel guilty when our love (or energy) runs out. This ignores the vital truth of Holy love: it is a gift of grace. We can’t simply “muster up” the perfect love of Christ from within ourselves, or meet its demands by our own strength. We must actually *receive* it as a gift of the Spirit. First we are filled by His love, *then* we offer it back to Him and neighbor (Dongell 2014, 20–23).¹¹ Thus, if our worship praxis *does nothing to facilitate and encourage this*, then it is sadly deficient (Stringer 2015).

Parallels Between Wesley’s Worship Practices and Ethnodoxology

Having taken the time to explain both ethnodoxology and the relevant core tenets of Wesleyan thought, it’s now time to pull the two together. As we compare both, the interrelated nature of both should become apparent, as the same themes begin to show up again and again.

Ethnodoxology and Prevenient Grace

The implications of Prevenient grace for ethnodoxology should be clear: if God’s grace is already at work throughout the world to reconcile all people to himself, why wouldn’t it be working *in* and *through* their cultural contexts? And if it is, shouldn’t we be paying attention to it? That’s the conviction of Missiologist Don Richardson (author of *Peace Child*), who famously coined the term “redemptive analogies” to describe how each culture, by God’s providence, must have some story, practice, or other cultural element which allows them to comprehend the presentation of the Gospel. He encouraged believers to find and use them for God’s work in the world.

While Richardson roots this “redemptive analogies” concept in the *omnipotence* of God, and Wesleyans would probably appeal to His *omnipresence*, the concept still resonates. We could even argue that he doesn’t go far enough. Why can’t God’s grace-driven providence also be present in the ways local songs shape a people’s affections (the emotional dispositions of their heart), increasing their spiritual openness or development (Price-Linnartz 2019, 13)? Couldn’t a well-spoken local proverb provoke contemplation—from within one’s conceptual framework—which facilitates God’s actions in their heart? Is God powerless to redeem their imagery or kinesthetic stimulations that evoke the divine, redirecting them to Himself?

¹¹ Of course, as with every aspect of our growth in sanctification, it comes only by *God’s* grace, and therefore his *timing* and *manner*. We can’t demand it from him, but must wait expectantly while continuing to diligently work out our salvation (Dongell 2014, 18–19).

This approach describes exactly what ethnodoxology is trying to do. Rigorous application of the social sciences may not sound especially “spiritual” to us (then again, that may just be the Gnosticism talking), but at its heart, it is a way of feeling out God’s prevenient presence in the world. If all of history is God’s conversation with a people, then it’s only by deeply understanding their spiritual discourse that we can truly respect and speak to the ways in which he is present with them. Meanwhile, *ignoring* these insights risks dismissing the Spirit’s workings. But perhaps, if *God’s* grace has been working in a place before we get there, it’s best not to trample on it once *we* do.

Contextualization and the Wesleyan Quadrilateral

Unlike many of his future followers, contextualizing worship praxis was John Wesley’s *modus operandi*. While he respected tradition, Wesley was also an *innovator*. In his view, the Anglican church was not helping most of its adherents grow in Christ, so he adapted traditional practices to new circumstances, and developed new ones to fill in the gaps (McLaughlin 2013). He embraced Jesus’ example to reach “people where they were in their own language,” drawing on their experiences to connect with them (Wilson 2011, 22). Wesley never sought to establish a new denomination, remaining a lifelong, dedicated Anglican. Rather, what he sought was to help a “detached” or “nominal” church to re-contextualize its worship practices, and in so doing to reinvigorate its Mission efforts.

Of course, Wesley’s process was not uncritical; he was well aware that prevenient grace is not free reign to do whatever “feels right.” Rather, it entails responsibility in our actions. The freedom it espouses means that we can also oppose God’s grace, if we so choose—even by simply neglecting to think things through. Carelessness in giving attention to the wisdom embedded in the created order can obstruct grace, too. For this reason, Wesley was meticulous in his efforts to adopt the holiest and most effective practices possible, and he never did so unilaterally.

The *Wesleyan Quadrilateral* is a term coined to summarize Wesley’s general process of evaluating a spiritual practice or theological belief. Following his example, there are essentially four ways we can ascertain their correctness: 1) Holy Scripture, 2) Church Tradition, 3) Philosophical Reason, 4) Collective Experience. Wesley, being a Protestant, made it clear that Scripture was the ultimate authority by virtue of being God’s most consistent revelation to us; he considered himself a man of the book, first and foremost (Thorsen 2005, 42). However, Scripture is inevitably received and interpreted via Church tradition, mental thought processes, and prior experiences (Crutcher 2014, Kindle Location 1330). Therefore, one must check their *interpretation* of Scripture by means of tradition, reason, and experience (Thorsen 2005, 2–5).

“Tradition” for Wesley would have referred to the beliefs and practices of the Anglican Church, other major branches of the Church, and especially the writings of the Church Fathers prior to 400 AD (Maddox 1990, 33). “Reason” meant rational, structured thought; for Wesley, this would have especially connoted Aristotelian logic (Crutcher 2014, K.L. 1390). “Experience” refers not to individual/personal experience, but to discerning the activity of the Holy Spirit within the Christian community. Indeed, subjective spiritual convictions *always* need to be examined via the discernment of the Body, which should be constantly praying for the wisdom and guidance of God. If an interpretation of Scripture *didn’t actually bear fruit* when employed

in Christian ministry and the life of the Body, then it's clearly wrong (Crutcher 2014, K.L. 1422-1437; Thorsen 2005, 2–5).

This “Quadrilateral” process of discernment is the foundation of “lived” theology, a practice of reflectively incorporating theological beliefs and spiritual practices from sources other than Scripture (which, of course, the church has always done, whether or not we’ve admitted it); these are submitted to both prayer and Scripture before being allowed to take a formational role (Crutcher 2020). Throughout his writings, Wesley refers to this as an “experimental” way of doing theology. Read as much Scripture and Christian writing as possible. Converse, pray, and seek the Spirit together. When a pattern of the Holy Spirit’s work becomes visible, discern together how to formulate it into a practice. Employ it, and if successful, it can become a formalized belief. In this way, the Body continues to be sensitive to and engaged with God’s movements among them and the contextual needs of their world (Thorsen 2005, 46–48).

In the same way, ethnodoxology includes processes of accountability, working to ensure contextualized forms are in line with the truth of God. One popular tool is Paul Hiebert’s model of Critical Contextualization, which outlines a process for bringing the community and Scripture together in conversation, discovering the relationship between cultural forms and their meanings in order to consciously point them towards Christ (Harris 2006, 15). Organizations like SIL have formalized systems of employing trained consultants and community experts to evaluate new worship creations, checking their effectiveness and appropriateness. GEN promotes training in their “CLAT” methodology (Creating Local Arts Together), which has been carefully assembled within a community of faithful practitioners who continue to evaluate it time and time again.¹² Scripture, reason, community experience—and even tradition; the echoes of Wesley here are hard to ignore.

Contextual Worship as Lived Theology

My opening vignette demonstrates ethnodoxology in the more general sense—the organic creation of contextualized worship forms. In it, we can see how Southeast African song-dance developed as contextual, *lived* theology. Although their approaches varied, in general no doctrinal formulation initiated these churches’ contextual worship. It originated as a way to engage their full physical, emotional, and cognitive faculties in the worship of God. When they did so, they found their physical and spiritual beings were changed; the Spirit was apt to flow into their lives in new ways—not unlike the reported effects of early Methodist hymn singing (Gorman 2013, 128–31).

Many churches were inevitably drawn into prayerful discussion (and some to knee-jerk reactions) to discern if the Spirit’s presence was in the activity, and if it resulted in long-term spiritual growth. Scripture and reason were consulted, often through conversing with missionaries and other local church leaders. In this way, missiology’s academic, scriptural, and historical perspectives were also brought to bear on the issue. Some churches engaged in this process carefully; others made hasty decisions. However, ultimately song-dance was adopted by most churches in the area, and the overall collective testimony of the Body is that it’s been a good thing.

¹² *Creating Local Arts Together* (2013), edited by Brian Schrag, is a volume dedicated to explaining this.

Obviously, most of its practitioners' experiences were not so cerebral; most simply did it because it made sense: God was there. Nevertheless, this entire process was Wesley's quadrilateral at work. The practice entered through the community's lived experience, then was evaluated by the other lenses. This was how Wesley himself defended his adoption of outdoor preaching (by itself scandal in his Anglican context—even worse, he did it in others' parishes) and the writing of hymns which didn't only quote scripture (Wilson 2011, 21). Based on Wesley's method, the emergence of such contextual worship should be viewed as sound.

In this sense, ethnodoxology has been part of most Wesleyan traditions to some degree. My own denomination has rarely been antagonistic to such things, but it also does very little to purposely cultivate them. Rather than simply waiting and hoping for them to emerge, shouldn't we intentionally facilitate them through conscious and sustained engagement with this discipline? Is it not worth our while to develop formal mission structures for equipping and employing specialists (as many organizations do) to help birth worship praxis that engages the whole of the being, and fills us with Missional love? The resources we expend—the time, money, and people—to cultivate such worship is more than worth the investment. Certainly, Wesley seemed to think it was worth *his* time.

Ethnodoxology as a Prudential Means of Grace

One could certainly argue that ethnodoxology, as a discipline, is a prudential means of grace. This is a bold claim, but consider the evidence. It did not begin as an academic endeavor; rather, when missionaries and worship leaders encountered (or instigated) contextual worship, they found the Spirit at work. Besides invigorating worship, it was providing new means of effective communication, evangelism, and community development—the works of mercy. As mentioned in my vignette, they often encountered resistance from established missions and church structures, but knowing it was the right thing to do, they explored scripture, reason (missiology), and even tradition to make sense of their experiences and present their case. They began to create community structures (networks of practitioners and fields of discourse) which allowed them to further refine their practices. Many believe the Spirit guided them to establish the discipline, so as to form the structures that would continue to channel an ever-growing stream of grace into the lives of untold numbers of people (see Schrag 2013, K.L. 203-231, and 280-301).

This places a decision before us: will we be prudent and accept a clear means by which God is pouring His grace into the Church—or will we choose to ignore it, and deny our communities access to a stream of God's grace? Were John Wesley alive today, how might he advise us? Enter into the stream, or stay dry?

Holy Love and Edification

For Wesley, worship was always linked to building an identity as the people of God. Wesley strongly denounced understandings of faith that prized the individual over the Body or diminished the role of community in spiritual practices; he believed that growth in faith required the encouragement, support, and accountability of banding together with other believers (Burdon 1997, 311–12; Crutcher 2014, K.L. 2760-2797). Thus, corporate worship services, small groups, personal devotions, prayer, creation of art, or any other practice, whether noisily public or silently out-of-sight, ultimately should bring us closer together as the people of God. This was the origin of their famous (and highly-organized) system of “class, band, and society” meetings,

but this conviction went much deeper. Any pursuit of the Body (such as social action) and work of the Spirit (such as sanctification) always had a social component (Gorman 2013, 126; Price-Linnartz 2019, 17–19; Maddix 2019, 43–44). Besides his pragmatism, such conviction also seems to stem from his dedication to Holy love—worship should always be about *loving others*, not merely tending to ourselves.

If we appreciate this, we should make sure worship is edifying to the whole Body. If we are going to sing hymns, we must make sure that they build the Body up, communicating clear and proper theology. If we’re going to read or preach scripture, we must be careful to prepare well beforehand, so as to mitigate any chance of misunderstanding (Ellis 2013; *Holiness Today* 2017). This mindfulness of the effects of our own spiritual practices on the sanctification of others is itself a Means of God’s grace to them—something we should take seriously, but also rejoice in and regard with amazement (Burdon 1997, 314, 316).

We see this clearly in Wesley’s intense concern for intelligibility, comprehension, and effective pedagogy. Thus, the hymns of Charles Wesley exemplify careful consideration of content, musical style, excellent artistic integrity, clear and diverse theological training, and poetic devices to aid retention. In them, we see a simultaneous desire to make excellent, joyful art, and to use it pragmatically to build up the body. We see the same dynamic at work in John’s poetry and sermon writing as well (Price-Linnartz 2019, 17–19; Ellis 2013). This testifies to their deeply held beliefs that properly designed and executed worship is key to the spiritual formation process, while inappropriate or careless worship practices stand the chance of distorting this formation and making us *less* like Christ (Ellis 2013).

This all intersects very well with the concerns of ethnodoxologists, who have always been concerned with how people in different cultures best learn, communicate, and express things such as emotion or spirituality. A great deal of time is spent trying to uncover the various social dynamics of a given context that may create obstacles to understanding and engaging with scripture, for example.¹³ Researching, choosing, and employing the appropriate artistic genres, choosing the right lexical and artistic content, choosing the correct language register (or even just “language”)—these are the bedrock of the discipline, all employed for the sake of clear and beneficial communication in worship.

Some dismiss this process as too labor-intensive, but consider what’s at stake. Careless or ineffective worship practices—such as using artistic forms that connote the wrong emotion, or are simply confusing or distracting rather than emotionally or conceptually potent—may well stifle those aforementioned encounters with Holy love critical for sanctification and missional living. Taking seriously that God’s grace is mediated through his creation—yes, even *us*—means accepting the responsibility we have to each other to learn how to do worship well. Mission demands it. Worship, itself, demands it. The good news is Wesleyans could spare themselves much time, energy, and loss if don’t re-invent the wheel, and join the ethnodoxology conversation already in progress.

¹³ In fact, there is an entire sub-discipline dedicated to recognizing and removing the obstacles between peoples of every culture and the Scriptures; it’s called “Scripture engagement,” see Dye (2009), Schrag (2007), and Petersen (2017) for more information on this field.

Ministry to the Marginalized

In keeping with His theologies of Holy love and the Works of Mercy, Wesley's movement was primarily among those who society and the state church considered less-than-important: the poor, the sick, the imprisoned, the illiterate, the orphaned, the overlooked and intentionally oppressed. Even as his spiritual successors have faltered in other areas, their passion for social action has famously endured. But beyond the familiar societal accomplishments of education, poverty alleviation, healthcare, and abolition, Wesley was also committed to pay attention to the spiritual well-being of the marginalized (Maddox 2001, 40–41; Sigler 2018, 175).

One of the clearest examples of this was his work to adapt his communication styles to oral contexts. Because so many of the people he ministered to were unable to read, he had to find ways to communicate Scripture and theology in engaging, memorable ways. The early Methodists' best-known signifiers testify to this: carefully written, theological hymn texts set to popular melodies, fiery and emotionally compelling preaching, discussion-based discipleship techniques, and the like (Wilson 2011, 24–25; McLaughlin 2013).

As it happens, ethnodoxologists frequently work in similar contexts, enacting the Works of Mercy with similarly marginalized people groups. Certainly, their methodology—deeply formed by community development—demonstrates concern for the same diversity of social factors influencing poverty and oppression. But perhaps even more profound is their similar work in oral contexts. Learning how to communicate, teach, and witness in ways that make use of oral arts and oral learning styles is one of the primary concerns of their training¹⁴—as are grappling with dynamics (such as importing electrified, rock-band worship in Western cultural idioms) that might tend to draw the church into ministry with the rich, rather than the poor. We might say that those who ignore ethnodoxology are Wesley's Anglicans; ethnodoxologists are the Methodists.

Engaging the Whole of a Person

An underappreciated aspect of Wesley's praxis was his emphasis on the whole person—the mind, body, emotions, and spirit. Because of his emphasis on the “spiritual” dimension of life, many assume he has a detached view of physicality. Nothing could be further from the truth. Wesley included basic medical training in the course of study for all his preachers; he even wrote a medical text for the purpose. He emphasized how spiritual reconciliation could have myriad physical benefits and could lead directly to holistic health. He taught the body should also be engaged through devotional activities, via posture, fasting, and other means. He encouraged the stimulation of both one's cognitive, rational ability (he was known to be a voracious reader in all manner of disciplines), but was also so spiritually engaged as to develop a sophisticated theory of a spiritual “sense.” He recognized the value of poetry and song to not only stir the heart, but to provoke the mind to ponder and enhance the memory (Gorman 2013, 128–33).

We see this at work in his non-linear theory of the “affections” and “dispositions.” His exact terminology varied, but the gist is that cultivating the proper emotional posture can aid sanctification. Fleeting “feelings” don't signify much, but the deeper inclinations of the heart revealed an emotional-spiritual disposition indicative of one's surrender to Christ. Importantly,

¹⁴ See again Schrag (2007) or Dye (2009).

this theory was never developed for its own sake, but reflect his thoughts on how aesthetic communication affects one's spiritual well-being. Music, for example, has the ability to influence one's "affections" (something a little deeper than emotion) making them more receptive to the Spirit changing the "dispositions" of their heart. But even feelings have significance: their careful (or careless) manipulation intertwines with the affections—for example, by facilitating the proper contemplation of a verse. Aesthetic communication has power to influence us, so we should be wary of unedifying stimulations *and* eager to harness aesthetics for encouraging our spiritual growth (Price-Linnartz 2019, 12–18).

Likewise, ethnodoxology also emphasizes the engagement of the whole person.¹⁵ One of its primary emphases is using multiple modalities of communication and sensory experience. Consider my opening vignette; the term "sing-dance" reflects a well-known aspect of African music—it's as much kinesthetic as aural. To divorce the two impoverishes worship (something that's actually true of all humans). Multiple modalities of engagement encourage everything from healthier mind-body integration to increased textual recall, and generally, the more senses we engage, the more transformative our experience of worship (Petersen 2017, 77; Schrag 2013, Kindle Location 294, 1509). Knowing this, ethnodoxologists seek to find or develop indigenous worship forms which implement diverse sensory experience, rather than exporting worship forms that promote the dis-integration of the mind-body or senses.

Moreover, ethnodoxology utilizes local forms of artistic communication expressly *for* the sake of (like Wesley) both beauty and pragmatism. Local arts genres communicate more efficiently and affect people more profoundly. Unfamiliar, foreign, or otherwise unengaging art forms simply won't interact with the "affections" as effectively as local ones. And it bears repeating that *badly implemented* worship arts forms in *any genre* will likely not contribute to spiritual formation. To this end, Ethnodoxology has developed a wide variety of analytical and developmental tools which help refine arts implementation, making it more likely to function redemptively.¹⁶ In both of these ways, then, Wesleyans should be intentional in using Ethnodoxology to strengthen their ability to engage with the whole of a person.

Closing Thoughts

If grace is (as we've observed) mediated to us through the created order like the theology of the "Means of Grace" would suggest, then our experience of God is not necessarily a direct and subjective one (e.g. an intense sensation of God "speaking to you heart"). It may, for example, come through the medium of other people. A fellow believer "affirming our call," giving and receiving kindness in the face of need—in such conscious encounters God's grace is channeled to us, surely. But His ability goes beyond that, channeling God's grace to us through the wisdom-crafted structures of creation itself. Something as "simple" as the organized vibrations of air, the rich sensory delight of well-crafted words, even a breeze and drizzle while

¹⁵ Schrag (2013) 280-301, offers a helpful overview.

¹⁶ See Schrag (2007), Schrag (2013), and Krabil (2013) for a short, medium, and long explanation of this redemptive function, respectively.

hiking. If God is the immanent God of the Incarnation, then we must affirm all of this as the medium of His action.¹⁷

The different categories of the means of grace are Wesley's way of affirming both the dependability and the "fresh action" of God throughout the created order. There are some practices in which we can be confident that God's grace is waiting, ready to work in us. We can't force God to show up (or not to) in a radical way, but His loving presence is there even so, every time. Still, God has a tendency to never do the same thing twice.

After an absence of sixteen years, I recently returned to my childhood home in Mozambique. The songs had changed. It was unfamiliar, even painful. But as I spent time with my new musician friends, I found the same passion for God, the same joy in His presence. The channeling of grace always seems to find fresh ways of pouring into our lives. To return to the same fount again and again, demanding that God show up like He did before—this is also foolish.

If this is so, then contextualizing worship is not just recommended—it's a *must*. To fail to take seriously that this new culture, this new situation, is pregnant with God's grace, ready to be mediated to the community of faith (local and global) in all manner of fresh ways—to insist on doing worship *there* the way the Body has done it somewhere else—is to attempt to constrain the very grace of God. It's to refuse to have His fresh grace mediated to us. Truly, this seems a poor way to honor the theological heritage gifted to us.

Thankfully, the opposite scenario is always available to us. Just like Wesley, being faithful, attentive, and creative in our crafting of worship forms *always* allows for the grace of God to pour out into our context. There is *always* a new expression of the means of grace, *always* waiting to be a part of God's pursuit of every person, of His restoration of the world. While ethnodoxology may seem like a new story, it is, in fact, a very old and familiar one. It's an aspect of our heritage that we can recover at any time we choose. Let us do so.

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¹⁷ I owe half of this insight to Jeremy Begbie, from his *Resounding Truth: Christian Wisdom in the World of Music* (2007).

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