

In Search for a Taxonomy for Wesleyan Public Activism

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The Church of the Nazarene finds its ethos and example in the theology and practice of Scripture as exegeted and defined by John Wesley and the early Methodist movement. The victory over sin played out within the life of the individual believer under the rubric of “entire sanctification,” becomes the battle enacted publicly against societal sins as the Kingdom of God is extended on earth through the collective influence of lives lived in a holy engagement.

Wesley himself advocated **against** institutionalized bribery, smuggling, forced conscription and slavery and **for** childhood education and care, vocational training, medical health treatment, financial savings, the security of widows, etc. Historically, those who have exercised the Wesleyan mandate, have engaged in societal restoration. William Booth, William Wilberforce and 19th century American holiness proponents attest to the energy and paradigm that this represents.

With the theological fissure between liberals and fundamentalists in the early 20th century, Wesleyans vacillated between both factions, eventually succumbing to both extremes---the social gospel of the activist often devoid of personal accountability; and the fundamentalism of the Dixonians who advocated soul conversion over corporal.

Since the 1960’s with its Civil Rights movement in the U.S., the emergence of neo-colonial nationalism and the liberationist movements, especially in Latin American, there has been an evangelical reassessment of the theological divide of the previous years. Many churches have adopted slogans to describe their initiatives in societal obligations, e.g., Catholic “Charities”, Lutheran “Social Services”, terms such as “philanthropy,” “compassionate ministries,” “compassion evangelism,” “social justice,” “holistic discipleship,” “Wesleyan economics,” “Jubilee Economics,” etc.

If one surfs the Internet under the term, “Compassionate Ministries,” it becomes apparent that the Church of the Nazarene owns a monopoly on that terminology. Nazarene Compassionate Ministries, International, or US/Canada or Inc., are well represented. Nazarene college campuses are also highlighted. Districts have their CM representatives, and there are over 140 individually registered Compassionate Ministry Centers all state legalized. Beyond the U.S., is a growing body of institutions with equivalent forms.

The author of this paper applauds these initiatives yet questions their theological foundation at the same time. Felicitously, there is a growing body of serious theological dialogue about what “compassionate ministry” is and how to do it (witness the literature written by Bryan Stone, Tom Nees, Michael Christensen). Yet it is his belief that there are latent issues begging a truly Wesleyan scrutiny.

1. Is any ministry adequate that is “need-based?” If so, are we not exercising a deficient “anthropology” that reduces people to merely an extension of some identified need (usually categorized by the “need-givers” rather than the truly needy)? Should not the focus

be on manifest grace even in the lives of the most needy and build from that, rather than their deficiency? John McKnight's essay, "Why Servanthood is Bad?" highlights the transition in Christ's commission from a "servanthood" perspective to that of "friendship" (John 15:15). Furthermore, need-based service creates a false bifurcation between those who are needy and those who respond to needs.

2. Is any ministry capable of adequately responding to "need-based" individuals? By trying to "compensate" for deficiencies, heroic efforts are targeted to the needy, which can neither perpetuate nor provide for all needs. Care-givers crash, programs dissolve, dependencies are institutionalized, while systems grind out needs *ad infinitum*.

3. Ultimately, the "Good News" centers not on human need, but on God's need to be worshipped. "Bless the Lord, O my soul," is a stronger note of Scripture, than "Bless me, O Lord." North American preoccupation with the Prayer of Jabez attests to the latter skew. Blessing most authentically comes as a derivative of worshipful relationship with God. Hence, God's paramount gesture of compassion is to offer Christian community, where human assets are enjoyed rather than deficiencies highlighted. Wesley's philosophy of bands and meetings exemplifies this.

4. The compassionate gestures of God, of Jubilee, of Jesus and the seminal Christian Church are well documented in Scripture. These examples energize especially personal ethics and example. Yet there is a whole body of Biblical insight into the nature of evil beyond personal ethics. The phrase, "the World, the Flesh and the Devil" perhaps captures the tripartite nature of evil succinctly. The "World" refers to "systemic evil" seen in Pauline references to "principalities and powers," man-made institutions corrupted by sin in ways that transcend individual transgressions. Liberals monopolize this definition. The "Flesh" refers to "personal evil," the "willful transgression of the known will of God" and focuses most evangelical attention. Deficient in Wesleyan theology are "sins of omission" as opposed to "sins of commission," i.e. neglecting the needs of others. The "Devil" refers to "cosmological evil," the devouring roaring lion who is an evident focus of our Pentecostal friends.

A scripture that identifies and balances all three is found in Ephesians 2:1-2: "In the past, you were dead because you sinned (personal evil) and fought against God. You followed the ways of this world (systemic evil) and obeyed the devil (cosmological evil)." A Church engaged in compassionate ministry needs to understand the trinity of evils and their respective antidotes.

5. Yet the ultimate impact of the Gospel is not the elimination of evil, or problems masking as "evil." There needs to be an understanding of life enjoyed in the Kingdom of God, under the reign of *shalom*. The exigency of the Gospel is less "revival," and "renewal," that references the past, but rather, "newal," that envisions the future.

6. Could it be that the term "compassionate ministry" has pre-empted other valid perspectives, in offering funds and services rather than engaging systems that abuse God's material creation? If the term "social justice" is excessively overlaid with liberal hermeneutics, then what words might we use? How do we jog "compassionate ministry" from "that we do," to "who we are," measured by passions and lifestyle? And if, as a

church, we live a collective “compassion lifestyle,” what does this look like in our use of denominational as well as personal monies? In our institutional, as opposed to societal, values? In the midst of inequities? In our treatment of the handicapped, the mentally ill, the unborn, the “stranger in our gates” etc?

In our Wesleyan character, worship and activity, three spheres of life ought to be impacted:

- a) remedial influence that provides care for the needy, restores the damaged, reconciles the divided, recycles the discarded, delivers the bound; in short, the mission of Jesus as expressed in Luke 4:18-19.
- b) creative influence, that is, the building of community both as *ecclesia* and alternative *communitas* with the goal of the embellishment of life in all dimensions.
- c) confrontational influence, that is, recognizing evil and countering it with spiritual weaponry, including intercessory prayer and fasting, spiritual warfare, and incarnational identity.

What is needed is heightened dialogue about the nature of compassionate ministry, informed by Wesleyanism and the Word, but tailored for a world that is emerging with issues and opportunities for mission yet unimagined.