

WHAT IS THE CHURCH? TOWARD A WESLEYAN ECCLESIOLOGY.  
A RESPONSE

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Deirdre Brower Latz is to be commended for her well researched paper. Like a mirror before us, she placed her paper to give us an opportunity to look at ourselves. Our understanding of a Wesleyan ecclesiology will influence how we do church; how we relate with other denominations; and how we engage with the world around us. In reality our understanding of this important subject will be reflected more in our daily living.

The author helped us by successfully searching, picking and putting together the pieces of this puzzle called Wesleyan ecclesiology. On Wesley's ecclesiology David Smith states "There is no Wesleyan doctrine of the church as such, for John Wesley unlike John Calvin did not undertake a systematic compilation of his theology or his ecclesiology."<sup>1</sup> I find the Wesleyan ecclesiology as expressed by Wesley and his early followers, to have been more of a doing theology that was able to keep a close relationship between the **heart, head** and the **hands**. It was a biblical, dynamic, relevant, practical, accommodative and great commission driven theology.<sup>2</sup>

"One Lord, One faith, One baptism: Unity and Diversity in our Wesleyan Theological Tradition;" I assume that the purpose of her paper was to call us back to our roots, namely Wesleyan ecclesiology. One of the interesting things about Wesleyan ecclesiology is how it managed to keep a balance between the institution (Church of England.) and the movement (Methodism).

Early in her paper, Deirdre Brower Latz said:

"For the sake of this paper, then, the church will be defined theologically as a means of grace, a pro-existence, loving, alive, dynamic community of believers, living in the world, and pouring herself out kenotic ally for the sake of the world, in and through Christ."

These words are in line with the words of the Lord Jesus in Matthew 16:18-19

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<sup>1</sup> David Smith, "Ecclesiology," in Carter et al., *A Contemporary Wesleyan Theology Volume Two*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan 1983), p. 588

<sup>2</sup> More correctly, it is an ecclesiology with two foci – renewal movement and institution – out of which the various communions move alternately from one position to the other.

“...and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

The church (not a denomination.) exists to victoriously push back the forces of evil for the deliverance of mankind. It exists both for God and for mankind and God’s creation, against the devil.

A summary of our core values as Nazarenes are as follows: “We are Christian, We are a Holiness people, and we are a Miss ional church.” If clearly taught, understood and applied will help us to stay as close as possible to our roots as Wesleyans. Our newly released mission statement will help the denomination around the world to always stay focused on our identity as Nazarenes. “Making Christ like disciples of all Nations.”

I think we have enough material written and recorded to help us get a clear understanding of a Wesleyan understanding of the church. I want to invite us to take the debate further as an international church. The debate that will help us deal with the challenges of unity in diversity. This calls for the need to contextualize our theology without diluting it. I believe the main secret behind the Wesleyan movement beside the power of the Holy Spirit was its ability to adapt to the level of the common people of its time. That was also reflected in the way Charles Wesley and his brother went about in composing their music.

The debate should be centered on this very questions:- First of all How do we become an African/ Korean/ Iraq/ Japannesse/ Asian/ Palestenian, etc, Wesleyan church? True to the gospel and the doctrines of the church both in doctrine and practice and yet not be seen as an incarnated American in Africa or any other part of the world for that matter. What are we going to do to make sure that our churches on other parts of the world are not seen as satellites of the American church?

The second question that I think needs to be addressed by those of us who call ourselves Wesleyans is. How does the Wesleyan Ecclesiology respond to issues of social justice around the world? The church is known not by her good statements of faith, but its impact on people’s lives; when those statements of faith are incarnated. As a movement of revival across England, Wesleyans responded to issues of social injustice in England.

How does the Wesleyan ecclesiology equip me as a leader to respond to issues of social injustices? In my country South Africa I found my ecclesiology lame and crippled during the time of Apartheid and even now when my country is talking about justice and reconciliation. The irony of it all is that it was the voice of the Church of England through the voice of the honorable Bishop Desmond Tutu that was heard. That makes you think, doesn't it? How would Wesley respond to the Zimbabwe, Iraq, Israel vs. Palestinian, Darfur and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) etc? Is our silent approach a true reflection of our ecclesiology? I am not ignorant of the good that we are doing through our NMI / Compassionate ministry; I am just wondering if we are not taking an easy way out. How do we respond in the face of injustice? Is our response a reflection on our ecclesiology or our own human weakness?

The final question I want to leave with you is: Seeing that Wesleyan Ecclesiology is a product of many denominations through and through; how does this very ecclesiology facilitate our relationship with the bigger part of the body of Christ? Wesley was a member of the Church of England, influenced by Moravians, Puritans, George Whitefield and Arminius.<sup>3</sup>

Finally I want to close by saying that we should strive to make sure that after we have theologically clarify our ecclesiology, we do not complicate it by our usage of big terminology; but rather make sure that it is translated into our daily lives and the being of a church.

#### *Select Bibliography.*

Carter, Charles Web. R. Duane Thompson, Charles R. Wilson (Eds). *A Contemporary Wesleyan Theology Volume Two*, Michigan: Grand Rapids, 1983.

Quanstrom, Richard. *A Century of Holiness Theology*, Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2004.

Wiley, H. Orton *Introduction To Christian Theology*, Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1946.

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<sup>3</sup> Wesleyan family groups go back to John Wesley and the theological expression that Wesley enunciated and distinguished them from Catholic, Lutheran, and reformed groups. The second set of "roots" is the more immediate, centering around social, economic, and cultural circumstances, interwoven with the immediacy for "holiness" evangelism and complicated by eventual merges of "associations," prayer leagues, and other smaller denominations.