

“Incarnational sacramentality in dynamic Wesleyan ecclesiology”

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We are living in a historical moment filled with promising new movements of spiritual renewal of communion and mission among Wesleyan communities: emergent church, liturgical renewal, revivals of small group covenant discipleship, and missional church, to name a few. All of these in their own way are changing the landscape of ecclesial life in beneficial ways. But without a holistic and comprehensive vision of *being church*, even our best efforts at living ecclesial life can be unwittingly disoriented and fragmented. E.g., emergent churches can all too easily become culturally ghettoized; liturgical renewal may tend toward exclusive formalism (even if “contemporary”); covenant groups may become self-enclosed and self-satisfied. Over the past two decades, the missional church movement<sup>1</sup> has been particularly powerful as it has reoriented faith communities beyond the collapsing Christendom model of ecclesiology to post- or non-Christian cultures. Yet, if it is preoccupied with ‘sending’ and ‘evangelizing’ and to the neglect of *what* the content is of the sending and evangelizing, the missional purpose of the church will be detached from its Christocentric and Trinitarian ontology.

Ecclesiology, Wesleyan ecclesiology included, is in need of an orienting concept rooted in fundamental life practices around which a theoretical framework/ideology can be constructed without which there is very little basis upon which to integrate and unify (and hopefully change) the great complexity within Christian communities.<sup>2</sup> For quite some time, the formula  $E=MC^2$  has functioned in physics as an orienting concept that organizes a whole range of information but allows for unlimited diversity.<sup>3</sup> The aphorism is true: *the most practical thing is a good idea*, for ideas orient and direct behavior.<sup>4</sup>

Through the millennia of Church History, theologians have sought a unifying concept by which the whole of theology and ecclesial life can be holistically and inclusively organized. Usually, this is done primarily in terms of one of the following aspects of ecclesial life – liturgy, doctrine, or practice (discipline-discipleship-mission) – with the other two functioning merely in supporting roles. However, through ecumenical attempts over the past century or so to come to mutual understanding and acceptance among Christian traditions, greater strides are being taken to find common ground and a fundamental framework for ecclesiology that integrates primary, secondary, and enacted theology (i.e., liturgy, doctrine, and ministry).

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[NOTE: The footnotes have not been checked and finalized.]

<sup>1</sup> One of the largest contemporary networks for promoting and discussing the church’s participation in the *Missio Dei* is the Gospel and Our Culture Network, coordinated by George Hunsberger. Darryl Guder is a principle writer in this vein: he edited *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> In an attempt to understand the linguistic and cultural power of theology, Gordon Kaufman argues that the term, “God,” e.g., is a “limit concept” by which we organize and orient our lives and society. Regardless of whether “God” refers to anything beyond our imagination, Kaufman draws our attention to the *function* of the term in social discourse as “the ultimate point of reference in terms of which all else is understood, and the ultimate focus of life and of human existence,” The Theological Imagination: Constructing the Concept of God, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), p. 29.

<sup>3</sup> The theologian, says T. F. Torrance, who has written extensively on the rational framework for science and theology, “must develop, like the physicist, his own meta-science or critical and epistemological clarification of his basic concepts, if he is to give the faith compelling expression in the thought-world of today with its roots secured in the permanent theological gains of the past and the ground cleared for decisive advance in the future.” *God and Rationality*, (London: Oxford Press, 1971), p. 6. On the subject of meta-theological concepts within a theological framework, R. K. Martin, *The Incarnate Ground of Christian Faith*, (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1998), pp. 285-288.

<sup>4</sup> Reciprocally, behavior can inform and transform ideas, just as ideas can inform and transform behavior, but that is not the same thing or as fundamental as orientation and direction.

This paper is a one step in a larger project: to explore the mutual integration of liturgy, doctrine, and practice within a theological worldview (not just a theological system of doctrine, but the paradigm in which doctrine is produced and legitimated) that takes its bearing in the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. We are attempting to understand and practice ecclesial life holistically as a manifestation of the divine life in which all dimensions and aspects of ecclesial life are mutually permeating and mutually constituting each other for the sake of the church's life as the Body of Christ.

In the past century, the concept of sacramentality – which has been tacitly operating in many of the great Christian traditions for millennia – has arisen as an organizing principle of God's creative, sustaining, and redemptive activity in the church and world. Admittedly, to work for a unifying concept seems so...well, so *modern*. That a practical theologian to do this seems so *impractical*. But the concept of sacramentality does hold promise for helping us not only to understand and interpret a wide range of phenomena, but also to construct a more theologically focused, holistic, and comprehensive approach to Christian community and discipleship. A sacramental worldview has important implications for theology and ecclesial life, not the least of which is a more thorough integration of the liturgical, communal, and missional dimensions of the church.

Because John and Charles Wesley had quite a developed understanding of and reverence for sacramental practice and theology, I am hoping this project will be especially beneficial for Wesleyan ecclesiology, particularly with respect to integrating the dimensions of communion and mission. Although this is not the occasion to lay out a full exposition on Wesleyan ecclesiology, we will touch on major themes in Wesleyan sacramental theology that *suggest* a general concept of sacramentality that might undergird the Wesleyan holistic practice of missional communion and communal mission. My hope is that a practical theological enterprise in which concept, ritual, and practice are mutually reinforcing will be better able to resist the fragmenting forces of Western culture.

### *Introduction to "Sacramentality"*

Before moving into Wesley's sacramental theology, we should do two things. First, there is a need to clarify at least the essentials of the concept of sacramentality toward which we will be moving. Second, we will briefly mention some of the contemporary obstacles in the thought and practice of Wesleyan traditions that work against a robust and holistic sacramental theology.

The concept of sacramentality. According to James F. White, the term sacramentality is a modern development even though one can trace themes of the concept back to the Reformation and further to the patristic theologians and even to apostolic writings in scripture. It has to do with the basic intuition that the "outward and visible can convey the inward and spiritual."<sup>5</sup> White tends to use the term generally to connote the attempt to sacralize anything in society, including the flag, sport events, etc. But, this is too generic a definition. It blurs the distinctiveness of Christian sacraments as ordinary means by which the extraordinary is manifest. Surely, the American flag is not on the same symbolic level as the Eucharistic bread and wine.

Identifying the flag and ballgames as sacramental, White has collapsed the uniqueness of "sacrament" into that of "symbol." *The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism* has a much more circumscribed definition of sacramentality: "The notion that all reality, both animate and inanimate, is potentially or in fact the bearer of God's presence and the instrument of God's saving activity on humanity's behalf. This

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<sup>5</sup> James F. White, *The Sacraments in Protestant Practice and Faith*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), p. 13.

principle is rooted in the nature of a sacrament as such, i.e., a visible sign and instrument of the invisible presence and activity of God.”<sup>6</sup>

Essentially, the main difference between flag waving and eucharistic sharing is the crucial distinction in the very nature of the created order between symbol and sacrament.<sup>7</sup> According to Orthodox liturgical theologian Alexander Schmemmann, because we believe that the world has been and is continuing to be created in and through the divine *Logos* by the power of the Holy Spirit, the world is intrinsically symbolical because it is a means by which God is disclosed *and* it is a means of participation in the divine life in which we are being created, sustained, and redeemed. For Schmemmann, in the sacraments, the symbolical quality of the world is transformed; it goes through a baptismal death to self-sufficiency and individualism and takes on a eucharistic character of self-sacrificial love in communion.<sup>8</sup> Christians have become aware of this generic and universal disclosive and participative<sup>9</sup> quality of creation *primarily* through the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. It is through his life, death, resurrection and ascension that we read back into creation its fundamental incarnational structure.

Obstacles to a holistic sacramental theology. In recent decades there has been a concerted attempt by Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant scholars to reinterpret sacramental theology for churches that have, by and large, been captivated by reductionistic ideologies (both Western and Eastern).<sup>10</sup> There are many types of criticisms that have been levied against Western modernity and postmodernity, but at this point, I can only briefly discuss two of the main obstacles to a more robust and holistic sacramental practice: individualism (the notion that the individual is the fundamental category of anthropology and that sociality is secondary and derivative) and fragmentation (a lack of a holistic, theological worldview). I mention these in particular because the concept of sacramentality will have a trinitarian and incarnational relationality at its very heart. It is very difficult to develop a concept of sacramentality from a theological perspective that emphasizes individual faith and salvation and ignores the social/communal/cosmic dimensions of soteriology. It is also difficult to construct a notion of sacramentality that is holistic and universal/cosmic when the celebration of the Eucharist sacrament is a) compartmentalized away from other parts of the liturgy of worship such as proclamation, baptism, offering, and the sending forth in mission, b) is disconnected from other dimensions of ecclesial life such as administration and leadership, c) is understood as the episodic consumption of “bits-o-grace” rather than as an ongoing way of life that is grace-full, and d) when the focus is primarily on the quasi-magical properties of the elements of bread and wine while the relational and transformative dimensions of the eucharist are overlooked.

These are significant problems for a contemporary appropriation of sacraments for sacramental theology and the concept of sacramentality because a narrow orientation to the individual eclipses the cosmic scope of God’s redemptive activity. An unconscious assumption of fragmentation obscures even the

<sup>6</sup> McBrien, Richard P., ed. *The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), p. 1148.

<sup>7</sup> Here we draw upon the seminal work of both Orthodox Alexander Schmemmann and to a lesser extent Roman Catholic Louis-Marie Chauvet and many scholars who have followed them. Ivana Noble has written an interesting and helpful comparison of their approaches, “From the Sacramentality of the Church to the Sacramentality of the World,” in *Charting Churches in a Changing Europe: Charta Oecumenica and the Process of Ecumenical Encounter*, ed., Tim and Ivana Noble, Martien E. Brinkman, Jochen Hilberath, (Amsterdam: Rodopi Press, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> Cf., Schmemmann, “Ecclesiological Notes,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 1 (1967): note 2.

<sup>9</sup> That participation is the primary way of knowing anything and everything, see epistemologist Michael Polanyi’s Gifford lectures, *Personal Knowledge*, New Ed, (New York: Routledge, 1998 [1962]).

<sup>10</sup> In his book, *Communion Ecclesiology*, theologian Dennis Doyle identifies five “reductive distortions” in Roman Catholic theology and practice of the sacraments: “individualism, the merely human juridicism, mystification, and exclusivism”, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 2000), pp. 14f.

slightest intuition of a greater whole. But this is exactly what a catholic concept of sacramentality drives at: ontological holism and universality.<sup>11</sup>

When we explore a Wesleyan ecclesiology and sacramental theology, we will undoubtedly notice Wesley's concentration on individual discipleship/sanctification as well as his profound awareness of the universal scope and communal nature of salvation. Whether these emphases are integrated coherently or they are tensively competitive is beyond the scope of this paper.

### *The Wesleys' Sacramental Theology*

Even the most cursory study of the Wesley brothers' ecclesiology will reveal the centrality of the sacraments in early Methodist understandings and practices. For example, not only were people exhorted to commune as often as possible, but it could be argued that sacramental practice (or lack thereof) was one of the decisive reasons John Wesley finally ordained some Methodist preachers and thereby allowed the emergence of new churches in America and Scotland apart from the Church of England.

Because much has already been written about the Wesleys' understandings of the sacraments, we can concentrate here upon a few salient themes of John Wesley that have most to do with our subject.

1. The purpose of sacraments: justification, sanctification, union. Wesley conceived of sacraments within the *via salutis* as distinctively Christian rites that are especially designed to convey God's grace for the purpose of justification and sanctification. The goal of the sacraments is union with Christ and other believers, a union which manifests through personal and corporate holiness of heart and life, the defining characteristic of which is love.<sup>12</sup>

2. The unity of material and spiritual.<sup>13</sup> Wesley drew upon the catechism of the Church of England for a *classic definition of sacrament* that relies upon the *Augustinian distinction* between *signum* and *res*: "an outward sign of inward grace, and a means whereby we receive the same."<sup>14</sup> The outward dimension of a sacrament cannot be separated from the inward without destroying what the sacrament is.<sup>15</sup> In other words, a sacrament is necessarily constituted as a bipolar relationality of two natures which cannot be mixed or confused. The relational structure of symbol, sacrament, and incarnation is the same: two things of very different natures which together constitute one thing. We wonder how that is possible beyond the hypostatic union of divine and human in Jesus Christ, but the fact is that type of differentiated relational unity is fundamental to the created order. We can take a wooden chair as a basic example. Wood is the raw material. But the wood could have been shaped into any number of different objects: table, floor, pencil, etc. What makes the wood into a chair? The "design". That is to say, a chair is constituted by two very different things: the raw material of wood and the design by which the wood is crafted a specific way. As such, there is an asymmetry between the design and the wood: the design exercises "marginal control" over the wood, but the wood conditions the design. There is no part of the chair that is not both design and wood, yet neither can be confused or mixed with the other.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., pp. 20-22. Also, Geoffrey Wainwright has explicated the eschatological orientation of the Eucharist, and of sacraments in general, in *Eucharist and Eschatology*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981). In the "Conclusion" he points to seven themes of the eschatologically oriented Eucharist, emphasizing its holism and universal scope.

<sup>12</sup> *Wesley's Explanatory Notes on the NT*, I Cor. 10.17.

<sup>13</sup> Wainwright, p. 149.

<sup>14</sup> John Wesley, "The Means of Grace," sermon 16.

<sup>15</sup> Borgen, "the sign and the thing signified are not identical or the same. Wesley allows for no confusion of the *signum* with the *res*: the one is outward, material, and divisible; the other is inward, spiritual, and invisible. This view can be traced back beyond the Reformers to Augustine" ("John Wesley: Sacramental Theology. No Ends Without the Means," p. 69).

For Schmemmann, this bipolar, asymmetrical relationship of symbol and sacrament is an *epiphany*; in the case of a chair, the wood is the means through which the design is revealed, expressed, and manifest. The symbolic/sacramental relationality is stated, A is a symbol of B. But this formula means that “the whole of A expresses, communicates, reveals, manifests the ‘reality’ of B (although not necessarily the whole of it) without, however, losing its own ontological reality, without being dissolved in another ‘res’.”<sup>16</sup> It is in essence a relationality that is analogous to the hypostatic union of Creator and created revealed in Jesus Christ. It is upon this basis that both Western and Eastern churches refer to Jesus Christ as the perfect Sacrament, the Sacrament of sacraments, as his (ordinary) creaturely existence was perfectly united with and expressive of the (extraordinary) divine life.

3. Effective Means of Grace. It is important for us to recognize that the Wesleys understood the sacraments to be “effective signs” that not only to help us remember the sufferings of Christ for our sake and to hope for the blessed life to come, but to convey the grace of God that orients anew and changes lives. The sacraments of baptism and Eucharist are not just mental or emotional imaginings as Ulrich Zwingli contended, but rather they are actual means of grace: these signs are enacted and they are effective in a realistic manner. Wesley believed “the Lord’s Supper was ordained by God to be a means of conveying to men either preventing, or justifying, or sanctifying grace, according to their several necessities.”<sup>17</sup> For example, although the Eucharist is a memorial of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, and although it is certainly a promise of the eschatological banquet, it also changes lives, quickens salvation, increases discipleship, and forms communities and institutions. Wesley claims, “this Sacrament duly received, makes the thing which it represents, as really present for our Use, as if it were newly done.”<sup>18</sup> It is a ritual practice that does not only have cerebral or affective effect; it is an action that is personally and socially productive. Furthermore, it is an action that establishes a pattern for how we are to engage one another. It is, as it were, a template or a model by which all our relations are to be oriented and by which they are measured. We are to be, in other words, at our very core a baptismal and Eucharistic people who offer ourselves sacrificially in adoration of God and service to the divine will, the ultimate goal of which is “Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as in heaven.”

4. The unity of the sacraments. The sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, even though different in their expression and function, are *inherently connected and mutually implicating*. For Wesley, baptism is the “sign and seal” of mystical union with Christ and the church.<sup>19</sup> It begins what the other means of grace, especially the Lord’s Supper, fosters. According to Ole E. Borgen, the function of baptism is “to *commence* what the Lord’s Supper (with other means of grace as well) is basically ordained to *preserve* and *develop*: a life in faith and holiness.”<sup>20</sup>

5. Primacy of the Eucharist. For its part, the Lord’s Supper is the means of grace *par excellence*. It is the most comprehensive sacrament and means of grace, Borgen argues, because all instituted means are involved: “the Word of God is read, preached, and meditated upon; prayers of several kinds are central

<sup>16</sup> *For the Life of the World*, p. 141. For an explication of the bipolar, asymmetrical relationality that is fundamental to the universe, see James E. Loder and W. Jim Neidhardt, *The Knights Move: The Relational Logic of the Spirit in Theology and Science*, (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1992), who draw upon K. Barth, T. F. Torrance, and S. Kierkegaard.

<sup>17</sup> Journal, Curn. II, p. 361. “By ‘means of grace’ I understand outward signs, words, or actions, ordained of God, and appointed for this end, to be the ordinary channels whereby he might convey to men, preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace,” from “The Means of Grace,” Sermon 16, 1872 edition. For the classification of means of grace into general, prudential, and instituted, see Journal, Curn I, p. 330; Works VI, pp. 510-11.

<sup>18</sup> Daniel Brevint, extracts from Brevint’s *Christian Sacrament*, 1673 for John & Charles Wesley’s Preface to *Hymns on the Lord’s Supper*, 1745, Section II, <http://www.canamus.org/Enchiridion/Xtrs/brevint.htm>.

<sup>19</sup> Borgen, “John Wesley: Sacramental Theology. No Ends Without the Means,” in *Contemporary Perspectives*, ed., John Stacey, (London: Epworth Press, 1988), pp. 76-78.

<sup>20</sup> Borgen, “John Wesley: Sacramental Theology. No Ends Without the Means,” p. 75.

to the whole sacrament; there issues communion and fellowship with God and fellow worshippers, all woven together into a mighty symphony of blessings.”<sup>21</sup>

6. Connecting sacramental relationality with sanctification. The bipolar relationality between *signum* and *res* has a further resonance with the kind of relationality that pertains to those who are regenerated or born again through baptism. Whereas the Eucharist is the sacrament of union, baptism is the sacrament of uniting: cleansing the soul and becoming one through a new birth. Wesley proclaims, “For ‘as many as are baptized in Christ’, in his name, ‘have’ thereby ‘put on Christ’ (Gal. 3.27); that is, are mystically united to Christ, and made one with him. For ‘by one Spirit we are all baptized into one body’ (I Cor. 12.13) namely, the Church, ‘the body of Christ’ (Eph. 4.12).”<sup>22</sup> In the same way that the ordinary expresses the extraordinary in sacramental action, through the process of sanctification we are transformed by the Spirit, we become conformed to Christ, we put on Christ, and come to have the mind of Christ.<sup>23</sup>

This is what holiness is: a conformity to the person of Jesus Christ, whose human (and creaturely) nature perfectly submitted to the divine nature. But this is not merely a moral or existential conformity whereby we imitate Jesus’ life and ministry. Rather it is an ontological indwelling, a conformity that transforms individuals into communal persons, communities into communion.<sup>24</sup> Thus, the relation of creature to Creator is asymmetrical; if we are to respond to God in truth – the truth of our contingency upon God for our very existence – our relation will be characterized first and foremost as an acceptance of our absolute contingency upon God and submission to the divine will, the definitive quality of which is universal and self-sacrificial love. The sacraments of baptism and eucharist, taken together,<sup>25</sup> engage people in precisely a gracious movement of submission and rebirth into the divine trinitarian communion. Baptism is the enactment of death to the old self and a transformative incorporation into a eucharistic communion of new life.<sup>26</sup> In these rituals of bathing and sharing a meal, the things of this world (water, bread, wine, human beings, giving and receiving, etc) are all coordinated and used by God as *signum* through which the *res* manifests itself; in and through these symbolic means, to greater or lesser extent, the divine life emerges and is manifest. This is precisely the ultimate purpose and destiny of human existence, and yes even of the universe: to be a Godbearer, *theotokos*.

Here we have rather strong images of a close coordination between ourselves and Christ as we are sustained and empowered by the Holy Spirit. This suggests that the relational structure pertaining to the

<sup>21</sup> Borgen, “John Wesley: Sacramental Theology. No Ends Without the Means,” p. 75.

<sup>22</sup> Works, X, p. 191.

<sup>23</sup> Wesley: “I believe [sanctification] to be...the life of God in the soul of man [Scougal]; a participation of the divine nature [2 Pet. 1.4]; the mind that was in Christ [Phil. 2.5]; or, the renewal of our heart after the image of him that created us [Col. 3.10]” Wesley’s Journal for September 12, 1739, *Works* 19:97, as found in Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley’s Theology Today*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), p. 82. Later Runyon claims that even though Wesley did not use the word, *theosis* or divinization, “the core idea of *theosis* – participation in, and transformation by, the creative energy of the Spirit – was central to Wesley’s understanding of regeneration and sanctification” (p. 245, n.35).

<sup>24</sup> John Zizioulas’ main theme in his *Being as Communion* is the Eucharistic transformation by the Spirit of self-protective individualism into self-sacrificial persons-in-communion and the diversity of structural and practical forms through which the Body of Christ can manifest itself. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Press, 1985).

<sup>25</sup> As Wesley advocated, baptism and eucharist should always be understood together, forming a unitary movement of the Spirit.

<sup>26</sup> For Wesley, baptism is the “sign and seal” of mystical union with Christ and the church. According to Ole E. Borgen, the function of baptism is “to *commence* what the Lord’s Supper (with other means of grace as well) is basically ordained to *preserve* and *develop*: a life in faith and holiness.” Borgen, “John Wesley: Sacramental Theology. No Ends Without the Means,” p. 232, n78; p. 75.

sacraments is very similar to if not the same as the relationality that pertains to sanctification, to the ongoing relationality of divine and human in each person and community.

7. Continuing this line of exploration, we move from the sacraments to the sanctification of human beings, and now to the participation of all things, the entire created order, in God's redemptive activity. In the book, *Orthodox and Wesleyan Spirituality*, several writers make a rather strong case for the cosmic scope of redemption in both John and Charles Wesley.<sup>27</sup> For example, Kenneth Carveley points to three of John Wesley's sermons that expound upon the universal "transformation of all creation, for all creatures":

The whole creation shall then be delivered from moral and natural corruption. Sin and its consequence, pain, shall be no more. Holiness and happiness shall cover the earth. Then shall all the ends of the world see the salvation of our God ("The Mystery of Iniquity").

...all the deformity of their aspect will vanish away, and be exchanged for their primeval beauty. And with their beauty their happiness will return ("The General Deliverance").

To crown all, there will be a deep, and intimate, an uninterrupted union with God; a constant communion with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ through the Spirit; a continual enjoyment of the Three-One-God, and of all the creatures in him ("The New Creation").<sup>28</sup>

Notice in these sermons how Wesley attributes relief, joy, and happiness to the creation as a whole and to each of its creatures as they are delivered from the consequences of sin and death and are transformed into constant communion with the Triune God. The entire created order will be liberated from its travail, and its yearning for wholeness and unity will be fulfilled as it is finally and fully joined with its Creator and Redeemer. Such is the cosmic scope of soteriology.

7. Sacramentality, Christology, and Panentheism. An important corollary to the universal reach of salvation is Wesley's cosmic and Trinitarian Christology in which Wesley envisions a world that has its being *in* God. In his sermon, "Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount," Wesley urges his audience to learn a "great lesson": "that God is in all things, and that we are to see the Creator in the glass of every creature; that we should use and look upon nothing as separate from God."<sup>29</sup> Further, in Wesley's commentary on the first chapter in Colossians, he writes, "All things were and are compacted in him into one system. He is the cement, as well as support, of the universe."<sup>30</sup>

Such is Wesley's expansive Christology, a radically *incarnational* Christology, that has a strong resemblance to what many contemporary theologians across Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant traditions are calling "panentheism": a conviction based upon Acts 17:28, "in him, we live and move

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<sup>27</sup> In his chapter, "The Missiology of Charles Wesley and Its Links to the Eastern Church," Tore Meistad traces Orthodox resonances with the hymnody of Charles Wesley. He reminds his readers that the "connecting link" between the Wesley brothers and Eastern Orthodoxy is the theological training in the Anglican tradition which "has always included more thorough studies of the Greek Fathers than that of any other Protestant tradition." As a summary claim, he writes, "the soteriological and missiological ideas basic to [the Wesley's] communication of the good news of the gospel are deeply rooted in Christian antiquity, and in the Greek fathers more than in the Latin fathers" in *Orthodox and Wesleyan Spirituality*, (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002), p. 224. A. M. Allchin makes the same point in his book, *Participation in God: A Forgotten Strand in Anglican Tradition*, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1988), p. 27.

<sup>28</sup> Carveley, "From Glory to Glory: The Renewal of All Things in Christ: Maximus the Confessor and John Wesley," *Orthodox and Wesleyan Spirituality*, (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002), pp. 183, 188

<sup>29</sup> Discourse 3.

<sup>30</sup> Notes on the New Testament, Colossians 1:17.

and have our being.” Arthur Peacocke has characterized panentheism as a working model of the immanent/transcendent relation of God and the world: “the world is in God but God is more than the world.”<sup>31</sup> It is impossible for us to say whether or not Wesley would have adopted Peacocke’s term and definition, but the overall concept to which the term panentheism refers is well documented in both John Wesley’s writings and in the Wesley brothers’ hymns and poetry.<sup>32</sup>

That creation itself is incarnational is a theme that has run throughout the Christian tradition.<sup>33</sup> We have already alluded to the theme of the continuing incarnational creative activity of God as all things are created in and through the Logos of God through the power of the Spirit. In the 6<sup>th</sup> Century, Orthodox theologian and priest St. Maximus the Confessor was the first to make explicit three ways that God is incarnate in this world. First, God is revealed supremely through the person and work of Jesus Christ. Second, God is also revealed in and through scripture. Third, according to Maximus and echoed in a variety of Christian traditions, the creation itself – the entire cosmos – is a means of God’s grace, of the divine presence and activity.<sup>34</sup>

Incarnation not only describes the presence and activity of God in the world, but it also characterizes the *very nature of the world and of ourselves*. If you look in a dictionary, “incarnation” is not just an attribution of Jesus Christ. It broadly refers to an embodiment of an invisible reality. For example, we are the unique incarnation of our mothers and fathers and extended families. We hold within us beliefs and passions which are invisible but nevertheless very real, and they are expressed incarnationally through our actions. We may not think about ourselves too often as incarnate beings, but that is exactly what we are.

It is within this incarnational-sacramental worldview that we understand the tensive difference between symbol-sacrament. Schmemmann writes,

It is then the “natural” symbolism of the world – one can almost say its “sacramentality” – that makes the sacrament *possible* and constitutes the key to its understanding and apprehension. If the Christian sacrament is *unique*, it is not in the sense of being a miraculous exception to the

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<sup>31</sup> Arthur Peacocke, Paths from Science Towards God: The End of all Our Exploring, (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2001), p. 138. According to Peacocke, “God is best conceived of as the circumambient Reality enclosing all existing entities, structures and processes; and as operating in and through all, while being more than all... In this model, there is no ‘place outside’ the infinite God in which what is created could exist. God creates all-that-is *within* Godself.” Again, panentheism is a worldview that “the *Being of God includes and penetrates all-that-is*, so that every part of it exists in God and (as against pantheism) that *God’s Being is more than it is and is not exhausted by it*... [the world] is not identical with God and is not God’s body, for it is not in any sense a ‘part’ of God as such. *God is the immanent creator creating in and through the processes of the natural order*”, p. 57-58. For an ecumenical conversation on panentheism that includes Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox theologians, see the edited volume by Clayton and Peacocke, In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

<sup>32</sup> E.g., John Wesley’s commentary upon Act 17: 27-28 is unequivocal in the absolute contingency of all created being upon God for its existence: “We need not go far to seek or find him. He is very near us; in us. It is only perverse reason which thinks he is afar off... In him - Not in ourselves, we live, and move, and have our being - This denotes his necessary, intimate, and most efficacious presence. No words can better express the continual and necessary dependence of all created beings, in their existence and all their operations, on the first and almighty cause, which the truest philosophy as well as divinity teaches.”

<sup>33</sup> But as David Bosch has noted, “Protestant churches, by and large, have an underdeveloped theology of the incarnation.” David Bosch, Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992), p. 512.

<sup>34</sup> Andrew Louth, “The Cosmic Vision of Saint Maximus the Confessor,” in In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being, eds., Clayton and Peacocke, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), p. 190. St. Maximus the Confessor’s deep insight into the incarnate nature of the creation is a theme that has been embraced and developed by mystics through the ages. That the creation continually reveals God’s presence has been historically affirmed in the Orthodox Churches; I have drawn here upon the representative perspective of Father Alexander Schmemmann.

natural order of things created by God and “proclaiming His glory.” Its absolute newness is not in its ontology as sacrament but in the specific “*res*” which it “symbolizes,” i.e., reveals, manifests and communicates – which is Christ and His Kingdom. But even this absolute newness is to be understood in terms not of total discontinuity but in those of fulfillment. The “*mysterion*” of Christ reveals and fulfills the ultimate meaning and destiny of the world itself.<sup>35</sup>

In other words, if we believe that there is a deeper dimension to the creation beyond the “see-touch realm” (and even beyond the quantum realm, which is not ‘see-touch’ at all),<sup>36</sup> then symbolism is inherent to the nature of the created order. But symbols are only potentially – not necessarily – sacramental. To be sacramental, the creating, sustaining, and redemptive activity of God must be disclosed and enacted to some extent. Of course there is no definitive, categorical line between that which is merely symbolical and that which is sacramental. In fact, there cannot be, for only in Jesus Christ do we see and experience the perfect unity of creaturely and divine natures. Thus, every symbolical manifestation is a matter of being “more or less” sacramental. It is more a matter of degree that distinguishes symbol from sacrament rather than a matter of category. Thus, sacramentality names not only the *potentiality* of creation but also its *calling* and *destiny* to participate more fully in the divine life and in so doing allow the divine life to express itself, to manifest itself, in and through us. This is indeed the way of sanctification, of holiness,

### Conclusion

As a practical theologian who has been dabbling in Wesleyan scholarship for the last few years, I have not been able to identify definitively where either John or Charles Wesley thought in terms of sacramentality as a general category that is derived from the particulars of baptism and eucharist as the sacraments of the church. I do not have any evidence that they thought of the church, much less of the universe, as sacramental. But it seems to me that the few themes that we have explored in this paper are not aberrations or anomalies in the Wesley corpus, and as such we are given some basis in the unfinished and heuristic nature of the Wesleyan/Methodist “experiment” to pursue what many have taken to be a logical progression from Wesley’s sacramental theology to a sacramental worldview.

As we have seen, one of the benefits of sacramentality as an organizing principle of a theological worldview is that it bridges heaven and earth, as it were. It incorporates the abstract concepts such as Trinity and incarnation and grounds them in fundamental rituals that, in a Wesleyan perspective at least, play out in the rest of ecclesial life and personal discipleship. Sacramentality is thus an *integral* concept; it is praxiological.

I will draw only two implications for now:

1. Taking sacramentality seriously as an organizing principle of ecclesiology, in my mind, would mean orienting ourselves more fully to the most fundamental practices of worship: the sacraments. Although Roman Catholics and Orthodox affirm several sacraments, Protestants tend to focus on two: baptism and

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<sup>35</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, “Sacrament and Symbol,” *For the Life of the World*, (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1973 [1963]), pp. 139-140. In another place Schmemmann defines sacramentality: “The basic and primordial intuition which not only expresses itself in worship, but of which the entire worship is indeed the “phenomenon”--both effect and experience--is that the world, be it in its totality as cosmos, or in its life and becoming as time and history, is an *epiphany* of God, a means of His revelation, presence, and power. In other words, it not only “posits” the idea of God as a rationally acceptable cause of its existence, but truly “speaks” of Him and is in itself an essential means both of knowledge of God and communion with Him, and to be so is its true nature and its ultimate destiny.” “Worship in a Secular Age,” *For the Life of the World*, p. 120.

<sup>36</sup> The term, “see-touch realm,” is a favorite of Lawrence Leshan and Henry Margenau to distinguish the Newtonian paradigm from the Einsteinian and quantum paradigms which have transformed pure science and opened it to consciousness and spirit as intrinsic and unavoidable dimensions of reality, in *Einstein’s Space & Van Gogh’s Sky: Physical Reality and Beyond*, (New York: Collier Books, 1982).

eucharist. As a United Methodist with ecumenical openness, let me make a friendly suggestion that we think of the *Great Commission* in Matthew chapter 28 as a *sacrament of mission*: “Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (NIV). To be sent in mission is not only a commandment of Jesus, it is an action that he performed himself. It is a movement of the church – an extension of its very life into the world – that is *inherent and necessary* to being the body of Christ.

Being sent in mission is already a regular part of the liturgy in most traditions and we enact it by way of three liturgical moments: distribution of the elements, dismissal/sending forth, and benediction. It is inherently tied as well to the liturgical moments of proclamation and offering. Further, it is the means by which people are gathered for assembly. I am suggesting that this liturgical practice of sending the church forth as *the Body of Christ, a trinitarian communion, in mission* is an essential dimension of ecclesial life and should be recognized as such in its liturgy. Moreover, being sent out in mission is a natural and inevitable outcome of the two liturgical movements of baptism and communion. It actually *completes a sacramental cycle*: incorporation into the body of Christ by baptism, formation of the body of Christ in the eucharist, and the extension of the body of Christ to bring the Good News and to invite and welcome others through baptismal waters to their place at the Lord’s banquet table.

2. As we have said, if we are going to think sacramentally about the church and the world, then we will look for signs and symbols of the divine life in all things, even the “least of these”. However, there is a complementary assertion that should be noted. Just as sacramentality connotes a dynamic and continuous symbolic/sacramental character of the world, so too, the specific sacraments of baptism, eucharist, and dare we say it...mission...are not episodic but *continuous*. Sacramental rituals are moments of clarity and explicit enactment of the divine life, moments that do not end but reverberate continuously through life. This means that our baptism does not reside in the past, nor in our memory, but we are to be continually dying to self, surrendering to the Spirit, and being raised in new life. Likewise, the Eucharist: the ritual is not principally about how bread and wine become Body of Christ at a specific moment, but rather about how the Holy Spirit accepts our offering of self and transforms us and all that we have and do into the sacrament of Christ. And it is this transformed people who incarnate Jesus Christ more or less to each other and to the world in mission.

It is at this point that we can begin to understand the significant ramifications of a sacramental worldview in which we understand and experience ourselves as sacramentally manifesting the divine life through the Spirit. No longer will we need to strive to keep communion and mission together mainly through an act of our will. In a sacramental perspective communion and mission are inherently and unavoidably united. For the *missio Dei* is nothing less than the trinitarian life that Jesus revealed, and the church is nothing other than the sacramental manifestation of that trinitarian communion. If we are going to participate in the *missio Dei*, then it will necessarily be characterized in every respect by the divine life which is always communal. Whenever we approach the ministry and mission of the church, it cannot be otherwise than performed and experienced as trinitarian; otherwise, it is not God’s mission that we pursue, it is not the Body of Christ in which we participate, but a mission and ministry of our own making.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> It would make an interesting question: is “church” *signum* or *res*? In other words, if we are apt to identify the ‘church’ as the Body of Christ, then is ‘church’ be synonymous with particular congregations, communities of faith, denominational institutions, etc? Rather, are the institutional structures and practices of congregations signs of “church” that is more or less incarnated? Should we refer to an ecclesial institution as a ‘church’ in an unqualified manner?

We should also understand the Eucharist in a similar way, for what is it that we proclaim and enact in the Eucharist liturgy but the *missio Dei*? What is the bread and wine that are offered as symbols of our very lives but the harvest of the fields? How is the table of the Lord set except through the fruit of mission, through what the Lord has provided?

This type of ecclesial/theological integration needs to be instituted in our congregations and all ecclesial institutions. Doctrine and practice need to be integrated and focused through liturgical rituals, rituals that establish the basic patterns by which the divine life is enacted within and beyond our communities. A robust and integrative concept of sacramentality may help orient us to the Triune God who is closer to us than our breath, Who beckons us to new life of divine communion, and Who accepts our meager offering and transforms it into the Bread of Life for the sake of the world.

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