ALL THINGS NEW:
MISSION, WITNESS, AND THE WESLEYAN WAY

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Let this joyful hope invite us to mission: our witness is a living testimony to God making all things new. Witness, as I'm proposing in this paper, is the primary theological activity that integrates confession and mission, too long divided. Witness, as I will argue, inextricably links mission to theology because theology was born to bear faithful witness to God's mission in the world of inaugurating a new creation. In a consciously Wesleyan approach, bearing witness to the new creation cannot be relegated to a solely confessional activity; it involves the whole person. Witnessing in a Wesleyan way involves whole lives being integrated into the patterns of the new creation.

Witnesses to New Creation

The logic of Christian theology is witness. Theology bears witness to God and God's activity in the world, neither inventing new content nor untethering itself from what we have seen and heard. While theology quests after ever-faithful ways to describe God and God's activity in each generation, it does not do so as a novel enterprise; the only story it has to tell is that of the God who rescued Israel from Egypt, became flesh in Jesus Christ, who was crucified and resurrected, and has continued to enliven the church by the Holy Spirit.

Such logic is woven throughout Scripture and continued into the patristic era. Beginning with Scripture, we find vivid testimonies to God and God's activity. The carefully measured meter of Genesis 1, the psalter's soaring rhetoric of doxology, the plaintive cries of the prophets—all of these and more differ in genre but share the logic of witness: "Come and see what the Lord has done!" (Ps. 46:8).

The singular logic of witness expressed by the multitude of voices is the beauty of Christian Scripture, and it gestures to what theology would eventually become, especially as the patristic era began to dawn: a multitude of voices borrowing from the logic of witness. Justin (whose very name has become synonymous with witness) bore witness through convincing *apologia*, Ignatius by letter, Augustine by way of sermon, spiritual biography, and treatise. Witness to God and God's activity in the world is the nature of theology, or to borrow Barth's alluring description, theology is "the logic of wonders."

To what, though, is the wondrous enterprise of theology bearing witness? So far, I have maintained that theology bears witness to God and God's activity, but we need to be more specific: theology bears witness to the God who became flesh in Jesus Christ, who was crucified and resurrected, was poured out at Pentecost, having previously rescued Israel from Egypt. Further still, this is the God who has inaugurated the new creation in the crucified and resurrected body of Jesus and is inviting and empowering the church to live into this new reality through the power of the Spirit.

A brief survey of the New Testament reveals a community intent on proclaiming the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, but who could not possibly understand witness as mere

proclamation. Here were little gatherings of prisoners of hope, figuring out in real time how they were to live in a world where death had been overcome in Christ's resurrection. Paul's pastoral letters are testimonies to a cataclysm: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old is gone, the new is here!" (2 Cor. 5:17).

For Paul, the astonishingly good news arrived in Christ's resurrection that had already taken place in history, opening a new reality in which the church now lived and moved and had its being. While resurrection was a widely held Jewish expectation, arriving at the end of history, it was shocking to Paul and others that resurrection had taken place in the middle of history. For Paul and the early believers, this was more than a biological miracle; this was the beginning of a world where sin and death had been defeated, and living within that victory was now possible. "For Christ's love compels us," Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, "because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died and was raised again" (2 Cor. 5:14-15). Informed by recent Pauline scholarship, here we have a proclamation of "new creation which has already begun to take over the present creation with the unstoppable power of the creator God."[1] For Paul, the resurrection of Christ has opened a new reality that beckons eschatologically: come and live in God's future, for it has already begun, and to this beginning we are witnesses.

While the Synoptic Gospels each testify to Christ's incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection, John is especially keen to demonstrate the ways in which the events of the incarnation have inaugurated the new creation. His opening lines, for example, demonstrate that his Gospel will be couched in the themes of creation and re-creation. The re-creation theme introduced in his opening phrase, "In the beginning," is eventually developed throughout chapter 1 through his repeated use of the phrase, "The next day," and his presentation of Jesus's opening work in days (John 1:1, 29, 35, 43). If Genesis is about God's work in creation, John's Gospel is bearing witness to God's work through Christ of the renewal of creation.

John's witness to new creation is especially evident in his presentation of Jesus's breathing upon the disciples after his resurrection. "Receive the Holy Spirit," Jesus says as he exhales upon the frightened lot, an allusion to God's breath in Genesis 2, which brought life to the first human (John 20:22). In this recapitulation, the resurrected Christ now breathes the Spirit into a new creation body: the church. "It is through the event of Christ's death and resurrection, the glorification of Jesus and the completion of his work, that the new creation breaks through in its fullness," Murray Rae tells us. "The pattern of new creation is to be continued in the church because the Son has given his Spirit for the continuation of his work."[2] John's Christological vision, then, involves the new creation which had not only begun in Christ's resurrection, but to which the church witnesses by its participation in the new life made available through this in-breaking reality.

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[1] N.T. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective* (Fortress Press, 2009), 70.

[2] Murray Rae, "The Testimony of Works in the Christology of John's Gospel," in *The Gospel of John and Christian Theology*, Richard Bauckham and Carl Mosser, eds. (Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 299. See Murray's essay for a more complete documentation of the theme of new creation in John's Gospel than I can provide here.

As the first century was nearing its conclusion, the early Christian imagination for witnessing to new creation reached its zenith. The bombastic images of John the Revelator, splashed vividly onto papyrus, known to us today as the Book of Revelation, colorfully confront readers: you are witnesses of new creation; stay faithful! Fascinatingly, John roots all witnesses to the new creation in the resurrected Christ, "who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead" (Rev. 1:5). Here, resurrection and witness are so deeply integrated that Christ's own witness is his resurrection, a vitally important point for the remainder of Revelation.

Without the space for a complete treatment of the theme of new creation and witness in Revelation, we will have to settle for this all too brief overview: Revelation presents new creation arriving in the Slaughtered Lamb who lives and in those who remain faithful to the Lamb as victors who inherit the fullness of the new creation. These victors, however, do more than confess a belief in the resurrection of Christ; they give themselves entirely to the new reality that opens in his death and resurrection. When John sees those who had themselves been slain "because of the word of God and the testimony [Gr. *marturian*] they maintained," we see a unification of proclamation and living reality. These martyrs are witnesses because they lived fully into the reality that the way of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection is the way all things are being made new (Rev. 5:9).

As Revelation's vision continues to unfold, those who bear faithful witness to Jesus are surprisingly victorious over beastly realities that, at first glance, have far more power. Chapter 12 presents a climactic scene of a great dragon, "that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray," losing a battle and being hurled down. The victory over the dragon, however, does not come at the hands of a more dragonly dragon, but "by the word of the Lamb and the word of their testimony [Gr. *marturias*]" (Rev. 12:11).

Ultimately, all forces set against the goodness of God's creation are defeated in Revelation. Death itself goes to defeat just before the dawning of the vision of the renewed creation, freed from the degenerative influence of sin and death (Rev. 20:14). "I am making everything new!" we hear from the throne at the middle of the new creation city (Rev. 21:5).

Bringing together the primary point for our purposes, the Book of Revelation presents the apex of God's renewal project—God's mission. That mission is being accomplished through the pattern of a Slaughtered Lamb, as unlikely as that may seem. The central message to the church from Revelation, then, is to remain faithful witnesses to God's cruciform renewal mission in the world. But this point is especially crucial for us: witnessing cannot be reduced to mere proclamation—witnessing requires participation in God's mission. Christian witness is more than pointing to a reality unfolding outside of us; Christian witness takes place from within the mission. Theology, then, is integrated with mission at its deepest level. Indeed, the logic of witness in Revelation calls the church to join what has already taken place and participate in the patterns of crucifixion and resurrection, such that we might be found faithful at the great wedding of the Lamb (Rev. 19).

Overall, what was it that the biblical writers thought they were doing? They were bearing witness to the new creation that had begun in Christ's resurrection from the grave. This was, however, far more than a breaking of biological norms by way of divine miracle. The resurrection is the monumental moment of God's mission—consistent with previous divine

action but surpassing them in new ways—of making all things new by the overturning of sin and death. It is a present reality with a future fulfillment. And yet, our hope-filled calling is to be participatory witnesses to new creation, rooted in the faithful witness of him who is the firstborn from the dead.

Problem: The Fracture of Witness

We move now to a brief diagnosis, that we might soon move to proposing a cure. Stated succinctly, when witness became primarily about transmitting ideas, it was fractured from the lived experience that had marked Christian witness, disconnecting witness from mission. Across the past several decades, the energy around evangelical mission largely had to do with 'witnessing to others,' which primarily meant telling other people about Jesus with the intention to convince them to believe in him. This movement has its roots in what I'll refer to as the rationalization of Christian theology, which is built upon a centuries-long philosophical legacy we will examine shortly.

This type of theology of witness and its accompanying anthropology stands as the legacy of Western philosophy's shift toward the interior life of a person, fragmenting the heart/soul/mind from the body. Most scholarship points to Plato as the primary originator of this kind of thinking. His distinction between the body and soul laid the groundwork for witness to become the business of transmitting ideas from one soul to another, or what I'm calling a rationalist anthropology. Descartes, Kant, and Hegel carried these assumptions into their work, shaping the Western church so deeply that we would assume their rationalist anthropology as natural, even though the biblical writers largely work with a far more Hebrew-formed holistic vision of humanity.

The adoption of "a rationalist, cognitivist anthropology," James K.A. Smith has argued, "accounts for the shape of so much Protestant worship as a heady affair fixated on 'messages' that disseminate Christian ideas and abstract values…The result is a talking-head version of Christianity that is fixated on doctrines and ideas, even if it is also paradoxically allied with a certain kind of anti-intellectualism."[3] Drawn into our argument, Smith's observations illuminate the way witness has been reduced to a disembodied transmission of ideas, rather than an integrated testimony—heart, mind, soul, and strength—to Christ's resurrection and the new creation it has inaugurated. The rationalization of Christian theology has resulted in conceiving of witness as the activity of transmitting ideas and concepts. Ostensibly, one could 'witness' to Christ without participation in him.

Incidentally, theology came to be understood as the realm of ideas while mission was considered the 'practice' of Christian ministry. Theology was thought to tend to the ideas that would be transmitted through effective practices, though the two were not necessarily integrated into one another. Rationalization has placed theology and mission in an uneasy relationship to one another, a situation that continues to afflict Nazarenes today.

[3] James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Baker Academic, 2009), 42.

The fragmentation of witness and mission lies at the roots of our understanding of what a human being is and the human relationship to God's activity in the world. We may agree that God's mission is about making all things new and that God is actively engaged in the world for the sake of redemption, but as long as our anthropology operates in the categories established by Plato, Kant, and Hegel, we will be tempted to disconnect our witness from God's mission.

I am, of course, not arguing against the development of clear, faithful, and compelling formulations of doctrine. Rather, I seek to unite doctrine to life at a fundamental level. Belief, then, cannot remain locked into the realm of the mind away from the body. As integrated beings, our witness must be integrated into our actions; we believe not only with our minds, but with our feet.

An illustration from recent Nazarene missiological history may be helpful at this point. In his 1998 book *Torture and Eucharist*, William Cavanaugh provides a powerfully insightful theological analysis of the use of disappearance and torture by the Augusto Pinochet regime in Chile throughout the latter part of the twentieth century as a means of fragmenting the church and reinforcing the state's power. Torture, Cavanaugh argues, was the means by which the state ensured that a rival social reality would not form inside Chile's borders. Torture "is much more than an assault on the bodies of individuals; it is rather an assault on social bodies."[4] By using torture, invisible to most citizens, the regime fostered a ubiquitous culture of fear in which the state maintained absolute power to disappear persons at will and return them if they wished, bearing scars that could not be seen. Each time a loved one or church member disappeared, a subtle message was being sent: the state can do whatever it wants, and you can't stop it. According to Cavanaugh, torture was used by the regime as "a social strategy, the effect of which is to discipline the citizenry into a complete performance scripted by the state. That performance atomizes the citizenry through fear, thereby dismantling other social bodies which would rival the state's authority over individual bodies."[5]

Underneath the regime's strategy was an anthropology that asserted human beings could be fragmented into bodies and souls. The church was welcome to the soul, so long as it did nothing to challenge or interfere with the state's control of the body. In essence, you can believe whatever you want, so long as you still do what the state desires.

The problem arose when various churches began caring for the bodily needs of those who were most in need. The Catholic Church, in particular, was known for establishing schools and hospitals, which presented a challenge to the way the state wished to order the bodies of its citizens and made them targets of the state's use of disappearance and torture. "Any attempt to enact the body of Christ was defined as a confusion of the spiritual and the temporal," Cavanaugh argued. "Individual Christians were left with a vague interior 'spirituality' of politics which left the imagination of the nation-state untouched."[6] That is, the state was threatened by an

[4] William T. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ* (Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 22.

[5] Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist*, 2.

[6] Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist*, 149.

integrated witness that held together the confession of Christ's resurrection with the enactment of and participation in the new creation that emerged from his empty tomb.

Upon hearing that I was reading *Torture and Eucharist* several years ago, a former Nazarene missionary to Chile, who remains a dear and trusted friend, asked me to recount Cavanaugh's argument. Upon hearing it, he said, "I don't agree with that at all. I was a missionary who lived down the street from Pinochet's palace, and he never did anything like that to us. He loved the church." I was immediately struck with the disparity between my friend's telling of his experience alongside the many documented cases of torture enacted against Christians in Chile. Then, a realization emerged: the Church of the Nazarene presented no threat to the state's control of bodies, largely because our understanding of witness was contained to the 'spiritual.' That is, his experience represented a part of our history in which 'witnessing' was primarily about transmitting rationalized ideas about God from one person to another, which were primarily understood as 'beliefs' tucked into the interior of a human soul.

Integration: Mission, Witness, and Wesleyan Theology

The Wesleyan tradition offers a balm to the wound that has ruptured mission from the witness to new creation. Wesleyan theology integrates mission and witness so deeply that one cannot be extracted from or held apart from the other. With the writers of Scripture, Wesleyans share this testimony: God is making all things new! Wesleyans, too, are those who not only proclaim this good news as confession, but dynamically and actively live this reality now in the power of the Spirit. As such, participation in God's mission is our witness.

First, a Wesleyan anthropology presents human beings as creatures who are actively being renewed by God's grace in the divine image. Proclaiming the restoration of the divine image, Wesley sermonized, "Thus it is that the 'law of the Spirit of life makes us free from the law of sin and death'; thus it restores us, first to knowledge, and then to virtue, and freedom, and happiness."[7] In this act of grace toward humans, God "stamps upon them His own image and superscription; He createth them anew in Christ Jesus."[8] For Wesley, then, human salvation was far more than a change in legal status before God, carrying implications only for the life to come. His understanding of a human being as a creature in whom God's image can be renewed in this life opens a pathway for seeing human salvation as embedded within God's mission of making all things new. It is our very salvation, then, that bears witness to God's renewal of the world. For Wesleyans, mission and witness are integrated in the very fabric and logic of our salvation.

Secondly, mission and witness are integrated in the doctrine of sanctification. For Wesley, sanctification was nothing other than being "renewed in the image of God, 'in righteousness and true holiness,'" an acute articulation of the eschatological hope underlying Wesley's soteriology.[9] Rather than humans continuing to languish under the power of sin throughout their lives, Wesley joins the chorus of biblical and patristic writers who affirm God's

[7] John Wesley, "The Image of God," in *The Sermons of John Wesley: A Collection for the Christian Journey*, Kenneth J. Collins and Jason E. Vickers, eds. (Abingdon Press, 2013), 1-11.

[8] John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1966), 32.

[9] John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, 41.

work that frees human beings from the power of sin in this life. What will be completed in the life to come has already begun in a very real way, such that those who have followed Wesley have continued to provide witness to God's mission through their presently transformed lives. The point, then, is this: Wesleyan theology integrates witness and mission in the lived experience of those who give testimony to sanctification, which is nothing other than deep, transformative participation in the grace of God. Wesley's special fondness for extoling the "witness of the Spirit" in human life signifies the theological affirmation that we humans bear witness to God's work precisely because we are caught up inside of that work. We do not observe God's mission from a distance. Sanctification and our testimony of it demonstrate an integrative reality: in our sanctification, we bear witness to God's mission of renewal.

Though Wesley can be quickly critiqued for a soteriology that is overly individualistic, the later decades of his life demonstrate theological development that situated human salvation within God's mission of making all things new. For the mature Wesley, God's work was holistic, encompassing the spiritual, social, and cosmic.[10] By the time he was in his early 60s, Wesley published his sermon, "The Scripture Way of Salvation," in which he contends that salvation "is not what is frequently understood by that word, the going to heaven, eternal happiness. It is not the soul's going to paradise… It is not something at a distance: it is a present thing; a blessing which, through the free mercy of God, ye are now in possession of… 'Ye have been saved': so that the salvation which is here spoken of might be extended to the entire work of God."[11]

Here, then, is the eschatological and missional point we cannot miss: salvation is already taking place in the work God is presently doing to make all things new. As such, God's mission of renewal opens to us for our *present* participation in what typically goes under the terms justification and sanctification. Again, Wesley: "And at the same time we are justified, yea, in that very moment sanctification begins."[12] For Wesleyan theology, salvation is not only a legal change in status before God, realized only after we die. Wesleyan theology 'closes the gap' between the historical work of Christ Jesus on the cross, the future completion of that work, and our present living.

A Wesleyan understanding of mission, then, cannot be something happening to which we point from the outside. For Wesleyans, mission is something in which we participate, and our participation is simultaneously our witness and our salvation. In essence, a mode of 'witness' that does not involve our participation in God's mission cannot rightly be called Wesleyan. A Wesleyan approach to witness cannot simply point to a set of ideas or attempt to convince others of them. Rather, our witness springs from dynamic and transformative participation in the new creation, even as we invite others to participate with us. Theology, then, is not a task of describing divine activity objectively. Wesleyan theology is a descriptive task from within God's

[10] For a more complete demonstration of this, see Randy Maddox, "Nurturing the New Creation: Reflections on a Wesleyan Trajectory," in M. Douglas Meeks, ed., *Wesleyan Perspectives on the New Creation* (Kingswood Books, 2004), 21-52.

[11] John Wesley, "The Scripture Way of Salvation," in *The Works of John Wesley* (Baker Book House, 2002), Vol. 6, p. 44.

[12] John Wesley, "The Scripture Way of Salvation," 45.

mission, offering descriptions of what we think is happening as God renews us, that we might join in the renewal of the world.

What we have just described is the conviction underlying Mildred Wynkoop's treatment of what she termed "the credibility gap," which is frequently misunderstood and misrepresented as mere hypocrisy—testifying to an experience of sanctification while acting otherwise. For Wynkoop, the credibility gap is deeper than claiming an experience of sanctification while acting otherwise. The source of the credibility gap is *missional*. Specifically, it is the gap that emerges between God's mission of making all things new and lived human realities. Calvinism, she argues, tends to locate God's work in objective realities, such as the crucifixion of Jesus, that have secured what is necessary for our justification, while not necessarily joining human lives to what God is doing in history to make all things new. For Calvinism, it may be possible to witness to God's work without actively participating in it, but the dynamic nature of Wesleyan theology can countenance no such reality. With its strong emphasis on justification as a change in legal status and imputed righteousness, Wynkoop points out that Calvinism potentially makes salvation a primarily legal matter. Morally, then, a person may be justified by the imputed righteousness of Christ's atonement, but there is no necessary ongoing dynamic at play in such theology; it is an objective reality in which we trust, but do not participate. For Calvinistic theology, salvation is what happens 'above' us for now, with the promise of a 'someday' fulfillment. Wesleyan theology, however, affirms that 'someday' has already dawned and our salvation involves active participation in God making all things new. The gap emerges between God's mission and our lived, historical lives. "Holiness theology," on the other hand, "must become incarnate *in history* as Calvinistic theology need never be."[13]

Wynkoop ultimately proposes a recovery of Wesleyan theological dynamics that I echo here. Undergirding her proposal is predicated on an anthropology and a soteriology that sees a human as a dynamic being, but not one that divides body from soul. "The unity of personality is everywhere assumed" by the New Testament writers, she argues. "Heart, mind, soul, spirit, conscience, flesh, body are not distinguishable parts of man put together as something that man has."[14] Such a thoroughly biblical anthropology allows Wynkoop to treat salvation—from justification through entire sanctification—as an ongoing, unifying integration. For her, Christian salvation involves the love of God unifying human desires, actions, and activities. Thus, "Perfection is integrity at any point along the line of maturation."[15]

Drawing upon these theological dynamics, we can carry them forward to unify mission and witness. Our witness to the new creation is our lives, unified by God's love such that every aspect of who we are testifies to the new creation in Christ Jesus. Mission, then, is a living witness to the breath the resurrected Christ continues to breathe upon disciples. Mission is participation in God making all things new, precisely in our living witness to what God has and continues to do to make all things new. While witness certainly includes proclamation, Wesleyans cannot leave it there; guided by our anthropological and soteriological convictions,

[13] Mildred Bangs Wynkoop, *A Theology of Love: The Dynamic of Wesleyanism* (Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2015), 49.

[14] Wynkoop, *A Theology of Love*, 129.

[15] Wynkoop, *A Theology of Love*, 303.

we bear in our bodies our witness to Christ's crucifixion and resurrection and in him, all things being made new.

The implications of unifying mission and witness are manifold, though the primary suggestion I offer here is to chart a pathway between two extremes. First, we should avoid the extreme of reducing 'belief' to agreeing with disembodied ideas. Nazarenes are pressed to embrace the hope woven into the fabric of our theological heritage by embracing an embodied witness. This is, of course, happening around the globe, though the temptation to disembodied witness lingers. Where we may be tempted to turn mission into a transmission of ideas, we should come to believe 'in our bones' the message of the gospel. On the other hand, Nazarenes must be careful that in our desire to offer practical ministry, we do not assume a distance between theology and the practice of ministry, because the logic of theology is witness. Not only is such a move out of step with our deepest theological confessions and identity, but it drives the wedge that Wynkoop helped us extract a generation ago.

Following a middle trajectory between these twin extremes, then, draws us toward the affirmation that witness and mission cannot be held apart from one another. As we participate in God's mission, our participation is our witness. We cannot witness to something in which we do not participate, but we participate now by grace in the reality that God is making all things new.