

## **Towards an inclusive, missionary and peregrine ecclesiology Recovering lost links of the Wesleyan tradition**

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The reflection upon the being and mission of the church awakens intense passion, generally mixed with diametrically opposed feelings. Many people would not hesitate to describe it as “the grave of God”<sup>1</sup>, as did Friedrich Nietzsche, while others would readily characterize it, following Wesley, as “the theatre of the divine wisdom”<sup>2</sup> or as “the Kingdom laboratory”<sup>3</sup>, as the Methodist theologian from United States, Olin Curtis (1815-1918), did. It is also very common to find the same persons expressing different reactions in distinct moments. At times they swear eternal fidelity to the church, while at other times they curse its institutional dogmatism and intolerance. In an age such as ours, marked by tensions and ambiguities in the ecclesiastical sphere, it is relatively easy to understand the terms in which D. Elton Trueblood, respected Quaker theologian, formulated the question: “The hardest problem of Christianity is the problem of the church. We cannot live with it, and we cannot live without it”.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps it is possible to derive, from these words, a thesis that is difficult to refute: it is impossible to do theology outside the life and mission of Christian community. “...We cannot live without it”! It is, in fact, almost impossible to separate theological reflection from the practice of faith – which is awaked, reinforced, achieved, and shared only in communion with other people. It is true for those who confess the name of Christ as well as for those who think theologically: no one can be a Christian in splendid isolation. As suggested by Gerhard Ebeling, German theologian, theology without preaching is a speculative and metaphysical business; and preaching without theology is, in the best of hypotheses, a blind activity. To make sense, theology always has to be connected with its social and ecclesial context.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Nietzsche’s phrase inspired the title of the book of the former Catholic Bishop of Holland, Robert ADOLFS, *The Grave of God: Has the Church a Future?* New York: Harper & Row, 1967. In the face of institutional crisis, the author proposes a kenotic ecclesiology. The church must empty itself, abandon all forms of power and assume the condition of servant to humankind.

<sup>2</sup> *Notes upon* Eph. 3.10. Cf: WESLEY, John. *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*. London, Epworth Press, 1977, p. 711.

<sup>3</sup> *Apud* MÍGUEZ BONINO, José. “La ecclesiología wesleyana. ¿Una iglesia que nace del pueblo?” In: DUQUE, José (editor). *Tradición Protestante en la Teología Latino-americana*, Primer Intento: lectura de la tradición metodista. San José: DEI, 1983, p. 285-6.

<sup>4</sup> *Apud* HARPER, Steve. *The Way to Heaven: The Gospel According to John Wesley*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2003, p. 105.

<sup>5</sup> Vide MARLÉ, René. *Hermenêutica e Catequese [Hermeneutics and Catechesis]*. Petrópolis: Vozes, 1973, p. 27-29.

There is no doubt that the theology of the Wesley brothers was deeply rooted in the dynamic of the Methodist movement, in a *kairos* of great ecclesial fermentation, in which the united societies were the protagonists. The manifest intention of their *practical divinity*<sup>6</sup> – which expressed itself through the language of the faith community, namely sermons, hymns, biblical comments, prayers, letters, diaries or religious narratives, short tracts, and so on – was to spread the holiness of heart and life, to renew the *imago Dei* in human beings, to reform the nation and church and, finally, to restore all creation to God's design. In a Wesleyan perspective, the ground where the theology is nourished and improved is the communal life and the missionary efforts of the church. In different words, the style of ecclesial life constitutes itself as a fundamental criterion to evaluate the strength and the weakness of all theological formulation. Therefore, it is of fundamental importance to give much more attention to ecclesiology than has been given until now.

### **The necessary nexus between soteriology and ecclesiology**

One justification to avoid this subject might be to allege the centrality of the doctrine of salvation in Wesleyan thought. One could evocate the opinion of renowned Methodist scholars to sustain his position. This could be case for the axiom of A. C. Outler: “*Salvation, Faith and Good Works* is (...) a genuine fundament of the Wesleyan theology”.<sup>7</sup> As a matter of fact, the majority of texts published on John Wesley's theology concentrate on the basic aspects of his soteriology: creation of human beings in the image of God; the reality and consequences of sin; prevenient grace; the expiatory work of Christ; repentance; faith; justification; new birth or regeneration; assurance or witness of the Spirit; sanctification and Christian perfection. The order or emphases can vary in relation to different interpreters but certainly all these elements will be remembered. In any case, reflections on the church have occupied a marginal place in the understanding of Wesleyan theology.

Nevertheless discourse on the way of salvation cannot be divorced from others domains of Christian theology, as, for example, the doctrine of creation<sup>8</sup> or, to be more specific, the

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<sup>6</sup> In conformity with Langford “practical theology, as Wesley understood it, is not identical with applicability, accommodation or sheer pragmatism. It has to do, rather, with theology belonging no to an elite but to the whole church and shaping life not according to dominant cultural patterns but in distinctively Christians ways” (See LANGFORD, Thomas A. *Methodist Theology*. London: Epworth Press, 1998, p. 3-4, and note n° 2, p. 97).

<sup>7</sup> OUTLER, Albert C. (editor). *John Wesley*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1980, p. 123. Italics are from the author.

<sup>8</sup> This point was further developed by the author in “Creation, New Creation and Theological Method in Wesleyan Perspective”. Cf.: <http://oxford-institute.org/site/2002papers/2002-2Souza.pdf>. The article was

concept of the church. Hence it is accurate to deduce that ecclesiology and soteriology are mutually implied areas of theological knowledge that cannot be dissociated one from another. Otherwise we break with the Wesleyan, that is, biblical orientation of our theology, multiplying distortions that could be corrected only with much effort.

Without the ecclesiological perspective, soteriology incurs the danger of being reduced to gross individualism. John Wesley was conscious of this threat and advised his followers when he announced that Christianity was “essentially a social religion” that could not “subsist at all without society, without living and conversing with other men”.<sup>9</sup> It is generally known that, after his decision to devote himself wholly to God, in 1725, to search for holiness of heart and life, Wesley was strongly attracted by mysticism. During his journey to Georgia, he carried various books of mystic inspiration; for example, Johann Tauler, Miguel de Molinos and *Theologia Germanica*. However he was gradually becoming free of their influence until he confessed to his older brother, Samuel: “I think the rock on which I had nearest mad shipwreck of faith was the writings of the Mystics”<sup>10</sup>. Of course his posterior position did not impede his appreciation of their devotion and discipline, and he retained what he acknowledged as suitable in their comprehension. But he was not predisposed to endorse what looked to be a disastrous misunderstanding, the solitary quest for holiness. Wesley came back to this theme in the preface of *Hymns and Sacred Poems*:

“Directly opposite to this is the gospel of Christ. Solitary religion is not to be found there. ‘Holy solitaires’ is a phrase no more consistent with the gospel than holy adulterers. The gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness. ‘Faith working by love’ is the length and breadth and depth and height of Christian perfection. ‘This commandment have we from Christ, that he who loves God, love his brother also’; and that we manifest our love ‘by doing good unto all men; especially to them that are of the household of faith’”.<sup>11</sup>

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also published in Portuguese: CASTRO, Clovis Pinto de (org.). *Meio Ambiente e Missão: A Responsabilidade Ecológica das Igrejas*. São Bernardo do Campo: Editeo, 2003, p. 67-88. Dr. Rui de Souza JOSGRILBERG and Dr. Claudio de Oliveira RIBEIRO maintain, in the same book, similar position (cf. p. 89-115). It is important to note the significant article of Roy H. MAY: “Juan Wesley y la crisis ambiental en América Latina”. In: *Teologia e Prática na tradição Wesleyana: Uma Leitura a partir da América Latina e Caribe*. São Bernardo do Campo: Editeo, 2005, p. 161-76.

<sup>9</sup> Sermon 24, “Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount”, Discourse the Fourth, I, 1.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. WESLEY, John. *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley: Vol. 25: Letters I, 1721-1739*. Edited by Frank Baker. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1980, p. 487.

<sup>11</sup> *The Works of Rev. John Wesley*. Edited by Thomas Jackson. London: Wesleyan-Methodist Book Room, s/d, vol. XIV, § 5, p. 321.

Dr. Richard P. Heitzenrater considers this paragraph to represent “a very good summary of Wesley’s ecclesiology”.<sup>12</sup> The neglect of the ecclesial perspective leads, therefore, to serious distortions in understanding of Wesleyan soteriology.

On the other hand, outside the path of salvation, ecclesiology degenerated very easily into *ecclesiocentrism*, and the church loses its primary purpose, “the salvation of souls”, that is, the renewal of life in all its dimensions<sup>13</sup>. Perhaps this was the main fragility of the Church of England at the time of Wesley. Established in privileges and power, absorbed in its own institutions and predominantly worried with its social status and prestige, the official church revealed a near total inability to proclaim the gospel and to be a sign of abundant life in English society of the eighteenth century. The general rule was pastoral abandonment of the impoverished classes. In this direction, the decision of Wesley, in 1739, to go the Bristol and preach in the fields, mobilizing himself for meeting with the people where they were, became a decisive moment of rupture with a formal and self-accommodating ecclesiology which avoided raising questions regarding the purpose of the existence of the church.

### **In the threshold of a rupture**

From the preceding arguments it can be inferred that, on some occasions, there is a sharp contradiction between being Christian and being a member of the church. In some circumstances it seems that “we cannot live with” the church! When ecclesiastical structures, order and institutions petrify, that is, when they become rigid and inflexible, one has the impression that the way of life required by the gospel is impracticable except outside the sphere dominated by the church. Under such conditions it is quite common that inflamed defense of the institution alternates with vehement protests against it. While some plead for reforms and others prefer to

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. HEITZENRATER, *Richard P.* “Wesleyan Ecclesiology: Methodism as a Means of Grace”. Göteborg, Sweden: The Källstad Lecture, Överås Metodiskyrkans Nordiska Teologiska Seminarium, 2005, [http://www.metodistkyrkan.se/overas/pdf/Wesleyan\\_Ecclesiology.pdf](http://www.metodistkyrkan.se/overas/pdf/Wesleyan_Ecclesiology.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> The expression “to save souls” is present in several specific circumstances and during all the ministry of Wesley, but it does not imply absolutely in a spiritualistic or metaphysical conception. “To save souls” portrays the patient and constant effort to announce the gospel, searching to rescue, by divine grace, the people from sin and death and awake them to life with God *hic et nunc*. It implies the adoption of a new style of life, marked by sanctity in love. So the phrase summarizes the supreme intention of Christian ministry. In sermon 68, “The Wisdom of God’s Counsels”, Wesley describes how the first Methodists answer the question of divine vocation: “But what means did the wisdom of God make use of in effecting this great work? He thrust out such labourers into his harvest as the wisdom of man would never have thought on. He chose the weak things to confound the strong, and the foolish things to confound the wise.<sup>46</sup> He chose a few young, poor, ignorant men, without experience, learning, or art; but simple of heart, devoted to God, full of faith and zeal, seeking no honour, no profit, no pleasure, no ease, but merely to save souls...” (§ 13).

speak of renewal, more than few are opposed firmly to any changes. If today there are new models of the church that seek greater functionality in relation to the spirit of the time, there is also a growing number of people who, even supposing to be religious, consider the churches to be totally unnecessary, or fossilized parts of an era that need not, or should not, return. Internal disputes disrupt proclaimed fraternity and appear to confirm the generalized sense of discredit.

The people called Methodist lived intensely this experience. John, more than Charles Wesley, suffered conflicts with the Anglican hierarchy. Despite his frequent assertion of a most severe allegiance to the authority of the Church, John Wesley did not hesitate to practice innumerable irregularities, according to the more rigid application of ecclesiastic discipline, when he judged that the preaching of the Gospel was at stake. He also admitted the possibility of breaking with the Church of England if the Methodists were obliged to abdicate practices such as lay and open-air preaching, organization in societies, and extemporary prayer.

“We act at all times on one plain uniform principle – we will obey the rulers and governors of the Church, whenever we can consistently with our duty to God, whenever we cannot, we will quietly obey God, rather than man”.<sup>14</sup>

Mission and the preaching of the gospel had priority over Church rubrics despite the fact that these were subject to the strictest consideration. Frank Baker, a scholar who exhaustively analyzed the relation of Wesley with the Church of England, summarized this tension in the formula: “Church or no church, the gospel must be proclaimed”.<sup>15</sup> It is opportune to emphasize that, in accordance with Baker, two contrastable elements integrate and shape the existential experience and thought of Wesley: on one side, the church in which he was born and died and from which, in fact, he never was excluded or abandoned; from another side, what he judged to be the action of the Holy Spirit. His great dilemma is that both elements seemed to be in contradiction much of the time. His conception of church was indeed singularly affected by such contingency. Baker affirms: “Although Wesley did in fact revise his early views of church, ministry and sacraments in some details (...), there is little doubt that the original cause of most of his separatist actions was spiritual need rather than theological convictions”. It could be asked, to be fair, if the duality of spiritual need - theological conviction, suggested by Baker, is in fact sustainable. However, for effect of the argument elaborated here, it is enough to indicate the

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<sup>14</sup> *Minutes of the 1747 Conference*, apud MONK, Robert C. *John Wesley: His Puritan Influence*, p. 195. Cf. *The Letters of Rev John Wesley*. Edited by John Telford. London: Epworth, 1931, vols. IV, p. 146: “I would observe every punctilio of order, except where the salvation of souls is at stake. Then I prefer the end [salvation] to the means”.

<sup>15</sup> BAKER, Frank. *John Wesley and the Church of England*. London: Epworth Press, 2000, p. 3. The book was originally published by Abingdon Press in 1970. The numeration of the pages is same.

aspect that the author intends to emphasize: “He did not attempt to formulate a new doctrine of the church but to remedy its decadence”.<sup>16</sup>

In any case, tensions with the bishops of the Church of England persisted until the end of his life. In the Annual Conference of the 1747, Wesley himself raised the question of to what point obedience to authority must be maintained, and, in reply, he safeguarded the right to private judgment, in that each person must give accounts of himself before God. The principle of Acts 5:29 – “We ought to obey God rather than men” – is many times evoked in this context. In his *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*, commenting I Corinthians 11:18, Wesley reinforced, with some bitterness, the same argument: “Both heresies and schisms, in the modern sense of the words, are sins that the Scripture knows nothing of; but were invented merely to deprive mankind of the benefit of the private judgment and the liberty of conscience”.<sup>17</sup> In spite of the pressures and Methodist “irregularities” regarding ecclesiastic discipline, Wesley prevented the rupture and died a minister of the Church of England.

Independent of the answer, it is almost inevitable, in similar situations, to repeat the same questions: As church, that is, as the body of Christ, what kind of community are we called to be? After all, what is the church? What is its essential nature? What are its purposes? What internal structures are adequate to fulfilling God’s design for the Church? In the specific case of this investigation, it is necessary to analyze where Wesley stood in this debate, as well as what sources inspired him when facing these problems.

Before advancing in the consideration of these issues, it is opportune to make a brief digression. There is an interesting parallel between the experience of John Wesley and the Vatican process against Leonardo Boff. Unhappily, for the former Franciscan theologian and one of the most outspoken Brazilian exponents of Liberation Theology, the proceedings had a much more dramatic outcome. He was condemned, by the Vatican, to maintain a period of obsequious silence which he, in obedience, observed. The year was 1985, when Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the current Pope Benedict XVI, was prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the

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<sup>16</sup> BAKER, Frank. *Op. cit.*, p. 2.

<sup>17</sup> WESLEY, John. *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*. London, Epworth Press, 1977, p 620. In his note on Matthew 23:8-10, Wesley keeps up similar position: “The Jewish Rabbis were also called Father and Master, by their several disciples, whom they required, (1) to believe implicitly what they affirmed, without asking any further reason; (2) to obey implicitly what they enjoined, without seeking further authority. Our Lord, therefore, by forbidding us either to give or receive the title of Rabbi, Master, or Father, forbids us either to receive any such reverence or to pay any such to any but God”. In the Sermon 75, “On schism”, of 1785, he comes back to this topic.

Faith. Boff had published a book strongly criticizing Roman centralism, which he placed on the same level, in terms of rigidity and autocracy, as that of the Soviet Party. Throughout history, as Boff's analysis ratified, the Church consistently failed in the test of power; suffocating *koinonia*, communion, fraternity, and thus impeding human rights in the interior of the church itself. Women, the poor, lay persons and prophets were systematically silenced.

However, Leonardo Boff was more interested in theologically and ecclesiastically grounding the experiences of Base Ecclesial Communities than criticizing the former establishment. For Boff, the church was experiencing, by the strength of the Spirit, a new birth in the midst of poor and faithful people. The Base Ecclesial Communities had developed alternative structures with *charisma* as the organizing principle of church. By the manifestation of the Holy Spirit not only gifts and ministries are granted to all members but the elements which promote creativity and synchronization with living history are put higher than items which promote the institution itself. This does not mean to conceive the church as a pure movement or to ignore the necessity of power and historical mediation. Spiritualistic or non-historical ecclesiology was not valued. Rather, as the title of the book reveals, it should be a dialectical relationship between both dimensions of the nature and mission of the church, *charisma* and power, that safeguarded the priority that would have to be given to historical functionality, that is, to the manifestation of the Spirit of God in the force of social and religiously excluded people.<sup>18</sup>

### **A conjunctive ecclesiology**

It is interesting to note that, among the not officially admitted charges against Leonardo Boff were the Protestant tendencies of his ecclesiology. Moreover it is not surprising to recognize some similarities between his ideas and Wesley's view regarding the church. It is very probable that, at this point, such an enterprise encounters obstacles given the diverse interpreters of Wesleyan thought. For example, Durward Hofler categorically 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>19</sup>. Even Albert C. Outler – in a memorable article presented at the Second Institute Oxford of Wesleyan Studies under the title

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<sup>18</sup> BOFF, Leonardo. *Church: Charism and Power: Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church*. New York: Crossroad, 1985. The Brazilian edition was published in 1981. See also of the same author: *Ecclesiogenesis: The Base Communities Reinvent the Church*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1986 [original edition was of 1977].

<sup>19</sup> HOFLE, Durward. "The Methodist Doctrine of the Church". In: *Methodist History*. Lake Janaluska, North Caroline: American Association of Methodist Historical Societies, Vol. VI, no. 1, October 1967, p. 25.

“Do Methodists have a Doctrine of Church?” – affirms: “In the way it is posed here this question is a trap for the unwary. The answer ‘yes’ says too much; ‘no’ says too little”.<sup>20</sup>

Besides this restriction, some authors attempt to relate Wesleyan concepts of church and ministry to not only different but contradictory traditions. Sometimes Wesley is described as an Anglican high churchman (J. E. Rattenbury)<sup>21</sup> or associated to the Roman Catholic legacy (Martin Schmidt)<sup>22</sup>. The range here is very large, expanding from right to left, from the conservative Non-jurors to the liberal latitudinarians, or the extreme dissidents. Sometimes he is identified with his puritan heritage (Robert C. Monk)<sup>23</sup> or with the Moravian influence (F. Ernest Stoeffler)<sup>24</sup>. In fact, Wesley has been identified with both branches of the Reformation, the classical or magisterial (Collin W. Williams)<sup>25</sup> and the radical ones (Howard A. Snyder)<sup>26</sup>. Some authors have sought to derive his churchmanship directly from the Bible, with special attention to his *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* (John Deschner)<sup>27</sup>, or from Christian Antiquity (Ted Campbell)<sup>28</sup> rather than the thinkers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The problem is that, when the works of John Wesley are examined, it seems all of the scholars are correct in their interpretation! It is interesting to point out that Stoeffler, even indicating the proximity between Wesley and the German Pietists, embraced an analogous point of view: “Interestingly enough passages can be found in John Wesley’s many writings which

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<sup>20</sup> In: KIRKPATRICK, Dow (editor). *The Doctrine of the Church*. New York / Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1964, p. 11.

<sup>21</sup> Among several titles of the author, see: *Wesley’s Legacy to the World: Six Studies in the Permanent Values of the Evangelical Revival*. Nashville: Cokesbury Press, 1929; *The Evangelical Doctrines of Charles Wesley’s Hymns*. London: Epworth Press, 1954; and *The Eucharistic Hymns of John and Charles Wesley*. Akron Ohio: OSL Publications, 2006 (First Edition, 1948).

<sup>22</sup> SCHMIDT, Martin. *John Wesley: A Theological Biography*. London: Epworth Press, 1973, 2 vol.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. MONK, Robert C. *John Wesley: His Puritan Heritage*. Nashville, New York: Abingdon Press, 1966, especially p. 193-226.

<sup>24</sup> STOEFLER, F. Ernest. “Tradition and Renewal in the Ecclesiology of John Wesley”. In: JASPERDT, Bernd & MOHR, Rudolf (editors). *Traditio – Krisis – Renovatio aus theologischer Sicht*. Festschrift Winfried Zeller zum 65. Geburtstag Marburg: N. G. Elwert Verlag, 1976, p. 298-316.

<sup>25</sup> WILLIAMS, Colin W. *John Wesley’s Theology Today*. New York/Nashville: Abingdon Press: 1960, p. 141-166.

<sup>26</sup> SNYDER, Howard A. *The Radical Wesley and Patterns for Church Renewal*. Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1980, especially p. 109-24.

<sup>27</sup> DESCHNER, John. “Methodism’s Thirteenth Article”. In: *The Perkins School of Theology Journal*. Dallas: Southern Methodist University, Vol. XIII, Winter 1960, p. 05-13.

<sup>28</sup> CAMPBELL, Ted A. *John Wesley and Christian Antiquity: Religious Vision and Cultural Change*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991, especially p. 73-101.

will support either one or all of these interpretations”<sup>29</sup>. The fact is that the thought of Wesley can not be reduced to any simplified factors, neither deducting elements which are essential for him, nor adding others absolutely irrelevant in his opinion. As Paul Chilcote understands, Wesleyan theology is a conjunctive theology which refuses the very common either/or effort to grasp the both/and model.<sup>30</sup> This is particularly true concerning his ecclesiology. Very often Wesley combines paradoxes which cannot be separated if the aim is to reach the complexity and richness of his thinking and praxis, and not simply to invoke its authority to justify this or that opinion.<sup>31</sup>

### **An inclusive ecclesiology**

An excellent example of the enormity of the Wesleyan conception of church is in the Outler introductory commentary to Sermon 74, “Of the Church”. Despite it has been written only in 1785, amidst passionate controversies around the ordinations ministered by Wesley for the Methodists in United States, this sermon is considered “the first written summary of his ecclesiology”. Outler observes that Wesley’s “personal definition of the church (§ 14) is, or so he claims, ‘exactly agreeable to the nineteenth article of *our church*’ (§ 16), although he feels free to interpret this article more comprehensively than its authors had ever intended. However, his final conclusions are neither Anglican, Lutheran, nor Calvinist. (...) This is (...) an unstable blend of Anglican and Anabaptist ecclesiologies; it is also one of Wesley’s more daring syntheses”.<sup>32</sup> It is possible to apply the same adjective employed by Heitzenrater in the biographical book – *The*

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<sup>29</sup> STOEFLER, F. Ernest. “Tradition and Renewal in the Ecclesiology of John Wesley”. In: Jasperdt, Bernd & Mohr, Rudolf (editors). *Traditio – Krisis – Renovatio aus theologischer Sicht*. [Festschrift Winfried Zeller zum 65. Geburtstag]. Marburg: N. G. Elwert Verlag, 1976, p. 300.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. CHILCOTE, Paul Wesley. *Recapturing the Wesleys’ Vision: An Introduction to the Faith of John and Charles Wesley*. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2004. Howard Snyder had already convincingly argued this thesis in the previously mentioned book. In the same line of reasoning, Collins is more direct: “... just as there are many ‘conjunctions’ in Wesley’s soteriology (such as law *and* grace; faith *and* works), so too are significant ‘conjunctions’ in his ecclesiology as well. That is, Wesley held on to both an institutional model of the church as well as a functional model. Without the former, Methodism would have lost its form; without the latter, it would have lost its purpose” [cf. COLLINS, Kenneth J. *John Wesley: A Theological Journey*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003, p.165].

<sup>31</sup> As occurs with other historical personages, such as Luther or Calvin, the memory of Wesley became a symbol for the self-understanding of a large number of people. Millions of men and women claim some type of participation in his theological heritage and search to constitute their corporative identity from his wide-ranging works. In virtue of this, one can easily observe a persistent trend in shaping, conscientiously or not, the figure of Wesley in accordance with the religious or social necessities of the interpreters or the public which they address to.

<sup>32</sup> In: *The Works of John Wesley*, v. 3: *Sermons III*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986, p. 45-6. Cf. also OUTLER, A. C. (editor). *John Wesley*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1964, 306-344 where the author registers the main influences assimilated by Wesley in his ecclesiology.

*elusive Mr. Wesley* – to qualify Wesleyan ecclesiology.<sup>33</sup> In some sense, Wesley's view regarding the church is somewhat elusive. Many interpreters, such as Colin Williams, Franz Baker, Míguez Bonino, Howard Snyder, Clarence Bence, David Watson, Kenneth Collins, Theodore Runyon, David Carter and David Hempton – only to mention a few – are prompted to recognize the creative tensions in the Wesleyan perspectives on the church, ministry and sacraments, even though they disagree about what must come first.<sup>34</sup>

This statement should serve as a warning to those who seek to hastily to fit Wesley in this or that predominant trend, using a method that could be characterized as *procrustean*<sup>35</sup>. A simple reading of the above mentioned sermon discloses the vastness of Wesleyan reflection and, consequently, its potential ecumenical dimension. Its starting point is the XIX of Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion of the Church of England [equivalent to XIII of “Methodist” Articles]: “The visible church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in which the pure word of God is preached, and the sacraments be duly administered according to Christ's ordinance”.<sup>36</sup> In his analysis, John Wesley distinguishes three elements: the pure word of God, the proper administration of the sacraments and the congregation of people endowed with a living faith.

It would not be difficult to relate such distinction to the peculiar emphases of the protestant reform, the tradition catholic and the radical spirituality, respectively.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless Wesley endeavors to keep all these elements dialectically conjugated. None of them, taken separately, expresses the whole truth of the church. Even so, as soon as Wesley perceives the probable excluding use of the Article on the Church, he confesses that he is not ready to

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<sup>33</sup> Cf. HEITZENRATER, Richard P. *The Elusive Mr. Wesley*. Nashville: Abingdon, 2003 (Second Revised Edition).

<sup>34</sup> In one of the most recent books on the Methodist vision concerning the church, David Carter not only affirms “it is true to say that his complex, and rather shifting idiosyncratic ecclesiology, has not yet received adequate attention”, but also remarks: “Interpretation of his legacy was all too easily bedevilled by those propagandists, both within Methodism and in later Anglicanism, who wanted to claim Wesley for their own views” (cf. CARTER, David. *Love Bade Me Welcome: A British Methodist Perspective on the Church*. London: Epworth, 2002, p. 5-6).

<sup>35</sup> From Procrustes (= that who stretches), odd personage of mythology Greek, a robber who compelled his victims to lie down in a bed which never was adjusted to their size. Then he cut the legs of those that exceeded the measure or strained the ones of those that did not reach it. Teseu imposed to him the same capital punishment.

<sup>36</sup> This Article reflects, as a matter of fact, the *Augsburg Confession*, prepared in 1530 by Phillip Melancthon, and generally accepted by the others reformers as Calvin. On the position of Wesley, vide too: *An Earnest Appeal you the Men of Reason and Religion* (§ 76-77). In: *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*. Vol. 11: *The Appeals to Men of Reason and Religion and Certain Related Open Letters*, Edited by Gerald R. Cragg, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1975, p. 77.

<sup>37</sup> Thus, for instance, WILLIAMS, Colin W. *John Wesley's Theology Today*. New York/Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1960, p. 141-166.

vindicate the exactness of this conceptualization and retrieves the definition inspired by Ephesians 4:1-6, the main text of this preaching:

“Whoever they are that have 'one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one God and Father of all', I can easily bear with their holding wrong opinions, yea, and superstitious modes of worship. Nor would I on these accounts scruple still to include them within the pale of the Catholic Church. Neither would I have any objection to receive them, if they desired it, as members of the Church of England (§19).

It is important to highlight that Wesley mentions here, nominally, the Church of Rome. The dogmatic definition could not be manipulated to the point of excluding any person in function of his confessional adherence, or his peculiar theological position. If, until the year of 1746, Wesley considered the episcopate as an essential element of his definition of church, at this time he defended the idea that no form of ecclesiastical organization was prescribed in the *New Testament*. Similarly, despite the countless criticisms that he directed, in accordance with the protestant position, toward Roman Catholics, Wesley revealed a disposition to appreciate their values, and did not dare to put them outside of the Church of Christ.<sup>38</sup>

Therefore, there was sufficient openness in his concept of church to shelter a great variety of people independently of their convictions, or particular opinions. From this standpoint, the people called Methodist witnessed, within the pale of their societies, a novel work of divine providence: “Ye are a new phenomenon in the earth; a body of people who, being of no sect or party, are friends to all parties, and endeavour to forward all in heart religion, in the knowledge and love of God and man”.<sup>39</sup> Unity, thus manifested, was not the outcome of conformity to austere standards of opinions, ways of worship or ecclesiastical order. Rather it was the fruit of the Catholic spirit or love, extensive to all humanity without taking into account theological concepts and liturgical practices. Therefore, discouraging any separatist intentions, Wesley appealed with vehemence: “Do not cast away the peculiar glory which God hath put upon you, and frustrate the design of Providence, the very end for which God raised you up”.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Concerning the relationship between John Wesley and the Roman Catholics, vide: BUTLER, David. *Methodists and Papists: John Wesley and the Catholic Church in the Eighteenth Century*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1995; and CHAPMAN, David M. *In Search of the Catholic Spirit: Methodists and Roman Catholics in Dialogue*. London: Epworth, 2004.

<sup>39</sup> Sermon 121, *Prophets and Priests*, §18.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*. The caution of Wesley becomes increasingly relevant in this age where sectarian tendencies are reappearing within the Methodist Church, in Brazil, dissolving essential marks of Wesleyan heritage, by curiously appealing to the texts of Wesley himself, but according to the method of Procrustes, that is, amputating what it is not adequate to certain beliefs. See, as contrast to this closed mentality, paragraph III, 8 of the sermon 53, *On the Death of George Whitefield*: “How amiable a character [that is, the

Many authors have emphasized that, even after the Methodist societies were constituted as an autonomous and independent ecclesiastical body, they continued to preserve a sharp sense of being part of a larger totality, namely the unique Church of Christ. In this direction, Ronald G. Williams, in his doctoral thesis, regard as inadequate the famous phrase – *ecclesiolae in ecclesia* – that numerous interpreters apply to the Wesleyan vision. He proposes its replacement with the more adjusted expression – *ecclesia pro ecclesia* – formulated by Karl Barth in his new evaluation of Pietism. For Williams, it is completely unsatisfactory to appeal to the *ecclesiolae in ecclesia* notion or to the church in Diaspora, of Moravian leader Nicholas Ludwig Von Zinzendorf, to theologially justify the emergence of the Methodist movement inside the Church of England. Nor does the author admit the notion of an evangelical order in the interior of the greater church, as Colin Williams and Albert C. Outler sustained. The problem is this terminology can be interpreted – and in fact may be taken to imply – in a way in which divisions, which there are in the body of Christ, are a part of the divine design. The Wesley passion for unity, associated with the fact that he never used such language, points in another direction.

“In what way does Wesley’s understanding of the United Societies suggest the conception of *ecclesia pro ecclesia*? (...) Each congregation or society was an expression of the universal church and an example of what the church should be. Each society did not live for itself but for the end of mission and for the growth of its members in love and holiness”<sup>41</sup>.

This concept expresses more suitably the way that John Wesley regards the Methodist societies: as a people, a church in the Biblical sense, carrying the marks of sanctity and unity, testifying the transforming power of love, and living not for themselves, but for the renewal of the church and all life. At last, “a church for the church”.

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Catholic love] is this! How desirable to every child of God! But why is it then so rarely found? How is it that there are so few instances of it? Indeed, supposing we have tasted of the love of God, how can any of us rest till it is our own! Why, there is a delicate device whereby Satan persuades thousands that they may stop short of it, and yet be guiltless. It is well if many here present are not in this ‘snare of the devil, taken captive at his will’. ‘O yes’, says one, ‘I have all this love for those I believe to be children of God. But I will never believe he is a child of God who belongs to that vile congregation! Can he, do you think, be a child of God who holds such detestable opinions? Or he that joins in such senseless and superstitious, if not idolatrous worship?’ So we justify ourselves in one sin by adding a second to it! We excuse the want of love in ourselves by laying the blame on others. To colour our own devilish temper we pronounce our brethren children of the devil. O beware of this! And if you are already taken in the snare, escape out of it as soon as possible. Go and learn that truly catholic love which ‘is not rash or hasty’ in judging; that love which ‘thinketh no evil’, which ‘believeth and hopeth all things’; which makes all the allowances for others that we desire others should make for us. Then we shall take knowledge of the grace of God which is in every man, whatever be his opinion or mode of worship. Then will all that fear God be near and dear unto us ‘in the bowels of Jesus Christ’”.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. WILLIAMS, Ronald Gordon. *John Wesley’s Doctrine of the Church*. Thesis (Th.D.). Boston University, School of Theology, 1964, p. 213. Vide also p. 205-221.

### **A missionary ecclesiology**

These considerations indicate another evident characteristic, previously referred to, of Wesleyan ecclesiology, its missionary orientation. The church cannot be an organism exclusively concerned with itself, worried about its survival as an institution and the reinforcement of its internal structures. Before all else, the church must be oriented by mission.

“This is the original design of the church of Christ. It is a body of men compacted together in order, first, to save each his own soul, then to assist each other in working out their salvation, and afterwards, as far as in them lies, to save all men from present and future misery, to overturn the kingdom of Satan, and set up the kingdom of Christ. And this ought to be the continued care and endeavour of every member of his church. Otherwise he is not worthy to be called a member thereof, as he is not a living member of Christ” (Sermon 52, *The Reformation of Manners*, §2).

Wesley adds: “the making an open stand against all the ungodliness and unrighteousness which overspread our land as a flood is one of the noblest ways of confessing Christ in the face of his enemies” (II, 1). Facing the social and spiritual misery of the English nation, Wesley refused to be inactive, waiting for a miraculous transformation. Rather, he took prompt action. Pragmatically, he adopted an offensive position and defied his critics, zealous of a Church in good order, he inquired about the end of all ecclesiastical order: “Is it not to bring souls from the power of Satan to God, and build them up in His fear and love? Order, then, is so far valuable as it answers these ends: and if it answers them not it is nothing worth”.<sup>42</sup>

Hence, to suppose that the social witness of early Methodism was merely amended to its ecclesiology is erroneous; in truth, it is an essential part of the concept of church. For example, Wesleyan concerns for scarcity of provisions, his tenacious opposition to slavery and war, criticism of the British colonialist enterprises in India, endeavors in favor of the reform of education and prisons, and, finally, the development of practical alternatives in response to the challenge of poverty, despite not perceiving in all its extension the character of the structural changes then in course, are all more than simple illustrations of his insights regarding social holiness. They disclose a conception of church that, far from being introverted, is utterly intended for the mission. A silent church, inmate in its spheres, fleeing from the public requirements of its mission in society, not only resigns the purposes for which the Lord constituted it, but denies its own being. This establishes the nexus between salvation and church, between social holiness and the kingdom of God. Clarence Bence corroborates this statement integrally:

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<sup>42</sup> *Letter to John Smith*, 25 June 1746. In: *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*. Vol. 26: *Letters II, 1721-39*. Edited by Frank Baker. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1982, p. 206.

“Social holiness is the penetration and permeation of the gospel into all aspects of social order with the intent of changing that order into the kingdom of God. Wesleyan ecclesiology as an expression of his soteriology must be transformational in its deepest sense. The goal of the Church is to be the firstfruits of the coming kingdom, to be the first installment of God’s reign on earth”<sup>43</sup>.

At this point, it is possible to establish parallels, if not convergences, between Wesley and the life and mission of Latin-American Churches. Similar to the Base Ecclesial Communities, early Methodists appreciated vigorously the importance of small groups (bands, classes and societies) where people could meet frequently in order to share their joys and concerns and support one another in an age when the fast and uncontrolled growth of the cities destroyed traditional communitarian bonds and promoted both mass and individualistic trends. Poor people, common workers, lay persons, men and women, acquired spaces wherein they could take an active part in different ministries as the movement increased and spread. Daily experience in Methodist societies propitiated opportunities to live deeply in fraternity, in a unique way that was not possible in the Anglican parishes of that time. Nonetheless they did not turn into refuges for the intimate nurturing of piety, but became cells of Christian militancy where growth in sanctification and the exercise of co-responsible discipleship were made possible.<sup>44</sup>

Nothing of this is strange to the Latin American ecclesial experience that held the inclusion of excluded people, both social and religiously, as a sign of the strength of the Gospel of Christ. In his classic study *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, H. Richard Niebuhr refers to the “Methodist revival” as “the last great religious revolution of the disinherited in Christendom”, even so disclosing a strong trend to change itself into a respectable middle class church, which, in fact, has occurred, according to the author’s evaluation. Niebuhr’s analyses are certainly an important warning regarding the best of human intentions.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> BENCE, Clarence. “Salvation and the Church: the Ecclesiology of John Wesley”. In: DIETER, Melvin E. & BERG, D. N. (editors). *The Church: An Inquiry into Ecclesiology from a Biblical Theological Perspective*. Anderson, Ind.: Warner Press, 1984, p. 314. About the public witness of the Methodist movement, see, among others: RUNYON, Theodore. *New Creation: The John Wesley’s Theology Today*. Nashville: Abingdon Press: 1998, p. 168-221; MARQUARDT, Manfred. *Praxis and Principles of John Wesley Social Ethic*. Durham, N.C.: Labyrinth Press, 1987; JENNINGS Jr., Theodore W. *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley's Evangelical Economics*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990; WEBER, Theodore R. *Politics in the Order of Salvation: Transforming Wesleyan Political Ethics*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001. After these works, to classify summarily John Wesley as Tory and his position social politics as conservative it is, at least, an unsustainable simplification.

<sup>44</sup> This feature is particularly emphasized by WATSON, David Lowes. *The Early Methodist Class Meeting: its origins and significance*. Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2002 (1<sup>st</sup> edition, 1985),

<sup>45</sup> NIEBUHR, H. Richard. *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1929, p. 72. Chapter 3 – “The Churches of the Disinherited” – is of fundamental importance.

In any case, these factors, as already indicated, have been a permanent source of conflict within the established church. Even so, Wesley achieved what was within his reach, to prevent a breach with the Church. On the contrary, the movement would utterly lose the purpose of its existence: to be as the leaven in the mass bringing renewal and hope to the interior of the “great congregation”. This reflects the consistent persistence of Wesley to maintain joined charisma and power, renewal and tradition, movement and institution.

### A peregrine ecclesiology

Early Methodism repudiated, with great energy, sectarianism and bigotry. Wesley’s commitment to mission was as large as his love for the unity of the church. But it never transformed itself into *ecclesiocentrism*. The dialectical relationship between Church and mission, ecclesiology and soteriology, was always preserved. As such, Outler is partly correct when observes that “Wesley’s understanding of the church was that is an act, a function, a mission in the world rather than a form and institution.”<sup>46</sup> However, Bence is also right when he states that we “should be careful not to reduce the church to utilitarian activity” because “the church is a substantial reality as well; for Wesley it is the body of Christ, the company of the redeemed and the visible manifestation of the kingdom of God.”<sup>47</sup> In the Wesleyan perspective, the church is called to be a messianic community, the sacrament of the kingdom of God, the people who peregrinate in history and anticipate the future. An effective means of grace! The theological and practical implications of this condition were plainly stated by Howard Snyder:

“Wesley did not pluck the church out of history and plant it prematurely in heaven. Neither did he sanctify all the traditions and structures arrayed under the name ‘church’. He saw the fallenness of the church, but also that it was still a channel of God’s grace. He granted some value and function to the institutional church, even in its fallenness. But he worked ceaselessly for a more vital, more aggressive, more loving, and more authentically visible manifestation of the church as the community of God’s people, the eschatological community which was to be the agent *now* of the coming Kingdom of God”.<sup>48</sup>

The church itself is in the way. It is *ecclesiola in via*, and must be aware of its provisory character without losing sight of the horizon that gives it direction. Today, ambiguity and

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<sup>46</sup> OUTLER, A. C. “Do Methodists have a Doctrine of Church?” In: KIRKPATRICK, Dow (editor). *The Doctrine of the Church*. New York / Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1964, p. 19.

<sup>47</sup> BENCE, Clarence. “Salvation and the Church: the Ecclesiology of John Wesley”. In: Dieter, Melvin E. & Berg, D. N. (editors). *The Church: An Inquiry into Ecclesiology from a Biblical Theological Perspective*. Anderson, Ind.: Warner Press, 1984, p. 311.

<sup>48</sup> SNYDER, Howard A. *The Radical Wesley and Patterns for Church Renewal*. Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1980, p. 89.

contradiction still overcome, but it can not give place to despair. Much less should it take refuge in the past, in a golden age, that is theoretically superior to today. Such an interpretation of history, was, in fact, repudiated by Wesley in Sermon 72, “Of Former Times”, written in 1787, when he was in the last stage of his life. Perhaps he had reason to cultivate some pessimism. Still, he searched to find positive signs, full of hope, whose foundation was not in the idea of continual progress, but in the efficient action of divine grace and the responsible response of human beings. By no means was the present time inferior to the past. Rather, benevolence and tolerance, knowledge and solidarity had reached levels not known before. Further, there was the providential work of God by the people called Methodist:

“I cannot forbear mentioning one instance more of the goodness of God to us in the present age. (...) He caused near fifty years ago as it were a grain of mustard seed to be sown near London, and it has now grown and put forth great branches, reaching from sea to sea. Two or three poor people met together in order to help each other to be real Christians. They increased to hundreds, to thousands, to myriads, still pursuing their one point, real religion, the love of God and man ruling all their tempers, and words, and actions” (§22).

To say that the former days were better than these (cf. Eccles. 7:10) was evidence of ungratefulness and insensibility to current manifestation of God, renewing all humankind and creation in justice and the spread of true holiness. Wesley concludes that, since the times of the apostles, there had not been a more blessed moment in all of history. As a peregrine people, the church must journey without rest, transforming all things within its reach into signs of God’s love in human society, while still trusting solely in the one who is the Lord of all history: “Shall thy promise fail? Fear it not, ye little flock. Against hope believe in hope. It is your Father's good pleasure yet to renew the face of the earth.” (Sermon 22, *Upon our Lord's Sermon on the Mount*, Discourse the Second, III, 18).

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