

WESLEY'S TRINITARIAN ECCLESIOLOGY

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Is there a distinctive Wesleyan contribution to an ecumenical doctrine of the church today? It seems to me that there are at least two areas of Wesleyan theology and praxis that could well form the basis for such a contribution. Both are implicit in the theme of this Oxford Institute, "Trinity, Community and Power." The first is the attention that should be given to the role of the Spirit in any doctrine of the church, and the second is the importance of experienced community in the church.

I have spent the past six months teaching and lecturing in Africa, and the African context has provided a new angle from which to examine and appreciate Wesley's ecclesiology in comparison to traditional western theologies. In most western ecclesiologies the doctrine of the Spirit has received minimal attention. In trinitarian terms, the Anglicans and Roman Catholics have placed their emphasis on the *second* person of the Trinity, on the church as the Body of Christ, with an accompanying emphasis on the institution which Christ founded and to which, through the apostles, he gave authority. Churches in the Reformation tradition, on the other hand, have placed their emphasis on the *first* person, with the Lutherans emphasizing the Word of God from the Father through the Son constituting the church, and the Calvinists stressing the covenant with the elect established by the Father from all eternity, of which the church is the communal expression. By comparison, the doctrine of the Spirit seemed neglected.

This became especially apparent to me in the African context when I was asked to expand my lecture course on the ~~on the~~ theology of the church and sacraments to include the doctrine of the Spirit, thus giving more complete coverage to the third article of the Creed. Recognizing the importance of the Spirit in African religion, I looked for a text by an African author which I could recommend to my students. To my dismay, I found no monograph on the Spirit produced by a black African. When I raised with theologians the question of this gap in the rich field of contemporary African theology, they replied it was because they had been trained in western European and American theology, where the Spirit plays a lesser role. And they were interested in the contribution which Wesley and the eastern Fathers could make to overcome this gap.

It is not that Wesley did not fully appreciate the importance of the covenant community and the Body of Christ in his understanding of the church. But he asks, What is the final purpose of both Christ and the church in the divine plan? In his sermon, "The End of Christ's Coming," Wesley answers that

the purpose for which the Son of God was manifested is "a restoration of man...to all that the old serpent deprived him of; a restoration not only to the favour, but likewise to the image of God; implying not barely deliverance from sin but being filled with the fullness of God" (*Works*, 2:482). And this is the work of the Holy Spirit. Both Christ and the church have as their mission and goal the new creation, the *kaine ktisis*, the transformation of the creature once again into the image and reflection of God. And to do this is the work of the Spirit. Thus this work of the Spirit becomes the all-important mark of the church. This transforming work comes to the fore in Wesley's ecclesiology because it is the chief characteristic of his soteriology. And here he has the support not only of his mentors among the eastern Fathers but of the eastern branches of Christendom today, who have long felt that the western church has lost the balance found in the doctrine of the Trinity by its practical neglect of the doctrine of the Spirit and its concomitant neglect of the dimension of holiness.

This is illustrated in Wesley's sermon, "Of the Church." He asks, "What is the church?", and answers, the catholic or universal church is all the persons whom God hath called out "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'" (*Works*, 2:50).

But then Wesley contrasts this biblical definition with the nineteenth of the 39 Articles which defines the church, borrowing a Reformation formula, as "a congregation of faithful men, in which the pure Word of God is preached and the sacraments be duly administered." According to this definition those congregations in which the pure Word of God is not preached or the sacraments duly administered are not part of the church catholic. But Wesley balks at this. He appears to be more generous:

I dare not exclude from the church catholic all those congregations in which any unscriptural doctrines...are sometimes, yea, frequently preached. Neither all those congregations in which the sacraments are not 'duly administered'. Certainly if these things are so the Church of Rome is not so much as a part of the catholic church; seeing therein neither is 'the pure Word of God' preached nor the sacraments 'duly administered' (*ibid.*, 2:52).

Yet Wesley recognizes that in the Church of Rome are many who meet the biblical definition, many who share with other Christians "one spirit." And he adds, "I can easily bear with their holding wrong opinions, yea, and superstitious modes of worship. Nor would I on these accounts scruple still to include them within the pale of the catholic church. Neither would I have any objection to receive them, if they desired it, as members of the Church of England" (*ibid.*). For the eighteenth century this can only be described as amazing tolerance. Yet it is based on Wesley's theological first principles, for when he proceeds to describe the *holiness* of the church he wants to draw the lines more sharply and he disagrees with one alternative after another, formulas such as Augustine's, "The church is called holy because Christ the head of it is holy," or "because all its ordinances are designed to promote holiness." Or, it is holy because "our Lord *intended* that all members of the church should be holy." None of these traditional definitions of the holiness of the church in terms of its divinely instituted nature or even its goal suffice. "Nay, the shortest and plainest reason that can be given," says Wesley, "and the only true one is: The church is called 'holy' because it is holy; because every member thereof is holy, though in different degrees, as he that called them is holy" (*ibid.*, 55f.). Not the institutional structure, nor even

institutional goals and aspirations, but the factual presence of holiness in its members is what constitutes the holiness of the church. And, as a result, "none that is dead to God can be a [true] member of his church" (*ibid.*, 56).

Here we have the strongest clue as to what for Wesley constitutes the real nature of the church. The church is found wherever there is actual participation in the Spirit, wherever the Spirit is indeed present and is bringing about actual renewal in the lives of men and women who are open to the Spirit. But "if the church, as to the very essence of it, is a body of believers...animated by one spirit,...then he who has not that spirit...is no member of this body" (*ibid.*). The presence and renewing activity of the Spirit is for Wesley, therefore, the *sine qua non* of the church. This is why Wesley can be so generous in including in the church those who hold heretical opinions who nonetheless give evidence of the Spirit at work in their lives, while excluding those who hold correct doctrines and who through baptism have formal membership but are not open to continuing life in the Spirit. Baptism is the "outward and visible sign" of the gift of the Spirit, and Wesley does not doubt that the gift is indeed offered in every baptismal act. But if this gift is resisted, or if we "do not live answerable thereto," we make God's gift of none effect (cf. Outler, *John Wesley*, "Treatise on Baptism," 323)..

It is important to note, however, that in this emphasis upon the Spirit Wesley is not a sectarian. He does not say that only those who are entirely sanctified are true members of the church. He recognizes that there are "different degrees" of holiness, and that persons find themselves at different stages on the way. But there is no basis for a "holier-than-thou" attitude. And Wesley decries the fact that in the history of the church "whenever there was a great work of God in any particular city or nation, the subjects of that work soon said to their neighbors, ... 'we are holier than you!'" (*Works*, 4:80) Because the Spirit is at work in all, "babes in Christ" in whom the work of the Spirit is only beginning are just as much members of the body as are the "fathers in faith". Objectively, all are participating in the Spirit, and in all the image and reflection of God is being renewed. Thus Wesley's ecclesiology is consistent with his soteriology. The activity of the Spirit renewing the image of God in humanity defines the church in both its purpose and its membership. Thus Methodism's contribution to ecumenical ecclesiology would of necessity include increased emphasis upon the importance of the third Person in any adequate trinitarian ecclesiology.

This brings us to Methodism's second contribution, the importance of *experienced community* in the life of the church. It is not that the churches, both Catholic and Protestant do not emphasize community in their ecclesiologies, but too often this remains on the forensic or theoretical level. Wesley wants to see it practiced. This is not unrelated to the doctrine of the Spirit, but the question is, How does the Spirit become "perceptible"? For this to happen, community must be practiced. "Have you not read, 'How can one be warm alone?' [Eccles. 4:11]" (*Works*, 3:517). New life is to be lived out not

in isolation but in community, not only because of the mutual aid and support which the community affords, but because only in and through community can this new life be *extended*. "The providence of God has so mingled you together with other men, that whatever grace you have received of God may through you be communicated to others" (*Works*, 1:537). This communication of life through the Spirit experienced in community was extended not only through the Methodist societies but through the smaller groups, the classes and bands, that supplied that sense of community and family that had characterized the rural villages but had been disrupted and lost in the uprooting of rural populations and the migration to the cities in eighteenth-century industrializing Britain. "We introduced Christian fellowship," claimed Wesley, "where it was utterly destroyed. And the fruits of it have been peace, joy, love, and zeal for every good word and work." Wesley saw this as a recovery of early Christianity, where catechumens were advised to "watch over each other" and where more experienced Christians "took account of their names...that they might instruct, rebuke, exhort, and pray with them, and for them, according to their several necessities." Where is this kind of care and concern available to new Christians in the church?, asked Wesley.

Who watched over them in love? Who marked their growth in grace?...Who prayed with them and for them, as they had need? This, and this alone, is Christian fellowship. But, alas! where is it to be found? Look east or west, north or south; name what parish you please. Is this Christian fellowship there? Rather, are not the bulk of parishioners a mere rope of sand? What Christian connexion is there between them?...What bearing of one another's burdens? ("A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists," *Works* (Jackson), 8:251f.)

In addition to providing fellowship, the groups provided training in mutual accountability. In their weekly meetings, all were to reflect on the ways in which they had lived out their discipleship. Holding each other accountable, they not only experienced community, they overcame the natural tendency toward complacency and encouraged each other to "grow in grace."

Unfortunately, in many parts of today's Methodism the structured fellowship of the class meeting has been lost, though in many places it is being recovered through Discipleship Bible Study and other small group projects. And where Methodism is growing, as in Korea and Africa, it has been most consistent in retaining the classes and bands. From Methodism in these lands the small-group structure has spread to other denominations as well, which demonstrates that this important Wesleyan witness should not be neglected in the present-day church and should be incorporated into ecumenical ecclesiologies that strive to be genuinely catholic.

The two Wesleyan contributions which we have examined are obviously interconnected. If the way is to be cleared for the Spirit to reach persons with liberating power, structures and means of grace must be found that are effective in today's world. For the principle enunciated by Wesley remains constant, "The gospel of Christ knows of no religion but social, no holiness but social holiness" (Preface to *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, *Works* [Jackson] 14:321).

The power of the Spirit through community, and community through the power of the Spirit. There are other insights into ecclesiology that could be derived from the Wesleyan heritage, but these two have the potential to contribute significantly to ecumenical theology today.