

“The Church: In and For the World”: A Wesleyan and Methodist Reading of the WCC Faith and Order Convergence Document “The Church: Towards a Common Vision” (2012-13)

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In the last decade of the twentieth century and the opening years of the twenty-first, the studious attention of WCC Faith and Order has been concentrated on ecclesiology. *The Nature and Purpose of the Church* (Faith and Order Paper No. 181, 1998) was transformed after feedback into *The Nature and Mission of the Church* (Faith and Order Paper No. 198, 2005), itself remaining “a stage on the way to a common statement”. At last *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* emerged as a “convergence document” in 2012-13, being sent to the churches for their response after the manner of the Lima text of 1982, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*.

Historico-systematically, the big ecclesiological picture is sketched in the very first paragraph of the WCC convergence text under the chapter heading “The Church in the Design of God”. Thus:

The Christian understanding of the Church and its mission is rooted in the vision of God’s great design (or “economy”) for all creation: the “kingdom” which was both promised by and manifested in Jesus Christ. According to the Bible, man and woman were created in God’s image (cf. Gen. 1:26-27), so bearing an inherent capacity for communion (in Greek *koinonia*) with God and with one another. God’s purpose in creation was thwarted by human sin and disobedience (cf. Gen. 3-4; Rom.1:18 – 3:20), which damaged the relationship between God, human beings and the created order. But God persisted in faithfulness despite human sin and error. The dynamic history of God’s restoration of *koinonia* found its irreversible achievement in the incarnation and paschal mystery of Jesus Christ. The Church, as the body of Christ, acts by the power of the Holy Spirit to continue his life-giving mission in prophetic and compassionate ministry and so participates in God’s work of healing a broken world. Communion, whose source is the very life of the Holy Trinity, is both the gift by which the Church lives and, at the same time, the gift that God calls the Church to offer to a wounded and divided humanity in hope of reconciliation and healing.

A striking substantive resemblance may be found between that biblical and theological vision of the “Heilsgeschichte” and the sermons grouped in the fifth volume of John Wesley’s *Sermons on Several Occasions*, published in 1788 (numbered here according to the Bicentennial Edition of *The Works of John Wesley*, volume 2, pp. 349-600). Thus:

54. On Eternity
55. On the Trinity
56. God’s Approbation of His works
57. On the Fall of Man
58. On Predestination
59. God’s Love to Fallen Man

60. The General Deliverance
61. The Mystery of Iniquity
62. The End of Christ's Coming
63. The General Spread of the Gospel
64. The New Creation
65. The Duty of Reproving our Neighbour
66. The Signs of the Times
67. On Divine Providence
68. The Wisdom of God's Counsels
69. The Imperfection of Human Knowledge
70. The Case of Reason Impartially Considered.

Certainly there is sufficient similarity between the Faith and Order text and Wesley's exposition of the Christian story for a positive comparison to be made, even while allowing also certain differences of emphasis perhaps to be detected. Interaction between the WCC convergence document and the Wesleyan texts will allow us to locate historic and contemporary Methodist ecclesiology in relation to the present ecumenical scene as well as evaluating the ecumenical work according to a Methodist reading. Methodists and Methodism typically "claim and cherish our true place in the one holy, catholic and apostolic Church" and have been engaged in the modern ecumenical movement since the very beginnings of the latter (cf. Geoffrey Wainwright, "Methodism and the ecumenical movement" in C. Yrigoyen, Jr (ed.), *T & T Clark Companion to Methodism*, London and New York: T & T Clark International / Continuum, 2010, pp. 329-349; 579-582 [end-notes]).

Given the theme of the 2013 Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies as the relations between Church and world, we may expand our Wesleyan sources to include Sermon 80 ("On Friendship with the World") and Sermon 81 ("In What Sense we are to Leave the World"). When it comes to an engagement with the last twenty-five or so years of WCC Faith and Order work on ecclesiology, it will be appropriate – from the Methodist side – to draw also on the temporally proximate statement of "Wesleyan Essentials of Christian Faith" approved at the meeting of the World Methodist Council and Conference in Rio de Janeiro in 1996 (*Proceedings of the Seventeenth World Methodist Conference: Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. August 7-15, 1996*, ed. Joe Hale, World Methodist Council, 1997, pp. 266-69).

The WCC Faith and Order document of 2012-13 may provide us with a handily brief title for our paper in the heading of its fourth chapter, "The Church: In and For the World". The complexity and duration of the theme "Church and World" will justify our adding to the "in and for" a number of other prepositions and prepositional phrases (some of which are single words in languages other than English). It might even have been possible for me to entitle the present essay "Prepositional Propositions" or "Propositional Prepositions". To give the game away: Christians and the Church are called by God "out of the world" and are in turn sent by God "into the world"; the mission is "in aid of the world". Salvation is first signified by "baptism in the name of the Trinity", to whom the Church offers worship "on behalf of the world", all "for the sake of God" and "ahead of the final communion" between the purposeful Creator and the world of his love.

May I, as a systematician, announce in advance the themes that belong to a theological consideration of the connections between Church and world:

At its most fundamental level, the Christian faith and teaching maintains both an ontological distinction and an ontological relation between God and the world, between Creator and creation.

In the matter of soteriology, the Christian faith and teaching again recognizes a distinction and a relation between God and humankind, between the Saviour and the Church.

In the cause of human salvation, the Christian faith and teaching attributes an apostolic role to the Church in the preaching and exercise of the Gospel.

In the exercise of love towards all humankind, Christians and their community are called to serve their neighbours in practical, medical or educational need.

In anticipation of God's final Kingdom, an eschatological tension has to be maintained between the already and the not-yet.

And now for the more detailed comparison between the Faith and Order text and John Wesley's understanding and account of the big picture, with special attention to "Church and World".

God's Love for the World

Most striking in the Faith and Order document is the repeated affirmation of God's love for the world. Thus under "God's plan for creation":

The reason for the mission of Jesus is succinctly expressed in the words, 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son' (John 3:16). Thus the first and foremost attitude towards the world is love, for every child, woman and man who has ever become part of human history and, indeed, for the whole of creation. The kingdom of God, which Jesus preached by revealing the Word of God in parables and inaugurated by his mighty deeds, especially by the paschal mystery of his death and resurrection, is the final destiny of the whole universe" (para. 58).

The Johannine text has already been invoked in paragraph 13 under "The Initiative of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit", where the Church figures as the first beneficiary in the redemptive realization of God's cosmic plan:

The Church is called into being by the God, who 'so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life' (John 3:16) and who sent the Holy Spirit to lead believers into all truth, reminding them of all that Jesus taught (cf. John 14:26). In the Church, through the Holy Spirit, believers are united with Christ and thereby share a living relationship with the Father, who speaks

to them and calls forth their trustful response. ... [The Church] is by its very nature missionary, called and sent to witness in its own life to that communion which God intends for all humanity and for all creation in the kingdom.

While the Johannine and other texts clearly affirm God's love for the world, the incarnation of the divine Son shows the need for that love to have been redemptive. Thus St. Paul can exhort Christians: "Be not conformed to the world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God" (Romans 12:2). John Wesley shared that suspicion of the/world affected by the Fall, as the two named sermons show (Sermons 80 and 81)

In its narrative account of the historical origins of the Church's mission, the Faith and Order text (para. 2) recalls with the New Testament records that it was those whom Jesus had first called *unto* himself that were then sent *into* the world to make more disciples for their Lord:

Each of the four gospels closes with a missionary mandate; Matthew recounts: "And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always to the close of the age'" (Matt. 28:18-20; see also Mark 16:15; Luke 24:45-49; John 20:19-21).

In his Sermon 74 "Of the Church", John Wesley expounds his ecclesiology on the basis of Ephesians 4:1-6, beginning with the etymological remark that the Church (*ek-klesia*) comprises "those whom God had 'called out of' the world (so the original world properly signifies)":

Here, then, is a clear, unexceptionable answer to that question, "What is the Church?" The catholic or universal Church is all the persons in the universe whom God hath so called out of the world as to entitle them to the preceding character – as to be "one body", united by "one Spirit", having "one faith, one hope, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in them all."

According to Wesley, Christians are first called *out of* the world in order that God may begin his sanctifying work in and among them – and only then are they before sent (back) *into* the world in order to accomplish the mission with which they are divinely charged. That mission is expounded in Wesley's Sermon 63, "The General Spread of the Gospel". For our present purposes that sermon is particularly valuable for its exposition of Wesley's reading of his own "Methodist movement" within the longer – and qualitatively rather mixed -- history of Christianity, and even its future.

Describing and envisioning "the general spread of the Gospel", Wesley in 1783 recounted the rise of Methodism in this way:

Between fifty and sixty years ago God raised up a few young men in the University of Oxford, to testify those grand truths which were then little attended to:

That without holiness no man shall see the Lord;
That this holiness is the work of God, who worketh in us both to will and to do
[cf. Philippians 2:13];
That he doth it of his own good pleasure, merely for the merits of Christ;
That this holiness is the mind that was in Christ [cf. Philippians 2:5], enabling us
to walk as Christ also walked [cf. 1 John 2:6];
That no man can thus be sanctified till he is justified; and
That we are justified by faith alone.

These great truths they declared on all occasions in private and in public; having no
design but to promote the glory of God, and no desire but to save souls from death.

From Oxford the “little leaven spread wider and wider”: “More and more saw the truth as it is in Jesus, and received it in the love thereof. More and more ‘found redemption through the blood of Jesus, even the forgiveness of sins’ [cf. Colossians 1:14]. They were born again of his Spirit, and filled with ‘righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost’ [cf. Romans 14:17].” The movement extended through Britain and Ireland and “a few years after, into New York, Pennsylvania, and many other provinces in America, even as high as Newfoundland and Nova Scotia.” And this was but the dawn. Would not the work of God spread “first through the remaining provinces, then through the isles of North America?” And at the same time, “from England to Holland,” from there “to the Protestants in France, to those in Germany, and those in Switzerland. Then to Sweden, Denmark, Russia, and all the other Protestant nations in Europe.” Next to “countries where Romanists and Protestants live intermixed and familiarly converse with each other.” Then to “those countries that are merely popish, as Italy, Spain, Portugal.” And gradually “to all that finally name the name of Christ in the various provinces of Turkey, in Abyssinia, yea, and in the remotest parts, not only of Europe, but of Asia, Africa, and America.” With the increase of holiness, “the grand stumbling-block being thus happily removed out of the way, namely the lives of the Christians,” then “the Mahometans will look upon them with other eyes, and begin to give attention to their words,” as will happen also among “the heathen nations.” Next will come “those more distant nations with whom the Christians trade”: “The God of love will prepare his messengers and make a way ... into the deepest recesses of America, and into the interior parts of Africa, yea, into the heart of China and Japan, with the countries adjoining to them.” And even to those nations that “have no intercourse either by trade or any other means with Christians of any kind, such [as] the inhabitants of the numerous islands in the South Sea,” God will raise up and send preachers.

Wesley’s vision culminates in the grand peroration to his sermon on “the general spread of the gospel”:

We have strong reason to hope that the work [God] hath begun he will carry on unto the day of his Lord Jesus [cf. 1 Corinthians 5:5; 2 Corinthians 1:14]; that he will never intermit this blessed work of his Spirit until he has fulfilled all his promises; until he hath put a period to sin and misery, and infirmity, and death; and re-established universal holiness and happiness, and caused all the inhabitants of the earth to sing together, “Hallelujah! The Lord God omnipotent reigneth!” [cf. Revelation 19:6] “Blessing, and glory, and wisdom, and honour, and power, and might be unto our God for ever and ever!” [Revelation 7:12]

With hindsight we can of course say that things did not quite work out that way in the intervening period of history (although the eschatological hope remains integral to the Christian faith, whatever may be the modes of its realization). Nevertheless, Wesley's sermon adumbrated certain features of "mission history" during the following century and a half; and in that history, Methodism played a role that is no less honorable than that of other evangelically motivated bodies in Protestantism and indeed Catholicism. Bearing in mind the "eschatological reserve" that should qualify all such claims, the role of Methodism in evangelism at home and mission abroad should be part of the evidence when Methodist claims to apostolicity are being evaluated. In the other direction, Methodists should be open to learn from churches that deliberately root their transmission of the Gospel in a tradition of faith and practice that reaches back to the apostolic age itself. The Joint Commission for Dialogue between the World Methodist Council and the Roman Catholic Church recognized the bi-directional exchange in its "Seoul 2006" report, *The Grace Given You in Christ: Catholics and Methodists Reflect Further on the Church*: "Methodists can receive a vital sign of *apostolicity* from Catholics, namely the apostolic succession of bishops. However, Catholics have much to gain from the commitment to apostolic mission which is an explicit part of Methodist identity" (para. 137, d). Membership in the Methodist Church of Great Britain for long brought with it *ipso facto* membership in the Methodist Missionary Society.

Faith and Order's Chapter Four: "The Church In and For the World"

In its Introduction, the Faith and Order document announces three themes in particular for treatment in its fourth chapter that will run through paragraphs 58-66 and bear the title "The Church: In and For the World":

The fourth chapter develops several significant ways in which the Church relates to the world as a sign and agent of God's love, such as proclaiming Christ within an interreligious context, witnessing to the moral values of the Gospel, and responding to human suffering and need.

The fourth chapter's three sections are headed "God's Plan for Creation: The Kingdom", "The Moral Challenge of the Gospel", and "The Church in Society". For our purposes we may usefully abbreviate what are in fact the fourth chapter's three intertwined themes as (a) evangelization, (b) ethics, and (c) eschatology.

(a) Evangelization

Certainly, says the WCC document, "evangelization is one of the foremost tasks of the Church in obedience to the command of Jesus": "The Church's mission in the world is to proclaim to all people, in word and deed, the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ (cf. Mk. 16:15). ... The Church is called by Christ in the Holy Spirit to bear witness to the Father's reconciliation, healing and transformation of creation" (para.59). The "promotion of justice and peace" is said to be "thus a constitutive aspect of evangelization" (ibid.). Before we get to "The Church in Society", however, the WCC document raises in paragraph 60 the matter of "religious pluralism"

and “the wide array” of other religions and “the positive truths and values they contain” – a recurrent theme in this chapter on “The Church In and For the World”.

“Today,” says paragraph 60, “Christians are more aware of the wide array of different religions other than their own and of the positive truths and values they contain.” Moreover, “Christians acknowledge religious freedom as one of the fundamental dimensions of human dignity and, in the charity called for by Christ himself, they seek to respect that dignity and to dialogue with others, not only to share the riches of Christian faith but also to appreciate whatever elements of truth and goodness are present in other religions.” A Wesleyan may wonder whether – with a view to evangelization – those “elements of truth and goodness” may be understood and treated as bearers of “prevenient grace” or even as instances of a “*preparatio evangelica*”. From Wesley’s sermon on “The General Spread” Methodists may properly deduce the continuing need and responsibility for an explicit communication “of the Gospel” that has Jesus Christ at its heart

As to “the possibility of salvation for those who do not explicitly believe in Christ” and “the relation between interreligious dialogue and the proclamation that Jesus is Lord”, the Faith and Order document notes under “Ecumenical Response to Religious Pluralism” that these have increasingly become topics of reflection and discussion among Christians,” and “there remain serious disagreements within and between some churches concerning these issues”: “Some hold that, in ways known to God, salvation in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit is possible for those who do not explicitly share Christian faith. Others do not see how such a view sufficiently corresponds to biblical passages about the necessity of faith and baptism for salvation.”

Among the “Wesleyan Essentials of Christian Faith” we find declared under “Our Beliefs” the universal scope of God’s salvific purpose: “Methodists rejoice in the loving purpose of God in creation, redemption and consummation offered through grace to the whole world.” Under “Our Witness”, “we proclaim Jesus Christ to the world through word, deed and sign; we seek the realization of God’s will for the salvation of humankind; we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to be signs of Christ’s presence in our communities and in the world through our preaching, teaching, and in deeds of justice, peace, mercy, and healing as the outworking of faith.” Moreover, “we seek to understand and respond to the contexts and situations in which we live, so that our witness will have integrity.” Under “Our Common Life” the WMC text declares in a final exhortation that “we will, through dialogue and partnerships for service to the world, endeavour to establish relationships with believers of other religious traditions.”

(b) Ethics

In its paragraphs 61-63 the Faith and Order text arrives at “The Moral Challenge of the Gospel”. According to the Faith and Order document, “it is on the basis of faith and grace that moral engagement and common action are possible and should be affirmed as intrinsic to the life and being of the Church” (para. 61): “The ethics of Christians as disciples are rooted in God, the creator and revealer, and take shape as the community seeks to understand God’s will within the various circumstances of time and place. The Church does not stand in isolation from the moral struggles of humankind as a whole. Together with the adherents of other religions as well as

with all persons of good will, Christians must promote not only those individual moral values which are essential to the authentic realization of the human person but also the social values of justice, peace and the protection of the environment, since the message of the Gospel extends to both the personal and the communal aspects of human existence” (para.62).

Ecumenically, “the churches have come so far in fellowship with one another that they are aware that what one does affects the life of others, and, in consequence, are increasingly conscious of the need to be accountable to each other with respect to their ethical reflections and decisions. As churches engage in mutual questioning and affirmation, they give expression to what they share in Christ” (para. 62). In the face of certain philosophical, social and cultural changes amid humanity at large, however, new controversies and conflicts have arisen both within and between churches concerning “what principles of personal or collective morality are in harmony with the Gospel of Jesus Christ” and as to whether moral questions are of their nature “church-dividing” or not (para. 63). The Faith and Order document then invites “the churches, guided by the Spirit” to “discern together what it means today to understand and live in fidelity to the teaching and attitude of Jesus”: “How can the churches, as they engage together in this task of discernment, offer appropriate models of discourse and wise counsel to the societies in which they are called to serve?”

Certainly, John Wesley believed and taught that the Christian faith entailed – and even included – certain principles, and even rules, of thought, attitude and conduct, as may be detected for instance in his “Letter to a Roman Catholic” of 1749 or his sermon 85 “On Working Out Our Own Salvation”. Wesley was an advocate and exemplar of what he called “scriptural holiness” or “holiness of heart and life” and his Methodist movement received from him this *Advice to the People called Methodists* (1745):

By Methodists I mean, a people who profess to pursue (in whatsoever measure they have attained) holiness of heart and life, inward and outward conformity in all things to the revealed will of God; who place religion in an uniform resemblance of the great object of it; in a steady imitation of Him they worship, in all his imitable perfections; more particularly, in justice, mercy, and truth, or universal love filling the heart, and governing the life. ...You to whom I now speak, believe this love of humankind cannot spring but from the love of God from a grateful filial love to the common Father of all....

In the winter of 1783-84 we find the octogenarian “father of Methodism” traipsing through the snowy streets of London while begging for money in order to bring food, coals and clothes to the poor (John Wesley, *Journal* for January 4th, 1784). In the wake of John Wesley, the “people called Methodists” consider themselves obliged – according to the “Wesleyan Essentials of Christian Faith” – to “spread scriptural holiness throughout the whole earth, to the glory of the one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” It is significant that “Together to Holiness” was the title given by the Joint Commission for Dialogue between the World Methodist Council and the Roman Catholic Church to the document synthesizing its first forty-five years of reflective work.

Methodist bodies habitually make ethical pronouncements concerning the proper life of persons and society. Individual Methodists enter politics and often there reveal their character as well as their moral sense. Such was the case of Margaret Thatcher, who was at least raised as the

daughter of a politically active Lincolnshire grocer and Methodist local preacher, Alfred Roberts, and his wife Beatrice. In an interview with the *Catholic Herald* thirty-five years ago (December 22-29, 1978), the same Margaret – though she had herself by then turned Anglican -- still characterized Methodism as “the most marvelous evangelical faith”. Mark Tooley in fact entitled his recent obituary of her: “Margaret Thatcher the Methodist”: “Her world outlook was shaped by post-Victorian Methodism, ... when it still emphasized personal faith, unceasing diligence, exacting self-discipline, and perpetual exertions for social improvement based on rectitude” (*The American Spectator*, April 9th, 2013; Tooley is the author of *Methodism and Politics in the Twentieth Century*).

(c) Eschatology

Still under the title “The Church: In and For the World”, the fourth chapter of the WCC Faith and Order document contains a third section headed “The Church in Society”. From its very start, the document in the first paragraph of its first chapter – as already quoted – had introduced the notion of the divine Kingdom, the human capacity for *koinonia*, and the Church’s mission to participate in God’s dynamic work of healing a broken world and so bring creation towards its divinely intended destiny. Then in chapter three -- in a section headed “Already but Not Yet” – we find the Church characterized as “an eschatological reality, already anticipating the kingdom, but not yet its full realization”: “The Holy Spirit is the principal agent in establishing the kingdom and in guiding the Church so that it can be a servant of God’s work in this process. Only as we view the present in the light of the activity of the Holy Spirit, guiding the whole process to its final recapitulation in Christ to the glory of the Father, do we begin to grasp the mystery of the Church” (para. 33).

Now under “The Church in Society” (paras. 64-66) we find that “the source of Christians’ passion for the transformation of the world lies in their communion with God in Jesus Christ.” As disciples of Christ, Christian communities “cannot stand idly by in the face of natural disasters which affect their fellow human beings or threats to health such as the HIV and AIDS pandemics. Faith also impels them to work for a just social order, in which the goods of this earth may be shared equitably, the suffering of the poor eased and absolute destitution one day eliminated” (para. 64). In fact, “Christians will seek to promote the values of the kingdom of God by working together with adherents of other religions and even with those of no religious belief” (ibid.) This will also entail “supporting initiatives of the civil authorities that promote justice, peace, the protection of the environment and the care for the poor and the oppressed” (para. 65). “Together with all people of goodwill,” in fact, “the Church seeks to care for creation, which groans to share in the freedom of the children of God (cf. Rom. 8:20-22), by opposing the abuse and destruction of the earth and participating in God’s healing of broken relationships between creation and humanity” (para. 66).

We had already seen the Faith and Order document declaring in paragraph 58 that “the kingdom of God, which Jesus preached by revealing the Word of God in parables and inaugurated by his mighty deeds, especially by the paschal mystery of his death and resurrection, is the final destiny of the whole universe.” Looking at the “Wesleyan Essentials of Christian Faith”, we correspondingly find under “Our Worship” of “the Triune God” these declarations:

In worship, we respond in gratitude and praise for God's mighty acts in creation, in history, in our communities, and in our personal lives.

In reading, proclaiming and receiving the Gospel, we affirm God's creating and saving power.

In the celebration of the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, we participate in the mystery of God's presence, redemption and reconciliation.

From worship we go into the world to love and serve others and to be instruments of justice and peace in the establishment of God's reign on earth.

The New Creation

Having seen *koinonia*/communion as characterizing the inner being of God, the social capacity of humankind, and the vocation and transformative mission of the Church, I think we may appropriately conclude eschatologically by citing the peroration of John Wesley's Sermon 64 "The New Creation". Sin, suffering and death will be no more:

And to crown all, there will be a deep, an 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!