

impossibility of G was attempt to say G is unchanging

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God constructs - ch is a community which allows G to construct us.

(Scott's)

## WESLEY AND POSTMODERN IMAGINATION

"Spiritual senses" are not a sixth sense but a quickening of the ordinary senses: *renewal of the visual/auditory/craft of x.r. disciplines learned/ sound of speaking & living*

There are striking similarities between conditions in Wesley's 18th century England and those prevailing today throughout the Western world. Both the 18th and late 20th centuries were times of rapid social and economic change, unsatisfied religious needs and moral crisis.

*Spirit is both occasion for to order (Sp over waters) but also pentecost blows the previous o.*

In both periods these characteristics were to a large extent the result of a fundamental shift in the way the world and all reality was perceived and the massive changes in work and life style resulting from a knowledge explosion, especially in science and technology.

*of the way Anglicans say G the Sp is not Sp of disorder, but they say that to impose their*

The Enlightenment has been well documented as the Age of Reason. In fact the 18th century was part of a protracted process which saw the beginning of the modern outlook we have all experienced; the period when, from the medieval hegemony of God, King, Church and people, emerged the hegemony of scientific positivism which extended into all areas of human endeavour.

*Wes: It doesn't matter if you make mistakes*

Many social commentators and academics today are suggesting that the modern period is coming to an end and a new era is emerging. This is most commonly labelled postmodernism. The term has entered our language and is used in many ways and with a variety of meanings and it is not the purpose of this paper to evaluate the debate per se. The aim is rather to attempt to summarise some of the basic attitudes, perceptions and assumptions of postmodernism and to see whether an examination of Wesley's theology and method can identify trajectories by which we can better address these issues in our own situation and in the future.

Scripture was the acid test for all Wesley's theology and our enterprise might be helped by the insights of two recent books on postmodern approaches to the interpretation of Scripture. Walter Brueggemann in The Bible and Postmodern Imagination: Texts under Negotiation, to whom I am indebted for the title of this paper, points out that the Enlightenment gave rise to the method of historical criticism in which the Bible was studied as object. The aim, of course, was certainty. But Brueggemann believes that knowing consists not in settled categories, certitudes or givens, but by "the human capacity to picture, portray, receive and practice the world in ways other than it appears to be" (1993:13) and this is imagination. The world we have taken for granted in science, economics, politics and so on has itself been imagined and constructed by people and can be constructed differently. All claims of reality are under negotiation.

*Olive believes this opens a new interp of spiritual senses as sensitivity to an alternative world. \* Introduce by the Sp?*

The second book (Middleton, J R and Walsh, B J: 1995:183) makes the point that the Biblical narrative is not a self enclosed book of theoretical ideas, nor is it an archive to be studied from afar. It is a covenant text which calls for a response. The authors see the "Texts of Terror" (1995:176) and other parts that do not fit the overarching scheme, the meta-narrative, as indications that the story is still open, and they compare it to an unfinished drama. Our task in the uncertainty of our postmodern era is to "faithfully improvise" as in the light of all that has already happened in this drama, we work out our covenant response. I believe that approaches such as these, the ability to imagine and to faithfully improvise can help our study of Wesley too.

### Wesley's Theology and the Beginning of Modernism

In many respects Wesley's theology was typically that of an 18th century high church Anglican, but in some respects it was also distinctive. He clung to traditional notions that were almost unchanged since medieval times but he also struggled with some of the newer concepts of the Enlightenment that were to play such a part in shaping the modern world; ideas about human

freewill and responsibility, about the nature of certainty, assurance and the place of reason in spiritual matters.

For Wesley the sovereignty of God was complete and absolute. In spite of the democratic pressures beginning to emerge at this period he still believed in the divine right of kings and could not accept any external limitation to God's power. But Wesley was also a man of his time in his distinctive concern that God's power should not be interpreted as over-riding human choice. Although he held the traditional Anglican position on all the attributes of God, including God's impassability, he retained a place for the affections in God because the New Testament convinced him that God took an individual interest and joy in each conversion. His convictions about the nature of God then were to lead him both to defend the tradition he had received and to re-interpret it.

In his short Thoughts upon God's Sovereignty Wesley shows himself to be concerned also with God's role as Governor. For God cannot "act according to his own mere sovereign will; but . . . according to the invariable rules of justice and mercy" (Jackson Works:362). Indeed in some cases "mercy rejoices over justice", rewarding more than punishing. Here God's nature of justice and mercy define the exercise of God's sovereignty.

Another important issue for Wesley was that of freewill. In the course of his long and well known disputes with Calvinists he insisted on a number of occasions that although God's power may be absolute God chooses to work by enabling human obedience and response and not by overpowering it. Randy Maddox plays with great effect on the words response - ability and responsibility to illuminate this understanding of God working powerfully but not irresistibly in human lives (1994:55). Again Wesley's argument was scriptural. For him predestination was inconsistent with divine justice and mercy because scripture suggests the universal nature of salvation and God's love and goodness to all people.

This brings us to an important point. Wesley's theology has often been described as not systematic but practical and it is true that although his prolific writing covered many doctrinal issues he never set out a systematic or comprehensive statement of the theological basis of his mission. Yet Wesley's practical theological concern was of a particular bent; it was first and foremost not just moral but soteriological. His aim was nothing less than the salvation of all humanity, all the world. We see his soteriological interest emerging strongly in Sermon LV on the Trinity. The speculative language of the Councils was to him of secondary importance for this was merely opinion, the philosophical illustration of the doctrine. The important truth, the "close connexion with vital religion", is that "There are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word and the Holy Ghost; and these three are one". (Jackson Works VI:200). This is the 'fact' of the revelation; everything else is opinion and could be mistaken.

The 'fact', though, is important to maintain because the work of redemption is the work of the whole Trinity. Writing on the text of Hebrews 9.14, he says,

"The Father delivers up the Kingdom to the Son; and the Holy Ghost becomes the gift of the Messiah, being, as it were, sent according to His good pleasure" (Notes on the N.T.835).

It is not surprising to note here Wesley's unquestioning acceptance of the filioque clause but it is perhaps surprising to us that Wesley makes little use in his theology of the social nature of the Trinity or of the human nature of Jesus in the Incarnation, both of which have been strong theological emphases in our own period. In the Western church at that time, however, Wesley's understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit was distinctive.

Wesley spent little time in expounding the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, he simply assumed it, but it is central to his understanding of the Christian life. The Holy Spirit is nothing less than God's gracious presence in us and in the world. As prevenient or prior Grace, He awakens in us and all people a conviction of sin and enables our response, if we will, to God's initiative; He brings us to faith in the objective work of Christ by which we are justified and He continues to work in the new born believer in the process of sanctification.

Following the long Monarchian tradition in the West there was suspicion in 18th century Anglicanism about attempts to give too independent a place to the work of the Spirit (e.g. in some Puritan and Quaker groups) and both Roman Catholic and continental Protestant churches had subordinated the Holy Spirit to the Word. Wesley's understanding of the prominent work of the Spirit throughout the Christian life brought his theology much closer to the Eastern emphasis on the distinctness of the divine persons.

One more point should be developed here. The dominant philosophical atmosphere of the Enlightenment came from the rationalism of, for example, Descartes on the continent and the empiricism of John Locke and his contemporaries in England. The overriding aim was epistemological certainty - how do we know and verify the truth. For Wesley reason was to do with "the nature of things" and the relation between them; it was not the prime source of knowledge but the processor of knowledge. As such reason played a vital part in our understanding of the faith and of scripture but the source of knowledge was experience, one's own personal experience together with the experience of others.

Too much has been said about Wesley's appeal to experience and what he meant by it to deal with the subject adequately here. We could, however, usefully refer to Randy Maddox's summary that Wesley's claim to religious experience or the witness of the Spirit within was not to 'immediate' knowledge or feeling but first to confirm scripture, especially where the interpretation was unclear or controversial. And second it referred

"typically to an external, long term communal reality: his (Wesley's) observation of his life, the lives of his Methodist people, and human life in general". (1994:46)

But we should remember, too, that to Wesley in the empiricist climate of his day this long term reality is based on particular realities experienced by the 'spiritual senses'. Just as the 'natural senses' are capable of discerning objects, for example sight discerns colour where neither reason nor another sense can do so, so "you cannot reason concerning spiritual things if you have no spiritual sight". (Works 11:57).

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Wesley's epistemology, then, was firmly based on the revelation of God through the Holy Spirit as it became known through reason and the experience of faithful believers: and tested against Scripture and Christian tradition.

1. Nature of reality
2. Nature of Script. Salvation
3. Nature of Ch.

#### Reality and Postmodern Imagination

*Modernism: all knowledge is either empirical or rational*

During the modern period empiricism became increasingly sceptical and appeals to such a basis as a 'spiritual sense' were dismissed as metaphysical non-sense. But the scientific positivism and the overarching authority structures built on it to which radical scepticism gave rise are now themselves breaking down. Deconstructionism has eroded confidence in most institutions of modern society; the legal system, politics, science and medicine, as well as the church have suffered from fiercely iconoclastic attacks. Over-arching universal claims to truth no longer seem plausible and as a result many people feel confused and powerless. Though we may disagree with

the claims of some equally radical postmodernists that there can be no longer any meta-narrative, any grand story, we may find in this climate a trajectory from Wesley for a renewed place for religious language and spiritual experience. The very openness of the postmodern condition presents the church with a new opportunity. We need no longer accept the marginal and mute place ascribed to theology by the positivist claims made by science and economics during the modern period. An alternative world can be imagined. Brueggemann's plea is that the church, where liturgy and proclamation meet, should provide the materials that will fund, feed, nurture, nourish, legitimate and authorise a counter imagination of the world (1993:20). He recognises that Christian claims to truth now compete with many others but he is less anxious about pluralism than he is about the old claims to objective truth. These were used to support Euro-American, white, male colonial domination, to support a distorted theology of a macho sovereignty of God and a method of scripture study that reduced the text to object, severely limiting its power to address us.



Can we see in Brueggemann's 'imagination' an echo of Wesley's 'spiritual sight'; a Christian sense perception, suppressed by modernism that can become bold enough to make alternative claims about the way things are - more modest, less ambitious claims to be sure, but a different construct all the same.

In a recent essay Lesslie Newbigin asserts that Christians can have Proper Confidence (1995) in their knowledge of the reality to which they are committed. Following Polanyi as he explores the nature of certainty and claims to truth he maintains that all knowledge begins with an act of faith and personal knowledge is involved in knowing anything at all. Newbigin would not see this as support in any way for a popular anti-intellectual stance that is unwilling to think about all aspects of the faith. We need to remind ourselves of the important place Wesley ascribed to reason as he sought to discern fallible opinion from right doctrine and, as a church, continue to engage in rigorous theological enterprise. A Cartesian kind of certainty is now seen to be an uncertain guide to anything except its own thinking self but perhaps in the face of so many competing claims Methodism today needs to go further than Wesley in trying systematically to identify the doctrines we preach and teach.

However, we are reminded by Bernhard Anderson (1996, 1:7) that God's sovereignty did not banish chaos at creation but restrained it. Both order and chaos belong together in creation which to God is very good. In our present situation which is deeply ambiguous, and confused if not chaotic, do we not need to be cautious about adopting both Wesley's evangelical impatience (a reflection of the growing optimism of the 18th century?) and the modern Western triumphalism that believes that we should be able quickly to find the answer to every question, the solution to every problem? As we seek to give expression then to our perception of reality Wesley reminds us that assurance does not depend on our feel good factor but on God's grace.

### Salvation and Postmodern Imagination

Another area where a post-modern imagination could help us usefully to develop trajectories from Wesley's theology is that of salvation. There is no need to rehearse here the details of Wesley's soteriology but if we follow the views of Albert Outler and Randy Maddox (1994:142) that it provides a distinctive blend of Western juridical emphases and Eastern therapeutic concerns we may find in it a fruitful direction for further consideration. Deep seated (and often incoherent) feelings of guilt and a poor self image are well documented areas of psychological dis-ease today and the malaise of fractured relationships, with other people, with the world in which we live and with God, lie at the root of much conflict. So too does the unsatisfied longing

*Are Xn metanarratives necessary?*

*B. Anderson. Chaos was not abolished by creation, but limited to act.*  
*Script - we are part of ongoing unfolding of Scripture. Our imagination's relation Sp.?*  
that seeks relief in consumerism that becomes blind to the needs of those who cannot buy. All may be approached via an imaginative interpretation of Wesley's theology of salvation as a therapy of the soul - prevenient grace prompting and beginning the process of restoration - for salvation is not only a matter of forgiveness, it is recovered holiness. (Maddox 1994:33)

But salvation is more than a matter for individuals. We have now become aware of the sinful effects of some of our most basic political and economic structures; the utilitarianism that underlies our democratic systems penalises minority groups, the market place economics that generates consumerism makes the poor even poorer. And in religion, too, assumptions about the nature of God must be scrutinised. Wesley's thoughts on the nature of God are relevant here but we also need to go beyond Wesley however in extending his treatment of the Trinity to community as well as individual salvation. Building on the earlier (1983) work of the Moltmanns Douglas Meeks (1989) develops a Trinitarian critique of the (often unconscious) God concepts entailed in political systems. Expounding an interpretation of God as economist (from oikos and nomos) he uncovers a different understanding of the world as the household of God, the site where all people (should) have their livelihood, but in which instead they are too often regarded as mere commodities. Belief in the Triune God means that

"we must criticise every concept of God that defines God as radically individual, self sufficient and passionless, . . . . . the Holy Spirit *is* the reality of love between the Father and the Son . . . . . the self giving of each for us" (1989:171).

Terence Tilley, using the concept of communicative action makes a similar point.

"The knowledge of God includes the knowledge that a communal existence is possible, an existence that is not dominated by the mechanisms of power accumulation" (1995:14).

How then can we imaginatively envisage and work for such an alternative existence when we are surrounded by structures that seem to overwhelm us and to drown out God? The very success of Wesley's mission may make him seem less helpful here though we should not forget that he experienced many periods of doubt and despair. The Biblical drama, too, is full of occasions when God was able to use little people against apparently insuperable odds in order to achieve His purposes. Neither was the Incarnation safe; it was contingent, full of vulnerability and risk and Resurrection came only via the cross.

An important contribution to this area of concern is that of Shirley Guthrie (1996:27).

Addressing the question of how we can at the same time seem to speak of a theology of the suffering love of God that offers too little and a theology of the sovereign power of God that promises too much, she offers a Trinitarian doctrine of the sovereignty of God (1996:27-33). She concludes that faith in God's sovereignty must be seen as hope for the future, faith that "God's loving and just will *will* be done" (1996:33). Israel remembered the power of God in their deliverance from slavery, the church remembered the power of God that raised Jesus and they looked forward to the time when they would see the victorious and powerful love of God in their own lives.

As the early church lived between their memory of the sovereign power of God and their hope for it they were sustained by the presence of God sharing their weakness, they experienced little, provisional, temporary but real evidences of the liberating power of God at work in their lives and that gave them the confidence and courage to keep up an active struggle for

"the wholeness, justice, freedom and peace of the Kingdom of God they were sure was already on the way and would surely come" (1996:33).

This is a salutary reminder to the church in the West today. As the old sacrēd canopy seems to have been replaced by the dominant infrastructure of consumerism the church needs to maintain faith in its Creator and confidence in the ultimate outcome of God's mission.

### The Church and Postmodern Imagination

Wesley was less interested in the large metaphysical and speculative arguments of the scholastics than he was in the essentially pastoral and practical concerns that his preaching uncovered. That there is a spiritual hunger in society today is shown by a proliferation of interest in New Age ideas, in astrology, the occult and science fiction and also in a wider general acknowledgement of the place of spirituality in human well being.

Wesley went where people were, and proclaimed the gospel in terms they needed to hear. He was aware of the wider social and economic problems of everyday life but in spite of their imperfections he had a healthy regard for the systems and structures that supported it. Some of the problems we face are similar, some are not but may we not think of his method as Inculturation (Bosch, 1992:452), an incarnation, a taking flesh of the missio dei anew in each local situation? This is not to identify the gospel with culture because the gospel must always retain a critical function (and perhaps the church in the West needs to exercise this function most) but it reflects the greater emphasis in recent decades on the flesh and blood reality of the Incarnation.

There are many times when the Christian gospel must proclaim its own faith. It must also be willing to proclaim a public truth about what is important in social and economic life, what is real in terms of the values we put on human life, the created world and inter-personal relationships, when it must be counter cultural. In our present climate, when claims to large objective truths seem no longer plausible, Lesslie Newbigin suggests that this can only be done by a congregation - sometimes small, always local - which in its own neighbourhood is a hermeneutic of the gospel: it is God's embassy in a specific place (1989:229).

Here too we can learn from Wesley for the members of such a congregation will be diligent in their reliance on the means of grace, in deepening their own faith and in supporting one another in it. They will also be eager to give reason for the faith that is theirs and function as a community of truth, remaining healthily sceptical and questioning about its own and other truth claims. The hermeneutical congregation would also (re) discover the gifts of all its members, affirming them in their everyday work where rival claims are most pressing and vocal, but also looking for the gifts of those weaker or less clamant members whose voice is less frequently heard. This may even mean rethinking the relative roles of clergy and layperson. Do the churches in postmodern Western societies need to learn something of the techniques of the base ecclesial communities of S. America, in other words to re-learn their Methodist roots?

Wesley's own ecclesiology was seriously challenged by the demands of his mission. The need for order and discipline to be seen in his life in the Holy Club was an inhibiting factor that had to be overcome as he began to preach in the open air and, later, to permit the use of lay preachers. This same trait, however, was productive in the organisation of the Methodist societies. If we can imagine a society beyond postmodernism we already have in Methodism a structure that, though sinful, may continue to be a vehicle of the means of grace. For Wesley the radically isolated individualism of our present life style would be an anathema. In the liminality of our situation, just as in his, the structure of societies, classes, bands, pastoral care and mutual help and outreach to those in need may still be a sign of the rule of God for individuals and communities.

Although the cohesion of European Christendom had by then broken down, the plausibility structure of eighteenth century England was still that of the Christian faith. However, there was a legacy from the religious disputes of the 16th and 17th centuries that had led to bigotry and even open hostility between different Christian groups. It is against this background that Wesley's remarkable eclecticism must be seen; not only in his Letter to a Roman Catholic but his willingness to draw on a wide range of traditions - Eastern Orthodoxy, High Protestantism, Calvinism as well as his own Anglican divines - in pondering and expounding the gospel and communicating the faith to his own generation. Today Methodism is taking a full and active part in ecumenical activities at national and international levels.

In the pluralism of postmodernity Brueggemann finds a helpful tool in the idea of perspectivism (1993:10). This advocates a certain position, a certain faith, but seeks to listen carefully to other perspectives. Wesley's openness to ideas from those with whom he would profoundly disagree on most matters can help us too to draw, perhaps even from other faiths, a new understanding of our own. This has already happened in Liberation Theology's use of the exodus and the enrichment of Christianity by a new appropriation of meditative practices from Indian religion. There may be other riches open to us if our perspective is wide enough.

Though his relations with his own church became more and more strained, for a High Church Anglican of his time Wesley's theology has remarkable ecumenical significance and his knowledge of and preference for the early Greek writers was clearly influential here. While he did not reject the dominant Western (both Protestant and Roman Catholic) juridical concern with the guilt of corrupt human nature, as we have seen Wesley's soteriology came much closer to the Eastern therapeutic emphasis on restoration of the divine image. His theology of grace may help to provide a bridge between Eastern and Western developments that have been separated too long. Another bridge, this time between the Western churches themselves may emerge from Wesley's sacramental theology.

There is ambiguity about Wesley's views on Baptism partly, perhaps, because he wrote comparatively little about it, but he practised both adult and infant Baptism throughout his ministry. For adults it was not a guarantee of salvation but initiation into the life of holiness, bestowing God's Presence but not irresistibly. For infants, too, Wesley seems to have accepted Baptism as regeneration and a removing the guilt of original sin. More important, though, was the benefit of adoption and admission into the church and the child's growing response to the grace of God that had been bestowed. This emphasis is entirely consistent both with the WCC Lima declaration on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, and with the ecumenical mission of the postmodern church.

Wesley refused to confine God's grace to any ordinance, instituting Bible studies, class meetings, love feasts and covenant services in the Methodist Societies. But contrary to the practice in most Anglican churches of that period he also insisted not only on regular but frequent, even constant, Communion, at first adjusting the times of Methodist events so that members could attend their Parish Church. Wesley expected his people to avail themselves of both but the chief means of grace was the Eucharist and he came to regard it as a converting ordinance. He largely followed Calvin in believing that the Spirit conveys the benefits of Christ spiritually in the act of faithfully communing not 'locally' within the elements of communion (as in Luther), but he explicitly rejected attempts (as in Zwingli) to substitute a purely spiritual or unmediated communion with Christ for the mediated communion of the Lord's Supper. Indeed, the Hymns on the Lord's Supper includes several invocations for the Holy Spirit upon the elements and the congregation (see for example Nos. XVI; XXX; LII; LXXII). Both the Wesleys (controversially in the

*where?*

Anglican Church at that time) supported the restoration of the epiclesis in the liturgy of the Eucharist which had been normal practice in Eastern churches since earliest times and long, desired by Puritans like Richard Baxter. *where?*

For Wesley the benefits are not conveyed intrinsically or mechanically (as was supposed about the Roman Catholic position) and they become effective only when the recipient receives and responds in faith. Yet God's grace offered in this way itself continually nurtures our ability to respond, empowering both pardon and the recovery of holiness. It is not to be regarded as a static re-certification of one's pardoned status. (Maddox 1994:195-200)

Does this emphasis on the Eucharist have implications for the Methodist traditions today? Do we need to re-think our priorities in terms of the time devoted to this and to other activities? In the danger of individual isolationism widespread in postmodern society we need to remember, too, the community nature of Holy Communion as, together, believers become in that place the Body of Christ they receive, the hermeneutical community. The recovery of the importance of the Eucharist in recent liturgical and ecumenical movements is certainly in keeping with Wesley's emphasis here.

We also need, like Wesley, to become more innovative and adventurous in ways and times of worship, remembering that for many people today, as in the early church, Sunday is an ordinary working day. As we struggle, as he did, with the need to balance novelty and tradition, the Inculturation of the Gospel with its counter-cultural presence, we find that the demand for us is the same as it was for Wesley: to safeguard the faith of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church in which he and we cherish our place and the proclamation of that faith to a changing world.

Writers disagree about the distinction between modernity and postmodernity. Brueggemann reminds us that whether we are entering a new and distinct paradigm in human perception as Stephen Toulmin and Zygmunt Bauman suggest or simply a diversion, a blip on the Enlightenment enterprise as Jurgen Habermas and Keith Tester assert, most thinking people accept that it would no longer be possible for us to return to the value systems of modernity even if it were desirable. The imperialism and hegemony of modernity is simply unacceptable; science has not proved to have all the answers and the Utopian quest for certainty and unity has been seen to be an illusion. *how defini?*

\* In this situation Middleton and Walsh (1995:183) propose as a model for Christian living the notion of Faithful Improvisation - improvisation following the extant but unfinished drama of scripture. We might wish to add that of Wesley's theology too, for the idea is in line with much of what he said about Perfection. Perfection, holiness, is not an instantaneous gift but a process, the gradual recovery of the holiness God has always intended for us and it is revealed in holiness in action. This too comes by faithfully improvising, in the demands of everyday living, our response to God's empowering grace. In his sermon 83 On Patience, Wesley said that perfection is 'as high a degree of holiness as is consistent with (one's) present state of pilgrimage'. (Works 3:179). Perhaps in our present state all we are called to do is to improvise but above all we are called to be faithful.

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